

Will the Jewish People Disavow Circumcision?

This is my covenant which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised.

And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

Genesis 17:10-11

It is impossible to write a book of this nature without addressing the issue of Jewish circumcision, for it is widely known that Jewish infant boys are circumcised for religious reasons.

The Jews did not “invent” circumcision, however. Circumcision was in practice in Egypt and other parts of Northern Africa long before the Jews began to practice it in adherence to the above Abrahamic covenant about 4,000 years ago. What effect will the information in this book have on Jewish ritual circumcision? Could a ritual practiced for so long be changed? These are the questions this chapter will address.

All Jews are not automatically in agreement with circumcision just because they are Jewish. Though not well known, some Jewish parents do not circumcise their sons, and there are many Jewish people currently involved in the anti-circumcision movement. As far back as the mid-1800s, some Jews, through the Jewish Reform Movement, sought to abolish circumcision. But their attempts were unsuccessful. Thus, circumcision remained as a religious tenet.

If you are a present-day Jew, you should ask yourself if the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis has any real meaning to you in today's modern world. Do you really believe that God spoke to Abraham and told him to cut off part of the penis of all male Jews?

The majority of today's Jews probably do not have the Abrahamic covenant in mind when they choose to have their child circumcised. They choose it for the same reasons as non-Jews—because they have heard that it supposedly has medical benefits, etc.—or merely to conform with the religion of their parents, a religion in which they themselves, however, are not truly active. Many Jews who elect the circumcision ritual are simply following the tradition among their people, with little or no awareness of the religious meaning ascribed to the ceremony (1).

Some Jews believe that circumcision had its beginnings as a health measure. Edward Wallerstein, himself a Jew and author of *Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy*, maintains that this is not true. He asserts that for the Jews, circumcision began solely as a religious ritual, and Jewish religious leaders throughout history have abhorred the idea that circumcision is done for health benefits (2). In the words of Wallerstein:

In summary, there are no substantive data in Jewish circumcision history or practice to support the thesis that circumcision is a health measure or that health benefits are in any way derived from it. Historically, the methods employed in performing the surgery were anything but sanitary or scientific. To this day [1980], little or no control is exercised over its practitioners, who can and do cause harm, even death.

Religious Jews vehemently deny any health benefits and insist that circumcision is purely a religious rite. Nonreligious Jews who accept circumcision for its supposed health benefits derive support for that theory from the wide acceptance of routine circumcision by non-Jews. Thus, a brief overview of Jewish circumcision sheds no light as to its health origins and no proof of its purported hygienic benefits in its past or current practice (3).

The Jewish ritual of circumcision is done solely for religious reasons. Changing the ritual must come through the religion itself. If you are a Jew who has come to a greater understanding of circumcision by the information in this book, you now realize that a way must be found to reconcile the disparity between circumcision's harmful effects and God's covenant as "communicated" through Abraham. For this issue affects the lives of children who are soon to be born and generations yet to come. If you believe this ancient ritual should be re-evaluated, express your feelings to your rabbi and to others within your religion. To anyone informed on this issue, the importance of an intact foreskin takes on new significance. I assert that non-circumcision is an idea whose time has come for all races and creeds.

Unknown to most Jews, the ritual of circumcision has already undergone several changes throughout its history, according to Wallerstein (4). In the earliest days, the Jews practiced a circumcision style called *Milah*, in which only the very tip of the foreskin was cut away. This early form of circumcision was nothing like the fully-bared-glans style of today's circumcision.

When the ancient Jewish circumcisers cut off only the protruding tip of the infant foreskin, a great deal of the natural foreskin remained intact to cover a substantial portion of the glans (when flaccid). However, because the *ridged band* was destroyed during the *Milah* procedure, the foreskin could not function entirely the way nature intended, although it did leave the penis shaft some extra skin to expand into during erection and provided somewhat of a gliding mechanism during intercourse.

DAVID'S FORESKIN

Many people have wondered, and explanations have been debated, as to why David, in Michelangelo's famous statue of him, has a foreskin. Surely, a man with Michelangelo's knowledge of the male anatomy and Biblical history would have known not to put a foreskin on a Jewish youth. Did he consider the circumcised penis unaesthetic? Was he simply too embarrassed to chisel the

intimate details of a bared glans? Were all his models natural (uncircumcised), so he therefore sculpted what he was familiar with? These are some of the speculations that have been raised regarding the statue of David “mystery,” which was chiseled in stone.

The carving of David was not a hasty affair. Michelangelo labored over it for years. Why, then, would he sculpt a Jewish youth with a foreskin? Recently, a very convincing theory has been put forward by Wallerstein. He states:

Michelangelo probably knew exactly what he was doing. First, it is necessary to examine the precise method of circumcision in 1000 B.C. [around the time of David’s birth]. Originally, the procedure called for removing only the very tip of the foreskin. Known in Hebrew as Milah....

The glans of David’s penis is almost completely covered by the foreskin. This factor probably prompted physicians to claim that Michelangelo sculpted the penis as uncircumcised. ...In addition, the sculpting of this statue was not a hasty affair. Michelangelo labored on it for four years. We can assume that with his astute knowledge of anatomy, he was as meticulous in penile details as in all others.

It is therefore probable that Michelangelo correctly portrayed David as circumcised, based upon the surgical procedure of that period—that is, with only the very tip of the foreskin removed (5).

In any event, Milah was in use for almost 2,000 years and was not changed until the Hellenistic period (circa 300 B.C.-1 A.D.). At that time, the Greeks were trying to convert the Jews to paganism. Some Jews, in order to “restore” their foreskins, resorted to blistering the tip of the remainder of the foreskin in order to enlarge it, thereby appearing more uncircumcised. So many Jews adopted this practice that the rabbis of that period decided to alter the circumcision procedure in order to make it impossible for a circumcised Jew to try to appear uncircumcised. This was accomplished by a procedure known as Periah, in which

the entire foreskin was cut off, including the inner lining and frenulum, torn by specially sharpened fingernails of the Jewish ritual circumciser (mohel).

The next change in the ritual, although not universally adopted, began in the Talmudic period (circa 500-635 A.D.). At this time an additional element was added—Messisa (sometimes spelled Mezziza or Metzitzah, its phonetic pronunciation). Messisa consisted of moistening the lips with wine and then taking the bleeding penis into the mouth to suck the blood. This was done several times, and a special receptacle was provided to receive the blood that was spit out.

These two parts of the ritual—Periah and Messisa—remained in general use until about 100 years ago. The above procedures became, for the majority of the Jewish community, radically changed in the last quarter of the 19th century by the introduction of advances in aseptic surgery. The total foreskin was still removed, but the use of fingernails was often replaced by a knife or scissors (although Orthodox Jews continue to use fingernails as an instrument for tearing the tissue of the inner foreskin and the frenulum). Sucking blood directly from the penis was also discontinued, or at least replaced with a glass tube to avoid direct mouth-penis contact. This practice has also, for the majority of Jews, been discontinued.

In addition to the above changes, the first half of the 20th century brought an increase in the number of hospital births. Many Reform Jews began using doctors instead of mohels to perform the surgery. Over the years, even Conservative Jews adopted this practice. Orthodox Jews, however, have never allowed doctors to replace mohels.

As noted above, the Jewish religious ritual of circumcision has undergone several changes throughout its history. In light of the new information we now have about the deleterious consequences that can result from cutting off the foreskin, it is hoped that Judaism will re-evaluate this ancient practice and make one final change—abolish it. This, I believe, may be accomplished

through Judaism's own Talmudic Laws, which are presented below.

TALMUDIC LAWS AS A MEANS TO DISAVOW CIRCUMCISION

During the Talmudic period of Jewish history, making vows was, in general, considered a sign of bad upbringing because if a vow could not be fulfilled it could cast reproach upon the honor of one's family. Mainstream rabbinical tradition was opposed to the making of vows and discouraged people from making them (6).

“If you forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in this.”
(Deuteronomy 23:23)

“Do not form the habit of making vows.” (Babylonian Talmud—Nedarim 20.a)

But since some people did make vows, the rabbinical authorities were confronted with the dilemma of how to resolve a situation in which one made a sacred vow but, for various reasons, could not fulfill it.

During the Talmudic legislation period, many sages maintained that Jewish law should have a way of annulling a vow. They argued that a person might regret making a certain vow, and there should be some remedy for its retraction. They succeeded in establishing a methodology for annulling a vow which was implemented into standard Jewish law and is still operative today (7).

Here is how a vow is undone by one who wishes to have it annulled: (8) The person who has made the vow which cannot be fulfilled appears before a sage or a quorum of three knowledgeable men, who ask the person: “If you had known the consequences of making this vow, would you have done it?”

If the person replies, “I would not have taken the vow,” the sage or the quorum of three pronounces him absolved of his oath.

Another remedy for the failure to fulfill a vow can be found in the “Kol Nidre” (“All Vows”) recited at the beginning of the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This holiday is a 24-hour fast for transgressions and oaths that could not (or cannot) be fulfilled, which one regrets having sworn to:

All vows, bonds, promises, obligations, and oaths wherewith we have vowed, sworn, and found ourselves from this Day of Atonement unto the next Day of Atonement. They shall be absolved, released, annulled, made void, and of no effect; they shall not be binding nor shall they have any power. Our vows shall not be vows; our bonds shall not be bonds (9).

Rabbis are also familiar with a lesser known ceremony which focuses more closely on individual vows. In the Jewish religion, it is referred to as Hatarat Nedarim, the Annulment of Vows. The traditional time for this ceremony is just prior to Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. During this ceremony, three or more individuals band together and take turns representing a quasi-ecclesiastical court. Each individual, in turn, recites a formula whereby he renounces all oaths and promises. Reference in this formula is made to vows and various promises forgotten, and vows of which one is still aware (10).

Finally, the Formula for Annulment of Vows is as follows: (11)

The three “judges” sit while the petitioner seeking annulment stands before them and states:

Listen please, my master, expert judges: every vow or oath or prohibition, or restriction that I adopted by use of the term *konam* or the term *cherem*, that I vowed or swore while I was awake or in a dream, or that I swore by means of God’s Holy Names that it is forbidden to erase, or by means of the name Hashem, Blessed is He; or any form of Naziritism that I accepted upon myself, even the Naziritism of Samson; or any prohibition, even a prohibition to derive enjoyment that I imposed upon myself or upon others by means of any

expression of prohibition, whether by specifying the term *prohibition* or by use of the term *konam* or *cherem* [konam means any vow of abstinence, cherem is any ban]; or any commitment even to perform a *mitzvah* that I accepted upon myself, whether the acceptance was in terms of a vow, a voluntary gift, an oath, Naziritism, or by means of any other sort of expression, or whether it was made final through a handshake; any form of vow, or any custom that constitutes a good deed to which I have accustomed myself...

Therefore I request annulment for them all. I regret all the aforementioned whether they were matters relating to money, or whether they are matters relating to the body or whether they were matters relating to the soul. Regarding them all, I regret the terminology of vow, oath, Naziritism, prohibition, cherem, konam (i), and acceptances of the heart.

The judges then repeat three times:

May everything be permitted you, may everything be forgiven you, may everything be allowed you. There does not exist any vow, oath, Naziritism, cherem, prohibition, konam, ostracism, excommunication, or curse. But there does exist pardon, forgiveness, and atonement. And just as the early court permits them, so may they be permitted in the Heavenly Court.

Finally, the ceremony is concluded with the petitioner declaring for the final time that he “cancels from this time onward all vows and all oaths.”

CIRCUMCISION CONTRADICTS JEWISH MORAL PRINCIPLE

Another important consideration is that Judaism teaches that enjoyment of life is an authentic goal of life. Furthermore, rabbinical teaching maintains that “in the world to come” we will be judged for the failure to enjoy life’s legitimate pleasures (12). Since circumcision drastically interferes with one of life’s

fundamental joys—a man's and his female partner's ability to both give and receive pleasure during intercourse—with detrimental effects on their love relationship—another quintessential joy, it seems prudent that Judaism re-evaluate religious circumcision for this reason alone.

Let me close this chapter with a statement from *Circumcision: The Hidden Trauma*, by Ronald Goldman, Ph.D., himself a Jew:

I hope that the review of American circumcision practice is independent of religious considerations. In particular, I encourage those individuals and groups who may take a position on the issue to do so regardless of how their position may be received by Jews. Though concern for the feelings of Jews is appropriate, Jewish discomfort with this issue is inevitable....

[T]he Jewish community has a considerable role to play in the national circumcision dialogue. That role, I believe, is to act and speak responsibly. I am concerned that a small but vocal minority of Jews may use reckless charges of anti-Semitism to respond to arguments against circumcision. Thoughtful questioning of circumcision is not anti-Semitic because Jews are also questioning the practice. Furthermore, it is possible to question the actions of a person or group without being categorically opposed to the person or group. In fact, questioning an action that causes harm is more likely to be motivated by concern rather than ill will. I believe that most Jews will not stereotype those opposed to circumcision and impugn their motivation.

Jews have long-held repressed feelings about circumcision. The growing debate will certainly stir them. In my view, the proper response for Jews is to support each other as we air these feelings within the Jewish community (13).