

“CIRCUMCISION: WHO NAMES THE SACRED?”

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In 1978 and again in 1982 two beautiful, perfect baby boys were born to me. Assured that no serious pain was involved, that the foreskin was an unnecessary organ and only minimally attached to the head of the penis, I contacted the *mohel* to perform the celebratory *brit* with friends and family. My babies screamed, screams that caused my milk to nearly stop and affected their sleeping and eating patterns for months.

Never did it occur to me to question this mandatory practice, that, perhaps, like Abraham who had challenged G-d over the justice of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gemorah, indeed, I too might raise my voice to question the sanctity of inflicting such pain on a newborn child. So deeply was my instinctive maternal voice stifled, that even after the first traumatic experience with my older son, I repeated it with my second.

For many years, I spoke to no one about this matter. Nevertheless, their screams had lodged in the marrow of my bones, and continue to haunt the edges of my mind. Silently I obsessed. I feared I had betrayed these beautiful children on a profound level, and yet, I loved being Jewish.

Judaism has been an identity that I was both born into and also embraced, a subterranean current that connected me millennia back in time, has given meaning to the present and encoded in my D.N.A. messianic longings for a peaceful future balanced with justice and mercy. Judaism has been the home of my body, my heart, my mind and my spirit. It has been the nexus of my sense of community, my imprint about the workings of the heart, the scaffolding for the contours of my mind and the inspiration and anchor of my spirit. It has defined and illuminated my understanding of all that is sacred.

Judaism is adamant about sanctifying life. The principal of *pikuah nefesh* informs biblical as well as Talmudic discourse, that is, for the sake of saving a life, even the Sabbath may be desecrated. *Sh'mirat haguf*, the protection of the integrity of the human body is a specifically articulated biblical priority: tattooing, cutting the flesh and amputation are all prohibited acts. Consciousness of animal suffering permeates biblical and Talmudic texts as expressed by the concept *tsa-ar ba-alei hayim*, or compassion for all living things. In the fourth commandment, animals as well as humans are commanded to rest on the Sabbath and, according to the Talmud, Sabbath observance may be broken to ease the suffering of an animal. The laws of *kashrut* are specific and elaborate pertaining to permissible animal slaughter with the clear intention of reducing and regulating animal suffering if we are to be a meat-eating people. The precept of *ba-al tashhit* also informs biblical and rabbinic thought requiring that the lives of fruit trees are to be spared during a war.

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The notions of *sh'mitah and yovel*, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, mandating the necessity that every seventh and, again, every fiftieth year, the earth be allowed to rest from deliberate economic use further elucidates these primary Judaic convictions. The message is clear: we are stewards of this earth and it is our task not only to protect it and the life it contains, but more than that, *l'havdeel bain kodesh v'chol*, to make distinctions between the holy and the profane, so that we may consciously and continuously sanctify life.

...and, then, there is circumcision...

In 1987, I attended the Congress on Pre- and Perinatal Psychology held in San Francisco. It was an inspiring and illuminating series of days, but I hadn't counted on one very painful confrontation. Outside of the main conference room, a number of informational exhibits had been set up, one of which was by NOCIRC, the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers. A video was playing on their monitor. It was a circumcision with full stereo replication of the screams I knew only too well. Feeling utterly exposed, I was overcome with an inchoate sense of rage and shame. How dare they, I thought. Hurrying past, not making eye contact with anyone, I consoled myself thinking, I will have nothing to do with these people.

That didn't work. Having attended the Congress on Pre- and Perinatal Psychology, I found myself on the NOCIRC mailing list, and, some time later, the recipient of a brochure announcing the Second International Symposium on Circumcision to be held in San Francisco in the Spring of 1991.

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Tempted as I was to toss this piece of unsolicited “junk” mail into the recycling bin, I couldn’t. It floated around on my desk for weeks. Finally, I allowed myself to peruse its contents. Presentations would discuss the anatomy of the foreskin, the implications of early traumatic pain on maternal-infant bonding, the possibilities of restoration, and much more. I went into immediate overload. Again, I set it aside. In a rare act of courage, I decided to phone the number published on the brochure. Marilyn Milos, founder, director and inspiration of NOCIRC, and soon to become my lifelong friend, answered the phone. A gentler, more informative, passionate and generous person would be hard to find. Slowly I allowed her to persuade me to attend the symposium. It changed my life.

With much trepidation, I listened for three and half days and wept as presentations from the fields of science, anthropology and psychology confirmed my dreaded, growing intuition: circumcision inflicts serious pain. It is physically damaging and has profound implications for lifelong psychological wounding.

What are we doing and why are we doing this? The what may be easier to answer than the why. What we are doing is cutting the most exquisitely sensitive living tissue away from the glans of the penis. What we are doing by cutting away the foreskin, is removing over one-third of all the penile tissue, the most densely enervated tissue in the male body.

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What we are doing is inflicting trauma of an extreme magnitude that can now be scientifically measured and which has serious neurological and psychology-cal consequences. That's what we are doing.

In biology we know that when form is altered, function is also altered. It is no different with circumcision. The foreskin serves a number of functions, all of them critical to the health of the penis and the developing sexuality of the male. First, the foreskin protects the glans (the head of the penis), which, like the clitoris, is designed to be an internal organ. In infancy, it shields the glans from contamination of urine and feces. Without this protective covering, the mucosa of the glans becomes dried up and keratinized, a process of unnatural thickening that occurs and greatly diminishes sensitivity as the man ages (Ritter, 1992). Second, the foreskin stretches to cover the penis, which increases by fifty percent in diameter and length upon erection. Without this extra skin, the skin of the circumcised penis is pulled taut when erect and sometimes is bowed, causing discomfort during erection or intercourse. Thirdly, because the most erogenous portion of the penis is lost with the excision of the foreskin, the pleasurable potential this represents for a man's sexuality is also lost (Dr. John R. Taylor as cited by Bigelow, 1992). Finally, the presence of the foreskin facilitates pleasurable intercourse by increasing sensitivity and enhancing the pleasure dynamic of the couple (Ritter, 1992).

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The implications of this radical change in a man's natural anatomy are many. When a woman is in her prime, her natural vaginal secretions may easily compensate for the dryness of the glans during intercourse. However, once this couple ages and the woman is menopausal, those secretions diminish substantially. Now a desensitized and keratinized glans is interacting with a poorly lubricated vagina. The sexual pleasure once enjoyed by the couple can become fraught with tension. Alienation and even marital break-ups can occur as the man opts to pursue a younger woman unaware that the difficulty is not simply his wife's naturally aging vagina, but his own unnaturally altered penis.

Another possible consequence of circumcision was brought to my attention when I was sharing some of this information with a gay friend of mine. "Oh, that's interesting," he said. "I hardly have any sensation in my penis. I find my anus far more sensitive. If I hadn't been circumcised, I wonder if I would have made different choices about how I have pursued sexual pleasure." Both the absence of a foreskin and the process of removing it, have very serious and long term implications.

Even though the long term marital and psychological ramifications of circumcision cannot be centrifuged and quantified in laboratories, the physical pain and trauma associated with the act of circumcision have been well documented.

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Multiple studies have measured cardiac activity, blood pressure, oxygenation and cortisol levels, as well as changes in types of sleep during and after circumcisions. Even when sucrose nipples or dorsal blocks are introduced, the measurable pain infants experience is extreme. Dr. Robert S. Van Howe, M.D. has summarized these findings stating that:

...parents need to be told that the currently available pain relief techniques may blunt the pain, but, even with these techniques, neonatal circumcision is extremely painful, stressful, and produces long-term alterations in neurological response to painful stimuli. (p.90)

Such massive and shocking pain also has psychological ramifications. Erik Erikson has established that the first and most critical task of psycho-logical development is establishing trust (Erickson, 1950). He further argues that trust is the basis of all later development and that it is focused entirely on the mother. New York psychiatrist, Rima Laibow elaborates this theory, explaining that, because the mother has been the entire universe to the infant since its conception, it is imprinted to experience all pleasure and all pain as flowing from the all-unifying maternal source. She writes, "When in fact, mother is truly complicit, as in giving permission for unanesthetized surgery (i.e., circumcision), the perception of the infant of her culpability and willingness to have him harmed is indelibly emplaced. The consequences for impaired bonding are significant (Laibow, 1991)."

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Clearly, the risk for the psychosexual wounding of the baby is extremely high, if not inevitable, but what of the wounding of the mother? A newly birthed woman is often deeply connected to a new, raw knowing that does not flinch at sacrifice. It is the emergence of her primary mammalian instinct, a surging savage power to protect her newborn at all costs. Precisely at this moment her culture demands that she surrender her tender son so that the men may cut his most exquisitely sensitive organ in order to bond him with the male community and a male imaged G-d. Her reluctance and unvoiced terror is typically trivialized by the mohel, her male relatives and possibly even her husband, as she dutifully relinquishes her child. At this point, many women, though silenced, are catapulted into a profound conflict with their entire life-giving feminine biology. When a woman is made to distrust her most elemental instinct to protect her newborn child, what feelings can she ever trust?

The subordination of the mother at the birth of her son, artificially distorts the relationship between husband and wife. They no longer share equal authority regarding the raising of their son. Eighteen years later, the cycle repeats itself with the combative and violent initiation into manhood, which occurs with conscription. Once again, the mother is expected to suppress her natural protest as her male child is ushered by the men into a larger circle of men, not with knives, but this time with weapons of immense destruction. In this sense, circumcision foreshadows conscription. The maternal voice stifled shortly after birth can offer no resistance.

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Circumcision did not begin with Judaism. It is a pre-Judaic rite originating in the third millennia B.C.E., or perhaps, even earlier. In the Hebrew Bible, circumcision is given holy status in Genesis 17:9-14 as a primary mitzvah, a commandment, when G-d tells Abraham that he must circumcise all male members of his household so that circumcision shall be a sign of the covenant throughout all generations and that Abraham is to father a new nation. Traditionally, circumcision has connected Jewish males to their contemporary community of men, as well as to their lineage of male ancestors and to the Jewish G-d whose voice has been consistently represented in the masculine gender. What happened to woman's voice?

Answers to this question may be heard in the echoes of the akedah, the biblical story of the binding of Isaac, as we examine what happened to Sarah's voice. While tradition views the akedah as an exemplary demonstration of Abraham's faithfulness to G-d, I believe this story also offers us a glimpse of a paradigm shift of profound proportions as issues of gender and power emerge and are resolved. In the story contained in Genesis 22 and 23, many sacrifices take place. No one emerges whole. All are transformed, but only one is destroyed, body and soul. It is not Isaac. It is Sarah. Sarah, who is unseen and unheard during the entire episode of Abraham's escorting, binding and intended murder of her child, is reintroduced in the beginning of the next chapter so that the reader may learn of her death. Sarah is the one who is sacrificed in this story. What happened?

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Abraham is called by G-d to take Isaac to be a sacrifice to this new male-imagined G-d. Sarah, mother of Isaac, is never consulted. In Hebrew her exclusion is more dramatic: *Va-yomer kah-nah et bin-hah et yehid-hah asher ahavtah et Yitzhak* (Genesis 22:2). While in English the possessive pronoun “your” does not denote gender or number, in Hebrew the suffix “your” is gender and number specific, masculine singular, making Sarah’s exclusion unquestionable. G-d is addressing Abraham and Abraham alone as the sole parent of Isaac: “And He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love ...’” How odd that Isaac is referred to as Abraham’s “only” son, when, in fact, Abraham also fathered Ishmael. It is Sarah for whom Isaac is truly her only son, and in this monumental event affecting her child, she is not included. Her motherhood is denied by G-d and ignored by Abraham, as he prepares to take her only child to sacrifice for this higher cause.

Sarah’s authority as a mother and her position as the grand matriarch of her people is completely undermined by this G-d’s demand and Abraham’s compliance. She is utterly disempowered by this cataclysmic event. In this context, her death makes sense. It is the defeat and subordination of the matriarch, which had to precede the new covenant. Abraham has passed the test and is now ready to be the acknowledged progenitor of a new nation.

Yet, the matrilineal underpinnings of Judaism were not so easily erased. The ancient burial site at Machpelah, known as the Cave of the Patriarchs, was actually the burial place of Sarah’s descent group, not Abraham’s.

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In his book, *They Took Themselves Wives*, David Bakan writes, "Sarah is more definitely the ancestor of the Israelites than Abraham," (p. 95).

Many would argue that circumcision arose to compete with this strong matrilineal principal in Judaism. It permitted the transfer of inheritance through patrilineal descent and conferred status and privileges to men. However, circumcision never succeeded in completely erasing or in surpassing the more powerful matrilineal origins of Judaism. According to Orthodox law, as well as the Israeli Supreme Court, a Jew is defined by whether one's mother was a Jew, not by circumcision.

Nevertheless, circumcision persists. Modern day justifications include medical arguments, which are nearly universally untrue. Hygienic appeals which have no basis in traditional Judaism or in the modern world. Rarely do we get to hear the explanation offered by Moses Maimonides, revered 11th century philosopher, physician and Judaic scholar who exposes another critical function of circumcision when he candidly comments in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (1190) as follows:

The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened. The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have explicitly stated: It is hard for a woman with whom an uncircumcised man has had sexual intercourse to separate from him (*Genesis Rabbah* LXXX). In my opinion this is the strongest of reasons for circumcision. (p.609).

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There they are, the twin fears: the fear of woman and the fear of pleasure. Circumcision is the antidote which both assuages and perpetuates these ancient terrors. This is the achievement and true purpose of circumcision. It achieves this by violently breaching the maternal-infant bond shortly after birth, by mutilating and marking the baby's sexual organ, by disempowering, "taming", the mother at the height of her instinctual need to protect her infant, by bonding the baby to the men and the male-imaged G-d and by psychosexually wounding the manhood still asleep in the unsuspecting baby boy. Circumcision may be an ancient rite, but it is wrong. It is wrong in terms of Jewish values for it violates the most fundamental Jewish principles of sanctifying life.

Who defines the sacred? Our babies know and many Jewish mothers are beginning to know: defining the sacred begins with us!

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