

The First Cut is the Deepest
Circumcision in the Modern American Jewish Experience
Nissayon Text Study: Rabbi Dan Moskovitz, Temple Judea

Context:

*There are people who find **brit milah** (circumcision) a profoundly meaningful way of connecting with the Jewish people and there are those who don't. . . . People have to fulfill their inner sense. . . . (Northern California Jewish Bulletin)*

*The only thing this sentiment, so quintessentially of the moment, neglects to acknowledge is that people's "inner sense" is itself inextricably connected with the culture in which they find themselves. Should that larger culture come to judge brit milah to be not only medically unnecessary but also brutalizing and mutilating, the number of Jews who find the practice "profoundly meaningful" will assuredly diminish, and the abhorrence of it expressed by some early Reform leaders will return with a vengeance. (Jon D. Levenson, *The New Enemies of Circumcision* Commentary Magazine 2000)*

Text #1:

Abraham asks God, "If circumcision is so precious, why was it not given to Adam?"

This question can be understood in at least two ways:

- *If milah (circumcision) is so special why wasn't it commanded to Adam – so that it could be observed by all human groups?*
- *If milah is so special why did God not create males without foreskins in the first place?*

Two Responses from Rabbinic Tradition

Answer #1:

Replied the sage: "Whatever was created in the first six days of creation requires that something more be done to it: mustard needs sweetening, lupine needs sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and man, too, needs to be perfected." (Midrash BR)

Answer #2:

[God says to Abraham], "That's enough! You should be satisfied that you are alive in this world together [that I bothered even to create you]; that I am your God and your protector. If you will not undergo circumcision then the world has gone on long enough.

Commentary:

To the Bible and the ancient rabbis alike, *brit milah* is not a personal option for Jewish boys. It is a mitzvah, a religious act commanded by God as part of His gracious offer to bring the Jewish people close to Him in holiness. To say that a Jewish child will decide whether to fulfill the mitzvah himself upon reaching adulthood—“The only persons who may consent to medically unnecessary procedures upon themselves are the individuals who have reached the age of consent,” goes the Declaration of the First International Symposium on Circumcision—is like saying that he will at the same point decide what his mother tongue will be.

In this key regard, Classical Judaism takes its place unmistakably on one side of the struggle over the long-term effects of contemporary liberal culture.

Where that culture speaks in terms of human rights and the supremacy of personal choice, the ancient sources of Judaism speak powerfully of human duties (and of more duties for Jews than for Gentiles).

Where it tends to endorse the voluntary character of identity, classical Judaism speaks of an inherited membership in a people from whom the individual is not free to resign.

Where many today celebrate being whole (“intact”), classical Judaism pursues holiness, and always prefers the moral to the aesthetic.

Where liberalism has embraced the interchangeability of sexual roles, Jewish sources see men and women as different by nature and by the plan of nature’s divine Author.

Where much of contemporary American culture now places the highest valuation on pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, and on the avoidance of any sort of pain, the classical Jewish texts value the willingness to suffer for a worthy cause, speak of the sanctity of marriage, and elevate self-control over self-expression.

In light of these radical disparities, it begins to seem no accident that circumcision, the very sign of the covenant between the Jews and their God, should have become the latest front in the battle over the Jewish future in America, or that the values at stake in this battle should turn out to include not only those of contemporary Judaism but, *mutatis mutandis*, those of contemporary America as well, a society undergoing a painful sorting-through of its own moral and cultural dispositions.

For the sake of all parties concerned, and quite aside from the fate of specific medical procedures, one can only hope that victory in this struggle goes to the values that once were much more common in America than they have become, and that firmly underlie the theory and practice of *brit milah*.

(Jon D. Levenson, [The New Enemies of Circumcision Commentary Magazine 2000](#))