

Circumcision – defending the indefensible

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By screening my TV documentary 'It's a Boy!' for European parliamentarians I aim to help shore up their commitment to protection of children's right to physical integrity.



Baby undergoes circumcision R 370

I am a Jewish filmmaker and I have been invited by the Council of Europe to its Parliamentary Assembly next week. By screening my television documentary *It's a Boy!* for European parliamentarians I aim to help shore up their commitment to protection of children's right to physical integrity – a key step toward ending ritual circumcision of boys. Yet there is a struggle underway. Israeli Knesset members have orchestrated moves to reverse progress and protect the ancient custom instead of protecting children from harm. That's why remarks quoted by MK Nachman Shai defamed me in this newspaper this week. Shai insinuated that the documentary, celebrated for its depiction of parental remorse over circumcision, was made by an enemy of the Jewish state. Never mind that I have lifelong deep ties to Israel evidenced in several acclaimed films, an ad hominem attack has been

leveled without a shred of evidence for it. But will thinking people therefore shun an authoritative film? Those who would hope so demonstrate the poverty of their argument in favor of a cruel birth rite. In Strasbourg, my film will show the hidden casualties of circumcision – bleeding infants rushed into hospital, infected babies in intensive care, permanent deformities of young boys, and deaths. It will show mothers and fathers, Jewish, Muslim and African, full of sorrow and remorse for what they inflicted on their offspring. And I will refer to my experience as a Jewish father, the story I tell here. From a very young age attending Jewish schools my personal preoccupation was the Jewish thirst for justice and our empathy for suffering. *Tsa'ar ba'alei chayim*, the Jewish injunction to heed the distress of living beings, became the wellspring of the filmmaking I'm most proud of, including films about Israeli society, its past, present and future. When my wife and I were trying for our first baby, for a worryingly long time it wasn't happening. But eventually we brought into our home a tiny lad with a wide-eyed look, a soft gurgling presence, and he brought out more gentleness than I knew I had in me.

Until the calls started coming through. Have you fixed who will do the deed? When is the circumcision? But slicing away a body part from a healthy baby seemed to me neither natural nor inevitable, and I worried about him suffering. After several weeks of ignoring the messages, they became insistent. You do know your mother is dying of cancer? Get it done. The counsel from relatives was it's harmless, it's healthy, it's just a few seconds. The doctor assured us the liquid anaesthetic he applied to the foreskin would make the procedure pain-free. The nurse spread our boy's limbs and gripped them tightly. He started bawling. A frenzy of bawling. No-one had ever restrained him like this. There was a shriek. High-pitched, prolonged, unlike any sound I'd heard from him before. An instrument was attached to our son's penis, and with each manipulation our child let out more shrieks. And then when the cutting edge was pressed through his flesh we heard a twisting, animal-like groaning and he writhed and grimaced as though something truly awful was being done to him. And then it was over. But it wasn't over. The instruments were wielded again for "neatening the cut" and then "dressing the wound" – steps usually done out of sight of parents and celebrants. Our boy had a new kind of voice which rose up hoarsely at each contact with his genitals. At home, the wide-eyed look and soft gurgling were gone. Instead there was a helpless being with a raw wound to be re-bandaged repeatedly. For two days and nights he was writhing and crying. It had not been pain-free. It had not been a few seconds. It had been a betrayal of our son, and of ourselves. Only much later did I learn from a consultant paediatric anaesthetist how a baby's pain is likely to be greater than an adult's with the same procedure. If anaesthetics are injected, the procedure can be almost pain-free, but anaesthetic injections entail risks for a baby, and afterward while the wound heals protracted pain is inevitable. I learned that no matter who performs circumcisions, significant complications can threaten a child's survival or his future experience of life; bleeding, infection and deformities are one-in-50 events by conservative estimates. And each year there are deaths. How many? It's impossible to know because no-

one is counting, and such deaths are sometimes attributed to heart failure or other causes less controversial than circumcision. Had I known such facts earlier, my son would have remained intact, as is the case with increasing numbers of Jewish boys today, including thousands in Israel. What of the health benefits claimed? A very slight reduction in the extremely rare condition of penile cancer is cited. The circumcision of grown men in Africa is credited with a reduction in HIV transmission in that region, but is not a serious justification for circumcising babies and young boys in Europe or Israel. A decrease in frequency of urinary tract infections (UTIs) in babies – that is vaunted as the statistically significant benefit from circumcision. But the same result can be achieved by soap and water, and in any case UTIs are readily treatable with antibiotics. Parents like me know from our remorse that it was wrong to make such an irreversible, painful and dangerous decision for our children. We owed our children protection, and we owe it to our communities not to be silenced when we have erred as parents. But the fear of being cast out from our tribes remains an intense pressure. Fear cowers individuals who wish to dissent publicly. Fear cowers parents who want to reject circumcision. That's why boys from all backgrounds need the protection of the rule of law – secular law – wherever they may live. The necessity for this now in Israel is obvious. To deprive children of Jewish and Muslim descent in any country of full legal protection because of their lineage amounts to a most perverse kind of prejudice against those children. As for any attempt by real anti-Semites to latch onto this issue, that would be denounced publicly. But then real anti-Semites are not usually the people keen to protect Jewish children from harm, and real anti-Semites would probably like nothing better than continuance of a practice that stokes anti-Jewish feelings and for generation after generation inflicts suffering on Jewish boys. Children's right to physical integrity should be what Israeli parliamentarians defend – rather than a brutal anachronism. *The author produced and directed It's a Boy! www.itsaboythefilm.com.*