

# the Midwife Advocate

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## Circumcision: The Unkindest Cut

by Ronald F. Goldman

Circumcision has become a unique American cultural tradition. The United States is the only country in the world that routinely circumcises most of its male infants for non-religious reasons. About 85% of males in the rest of the world are uncircumcised or "intact."

Recent medical reports have raised concern about the practice of circumcision. In a recent issue of *The Journal of American Medical Association*, Howard J. Stang, MD and colleagues at Group Health Inc. at the University of Minnesota report, "There is no doubt that circumcisions are painful for the baby. Indeed, circumcision has become a model for the analysis of pain and stress responses in the newborn. Not only does the anesthetized newborn cry vigorously,



tremble, and in some cases become mildly cyanotic because of prolonged crying, but other stress-related physiological reactions have also been demonstrated, including dramatic changes in heart and respiratory rates and in transcutaneous oxygen and plasma cortisol levels."

In *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Anand and Hickey, in a comprehensive review of recent medical literature of newborn pain, conclude that newborn responses to pain are "similar to but greater than

those in adult subjects." Concerning the memory of pain in neonates, they write, "The persistence of specific behavioral changes after circumcision in neonates implies the presence of memory. In the short term, these behavioral changes may disrupt the adaptation of newborn infants to their postnatal environment, the development of parent-infant bonding, and feeding schedules. In the long term, painful experiences in neonates could possibly lead to psychological sequelae, since several works have shown that newborns may have a much greater capacity for memory than was previously thought."

Psychiatrist Rema Laibow does clinical work in experienced anomalous trauma. "Events which impact upon the child's

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## Circumcision: A Jewish Response

by Mitchell Silver

If Ronald Goldman had restricted himself to the modest claim that circumcision is painful to infants and medically unnecessary, and therefore ought not to be done without strong cultural imperative, I would have no quarrel with him. I would merely point out that for the overwhelming majority of Jews, our wish to identify with Jewish tradition and history provides such an imperative. But without quite saying it, Goldman suggests that circumcision is too serious an evil to be justified by any tradition or history. I take it that Goldman believes that the correct answer to his rhetorical "Does anyone have the right to forcefully amputate a normal, functioning part of another human being," is "no." I'll try to explain why, at least in the case of Jews, the answer is "yes."

In the Jewish religious tradition, circumcision is a fundamental ritual. It forms part of the covenant, the nation's agreement with God which constitutes the Jewish people. Even on the Sabbath, which requires suspension of all other laboring activities, an exception is made for the performance of circumcision. All Jewish men, secular and religious, have been indelibly marked by circumcision as members of this people, and to the extent that the fate of Jewish women is intertwined with that of their fathers, husbands, and sons, they too have been

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Elizabeth Noble speaks out...page 11



marked by circumcision. At some level, most Jews feel, not without reason, that to abandon circumcision is to abandon the Jewish people. When Jewish parents weigh their son's right to a pain-free infancy against their sons' right to be included in, and their parental right and responsibility to carry on, an ancient cultural and historical heritage, Jews see the greater righteousness in circumcision.

Except for the most Orthodox, many Jews will grant that traditions, even central ones, ought to be modified or discarded if they are deeply morally objectionable. Many Jews have found the exclusion of women from full religious life sufficiently morally noxious to demand change. The real question raised by Goldman's article is whether circumcision is so morally offensive, that in spite of the strong cultural grounds Jews have to continue the tradition, they ought to abandon it.

Goldman levels four charges at circumcision: It causes excruciating pain, it damages the baby's relationship to his mother, it decreases the potential for sexual pleasure, and it violates the infant's right not to be subjected to medically unnecessary surgery.

I have granted the case for pain, but the case for extreme or lasting pain is, at best, highly speculative. Pain is largely a subjective phenomenon; some people cry when they are pinched, while others endure severe burns stoically. It is most people's experience that babies cry hard and undergo physiological changes due to a variety of stimuli. I don't know how painful it is for a baby not to be picked up from a crib within a minute of waking, but I do know that a slower-than-desired response will cause some babies to scream bloody murder, turn color, change breathing patterns, and vomit. The studies Goldman cites make a case that circumci-

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While I have heard many complaints from the circumcised about their sex lives, I have yet to hear anyone complain that his penis wasn't sensitive enough.

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sion probably hurts. But, as he describes them, they provide no evidence that circumcision involves a magnitude of pain that must for no reason be inflicted. Perhaps some ingeniously designed study of comparative pain response of infants to various stimuli will suggest that circumcision is especially and enduringly painful. The enduring part is important since an ephemeral pain, however intense, loses much of its moral offensiveness. But Goldman doesn't speak of such studies. The "persistent behavioral change" passage requires a host of shaky inferences to support a charge of enduring pain. In any event this can only be an objection to unanaesthetized circumcision, not to the practice altogether.

The damaged maternal infant bonding charge is, frankly, absurd. Lots of things have been said about Jewish boys, but not being adequately attached to their mothers is not one of them. I would not rest the case on ethnic stereotypes if there were a plausible alternative. Does Goldman know of any studies that demonstrate that the cir-

cumcised haven't bonded as well as the uncircumcised? He does not cite them. Dr. Laibow's view that the infant becomes distrustful of Mom whenever he feels "overwhelming pain," but is especially shaken when "in fact mother is truly complicit, as in giving permission for unanesthetized surgery" (i.e. circumcision), attributes a degree of conceptual sophistication to newborns that is surprising. Perhaps we should include in the circumcision ceremony a maternal declaration, ostentatiously performed in front of the infant, strongly objecting to the proceedings.

Little needs to be said about the "less sensitive penis, therefore less sexual pleasure" charge. Few individuals get a chance to grow up with both a circumcised and uncircumcised penis and offer an informed opinion on relative sensitivity. Are there studies showing that the circumcised require more time to become erect, suffer more impotence, seek out sex less frequently, enjoy their sex lives less or are less prone to premature ejaculation than the uncircumcised? (The last result, of course, would not count in a case *against* circumcision.) While I have heard many complaints from the circumcised about their sex lives, I have yet to hear anyone complain that his penis wasn't sensitive enough.

Concerning the right of infants not to be subjected to "medically" unnecessary surgery; I deny there is any such absolute right. Of course, one would need a very good non-medical reason for doing so. Imagine a culture that mercilessly ridiculed, discriminated against and found aesthetically repugnant ears that stuck out. Suppose the condition could most easily, effectively, and *relatively* painlessly be surgically corrected shortly after birth. The ears work just fine sticking out. But the parents may have good, culturally grounded reasons, that serve their child's overall well being (for we are social, and not merely biological creatures), to subject the baby to medically unnecessary surgery. For Jews, the love of our heritage and the suffering of our martyrs, all intimately bound up with the commandment of circumcision, gives us very strong reason to circumcise our sons. •

Mitchell Silver is a nurse and teaches philosophy and medical ethics at U. Mass Boston.

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