

MOURNING A FORESKIN

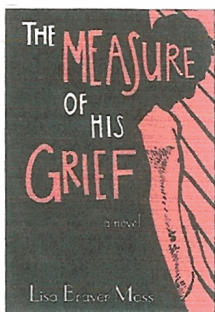
THE MEASURE OF HIS GRIEF
by Lisa Braver Moss, CreateSpace, 2010

Review by Patricia Karlin-Neumann

"Just as he has entered into the covenant of Abraham, so may he be entered into the life of Torah, the blessing of family life, and the practice of goodness."

DON'T BELIEVE THAT THESE words, spoken at a *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision), are found in Lisa Braver Moss's provocative novel, *The Measure of His Grief*, but they nonetheless provide a paradoxical frame through which to view the search for wholeness of its protagonist, Dr. Sandy Waldman.

Sandy experiences an inexplicable pain in his penis during the shiva period of mourning for his father Abraham; for him, the *brit* (covenant) is lost in the *milah* (circumcision). *Brit* celebrates a relationship with the Divine and with community. Sandy's physical pain leads him to attempt to undo his own *milah*. Mourning his circumcision, he strains the covenants he has made in his life; cuts himself off from his medical colleagues, his wife, and his friends; disputes medical and religious justifications for circumcision; and becomes an obsessed and slightly unhinged crusader.



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CULTURE

Moss, long an activist herself in the controversy over circumcision for Jewish ritual purposes, gives Sandy many opportunities to articulate the anti-circumcision position. The novel's protagonist argues with rabbis and *mohelim* (those who perform the ritual circumcision), with feminists and physicians. To Moss's credit, her novel evokes thoughtful and even civil discussion with a range of perspectives, creating a living-room conversation with an Orthodox *mohel*, a feminist female rabbi with a hyphenated name who nonetheless upholds the tradition of ritual circumcision, a liberal cantor, a "conscientious objector" (a Jewish woman seeking a *brit* without the *milah*: a covenant ceremony for boys like those newly created for girls), and a Jewish man who is an "intactivist" (a proponent of leaving baby boys intact) who leads a foreskin restoration group. By making space for all of these characters to explain their understanding of the issues and the stakes, Moss makes both doubt and affirmation of circumcision comprehensible positions in a Jewish context.

The civility of this discussion is not often replicated in a real Jewish living room, in synagogue, or in a rabbi's study. Like many of my colleagues, I have seen marriages between two Jews irrevocably ripped asunder by differing perspectives on *brit*

milah. I have tried to mediate while a Jew and a non-Jew argued passionately about circumcision, even when they had made a decision to raise their son as a Jew. When I was pregnant and attending a class for prospective parents, the nurse leading it provided literature on circumcision; "But if you're planning to circumcise your son for ritual purposes, don't bother to take it," she said. When it comes to ritual and tradition, these are rarely logical and cerebral discussions.

Sandy thinks he will resolve his mourning and his profound sense of nakedness by following the guidance of those engaged in foreskin restoration. With tape and weights, he hopes to undo his *milah*. In one comic moment, at a book signing for his wife's new cookbook, the stainless steel device he has fastened on to grow his foreskin dislodges and, clattering, drops and rolls, landing at the feet of his wife, giving new meaning to the firefighter's advice to "stop, drop and roll." In the midrash, Rav Amram, tempted by an illicit sexual relationship, literally yells "fire," thereby calling in his fellow rabbis to prevent him from ruining his life (*Kiddushin* 81a). Dr. Sandy Waldman is incapable of seeing his self-destructiveness, let alone yelling to save himself.

Impatient with his self-indulgence, Sandy's wife leaves him; his daughter is

estranged. His colleagues are wary of his obsession, as he scores physicians on their views of circumcision. He abandons the blessing of family life and seems indifferent to the practice of goodness. Yet, there is one part of the blessing from the *brit milah*—"so may he be entered into the life of Torah, the blessing of family life, and the practice of goodness"—that takes root. By being drawn into a controversial question of Jewish ritual practice, Sandy makes his way into Torah study to understand, to question, and to stake his claim. The book ends with his adult bar mitzvah, at which he pointedly reads the Torah portion of *Korach*, the fiercest rebel in Jewish sources.

Through her fiction, Lisa Braver Moss has found a new way to insinuate the circumcision controversy into the Jewish conversation. In this, she has done a service for the Jewish community. May that conversation result in increased Torah study, richer blessings of family life, and a sustained practice of goodness. ■

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