

Circumcision: Identity, Gender, and Power

by Miriam Pollack

June 27, 2011



"Isaac's Circumcision," as depicted in the Regensburg Pentateuch, Germany, c. 1300. Credit: Creative Commons/BecomingJewish.org.

Circumcision is seen as the central *mitzvah* (or commandment) of Judaism. Even for nonreligious Jews, circumcision continues to be perceived as the *sine qua non* of Jewish identity. And yet, unlike any other controversial topic that we Jews address, the subject of circumcision is not to be challenged. We can calmly discuss whether there is a G-d or no G-d, if G-d is masculine, feminine, or neuter, or whether homosexuals should become rabbis. Yet, questioning circumcision has been out of bounds. This taboo, in and of itself, is indicative of how strong the feelings are that surround this ancient rite, and how much lies below the surface, in the dark silence, where powerful forces have coalesced for thousands of years.

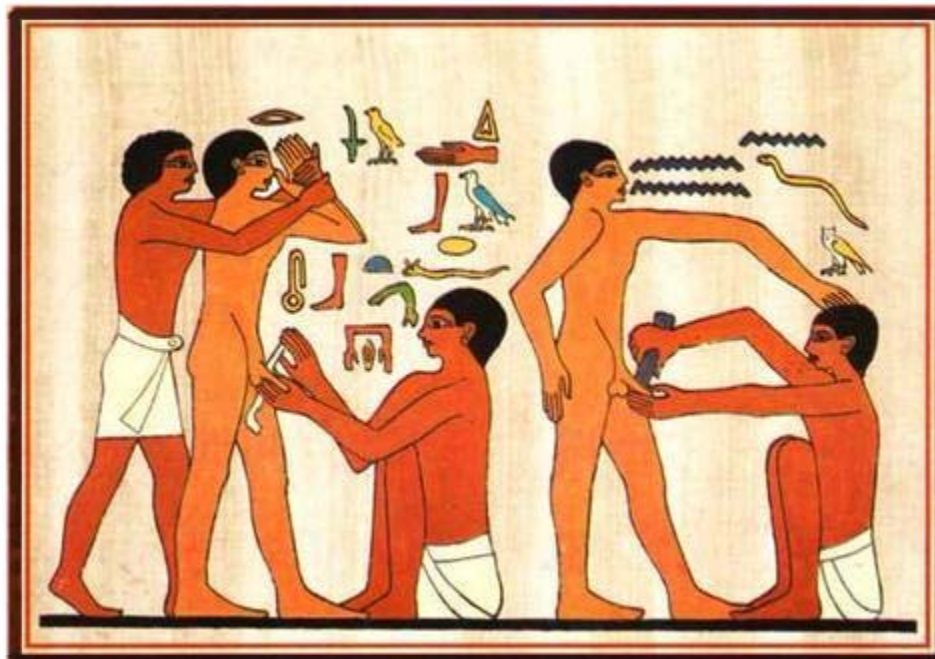
In order to attempt to understand the role of circumcision in Judaism, we need to explore not simply the biblical injunction found in Genesis 17:10-12. We are also obliged to focus on the functions that male genital cutting serves — socially, politically, psychologically, and individually — in order to see what and whose invisible needs are being fulfilled. Some of this information comes to us from scholarship; some can only be derived by examining the more subtle ramifications that result from the permanent alteration of male sexual organs.

Circumcision is hardly unique to Judaism. However, two elements distinguish the Jewish version of male genital cutting. First, in Judaism circumcision is expressed as the divine mandate, which seals and perpetuates the covenant, G-d's contractual and eternal relationship, with the Jewish people. Second, it is commanded to occur on the eighth day of the baby boy's life. Other than these unique identifiers, circumcision in Judaism shares much with rites of circumcision in other societies.

What I intend to do here is to show that cutting out a portion of a child's genitalia is fundamentally about gender and power. This is true whether the mandate is divine, tribal, secular, or pseudo-medical, and it pertains to little girls as well as little boys.

For those of us who have grown up with the normalcy of newborn male circumcision, this may seem like a bold, perhaps even outrageous statement. As Karen Ericksen Paige and Jeffrey M. Paige state in their book, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*, of the many theories advanced that attempt to explain the function of reproductive ritual, all agree that "the purposes of ritual are seldom if ever the object of conscious knowledge."

{{subscriber[2.00]}}



In ancient Egypt, circumcision was depicted as a rite of passage to adulthood. This drawing of a tomb painting from Ankhmahor in Saqqarah, Egypt, is the oldest known illustration of circumcision. Judaism took this painful rite of passage and placed it on the eighth day of the child's life to reduce the pain it involved. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

In each and every circumcising society, circumcision fulfills multiple unspoken social, political-tribal, and sexual needs. Paige and Paige claim that male circumcision originally functioned as a vehicle for attempting to achieve by means of ritual what could not be accomplished by means of political arrangement: that is, the defusing of possible competitive claims by male progeny for the same limited resources. In pre-industrial societies, where clan and tribal

loyalties formed the basis of economic and military security, the father's willingness to expose, sacrifice, and risk the tender organ of his son's procreative potential and the promise of his own male progeny to the knife was a dramatic demonstration to the elders (read that as male elders) of the father's allegiance to his tribe, a point noted by Leonard B. Glick in *Marked In Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America*. For this reason, circumcision is rarely a private surgical event. Rather, it is most commonly a communal ceremony accompanied by feast and celebration. Circumcision is, typically, a public declaration of alignment and thus not simply a social event, but a political statement as well. Without a whisper of the true hierarchical intentions of this ceremony, the outcome was always, and continues to be, a reassertion and institutionalization of a power structure based on gender.

The timing of male circumcision furthers the political/social relationships in less obvious ways. Even though

the age for circumcision ranges widely across all circumcising societies, what is most universally constant is the requirement that circumcision occur *before* marriage. This rule not only establishes the father's status in the male-dominant community, but it also works to achieve another salient objective: marriageable girls are entrained to view any uncircumcised man as undesirable, thereby ensuring the ethnic stability of the tribe. Girls know from an early age that they would risk social ostracism by mating with an uncircumcised male. By enculturating all group members to the necessity, normalcy, and moral superiority of circumcision, circumcising children not only reaffirms the political and social structure of the tribe, but also deepens the identity formation of the group. In this way, circumcision functions as a primary and potent entrainment for group bonding.

At a more muted level, circumcision does more than restructure identity based on contemporary and historical alliances of gender and power. On a meta-historical and biological level, circumcision acts to rename, remap, and invert our fundamental and primal relationship to the feminine. It is not coincidental that this ritual of tribal belonging necessitates the cutting, blood-letting, and altering — in a public ceremony — of the male child's sexual organ. As Glick points out, "Female blood contaminates, male blood sanctifies." Thus, he explains, "the shedding of male blood is an act of consecration." By creating historical and social linkage through this sacrificial ritual, circumcision functions to supersede and transcend our most primary maternal and biological system of relationship making patrilineal and patriarchal hierarchy appear "natural and inevitable," as Nancy Jay notes in her brilliant book, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*. Karen E. Fields, in the foreword to this same book, comments as follows:

In no other major religious institution is gender dichotomy more consistently important, across unrelated traditions, than it is in sacrifice. This is true not only of ancient and so-called primitive religions. Even among contemporary Christians, the more vividly the Eucharist is understood to be itself a real sacrifice, the greater the opposition to ordaining women. ... Consequently, a study of sacrifices focusing on gender leads to a new understanding: sacrifice as remedy for having been born of woman.

Similarly, in both the Hebrew Scriptures (Samuel 1:1) and the New Testament (Matthew 1:1-16 and Luke 3:23-38), by citing and repeating the lineage of male progenitors, legitimacy is established. The names of the mothers are usually unmentioned, irrelevant in a male-dominant culture.

Circumcision subverts the community's relationship to the life-giving principle of the feminine, not only by obliterating the woman's rightful identity in structuring the historical social network of her tribe, but also by trivializing and implicitly forbidding her to acknowledge, much less act upon, her deepest mammalian instincts to protect her newly birthed child. She knows, long before she has even conceived, that in order for her male child to be bonded to the male community — past, present and future — and to a male-imaged god, she must surrender him to the men with a knife to cut, wound and cause great pain to the very vulnerable sexual organ of this newly birthed child. Typically, a mother's feelings are dismissed or ridiculed. Her voice is silenced, even to herself.

Can it be a coincidence that we have language for the primary disempowerment for men, but not for women? When men are wounded in their primal potency of manhood, we say they have been "emasculated." When women are wounded in their primary potency of womanhood, we rarely notice. We have no language, no conceptual structure, no word to claim, much less attempt to heal the experience of core female disempowerment.

The wounding of circumcision irreversibly alters both mother and child: the mother is fractured at the base of her deepest womb-wisdom, which knows that she must protect her child no matter what; and the baby, shocked and traumatized, is fractured in his ability to absolutely trust the protective arms of the mother he has biologically and innately turned to as his primordial source of safety. From the beginning, masculinity is

now defined as that which must be cut off from the mother and all that is female, nurturing, and essential for human survival. In this way women are made complicit in this masculine-defined model of motherhood. Nancy Jay states, "Gender is therefore unequaled as a cornerstone of domination." Circumcision is the weapon that not only destroys a boy's foreskin but also deftly excises maternal authority over the ultimate well-being of her child. For if a woman is forbidden to feel entitled to her instinctive need to protect her newborn child, what feelings of her own can she ever trust?

In all circumcising societies, the sacrifice endured by the child is considered incidental to the social, political, and/or religious forces that require it. Typically, the extremity of the baby's pain is denied, ignored, or made the object of countless jokes. Because we Jews circumcise at eight days of age, when a child is easily overpowered and will not consciously recall this event, we deem those who circumcise children at later ages barbaric.

Many of us Jews are capable of witnessing a *bris*, that is, a ritual circumcision, looking into the eyes of the shocked, terrified, and shrieking baby, his head flailing and chin quivering, as his foreskin is severed from the delicate surface of the glans, cut, and crushed, and many of us conclude that this is no different from a routine infant protest of having a wet diaper changed.



Many Jewish families continue to view their observation of the Torah's circumcision command as a joyous occasion. Credit: Creative Commons/spilltojill.

We ignore or choose to be ignorant not only of what our hearts and wombs are telling us, but of the abundance of scientific data, replicated numerous times in the past several decades, that leave little question about the reality of the baby's experience. Heart and respiratory rates, as well as cortisol levels of babies undergoing circumcision point to the unambiguous conclusion that circumcision is excruciatingly painful to any baby. And, as is the case in other severe trauma at the neonatal level of development, the implications of lasting sequelae in the nervous system are serious (for the data behind this, check out *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*). Science has not yet turned its attention to identifying what these sequelae may be. Nevertheless, a modicum of psychological awareness is sufficient to suggest that issues of trust, fear, intimacy, sexuality, and gender relationships would be reasonable places for scholarly investigation. While traumatizing an infant is neither the stated nor the conscious intention of circumcision, it is an inevitable corollary of cutting a child's genital organs with possibly unspecified but hardly neutral alterations in the nervous system.

Although the fact is vigorously denied by the proponents of circumcision, the forcible removal of the foreskin also has profound and long-lasting effects for a male's sexual experience. Even during ancient times, when circumcision was less radical than it is today, the unique quality of the foreskin was understood. In biblical Judaism, circumcision consisted of cutting the foreskin that extended beyond the glans, leaving most of it intact. The full reaming and ablating of the entire foreskin, known as *periah*, was only innovated by rabbinic decree during Hellenic times in response to the practice of some Jewish men who were trying to avoid ridicule of their fellow Greek athletes by attempting to tie and stretch their foreskins so as not to look circumcised.

Both the Hellenic Jew Philo, in the first century CE, and Moses Maimonides, also known in the Jewish tradition as the Great Rambam in the twelfth century, wrote of the consequences of violently removing the most sensuous part of a man's sexual organ before he is old enough to understand or consent to this loss. Philo wrote in *Special Laws* that the "excision of pleasure [caused by circumcision] . . . is most necessary to our well-being." Many centuries later C.J. Cold and J.R. Taylor would confirm in the *British Journal of Urology* that the effects of circumcision on sexuality were, indeed, significant, when they discovered that there are over 20,000 specialized fine touch receptive cells in the human foreskin, which function to allow far greater nuanced sensation and control than any other penile tissue.

Additionally, the removal of the foreskin creates a secondary loss of sensitivity: not only has the most erogenous tissue of the male sexual organ been removed, but, as the man ages, the glans loses its mucosal covering, becomes dried out, and keratinizes over time. Typically by middle age the glans of the circumcised penis has lost much of its receptive potential and the man requires more abrasive stimulation to achieve orgasm. Often this is just as a woman is becoming peri-menopausal and experiencing decreasing vaginal lubrication. Typically, the problem is identified as the woman's entry into menopause; the contribution of the circumcised partner is rarely acknowledged. In subtle but profound ways, circumcision functions to diminish a man's pleasure potential, allowing his bond to his partner to be subordinated to his bond to his tribal male peers. Both Philo and Maimonides knew beyond a doubt that, as in all other aspects of biology, altering form alters function. Here is what Maimonides, the great philosopher, physician, and Talmudist, had to say in his famous book, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, written in 1160:

The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened. *The Sages, may their memory be blessed*, have explicitly stated: *It is hard for a woman with whom an uncircumcised man has had sexual intercourse to separate from him* (Genesis Rabbah LXXX). In my opinion this is the strongest of reasons for circumcision.

There they are, the twin patriarchal fears: the fear of woman and the fear of pleasure. Circumcision is both the vehicle and the product, the menace and the antidote, which simultaneously assuages and perpetuates these ancient terrors. This is the achievement and true function of circumcision. Circumcision achieves this by violently breaching the maternal-infant bond shortly after birth; by amputating and marking the baby's sexual organ before he knows what he has lost; by disempowering, "taming," the mother at the height of her instinctual need to protect her infant; by bonding the baby to the community of men past, present, and future and to a male-imaged G-d; by restructuring the family and the society in terms of male dominance; and by psycho-sexually wounding the manhood still asleep in the unsuspecting baby boy. In all of these ways — socially, politically, religiously, ethnically, sexually, tribally, and interpersonally — the cutting of our baby boys' sexual organs is the fulcrum around which patriarchy exerts its power. Circumcision is a rite of male domination — domination and the entitlement of domination over other men, women, and children, both institutionally and personally. It is the essence of patriarchy.

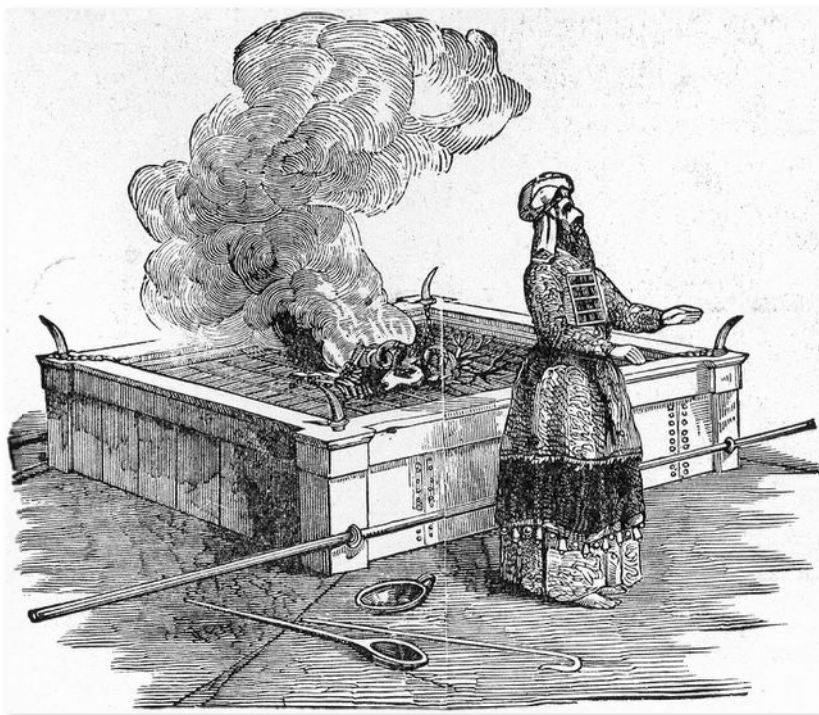
Nevertheless, it would be grossly oversimplifying to characterize Judaism as a purely patriarchal religion,

nor would it be accurate to view Judaism as the source of patriarchy in Western religions. The emphatic and elaborate emphasis on this life, on the sanctity of all life as a primary organizing value throughout both biblical and talmudic texts is in complete contradiction to the practice of circumcision. Removing functional sexual tissue is harmful: it is harmful to the infant, to the pleasure potential and sexual bonding of the mature man, and to the mother who is entrained to surrender her sacred bond with her infant in order for his masculinity to be redefined in terms of his community.

The rabbis explain that, because women are closer to the divine due to our ability to give birth and sustain life, men are in need of other ways to access spirituality — circumcision being the primary one. However, the notion that trauma can be a bona fide path, much less an ethical avenue, to greater spiritual awareness would be vociferously challenged by contemporary neonatologists as well as epigeneticists. What is unethical cannot be spiritual. The dichotomy and hierarchy assumed and taught for millennia in multiple religions between sexual aliveness and spirituality is false and has led to ages of human suffering. Spiritual sexism is still sexism and needs to be discarded.

I remember when I first learned about the phenomenon of female genital cutting. I was appalled. How could they? How could anyone? It took years before I could hear their voices: "It's who we are, who we've been for thousands of years." "No one will marry us if we're not cut." "Intact genitalia are ugly." "They are unhygienic." Then, I realized... we say the same things.

Yes, there are significant differences between female and male cutting, but it is not honest to claim that one is physically and sexually insignificant and the other barbaric; that one is enlightened, the other primitive. Holding a child down and forcibly removing genitalia is sexual abuse. We would not hesitate to use that label for an individual or culture that countenanced sexual fondling of children. Why do we think slicing off genitals is acceptable? Circumcision is not holy, it does not transmit the Jewish spiritual heritage, nor does it secure Jewish continuity.



Could Jewish communities discard circumcision rites, just as they discarded the kind of animal sacrifice pictured above? "The discarding of animal sacrifice ... did not result in an unraveling of Jewish spirituality or continuity," the author argues. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

For religious as well as tribal and secular reasons, many Jews believe that "circumcision ensures our survival." Without circumcision, we tell each other, the Jewish people will disappear, a very frightening prediction to a people for whom annihilation is a perpetual possibility. Again, the transparent sexism of such a contention is only too apparent. Are males the only ones who count as Jews? Is the contribution of Jewish women irrelevant, invisible, and insignificant? More fundamentally, why is it that Jewish women can carry on our spiritual legacy and remain whole, but Jewish men cannot? How, indeed, did circumcision further our survival during the desperate epochs of Jewish purges when the enemy

had only to pull down pants in order to eliminate Jewish males?

In the United States, where most men over thirty have been circumcised, or in the Middle East, where circumcision is normative for Muslims, are naked Jewish men distinguishable from their non-Jewish counterparts? And if circumcision is the quintessential protector of Jewish identity, why do we have tens of thousands of Jewish men in the United States who have had their genitalia radically and permanently altered but are ignorant of Judaism and completely unaffiliated with Jewish communities? The question of how we are to secure and sustain Jewish survival is extremely serious, but the answer is not circumcision.

An orthodox rabbi interviewed by Eliyahu Unger-Sargon in his brilliant movie *Cut: Slicing through the Myths of Circumcision* stated unequivocally that circumcision was tantamount to sexual abuse. Yet this thoughtful man went on to justify the practice of circumcision for religious reasons, saying that this is where “the rubber hits the road” if you are a Jew. It is a commandment. We have no choice.

Indeed, we do have a choice. What is sacred is our obligation to protect the integrity and privacy of all of our children’s genitals. They are not the province of family, community, or anyone else. Spiritualizing the wounding of circumcision does not change the damage, nor make it ethical. As Deuteronomy 30:6 teaches, what is truly required of us in order to contact the divine has to do with the architecture of the heart, not the alteration of male genitals. Creating a joyful and loving Jewish home, and providing our children with meaningful and in-depth Jewish education, are the only authentic means we have to ensure our survival. Cutting our babies’ penises will not do it.

Neither in biblical texts nor in the Talmud has *brit milah* been commanded for hygienic reasons. Nevertheless, in the United States routine neonatal circumcision has been normative, in spite of the fundamental standard of all U.S. medical practice that requires that surgeries be used as a last resort, not a preventive strategy, particularly when dealing with healthy tissue on non-consenting minors. For these reasons and more, the medical societies of Holland, Finland, Australia, Canada and the UK have been explicit in stating that routine neonatal circumcision is medically ill advised and not in the child’s best interest. Promoting circumcision for presumed health benefits is neither an authentically Jewish position nor medically valid.

Circumcision may be an ancient rite, but it is wrong. Over the ages Judaism has demonstrated a remarkable ability to mutate in practice and retain the integrity of its spiritual legacy. Judaism was not vanquished when the first temple was destroyed, nor when the second temple was razed. The discarding of animal sacrifice as the primary mode of worship did not result in an unraveling of Jewish spirituality or continuity. Legally, Jewish identity is defined both by *halachah* (Jewish law) and by the Israeli Supreme court according to the status of the child’s mother: if the mother is Jewish, the child is Jewish. Circumcision does not trump maternal lineage.

Without compromising either our children’s identity or the survival of our people, we can invite all of our Jewish children, our baby girls and our baby boys, into a *brit b’lee milah*, a covenant without circumcision, and school them in the wisdom, love, and beauty of the Jewish tradition. Unlike Christianity, which teaches that a child is born into original sin and must be redeemed, Judaism teaches that the soul is pure — only the penis needs “redemption.” The truth is that the whole baby is pure, body and soul, *including* his tender genitals, and it is both a *mitzvah* and our most sacred duty to protect him.

(To return to the Summer 2011 Table of Contents, [click here](#). For an attractively formatted, ready-to-print PDF of this article, [click here](#).)

For the past twenty years, Miriam Pollack, member of a Conservative Synagogue, has been advocating, locally

and internationally, for intactivism. She is founder/director of the Literacy & Language Center in Boulder, Colorado.

Source Citation

Pollack, Miriam. 2011. Circumcision: Identity, Gender, and Power. *Tikkun* 26(3).

tags: **Gender & Sexuality**, **Judaism**, **Rethinking Religion**

<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/circumcision-identity-gender-and-power>