

# Circum-Decision

by [Rabbi Daniel Frank](#)

## Should I circumcise my child? Here are the arguments for and against.

The mystique of Bris Milah is as old as Judaism itself. Throughout the generations, this mitzvah has been the pilot light, making sure that our spark would never be extinguished. For no matter how high the assimilation rate would rise, the importance of Bris, the seal of a covenant with God dating back to Abraham, was never questioned. Bris remained sacred to Jews of all stripes.

But now, for the first time in our history, that reassuring flame has begun to flicker.

*"My husband and I are both Jewish, not practicing in the traditional sense, and we are debating whether to circumcise our son, soon-to-be born. We both have some problems with circumcision, and are researching a Jewish organization that opposes circumcision."*

So speaks a young American woman on a popular radio talk show, sharing her willingness to give up a 3,000-year-old legacy, based on the little she knows about the procedure, and almost nothing about its meaning.

Yes, this woman may represent a negligible minority. But anti-circumcision literature is proliferating rapidly through the Internet and on the airwaves, planting thoughts in people's minds. Here is one example, which would be comical if it weren't so sad, from "Mothering" magazine:

*"Last year a baby boy was born to Jewish parents. The parents wanted to give the child a Bris without inflicting the pain of circumcision. On the eighth day friends were invited to their home. A friend who is a rabbinical student read the appropriate scriptures, blessed the child with a Hebrew name, and at the time of circumcision, a large organic carrot was produced and the tip severed. It was a joyous moment for all involved... Perhaps this is the alternative some of you may have been looking for."*

## FACING THE ISSUES

Let's address three of the most common arguments against circumcision.

*Issue #1 -- "It's cruel. I can't do something barbaric to my child. It will psychologically scar him for life!"* Let's be honest. No matter how undeveloped an 8-day-old baby's pain receptors may be, it is obvious that between the diaper change, exposure to cold, and the excitement of the event, the baby would rather be sleeping than having a Bris.

Yet many observations made about pain levels are based on medical circumcisions, which have little in common with a traditional Bris. The methods are different, the circumstances are different, and the results are different.

For instance, a hospital circumcision, done far from the baby's mother, is performed with painful clamps and can take up to 15 minutes. By contrast, the work of a mohel, with concerned "bubbies" looking over each shoulder, is completed in seconds.

In the hospital, the baby's hands and feet are strapped down to an impersonal and restrictive circumcision board, while at a Bris he rests on the reassuring lap of a caring grandfather.

These and other differences were noted in 1997 by the Associated Press, which reported that "Jewish circumcisions are gentler" than those performed in secular settings, and that "mohels, the deft practitioners of the ancient Jewish rite of circumcision, appear to inflict less pain on their newborn subjects than most doctors

do."

Psychological scars, anesthetic requirements, barbarism and cruelty -- this speaks of hospital-style circumcisions. In the words of one Californian mohel, "If I had to do a Bris using the hospital's technique, I would not want to be a mohel."

## **ISSUE #2 – HUMAN RIGHTS**

*"Why should I impose the Bris on my child without giving him a choice? It's a violation of basic human rights!"*

This represents a philosophical flaw in modern parenting.

As parents, we are *expected* to impose on our children. And we do this as a matter of fact. Don't we choose their clothes, babysitters, and schools? Don't we decide on inoculations which come with their own pain and degree of risk? Don't we impose our values and behavioral standards?

How many of the things that are important to us (e.g. good character) do we wait for our children to choose for themselves? Would we allow them to cheat and steal until they get older so they can formulate their own opinion about those behaviors?

Responsible parents try to ingrain values within their children in the hope that when they grow up, they will embrace them as well. Is that an unfair imposition, or is that our job as parents?

Shouldn't we do the same for Jewish identity and values? If the Bris is the symbol of one's Jewishness, why can't we "impose" it, with all that it represents, on our child at birth?

One might argue: "But circumcision is different because it is permanent." True, but impressions made on a child's mind and heart are just as permanent. The way spouses interact, the method of parental discipline -- in fact everything parents do -- deeply affects their children. We, as parents often forget how empowered we really are over our children, and the Bris is only the first of many "impositions" we make upon them.

If Judaism is important, then parents have a responsibility to introduce children to it at the earliest age. Otherwise they may never reclaim it again. Even Leopold Zunz, a 19th century leader of radical reform Judaism, observed: "Circumcision is not a mere ceremony... The son who, on principle remained uncircumcised, will hardly, on principle, remain in Judaism."

## **ISSUE #3 – HYPOCRISY?**

*"We feel like hypocrites! We are not religiously observant, so why should we perform this mitzvah?"*

Parents with this concern will be happy to know there is room for inconsistency with regards to Bris Milah. In Zechariah 9:11-12, the prophet predicts that at the end of days, the only Jewish merit will be that of Bris; all else will have been forsaken. Nachmanides explains:

Ongoing Jewish tradition reflects these prophecies. The Midrash explains that during the days of Elijah the Prophet, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel led the Jews astray and, among other things, in rebellion against the mitzvah of Bris Milah. This distressed Elijah, and he decreed that the heavens should withhold rain. Seeing this, God reassured Elijah that Jews would recommit to Bris Milah and remain committed to it forever, regardless of how far they would stray.

God then appointed Elijah as the ongoing "Angel of Circumcision" to witness the Jews fulfilling the Bris. This is why we designate a chair for Elijah at every Bris.

At the time these prophecies were made, they must have surely sounded strange. After all, who would have thought that the one mitzvah to withstand assimilation would be that which imposes elective surgery on a

helpless child? Yet incredibly, these prophecies have found fulfillment in recent times.

As Dr. Peter C. Remondino, one of San Diego's most active and well-known physicians during the turn of the 20th century, observed:

## **THE MARK OF A JEW**

All this said, we are still left to wonder, "Why Bris?" Couldn't God have chosen a less intrusive symbol of faith -- like, Tefillin, or tzitzit, or a kippah?

To speak intelligently about Jewish symbols, we ought to first explain what a Jew is. Exodus 19:6 defines the Jews as a "kingdom of priests and a holy people." According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, holy people are "moral masters over all of their energies and natural tendencies," with the product of that mastery being holiness itself.

This concept is uniquely Jewish. Religions have very different views about the sexual drive -- the strongest, and therefore most representative of "energies and natural tendencies." The pagans espoused excessive, uninhibited sexual expression. Other belief systems have a begrudging concept of marriage and condemn all sexual activity as inherently sinful.

Judaism, true to its calling to holiness, promotes a balance by which man can master and optimize -- not stifle or submit to -- his energies.

This dynamic is explained by Lord William Rees-Mogg, former editor of The Times of London:

*In the attempts which have been made to harness nuclear fusion -- the power of the hydrogen bomb rather than that of the atom bomb -- the problem which has so far defeated the scientists has been to control the energy of the reaction. Attempts have been made to hold the plasma of energy together, for only the briefest of periods, by wrapping it in a magnetic field from which it cannot break out. That wrapping is called a magnetic bottle.*

*In the same way, the energy of the Jewish people has been enclosed in a different type of container -- the law. That has acted as a bottle inside which this spiritual and intellectual energy could be held; only because it could be held has it been possible to make use of it. It has not merely exploded or been dispersed; it has been harnessed as a continuous power. If energy is not contained, it cannot be used over an indefinite period; uncontrolled energy is merely a big and usually destructive bang. In human nature, only disciplined energy is effective.*

Indeed, the Torah is the magnetic bottle that enables us to master our "energies and tendencies." It is the master plan that provides the discipline for bringing holiness to the world. And it is the Bris that serves as the permanent reminder of our commitment, at all times and under all circumstances, to that "chosen" task.

## **WAR OF THE WORLDS**

Bris represents the Jewish mission of ethics and holiness, a point that even our enemies have understood:

*It is true, we are barbarians. It is an honored title to us. I free humanity from the shackles of the soul, from the degrading suffering caused by the false vision called conscience and ethics. The Jews have inflicted two wounds on mankind: circumcision on its body and a conscience on its soul. These are Jewish inventions. The war for domination of the world is waged only between the two of us, between these two camps alone, the Germans and the Jews. Everything else is but deception.*

Thus spoke Adolf Hitler.

If World War Two was waged against "the Jewish inventions of circumcision and ethics," then we are still at war. And it is the parents of every newborn Jewish boy that stand at the frontlines of this battle, armed with the decision whether to choose Bris or not.

Our generation has been desperately trying to find ways to perpetuate the memory of the 6 million and eradicate that of their oppressors. The right choice will help strike a blow at the Nazi cause, to erect the most meaningful monument to our martyred millions.

What can we do? Build museums? Hold remembrance ceremonies?

More than anything, the answer is Bris Milah. There is something so central to Bris Milah that for its merit alone, we can be redeemed -- even if nothing else is kept. So trust your Jewish instinct. Recognize, and don't resist, the mystique of Milah, for as Spinoza observed, "it alone would preserve the nation forever."

Bris is the ultimate statement of Jewish identification. And that is something that cutting a carrot can never achieve.