

RESPONSE

A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH REVIEW

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SARAH'S SEED A New Ritual for Women

The Jew has the sign of the Covenant of Abraham on his body and may therefore be said to be constantly fulfilling God's command. (Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, IV 260)

It is not the operation itself . . . but the state of being circumcised from one's eighth day onward that is the core and essence of the commandment . . . (Zunz, quoted in Gaster, *The Holy and the Profane*, p. 54)

The main purpose of this article is to share an idea which I had concerning a particular sequence of ceremonies for girls. These ceremonies are intended as an equivalent, but not a copy of, the circumcision ceremony for boys. They are offered as an attempt to rectify what I see to be an imbalance within Judaism. It is my belief that women have been treated kindly throughout Jewish history, but never equally. Their place has been in the home while Torah and God have been the exclusive province of the men. And, perhaps since men were more directly linked to God, boys were always valued more than girls.

When she came back from the mikva everybody who met her on the street would wish her to conceive a nice son that night—of course not a girl! . . . (Zborowsky and Herzog, *Life Is With People*, p. 286)

As the sign of the Covenant, circumcision lies at the heart of Jewish spiritual expression. By virtue of its central position, it can, I think, be seen as a fundamental assertion of belief about many things. It is striking to me that the basic expression of relationship "between God and man" is manifest in such a way that women are de facto excluded. I hope that by creating new ritual we can begin to

change the image of women within the tradition.

As I started digging into the subject, I discovered that it is quite complex—with threads leading out into all directions—initiation rites, menstrual taboos, the meaning of the Covenant, the history of circumcision within primitive cultures and within Judaism, sociological and psychological meanings and ramifications, folklore, myth, etc. I was then faced with the task of condensing all of this material and focusing it in some meaningful but brief way. Thus, much of what I present will be sketchy and admittedly incomplete. I have divided the article into three parts. In part one I simply present my proposal for a new ritual for girls. In part two I pose the following questions: "Why is circumcision as a rite so widespread, and why does this particular rite signify the covenantal relationship with God for the Jews?" and answer them through a theory about circumcision rites advanced by Bruno Bettelheim. In part three I restate my proposal and examine briefly my reasons for suggesting these particular ceremonies. In addition, I look at some of the possible effects and ramifications of the new rituals.

I.

A two-part covenantal ceremony for girls:

1. A ritual rupturing of the hymen soon after birth. The operation should be performed by a woman.
2. A special blessing and perhaps a celebration (if the girl wishes it) upon the occasion of her first menstruation.

II.

Circumcision is the oldest and most widely spread surgical operation known. It has been estimated that the rite is observed in one form or another by between two and three hundred million people throughout the world. It is practiced by the most primitive aborigines and by the most sophisticated technocrats. What is it about this particular rite that causes it to be so widespread and so all-pervasive? What basic needs or desires or fantasies does it satisfy that it appeals to the sophisticated as well as to the savage, and this since the Stone Age?

In most societies circumcision seems to have been (and still is in

the more primitive societies) a pubertal initiation rite marking the young man's entrance into the adult community. Upon passing into this community, the youth becomes entitled to adult privileges as well as obligated by adult duties. For example, following circumcision, the young man is permitted, and even sometimes expected, to have sexual intercourse. Often he is expected to marry soon afterwards and set up a household.

Within Judaism, circumcision seems also to have been initially a pubertal or premarital initiation rite. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, however, attributes a special twist to the Jewish practice of the rite even from the beginning:

The ancient Hebrews followed the more primitive custom of undergoing circumcision at the age of puberty, the circumcision of young warriors at that age signifying the consecration of their manhood to their task as men of the covenant battling against the uncircumcised inhabitants. After the settlement of the Israelites in Palestine, the rite was transferred to the eighth day after birth.

It is highly probable that at one time the rite also carried sexual overtones similar to those of other societies, but such connotations are not acknowledged by any Jewish commentators that I have read. Rather, in Jewish custom and lore, circumcision is an act enjoined upon Abraham and his descendants (male) forever after as a physical mark of the Covenant between God and Israel. Not to be circumcised is to be "unclean," not a true member of the community of Israel; to be circumcised means to belong to that community, to belong to the God of Abraham, and to gain a place in the world to come. Circumcision is so important that it is performed even on the Sabbath. To cite Ginzberg:

Israel would never have been able to enter the Holy Land had not Joshua circumcised those born in the wilderness, since the land was promised to the patriarchs on the condition that their descendants would observe the rite of circumcision. (I 172)

... a man's body becomes perfect after its natural state has been improved upon by circumcision. (V 269)

The Jew has the sign of the covenant of Abraham on his body and may therefore be said to be constantly fulfilling God's command. (IV 260)

If you will observe the Abrahamic covenant, the Sabbath, and the commandment against idolatry, then will you be my possession. (III 86)

And returning to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, we find the view: "Circumcision is of such importance that heaven and earth are held by the fulfillment of that covenant." Thus, although "Unlike Christian baptism, circumcision, however important it may be, is not a sacrament which gives the Jew his religious character as a Jew," there is no doubt that circumcision is crucial in Jewish life and ritual.

Earlier I wondered why circumcision has been so widespread and all-pervasive throughout all time and peoples of the world. Now I wonder why, within Judaism, this particular rite was selected as signifying the Covenant, the special relationship between God and Israel (I do not believe in divine revelation in relation to ritual). Why the sign of the Covenant carried in the flesh of the penis? And why, finally, a sign which, by definition (and biology), automatically excludes females from participation in it?

In answer to some of these questions, the most intriguing and certainly the most provocative explanations I have run across are those of Bruno Bettelheim in his book *Symbolic Wounds*. Bettelheim writes: "I have been impressed profoundly with the great measure to which initiation rites seem to be due to efforts to integrate, rather than discharge, asocial instinctual tendencies." (p. 24) And what are these asocial tendencies? Bettelheim points out that while penis envy in girls and castration anxiety in boys have received much attention,

... a possibly much deeper psychological layer in boys has been relatively neglected. This is a complex of desires and emotions which, for want of a better term, might be called the "vagina envy" of boys. The phenomenon is much more complex than the term indicates, including, in addition, envy of and fascination with female breasts and lactation, with pregnancy and childbearing. (p. 20)

He later goes on to say:

... Most probably, circumcision developed as a result both of man's desire to demonstrate his sexual maturity, and to participate in the female power of procreation ... (p. 116)

Bettelheim is saying, then, that the rite of circumcision may have

developed out of the male's envy of the female's reproductive capacity. By bleeding from the penis during circumcision, the male may be trying to reproduce the blood of menstruation, a physiological process in women which was both greatly feared and held in awe by primitive man. Also, menstruation is a definite sign marking the biological change from girl to woman. Boys have no such distinct sign to mark their sexual maturity. Circumcision seems to have been an attempt to do so.

This theory helps me begin to answer some of the questions I posed earlier. If the rite arises out of basic instinctual feelings, in particular male envy of the female reproductive ability, it then becomes readily understandable 1) that the custom would be so widespread throughout the world and for so many thousands of years, and 2) that such a custom would focus on the genitals of the male. (Female circumcision, though it exists, is not so widespread and the rites have nowhere assumed the importance that male circumcision has.) Such a rite seems to say in effect, "Don't think you're so important, our penis can bleed as does your vagina, and look at all the fuss that is made over us at our ceremonies; look how important *our* genitals are!"

Let us begin to apply this to Jewish custom. I have already mentioned that the Jews changed circumcision from a pubertal initiation rite to a covenantal ritual occurring on the eighth day of the boy's life. At one very important level, circumcision seems to be clearly a dedicatory act for Jews. In answer to the question "Why *circumcision* as the sign of the Covenant?", it seems to me that the mark in the flesh of the penis may have served, and may still serve as a constant reminder that the creative, generative powers of procreation (together with the seed and the future generations of Israel) are consecrated to the Lord.

Thus, the meaning of circumcision within Judaism seems to have been desexualized and spiritualized. What, then, does it have to do with Bettelheim's theory? What are the connections? Shocking as this may be to many, I would argue that a kind of "vagina envy" still operates within the Jewish customs despite the spiritualization of the ceremony. I will try to explain why I say this.

Let us take a further look at the spiritual meaning of circumcision as expressed by Leopold Zunz. He says,

It is not the operation itself . . . but *the state of being circumcised from one's eighth day onward*, that is the core and essence of the commandment . . . Circumcision is a symbol at once of the unity and of the eternity of Israel; an act which *exemplifies in concrete form* the inheritance of God's Law from the past and the transmission to the future. *Neglect* of this rite is more than a personal matter; *it compromises* the succeeding generation.

The covenantal commitment imposes upon *the Jew* the obligation of exemplifying and transmitting the Law of God. *He therefore carries in his flesh a constant reminder of the fact that his own self-perpetuation* is also the perpetuation of Israel's mission, and that *the offspring which he begets* are not merely *his* own heirs but also the prospective agents and witnesses of an eternal God. (Gaster, pp. 54, 53; emphases mine)

These passages are very important. The Covenant, presumably, is between all the people of Israel and God. God says of Sarah as of Abraham, "I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of people shall issue from her." Sarah, however, is given no mark which "exemplifies in concrete form" her share in the Covenant. She carries no "constant reminder . . . that the offspring which (she) begets" are "witnesses of an eternal God." In addition, within this scheme, only her male offspring are consecrated as witnesses anyway. Zunz refers to the "state of being circumcised from one's eighth day onward" as the "core and essence of the commandment." Sarah and her daughters were granted no such "state." The passages refer to succeeding generations and to the importance of circumcision as a sign of commitment to the future of Judaism. This sign, obviously, is passed from male to male, from penis to penis, with no mention or focus either on the female's reproductive system or on her role in the process. Although there is much emphasis in the tradition upon the importance of women's role in raising their children to be good Jews, a very important step is left out. It is almost as if the women raise the children that have been *begotten* by the men. (This reminds me of the striking reversal in the creation myth where Eve is created out of Adam's rib, i.e. the male begetting the female.)

Especially valued is the male child whose birth is feted with special ceremonies and festivities. Is it not *he* who will carry on the Covenant (as shown by the mark in his flesh)? Is it not *he* who will exemplify and transmit the word of God? In contrast, the birth of a

girl child is marked only by a brief naming ceremony which occurs during the regular sabbath service at the synagogue. There is no separate ceremonial gathering for her, no elaborate ritual. In addition, the baby is usually not even present at her naming.

The questions leap out and are unavoidable. Why the double standards? Why the omissions? Why are boys so obviously valued more than girls? To me, the most convincing explanations still lie in Bettelheim's theory.

There are no ceremonies within Judaism which celebrate woman's "femaleness," her reproductive, her procreative powers. When a woman begins to menstruate, not only is this sign of the maturation of her reproductive system not celebrated, but, on the contrary, she becomes "unclean." The laws of niddah are very strict. Husband and wife must not have any kind of contact either during the seven days of her menstrual flow nor during the seven "white" days following it. Contact can be restored only following the "purification" of the woman at the mikvah. Further, Gunzfried's *Code of Laws* states that "It is customary for a woman during her menstruation period before the white days, *not to enter the synagogue and not to pray*." (153:16; emphasis mine) The same emphasis on the uncleanness related to female reproductive functions holds after childbirth.

A woman who has borne a son is unclean for seven days, after which she must count seven clean days and undergo immersion. And if she has borne a daughter, she is unclean for fourteen days, after which she must count seven clean days and undergo immersion. In some communities, the custom prevails that women do not perform the immersion until *forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter*. Wherever this is an accepted custom, it must not be disregarded, for there is some reason for this. (158:1)

Granted that this kind of separation is a hardship on the men as well as the women, and granted that there is a general uneasiness related to blood within Judaism, the emphasis upon "uncleanness" of normal bodily functions of women, indeed, upon those very functions which relate to her uniqueness in relation to men and to her reproductive capacity, strikes me as curious.

It might be argued that the woman's menstrual blood is equivalent to the male's "discharge of semen in vain" which, according to the *Code of Laws*, is "a graver sin than any other mentioned in the Torah." (151:1) Thus, following this reasoning, the woman becomes unclean by the "spilling" of her seed, that is by her lack of impregnation. This argument is compelling, but there still remain large discrepancies. Presumably the male can control whether or not he spills his seed, and his doing so is connected in some sense with "deviations" of sexual expression. The woman, unless she is perpetually pregnant from the onset of puberty until menopause, has no control over the "spilling" of her seed. This may be why it is not considered a "sin" for her; but, unless pregnant, she still becomes regularly and inevitably "unclean" for fifty percent of her adult life. And as a result of this uncleanness, she is isolated not only from her husband, but also from the spiritual community. All of this is to say that the woman, at the periods when her femaleness is most visible (excepting pregnancy), is "unclean" before man and God!

And what, finally, are we to make of the regulation that following childbirth the woman remains unclean twice as long after the birth of the girl as after the birth of a boy? This attitude says rather clearly: girls contaminate twice as much as boys. What rationale is behind this kind of attitude? What does it say about how girls are regarded within Judaism?

The restrictions surrounding menstrual blood are in rather striking contrast to the attitude towards the blood of the circumcised baby boy. For not only is the boy not considered unclean after the blood is spilled from his genital, but there is a very ancient custom within Jewish circumcision ceremonies which is called "metsitsa."

By this is meant the sucking of the blood from the wound. The mohel takes some wine in his mouth and applies his lips to the part involved in the operation, and exerts suction, after which he expels the mixture of wine and blood into a receptacle provided for the purpose. (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, "circumcision")

Thus, far from being treated as unclean, the blood from the boy's genital is handled in a most intimate fashion and then mixed with wine, a sacramental substance. The baby has to undergo no subsequent purification ritual after the loss of his blood and he is not

isolated from contact with others. Indeed, the performance of this act is considered a great honor —

... The greatest honor of all is that of the metsitsa, performed by a venerable and pious man who sucks the first drop of blood. (*Life Is With People*, p. 319)

Why, one might ask, this double standard with relation to bleeding from male and female genitals? I find myself drawn back to Bettelheim's theory. Perhaps at some primitive layer of even the Jewish psyche, the blood drawn from the penis of the circumcised boy represents the male's desire "to participate in the female power of procreation." If in this process, as Bettelheim suggests, the male is expressing his envy of the female, then it would stand to reason that he would place special value on *his* ceremony and on *his* blood and place negative valuation on *her* blood.

III.

The purpose of this article is not simply to complain about the position of women with regard to circumcision and the laws of nidah, but first to point up the discrepancies as I see them and then to propose a way of correcting the imbalances. It is in this spirit, then, that I have offered my proposal for new rituals as a formal measure which, hopefully, will restore to the daughters of Sarah their rightful place and share in the Covenant.

Here, again, is my proposal:

1. A ritual rupturing of the hymen soon after birth. The operation should be performed by a woman.
2. A special blessing and perhaps celebration (if the girl wishes it) upon the occasion of her first menstruation.

Point 1 of my proposal will, I expect, arouse much shock, dismay, anxiety and disapproval. Let me try to explain my rationale for this suggestion. As I indicated earlier, in my understanding the underlying spiritual meaning of circumcision involves a marking and opening of the generative organ and a consecration to God of the seed which will issue from it. There is no comparable ritual "opening" of the woman. At present her seed is consecrated only

through her male children. She lacks, as it were, a direct line to God as well as a direct connection to the Covenant which God made with Israel. What I am proposing with the ritual rupturing of the hymen is an equivalent "opening" of the girl's generative area so that her seed, also, can be directly and symbolically dedicated to God.

Some have argued that the primitive custom of removing or mutilating the clitoris would be the true equivalent of circumcision. This is a cruel and painful custom which results in a drastic reduction of the female's sexuality. In addition, I am not so much interested in developing an exact equivalent as in getting to the meaning behind the acts. A further objection has been raised about the fact that rupturing of the hymen is something that will happen to the girl naturally anyway at a later period of her life, so how can it be a "sign in the flesh?" Again, I am more interested in the underlying symbolic significance of such a ceremony than in developing exact equivalents.

With regard to medical questions involved with such an operation, I have checked with several doctors and been told that it would be quite safe provided, of course, that care was taken not to cut any of the surrounding tissue. They seemed to feel, also, that it was not likely that it would grow back. The hymen seems to serve no special physical function within the body, and it is an interesting but unanswered question as to why, phylogenetically, it developed. Throughout history, and certainly within Jewish culture, the main social function it has served has been as a means of testing the female's virginity. And since, within the tradition, virginity has always been highly valued, the presence of the intact hymen as proof has been very important. Indeed, traditionally, the sheets of the newlywed couple were carefully inspected for the bloodstains after the wedding night. Men, also, were expected to be sexually innocent, but, of course, there was (and is) no way of proving it. One obvious consequence of part one of my proposal is that since the hymen would be artificially ruptured at a young age, this ancient means of testing a woman's virginity would be eliminated. I can imagine that some might find this offensive; I feel that it is positive.

The second part of my proposal is not unique. Many within the current Jewish feminist movement have spoken of it, some may even have worked out particular wording for such a blessing. I propose it in this context as a continuation of the dedicatory process and as a

means of further strengthening a positive view of female biological processes. What a beautiful thing if we can change the view of menstruation from a curse to a blessing!

Joseph Campbell, a great student of mythology, says in *The Masks of God*: "Ritual is mythology made alive." (p. 118) What I am attempting to do here is to create a positive mythology which says that women are valued, that what is most unique about them is blessed and consecrated. Women have been nonpersons spiritually within Judaism. There have been few special rituals, no real spiritual mythology. I am trying to forge a spiritual place for women within Judaism by bringing them ritually into a share of the Covenant with its duties, obligations and privileges. Just as changing circumcision to the eighth day was according to Gaster "... yet another example of the Jewish genius for infusing new, spiritual meanings into general popular usages," (p. 44) so celebrating first the ritual opening of the girl and then her menstrual flow is not only to bless, but also to spiritualize that process.

It is my hope that, even if (as Bettelheim claims) deep within the recesses of our psyches all of us harbor envy of the other sex, perhaps knowledge of this envy and how it fosters inequalities can help us all to grow. This proposal is an attempt on my part to correct, in a direct and positive way, what I see to be great imbalances within our tradition. Whether or not this particular proposal seems acceptable, I hope that my thinking has helped to stimulate others to question and to ponder.