



Why Reform Never Abandoned Circumcision

By Mark Washofsky

Reform Judaism has done away with a number of ritual observances that conflict with our contemporary cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. And it is difficult to imagine any ceremony that stands more at odds with the views and habits of modern civilization than *berit milah*, ritual circumcision. Critics of the procedure, including a not-insignificant number of Jews, condemn it as a gruesome and dangerous procedure, some calling it “genital mutilation.” Many would add that a ritual from which females are naturally excluded calls into question our Reform Jewish commitment to gender equality.

Yet this practice survives. Indeed, *berit milah* is enjoying somewhat of a renaissance in our Movement.

Historians tell us that Reform Jews never abandoned circumcision—it has been a red line Reform Judaism has never crossed. For many years it was a purely surgical procedure performed in the hospital without accompanying ritual. In recent decades, however, our people have transformed “circumcision” into *berit milah*; that is, we have rediscovered its significance as a ritual act. Accordingly, we perform circumcision in the setting of its traditional liturgy, which includes the recitation of blessings (*berakhot*) that praise God “who has sanctified us through *mitzvot* and commanded us” to bring our sons “into the covenant of Abraham our father,” and have added the Sephardic custom of recit-

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AFTER THE *BRIT MILAH*, GRANDFATHER HOWARD ELFAND HOLDS BABY DANNY, HIS MOTHER JOLIE ELFAND AXLER KISSES HIM, AND HIS FATHER NEIL AXLER WATCHES. THE CEREMONY TOOK PLACE AT CONGREGATION RODEPH SHOLOM IN NEW YORK CITY, MAY 6, 2008.

ing *shehechyanu*, thanking God for making it possible for us to reach this joyous event. And in 1984 our Movement established the Berit Mila Program of Reform Judaism, which trains and certifies qualified medical practitioners, men *and* women, as *mohalim* and *mohalot*.

The question remains, however: why do we Reform Jews, who do not hesitate to remove outdated prayers from our *siddur* (prayer book) and to excise archaic ceremonies from our practice, insist upon maintaining an ancient tribal rite taught to us in Genesis? (“God said to Abraham: ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant [*berit*], you and your offspring to come, throughout the ages. Such is the covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring to follow: every male among you shall be circumcised...’” Genesis 17:9–10.) Why does *Gates of Mitzvah*, the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ preeminent “guide to the Jew-

ish life cycles,” assert: “It is... a *mitzvah* to bring a male child into the covenant through the rite of circumcision—*berit milah*”? And why did the CCAR Responsa Committee state in 1982 that circumcision remains for us an essential sign of the covenant: “We have affirmed it since the days of Abraham, our Father, and continue to affirm it”?

I think that the answer to these questions lies largely in the words “ancient tribal rite.” For that’s what *berit milah* is. That’s why we do it, and, really, it’s the *only* reason we do it.

Circumcision is a tribal rite in the same way that every Jewish ritual observance is a “tribal rite”: a means by which the members of our “tribe” express their identity as a people, as a community covenanted with God, through the performance of a “rite” meaningful *only* within the context of that covenant. Putting it another way, if we seek to explain why we light Shabbat candles, or fast on Yom Kippur, or hold a Passover *seder*; it would be enough to say simply that “we do these things because we are Jews, because only Jews do them, and because we rehearse our uniquely Jewish identity by means of these uniquely Jewish acts.” Every tribe in the world behaves in this way, proclaiming its sense of community through the performance of rituals that allow the tribe to tell its story and to recount its sense of self. And make no mistake: we Jews *are* a “tribe,” a social grouping that has defined its existence and historical destiny as that of a family, an *ethnos*, a community that reproduces itself by giving birth to Jewish children. (The Jew-

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