

## Be Honest About the Bris: A Jewish Call for Greater Integrity

Posted by Max Buckler | Feb 1, 2022 | Community | 0



### AUTHOR



Max Buckler

Max Buckler is an expat and member of the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong. He currently serves as director of strategic initiatives for Bruchim.

As a founding member of [Bruchim](#), the new Jewish nonprofit advocating for Jews who hold critical views of *brit milah*, I seek to build bridges between those who continue to practice the traditional ritual and the growing number of Jews who have come to believe, as I do, that circumcision should be a personal decision. In this capacity, I enter into lots of Jewish discussions about the topic. I've had the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of Jewish thinkers — ranging from my own friends and family, to *mohels*, to world-class medical professionals and bioethicists, and to rabbis across the Jewish religious spectrum.

It's fascinating to me that in many, if not most, of these interactions, the conversation turns out to be the first critical Jewish examination of *brit milah* for the other party, and in some cases, it's even the first time they've thought deeply about it at all. *Brit milah* is supposed to be the covenantal act of the Jewish people. It's supposed to be important; it's an issue that raises ethical concerns, such as the nature of violence, children's rights and the boundaries between religious and personal freedoms, yet many attempt to defend it despite the fact they've never given it a second thought. My intention is to bring these conflicts into the light and discuss them for what they are because if the liberal Jewish community wishes to continue justifying this ancient, yet controversial ritual, it must do so with much more honesty.

Below are four considerations:

#### 1. ***Brit milah* is just as open to Jewish reinterpretation as all other mitzvot:**

Before getting into critiques of circumcision itself, a serious question: Why do we *need* to keep circumcising babies? Surely, it's not because we, in the liberal community, believe that we would be violating a literal pact between a person named Abraham and all-powerful God?

According to the most recent Pew data, more than 70 percent of Jews don't believe in God, at least not as a specific, personal deity like an old man in a chair.<sup>[1]</sup> Most Jews don't believe in a seven-day creation story, or that Noah was a real person who built a real boat. And yet, when it comes to circumcision, even many progressive rabbis still treat this tradition as if they're Bible literalists! As if circumcision on the eighth day is somehow an immutable tradition, while everything else is up for interpretation.

For the progressive Jewish community to cling to infantcircumcision as static, as if there is no way to reconcile the serious ethical problems with circumcision, is a low-integrity defense. There are myriad commandments and concepts in the Torah that have been drastically reinterpreted in progressive spaces.

Judaism can be said to value questions more than answers. This ties back all the way to Abraham, Rebecca and Moses questioning God in the Torah, and to the Mishnah and Talmud, wherein Rabbinic Judaism cemented itself as an interpretative tradition. No matter the generation and no matter the issue on the table, the Jewish people have never limited themselves purely to the customs of the prior generation. While the Jewish people have proved throughout the ages to be quite stubborn when it comes to retaining our distinctive cultural identity, on the other hand, we have also proven quite *flexible* when it comes to defining for ourselves what that cultural identity actually looks like. We have lived up to our namesake *Yisrael — One who wrestles with God*.

It is difficult, it takes courage, but if we have a problem with a tradition, we can change it.

- **Placing extreme significance on maleness conflicts with egalitarian values.**

I was recently at a Shabbat dinner with a group of very progressive friends where the discussion centered around gender — specifically, the recent trend of *gender reveal parties*. Everyone at the table agreed that they disliked these events. In fact, several friends even thought they were unethical since they are based on a warped sense of gender that assumes that the genital characteristics of the baby are determinative of what they will be like and how they will be raised. Pink for girls, blue for boys, etc. This group of friends agreed they did not want to gender a baby in such a way.

"Well," I said, "what do you think a *bris* is?"

Stunned silence.

We need to be honest about what *brit milah* literally is — a religious ritual that sanctifies penises, which sanctifies *maleness* at birth. And importantly, *brit milah* remains a distinctive marker of the traditional Jewish preferential status placed on maleness. For thousands of years, children born with penises were elevated in the community while those without received barely any welcome at all. As Jewish sociologist Michael S. Kimmel once reasoned, circumcision "is the single moment of the reproduction of patriarchy ... the moment when male privilege and entitlement is passed from one generation to the next ... "[2]

Even when considering *brit milah* through the most charitable lens, it's challenging to reconcile this with modern egalitarian values — values the liberal Jewish community has come to champion in spite of the traditional Jewish patriarchy in which men are the ones who count. As much as it may be a physically harmful sacrifice, *brit milah* is also a ritual that places penises at a premium. Baby *boys* are brought into the covenant of Abraham. Not girls. Ceremonies that have been developed in the last few decades for those assigned female at birth, such as the *brit bat* or *simchat bat* — while crucial in elevating those who were formerly left out entirely — are too often still viewed as secondary and also



remain bound to traditional gender norms. As long as we practice infant circumcision, it means we are looking at our children's bodies, specifying that one type of child is a candidate for our traditional covenantal act while another is not, and we are assigning which-is-which based purely on what type of genitals they have.

If we're serious about unwinding ourselves from patriarchy, then we need to reckon with the ways in which this inherently gendered practice creates a barrier to change. In my view, the best way to promote egalitarianism in this area would be to move towards a totally gender-neutral, non-genital focused ceremony such as *brit atifah*, a covenant of wrapping (developed by Rabbi Elyse Wechterman).[3]

- **Minimizing the harms is disingenuous and willfully ignorant.**

Circumcision hurts the baby.

The foreskin is a healthy body part. It is no more "extra" to the penis than the pinky is to the hand, or as Jewish novelist Gary Shteyngart recently noted in *The New Yorker*, than the eyelid is to the eye.[4] In a *brit milah*, we are cutting off part of a child's genitals in an ancient religious blood ritual, yet our collective reaction in the Jewish community most often takes the form of jokes — jokes that serve to minimize not only the permanent loss of a body part, but of the child's immediate suffering. If you've been to a *bris*, then you know the jokes; they're often the same.

"Does the mohel get paid a fee? Or does she just get to keep the tips?" — "After my circumcision, I couldn't walk for a year!" — "I asked the rabbi when the *bris* was starting, and he said, 'It won't be long now!' " — "Looks like the kid is *taking it like a man*."

I'm all too familiar with how natural it can feel to make these kinds of jokes, since I used to make them myself. During my time in Kaskaset, Binghamton University's Jewish a cappella group, I even had a solo in which I sang the lyric, "Abraham's really famous, no he ain't no yutz! He even circumcised himself and that takes guts!" And it always got a laugh.

We tend to joke about genital cutting because it is uncomfortable. And in an attempt to address that discomfort, we also minimize the act in other ways. It's common to hear that the surgery is "just a quick little snip," and that "the baby barely cries." But what is heard from the child nearly every time is a brutal, primal scream of pain, which almost always occurs at the moment when the *mohel* inserts the probe or hemostat into the genital opening. In a 2020 *Tablet* article titled "Why We Didn't Circumcise Our Second Son," Jewish mother Yagi Morris described it as "a scream you never forget."[5]

And what about the permanent loss of the body part itself? In the Jewish community, the physical significance of the human foreskin is perpetually trivialized to the point that most Jewish people have no concept of what it is, does or even looks like. This is a major problem. If one can't answer the most basic question of "what is a foreskin?" then how can one confidently discuss this topic at all?

The difference between a circumcised and a whole, natural penis is significant. There are several plainly apparent differences in the mechanisms and attributes of the natural penis compared to the circumcised one. And I'm not talking about some speculative quantification of nerve endings; I'm talking basic functional differences, noticeable to the naked eye. One striking example: the natural, intact penis's glans head is **self-lubricating**, much like its analogous anatomical structure, the clitoral hood. A natural penis's glans appears glossy and red, like the inside of the human cheek. Circumcision causes the glans to permanently dry out, which leads to chafing, and which more often requires synthetic lubricant for comfortable masturbation and sex.

The baby experiences excruciating pain and trauma at this event. The penis is permanently modified from its healthy, intact state. We leave a scar on the baby's genitals for the rest of their life. Denying this is dishonest.

- **Infant Circumcision Challenges the Value of Consent**

If we vaunt the importance of non-consensual circumcision, then we are making a statement, as a community, that we are *anti-consent*.

There's common misconception about the traditional Jewish circumcision. It's not that the commandment is for a person to *be circumcised*; it's specifically for the parent to circumcise their child. The father receives the *mitzvah* on the eighth day and keeps the covenant, not the baby.

This is not just in conflict with the values of consent and bodily integrity, it's actively opposed to those values, **saying that, when it comes to our own bodies, informed consent is not a Jewish value**. And to be honest, from a traditional perspective, it isn't. In the Torah, women and children are considered property; it is encouraged for men to take wives, to take slaves and for everyone to obey the man as the head of the household. All that awful stuff that no one in the progressive community thinks anymore ... by adhering to *brit milah* on the eighth day, we're still enforcers of it.

Last year, the State of Texas enacted the Texas Heartbeat Act, which makes abortion illegal once a fetal heartbeat can be detected in a pregnancy. In response, the liberal community was driven into a fury. The vast majority of Jews support personal autonomy when it comes to abortion — that the person

whose body will be impacted is the ultimate decision-maker.[6] I, too, am a fervent supporter of a person's right to choose when it comes to reproductive rights, so I struggle when it comes to reconciling this value against the community's adherence to infant circumcision — the act of permanently modifying another person's body without their consent.

How can the progressive Jewish community remain committed to vaunting gender equality, to fighting for reproductive rights, to opposing sexual abuse ... while continuing to forcibly alter our children's healthy genitals?

## **Conclusion**

As the popularity of in-hospital circumcision declines,[7] the ethical debate around the religious practice will only grow in intensity. At present, many official Jewish responses to reasonable criticisms have been outright dismissive, which is disappointing, and increasingly lacks integrity. Going forward, the progressive rabbinate will have to contend with the ritual for what it is: not as a medical or cosmetic procedure, but as the foundational act of Jewish patriarchy marked by a blood sacrifice performed on a child.

I offer the following challenge: Get together with someone you trust and have an honest conversation about this topic.

Do a parent's religious beliefs outweigh a child's right to genital autonomy, or should everyone be free to make this decision for themselves? Is the commandment to cut a child's genitals the word of a literal deity? Does the fact that we've been doing it for thousands of years justify its continuation? How do we relate to circumcision through an egalitarian lens? When these surgeries are botched, leading to further injury and sometimes even death, then what does this mean for our conception of *piku'ah nefesh*? [8] These are the relevant complex questions.



---

[1] <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/11/10-key-findings-about-jewish-americans/>

[2] Michael S. Kimmel. The Kindest Un-Cut: Feminism, Judaism, and My Son's Foreskin. *Tikkun*, 16(3), May/June 2001.

[3] <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/brit-atifah-jewish-baby-naming-home>

[4] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/11/a-botched-circumcision-and-its-aftermath>

[5] <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/why-we-didnt-circumcise-our-second-son>

[6] <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/jewish/views-about-abortion/>

[7] [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/circumcision\\_2013/circumcision\\_2013.htm#:~:text=Over%20the%2032%2Dyear%20period,dropping%20to%2041.0%25%20in%201989.](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/circumcision_2013/circumcision_2013.htm#:~:text=Over%20the%2032%2Dyear%20period,dropping%20to%2041.0%25%20in%201989.)

[8] Though rare, death is among the surgical risks present in circumcision. The rabbis were aware of this, as noted in Yevamot 64b: [https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.64b.9?lang=bi&namedEntity=%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%92-\(ambiguous\)&namedEntityText=%D7%A8%D6%B7%D7%91%D6%BC%D6%B8%D7%9F%20%D7%A9%D7%81%D6%B4%D7%9E%D6%B0%D7%A2%D7%95%D6%B9%D7%9F%20%D7%91%D6%BC%D6%B6%D7%9F%20%D7%92%D6%BC%D6%B7%D7%9E%D6%B0%D7%9C%D6%B4%D7%99%D7%90%D6%B5%D7%9C&with=Lexicon&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.64b.9?lang=bi&namedEntity=%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%92-(ambiguous)&namedEntityText=%D7%A8%D6%B7%D7%91%D6%BC%D6%B8%D7%9F%20%D7%A9%D7%81%D6%B4%D7%9E%D6%B0%D7%A2%D7%95%D6%B9%D7%9F%20%D7%91%D6%BC%D6%B6%D7%9F%20%D7%92%D6%BC%D6%B7%D7%9E%D6%B0%D7%9C%D6%B4%D7%99%D7%90%D6%B5%D7%9C&with=Lexicon&lang2=en)

[9] In a more recent case in December 2021, a toddler in Australia died due to complications incurred during their circumcision. This was a preventable death since there was no medical indication for the child to receive surgery. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/dec/09/toddler-dies-and-baby-brother-in-serious-condition-after-circumcisions-at-perth-clinic#:~:text=Australia%20news-,Toddler%20dies%20and%20baby%20brother%20left%20in,after%20circumcisions%20at%20Perth%20clinic&text=A%20toddler%20has%20died%20and,not%20being%20treated%20as%20suspicious.>

***Read more about the work of Bruchim here.***

## New Startup Challenges Circumcision Status Quo

Posted by Evolve | Feb 1, 2022 | Community | 0 ●

**Bruchim** is a startup nonprofit that advocates for Jewish families opting out of circumcision and others who object to the practice. Bruchim holds that forgoing circumcision is fully compatible with traditional Jewish values and full Jewish engagement.

The organization provides opportunities for Jewish people to connect and engage around the historically taboo topic of infant circumcision. These opportunities take the form of gatherings, text studies and *divrei Torah*. Bruchim also actively seeks out forums in which to have conversations about Jewish circumcision, working to connect new and emerging thinkers with publications and podcasters.

Much of Bruchim's current work focuses on promoting the inclusion of non-circumcising families within existing Jewish institutions. Many such families would like to participate in synagogue life, preschools, summer camps, JCCs and the like, but there is often a perception that circumcision is required. Bruchim invites Jewish institutions to examine how they can send clear messages of inclusion to these families.

### Does Circumcision Status Matter?

Most Jewish institutions and clergy don't exclude based on circumcision status. According to Jewish law, those who are not circumcised are still fully Jewish. Indeed, there's no basis in Jewish law for denying an intact (not circumcised) person access to religious life, including *b'mitzvah*. Despite this, some rabbis/synagogues *do* require circumcision for full participation. This has contributed to confusion and concern about whether a child's lack of circumcision will be a barrier to their Jewish involvement.



Families with intact children often have unique concerns, such as:

- Will our rabbi officiate at a birth ceremony that doesn't include circumcision? If our rabbi says no, or we are not affiliated, can we find a rabbi in our area willing to officiate?
- If our child is in diapers or needs help toileting, does daycare staff know how to care for the natural anatomy? (Specifically, young children's foreskins should never be retracted for cleaning as the foreskin is naturally fused to the head of the penis.)
- Will our child be allowed to enroll in Hebrew school and become a *b'mitzvah* in a particular congregation?
- If we choose not to share our child's circumcision status and someone finds out, will our child be asked to leave camp or school, or told they can't become a *b'mitzvah*?

### **Reconstructing 'Bris'**

Bruchim also encourages families who elect not to circumcise to hold covenantal birth ceremonies, affirming Jewish connection and continuity rather than simply skipping circumcision. Our Rabbinic Advisory Council includes those who have pioneered and routinely officiate at such ceremonies, including Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, whose ceremony "Brit Atifah" can be found on *Ritualwell.com*.

Rebecca Wald and Lisa Braver Moss

Co-Founders, Bruchim

**Please visit [www.bruchim.online](http://www.bruchim.online) to learn more about this organization and its many endeavors.**