

An open letter to the Danish Prime Minister, translated from the original Danish version.  
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## **Dear Mette Frederiksen: Forced circumcision of minors is in violation of human rights and Judaism - open letter from the United States**

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by David Balashinsky

CIRCUMCISION // DEBATE - The citizens' proposal to ban forced, non-therapeutic circumcision of individuals under the age of 18 is being considered in the Folketing. In this open letter to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, activist David Balashinsky, who is himself a Jew and circumcised without his consent, writes that the Prime Minister's opposition to the proposal is based on erroneous assumptions about Jews and Judaism. Forced circumcision violates Jewish ethics and morals as well as contemporary human rights, he believes. A growing movement within Judaism also opposes the custom and insists that no one has a right to cut, damage or maim a healthy part of a child's body because of religion or culture. The only person who has the right to have his genitals changed permanently is that person himself.

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*This post is an expression of the writer's attitude.  
All views that can be expressed within the framework of criminal law and  
press ethics are welcome, and you can also send us your opinion [here](#).*

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*An open letter to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen in support of the citizens' proposal to introduce an age limit of 18 years for non-therapeutic circumcision in Denmark.*

Dear Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen,

In Denmark – a nation known for its strong democratic and progressive traditions that historically defended Jewish Danes during the Holocaust – a citizens' proposal regarding legislation of a minimum age of 18 for non-therapeutic circumcision two years ago reached 50,000 signatures. If the citizen proposal is adopted, it will give all Danish boys (not just the Jews, but all boy children) the same legal protection against genital mutilation that girls in Denmark have had since 2003 and girls in my own country, the USA, have had since 1996.

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**For as long as Jews have practiced circumcision,  
there has been just as long intense Jewish opposition to this practice**

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With reference to this proposal, you published a [statement](#) five months ago stating that you were against the proposal:



English Translation:

Appeal

The debate about circumcision appears in Denmark from time to time. I understand the starting point as such. That the right to decide over one's own body applies to everyone.

But at the same time, the discussion about circumcision of boys must not become a single issue torn apart by our European history .... See more

At the same time, in the post on Facebook, you confirmed Denmark's promise never to allow persecution of its Jewish citizens. The last part of your statement, the confirmation of the promise, I welcome, not only because I oppose anti-Semitism in principle and in general, but because I myself am a Jew.

As a member from the birth of this widely branched ethnic group that has had to endure persistent inhuman persecution, I feel a pronounced kinship with all other Jews. Therefore, I perceive an attack on Jews, no matter where, as an attack on myself personally.

## Universal standard of justice

I mean, like Dr. Martin Luther King put it that “Injustice everywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. As I understand him, King meant by this that if society allows injustice on a single point, it loses the moral authority to oppose injustice in all other areas. Injustice is thus in a way legitimized, and once that happens, we are all threatened by its further progress.

Therefore, all people have a personal interest in the existence of a single, universal standard of justice. In the same way, all people have a personal interest in fighting injustice, no matter where it occurs and no matter who is exposed to it.



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I see in no way a contradiction between my Jewish identity and my commitment to the ideal of universal justice. On the contrary, they are inherent in each other. I cannot separate the ethics and values that are at the core of my Judaism from my belief in universal justice.

Therefore, it is not because I am Jewish, but *because* I am, that I believe that bodily integrity is a human right for all children – no matter what child it is. That is also why I strongly support legislation that will ban non-therapeutic circumcision of anyone under 18 years of age.

## Growing Jewish resistance to circumcision

This brings me to your opinion. Although the attitudes expressed are noble, they are based on several misconceptions. The biggest is that all Jews practice circumcision. That is simply not true. Jews all over the world – [including in Israel](#) – are rejecting forced circumcision in ever-increasing numbers.

In 2016, [anthropologist](#) Leonard B. Glick estimated that one in six Jewish boys born in the United States remained intact. This number is about something only increased since then. The number of Jewish American parents who have rejected this practice may not seem large, but it should be borne in mind that with 5.7 million Jews in the United States, there are almost as many Jews as in Israel (6.15 million). Glick’s estimate is therefore relevant, even if it is only approximately accurate.

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**There is a growing movement within Judaism  
that wants to end the harmful and blatantly unethical  
practice of forced circumcision of newborns**

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This development is not solely due to declining religious engagement. Jews deliberately and out of conscience reject a practice that inflicts severe pain on their newborn sons and that irreversibly involves damage and scars to the penis. But do not just take my word for it. Visit the [Beyond the Bris](#) website and read what Jews who oppose forced circumcision say in their own words.

## Judaism and circumcision can be separated

This underscores yet another fundamentally erroneous assumption that you make: that no matter how many Jews practice circumcision, and in whatever form, there is something fundamentally essential Jewish about circumcision – as if Judaism and circumcision are inseparable.

But there has been Jewish opposition to circumcision since it was imposed on us by fanatical priests in the sixth century BCE (after the Babylonian exile and the return of the Jews 60 years later). There was opposition from Hellenistic Jews, who were desperately trying to reverse the damage they had suffered by resorting to what is today referred to as “foreskin restoration.”

It was hotly debated during the *Jewish Enlightenment* in the 19th century, and it has been the subject of controversy among Jews throughout our diaspora history. Just as long as Jews have practiced circumcision, just as long there has been intense Jewish opposition to this practice.



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You, on the other hand, seem to take it for granted that the Jewish approach to circumcision practices is cast in concrete. By passing on this myth in your statement, you are to some extent adopting a stereotype about Jews: namely, that all Jews think alike because they are Jews.

By not acknowledging the existence of a living Jewish opposition to male circumcision, your statement helps to marginalize and effectively silence the Jewish voices that have spoken out against and continue to protest the perpetuation of this harmful, inhuman and anachronistic violation of children's human rights.

## **Misconceptions and a misunderstood defense**

Of course, it is not fair to blame you for your erroneous assumptions. They are understandable in view of the statements against an age limit for circumcision that Jews themselves have made.

For example, the Jewish press [reports](#) that the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has spoken directly to you to thank you for your “firm position as a defender of Jewish society and the ancient tradition of circumcision.”

The Times of Israel [quotes](#) the chairman of the Jewish Community in Denmark, Henri Goldstein, to describe the proposed age limit as “the worst threat [to Denmark's Jewish citizens] since World War II”.

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**Exposing a child to a non-medically justified operation  
that irreversibly changes the child's genitals  
violates the child's right to bodily integrity**

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When a similar proposal on the age limit was considered in the Icelandic parliament, Alþingi, two years ago, Jonathan A. Greenblatt, the director of the *Anti-Defamation League*, wrote a [letter](#) to the committee to speak against the proposal.

The *Anti-Defamation League* (ADL) is an organization that I admire and support, but which unfortunately has a morally blind spot when it comes to circumcision.

After falsely (and absurdly) claiming that circumcision “is universally practiced by all families who identify as Jewish,” Greenblatt stated that “such a ban would mean that no Jewish families could grow up in Iceland, and that it is impossible for a Jewish community to remain in a country that forbids the religious circumcision ceremony, *brit milah*”, which means the *circumcision covenant*.

What Jewish opponents of forced child circumcision want is that you acknowledge that Netanyahu, Goldstein, and Greenblatt do not speak for all Jews, and that they certainly do not speak for me.

### **Who are we opponents of forced circumcision?**

As mentioned, there is a growing movement within Judaism that wants to end the harmful and blatantly unethical practice of forced circumcision of newborns. The purpose of this open letter is to acquaint you with this movement and explain why Jewish opposition to forced circumcision is just as authentically Jewish and just as fundamental to the values of Judaism as its defenders claim *brit milah* is.

So who are we Jewish opponents of forced circumcision, and what do we believe in?

We are men and women from different parts of life and different parts of the world, who, however, have two things in common: We identify ourselves as Jews, and we are unwavering in our opposition to forced sex surgery.

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**Jewish opponents of circumcision reject the implicit idea that forced circumcision is what makes a person Jewish.**

**A Jewish girl is no less Jewish than her brother**

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Some of us are secular Jews who identify as Jews ethnically and culturally, while others are practicing Jews for whom Judaism is central to their religious beliefs and values.

Some of us have been subjected to circumcision and others have not. Some of us were circumcised in connection with the religious *brit milah*, while others – primarily those of us who are from the United States – were circumcised simply because we were born into a time and place where circumcision had become a routine, medical part of the birth.

Those of us who have been subjected to circumcision maintain not only that we were physically harmed by it, but also that we were denied the fundamental right to bodily autonomy, in that we were denied a choice about the shape of the body itself. We absolutely do not reject our Jewish origins, and those of us who are religious do not reject the Jewish faith. We reject one, and only one thing: involuntary circumcision.

### **Circumcision is not essential in Judaism**

Jewish opposition to involuntary circumcision rests on a foundation composed of ethical and religious beliefs:

First of all, there is the simple fact that exposing a child to a non-medically justified operation that irreversibly changes the child's genitals violates the child's right to bodily integrity. All children – whether boys, girls or intersex children – have an inviolable right to grow up with the genitals they were born with until they decide for themselves otherwise.

Jewish opponents of circumcision reject the implicit idea that forced circumcision is what makes a person Jewish. A Jewish girl is no less Jewish than her brother. And a Jewish boy born to Jewish parents is no less Jewish just because he has not had the most sensitive part of his penis cut off. Being a Jew is a product of one's genes, one's heritage, family life and upbringing, of one's values, traditions and culture.

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**Involuntary circumcision has long been on a collision course with modern society, especially as the world has evolved towards a more universal recognition of fundamental human rights**

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Jewish opponents of circumcision also reject the claim that ritual circumcision is essential to practicing the Jewish faith. More and more religious Jews are replacing *brit milah* with *brit shalom*, meaning the *covenant of peace*.

*Brit shalom* is a religious ceremony that serves exactly the same spiritual and community-inclusive purpose as *brit milah*, but without the pain, without the injury, without the blood, without the trauma, without the permanent loss of erogenous tissue and without human rights violations.

Nor is circumcision essential to the survival of Judaism as a cohesive religion. Jewish women are not forced into circumcision. They are no less spiritual, and they do not perceive themselves as less loved by Him (or Her), whom they see as the Creator of the universe – than their Jewish fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons who are circumcised.

There are also countless intact Jewish boys and men in the world today. Nor are they less spiritually oriented or less devoted than their Jewish brethren, who were subjected to forced circumcision only eight days after they were born.

Judaism is the sublime manifestation of the spiritual and religious beliefs of the Jewish people. To claim that it can ultimately be reduced to the shape of a penis is not just an insult to Judaism, but a degradation of it.





Photo: carol\_austin1, Pixabay

## **Circumcision is against Jewish principles**

My perspective on all of this is secular, but I would also like to share with you the perspective of a deeply religious Jewish woman who has written and spoken exhaustively on this subject.

In her essay “[Circumcision: A Jewish Inquiry](#)” (Midstream, January 1992), Lisa Braver Moss puts into words the many ways in which *brit milah* actually contradicts basic principles of Judaism.

Braver Moss writes that all the arguments against involuntary circumcision “originate from Jewish principles”:

*“Concern for (...) infant pain is an echo of the Jewish prohibition against inflicting pain on living beings. Resistance to physical mutilation is based on the Torah's showdown with pagan customs such as tattooing and art-tattooing. Also concern about medical risks is rooted in halacha (Jewish law): Any medical intervention that is merely potentially life-threatening is halachically forbidden. And the idea of protecting children's rights makes one think of the Jewish principle that the poor and weak should be treated on an equal footing with the rich and powerful.”*

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**Again and again we hear that it is the social pressure that new parents are exposed to from *their* parents, relatives and circle of friends that is the direct reason why this harmful practice continues.**

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It is obvious that Jewish opponents of involuntary circumcision reject the claim that this practice is essential for the continued existence of the Jewish people as a people. The Jewish people existed long before circumcision of newborns became a religious mandate. We existed even longer before (and even before the beginning of our era) that circumcision was extended to the radical amputation of the foreskin (*peri'ah*) that is practiced today.

And we will continue to exist long after circumcision ceases – just like other religious precepts that are no longer followed by the overwhelming majority of Jews (such as the ritual bath after menstruation), and just as we exist without the long-rejected and rejected customs of polygamy, death by stoning and slavery.

Yet we see a recurring warning from Jewish opponents of this and similar legislative proposals reflecting their fear that a minimum age of 18 for non-therapeutic circumcision would be an existential threat to Judaism and the Jewish people.

### **Circumcision collides with human rights**

Therefore, we see exaggerated statements from Mr. Goldstein that the proposed legislation will be “the worst threat since World War II”. But in contrast to this, many Jewish opponents of circumcision are of the opinion that continuing the custom of forced circumcision is an even greater threat.

In my work as an advocate for the right to bodily autonomy, I have more than once received comments from people describing themselves as “former Jews” who, solely because of their anger over what was done to their genitals as infants, have rejected not only the *brit milah*, but the Jewish faith itself and their own Jewish identity.

Forced circumcision has far from linked these men to their religion and their people, but on the contrary has been the reason why they have been driven away.

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**After all, how can we claim to support fundamental human rights when we deny our own sons these rights?**

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There is every reason to believe that this trend will not just continue, but will intensify. Involuntary circumcision has long been on a collision course with modern society, especially as the world has evolved towards a more universal recognition of fundamental human rights. We are now witnessing this collision and its unfortunate results in real time. One can no longer reconcile *brit milah* with contemporary perceptions of self-determination and the inviolable physical boundaries of the individual.

It is therefore inevitable that more and more Jews will be driven away from the Jewish faith and Jewish identity in general if they are made to feel that their acceptance of forced circumcision is a condition that cannot be negotiated if they want to stay in the fold.

In the modern world, then, there is a growing risk that a continued forced circumcision of newborn Jewish boys will act as a wedge that alienates the Jewish men they grow up to become from their families and their community.



Photo: Michal Jarmoluk, Pixabay

## **Circumcision takes place due to social pressure**

At the same time, the social pressure on Jewish parents to have *their* sons circumcised increasingly acts as a wedge between their duty as parents to protect their sons from harm and pain – and their sense of loyalty to the Jewish community.

Again and again we hear that it is the social pressure that new parents are exposed to from their parents, relatives and circle of friends that is the direct reason why this harmful practice continues. One can only guess how many new Jewish parents have been pressured against their natural father and mother instincts to let their sons undergo circumcision.

Braver Moss describes this conflict, remembering her own reluctance to have her two sons circumcised, as follows:

*“I was deeply in doubt about my decision. But because open discussion of brit milah seems to be frowned upon in the Jewish community, my doubts remained private and without consolation (I had not yet initiated a dialogue with other Jews questioning brit milah).*

*Therefore, the ritual that should have inspired feelings of Jewish community instead produced a sense of loss and alienation. In my heart, I do not believe that God wanted me to feel this loneliness, and I do not believe that God wants me to cause my children pain.”*

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**Even if the right to *practice* one’s religion can be considered fundamental, that right is still limited by the *even more basic* right of all other persons not to suffer physical harm.**

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The personal accounts of Braver Moss and of Jewish men protesting against what was done to their bodies undermine the claims of our Jewish comrades such as Greenblatt from the ADL that the result of an age limit of 18 years for non-therapeutic circumcision will be that Jews become *personae non grata* in any country that imposes such a restriction.

As I have described above, Greenblatt, when considering similar legislation, stated that “it is inconceivable that a Jewish community could remain in a country that bans *brit milah*”. But this claim completely writes off the thousands of Jews who detest *brit milah* and will happily let their family live a Jewish life in a country where the forced circumcision of minors is prohibited by law.

Contrary to the claim that an age limit of 18 years will lead to an emigration of Jews, such an age limit may paradoxically just as well have the opposite effect: An immigration of Jews who will be happy to let their families grow up in a country where, with the law behind them, they can reject social pressure to have their children circumcised.

## **Circumcision is against Jewish ethics**

Several of the arguments I have just put forward are *negative* arguments – explanations as to why an age limit of 18 years for non-therapeutic circumcision would not pose an existential threat to Judaism and the Jewish people.

But there is also a strong *affirmative* argument against involuntary circumcision, which comes from Jewish ethics. Jewish measures to stop ritual circumcision and all non-therapeutic interventions on healthy children on genitals are rooted in the concept of *tikkun olam*, meaning *the repair of the world*. This concept, which can be traced back to the third century and perhaps earlier, appears in the *Mishnah* (a compendium of rabbinic teachings) and basically means that Jews have an obligation to work for social and universal justice.

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**The proposed 18-year age limit should therefore not be seen as an attack on Jews, but simply as the inevitable and logical consequence of the rising universal standards of human and children's rights.**

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This means that we have a duty to defend fundamental human rights. And because there is no right that is more fundamental than the right to bodily integrity and autonomy, Jews who take the moral significance of *tikkun olam* seriously must oppose any practice that involves traditional pruning of a child's genitals.

That is why we are opposed to all forms of non-therapeutic circumcision – no matter who is exposed to it – and that is why we feel obliged to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. This, of course, includes infant Jewish boys.

After all, how can we claim to support fundamental human rights when we deny our own sons these rights? This is also why, as I wrote at the beginning of this letter, our active opposition to forced circumcision does not exist *in spite of* our Jewish beliefs and values, but *because of* it.



Photo: Russ Burnham, Pixabay

## **The right to bodily autonomy is fundamental**

It is, of course, inevitable that a proposal to establish an 18-year age limit for non-therapeutic circumcision will be met with the argument that such a restriction would be an unacceptable violation of the right of individuals and minority communities to practice their religion.

But the right to subject an infant or a child to a ritual circumcision is certainly *not* a right covered by the right to practice one's religion. While the freedom to *believe* (or not believe, for that matter) is fundamental and unlimited, it does not follow that the right to *act* is also unlimited.

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**In the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Denmark in 1991), Article 37, para. a, it reads that no child may be “subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”**

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It should be obvious that the freedom to practice one's religion does not imply the right to act in a way that harms others. Even if the right to *practice* one's religion can be considered

fundamental, that right is still limited by the *even more basic* right of all other persons not to suffer physical harm.

No exceptions should be made to this human rights foundation of any religion, not even ours. It is not a radical point of view, and certainly not an anti-Semitic one. On the contrary. This view of the balance between one person's religious freedom and the other's bodily autonomy is merely an expression of today's norms, of fundamental human rights and human dignity. No one has the right to cut, damage or maim any healthy part of a child's body because of religion or culture. The only person who has the right to have his genitals changed permanently is that person himself.

### **A ban on circumcision is not anti-Semitic**

I understand the social context (and appreciate the good intentions) in which your opposition to the proposed legislation stems. I can assure you that Jews do not need to be reminded of the history of anti-Semitism and the persecution of our ancestors through so much of European history. It is well known that this persecution manifested itself, among other things, in a ban on circumcision in the past, and that these bans, when they were introduced, were part of clearly anti-Semitic measures.

It is therefore entirely understandable that one hears – or thinks one hears – gloomy echoes of Europe's dark anti-Semitic past in the current attempts to ban forced circumcision of minors. This is especially the case due to the alarming resurgence of nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism that has been a reality on both sides of the Atlantic over the last many years.

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**By making a common front *with* the Jews who defend forced circumcision, you are at the same time making a front *against* the many Jews who are opposed to it.**

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But the ban on circumcision from previous centuries, which had an explicit anti-Jewish origin, is fundamentally different from the current efforts to ban involuntary sex surgery for all children, and not just boys, but also girls and intersex children. The proposed 18-year age limit should therefore not be seen as an attack on Jews, but simply as the inevitable and logical consequence of the rising universal standards of human rights and the rights of children.

### **Prohibit circumcision for anyone under 18 years of age**

In the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Denmark in 1991), Article 37, para. a, it reads that no child may be “subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading

treatment or punishment.” An 18-year age limit for non-therapeutic circumcision will only be an inclusion that should have been introduced a long time ago, under the already existing legislation that protects girls in Denmark and large parts of the world.

It should also be borne in mind that the purpose of the proposed legislation is not to prohibit circumcision. It is to ban *involuntary* circumcision of children’s healthy genitals. There is nothing in the resolution that will prevent someone who has reached an age where he can make well-considered decisions about his own body from deciding to be circumcised. And this is exactly as it should be: it is *his* body, and that is why it must be *his* decision.

I began this open letter by stating that one of my goals is to make you aware of the fact that there is a large and growing movement among Jews seeking to put an end to all forced ritual circumcision. Another goal, of course, is to add my own voice – as a Jewish man and as one who was subjected to circumcision without giving consent – to the choir, which opposes the practice of forced circumcision.

First and foremost, my aim with this letter with all due respect is to inform you that no matter how good your intentions may be with your opposition to the bill that the Folketing is now considering, it is in fact more in support of an anachronistic and harmful practice that also meets resistance among many Jews than it is a support of the Jewish people.

By making a common front *with* the Jews who defend forced circumcision, you are at the same time making a front *against* the many Jews who are opposed to it. And thus also against the children – Jews and non-Jews alike – who fall victim to it.

Yours sincerely,

David Balashinsky