

Circumcision

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am a very squeamish person. I cannot bear to look at blood, or even at TV programs about hospitals when they show some operation. I would be useless in an emergency and would certainly never, ever be able to slaughter animals or be a mohel (theory is one thing, practice altogether another). So when I have to tend a circumcision ceremony I stand as far back as I can. I am the polar opposite of the aficionados or Dracula wannabees who peer in close to take videos of the gory process. Last week I was present at the Brit of my latest grandson and made sure I was well shielded by my son-in-law.

I hate hearing babies cry, too. And even the most efficient, speedy, surgically expert circumcision is heart-wrenching. It is true the baby starts crying simply when his nether parts are exposed to the elements (in this case a typically lukewarm London summer), but the actual cut itself is over in seconds and while we hear his ongoing complaints at the indignity it has suffered, the mohel is simply bandaging up the wound. In a matter of minutes (that feel like an hour) it is over, the mandatory cup of wine is poured and the baby is happily sucking on a wine-drenched finger before it is returned to the primordial sanctuary of his mother's breast. Then, as is the norm in Jewish society, everyone gets down to the food and the drink.

I confess I do have mixed feelings. We have been doing this for thousands of years. It is [one of the most significant parts of our ancient tradition](#). Yet I still feel a twinge, an inexplicable sense that it is all a bit primitive. At the same time, I also feel immense pride, that through thick and thin we as a people have been so loyal to this strange ritual, this act of dedication we impose on our sons. It gives us an immediate and visceral link to all the millions of Jews who have come before us who have, like me, all continued to follow, often at great self-sacrifice, our amazing and profound gift to humanity. A gift that most of humanity tries so hard to ignore, if not repudiate. It is a very moving experience. It is like so much of our religion that defies logic yet works, that appears trivial yet is profound, that strikes one as tribal and yet is also universal.

But why is circumcision so crucial? The only other physical assault on the human body is the Biblical law that imposes a pierced ear on the Hebrew slaves who prefers dependency to freedom. Otherwise the body is regarded with such reverence that even tattoos are forbidden. The bond between a human and God is not surely established by a ceremony and pain that is almost immediately forgotten. And as for noticing it later on, enough circumcised Jews have repudiated their fathers' decision. Surely commitment is in the mind and heart not the penis? Anyway is the ceremony not rather about the father's, the parents', commitment and it is this that is being passed on? And if it is so crucial to being Jewish, why does it not apply to women?

Now here is the point. I have read the endless pathetic and nasty anti-Semitic blogs and pseudo-learned essays about the evils of circumcision. I

have read how it denies Jewish men the true pleasures of sex. And frankly I have laughed as I would if someone told me that having your tonsils out prevented you from enjoying food or singing. I have to say that most Jews I know do not complain about that side of the issue. [That which people \(wrongly\) call "female circumcision"](#) does indeed deny sexual pleasure and may be intended to; it is the permanent removal of a vital organ, which is really is [excessively barbaric](#). But actual circumcision, as is done to males, is the removal of a totally redundant piece of skin. Not only, but evidence keeps coming in about the benefits of male circumcision in [reducing the incidence of certain diseases](#) in both men and women.

Culturally, of course, there was a time when Greeks and Romans looked down on circumcision and naked athletes of Jewish origin tried all kinds of devices to hide it, [as indeed do some men in the US](#) who seem to prefer the [proboscidean](#) state. Nowadays, what with Muslims circumcising their boys, the still common Western preferences, and Christianity happy to remind us that [Jesus was circumcised](#) on his putative eighth day it seems circumcision is mainstream.

I do often hear the [complaint that there is no specific ritual to welcome girls into the covenant](#). But I am impressed by the [mystical explanation that the regenerative blood of the monthly cycle is the female blood of the covenant](#), even if it is involuntary (and even if all females have it, regardless of religion). It does, after all, make up the symmetry of both reproductive organs uniting in ensuring the tradition continues.

So when all is said and done, I hate the cut and the cry, yet I am moved by context, the power of our religious tradition, the sense of continuity we are ensuring, and the feeling of shared community. As one of the most important texts of the ceremony, borrowed from the prophet and repeated at the Passover table declares, "Out of blood comes life!"