

Alternative Rituals as Protest

Lindsey Jackson

When I mention that the topic of my PhD dissertation is the decision taken by some Jews not to circumcise their sons I am often met with disbelief, confusion, shock, and sometimes even anger. These responses generally stem from the feeling that rejecting circumcision is a gross violation of Jewish tradition, and by extension, of Judaism itself. Despite the halakhic ruling that anyone born of a Jewish mother is Jewish, the rejection of this particular life-cycle ritual often brings into question one's Jewishness. Can one really be Jewish *and* against circumcision? Is a Jewish man *really* Jewish if he is not circumcised? Are noncircumcision Jews rejecting Judaism? To put it simply—yes, one can be Jewish and against circumcision. Yes, a Jewish man is Jewish regardless of his circumcision status. And no, noncircumcision Jews are not necessarily rejecting Judaism. In fact, noncircumcision Jews provide a compelling model for intracommunal protest. And the site of this protest is not in the streets with banners and posters, but in the ritual space with family, friends, and a rabbi present. Jewish parents who are choosing not to circumcise their sons are using this ritual moment to take a stand against a ritual they deem harmful, unnecessary, and patriarchal. But instead of opting out of the bris entirely, many noncircumcision parents are adapting the ritual and replacing the removal of the foreskin with other symbolic actions. This particular model of ritual rebellion demonstrates how protest represents engagement with, and not rejection of, Judaism and Jewish tradition.

A bris is a celebratory moment, where family and friends congregate to celebrate the birth and entrance of a baby boy into the covenant. Food is usually served, and a social gathering follows the ritual enactment. So what does it mean to opt out of circumcision? Opting out of circumcision does not necessarily mean opting out of this celebratory moment—in fact, alternative noncutting rituals are often just as meaningful and celebratory.

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Opting out of circumcision does not represent opting out of Judaism—noncutting rituals are undoubtedly Jewish and these rituals affirm the Jewish identity of the newborn baby. For the majority of my research subjects, what opting out of circumcision *does* represent is a declaration of dissent against a particular component of the ritual—the removal of the foreskin. The ritual performance, then, becomes a site of protest and affirmation—protest against a specific ritual action, and affirmation of the Jewishness of the family and, in particular, the newborn baby boy, through the alternative ritual.

Not all noncircumcision Jews opt for an alternative ritual. Some simply choose not to circumcise and forego any ritual enactment. But the overwhelming majority of my interlocutors *do* opt for a noncutting alternative. So how is the removal of the foreskin replaced in alternative rituals for some noncircumcision Jews? Well, this depends on the family. Sometimes the removal of the foreskin is omitted without replacing it with another action. Sometimes parents choose to include a symbolic cutting, usually of a fruit. Sometimes the *milah* is replaced with another action entirely, such as washing the baby's hands and feet with water, an homage to the biblical story where Abraham washes the hands and feet of people who visit his home (Gen 18:1-4) Other times blood is incorporated in the ritual in an entirely novel way, such as through the parents donating blood on behalf of their newborn child. The essence of the ritual—the gathering of family and friends, revealing the Hebrew name and explaining its significance, and establishing a connection to Jewish tradition—are all maintained. The ritual isn't rejected in its entirety; it is simply tweaked and adjusted to accommodate the new parents' views on circumcision. To use a particularly apt expression here, the baby isn't thrown out with the bath water.

But the decision typically involves some blowback. Even if it makes for a more comfortable and less anxiety-inducing ritual enactment, the decision is often accompanied by protests from disgruntled family members.

Grandparents, especially, are often troubled by the decision to opt out of circumcision. In most cases, the conflict subsides once the ritual enactment is complete, but the lead-up is very often contentious and combative. These rituals inspire protest from various angles—from the parents who are actively choosing not to circumcise, and from family members who often disagree with this ritual choice. Protest envelops this ritual moment in more ways than one.

Debating, questioning, disagreeing, and protesting—these are all important facets of Jewish tradition. And by voicing their disagreement, noncircumcision Jews are indeed participating in this long-standing tradition. By challenging this quintessential life-cycle ritual and adapting it in uniquely Jewish ways, noncircumcision Jews are, contrary to popular belief, doing the most Jewish thing of all.

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8 ART CONTRIBUTOR: ILANA ZEFFREN

“Go” (“Lech” in Hebrew) became the slogan of the long-running Israeli protest against Benjamin Netanyahu, the rallying cry for him to resign and leave office. Go, 2020. Pencil and Photoshop, 3.6 x 3.6 in. From the weekly column “Petting Corner” in Haaretz newspaper. © 2020 Ilana Zeffren. Courtesy of the artist.

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