

# Ending Circumcision In the Jewish Community?

Moshe Rothenberg

*Presented at The Second International Symposium on Circumcision, San Francisco, California, April 30-May 3, 1991.*

---

## Abstract:

**Spinoza once said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” The same can be said about the religions and cultures to which we belong. Judaism is a tremendously rich, pro-survival religion that, because of continuous misinformation and mistreatment, is widely misunderstood. However, the mistakes it carries with it, such as the ritual of circumcision (brit milah), should be considered no differently from the way they are considered by society in general, no matter how centrally important they seem to Jewish culture.**

**Circumcision is child abuse. It is medically unnecessary. It is a poor way to introduce a newborn male into the world and into the Jewish community. It completely excludes females from participation in a sacred ritual (thank God), but the result is a lessening of respect. Jews have much to learn from society-at-large (and vice versa), and their doing so would add greatly to the tremendous reverence for life already existent in Jewish culture.**

---

This presentation will focus on my experience as an active Jew living in an observant Jewish community in Brooklyn, New York, who chose not to have his son circumcised. I will present the brit (literally “covenant”) b'lee milah (without circumcision) ceremony that my wife, a full participant in the decision, and I held on the eighth day of our son Sammy's life.

This is an anonymous poem entitled “To Be.”

“To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century  
Is to be offered a gift,”  
- says Muriel Rukeyser, the poet.

I accept.

I am of a people alive for centuries, 500 centuries,  
Scapegoated as the butt for others' distresses,  
Called kike, Christ killer, and gassed in the ovens.  
“To make their society pure,” they said.  
The Temple twice destroyed; the dates were  
Five hundred and eighty-six years before Christ  
And seventy years after his death.  
Even the dates bespeak an alien calendar.

I am of a people of law and obligation,  
Of ritual and celebration,  
A people who created their code  
To live and die by. Richly textured strands  
Of joy and mystical oneness,  
Of legalistic reasoning and family storytelling.

And at the center the book and the House of Prayer.  
Selfpreserving and selfidentifying  
A tradition of hope when there seemed no reason to hope,  
Of dancing and singing when there seemed no reason to dance and sing.  
Making sense of a world and creating significance  
When neither seemed clearly given:  
The encounter with the mystery and sanctity of life  
These are my people.

I am a man, German and English and Russian Jewish by heritage,  
“American by heritage, Revolutionary by choice,  
Pulsating with the dignity of myself through the ages.

To be a Jew in the 20th Century  
Is to be offered a gift,”  
- says Muriel Rukeyser, the poet.

I accept.

Yet, though I accept this gift,  
I accept not unto myself the continual rehearsal of our sorrow,  
And our children's sorrow,  
The suffering of the ages, of this very century of Holocaust.  
I am one of those who seek  
Those moments of the past  
Which resonate a new vision of reality,  
I dare to be wholly Jewish and dare to be wholly human.

I seek a world where humans share joy with each other  
Take care with each other, delight in each other,  
Build societies which serve all the people:

“To be a Jew in the 20th Century  
Is to be offered a gift.”

I accept.

A famous philosopher once said: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” The same can be applied to the religions and cultures that we belong to. Judaism is a tremendously rich prosurvival religion that, through persistent mistreatment and misinformation, is still widely misunderstood. However, the mistakes that it carries within it, such as the ritual of circumcision, called brit milah, should not be considered any differently than in society in general, no matter how essentially important to the Jewish culture it is seen. Circumcision is child abuse. It is medically unnecessary. It is nothing short of a traumatic way to introduce a newborn male into the world and into the Jewish community. The centuries of a covenant with God has produced great denial in viewing the very real pain of the newborn. From the start it relegates females as being less important than males as historically there has been no equivalent ceremony to welcome the newborn Jewish female baby. Too often the needs, wishes and cries of the young go unnoticed or unheeded. Often described as silly or immature in nature, none of us were assisted in great measure to feel as important as we really were or are as young people. Our minds from birth are described as tabula rasa. Make no mistake about it, young people do not ask for and react sharply to the imposition of adult values on them and on their bodies. Expecting nothing short of a complete and exuberant welcome into their world, the pain of the tools used by the mohel, or the doctor, is a rude shock not readily forgotten by the newborn with an already developed nervous system and a brilliant mind.

The following are excerpts of the ceremony that my wife, Yahudit, and I performed on Sammy's eighth day - the traditional time of welcoming a newborn into the Jewish community. We called it brit b'lee milah, bris without circumcision.

As part of our community, Yahudit and I would like to welcome all of you coming. We welcome you becoming part of our son's own community. I am going to start the ceremony with a quote from Selma Fraiberg's, *The Magic Years*:

“The magician is seated on his high chair and looks upon the world with favor. He is at the height of his powers. If he closes his eyes he causes the world to disappear. If he opens them, he causes the world to come back. If there is harmony within him, the world is harmonious. If desire arises within him, he utters the magic syllables that cause the desired object to appear. His wishes, his thoughts, his gestures, his noises command the universe.”

We very much want Sammy to be in charge of his world, of his life, as this quote describes. We want him to always be involved and make his own decisions. As Emerson once said: “Infancy conforms to nobody. All conform to it.” Sammy, like the rest of us, is part of Jewish heritage and tradition. At the same time, this is a fresh moment and his future, like ours, will be different than the past.

Bris means covenant. On this day I am making the following commitment to Sammy, to Yahudit, and my family: I will never intentionally ever hurt either of you. I will not commit violence towards you, Yahudit. I will do my very best never even to argue with you and I will make the same commitment to you, Sammy, that today I will not hurt you physically or in any other way, come what may, which we do not know, but today as always, I want to give you the very best start possible.

“Finally, I want to speak about Klal Yisroel, the community of Jews. We are a wonderfully diverse people and sometimes we forget that difference is a good thing. Each of us brings different thoughts, actions and beliefs into what is collectively called Judaism. Today, the Jewish world is deeply involved in serious disputes with each other, and this ceremony, what is and what is not being done today, today apparently creates another. I appeal to each of us to wrestle with our own beliefs inside, learning to disagree, rather than think that what we are doing is always right. Only then will our true sense of community thrive. Thank you again for coming. Yahudit will now conduct a water ceremony, and we will officially name our baby.”

Coming to the decision to leave Sammy's penis intact was extremely difficult for me and my wife. It took years of counseling and talking to many, many people in and out of the Jewish community to come to this decision. One of the parts of the tradition that helped me enormously was a thought written eight centuries ago by one of the greatest of all Jewish rabbis, [Maimonides](#), who said that circumcision should only be done as an act of faith. By the time Sammy was born, I knew that the only thing that could convince me to perform the circumcision was the sway of conformity. By the eighth day of his life, I could not have performed the circumcision even if I thought it was the right thing, so much was I truly in love with him.

Sammy is now three years old. He is loved, literally, by every person who has ever met him. At our bris, eight orthodox Jewish friends of mine came, two of them are rabbis, another Jewish rabbi performed the ceremony. The only reason they came was out of their commitment to me and the belief that I and my wife, Yahudit, were doing what we did out of the deepest moral and spiritual conviction. The friendships have only increased since that time three-and-a half years ago. When I go and pick Sammy up in school, I usually am the lucky first one to go and pick him up because I finish work at 2:20 and all the other children come and say, “Bye, Sammy.” They stop playing and they go and play with him. I have never met a single orthodox, reform, conservative, reconstructionist, Jew who ever said, “I want nothing to do with you or your child because of what you did.”

I end this speech with a word of caution. Because of the history of oppression, Jews have been told over and over again that what we believe to be good and true is wrong. Unquestionably, many Jews will believe when this issue is brought up that another attack on their religion is being made in the name of Western rational thinking. The solution to ending circumcision in Jewish and other cultures does not lie through imposition, legal or otherwise, even though child abuse is what is in question. Love, education, helping to make the world safe for Jews on a variety of fronts, and a general

increased awareness of the needs of the newborn will advance the goals that we are all trying to achieve. Become friends to Jews and other minorities. Only through deep caring will this issue resolve itself; toward the perpetrators, caring parents, as well as our beloved community of children.

### **Biographical Notes**

*Moshe Rothenberg, CSW, is a social worker for the New York City Board of Education. He received his MSW in Social Group Work at [Yeshiva University - Wurzweiler School of Social Work](#) (1973) and did post-graduate work in group and family therapy at [Albert Einstein School of Medicine](#). He coordinated a program involved with Affirmative Action for the [National Conference of Black Lawyers](#), which helped win a positive Supreme Court decision in the Weber case. Mr. Rothenberg initiated and coordinated two parent groups providing advocacy and counseling services for the Miskin-Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in New York. He teaches Re-evaluation Counseling to adults on such issues as parenting, feminism, and racism, and lead parent support groups. He is an educator on the subject of Brit B'lee Milah both within and outside of the Jewish community in which he lives.*