

Bris Milah Beautiful or Barbaric?

by [Rabbi Shraga Simmons](#)

Is circumcision a barbaric ritual that harms a child physically? Or is it a deep meaningful act that has both spiritual and medical benefits?

These days, the internet is filled with bulletin board discussions entitled "To circumcise or not?" Many will voice the opinion that circumcision (Bris Milah) is a cruel, barbaric procedure that can traumatize the baby. Some go so far as to claim that a Bris decreases future tolerance to pain, increases the risk of infection, has long term psychological affects, decreases sexual arousal, etc.

In Europe today, "human rights" groups have mounted a grass roots campaign opposing circumcision, comparing it to the brutal mutilation of African women. The Netherlands Institute of Human Rights wants to outlaw Bris Milah. And an article published in the prestigious British Medical Journal (April 2000), written by obstetricians, gynecologists, and midwives from hospitals in France, claimed:

"The [African] women we interviewed considered their daughters' mutilation and their sons' circumcision to be similar. Male circumcision is also a form of genital mutilation since it involves removing a healthy part of an organ. How can we convince mothers that they should not mutilate their daughters while they could continue to have their sons circumcised?"

Shockingly, this campaign even has adherents in Israel. In February 1998, a group of Israelis petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court to outlaw circumcision on the grounds that it is criminal assault. A joke? No. Case number 5780/98 is a real case, and the court has already held hearings.

Avshalom Zoosmann-Diskin, Executive Director of the Israeli Association Against Genital Mutilation in Tel Aviv, says that a campaign is urgently needed to end Bris Milah. "Why are they discriminating against me as victim of Jewish male genital mutilation?" he decries. "Are my human rights, bodily integrity and suffering less important than those of African girls?"

JEWISH REASONS

The truth is, there is no "logical" argument for cutting a piece of flesh off a helpless baby.

Yet circumcision has been practiced on Jewish males for close to 4,000 years, ever since Abraham was so commanded by God. Why does the foreskin need to be removed?

In Kabbalistic terms, the foreskin symbolizes a barrier which prevents growth. For example, when the Torah speaks about getting close to God, it calls upon us to "remove the *Orlah*, the foreskin of your heart" (Deut. 10:16).

When Abraham circumcised himself at age 99, God added the letter "*heh*" to his name. "*Heh*" is part of God's own name, signifying that through Bris Milah, the human being adds a dimension of spirituality to the physical body.

It is a foundation of Judaism that we are to control our animal desires and direct them into spiritual pursuits. Nowhere does a person have more potential for expressing "barbaric" behavior than in the sex drive. That's why the Bris is done on this specific organ. If we bring holiness into our life there, then all other areas will follow.

IDENTIFYING THE JEW

Another aspect of circumcision is that it is integral to Jewish identity. This point was made quite powerfully by a movie called "Europa Europa," It is the true story about a young Jewish boy trying to escape detection by the Nazis. The boy resembles an Aryan and speaks German fluently, so he poses as a non-Jew and is eventually recruited into an elite training program for the next generation of SS officers.

This boy was on his way to a fully non-Jewish life, except for one thing: His circumcision. He couldn't hide it. And that is what kept him Jewish throughout the entire ordeal.

Bris is the sign of the covenant. So a boy who is not circumcised has basically lost his spiritual attachment to the Jewish people.

The man survived the war, and made a new life for himself in Israel. Instead, he may have ended up becoming a Nazi officer. It all depended on the Bris.

MEDICAL DATA

It is a principle of Jewish life that our decision to perform mitzvot is not based on the "practical benefit." At the same time, the mitzvot frequently have positive observable effects in our everyday life.

Regarding the medical issues, Rabbi Yonason Binyomin Goldberger writes in "Sanctity and Science":

As an operation, circumcision has an extremely small complication rate. A study in the New England Journal of Medicine (1990) reported a complication rate of 0.19 percent when circumcision is performed by a physician. When performed by a trained mohel, the rate falls to 0.13 percent or about 1 in 1000. When a complication occurs, it is usually excessive bleeding, which is easily correctable. No other surgical procedure can boast such figures for complication-free operations.

One reason why there are so few complications involving bleeding may be that the major clotting agents, prothrombin and vitamin K, do not reach peak levels in the blood until the eighth day of life. Prothrombin levels are normal at birth, drop to very low levels in the next few days, and return to normal at the end of the first week. One study showed that by the eighth day, prothrombin levels reach 110 percent of normal. In the words of Dr. Armand J. Quick, author of several works on the control of bleeding, "It hardly seems accidental that the rite of circumcision was postponed until the eighth day by the Mosaic law."

Furthermore, circumcision has been known to offer virtually complete protection from penile cancer. According to a recent review article in the New England Journal of Medicine, none of the over 1,600 persons studied with this cancer had been circumcised in infancy. In the words of researchers Cochen and McCurdy, the incidence of penile cancer in the U.S. is "essentially zero" among circumcised men.

Also, research at Johns Hopkins University Medical School in Baltimore have shown that circumcised men are six to eight times less likely to become infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Researchers believe that protection is due to the removal of the foreskin, which contains cells that have HIV receptors which scientists suspect are the primary entry point for the HIV virus. (Reuters, March 25, 2004)

Several studies reported that circumcised boys were between 10-to-39 times less likely to develop urinary tract infections during infancy than uncircumcised boys. In addition, circumcision protects against bacterial, fungal, and parasitic infections and a variety of other conditions related to hygiene. The extremely low rate of cervical cancer in Jewish women (nine-to-22 times less than among non-Jewish women) is thought to be related to the practice of circumcision.

As a result of studies like these, a number of prestigious medical organizations have recognized the benefits of circumcision, and the California Medical Association has endorsed circumcision as an "effective public health measure."

BRIS IN THE HOLOCAUST

Bris has been the hallmark of Jewish identification for millennia. The following powerful story appears in "Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust" by Yaffa Eliach:

One of the forced laborers in the camps relates that one day he heard frightening cries of anguish the likes of which he had never heard before. Later he learned that on that very day a selection had been made -- of infants to be sent to the ovens. We continued working, tears rolling down our faces, and suddenly I hear the voice of a Jewish woman: "Give me a knife."

I thought she wanted to take her own life. I said to her, "Why are you hurrying so quickly to the world of truth..." All of a sudden the German soldier called out, "Dog, what did you say to the woman?"

"She requested a pocketknife and I explained to her that it was prohibited to commit suicide."

The woman looked at the German with inflamed eyes, and stared spellbound at his coat pocket where she saw the shape of his pocketknife. "Give it to me," she requested. She bent down and picked up a package of old rags. Hidden among them, on a pillow as white as snow, lay a tender infant. The woman took the pocketknife, pronounced the blessing -- and circumcised the child. "Master of the Universe," she cried, "You gave me a healthy child, I return him to You a worthy Jew."