

The San Francisco Cut

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Do you really believe those San Franciscans who want to make circumcision illegal are genuinely concerned with the welfare of children? If they were they'd immediately introduce a law restricting parenthood to those who have passed a psychological examination. But then I doubt many of them would survive sane.

I ask you, what is likely to do more harm to a child? The loss of a minute piece of skin and a moment's transitory pain (and most children I have heard cry do not go on for more than they do after an inoculation), or years of mental cruelty, sexual abuse, violence, and manipulation? The hypocrites should at least be consistent and [include piercing children's ears in the ban](#), but then that would offend all the aging hippies as well as the other local lobbies.

Let us not in any way compare it to female circumcision in which an organ is removed and the whole purpose is to prevent female sexual pleasure. In Judaism sexual pleasure is marital obligation and required. I am not aware that circumcised Jews or Muslims have a reputation for not enjoying sex.

There are those who argue that the experience is so traumatic it damages children psychologically forever. You can respond in several ways to that. One is to say we Jews don't seem to have done too badly on it. We have outlasted most of our competitors and shown ourselves to be remarkably resilient; indeed, the more Orthodox we are, the more we reproduce.

Circumcision did not seem to have held back all those Nobel prizewinners, world renowned musicians, academics, economists, writers, artists, and financial wizards. But if we Jews have not been noticeably traumatized by circumcision, what we HAVE been traumatized by is anti-Semitism. Actually, given that such a high proportion of males in the US get circumcised too, perhaps we should blame the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on circumcision. Oh yes, and New York passing gay marriage too!

Much of the material disseminated in California about circumcision is manifestly anti-Semitic and directed against a religious ritual rather than cruelty. Of course there have been errors and accidents and some circumcisions have gone wrong. There have been mistakes throughout the medical world. Thirty billion dollars are awarded each year in the USA alone for medical malpractice. Shall we ban medicine?

I am, of course, not a medical expert. I have never argued that we should adhere to any of our traditions for medical reasons. It certainly doesn't do any harm, and I have read that circumcision helps prevent the transmission of certain sexual diseases, including AIDS. But I don't know if it does, and I certainly don't base my religious observance on those grounds. Neither am I willing to argue aesthetically that a circumcised penis looks nicer. Beauty

is in the eye of the beholder or the partisan.

I am also prepared to assert that if anything could be proven to be medically dangerous or psychologically damaging, this alone in Jewish Law requires one to desist. That is why the most Orthodox of hemophiliac children will not be circumcised. It is a cardinal principle of our religion to put health and life first.

Therefore it seems to me that the opposition can only be animated by prejudice and antagonism. The argument is put that the campaign only aims to open the public's eyes to the fact that circumcision is not necessary. Well blow me down. I am not aware of any law in a free society that says it is. It may be a matter of fashion, but then people do indeed do weird things in the name of fashion without making a law about it. By all means, spend as much money as you want publicizing the beauty, medical advantage, and benefits of not being circumcised. Be my guest. I'll even donate, if it can be proved. But surely an attempt to ban it is both a prejudiced expression of irrational hatred and an infringement on a person's liberty.

Circumcision is usually an expression of parental love for their children, that that are inducting them into a moral and spiritual tradition that they value. It is not an act of cruelty. And I write this as someone who hates circumcisions and looks away or stands as far back as possible; if it were not a religious obligation, I would forgo it! Perhaps one might argue that all religion is dangerous and a lot of religion is indeed very dangerous. But we do not proscribe it just because we disapprove. Otherwise I'd campaign to ban most religions.

Surely society has gone mad if it permits any kind of behavior that is libertarian while at the same time it seeks to ban something simply because it is tradition. Surely if we start interfering in what parents do without the evidence to substantiate the claim, then we must legislate to stop parents producing children unless we are convinced and they have passed the tests to show that they can be good caring and responsible parents. In my long educational experience I can state with absolute confidence that more lasting and detrimental damage has been done to children by poor parenting than by any cuts or injections. But clearly some San Franciscans don't care for who is a good parent or not, only for trying make everyone else as unbalanced as they are.

Thank goodness the USA has a constitution that protects freedom of religion. Anyway there are far more Muslims in California than Jews. If the antis don't mind offending Orthodox Jews, they might twice about Fatwas.