Once again, the right of Jews to circumcise their sons at the age of eight days—a tradition that is thousands of years old—has been attacked. This time, by the Progress Party in Norway. Only a few days ago, on the 6th of this month, it voted in favor of banning ritual circumcision of children under the age of 16. The so-called reason: “violation of children’s rights,” and “mental and physical harm” to the child.

This was done a day after the Belgium Parliament of Wallonia voted in favor of banning shechita (kosher ritual slaughter). In both cases, these verdicts, although not yet accepted by the Norwegian and Belgian governments, are a serious attempt to ban Jews not only from these countries but from all of Europe.

In 2013, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) recommended to all its 47 member states to ban circumcision.

This is nothing less than blatant anti-Semitism.

While it is impossible to argue with anti-Semites, since hate is all they know and no reasoning will change their minds, it is most important to realize that many well-meaning people, including Jews, are deeply influenced by these so-called “humanitarian” considerations and begin wondering whether they are, after all, justified. Indeed, is this not an infringement on the rights of a child who never consented to this intervention? And, in truth, is it not a harmful and traumatic experience? Perhaps all the parties who want to ban circumcision are right, after all?
What these well-meaning people, especially Jews, have to realize is that the whole premise on which these objections are based is the result of a profound misunderstanding of what human beings are all about, what moves them, and what makes their lives meaningful.

To be truly alive is possible only when one lives for some supreme goal. The ultimate question regarding our lives is whether there is anything worth dying for. If the answer is no, then we must ask ourselves whether there is anything to live for. For most thinking people, there is more to life than our physical survival, or having a great time. It is the exaltation of existence and the ability to hear a perpetual murmur emitted by the waves beyond the shore of worldliness that give us the feeling of life's utmost significance. If not for that, we would agree with French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus who said that the only serious philosophical problem is whether or not to commit suicide.

There are values in life that surpass our concern for the mundane, and many of us are prepared to make highly uncomfortable and even painful sacrifices in order to live by those values. It is these sacrifices that give our lives a notion of belonging, of being part of something much larger than the sum of the components that make up our physical existence.

We ask: What gives us the right to bring a child into a religious covenant by way of circumcision, without its consent? Circumcision, after all, is the sign of belonging to the Jewish people. And to be Jewish means to be part of a nation that is rooted in a covenant that asks Jews to risk their very existence for the sake of a moral and religious mission—to redeem humankind of its moral setbacks and to offer it hope. How can we commit children to a lifelong mission that they may not wish to fulfill? Fair questions, indeed.

But shouldn't we really ask a different question, one that many of us do not want to face? What right do we have to bring children into the world without giving them a higher mission? Is there anything more heartless than giving birth to children and not letting them know why they live? What right do we have to throw children into this turbulent jungle, filling them with anxieties and uncertainties, without giving them a clue as to their higher purpose? While Socrates explained that life without thinking is not worth living, Judaism teaches us that a life without commitment is a life not lived. The dignity of a person is in direct proportion to their obligations. All human beings, Jews and gentiles alike, need to teach their children a strong commitment to a meaningful purpose beyond the mere mundane, and more than just the pleasure principle.

To deny our children this opportunity is to withhold from them real joy and the capability to withstand major challenges, as well as the chance to experience the highest, truest value of living in this world. Joy is “man's passage from a less to a greater perfection,” said Spinoza. But it is only through hardship and discomfort that one can achieve such perfection.

Surely children will always have the opportunity to reject the individual missions chosen for them by their parents and replace them with other callings. Yet, of invaluable importance is that their parents made them aware of the fact that without a mission life is not worth living.
When we object to circumcision on the basis of child mutilation—a description completely disproportionate to the small incision that takes only a few seconds, heals within hours, and has no serious consequences—and denying the child’s right to autonomy over his body, it seems that we are making a valid claim. Indeed, by what right are we, as parents, allowed to do so? But shouldn’t we also ask ourselves honestly whether we have the right to bring a child into this world at all? Is that not a much greater injustice than circumcision?

No doubt, even with today’s advanced medical knowledge, many children are tragically born with all sorts of deformities or illnesses, often crippled and handicapped for life. Others may suffer at some other stage in life, contracting diseases, experiencing violence, and even becoming victims of war and other atrocities.

Has anyone, before planning birth, ever asked their future child for consent to be born? Should we ban all future pregnancies and births, as we now want to do with circumcision?

Subconsciously, we all know that we have the right to bring a child into the world because there is something about life that overrules all objections against it. If we would not believe this, it would be completely prohibited to risk bringing children into the world knowing full well how much harm and pain they will most probably suffer. “To live is like to love—all reason is against it, and all healthy instinct for it,” as Samuel Butler humorously said. Only if we understand that life is of invaluable importance—and not merely a matter of physical survival—can we live a life of grand spiritual import. One of the greatest tragedies of modern times is that millions of people live and die without ever being aware that there is supreme meaning to their lives.

Closely related to this is the issue of rights and duties. Western society is rights-oriented, and secular ethics are deeply rooted in this. Judaism and, to a certain extent, other religious denominations are duty-oriented. This is an essential distinction that cuts across many issues. Judaism does not believe that people own their bodies and are therefore free to do with them whatever they please. Judaism and most monotheistic religions believe that the human body is a loan granted by God Who is the ultimate Owner.

Parents, therefore, have the responsibility to convey to their children a purpose in life, which must reflect the notion of obligation. For the same reason, it is not a human right to bring children into the world; it is a religious duty. If it is seen as merely a right, what happens when the rights of the parents clash with those of the child? When parents abort a healthy fetus because they have the right to do so, are they not violating the right of the child to be born?

The rite of circumcision is the Jews’ way of passing on life’s meaning to their children by obligating them to fulfill the Jewish people’s covenant with God, sealed thousands of years ago. It is duty we talk about, and there is no growth except in the fulfillment of one’s duties.

For Jews, circumcision—the promise to live life with a great mission as its guide—is God’s seal imprinted on human flesh. And it is only proper that this sign of allegiance be imposed upon the
**body, for** after all, it is not the soul that needs to make the commitment. The soul *is* committed to its mission. It is the body—the very instrument through which man carries his soul, his constant companion, enabling him to live a life of nobility—that makes a vow to compel itself to serve God. Like a piece of paper that carries the buying power of a certain dollar amount, the body serves as the vessel that holds the soul. Just as the symbolic markings on the bill inform us of the value assigned to it by the treasury department, so too does the ‘sign’ that parents inscribe on the bodies of their children reveal the greatness of the souls they house.

Since Judaism strongly believes in action and the physical, not only in faith and spirituality, the transient act of baptizing with water is insufficient. Judaism wants the body to be transformed. And if the body fails to live up to its lofty responsibilities, the physical imprint of the circumcision serves as a constant reminder of what it means to reside in the presence of God; it is a testimony to one’s spiritual obligations and potential. The claim that it may hurt for a moment and that it interferes with the child’s self-determination is totally disproportionate to its infinite spiritual value. The child, from the very beginning of his life, is physically and symbolically reminded that living a life of higher meaning requires sacrifice, but is also the source of both ultimate happiness and the notion of mission.

Medical science has not yet determined whether circumcision reduces or enhances sexual pleasure. Either way, it is remarkable that Jews have greatly succeeded at sex. As one of the oldest nations in the world, if not the oldest, the Jewish people have had more children proportionately than any other nation. Sex was and is seen as a commandment by God not only to facilitate having children, but also as a joyful experience. Pleasure, however, is not a supreme value to which everything else must yield. It has a place in this world, but it is not the ultimate. That Judaism requires its followers to circumcise their sons proves the immense importance it attributes to this rite, as a token of the highest level of dedication to a mission. This, notwithstanding its uncompromising concern for the human body—as reflected in its total opposition to any other intrusion on the human body for non-medical reasons—and despite its insistence that everything must be done to stay physically healthy, and that no unnecessary harm may be done even to animals.

What is very surprising, as well as revealing, is the durability of circumcision among those Jews to whom tradition no longer plays any major role. They did away with Shabbat, the dietary laws, daily prayer and more, but circumcision endured. It is as if they agree with the famous arch-critic of Judaism, Baruch Spinoza, who wrote: “The sign of circumcision is, I think, so important that I could persuade myself that it alone would preserve the nation forever”. Jews may reject Judaism, but the fact that they are circumcised has always reminded them that there are values to live for far beyond the mundane. It represents a good deal more than just a religious rite.

Circumcision is an event that exists as a moment in the past, yet extends into the present. From a human perspective, circumcision happens just once; but from the perspective of mission, the message conveyed by this act—the Jewish nation’s unwavering commitment to God—resounds forever. Monuments of stone may disappear; acts of the spirit will never vanish.
At the time of circumcision, parents imprint God’s seal on the body of their child, thus bringing him into the covenant with God. From that moment, the child begins his journey on the road of commitment to holiness which, although not yet known to him, is the most challenging and rewarding mission life can offer—to become a servant of God and a blessing to all nations.

It may be difficult for some to understand this, but the crux of the circumcision conflict is whether we are motivated by human rights or by human moral duty. It is even harder to grasp that circumcision is the secret to the miracle of Jewish survival. What those who oppose circumcision should never forget is that the attempt to outlaw this rite may not just make Jewish life impossible, but would probably end all Jewish existence and its contributions to civilization. This would be tragic given that these contributions are grossly disproportionate to its world population. The remarkable capacity of the Jewish nation to outlive all its enemies—from the Egyptians to the Greeks, Romans, Persians... and down to the Nazis—may quite well be the result of this small physical intervention. It takes a few seconds, but it creates eternity.

As Winston Churchill once said, “Some people like Jews and some do not; but no thoughtful man can doubt the fact that they are beyond all question the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has ever appeared in the world”.

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* This essay was influenced by some thoughts of R. Abraham Joshua Heschel.

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3 Concerning the question why Jewish women do not undergo circumcision, there is much literature to be found. For an excellent overview: Professor Shaye J.D. Cohen, Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2005). For a rejoinder: Professor Björn Krondorfer in Men, Masculinities and Spirituality, Vol. 3, No. 2, June 2009, pp. 155-158. See also: Yael Levin, “Ishah Kema-an Demehila Damya—Domah Ha-Isha Le-mi She-mahul,” Masechet, Vol. 2, 2004, pp. 27-45 (Hebrew). Interesting is the observation by Professor J.D. Levenson in “The New Enemies of Circumcision,” Commentary, March 2000: “To say...that women are party to the covenant only in a secondary way is like saying that American citizenship applies only to those who fly the stars and stripes on their flagpoles, everyone else being a second-class citizen.”
5 In a profound story, the Talmud relates: “...when King David entered the bathhouse and saw himself standing naked, he said ‘Woe is to me that I stand here unclothed without a single mitzvah [religious obligation],’ and once he remembered the circumcision in his flesh, his mind was put at ease” (Menachot 43b).
QUESTIONS TO PONDER FROM THE DAVID CARDOZO THINK TANK

We suggest printing out and discussing at your Shabbat table, if you like.

1. Rabbi Cardozo frames the debate on circumcision as one of human rights versus human moral duties. Even as he builds the case for circumcision, are not secular states built on the right to apply their own moral codes? If a Jew wants to circumcise their baby, aren't there other countries, including Israel, in which to do this?

2. Kashrut too is framed as a debate on animal rights versus the duty to eat only meat that has been ritually slaughtered. As with circumcision, there is a "victim" of religious ritual, or is there? To what extent should a secular state weigh in to protect those without a voice?

3. On questions 1 & 2, is there a middle ground which allows for both sides of the debate?

4. In matters of ultimate religious value or mission, what limits or guidelines, if any, would you impose? Based on what criteria?

5. Rabbi Cardozo derides the description of circumcision as mutilation as "completely disproportionate to the small incision that takes only a few seconds, heals within hours, and has no serious consequences." Do you think that the term mutilation should be reserved for major operations? Or could any physical operation, inflicted without consent and of questionable health benefit, qualify as mutilation? Why?

6. Why do you think Europe is up in arms against circumcision, but indifferent to the piercing of the ears of little babies and children for nothing more important than their decoration?

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Every week I receive hundreds of emails, as well as a host of important observations on my essays, via our website, Facebook, newspaper blogs, and other media outlets. It is therefore completely impossible for me to respond—for which I apologize—but please be assured that I read every comment, which I deeply appreciate and from which I learn so much. Only in exceptional cases will I respond in a subsequent essay. My office staff will try to be more prompt in posting these remarks on our website.

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your comments with me, as well as with your fellow readers. I hope you will continue to do so.

Nathan Lopes Cardozo