No to the Proposed Legal Ban on Circumcision

by Michael Lerner
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Because *Tikkun* has always sought to create a community in which issues that are taboo elsewhere can be explored with intellectual honesty and tolerance, particularly when those positions differ from our own or from the accepted worldviews of our readers, we are printing in this issue an article that fiercely critiques the Jewish practice of circumcision. I have invited others to write a response to it, which I hope to print in addition to your letters to the editor on this topic.

Circumcision does not have a higher status in Torah law than other commandments that have been ignored or transformed in the course of the evolution of Judaism. The entire system of animal sacrifice has been abandoned. The author of the article on circumcision in this Summer 2011 issue of *Tikkun* contends that it has been a key element in patriarchal practice. Perhaps. But even the most cursory look at other societies that did not practice circumcision, e.g., feudal Europe, Chinese dynasties, Nazi Germany, or Soviet Russia, shows that they had no problem maintaining patriarchal practices without it.

In the last forty years of feminism within Jewish communities, there have been many articulations of an anti-sexist Judaism and efforts to challenge patriarchy that have not required the jettisoning of circumcision, which many still experience as a culturally and religiously meaningful tradition. Historically, violence against women has been officially shunned within the Jewish community, unlike in many other societies where it has been accepted and even legitimated by the dominant cultural ethos. Of course this has not prevented such violence from occurring, but our tradition’s official opposition to sexist violence has helped to buoy the work of Jewish men and women committed to creating a safer and more just society. When considering the arguments of those opposed to circumcision on feminist grounds, it’s important to realize that “intactivists” are just one voice within a strong and diverse Jewish feminist community.

Why did circumcision become so important? Why did it not get “reinterpreted” or simply abandoned over the centuries as so many other ancient rites disappeared from Jewish practice? Largely because the Greek and Roman conquerors of ancient Israel found the practice “barbaric” and banned it on penalty of death. Jews resisted the imperialists’ attempt to inscribe on Jewish bodies the imperialist designs, and so circumcision became an arena of resistance to the conquerors. Throughout the past two thousand years, and then even more dramatically during Nazi Germany’s short but wildly destructive period, circumcision became for the dominant oppressors the sign that could identify Jews and hence lead them to the tortures of the Inquisition or to death in the gas chambers and crematoria of Nazi-dominated Europe.

It was in response to this dynamic that Jews have clung to circumcision as our right and as a reminder of continuing resistance to those who seek to dictate to Jews how we should shape our bodies, much the same way as some African Americans refuse to allow dominant cultural norms to push them to appear “less black” by straightening curly hair or using skin-lightening products.

There is little evidence that circumcised men have less sexual pleasure than uncircumcised men, and some evidence that they are less likely to carry some diseases than the uncircumcised.
The debate on circumcision will likely intensify in coming years. But one thing should be clear: the American majority should not impose its will or cultural preference on members of the Jewish minority who are committed to continuing the practice. Those who have put circumcision on the ballot in San Francisco and elsewhere, or used other methods to ban circumcision, are undermining the First Amendment rights of Jews and creating a slippery slope toward the abolition of all religious practices. It’s not hard to imagine some who were sexually abused by Catholic priests as children attempting to ban Catholic educational institutions or even the Church itself, attacking the entire institution as sexually perverted or violently patriarchic. Indeed, there are some who believe that all religions are so deeply patriarchal that they need to be replaced or banned, as they were for a time in the Soviet Union.

Freedom of religion, as well as freedom from religion being imposed by the government, should be expanded, not contracted. So while we have printed a severe critique of circumcision, and encourage this debate within our own pages, we strongly oppose the use of state power to impose through coercion a ban on circumcision. Just as the state should never criminalize abortion, it should never criminalize circumcision.

*(To return to the Summer 2011 Table of Contents, click here. For an attractively formatted, ready-to-print PDF of this article, click here.)*

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