

Non-Circumcising Families in the Jewish Community

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Abstract More Jewish parents are choosing to leave their newborn sons intact. How is mainstream Judaism addressing this new reality? I began a dialogue with the clergy and administration of my own congregation, a large, progressive Reform synagogue in Oakland, California. I then interviewed Reform rabbis from around the country to get a sense of how Reform Judaism, the largest denomination of American Jews today, is dealing with this issue. The Reform movement has no stated policies regarding families wanting to opt out of circumcision, so I was curious: Are these families welcomed or shunned? Are intact boys discouraged from having bar mitzvahs? Do Reform rabbis offer *brit shalom* ceremonies if asked? How do these rabbis counsel families in conflict over circumcision? In my presentation, I'll discuss the surprising things I learned. I'll also introduce an innovative way to frame the topic of circumcision when conversing with the Jewish religious establishment.

For many years, when Jewish friends and acquaintances from my synagogue would find out that I had penned articles questioning Jewish circumcision—or when they'd learn that I was the author of *The Measure of His Grief*, the first novel ever written about circumcision—they'd quickly begin to understand that I'm not neutral on this issue. In fact, I think the Jewish people should stop circumcising.

"But—circumcision is so much healthier!" the person might feel compelled to explain. "It's the sign of the covenant, too—plus, it's more hygienic. It prevents disease. Don't you know that AIDS rates in Africa have gone down dramatically because of it? Oh, but the procedure is so much worse when the person is an adult. Much less traumatic to get it done in infancy, much more humane... nothing like what's done to women in Africa—now, *that's* barbaric..."

I'd smile serenely. I'd patiently explain that there's no reason for radical surgery on healthy tissue except as a last resort. Or, I'd state the erogenous nature of foreskin tissue in the most matter-of-fact tone conceivable. Sadly, none of it ever seemed to change anyone's mind.

I've just had to figure that in showing up, in being actively involved at my synagogue, in being open about my work and my views, I am saying over and over again, week in and week out, year in and year out, that I have a right to be there as much as any other congregant—including one who happens to be a world-renowned and much-respected pro-circumcision advocate.

Some months ago, a typical exchange was brewing between me and another congregant. "Circumcision is much better medically," the woman opined. "Fewer urinary tract infections, less cervical cancer in the female partners..." But this time, as she was rattling off the standard litany, I had something new to try.

“You know,” I said, when she came up for air, “there are Jewish parents who have all the information that you’re referring to—and they come to a different conclusion.”

“Oh!”

I let it sink in. “So I would ask you a question. Do you think those families should be welcome in our congregation?”

“Of course they should be,” she answered. And in that short reply, she seemed to be saying (a) that nothing could be more obvious, and (b) that she’d never thought of any of this before.

I was pretty thrilled—and because the conversation went so well, it became the basis for many interactions I’ve had since. I always try to stick to the formula, starting with a respectful, matter-of-fact, and yet entirely disarming statement: *Some Jewish families analyze all the information and they come to a different conclusion.*

It’s only after the disarming that there’s the white space in which I can pose a productive question, a magical question, one that would almost never get asked in this context—*should the Jewish community embrace these families?*

I feel deeply proud to say that whenever I’ve asked this question since, the answer has been, nearly without exception, “Yes.”

So, how did I stumble on this new rhetoric?

A little background about my synagogue is necessary here. I belong to a large, urban Reform congregation. Reform Judaism is the largest Jewish denominational movement in the United States. A high proportion of Jews living in the United States today are non-denominational, but of those who do identify with a movement, most identify with Reform.

The core principle of Reform Judaism is “choice based on knowledge,” i.e., we make ritual choices (such as observing the sabbath, keeping kosher, etc.) after thoughtful inquiry into Judaism. We base our decisions on the ways in which various rituals feel meaningful to us personally and are compatible with modern-day life and culture. Our individual choices are our business.

More than a third of all Jewish adults in the US—that is, about 700,000 Jewish adults—identify as Reform.

Reform Judaism today is very much concerned with issues like social justice and making Jewish communities feel more welcoming and inclusive. My synagogue,

Temple Sinai of Oakland, is at the forefront of such efforts. We've spearheaded innovative outreach toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews, Jews with disabilities, multi-ethnic Jews, and interfaith families. Our community is one of joy, inclusion, and vitality.

To go back now to the question of how I stumbled on the new rhetoric—it was a kind of lightning bolt, something probably more mystical than one might imagine. For years, I'd been thinking of circumcision as a controversy, a treacherous topic to be navigated cleverly, something about which progress depended on careful, strategic language and tone.

Wait a minute! I suddenly realized one day. *What if Jewish circumcision isn't about controversy at all? What if, instead, it's about inclusion—the inclusion of families who are opting out?*

As I've mentioned, my synagogue already had a strong and very beautiful infrastructure of minority outreach and inclusion and welcoming. So perhaps Jewish families not wanting to circumcise could be reached out to as a Jewish minority—and the whole conundrum could be reframed as *an inclusion issue*.

I didn't know if my rabbis would see it this way; I didn't know if anyone would. But I was determined to find out.

First, I needed to verify that Jewish families opting out of circumcision were already welcome at Temple Sinai. (Note: in this article, I'm using the shorthand term "Jewish families" where one or more partners has religious, cultural, or ethnic ties to Judaism that might affect the circumcision decision. "Jewish and interfaith families" may be more accurate.)

I knew that the Reform movement had no stated policy about non-circumcising families, so I talked with the clergy and executive director about what was happening at Temple Sinai.

All of them said these families are welcome; intact babies, boys, and men are currently members of our preschool, religious school, bar mitzvah classes, and on up. All of the clergy said they either had, or would, officiate at brit shalom ceremonies if asked. (Brit shalom, Hebrew for "covenant of peace," is a baby-welcoming ceremony for families opting out of circumcision.)

The executive director told me it is not at all uncommon, maybe 2-3 times every year, that prospective members ask whether a decision not to circumcise a baby would be an issue, and/or whether an intact older child would face problems at the religious school or the teen program. The family is assured that the child is welcome to enroll in the preschool, have a bar mitzvah, and fully participate in synagogue life.

That being said, there are some very real prejudices even in the liberal Bay Area, and Temple Sinai does mention this to families. Indeed, as I began to ask around, two local Conservative rabbis told me that intact boys are not allowed to have bar mitzvahs at their synagogues. These rabbis both made it clear, though, that they would respectfully steer the families toward communities that *would* fully welcome them.

I kept coming back to the idea that there had been entirely too much fear mongering about keeping Jewish babies intact—about all the ways in which they might be rejected in Jewish life as they grew. But there had been virtually no investigation of where in Jewish life these families *were* welcome.

Intuiting that Temple Sinai couldn't be the only synagogue welcoming non-circumcising families, I decided to write an editorial that would challenge the idea that if a family chose not to circumcise, the boy would essentially be a Jewish outcast. I would include information from a sampling of rabbis and synagogue communities across the country.

I began to e-mail a brief questionnaire around, focusing on Reform congregations. This is not to say that Conservative, Orthodox, and other movements of Judaism are insignificant; only that I consider Reform “the big fish” because of its numbers and influence. If Reform synagogues had an unstated convention of welcoming the families, I wanted to know about it—and state it.

Nearly every Reform rabbi I interviewed said that non-circumcising families were welcome, that he or she would perform a brit shalom ceremony if asked, and that he or she would allow the boy to be bar mitzvah'ed.

Though my research was by no means exhaustive, I did get enough feedback to write up credible results. I submitted the article for publication in *j. weekly*, my local Jewish journal, hoping the topic and especially the spin wouldn't be deemed too controversial.

To my surprise, the acceptance note arrived quickly. And although the piece wound up being subjected to the usual editing—losing some important nuance in the process, I felt—my irritation over that was mitigated by the headline that the editors came up with:

Choosing not to circumcise—last frontier of Jewish inclusion?

In other words, the editors completely accepted the concept that parents choosing not to circumcise their infants should be included in Jewish life. Additionally, in referring to this choice as a last frontier, the editors suggest that all other Jewish minorities have by now been given their due and that perhaps it's time non-circumcising families were, too.

In the printed version of the piece, the article was continued on a second page, yielding another astonishing headline:

Meeting ceremonial needs of noncircumcising families

The reference to ceremonial *needs*, and to the meeting of those needs, lends a legitimacy to the decision not to circumcise that I found quite startling, if not groundbreaking, in a Jewish publication. The use of the adjective “noncircumcising”—as if this were a common word/usage in the Jewish lexicon—is also noteworthy.

Meanwhile, I had begun work with a co-author on *Celebrating Brit Shalom*, a book of ceremonies for Jewish families opting out of circumcision. The “inclusion” paradigm was gelling in my mind, and my co-author, Rebecca Wald, and I began incorporating it into our manuscript and into our thinking as we wrote.

Rebecca is publisher of *Beyond the Bris*, an influential web site for Jewish parents questioning circumcision. Shortly after my essay was published in *j. weekly*, Rebecca interviewed a rabbi from the Conservative movement who does not currently have a pulpit. She asked whether he thought non-circumcising families should be included in Jewish congregational life. The result is this extraordinary quote: “Jewish families who want to be part of congregational Judaism—whether or not their sons have been circumcised—should be not only included in Jewish life but embraced!”

Thus, it would appear that families opting out of circumcision are welcome and are accepted by many rabbis and in many synagogue communities in the United States.

Now for the bad news. Other than through the two articles I’ve published this year (the one in *j. weekly* and then another in the *Huffington Post*)—and the *Beyond the Bris* interview excerpted above—these families would have no way of *knowing* they’re welcome. They’d have to be willing to brave a conversation with a congregational rabbi or other representative from mainstream Judaism, just in order to ask.

In other words, the family would have to get over the very real hurdle of thinking the rabbi might be unsympathetic, so as to find out whether he or she might be willing to officiate at a brit shalom ceremony—and/or whether the baby would later on be accepted in the synagogue’s preschool, Hebrew school, etc. This would be a difficult conversation to have, let alone initiate.

No wonder so many of these families either hold no ceremony at all, or find their way to the *Celebrants of Brit Shalom* page, maintained by our colleague Dr. Mark Reiss. This page lists over 200 rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders willing to officiate at brit shalom ceremonies on a freelance basis. Synagogues and other Jewish

institutions would do well to note the tremendous success of this page, and the service that it is providing in the absence of meaningful outreach to these families from mainstream Judaism.

I have perused the websites of many major Reform congregations across the country. To my knowledge, none of them openly or explicitly welcomes families opting out of circumcision. Yet we know that many of these institutions do welcome the families. What's wrong with this picture?

One issue is that currently, there's no one way to refer to the families. Clearly, it would be awkward to announce on a synagogue website, "All penises welcome!"

Kidding aside, an open welcome is absolutely crucial if we are to move forward in legitimizing Jewish families' choice to opt out of circumcision, and for that to happen, language is needed. I've proposed "brit shalom families," a term some rabbis whom I've polled seem to like. *j. weekly* has offered the straightforward (if clunky) "noncircumcising." The point is, an open welcome would have huge positive consequences for Jewish intactivism.

I am currently in active conversation about this with my own synagogue, whose senior rabbi is now willing to change the wording on our website to be more explicit about welcoming the families. I'm also working on it with several rabbis whom I contacted in the process of writing my article. And, I've begun reaching out to the governing body of the Reform movement about this topic. My logic is as follows: since the families aren't being explicitly welcomed, they lose an opportunity for belonging, support, and community. Jewish institutions, meanwhile, are losing numbers, diversity, and vitality.

In this talk, I haven't yet addressed how rabbis counsel families in conflict over circumcision. Based on my conversations with clergy, I don't think we're at the point where rabbis are steering on-the-fence families away from circumcision—and this seems unlikely to change any time soon. Thus, there's still a lot of work to be done by intactivist organizations to support expectant Jewish parents.

What can intactivists can do to help in general? One idea is to have a different kind of conversation when encountering resistance and defensiveness. I'm still using the same basic template as I approach my conversations that I described earlier, leaving the person with a question at the end instead of lecturing them:

Some parents look at all the same information, and they come to a different conclusion. Should they be included in our community?

I'm hoping this is a useful tool for other intactivists to consider in their communications.

In conclusion, I'd like to share that after many years of studying the issue of Jewish circumcision, I've all but lost interest in it as "the controversy." To me, it's now "the inclusion issue." I'm finding the latter to be so absorbing, and so challenging, that I wonder if it's in some way a more radical idea than arguing for the abolition of circumcision.

Though change is slow, there's much to be grateful for—starting with the sturdy infrastructure of inclusion and welcoming in Reform Judaism and other progressive movements of Judaism today.

Once a family decides to keep a baby intact, they need not fear that there is no place for them in the Jewish community. There is indeed a place for these families.

There are many places for them.

Lisa Braver Moss, BA, is a writer specializing in health, family issues, Judaism, and humor. Her work has appeared in the *Huffington Post*, *Tikkun*, and *Parents*; she has also written several nonfiction books and an essay collection. Lisa is the author of two seminal articles addressing the problems inherent in Jewish circumcision, and was a speaker at the 2nd International Symposium on Circumcision. In 2010, Lisa published *The Measure of His Grief*, the first novel ever written about male circumcision and foreskin restoration. Lisa is co-author of the new book *Celebrating Brit Shalom*. She holds a BA in English from UC Berkeley, Piedmont, California, USA.