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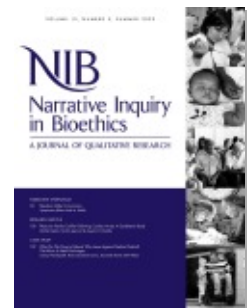
Proudly Jewish—and Averse to Circumcision

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about presentation and ensuring the foreskin was cut properly, and some were just old school and had their preferences. I wanted to comfort the baby and make his world as comfortable as possible.

Watching circumcisions being performed, I never formed an opinion about them. I really looked at circumcision like any other procedure. However, I did see some parents really toil over the decisions, especially fathers who did not want to “see their son tortured or mutilated like that” as one told me once. I didn’t quite understand the comparison to mutilation, but I understood why he did not want his son to go through the procedure. It wasn’t until years later that I understood the gravity of the decision when I became pregnant with our son and knew immediately it was a boy. Call it a mother’s intuition, but I just knew. To circumcise my son was never a decision I had to deliberate very long because it was something I was accustomed to in my family. It wasn’t until one of my relatives got married and had her first son that I became aware that this would ever be a weighty decision for someone in my family.

I took it for granted all those years before working in the NICU because circumcision was superficial to me. I realized that it’s not just a piece of foreskin to many people. For some circumcision is done for religious reasons, for others making the choice to circumcise is about sameness, or hygiene. For my extended family member, it happened to be about sameness. She didn’t want her sons to look different from their dad. Since potty training was mostly going to be taught by their father, they wanted their sons to look like him. Many NICU parents told me they wanted their sons to look like their fathers, so this notion was familiar to me. After my extended family member explained why sameness mattered, I understood the reasons why some parents felt this way.

There are other stories like this which we pondered upon when we got pregnant with our son, and I really began to reflect on whether we should circumcise or not. Then two additional frames of thoughts arose; one, I ensured that my husband and I jointly made the decision together, but I really leaned on him for his opinion because he was a male and most of the male teaching would come

from him. Second, we considered if the decision to circumcise should come from him once he became an adult. His father and I discussed whether he should have a choice regarding being circumcised. He may have chosen a different decision than us and we didn’t want to take away his right to choose. However, waiting to have a circumcision as an adult comes with its own sets of challenges, including the possibility of infection, increased pain, missed work, edema, etc. So, ultimately, we made the decision to go ahead with the circumcision.

In our case, our pediatrician performed the circumcision. I asked him explicitly which instrument he used because I had my preference, and I was not going to allow my son to be circumcised by a healthcare professional that did not use my preferred method. When he stated that my preference was the method he used, I was elated and knew my son was in the right hands. I asked if I could be present for the circumcision, but they stated no parents were allowed. I was disappointed but understood. Once they brought our little guy to us after his circumcision, it went exactly as planned and as I remembered it when I worked in the NICU as a nurse. My son wasn’t in any discomfort or pain. He had the plastibell ring around his penis head. It stayed on for about 5 days and then fell off.

I believe that the decision to circumcise is a personal decision for the entire family, but each family makes the decision based on numerous factors. Our reasons were based on sameness and hygiene. Others could be based on religious factors. Whatever the factors could be for an individual or family, the personal decision is always the right choice for you.



Proudly Jewish—and Averse to Circumcision

Lisa Braver Moss

I’ve always had a strong sense of my Jewish identity—and I’ve always had grave misgivings about circumcision. It used to seem that these

statements were at odds with one another. Now I'm on a mission to integrate the two.

I'm married to a man who's also Jewish. In the late 1980s, we had two sons, whose circumcisions I agreed to. *Brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision) is intended as a spiritually meaningful act symbolizing the agreement between God and the Jewish people. But for me, the experience was so upsetting that I didn't feel God's presence. In spite of all the arguments in favor—the weight of tradition, wanting my boys to be accepted in the Jewish world, and so on—I came to regret my acquiescence.

I began to explore reasons to question circumcision from a Jewish point of view, publishing articles in Jewish magazines and speaking at conferences. Rather than focusing on the medical pros and cons, I wrote about Jewish law and ethics, and spoke with many rabbis. I was hoping to deepen Jewish dialogue on this topic, which was oddly off-limits in a culture that values intellectual inquiry.

Besides helping me understand more about Judaism, my research and writing was a way of living with my guilt. I had succumbed to—and put my boys through—a tradition that went completely against my maternal instincts. This schism had made me doubt myself as a new mother. What kind of parent was I if I couldn't be a fierce protector of my newborn baby? It was not a positive or welcoming way for me to enter into motherhood.

I blamed myself. I hadn't done medical research before my boys were born, trusting instead in the longevity of the tradition and the claim that circumcision is more hygienic. I bought into the medical justifications for circumcision—all of which, I later learned, fail to acknowledge the erogenous nature of foreskin tissue and its physiological function. If I'd known more; if I'd thought more deeply about infant trauma; if I'd taken my own spirituality more seriously—I would have fought for a different outcome, despite the pressure I felt as a Jewish person.

Years went by. I wrote a novel about Jewish circumcision, then co-wrote a book of alternative *brisis* ceremonies for families opting out of circumcision. Slowly, I came to understand that blaming myself for agreeing to circumcise my sons was not only a waste of time, but also missed the larger point. I'm

not alone in my objections to this ancient tradition. Indeed, many Jewish parents get through the event with white knuckles, emotional detachment, alcohol, or sedatives rather than with genuine religious feeling. Shouldn't their spiritual authenticity matter? Shouldn't mine have mattered?

In Judaism, every commandment (of which circumcision is one) should be approached with *kavanah*, or spiritual intent. Thus, my non-spiritual feelings about the circumcision tradition are problematic from a Jewish point of view. I should have been able to tell the rabbi I didn't really believe circumcision was what God wanted me to do. I wish I'd been guided in coming to a decision that reflected my actual spirituality. Instead, all that seemed to matter to anyone was getting the deed done.

Going against my instincts and spirituality was not just my failing—it also represented an institutional failing. Jewish leaders and rabbis aren't trained to respond compassionately to those averse to circumcision. Even parents merely questioning the practice may be subjected to judgment, lectures, and condescension. Parents deciding not to circumcise may face all that and more: in some synagogues in the U.S., boys that have not been circumcised are currently being denied bar mitzvah.

In the Jewish world, we tend to look upon circumcision as *the* one monolithic tradition: we assume that every Jewish male is circumcised and that no one talks about or questions this. The truth is that throughout our history, there have been males who, for various reasons, did not undergo the ritual. In ancient times, babies were exempted from circumcision if two older brothers had died following their *brises*. Remarkably, the Torah addresses the status of uncircumcised Jewish priests—so clearly, even those with leadership roles were not universally circumcised. Babies born during the forty years of wandering in the desert with Moses were not circumcised. In more recent times, Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism, did not circumcise his son. Obviously, there are many Jews from the former Soviet Union who are not circumcised, and in predominantly non-circumcising countries such as Sweden, secular Jews have a long history of

not circumcising. Still, the myth that circumcision is a given among Jews persists and is one element that makes parents feel pressured to conform. This is not to mention that in past generations, Jews have died for the right to circumcise—a very sobering reason to fall in line.

As I began to approach this topic within my own synagogue and its membership, I realized that today's Jewish institutions may be losing valuable participants because of the perception (in some cases accurate) that circumcision is "required for entry." No one checks at the door, of course, but the reality is that opting out of circumcision is rarely a purely private affair. For example, in Jewish preschools, diaper changes and toilet supervision make it impossible to keep a boy's circumcision status a secret.

We don't know how many American Jews today are opting out of circumcision or are otherwise averse to the practice. We do know they exist. At Bruchim (<http://bruchim.online/>), the Jewish nonprofit I co-founded in 2021 in support of non-circumcising families in the U.S., we hear from Jewish people all over the world who are choosing not to circumcise. They want to attend our by-us-for-us monthly online gatherings; they need to find a sympathetic rabbi to officiate at a *brit shalom* (ceremony for non-circumcising families); they feel alienated from Judaism or aren't sure whether mainstream Jewish institutions will accept them. We're helping non-circumcising Jews find Jewish communities that value and welcome them.

Many of the rabbis I've engaged with have told me that non-circumcising families are perfectly welcome. "It's don't-ask-don't-tell," several have added cheerfully. But why should parents be hush-hush about their decision, as if there were something shameful in it? At a time when synagogues are working hard to attract and engage young families—and to encourage personally meaningful rituals—this approach makes no sense.

What's missing from the Jewish world because non-circumcising families aren't sure they're welcome in Jewish spaces? A lot. Every Jewish person who feels alienated from their Jewishness over this issue—and at Bruchim, we hear many such

stories—is a loss for our community. Conversely, each person's spiritual authenticity adds to the vitality and relevance of Jewish life. Why not take measures to ensure that those averse to circumcision can bring their authentic selves to Judaism?

I've never found circumcision humor amusing, but of all such jokes, my least favorite is the adage that circumcision is harder on the parents than it is on the baby. I'm galled by this callous dismissal of the infant's very real suffering—so much so that in solidarity with my infants, I couldn't acknowledge my own pain and distress for a long time.

I, too, lost something to the circumcision tradition. I came into Jewish life as a married woman eager to participate and belong. I felt confident that I would find meaning in Judaism and comfort in community. Instead, I felt my most basic instincts were dismissed as unimportant—an annoyance. I was robbed of feelings of well-being and self-confidence about my entry into motherhood. It was a painful blow.

Somehow, though, I never wavered in my strong Jewish identity. I sent the boys to Jewish preschools, had an adult bat mitzvah, joined my synagogue choir, went on several trips to Israel, and participated in countless fundraisers for various Jewish causes. I'm proud to be Jewish, *and* I'm proud to do the work that I do.

My husband was initially very pro-circumcision, but after all these years, he's come to see things as I do: that there are legitimate reasons not to circumcise; that no parent, Jewish or otherwise, should be pressured into it; and that there should be a place in Jewish life for those who opt out or choose *brit shalom*.

Some Jewish men feel aggrieved over their own circumcisions. I consider myself very fortunate that my own sons do not. Still, my boys (now men) understand and support the work that I'm doing, and even honor me by making contributions to Bruchim when it's time for gift-giving.

One never knows how, or whether, the next generation will adopt Jewish practice. My husband and I tried to inculcate Jewish values in our boys

and to make holidays and rituals joyous. But we were surprised, and deeply touched, to receive a brief Rosh Hashana (Jewish new year) video from them last year. In it, the table is set, the candles, wine, and challah are ready, and one of my sons has his guitar. My sons and my daughter-in-law all sing the blessings as a one-year-old baby—my grandson—delightedly looks on.

He's the most adorable baby in the world, and he had a *brit shalom*.



Declining Circumcision for My Premature Newborn

Dionne Deschenne

In 1993, I was pregnant with my first of three sons and was busy preparing for his arrival. Unlike most parents, who focus much of their time on decorating the nursery and buying supplies, I was researching the medical decisions that I would need to make in the moments and weeks following his birth. Having worked in a hospital while a pre-medicine student, I had heard the cries of babies undergoing tests and procedures shortly after birth and knew I needed to be clear on the necessity of those tests and procedures if I was going to consent to them for my baby.

My husband was in the Navy and out to sea for six months, so I took a few college courses to pass the time. One was a philosophy course on ethics, and I chose the bioethics of infant male circumcision as the focal point of my coursework that quarter. This allowed me to work through my findings in a racially, religiously, and age-diverse classroom under the guidance of a skilled professor. I was shocked to learn that even the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) at that time acknowledged that there were no known medical benefits that resulted from circumcision. How, I wondered, could parents allow their newborns to undergo such a harrowing experience for no reason?

As the months passed and the birth of our first son grew nearer, I had everything ready—all of the decisions made, the doctors prepared, and the hospital selected. All of that preparation went out the proverbial window when I contracted pneumonia at 30 weeks. I was admitted to the Naval Hospital and treated for a week before being airlifted to a nearby Army Hospital when my condition worsened. After a few days there, the doctor came in very early one morning to wake me. Our son's heart rate was slowing, and we were at risk of losing him. They needed to immediately perform an emergency Cesarean section to preserve his life. I was terrified, knowing the potential myriad adverse effects his pre-term birth could cause.

We were rushed into the OR and within seconds I had an epidural in my back. Moments later, my perfect, tiny but silent baby was whisked from the room to be attended to by a highly skilled and immensely respected NICU team. My husband followed to keep a watchful eye on our son while I was taken to Recovery. A few hours later, I was allowed to join my husband and son in the NICU.

Our baby was beautiful, but so tiny that my husband could hold him in one hand. He weighed four pounds and had an enormous needle in the top of his head. The nurse explained to me that the IV needle was in the best location for administering the IV fluids and medications that our baby needed. His pre-term birth had introduced the need for several tests and treatments I had not anticipated. This was immensely distressing for me as someone who wanted to research and understand so that I could make well-informed and ethical decisions. Keep in mind that this was in the days before smartphones. In fact, we didn't even have cell phones at that time! In order to do research, I needed to find a medical text within the hospital that I could read, or get to a library. I had an abdomen full of staples, couldn't drive, and refused to be away from my baby, so going to the library was not an option.

Under the conditions, I relied on the hospital staff to help me understand the risks, benefits, and necessities of each procedure or test that they recommended. We formed a relationship of mutual respect. I think this was due to the in-depth