Arizona Rightly Ended Funds For Circumcision

By Lawn Griffiths, reprinted from the Arizona Tribune

Arizona, whose most popular alternate license plate says, "It Shouldn't Hurt To Be a Child," has validated that statement by deciding to no longer pay for routine infant circumcisions for newborn boys under Medicaid.

It means as many as 12,600 more Arizona newborns per year likely won't suffer genital mutilation at birth because there will be no Medicaid funding to subsidize the intrusive, medically unnecessary surgery.

Arizona becomes the seventh state, along with California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, North Dakota and Mississippi, to end such taxpayer-supported circumcisions. North Dakota stopped Medicaid coverage in 1991.

When government departments were instructed to offer up ways to cut their budgets, the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System staff determined they could save money by not cutting foreskins. While their prime motive was balancing the budget, their actions were a de facto endorsement of infant human rights and body integrity. They confirmed what has been known for decades about circumcision: The impairing procedure permanently removes what nature put there for a purpose and offers spurious health benefits.

"There are all kinds of reports now that say it isn't medically necessary," said Sen. Ruth Solomon, D-Tucson, during the recent legislative session as lawmakers sought ways to balance the $6.1 billion budget for the year beginning July 1. With no medical society in the world recommending circumcision, it becomes an issue of medical ethics to stop the discredited procedure that survives in America largely out of cultural tradition and conformity with the tacit support of doctors who know better. Repeated studies by the American Academy of Pediatrics, since 1971, and other research confirm that medical risks, pediatric trauma and permanent structure loss outweigh any slight benefits.

Other states, (continued on page 4)

Late-Breaking Update

As we went to press, we received the important news from Zenas Baer that the Flatt v. Kantak circumcision case has survived the opponents' summary judgment motion and will proceed to trial on February 3, 2003. Like the Stowell case, this case would be a breakthrough in establishing that circumcision is actionable even where there is no "botch" and "consent" is given but there are problems with the "consent" (in this case, the mother was not informed of the procedure prior to signing the "consent" form). Zenas writes, "There will be a 9 person jury hearing the case. I am optimistic we will be able to have the "informed consent" issue decided by the jury. It will be precedent setting. The overriding argument of the Defendant was that the case should be dismissed because Dr.'s Cold, Van Howe and Wayne do not currently and Van Howe and Wayne have never performed a circumcision so their testimony is "incompetent" and should be excluded. The court rejected this argument stating it is 'the courts job to apply the correct legal standard' and the personal opinions of the experts is not material. The court also observed that in an informed consent case the type of information to be disclosed to a parent is a 'standard set by law for physicians rather than one which physicians may or may not impose upon themselves'. This is a huge statement and will put the physicians in their place if we can convince 9 reasonable people that the physicians failed to give adequate information.'

Additional updates on page 3.

Medicaid project update - July 2002

By Amber Craig

It appears state legislators are now getting the message - taxpayers should not fund unnecessary and harmful genital alterations on unconsenting minor males! In May of this year, Arizona became the seventh state to end Medicaid funding for infant circumcisions (joining California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, North Dakota and Mississippi). Legislation to eliminate Medicaid funding of circumcision is also pending in several other states - North Carolina, South Carolina, Missouri, Michigan, and others. Also, the Florida Medicaid office has indicated that it will be eliminating coverage later this summer. Unfortunately, a few Medicaid offices are determined to continue funding this harmful practice, even though the poor in their states are going without basic coverage of many other needs.

The push to end government subsidized circumcisions has also generated a significant amount of press coverage, both locally and nationally, including articles in the Washington Post, Newsweek, and the National Journal. To view the recent press coverage of this issue, please visit these URLs:

www.cirp.org/news/washingtonpost02-23-02/

An Independent article (Raleigh North Carolina): www.cirp.org/news/independentweekly06-12-02/

The Charlotte Observer article: www.cirp.org/news/charlotteobserver06-18-02/

Medicaid pays for 25% of all newborn circumcisions in the United States. Medicaid funding of circumcision sends the wrong message to our nation's poor parents. They are likely to assume that if the government pays for circumcision, it must be a good thing for their child - why would the government pay for something that is harmful? Medicaid parents, and innocent boys, are further victimized by this subsidy because Medicaid parents are often not given any information about circumcision, yet are solicited by the medical staff (continued on page 4)
Publication News

By J. Steven Svoboda

An article has just been published by the Journal of Health Psychology entitled "Male Circumcision: Pain, Trauma and Psychosexual Sequelae." The authors are Gregory J. Boyle of Australia's Bond University, Ronald Goldman of the Circumcision Resource Center, J. Steven Svoboda, and Ephrem Fernandez of the Department of Psychology of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. It is in the May 2002 issue, Vol 7 (No. 3), pp. 329-343. The article is available on the Internet at: http://www.cirp.org/library/psych/bboyle6/. This may be the first academic article to be published which focuses on surveying the psychological harm caused by circumcision.

Thanks to my co-authors and particularly to lead author Greg Boyle.

Also, the Fall issue of the Harvard Law Bulletin is scheduled to include a feature on ARC and the intactivist movement, including a color photo or two. Bulletin editor Lewis Rice gave me one of the most sympathetic and knowledgeable interviews I have ever had.

The Bulletin is a glossy, full-color publication to update Harvard Law School alumni and supporters on ongoing events on campus and among HLS graduates. It is not to be confused with its cousin, the Harvard Law Review, an academic journal.

Fraud: It's Your Turn

They got caught, Jeff Skilling (Enron) and Bernie Ebbers (WorldCom), with their slick fingers in your wallet, while other fingers, those of Edgar Schoen and Thomas Wiswell, also seeking to take, continue to search the genitals of newborn American males. Sometimes fraud hides behind the secure status of a large walnut desk, and other times behind the reassuring symbolism of a stethoscope. It has many faces, always smiling and reassuring, with the promise of better things to come. It's a face that always 'whistles a happy tune' on the way to the bank.

Recently, at a NOCIRC information table, a young mother approached and stopped to talk. She was very supportive of our efforts and stated that five years ago, without question, had she bore a son she would have had him circumcised. But somewhere, somehow, she learned about circumcision, and two years later when she did give birth to a son, under her protection he remained whole and intact.

She worked in a day care and shared an observation while supervising a small group of young boys in the bathroom. Watching as two new friends, one circumcised, one intact, stood at the urinal, she noticed the circumcised boy tugging downward on his penis, trying to cover it like his intact friend. He was using such force that she had to intervene and coax him to do something else. This had clearly disturbed her. She thanked us for being there and left with several pamphlets.

A few years from now she might see this young man in court, seated across the table from his circumciser. Fairness and justice would dictate it. The defense of a basic human right doesn't come cheap, but is a privilege based on ability to pay. Until we can afford justice, how many three year olds, when they reach the age of majority, will have their day in court?

For the next several issues this is your space...the ball is in your court. Sound off, your thoughts and ideas do matter! The address is: arcletters@hotmail.com AMF

Book Review


Review by J. Steven Svoboda

Rabbinical scholar Lawrence A. Hoffman has written that rarest of books: A learned, well-referenced, thoughtful academic work on a very focused topic that nevertheless manages to engage, even grip the reader. Circumcision, Hoffman notes, has long been the sine qua non of Jewish identity. Yet even that apparently simple statement is more complicated than it appears, both because obviously it does not speak to women's Judaic status, and also because the state of one's penis is technically irrelevant to one's membership in the religion.

Hoffman, so troubled by his findings that it took him (continued on page 6)

Book Review


Review by J. Steven Svoboda

Recently I have read a whole stack of pro-circumcision books in the interest of "knowing the enemy." Two physicians who double as mohels have written guides to the Jewish ritual of circumcision. Both books may be of interest to anyone concerned with male genital (continued on page 6)

Volume 2, Issue 3
Message from the Director

Warm wishes to everyone. Thanks to the superlative leadership of Marilyn Milos and NOIRC, the Seventh International Symposium, held at Georgetown University in Washington, DC from April 4 through 7, was a smashing success. Jeannine Parvati Baker contributes a detailed report on the event. Well over 120 folks attended. (I presented an article discussing our work in Geneva last July and August with the United Nations, in which I laid out concrete steps to be taken to attain UN recognition of circumcision as a human rights violation.)

The list of speakers in DC was spectacular. Milton Diamond of the University of Hawaii and Hanny Lightfoot-Klein may have been the best-known folks present (with Van Lewis discussing at length an even more famous person, Nobel Prize Winner George Wald), but everyone was impressive. Most people agreed it was probably the greatest symposium yet. Congratulations to all who helped make it happen.

Our particular congratulations to award winners Amber Craig, Norm Cohen, David Wilson, Jeannine Parvati Baker, George C. Denniston, Paul Fleiss, and Yngve Hofvander. The march to the Capitol that followed the Symposium the afternoon of Sunday the 7th also went well, with over 65 participants. Police cleared a lane of traffic for us. ARC was also able to fit in our first official Board Meeting since receiving our 501(c)(3) non-profit status in August 2001. Heartfelt thanks to Board Members David Llewellyn, James Dwyer (whom I met in DC for the first time), Christopher Price, and Stefan Ivarssoon. We would also like to welcome to our Advisory Board experienced litigator John Geishketer, who joins Martin Novoa, Zenas Baer, and Charles Bonner on the A-Board.

William Stowell and I were interviewed by the local Fox affiliate in DC on April 6 and our interviews were included in a news broadcast that evening regarding circumcision litigation and the symposium. The United Nations recently published and given a United Nations document number to the written intervention I submitted with assistance from Ken Drabik while working with the Sub-Commission in Geneva last July and August. This marks the first official UN document that centrally discusses male circumcision as a human rights concern. Recently the Journal of Health Psychology published the first academic article to survey the various forms of psychological harm caused by circumcision. The lead author was psychologist Gregory Boyle, Ph.D. of Australia and the other authors were Ronald Goldman, myself, and Ephrem Fernandez. Since the last issue of this newsletter, we have also been interviewed and/or quoted in articles by the New York Times, the Toronto Star, the Independent (North Carolina), the National Journal, and Mothering Magazine.

Exciting events continue. As organizer par excellence Amber Craig and journalist/activist Lawn Griffiths discuss in this issue, Arizona recently became the seventh state that does not permit Medicaid money to pay for neonatal circumcision. At least five other states are also considering discontinuing Medicaid funding of the procedure. William Stowell and David Llewellyn are continuing their hard work toward achieving victory in William’s important lawsuit over his infant circumcision. The movement is continually internationalizing, as a recent Taiwanese award of US $20,000 in a botched circumcision case was announced on June 7. Full speed ahead!

J. Steven Svoboda

Attorneys for the Rights of the Child associates (L to R) David Llewellyn, James Dwyer, Martin Novoa, Jeff Borg, Steven Svoboda and Al Fields at the TISGI, Washington, DC, 4/6/02.

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Volume 2, Issue 3

Page 3
Arizona

(continued from page 1) also facing tough challenges to balance budgets, are eyeing eliminating medical reimbursements for circumcision.

A growing number of private insurance companies have similarly dropped coverage. They have determined it is a form of elective cosmetic surgery - elective for parents, but clearly without consent of a helpless baby boy whose foreskin is amputated.

Medicaid paid an average of $1232 per circumcision in Arizona last year, or $1.6 million - two-thirds of it in federal dollars and one-third, or about $554,400, from state funds. A national study, completed last year, noted that where states pay more than $60 per circumcision, the rate of such surgeries is twice as high as when they are under $50 (38 percent to 20.2 percent), thus suggesting a financial incentive for doctors to perform what they otherwise wouldn't press parents to perform.

With growing public awareness that the foreskin plays multiple roles for protection, sensitivity, lubrication and the mechanics of sex, the rate of circumcision in America has dropped from almost 90 percent in the 1970s to under 60 percent today, and only about 35 percent in America's western states.

Public awareness has stemmed from a host of books debunking circumcision, countless Internet Web sites and clearer informed-consent forms for expectant parents. Add to that lawsuits from botched circumcisions, deaths attributed to complications from circumcisions, and the work of activists and such outspoken anti circumcision voices as Howard Stern, Dr. Dean Edell and the late Dr. Benjamin Spock. Currently about 25.9 percent of all circumcisions of newborns performed nationally are in low-income families covered by Medicaid. At least $35 million in public funds could be saved and more than 310,000 baby boys per year could grow up whole and intact as more than 80 percent of males do worldwide.

Arizona, which often ranks abysmally low in measurements of the health, safety and welfare of its children, has taken a key step forward in respecting the rights of our newest citizens. Fewer newborns will face the assault of the Gomco clamp - the roughest welcome to a baby's world. May parents, regardless of income or insurance, recognize the inherent right of all human beings to an intact body, especially in Arizona, where "it shouldn't hurt to be a child."

Tribune writer Lawn Griffiths, who has worked for more than 25 years for newborn rights, can be reached by e-mail at: lgriﬃths@aztrib.com or call (480) 898-6522.

Medicaid

(continued from page 1) to sign a consent form. If you want to make a difference in the lives of our nation's poor baby boys, please contact your state and federal legislators to ask that they put an end to Medicaid funding of circumcision. If you live in a state that does not use Medicaid funds for circumcision, please check with your legislator to see if they also have eliminated tax-payer coverage of circumcision for their state employees' private insurance health-care plans. You can find their contact information at: www.statelocalgov.net.

For more information, please contact Amber Craig at: ambere@atgglobal.net.

Report

(continued from page 5)

I had one personal success while marching that meant a lot to me. (This is how desperate I was for at least one success!) A carload of young men looked approachable. I started away from the line of marchers -- NOCIRC cards in hand, in two languages. When the driver rolled down the window, I handed him a card (in English). The passengers looked interested so I gave them each a card, too. The driver asked where he could get a STOP CIRCUMCISION button like the one that I was wearing on my lapel, and so I gave it to him. I saw him putting it on his shirt as I reunited with the march.

It is quite likely that everyone in that car had been circumcised as a baby, without the parents' informed permission and without any consent at all from the baby. These beautiful young men were beginning to do the healing work by caring about those yet to be mutilated through lack of information. From being victims to becoming healers -- I gracefully got to witness that moment.

At the end of our march as we stood by the Capitol, Shane Peterson from Australia, asked me, "Why do Americans laugh at us?" (Shane is famous for being awarded a nearly half million-dollar settlement for his botched circumcision in Western Australia. His presentation left no eyes dry when he presented his slide show of his journey through surgical repair and that subsequent injury.) I told him that I thought that Americans laugh as a defense against feeling the pain about their own circumcisions, or from guilt if they are mothers who permitted the mutilation. Perhaps they laugh merely because we are a motley crew of protestors. Babies, kids, teens - all ages, all the way to our elderly -- professionals to hippies, as well as many ethnic and religious groups are in our colorful assembly of activists. We are representative of all genders. Our group includes pre-babies (yet to be born) all the way to those whom we won't see next year, as they will pass on. For a few minutes, we held silence at the closing ceremony to honor those of us who are mortally ill and celebrate those we honored last year who are still with us. Each one of us is precious.

And who are we? We are nurses, musicians, bankers, bums, research scientists, clowns, social workers, performance artists, mechanics, first peoples, anarchists, farmers, prostitutes (retired), contractors, lawyers, single parents, ex-patriots, radio show hosts, Muslims, administrators, doctors, military men, journalists, educators, nerds, atheists, homeys, jocks, historians, pacifists, Christians, homemakers, saints, pilots, medical students, eco-activists, construction workers, pagans, families, immigrants, psychologists, accountants, midwives, philanthropists, ministers, Jews, real estate agents, and many more!

There has never been a time when so many people, from all walks of life, are willing to protest against the most invisible form of child sexual abuse -- circumcision, or genital cutting. It is inspiring to see how this movement has grown over the years. We are moving out of the adolescent phase of our work and now are somewhat less about protest than about education, a little less political and a lot more litigious. We will meet again in D.C. to march and speak out for the babies next year -- every year -- until the genitals (and souls) of baby boys in the USA and for all children everywhere are safe.

And let us also remember to protect mothers from genital cutting by supporting freebirth. At our local hospital (central Utah), a birth is still considered "natural" even with episiotomy (genital cutting of the mother's birth opening).

Beyond the end of sexual mutilations, our work will be to sustain the integrity of our Earth. Perhaps when we stop cutting the most sensitive and exquisite organs of our bodies, we will cease our disconnection from the ecstatic Earth, the original ground of being. If we can be kinder to the children, surely they will be kinder to our Earth.

With gratitude to Marilyn Milos for editing assistance. 28 April 2002, Joseph UT www.freestone.org

March to the Capitol, 4/7/02

Volume 2, Issue 3
Report from D.C. 7ISGI 2002
by Jeannine Parvati Baker

IT'S A MIRACLE. At the beginning of March, I wrote to the Symposium Director, Marilyn Milos, to inform her I couldn't afford to attend and look what happened!

We put out a plea to fundraise for the Conference on Human Rights in Modern Society, a.k.a. the 7th International Symposium on Genital Integrity (7ISGI) in D.C. this April and two United Airlines tickets were donated for Hallie & me, the conference registration paid, a room on the way to the airport pro bono, plus $1200 to pay for our hotel room & meals, gas for our caravan, taxis at airports, etc. It took a few weeks of effort to pull this together, yet well worth the time invested in getting donations to Six Directions, our non-profit corporation.

It is still a mystery to me how ending the mutilation of children is crucially important and so deeply motivating to me, as I have no personal experience or guilt about it -- other than having a Jewish mother -- and, even then, she had only daughters. Yet when spring arrived and the funds weren't available, I could only think about how sad I'd be without the symposium. This fund-raising effort allowed me once more to be the closing speaker at our symposium.

I have already thanked many intactivists for their timely help both personally and on our website (Six Directions page -- www.freestone.org). You know who you are. So it all came through -- I had the backing to attend the symposium once again. Marilyn never lost faith that I would attend this year.

It was an ordinary miracle for this devoted intactivist. Words cannot express how I feel now, knowing that it is not only my personal intention to be a voice to free all children from harm, but the desire of so many others who likewise passionately care about the babies. The babies' voices have been ignored for millennia, so it's about time we had an inter-disciplinary choir.

The 7ISGI in D.C. was an event we have been waiting for since the 1st International Symposium in Anaheim, California back in 1989. I have attended each one and have closed each one out as the "Mistress of Ceremonies". This time it was clear that the movement to stop the genital mutilation of boys and girls in the world has come of age. Now we have members from most countries and speakers from as far away as Italy, Israel, Australia, the U.K., Somalia, Canada, Sweden, and France, who truly brought international perspective to this complex issue.

We met at the Georgetown University Conference Center, a beautiful setting for us to gather AT, filled with the history of those committed to the search for truth. The quality of the presentations was world class and engaged me thoroughly for the entire conference. My heart was wide open to all of my colleagues who work to make this planet one that honors babies and children from many fields - anthropology, history, anatomy, urology, religion, psychology, law, ethics, obstetrics, pediatrics, etc.

For the Closing Ceremony, I had Awards to give to the less visible members of our movement -- Amanda, the new wife of William Stowell -- for her courage and support of her now-famous and heroic husband, William Stowell has the ongoing legal case against the circumcision for his foreskin amputation twenty years ago. Since the age of fourteen, William educated himself about circumcision and impressed the general assembly with his clarity and commitment. His sole purpose is to bring attention to this issue so that unlike his own mother who signed away her son's foreskin from beneath the haze of post-op drugs after a cesarean delivery, all mothers will understand that there is no good reason to cut off any part of their newborn son's penis.

Amanda was the first to be honored followed by Zen Anton, the seven-year-old son of a NYC doula and intactivist. He attended almost all of the sessions, which convened from 9 AM through 5 PM each day with an hour break for lunch. He reminded me of my Quin (Baker), another long-haired young boy listening to the presentations at the symposium, silently drawing or writing during the lectures. This year, I was able to take care of the house and garden, for which we are grateful. I missed him, which I suppose is why Zen so favorably impressed me.

Next to be honored was Hallie Sophia Baker for supporting her mother all of these years. Hallie has attended each of the symposia (even before her birth). Before the closing, she peered over my shoulder and saw my notes of people to be honored. She whimpered to me that, in the interests of time (we were running 15 minutes late at that point), I could skip her Award. She said that just knowing about my wanting to give her one was enough. How could I pass by this opportunity to reward such humility?

Kerry Peterson, Shane's mother, was also honored. I met Kerry in Sydney. We talked about being mothers and found a connection that bridged the two oceans between our colleges had been horribly mutilated during his unnecessary circumcision and Kerry had no idea at that time or even much later how his botched circumcision had affected his soul. When we first met, though Shane had been involved in litigation for years at that point, Kerry still seemed shell-shocked. This year, she had turned a corner in her journey and was radiant and proud to be the mother of such a pioneering and compassionate son.

Last, I honored Marilyn Milos for once more creating a magnificent event and gave her the Nile River Goddess pendant that I have been wearing since the last symposium. This token goes back and forth between us over the years, keeping our hearts connected and resonant to one another. Marilyn is the great-grandmother of our movement and rumored to be the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (or at least the Alternative Nobel Prize) one day in the not so distant future.

At the end of our three edifying days together, a big surprise was in store for me. Marilyn had run through her list of intactivists who she wanted to honor for Lifetime Achievement at the symposium with me in advance of the event. When she brought up my name, I told her it would be redundant, as I already had my "award" -- I had an intact and loving family. So, when Marilyn gave me my own Lifetime Achievement Award before my closing ceremony, I was shocked to see the standing ovation acknowledging my work to bring back the natural way to families.

My daughter Hallie tells me that she had an interesting perspective while the award was being given to me. She was to the side of the hall and could see me from behind the podium when I folded down into a squat as the Moderator was reading my introduction. I was weeping by then and my head was bobbing back and forth as I covered my face with my hands. I leaned over to gather my notes and Hallie tells me that I appeared to have my face in the crotch of the elderly man introducing me. He is the venerable head of NORM-UK, a retired physician involved in foreskin restoration and has the most lovely Oxford accent and distinguished countenance about him.

Did I tell you his name? It is Dr Peter Ball. On that note, the Symposium concluded and we gathered for the march to the Capitol steps. Throughout D.C., the cherry blossoms were bursting into color and so were the not so camouflaged security measures throughout our country's capital. I thought that it was an honest statement by our present administration that the government is no longer accessible to the people. Indeed, for this march, we were not allowed to stand on the Capitol steps. (On the way to D.C., even my shoes were confiscated by the fed's to be checked for bombs at the Salt Lake City airport. I got them back. Good thing I had clean socks on that morning! These were my walking shoes and what I was seeing wearing on the TV News program. But I get ahead of myself!)

Although our ultimate destination near the Capitol steps seemed to be concealed, the demonstration did get the attention of many commuters and tourists walking from the Ellipse to the Capitol. This time we were given Fox TV News coverage - William Stowell and Steven Svoboda, Executive Director of Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, were interviewed. Briefly Halley and I were seen with our colleagues carrying a huge poster to STOP CIRCUMCISION. We saw the report on the evening news in the hotel room of NOCIRC-International and were thrilled to see the news story about our conference and demonstration. Ken Brierley, the partner of Marilyn, exclaimed while watching the march on TV, "There goes the White Witch of the West?" when I marched by the camera.

The police accompanied us as we walked and chanted to make our statement. It seemed to me that the local commuters were quite used to demonstrators and had the attitude my neighbors do when we stop traffic to let a snake cross the road. It's not exactly something that you'd wish would happen on the way hither or thither, and yet if it happens, it can be rather entertaining.

As we were marching and chanting "Hey hey, ho ho, circumcision's got to go," I noticed a woman who was stuck in traffic get out of her car, peel a banana, and bite off the end. I pointed this out to the intactivist walking with me and he shouted out to the elderly fanatic, "How appropriate." She gave us back a big grin. However, not all of the spectators were so congenial: We were heckled, cursed at, and ridiculed. And that's when we got a reaction -- worse was being ignored. (Like a baby being circumcised and no one hears the screams.)

(continued on page 4)
Covenant of Blood
(continued from page 2) eight years following his completion of his research to actually publish Covenant of Blood, proves a thesis so sweeping and yet so simple that it is shocking that no one has breached the issue before him: Circumcision symbolizes a covenant between the males being circumcised and God. The practice thereby expresses the awkward (by today’s standards) truth that in traditional rabbinical thought, Judaism, despite its matrilineal passage of religious identity, equates “man” with “Jew,” allotting women an appendage-like role. Circumcision made possible and even embodied an analogy that Hoffman shows was implicit in Judaism: man was to woman as Jew was to non-Jew. And how did a male Jew demonstrate that he belonged and was of the covenant? By going under the knife. “One eternal verity... endures in Jewish culture: a tenacious grasp on circumcision to the point where opposition to it was considered a taboo.”

It is important to realize that things were not this way from the inception of Judaism. Carefully sifting through reams of confusing and sometimes conflicting ancient religious texts, Hoffman shows that circumcision has not always been considered an essential Jewish covenant, but rather was constructed as such a few centuries before the birth of Christ, at a time when animal sacrifice was on its way out as part of Judaism. The blood spilled during circumcision is essential to brit milah because it harks back to the brit’s ritual predecessor, animal sacrifice. At the same time, the blood represents the aspect of sacrifice that offers salvation. “By itself, the foreskin is useless, but covered with circumcision blood, it saves.” By contrast, menstrual blood was viewed as a pollutant, again demonstrating the exclusion and subordination of women. Interestingly, however, as part of this historical transition, women had to be displaced from the brit milah. In its original form, the ritual placed father, mother, and child at center stage. Later, the brit was recontextualized to exclude all females including the mother and to emphasize its nature as “a male-only ritual, almost sacramental in both public and official meaning.”

In a fascinating three-way power struggle between the monarchy, the Jewish “priests” (as Hoffman terms them), and the prophets, circumcision emerged as a ritual of overriding importance. Hoffman pinpoints one particular ancient religious author, the creator of the so-called “P text,” as the original promoter of the equation of Jewish identity and circumcision. This writer, palpably obsessed by the need to ensure successful reproduction, which he metaphorically associated with images of horticulture, associated the need for circumcision as “pruning” to promote fertility. Circumcision came to be conceptualized as a ritual form of castration in which the elders’ power was publicly demonstrated, with the potentially rebellious son’s loyalty made clear by his submission to the circumciser’s knife.

We get a “bonus”: Hoffman deconstructs the entire brit milah ritual in great detail, delving into the historical origins of each step, showing us how it developed through a combination of rabbinic authority and (sometimes unwitting) popular interventions. The author convincingly demonstrates that the rite is “a ceremonial celebration of the obligation that binds men to each other in rabbinic culture.” Except for the mother, Hoffman notes, it is men alone who are featured in all rabbinic stories about circumcision. Blood symbolizes the opposition between men and women; women are seen as dirty and as lacking control of their (menstrual) blood and thus of themselves, while men are portrayed as clean and as in control of their (circumcision) blood, thereby supposedly justifying their preferential entitlement with passing on religious doctrine.

Lawrence A. Hoffman closes his magnificent book with an afterword meditating on the brit milah in modern American culture. He discusses the positions of some modern Jewish commentators on ritual circumcision, and surveys its disparate forms in the present day US. I urge every reader to be sure not to miss one of the most fascinating, learned, and original books ever written about circumcision.

Bris Milah
(continued from page 2) integrity, particularly to those interested in Judaic aspects. Romberg’s work, while it is the more dated of the two books (and also happens to currently be out of print), proves itself easily the superior and more engaging of the two.

Henry Romberg’s words, while they are merely two decades old, seem to come to us from another era. I enjoyed Romberg’s folksy tone, which is charming in its way (at least as long as one is able to forget his subject). The author describes how, following his medical internship, he settled in Cleveland on the advice of his spiritual mentor. At that time he was one of the very few mohels in that city and was often called upon to travel to perform brises in places where no mohel was available. Romberg cheerfully describes his apprenticeship and learning process as a mohel, the advantages and disadvantages of being both a physician and a mohel, ceremonies associated with the bris, the details of how the bris is performed (both ritual and procedure are described), his advice to parents, etc. One purportedly humorous yet unintentionally painful story is provided of a set of triplet boys whose birth occasioned a trip by Romberg in order to ritually circumcise them. Romberg does mention in passing at one point that opposition to circumcision does exist, but quickly dismisses the issue and notes that certainly no Jew worth the name would ever question the practice. The author provides appendices on Jewish laws, on questions he has been asked about bris milah, and about the significance of the covenant.

Samuel Kunin is a prominent proponent of circumcision who has appeared on television to debate leading intactivists. Citing his predecessor Romberg at one point, he comes across as very enthusiastic but curiously uninformed (or deliberately deceitful) advocate of the procedure. Unlike Romberg, he cheerfully conflates distinct issues (e.g., medical rationales vs. religious rationales) until it almost seems he wishes to defend the practice by confusing the reader. Rather remarkably given his medical degree, he suggests that NO circumcised man has ever had cancer of the penis, which is easily disprovable through a quick search of the medical literature. Despite his intellectual achievements, Kunin seemingly will not allow truth or accuracy to stand in the way of his cheerleading for his favorite procedure. In this respect, Kunin probably resembles other modern-day physician advocates of circumcision. Typographical errors also crop up repeatedly throughout the book. Kunin’s book comes across as a bizarre curiosity, almost comparable to another radically pro-circumcision book written a century earlier, Peter C. Remondino’s History of Circumcision from the Earliest Times to the Present. Proceed with caution! At least read Dr. Romberg’s book first if you can find it!