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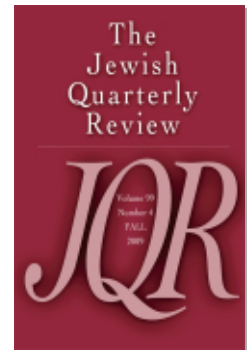
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Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?

MARY R. D'ANGELO

SHAYE J. D. COHEN. *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. xvii + 317 pages

Given recent recognition of the horrific results of some forms of female circumcision, a reader happening upon this title might well dismiss Shaye Cohen's question with a sigh of gratitude that Jews have had better sense than to circumcise (or "excise") women. The subtitle articulates the inadequacy of this response: as uncircumcised, women might be seen to be excluded from the covenant—perhaps even from Jewishness. Cohen traces the question historically: Who asks this question? Why? How do they answer? It also functions heuristically: What does the noncircumcision of women tell us about women in Judaism? About circumcision? About men? Or rather—what does it tell us about what men think about these issues?

The study's focus is rabbinic writing from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, but its chronological scope is far greater. The first chapter lays out the "canonical history" of circumcision. Beginning from Torah texts and classical rabbinic literature (the Mishnah, the two Talmuds, and related works), Cohen traces transformations of circumcision through the eighteenth century on four "trajectories": from rendering the child ritually pure to conferring sanctity; from removal of the foreskin to the shedding of salvific blood; from an apotropaic protection from death to salvation from evil, sin, and death; from sign of the covenant to sacrament analogous to Christian baptism. A final chapter engages the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, delineating the emergence of challenges to circumcision from the reform movement and from the emergence of concerns for equal status for women and girls.

The overarching questions of the relation of circumcision to covenant,

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and the import of its limitation to males, are set by Genesis 17. Cohen notes that this account is a composite and leaves the relation between covenant and circumcision unclearly defined: circumcision is an obligation proceeding from the covenant (throughout, but especially in Gn 17.14); or the covenant itself (17.10); or a sign (reminder to the deity) of the covenant (17.11, cf. Gn 9.12–17). Males only are to be circumcised; for Sarah there is the promise of a child, but no sign of the covenant. Yet the covenant is with her child Isaac and not with Ishmael and his descendants, though they are both circumcised. This paradox points forward: not all the circumcised are Jews (for instance, Arabs and most American men) and not all Jews are circumcised. Rabbinic texts insist on circumcision for male converts to Judaism but allow that circumcision may be delayed, or even dispensed with, to save the life of a child. The Jewish man who grows to adulthood uncircumcised remains a Jew, suffering some restrictions in rabbinic law but clearly a member of the community.

Outsiders looking in (for the most part Christian polemicists) seem to be the catalysts who get Jews thinking about the apparent anomalies of circumcision as sign of the covenant. The most exotic are claims that Jews circumcise women. Strabo (first century B.C.E./C.E.) described both Egyptians and Jews as circumcising men and excising women, while much later Richard Francis Burton (nineteenth century) ascribed the practice to “outlying tribes of Jews,” a view Cohen attributes to Burton’s sexual imagination, a factor doubtless engaged in much Christian polemic.

Philo of Alexandria (first century C.E.), the first (surviving?) Jewish writer to raise the question of why circumcision is limited to males, was aware of the circumcision of women in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt and felt compelled to explain why Jews circumcised only males: to check stronger male sexual desire and pleasure, and stronger male pride because of the greater male part in generation. He presents these two reasons as his addition to four ancient and traditional explanations for circumcision: (a) as a prophylactic against a disease most prevalent in the southern areas where circumcision is practiced; (b) to increase fertility; (c) for ritual purity; (d) to liken the penis, the organ of generation, to the heart that generates thoughts.

Philo apparently contended not only with gentiles but also with Jews who contested the necessity of physical circumcision. Their arguments, transformed by Paul’s gospel, would soon be adapted and supplemented in the diverse and extensive body of Christian anti-Jewish literature, which produced (at least) three arguments on the basis of the noncircum-

cision of women: first, that women are not required to be circumcised shows that circumcision is not really required by God for righteousness but is merely a sign (see, e. g., Justin Martyr [ca. 150]); second, that women are not circumcised shows Judaism's inferiority and inadequacy (e.g., Cyprian [mid-third century]); third, women are an anomaly, are not really Jews, because of their uncircumcised state (e.g., *Dispute between the Church and the Synagogue: A Dialogue* [fifth c.]). But Christians had also to explain the biblical command. In medieval Christian theology, circumcision became analogous to baptism—a sign of the faith by which justification, including the amelioration of the effects of original sin and the hope of eternal life, was bestowed on the biblical saints (but not on the theologians' Jewish contemporaries).

That women were not circumcised was obvious but unproblematic for the rabbis of antiquity. They did not see circumcision as coterminous with Judaism: Jewish women and men alike were Jews by birth. That the lack of circumcision might make women inferior was equally unproblematic: ancient Judaism, like ancient Christianity, was patriarchal in outlook and structure: women were "lesser," and "real" Jews were men. Although medieval Judaism and Christianity were no less patriarchal, Jewish writers of the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries found the Christian anti-Jewish interpretations of the noncircumcision of Jewish women compelling enough to answer, and even to think with. Cohen points to two factors in this shift: changes in the status of women made them more visible in the community, and Jewish engagement with philosophy moved the definition of Judaism from ethnicity closer to philosophy and religion.

Cohen investigates the responses of the medieval Jewish thinkers under four headings: the celebration of manhood, the reduction of lust and the unmaning of men, true faith and the exemption of women, and the celebration of womanhood. Each is treated in a chapter that gives an account of one or two major thinkers and traces the answer and its ramifications backward and forward in time. The chapters build on each other conceptually rather than chronologically.

On the celebration of manhood, Cohen begins from the work of the thirteenth-century thinkers Anatoli and Menahem. Anatoli explains that circumcising males suffices because the female role is "helper" (Gn 2.18) and the male rules over her (3.16); so also, because of her subordination to a master other than God, she is exempt from positive commandments dependent on times. Cohen then traces rabbinic explorations of this exemption that argue the subordination of women and raise the question of whether women are Israel. As in the Christian works of the period, men are the norm, women the Other.

The reduction of lust was one of Philo's explanations; it appears in Anatoli, but comes into its own in the philosophical concerns of Maimonides. Although Maimonides never directly addressed the question of why women are not circumcised, he explained circumcision as weakening the penis, causing pain, and reducing pleasure, and so conducive to the limitation of excessive lust. Maimonides also saw circumcision as a sign uniting those who believe in the oneness of God (and so, for Spinoza, an asset in the survival of the Jews). But Maimonides did not connect circumcision with election, did not speak of *berit milah*, and did not allow circumcision any special rank among the commandments. Jewish sexual imagination was engaged by theory that circumcision lessened the pleasure of the female partner: Gentile men were assumed to both have and give more fun. This idea provided fodder for Christian polemicists, for whom it seemed to make Jewish men effeminate. In contention with Eilberg-Schwarz, Cohen argues that rabbinic writers did not share the Christian view that circumcision feminized men but did see the social disenfranchisement of Jewish men as unmanning.

Maimonides' "decovenantalization" of circumcision was extended by a third response to the question, represented by R. Yom-Tov Lippman Mühlhausen's (fifteenth-century) startlingly Pauline reading of circumcision. The Christians who argue that uncircumcised women are not real Jews and who coerced Jews to be baptized show their ignorance. Circumcision does not make a Jew, nor baptism a Christian; only faith in and from the heart can do that. Only the Jew who believes truly and rightly is a Jew, whether or not circumcised; the Jew who is baptized, but without believing in Christianity, is not a Christian. Circumcision is one of the commandments incumbent on men only; so also there are commandments that can only be performed by women.

Cohen finds a "celebration of womanhood" in the fourth response articulated by R. Joseph Bekhor-Shor (twelfth century), followed, less boldly by the *Sefer Nizahon* (ca. 1300) and by R. Yair ben Shabbetai da Correggio (sixteenth century). In contrast to the decovenantalization of circumcision in Maimonides and Mühlhausen, Bekhor-Shor placed circumcision above all other commandments, finding in it the sign of the covenant and the covenant itself. But for women, there is an analogy to circumcision; the blood of circumcision becomes covenantal blood through a woman's observation of legal requirements in regard to it. This analogy between the blood of circumcision and menstrual blood rightly observed was enabled by Bekhor-Shor's explicitly rationalist treatment of purity and impurity.

Finally Cohen explores attempts to redress the problem of the ritual

disadvantage created when women are not circumcised. Three basic approaches emerge. One seeks to eliminate circumcision entirely, for some as a mutilation, on analogy to “female circumcision” or “excision”; for some because it creates and celebrates male privilege. A second attempts to create a parallel covenantal ceremony for girl children. A third proposes performing a private circumcision for male children on the eighth day, then, thirty days after birth, a communal naming ritual celebration identical for girls and boys. Cohen sees this as an elegant solution; it strongly resembles his description of Maimonides’ position, in that it treats circumcision as a commandment incumbent on men but not as an entry into the covenant.

The emergence of women agents in the last chapter comes as something close to a shock; throughout the preceding history, women appear as the Other with whom men think—or polemicize. Cohen seems fully aware that his informants write over the scraped parchment of women’s lives and looks hard for real women: he notes the points at which godmothers were excluded from the ritual, cites a practice of a week of celebration for the births of girls as well as of boys in medieval Spain, notes the wimple dedicated by Sara Gelner for her daughter in 1927, and offers the proposals of feminist like Mary Gendler and Shulamit Magnus. But the study brings home the difficulty of accommodating tradition for the full participation of women. And the comparable status of Jewish and Christian women through the centuries makes clear that the “equal” baptism of christianity did not produce equal results.

Copious notes, extensive bibliography, and detailed indices make this book friendly to the scholarly user, while dates and contextualizations of the writers provide useful guidance for readers unfamiliar with the material. For both scholar and amateur Cohen’s clear and fluid writing make for a pleasurable read.

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