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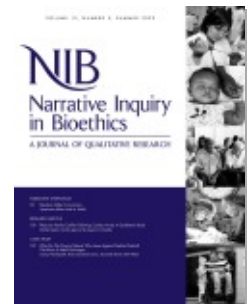
When the Political Becomes Personal: Circumcision as a Cause  
and as a Parental Decision

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it important to debate circumcision. The intense nature of the assault on circumcision makes me wonder whether concern for children is the main motivation.

Some of the reactions I have encountered may reflect a widespread misunderstanding by non-Jews of Jewish religious obligation. This is common even among well-meaning people. Friends who would be tolerant of vegetarians are annoyed that I won't eat pork or shellfish. I recently skipped a school reunion that I badly wanted to attend because it overlapped with Passover, whose special dietary restrictions make travel almost impossible. A sympathetic friend suggested that I could just omit Passover observance for a year.

In this vein, those who belong to communities in which religion is strictly a personal matter are likely not to appreciate that we believe that (much like citizenship) the privileges and obligation of being Jewish accrue through birth as a Jew.<sup>6</sup> For the born Jew, they are not subject to choice. Converts assume the same privileges and responsibilities by dint of becoming Jewish, and are considered indistinguishable from born Jews. Many Jewish obligations require action or abstention from action in commonplace matters, such as what one may or may not eat, or when one may or may not work. The rite of *brit milah* is not analogous to baptism. Rather, it is an obligation of parents toward their sons, uniting them with their community as commanded by God.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, my experience with ritual Jewish circumcision is interesting mostly for its ordinariness. It is a near-universal practice among Jews who identify with the Jewish religion, and rarely causes significant harm. Almost all of us are proud or, at worst, indifferent to having been circumcised. We would prefer that our neighbors respectfully accept our practices.




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<sup>6</sup> Jews differ widely regarding the nature of the responsibilities of being Jewish, and even regarding how to define who can call themselves Jews. This is a topic for another day.

## When the Political Becomes Personal: Circumcision as a Cause and as a Parental Decision

J. Steven Svoboda

As I prepared for the arrival of my first child, a son, a central activity that I previously saw as political suddenly also became very personal. I had founded a non-profit organization in 1997 devoted to educating the world that genital cutting of a child, regardless of a child's gender, is unnecessary and harmful. This includes male circumcision. In 2001, as part of my non-profit work I led a team that went to the United Nations in Geneva and for the first time, put the issue of male circumcision as a human rights violation in the United Nations record. At the time, my then wife was pregnant with our first child, a son. (I had the ultrasound photo of my son-to-be on my nightstand while in Geneva.) Now the circumcision question would be posed to me!

A few months after the Geneva trip, when it came time in early 2002 for my son's birth on the US territory of Guam, I naturally was never going to agree to the procedure. Nevertheless, I was trying not to inject my own beliefs into the arrival of my first child. My children's mother, while Jewish, is a pediatrician who always had some doubts about the wisdom of circumcision and easily agreed with my desire to keep our son intact. No one in either of our families had any serious problems with our decision.

The nurse at the hospital in Guam where my wife worked and gave birth asked me a total of five separate times if I wanted my son to be circumcised. Each time, I answered, "No," without saying more, until the fifth time, when I politely added, "You do know that there is no medical reason for this to be done, right?" The nurse replied in a chirpy voice, "I know." I then asked, "Why do you ask parents about it then?" She replied, "Because they want it sometimes." Well, the odd thing about that is there is no other medically unnecessary procedure on their children for which parents are repeatedly solicited. And if I had agreed even one time, I am sure that my child would have been circumcised

without any follow-up questions to make sure I really wanted this done. Besides, at least in the absence of any medical condition making it necessary (which is essentially never the case), it should not be my decision to make, nor his mother's, but rather the child's whose body it is.

The oddest aspect of this whole chain of events may be that I was not given a single shred of information explaining why I should support my son being cut. My son had zero issues after being left intact, and how could it be otherwise? My advice, naturally, to parents expecting boys (or girls, or intersex children, for that matter) is to educate yourself. You will learn, the more you look into these issues, that there are thousands of people around the world, including countless physicians and other experts, who believe childhood circumcision is as outmoded, useless, and as harmful a practice as footbinding. Why not leave the choice for the child to make about their own body? No asserted medical reason withstands the most minimal scrutiny. And religious claims must stop at the boundaries of another person's body, even if the person is your child. Parents: you have the right to teach your children your beliefs, but your children may not follow your beliefs, and they have the right to make their own decisions, so please consider refraining from marking their bodies with your religion. Two months to the day after his birth, I was holding my son in Washington, DC, having just traveled half-way around the world from Guam. (I was in DC to receive the National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Center's (NOCIRC) Human Rights Award, which I was presented with for my founding of the non-profit.)

My own experience with circumcision strongly influenced my decision. For a decade, I felt that no other single event in my life has so strongly affected me as this mutilation of my body that occurred in the first days of my life. While the passage of time has helped relieve my former distress, for many years, there was no other event about which I was anywhere near as angry, sad, and depressed as my circumcision.

I was somewhat "lucky" with my circumcision. My penis was not inadvertently amputated, as

happens to some boys. Nor was the operation performed so unskillfully that my penis points to the side when erect, as is true of some men I know. I was not overly fortunate, though, since a relatively high amount of skin was removed.

Like most men, I do not consciously remember my circumcision. However, in 1994, I did do a particularly powerful form of breathwork in a workshop during which I accessed body memories of the event. I felt the pain and concretely re-experienced what it was like to be circumcised, although with dramatically less vivid feelings of pain than I must have endured as a newborn.

I grew up in the suburbs, where nearly all my fellow boys were also circumcised. Like many boys of my era, I assumed that I had not been circumcised; my penis looked like everyone else's and it seemed that everything that was supposed to be there was there. I remember feeling relief that this mysterious, presumably horrible thing had not happened to me.

As I got older and became a young adult, however, still a decade before the arrival of the Internet, I began to learn some information that suggested to me that I was, in fact, circumcised. I don't remember the exact sequence of events but eventually I realized I actually had been surgically cut in my genital area.

I spent several years in denial about the pain and loss this represented. I attempted many rationalizations; this seemed easier than accepting that I had lost something so integral to my own identity and self. For many reasons, not just my circumcision, I began attending men's events that focused on support and personal growth. Some of these events even included workshops on circumcision. I began to more consciously acknowledge my unhappiness and anger that this had been done to me. I attended a support meeting organized by the National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) (then known as RECAP) to provide emotional support for men involved in non-surgical foreskin restoration.

I am proud that I survived. This is the only recourse we circumcised men have, to survive and to literally pick up the pieces and do our best to carry on.

In December 1992, I had my first conversation about circumcision with my mother. We talked again a month later. Before both discussions, I was quite scared to raise the issue with her. I feared that she would shame me or refuse to discuss the matter. However, my mother has grown in a lot of ways over the past thirty years, particularly since my father's death. She was able to listen to what I had to say and even to acknowledge that she understood I was in pain and why. Although she did not say so, it was clear that she regretted that she had allowed me and my brother to be circumcised. She told me, as I expected, that at the time she had devoted virtually no thought to the matter. The doctor had advised her that it was "cleaner" to do the circumcision, and that information satisfied her and my father.

Based on my experiences with my non-profit, while awareness is growing that children should be left intact so they can make their own decision upon reaching adulthood, changes are coming more slowly than I expected. Circumcision still happens countless times every day. Male circumcision remains not only the most common medical procedure performed in the United States, but the only procedure performed without a genuine medical indication.

The movement to protect children from genital cutting has had some success. I was one of a few leaders of a big project around twenty years ago to try to stop Medicaid funding for the procedure. (I would regularly get up at 3 AM on Guam with its huge time difference to make telephone calls to East Coast Medicaid offices.) We actually succeeded in convincing ten (!) states to stop their funding, but since that time some states have reverted to again paying for circumcisions.

One paradoxical feature of my "circumcision experience" is my questioning whether my knowledge of the damage I endured hasn't decreased my enjoyment of life. I know that I have lost a tremendous amount of sexual enjoyment due to the amputation of functional, integral portions of my genital anatomy.

My circumcision experience, by its very omnipresence in my life, has fueled my commitment to

the struggle for true gender equality in our society. My circumcision always serves as a reminder that I am not crazy in thinking that men also face certain forms of discrimination. Circumcision more generally reminds me that many of our ideas come from cultural prejudices and blindnesses, and reconfirms the importance of thinking for oneself and not trusting received ideas.

If they can do this to us with impunity, they can do anything, and they do. Taking a knife to a baby's genitals, with no rational medical reason, often without anesthetic, and deafening themselves to the baby's screams. What a powerful metaphor for our blindness in general to men's suffering—our shorter lifespans, our dramatically higher suicide rates, the lack of educational resources being directed to boys' needs even as boys fall farther behind girls academically. I feel that circumcision is the primal wound for males; it was for many of us, our first sexual experience. For men, pain and pleasure can have a complicated relationship in the sexual arena.

It hurts and angers me that society has such great compassion for women and children and so little relative concern for the struggles of men. I have come to believe that the numbness in our penises resulting from circumcision here in the United States parallels the emotional and physical numbness that those in power need for us to have. (The Supreme Court recently heard a case in which I helped write the briefs challenging the male-only draft, but the case was denied and male-only draft registration remains legal. This is the only federal law still on the books that explicitly discriminates on the basis of sex.)

I feel angrier toward my circumciser than I do toward my parents. In the demographic, geographic, and temporal niche where I was born, my parents would have had to have been unusual people who questioned authority in order to have saved my body from the knife. Actually, they were very typical people for that place and time, and would never have resisted a doctor's instruction that circumcision was good for the baby. I thus had no hope of avoiding being cut.

Still, I am somewhat angry at them for not having questioned this terrible violation of their firstborn

child's bodily integrity, but I feel significantly angrier with the physician who should have, and perhaps did on some unconscious level, know better. It is criminal that he was convincing hundreds or thousands of parents to allow him to take the knife to their perfect newborn baby boys.

I do feel extremely frustrated that even today, in a developed country, we have to spend time and energy even discussing this issue. Do we spend time discussing why babies' arms and legs should not be cut off? Do we spend time weighing the medical advantages and disadvantages of amputating women's breasts? It is only due to our peculiar cultural history of practicing circumcision for a century that the ghastly procedure is even an issue. In a truly civilized world, such discussions would not be necessary.

As I get older, I notice the loss of sensation more and more. Yet paradoxically, I could never have written this story today with the same personal details—so much has receded into memory and faded in vividness. I have self-medicated in a sense, smoothing out my former upset. I feel less anger over my circumcision and have reached a level of resignation about the situation. I am blissfully remarried to the love of my life and have two adult children who are thriving. Yet my commitment continues to supporting people seeking to learn about circumcision and about how best to protect vulnerable children.



## Newborn Circumcision, With a Twist

Joyeeta G. Dastidar

**W**hile I'm currently an internal medicine hospitalist taking care of adults on the inpatient side, my residency entailed dual training in both Internal Medicine and Pediatrics. For four years, I'd switch every three months between working in the adult and pediatric hospitals. My first rotation was Newborn Nursery, where

I rounded on healthy newborn babies. There was an aide whose job it seemed, was to swaddle and cuddle the babies. I had a flash of envy regarding how much more time the aides actually got to spend with the babies when compared with the pediatricians. During this time, and throughout my pediatrics residency, I had the opportunity to observe neonatal circumcisions. It seemed archaic: The baby boys had their arms and legs strapped down into place to give clear access to their penis. The restraints reminded me of a more sanitized version of medieval torture devices I'd seen at a museum. As the observer, I tried to help soothe the baby through shushing and patting and letting the baby lick sugar water from a syringe. These comfort strategies were not enough, and the babies invariably wailed during the procedure. They left the treatment room with a generous layer of petroleum jelly and an extra-padded diaper for protection.

Years later, when my husband and I were pregnant with our son, we debated two things primarily. First, we didn't agree on what type of food to feed the baby. I'm vegetarian, whereas my husband is not. My husband won out in feeding the baby an omnivorous diet. Second, we debated whether to have the baby undergo a circumcision. On the one hand, we wanted the decision about circumcision to be up to our baby. However, we knew he'd only truly be able to decide much later in life, closer to adulthood. While we were aligned on this end, perhaps due to being male himself, my husband felt even more strongly than I on the point of preferring to let our son decide for himself. On the other hand, we knew it'd be much easier to get a circumcision done as a baby. As a bonus, if done as a neonate, our son would have no recollection of the procedure.

In South Asia, where my family originated, the decision to circumcise often fell along religious lines. While grappling with agnosticism personally, I was raised in a staunchly Hindu household. In talking to my mother, she mentioned that circumcision was not something done in our faith. However, this was a one-time statement that my mother said in passing, knowing her input would be disregarded if we felt circumcision was in baby's best interest from a medical standpoint.