

Why Circumcision? ***Shabbat Lech L'cha 5778***

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The Covenant of Circumcision is known in Hebrew as *Brit Milah*, often shortened to *Brit* or the Ashkenazic pronunciation, *Bris*. One of my favorite tricks is to ask a classroom full of people: So, what do you think the word *brit* or *bris* means? Invariably, most people answer, “circumcision.” However, *brit* means “covenant.” The most important aspect of a *Brit Milah* is not the surgery, but is bringing the child into the Covenant between God and the Children of Israel. *Milah*, circumcision, is the sign of that Covenant for boys. We also bring baby girls into the Covenant, a ceremony that may equally be called a *Brit* or *Bris*, no surgery required.

From time to time, expectant parents will ask me: “If we have a boy, do we really have to have him circumcised in order for him to be Jewish?”

The short answer is “no.” The child of at least one Jewish parent, raised exclusively as a Jew, is a Jew, circumcised or not. Still, I encourage parents to have their baby boys circumcised. Our sages placed that obligation upon fathers,ⁱ with a succession of others required to carry out the task if the father fails. Even Moses appears to commit this sin, making a priority of getting to Pharaoh quickly to demand his people’s freedom without first circumcising his newborn. God “sought to kill him” Torah tells us, until his wife Zipporah, daughter of a Midianite Priest, “cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at [Moses’s] feet, saying, ‘You are a bloody bridegroom to me.’”ⁱⁱ Ultimately, Jewish law requires an uncircumcised Jewish man to take care of the matter himself, lest he be cut off from our people.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Hesitant parents find allies in at least some of our Reform founders, beginning as early as the 19th Century German Reform pioneer Rabbi Abraham Geiger: “I cannot support circumcision with any conviction...It is a brutal act that does not deserve continuation”^{iv}

I have little trouble suggesting reasonable justifications for *Brit Milah*, without threatening that the child would be cut off from the Jewish community. Push comes to shove, if parents wished to raise their child Jewish without circumcision, I would welcome that child into the *Brit*, the Covenant, with a Jewish ceremony. Still, I find tremendous value in a ritual that has linked our

people from generation to generation across countless centuries. *Brit Milah* is considered so important that it must proceed on the eighth day, as commanded in our Torah portion, even if that falls on Shabbat or a Holy Day. I wonder if the uncircumcised boy will feel cut off from our people, even if the rabbi and congregation embrace him and his family.

What does not persuade me is the explanation offered by the medieval rabbi, physician, and philosopher, Moses Maimonides, who suggests that circumcision is intended to curb the insatiable male libido.^v

On the one hand, Maimonides is correct: Male sexual appetite does indeed seem to be voracious. If a procedure could limit that urge, we ought to consider it. If we did not know it sooner, recent weeks have taught us the horrors that the unrestrained male libido can wreak upon women and our society. If we did not know it sooner, the last year has identified virtually all men as either perpetrators or bystanders in our society's epidemic of sexual harassment and assault.

Two weeks ago, we were horrified by movie mogul Harvey Weinstein's unspeakable objectification and abuse of women. Days of reckoning have followed, as unnumbered women have come forward to say that they, too, have been victims of sexual assault and/or harassment. The last ten days have also seen one Hollywood figure after another confess that they knew about Weinstein's misdeeds but looked the other way.

We all knew. About Weinstein? Well, comedian Seth MacFarlane told us when he hosted the Oscars in 2013. After announcing the nominees for best supporting actress, he cracked, "Congratulations. You ladies no longer have to pretend to be attracted to Harvey Weinstein." The audience laughed. MacFarlane now claims that he was attempting to name Weinstein's abuses, but his words suggest that the five accomplished actors reached the pinnacle of their craft by flirtation or worse. We're talking about Sally Field. Anne Hathaway. Jacki Weaver. Helen Hunt. Amy Adams. Anybody think these five women had to "pretend to be attracted to Harvey Weinstein" in order to be successful? The sad reality: maybe so.

Still, here in the hinterlands, we couldn't have been expected to get MacFarlane's "joke," much less to assume that one of Hollywood's most talented and successful executives was taking advantage of his power to harass and perhaps even to rape.

And yet, we knew. If not about Weinstein, we knew about the dangers of the male libido and its dangers to women.

How can we claim not to have known?

Twenty years ago, President Bill Clinton took advantage of his exalted position to satisfy his sexual appetite with an intern. While there's no reason to believe the encounter wasn't consensual, given the power disequilibrium, Monica Lewinsky was unquestionably the victim of sexual harassment. And yet, the President was brought up on charges, not for sexual harassment, but for perjury. While millions of Americans were rightly appalled by President Clinton's disregard for his wife and daughter, little concern has ever been raised for Ms. Lewinsky, and certainly not by those who share Clinton's political philosophy, which prominently includes women's equality.

How can we claim not to have known?

In 2014, the Jewish world was shocked by a revelation about Rabbi Barry Freundel of Keshet Israel Congregation, a prominent Orthodox synagogue in Washington, D.C. He had a video camera installed in the shower room at the *mikvah*, the sacred ritual bath. Freundel leered at the naked bodies of women who trusted him while they were performing a *mitzvah* he taught.

How can we claim not to have known?

The U.S. Department of Justice reported in that, from 2010 to 2014, there were, "on average ... 321,500 victims (age 12 and older) of rape and sexual assault each year in the United States."^{vi}

How can we claim not to have known?

Bill O'Reilly and Roger Ailes. Bill Cosby. Anthony Weiner. Just yesterday, Mark Halperin. And of course I'm naming only a few.

How can we claim not to have known?

Last October, all of America was exposed to language so vile I cannot repeat it, in a videotape of a presidential candidate. He bragged about committing sexual violence, speaking of women in terms that would demean a dog. Weeks later, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States.

How can we claim not to have known?

In the days that have followed the Harvey Weinstein revelation, millions of women have spoken up, many of them with the social media hashtag, #metoo. Anybody who uses Facebook – and probably other social networks, too – cannot escape the conclusion that every single woman in America has faced either sexual violence or harassment at some point in her life. Women rabbis have told me of instances when congregational leaders or members, even male senior rabbis, have committed violations against them ranging from inappropriate remarks about their appearance to assault.

America, we have a problem. More precisely, American men have a problem. And, lest there be any mistake: Jewish men have a problem. Maimonides seems to have been mistaken: Circumcision would not appear to inoculate Jewish men against acting upon excessive sexual desires.

Nevertheless, the laws of circumcision help us to think about how we might address the male proclivity for sexual harassment and assault we can no longer deny.

Just as the father is obligated to assure his son's circumcision, Jewish fathers of boys are bound by a *mitzvah*, a religious obligation, to teach our sons to respect women and their boundaries.

Just as circumcision on the eighth day takes precedence over Shabbat and Holy Days, properly instructing our sons is urgent, not to be delayed even for what would otherwise seem like a good reason. The conversation is not an easy one, particularly with teens, but we must start early and we must persist.

And if the father fails, the mother, a grandparent, or another parental figure must take up the critical responsibility. The obligation of circumcision can devolve upon the community if the family doesn't act. Our institutions, our government, and our society as a whole must say, with our words and with our actions: No more! Sexual harassment and sexual assault are not the same thing, but neither may be tolerated in a civilized community. Our congregation, for example, adopted a Sexual Harassment Policy in 2013; to my knowledge, we also live by it ever since

Ultimately, should all else fail, the obligation falls to the uncircumcised adult. Each and every man must examine his own actions. Let none of us give ourselves any leeway to comment inappropriately about a woman's appearance, any more than we would force ourselves upon her sexually.

Let each and every man be circumcised, if not in the flesh then at least in the heart and the mind. Let us recognize the awesome power of the male libido and its destructive potential. Let us restrain that lust. Then, like Abraham before us, may we walk with God in purity. Then, may we be a blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah* 260:1.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 4:24-25.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah* 261:1.

^{iv} Cited in "Progressive Rabbis On Creating A Jewish Covenant Without Circumcision," *IntactNews*, January 27, 2012.

^v Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*," translated by Shlomo Pines, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, Part III, Chapter 49.

^{vi} Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2010-2014 (2015), accessed at rainn.org, October 27, 2017.