
■ NOCIRC OF MICHIGAN ■

INFORMANT

PREVENTING INFANT CIRCUMCISION — FOR THE WELL-BEING OF ALL

VOLUME 7 — NUMBER 2 — DECEMBER 2003

The Case Against Religious Circumcision Part Two: A Change in Practice

by Norm Cohen

The governing body of Jewish rabbis for the largest branch of American Judaism issued a landmark resolution on gay marriage in 1996, stating, “the Central Conference of American Rabbis supports the right of gay and lesbian couples to share fully and equally in the rights of civil marriage.” The rabbis went on to say that they “oppose governmental efforts to ban gay and lesbian marriage.”

Later, the group issued a follow-up resolution stating, “the relationship of a Jewish, same gender couple is worthy of affirmation through appropriate Jewish ritual.”

This fundamental change that took place in mainstream Judaism demonstrates that long held traditions and rituals can change in response to the changing social attitudes in which Jews find themselves.

Voices of conscience within the progressive Jewish community have been struggling

with their practice of *bris milah* (ritual circumcision) for the last 160 years, ever since Reform Judaism began. Why? Because circumcision is strangely out of place among all other Jewish traditions. It is a violation of another person’s body and his sexual organ. Circumcision entails surgical pain and trauma, medical risk and long-term harm.

Many Jews have tenaciously defended the practice, performed not on themselves but on their non-consenting sons, for a wide variety of both religious and secular reasons.

The ritual often occurs during a large party in the family’s home on the eighth day of a boy’s life. It is practiced both by observant Jewish parents and by parents who do not regularly practice Judaism. Many of these parents are married to non-Jews.

Two-thirds of the families who hire a *mohel* (Jewish ritual circumciser) are not affiliated with a Jewish congregation. As a result, area mohels must advertise in the local Jewish newspaper.

The honors that are handed out to grandparents on that special day include holding down a leg of their grandson while he futilely tries to kick the mohel’s hand away. This is often followed by screaming and uncontrolled sobbing by the honored child.

Many a new Jewish mother has privately wished that the practice of circumcision would just go away. Instead of a day of welcoming and joy, the *bris milah* often turns into a day of fear and guilt for the mother, possibly for the father, and for many of the invited party guests.

Circumcision is the secret problem child in Judaism. Unlike the *bar mitzvah*, the *bris milah* is not a spiritual experience for a boy. He does not come forward to volunteer any religious devotion by undergoing a circumcision. For him, the ritual is nothing but an attack of indescribable pain, during and after the event. Perhaps he may one day proudly accept his involuntary circumcision, but perhaps he may not.

continued on page 2 →

DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

It may come as a surprise to some parents that being born a male is not a disorder requiring immediate surgical correction. Informing parents of this is the mission of **NOCIRC**.

However, we cannot do it without help from the doctors and nurses who are already on our side or the ones that we win over every year. Health care providers have more influence over the circumcision decision than they give themselves credit for. Many of the parents we meet tell us that their doctor or nurse said years ago that circumcision is not necessary and that this simple statement made all the difference to their decision.

So on behalf of the lucky boys that have had a doctor or nurse bold enough and kind enough to take the time out and say the right words to educate unknowing parents, we say, “Thank you!” You have made a permanently positive difference and we hope that you will keep on preventing circumcisions.

Of all the trials and tribulations that an intact boy may have to face in his life, he will never have to feel the pain of losing part of his penis to an uninformed choice.

*On behalf of all the children, thanks!
Norm Cohen, Director*

continued from page 1

Islam adopted circumcision from the Jews, through their common ancestor, Abraham. As pointed out by Muslim dissidents to circumcision, it is not even mentioned in their holy book, the Koran. The ritual is not one of the five basic tenets of Islam. So far, there is little opposition among Muslims.

Circumcision, which was once a source of pride among Jews, is now becoming a practice that they need to defend. Jews who seek to protect circumcision by clinging ever more tightly to its supposed medical benefits and its acceptance as an American practice have actually diminished its significance as a religious ritual. The insistence on changing, of all organs, the penis, trivializes the essential meaning of the sacred covenant between God and Abraham as described in the Hebrew Bible.

Because circumcision is one of the most common surgeries in America, non-observant Jewish fathers have long followed “the American locker room look”—not the Jewish tradition—when it comes to circumcising their sons. What began as a sacred act of faith now survives for many Jews because of petty fears about social conformity.

Add in other reasons to circumcise, like pressure from the in-laws and out-of-date medical beliefs, and what many Jews are left with is pretty shallow as a spiritual event. Instead of enriching the spiritual experience of Jewish families, the practice has cheapened it.

It would be a mistake to assume that the practice of circumcision is absolute in Judaism. It is not. Notable Jews from Moses to Theodore Hertz (the founder of Zionism) declined to circumcise their sons. Today in Sweden only 40% of Jewish boys are circumcised.

The practice of Jewish traditions has never been an all or nothing proposition. Reform Judaism eliminated the requirement of adult circumcision upon conversion to Judaism. Bris milah is not essential to the survival of Judaism. Jewish law says that a boy born to a Jewish mother is Jewish, regardless of whether he is circumcised. Circumcision is not a prerequisite, nor essential to the belief or practice of anything else in Judaism.

Circumcision is out of place among an otherwise nurturing and aware people. Jewish opposition to it is most certainly greater than is made public. Some parents choose to protect their own children, but they stay silent in order to be accepted in their community.

Some Jewish mothers and fathers have long recognized the pain, harm, and human rights problems present in ritual circumcision. Several alternative *bris shalom* (covenant of peace) ceremonies have been created which meet the spiritual and communal obligations of the traditional ritual by welcoming a newborn into the Jewish covenant of Abraham without the traumatic effects and bodily violation of circumcision.

I wrote such a ceremony that is based largely on the traditional bris milah service and carefully maintains its spirit, while sharing the wisdom of this modern age. It is available online at www.NOCIRCOFMI.org.

Parents have been empowered by bris shalom ceremonies to transform the ritual into a positive, happy, and life-affirming event. Jews are still being Jews and choosing to protect their baby boys, and the men they will become, from unnecessary harm.

There have been unquestionably wrong traditions throughout human history, such as animal sacrifice, collective punishment, slavery, and gender inequality. All of these traditions are mentioned in religious texts and all, over the right period of time, were modified or discarded by Westerners.

The history of religion is filled with dissent and rebellion from within the ranks of worshippers, even among the most observant. There is no shortage of examples of the revision or outright abandonment of religious practices from people on the fringe, liberal or orthodox, that eventually received acceptance from some mainstream branch of the religion. These early reformers were not just dissenters, they were pioneers.

Jewish women have succeeded in taking a greater role in religious life. The feminist influences within modern Judaism have undoubtedly contributed to the falling rate of Jewish circumcision. A Jewish covenant ceremony created for baby girls, *bris bat*, emphasizes the meaning of the covenant rather than physical cutting, thereby expos-

continued on page 4 →

MISSION STATEMENT

NOCIRC of MICHIGAN

NOCIRC of Michigan is a non-profit, consumer rights advocacy group that educates people about circumcision and about the benefits of intact genitals.

We inform parents and health care providers in Michigan about the impact of circumcision and about the proper care of intact genitals. We protect consumers from fraudulent medical claims. We promote the benefits of normal genitals and foreskin restoration.

We know the removal of normal, healthy tissue from a child's genitals—in the name of medicine, religion or social custom—results in a loss of sexual function and is a violation of human rights.

We are a group of dedicated consumer activists and health care professionals. We are committed to effective education, advocacy and activism on behalf of children to protect them from harm. We are part of a worldwide movement to end all forms of male and female genital mutilation.

INFORMANT (ISSN 1092-020X) is published three times a year by **NOCIRC of Michigan**. It represents our commitment to provide educational information in this state and to activists everywhere. Articles, comments, and questions are always welcome.

NOCIRC of Michigan Educating a New Generation

www.NOCIRCOFMI.org

PO Box 333
Birmingham, MI 48012
Phone: (248) 642-5703
Fax: (248) 642-9528

Norm Cohen, Director
NormCohen@NOCIRCOFMI.org
Lori Hanna, Education Coordinator
Lori@NOCIRCOFMI.org

Suffering at the Breast is *Not* Best*La Leche League Censors While Mothers and Sons Suffer***To La Leche League Board of Directors, Staff, Leaders, Members, and Alumnae:**

In a shocking display of mixing with religious causes, La Leche League's Board of Directors has let a small group of Jewish women defeat the free exchange of information on circumcision's negative impact on breastfeeding success.

In April of 2003, **NOCIRC** signed a contract with La Leche League International as an exhibitor and paid for exhibit space for your international conference held last July. Shortly before the event, your board of directors vetoed our admission as exhibitors. Word of our attendance had spread to a few powerful Jewish women in your organization who objected to our very presence.

NOCIRC has exhibited successfully at literally hundreds of conferences locally, regionally, and nationally. We are asked back year after year. Without religious prejudice, we provide information about the traumatic effects of circumcision. We hand out our information pamphlets in a non-confrontational manner to those who approach our table because they are interested in learning about the issue. Last November, we had a well-received exhibit booth for physicians attending the American Academy of Pediatrics conference in New Orleans.

NOCIRC already counts among its supporters hundreds of LLL members and former members. The silent majority of leaders within League are already on our side. Attendees who were interested would have appreciated our information; those who were not interested would have just walked on by.

The vast majority of boys who are circumcised in the United States are *not* sons of Jewish or Muslim parents. Preventing these non-religious circumcisions has always been the primary focus for **NOCIRC**. This painful surgery, the most common procedure that baby boys are forced to experience, puts breastfeeding success at risk. Good chest-to-chest positioning requires mom to press her son's wounded penis up against her body, and the pain makes him unable to nurse.

La Leche League reported problems with breastfeeding by circumcised infants in their 1981 edition of *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*. In 1996, LLL ratified the *Mother-Friendly Childbirth Initiative*, along with 25 other organizations. Your organization accepted ten basic principles for mother-friendly care, including the requirement that service providers must "discourage non-religious circumcision of the newborn." (online at www.MotherFriendly.org).



Noah Gardner shows his support for his parents informed choice to say no to circumcision. *Photo by Jennifer Gardner*

The breastfeeding relationship does not begin in a vacuum. In 2002, **NOCIRC** issued its position statement, "The Effects of Circumcision on Breastfeeding," available at www.NOCIRC.org. Researchers have found that some male babies are unable to suckle the mother's breast after circumcision. The circumcised infant is in pain and is in an exhausted, weakened, and debilitated condition. The circumcision procedure frequently causes the newborn to withdraw from his environment, interfering with his process of bonding and breastfeeding.

La Leche League claims it is a non-sectarian organization. However, when it comes to circumcision, it is a Jewish organization. A few powerful Jewish members are keeping clinical data regarding breastfeeding obstacles out of the hands of all members because of their personal religious viewpoint. For five years now they have systematically excluded **NOCIRC** from simply having a table at your area and national conferences.

Your Board of Directors has placed a higher priority on protecting religious circumcision than on breastfeeding success for the 94% of non-Jewish, non-Muslim moms. Jewish boys have seven days to establish breastfeeding before undergoing surgery; non-Jewish boys do not because they are circumcised at birth, and thus they are at a greater risk.

The Board's action is hypocritical in light of LLL's own struggle with those who block the promotion of breastfeeding benefits for fear of upsetting parents. Your own organization has been accused of producing guilt when you describe the advantages of breastfeeding in much the same way that **NOCIRC** is being accused now.

LLL has an obligation to its members to make available information on how circumcision affects breastfeeding. New and expectant moms need this information in order to nurture a successful breastfeeding relationship with their sons. **NOCIRC** can help to insure that this happens.

NOCIRC is not asking for an endorsement from LLL nor are we asking for leaders to discuss circumcision during meetings. We are simply asking to be one of the many outside organizations and merchants not directly involved in breastfeeding that exhibit each year at your excellent conferences.

Are you surprised by the League's lack of courage on this issue? If so, then write your board of directors (www.lalecheleague.org/BOD/BOD03.html). Demand that they stop this petty censorship and trust conference attendees to make their own informed choice about circumcision. On behalf of babies yet to be born and mothers yet to be educated, demand that they take the moral high road and let **NOCIRC** be a participant in breastfeeding success.

Sincerely,

Norm Cohen

Director

NOCIRC of Michigan

P.S. We exhibit every year at the Michigan Association of Lactation Consultants.

continued from page 2

ing the narrow, patriarchal nature of bris milah. The bris bat ceremony demonstrates the progressive nature of Judaism and serves as an example of how the male ceremony will change.

Some of circumcision's biggest public critics have been Jews. There are those who argue that discarding bris milah can be justified for one or more of the following reasons: 1.) ethical considerations found within traditional Jewish theology, 2.) the original procedure was less extreme, and 3.) earlier versions of the Bible did not mention circumcision.

These well-intentioned revisionists are working against the precedent set by the actual practice of widespread ritual circumcision for the last 2,000 years of written Jewish history. Each of these reasons may be interesting to those already inclined to discard the practice, but this powerful mainstream tradition cannot be made to simply go away by these arguments.

The only sound argument for Jews is to reject circumcision outright on moral grounds, while retaining Judaism's moral values and observances. No further apologies or excuses are necessary. In making this simple choice, parents can become a force for change in their local religious community.

Historically, outside cultural influences have always motivated internal changes to mainstream religious traditions. Until recently, Jews have been reassured and comforted by the claims of health benefits and by the American acceptance of circumcision. However, the opposite will also be true. As

the medical claims are discredited and the American circumcision rate continues to fall, American Jews will be left without any justification for harming their children. As American society gradually turns away from circumcision, so will most Jewish families.

Some families continue the practice out of fear of being ostracized by other Jews. Others reject the practice but stay silent. In doing so, they fail to find and communicate with like-minded families who would accept and support them.

The challenge for reducing Jewish circumcisions is in convincing a growing number of families who are already inclined to reject the practice but desire to remain connected to their religion and their community. Jewish families who have already rejected circumcision while remaining active in their community serve as an important example. They in turn lead to more families who will reject circumcision, and so on.

As the population of intact Jewish boys increases, a competing belief in non-circumcision is emerging. The baby is being celebrated during the bris shalom ceremony as a sacred, whole, and conscious individual.

Those families who choose to continue the practice risk defining themselves by their penises rather than by their core religious beliefs. If rabbis insist on the practice and ignore its dissidents, they risk alienating the growing number of Jews who have rejected it. They will foolishly turn the penis itself into a religious symbol. How will it be possible for rabbis to verify circumcision status without taking absurd measures?

The promotion of circumcision as a medical procedure in this country has protected its legal status for the religious communities that practice it. If infant circumcision can no longer masquerade as a medical procedure, then it runs the risk of being reclassified as a criminal assault.

Ritual circumcisers have much to fear if mainstream medical science documents harm from the procedure. If warnings won't keep circumcisers from harming other people, then civil law certainly must. If only 1% of the 27,000 Jewish boys who reach adulthood each year choose to sue their mohel and settle for \$30,000 each, the payout would be 8 million dollars every year. Even half of that percentage would not keep the circumcisers in business for very long.

Religious circumcision has gotten stuck in the cracks between antiquity and modernity. The business of the future is in cleaning up the past. In the next 100 years, we can stop 6,000 years of ritual child abuse. In doing so, we will have improved civilization forever.

It is difficult at times to stand up and speak for what is right. But after enduring some conscious suffering ourselves, we soon learn that it is just as difficult not to.

While Jews who decline to circumcise their sons may have a social dilemma in their own community, they do not have a moral one among the Human family. They will find holiness preserved in the wonderfully intact body of their little baby boy. In time and by their own example, they will find acceptance within their own religious communities as well.

BAD IDEAS FROM THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Real Quotes From Real Doctors

"Not infrequently marital unhappiness would be better relieved by circumcising the husband than by suing for divorce."

Dr. A. W. Taylor
"Circumcision — Its Moral and Physical Necessities and Advantages" in *Medical Record*, 1899 vol 56 p 174

TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT CIRCUMCISION

How to Become An Informant

- ◆ Help us to educate parents and health care providers! A *tax-deductible* membership fee of \$25 or more makes you a **NOCIRC of Michigan Informant**.
- ◆ Free pamphlets and newsletters are available in bulk to anyone wishing to distribute them to parents & care providers.
- ◆ We exhibit at many conferences and health fairs each year. Please call to volunteer to help staff our information tables.
- ◆ Please let us know about relevant conferences or fairs that **NOCIRC of Michigan** may exhibit at anywhere in the state.

(248) 642-5703 PO Box 333 Birmingham, MI 48012