

“Jews Against Circumcision” is a website I have visited repeatedly of late. As its name implies, it argues against circumcision, stating “[W]e are no longer a primitive society and we have come to believe in human rights.”

The website gives a long list of citations from the Torah (the Christian Old Testament) of traditions that have been discontinued. They include punishment for homosexuality and blasphemy, the right of divorce for men only, the subjugation of women, the holding of slaves, and other practices sanctioned by the Torah.

It concludes that “We must embrace the notion of Bris Shalom, in which the genital mutilation part of the ceremony is omitted.”

A “Brit Shalom Celebrants” website provides the testimony of a retired physician, Mark Reiss:

“I am a retired physician, a Jew born in 1933 who is an active member of a Conservative synagogue, and a grandfather.

“When I was in Medical School in the 1950s, almost all newborn males in the US were circumcised . . . we were taught that circumcision was the correct and healthy thing to do. It was thought to control masturbation, decrease cancer risk, and help curtail sexually transmitted diseases. We learned nothing of foreskin anatomy or function. Infant nervous systems were thought to be undeveloped, and their pain was so trivialized that it was almost ignored. As a young physician, I participated in many circumcisions. Over the years I've witnessed brit milah in the homes of friends and family . . . like most physicians, and like most Jews, I said and did nothing to question circumcision.”

Later on, though, as he began to doubt the practice, he discovered “overwhelming reasons” to omit circumcision. Further, “To my amazement I learned that the USA was the **only** country in the world routinely circumcising babies for non-religious reasons.” He also discovered that among Jews in Europe, South America, and even in Israel, circumcision is by no means universal, and he concludes his essay with this advice:

“As a Jewish grandfather, I want to assure young couples about to bring a child into the world, that there are other members of the Jewish ‘older’ generation, including other Jewish physicians, and even some rabbis, who feel as I do. If your heart and instincts tell you to leave your son intact, listen!”

Why am I, a non-Jewish woman, interested in these websites? When I first heard of intactivists, people who believe in keeping babies’ genitals intact, I remembered the trauma of forty years ago when, as a young mother in a brand-new, gleaming American hospital, I was told I must submit my baby to circumcision. I couldn’t believe my ears! In Europe, as in many East European countries and even in Russia, the practice is unknown. Yet in the United States, physicians were/are convinced the practice is necessary to improve the baby’s health. That argument, of course, makes no sense whatsoever to an outsider: European men who are uncircumcised do not suffer any loss of health greater than American males. To me, it was as if the doctors were telling me one of the baby’s little toes must be amputated to secure his well-being. My Christian husband, however, who had suffered circumcision as a baby, was convinced

him we needed to comply with the physicians' edict. My objections were ignored. Once I'd resigned myself, I asked what anesthetic he would use. The good doctor replied, "No anesthetic. They don't feel anything at that age." What the? Whatever would make a physician think that newborns feel pain less acutely than infants, children, or adults? I felt insulted to the core.

Countless European and Russian immigrants must have been as distraught as I was when learning that they had no say in this matter. I have heard of men accusing their parents, even suing the hospital in which they were circumcised, over what happened to them as infants. Yet a surgery of that magnitude, imposed when the boy was a helpless babe, cannot be undone decades later.

While teaching in academia, trying to adhere to the "publish or perish" edict, I once submitted a rant against circumcision that the editors must have thought anti-Semitic, for they politely declined to publish the essay. "Jews Against Circumcision" makes a crucial distinction between humanist practices and anti-Semitism:

"Some Jews are afraid to look at circumcision for what it is because they think that if you're against circumcision, you're anti-Semitic. That is a ridiculous notion. Jews are not defined by our practices. In fact, the only requirement for Judaism is that you are born of a Jewish mother. Jews are taught to pursue education and question everything. We have questioned many practices in the Torah. Due to our enlightenment and education, we no longer practice some of them."

So, I've joined the intactivists around the world who raise their voices to speak out against the cruel custom. It's too late for my sons and even my grandsons. Unfortunately, enlightenment often arrives only on retirement, when we can afford the time to investigate social and cultural systems and, hence, begin to reflect on them critically.