

Circumspection

An Inquiry into *Brit Milah*

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Jewish men devote little thought to it, but each of us secretly carries a sign set in us in obscure infancy. How many words have been spoken about it, how much weight ascribed to it! And there it is, upon us, in our flesh. Not immediately do we understand it to be man-made. It always seemed so natural. Only gradually, over the course of years, do we come to our senses; and when finally our eyes are consciously awakened to the dilemmas of our identity, the sign – Jewish, they say – is already there, ancient and irreversible. Who is responsible? Whose blade flashed in that darkness? We have only just begun to plumb our inward depths and mysteries, and already, without our permission, has our inner self been stapled to the outside world. In the name of

what have we been sentenced to this labeling? In the name of what – to this burden?

It is well known that throughout history there have been many attempts, originating in the outside world, to force the Jews not to circumcise their male children. Somewhat less well known is the fact that from time to time, opposition to the rite of circumcision has arisen from *within* the people itself. Sometimes it was part of a general call to abandon tradition altogether, through dispersion or conversion; sometimes as an effort to reform only some practices. But all of these calls were led by Jews (circumcised, of course), who, for reasons that varied with the times, opposed *Brit Milah* – the rite of circumcision, traditionally considered a

testament to the ancient covenant between Abraham and God. In modern times, there was the mid-19th century proposition promoted by elements in the Reform movement to forego circumcision – portrayed as a primitive and barbarous act – as an essential component of Jewish identity. The proposition, which eventually proved too extreme even for the Reform movement, was rejected. Today, even secular Jews who have largely abandoned Jewish tradition all circumcise their male children.

Or rather, almost all. With the escalation of the religious-secular conflict in Israel in recent years, and as part of a greater attempt to diminish religion's influence in public life, new voices are being heard that seek to delegitimize circumcision, and even legally prohibit it. For the first time, efforts are being made to break up the broad consensus held by the mainly secular Israeli public to continue practicing the custom in the hope of bringing an end to it. It should come as no surprise. With the importance of the institution of marriage, bar mitzvahs and traditional burials having been questioned, circumcision's turn was bound to come. Perhaps the most surprising thing is that it took so long for circumcision to be placed on the agenda.

Yet the discourse pursued by the opposition movements centers solely on the *physiological* aspect of *milah*. Most of the arguments revolve around an attempt to shake the widely held belief that circumcision is medically desirable. They cite possible medical risks, and question the idea of intervention in the structure of the body, which they term “mutilation.” Much attention is focused on the claim that circumcision reduces sexual pleasure. When the debate does transcend its physiological character, it tends to address questions along the lines of ‘Why go against what nature wanted?’ or ‘Does circumcision violate a child's natural right to freedom of choice?’ Issues of intrinsic significance and deep symbolism are ignored.

It is difficult to ascertain if the current opposition will have any decisive influence, or, like the 19th-century Reform attempt, will simply fade away. Time will tell. In any event, it is impossible to understand the full implications of their proposition without knowing the whole gamut of meanings associated with *milah*. For those who object to it, the issue may be a strictly physiological one. But religious actions, external and superficial as they may seem to be, do not come naked into the world. They carry with them, like an invisible tail,

cumulative layers of meaning. Just as a living organism is never isolated, but is part of a larger ecological whole, so every symbol and every act echoes an entire system of other symbols. They cannot be isolated and investigated in laboratory conditions. *Milah* is a sign written both on the body and in the abstract space of symbols. It is a vital hub of ideas, in which diverse questions – about nature and God, sexuality and identity, freedom and power – all converge.

Nature and Spirit

Western civilization, it seems, has always been trapped in the movement of an intense emotional pendulum. It travels back and forth between a worship of material nature, on the one hand, and a longing for a purely spiritual world, on the other. On the one end, Nature is depicted as a kind of incarnated divinity, a perfect, harmonious, self-balancing whole. Our purpose, according to this image, is merely to incorporate ourselves into the natural order. On the opposite end of the pendulum, Nature is depicted as an evil and threatening element, man's purpose being to subjugate it to the rule of the rational mind, and eventually

release himself from its hold and join the world of pure souls. The history of the Occident is largely a chronicle of the periodic motion, back and forth, between these two poles.

The pendulum movement is clearly evident in the history of *sexuality*. The West seems to be veering sharply between hedonist worldviews that sanctify the sexual impulse, and ascetic worldviews that demand a complete abnegation of sex. It was against the Greek aristocracy's hedonism that Plato and his followers arose, claiming that the soul is trapped in the body "as in a tomb" (to this day, physically unconsummated love is named for Plato); Rome countered with its uninhibited, orgiastic lifestyle; the barbarian tribes, after the ecstasy of destroying the empire, suddenly accepted Christianity and were hurled headlong into the opposite extreme, the Catholic torment of self-flagellation; when the Catholic church sank into corruption and debauchery, the even more puritan Protestantism emerged; and when Christianity altogether lost its vitality, there arose from within her, with equal and opposite force, modern secularism, which introduced the sexual revolution of the 20th century. The West is characterized neither by total hedonism nor total asceticism;

totality itself is the true leitmotif. Between one revolution and the next, in spite of all changes of shade, it appears that – inasmuch as the corporeal and the spiritual are concerned – the West is unable to break free of its either-or paradigm. Hither and thither swings the pendulum; the somber smile that it draws in the air forever remains.

How did Judaism confront the Western pendulum? The answer is closely linked to *milah*. One of the first associations *milah* brings to mind is castration. *Milah* appears to be an imitation of castration. In Abraham's case, it is self-castration; in all cases ever since – castration of the son. Indeed, modern psychologists regard *milah* as an expression of the father's secret desire to castrate his own son, and connect the ritual to the Oedipus complex. According to this interpretation, Judaism appears to be located near the ascetic end of the Western pendulum, making a bold anti-natural, anti-sexual declaration through a ritual of symbolic castration. Furthermore, *milah* seems to be making a statement against Nature in general: it expresses a discontent with the human body in its natal state, and chooses to artificially alter it.

Except that Judaism's approach to nature in general, and to sexuality in particular, is very different from both Greek

philosophy and Christianity, obliging us to seek a different interpretation. From the very start, Judaism forbade sexual celibacy. "Be fruitful and multiply" is the first mitzvah of the Torah, and it applies to each and every Jewish man. Even if Jews wanted to practice abstinence (and, incredible as it may seem to us, this has been known to happen), the Torah obligated them to marry and bring forth descendents. Despite its superficial similarity to the act of castration, *milah* ushers the Jewish man into a covenant that *obligates* him to engage in sex.

This dual nature of *milah* is reflected in the criticisms voiced against it by the West, criticisms that varied in accordance with the movement of its pendulum. In the Middle Ages, when the pendulum was at its ascetic extreme, Christians circulated rumors of how circumcision greatly enhances Jews' sexual pleasure, making them obsessed with sex. Both Maimonides and Judah Halevi, to name but two important Rabbis, rebuffed this accusation with the claim that *milah*, rather than increasing pleasure, diminishes it. But today, with the reversal of moral norms, their statement has been miraculously transformed from a defense of *milah* to an indictment of it: "*Circumcision should be abandoned*", cry out its modern opponents, "*because it decreases sexual*

pleasure. Even Maimonides said so!” In response, *milah* proponents brandish surveys that prove the opposite: sexual pleasure in heightened by circumcision! The Western pendulum swings back and forth, and Jewish apologetics hastens to catch up with the prevailing norms.

The explanation to this paradox is that *milah* is more complex than it seems. In the face of the two Western alternatives related to the sex drive – total suppression or total release – Judaism chose a third path: *reduction, concentration and sanctification*. Don’t repress the sexual urge, it seems to be saying, but don’t waste it, either. Accept it, and by channeling it into a structure of conjugal commitment and fertility, imbue it with a dimension of sanctity. Judaism’s attitude toward sex is its general attitude toward nature as a whole. *Milah* represents a covenant with a transcendental, supernatural God – not for the purpose of forsaking nature, but for *completing* it. Many *midrashim* take up this motif. For example, Abraham was called “*tamim*” (whole) only after circumcising himself. Only when you subtract from the corporeal is there room for the spirit, goes the logic. This is the first message of *milah*: reduction can result in expansion.

Distinction and Diffusion

So in a sense, by neutralizing the two extremes of the Western pendulum, *milah* “saved” the Jews from it. But at the same time, it trapped us in a drama of our own: an altogether different pendulum, though no less vicious than that of the West.

For *milah* distinguishes. It is the Jewish trademark, the sign of the people’s isolation from other nations, a symbol of its belief that it is a chosen and elevated people, “a priestly kingdom and a holy people”. Whether or not one agrees with it, the idea of being chosen is at the core of the collective Jewish unconscious. A chosen people: it is a grandiose, provocative, infuriating claim. It always has been so, and always will be. Even if all would be secularized, the idea of being chosen would remain as a formative memory. But this claim is a matter of controversy not only among other nations; it evoked mixed feelings, to say the least, among Jews, as well. The idea of being a chosen people – and the *milah* that symbolizes it – lie at the heart of the basic emotional pendulum of the Jewish people, which also fluctuates between two destructive extremes.

One of these is the concept that the Jewish people is the *only* important people.

That is, not only is it a chosen people, but that there is no other important people but it. The expression “*goyim*” is, in itself, quite innocent, but as perceived in this context, and as it is frequently pronounced – with a rude, contemptuous G – it embodies *the* sin that lies in wait for Jews. Be it the Greeks and their “barbarians”, or the Christians and their “pagans,” every group is inclined to purge itself of the Other. But for the Jews, whose otherness is explained as divine choice, the temptation is more dangerous: since the people is conceived as being holy, other peoples may be perceived as profane. The fact that the Jews’ declared purpose is to serve the other nations is forgotten, and is supplanted by the sense that everything exists on this earth to serve *them*. That only they exist. That there are no *goyim*. The result is a withdrawal from the outside world and a blatant contempt for non-Jews. And I only wish I could be writing in the past tense.

Jewish apologetics tries to offer evidence to justify the Jews’ chosen status, but at the end of the day, I believe, the argument is circular: the people has been chosen because the Torah says so, and the Torah has been given it because it was chosen. In the absence of any proof, this becomes a matter of faith. And faith is

fickle; it can disappear as easily as it appears. But the unbearable lightness of being Jewish is, that with loss of faith, one’s self-image undergoes a 180-degree reversal: if the Jewish people was not chosen by God, the only way to explain this belief is that it *convinced itself it had been chosen*. Not only is it not sublime, then, it is in fact extremely lowly – so lowly that it had the temerity to declare itself sacred. This turns everything on its head: the “chosen” people is revealed to be suffering from delusions of grandeur. It needs to be hospitalized, stricken out, or left alone to its mutterings.

This has always been the version subscribed to by other peoples. But every now and then, when doubt trickled into their hearts, Jews found themselves adopting this version of events, as well. For a Jew, whose inner radar suddenly locks onto this new vision, the experience is nothing short of cataclysmic. *I, who had thought myself sacred, am but insane. If my history is unique, it is because it is uniquely grotesque.* With a sharp thrust, the pendulum is thrown backward, decapitating Jewish pride, and leaving behind it a fount of bleeding self-hatred. The body falters and collapses. The wish to be separate and unique is supplanted by an intense desire to expunge one’s

individual identity, to assimilate, to cease to exist.

Impelled by this version of events, Jews left the religion, and then came back to persecute their own people. The experience caused Jews to flee, disguise themselves, change their names, disappear. Held in its thrall, Jews cursed their reflection in the mirror every morning. When I first confronted it as a secular teenager, I nearly vowed to marry a *goya*. I am not alone. Just as many Jews live with a sense of racial superiority, many Jews live with a sense of inferiority and lowliness. As long as the word “Jew” has any meaning whatsoever, the pendulum that swings between arrogance and self-hatred is the inevitable lot of our people.

One of the major issues on which the Jewish self-hatred focused was *milah*. Jews who wanted to assimilate viewed abolition of *milah* as a symbolic erasure of the entire people. Like the attitude of non-Jews, the attitude of assimilated or converted Jews to *milah* varied in accordance with the shifts of the Western materialist-spiritualistic pendulum. Therefore, when one looks at it from the pendulum’s two end-points, it is viewed in two diametrically opposed ways. When the Western pendulum tended toward naturalism, for example in the Hellenistic

period, *milah* was attacked as a symbol of the repression of nature. In order to be accepted in Greek gymnasiums – where athletic training was conducted in the nude – some Jews would “pull their foreskins”, i.e., artificially recreate the look of the pre-circumcised penis. (Believe it or not, but today, with the pendulum having swung back to the same place, “foreskin reconstruction” surgery is actually back in fashion.) Conversely, at times such as the Christian era, during which the pendulum tipped toward the other extreme, when naturalism was denounced and asceticism was celebrated, converts to Christianity would claim that *milah* actually focused too much attention on the flesh, and therefore hindered spiritual growth! Both cases involved Jews who came to loathe what they perceived as Jewish provincialism, and opted for cosmopolitanism. Their arguments therefore corresponded with the values of the prevailing culture.

The birth of Christianity itself is linked, as by umbilical cord, to both *milah* and the two pendulums, the Western and the Jewish. In the first century, several years after the crucifixion of Jesus, it was Paul, a Jew born in Asia Minor, who created Christianity as we know it: a universal, non-Halakhic version of Judaism. The belief in Jesus as

messiah enabled him to make the theological shift that launched Christianity: with the arrival of Jesus, claimed Paul, a new covenant has been struck; not a “material” covenant that applies to only one people and entails the observance of practical commands, but a “spiritual” covenant that applies to all of mankind and requires only faith.

And what was it that, for Paul, symbolized this radical twist, this surge *outward* (from the confinements of the Jewish people) and *upward* (from the confinements of material nature)? You guessed it – the abolishment of *milah*. Only by ridding himself of the sign of Jewish separateness could Paul approach the other nations. Furthermore, abandoning the rite of *milah* symbolized the cancellation of the *Mitzvoth* altogether – the first step, for Paul, along the road to forsaking the material world altogether. Paul’s theological doctrine enabled him to remain loyal to Jewish tradition (the idea of a chosen people, the Bible, and messianic beliefs) while simultaneously relinquishing it. In so doing, he resolved his problem of the Jewish pendulum. But he simultaneously hurled Christianity headlong into the orbit of the Western pendulum, deep into its most ascetic extreme. With an ironic twist of

connotations, the cancellation of *milah* – a seeming symbol of the *affirmation* of nature – here stood for the *repression* of nature, in favor of the spiritual. The abandonment of the Jewish rite of mock-castration helped to create a much more castrating theology.

Returning to Judaism, we must ask: what is the true meaning of the idea of remaining separate? What is the true meaning of the concept of being a holy people? Do they really imply a blind disengagement from the outside world and a negation of the other? I think not. To sanctify means to make one thing distinct from other things. To be separate means to maintain distinctions, to preserve individual identity, to move something from the past to the future without it melting away. The same is true of the Jewish people. The covenant and the chosen-people status has never meant denial of the existence of other peoples. The opposite is the case: the Jewish people’s declared purpose is to provide a service to the *goyim* by operating a *universal* house of prayer: “And my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”. If one wanted, this idea could be developed into an arrogant racial theory, replete with contempt for other peoples; numerous Jews have done so. One could also embrace the opposite extreme, and give up on the entire

project, in favor of normalization and dispersion in the family of man. This is the stand adopted by opponents of *milah* over the years. In itself, *milah* offers a middle path: be yourself without nullifying the existence of the other.

Freedom and Coercion

An eight-day-old child does not have freedom of choice, and circumcision is irreversible. Isn't that coercion?

As a teenager, beginning to form my own opinions, I remember being quite perplexed by the claim that I was Jewish. From what I knew about this 'Judaism', it did not strike any chord in my soul. I thought of myself as a modern, Western person, or simply an individual. If anything, I had much stronger feelings regarding *anti-Semitism*. The swastika, the clicking of Gestapo boots, the harsh, unrelenting pictures of the concentration camps – all these made a deeper impression in me than all the "Jewish stuff." But my horror of anti-Semitism was somewhat hollow: I was being persecuted because I was considered Jewish, but I did not consider myself Jewish! I felt as if I'd been forced to wear a coat with a yellow patch that I could not

remove, and now, trapped in a tragedy of errors, I had to flee from Nazis who wanted me dead. This sensation was associated with *milah*. Stories about Jews in the Holocaust who made efforts to disguise their sex organ implanted in me a vague dread, that someday, I too might be forced to similarly disguise myself. And all this for what? Who said I was Jewish? What right did he have?

I recently asked my father, who describes himself as an "ultra-orthodox secularist," why he had me circumcised. Our house has no *mezuzah*, we did not celebrate any of the holidays, and when I decided to pass on having a *bar mitzvah*, he gave a sigh of relief. He admitted that, back then, he hadn't given the topic much thought. When I pressed him, he said he didn't want to coerce me into being different and not to belong to my community. Because you oppose using coercion, I asked, that's why you circumcised me? By circumcising me, you coerced me into Judaism! He laughed. The thought surprised him.

The closer one examines the concept of freedom, the more one realizes that, while it is possible to discuss *degrees* of freedom, *absolute* freedom is a difficult notion to entertain. Even when all the options are available to us and all the means are at our disposal, at least one thing remains out of

our hands: we are unable to choose the individual that faces these options – the person we are. Our own selves are the one thing we can never create *ex nihilo*, in a vacuum. Yes, we always have the possibility to change, even to be ideologically and emotionally reborn; but we can never change our own past and the way it has shaped us. We can never choose childhood memories, or parents, or first values. It matters not what second language we choose, or how much energy we devote to learning it, we will always have an accent; our mother tongue, flowing in our veins and penetrating our hearts, cannot be replaced. No matter what sort of childhood parents give their children, it will be chosen without the child's input. Our origins will forever limit our freedom.

The implication of all this is that *it is impossible to coerce nothing*. Whether he would have circumcised me or not, my father would have ended up coercing me into *something*. As we can see, the term “coercion” soon loses its negative meaning. *Milah*, then, seems to be no more of an act of coercion than any other decision a parent makes that affects his or her child. One could even say that since *milah* is expressly paternalistic, *it lays down the simple fact that we are never fully free*. To paraphrase a

line I read once: *milah* doesn't imprison us; it just shows us the bars.

Still, we cannot easily accept the claim that circumcision is just like every other childhood experience. It does, after all, mark the body itself, it is irreversible, and above all – it is avoidable. Something inside me insists that *milah* does force something that other experiences do not. But what exactly?

Does it coerce us into belonging to a people? I used to think so; now I think not. The feeling I had when I was young – that Judaism had been forced upon me – was inaccurate. I still have the ability to choose which group – if at all – I belong to. *Milah* does not force membership; *it forces a dilemma*. It forces upon the boy the *expectation* that he will consider himself part of the Jewish people. No matter where he goes, no matter who he is, he will not be able to escape this expectation and the dilemma it poses. *Milah* functions as a bodily conscience of sorts, staring at us from the outside, requesting us to be Jewish. But it is not more than a request; freedom of choice is not denied.

Milah stands, then, at the midpoint between absolute coercion and absolute freedom. Both are negative: absolute coercion – because it is undesirable, and absolute freedom – because it is impossible.

Milah does not force an identity on the child, nor does it leave him in an expectation-free vacuum. It poses a plea before him.

Hanging by a Thread

Milah whiffs of *repression*, *arrogance* and *coercion*, but does not really carry them out. It makes a *gesture* towards them: It acknowledges them, makes a curt bow, and pays them their due. It does not castrate nature, merely removes a thin layer from it. It does not proudly pronounce the exclusive importance of the Jew, but secretly stakes the claim for his separate existence. It does not force identity, only issues a call for self-identification. It preserves the memory of repression, arrogance and coercion, freezes their portrait, traces their movement. Lest we forget: they are real, and even tempting. And to remind us: they are undesirable.

But the most important thing of all has not yet been said. *Milah* has never been viewed separately from a holistic picture, which sees the body and the soul as reflecting one another. Removal of the external foreskin hints at three other, internal circumcisions. One is *milah of the ear*, the

opening of our minds to new ideas. *Milah* calls on us to listen to other voices even when we are being called upon to reexamine our worldview. The second is *milah of the tongue*, which asks us to inhibit the rush to externalize everything inside of us. *Milah* counsels us to carefully examine what is worth expressing, and what is not. The third is *milah of the heart*, excision of the coarse layer of cynicism and bluntness that envelops our hearts. Instead of being suspicious or judgmental of our fellow man, *milah* recommends an openness and a willingness to assume the best, not the worst.

In all three cases, *Milah* teaches us the attribute of ‘applying the brakes’ (*blima*): caution, reduction, humility. The secret of growth and transcendence.

Even if unintentionally, present-day objectors to *milah* not only come out against the physical act, but also against the fabric of meanings implanted, as it were, in the flesh of the act. Although their object is to protect an organ of the body, in effect they are causing its removal from an entire spiritual organism.

That is the gain. These are the losses.
The choice is in our hands.