

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Lech Lecha  
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For the first time in my life, I'm going to give a sermon about circumcision. Tune in or tune out, as is appropriate.

Over the summer, I had conversations with a couple of different Jewish men, neither of whom are part of our congregation. One was uncertain about having his then-unborn son circumcised, and one was adamantly opposed to circumcision, and tried (unsuccessfully) to convince his sister not to have her then-unborn son circumcised.

In my 11<sup>th</sup> year as a rabbi, it was the first time I'd had conversations on this topic. That doesn't, of course, mean that no one has been uncertain about circumcision within our community; it just means they haven't talked to me about it.

The week before last saw the confluence of two other public conversations about circumcision. In *The New Yorker*, Jewish novelist Gary Shteyngart, who immigrated from the Soviet Union to the US in the late 1970s, wrote about the significant and long-lasting medical issues and pain caused by his circumcision that happened in Queens when he was seven years old<sup>1</sup>. (Circumcision was not especially available for newborn Jews in the USSR.)

Within a day or two of that article's publication was the launching of an organization called *Bruchim*, which means "welcome." Bruchim describes itself as "Fostering welcoming spaces for Jews opting out of circumcision."<sup>2</sup>

As I read over the parasha this week, with particular attention to the last third, the part we would read if we were reading the triennial section (it's a helpful way for me of focusing on different parts of each parasha), it occurred to me that if there's one parasha to talk about circumcision, this is it.

One other preliminary remark: this is, by nature, a conversation that involves bodies, and body parts. Usually, sex, or sex assigned at birth, refers usually to anatomy; gender is used to refer to identity. Please understand all my references to "men" and "women" and "male" and "female" throughout my remarks today as referring to sex assigned at birth, not to gender identity. There could be female-identified people who are or could be circumcised; and there could be male-identified people for whom circumcision is not a relevant category.

In Genesis 17, God tells Abraham, "Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days.... Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken my covenant (Gen. 17:10-14).

First, a couple of points of halakhah, or Jewish law. A father, and in the father's absence, the community, is obligated to circumcise a child assigned male at birth born to a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/11/a-botched-circumcision-and-its-aftermath>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bruchim.online/>

Jewish mother. Nowadays, all parents should have a role in this decision and ritual, and in a father's absence, mothers take on the responsibility for circumcision.

Circumcising is a positive commandment, but not circumcising is not violating a negative commandment, explains Maimonides in the Mishnah Torah (Hilchot Milah 1:1). "Circumcision is a mitzvah of the Torah, but dereliction in its regard does not deprive the uncircumcised individual of his Jewishness any more than would dereliction with respect to any other commandment," writes Rabbi Carl Astor in *The Observant Life*,<sup>3</sup> the 2012 guide to Jewish religious life published by the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis.

This is to say, someone who is derelict in the mitzvah of circumcision can still be a member of a synagogue, have an aliya, and be considered a full member of the Jewish people and Jewish community.

The Torah said though that the penalty for an uncircumcised male is *karet*, spiritual cutting off—the same punishment imposed on one who violates Shabbat, eats *chametz* on Pesach, or commits incest.<sup>4</sup> These are generally, religious transgressions, not things like murder or stealing, which are punished by human courts.

Maimonides (Hilchot Milah 1:2) specifies that one does not suffer *karet* for being uncircumcised until they have died, having willfully remained uncircumcised.

In general, a male seeking to convert to Judaism must be circumcised—but that's not my focus for today.

For some people, it's simply sufficient to say that circumcision, *milah*, is a mitzvah, a commandment, from God in the Torah. For others, it's sufficient to say simply this is tradition—Jewish baby boys are circumcised.

Some believe circumcision has health benefits; others argue that it's unnecessarily risky, causes pain, and inflicts a choice on a newborn baby who gets no say.

I have not seen compelling medical reasons not to circumcise, and medical advice about circumcision seems to cycle between recommending it, and not seeing it as conferring any benefit (but not causing harm).<sup>5</sup>

What I am interested in and want to focus on now is reasons to circumcise beyond the medical and legal rationales. These may not be sufficiently compelling to persuade someone, but they are ways of understanding and giving additional meaning to this mitzvah.

One approach is to describe circumcision as a permanent way of identifying as a Jew—it's welcoming someone into the covenant forever. "Being circumcised meant that Abraham and those born to his family could not deny what they stood for, could not hide from their role by posing as just ordinary people," writes Rabbi Yitz Greenberg in his classic, *The Jewish Way*.<sup>6</sup> Jews have been killed because they were circumcised. Perhaps that's a reason not to circumcise; perhaps it's a powerful reason to circumcise.

Another approach focuses on our relationship as parents with God, and with the child. Writes Rabbi Laura Geller, "To witness a *Brit Milah* is to experience a primitive enactment of a very ancient understanding that this child belongs not only to his parents, but also to God—and

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<sup>3</sup> P. 241.

<sup>4</sup> See Mishna Keritot 1:1 for a full list.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Mike Rovinsky for this observation.

<sup>6</sup> P. 71.

God wants what parents cannot fully understand. Through the *Brit Milah*, the child is wrested from his parents in order to fulfill the ancient demand. Parents are often uncomfortable with the message that their children do not belong completely to them, but it is a lesson that they must eventually learn in order to allow their children to become themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

Geller also describes circumcision as a blood ritual connecting father and son, parallel to the mother’s experience of birth as painful and bloody.

Leon Kass, in his beautiful book on Genesis, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, writes that “Israel’s covenant with God begins by transforming the meaning of male sexuality and of manliness altogether. Covenantal circumcision emphasizes and sanctifies man’s natural generative power, even as it also restricts and transcends it.”<sup>8</sup>

Kass sees circumcision as a transmission of identity in flesh to a next generation, and also as a sanctifying, a making holy, of what has been at times a weapon of war, and at other times, a weapon of abuse and oppression. In the same way that *tzitzit*, fringes, are to be worn to remind us of the mitzvot, a circumcision is to remind anyone seeing it of one’s holiness and obligations.

This last explanation begins to address the question of why women aren’t circumcised, or why there is not a parallel ritual for women. About that, there is much more to say another time.

I encourage circumcision. And anyone eligible but uncircumcised has a place here at Kol Rinah. The question should never be asked.

For me, circumcision is a holy reminder, a sacred connection across space and time, and a sign of permanent membership in the Jewish people. Circumcision—*bris milah*, the ritual—should be a time of seriousness, and focus, not a time of jokes or lightness. It’s a time of holiness, as a newborn is inducted into an עם קדוש, a holy people, for what we hope will be a lifetime of קדושה, holiness.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>7</sup> “Welcoming Children Into Name and Covenant,” in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages & Personal Milestones*, V. 1, ed. Rabbi Debra Orenstein, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> P. 313.