

CIRCUMCISION AND MASCULINITY:
MOTHERLY MEN OR BRUTAL PATRIARCHS?

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Prologue: Sometimes a Pickle Is Just a Salami

Shortly after the year 2000, to use a particular calendar, several groups of young American Jews self-consciously sought to push Judaism to the cutting-edge of contemporary culture. The New Jew Cool, as this dispersed movement is sometimes called, yearns to redefine Jewishness so as to challenge the reigning ideologies and institutions of mainstream American Jewry. These "hipster Jews" are politically progressive, post-denominational, witty, urbane, sometimes brilliantly insightful, but also, to be honest, occasionally pretentious, narcissistic, and parochial. They are, to repeat, bright kids in their 20s.

The New Jew Cool sees the hegemonic modes of Jewish identity as anachronistic and alienating, inert and dull, rooted in stale theology, and lacking resonance and relevance. This younger generation wants Jewishness to become central to the politics of identity and multiculturalism. They shun the tones and etiquette of conventional Jewry, and instead express their Jewishness as irreverent, sardonic, playful, jarringly aggressive, and scandalously erotic. With the in-your-face demeanor normally associated with hip-hop, the New Jew Cool wants Judaism to be fashionable.

The flagship venue for this movement is *Heeb Magazine*, a polished monthly periodical, perhaps best summarized as a borscht belt smorgasbord of *National Lampoon* and *People Magazine*. The publication received start-up funds in 2001 from an institution prominently seated in the front pews of the Jewish mainstream, namely, the Joshua Venture Fellowship, itself partly supported by Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation and the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. Despite these conventional roots, *Heeb* aims to undermine the middle-aged authority and authenticity of the Jewish establishment.

Heeb delights in presenting humorous, bawdy, slightly offensive, and sophomoric self-advertisements. I recall one issue where a young Talmudic scholar, a *yeshiva bocher* with long *peyess*, large velvet *yarmulke*, and black suit, sits on a park bench with his face nervously buried in the magazine. To hide his shameful transgression of orthodox modesty, the student attempts to conceal his copy of *Heeb* behind a slightly smaller yet more palatable magazine: *Barely Legal*.

In the same issue of *Heeb*, another self-advertisement features a grim tableau of an anonymous New York City street. We see no people, only a grimy fire hydrant and a chewing-gum-bespeckled sidewalk on which some hapless soul has placed a few used books and miscellaneous items for sale. In the background rises the facade of a brick

building besmirched with graffiti. One tag is prominent: All ethnic groups love our salami!!!

The middle-school innuendo is obvious but also ambiguous. Should we see the salami as bravado by Jewish men, or as boast by Jewish women about their Jewish partners? Perhaps the salami refers *in general* to the idea of Jewish manhood. Or it might instead evoke a more *specific* bodily focus and thus point to the unique Jewish phallus—a phallus, of course, marked the signal bodily token of Jewish identity: circumcision.

Equally ambiguous is the cover of a rather different publication, the 1999 literary anthology *Neurotica: Jewish Writers on Sex*, which features a prominent pickle. On Amazon.com, Kirkus Reviews says, "Abundantly juicy. One bite and you're lost." But here, too, like the *Heeb* parody, the seemingly obvious pun is actually quite slippery. The pickle, of course, alludes to a broad sense of Jewish ethnicity through a culinary nod to the delicatessen. But the pickle also represents Jewish sexuality in general through the common cross-cultural equivalence of food and sexuality.³ From this angle, the gustatory symbol on *Neurotica* alludes to the distinctive flavors of Jewish eroticism—whatever that means. From another angle, though, the pickle, like *Heeb*'s salami, suggests the specific sexuality of Jewish men. And on this point, the pickle finds itself in a bit of a semiotic pickle.

To the extent that the pickle represents the penis, it is a phallus detached from the body. Indeed, the *Neurotica* pickle is depicted against a plain white background. It is, dare I say it, a circumcision gone awry—a culinary representation of castration anxiety, we might say, or a symbol of male sexuality that also erases masculinity. From another angle, the pickle is the Jewish variant of male adolescent humor concerning women and cucumbers that, however misogynistic, also registers anxiety about the role and value of male sexuality. It is not unlike an old joke: "Did you hear that hospital stopped doing circumcisions? No, why? They were throwing away the wrong part."

This leads me to my last point about the pickle illustrating *Neurotica*: for all of its Jewishness, this pickle is surprisingly *uncircumcised*. It is whole. There is no bite. The *Neurotica* pickle thus triply erases Jewish masculinity: first, by representing most Jewish men as they are not; second, by severing the phallus entirely; and third, by alluding to Jewish masculinity through another ethnic body. No ethnic groups, as *Heeb* might put it, like our salami.

Yet both *Heeb* magazine and the *Neurotica* anthology, however much they may seem to emasculate Jewish manhood, also sustain the centrality of men within Judaism by allowing the male body to stand for *all* Jews, male *and* female. Here, to continue the culinary quip, there are only salamis and pickles, no bagels. To the extent that we could, or should, take these comedic efforts at representing Jewishness seriously, we can all likely agree that the salami and pickle resist any singular inter-

³ Another example from the same milieu as *Heeb* is t-shirts sold on the Internet that proclaim "Eat Me I'm Kosher."

pretation. They lend voice to a wide-ranging ambivalence and anxiety over the definition of Jewish masculinity.

From Pickles to Penises

The same themes, albeit with far less humor and innuendo, animate current debates within Judaism over the meaning and relevance of ritual circumcision (*Brit Milah*). My interest here is narrowly focused. I want only to explore the dispute over *Brit Milah* for what it says about Jewish masculinity. Consequently, I refrain from assessing the respective merits of arguments pro and con. I stake no particular claim. Likewise, I do not here comprehensively review the rite historically or cross-culturally, nor probe the ongoing controversy over medical circumcision. I have covered all these topics elsewhere (Silverman, 2004, 2006). Rather, I want only to listen to voices within the Jewish community that construe the rite of *Brit Milah* as carving images of manhood into the bodies and psyches of men.

On one side, the rite ideally shapes infant boys and their fathers into loving, caring, responsible, and even motherly men. From this angle, too, *Brit Milah* bonds father and son through its emotional, bloody anguish and fosters male empathy toward women. Finally, the rite circumscribes masculine sexuality within a moral framework. All told, *Brit Milah* shapes Jewish men into a kinder, gentler masculinity.⁴

On the other side, however, *Brit Milah* is a sign and symptom of brutal patriarchy and misogyny. This mutilation cuts away any possible moral virtue. Circumcision wounds the boy in his body and soul and celebrates manhood by coercing mothers into sacrificing their natural maternal instincts to protect their newborns. *Brit Milah* arises from a cycle of inter-generational abuse whereby adult men deny the pain they both inflict and suffer. So deeply repressed is this psychic torment that most Jewish men refuse to confront their anguish directly and, indeed, deny their suffering entirely. But this same repression nonetheless compels circumcised Jews to reenact their trauma by traumatizing male infants. From this angle, the rite sustains a vision of masculinity that brutalizes all Jews—fathers, sons, mothers, and neglected daughters. The rite is simply wrong.

For the purpose of this essay, to repeat, I intentionally avoid questions of verification and validity. It is not my task here to validate or refute. Rather, I want to show how Jews today attach to the rite of circumcision a broad range of masculine anxieties, fears, tragedies, and triumphs. In Judaism, as in many cultures, circumcision is a powerful and, more significantly, tangible symbol of masculinity, whether monstrous or *menish*, on account of the sheer physicality of the rite—its potent juxtaposition of intimacy and infancy, joy and anguish, celebration and fear.

A Long Tradition

Appeals to history are common rhetorical strategies used to sustain Jewish circumcision, especially after the Holocaust or Shoah. To abandon the rite is tantamount to countenancing a posthumous victory for Nazism or to forsaking the blood of Jewish martyrs throughout history.⁵ The rite, too, is often justified on the basis that Jews have unswervingly abided by *Brit Milah* for over 5,000 years. We have kept the covenantal ceremony, and it, in turn, has symbolically sustained us. To refrain from circumcising our sons is to shatter a chain of tradition that has persisted intact for centuries in spite of, or perhaps because of, the best efforts of our enemies. But lacking from these common, deeply held sentiments is the recognition that Jewish debates over *Brit Milah* also constitute an equally enduring tradition. For as long as we Jews have circumcised our sons, we have also registered discontent, anxieties, and qualms about the rite.

There is considerable evidence in biblical and rabbinic literature for Israelite and Jewish ambivalence toward *Brit Milah* (see Cohen, 2005; Click, 2005, & Silverman, 2006). For example, nearly all biblical references to the rite are connected to some act of terrible violence. In Genesis 34, for example, the sons of Jacob use circumcision to avenge the rape of their sister, Dinah, by a Hivite named Shechem. Afterwards, Shechem proposes marriage, but Dinah's brothers refuse to "to give [their] sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace among [them]." Then they offer a compromise: if the Hivites collectively undergo the rite, "[they] will give [their] daughters to [the Hivites] and take [the Hivites'] daughters to [themselves] ... and become as one kindred." The Hivites agree, but while they are convalescing in pairs after the circumcision, they are slaughtered. Dinah's brothers kill all the male Hivites plunder their town, and take captive the women and children. In this biblical context, circumcision symbolizes deception and retributive slaughter—really, a moment of ethnic cleansing.

In Genesis 17, God commands the rite to Abraham and all subsequent male Israelites. Upon performance of the act, promises God, the Israelites will reap numerous benefits, including bodily and moral wholeness, nationhood, refuge from exile, and plentiful "seed." Given the propensity of ancient peoples to dramatically alien their bodies in religious devotion, one could reasonably expect that the Israelites would have celebrated the fact that the covenant required *only* the removal of the foreskin. Such a minor prick to receive such divine beneficence! What's more, circumcision was well known throughout the Near East. The rite was not, in its historical and cultural context, a big deal.

⁵ Circumcision is famously central to the 1990 Holocaust film *Europa, Europa*, see Lungstrum (1998).

⁶ The pun here on the word *prick* is, of course, intentional and ultimately derives from the famous speech by Shylock in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (see Katz, 1999; Shapiro 1996).

⁴ Many readers will immediately trace the "kinder, gentler" phrase to the Presidential campaign of George Herbert Walker Bush, but, when I use the term in regard to Jewish masculinity, I draw instead on Boyarin (1997).

Yet the biblical punishment for the non-performance of circumcision was severe: you were "cut off" (*kā'ref*), a verb that refers not simply to death but to total family annihilation, that is, death without male heirs. Later Jewish texts are more explicit: Jews who forsake the rite, declares Jubilees 15, will be "destroyed and slain from the earth." Even Moses himself, the lawgiver and the liberator, apparently had qualms about the rite. At the very least, he simply neglected to perform it. Indeed, Moses would have suffered death by the Lord for this infraction had Moses's wife, Zipporah, not swiftly severed their son's foreskin (Exodus 4:24–26). All this suggests, I contend, that the ancient Israelites and early Jews in Late Antiquity registered at least some unease with circumcision. Why else would they so commonly connect circumcision with violence and death? And why would God, as well as His (pronoun intentional) human emissaries, namely, the prophets and rabbis, need so aggressively to enforce the rite—to bully, if you will, the Israelites and Jews into performing it?

Another historical moment that clearly evidences the lack of consensus among Jews on the relevance of *Brit Milah* occurs in the Maccabean literature. Most Jews today know these texts only vaguely through children's stories told during *Hanukkah*. But the actual texts are rather more grim and revealing. In many respects, the conflict memorialized through *menorahs*, *latkes*, *dreidels*, and gift-giving was a bitter civil war that pitted Hellenized Jews against Jewish traditionalists. The Jews who embraced Greek culture, and so abjured circumcision, can be seen as reasonable reformers or vile apostates. Likewise for the traditionalists who repelled them: they are either gallant saviors who rescued our heritage or fundamentalist fanatics akin to the Taliban. Either way, the traditionalists triumphed, whereupon they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys they found in Israel (1 Maccabees 2:46). However much the Jews of Palestine were thrilled with liberation and the restoration of traditional Judaism, they did not celebrate victory by reaching for the covenantal knife; the blade was imposed on them.

Even Maimonides, hardly a foe of circumcision, understood Jewish ambivalence and anxiety about the rite (Stern, 1993). Why, he asked, does circumcision occur in infancy? For one, adults would outright refuse the procedure. For another, parental love and affection increases over time, and so fathers would never allow the rite on an older child. On both accounts, Maimonides seems not altogether wrong.

In the mid-19th century, Jewish dissent over *Brit Milah* dramatically increased as European Jewry embraced modernity and welcomed the long-overdue invitation for full citizenship in the nation-state (Judd, 2007). Jews aspiring to assimilation, especially members of the burgeoning Reform movement originally based in Frankfurt, understood compulsory religious circumcision to violate the basic tenets of modernity: science, progress, individualism, secularism, hygiene, and rationality. Reform Judaism enacted many religious innovations in the late-19th century, including the abandonment of the dietary codes, mixed male and female pews, vernacular worship, bare-headed male prayer, and the education of girls. But no reform so enflamed traditionalists as the decentralization of circumcision to male Jewish identity. Reform Judaism never formally abandoned *Brit Milah*, however. Rather, the movement only

shifted *Brit Milah* from a compulsory to an optional sign of Jewish masculinity. Circumcised Jewishness became a matter of free-choice, and thus male Jewish identity joined, rather than opposed, modern individualism.

Traditional Jews bristled at their reformist coreligionists. As they saw it, the whole point of circumcision was to cut off Jews from the wider society! Worse, reformist appeals to modern rationality and scientific hygiene undermined the authority of God and the rabbis. For them, the circumcised definition of Jewish manhood was beyond debate.

In the latter 19th century, many Jews and Gentiles, especially in the intelligentsia, increasingly saw Jewish circumcision as an antiquated violation of modern sensibilities. Ironically, the practice of circumcision as a medical, not Jewish, procedure gained currency in the very same era. From one angle, circumcision was dismissed as premodern. From another angle, the procedure exemplified modern medicine. By the 1880s, many American and British physicians enthusiastically promoted the routine circumcision of boys as a broad hygienic measure and a specific prophylaxis against syphilis.⁷ The procedure, too, offered a defense against masturbation, a ke site of moral panic in the Victorian era, and a curtailment of excess licentiousness. No longer did circumcision betoken Jewish separatism and barbarism or cut Jews out of European civilization.⁸ Now the rite positioned Jews at the cutting edge of modernity. To non-Jews, the bodily sign of Jewish masculinity was now, after centuries of theological derision, good.

American and British medical journals suddenly published papers that lauded Jews for their (supposedly) superior health, a quality often attributed to the (supposedly) superior cleanliness of the circumcised Jewish penis. The benefits of the procedure were moral as much as medical. Jews, declared Brown (1896–1897) in *Journal of the Official Society*, rarely "figure in silly crimes, police or divorce courts (p. 299). Of course, the medical practice was not promoted to create more Jews. Rather, it would guarantee pious, hard-working Christians (see Darby, 2005). The Jew's body was still different, much as it was throughout European history, but this difference was now worth emulating. The "old Mosaic rite," boasted Hirschfeld (1858) in the *American Medical Monthly*, "receives a confirmation, perhaps stronger and more binding upon [ones] age than that in which the Legislator lived" (p. 275). And so, by the early decades of the 20th century, the genitals of Jewish men shifted from an ethnic peculiarity at best, and a bodily affirmation of Jewish perfidy at worst to the image of normal male health itself.

⁷ For broader surveys of this issue, see Efron (2001), *Medicine and the German Jews*; Judd (2007) *Contested Rituals*; Gollaber (2000), *Circumcision*; and Silverman (2006), *From Abraham to America*.

⁸ Gilman's (1991) book *The Jew's Body* remains the classic source on the somatic fantasies of the Jewish body in Europe (see also, Gilman, 1993, 1995).

A Hole in Masculinity

By the mid-1990s, circumcision reemerged as a popular issue in defining Jewish identity and masculinity. Major Jewish monthlies—*Conservative Judaism*, *Tikkun*, and *Moment*—devoted special issues to the topic. National Public Radio featured the debate on the program “All Things Considered,” as did Jewish and non-Jewish newspapers, magazines, and Web sites. Anti-circumcision “inactivists” launched organizations and websites,⁹ lobbied legislators, and even registered as nongovernmental organizations with the United Nations. References to the rite frequently appeared on television shows, such as “thirtysomething,” “The Nanny,” “Will & Grace,” “Dharma & Greg,” “L.A. Law,” “St. Elsewhere,” “South Park,” and “Seinfeld.”¹⁰ Most significantly, Jews over the past decade have penned scores, if not hundreds, of articles, op-ed columns, and essays as well as several books, variously defending and especially deriding *Brit Milah*. Once again, Jews and non-Jews debate the status of the Jewish penis and the normal body of Jewish manhood.

A prominent figure opposing *Brit Milah* is Goldman (1997, 1998), author of *Circumcision: The Hidden Trauma and Questioning Circumcision: A Jewish Perspective*. Critics of infant circumcision, such as Goldman, see the procedure as directly causing severe social, sexual, and psychological traumas (see also Boyle et al., 2002; Hammond, 1999; and Rhinehart, 1999). The circumcised man is a traumatized man. Symptoms of his circumcisional distress may include low self-esteem, excessive rage, feelings of parental betrayal, anxiety disorders, sexual dysfunctions (including homosexuality), depression, shame, distrust, victimization, powerlessness, grief, withdrawal, teenage suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, promiscuity, theft, hatred, genital insecurity, misogyny, and rape. Goldman suggests that some cases of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) may in fact be a type of infant suicide following the trauma of circumcision. Inactivists see the procedure as permanently damaging the neurological architecture of the infant's brain. Consequently, a circumcised man is more

⁹ The more prominent online organizations include CIRP (Circumcision Information Resource Pages; www.cirp.org), NOCIRC (National Organization of Circumcision Resources; www.nocirc.org), NOHARM (National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males; www.noharm.org), Mothers Against Circumcision (www.mothersagainstcirc.org), ARC (Attorneys for the Rights of the Child; www.arc4aw.org), and In Memory of the Sexually Mutilated Child (www.sexuallymutilatedchild.org). Elsewhere, I extensively discuss these organizations, as well as the anti-circumcision literature in general, with an eye toward discerning and thoroughly documenting the unfortunate retention of medieval caricatures of the Jew as a mutilated and mutilating threat to civilized society (Silverman, 2006, Chap. 10). One of the more egregious examples of this anti-Judaism is a book published in a medical series by Warner Books, a subsidiary of AOL Time Warner—one of the largest entertainment and media conglomerates in the world (Fliess & Hodges, 2002).

¹⁰ An anti-circumcision Web site actually keeps track of these episodes; see “Treatment of Circumcision on TV,” <http://www.circumstitutions.com/TVSitcoms.html>. This and all Web sites were accessed in August 2008.

likely than his foreskinned counterpart to pursue deviant sexuality and sado-masochism, and to exhibit aggressive antisocial behaviors. The circumcised man is a wounded man, and he wounds others.

Self-declarations of circumcised woe, especially on Internet Web sites, punctuate anti-circumcision literature. Jed Diamond, a leading psychotherapeutic figure in the men's movement, connected circumcision to “irritable male syndrome.” In a letter to *Moment* magazine (August, 1997), moreover, Diamond writes that he “would break into tears when [he] tried to write about shame” for his book *The Warrior's Journey Home: Healing Men, Healing the Planet* (1994). Why? Because he had “body memories of having been circumcised and realized that [he] carried a great deal of pain, even 50 years later.”

In a progress report issued by the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males, another Jewish man traces his adult and childhood anguish to his *Brit Milah*. He recalls recurrent boyhood nightmares of a “long bearded goat”—the *mohel*—“eating its way through the wall of the bedroom . . . to take bites out of [his] flesh” (Traiman, 1994). He connects his loathing for alcohol to the failure of the *mohel's* wine-soaked cloth to soothe the pain of the circumcision. The rite, too, explains his “earliest memories . . . of terror, pain and helplessness.”

Another popular Internet site advocating the abolishment of circumcision is titled “In Memory of the Sexually Mutilated Child” (<http://www.sexuallymutilatedchild.org/levrit>). On it, another Jewish man recounts his emotional response to reading Bigelow's (1994) book, *The Joy of Uncircumcising: Exploring Circumcision*.¹¹ He “curled up in a fetal position . . . and cried and grieved.” Then grief turned to rage as follows:

I denounce Judaism . . . as sick, perverted and immoral. . . . I fantasize about revenge on the mohel who circumcised me. . . . One of the main reasons I'm active in the intact baby movement is to vent my rage in a positive way and not end up in prison. I've put a MOHEL = MENGELE sign across the back of my car.

So furious are some circumcised men at their foreskinlessness that they publically declare on the Internet their desire actually to kill their parents.

Let me examine in more detail some of the wounds allegedly inflicted by *Brit Milah*. Neonatal circumcision, including *Brit Milah*, irredeemably ruptures the mother-infant bond. By disrupting “the development of basic trust in infancy,” the rite thwarts “the potential for intimacy in later life” (Goldman, 1998, p. 98). Circumcised men may thus approach all intimate relationships with guarded mistrust. Similarly, the circumcised child may grow into an adult man who experiences emotional withdrawal. Since most Jewish boys are circumcised, the inevitable conclu-

¹¹ Nonsurgical foreskin restoration typically involves the attachment of various weights, cones, and tapes that tug the skin around the shaft of the penis over the glans in order to simulate a prepuce.

sion is that most Jewish men are emotionally wooden—unable properly to express their emotions or to emotionally connect with others.

Infants are so profoundly traumatized by circumcision, aver intactivists, that they become adult men who can *only* function and protect the ego by repressing their psychic pain. But the trauma is so indelibly and overwhelmingly etched on the circumcised man's psyche that he is compelled to circumcise his own son as a way of repeating the ordeal. After all, reasons Goldman (1998), "we tend to act out our repressed feelings on those who are weaker" (p. 69; see also Goldman, 2004). In short, cut men like to cut. And they do so without acknowledging their own suffering or the suffering they inflict on others.

A recent paper from Hill (2007) offers a similar view of the psychic trauma experienced by circumcised men:

Failure to grieve the loss of the foreskin function results in a cohort of men who are in denial about their loss. Traumatized persons tend to reenact and repeat their trauma. The compulsion to repeat the trauma and the emotional need to deny the loss result in a large cohort of circumcised men who seek to perpetuate the practice of non-therapeutic circumcision. Such men become the "adamant fathers" who insist on circumcising their sons despite medical evidence that the operation is injurious. (p. 319)

And here is a comparable assertion on the Web site for Jews Against Circumcision (www.jewsagaincircumcision.org):

The excruciatingly painful trauma we inflict on infant boys when performing circumcision rewrites their brain[s] to be violent, and causes brain damage.... Males are violent due to circumcision. It is usually boys who go to school and kill people, they are violent since their brains are wired for violence from infancy. Rarely does a girl take a gun to class and kill people. (<http://www.jewsagainst-circumcision.org/psycholo.htm>)

From this angle, normative Jewish manhood rests on a brutalized psyche—a psyche so damaged that it can only seek resolution by terrorizing helpless infants.

Many opponents of *Brit Milah* dismiss Jews who adhere to the rite, especially proponents who find validation in classic rabbinic theology, as loathsome religious fundamentalists. More commonly, circumcising Jews are pitied for being what Goodman (1999a) calls the unwitting victims of a "culturally conditioned terror" (see also Sandel, 1996). Judaism is at fault—not individual Jews. Goodman and others explain the persistence of *Brit Milah*, which Goodman summarizes as "a wounded human being... wounding another," as "compulsive behavior on the part of people who at some level do want to stop" (see also Goodman, 1999b). In this framework, the Jew is a victim and victimizer ultimately trapped in his own damaged psyche. Were it not for normative Judaism, Jews would otherwise grow into whole persons. Instead,

the Jew suffers from a deep hole in his psyche—a wound attributed to *Brit Milah*. It is this masculine wound, suggests Goldman (1998), which best explains a key theological tenet of *Brit Milah*. Jews often connect the rite to "a desire for God's protection" (p. 69). Why? Because most Jewish men "received no protection when they were circumcised as infants" (p. 69). From this angle, one can also understand the source of the ancient yearning to appease God: the return of the repressed fear related to circumcision. In effect, Jewish men look to God for the parental nurture they never received. The rite thus doubly scars the psyche of Jewish men—first, by subjecting them to a ceremony that is routinely dubbed as child abuse and, second, by offering an illusory solution to their longing for nurturing parents.

But Jewish men experience yet another layer of psychological trauma. Despite the horrific trauma subjected to Jewish boys in the early days of life, most adults refuse to validate the subsequent psychic pain. At a time in history when the (civilized) world rightly condemns (uncivilized) female genital mutilation, the equivalent disfigurement of infant boys, so goes this argument, receives scant criticism—worse, it is even celebrated in Judaism! There is no patriarchy here but quite the opposite: the Jewish boy is brutalized, and the man later neglected, precisely because they are male. He is first abused by *Brit Milah*, and then by the denial of his trauma and adult dyfunctions.

Despite the multiple levels of masculine wounding inherent in *Brit Milah*, the rite also violates motherhood, as befitting the overall patriarchal structure of biblical culture and traditional Judaism.¹² The rite cuts women out of the covenant. It shifts the early experiences of a newborn boy from his mother and her breast to men and their knife. *Brit Milah* not only arises from the fear of women it also arises from the fear of pleasure, especially the pleasure of emotional security, the pleasure of intimate human relationships first learned from the mother-infant bond, and the pleasure of sexuality (Pollack, 1995, 1997). As Pollack (1995) writes, the covenantal rite has the effect of "psychosexually wounding the manhood still asleep in the unsuspecting baby boy" (p. 185).¹³

Brit Milah reproduces religious patriarchy by consecrating male (not female) bodies and masculine (not feminine) procreative potency. *Brit Milah* celebrates the paternal phallus—yet Judaism offers no comparable ritual exaltation of motherhood. In this sense, the rite endows men with hegemonic privilege even as it carves a hole in Jewish men's psyches, damages Jewish men's (and women's) sexuality, and cuts

¹² See, for example, Karsenty (1988); Kimmel (2001); Moss (1990). For scholarly accounts of the role of mothers in the history of *Brit Milah*, especially in regard to rabbinic texts, see Cohen (2005) and Margalit and Tziraki-Segal (2006). I do not challenge the idea that circumcision threatens motherhood—and, indeed, I make this very argument in my own book on the rite—but I think it fair to say that most critics of *Brit Milah* who make parallel claim have simply failed to read carefully the relevant literature, either scholarly or rabbinic.

¹³ The claim that circumcision severely damages male sexuality is crucial to the opposition to routine medical circumcision but less pronounced in the debate over *Brit Milah*.

apart a child's first and most important relationship: that with the child's mother. But the rite also causes a more direct brutalization of Jewish women.

Many inactivist or non-cutting covenantal Jews affirm that *Brit Milah* gives rise to a vicious Jewish misogyny since men are angry at their mothers for the ceremonial abandonment. This sexism takes the mild but biting form of popular jokes that mock the stereotypical Jewish-American mother and her daughter, the Jewish-American Princess.¹⁴ But some critics, such as Goldman (1998), understand circumcised Jewish misogyny to go much further than sexism, bawdy humor. The rite explains the serious problem of Jewish domestic violence. "It may be," proposes Goldman, "that, from the infant's perspective, while he is having his penis cut, he is experiencing a betrayal by his mother" (p. 64)—a betrayal he later unconsciously avenges through misogynistic rage and a general distrust of women. In turn, women respond with reciprocal suspicion and anger. In this cycle of terror, the rite of *Brit Milah* cuts men and women off from each other, while sustaining and causing male violence toward women.

Nonetheless, the indelible mark of *Brit Milah* ultimately marks men, and not women, for potential death in the event of anti-Jewish violence. The typical martyrology of *Brit Milah* is misconstrued. Jews should not see the rite as inscribing past tragedies into men's bodies. Critics of *Brit Milah* strenuously reject the common rhetorical trope by proponents that Jews should circumcise their sons to honor those Jews who died while upholding the covenant. Rather, Jews should see the rite as branding Jewish men so they are more easily identifiable by their enemies (Pollack, 1997). For all of Judaism's patriarchy, Jewish men are ultimately disposable.¹⁵ Additionally, asserts Hayward (1993), executive director of Men's Rights, Inc., Sacramento, California, *Brit Milah* denies men the same "sovereignty over their bodies that women have long enjoyed," and causes men to voice "the same sense of outrage when their bodies are violated" (p. 12).

Finally, *Brit Milah* can explain Jewish xenophobia. The Walking Stick Foundation is an "educational organization dedicated to the restoration and preservation of aboriginal Jewish spirituality, occasionally sharing events with teachers indigenous to Native American and other earth-honoring traditions" (www.walkingstick.org). In a 1992–1993 issue of the now-defunct newsletter of the Walking Stick Foundation, *Pumbeissia*, a writer called attention to Jewish anger at non-Jews, parents, and even Judaism itself. Often, Jews attribute this anger to their "collective history of oppression." But they are wrong. Rather, Jews are angry from "personal histories of betrayal ... by [their] parents to the *mohel*" (Susskind, 1993).

¹⁴ For a more nuanced account of American Jewish humor and derision toward mothers and daughters, see Prell (2000).

¹⁵ Not incidentally, the men's movement offers the very same argument against medical circumcision. "The discarded foreskin, writes Farrell (1993, p. 355), represents the "disposability" of modern men "as soldiers, workers, dads." Keen (1991, pp. 30–31), for example, is bitterly critical of medical circumcision.

In a similar vein, Rothenberg (1989) affirms that, because "people who have been imposed upon are conditioned to impose upon others" (pp. 22–23), *Brit Milah* explains Jewish oppression of the working classes and Israeli oppression of Arabs. Ever the internationally celebrated Egyptian feminist and human rights advocate e Sadawi (1999, Introduction) connects "overtaking the land of Palestine and the cutting of boys' foreskins."¹⁶ Of course, all these references to Jews really concern circumcised Jews—that is, Jewish men. Here, again, conventional Jewish manhood is construed as a form of brutality that assaults non-Jews, women, infants, and blue-collar workers—as well as Jewish men, women, and children.

What does all this rhetoric against *Brit Milah* say and imply about Jewish manhood? What are the overarching implications of *Brit Milah* for the psyches of Jewish men? There are two overarching trajectories of innuendo. On the one hand, Jewish masculinity appears brutalized—wounded in psyche, deficient in eros, tortured, anxious, slightly paranoid, emotionally stilted, and suspicious of all intimacy. The Jewish man is a lesser man, a damaged man, a man whose severe psychological pains are severely denied by his own parents and people. On the other hand, Jewish masculinity appears brutal. The Jewish man is hyper-masculine, a monster of manhood who views the world through flat affect and wrathful eyes. He directs his anger at everybody—women, mothers, children, non-Jews, even himself. He is cut off from the world and reacts with unsurprising viciousness. Above all else, the average Jewish man is unaware. So dreadfully has *Brit Milah* ruined his psyche that he is unable to access his own tortured, torturing soul.

A Cut of Wholeness

Jewish circumcision has a long history of derision. Greek and Roman satirists such as Martial and Petronius, delighted in mocking the foreskinless Jewish penis (e.g., Stern, 1974/1984).¹⁷ In the latter first-century ACE, Paul construed circumcision as the fundamental impediment to the globalization of faith in Christ (e.g., Romans 4:9–12; see Boyarin, 1994).¹⁸ The early Church Fathers bested Paul, at least rhetorically, and scoffed at circumcision as a grave theological error and, worse, divine punishment for the betrayal of Christ (e.g., Origen, Homilies on Luke 5:8, mid 3rd century). In the imagination of medieval Christendom, *Brit Milah* served to anchor several anti-Jewish obsessions, including the blood libel and the belief that Jewish men menstruated (Silverman, 2006, pp. 62–68). In England, during the 175:

¹⁶ This statement occurs in el Saadawi's (who is not, I should add, Muslim) "Introduction to the Arabic edition of a scholarly and widely-hailed yet at times ludicrously anti-Jewish book by Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh (1999).

¹⁷ The classic source for ancient writers on the Jews is Stern (1974/1984), *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*.

¹⁸ No mention of Paul on circumcision and the Jews can fail to cite, and read carefully, Boyarin's (1994) masterful *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*.

tumult over the "Jew Bill" or Jewish Naturalization Act, opponents vilified Jews as the clippers of coins and not just penises (Wolper, 1983). Throughout European history, non-Jews attached a knife to Jewish manhood—a blade that either armed the Jew as aggressively dangerous or unmanned him as dangerously effeminate.

To all this scorn, the classic rabbis, especially in *midrashim*, offered many responses. I want here to mention some common rejoinders. First, the rabbis steadfastly rejected any insinuation that circumcision mutilated Jewish manhood. They did quite the opposite: they saw circumcision as a means of shaping masculine wholeness (see Silverman, 2006, pp. 62–63).¹⁹ The rite ensured moral-bodily perfection, refined nature, and domesticated man's innate wildness. After all, God introduced Abraham to the covenant of circumcision by inviting the patriarch to "walk in my ways, and be blameless [*tamim*]," a word that also means whole and perfect (Genesis 17:1). In effect, the rite *created* masculinity. The rabbis were no Rousseauists. They had little nostalgia for the natural, foreskinned state of man.

A second rabbinic defense of circumcision arose within Kabbalah. The Jewish mystics understood *Brit Milah* to bring about an intimate union between man and God. The rite cut away an excrescence that barred manhood from the divinity. *Brit Milah* was a wedding between man and God (Boyarin, 1994, pp. 128–129).²⁰ What's more, the mark of circumcision literally inscribes the divine name into the male body and so hews masculinity into the *imago dei* (Wolfson, 1987).

Third, the rabbis viewed the act of circumcision as representative of a key ambiguity of rabbinic masculinity. The *removal* of the foreskin (called *milah*), and the subsequent *peeling back* of the underlying mucous membrane that covers the corona (called *periah*), mirrored the mystic's goal of uncovering the hidden meaning of Torah to gain access to divine revelation (Wolfson, 1994, 2003). From this angle, circumcision molded Jewish men into scholars attuned to the mysteries of God.

The rite also represented the circumscription of manhood within the Law. In Exodus 24, Moses, beneath Mount Sinai, officiated over sacrificial offerings of well-being to the Lord. Moses then read aloud the record of the covenant and dashed the sacrificial blood on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord now makes with you concerning all these commands" (Exodus 24:8). The rabbis interpreted Moses's declaration as equating circumcision with *all* the commandments in the Torah (Cohen, 2005, p. 232).²¹ Thus construed, *Brit Milah* shapes Jewish men into law-abiding citizens—especially, as I now show, in matters of sexuality.

Last, the rabbis understood *Brit Milah* to offer erotic restraint. Opponents of circumcision often set the rite against erotic joy. But even a cursory exploration of classic rabbinic texts reveals the naïveté of this claim. The rabbis not only endorsed matrimonial sexuality, they *mandated* it. Indeed, the rabbis interpreted Exodus 21:10

as a divine decree that required husbands *regularly* to pleasure their wives.²² Moreover, the erotic tones of Kabbalistic discourse, especially concerning the circumcised intimacy between man and God, *clearly* undermine any suggestion that rabbinic culture preserved *Brit Milah* in order to cut off erotic delight from masculine experience.

Circumcision foes often cite the great 12th century philosopher Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides, as the authoritative voice for Judaism in regard to the real intent of *Brit Milah*. Maimonides offered several justifications for circumcision. Perhaps most controversial is his statement that the rite weakens, or diminishes, the erotic drive of men—and also constrains female lust since it "is hard for a woman with whom an uncircumcised man has had sexual intercourse to separate from him" (Maimonides, 1963). I have no desire to endorse Maimonides on this point. But it seems somewhat clear that he defended circumcision as a curtailment of "violent concupiscence," to use his phrase, and *not* as a means to celibacy or renunciation. Moreover, his plea for erotic moderation takes root not in Jewish theology or culture but in Hellenistic philosophy, especially Platonic idealism. Maimonides, moreover, does not unvocally speak for Judaism; his is not the sole official voice. He speaks as a Jew from a particular philosophical orientation.²³ Still, it is clear that the rabbinic tradition understood *Brit Milah* to restrain masculine lust—and female desire—while nonetheless preparing Jewish men for reproduction.

In summation, the rabbis understood *Brit Milah* to create a particular kind of man. Circumcision perfected Jewish manhood both morally and bodily. The rite, too, represented several goals of rabbinic masculinity: scholarly erudition, intimate union with God, sexual restraint, and the siring of sons.

Devout Jews today, as in the past, generally abide by *Brit Milah* on the basis of faith and biblical conviction. For them, the rite is a divine commandment—perhaps the signal commandment of monotheism. But most contemporary Jews who uphold the rite do so through more diffuse appeals to religious authority—say, a general commitment to the covenant while rejecting the everyday strictures of Orthodoxy (the very rules that Orthodox Jews believe the covenant entails). Many Jews today also typically connect circumcision to fuzzy notions of hygiene, aesthetics, conformity, and father-son identification. For them, the force of the rite is largely emotional, not cosmological. They see *Brit Milah* as sanctifying new life, commemorating tradition, and renewing community. The ceremony defies tyrants past and present. It acknowledges the weight of history. And *Brit Milah* indelibly etches a Jewish identity into the body of a baby boy.

But some contemporary supporters of *Brit Milah* also call attention specifically to masculinity. They see the rite, as did the classic rabbis many centuries ago, as creating not just a male Jew but a particular kind of man. For example, the rite carves

¹⁹ The connection of circumcision with moral and somatic wholeness occurs in numerous *midrashim* (e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 46:3).

²⁰ See also, for example, *Numbers Rabbah* 12:8.

²¹ See also, for example, *M. Shabbat* 19:3.

²² See *M. Kerubot* 5:6; *B. Kerubot* 61b.

²³ Philo, in *On the Special Laws* 1:1–11, anticipated Maimonides's argument for circumcision.

sense of communal and covenantal obligation into the boy (Roth, 1992), and symbolizes the Jewish ethos of self-sacrifice (Klitenik, 1998). In other words, the mark of circumcision serves to remind the Jewish boy—and, later, the Jewish man—that he inherits responsibilities neither of his own making nor his own choosing. The rite affirms the male Jew's obligations to his community and makes the community responsible for his masculine identity. The rite shows that the boy is needed for something grander than either himself or his immediate family (Cohen, 1998; Gordis, 1998; Landes & Robbin, 1990; Levenson, 2000; Neusner, 1987). It imbues Jewish manhood with significance that expands beyond the romantic images of individual desire.²⁴ Because the community has bestowed on him a Jewish identity that he cannot erase, the Jew must assume an obligation to the community. In this way, *Brit Milah* contains manhood within a moral framework.

Oponents of circumcision perceive the rite as terribly violating a cherished premise of modernity, namely, the inalienable right of each person to freely choose his or her religious affiliation and bodily shape. Individuals alone, in the absence of coercion, should define themselves by shopping, in a sense, in the marketplace of ethnicity. Advocates of the rite agree. *Brit Milah* does breach this modernist assumption of personhood. But the rite does so precisely to craft a form of manhood that expressly opposes, or at least constrains, the modern ideologies of individualism and the self-made man—a man who, more often than not, mainly pursues material expressions of superficial self-interest (Kimmel, 1997).²⁵ The *Brit Milah* ceremony—precisely because it imposes an identity onto the child rather than asks the child later to choose his own identity—enfolds manhood within a tradition and a historical community.

Sokobin (1976), a rabbi, tells that the bodily location of *Brit Milah* effectively domesticates male sexuality and thwarts masculine hubris. How? By reminding men that God, not man, is the ultimate creator of life and by intimately uniting man with the Creator.²⁶ The location of the covenantal sign also represents a key choice for the Jewish man: he can use this organ for "a life of debauchery or—if he pays close attention to the deeper meaning of the sign—to a life of procreative holiness" (Klitenik, 1998, p. 59). The implication here is clear: *Brit Milah* shapes Jewish men into better, more ethical men. To cut to the chase, they will use their penises wisely.

A brief essay by Landes and Robbin (1990) elaborates on this ethical vision. The physical placement of *Brit Milah* carves a moral boundary, or "fence" to use a rabbinic concept, around the natural proclivities of men. The rite transforms intercourse between Jewish men and non-Jewish women from sexuality into a covenantal viola-

tion. The rite, too, thwarts the very modern principle that erotic desire is the prerogative of individuals—and thus positions Jewish men outside the Enlightenment tradition and its valuation of individual will and free-choice. *Brit Milah* convert male sexuality from a private, personal affair into a public, communal obligation.

Likewise, the performance of the ceremony encloses mother and son within an intergenerational group of friends, kin, and religious leaders. Rather than seeing *Brit Milah* as brutally shattering the mother-child bond and so wounding women and men, the rite incorporates motherhood and nascent masculinity within a loving community. The ceremony enmeshes parents and child in a network of enduring social ties. In effect, the rite resists the very individualism that opponents endorse. It creates a sense of communal manhood in which the message is precisely that one is *not* his own man and his penis is *not* his alone. Rather, a man is part of a community in which, like it or not, his masculinity is everybody's responsibility—just like his responsibility is to reproduce the moral order of the community. As anthropologists would put it, the rite carves a sense of sociocentric identity into the boy, thus preventing him from later embracing a wholly egocentric mode of personal identity. It is, from this angle, a tribal rite that resists the ideology of individualism.

Through circumcision, the masculine self becomes permanently plural. Jewish manhood is defined from the start, but it is not defined in terms of loss and longing, as critics contend, but in terms of "belonging" (Raul-Friedman, 1993, p. 33). And through the bestowal of a name during the ceremony, manhood is connected to a long heritage, thereby tethering masculine individualism to a communal identity.

Landes and Robbin (1990) construe *Brit Milah* as a bodily protest against the natural propensity of men to succumb to carnal desire and, worse, to exercise sexual violence against women. The rite "affirms the value of sexuality through restraint" (Landes & Robbin) and thereby hampers phallic aggression. This way, *Brit Milah* "seeks to set both women and men free from all bondage" (Landes & Robbin)

In this view, *Brit Milah* emancipates men from their own masculine desires. Critics argue that circumcision assaults free choice and thus denies men their autonomy. But Landes and Robbin (1990) turn this argument to claim that *Brit Milah* liberates men from their animalistic urges so they can pursue meaningful, moral endeavors. They can expand the definition of manhood beyond brute phallic power and sexual conquest. For conservative Jews, such as Levenson (2000), the expansion or contraction of masculinity represented by circumcision includes "the sanctity of marriage" as well as the "traditional virtues of sacrifice, discipline, and obedience" (p. 36).

The political left and right disagree on what precise merits circumcision inscribes in men, but they both agree that *Brit Milah* creates or stands for masculine virtue. And both views understand the rite through an egalitarian lens. By trimming away dangerous masculine desires and self-delusions of phallic potency, *Brit Milah* enhances trust between men and women. The rite does not glorify phallic potency and submerge women within an enduring, muting misogyny. Rather, circumcision pro-

²⁴ The rite imbues birth, as a biological affair, with profound social significance. Similarly, the ceremony resists the modern ideal of family privacy.

²⁵ For the history of the self-made man in America, see Kimmel (1997).

²⁶ When I write here and elsewhere in this essay with a masculine phrasing, it is not to universalize manhood and so erase women but to intentionally convey a particular gendered nuance that seems appropriate to the underlying meaning of the ceremony.

jects Jewish men and women from the dangers of an unfettered, raw, natural masculinity. That is, the rite shapes Jewish men into a kinder, gentler manhood.

Some Jews, as discussed, denounce Jewish men into an unjustifiable infliction of agony onto a helpless infant in violation of Jewish ethics and basic human rights. Why do Jewish fathers tolerate the intentional infliction of pain onto their sons? What sorts of defense mechanisms permit this torture (Hezbrun, 1991)? What, in short, is wrong with Jewish men? The answer, of course, is psychological: normative Jewish manhood presupposes a wounded psyche—an otherwise normal personality destroyed, and in turn destroying, by circumcision.

Advocates of the rite do admit to the pain, but they seek to harness this pain to moral purposes. The sting of *Brit Milah* expresses tough love and, furthermore, "most pain leads to growth" (Kletenik, 1998, p. 59). Far from wounding boys, *Brit Milah* is simply one of many painful events characteristic of childhood through which parents soothingly guide their sons. The rite thereby strengthens, not dilutes, parental bonds (Kletenik, 1998). The ceremony does *not* celebrate a hard, cruel, affectless version of manhood. Instead, it teaches boys from the beginning to work through their pain together with a loving family and community. The trials of manhood are not yours to suffer alone.

In its biblical setting, Israelite circumcision resembled male initiation ceremonies in Melanesia (see Silverman 2001). Both rites defined masculinity against—yet in terms of—motherhood. The ceremonies detached youthful masculinity from femininity by gifting men religious significance not bestowed onto women. But the ceremonies also celebrated male reproduction by symbolically connecting men to a bloody menstrual and parturient fecundity that, when associated with women, was cast as polluting. Circumcision thus transformed Israelite men into mothers while denying that identification, lest men admit to themselves and, worse, to women, the primacy of female fertility (Kletenik, 1998).

One of the central figures in the Jewish Renewal movement, Rabbi Waskow (1984), tacitly recognizes the validity of this post-Freudian interpretation. Anthropologically, however, he erroneously romanticizes the masculine emulation of female fertility that is so pervasive in many premodern, or pre-state, tribal societies—and in Judaism. But the contours of his argument mandate some consideration. Waskow argues that certain categories of men—priests, rabbis, monks, and mystics—pursued psychological wholeness by nurturing the community and ritually experiencing feminine mystery. In other words, male leaders sustained their authoritative positions by experiencing and expressing femininity. Waskow offers the same analysis for *Brit Milah*: "This moment of intense physical and emotional connection binds the father to his son in a way analogous to the mother's physical and emotional connection through the birth canal." The father appears poised to murder his son but instead becomes "motherly" and hallows the boy's genitals, thus "nurturing the cycle of the generations." The rite also removes the "tough outer casing" of the boy's genitals in order symbolically to make him "more vulnerable, more open, more 'womanly.'" The menstrual imagery of the rite only enhances this ritual transformation.

For politically conservative proponents of *Brit Milah*, such as Levenson (2000), the rite restores and defends traditional gender roles and the separation of male and female. But for Waskow (1984), *Brit Milah* transcends normative gender through ritual androgyny. The rite emulates women so men can access their otherwise suppressed abilities to nurture the community. Circumcised Jews are not brutal patriarchs who dominate others but tender figures of masculo-feminine empathy and care.

Rabbi Zaslou (2003) similarly sees *Brit Milah* as fostering empathetic fatherhood, thus transforming men into nurturers (see also Kozberg, 1984). The rite is "the once in a lifetime chance for the souls of father and son to bond in the deepest way imaginable" (Zaslou 2003, p. 196). When Zaslou administers over the rite, he counsels "the dads to hold the hands of their sons, and to whisper blessings of love to them" (p. 196). He implores fathers to carry the pain of their sons and to weep "for all the pain their sons will experience in their lives" (p. 196). For him, then, *Brit Milah* engenders male love and compassion. The ceremony also attaches this sense of generative fatherhood to femininity because "our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters experience the awesome spiritual bonding power of blood every month" (p. 196). Men can do so only during circumcision.

Jews commonly see circumcision, as well as the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, called the *Akedah* in Hebrew, as a defining moment in human history that also demonstrates the compassion of Judaism. When fathers in other ancient cultures still "killed their firstborn sons as a sacrifice to a bloodthirsty deity" (Meyer, 1992, p. 45), Jews (or Israelites) were guided by God and their own keen moral compass to offer a substitute: animals and foreskins. Of course, this argument is simply run-of-the-mill ethnocentrism. All cultures tend to create their collective self-worth by exaggerating the savagery of their neighbors.

But several recent commentators on *Brit Milah* also take this argument in a different direction—particularly two rabbis who circumcised their very own sons. The first rabbi, Meyer (1992), highlights the fact that fathers and *mohels* do not, despite the knife, kill Jewish sons. *Brit Milah*, then, mobilizes the tension, anxiety, and potential horror of the rite to the forging of a loving, trusting union between father and son. The second rabbi, Hammerman (1994) understands the rite to transform every Jewish father into a potential murderer. *Brit Milah* is tied to the primal anger unleashed by the sight of another male—in this case, a son—in physical intimacy with one's wife. The rite, too, continues Hammerman, adheres to a primal anxiety elicited when a man confronts his own death in the guise of his son since, in traditional Judaism, a male offspring is called one's *kaddish*—the person who will recite memorial prayers over one's grave. The father envies his son, yet fears his own death. But then Hammerman tells of gazing into the trusting eyes of his son as he cut the foreskin:

I finally understood that the knife transforms the father ... into a shield. The breast provides, but the knife protects. It channels a father's natural anger and

jealously into one controlled but he takes off one small part in order to pre-serve—and love—the whole. (p. 29)

However cruel *Brit Milah*, the rite nonetheless accomplishes two redemptive tasks. First, it allows the father ritually to act on aggressive emotions he would otherwise be loath to admit, never mind express. Second, *Brit Milah* arouses a passionate desire to never again allow those emotions to potentially harm the child: "For it is from the father's hand," writes Hammeman (1994, p. 29), "that Abraham's knife dangles, every moment of every day." A instant of brutality, in other words, affords Jewish men a rare yet therapeutic glimpse into the dark side of manhood that immediately transforms them into loving, protective fathers.

In a complex but fascinating essay, Boyarin and Boyarin (1995) paint a heroic yet kindhearted image of the circumcised Jew. The rite challenges dominant Euro-Christian—ultimately, Hellenistic—bodily notions of natural perfection and unnatural mutilation. Likewise, the rite proudly allows Jews, as I hinted earlier, to push against the homogenizing, theologically foreskinned, universal spread of Christianity. Finally, as I also stated earlier, the rite opposes the very American ideal of the self-made man. In each instance, *Brit Milah* creates a sense of Jewish manhood that resists hegemony. Jewish men thus stand for all ethnic groups that celebrate difference against the wider, pervasive forces of mute conformity. Jewish men, since the rise of Christianity, can point to their circumcised penises as the original emblem of multiculturalism.

But the Jewish penis, for all of its resistance, does not—and should not—shape Jewish men into martial men. Christendom often defined the circumcised Jew as grotesquely monstrous—or as grotesquely emasculated, a wimp, virtually castrated, lacking full phallic puissance, and so barred by his own chosen effeminacy from the warrior ideal of European manhood. In late 19th-century Vienna, in fact, the clitoris was dubbed "the Jew" (Gilman, 1993, p. 39). A masturbating woman was "playing the Jew." Circumcision, in this sense, created not an alternative form of manhood but simply an illegitimate one. The Jew was negatively feminized.

This caricature is not entirely wrong, as Boyarin (1997) recognizes: it is only misguided. Within Jewish culture, circumcision *did* feminize Jews, at least in comparison to the wider society. But the feminine infliction of manhood *within* Judaism nonetheless constituted a *legitimate* form of masculinity, one in which Jewish men clearly succeeded at the two endeavors that the wider Euro-Christian society coded as quintessentially male: attracting women and siring sons. Circumcision was *not* castrative in rabbinic culture because masculinity was *not* defined in terms of phallic aggression. Rabbinic culture inverted Euro-Christian norms but still favored men. The rite (to use Boyarin's felicitous phrase) is counter-phallic. It celebrates manhood over femininity, but it does so not through the exercise of aggressive power. Rather, *Brit Milah* privileges men because they remain men (at least within Judaism) as well as a type of woman.

Most proponents of *Brit Milah*, when thinking about manhood, see the rite as shaping Jewish men into better men—into loving, nurturing, caring, compassionate, sexually restrained men. Circumcised men are better fathers and better husbands who, moreover, resist hegemony by standing up for the right and duty to be different—but they stand, however heroically, with an ennobled pacifism.

A Return to Comedy

Despite the counter-phallic inflection of *Brit Milah*, many Jews today internalize a phallic ideal of masculinity and see circumcision as a mark of ambivalent or lesser manhood.²⁷ Gilman (1991, p. 29) offers a wonderful example of this ambivalence. After the cancellation of Jackie Mason's short-lived 1989 television show, "Chicken Soup," Mason commented to the effect: "Well, at least Americans now know what a Jew looks like." To this, a columnist in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (Merkin, 1991) replied, "If Jackie Mason is even remotely like a typical Jew, then I'm in the market for a used foreskin in a medium—um, make that a medium large."

Jackie Mason, of course, exemplified one stereotypical image of the male Jewish body. Woody Allen does likewise and, indeed, plays the role fittingly in his 1977 comedy *Annie Hall*, where, in the guise of Alvie Singer, Allen obsesses about foreskins and anti-Semitism. Jackie Mason is apparently more comfortable with his circumcision. But Merkin evidently is not, as Gilman (1991) brilliantly recognizes. Merkin responded to his anxiety by voicing, in response to Jackie Mason, a fantasy for a longer, more powerful, seemingly non-Jewish phallus.

Some Jewish proponents of circumcision believe that the rite creates a docile form of manhood. Opponents of the rite reject this argument, yet they subscribe to the very same logic when asserting that circumcision creates a hostile Jew. Clearly, the adult imagination about circumcision is equally as powerful, dare I say it, as the infant's experience of the rite. It will surely be more enduring.

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²⁷ Many contemporary theorists offer a similar explanation for the martial stance of Jewish manhood celebrated by Zionism and the state of Israel (see Boyarin, 1997) and Breines (1990). For a different take on Jewish aggressiveness, especially as evidenced by 20th century Jewish-American male literature, see Rosenberg (2001).

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3

NOT-SO-NICE JEWISH BOYS:
NOTES ON VIOLENCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF JEWISH-AMERICAN
MASCULINITY IN THE LATE 20TH AND EARLY 21ST CENTURIES

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Every Saturday morning before my high school football games, our team would meet at the local Catholic Church, St. John the Evangelist, where the monsignor would give us a talk about life, manhood, and football. I don't remember much about what the grandfatherly Irish-American priest actually told us back in the late 1970s, but I do remember the discomfort I felt every week when I walked up the aisle to the first four or five rows of pews where all the guys gathered. It was at that moment when, as one of only a handful of Jews on the team, I was forced to announce my Jewishness publicly. Most of my teammates and coaches were Catholic, and they invariably kneeled as they entered the pews. I wanted to fit in with my fellow football players, but there was no way I was going to make that gesture under their watchful eyes in a sacred space that felt both foreign and vaguely threatening. Still, as one of the best players and a team leader, I felt exposed and self-conscious about thus declaring my outsider status.

Being Jewish coded me not only as "other," but also potentially raised questions about my masculinity. In my hometown just north of Boston, as elsewhere in the United States, I was more than aware of the prevailing stereotypes about middle-class Jewish boys (and girls) in the post-war era, i.e. that we were pampered and entitled, academically strong but physically weak. As an outwardly confident but covertly anxious adolescent, I wanted nothing more than for my friends, their parents and others in the community to accept and respect me, both for my intellectual abilities and as a three-sport varsity athlete. Most of all, I coveted the respect I would gain—especially among non-Jews—if I could prove on the football field that I was as tough as the Irish and Italian boys whose families ruled in my small-town suburban "jockocracy." Academic accomplishment was valued in my family, in the local Jewish community, and in our school system as a whole. But before my own bar mitzvah and long before I even knew the meaning of the word *assimilation*, I had learned that the quickest way to popularity in the larger culture was to prove myself not in the classroom but in violent physical competition with other boys.

This essay is about the complex and conflicted role that violence has played in my life as well as more generally in the construction of late 20th and early 21st century Jewish-American (*Ashkenazic*) masculinity. It is an attempt to draw from and build on important foundational work in this area in the past couple of decades. Several pieces

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New Perspectives on Jewish Masculinity

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