

The Mysterious Power of Brit Milah

Parashat Lech Lecha

October 16, 2021; 10 Cheshvan 5782

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This past Monday, I had one of those Facebook memories pop-up on my feed. For those of you who do not understand the sentence I just said, Facebook has this function that it will re-share pictures or stories that you yourself posted in the past, which were of special significance. So I was reminded of an event that I posted pictures and a message about, three years ago Monday. It was my nephew Hunter's bris. There are two amazing pictures: One is of me, the proud uncle, cradling my little eight day old nephew in my arms, so enamored with his little *sheina punim*. The other is of my brother and sister-in-law looking on just after their first child was circumcised, swaddled, and probably a little bit drunk from sucking on a roll of gauze drenched in Manischewitz wine! I had the privilege to bestow our late grandfather's Hebrew name *Ya'akov* on my sweet nephew, my brother's son. If it were only for moments like these that I went to rabbinical school, *dayeinu*, it would have been enough!

As I look at these pictures now, three years later, during the week of Parashat Lech Lecha, I have to admit to another reaction...surprise, astonishment, even a bit of incredulity. Of all the Jewish people's ancient rituals, many that we continue to practice to this day, and others that have fallen out of the Jewish repertoire over time (like animal sacrifices, triannual festival pilgrimages, or stoning various law breakers), don't you find it just a little bit amazing that Jews are still circumcising our sons on their eighth day of life? Now before you answer that question, imagine a world where there is no American Academy of Pediatrics that endorses and even recommends infant circumcision. Imagine a world where there were no mohels who also happen to be physicians, and who could apply a topical anesthetic to numb the entire area. Imagine a world where people were not as aware of hygiene, sanitary conditions, or state of the art medical instruments. This is of course the world that we inhabited right up until about the last century or so. And yet, bris milah has gone on virtually unabated among Jews ever since God told Abraham in parashat Lech Lecha:

*Zot b'riti asher tish'meru beini uveineichem...*This is My covenant that you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring to follow, *himol lachem kol zachar*. Every male among you shall be circumcised. (Gen. 17:10)

I find it fascinating that modern Jews like my brother, who certainly knows he's Jewish, had a bar mitzvah, went on a birthright trip, married a Jewish girl, sends his kids to a Jewish preschool, but certainly isn't "religious" in the traditional sense of the word, would have this ancient rite performed on his first child, especially outside of a hospital setting. Their second child, by the way, is a girl! Hunter was born before anyone knew the word Covid, but my brother and sister-in-law insisted that I get a T-DAP shot before I could even touch their child. But a stranger with a clamp and a scalpel could come in and perform a minor surgery in the living room with no problem. That's sort of astonishing when you stop and think about it!

And it also testifies to the mysterious power of this ritual. Even the early Church, which dropped almost all the original trappings of Jewishness, wrestled with the question of brit milah, and whether gentiles who joined the church would have to be circumcised just as converts to Judaism do. The New Testament Book of Acts, chapter 15 describes a pretty major showdown between those who insisted that brit milah is necessary for entry into the covenant and those who argued it was no longer necessary. The party that won the day included people like Paul, who insisted that brit milah was not only dispensable, but an unwelcome Judaizing of the early Church.

In 1885 the Reform Movement adopted a statement of principles called the Pittsburgh Platform.¹ In that document, Reform rabbis famously claimed that only the Torah's moral laws remained binding on Jews, but not the ceremonial or ritual ones. And although Abraham Geiger, a German rabbi often considered the founding father of Reform Judaism called brit milah a "bloody, barbaric rite," a ban on circumcision never gained any real traction among early Reform Jews. Somehow, brit milah was just too intrinsic to Jewish identity to dispense with it.

In the most recent issue of the New Yorker magazine, the bestselling author Gary Shteyngart wrote a scathing piece about his own botched brit milah.² Shteyngart was born in 1972 in St. Petersburg, before the fall of the Soviet Union. Part of the communist repression of religion involved the outlawing of circumcision for Jewish children. When Shteyngart's family managed to leave and relocate to the U.S. in the early 80's, his parents were convinced that their then-seven year old son needed to be circumcised immediately. Suffice it to say the bris was not performed well, and he describes a litany of pain, complications, and disfigurement that resulted. Shteyngart's anguishing article is the latest in a growing movement both outside Judaism and increasingly within the Jewish community as well to discourage or even ban circumcision whether through legal means or appealing to the intrinsic sensitivities of new parents.

I remember my son's bris and the swirl of emotions I had that day. My brother-in-law Warren was the kvatter, the person honored to bring the baby into the room, and he carried my eight day old son Ezra into the sanctuary of my former shul in one hand raised above his head like Simba in the Lion King! I think that was more frightening than the bris itself. I won't tell you that I didn't worry about Ezra feeling pain, or that I didn't worry that while the mohel we selected had successfully performed thousands of brises before—his website is called easycircumcision.com!—that this could be the one where he made a mistake or his hand somehow slipped. I was as nervous a father as any, even though as a rabbi I had officiated countless times at *other people's brises*! Still, never for a moment did I consider not giving my son a bris.

The Yale Jewish historian Ivan Marcus³ notes that the word for male and the word for memory share the same Hebrew root. *Zachar*...The memory of our ancestors performing this rite to maintain their link to past generations...to preserve their connection to Abraham and his revolutionary faith is a powerful force to this day. It is a memory that binds us to the earliest chapters of our people's existence and every single generation since. It is also the memory of our ancestors hiding from oppressors, defying decrees, and avoiding detection to make sure their sons have brises. Enemies of the Jewish people have always known that if they could snuff out the brit milah, they could snuff out the Jewish people. Local

¹ <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/11/a-botched-circumcision-and-its-aftermath>

³ Marcus, Ivan G. *The Jewish Life Cycle, Rites of Passage from Biblical to Modern Times*, p. 43

mohel Dr. Lou Marmon often talks about how Jewish families would place candles in their windows during the Spanish Inquisition as a sign to other Jews that a bris was taking place inside the house, because a candle on a windowsill wouldn't arouse the suspicions of Christian informants. How many generations went to untold lengths to keep this ritual alive!

And how strange that today from the Netherlands to Norway, Germany to Great Britain, Iceland to Sweden to the Council of Europe itself, circumcision bans have been proposed and debated. Take Iceland for example. Everyone wants to travel to Iceland...I want to go there too! It sounds spectacular, this Kentucky sized island floating in the north Atlantic with its Northern Lights and hot springs. Iceland's population is about half that of Washington, D.C. There are at most a few hundred Jews in this country, only one rabbi, and a synagogue that meets in a hotel conference room. That's it. The only other community that practices circumcision is the Muslim community, which numbers no more than a thousand. So one has to wonder why this country is so obsessed with the practices of a tiny minority, Jews are 0.1% of the Icelandic population! As Prof. Iddo Porat argues: "When the majority in a society suddenly gets an overwhelming paternalistic urge to protect its minorities from their own practices, one should be suspicious."⁴ In all those countries debating circumcision bans, Jews are a tiny fraction of the population. Muslims represent a larger percentage but are still a significant minority. Propositions to ban circumcision traffic in pseudo-scientific myths, and are often juxtaposed with female genital mutilation, which is abhorrent to all Jews and almost all Muslims, and often causes extreme suffering and even death...neither of which is the case for male infant circumcision. One has to wonder whether the real impetus for taking aim at the religious and cultural practices of minority populations is not an attempt to make them feel unwelcome and ultimately to make life untenable in those places. Some of the most vocal opponents of circumcision also happen to associate with anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and nativist parties. It's the same old hate, repackaged for a new generation. Rabbi Nathan Lopez Cardozo, himself born in the Netherlands, and now living in Israel wrote: "The remarkable capacity of the Jewish nation to outlive all its enemies...may quite well be the result of this small physical intervention. It takes a few seconds, but it creates an eternity."⁵

In conclusion, let's return to the Soviet Union, Riga specifically, the capital of Latvia. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, on a mission to visit Soviet refuseniks is woken up at two o'clock in the morning by someone banging on his hotel room door. Someone from the Jewish community came to ask Rabbi Riskin to help a man who had a son about to be a bar mitzvah his younger 2 week old baby have brises. A doctor had been secured for the procedure, but they needed a rabbi to help with the various berachot and rituals. A car was waiting downstairs. Rabbi Riskin hastily got dressed and went with them, and he was told to lie down on the floor of the car so no one would see him. Eventually they pulled up to a cemetery, where the bris would be performed in the middle of the night. No one would ever expect that! The only anesthetic was a lot of Russian vodka. He recited the berachot, and the doctor, who thank God was very skilled, performed the circumcisions quickly. In the prayer after the baby receives his Hebrew name everybody says: *Kshem she'nichnas la'brit, kein yikanes la'Torah, le'chuppah, ule'maasim tovim*. **Just like** this child has entered into the covenant, so too he should become a bar mitzvah, get married, and live a life of Torah and good deeds. After Rabbi Riskin said those words, the father started yelling NO! NO! Everyone was being so careful to be quiet and undetected, and all of a sudden this father was shouting NO! "*Nit K'shem*," he said. "I don't want it to be '**just like**.' I don't know

⁴ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2018/04/27/the-problem-with-icelands-proposed-ban-on-circumcision/>

⁵ Cardozo, Rabbi Nathan Lopes. *Cardozo on the Parasha*, Gensis (Lech Lecha)

why I'm doing this. I'm not even an observant Jew. I only know that I want my children to be Jewish, and that without being circumcised, I feel that they won't really be Jewish in the full sense of the world. But I don't want them to be bar-mitzvahed and married 'just like this, *ke'shem*' hiding in a cemetery, afraid of the KGB. I want future occasions to be in Jerusalem, publicly, without fear and with great joy..."⁶

Rabbi Riskin said it was the most inspiring circumcision he had ever experienced. And indeed the bris of that man's grandson did take place in Jerusalem, and Riskin was there to celebrate. This is the mysterious power of brit milah. Whether we understand it fully or not, it is an unbreakable bond that has held the Jewish people together since *Avraham Avinu* in the parasha this morning. May we continue to experience many more brises with joy, in freedom, without fear, and if we're lucky, in *Yerushalyaim*!

Shabbat Shalom

⁶ Riskin, Rabbi Shlomo. *Listening to Go*, "Circumcision, Riga Style," p. 259