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Circumcision: The False Initiation

by Richard Newman

This excerpt from *The Brotherhood of Man, a work in progress*, looks at the religious and secular forms of circumcision, and how circumcision disrupts an innate spiritual cycle associated with our penis, and more generally with male love. Three notions, developed earlier in the essay, are taken for granted: 1. that circumcision is painful, dangerous, debilitating of male sexuality and is properly understood as sexual mutilation which cultural rhetoric has transformed into something else; 2. that the cultural and medical denial of this pain constitutes one male-dominant strategy by which the bodies of men are made to conform to the "take it like a man" ideology of male dominance; 3. that this strategy perpetuates the notion that men are men because of what we do, not what we feel. No mention is made of female circumcision because, while that practice is absolutely abhorrent and equally a component of male dominance, it has been written about well and extensively, e.g. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*.

"Initiation is rebirth. By rebirth birth from one's 'real' mother is nullified.... and a new spiritual mother found."¹ Initiation into a brotherhood, therefore, provides the initiate with a male mother, with an entire community of male mothers. This is the significance of the genital wound — circumcision, subincision — which accompanies the rites of passage of adolescent males in many cultures. It has been argued that cutting the penis creates an artificial vagina, a "penis womb"² which, through the mystery of the wounding itself, allows men to believe we have acquired the life-bearing aura of which women are the embodiment. Thus, a circumcised penis is symbolic of the power of men to nurture, to bring forth boys into manhood. This logic, which rhetorically transforms the pain and violence of the circumcision ceremony into the illusion of male eroticism and male maternity eviscerates the significance of women's role as the bearers of children.

The concept of male motherhood can also be seen as an attempt at androgyny, at a metaphysical wholeness that would endow the male body with a visceral connection as strong as that of women to the

cycle of life and death in which all human beings take part.

Because women are the people who give birth, and because women use their own bodies to feed the human beings they bring into the world, and because this bringing forth first requires of women that they accept within their bodies the bodies of men, the life of a female body involves women quite intimately with what it means to live an embodied life, to know the world through the concrete reality of our human flesh.

In our cultural imagination, then, the emotions — love, compassion, tenderness — that both men and women associate primarily with women grow from this knowledge, from the experience of an embodied female existence. The mutilation of male initiation rites in general, and of circumcision in particular³ is an attempt symbolically to transform male bodies into the only kind of bodies we know that experience and share with others these life-giving emotions: the bodies of women.

The process of erection, however, is no less a reproductive cycle than the monthly cycle of women; the extension of a penis into the world is no less vulnerable than women's physically interior and patriarchally invaded sexual space. It takes real existential courage to reach out for another person, to enter them, *to allow them to accept you or not*. The bodies of men enact this reach far more graphically than those of women. In fact, our sexuality *is* this reach out of ourselves and into the world.

For men who were circumcised as infants, though, for those of us who were cut before we even knew we had a body, before the world was anything other than us, this reach resulted in pain and mutilation. For some of us, the mutilation led to death; for others, a permanent crippling of bodies and our sexuality. Others only became aware that we had been mutilated when it was pointed out to us. For all of us who were cut when us and mother and world were still synonymous, the *vagina dentata* is a concrete reality. Those of us

who have survived carry the scars of our confrontation with that reality on our genitals. We not only embody the image of penis as weapon, of sex as battle, but at some level of our being, of the physical knowledge we have of our life-long interaction with the world, we know those images to be true.

Denying a Masculine Sensuality

Its conceptual function as "cover" for the pain and violence of circumcision notwithstanding, the rhetoric of androgyny

provides a seductive framework for the deconstruction of these male dominant phallic images because it insists on a balance between male and female, on the at least apparent absence of sexual hegemony. Androgyny holds out the promise of a rediscovered male embodiment, of a masculinity emptied of the need to dominate. The circularity of this reasoning, however, by which androgyny is used to justify the hurting of a male body — to allow that body the acquisition of so-called feminine character traits diametrically opposed to maiming and wounding — denies the original act of wounding, requires that the pain of the wound be forgotten. Violence erases violence by calling itself non-violence. In the case of circumcision, the ceremony itself and the rhetorical androgyny which embellishes the ceremony do not celebrate the male body, but use the violence of male dominant masculinity to deny the existence of an inherently masculine sensuality.

In an essay entitled "The Bible's Sleeping Beauty and Her Great-Granddaughters," for example, Arthur Waskow argues for an androgynous interpretation of Jewish values, for an understanding of Jewish culture as an embodiment of balanced male and female energies. He puts forward the possibility that "many of the practices that the Bible enjoins upon men are precisely intended to 'motherize' [us]: to limit and dissolve [our] mastery and [our] activism lest it swallow up and destroy the world."⁴ One of the practices which serves this "motherizing" function is circumcision. His

Violence erases violence by calling itself non-violence.... Circumcision uses violence to deny an inherently masculine sensuality.

failure to perceive the male-dominant underpinnings of the logic with which he is trying to subvert male dominance is, at least for me, infuriating:

For example, it may be that the biblical command that fathers circumcise their boy children was intended to “motherize” both the father and the son. How does this work? First of all, this moment of intense physical and emotional connection binds the father to his son in a way analogous to the mother’s physical and emotional connection through the birth canal. Otherwise, fathers might feel only distantly connected. And this act of connection is one in which the father almost enacts the impulse to murder his son, but deliberately refrains. What does he do instead? By hallowing the child’s genitals, he looks forward to the next generation, to his grandchildren. He becomes “motherly”; he focuses on nurturing the cycle of generations. As for the son, removing the tough outer casing of his genitals makes him — at least symbolically — more vulnerable, more open, more “womanly.” By shedding even a little blood from his genitals, he imitates women’s menstrual bleeding.⁵

Note that Waskow accepts as natural the passive-aggressive dichotomy of traditional gender roles. His androgyny may be the embodiment of both male and female roles in one person, but it does not resolve the dichotomy. The “feminine component” of male being is necessary not to provide men with a mode of emotional expression, but to limit the destructive capacity of male energy. That this version of female energy is alien to masculinity (and I am *not* arguing for a biological determinism that makes of men inherently aggressive and violent creatures) should be evident both from the genital violence used to force male being into an androgynous shape and from the Jewish history of circumcision itself.

To begin with, circumcision is used in the Bible at least three times by Jewish men in connection with distinctly male and explicitly non-androgynous values. When Simeon and Levi avenge the rape of their sister Dinah by slaughtering the people of Shechem, they take advantage of the fact that Shechem and his people had agreed to be circumcised so that the two nations could intermarry. The brothers attack “on the third day [after the mass circumcision], when [the people of Shechem] were in pain”⁶ and unable to defend themselves. When King Saul

wants to arrange the death of David, who had asked to marry the King’s daughter Michal, Saul sets the bride-price at one hundred Philistine foreskins. David dutifully kills and circumcises not one, but two hundred Philistines in order to obtain the woman he wants.⁷ And when Judah the Maccabee conquered the Idumaeans, Jonathan Hyrcanus forcibly converted them to Judaism, a process which required circumcision.⁸ Were circumcision a truly effective means, as Waskow claims, of instilling in men maternal feelings towards our male children, certainly men could not have transformed the practice so easily into one of conquest, as a symbol of male dominance.

Further, Waskow’s comparison of circumcision and childbirth passes very smoothly over crucial differences between the religious ritual and the biological event. First, there is no mention in his description of circumcision of the pain which the procedure causes, nor of the fact that the father must deny the pain in the body of his son in order to perform the ceremony at all. Thus, the “intense physical and emotional connection” which Waskow claims that circumcision

establishes is, in fact, the pain of the fathers, who were themselves circumcised, transformed into the pain of the sons. Were the men who perform circumcisions, or in whose names circumcisions are performed, truly empathetic, surely no man would inflict upon his own son — or any son for that matter — a pain which the man himself would experience not as “motherizing” or nurturing, but as unmaning, castrating, emasculating.

Further, in order for the analogy between the “physical and emotional connections” of childbirth and circumcision to

work, we must either deny the agency — and, therefore, the responsibility — of the person who performs circumcisions, so that circumcision can become as “natural” a process as giving birth, or we must reconceptualize pregnancy and childbirth as a violence done to women.

Take It Like a Man

The notion that circumcision “hallows the child’s genitals,” the logic by which the causing of such intense pain somehow “motherizes both father and son,” is structurally analogous not to a mother-child relationship. Rather, it resembles the notion that fathers teach their sons best and most responsibly through the suffering that men must learn to endure in order to be considered men, the suffering that robs us of the very qualities Waskow argues circumcision is meant to instill. And what are we to make of Waskow’s *de facto* institutionalization of “[the father’s] impulse to murder his son?” Is this impulse the natural condition of human males? Do men need violence to teach us not to do violence? Waskow’s argument overlooks completely the principle that



“The Silent Child”

violence perpetuates violence, that victims of abuse often become abusers themselves.

In addition Waskow's assertion that "removing the tough outer casing of [the boy's] genitals makes him... more vulnerable" denies entirely the physical nature of the foreskin. That piece of flesh is "the size of a quarter containing more than three million cells, twelve feet of nerves, one hundred sweat glands, fifty nerve endings, three feet of blood vessels.... and [the] penis's own personal lubrication.... An essentially internal organ [has been] made permanently external, with the drying out and desensitization that accompanies any moist, sensitive skin adapting itself to frequent contact with an often abrasive world."⁹ Circumcised men have lost, have had stolen from us, not only a highly sensitive and extremely functional part of our bodies, but also part of the full sexuality that ought to have been ours. To claim that the forcible cutting from a boy of the skin he was born with somehow makes him more vulnerable confuses an act of violence, of victimization, with true vulnerability, with the conscious and purposeful opening of oneself to the world, to the possibilities for life that the world and its inhabitants offer. A similar confusion mistakes the act of rape for the act of making love.

And, finally, the notion that infant boys need to be forced by and for their community to mimic women's menstrual bleeding implicitly denies any in-and-of-itself significance of what it means for a man to live in a male body. The circumcision ceremony institutionalizes and enacts that denial.

Spiritual Cycle of the Penis

In Jewish culture, there are two concepts, *t'miyah* and *tahorah*, which seem to me to provide a symbology of male sexuality diametrically opposed to the violent phallocentrism of male dominance and its androgynous projections. *T'miyah* is usually, and perhaps inaccurately translated as impurity, and *tahorah* is usually given the meaning of purity or cleanliness. The etymological history of these words is not my concern here, nor am I interested in denying that in the case of *nidah*, the laws concerning menstruation, these two concepts have functioned historically in the oppression and subjugation of women. Rather, I want to use an alternative interpretation of these concepts to explore some objective facts about male sexual biology and their spiritual meaning.

In the Torah, people become *tamei* when they come in contact with a "life-

death nexus," a corpse, menstrual blood, childbirth, nocturnal emissions and so on. People who become *tamei* are expected to withdraw from the life of their community, and from religious life in particular, in order to meditate on, and be a symbol for the community of human mortality, some manifestation of which they have touched. After a period of time, the individual undergoes ritual purification — becomes *tahor* — and is able once again to be in the world, to enter the routines of daily living.

An erect penis, an externalized penis, is *tahor*, is irrevocably in the world. It is my body telling me it is alive, full of the life we all move through as it moves through us. Truly to masturbate as an act of self-love is to meditate on that life, to hallow it in a celebration of my own *tahorah*, but simply experiencing an erection, letting my penis be hard and then soften is also a kind of celebration, a hallowing of the life that is in me. To make love with another is to share that life, to offer it to them, and it also to accept in my life their life, to be known by each other both inside and out.

A soft penis, an internalized one, is *tamei*, has withdrawn from the world. After I make love, whether I fuck or not, whether or not I have an orgasm, my penis carries with it, carries back into me, a sense memory of what it was like to have been touched so intimately by, to have touched with such vulnerability the life of another human being.

That memory sustains me when I do not have a lover, helps me to remember that I have a place, an embodied place, within the human community, that I deserve this place, that it is my birthright. The *tahorah* of my body, the in-the-worldness of being physically male, is symbolic of the way in which everyone, male and female, must reach out of themselves to live in the world, to be part of the world's body. My love, male love, can grow from this knowledge, this experience in the flesh of what it means to extend ourselves, to risk claiming a presence and a place among all the beings with whom we share this earth.

This is the love we have to give to the lovers and companions who accept our trust, our need of them, who allow us into their lives, their bodies, and who reach into our lives and our bodies with the same trust, the same need. This is the love we have to give to the world, to the environment in which we live, the love which ought to motivate our politics, our economics. This is the love we have to give to our children, who have no choice but to leave the security of the womb.

This is the love we betray when we allow our male children to be circumcised. This is the love that so-called "brotherly love" ought to be.

Male dominance, however, through the cultural investment of its proponents in rituals like circumcision, locates the lives of men in a permanent *tahorah*, a perpetual, unassailable, self-evident being in the world, a conflation of our lives, our selves, *with* the world. Such lives can have no boundaries, must assume that obstacles are designed expressly to be overcome. Otherwise, what would be the purpose of our existence? How could our being be self-evident? But *tahorah* is meaningless without *t'miyah*, without the right to withdraw, to set the boundaries of identity which give us a self to reach out with, to share with others, which we can open and close when we want and to whom we want.

T'miyah is the circumscription required of ourselves so we can know ourselves. All ideologies of oppression — racism, classism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism — require of their adherents a lack of self-awareness, an unwillingness simply to be themselves, for to be themselves would mean to allow for the existence of other identities, of boundaries which could not be crossed. Thus, the fear of death underlies all oppression. That final *t'miyah*, like the initial *tahorah* of being born, is beyond our control; we bring to it only the memory of who we have been and how we have lived in the world, or we bring to it our denial. Death gives us no choice but to become ourselves, to become completely self-aware. In the end, irrevocably, each of us dies alone. ■

References

1. *Love's Body*, Norman O. Brown, p. 33.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
3. See also the book *Iron John* by Robert Bly which traces one version of the process of becoming male, from childhood through initiation into adulthood. Also, I am aware that there are cultures which ascribe to circumcision the masculinization of men, the removal, with the foreskin, of all that is feminine. Whether androgynizing or masculinizing, the purpose is the same: bringing into the realm of masculinity the physical and emotional roles usually associated with mothers and women.
4. Arthur Waskow, "The Bible's Sleeping Beauty and Her Great-Granddaughters," *Tikkun*, 4 (2) p. 125.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Genesis, 34:24
7. Samuel I, 18:20-27
8. Maccabees I, 5:65
9. *Op. cit.* Boyd, p. 37.