

Bris Milah

Dale Lieberman

Circumcision...is a very, very hard thing
Maimonides

YOU SEE, I DON'T THINK GOD WANTS ME TO PUBLISH THIS ESSAY. AND TO TELL THE TRUTH, WHAT I HAVE TO SAY, I THINK SHOULD BE KEPT A SECRET. ON THE OTHER HAND IT'S A SECRET THAT NEEDS TELLING. BUT first, let me tell you, I have received signs!

When my computer, in a moment, consumed three hours of work on the first draft of this *dvar Torah*, I could not believe what had happened and could not understand what I had done wrong (at least with the computer). Instead of the text I was left only with the number 1 on the monitor screen. As I struggled with the frustration of losing three hours of work and thought and puzzled over what error I may have made, I reflected on the "hiddenness" of my subject and began to wonder whether the number 1 was truly a signature of the God who is One.

And I thought about sacrifices being consumed on an altar, and wondered whether my text had been consumed out of approval or disapproval. My mind was not yet a blank, and I wanted to persevere. Of course, I knew that the erasure was my fault—my inexperience with the computer. And besides, I don't expect signs.

Many days later, having dwelled continually upon the subject of the *dvar Torah*, I learned that my presentation at the small minyan I attend had been preempted by another member's *dvar Torah*, despite my previous confirmation and reconfirmation, weeks before, with the rabbi in charge of assigning *divrei Torah*. I again wondered if I were receiving a sign. Perhaps some things are better left unsaid.

I

IN *PARSHAT VAYERA* [GENESIS 21:4] WE ARE TOLD THAT ABRAHAM CIRCUMCISED Isaac on the eighth day, as God had commanded. One verse. No elaboration. Would you not expect the Torah to tell us more about this event, the establishment of God's covenant directly upon Isaac, the confirmation and reaffirmation of His covenant with Abraham? In the preceding chapters we are told thirteen times of God's covenant. Why so little attention to this important circumcision?

We can imagine how Abraham and his people had suffered upon the occasion of their own circumcisions. Adult circumcision is reputed to be no easy thing! Out of concern for Abraham's discomfort after the circumcision, God Himself proposed to pay a sick call, according to the Rabbis, and from this we derive the great mitzvah of visiting the sick.

Disregarding the pain and suffering of circumcision with which he was intimately familiar, Abraham performed the mitzvah of *milah* (circumcision) upon the son of his old age, the only son of Sarah, his gift from God, this newborn vulnerable infant. By any measure this must have been a great and troubling event for Abraham, but the Biblical text is a classic of parsimonious description.

Even the Rabbis minimize this event for Abraham. They list his own circumcision as one of his ten trials, but not this "mutilation" of his newborn son. Now, I know from experience with my own sons that this mitzvah is not easily performed and provokes ambivalent feelings. Can we assume that Abraham was less sensitive? Why does the Torah treat this event so sparingly? I am convinced that the Torah deliberately downplays this event.

At the first bris I personally as a father was obligated to perform, that upon my older son, I felt that I was being called upon to make a sacrifice—literally. Using the dictionary definition, it was a "forfeiture of something highly valued [a part of his body as well as his comfort, security, safety and freedom from pain] for the sake of a greater value or claim [Jewish identity, compliance with a mitzvah, the fulfillment of an obligation]." As I authorized the *mohel* (circumciser) to perform the circumcision, I imagined at that moment that I was feeling what Abraham must have felt as he prepared to sacrifice his son on the altar on Mount Moriah.

That revelation was enhanced shortly thereafter at the *bris milah* (covenant of circumcision) of the first-born son of friends of ours. An infant surrounded by men in black coats. A circle around him so exclusive that the



Photographs by Dale Lieberman, copyright 1993.

mother, wanting to send a pacifier to her child, approached diffidently, crouching, stretching forth her arm so as not to intrude upon a place and event from which she felt excluded.

Affected by the power of the circumcision ritual, I photographed others. Photographs of a *bris* in New York City illustrate the delivery of the infant to the *bimah*, first by the women and then by the men, joyfully; and then the solemnity of the male-dominated ritual, the raising of the infant for all to see prior to the circumcision itself, as a sacrificial lamb about to be offered on God's altar.

A photograph from another *bris* even reveals God's comforting the father during the circumcision! God's name, Shaddai, by which He identified Himself to Abraham when establishing the covenant of circumcision, is borne in the strap of the tefillin on the rabbi's comforting hand laid upon the father's shoulder.

As I documented the *bris milah* ritual, I realized that *milah* is not merely a symbol of a sacrifice. The repeated fulfillment of the command to circumcise our sons is a sacrificial ritual. Calling *milah* a "sign" of the covenant belies its cost. This is not a mezuzah on the doorpost, a star of David around the neck, or a ring upon a finger. This is not challah pulled from the dough before baking. This sign requires the taking of a piece of a child's body.

This is not making pretend, as we do with the afikoman and wine at Pesach. This is the true body and blood of one real live child that is cut and bled. The crying is real. The pain is real. The cutting and blood are real. And real healing is required.

At the *bris* the mother and particularly the father are required to do something contrary to their natural protective instincts: to inflict pain upon their newborn son. They respond to a demand—call it religious, cultural, social, familial, whatever—with the understanding that failure to do so would be unacceptable at some level.

II

WHY DID THE SACRIFICIAL COMPONENT OF CIRCUMCISION SURPRISE ME? PERHAPS because it is largely unacknowledged, both by parents and by religious officials.

Those who attend a *bris* often see and hear very little. Hebrew texts which convey sacrificial imagery, even if recited, are seldom heard or understood. Those attending the *bris* are not confronted with the sacrificial imagery, and as

participants rather than observers, they are not predisposed to associate the structured religious drama with a sacrificial service otherwise known only at a distance of two thousand years.

There also seems to be little professional interest on the part of *mohalim* and rabbis in promoting the connection with sacrifice. Seldom does one hear about sacrifices at a *bris*. Guides to Jewish practice and speeches at a *bris* highlight not the pain of the parents and child but the joy and meaningfulness of the experience. It is with great relief that the "surgical" part of the ritual is completed and the "naming" part of the ceremony proceeds. Even well-educated Jews tersely describe the first part of this ceremony as "barbaric" and embrace and dwell upon the importance and meaning of the naming ceremony.

It is not accidental that the allegedly barbaric aspect of the ritual is shrouded. Not only is its physical aspect often concealed by the bodies of the closest participants (usually male), but its privacy and its pain (real and imagined) usually repel close observation. *Metzitzah* (the suction of the blood from the wound), traditionally considered one of the three components of the



bris milah ritual, is done so quickly and discreetly by observant *mohalim* that its performance may go unnoticed. Yet the blood of circumcision, hidden literally and figuratively, may also be the most mysterious and most sacrificially significant element of *bris milah*.¹

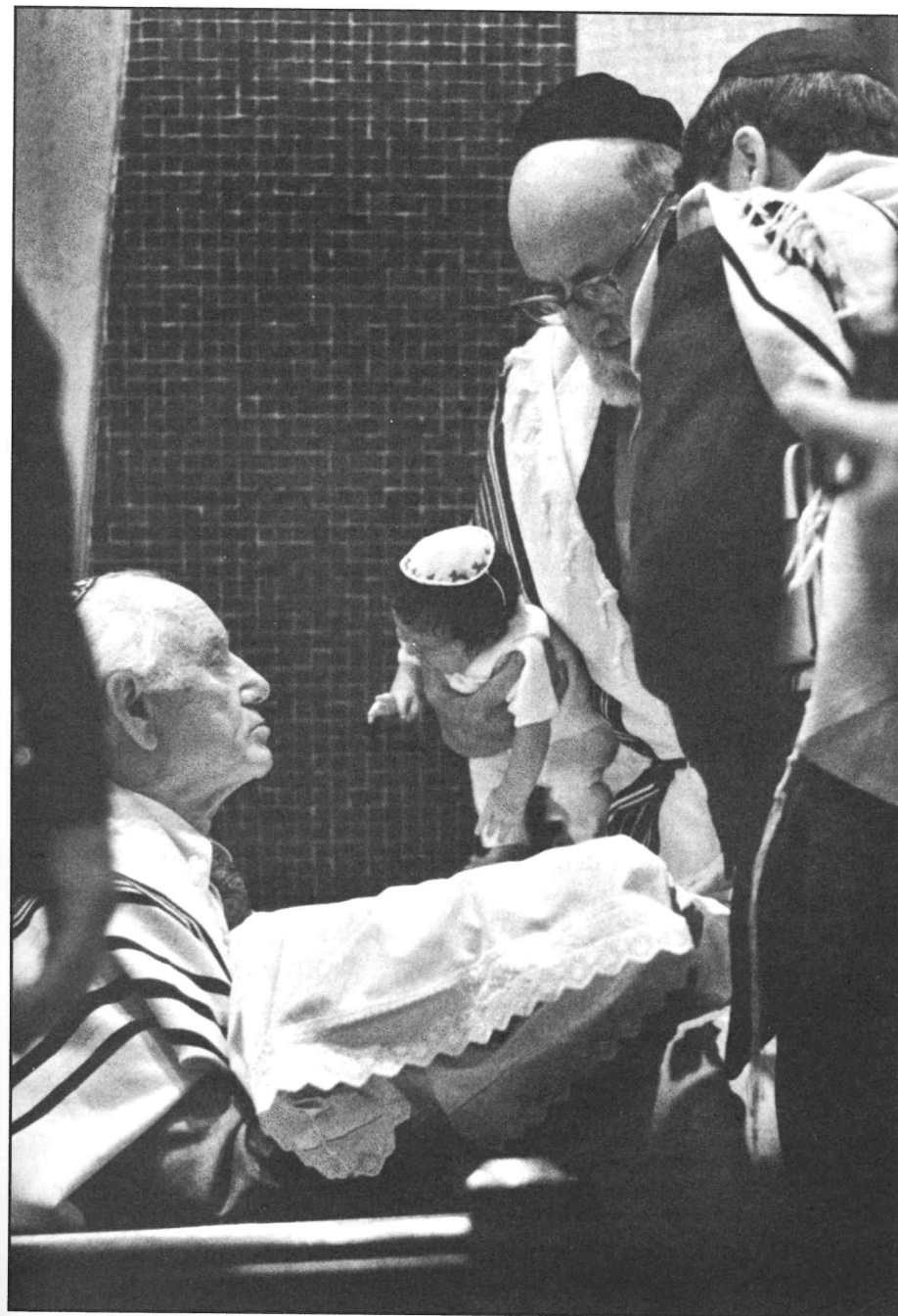
As the ritual of *bris milah* has become more antiseptic, literally and figuratively, we have distanced ourselves from our occasions of circumcision. Circumcision instruments adorned by artistic images of the *Akedah* are not passed around for viewing but are appreciated only by the *mohalim* who continue to use them. Circumcision instruments which are objets d'art have become relics to be found only in museums; they are certainly not commonly displayed with menorahs and shofars in Jewish homes. Matched circumcision cups, one the *cos shel brakha* (wine goblet) and the other the *cos shel metzitzah* (cup for *metzitzah*), are seldom seen outside a museum. How often do we find as ritual objects the pillows and wimpels of circumcision or finely bound albums of photographs from the occasion, as we have from the other rites of passage—the great religious events of bar and bat mitzvah and weddings? To some extent we are embarrassed by our ritual and its evidence remains in the flesh alone.

III

NOT ONLY IS POPULAR OPINION DISCOMFITED BY THE NOTION OF SACRIFICE, BUT our sources are ambivalent as well. Some openly acknowledge the sacrificial component of *milah*; others downplay or omit it. Some contemporary sources in English make explicit the association of *milah* and sacrifice. One example from the tradition, a guidebook by Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn,² includes a Kabbalist prayer comparing fulfillment of the covenant of circumcision to the delightful fragrance of a sacrifice. Another prayer, to be recited by the *mohel*, equates *milah* with the first fruits offered to God, asking God to reckon the blood of the covenant as if the *mohel* had built an altar and brought upon it burnt offerings.

1 The Talmud (NEDARIM 32a) associates the blood of circumcision with the sacrificial blood of oxen sprinkled upon an altar and upon the people Israel. It was the combined blood of the *pesach* (paschal lamb) and the blood of circumcision daubed on the doors of the Hebrews which saved them from the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt.

2 Paysach J. Krohn, *Bris Milah; Circumcision—The Covenant of Abraham*, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1985, pp. 117-137.



Rabbi Krohn's book includes his translations of other significant prayers. The prayer for the *sandak* (one who holds the infant), from *Avodat HaKodesh* by Rav Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806), includes the following:

Behold I have come to be a sandak. I will be a throne and an altar, so that the circumcision may be performed [with the baby upon] my lap. May it be Your will, Hashem, my God and the God of my forefathers, that it should be an altar of atonement; that it should atone for all my sins, wicked acts, and rebellious deeds, and specifically that which I may have flawed in my sensual behavior and in the sign of the holy covenant... May the circumcision be reckoned as the burning of incense...

After the circumcision, as the child is named, the reader quotes the traditionally-recited passage from the Book of Ezekiel, 16:6:

And it is said, *Then I passed by you and saw you trampling in your blood, and I said to you: "Because of your blood you shall live!" and I said to you: "Because of your blood you shall live!"*

As these words are repeated by those present, drops of wine are applied to the lips of the infant, linking the blood imagery and the wine. The blessing of the child to be said at this point includes the following:

Master of the universe, may it be Your will that he be worthy, favored, and acceptable before You as if I had offered him before the throne of Your glory, and may You, in Your abundant mercy, send through Your holy angels a holy and pure soul to _____ who has now been circumcised for the sake of Your Great Name.

Interestingly, a Reform anthology prepared for use in *bris milah* training also recognizes the sacrificial character of *milah*. In one article, for example, Rabbi Richard N. Levy notes: "...a 'routine surgical procedure' is being transformed into a religious celebration; and a physician, two parents, old and honored relatives become priests at an altar."³ He compares the table to "the altar upon which the covenantal renewal is being celebrated" and the *sandak's* lap to "an altar to God upon which the *berit* will be offered." He observes:

Mystical commentaries on *berit mila* indicate that part of the *kavana* of participants in the service should be that they are preparing an offering to God. The offering is in two parts: the foreskin itself, *orla*, and the

³ "The Liturgy of Berit Mila," *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, Lewis M. Barth, ed., Berit Milah Board of Reform Judaism, 1990, pp. 3-15.

blood... The Torah uses the word *orla* to refer also to the first three years of fruit on fruit trees, which is not to be eaten, but returns into the Godly cycle. Similarly, the *orla* of the penis "belongs" to God and is to be returned to God.

Like other offerings, the blood also belongs to God... In a *korban* (offering, or sacrifice), blood flows only from an animal that has been killed; when blood flows from a living human being as *dam berit*, it symbolizes the individual's own survival, in this world and the next, and as well the survival of the Jewish People, evidence of God's faithfulness to the promise to Abraham. It reminds us that the life that flows in our veins finds its source in God.

On the other hand, in some contemporary prayerbooks and guides, the descriptions and retranslations of the liturgy contribute to the concealment of sacrificial imagery and symbolism. According to a recently published description of the use of wine in the ceremony:

Following the actual circumcision, the newborn boy is officially named over a goblet of wine, from which the parents and family members and close friends drink. Often a piece of gauze is dipped into this wine and placed in the baby's mouth during the operation, a gesture of pacification during the somewhat traumatic experience of circumcision.⁴

The association of wine with blood imagery is omitted entirely.

Another text takes the Hebrew blessing, which reads literally: "From the eighth day onward may his blood be accepted..." and retranslates it as "May the *Brith Milah* protect him..."⁵

In the Conservative Movement's widely-used *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* by Rabbi Isaac Klein, not one of the introductory texts to the article on ritual circumcision alludes to sacrifice.⁶ Instead, Rabbi Klein refers to circumcision as the "sign of the b'rit," as "an outer sign of the circumcision of our inner hearts," and as an "abiding symbol of the consecration of the children of Abraham to the God of Abraham."

⁴ David Novak, "Be Fruitful and Multiply: Issues Relating to Birth in Judaism," *Celebration and Renewal: Rites of Passage in Judaism*, Rela M. Geffen, ed., Jewish Publication Society, 1993.

⁵ Eugene J. Cohen, *Guide to Ritual Circumcision and Redemption of the First-Born Son*, Ktav Publishing House, Inc., New York, 1984.

⁶ Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1979, pp. 420-421.

These omissions and retranslations are reminiscent of prayer books which include the description of Temple sacrifices in the Hebrew but not the English text. Just as the facts of animal sacrifice in our history may be considered disquieting and out-of-date, similarly, aspects of the *milah* ritual are considered barbaric and disquieting and are avoided.

IV

OUR TRADITION'S STRAIN IN COMING TO TERMS WITH SACRIFICIAL ELEMENTS IN *milah* is exemplified by the writings of Maimonides (Rambam) on the reasons for circumcision. Despite the fact that associations between circumcision and sacrifice appear in the Talmud and midrash,⁷ Rambam rationalizes the explanation of circumcision.

Rambam first asserts that one of the purposes of circumcision is to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and violent concupiscence.⁸ Rambam then

7 For example, among the many praises of circumcision in the Mishnah [NEDARIM 32a], we find the following: "Great is circumcision, for it counterbalances all other precepts put together, as it is written: behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words." The prooftext, Exodus 24:8, relates to blood of oxen sacrificed to God, half of which Moses sprinked upon the people of Israel and half upon the altar, ratifying Israel's acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. As another example, Midrash Leviticus Rabbah (*Parshat Emor* 17:1) includes the following association:

R. Isaac expounded: The ordinances pertaining to man and the ordinances pertaining to beast are placed on a par. Of the ordinances pertaining to man it says, *And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised* [LEVITICUS 12:3], while of the ordinance pertaining to beast it says, *From the eighth day and thenceforth it may be accepted for an offering*.

8 All references to Maimonides are from Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press, 1963. The text is as follows:

"Similarly with regard to *circumcision*, one of the reasons for it is, in my opinion, the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible. It has been thought that circumcision perfects what is defective congenitally. This gave the possibility to everyone to raise an objection and to say: How can natural things be defective so that they need to be perfected from outside, all the more because we know how useful the foreskin is for that member? In fact this *commandment* has not been prescribed with a view to perfecting what is defective congenitally, but to perfect what is defective morally. The bodily pain caused to that member is the real purpose of circumcision. None of the activities necessary for the preservation of the individual is harmed thereby, nor is procreation rendered impossible, but violent concupiscence and lust that goes beyond what is needed are diminished. The fact that circumcision weakens the faculty of sexual excitement and sometimes perhaps diminishes the pleasure is indubitable. For if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened. The *Sages*, may their memory be blessed, have explicitly stated: *It is hard for a woman with whom an uncircumcised man has had sexual intercourse to separate from him*. In my opinion this is the strongest of the reasons for *circumcision*."

proceeds to outline several positive bases for circumcision. First, Jews [i.e., males] who share the belief in the unity of God should have a bodily sign uniting them, so that they can recognize each other as fellow believers, since non-believers would be unlikely to perform circumcision upon themselves or their sons. Rambam adds:

Now a man does not perform this act upon himself or upon a son of his unless it be in consequence of a genuine belief. For it is not like an incision in the leg or a burn in the arm, but is a very, very hard thing.

Moreover, those who are circumcised in fulfillment of the covenant made by "Abraham our Father," are brought into the covenantal community and at the same time are obligated to believe in the unity of God.

Rambam next offers several reasons for performing circumcision in childhood:

The first is that if the child were let alone until he grew up, he would sometimes not perform it. The second is that a child does not suffer as much pain as a grown-up man because his membrane is still soft and his imagination weak; for a grown-up man would regard the thing, which he would imagine before it occurred, as terrible and hard. The third is that the parents of a child that is just born take lightly matters concerning it, for up to that time the imaginative form that compels the parents to love it is not yet consolidated...At the time of its birth...this imaginative form is very weak, especially as far as concerns the father upon whom this *commandment* is imposed.

Only at this point does Rambam bring in the notion of sacrifice and he embeds it within a rational argument dealing with the timing of circumcision on the eighth day:

The fact that *circumcision* is performed on the eighth day is due to the circumstances that all living beings are very weak and exceedingly tender when they are born, as if they were still in the womb. This is so until seven days are past. It is only then that they are counted among those who have contact with the air. Do you not see this point is also taken into account with regard to beasts? *Seven days shall it be with its dam, and so on*. It is as if before that period it were an abortion. Similarly with regard to man; he is circumcised after seven days have passed. In this way the matter is fixed: *You do not make out of it something that varies*.

On its face Rambam's concern for the weakness and tenderness of the infant justifies deferring circumcision until the eighth day after birth. He

compares this to the weakness and tenderness of beasts in the first week of life. Significantly, Rambam refers to the Biblical passage requiring the sacrifice of those animals on the eighth day, quoting Exodus 22:29:

Thou shalt not delay to offer of the fullness of thy harvest, and of the outflow of thy presses. The first-born of thy sons shalt thou give unto Me. Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen, and with thy sheep; seven days it shall be with its dam; on the eighth day thou shalt give it Me.

Rambam's choice of a Biblical proof-text for the sufficient strength of the child on the eighth day takes the argument from the level of what is medically appropriate to what is appropriate in the context of ritual sacrifice—the sufficiency of the creature for the ritual. While Rambam's rationale suggests that circumcision should not be performed during the week of initial tenderness, he insists upon the eighth day for *other* than “humanitarian” reasons. Abandoning rational persuasion, Rambam states unequivocally: “You do not make out of it something that varies.” Rambam has justified the necessity and timing of circumcision by sacrificial standards.

V

THERE ARE GOOD REASONS TO CONTINUE TO BE CIRCUMSPECT ABOUT THE sacrificial element of this ancient blood ritual. As a matter of prudence, we may want to protect *milah* against contemporary challenges, both internal and external.

One subtle challenge to the continued fulfillment of *bris milah* may arise in a public policy context. In a society concerned with safety and health, humane practices, and the protection of children's rights, it is conceivable for communities to enact legislation affecting the ritual of *bris milah*. For example, to protect against the transmission of infectious disease, sterile practices might be required; circumcision might be permitted only in hospitals and doctors' offices and only by persons certified by the state to perform such surgery in accordance with government prescribed medical procedures. Certain types of anesthesia might be mandated. Children might be prohibited from viewing any such surgery. Children's rights advocates might argue, particularly if the medical evidence weighed against circumcision, that circumcision should be a decision of the child and should await his majority.



Application of these public policy concerns may raise serious religious and legal issues, when public policy conflicts with religious practice, purposefully or incidentally. Such a conflict between the free exercise of religion and an “asserted public interest” arose in 1987 between practitioners of Santeria, a religion of African-Cuban origin, which required animal sacrifice in its ritual, and the City of Hialeah, Florida, which sought to prohibit the animal sacrifice. This conflict, which may not be so far remote from the subject of circumcision as it seems, attracted considerable interest from various organizations in the Jewish community and gave rise to fascinating litigation in the federal courts.⁹

The National Jewish Commission on Law and Public Affairs (“Colpa”), an organization of volunteer lawyers and social scientists representing the interests of the American Orthodox Jewish community, filed with the Supreme Court an *amicus curiae* brief as did the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, and a host of religious organizations jointly concerned with the constitutional issue of religious freedom.

The most immediate practical consideration for Colpa was the implication for the laws of kashrut and the continued practice of kosher slaughter. The broader basis for Colpa’s concern related to the general principles regarding religious freedom and “centuries-old observances of the Jewish faith.” The *amicus* brief of the other major Jewish organizations argued that animal sacrifice is “an ancient, long-standing, well-established, sincere religious practice” worthy of respect and protection.¹⁰

What is notable about the litigation in the context of this essay is the legal threat to established Santerian ritual from those with certain agendas and priorities in conflict directly or coincidentally with the religion. The Supreme Court concluded that the suppression of the central element of the Santerian worship service was the object of the ordinances in question. The concern from a

Jewish perspective is that those opposing Jewish ritual, for reasons anti-Semitic or otherwise, may do so under color of laws which pass constitutional muster, as generally applicable and religiously neutral on their face, but which nonetheless impact adversely upon traditional practice.

In a world susceptible to anti-Semitism, the perception of *milah* as a lesser form of sacrifice would feed prejudice against circumcision among those hostile to Judaism and Jewish practices. Such a perception may also weaken the commitment of non-religious Jews. In a society whose majority believes that the sacrifice of Jesus made further sacrifice unnecessary, there may well be a negative connotation and common objection to human blood-letting as a ritual act to satisfy the God of the Jews.



⁹ Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah, 113 S. Ct. 2217 (1993) (argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, November 4, 1992; decided June 11, 1993).

¹⁰ In opposition to the positions taken by these other Jewish organizations, the Jews for Animal Rights filed an *amicus* brief, basing its argument against animal sacrifice upon the Jewish principle, *tsa'ar ba'alei chaim*, (not causing pain to living creatures). The organization described its goal of making this Jewish value a contemporary moral issue through promoting vegetarianism and by seeking to influence the animal-related decisions of Jewish organizations, rabbis, and Jewish action groups.

Parshat Vayera suggests the lesson that Rambam elaborated in defense of circumcision: fulfill the commandment of *milah*, but guard it, conceal its purpose and justification. Justify it rationally if you must, but observe it regardless of reason. Do it and do not make out of it something that varies. Protect it. Not only is it precious; it is the consideration for God's correlative promise to multiply and make fruitful the people of Israel. It is a condition for Jewish survival.

VI

PARADOXICALLY, THOUGH, ONE WAY TO DEFEND *BRIS MILAH* MIGHT BE TO acknowledge its sacrificial component and understand its deeper meaning. Certainly the "rational" defenses of *bris milah* are weakening. In the scientific community the medical and hygienic benefits of circumcision are debated.¹¹ Many people are also concerned about neonatal pain. A recent article, noting a gradual shift in public opinion, summarized the threat to *bris milah* from within the Jewish community itself:

Increasingly, there are young people whose "respect for nature" (the values of natural childbirth or vegetarianism may be factors) is violated by what is regarded as traumatic and mutilating. Jewish Feminism finds itself unable to compensate fully for circumcision with alternative ceremonies for girls. But whatever the motives may be, an increasing number of Reform Jewish parents, including some very Jewishly committed ones, now express hesitation about circumcising their sons.¹²

11 The medical desirability of circumcision continues to be a matter of debate and is the subject of many articles in the medical literature. In *Pediatric References*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1992), an issue entitled "To Circumcise or Not to Circumcise: An Update and Discussion," circumcision is described as "currently the most commonly performed surgical procedure in the United States" which nonetheless is a "roiling nexus of medical controversy." Previously, in 1971, the American Academy of Pediatrics had stated, "There are no valid medical indications for circumcision in the neonatal period." Again in 1975 the Academy concluded, "There is no absolute medical indication for routine circumcision of the newborn," a statement reiterated by the Academy in 1983. However, in 1989 the Academy's Task Force on Circumcision issued an opinion stating: "New evidence has suggested possible medical benefits from newborn circumcision." Nevertheless, concluding its review of the circumcision literature, the article in *Pediatric References* noted: "Perhaps most significant are the findings about pain and analgesia. . . [I]t is apparent that circumcision is painful to the neonate."

12 Michael A. Meyer, "Berit Mila Within the History of the Reform Movement," *Berit Mila in the Reform Context*, op. cit.

Perhaps the time has come for Jews to become more comfortable with a non-rational defense of *bris milah*. Why might the concept of *bris milah* as sacrifice be valuable for us to recover? What is implied in the act of sacrifice?

Dr. J. H. Hertz, editor of the Soncino translation of *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, expresses a conventional understanding of sacrifice as "an act of homage and submission to the Heavenly Ruler or of thankfulness for God's bounties" or as an attempt to propitiate a deity, much as one would do with a human king.¹³

Contemporary anthropologists and religious scholars take these ideas a step further, enriching our notions about the function of sacrifice. For example, structural anthropologist Edmund Leach describes a metaphysical, liminal space between an other, holy world of existence and our world of temporal experience. Sacrificial or other religious ritual creates an area of intersection between these two worlds, a space across which communication can occur and through which "the power of the gods may be made available to otherwise impotent men."¹⁴

Applying this model to the traditional ritual of *bris milah*, we can appreciate the importance of the ceremony's architecture: the mother bringing the child through an audience, handing the infant over to the males who have gathered to perform the ritual. They establish an altar upon the lap of the *sandak* and sanctify the place and the event with wine and blessings. Finally the mother retreats with the child away from the sacred space, back through the audience and back to the privacy of the family.

Leach also suggests that "sacrifices are markers of boundaries in social time." An individual joins society in a new role, moving from the social timelessness of ritual separation from society and existence outside society, into the realm of social time.

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has written:¹⁵

13 *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, J.H. Hertz, ed. (Soncino Press, London, 2d ed. 1964), p. 560.

14 Edmund Leach, "The Logic of Sacrifice," *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, Bernhard Lang, ed. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985).

15 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1966). Lévi-Strauss argues against the razor of scientific knowledge: "scientific *praxis*...has emptied the notions of death and birth of everything not corresponding to mere physiological processes and rendered them unsuitable to convey other meanings. In societies with initiation rites, birth and death provide the material for a rich and varied conceptualization, provided that these notions...have not been stripped by any form of scientific knowledge oriented towards practical returns—which they lack—of the major part of a meaning which transcends the distinction between the real and the imaginary: a complete meaning of which we can now hardly do more than evoke the ghost in the reduced setting of figurative language" (pp. 264-65).



Whether in Africa, America, Australia or Melanesia, the rites follow the same pattern: first, the novices, taken from their parents, are symbolically 'killed'... after this they are 'reborn' as members of the society.

Making explicit the sacrificial element of circumcision also legitimates and transforms the mixed feelings of the parents. It emphasizes their roles as active subjects, suggesting at the same time that the infant as a passive object is not the honoree but is one who provides an opportunity for the parents' and the community's devotion, acknowledgment of God's power, and connection to Jewish history and tradition.

The commandment of *milah* sets up a dramatic trial for the parents. Like the commandment to sacrifice Isaac, it brings them to the point of suspending reason, overcoming and contravening the natural impulse to protect the child from pain. By virtue of the parents' trial of pain and ambivalence, it initiates them (as Abraham was initiated) into the covenantal community of Jewish progenitors. The Jewish commitment is tested and forged as we impose the sign of the covenant.

Like the *Akedah*, undertaken as promptly as possible after God's command to Abraham (who rose early to set out for the sacred place), the bris is performed as promptly as possible, as soon as the infant is fit. The eight-day-old taken to a sacred place is like the unprotesting Isaac subject to his father's will, and we are like Abraham who accepted a commandment, for which no meaning

was given, and who set out to comply not because he understood or was offered reasons but because he was commanded to do so.

Thus the progression of feelings from joy to awe to pain, perhaps to guilt, to atonement, expiation, relief, satisfaction, and celebration, is repeated bris after bris. Just as space and time are organized by the *bris milah* ritual, so too are the emotions.

The understanding of *bris milah* as sacrificial may also guide our formulation and assessment of rituals for celebrating the birth of girls. A sacrifice-based model would recommend sensitivity to the importance of sacred place for these rituals, possibly encouraging the choice of a synagogue or minyan on a day that the Torah is read, so that the naming and celebratory ritual would have a sacred locus. It might encourage choosing an other-than-arbitrary date, so that an imposed timeframe—such as the first Torah reading after the birth or the termination of the mother's initial ritual confinement (according to the Torah, fourteen days)—can shape the event as a sacred occasion. Finally, incorporating a pledge or charitable donation in the baby's name, or some other commitment believed to be pleasing to God, would link the event to the Biblical notion of sacrifice imposing a cost on the offeror.

Subjecting religious practice to the razor of reason will denude it. We are left to defend it not on a rational basis but on a religious basis; our religion requires it as an act of faith. Our willingness to preserve a cultural element whether we can understand it or not serves to preserve Jewish civilization. Whether we think of *milah* as quasi-sacrificial or "like" sacrifice, consideration of sacrificial models restores traditional complexity to the sign of our covenant.



Dale Lieberman is a photographer and graduate of Yale College's Department of Religious Studies. He is working on, and seeking support for, a documentary on the contemporary performance of bris milah.