

From Covenant to Crime: *Why 21st Century Europe is Attempting to Ban Judaism's Oldest Ritual*

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At my son Ezra's bris, there was one boy who cried a whole lot. The funny thing is that it wasn't Ezra. Sure he fussed when his diaper was removed, but I must say the mohel we hired was so lighting fast that I don't think Ezra even had a chance to whimper. I, on the other hand, was like Niagara Falls. I was a mushy, incoherent, emotional mess. As a rabbi, I have been to countless brises, but I had never once before cried at a bris. I had comforted a lot of anxious, nervous, emotional parents during *their* childrens' brises, but as meaningful as those events were, I was never brought to tears. When it was my own son, my only son, it was a totally different story. There was never any doubt that we would have a bris. In fact, I remember using a bold red magic marker to cross out the hospital circumcision form. "Are you sure you don't want your son circumcised," the admitting nurse at Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas asked us. "Yes, we do want him circumcised, just not by you," we explained! A circumcision was for us not solely a medical procedure, it was a religious ritual of the utmost importance. Religious rituals are not typically done in hospital procedure rooms absent *berakhot* or the presence of loved ones. Our son's bris would be done by a *mohel*—an expert in one and only one procedure—who performed this rite in the synagogue not the hospital, with the awareness that what he was doing was consistent with Jewish practice since the time period of this morning's parasha! We just read the words where God commands Abraham not only to circumcise himself, but to circumcise all the males in his household then and for all future generations on the eighth day of life, as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. I happen to believe that there are certain things in life that are very difficult to articulate or to explain rationally, even though they have tremendous emotional significance. I have read all the classical interpretations of brit milah; I have studied the endeavors of both ancient and modern Sages to explain it in reasoned, logical arguments. By the way I am also aware of the American Academy of Pediatrics endorsement of circumcision, and their belief that it lowers rates of urinary tract infection, HIV, human papillomavirus; that it's more hygienic...the AAP didn't always feel this way, but that's their current opinion. The truth is, though, I can't point to any one of those explanations or arguments—religious or scientific—that had foremost meaning for me. And the tears I shed at Ezra's bris, my inability to complete a sentence when I was describing his name to our family and friends had little to do with him being under the knife, and a whole lot to do with the overarching power of this ritual, and our sense of gratitude for his birth. The truth is that there are few Jewish rituals that have been as historically compelling as circumcision. Few rituals that Jews have defied the capital punishment, have been willing to be martyrs of Roman Emperors or Spanish Inquisitors in order to fulfill; that Jews have risked being sentenced to decades in Siberia if they had been caught; that Jews hired mohels to move clandestinely through eastern bloc countries to illegally perform; that Jews smuggled knives around Nazi concentration camps so that babies born in those hellish places could have a bris even though those very babies would live ruthlessly short lives, condemned almost immediately to the gas chambers. While Jews throughout the ages clung to certain practices, modified others, and even discarded some temporarily or permanently in order to stay alive or to be able to feed their families or to

assimilate in new societies, the brit milah even to this day has been something we as a people have put everything on the line for. Even in halakha, if the eighth day of a healthy baby boy's life falls on Shabbat, or Rosh Hashanah, or Yom Kippur or any other day, the bris supersedes everything. You would think that if anything would be a casualty of time; if any Jewish practice would be considered an anachronism; if any ritual might be discarded or eclipsed across the expanse of time, it would be brit milah. But every generation has somehow recognized the mysterious power of this practice. Every generation has made sure that its male children would have this physical sign of the covenant no matter the risk. That's I think why I was so emotional.

And that is why it came as a total shock to me and to the Jewish world that in the 21st Century in some of the very same places where Jews were stripped of ethnic and religious rights, where Jews were massacred by the millions only a generation ago—that many of those same countries, Germany and Austria among them—have moved to outlaw the ancient rite of brit milah. In 2004, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warned all the Jews of France to get out while they could... a statement that set off a major diplomatic rift between the two countries. Now, however, Jews across the Europe are asking themselves whether there is in fact any meaningful future for Jewish life on a continent that seeks to outlaw brit milah, shechitah, kosher slaughter, and other necessities for any viable Jewish community. The movement to ban circumcision, a self described enlightened secularism, often uses the language of human rights and consent to condemn circumcision. A baby should not have this done *to him*, he should not have this part of his body removed without his consent they claim on websites and placards. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain noted that we give babies children vaccinations, teach them to speak a language, and make them go to school without their consent and sometimes in defiance of their objections. But no matter. Consent is not what this is really about. So what is it about...?

First, some have argued that this kind of legislation is actually not targeted at Jews. Ben Cohen's recent article in Commentary magazine described Jews as "collateral damage," because the true attempt of these countries is to deal with the surge of Muslims who have relocated to Europe. Indeed there are about 25 million European Muslims and only about 2 million European Jews. The anti-ritual laws that are spreading across the continent represent a nervous European attempt to quash differences and mainstream everyone—especially Muslims who tend to dwell apart, and some of whom maintain ties to extremist elements in other countries. Muslims have been less amenable than Jews to mainstreaming, often fanning the flames of right wing political parties and the anti-ritual movement. If this were a sufficient explanation it would be bad enough. But Cohen cautions readers not to be deluded. Jews are not just "casual victims." Because another phenomenon that is festering in Europe, that directly implicates Jews is the scourge of anti-Zionism and hatred of Israel in nearly every country on the continent. It has become commonplace for the media, academics, politicians, and writers to condemn Israel in the most unmistakable ways. And this time from the secular left wing of the political spectrum, brit milah and other Jewish rituals seem like the most modern manifestation of anti-Semitism, which operates under the guise of anti-Zionism. As Cohen writes in Commentary: "Anti-ritualism, like anti-Zionism, uses human rights concerns as a fig leaf for a much more insidious agenda: namely the removal of those characteristics that make Jews Jewish. However much anti-ritualists are in denial, the historical record demonstrates conclusively that opposition to Jewish ritual has always been a central theme of anti-Semitism in its premodern and modern forms."

Chief Rabbi Sacks found himself seated across from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and leaders of the European Union not long ago. He said honestly and directly that Europe has all by itself bequeathed to the modern world words like: expulsion, forced conversion, inquisition, blood libel, ghetto, Holocaust...He insisted that it's time Europe rescind its latest efforts to undermine its Jews. Rabbi Sacks did not address the delegitimizing of Israel in his remarks, which is also becoming a European sickness of epidemic proportions. While Prime Minister Sharon was panned 8 years ago for warning Jews about a most uncertain future in Europe, one has to wonder whether he was in fact prophetic. I hate to think that anti-Semitism is so deeply engrained in European society that it will always be just beneath the surface, rearing its ugly head in every generation. What I believe with all my heart is that brit milah, begun by our patriarch Abraham thousands of years ago, will continue as a symbol of Jewish identity for countless generations to come. No physical or spiritual threat will come between the Jewish people and and its sacred history. I pray that the leaders of Europe come to understand that soon, before another catastrophe arrives at its already blood soaked doorsteps. I pray that its politicians and social commentators somehow wake up to the time tested fact that the way to achieve a truly multicultural society is not to try to erase cultural or religious differences among people, but to embrace them; that the way to encourage minorities to appreciate and participate in a democratic society is to protect with their lives the rights of all people to express themselves freely and without fear of prejudice. And perhaps, too, Europeans will someday revisit their churches and synagogues, which today are shockingly empty. Whether Anglican or Catholic, Lutheran or Methodist—churches across the continent today are empty edifices as people have flocked to secularism in those countries. You can't riot when a church is purchased by a mosque when you have abandoned your own faith and your own houses of worship. Europe is facing a true existential crisis; an age of self-examination and reflection. The outcomes of previous such time periods in that land have often been preceded by bloodshed and war. Perhaps, we can only pray, that this time they will behave in as evolved a manner as they claim to be. God knows that another conflict of civilizations this world surely does not need.