

Jewish Public Forum Archive

Established in 1999, the Jewish Public Forum at CLAL is a think tank that generates fresh thinking about the social, political and cultural trends affecting ethnic and religious identity and community building at a time of great change. It is an unprecedented effort to broaden the conversation about the Jewish and American future by creating a network of leading figures in the worlds of academia, business, the arts and public policy, most of whom have not been involved in organized Jewish life. Here you will find articles published under the auspices of the Jewish Public Forum.

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"The Future of Family and Tribe," a seminar of CLAL's Jewish Public Forum held January 28-29, 2002 in New York City, brought together a dozen leading thinkers on gender, gay rights, adoption, reproductive law, bioethics, and aging. **eCLAL** is publishing a series of articles based on participants' contributions to the seminar. *To view other essays from "The Future of Family and Tribe" seminar, click [here](#).*

This seminar was part of **Exploring the Jewish Futures: A Multidimensional Project On the Future of Religion, Ethnicity and Civic Engagement**. For more information about the project, [click here](#).

Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner participated in "The Future of Family and Tribe" seminar. He is a Senior Teaching Fellow at CLAL, has served as spiritual leader for the congregation "String of Pearls" in Princeton, NJ, and as chaplain at the Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, and Montgomery County Correctional Facility. He is currently working on CLAL's Jewish spiritual guidebook for palliative care. His

contribution to the JPF Seminar follows below.

The Future of Foreskins

By Daniel S. Brenner

In 1999, the American Academy of Pediatricians issued a statement that decreed circumcision an elective surgery. Since then, the number of male babies undergoing circumcision has been in sharp decline. Many HMOs no longer cover the in-house hospital procedure, and the cut once done on 85% of males is now performed on less than half of American born boys.

Many read this trend as a reflection of a growing social and environmental consciousness regarding the ways humans unnecessarily alter nature. Circumcision is not only seen as painful to the child, but as a violation of the natural human form.

Simultaneously, another seemingly opposite trend is also taking hold -- natural childbirth is in decline. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, nearly one in every four children born in America is delivered via surgical methods. Advocates of natural childbirth who used to hope that it would be possible to lower the C-section rate under 15% by 2000, are now worried that in fact it will rise above 25% in 2002. Many doctors prefer their patients of all ages to deliver by C-sections; for women over forty, the rates of birth by C-section have doubled in recent years.

What might these two trends suggest about the future of parenthood? If they seem like trends that run counter to each other—"back" to nature and away from it—I would suggest that in fact both reflect a similar acceptance of the idea that parents do not need a dramatic physical bond with their newborn child. In an age of genetic determinism, this seems a somewhat strange attitude, but maybe it is precisely because these days we imagine ourselves as so linked to our biological offspring through our chemical codes that we downplay the power of cultural *processes*—experiences we ourselves must go through-- that teach us about how our children's bodies came from our own and are intimately and deeply connected to us.

Of course, I realize that I am talking about something that is extremely gendered and not applicable to the many parents who adopt children. For

women, breastfeeding and childbirth can be a direct experience of physical connection with a newborn, what might such a thing be for men? Circumcision, I believe, is a ritual that has always tried to express this kind of bond, one that is both highly symbolic and intensely physical.

I say this as a father who has established a strong bond to his children in part because I circumcised my two sons.

I cut my sons even though I knew that the procedure had been declared medically unnecessary. I knew that I was causing them pain. I had heard that the lack of a foreskin might diminish their sense of sexual pleasure. I say all this, and yet when I stood above my boys, scalpel in hand, I experienced an unparalleled sense of connection to and responsibility for life. The birth was pure wonder. The circumcision was primal and mysterious, connecting me to flesh and blood in a violent and careful moment of father-love.

Since the circumcision, I've been verbally attacked on a number of occasions for what I did by people who have heard me speak on the subject or read my writing. I've read or heard that my actions were "barbaric", "savage", and "criminal". In an interview I gave to *Icon* magazine, my positive opinion on the subject was placed in the context of an article that promoted the idea that circumcision kills babies. I am featured on the web-site www.sexuallymutilatedchild.org. The worst was when a woman I met at a benefit dinner called what I did "torture."

I'm not a doctor. I got the idea of doing the "final cut" from a friend of mine in Philadelphia who did his sons. Here's how it was done—the moyel, ritual surgeon, sets up the procedure by using a scissors-like device that slips between the penis shaft and the foreskin. Then the moyel places the foreskin into a stainless steel clamp. The clamp allows the father to remove it with a single cut of the scalpel. The whole procedure takes less than two minutes.

Circumcising my first born son was harder than I thought it would be. Not the emotional challenge, but the physical part, the actual slicing involved. It took more elbow grease than I had imagined. It was easier five minutes later with my second son.

So, am I a child abuser? Should I be locked up?

Every parenting book or magazine I read told me to leave them alone. The video at the birthing center showed how to clean a foreskin. Our Lamaze teacher talked about the natural beauty of an "intact" member. But with over fifty people watching, I quickly uttered a blessing and did my first surgery. I

surprised myself – I was more calm and focused than I could have imagined. Thankfully, the boys didn't cry much – their eye exam a few days earlier was twenty times worse. And, to be honest, there wasn't much blood.

Many Jews I speak with imagine that as American culture in general moves away from the practice and our own numbers dwindle through intermarriage, we will be left with only a few die-hard members of our tribe who will still perform the ceremony. In coming years, choosing the practice will be much akin to the experience of Jews in Great Britain, where only 1% of the general population of males is circumcised, and many Jews opt out.

This will pose a dilemma for American Jewish parents. Should circumcision, the tribal marking of "Jewishness" established by Abraham (Genesis 17:11) be shunned and replaced by the rituals that have recently been popularized for Jewish girls? Many of my rabbinic colleagues have already been asked to conduct such ceremonies. My bet is that this ritual trend will soon be the norm. In ten years, most Jewish boys will be intact. And lox and bagels will be served at their naming ceremonies.

On the other hand, if the process were not so bloody and painful—if, say, laser surgery or genetic engineering could make removing a foreskin a piece of cake—would more opt for it?

There is precedent in Jewish legal tradition for such cases. Since there have always been males who emerged from the womb foreskin-less, the rabbinic authorities had to create an alternative ceremony. In such cases, a simple drop of blood, *hatafat dam brit*, was extracted from the skin of the penis. (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 263:4)

Whether it will be a tiny needle prick, laser surgery or genetic modification, I imagine there might be medical technologies available to my children when they become parents that would ensure a relatively painless *bris*. This could lead to a return of the practice, albeit under very different circumstances. I also sense that these technologies will fundamentally change what circumcision as a rite-of-passage has come to mean to me.

I could have just said some words to my boys, or lit a candle or given a gift. But I believe the blood, the marking of their bodies, mattered. Maybe on some level we need small, ritualized acts of violence to curb larger ones. This is how sports work to channel aggression, or dancing in a mosh-pit, mashing potatoes or chopping firewood. Circumcision, like a gang tattoo, is a small act of violence that makes a covenant between bodies. It is a moment of betrayal and danger that produces, paradoxically, a promise of trust and safety. "You are

now like me," the mark says, "so we will protect one another."

Ultimately, I hope that the moment of ritual violence I performed on my sons will be placed by my sons into a larger context of love, loyalty and protection that they receive from their father. That is how I view my own father's actions, and hope that my son's will view theirs and so on down the line.

The question of how Jews will remain connected to ancient rites of violence is, of course, not isolated to the future of foreskins. In the other uses of the knife - ritual slaughter of cows, chickens, and goats - the entire question of what is kosher may be altered by new technologies. Clearly the next phase in food development will be to synthesize and produce meat products without the need for husbandry. Goodbye butcher shops, and steaks that take an hour to chew, hello kosher cheeseburgers.

I am glad that I chose to use the knife. But I honestly cannot predict what my children will choose if they have sons. If my hypothetical grandsons are not going to be marked by circumcision as Jews, how will they be symbolically seen as tribesmen? Will there be a Jew tattoo? A Jew appendage? A Jew hat? A Jew sticker to slap on the back of your Segue?

Our relationships to our bodies, and to our children's bodies, have changed enormously over the millennia, never moreso than through modernity's astounding advances in medical technology. But we have the power to make choices about our physical connections to the human beings that carry our DNA, and not just through the technological magic of modern science, but with our own hands, our own actions, as well.

To view other articles by Daniel Brenner, click [here](#).

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