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The Day I Cut Off My Sons' Foreskins

By Daniel Silberman Brenner

It has been a year and a half now since I cut off the foreskins of my two sons. Noam and Jonah, my identical twins, are now singing "rubber duckie," feeding themselves oatmeal and re-arranging the porch furniture-a long way from the preemie infants whom we welcomed into the world a year and a half ago. Why did I cut them? 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 cut, I've read or heard that my actions were "barbaric," "savage," and "criminal." One host of a New York radio talk show called circumcision "child sexual abuse," a sentiment confirmed by my wife's favorite magazine, *Mothering*. 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. 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.

Cutting my firstborn 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. I think that explains why he urinates straighter than his brother.

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

As a Jew, I am a member of a small tribe that has survived generations of physical abuse from the outside world -- so I find it ironic that my people are seen as the abusers. Hitler, who engaged in the same anti-circumcision rhetoric that I hear today, later enacted a government project to systematically murder hundreds of thousands of infants and toddlers.

But the Nazi horror is old news. The question is how to live now, in a time of virtual peace and prosperity, when I can give my children the absolute best. So why didn't I let my sons run around with foreskins?

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 how natural it was to be "intact." But with over fifty people watching, I quickly uttered a blessing and did my first surgery. I even 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.

After the ceremony, this is what I felt -- cutting my sons' foreskins had made me more of a man than losing my virginity, getting my driver's license, getting hitched, or even becoming a parent. Any fool can become a parent. My actions were a public declaration that I am responsible for my sons' lives, and that I will protect their lives by any means necessary.

All this got me to think about father-son relationships. In a world where millions

of sons grow up without fathers, or grow up emotionally detached from their fathers, the act of circumcision establishes a bond between natural enemies. That's what fathers and sons are, natural enemies. They will fight over mom's love, over money, over power. And in a society of affluence and freedom, the sons will eventually run away. But why violence? Why blood? Why mark the body? Couldn't I have just said some words to my boys? Or lit a candle or given a gift?

I hate to say this, but on a certain level you need small, ritualized acts of violence to curb larger ones. This is how sports work to channel aggression, or dancing in a mosh-pit, or chopping firewood. Circumcision, like a gang tattoo, is a small act of violence that makes a covenant between bodies. The implicit meaning is that "you are now like me, so we will protect one another."

I don't know much about having daughters, but it seems that they, in general, do not act as rivals in the same ways that sons and fathers do. Fathers I know see their daughters as possessing the best qualities of their mothers. And though daughters rebel, and run away, their enemy is most often mom. Maybe that is why my ancestors did not cut baby girls.

Ultimately, I hope that the moment of ritual violence I performed 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 sons will view theirs and so on down the line.

So am I an abuser or torturer?

In a world where real abuse and torture continue to effect the lives of children, the question disturbs me. What I am is simply a parent, a father who like all first-time parents goes off into uncharted territory. I have chosen to take some traditional wisdom with me. Some traditional wisdom, and a knife.



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