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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BRIT MILAH
IN REFORM JUDAISM

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

1986

Referee: Dr. David Weisberg

DEDICATION

T O L I N D A

My beloved partner and friend for life in whose love I see
eternity. . .

DIGEST

In the 1840's there were those in Reform Judaism who sought to rid the movement of the "primitive" rite of ritual circumcision. In 1984 the Reform Movement established the first ever Reform Brit Milah Board, a program for the training and certification of Reform Mohelim. What transpired over the course of the last 140 years and why with respect to the controversial issue of brit milah in Reform Judaism, is the topic of this study.

The thesis begins with an introductory chapter detailing the general history and development of brit milah in this country from 1733-1900. This chapter outlines the various practical and sociological difficulties and challenges encountered by Jews in this country who attempted to circumcise their sons in accordance with Jewish law and tradition. Their struggle to maintain this venerable rite, despite the enormous pressures financially and socially to do otherwise, is reflective of the battle of words waged by the early Reformers over this most controversial rite of passage. Chapter two focuses exclusively on the history of the debate within Reform circles over the value of brit milah as a rite worthy of continuance in Reform Judaism. From the inception

of the controversy in Frankfurt in 1844, through the various conferences and synods in Europe and in America, up until the establishment of the Reform Brit Milah Board, this chapter records and analyzes the arguments and attitudes of the leading Reformers of the age. Reformers such as Holdheim, Geiger, Wise, and Einhorn each express his views on the place of brit milah in Reform Judaism.

Chapter three continues with an investigation into the significance of brit milah as understood biblically and rabbinically with the ultimate intention of determining to what extent the traditional understanding of brit milah comports with Reform Jewish values and concepts. It is in this respect that I feel the thesis makes its greatest impact. After combing the rabbinic literature for references to brit milah, the findings are categorized by theme with respect to the different meanings ascribed to brit milah by the tradition. In all six different significances are gleaned from the sources. These then are juxtaposed with quintessential Reform Jewish values in order to determine where they correlate and where they do not. In this way the significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism is considered and ultimately defined.

Acknowledgements

In the course of the writing of this thesis I have had the privilege of consulting with many esteemed scholars and Reform Jewish Leaders. To them I am indebted for their assistance, guidance, and encouragement. Gratefully, I acknowledge the following people for all their help: Rabbi Lewis M. Barth, Dr. Solomon B. Freehof, Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, Dr. Michael Meyer, Dr. Eugene Mihaly, Dr. Jonathan Sarna, Rabbi Daniel Syme, Dr. Ben-Zion Wacholder, and Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz.

I would also like to thank Rhea Klein for her constant encouragement and for helping me to complete the Thesis on time.

I am especially grateful to Dr. David Weisberg who patiently and dilligently worked with me through every phase of this special project. For the many pleasurable hours of study and fellowship spent together, his helpful suggestions and his sincere interest in my work and my welfare, I express my most heartfelt appreciation and respect.

Lastly, but far from least, I would express my deepest gratitude to my beloved wife, Linda, for her patience, her inspiration and her unfailing support and love.

List of Abbreviations

- A.M.A. - American Medical Association
A.J.A. - American Jewish Archives
A.Z.d.J. - Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums
C.C.A.R. - Central Conference of American Rabbis
H.U.C.-J.I.R. - Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute
of Religion
J.T.S. - Jewish Theological Seminary
U.A.H.C. - Union of American Hebrew Congregations

NOTE: All References to the Talmud Are to the Babylonian
Talmud, Unless Otherwise Noted.

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CHAPTER ONE

BRIT MILAH IN AMERICA:

Difficulties and Challenges 1733 - 1900

Introduction

From the time of the Biblical figure of Elijah to the time of the Hellenistic period, up to the present day, circumcision has been and remains a controversial topic for Jews and non-Jews alike. In the biblical period the prophet Elijah charged the Israelites with forsaking their covenant with God,(1) which has been midrashically interpreted by some to mean the covenant of circumcision.(2) Again in the Hellenistic period Jews became ashamed of the circumcision mark and obliterated it by drawing forward what was left of the prepuce.(3) Today the issue manifests itself again as Mohelim are sued for having performed the ancient rite of circumcision.(4) In this country especially, the rite of ritual circumcision or brit milah has been and continues to be beset with difficulties and challenges.

In the colonial period when the Jewish population in America was miniscule,(5) through the nineteenth century, the practice of brit milah among the Jews was hampered continually by the lack of qualified mohelim. We can only imagine how many Jewish families regretfully dispensed with the practice of this mitzvah on account of the difficulty in

obtaining a mohel, and or the prospect of the hardship brought on by the exorbitant cost in procuring the services of such an individual. We must also take into consideration the social unpopularity and irregularity of such a medical procedure especially during the colonial period and early nineteenth century. Routine circumcision was not by any means the norm as it is today in many hospitals around the country. The "circumcised Jew" as a social anomaly was then the target of antisemitic venom. On a number of occasions Isaac Mayer Wise was called upon to defend the "circumcised Jews" in his newspaper The American Israelite. On one such occasion Wise, responding to two prominent politicians wrote, "Is it not the cowardice of the most enlightened men of the most enlightened party, of the most enlightened people to be afraid of one "circumcised Jew" or more?"(6) Wise felt compelled to respond to this view of circumcision as a term of disparagement against Jews, which indicates to us quite clearly how the rite of circumcision physically and socially separated Jews from the masses. This socio-religious distinction used as a pretext for prejudice against Jews, not only may have hindered the practice of milah amongst the "more enlightened Jews", but in some cases even led to self-hating attacks on ritual circumcision by Jews who called for its removal from Judaism. This in turn provoked others to defend the rite of brit milah from any number of a points of view.

In this chapter we will focus on the early period of

circumcision (1733-1900) in this country concentrating on three documents that should give us a flavor of some of the problems spoken of above related to brit milah. In addition, newspaper articles from leading Jewish periodicals of the time should help to illuminate the status of brit milah during this period, within the fledgling American Jewish community.

The Origin of Brit Milah in America
and
The Earliest Circumcision Books on Record

The origin of brit milah in this country and its attested significance amongst the Jews possibly goes back to 1654 and can certainly be traced to the first boatload of Jews who settled in Savannah, Georgia.(7) The ship that left London in 1733 and arrived in Savannah, Georgia on July 11, 1733 carried as part of its precious cargo a sefer Torah and a circumcision box containing the necessary utensils for the rite. In a letter to Isaac Leeser,(8) editor of The Occident, Levi Sheftall, grandson of Benjamin Sheftall, informs Leeser that, "These persons,(9) were the first of our nation who came to this country.(10) They brought with them a safer Torah, with two cloaks and a circumcision box, which was given to them by Mr. Lindo, a merchant in London, for the use of the congregation they intended to establish." That Benjamin Sheftall included the mention of a circumcision box along with a sefer Torah as two of the religious items brought by some of the first Jews to the new world is

significant. From the outset of the Jewish experience in America we learn that brit milah was deemed a religious duty not to be dispensed with or taken lightly despite the difficulties attendant to the rite that might be expected in the New World.

One of the earliest circumcision books on record and the first of its kind in Pennsylvania is that of Barnard Jacobs.(11) The record book, the oldest surviving vital record of Pennsylvania Jewry, is now in the Archives of Philadelphia's oldest congregation, Mikveh Israel. The "Pinkus" or circumcision book, kept from 1757-1790, consists of 17 leaves.(12) The original cover is mutilated, however, a few words are decipherable. They read as follows:

This is . . . Bear Isaac Jacobs . . .
Heidelberg in the Province of Pennsylvania. . .
The 10th of Heshvan in the year . . .

Superimposed on the small volume is a paper cover of later provenance reading:(13)

Record of Barnard Jacobs mohel of Heidelberg,
Pennsylvania. Presented to Lewis Allen(14) Parnass
by the late Jacob Mordecai(15) of Richmond,
Virginia.

The first seven leaves of Jacob's book contain the ritual for circumcision in carefully handprinted square Hebrew letters.(16) The remaining ten leaves report the record of the thirty-three circumcisions he performed between 1757-1790. It is from this data that we can draw some inferences about the nature of brit milah during this period. First we must consider the small number of circumcisions reported. For although the Jewish population of Pennsylvania

never grew large in the eighteenth century,(17) the small number of circumcisions may indicate how few indeed were the numbers of male children circumcised during this early period. By contrast, based on the circumcision book of F. Backman, also a mohel in southeastern Pennsylvania from 1845-1864, we find reported 1224 circumcisions.(18) Obviously the Jewish population was much greater fifty-five years later and it is true that among Backman's entries are included some out of state visits, nonetheless the startling increase (almost 38 fold) in the number of circumcisions performed is noteworthy.

Based on several birthdates, it is apparent that Jacobs was punctillious about the traditional eighth day. The news would reach him regarding the arrival of the baby boy, and neither distance nor winter weather kept him from jumping on his horse and riding from his place of residence in Heidelberg - later, Lancaster - to Philadelphia, Reading, York, Easton, or Lancaster itself.(19)

Each of Jacob's thirty-three listings follows a set formula, headed by the phrase "Le-mazel Tov." This is followed by "neemal Ha-yeled" (the lad, [so and so] was circumcised) - giving his name; "Bar" (son of) giving the father's first name in its Hebrew form, followed by the family name in Yiddish. Then comes the town in which the circumcision was performed, the day of the week and the Hebrew date.(20) Beginning with the nineteenth listing, he added a pious phrase after each listing:

God grant that he may grow up to study Torah, reach the marriage canopy, and to do good deeds. Shortly after Jacobs' last circumcision, that of his grandson Naphtali, Jacobs died in Baltimore in 1790. At the end of the circumcision book, we find appended an appropriate eulogy, written by Jacob Mordecai, the one who returned the book to Philadelphia:

. . .this interesting document preserves the [record of the] scattered residence of the Jews and (shows) that removed as they were (from one another) by distance, neither trouble (n)or happiness was regarded in their procuring a moll (in Hebrew) mohel, circimciser. . .

Richmond Virg(ini)a
Sivan 5595=June 1835(21)

If as Jacob Mordecai maintains that distance did not deter Jews from procuring the needed services of a mohel, then surely the lack of a trusted or qualified one did.

In a unique letter giving detailed instructions on how to perform a ritual circumcision, written in 1772, we find the instance of an incumbent mohel who is deemed by his community to be less than adequate in his performance of the mitzvah. The letter(22) purports to give a set of instructions written by the signer Abraham I Abrahams of New York City to Moses Seixas of Newport, Rhode Island on how to perform a brit milah. Abrahams had written at the request of Moses Seixas' father because at Newport and its environs the service of the mohel there, was apparently not too satisfactory. Therefore, Seixas undertook the responsibility of learning the technique himself.(23)

One might ask how one could learn such a technique from

written instructions alone. The answer must be that he watched carefully the circumcisions of the incumbent mohel, limited and unsatisfactory as they may have been, and apparently after three years, he had enough confidence to do a circumcision himself, operating first upon his own child, Benjamin Seixas.(24) This seems to have been a standard practice in Europe, wherein the mohel is not allowed to perform the rite on the sons of others until he has first performed the rite upon his own son. This, of course, is in keeping with the halachah on the matter(25) which requires that if one indeed has sufficient knowledge of the rite, he is not permitted to pass on the obligation to a "shaliach" or representative in his stead. In the letter itself there are a number of things worthy of note. We find here in the letter a full description of the three steps integral to the operation. "Chituch", the actual removal of prepuce and "Periah", the disclosure of the head of the penis by folding back the inner membrane are both discussed in paragraph four. "Metzitzah", the third and final step, which requires the mohel to suck the blood of the wound is discussed in paragraph five. A startling difference between the procedure as it was done then as compared to the operation today is that the actual blood of the child's wound was put back in the child's mouth, instead of the symbolic drops of wine used today, in accordance with the liturgical saying: "And I said unto Thee, 'Live in thy blood.'"(26) The procedure as described in the letter, aside from the substitution of the

wine for the blood and in most cases the use of a glass sucking tube instead of the mohel actually laying his lips on the wound, is very much in accordance with a traditional brit milah of today.

While in this case where Moses Seixas was convinced to take up the knife so to speak because of the incompetence of an incumbent mohel, in numerous other cases we find reports of Jews being unable to procure the services of a mohel at all.

Difficulties in Procuring a Mohel

In the American Israelite, the Cincinnati based Jewish weekly, the editor Isaac Mayer Wise reports that he is repeatedly asked the question, whether in places where no mohel can be found, if the operation might be performed by any physician who understands it.(27) Wise answers by quoting the Rabbinic Law(28) that only in exceptional cases where no mohel can be had is it permissible to use a non-Jewish physician. The Rabbinic law also requires that a knowledgeable Jew witness and supervise the non-Jewish physician during the operation, not so much for ritualistic purposes, but for fear that purposeful injury might be inflicted on the defenseless child during the procedure. This seems to be the force of the remarks made by one of Wise's readers in another letter to the editor, seven years later.(29) The letter dated August 7, 1876, informs Wise concerning the Jewish community of San Antonio, Texas. The

reader begins by describing the make-up of the population:
". . .20,000 people in all, 10,000 Germans, 7,000 Mexicans, 2,000 Americans, 1,000 Negroes and 40 Jewish families, mostly well to do." He tells of their elegant \$20,000 Synagogue that is locked up most of the time because they have no Rabbi. He sarcastically comments that instead of the Synagogue being open on Sabbath and holidays, the Jews open wide their stores and warehouses. He then comes to the point of his letter concerning circumcisions that are performed by a Christian doctor with a pair of scissors. He writes:

"Being by no means an Orthodox or "Lamdon" (learned scholar), but for curiosity, I would like to satisfy myself whether such is really consistent with our religion. On last Sunday I witnessed such performance by Dr. Herff, Jr., and seeing a few Jewish children lately, of some 2-3 years, that had been mauled by Dr. Herff, Sr., and in all cases Jews have found their foreskin covering the part, hence, would consider themselves as Jews, for the circumcision gone through with did not alter them from any one else; but the best joke on the Jehudim, is that their excuse for not having a mohel is the expense to Houston or Galveston, one days journey."

Wise comments on his readers' query by noting, "of course we would (consider them as Jews), although circumcision performed by a non-Israelite is not legal, except it be done under the supervision of a Jewish expert."

In cases such as the one above where no mohel could be had nor a Jewish physician, at times instead of prevailing upon a non-Jewish doctor to perform the rite, perhaps because of fear of the consequences as indicated by our reader in San Antonio, fathers would heroically take it upon themselves to perform the rite upon their own children. This was in fact

the case as stated in a letter from Galveston, Texas, dated 1852 (before they had the services of a mohel as indicated in the above letter) addressed to Isaac Leeser, editor of the Occident.(30)

"I have taken up my pen to inform you of what the remnant of Israel are doing this far south, namely in the state of Texas. There are not many Jews in the state; but still you will find a sprinkling of them in every village; some are adhering to our faith, others again are intermarried with gentiles.

I must not omit to mention a circumstance which happened in our city. A Mr. E. Cohen, lately from England, having a son born to him, concluded with a praiseworthy courage to perform the circumcision himself, on the eighth day, as we have no mohel nearer than New Orleans. People endeavored to persuade him to wait till the child could be taken thither, or a mohel be sent for. But he replied, that our Father Abraham performed this duty on the eighth day, why should he not do it also? He therefore did as he contemplated, in the presence of a surgeon; and the child is doing well."

While the above case is thrilling and heroic, we must agree that such a thing was exceptional and certainly not recommended as a normative resolution to this frustrating problem concerning the lack of mohelim in many parts of the country. Certainly if one was fortunate enough to be afforded a brit milah, in many instances it was not performed on the biblically mandated eighth day after birth. This was especially true in rural frontier areas during the period of Western expansion in this country. The following letter addressed to Leeser at the Occident reports of five children being circumcised in one week in Augusta, Georgia, three of whom were circumcised at ages nine, ten, and thirteen.(31) These were the first ritual circumcisions ever performed in

Augusta. The three boys were born in the interior of the state, far from any Jewish Congregation, all of them the offspring of Christian fathers. The author of the letter writes:

"Uninfluenced by counsel, unmoved by persuasion, unbiased by the hope of reward and unshaken by parental entreaties, these boys stepped boldly forward and from a self-conviction of its propriety, conformed to the ancient rite. Voluntary sacrifices!! The offerings of Pious hearts". . . 'If God requires it, I will go through it again', was the exclamation of one of them at the conclusion of the ceremony, a remark indicative at once of religious zeal and manly resolution. . . We present these cases to your readers, and proudly demand that they be conspicuously enrolled in the annals of Judaism."

This not too uncommon occurrence of children being circumcised much later than the eighth day or not at all is addressed by Leeser in his hortatory response to the letter from Augusta. His remarks indicate quite clearly how serious the problem was for Jews in mid nineteenth century America. Leeser addressing himself to the entire Jewish community, but especially to the parents of uncircumcised children pleads with them as follows:(32)

"We recommend the above cheering incident, illustrating the influence of religious instruction upon the minds of the young, suggestive as it is of so many reflections to the earnest thought of all our readers. And should this article reach the eyes of those who have in violation of the law left their children uncircumcised (of which we regret to say there are several in this country) we would earnestly beg of them to reflect on the momentous omission of which they have been guilty. It is the privilege of every Jew to be initiated into the covenant of Israel;. . .We hardly know how to stop when we commence speaking of such a subject; but we

forbear at present; let the example speak, it is more eloquent than words; and perhaps 'a line may reach some obdurate hearts who would fly when a sermon is preached at them.' One word before we close: Let all our readers who are pious Israelites urge upon those whom they know to have neglected the law, to remedy the omission without delay. Friendly conversation may do a great deal; it has done good at all times."

Hortatory remarks alone would not be enough to induce Jewish parents to circumcise their male offspring. As we have already demonstrated, the lack of qualified mohelim proved a real obstacle to the fulfillment of the mitzvah. To this end, Wise in response to two communications he received from Jewish physicians suggests, "that all Jewish physicians, by all means, should learn and practice the operation. The Rabbi in any place must be able to impart the ritual portion to any intelligent physician, in a few lessons; let the Rabbi recite the ritual portions, if the operator cannot or does not wish to do it; at any rate let the mohelim be physicians only. The few old mohelim we have are men only and will not live forever; and we do not want that anybody, who likes, perform so important an operation on a human being."(33)

The problem of not having a local mohel even prompted some to place advertisements in the Jewish periodicals of the time.(34) In most cases, however, those who were determined to fulfill the mitzvah did so at the risk of great financial peril, paying exorbitant fees to a mohel who may have travelled as much as 1,200 miles in order to perform the rite.(35) The financial burden upon those who could afford it or the embarrassment of not being able to afford it, posed

a great threat to the continuation of brit milah in the nineteenth century. Taking Wise's proposal one step further of training Jewish doctors to be mohelim, Isaac Leeser at the behest of a concerned reader in Circleville, Ohio calls for the establishment of a covenant society which would enable mohalim to be sent in all directions at minimal cost. This idea of a covenant society, the call for the first of its kind on American soil, would find its fulfillment many years later in a modified form in the milah board of the New York Kehillah, formed in 1916. Closer to Leeser's call for a national network of mohelim is the nascent Reform Brit Milah Board, which will be discussed in the next chapter. In the meantime I focus the reader's attention on the plaintive letter(36) from Circleville, Ohio and the accompanying response by Leeser. In these note the tone of urgency in Leeser's words, reflective of the seriousness of the situation. Note Leeser's emphasis on the need for a "competent" mohel as well as the need for an affordable one. The letter and the response are indeed indicative of the situation with respect to Jewish ritual circumcision in mid-nineteenth century America.

Dear Editor: . . . you must be aware of the rite of circumcision (one of our principal commandments), is one which very few of our co-religionists will neglect, although living far away from where a mohel can be had, attended as it often is with difficulties and heavy expenses, which are at times enormously high and exacted without regard to propriety; since I have myself often heard that men who were called on to leave their homes for two, three, or four days, have dared to charge forty, fifty, or even one hundred dollars, and that not unfrequently they receive

such enormous sums from people even who are actually not able, but who have religious zeal enough, and are too proud to refuse payment at any sacrifice. Might it be the case that some of our bretheren, to avoid exposing their inability to pay, will neglect their duty regarding circumcision? It seems certain that mischief must come out of such a state of things.

I had the pleasure to speak with quite a number of our bretheren on this subject, and all seem to agree that something should be done. Could not a society be established whose object it should be to collect annually sufficient money to pay a certain number of mohelim in the different cities of the U.S. an ample annual salary, so that they could afford to go to any place in the country and perform the rite of circumcision without making such heavy charges?

Leeser writes in his response:

"One of our subscribers residing at Circleville, a country town in the state of Ohio, where there resides but few Israelites, has sent us the adjoining letter. It is unnecessary to dilate on the importance of the subject, and the urgent necessity which exists to enable all parents, whether rich or poor, whether they reside in town or country, to initiate their sons at the earliest possible period into the covenant of Abraham and still the question must often obtrude itself on those who live isolated in the interior of the country, how they are to obtain a competent mohel, and at such an expense they can afford; for not everyone has the means to give a fee of fifty to one hundred dollars, besides defraying the costs of travelling. It strikes us therefore that in order to promote a great good, it would be well to form the Israelites living in the country into a covenant society, which such an organization as would enable them to send pious and competent men in all directions, when their services should be needed, with the least possible expense to the parents. Interested persons address the editor of the Occident, or Mr. Nathan Hirsch, Circleville, Ohio."

The Social Challenge to Brit Milah

Throughout the nineteenth century ritual circumcision not only proved problematic in the practical realm, but was challenged as well, concerning its actual religious and or moral validity in the intellectual realm. There were those who purported that brit milah as a rite among the Jews had lost its warrant for continuance. In two such instances it will be demonstrated that those who opposed brit milah and favored its abolition from Judaism did so because of its "primitive or barbaric" appearance. At a time when Jews were seeking to move into the mainstream of American life in order to be like all other Americans, coupled with the non-practice of routine circumcision for medically sound purposes among non-Jews, great pressure to dispose with the rite was brought to bear by some of the "more enlightened" Jews. In one such appeal Mr. Joseph Loeb of Little Rock, Arkansas published a twenty-one page pamphlet under the auspices of the Jewish Spectator, a Jewish journal in Memphis, Tennessee, entitled, "Circumcision, an Essay Published in the Jewish Spectator." In this pseudoapologetic attack, for as the author writes, "Nor is it the purpose to antagonize any custom or ceremony that binds to the pioneer days of Judaism," Mr. Loeb describes brit milah as a "barbarous excrescence of Judaism that fulfills no essential purpose of Judaism, neither as a religious or moral factor.(37) Mr. Loeb goes on to define circumcision as "physical mutilation" of the body part that

has no warrant for continuance.

Responding to this genteel attack on circumcision, Isaac Mayer Wise writes in the Israelite:(38)

"That neither the pamphlet nor the journal will influence any Israelite to abandon the Abrahamic rite in his family we are quite sure. Any observance deeply rooted in the consciousness of all Israel, and has been so these thousands of years as a religious duty, a matter of conscience, and national distinction, a sign of the covenant, the election of Abraham and his seed forever--such an observance, however foolish, superfluous or even cruel it may appear to the unconcerned reasoner, cannot be reasoned away in twenty pages octavo; the siege engine is too ridiculously small to batter down the giant tower which withstood all attacks these 3,000 years."

In another instance of an editor feeling compelled to defend the practice of brit milah, Isaac Leeser asserts in February, 1846 that "Jews practice circumcision, not because they wish to be unsociable or to be in contradiction to the world, but because Jews feel there is something sacred in their calling, that they are in possession of the truth, and because they are living witnesses to the existence of God who is powerful to save and whose deeds are true and faithful."(39)

Obviously Leeser is responding to the unsociability and unpopularity of circumcision in his day. To be circumcised in 1846, meant that one was different, set apart, and perhaps even eccentric. Although more and more doctors were beginning to expound on the medical benefits of such a procedure,(40) the medical option was by no means popular among the masses at that time.(41) To be circumcised was a sure sign of one's Jewish identity, something that one

hundred years later could hardly be taken with the same assurance.

Especially among the reformers, where a heated debate raged for many years concerning the issue of milath guerim (the requirement of circumcision for proselytes), there was some question whether milah in all cases should be abolished. Repeatedly Wise was forced to clarify his position in the Israelite. On one occasion Wise wrote: "One tells us, if milath guerim be dispensed with, then, milah is dispensible, and the "rite" ought to be done away with. If the Bible was not in the way, this argument might do. . .We want it understood, however, that the abolition of milath guerim has nothing in the world to do with milah for the sons of Abraham.(42)

In fact on another occasion Wise refers to brit milah as one of the "pillars of Judaism" in which the ritual serves as a sign from the diety that Israel will "never be extinguished from the nomenclature of nations, however, numerous and fierce its enemies or its own internal feuds or destructive conduct might be."(43)

Whereas Leaser and Wise homilectically defended the value of brit milah as a divine sign of the covenant never to be abolished, the real battle over the continuance of this ancestral rite was fought in the homes of Jews throughout the country wherever they may have resided. The vituperative nature of this controversy over ritual circumcision is brought home in an article that appeared in the San Francisco

Jewish weekly known as the Gleaner. The account first published in the Gleaner was picked up by and reported in the First American Hebrew weekly known as Ha-magid, which attaches a scathing editorial postscript to the published account. The account, obviously retold from a slanted point of view, reports the novel happening of a mother who secretly has her four sons circumcised because of her husband's opposition to the ceremony. The mohel is brought to court(44) by the irate father on the grounds that the mohel acted illegally in circumcising the children after the Biblically ordained eighth day after birth. The mohel is exonerated on grounds of having fulfilled his religious duty and the father is penalized by having to pay all court costs and legal fees. The following article, translated from the Hebrew, is included in full in order to afford the reader a taste of the editorial comments that punctuate the story. The biting remarks, attacking those "modern," "enlightened," Reform Jews "who are so wise in their own eyes," are indicative of the Orthodox community's opposition to ritual reform, occasioned by this bizarre story about brit milah. The incident, while noteworthy and of interest, is not significant; the attitudes of the editor as well as those attributed rightly or wrongly to the reformers is what is of great importance. These attitudes as they are played out in the controversy over milah in Reform Judaism will be the subject of our next chapter.

"Different News"

San Francisco: A Jewish weekly journal by the name of The Gleaner published an account in the aforementioned city stating that in that city a Jewish man was found who had not permitted his male children sired by him to be circumcised in the flesh of their foreskins. In all he had four boys, all of them remaining uncircumcised. In vain his wife shed many a tear before her husband, every time a male child was born to him, in order to do to the fruit of her womb according to the law of Moses and Israel. Her husband stubbornly turned a deaf ear to her cries and supplications saying, (as all those of this new cult of innovation among our people who are so wise in their own eyes) that a thing like this cannot possibly continue to be practiced in these modern times. And here his wife, a God-fearing woman, resolved to carry out her desire at the propitious hour against the will of her husband. When her husband was a long distance away from home, this woman of valor gathered up her courage and called upon a mohel to circumcise her four uncircumcised sons and entered them into the covenant of Abraham our father. When the father returned home he became incensed over the dispicable act (according to the opinion of the one inflamed with anger) and poured out his wrath upon his God-fearing wife and the anger that burned within him was also directed at the mohel, and he poured out his anger to the judges and also towards the men who were in his house at the time that his sons were circumcised. Therein he found a pretext to assail the mohel, saying to the judges that his sons were circumcised not according to the laws of Israel, for according to Rabbenu Tam they were obligated to be circumcised at eight days, and now days and years have passed; and it has been a great profanation of God's name on account of this wickedness that calls itself by the name of the enlightenment and the spirit of the new age. However, truthful words are forever established and shame has covered the face of this Reform Jew, for the judges adjudicated that the mohel acted according to the law and that his sons were not circumcised on the appointed day due to the fault of the father, who purposely and willfully interfered with the Jewish Law. They punished him by causing him to pay all the legal fees and court costs--up to this point this is from the article of the city stated above. From this it is shown how far this new Reform movement will lead our people astray. These are they who profane all that is holy and who sometimes destroy the peace of their

own homes on account of their false charges and who profane the name of God in public. All this is done in the name of honor which (in the opinion of the wayward ones) will inherit from the Christians warm acceptance in their ways. However, a double shame they will inherit. Behold, they will be neither Christians nor Jews, and they will be accounted for as nothing."(45)

Summary

The history of brit milah in this country between 1733-1900 is one replete with practical problems related to the actual performance of the mitzvah and controversial attacks on the value of the rite itself. Despite the difficulties brought to light in this chapter of procuring the services of a competent, affordable, Jewish circumciser, and despite the heated arguments that would flare up from time to time concerning its warrant for continuance in an "enlightened age" and despite the socio-religious distinctiveness that circumcision branded in the flesh at a time when the Jewish desire to acculturate was great, we must not conclude erroneously that great numbers of Jews remained uncircumcised. For while it is true that circumcision on the Biblically ordained eighth day was but a privilege that few could enjoy due to lack of sufficient numbers of mohelim, most Jews of that period, especially the majority who lived in the major cities of the day, were able to secure the services of a mohel, or at the very least a Jewish doctor(46) who could perform the procedure.

That brit milah in this country survived admirably during this early period in our country's history, at a time

before everybody in America routinely circumcised their sons,(47) is indicative of how deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Jewish people this ancient rite remains. In fact, one hundred and twenty years hence, Reform Judaism will have established its own Reform Brit Milah Board for the training and certification of Reform Mohelim. This intriguing evolution of the history of Brit Milah within Reform Judaism, will be the subject of our next chapter.

NOTES

(1) I Kings 19:10, 14.
"Ki Azvu V'Ritecha B'nei Yisrael"

(2) Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak) 1160? - 1235, writes in his commentary: "Uv'drash, V'Ritecha, She-Batlu May-hem brit milah". Also see Pirke de R. Eliezer, Chapter 29 end, and The Zohar 93a.

(3) I Maccabees 1:11-15.
". . . They also submitted themselves to uncircumcision and repudiated the holy covenant: Yea they joined themselves to the gentiles, and sold themselves to do evil."

(4) This contemporary manifestation of the controversial issue was first reported in the Northern California Jewish Bulletin on April 26, 1985 in an article entitled "Rabbi's wife sues to block future britot" pp. 1, 34, 35. The Ballonoff suit was paralleled by another suit by a doctor's wife who also filed a (similar) suit. See Chapter Three for a full treatment of the subject.

(5) The Jewish community in the colonies numbered approximately 2,500 in 1776.
Learsi, Rufus, The Jews in America, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., (New York, 1972), p. 31.

(6) The Israelite (Cincinnati), Vol. II, No. 19
(November 4, 1864), p. 4.

(7) See accompanying Appendix containing full details.
Document Number One. American Jewish Archives.

(8) The Occident (Philadelphia), Vol. I (April, 1843),
p. 382.

(9) The names of the first Jewish settlers who arrived in Savannah on July 11, 1733, of whom is included Benjamin Sheftall.

(10) In fact the first Jews are known to have landed in New York in 1654, fleeing persecution in Brazil. Shearith Israel was already established in 1730, before the Sheftalls even left England.

(11) Various known as Barent, Barnet, or even Baer Jacobs.

(12) The data is derived from the photostatic copies provided by the American Jewish Archives and the analysis thereof by Malcom Stern in his article: "Two Jewish functionaries in colonial Pennsylvania," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 24-51.

(13) See Document Number Two in Appendix.

(14) Lewis Allen, Jr. (1793-1841) was president of Mikveh Israel from 1834 until his death.

(15) We must assume that this Jacob Mordecai acquired the circumcision record from Barnard Jacobs' only son Solomon, a fellow resident of Richmond, who then returned it to its place of origin in Philadelphia. Stern, Malcom, "Two Jewish Functionaries in Colonial Pennsylvania," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 29.

(16) See Document Number Three in Appendix.

(17) The census of 1790 for that commonwealth shows approximately 250 Jewish men, women, and children.

(18) Backman, F., Circumcision book, American Jewish Archives, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1845-1864).

(19) Stern, Malcom, "Two Jewish Functionaries in Colonial Pennsylvania," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 31.

(20) See Document Number Three in Appendix.

(21) See Document Number Four in Appendix.

(22) See Document Number Six in Appendix.

(23) Zimmerman, Frank, "A letter and memorandum on Ritual Circumcision, 1772," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. 44, No. 1, p. 58.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Kiddushin 29a.

(26) Ezekiel 16:6.

(27) The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 16, No. 7 (August 20, 1869), p. 4.

(28) Avodah Sota 26b.

(29) The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 27, No. 7 (August 18, 1876), p. 4.

(30) The Occident, (Philadelphia), Vol. 10, No. 1, (April, 1852), p. 52.

(31) The Occident, (Philadelphia), Vol. 5, No. 1 (October, 1847), pp. 361-363.

(32) Ibid.

(33) The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 27, No. 9, (September 1, 1876), p. 4.

(34) The advertisement placed in The Occident was also printed in the French periodical Archives Israelites, January, 1853, p. 179.

(35) -C'est dans les Etats-unis, Province de Ohio, Que vient d'etre fait le plus long voyage dans le but d'accomplir la premiere des prescriptions religieuses celle de la circoncision. Un mohel de Cleveland recoit, par depeche telegraphique, l'invitation de venir circoncire un enfant ne aux grands-lacs, a la distance 1200 milles, malgre l'intemperie de la saison, la neige et la glace, il se met immediatement en route pour obeir a la loi du Seigneur. Il va sans dire que la renumeration etrait hors de cause. Archives Israelites, 1867, p. 574.

(36) The Occident, (Philadelphia), Vol. 12, No. 3, (June, 1854), pp. 153-154.

(37) The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 37, No. 46, (May 14, 1891), p. 4.

(38) Ibid.

(39) The Occident, (Philadelphia), Vol. 3, No. 11, (February, 1846), p. 530.

(40) The medico-surgical society at Leeds called for a law making circumcision, one to two weeks after a boys birth generally obligatory. The same was adopted in the International Congress of Paris, in which some of the most prominent scientists of the age were seated.

The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 34, No. 40, (March 30, 1888), p. 4.

Similarly, according to Mr. A. Franz, author of Das Buch der Religionen published in 1889, "The majority of medical authorities arrived at the conclusion that circumcision is of the greatest importance in dietetic as well as in hygienic respect. They have proved conclusively that there are a large number of different diseases against which the operation is the only preventive and the best method of cure."

The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 37, No. 18, (October 30, 1890), p. 4.

(41) Professor Menassein writes, "Whenever circumcision will be enforced by the law of the land in all civilized countries - which we do not expect to be done next year--..." The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 37, No. 14, (October 2, 1890), p. 4.

(42) The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 37, No. 14, (October 2, 1890), p. 4.

(43) The Israelite, (Cincinnati), Vol. 29, No. 51, (June 22, 1883), p. 4.

(44) Ironically in the same city of San Francisco, 120 years later, a mohel is being sued, this time by an irate mother, who claims that routine ritual circumcision has no medical basis and should be deemed as an assault on her son. For more on the subject see chapter four.

(45) Ha-magid, Vol. 9, No. 5, (February 1, 1865), p. 36. See Document Number Seven for the Hebrew Account.

(46) The American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati hold circumcision books for a number of large cities dating to that period including Philadelphia, New York, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and San Francisco.

(47) Estimated male circumcision rates in the United States show a steady increase from five per cent of the male population in 1870 to eighty-five per cent in 1979. Wallerstein, Edward, "Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy," Springer Publishing Company, (New York, 1980), p. 482.

CHAPTER ONE

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

1. Personal record of Benjamin Sheftall concerning Savannah Jewry's beginnings. Sheftall Family Files, American Jewish Archives.
2. Front page of Barnard Jacobs circumcision book American Jewish Archives.
3. Left: Blessings recited at a Brit Milah.
Right: The first six entries in Barnard Jacobs' circumcision book. (AJA)
4. Postscript by Jacob Mordecai at the end of Barnard Jacob's circumcision book. (AJA)
5. List of places and years recorded in the Barnard Jacob's circumcision book. (AJA)
6. Text of letter from Abram I Abrahams to Moses Seixas dated June 1, 1772. (2 pages) Photocopied from Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 60-63.
7. Hebrew account of man who sues a San Franciscan mohel in 1865. Ha-magid, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 36.
8. A page from F. Backman's Circumcision book 1845-1864. (AJA)

CHAPTER TWO

The History of Brit Milah in Reform Judaism

Introduction

"Belief in God, circumcision, study of Torah, praying, observing Shabbat and holidays, performing such mitzvot as being charitable and being concerned for our fellow human beings are but some of the minimum standards of behavior required of a Reform Jew."(1) This is the response of Rabbi Bernard M. Zlotowitz in his answer to the question, "Are Reform Jews required to follow specific forms of religious behavior?"

Today in 1985 this rather innocent looking statement of minimum Reform behavior requirements, which lists circumcision along with belief in God as primary elements at the essence of Reform Judaism, might be passed over with nary a critical thought. This would not have been the case however, one hundred and forty years ago when there were those within German Reform who sought to abolish the age-old rite of circumcision. The juxtaposition of the primitive tribal custom of removing the foreskin with belief in God and being charitable as basic Reform requirements would have seemed like an incongruity of the greatest proportions to some of the early Reformers. Even of greater incredulity to some of those daring leaders of the past would be the

announcement of the establishment of a Reform Brit Milah Board whose aim is to train and certify its own Reform mohelim, yet this is indeed what has transpired in the last 140 odd years.

This chapter will set out to explore the controversial history of Brit Milah in Reform Judaism. What was the spark that gave rise to the controversy? What were the responses of the early reformers and why? How was the issue of circumcision treated in the conferences and synods of the fledgling Reform movement in Germany and later in America? How has Brit-Milah been treated by individual Reform rabbis as indicated in Rabbinic catechisms and in congregational guides to ritual observance? Finally, what gave rise to the establishment of the Reform Brit Milah Board and what are its goals?

Brit Milah, perhaps more than any other Jewish rite of passage, has been the subject of bitter controversy marked by highly charged emotional debates.(2) To be sure the Reform movement in Judaism has voiced its opinion in the ongoing debate. The following is a record of how that opinion was voiced and shared among individual reformers from the earliest days of Reform up to the present.

The Reform Society of Frankfurt 1842 - 1845:

The Spark That Gave Rise to the Controversy

"Circumcision is not binding either as a religious act or a symbol."(3) This most controversial plank in the original five point platform of the Frankfurt Verein der Reformfreunde or Frankfurt Reform Society shook the Frankfurt Jewish community from center to circumference.(4) This first religiously radical grouping to arise within German Judaism(5) was constituted entirely by laymen with the exception of one rabbi, Rabbi Mendel Hess, the Landrabbiner or chief Rabbi of Saxe Weimar, who defended the society in his newspaper Der Israelit des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. The group composed of physicians, lawyers, intellectuals and businessmen met for the first time for a series of meetings in September 1842. Aside from Hess the only other notable figure seems to have been Theodore Creizenach, a twenty-four year old poet, scholar and teacher at the liberal Jewish Philanthropin school. Although the majority of the group seemed to have favored the abolition of circumcision as a requirement for male membership in the Jewish community,(6) it subsequently revised its original five point declaration(7) deleting the reference to circumcision. They did so for they feared that the specific reference might cause some would be supporters to back off because either they did not agree with the radical stand or were afraid to be seen as lending support to a group that publicly disavowed the venerable rite. Despite, however, the revised three

point platform(8) in which circumcision was listed only as an example of the non-authority of Talmudic legislation rather than a formal principle and which spoke in more general terms of a return to pure Mosaism and a curtailment of the Talmudic hegemony, the society nonetheless became known to its Orthodox opponents as the Anti-circumcision Society.(9) The Reform Society argued that circumcision is of pre-Mosaic origin, commanded to Abraham not Moses. They noted that circumcision is mentioned only once in Mosaic law and not at all in the book of Deuteronomy. They point out that Moses did not circumcise his own son and that the generation of the desert died uncircumcised. Finally they abhorred the rite because it was particularistic and clanish and because it provided a rite of initiation for sons with none to equal it for daughters.

On January 21, 1843, The Frankfurter Journal printed a brief notice in which the society's position on circumcision was clearly articulated. This then spread through the German press and was copied in the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums. The notice read as follows:

"A new Jewish sect has been founded here under the direction of Dr. Creizenach. The supporters--and they already amount to a considerable number--do not adhere to any Jewish Talmudic ceremony or law, do not look upon circumcision--either as a religiously or as a civilly obliging act; and believe that the messiah has come in the form of the German fatherland. The supporters of this sect are increasing daily and are already circulating lists outside Frankfurt."(10)

This view concerning circumcision was transformed from

declaration to deed when two fathers refused to circumcise their sons on the basis of the society's declaration.(11) When the Reform Society decided to publicly defend these two men in their resolve not to circumcise their sons, almost instantaneously the initial anxiety of the more moderate Reformers grew to outright condemnation of the society. Despite the sudden outrage, however, neither the more moderate Reformers nor the Orthodox paid much attention to the radical group. For while it is true that agitation over the circumcision question flared up from time to time, the issue was plainly academic. That is up until February 8, 1843. From that time onward the matter was far from academic; it was now to become a stormy debate over the question, "Who is a Jew?"

Before February 8, 1843, all citizens of Frankfurt were required to either circumcise or baptize their newly born male children. Although religious observance was not enforced upon Jews by the civil authorities, circumcision had been viewed as an obligatory prerequisite for membership in the Jewish community. Since Frankfurt's Jews were classified as "Jewish citizens", a category which required membership in the Jewish community, circumcision had essentially been required of all Jewish males. On February 8, 1843, in reaction to a number of infant fatalities due to poorly executed circumcisions, the health department of Frankfurt issued a new regulation governing the Jewish practice of circumcising all newly born male infants on the eighth day

after birth. The sanitary bureau of Frankfurt promulgated a measure, placing the circumcision of children under the direct supervision of the sanitary office. To this measure few objected. It was intended only to protect the health of the infant by regulating the process of circumcision. Ironically, however, the provocative section of the law which gave rise to the bitterly fought controversy which would rage for years, was merely a summarizing statement of what was now required, and was not legislative in nature. What ensued was a hotly contested battle over the merits of circumcision as a valid religious rite within Judaism. The clause that gave rise to the controversy began, "Jewish citizens and residents in so far as they wish to have their children circumcised. . ."(12) The civil authorities had wittingly or unwittingly declared with this clause that the circumcision of the Jewish infant is an optional act, subject to the discretion of the parents. Members of the Reform Society interpreted the clause to mean that the rite of circumcision was now to be performed or omitted at the discretion of the father. A father who wished not to circumcise his son, but still desired to raise him Jewishly and to be registered as such, now had that privilege. Circumcision, at least as far as the civil authorities were concerned, was no longer binding for membership in the Jewish community. Individual religious freedom, at least in this case, now devolved upon the individual, and no longer rested with civil or religious authorities. Even without circumcision, rabbis were forced

to list the names of Jewish children, who were considered as such by the parents, in the registry of Jewish citizens. Despite the repeated pleas to the Frankfurt Senate, Rabbi Solomon Abraham Trier, the aged Orthodox Chief Rabbi in Frankfurt, failed to convince the civil authorities to issue a declaration correcting any "misunderstanding" that could arise from the decree. Trier argued that circumcision was not a commandment that could be made dependent upon the free choice of the individual. Below find one of the numerous letters written by Trier to the Frankfurt Senate:

"A Jewish citizen in this community [Frankfurt], failed to have his newly born, healthy child circumcised. As soon as I knew of this, I tried every persuasive means to keep the father from this open breach with Judaism. But the goddess of fashion had done its work in the name of "enlightenment" and "higher spiritual direction," and its supporters were determined to fight the battle under her proud banner. Neither fatherly admonitions nor clear, simple reason availed against these so-called convictions. Now the long suspected secret intent of the so-called Reform Association, which had flourished in the dark, has come into the open through this public manifestation against membership in our faith. The tendency of this Association is now exposed all too obviously before everyone's eyes, for it desires to eliminate an undisputed Mosaic law, claiming that it is antiquated in the edifice of modern religion.

Consequently, on August 4, 1843, I did my duty and informed the illustrious Senate of the fact that a local member of the Jewish congregation, despite my insistent admonitions, would not agree to have his newly born child submitted to the religious act of circumcision, and I added that this was equivalent to a formal separation from the religious bond of our religious group. I said in my document: "If it is a generally known principle in our German fatherland that every subject must confess to one of the generally recognized religions in Germany and must do so in a visible ecclesiastical form, then the illustrious Senate cannot be indifferent in this matter. It cannot

allow that a Jewish subject is free to separate himself de facto from the Jewish religion, which is recognized by the state, without joining at the same time another recognized religious association. Otherwise, every person could arbitrarily form some religious system which would be in opposition to the Holy Bible and to all the teachings, laws, and customs which in the past we have recognized and followed." I closed with the request "that the illustrious Senate, in accordance with the law and present legal circumstances, would issue the correct decree, namely, that no child of Jewish parents may be admitted into the local Jewish association as Jewish coreligionist and Israelite citizen if he has not been circumcised." And I said that I looked forward with confidence to the illustrious Senate's decision."(13)

The Senate responded to Trier by claiming that "the ordinance in question in no way had the intention of annulling a Jewish Religious Law."(14) On another occasion when Trier requested that the Senate rule that an uncircumcised son not be recognized as Jewish by the community, the Senate, after a long delay, replied that it regretted that individual Jews might abandon the ancient rite and in so doing cause offense to the community, but that it could not take the action requested.(15)

According to Robert Liberles, whose doctoral dissertation focuses on Frankfurt Orthodoxy, the Senate's claim that it had no intention of abolishing a religious practice, but rather that the measure was introduced for reasons of health and safety, was only partly true. Liberles writes, "there was nothing innocent about the phrase, "Insofern sie wollen"---insofar as they desire---. It alludes to an individualism in religious practice that the Senate was now prepared to accept. It may have "regretted" that the

actions of some individuals would cause discomfort to the community, but it would not enforce compliance with the traditional laws. Nor would it at this point uphold the rabbis' authority in religious matters."(16)

Liberles further demonstrates to his satisfaction that the specific wording of the ordinance as well as the irregular nature of the public pronouncement of such a minor ordinance was by no means innocent of ulterior motives. In fact he claims that the ordinance was at least in part the framing by one of the members of the Reform Society, that so-called "Anti-circumcision Society". According to Liberles one of the few members of the Reform Society who could be identified by name was the general practitioner and obstetrician, Dr. Schwarzschild, the same Dr. Schwarzschild who is listed in Dietz's Stammbuch of Frankfurt Jewry as a member of the medical board of the health department of Frankfurt, the same body responsible for the circumcision edict. Liberles writes, "However well justified the ruling had been for reasons of health, its wording was not the error of an uninvolved official."(17)

To be sure, whether or not a firm link can be verified between the intentions of the radical Reform Society and the Health Department edict is a matter of conjecture. On the other hand, the turbulent debate that the ruling engendered is easily documented.

After repeated abortive attempts to convince the Senate of the danger of the new health edict, even to the point of

arguing that the uncircumcised Jew will no longer be able to swear by the "more Judaico", (18) Trier turned his efforts toward his colleagues. He addressed a communication to the Rabbis of Europe asking for their opinion of the radical Reform Society and upon the significance of circumcision. In his address to the Rabbis of Europe he asks for an opinion of the new sect and invites suggestions as to what measures should be taken against those fathers who refuse to have their sons circumcised through frivolity or unbelief. The communication was sent to eighty rabbis. Forty-one responses were received and twenty-eight were printed in a volume edited by Trier. The volume entitled, Rabbinical Responses on Circumcision included responses in German and Hebrew by the following Rabbis of Europe: Samson Raphael Hirsch of Emden; Nathan Marcus Adler of Hanover; Felsenstein of Hanau; Lazar Horwitz of Vienna; Jacob Aaron Ettlinger of Altona; S. Ullmann of Crefeld; M. Wetzlar of Gudensberg; Adler of Oberndorf; Samuel Hirsch of Luxembourg; Seligmann Bar Bamberger of Wurzburg; A. Wechsler of Schwabach; H. Aub of Munich; S. D. Luzzatto of Padua; I. N. Mannheimer of Vienna; L. Adler of Kissingen; S. L. Rapoport of Prague; A. A. Wolff of Copenhagen; B. H. Auerbach of Darmstadt; B. Levi of Giessen; J. Bamberger of Worms; A. Sutro of Munster; J. Lowenstein of Gailingen; S. Furst of Heidelberg; H. Traub of Manheim; Wassermann of Muhringen; L. Schott of Randegg; J. Mecklenburg of Konigsburg; and H. Schwarz of Hurben.

Luzzatto, Schwarz, Mecklenburg, Sutro and Rapoport

composed their responses in Hebrew. All of the twenty-eight printed responses take a strong stand against the Reform Society and its stated position on circumcision. In fact, Trier, in an attempt to win unanimous condemnation of the radical group invited and received opinions from men of all shades of thought. Samuel Hirsch the Reformer, Isaac Noah Mannheimer the Conservative, and Jacob Aaron Ettlinger the ultra-orthodox, all clasp hands in agreement upon the question at hand. They practically all agree that an Israelite who denies the obligatory character of the command to circumcise, and neglects to have his son circumcised on the grounds that he does not consider essential to Judaism, is to be considered a denier of the divine law and a destroyer of the eternal covenant.

Samson Raphael Hirsch, in the first of the 28 rabbinical responses collected by Trier, states, "that by such declarations and ads, they (the members of the Reform Society) have cut themselves off from Judaism, and the rabbi of the community to which they belong must treat them no longer as members of his community; they are apostates (mumrim)."(20)

N. M. Adler, Rabbi in Hanover, concurs with Hirsch and concludes that, "one who disregards the command is an apostate, and incurs all the sad consequences which law ordains in the case of apostates; he must be looked upon as excluded from the Congregation of Israel."(21)

S. D. Luzzatto of Padua also considered the members of

the Society as heretics and deniers of the Mosaic Law. Unlike the others, however, he exhibits a conciliatory spirit. Despite his strong stand against the Reform Society in which he declares that no congregational office or honor be bestowed on its members, or any gift or offering be received from them, he counsels leniency with respect to an indigent denier of the Law. He writes: "if he happens to be a poor man and in need of sustenance, it is a mitzvah to be compassionate and to give to him, for just as circumcision is a sign embedded in our flesh, similarly compassion and generosity is a sign fixed in our souls.(22)

In a rather interesting twist of Talmudic logic Luzzatto further urges leniency, even to one who refuses to be circumcised on account of the difficulty and or fear of the procedure. Luzzatto writes: "That if an uncircumcised child reaches the age of 20 and is still not circumcised, despite the efforts of the Bet Din (Religious Court) in informing him of his Jewish status and obligation to be circumcised, then his fate is the same as the father's. However, if the son rejects the ways of his father, observes and upholds all the laws of the Torah for many years, and says to us and commits to writing that if he has sons he will circumcise them, and only a lack of courage to undergo the procedure prevents him from doing so,. . .then it is my opinion to accept him and not turn him away." Luzzatto then bases his opinion on the Rabbinical leniency which allows for a younger brother not to be obligated to circumcision when an older sibling died on

account of his circumcision. "This," he concludes, "is how we should treat one who has knocked at the gates of repentance and only the difficulty of this mitzvah prevents him from fulfilling it."(23)

Luzzatto further urges that just as words of appeasement must first be offered to Israel's enemies as commanded in the Torah, so much the more so to our Israelite bretheren. Even if they have strayed from the proper path, it is our obligation to address them with words of truth and peace.(24)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, taking a hard line approach is the Viennese preacher, Isaac Noah Mannheimer. Mannheimer who had taken the part of Reform in the "Hamburg prayerbook controversy", this time sided with the orthodox. He asserts that the refusal to have a child circumcised is equivalent to a renunciation of the covenant of God; he declares also that should such a case occur in his congregation, he would not admit the boy to any Jewish function, would not register him as a Jew, would not confirm nor marry him, nor permit him to be buried in a Jewish cemetery; in Austria no Jewish child is registered unless circumcised.(25)

Sentiments such as those extracted above run consistently through Trier's volume. As expected the collected letters printed by Trier indicate the indignation and wrath of 28 European Rabbis. Of more interest, however, are the 13 other letters also received by Trier which were not included in the volume. We know, in fact, of at least

one letter which took exception to Trier's condemnation of the Reform Society, whose response was suppressed because of the difference of his views with those of the Rabbi of Frankfurt. This was the response of Rabbi Elias Grunebaum which was published in Hess' newspaper.(26)

Ultimately despite Trier's valiant efforts, by the end of 1844 four sons remained uncircumcised.(27) By the same token, however, the revolutionary thrust of the Reform Society which had rocked Europe for three years, had all but completely dissipated. The first religiously radical grouping to arise within German Judaism had proved to be a tiny evanescent phenomenon. In the end, neither Trier and his pro circumcision cohorts nor the Reform Society and the government edict proved completely victorious. Trier had indeed garnered the support of Europe's finest Rabbis in condemning the Society and in upholding the venerable rite, but in the end he was unable to convince the Frankfurt Senate to revoke the edict which for the first time allowed for individual fathers to decide for themselves whether to circumcise their sons or not to and still raise them as Jews.(28) On the other hand, whereas the Reform Society could be seen as having at least agitated for religious individualism, we must conclude that this was an idea whose time had come.(29) With respect to the circumcision question, which perhaps more than anything else spelled the Society's demise, it should be noted that circumcision among the Jewish masses, with few exceptions, continued unabated.

The Reform Society despite its truncated stormy existence aroused many leading Jewish thinkers of the time to consider or reconsider their views concerning brit milah. Some chose to share their opinions publicly, while others revealed their thoughts privately. Among them were a number of the early reformers, who even though they chose not to identify with the radical platform of the Frankfurt group, voiced their abhorrence for the ancient rite of circumcision.

The Response of the Early Reformers
in Germany and America 1842 - 1892

Before turning to the Rabbinic response of these Reformers, it is important to note the reaction of one who was not a religious reformer but rather a champion of Jewish political equality in Germany, Gabriel Riesser (1806-1863). After the Reform Society chose to remove the plank in their platform that promulgated the non-binding nature of circumcision, Reisser wrote in disappointment:

"This repugnant ceremony (circumcision), insofar as it is to be regarded as religious, must thoroughly disgust every sensibility, as much as Talmud and Messiah put together. . ."(30)

Despite Reisser's rebuke, the Reform Society did not restore the rejection of circumcision to their platform. Nevertheless, we bear witness to the expression of private sentiments vis-a-vis circumcision, evinced by the Society's anti-circumcision stance.

The Society's ill-fated stance on circumcision also elicited sympathetic responses from none other than Abraham

Geiger (1810-1860), and Samuel Holdheim (1806 - 1860) two of the pioneering forces who shaped nineteenth century European Reform Judaism. Although Geiger and Holdheim differed in how they expressed their views, (the former intended to keep his sentiments private whereas the later published his views) both took up strong ground against brit milah.

Geiger took up the pen to express his disappointment to his long-time correspondent and friend Leopold Zunz in response to Zunz's stated opinion on circumcision. Zunz in a pamphlet on circumcision dated 1844, warns against "church discipline" and so-called penalties for heresy. He recognizes as an Israelite him who has not been circumcised and would not debar him from the use of the Synagogue. His characteristic words are: "A Jew who is uncircumcised is an uncircumcised Jew." Despite this attitude, he regarded circumcision, not as a ceremony, but rather as an institution which belongs to the essence of Judaism. Zunz wrote on the subject:

"God forbid that we should tamper with this precept, which was in past times, and is still at the present day, revered as sacred by the whole Jewish people. Who will dare abrogate with impunity this holy rite?"(31)

In a letter addressed to Zunz dated March 19, 1845 Geiger responds to Zunz, and in so doing reveals in writing his great disdain for circumcision.

"I was not in agreement with the Reform-Verein (Reform Society). Its adherents were not clear as to the goals they

sought to pursue, nor were they sufficiently sincere in their pronouncements, and instead of choosing a more circumspect approach to the masses and refraining from such leaps and bounds, they elected to attack the rite of circumcision which was still considered the very nerve fiber of Judaism. . . on the other hand, I must admit that I cannot find it within me to take so decided a stand in favor of circumcision, simply because it is, and has ever been, a time-honored practice. The fact remains that it is a barbaric gory rite which fills the infant's father with fear and subjects the new mother to harmful emotional strain. The sense of sacrifice, which in days long past lent an aura of consecration to this ceremony, has long since vanished from our midst; nor is it so brutal a thought deserving of perpetuation. True, in olden days religious sentiment may well have clung to it; at present, however, its only foundations are habit and fear, and we surely have no desire to dedicate temples to either."(32)

Clearly Geiger states that the venerable rite which he acknowledges is at the "nerve fiber of Judaism" is no longer deserving of perpetuation. Although Geiger disputed the Reform Society's methods, he sympathized with their aims. Circumcision, so he thought, no longer possessed religious value and therefore had lost its warrant for existence in the religion of Israel.

Whereas Geiger expressed his views privately in a correspondence, Holdheim on the other hand issued a pamphlet entitled, Circumcision Viewed Religiously and

Dogmatically.(33) In this thought-provoking essay Holdheim considers the subject at length from three points.

1. Is circumcision of such great importance for Judaism that a child, born of Jewish parents but not circumcised, cannot be considered as belonging to Judaism?
2. Is the father, who neglects the circumcision of his son, or he, who, though not circumcised when a child, neglects the performance of this act in later years, to be considered an Israelite?
3. What have the Jewish religious authorities to do in such cases of neglect or circumcision; can they directly or indirectly interfere in the matter; have they the right--where they have the power--to enforce the circumcision or to cause the authorities of the state to enforce it?

Holdheim ingeniously demonstrates from Genesis 17:14 that all those Rabbis, who see in this passage that circumcision holds the same position for the Jew as baptism does for the Christian, were grossly mistaken. He argues, "for if circumcision is the condition of allegiance to Judaism, how can he, who, born of Jewish parents, neglects the same, be threatened with the penalty of extermination for this transgression, when the whole ceremony concerns Jews only? In other words how can such a one be called a "destroyer of the covenant" when he did not yet belong to the covenant at all until he had been circumcised?"(34)

With this argument, Holdheim supports the Frankfurt Reform Society's position claiming that it is not the circumcision, but the fact of being of Jewish parentage which makes one Jewish, as far as Jewish law is concerned.

Holdheim further points out that "it is strange that Moses speaks only once of the Abrahamic circumcision, not even mentioning it in the Ten Commandments; fixing no civil penalty for its neglect in the penal code; while the Sabbath is mentioned dozens of times as a sign of the covenant." (35) Holdheim further asserts that even the Talmud considers the uncircumcised Jew still a Jew, (36) proving to his satisfaction that circumcision is merely a ceremony like many others. That is to say that if one neglects to take up the lulav and etrog, also a biblically ordained command, one still remains a Jew and is permitted to be called to the Torah and retains all other Jewish privileges. Holdheim goes on to refute the following arguments that speak of the special significance of brit milah in relation to other commandments. Holdheim argues as follows:

"Those who claim that the fact that circumcision can be performed on the Sabbath is proof of its higher significance have forgotten that the sacerdotal and sacrificial rites were also performed on the Sabbath. Does this then also prove the higher significance of animal sacrifice? Would the Reformers and moderates such as S. Hirsch and I. N. Mannheimer call for the restoration of the sacrificial cult because it too was performed on the Sabbath?"

The argument that during the Syrian persecutions the Jews became martyrs for circumcision, proves no greater importance for the ceremony, as they also became martyrs for the dietary and other laws. The antiquity of the ceremony,

claims Holdheim, also proves nothing, as it was practiced among other oriental nations long before it was instituted in Israel.

With regard to the third question he answered with a decisive negative; the individual's freedom of conscience may not be tampered with by the application of force. To prove his point, Holdheim sarcastically asks of Mannheimer and his pro-circumcision cohorts whether he thinks that things were now the same as in the middle ages, whether he has forgotten that "a Jewish religious authority vested with worldly power, was thank God, a thing of the past." The Shulchan Aruch, the code of Jewish law, he argues, is a code which today has only archeological and antiquarian interest and which can no longer be made an object of practical jurisdiction. Holdheim further states:

"Do not condemn, do not accuse people of heresy, do not use force, if you do not want to be laughed at in your impotency as ignorant mountebanks. How can you dare to play the part of judges in the Judaism of today which recognizes only teachers? . . . and why is that just the question of circumcision which has so resistlessly animated you with hierarchical and inquisitional desires, that you seem to have lost all calm reflection? Do you not know that rabbinical jurisdiction in former times was empowered to enforce not only circumcision, but the practice of every other Jewish ceremony as well?"(37)

Holdheim finishes his scathing discourse by addressing

himself to the restrictions Mannheimer and others would enact against those fathers who opt not to circumcise their sons. He writes that such intolerance and attempted force in matters of conscience means a step backwards far behind Moses Mendelssohn, who has proven that the Mosaic penal had nothing to do with Mosaic religion; that compulsion is out of the question in matters of religious conviction. Holdheim continues saying:

"It is one thing to attack theoretically the "Frankfurter" and another thing to put into practice an opinion entertained against them, and to refuse them the privilege of registration and confirmation.

The mere fact that a person desires to be confirmed in the Jewish religion is in itself sufficient proof that he wants to be a Jew in his own way. . . . As to marriage, it is a well-known fact that a Rabbi is superfluous in this matter from the Jewish point of view. Refusal of marriage and burial smacks entirely too much of Catholicism. The Rabbis of the Talmud who even permitted non-Jews to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, "for the sake of peace," were far more in accord with the spirit of our humanitarian age than the half-reformers: Mannheimer, Sachs, Frankel and their associates."(38)

In summation, Holdheim declares that it is not circumcision, but rather birth that decides one's Jewish status. Circumcision he argues is not an all-essential

requirement in Judaism, hence both the father who neglected to circumcise his son, and the son who was not circumcised, are to be considered as Jews and accorded all rights and responsibilities appertaining to that status. To the third question, he answered with a decisive negative; the individual's freedom of conscience may not be tampered with by the application of force. The only mission of the Jewish teachers of religion is to teach.

At this point it is appropriate to consider whether Geiger or Holdheim was more radical in his stand concerning the rite of circumcision. Although Holdheim publicly disavowed the superior status given to this mitzvah by Jewish tradition, claiming that it is a rite like any other, and despite the fact that he argued vehemently against discriminating against uncircumcised Jews, we must acknowledge that Holdheim never advocated that the ritual be abandoned or replaced. In fact, quite the contrary is the case. According to Holdheim's theology, he ranks circumcision among the ceremonies which are not of a political-national nature, only to be revived with a return to a theocratic state in Palestine, but rather of the religious-universalistic dimension, which will always possess ritual validity. Circumcision, then, in his eyes is not to be abrogated or abandoned.

On the other hand, although Geiger was more reticent in revealing his opinion publicly, he not only states that circumcision has no significance for us, but goes as far as

to suggest a replacement for the ancient rite. In 1849, Geiger proposed in a letter to his friend Bernhard Wechsler, Rabbi in Oldenburg, that some new form of initiation into Judaism must soon be found which should take the place of circumcision. He proposed a ceremony in which the mother is blessed in the presence of the child, which ceremony might, in time, supplant circumcision. He reasoned that it will be dropped by and by just as the introduction of confirmation has done away with the "foolery" of Bar Mitzvah.(39)

Another Reformer, who began his career in Europe and then later continued in America is David Einhorn (1809-1879). This fiery orator who began his Rabbinic career in Birkenfeld, Germany was already well known in Europe when he decided to accept the call to Har Sinai Congregation in Baltimore. In America he became the principal exponent of radical reforms as opposed to I. M. Wise who is regarded as a more moderate reformer. Like the Rabbis already mentioned, Einhorn, too, was strongly opposed to the program of the Frankfurt Reform Society, mainly because he considered it inopportune. On the subject of circumcision, however, he sympathized with their aims. Unlike Geiger and Holdheim, Einhorn was drawn into the controversy by his being asked to rule on the Jewish status of an uncircumcised boy. In 1847, a Mr. Hirsch, of Teterow, Mecklenberg-Schwerin, neglected to have his newly-born son circumcised; he expressed the desire, however, to rear the child in the Jewish faith, and insisted that his son be entered in the registry of Jewish births and

receive its name in the Synagogue in accordance with the custom then existing in Mecklenberg. The teacher, Salinger, who officiated in the community, did not know how to proceed in this exceptional case, so he applied to the Jewish directorate for guidance. This in turn was referred to Dr. David Einhorn, the chief Rabbi of the Province for a decision. Einhorn authorized the teacher to name the child in the Synagogue, and showed that even from the Talmudic standpoint the uncircumcised Jew is not to be excluded from the Jewish community, if he has not willfully declared his purpose to cut himself loose from it. Einhorn claimed that this was not the case in this situation, for the father has expressly declared his intention to raise the child as a Jew, and certainly the innocent child is not to be excluded from the community for no fault of its own. In his letter of instructions, Einhorn closes thusly:

"May God bless the child, and adorn it with the virtues of an Israelite indeed, an Israelite of circumcised heart, and may all those who think that the integrity of our divine religion, which our forefathers sealed with their noble blood a thousand times as a covenant between God and Israel and all mankind, is threatened by such occurrences, and are therefore surely troubled, derive consolation from the thought that the divine by its very nature is imperishable and that Judaism rests on the indestructible pillars of right, truth, and peace, which will not totter even though the earth wax old like a garment and the heavens vanish like smoke."(40)

The uncircumcised child was named in the Synagogue on Sabbath Chanukah. In a similar case, Einhorn instructed the same when the situation became manifest at Horic, Bohemia. Some twenty years later Einhorn would spell out in detail his view of circumcision in one of his proposals to the Rabbinic Conference held in Philadelphia in 1869. In his proposal he reiterates the position that even a Jew who is uncircumcised, if by reason of birth he is a Jew, then he is to be regarded as a member of the Jewish community, and accorded full privileges. Einhorn's proposal will be taken up more fully later in our discussion of the Rabbinic Conferences.

Just as we compared Geiger and Holdheim, here too it is fitting to compare and contrast Einhorn's view with that of his American counterpart Isaac Mayer Wise.

Unlike Geiger, Holdheim, and Einhorn, Wise upholds without question the commandment of brit milah for one who is born of a Jewish mother. Wise on the other hand led the crusade against the need for a proselyte to be circumcised, called in Hebrew, Milat Gerim. Expressing himself primarily through the medium of his weekly newspaper the American Israelite, Wise presented his views on proselytes as follows:

"To us (Jews) it always appeared that the gentile before embracing Judaism, is "free of the Commandments" except the "seven Noachide laws" as the Talmud has it; hence he must also be free of the circumcision. He can only be circumcised AFTER he has become an Israelite and had accepted the law, for before that he was not obligated; but then he is already

an Israelite by the acceptance of the law and not be circumcision. Before being an Israelite he is not commanded to be circumcised. After he has become an Israelite, he is one. If he is one for a minute, he is one forever, and this is also according to the Rabbinical law."(41)

In response to Wise's stated position in this letter, Wise is asked if children of proselytes need to be circumcised. Wise answers:

"Of course male children need to be circumcised because when a proselyte accepts Judaism, he/she is adopted into the family and has an obligation to circumcise a son on the eighth day. They must submit to the laws of the family."(42)

In another editorial entitled "some remarks on milah" Wise demonstrates his view that ritual circumcision for Jews is a divine command not be abrogated. He writes:

"One tells us, if Milat Gerim (circumcision for proselytes) be dispensed with, then milah is dispensable, and the "rite" ought to be done away with. If the Bible was not in the way, this argument might do. That book, however, teaches not only that the rite is a divine commandment to be a sign of the covenant between God and the seed of Abraham, but shows also in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel that it always was the practice of Israel in Canaan, Goshen, and Palestine, everywhere at all times, while it does not say once that proselytes should be circumcised. As long as you do not do away with the Bible as a record of history and revelation, you cannot dispense with circumcision, for the seed of Abraham, although you might be an Orthodox Israelite according to the Bible to the very letter, accept proselytes without circumcision. . . . We want it understood, however, that the abolition of Milath Guerim has nothing in the world to do with milah for the sons of Abraham."(43)

Wise's view is clear: Ritual circumcision is binding upon

Israel as a divine command and is not to be abrogated.

Of the men we have thus far considered, including Reisser, Geiger, Holdheim, Einhorn, and Wise, it must be noted that none of them identified with the Reform Society in Frankfurt. While all of them, with the exception of Wise, supported the controversial view of circumcision espoused by the society, they each in their own way attacked the radical group of laymen from any number of points of view. They were criticized for being too outspoken on specific points, for moving too quickly, or for poor timing. The most resounding criticism, however, was that they lacked Rabbinic and scholarly guidance. In fact, as noted, the only Rabbi who identified with the Society and publicly defended it, was Rabbi Mendel Hess of Saxe-Weimar. He spoke repeatedly in favor of the Society and its platform in his newspaper in five leading articles that appeared in 1843. In these articles, he applauds the act of the founders of the Society and defends the fact that it was fathered altogether by laymen and non-theologians. He states that the Jews have advanced, but not Judaism, and that official Judaism is at fault, that life calls for reforms, and that this declaration is the first evidence that enlightened Jews have given of a clear understanding of the situation. With these thoughts, Hess accurately reflects the conflict of the age between religion and life as it effected the newly emancipated Jewish community in Europe during the mid nineteenth century. David Philipson in his book entitled The Reform Movement in Judaism

described the situation this way:

"Each day well-nigh in that stormy time brought evidence from here, there and everywhere in Germany of the difficulties encountered by Jews of living the new life in the world into which emancipation had thrown them, and carrying out faithfully the commands of Rabbinical Judaism. Many had already cut the Gordian knot by simply disregarding the legislation of the codes, but there were thousands who were troubled honestly and sincerely, and who were looking anxiously for a way out of this cul-de-sac: The conflict between religion and life had to cease; the problem cried for solution; who so qualified to solve it, if indeed solved it could be, as the religious theological experts?"(44)

The Rabbinical Conferences and Synods
in Germany and America 1844 - 1892

With the foregoing scenario in mind then it is no wonder that when Ludwig Philippson, the editor of the most widely circulated Jewish publication of the time (Die Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums) issued a call in 1844 for the convening of a Rabbinical Conference, his words met with an instant and sympathetic response. In this call Philippson wrote as follows:

"Let us speak plainly. The issue is no longer the permissibility or non-permissibility of this or that Synagogal Institution, of this or that alleviation for civil or social life; the issue before us is concerned with the entire content of our religion, which we must preserve and strengthen in its purity and divinity in order to rescue it from deadening rigidity on the one hand and from benumbing unbelief on the other. Judaism is weakening in its hold upon its followers day by day, and every layman is asking us, what are you doing? The objects of the conference shall be--(1) to bring the Rabbis into closer relation and acquaintanceship; (2) to promote unanimity in the conduct of the Rabbinic office; (3) to further the

founding of communal institutions; (4) to take counsel together on all Jewish affairs."(45)

With these goals in mind, the first Rabbinical

Conference was convened in Brunswick, Germany on June 12, 1844. Some of those who attended included Abraham Geiger, Samuel Holdheim, Ludwig Philippson, Samuel Hirsch, and Mendel Hess. It was not long before the circumcision controversy which had so agitated the Jewish world for some time, found its way into the Conference proceedings. The subject was broached in the Conference Hall when Hess introduced the following resolution:

"Be it resolved by this Conference that, although it has learned with pain that some co-religionists observe no longer a command so universally considered sacred as circumcision, yet it declares against all external coercion and exclusion as has been demanded by a number of Rabbis, and expresses the opinion that those who do not observe the command of circumcision are to be considered members of the Jewish religious community despite this, and as admissible to the taking of the oath, the giving of testimony, and the contracting of marriage with a Jewess."(46)

David Philipson reports that the resolution was quickly disposed of by the endorsement of the suggestion of the President of the Conference, J. Maier of Stuttgart, to the effect that since this matter was the subject of such bitter controversy in Jewry at this time it be passed over, it being inadvisable to give occasion to the play of passion on the floor of the conference. This proposed resolution which would have lent Rabbinic authority to the proposition that uncircumcised Jews should be accorded full privileges was the first and last time such a resolution was ever introduced or

entertained by any Reform Rabbinical Conference or Synod. Of course it was natural that Hess be the one to introduce the resolution, since he alone identified completely with the goals of the Frankfurt Reform Society. We can only conjecture, however, what support he might have garnered from the likes of Geiger and Holdheim, if a discussion of the resolution was allowed to ensue. Reflecting the high degree of passion with which the controversy engendered, no discussion followed and the proposed resolution was relegated to the minutes. Never again would a Rabbinical Conference be asked to officially sanction or approve the conduct of those Jews who refused to circumcise their sons, or those Jews who remained uncircumcised.

While to be sure, as we have seen, that individual Rabbis and lay leaders have severely attacked the rite of circumcision, it must be emphasized, as will be demonstrated in the foregoing pages, that at no time did any Reform Conference or Synod condemn the practice of milah or advocate its abolishment. In fact, these conferences only took steps to secure its proper and safe application.

Indicative of this attitude, is the resolution that was passed at Brunswick with respect to circumcision. The Conference adopted the resolution that "Rabbis are to keep registers regarding the rites of circumcision administered." (47) The resolution asked that Rabbis as well as mohelim keep a record of circumcisions performed in order to insure that the mohel is medically competent to perform

the task and that the operation is executed properly. This resolution reflected the concern expressed by the Frankfurt Health Department in its controversial edict which aimed at stemming the rising tide of illness and death caused by improperly executed circumcisions. It was this very concern, in fact, that occasioned the subject at the Second Rabbinical Conference held in Frankfurt, July 15-28, 1845.

A communication was addressed by Dr. Fr. Th. Baltz to the Conference on the subject of circumcision. He wrote that circumcision has evil results, giving rise to sexual desires, diseases, and sometimes to impotence. He proposed that, if it cannot be abolished altogether, it should be performed in such a manner as to preclude danger and evil results. The Conference answered by stating that it recognized gratefully the good intentions of the writer; "As for the supposed evil results of circumcision that he mentions, it must be said that there are other medical authorities who claim just the opposite; Jewish marriages are very fruitful as is well known. At any rate, the matter is of the highest importance and for that very reason is not ripe for consideration. As for the manner of performing the operation, most of the German governments had passed laws on the subject and put it under the supervision of the sanitary police. The Conference would undoubtedly take up the subject at some future time and would then take into consideration the communication of the writer."(48)

The subject did indeed present itself again, this time

at the Third Rabbinical Conference held in Breslau, July 13-24, 1846. This time the subject was introduced at the opening session occasioned by a communication from Dr. Adolph Arnhold of Breslau. In his letter he sets forth in detail the sad experience he had in having his two sons circumcised. The first had almost bled to death; the second had died from the effects of circumcision. He asked the Conference, not for a decision of the question as to whether circumcision was necessary and indispensable for Jews, but for an opinion as to how he should act in the future. "Should a son be born to me hereafter, will it not suffice if I have him named in the Synagogue and have the customary benediction pronounced? Can the state, can the congregation, raise any objection to such an initiation of my sons into Judaism, considering the experiences I have had?"

This communication, together with others on the subject of circumcision, was discussed in executive session.(49) Philippson urged the necessity of reforms in the method of circumcision; he declared that the operation must be so safeguarded as to exclude the possibility of fatal results. The entire matter was referred to a commission of three, consisting of S. Adler, S. Holdheim, and L. Philippson, with instructions to report during the sessions of the Conference. The commission reported on July 19, and after a lengthy discussion the conference adopted the following resolutions on the subject of circumcision:

1. It is necessary that every mohel take a

thorough course of instruction from a competent physician in all matters touching the operation, pass an examination, and have a license (legitimation).

2. Any mohel who, because of any bodily defect, such as trembling of the hands, nearsightedness, etc., is unfit to perform the operation, shall not be permitted hereafter to fill the office.
3. The operation of the p'riah (pulling back of the foreskin) with a surgical instrument is not ritually forbidden. It is therefore to be left to the judgement of the operator or the assisting physician which method is to be used whether with the nail, as is the traditional custom or with a surgical instrument.
4. The metzitzah (sucking of the blood by mouth) is to be discontinued.
5. It is desirable to leave the after-treatment to a physician or surgeon.
6. It is necessary that a medical examination take place before the circumcision in order that it be determined whether any bodily suffering or defect make a deferring of the act advisable or necessary.
7. In such cases in which, according to a physician's declaration, a child has died or has sustained lasting injury from circumcision, and it is therefore a fair supposition that danger to life and health threaten a second child of the same parents, the act of circumcision is to be suspended until a medical declaration has been given that no danger of any kind is to be feared as a result of circumcision.

The Conference did not discuss for a moment the question whether circumcision is a *conditio sine qua non* of admission into Judaism. The seven resolutions adopted at Breslau concerning circumcision had the purpose simply of reforming certain abuses and of preventing as far as possible any ill effects from the operation. Nevertheless this was the

fullest treatment of the subject to date by a recognized Rabbinical Assembly.

The three Rabbinical Conferences that met annually from 1844-1846 had indeed covered much ground with regard to many different topics of concern to Jewry, circumcision being one of them. The Conferences met with criticism however from the laity claiming the Conference's were not representative of popular assemblies. They did not originate from among the people and the people had no voice in their deliberations. There was a call for synods to be convened so that rabbis and laymen, scholars and teachers, theologians and men of practical affairs could participate together in solving the issues that confronted the modern Jew. Similarly, when it was found impractical or unfeasible to continue the Rabbinical Conferences, the executive committee that had been entrusted with the duty of convening the Fourth Conference, recommended that a synod, to be participated in by both Rabbis and laymen be called into being to take the place of the Conference. After a number of years of agitation for such a synod, the Leipzig Synod was convened on June 29, 1869. Sixty congregations were represented by 83 delegates, a number of whom came from outside Germany including Austria, Belgium, Bohemia, England, Hungary, Galicia, Roumania, Switzerland, the United States and the West Indies. The lay element was far in the majority, there having been 49 lay leaders and 34 Rabbinical delegates. The synod was opened with an address by Dr. A. M. Goldschmidt, the Rabbi of the

Leipzig Congregation, who declared the Synod to be the successor of the conferences of the fifth decade.

During the course of the week-long Synod, the topic of circumcision surfaced when Dr. Maximilian Engel of Vienna and Professor Julius Furst of Leipzig offered resolutions on the subject. Engel was a Vienna physician, a member of the board of the Jewish community and an editor of the Weiner Zeit (Vienna Times). Engel requested that the proposed resolution be referred to a committee for detailed discussion and to report back to the Synod with a decision. Likewise Professor Furst made the same request. Both resolutions were referred to a committee of five, consisting of Dr. Landau of Dresden, Dr. Aub of Berlin, Dr. Low from Hungary, Dr. Joel of Breslau, and Dr. Wechsler of Oldenburg. The committee was well-balanced--Landau representing the Orthodox; Joel, Aub, and Low, the Conservative; and Wechsler, the Liberal tendency.

Professor Furst's resolution was to the effect that "the Synod should declare, that according to the express dictum of the Talmud, every child born of Jewish parents belongs to the Jewish community by the very fact of its birth and not primarily by virtue of circumcision. Therefore, a boy born of Jewish parents is to be registered as a Jew without any further consideration as to whether he is circumcised or not. The neglect on the father's part to have his child circumcised is placed in the same category with all other commands, the neglect of which entails the punishment of

karet, (divine expulsion from the community) and is beyond all human jurisdiction. One that is uncircumcised may not be slighted either in the deposition of the oath or in being called to the Torah."

Dr. Engel in his resolution posed two questions to the committee followed by a recital of a famous case which explained the reason for his proposed resolution. The questions read as follows:

- A. Is a boy, born of a Jewish mother, but uncircumcised for some reason, to be considered a Jew according to the existing norms of Judaism which are generally recognized as binding?
- B. In case the first question is answered in the affirmative, how is such a person to be treated on ritual occasions later on, (again following above mentioned norms), both subjectively and objectively?

What follows is Engel's address to the Synod in which he eloquently describes the social, political, and religious factors that precipitated the resolution in question.(50)

Permit me to tell you briefly of the reason for my motion. Until recently we had in Austria, as in many other countries, the principle of a "must" religion, that is, every newborn child, through his father, had to belong to some definite religion, and the father, therefore, had to go through the necessary arrangements, such as baptism, circumcision, etc. Now in Austria, thank God, the new religious laws, which all of you know, have done away with this "must" religion, but at the same time this has caused a certain schism which threatens to spread more and more. Since we have religious freedom several people have declared: We would like to have our children continue to belong to Judaism but we shall not have them circumcised. Now in Austria the government has an official register in which the children of all religions are entered, and this duty has been placed into the

hands of the respective clergymen. This appeared to mean that the government wanted a religious register kept. Now when the clergymen concerned had to enter into the register a child who had not been circumcised, he refused such registry because he was afraid that if too great license would be permitted in such cases, the refusal of circumcision would spread more and more. Now what happened? A certain father brought suit before the Vienna Magistrates. The Magistrates did not know exactly what to do. On the one hand they did not want to offend the Jewish religion, and on the other hand they did not want to act against the new laws. The officials were caught, as is Austria as a whole, in a problem of dualism and could not decide whether the register was merely civil or whether it had religious character also. Now what did the official do? One Magistrate ordered the rabbi to enter the child into the registry and supported his opinion with a certain passage in the new laws in a manner which does not seem convincing. A similar circumstance happened in Prague. There, a higher Magistrate, the imperial representative, decided that the child had to be registered. However, he meliorated the decision by stipulating that the clergyman could keep a special private registry for himself in which he could note whether or not the child had been circumcised.

Now what did the trustees of the Jewish community in Vienna do? These trustees had always guarded their autonomy zealously and decisively, and they, therefore, now informed the Vienna Magistrate that they would file the official decision but would not follow it. Now it is unlikely that policemen will be sent into the houses in order to circumcise the children of obstreperous Jews. But on the other hand, the officials will also not put up with an obvious transgression of the law. The trustees wanted the officials to express themselves clearly and unequivocally what character they believed the registry to have. Secondly, they wanted the natural leaders and guides of the people, namely, the clergymen, to instruct them what religious status these uncircumcised children had. The Vienna trustees, therefore, asked their rabbis to meet with them and to discuss this second question. The rabbis came, with the exception of one single gentleman, who, however, afterwards promised a written opinion. They debated at great length, which was very sad; but finally they agreed that in any case such a child would have to be considered a Jew. Since this question had been answered

affirmatively, we wanted to know, further, what would happen with such a boy in the future; for the trustees wanted a practical, not merely a theoretical result. Now I must sadly admit that the written answers were so technical in nature--or perhaps we are too limited in our knowledge--that we have not understood them fully and still do not know whether such a child is to be considered a Jew, whether he can be called to the Torah, whether he can be married in a Jewish ceremony, etc. Only one of these gentlemen was very clear in his decision, but he stated it orally and not in writing. He said: "I make a difference between subjective and objective treatment. Subjectively, I consider the child a Jew, for instance at a marriage. However, he can never become a cantor or rabbi."

Now I have been sent here because our people expect that this illustrious assembly will proceed entirely differently in arriving at its judgment, and will base its judgment on generally recognized norms. Therefore, I ask you to refer the matter to a committee. Let me be honest. We in Austria, and especially in Vienna, have a very mixed public. There were two hundred families in the year 1748 and now we have grown to 40,000 souls. We have a lot of indifferent people, but they are interested in this question because it has social consequences. Then we have very orthodox, pious people, and we have also those who use orthodoxy as their sounding-board. Now I admit that this synod, with all the respect that it commands, has a little bit of a progressive, liberal reputation. I do not accuse you of this, and as a matter of fact, I do not even agree with this pre-judgment. However, if you would decide this question at once, then the Orthodox gentlemen would not fail to say, "Yes, the majority of the members of the synod were ultra-liberal and we cannot accept their decisions as binding. They acted too hastily." But the matter is different if you will first refer this question to a committee. There is no hurry because it is only a question of one year's delay. Whether such a child will be circumcised in 1869 or 1870 is really unimportant. But it is important what character your decision will have. Therefore, I move that this question be referred to a committee in order to pacify both those who are anxious and those who are entirely opposed, and, therefore, I have also added to my motion the words "based on the existing norms."

(There were bravos from the audience. After

some further discussion, Dr. Engel's motion carried.)

It was decided that the two resolutions submitted by Engel and Furst to the Leipzig Synod would be referred to a committee that would report at the next synod.

The synod was held two years later in Aussburg. The synod was composed of 52 delegates from thirty congregations, a noticeable falling off from the attendance and representation at Leipzig. Even so, the synod attracted notable rabbis and lay leaders. The Augsburg synod which met from July 11-17, 1871 included Rabbis such as Geiger, Aub, Low, Adler, and Wechsler. It included lay leaders such as Professor M. Lazarus, Professor Julius Furst, and Dr. Jacob Auerbach. The Leipzig resolutions were not considered in open session at Augsburg, but rather at an executive session at which nearly all the members were present. The decision of the committee was delivered in this manner:

"The president, M. Lazarus, having declared that the question had been thoroughly discussed in an executive session attended by most of the members of the synod at which session the great importance of this sign of the covenant and its maintenance as a symbol among Jews was dwelt upon and the fact deplored that it had been neglected in a number of instances, the Assembly unanimously resolves: Although the synod premises without any reservation the supreme importance of circumcision in Judaism, it yet declares in answer to the question propounded that a boy born of a Jewish mother who

has not been circumcised, for whatsoever reason this may have been, must be considered a Jew, and be treated as such in all ritual matters, in accordance with the existing rules regarded binding for Israelites (Talmud Babli, Yebamot 70b, Yore Dea 264.1)(51)

Augsburg ended the series of five European Rabbinical Conferences and Synods which began in Brunswick in 1844. In America, too, however, the circumcision question was a topic of hot debate. The first conference of Rabbis of the Reform School in this country was held in the city of Philadelphia, November 3-6, 1869. Included among the distinguished Rabbis who attended were Dr. S. Adler from New York; Dr. S. Deutsch from Baltimore, Dr. D. Einhorn from New York, Dr. B. Felsenthal from Chicago, Dr. S. Hirsch from Philadelphia, Dr. K. Kohler from Detroit, Dr. M. Mielziner from New York and Dr. S. Sonneschein from St. Louis. Dr. I. M. Wise of Cincinnati accepted the invitation but was unable to attend until the third session held November 4, 1869.

The circumcision question was submitted in the form of a proposal by David Einhorn, the same Einhorn who ruled in favor of naming a child in the synagogue despite being uncircumcised. After discussion in committee, the committee recommended the following resolution which was later affirmed by the conference:(52)

"The male child of a Jewish mother, no less than the female child, is to be considered as a member of the Jewish community by descent, even if uncircumcised--in accord with a basic principle of Judaism which has never been questioned."

Wise proposed the following addition to the above stated resolution: "As the Abrahamitic rite of circumcision is not obligatory for admission to Judaism, and the absence of it does not exclude a Jew from the Jewish community, nor absolves him from his duties, therefore, circumcision of proselytes as an act of initiation is not required."

Mielziner wished to see expressed in the committee's article that the command of circumcision is recognized by them as binding and would in any case propose, in view of the importance of the matter, that the article should be referred to a specially appointed committee which should report to a future conference.

Hirsch warned them not to delay. It should be clearly declared that a person did not become a Jew through circumcision, but through birth. Certainly it was somewhat different with circumcision of proselytes. At present there was still no definite norm in the Reform movement according to which proselytes should be received into Judaism. In accepting the article they were only defining a principle which had been unquestioned in Orthodoxy. A misunderstanding of the resolution was impossible.

Mielziner wished that the wording of the resolution were clearer, because the public could so easily misunderstand things, as if the conference had declared that circumcision was not obligatory, for which he, at all events, would not vote.

Einhorn was decidedly against such an amendment, since "we were certainly not called upon to give our opinion on separate mitzvot (commandments). The commandment is in the Bible and such an addition was unnecessary. We would then have to express our opinion on all the Taryag Mitzvot (613 Commandments)." Einhorn spelled out his position in detail in his motion to the conference. He concludes his address by citing the following words from a catechism published in Munich in 1826 by Dr. Alexander Behr.(53)

"But circumcision is by no means a condition for admittance to the covenant (Bund) of the Israelites, but it belongs to the class of Chayivay Keritot (transgressions for which Karet is pronounced) and he who violates it is not absolved from the remaining duties of an Israelite."

Einhorn writes further that "even though circumcision is called Ot (sign) and brit (covenant) this principle cannot be altered, as these designations which originated in pre-sinaitic times, were transferred to the Sabbath in Mosaic Law, and nobody has ever thought of making membership in the Jewish community dependent on the all important sanctification of the Sabbath."(54)

The matter was then brought to a vote, Mielziner's amendment was rejected, and also the motion for reference to a commission. The paragraph as introduced by the committee was thereupon accepted unanimously, with the exception of Mielziner, who abstained, since he still felt that the wording of the article could be misinterpreted.

Later the addition introduced by Wise, regarding

proselytes, was taken into consideration. The merits of requiring circumcision for proselytes was discussed at length with Wise urging as we have noted previously, that such an initiation be discontinued because "the more high minded who seriously wanted to follow the values of Judaism are held back as they shrink from this operation." After some debate the measure proposed by Wise was dropped for it did not seem opportune. While the motion was for the time being dropped, it should be noted that the course of discussion concerning circumcision in Reform Judaism had been permanently altered. In Philadelphia and in Augsburg two years later, the declaration was made that not circumcision but, birth determines one's Jewish identity as had always been the case in Jewish legal jurisprudence and that these uncircumcised Jews were entitled fully to all privileges and duties that are bound up with that status. The difference between Philadelphia and Augsburg was that in Augsburg a rider expressing the supreme importance of the command and its disapproval of those who neglect it was attached, and in Philadelphia, despite Mielziner's pleas for the same, none was appended. From this time forth the circumcision question would not concern itself with infant circumcision any more, but rather would center on Milat Gerim, the advisability for requiring circumcision for proselytes. This was the context in which the question was raised at the next conference in Pittsburg in 1885.

At the Pittsburgh conference held in November, 1885, the following resolution was adopted:

"Inasmuch as the so-called Abrahamitic rite is not considered by many as a conditio sine qua non of receiving male gentiles into the fold of Judaism, and inasmuch as a new legislation on this and kindred subjects is one of the most imperative and practical demands of our Reform movement, be it resolved, that a committee of five, one of them to be the president of this Conference, be entrusted with framing a full report to be submitted for final action to the next Conference."

This resolution which clearly indicates the temper of the conference in this matter was a product of previous debate in the Reform community. In 1878, Rabbi M. Spitz of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, addressed a letter to the Rabbis of the country, requesting their opinion as to the right and advisability of accepting a proselyte without circumcision, for a case such as this had occurred in his city and he was unsure how to proceed. The letter called forth a lengthy response from Dr. B. Felsenthal who argued from a historical perspective that circumcision for a proselyte was not necessary.(55)

Opposite this point of view, Dr. M. Mielziner expressed his view in an article which appeared in the Jewish Messenger in which he rebuts Felsenthal's arguments point for point.(56) He concludes his essay by stating, "I apprehend that a dispensing with Milat Gerim will lead more and more to the entire neglect of Milah among Israelites also."

After considering the arguments, Spitz refused to admit the young man in question without the initiatory rite. Nevertheless, the general attitude of those who attended the

Pittsburgh Conference seemed to follow the trend set in Chicago earlier that year. At Sinai Temple under the leadership of the radical Emil G. Hirsch, the Chicago Congregation resolved at a meeting on April 9, 1885:

"The Abrahamic rite is not an essential condition, the compliance with which must precede or follow admittance to membership in Sinai Congregation."

So the resolution passed in Pittsburgh was set to be taken up at the next conference called to meet in Cincinnati, in June, 1886. That Conference, however, due to unforeseen circumstances never convened and the resolution adopted in Pittsburgh came to naught.

The Conference, however, was not in any way bereft of controversy concerning the circumcision question. Dr. Kaufmann Kohler in discussing his views on the subject remarked:

"Likewise ought we to revise the Rabbinical regulations regarding the admission of Christians into our fold and no longer exclude those who are eager to join us 'because they have seen that God is with us,' by rites which reason and the spirit of humanity revolt against. I do not for a moment hesitate to say it right here and in the face of the entire Jewish world that to have a grown man who from conviction has with all his heart and soul become a Jew, in order to be admitted, undergo the act of circumcision, is a barbarous cruelty which disfigures and disgraces our ancestral heirloom and our holy mission as priests among mankind. The rite is a national remnant of savage African life, and has no bearing upon the religion preached by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the great Deuteronomic Law-giver. It certainly has no sacramental character." (57)

Kohler's sharp words stirred up criticism from those who

sought to discredit the conference. A rumor was spread that the Pittsburgh Conference had decreed the abolition of circumcision. In a document entitled "A record of American Judaism for A. M. 5646," the falsehood is clarified:

"Dr. Kohler did in his paper use the objectionable phrase, 'The barbarous rite,' speaking of circumcision, although he referred only to the circumcision of adult proselytes; the Conference objected, struck out the phrase with disdain and never discussed the question of circumcision at all, except that of adult proselytes, which was referred to a committee without any instruction."

Whether or not Kohler's words were solely directed at Milat Gerim or had in mind the rite in general is not clear, at least to this author. What is clear is that by any estimation he was not fond of the ceremony.

Although the resolution passed in Pittsburgh had for at least the time being been shelved, the debate over the question of circumcision for proselytes continued unabated. On July 23, 1890, Rabbi Henry Berkowitz of Kansas City, Missouri was asked to admit a Christian into Judaism without circumcision. Like Rabbi Spitz before him, he addressed a circular letter to the Rabbis of the country asking for their opinion and advice. He received a number of responses.(58) Casting their vote with those who would dispense with circumcision for the adult proselyte were Rabbis I. M. Wise, B. Felsenthal, G. Gottheil, K. Kohler, A. Moses, E. G. Hirsch, M. Landsberg, E. Schreiber, S. Hecht, and M. Samfield. Opposite this view was the minority opinion of Rabbis M. Mielziner, M. Spitz, and H. Illowizi. Unlike Rabbi

Spitz, Dr. Berkowitz received the young man into the faith without his having submitted to the initiatory rite.

At the Second Annual Conference of American Rabbis held in Baltimore in July, 1891, the above listed responses were read and discussed. It was decided, as had previously been stated in the Pittsburgh resolution, to refer the question to a committee of five. At the meeting of the conference held the following year in New York City, the report of this committee was submitted, and the whole subject was again discussed. After some heated debate based upon Biblical and Talmudic arguments, the following resolution was adopted:

"Resolved that the C.C.A.R., assembled this day in the city of New York, considers lawful and proper for any officiating Rabbi, assisted by no less than two associates, and in the name and with the consent of his congregation, to accept into the sacred covenant of Israel, and declare fully affiliated with the congregation L'chal d'var She-bikdusha, any honorable and intelligent person who desires such affiliation without any initiatory rite, ceremony or observance whatever; provided such person be sufficiently acquainted with the faith, doctrine, and religious usages of Israel; that nothing derogatory to such person's moral and mental character is suspected; that it is his or her free will and choice to embrace the cause of Judaism, and that he or she declare verbally, and in document signed and sealed before such officiating Rabbi and his associates, his or her intention and firm resolve--

1. To worship the one sole and eternal God and none besides Him.
2. To be conscientiously governed in his or her doings and omissions in life by God's laws, ordained for the child and image of the father and maker of all, the sanctified son or daughter of the divine covenant.

3. To adhere in life and death, actively and faithfully, to the sacred cause and mission of Israel, as marked out in Holy writ."(59)

This resolution which would bring an end to the discussion of the religious and legal merits or demerits of circumcision at Rabbinical Conferences was adopted by 25 ayes and 5 nays. Of the five who voted in the negative, three(60) of them expressed their concern that the abolition of Milat Gerim would lead to the abolition of circumcision altogether, this being their primary motive for voting as they did.

From the time that Hess proposed in Brunswick that those who neglect circumcision may do so with impunity up till the framing of the resolution in New York concerning adult proselytes, the concern had always been that Brit Milah amongst the Jewish masses would wane, if the proposed "leniencies" or "reforms" would be adopted. The fact of the matter, however, is that when all is said and done, during those fifty years (1842-1892), the only true reform of the existing halachah was to be found in the realm of Milat Gerim in which the reformers set aside the initiatory rite as a pre-requisite for admission into the faith of Israel. The other resolutions simply reiterated or perhaps re-emphasized the existing halachah. That is to say that the resolution passed at Breslau which delineated the steps to be taken to improve the safety of the operation was in keeping not only with the spirit of the halachah which puts life and health above all ritual matters but was in accord with the letter of

the law as well which requires that a mohel, first and foremost, be medically qualified to perform the rite.(61) It may even be said that the initial thrust that gave way to the controversy that would rage for fifty years can be attributed to the "evil" consequences of poorly administered circumcisions in Germany. One must remember, that although the edict issued in Frankfurt is noteworthy because of the phrase "as far as they desire to circumcise," the reason for issuing the edict and the major contents contained therein were directed at preventing future infant fatalities due to poorly executed circumcisions. Even Rabbi Trier and his Orthodox cohorts applauded those reforms. So one must consider that the question of securing the health and safety in performing the ancient rite, as a means of procuring its continued observance in Israel, was a major aspect of the controversy at least towards the beginning of the debate.

The second outcome of the fifty year struggle (1842-1892) concerns itself with the question of what status circumcision has in determining the identity of the Jew. Here, again, as in the health aspect, the halachah, after being assessed, analyzed and debated is merely restated. Anyone born of a Jewish mother is Jewish. That alone renders one Jewish (with the exception of converts) according to the halachah. Circumcision, while considered a significant birth ritual which is greatly esteemed by world Jewry as a distinct sign of one's "Jewishness," does not confer status upon the child. A Jew is considered a Jew even without brit milah and

is entitled to perform Jewish ceremonies. This is the halachah.(62)

This in effect was the extent of the resolutions passed in Philadelphia in 1869 and in Augsburg in 1871, and in this respect nothing new was spoken. What is of significance, of course, is the social, political, and religious conditions that forced the issue to be debated. In this respect the controversy over circumcision may be seen as merely a symptom of the new political-social and religious milieu in which the Jews found themselves. The winds of change had ushered in a new age of religious individualism. Now, individual conscience could determine what religious practices to observe or not. The various governments of Germany and elsewhere, began to take more of a hands off approach to the affairs of religion under their rule. Recall that Rabbi Trier's pleas fell on deaf ears. While the Frankfurt Senate wished no ill will toward the Jews, it refused to intercede. In America the situation was even clearer. Individual religious liberty reigned from the start; there was no government regulation of religion. Instead for the American Reformers the issue was proselytes and the necessity of retaining circumcision as an initiatory rite. Here alone was the normative halachah overturned when in New York, 1892, circumcision was deemed unnecessary for proselytes.

During the fifty year period that began in Frankfurt in 1842 with the radical statement by the Reform Society, through the various conferences and Synods, and up until the

Milat Gerim resolution in 1892, much attention had been drawn to the whole topic of ritual circumcision or brit milah. While, it has been demonstrated that individual rabbis and laymen of distinction agitated by the debate that swept across Central Europe and later in America severely criticized the venerable rite, it must be understood that at no time did the Reform movement as a group condemn the practice of brit milah, or advocate its abolishment. In fact, the contrary is the case. The record shows that it only took steps to secure its safe and proper application and that, while abolishing the rite for male proselytes themselves, it required that they vow to circumcise any male children born to them, as part of the oath taken by them in their conversion.(63)

From 1869 onward the question of circumcision in Reform Judaism no longer concerned itself with whether the rite should be retained or discarded. With the Philadelphia Conference resolution in mind, Rabbi Walter Jacobs writes:

"Subsequently, there was considerable debate about the need for circumcision on the part of converts . . . However, no one further questioned the necessity for infant circumcision. This is reflected in every subsequent manual or guide."(64)

Instead the focus of the debate shifted to questions of who may circumcise, when to circumcise, where to circumcise, and how to circumcise. These are, in fact, the topics that present themselves at future C.C.A.R. Conventions and are taken up in the Reform responsa literature. Before briefly

surveying that material, however, it is appropriate to make a few comments about how the ritual was treated by selected Reform Rabbis in their various individual manuals to ritual observance and catechisms written for their respective congregations or for the movement as a whole.

The Treatment of Brit Milah in Reform
Catechisms and Ritual Guides in America
(1872 - 1980)

In the early catechisms written most notably by I. M. Wise little if anything is mentioned concerning the ritual of brit milah. Perhaps due to the delicate nature of the subject, which was especially directed at school age children, the subject was avoided or skirted at best. In fact, the only references that this author has uncovered are to be found in Wise's Catechism's entitled, Judaism: Doctrines and Duties and The Essence of Judaism for Teachers and Pupils. In both works Wise notes that "the sign of the second covenant is circumcision." (65) This being the only mention of the rite is given in the context of the three-fold covenant according to Wise, made with man, with the fathers, and with Israel. Much more information is imparted through the various guides, manuals, and codes written and compiled by Reform Rabbis for their individual congregations or the movement at large.

In one of the earlier guides entitled, Liberal Judaism and Its Standpoint, the author sets out to answer the

question: What is the liberal Jewish attitude towards circumcision in the case of a newly born child? He answers that "The matter is left very much to the discretion of the parents. There is no hard-and-fast rule. Those who are undecided on the question will find the following remarks by Dr. Montefiore in his book, "Liberal Judaism and Hellenism" very helpful. He writes:

"It (circumcision) is a rite which depends upon very old ideas, and is found in one form or another among different races. The story of its first introduction cannot now be regarded as strictly historical. Nevertheless, Liberal Jewish congregations do well, I think, in temporarily retaining this unattractive rite for infants, while gladly abandoning it for adult proselytes. The reason for its retention is not religious, and it is not hygienic. . .The rite may justifiably be retained for reasons of a social order. If all Jews were Liberal Jews, it would be different. But while so many are not, it is not desirable that any liberal Jew should be under any religious disqualification or stigma in the eyes of his Orthodox bretheren."(66)

In 1956, Rabbi Abraham J. Feldman wrote concerning brit milah in his Reform Judaism: A Guide for Reform Jews the following words which reflects the majority opinion on the subject held by many Reform Rabbis:

"The circumcision (Brit Milah) of a male child on the eighth day of life is a religious obligation and is continued in Reform Judaism. However, since the operation is occasionally performed by a surgeon, rather than a mohel, it is proper to invite a rabbi to be present at the circumcision so that the religious character of the ceremony is preserved. Circumcision is not a hygienic measure; it is a religious obligation."(67)

In a similar vein a number of other Reform Rabbis have written expressing their view that circumcision is a

religious obligation continued in Reform Judaism and is to be performed on the eighth day by a mohel or a Jewish surgeon.(68) Departing from the mainstream is Rabbi Sanfred M. Shapero of the Park Avenue Temple in Bridgeport, Connecticut who counsels in his Reform Judaism: Challenge and Fulfillment, "There must be a flexibility in ritual. Try to plan a bris today when women leave the hospital before the eighth day." Also noteworthy of a non-mainstream approach this time from a conservative standpoint is the guidance of Rabbi Stanley A. Brav of Temple Sholom in Cincinnati, Ohio who would require a child who was circumcised before the eighth day to be "re-circumcised" by drawing a drop of blood from the prepuce (Hatafat Tipat Dam Brit) and performing the ritual according to traditional practice.(69) Aside from the above listed extremes concerning the eighth day, the mainstream approach as outlined by Rabbi Feldman is reflected in three of the most widely circulated guides to Reform Jewish Religious practice.

In A Guide for Reform Jews written by Rabbis Doppelt and Polish in which the authorities claim themselves that "ours was one of the first comprehensive guides to Jewish observance in the Reform movement," the subject of circumcision is treated in full.(70)

The first point under the heading of circumcision indicates clearly that brit milah is a mitzvah for Reform Jews, and should be performed on the eighth day after the infant's birth. The importance of the eighth day is stressed

in reaction to the practice of mothers leaving the hospital before the eighth day and therefore opting to have a medical circumcision performed before their return home. Therefore point number three states:

"Where mothers do not remain in the hospital for eight days, arrangements should nevertheless be made to have a brit milah on the eighth day, either at home or by returning with the infant to the hospital."

In point number six, the importance of having the father be present and participate at the religious ceremony is indicated. The guide encourages that, "every intercession should be made with hospital authorities to permit the presence of the father at the brit since this mitzvah is mandatory upon the father."

As to the question of who may circumcise, the guide advocates the viewpoint that the circumcision be performed by a medically and religiously qualified mohel or a surgeon, preferably Jewish. Halachically the statement would have been written as above with the addition of the words, "if a mohel cannot be obtained, then a surgeon, preferably Jewish may circumcise. The guide further teaches:

"When a mohel officiates, the presence of the Rabbi as an officiant is unnecessary. However, when the operation itself is performed by a physician, man or woman, the mitzvah of the brit should be consecrated by the father together with the Rabbi, as specified in the Rabbi's Manual."

As will soon be demonstrated, today, the Reform Brit Milah Board strongly encourages the Reform Rabbi to be

present when Reform Mohelim perform the mitzvah of milah. Also note the allowance of a woman physician, for indeed the first certified Reform mohel would be a woman many years later. Of great interest is point number twelve which states:

"If a mother is non-Jewish but the parents desire to raise the child in the Jewish faith, the child should be so inducted by the officiant during the circumcision and an appropriate certificate of induction should be given to the parents."

Today, given the patrilineal descent decision approved by the Central Conference of American Rabbis which states that a child born of a Jewish father, no less than of a Jewish mother is to be presumed Jewish, no certificate of induction is necessary at a brit milah. Nor is the circumcision itself deemed efficacious in altering the status of the child. In practice, according to Rabbi Lewis Barth, this has been the case as well, basing his assessment on the initial data of the newly certified mohelim.

In effect the work of Doppelt and Polish echoed the emerging "normative" reform practices outlined in the various congregational guides with regard to milah. They emphasize the significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism stating plainly that, "it is a mitzvah to submit every male child to circumcision, to bring him into the covenant which Abraham our Father, made with God. . ." They do not waver on the importance of the eighth day and stress the religious nature of the ceremony.

The next major guide outlining the practices of modern Reform Judaism was written by Rabbi Morrison David Bial entitled, Liberal Judaism at Home which was published first in 1967. Here again the important value of circumcision is described as Bial claims, "milah, circumcision, as a religious rite is of fundamental importance to the religious existence of Israel." (71) In support of his statement he cites Baruch Spinoza who declared:

"Such great importance do I attach to the sign of the covenant, that I am persuaded it is sufficient by itself to maintain the existence of the nation forever." (Theologico-Political Treatise Chapter 3)

With reference to the eighth day, as Doppelt and Polish before him, Bial writes:

"Because many crowded hospitals demand that mother and child leave before a full week has passed, some parents may ask to have the circumcision done before the eighth day. Tradition speaks loudly against this idea. If a baby's health demands, the rite can be postponed until he is strong enough. However, anticipating the eighth day is not countenanced in Judaism. . .if the mother and child leave the hospital before the eighth day, arrangements should be made for the circumcision in the house or at the hospital on an outpatient basis."

Bial further makes the statement that, "nor is the traditional feast following the ceremony more than a pleasant custom." Halachically, the feast is not considered a pleasant custom but rather a Seudah Mitzvah, a commanded feast. (Talmud Babli, Shabbat 130a)

Unlike Doppelt and Polish, Bial comments on the method

of circumcision. He writes: "Although the Orthodox differ as to the legitimacy of clamps or other mechanical devices at a circumcision, Liberal Judaism allows any proper surgical procedure." This sentiment is the one adopted by the Reform Brit Milah Board. In all other respects with regard to the details of the rite, the two guides are identical. It is interesting to note, however, how Bial hints at the spirited controversy of former times concerning a Jew who is uncircumcised. Bial echoes the sentiments of the Philadelphia Conference writing, "It is true that if for medical or other overriding reasons the child was not circumcised, or--circumcised without the ceremony--he is still a Jew, yet circumcision must not be taken lightly."

Finally, the latest of the Reform Guides to religious observance is one that was published by the C.C.A.R. itself. By its own admission it is the first such guide to Jewish practice ever issued by the Reform Movement. Entitled Gates of Mitzvah, (72) this is a guide which attempts to generally outline the "mitzvah" possibilities from which Reform Jews may choose. The guide is descriptive, not proscriptive. The topic of circumcision is treated under the rubric of "Entering the Covenant." This is in itself noteworthy, because for the first time a lengthy comment is offered expressing the fact that "even though the word brit has come to be associated with the circumcision of Jewish male children since the days of Abraham (Genesis 17:9-14), it should be understood that every child born into the Jewish

people, male or female, is part of the brit." Reflecting the egalitarian spirit of the age, the guide emphasizes the necessity for rites of initiation into the covenant for females as well as males. This is the sense of the statement which reads: "It is a mitzvah for every Jewish child to be brought into the covenant community with prayer and appropriate ritual."(73)

Having stressed the importance of initiation for both boys and girls, the guide after citing the Biblical injunction (Genesis 17:9-10) clearly states, "It is therefore a mitzvah to bring a male child into the covenant through the rite of circumcision--brit milah." It then emphatically states: "Brit Milah is, however, more than a surgical procedure. . .circumcision alone, without the appropriate prayers, does not constitute entrance into the covenant."(74)

This terse statement raises some interesting questions which need to be addressed. Does this mean that only through some initiation ceremony is a Jewish child entered into the brit? If as has been stated that birth alone determines one's Jewish identity, what is the relation of birth to entering the covenant? Are those Jewish boys who were circumcised but without any accompanying ritual, considered outside the covenant community as the guide seems to suggest?

These and similar such queries will be taken up in Chapter Three.

Concerning the eighth day, like Bial, Doppelt and Polish, the C.C.A.R. stresses the significance of the

appointed day. It argues in its favor and simply states, "Where this is not possible, the Rabbi should be consulted." Gates of Mitzvah, unlike Bial's work, encourages parents to share the joy of the brit milah with family and friends, preferably performing the rite at home, noting the religious importance of a feast followed the mitzvah. As to who may circumcise, the guide suggests first and foremost a qualified mohel, followed by a Jewish doctor, and if need be, then a non-Jewish doctor. The C.C.A.R. publication concludes this section by again noting its commitment to the equality of the sexes in religious matters and in consonance with that principle suggests that parents arrange a brit service for girls -- The Covenant of Life -- which they indicate can be found in Gates of the House, pages 114-117.

While all three of the above mentioned guides differ slightly on specific aspects of the rite, none of the above expresses anything but unwavering support for the ancient rite. They all acclaim its continuing fundamental religious importance in Reform Judaism. One-hundred and forty years after Frankfurt, no trace or echo of the bitterly fought controversy can be found in the pages of these guides to Reform Jewish practice. In fact, as noted, since 1869 when the Philadelphia Conference affirmed the importance of maintaining the rite in Reform Judaism, the only residual debates that remained concerned the various details attendant to the rite. These debates were recorded and discussed in the form of Reform Responsa literature collected and addressed by the Responsa Committee of the C.C.A.R. The

questions most frequently discussed in the past are the same questions that are being addressed by the newly established Reform Brit Milah Board as they are practically applied by Reform Mohelim. Unlike the past, where Reform pronouncements on aspects of brit milah were only of an advisory nature being that there was no practical organ of Reform Judaism to implement these measures, today the issues have been revitalized as Reform Mohelim, acting in the name of Reform Judaism, actively carry out the Reform approach to brit milah. These practical issues such as the importance of the eighth day, circumcising a child of mixed parentage, the use of an anesthetic or any other modern medical procedure, who can circumcise, the circumcision of dead children, and other critical questions are presented in the Reform Responsa Literature as collected over the years. Meanwhile we turn our attention to the establishment of the Reform Brit Milah Board.

The Establishment of the Reform
Brit Milah Board and its Goals 1980 -

While up to this point the focus of this work has concerned itself with the evolving nature of brit milah in Reform Judaism as treated from an academic perspective, little attention has been paid to the actual practice or non-practice of circumcision among Reform Jews. As one can imagine it is difficult if not impossible to ascertain how many Reform Jews over the years ritually circumcised their

male children or even how many circumcised their sons at all.(75) Records kept by Mohalim do not indicate whether the child was born to a Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Jew. Neither do hospitals record the affiliation of the Jew. While we cannot state, therefore, with any accuracy the numbers of Reform Jews circumcised, we can consider the various possibilities or manifestations of circumcision among Jews in the United States. From this assessment, some inferences may be drawn regarding the Reform practice of brit milah.

Charles Weiss in his study entitled, "A World Wide Survey of the Current Practice of Milah"(76) reports in his concluding remarks that:

"At present, at least six varieties of circumcision are practiced among Jews throughout the world: One, milah by a pious mohel with meticulous attention to periah, removal of the foreskin, metsitsah by mouth and recitation of blessings, mystic songs and prayers. Two, milah by a mohel who uses modern surgical instruments and clamps and performs metsitsah by means of a glass suction tube, a piece of gauze, absorbent cotton or not at all. Three, the substitution of an Orthodox Jewish physician for the mohel while a Rabbi or Cantor conducts the religious service. Four, circumcision by a medical doctor who is either a non-observant Jew or a gentile, with a Rabbi or Cantor saying the prayers. Five, an operation by a Jewish physician who also recites a blessing. Six, a purely surgical circumcision by either a Jewish or Non-Jewish physician, done immediately after birth or when the child is one to five days old, without a ritual and often without the presence of the child's father. In addition, a certain number of Jews will not or cannot have their sons circumcised."(77)

Choosing among the foregoing possibilities it is more than

probable that the Reform Jew in choosing to have his son circumcised more often than not falls into one of the last three categories. Of course, regional differences must be considered. The situation may vary as vastly as one metropolis differs from another. Nevertheless it is probably fair to say that those of a more traditional leaning would opt for a mohel or at least a Jewish doctor accompanied by an officiating Rabbi performed on the eighth day while those who are less traditional would simply have their sons routinely circumcised by the obstetrician before leaving the hospital, usually before the eighth day. Rabbi Lewis M. Barth, Professor of Midrash and related literature at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles and co-ordinator of the first experimental course for Reform Mohelim, supports the view that most Reform parents in the past have opted for medical circumcision without the ritual. Barth states: "Since the Reform movement was providing no trained professionals to perform the mitzvah, most parents chose to have their infant sons circumcised in the hospital as a routine medical procedure during the first few days after birth."(78) Dr. Eugene Mihaly, executive Dean of H.U.C.-J.I.R. further supports this view. He claims that if it were not for the medical advisability of the surgical procedure brit milah as a ritual among Reform Jews or even circumcision without the ritual would have died out long ago.

For whatever reasons brit milah was retained by Reform Jews as a meaningful rite of passage, we can surmise that on

a practical level, real and threatening difficulties plagued the level of observance among Reform Jews. It is indeed these difficulties that motivated two prominent leaders in the Reform Movement of today to propose a solution to a growing problem. Independently, one on the East Coast and one on the West Coast of the United States, Rabbi Daniel Syme and Rabbi Lewis Barth respectively initiated a process which would lead five years hence to the first ever establishment of a Reform Brit Milah Board, whose objective it would be to train and certify mohelim to serve the Reform Jewish community in particular and the general Jewish community at large. Both Rabbis independently of each other came to recognize the problem and deal with it in their own way until some time later when the two ideas merged and the two trailblazers joined together in a united effort.

In a telephone interview with Rabbi Syme, he outlined the problems as he saw them that threatened the continuance of brit milah among Reform Jews. Syme spoke of a personal dissatisfaction with some, albeit not all, Orthodox Mohelim, enough, however, to call attention to the problem. He cited the following situations that have come to his attention either in New York where he resides or incidents from elsewhere. Syme claims that, "Reform Jews have been brutalized by Orthodox Mohelim." A lack of sensitivity has led some orthodox Mohelim to refuse their services to Reform Jews simply because they are affiliated with Reform synagogues. Or in the case of intermarriage where a son is

born to a non-Jewish mother, even L'shame gerut or for the sake of a halachically valid conversion, an Orthodox Mohel has been known to refuse to perform the rite. In another situation, even against the standard halachah, Orthodox Mohelim have refused to circumcise a child born of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father. Clearly then one major problem for Reform Jews vis a vis brit milah is their dependency on the goodwill of Orthodox Mohelim. Although in all fairness to the many Orthodox Mohelim who are indeed practitioners of goodwill and see their role as serving all Jews, it must be noted that the negativism of even a few Orthodox Mohelim can and has destroyed the sanctity of the mitzvah for many Reform Jews. As a result of this attitude, Reform Jews have been forced to turn to non-religious functionaries to perform the rite. Either a Jewish or non-Jewish doctor performs the surgery usually in conjunction with an attending Reform Rabbi who recites the blessings. More often than not, out of convenience to the doctor the operation is performed in the hospital, often before the eighth day.

It was, in fact, on the occasion of Syme's own son's brit milah in a crowded hospital room that the idea of training Reform Jewish doctors in the area of ritual circumcision was first broached. Syme explained that because his wife needed extended hospitalization due to a cesarian section the brit milah took place in the hospital. Limited to a minimum number of guests, Syme asked his wife's

obstetrician, Dr. David James, to perform the surgery. James was also a member of a Reform Congregation. After the ceremony as Syme and James were talking, Syme remarked how nice it would be if he, Dr. James, would become a mohel, a mohel who could and would be sympathetic to the cause of Reform Judaism. Dr. James then revealed that at one time he did indeed apply to become a mohel. He was, however, rejected by the New York Milah Board because he was a Reform Jew. The two men continued their discussion, out of which emerged the novel idea of preparing Jewish medically trained professionals to perform ritual circumcisions for the Reform Jewish community. The idea had been broached; the next step was to test its viability.

In 1979, Syme held the post of National Director of the Commission on Education for the U.A.H.C. It was in this capacity that he asked James to speak before the commission on the subject of training Reform Mohelim. In a passionately delivered speech, James convinced the commission members to authorize a process that would set in motion the establishment of a board that could accept and review applications from Jewish doctors who wished to be trained as Reform Mohelim. Syme indicated that it was not only on account of Orthodox negativism that the idea was so readily accepted. Rather the program could stand on its own positive merits for the following reasons. "This unique Adult Education Program has the capacity to reach out to a whole

new sector of Reform Jewish life. Jewish physicians from across the country, perhaps those who were formally unaffiliated or inactive, could now be met on their occupational grounds." As a program of the Commission on Education the framework could now be set in place where Judaism could interface with professional interests. With respect to brit milah, Jewish learning now could be joined to the medical knowledge of the Reform constituency. Perhaps in the future, mused Syme, similar programs of outreach would be established to interface with other professional and non-professional interests such as law or baking. In a letter to Dr. Samuel Greengus and Dr. Paul Steinberg, Deans of the Cincinnati and New York Schools respectively, Syme summarizes his enthusiasm for the project by citing the following reasons:

"In one fell swoop, I believe we can put into place a significant educational program, invest Reform Jewish life with new religious commitment in one realm of observance, and break the Orthodox stranglehold on brit milah. . .and we might find a way to reach out to those many doctors who might find this program one vehicle for embracing--or re-embracing--their Jewish identity."(79)

On the West Coast, the idea for such a project was engendered in a significantly different manner. Rabbi Lewis Barth in his article entitled, "Introducing the Reform Mohel" recounts:

"In early fall, 1981, Dr. Deborah Cohen, who practices family medicine at Kaiser-Permanente Hospital in Los Angeles, contacted the Hebrew Union College. She wanted to become a mohel and asked if

the college could provide her with the requisite training. When her call was referred to me, it crossed my mind that the Reform Movement nationally had never produced either a mohel or a mohelet (feminine form). Reform Rabbis frequently officiate with physicians at brit milah ceremonies, but no program exists for the training of doctors in the history, laws, customs and religious values of this ancient ritual. Dr. Cohen's request was seminal in developing an experimental course for Reform Mohelim, the first of its kind in the history of liberal Judaism."(80)

There were other reasons as well that motivated Barth to organize the first course for the training of Reform Mohelim. Like Syme, noting the Orthodox negativism Barth argued that Reform Mohelim would provide, "A positive reform setting for Brit Milah, a setting that would be supportive of the whole process of Reform Judaism." Barth notes in his article that in committee discussions and during an H.U.C. seminar dealing with the issues of circumcision, Rabbis communicated their frustrations regarding brit milah. Barth explains that:

"Since the Reform movement was providing no trained professionals to perform the mitzvah, most parents chose to have their sons circumcised in the hospital as a routine medical procedure during the first few days after birth. Occasionally, Reform Jews would turn to Orthodox Mohalim, many of whom are highly regarded and competent. However, because of differences of principle between the Orthodox and Reform, embarrassing situations were commonplace.--Most Orthodox Mohalim do not recognize as Jewish the children of women converted by Reform or Conservative Rabbis. In cases where the mother was a convert, the Orthodox Mohel would often bring two "kosher" witnesses and perform the circumcision for the sake of conversion."(81)

Because of the prospect of embarrassing and humiliating situations such as the one described above, Barth notes that

Reform parents who want a brit for their child often get around the problem by having a Jewish doctor perform the surgical part of the ceremony while a Reform Rabbi recites the necessary prayers. "However," Barth claims that, "most Reform Jews simply have their sons circumcised in the hospital without any ritual at all. Having Reform Mohelim would make it more comfortable for people to have a brit milah because they would share the same values. It would eliminate the conflict of values at a moment that should be filled with great joy." (82) Barth concludes by quoting a fellow faculty member who summed up the need for Reform Mohelim by stating: "It is absurd to utilize a Religious officiant at life-cycle ceremonies of Reform Jews who would deny the authenticity or validity of Reform Judaism as a legitimate expression of Jewish religious commitment." (83)

Toward the end of 1981 contact was made between Barth's efforts on the West Coast and Syme's on the East Coast. When Barth was informed of Syme's parallel efforts in New York who had already won the approval of the U.A.H.C. to implement such a program, Barth then elicited the college's full participation. Barth organized and wrote the curriculum for the first experimental course which was held in Los Angeles at the college in the spring of 1984. Syme on the other hand requested and received the sanction of the C.C.A.R. who subsequently passed a resolution fully endorsing the project and pledging its support. By June of 1984, a proposed agreement to establish a National program for the training of

Mohelim by the Reform Movement was drafted by Rabbi Barth. In its initial clause the joint nature of the program is stressed. It reads as follows:

1. The H.U.C.-J.I.R., C.C.A.R., and U.A.H.C. agree to establish a program for the training of Mohelim by the Reform Movement.

The rest of the document(84) spells out in detail the purpose of the program, the division of financial and organizational responsibility among the three branches of the movement, the organizational structure of the Reform Brit Milah Board and its duties, qualifications for entry into the program, methods of evaluation of the program and requirements for recertification. While the document speaks for itself (see appendix), it is befitting to elaborate on a number of points. In answer to the question who can apply to the program, point number six notes as a pre-requisite that only obstetricians, pediatricians, urologists, family practitioners, or other physicians medically trained to perform circumcision, will be qualified to apply to this program. To this pre-requisite of medical knowledge the Reform Brit Milah Board has added that he or she must be affiliated with a Reform Congregation. As a result of this policy, Rabbi Syme points out that two to three formerly unaffiliated Jews now have joined Synagogues and have become active members.

The first course offered in the spring of 1984 in Los Angeles saw sixteen doctors and one nurse enroll in the program and the majority completed the requirements for certification. Of the first seventeen students, seven were women. The program, aside from its unprecedented nature, was and continues to be controversial because of its certification for the first time of women mohelim. In reaction to this innovation, Orthodox Rabbis who were interviewed dismissed outright the notion that women could be mohelim.(85)

With respect to the exact nature of the board itself it can be said that it sees its role as regulatory. The board receives applications from doctors and reviews their medical credentials among other pertinent information. The board establishes and enforces the criteria and standards for certification. It is responsible for the implementation of continuing education programs for previously certified mohelim and a procedure for program evaluation. With regard to standards relating to the surgical method of operation, the traditional view(86) is communicated and in some respects encouraged, but ultimately the choice is up to the individual doctor. While it is true that many have adopted the religiously traditional methods of circumcision, the main concern is for a well-done finely executed circumcision, whether that means use of clamps, local anesthetics, or any other modern device. In contrast to not regulating the

method of circumcision, the board on the other hand has taken a strong stand in favor of maintaining the religious significance of the eighth day. Reform mohelim will perform circumcision on a day prior to the eighth day, but only as a medical procedure. They will not accord the operation any ritual status; it will not be considered a brit milah. Of course in keeping with the halachah, they will perform the brit milah later than the eighth day as the health of the child dictates. On this principle in particular, the Los Angeles Mohelim have banded together.

The board through the medium of the classroom, introduces the student to the various liturgies, customs and ritual practices of the rite of circumcision, but does not authorize any particular practice. Most often the section on brit milah found in Gates of the House(87) is used as the liturgy, but others have also opted for other sources including everything from an Orthodox service to originally written creative services. The board similarly does not regulate the fee or honorarium received by the Reform Mohel. In practice, however, the Reform Mohel has been charging the same fee he or she would charge for a routine medical circumcision.

As to the question of who has availed themselves of the services of the newly certified Reform Mohelim, early data indicates that a large number of unaffiliated Jews in the Los Angeles region as well as a good number of Jewish fathers who are intermarried have utilized the services of the Reform

Mohel. In the later case, the Reform Mohelim interestingly enough, have acted in support of the C.C.A.R. patrilineal descent decision,(88) wherein the circumcisions they perform are NOT done for the sake of conversion,(89) but rather as the first act of Jewishness in the infant's life.

Barth and Syme both indicated that immediate plans include creating a syllabus and audio-visual materials for Rabbis in individual congregations throughout the country so that they can initiate local programs for the certification of Reform mohelim. They intend to tape all the lectures, have them transcribed, and provide a guidebook for the teaching and or administrating Rabbi. In this manner the program will be taken out of the two schools and into the interior of the country where the need for mohelim is the greatest.

The curriculum used first in Los Angeles and then later in New York was coordinated by Barth. The course outline includes an introduction to the sources and history of brit milah, and the theology, law, and folklore of Jewish circumcision ceremonies and practices.(90) The course runs for fourteen sessions and is followed by a written exam.(91)

Perhaps the most interesting development arising out of this innovative project is the reaction both pro and con it has received within the Reform Movement and from without. Both Barth and Syme have reported that both Rabbis and laity have demonstrated "real excitement" for the project. They claim that the almost unanimous positive reaction is due to

the realization of an idea whose time was long in coming. This author has, however, encountered less than enthusiastic support for the project. Especially in cities like Cincinnati and Philadelphia, where the Orthodox Mohelim are on good terms with the Reform community, there has been a reluctance to provide competition for the incumbent mohel or mohelim. The only significant criticism, however, from within the Reform Movement itself has been from Rabbis who would like to see the program expanded to accept individuals with no prior medical training who would be taught the procedure as part of the general instruction provided by the institution. Barth and Syme answer by stressing that it is too early to consider that option, if indeed it will ever be a viable option.

So while the reaction within the movement has been, as expected, a positive one, likewise as we might expect, the reaction among the Orthodox has been less than enthusiastic. In fact, it has been downright vituperative. Both in Los Angeles and in New York the rhetoric spoken by the Orthodox is strangely reminiscent of the battle waged by the Orthodox of Frankfurt, one hundred and forty years ago. The irony, of course, is that in Frankfurt the battle was waged because the reformers sought to abandon the practice of brit milah, and now the campaign is being waged because the reformers have re-embraced the ancient ritual and have begun to supply its own mohelim. "You cannot have a Reform Mohel, period," said Rabbi Eli Hecht, president of the Orthodox Rabbinical

Council. "The important thing is intent. I don't know if the proper intent can be there if someone doesn't keep all the commandments. A Reform Jew doesn't keep all the commandments. A Reform Jew cannot bring a person into the covenant, which has always had an Orthodox meaning. A Reform Jew cannot do an Orthodox ritual. It goes against the grain of everything the Orthodox Jew has known and stood for."(92)

With respect to the issue of women mohelim, the opinion is even more decisive. Rabbi Yehuda Lebovics, a well-known Orthodox Mohel in Los Angeles commented, "In this day and age, a qualified male can always be had by phone or car. I fly all over the west. They cannot argue women are allowable because of a lack of men. There is always the option of getting a man."(93)

Finally describing in practical terms what will be the result of Reform circumcisions, Rabbi Marvin Sugarman, the spiritual leader of Shaarey Tzedek Congregation in North Hollywood and the Rabbinical Council's honorary Chairman of the Board said, "boys ritually circumcised by "so-called Reform Mohelim" would not be considered properly circumcised by Orthodox standards. Should such a person decide to become Orthodox later in life, he would have to undergo a second ritual, known as hatafat dam brit, which involves drawing a drop of blood from the penis."(94)

As if the reaction on the West Coast was not strong enough, the reaction in New York was momentous. In New York, the Orthodox appealed to the State Legislature to pass an

amendment that would recognize as ritually valid only those circumcisions performed under Orthodox auspices.(95) They argue that, "A circumcision performed by a non-religious practitioner does not satisfy the religious requirements of any faith." According to the Orthodox who have pressed for this amendment of the New York State Public Health Law, Reform Jews therefore do not meet the requirement. In opposition to this view, Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz, U.A.H.C. Regional director for the New York area, provided evidence from Jewish sources to the legislative committee dealing with this proposed amendment that shows that anyone can circumcise. In a correspondence to New York State Assemblyman Tallon, Rabbi Zlotowitz informs him of his opposition to the proposed amendment. He objects on the grounds: "(1) It is a violation of the principle of separation of church and State and (2) it flies in the face of Jewish law!" At present the proposed amendment lies dormant in committee, but may be reconsidered in the future.

Summary

And so the history of Brit Milah in Reform Judaism has come full circle. One hundred and forty years ago Frankfurt Orthodoxy led by Rabbi Abraham Trier appealed to the State Senate because of the dangers posed by Reform Jews who sought to diminish the significance of the revered rite and who questioned the necessity of circumcising their sons. Today in 1985 the Orthodox, this time in New York State, have again

appealed to a legislative body, this time, however, to ward off the "dangers" posed by the training of Reform Mohelim and a Reform re-emphasis on the great significance of brit milah for all Jews. Rabbi Zlotowitz's statement equating circumcision with belief in God and other kindred mitzvot, with which we began this chapter, is symbolic of the Reform movement's re-embrace of this controversial rite of passage. The Reform Movement has moved from near abandonment of the Mitzvah to a demonstrative acceptance of the rite as indicated by the establishment of the first ever Reform Brit Milah Board.

This ironic historical twist is itself a beacon of insight into the evolving nature of Reform Judaism. What are the religious and or theological underpinnings that have preserved brit milah as a primary rite of passage among Reform Jews during this historical period? Of what religious significance is brit milah in Reform Judaism? This shall be the subject of our next chapter.

NOTES

(1) Zlotowitz, Bernard "Questions and Answers" Reform Judaism, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter, 1983, p. 43.

The author confirmed in a phone interview that it is not by accident that he equates circumcision with belief in God, etc.; He emphasized the religious importance of brit milah for Jews as a rite that needs to be continued.

(2) Consider the Ballonoff and London suits filed against mohelim in California. See the weekly Northern California Jewish Bulletin, San Francisco, beginning April 26, 1985 with editorials running through May 31, 1985.

(3) Philipson, David, The Reform Movement in Judaism, The Mac Millan Company, London, 1907, p. 118.

(4) Ibid., p. 131.

(5) Meyer, Michael A., "Alienated Intellectuals in the Camp of Religious Reform: The Frankfurt Reformfreunde 1842-1845."

(6) Ibid., p. 62.

(7) The five point declaration of the Reform Society stated that its supporters:

1. Considered the Mosaic religion capable of a continuing development;
2. Considered the ritual, dietary and other laws pertaining to corporal practices which originated in the ancient polity, for example,
3. Circumcision, not binding as a religious act or symbol.
4. Did not recognize the Talmud as an authority;
5. Neither awaited nor wished for a messiah who would lead the Jews back to Palestine, but rather regarded the land to which they belonged by birth or civil status as their fatherland.

(8) The revised three-point platform declared:

1. We recognize in Mosaism the possibility

- of an unlimited further development.
2. The collection called the Talmud, as well as all the Rabbinic writings and statutes which rest upon it, possess no binding force for us either in dogma or in practice.
 3. We neither expect nor desire a messiah who is to lead the Israelites back to the land of Palestine; we recognize no fatherland other than to which we belong by birth or civil status.

(9) Schreiber, Dr. Emanuel, Reformed Judaism and Its Pioneers, Spokane Printing Comapny, Spokane, Washington, 1892, p. 205.

(10) Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums, (A.Z. D. J.), VII, p. 405 from J.T.S. doctoral dissertation entitled "Frankfurt Orthodoxy" by Robert Liberles, 1978, p. 46.

(11) Philipson, (Above No.3) p. 131.

(12) "Israelitische Burger und Einwohner, insofern sie ihre kinder beschneiden lassen wollen". . .

(13) Plaut, W. Gunther, The Rise of Reform Judaism, World Union for Progressive Judaism, N.Y., 1963, p. 207.

(14) A.Z.d.J., VII, p. 201, from Liberles Dissertation, p. 48.

(15) A.Z.d.J., VII, p. 182, from Liberles Dissertation, p. 48.

(16) Liberles, Robert, J.T.S. Doctoral dissertation entitled "Frankfurt Orthodoxy", p. 58.

(17) Ibid., p. 60.

(18) "More Judaico", -- A humiliating medieval legal custom that required a Jew upon taking an oath to be escorted to a synagogue by the judge, the Rabbi, and ten Jews above the age of 13. Decked with Talit and Tefillin, the Rabbi had to impress upon him the solemnity of the oath. The witness then spoke a fixed formula and had to assure the court that he would not attempt to have it abrogated by a Jewish religious court or consider it annulled by the Kol Nidre Prayer.

(19) Rabbi Trier, Solomon Abraham, Rabbinische Gutachten uber die Beschneidung, Gesamelt und her/ausgegeben von Salomon Abraham Trier, Frankfurt am main, 1844.

(20) "Aber der judische kreis hat Sie nicht mehr also

die geinigen zu ersennen, weil sie dem willen nach Aufgehört haben, Juden zu sein, und damit in die kategorie der mumrim getreten sind, als welche sie in allen Beziehungen des judischreligiosen lebens fernerhin zu behandln sein werden." Rabbinische Gutachten über die Beschneidung, p. 4.

(21) Ibid., p. 13.

"ואם איש עני פוא וצדיק לעבדות, מצוב לרחק (22)
עליו וליתן לו, כי כמו שחמלה פוא אות בקשרנו, כן
ניחמלה ויחננוה פוא אות בקשרנו."

Ibid., p. 69

(23) Ibid., p. 70.

"ואחרי אשר אפילו ער באויביו צותה תורה (24)
ידר את אליה לעולם, דל וחמר ער אחינו בני ישראל,
אף אר תעו מני דרך, חובה עלינו לעדד בנייה
קדדרי שלום ואמת..."

Ibid., p. 71.

(25) Ibid., pp. 101-102.

(26) This response of Rabbi Elias Grunebaum published in Hess' Israelit des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, was accompanied by an editorial footnote that it had been suppressed by Trier's publication committee. Rabbi Mendel Hess was the sole Rabbi who openly identified himself with the Reform Society of Frankfurt.

(27) The Orient, Vol. V, 1844, p. 404.

(28) Liberles, (Above No. 16) p. 58.

(29) Philipson, (Above No. 3) p. 192. "More clearly, the Senate was recognizing the diverging patterns of individual religious practice."

(30) Meyer, Michael A., "The first identical ceremony for giving a Hebrew name to girls and boys", Journal of Reform Judaism, Winter, 1985, p. 85.

(31) Philipson, (Above No. 3) p. 189.

(32) Weiner, Max, Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism, H.U.C.P., Cincinnati, 1981, pp. 113-114.

(33) Ueber die Beschneidung in Religios - dogmatischer Beziehung, Schwerin and Berlin, 1844.

(34) Schreiber, (Above No. 9) p. 208

(35) Ibid., p. 208.

(36) Chulin 4, Avodah Zarah 27a.

(37) Schreiber, (Above No. 9) p. 210.

(38) Ibid., p. 211.

(39) His words in the German original are:

"Es muss nun bald eine form gefunden werden, welche diese alte ersetzt; die Aussegnung der Wochnerin durfte nicht ganz genugen, die anwesenheit des Kindes scheint gleichfall erforderlich, und der anfang dazu konnte mit den madchen gemacht werden; dann wurde all mahlich, wie die confirmation die Bar Mitzwah--all fanzerei, so auch die neue form die Beschneidung verdrangen." Nachgelassene Schriften, V. pp. 202-203.

Philipson, p. 192.

(40) Ibid., p. 191.

(41) The American Israelite, Oct. 23, 1868, Vol. 15, No. 16.

(42) Ibid., Jan. 1, 1869, Vol. 15, No. 26.

(43) Ibid., Oct. 2, 1890, Vol. 37, No. 14.

(44) Philipson, (Above No. 3) p. 200.

(45) Ibid., p. 201.

(46) Ibid., p. 218 (A.Z.D.J. VIII, (1844), 17).

(47) C.C.A.R. Yearbook, Vol. 1-5, 1890-1895, p. 81.

(48) Philipson, (Above No. 3) p. 260.

(49) For a detailed description of the discussion see: Protokolle der dritten versammlung Deutscher Rabbiner, Breslau, 1846, pp. 184-189; 275-278.

(50) Plaut, (Above No. 13) pp. 210-211.

(51) Philipson, (Above No. 3) p. 449.

(52) The following detailed description of the proceedings is from:

Temkin, Sefton D., The New World of Reform (Containing the proceedings of the Conference of Reform Rabbis held in Philadelphia in November, 1869), Hartmore House, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1971, pp. 71-73.

(53) "Lehrbuch der Mosaischen Religion Bearbeitet" von Dr. Alexander Behr. . .geprueft undanerkennt vom Rabbinat zu fuerth.

(54) Temkin, (Above No. 52) pp. 92; 122.

(55) Felsenthal's pamphlet was entitled, "Zur Proselytenfrage im Judenthum."

(56) The Jewish Messenger, No. 12, 1879. Also a concise precis of the article can be found in the CCAR Yearbook, Vol. 2, 1891-1892, pp. 96-98.

(57) From the Conference paper of Dr. K. Kohler in The Proceedings of the Pittsburgh Rabbinical Conference, CCAR, NY, 1923.

(58) These responses can be found in the CCAR Yearbook 1891, pp. 66-128.

(59) C.C.A.R. Yearbook, 1891-1892, p. 36.

(60) Dr. M. H. Harris, Rev. I. Joseph, and Dr. M. Mielziner.

(61) שו"ת אגרות קודש
(ה'תק"ל: ת"ת) "א"י נאמן"

(62) Yebamot 70b, 71a; Yoreh Deah, 264.1.

(63) The seventh question to a proselyte: "Do you also agree to have male children circumcised?" Judaism: A Manual for the Instruction of Proselytes, C.C.A.R., Cincinnati, 1928.

(64) Jacobs, Walter, C.C.A.R. American Reform Responsa Collected Responsum of the C.C.A.R. 1889-1983. C.C.A.R., New York, 1983, p. 142.

(65) Wise, Isaac Mayer, Judaism: Doctrines and Duties, published by the office of the Israelite, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1872, p. 35.

(66) Lazarus, O. L.L.A., Liberal Judaism and Its Standpoint, MacMillan and Co., Limited, London, 1937, pp. 178-179.

(67) Feldman, Abraham J., Rabbi, Reform Judaism: A Guide for Reform Jews, Behrman House, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1956, p. 16.

(68) See for Example: Outline of Jewish Belief and

Practice (with emphasis on the Reform viewpoint) Prepared by Rabbi Alfred C. Friedman, Union Temple of Brooklyn, NY, 1961, p. 25; and A guide to Jewish Living prepared by Rabbi Irwin Blank, Temple Sinai, Tenafly, New Jersey, 1960, p. 16.

(69) Brav, Stanley Rabbi, "A Guide to Religious Ceremonies" Temple Sholom, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1965, p. 18.

(70) Doppelt, Frederic A., and Polish, David, A Guide for Reform Jews, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., New York, 1957. (Revised Edition 1973) pp. 53-57.

(71) Bial, Morrison David, Liberal Judaism at Home, U.A.H.C., New York, 1967, (Revised Edition 1971), pp. 15-20.

(72) Maslin, Simeon J. editor, Gates of Mitzvah, C.C.A.R., New York, 1979, pp. 13-16.

(73) Ibid., p. 13.

(74) Ibid., p. 14.

(75) Dr. Eugene Mihaly claims that a whole generation of Reform Jews remained uncircumcised, a number in fact who he personally knew and even one who held a prominent position in the movement.

(76) Weiss, Charles, "A Worldwide Survey of the Current Practice of Milah," Jewish Social Studies, Vol. 24, New York, 1962, pp. 30-48.

(77) Ibid., pp. 47-48.

(78) Barth, Lewis M., "Introducing the Reform Mohel" Reform Judaism, Fall, 1984, p. 18.

(79) Letter from Rabbi Daniel B. Syme to Drs. Greengus and Steinberg, dated March 26, 1984. Copy obtained from Dr. Eugene Mihaly.

(80) Barth, (Above No. 78) p. 18.

(81) Ibid., p. 18.

(82) Rifkin, Ira, "Jewish women go after a religious man's job", Los Angeles Daily News, January 29, 1984, pp. 16-17.

(83) Barth, (Above No. 78) p. 18.

(84) See Appendix for a copy of the full document.

(85) Rifkin, (Above No. 82) p. 17.

(86) The halachic view for example would exclude the use of a scissors or forecepts; the use of anesthetic etc., but even among the Orthodox Mohelim there has been great variety in methods of circumcision.

(87) Stern, Chaim, Gates of the House, C.C.A.R., New York, 1977, pp. 111-113.

(88) The patrilineal descent resolution passed by the C.C.A.R. in 1984 declared contrary to the standard halachah that a child born of a Jewish father no less than a Jewish mother is presumed Jewish at birth.

(89) "Al Shame Gerut"

(90) For a week by week session by session overview see Appendix. Documents Number 10 and Number 11.

(91) See Appendix: Document Number 12.

(92) Rifkin, (Above No. 85) p. 17.

(93) Ibid.

(94) Ibid.

(95) See Document in Appendix: Document Number 13.

CHAPTER TWO

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

9. Agreement to Establishment a Natural Program for the Training of Mohelim by the Reform Movement
10. Registration, Requirements for Certification, Class Schedule and Faculty Listing for Brit Milah Course
11. Introduction to the Ceremony of Brit Milah: A Course for Physicians (Outline of Course and Detailed Bibliography)
12. Final Examination: Course for Reform Mohelim
13. Letter from Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz to the Honorable James Tallon and the Attached Laws of Circumcision from the Shulchan Aruch.

CHAPTER THREE

The Significance of Brit Milah in Reform Judaism Introduction

"Marriage, circumcision, and funeral observances will have to be amended, revised, rethought, and re-ordered in the light of reason and relevance. While Reform Judaism says it is proper to have a surgeon or doctor perform a circumcision with a rabbi saying the prayers and while our Reform tradition has emphasized circumcision on the eighth day, should not candor compel us to look again at the tradition and ascertain whether it should be observed on the first day, fourth day, eighth day or at all? Since it is a medical practice in most hospitals to circumcise almost all male children, of all faiths, is such a service uniquely Jewish? If not, how can we make it so? Moreover, we must ask ourselves whether the cutting off of the foreskin really signifies a covenant with the eternal God? If we consider this ancient rite objectively, how esthetic, meaningful or religious is it today? If it is retained, it must be made meaningful."(1)

In the space of one short paragraph Rabbi William B. Silverman has managed to zero in on the most interesting aspect of this study of brit milah in Reform Judaism. Simply

put, "what is the significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism?" As the ensuing documents will indicate this question however, is not merely an academic one pondered solely by rabbis and theologians such as Rabbi Silverman. It is rather a very real question in the minds of Reform Jewish parents faced with the decision of circumcising their sons in accordance with Jewish tradition. Given the change of opinion in the medical community concerning the medical advisability of routine circumcision, Jewish parents are seriously considering or reconsidering the medical necessity as well as the religious significance of the ancient rite. Over the past forty to fifty years when nearly all American males were routinely circumcised, Reform Jews generally circumcised their sons with or without the accompanying ceremony. In recent years, however, the rate of routine circumcision in the United States has dropped significantly from 98% in 1970 to 75% in 1985. This is due in large part to the statements issued by the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Both organizations after thorough study and investigation have concluded that "there is no absolute medical indication for routine circumcision of the newborn." (2) These conclusions have been buttressed by an increasingly ubiquitous literature detailing the risks and "dangers" of circumcision. (3) Jewish parents are no longer simply contemplating whether or not to accompany the medical procedure with a religious ceremony on the eighth day. They are asking "why circumcise at all?" By

raising this fundamental question, albeit generated by the medical controversy, Jewish parents are exploring and contemplating the meaning and significance of brit milah in a serious manner. As Rabbi Daniel Syme remarked, "That circumcision is not a medical necessity is in our favor. It can now be considered as an important life-cycle event like any other. Jewish parents will have to consciously make a decision regarding the significance of brit milah."

It was exactly these circumstances that motivated Hank and Gretchen, a married couple, struggling with the question of circumcision, to address a communication to Arthur J. Lelyveld, Rabbi of Fairmount Temple in Cleveland, Ohio.(4) In Hank's frank assessment of the issues effecting his decision to circumcise or not to circumcise his child (if indeed it turned out to be a boy which it did not), Hank raises several critical questions. For him and his wife, these questions are not theoretical; they are immanent and relevant. This chapter will address itself to some of the queries and issues presented in the following letter.

October 23, 1975

Dear Rabbi Lelyveld,

I'm sorry to bother you, but I'd very much like your advice about a problem Gretchen and I are troubled over--whether to have our second child, if he is a boy, circumcised. We have a 2-year old daughter, Amanda, and are expecting a new arrival in February. Let me present the issues as we see them.

There seems to be a general consensus among doctors we know and in the medical literature [see enclosure, for example(5)] that there is no medical

indication for circumcision. We are left feeling that the only reasons to circumcise our child are religious and perhaps psychological.

I don't understand the religious reasons. Does circumcision have any important symbolic meaning to raise it out of the category of interesting, primitive ritual? I suppose historically circumcision has strong emotional connotations as a vivid, irreversible declaration of Jewishness--but at the cost of being the only ritual practiced by Reform Jews that causes physical pain and suffering. (Perhaps the associated bris has some meaning--welcoming the child into the Jewish community, etc.--but I find the custom of "buying back" the child unpleasant. In any case, we're not considering a Pidyon Ha-ben) at all, so I'd just like to discard it as an issue.) Further, for the Reform Jew, who is supposed to make up his mind independently about Judaism at the time of confirmation, isn't circumcision at birth timed wrong? I suspect that if circumcision were performed following the confirmation ceremony, you would no longer have all the logistical problems of large confirmation classes! In retrospect, I am surprised that, when the Reform movement was founded and many rituals were discarded or modified, circumcision was not one of them. What is the "official" Reform thinking about circumcision? I know there has been a swing in recent years back toward the practice of certain rituals, and I think that generally that's a good thing--but I'm not sure that a surgical procedure on the penis adds anything spiritual to anyone's life.

As you can tell from my questions, I am not persuaded by the religious arguments for circumcision, though, admittedly, I don't know much about them. I am leaning toward circumcision, however, for reasons that I am not very proud of. I don't want my son to feel "different" from his Jewish and many non-Jewish (if the fad continues) friends. Kids can be cruel--I remember my "friends" who went to Hebrew school taunting me for having my chance to become a man at age 13. I don't want my son to think he's not Jewish. But these arguments really are a way of saying I just want to take the easy, conforming way out. In theory, I should be able to handle each of these problems--including my son's difficult question of why he looks different from me--with rational, thoughtful, and loving answers.

So, you can see, I'm on the fence. I haven't the faintest idea how actively Jewish my son (if he is a son) is going to be. I don't want to close

any doors to him but most of all, right now, I don't want to hurt him. And there is no mistake about that--circumcision hurts. To repeat, we do feel that some Jewish rituals add emotional dimensions to the Jewish experience, but we're not sure that circumcision is in that category and are sure that it is the only painful ritual that we might ever practice.

My questions can be summed up as follows: 1. What is the religious reason for circumcision? 2. How important are "historical" reasons (the "we've always done it that way" argument)? 3. What is Reform Judaism's viewpoint? 4. Would anyone ever require our son to be circumcised as an adult in order to be a practicing Jew? 5. Are there Reform Jewish couples not favoring circumcision? (Are we the only ones? I suspect that the numbers would increase, if more people know that there is no medical rationale.) 6. Finally, and maybe most important, what are your personal feelings?

As you can see, we are currently living in Belmont, Massachusetts, near Boston. I am working at Mass. General Hospital and Gretchen is spending most of her time with Amanda and working part-time at Cambridge Hospital (she is a pediatrician). Amanda is keeping us both very busy and happy. We hope you and your family are well.

Thanks very much for taking the time to read all this. By the way, we aren't sharing these concerns with my parents, who would be horrified.

In order to effectively address the question of the significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism as raised by Rabbi Silverman and our layman Hank it would be beneficial to first survey the evolving nature of ritual circumcision from earliest times up the present. This approach would allow us to trace the significance of the rite from pre-literate times, through the biblical period, as interpreted in Rabbinic times leading up to its accepted present day meaning. Following this historical appraisal of the evolving significance of brit milah, specific Reform religious values and principles will be discussed and then compared with the

traditional significance of brit milah. In this way it will be possible to indicate where present day Reform values are compatible with the religious significance of brit milah and where they differ. Finally, considering this rite objectively as well as subjectively, this author will respectfully offer some final comments concerning the religious significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism.

A. Biblical and Extra Biblical Materials
on the Significance of Brit Milah

Some Theories on the Significance of
of Circumcision in Various Ancient Cultures

Because of the great antiquity of the rite of circumcision much of its original meaning is shrouded in mystery. Herodotus, "the father of history," explicitly states that circumcision was the common custom among the ancient Egyptians,(6) and his words are borne out not only by a graphic account of the rite in an inscription of the 23rd century B.C.E.,(7) but also by a portrayal of the operation on a wall-painting at Thebes (8) and by the fact that the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for "phallus" depicts it circumcised. Herodotus also claims knowledge that the custom prevailed likewise among the Ethiopians, the Phoenicians, the Colchians, and the "Syrians of Palestine."(9)

That we may never fully understand the significance of the ritual as it originally developed, has been attested to by numerous scholars who have spent many years studying the topic. Charles Weiss, for example, in his article entitled

"Motives for Male Circumcision Among Preliterate and Literate Peoples"(10) writes: "It is impossible in the present state of our knowledge to state the original motives for its (circumcision) adoption by literate peoples, neither do available records tell us where the rite had its origins or how it spread from one part of the world to another."(11) Another prominent researcher in the field, Theodore H. Gaster, has stated, "The original purpose of circumcision has been widely debated, and no agreement on the subject has yet been reached."(12) Similarly, Bettelheim concluded at the end of his exhaustive study in 1962 that, "I am still unable fully and unequivocally to explain circumcision."(13)

These humble expressions of uncertainty should alert us to the dangers of putting too much stock in one theory or explanation over another. In the final analysis much of what is to follow is at best academic conjecture on the part of serious-minded scholars who base their claims on their accumulated knowledge. Because the significance of the original rite has been interpreted and re-interpreted numerous times(14) or changed at different times after its adoption in various parts of the world, it is difficult if not impossible to ascertain the original import of the rite. Therefore, instead of describing in detail the multifarious theories that have been proposed for the motives of circumcision in preliterate peoples, it would be advantageous to narrow our purview and consider them in the light of the biblical context in which they may or may not correlate. In

other words, to what extent do the various theories concerning prebiblical motives for circumcision relate to the biblical significance of brit milah?

Theodore Gaster based on his study claims that the most plausible theory is that "circumcision was originally designed to prevent or correct any untoward condition of the sexual organs that might threaten to interfere with the propagation of the species." (15) He rejects the theories that state that circumcision is a modified form of ritual castration, a substitute for the sacrifice of one's entire person to a deity or as a distinctive tribal mark of identification. Gaster supports his rejection of these explanations by asking, "who can believe, for instance, that even the most primitive level of civilization, the relation of a living God to a living people ever consisted in a demand that the latter should deliberately prevent its own perpetuation or commit mass suicide?" (16) With respect to the theory that circumcision provides a distinctive tribal mark of identification, which has been suggested by numerous scholars, Gaster responds by claiming that unlike some African tribes who resort to tattooing, knocking out a front tooth, stretching the neck, lips or ear lobes, in contrast circumcision is a mark that remains hidden, in that most primitives happen to keep their genitals covered.

Returning to Gaster's most plausible choice in which he accepts circumcision as an aid to reproduction, he states:

"Magically, by the common device of sacrificing a

part for the sake of the whole, the operation would have "hanselled" the genital members against the perils and hazzards thought to be inherent in first intercourse--as, indeed, in all things done for the first time. It would have been, in fact, of the same order as the sacrifice of firstlings or first fruits to a God or demon in order to protect the rest of the herd or crop from disaster."(17)

Gaster further finds support for this hypothesis in the fact that circumcision is often performed on females as well as males, and that it usually takes place at puberty or just before marriage. "Puberty" claims Gaster, "is sexual ripening; marriage is sexual consummation. Either time, therefore,--and very frequently they coincide--would be an appropriate moment for a measure designed to ease procreation."(18) Similarly on linguistic grounds Gaster points out that the Hebrew word for "bridegroom" ($\int \text{ן}$) derives from a root meaning "to circumcise." Likewise the Arabic word hatana meaning circumcision, indicates that the bride's father is called hoten, literally, "one who circumcises," and this would suggest that it was he that originally performed the operation. Also in Lahore, the ceremony of circumcision is called shadi, a Persian word meaning "a wedding."

Charles Weiss lends support to Gaster's view by adding that "certain tribes regard an uncircumcised male as declassé: as an animal or as an asexual infant who is unsuitable for coitus."(19) Weiss further points out that the Hebrew word Arel ($\int \text{ר}$) means not only uncircumcised, but obstructed, blocked, imperfect. By removing the

impediment the (סָרַח), by circumcising the foreskin, one could increase fertility and facilitate reproduction. As Gaster notes, removing the foreskin was not simply a utilitarian exercise to somehow physically aid the reproductive process, but was also a semi-magical rite in which one "hanselled" the genitals against the perils of first intercourse. Weiss concurs stating that, "Circumcision was a ritual means by which primitive man could regulate, appease, or bribe the cosmic forces or deities which controlled life's mysteries." (20)

In biblical usage, the same term orlah (סָרַח) is used to refer to the sacrifice of firstlings or first fruits in the fiftieth year, as an offering to God. In a similar mode the removal of the foreskin is seen as a pleasing sacrifice to God. This idea is expressed at the mass circumcision ceremony under Joshua's command immediately prior to the Israelites crossing over into the land of Canaan. There it is recorded (Joshua 5:3) that the excised foreskins were piled high into a heap. All the foreskins were gathered together until they became like a hill; hence the name gibeath--Ha-araloth, the hill of foreskins. The rabbinic comment on this section describes how the odor of the rotting foreskins under the hot desert sun was pleasing to God. It was a pleasing fragrance, (רֵיחַ אֲרָמָה), a savory scent akin to other animal sacrifices. Hence the connection is drawn between orlah and sacrifice.

This phenomenon of the removal of the foreskin as an act

of ritual sacrifice has its basis not only in the rabbinic interpretation as noted above, but is considered as an act of sacrifice among primitive tribes to this day. Some scholars believe that circumcision was instituted among some of the various tribes in Mexico as a substitute for child sacrifice.(21) In Moslem societies the term used to describe the customary religious feast following a circumcision is called in Arabic "korban" meaning sacrifice.(22)

The most widely accepted interpretation of the ancient significance of circumcision is that of an initiatory rite. In some societies, circumcision acts as test of courage, strength, or endurance which young men must pass in order to become full members in that community, tribe or clan. In other societies, circumcision is performed at about age thirteen, as a symbol of entrance into adulthood. Gaster reports that:

"Among primitive peoples circumcision is almost always performed not individually but en mass (23) as part of the ritual of the major annual or seasonal festivals. It provides a means of periodically replenishing the life and energy of a community by formally integrating into it a body of new members physically "conditioned" (at least in theory) to insure its continuance. It therefore constitutes a rite of initiation; the child or youth who submits to circumcision is automatically admitted to the bond of kinship--that is to the communal covenant."(24)

Gaster, taking this observation one step further, demonstrates how in Semitic societies in particular this rite of intitiation was made not only communally but with the deity as well. Gaster writes:

"In ancient Semitic society, the community consisted not only of its human members but also of its local genius or God--the personification of its corporate being. Entry into the bond of social kinship therefore implied also entry into the covenant with the God."(25)

As a proof text, Gaster cites the cryptic biblical account in Exodus 4:24-26, in which according to one interpretation Zipporah says to God after circumcising her son, "Verily you are a kinsman unto me by the blood of circumcision." In this statement Gaster sees the son of Moses and Zipporah being brought into a bond of social kinship and with God. Weiss concurs with Gaster's view of circumcision as an initiatory rite, at least at one time in the past. Weiss informs us that:

"Among the Egyptians, at one time circumcision was part of a mass puberty or intitiation rite, but by the time of the Ancient Empire, CA2600 B.C.E., it had become a religious ceremony of individual purification limited to the Pharoahs, the members of their court, the priests and scholars, and was required of all who wished to come into the presence of royalty or divinity. (Jonkheere, 1951; Straemans 1959)."(26)

The Significance of Brit Milah as Manifest in the Bible

Of the foregoing explanations advanced to illucidate as much as possible the various motives for male circumcision in ancient peoples, three are particularly relevant to our search for the significance of brit milah in Judaism in general and Reform Judaism in particular. Circumcision as a puberty or marriage rite, circumcision as related to

sacrifice, and circumcision as an initiatory rite, more than any of the other suggested theories have been widely accepted by most experts as the most likely motives for male circumcision. Not only because the weight of scholarly opinion favors these among the rest, but also because of their close correlation with later biblical scenarios, this author has chosen these three theories as a point of departure for this study of the significance of brit milah in the Bible.

Before analyzing each of these three theories in the light of biblical occurrence, it must be reiterated that the practice of circumcision long predates the biblical period. One should not assume that circumcision originated with Abraham or his estimated historical period, CA 2000 B.C.E. Scholars point to the fact that since a flintstone is still being used as the circumcising tool in an age of iron and metal, indicates the antiquity of the rite.(27)

Circumcision As A Puberty or Marriage Rite

J. Wellhausen, whose view has likewise been advanced by scholars of no less authority than W. Robertson Smith, Marti, Stade, Bertholet, H. P. Smith, and many others, holds that circumcision in Israel was originally a puberty rite, a kind of barbaric test of maturity which the youth had to undergo before he could marry.(28) According to Wellhausen the relationship between circumcision and marriage is implied in the Dinah and Shechem story in Genesis 34. Here the brothers

of Dinah compel Shechem to undergo the rite as a preliminary to his marriage with their sister. Likewise in Exodus 4:24-26 the necessity for the bridegroom to undergo circumcision as a requirement for marriage is implied even more directly in the use of the formula "You are now a bridegroom of blood unto me." Moses, a married man, has not been circumcised, and it is for this that the deity attacks him. But Zipporah circumcises her infant son instead of her husband, and by touching the genitals of her husband with the bloody foreskin of the child, she indicates that the circumcision of the child is equivalent in a modified form to the original pre-marital circumcision of the young men. In other words, here is a clear-cut indication that circumcision did not originally take place in infancy, but at the age of puberty or prior to marriage. The circumcision of the infant by Zipporah was but a vicarious method of redeeming Moses from the deity whose wrath had been kindled because of the failure of Moses to have undergone the rite himself.(28a) Wellhausen, besides using Genesis 34 and Exodus 4:24-26 as support for this hypothesis, also points to Genesis 17:25 where it is stated that Ishmael was circumcised in his thirteenth year, and to the practice in some Arab tribes in carrying out this rite at about this age, as further evidence that circumcision was originally connected with puberty and was a prerequisite for marriage.

Opposing Wellhausen and his followers, Dr. J. Morgenstern refutes the above arguments point for point,

claiming that circumcision was never a rite of puberty or a rite attendant to marriage, but rather a practice that took place at the time of infancy or early childhood. With respect to Genesis 34, Morgenstern simply states:

"In other words the tradition in Genesis 34 does not evidence any connection at all between the rite of circumcision and marriage, other than that marriage was certainly, according to Israelite practice, the latest possible date at which circumcision might be performed, and that, accordingly, an uncircumcised person like Shechem was not qualified to marry."(29)

In answer to Wellhausen's theory based on Exodus 4:24-26, Morgenstern holds that Exodus 4:24-26 is not part of the "J" source, but a fragment of an earlier document of a Kenite background and origin, which he calls "K," and regards as the oldest document of the Hexateuch.

Based on this interpolation, Morgenstern puts forth a very complicated hypothesis noting the significance of Beena marriage.(30) According to Morgenstern's view, Moses had contracted beena marriage with Zipporah of the Kenite tribe. Now under this system of marriage the oldest brother of the wife is the head of the clan and it is his prerogative to circumcise the male offspring of his sister or sisters. He is called the "choten" (חֹתֵן) or "circumciser." The child who is circumcised is designated "chatan" (חָתָן). The circumcision has a two-fold purpose, the removal of the taboo or to redeem the child from the evil power that threatened

it, and to initiate the child into the ordinary profane life of the tribe and into all the tribal relationships. The blood that was shed during the rite symbolized the blood relationship between the child and all the members of the tribe. Now in the case of Moses and Zipporah the chotan (| ִנָּח) was Hobab, Zipporah's oldest brother, and it was he who should have performed the circumcision of his sister's male offspring. But contrary to the fundamental principles of beena marriage, Zipporah leaves her tribe to accompany Moses. The child is born either shortly before they set out or upon the journey, but at any rate he has not been circumcised. Now under the conditions of beena marriage he should have belonged to the tribe of the mother, but the tribal deity, seeing himself about to be deprived of his due, tries to kill the child. But Zipporah acts in the emergency and carries out the function which normally belonged to the oldest brother, the (| ִנָּח). In circumcising the child herself and throwing the foreskin at the feet of the deity, and in pronouncing a formula by which the blood-relationship between the child and herself, and consequently between the child and her tribe and deity is established, she appeases the deity and therefore saves the life of the child. The formula which Zipporah recites means no more, according to Morgenstern's view, than "surely one related by blood, (i.e., the blood of circumcision) are you to me," or in other words, "surely you are now a full member of the tribe."

In answer to Wellhausen's argument based on Genesis 17:25, Morgenstern counters:

"In all likelihood the biblical author meant to tell no more than that Abraham happened to be 99 years old and Ishmael 13 at the time, just prior to the birth of Isaac, of the establishment of the covenant between the deity and Abraham, of which circumcision is represented as the seal. The author cites this fact for the same reason that he tells that Abraham was 75 years old when he came to Canaan and 86 years old when Ishmael was born, merely because of his characteristic interest in the pedantic detail of numbers, ages, and dates and by no means intending to imply that the Ishmaelites were circumcised at the age of thirteen years. Had this been his purpose, he would certainly have stated the fact plainly."(31)

Circumcision As A Form of Ritual Sacrifice

Opposite Wellhausen and company who maintain that biblical circumcision was primarily a puberty or marriage rite of intitiation into manhood or tribal membership, Morgenstern and Weiss present evidence that suggests that biblical circumcision was a rite of early childhood symbolic of ritual sacrifice. Weiss makes the following comment and then brings evidence to support his claim. He states:

"It is probable that in ancient Israel circumcision was closely associated with or a substitute for human, animal, or "blood" sacrifice (Feldman, 1918; Loeb, 1933, Schur, 1937,

Dreifuss, 1964)." This theory is supported by the following suggestive evidence:

(a) Having circumcised himself and the members of his household, Abraham was afraid that he had been remiss in not sacrificing his son, Isaac, in accordance with the local Canaanite custom (Orlinsky, 1957) and therefore brought him to Mount Moriah where the Canaanites offered up their children to their dieties. [The root of the name Moriah is the same as that of the Hebrew word Morah, a razor or knife used for sacrifices (Mirkin, 1963)].

(b) All those who wished to eat of the sacrificial pascal lamb had to submit to circumcision (Exodus 12:44-48).

(c) A meal (Seudah) is still part of the circumcision ritual, for, as with sacrifices, it is the eating that atones.

(d) Circumcision (milah) is referred to in two Jewish classics, the Midrash (Genesis Rabba 14) and Zohar (Genesis), as a sacrifice.

(e) After the circumcision, the father of the child recites the following prayer which is found in Sephardic prayerbooks: "May it be thy will, oh God, that the blood of this covenant be esteemed as if I had built an altar and offered burnt offerings (Olot) and slaughtered sacrifices (Zebachim)" (Zambo, 1719; Modena, 1837; Auerbach, 1860; Siddur, 1947).

(f) Just as an animal is not acceptable as a sacrifice to God until it is eight days old (Leviticus 22:27), in the same way a ritual circumcision is not valid if done before the boy is eight days old.

(g) It is not the removal of the foreskin, but "the drawing of the drops of blood of the covenant (ha-tahat dam brit)," which is the sine qua non of Jewish ritual circumcision. As the blood of circumcision is viewed by the supreme being as equal to the blood of bulls and portions of the sacrifices offered on the altar; for the sake of these He pardons the iniquities of His people, and justifies them as though they were righteous" (Form, 1914). The Israeli orthodox rabbinate will therefore not sanction the use of circumcision clamps since they interfere with bleeding.

(h) If a man is born with absence of the prepuce, or if he has been merely surgically circumcised, a mohel (Ritual Circumciser) must draw a few drops of blood from his glans penis and recite a blessing in order to make the operation acceptable as milah (Ritual circumcision) (Snowman, 1962).

Morgenstern for his part posits an interesting theory based on the ancient Semitic Akikah rites.(32) Morgenstern writes: "Closely related to the Akikah ceremony of cutting off the hair of a child and offering it as a substitute sacrifice upon the seventh or eighth day is the rite of circumcision."(33) Morgenstern supports this connection by noting that circumcision is practiced upon the very same day as are in the Arab world the Akikah rites of the sacrifice of a substitute animal and the cutting off of the child's first hair. He notes that it is significant too that the day of the circumcision of a Jewish child, and of the holding of the accompanying feast, was called in rabbinic literature Sabu'a ha-ben, literally, "The week of the son," just as among the present-day Bedouin the day of the offering of the redemption-sacrifice for the child is called yom sabua, "The day of the week" or "The day which completes the week." Moreover he indicates that the Akikah rites are performed upon the eighth day only by people who practice circumcision later in life, but where circumcision is performed upon the eighth day, as among the Jews, or as amounts to the same thing, upon the seventh day, as among the tribes of Southern Arabia and in Abyssinia, the Akikah rites are not performed. Morgenstern argues that like the Akikah rites, circumcision

served as an offering unto the deity to compensate the deity for the gift of new life. By removing the foreskin on the appointed day, the evil spirits which had previously threatened the fragile life of the infant, were appeased. The infant's life was redeemed by the sacrifice of the part. In the Akikah that part which redeemed the whole was the infant's hair, in the case of circumcision that part was the foreskin. The infant in both cases was removed from a state of taboo and initiated into the life of the clan or tribe.

Morgenstern concludes: "These facts can indicate but one thing: that circumcision and the Akikah are closely related ceremonies, both serving the same fundamental purpose, and moreover, that the performance of some such rite was imperative upon the seventh or eighth day after birth. Because the power of evil spirits was thought to reach its climax upon the seventh or "unlucky" day, the night before the circumcision of a boy is still called by Orthodox Jews "watchnight" or in German wachnacht. Since it is the moment of greatest danger for the child, someone must remain in the room with him and must keep awake throughout the night, to guard the infant against the evil spirits."(34)

Morgenstern, like Weiss, also notes that this taboo period applies to animals and fruit-bearing trees and finds support for this in the Bible. He notes that the same principle is basic to the biblical prohibition of using, for any purpose whatsoever, any animal during the first seven days after birth, and the fruit of a tree during its first

three years.(35) During this taboo-period the tree was regarded as being "arel," "uncircumcised" and its fruit was therefore called "orlah," literally "foreskin"; similarly, the wool of a sheep, while taboo during the animal's first year, is called Akikah, "foreskin." In other words, orlah in the biblical practice (36) partook of precisely the same nature and purpose as the Arabic Akikah. Both terms clearly imply that the fact of removal of the natural taboo thought to rest upon animals and children during the first period of life, and upon fruit trees during the first three years of growth, and which is designated in both Hebrew and Arabic as removal or sacrifice of the "foreskin" is, broadly speaking, circumcision.

The question remains why circumcision of the foreskin? Why should just the foreskin, in preference to some other part of the body, be offered by so many Semitic peoples as a taboo-sacrifice to redeem the life of the male child? The answer is not far to seek. As has been noted the principle underlying the ceremony of circumcision, just as that underlying that of cutting the hair or some other comparable part of the body, is the idea that the sacrifice of a part of the tabooed object redeems the remainder. Of course, the part of the body thus offered has to be one which could be dispensed without too greatly inconveniencing or crippling the child. And the sacrifice of the foreskin had two distinct advantages over that of any other part of the body, even the hair. For it had an actual part of the physical

organ which played an essential role in the process of human procreation, and for this reason alone it might seem the most natural and appropriate part of the body to be so sacrificed to redeem the life of the child. Moreover, Morgenstern notes that whereas in the hair-sacrifice no blood was shed, the sacrifice of the foreskin entailed the shedding of some blood of the child, for whom the foreskin was the taboo-offering. (Note that in the Jewish circumcision ritual, in addition to cutting off the foreskin itself, the inner membrane must also be broken in order to insure the shedding of at least a minimum amount of blood; shulchan aruch Yoredeah 264.) And, since the blood was regarded primarily as the seat of life, the sacrifice of the foreskin, particularly when accompanied, as in the Jewish ritual by the shedding of some blood, must have implied in fact what it symbolized in theory, the giving of the life of the child to the deity.

Having outlined his theory, Morgenstern summarizes his conclusions as follows:

"We may here very properly sum up our conclusions with regard to the origin and nature of circumcision among the Semites. First, circumcision was in origin a rite of removal of taboo thought to rest upon every newborn child during at least the first seven days after birth, and continuously thereafter until redeemed. The underlying principle in the removal of all taboo was that the sacrifice of a part of a tabooed person or object redeemed the whole. By the performance of this rite the child was redeemed from the

power of threatening evil spirits, or of some evilly disposed deity, and thereby entered upon the second period of his existence, that of non-tabooed, ordinary, profane life. Thus far, circumcision was in every way of common origin and purpose with the various Akikah rites, whether applied to human beings, animals or fruit trees. Moreover, in fundamental principle and character it was identical with other rites for the removal of taboo, such as the sacrifice of hair, particularly the first hair with which a child was born, which was as a rule cut as part of this akikah ceremony. Because of its primary character, circumcision might be performed appropriately at any time between the seventh day after birth and the attainment of puberty. But until it was performed the original taboo state continued, at least in theory. By the attainment of puberty, however, circumcision must under all conditions have been performed, for the condition of childhood, or even of infancy, implied by the uncircumcised state, was not at all consonant with the condition of maturity which followed immediately upon the attainment of puberty, nor with the various duties, obligations, and privileges of maturity. Puberty was, in principle at least, the terminus Ad Quem for circumcision; but in themselves neither puberty nor marriage had for the Semites, so far as the evidence indicates, the slightest direct or primary connection with circumcision.

Secondly, circumcision marked the entrance of the child into ordinary, profane existence and consequent tribal

membership. It served, therefore, as a rite of initiation into the tribe. But this was only of secondary import, a consequence of its primary character and purpose as a taboo-rite, and in no way accounts for its origin."(37)

Circumcision As A Rite of Initiation

Whether one sides with the Wellhausen theory, which posits the origin of circumcision to be a rite of puberty and finds evidence biblically to support his conclusions or if one opts for the Morgenstern theory which concludes that the origin of circumcision is closely associated with taboo-sacrifice and who also finds evidence biblically to bolster his conclusions, one must also acknowledge that common to both theories is the rite of initiation. Wellhausen's theory explicitly states that circumcision at puberty was a ceremony of initiation into manhood, with its accompanying duty and privilege of marriage. It was also an initiation into the tribe, with its consequence of kinship with every member of the tribe and with the tribal deity. The kinship or bond of union was established primarily by virtue of the blood shed during the act, whereby an enduring covenant was established between the circumcised youth and the deity and his fellow tribesmen.

Morgenstern's taboo-sacrifice theory on the other hand, while not maintaining that the idea of initiation was basic to the origin of circumcision, nevertheless acknowledges that the idea of initiation into profane, ordinary existence and

further initiation into tribal membership, was closely associated with the rite. It is important to note the common thread of initiation in both theories, for while both theories attempt to explain the original significance of circumcision and its manifestations in biblical literature, it is the idea of initiation into a brit or covenant that is central to the biblical injunction. Genesis 17:10-12 clearly indicates that at least from the biblical viewpoint circumcision was nothing other than a physical sign of entry into the covenant with God and the seed of Abraham.

"Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days."(38)

Summary

While as we have seen how Wellhausen, Morgenstern and countless others have offered convincing theories aimed at trying to uncover the original significance of circumcision in ancient times and as reflected or intimated in various circumcision scenarios in the Bible, one cannot dispute the claim of the biblical author that circumcision is first and foremost a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. It is this viewpoint that is expressed as

the Biblical significance of brit milah in most circumcision ceremonies to this day. Circumcision as understood in the Bible, at least according to the theological interpretation assigned to this primitive rite by the religion of Israel, is simply a sign of the pact made between God and Abraham. Circumcision in the Bible is a rite of initiation into that pact whether it takes place in infancy or at some later time. Through brit milah the child or youth is entered into a covenantal relationship with the God of Abraham and through Abraham with all his seed after him.

Despite this basic biblical claim attesting to the significance of brit milah as being primarily a rite of initiation, we shall soon discover that rabbinically it was not considered as such. It shall be demonstrated how "folk memories" and superstitions as preserved in rabbinic literature reveal other dimensions of this ancient rite. In addition, other interpretations will be gleaned from the practice or read into it, making it a ritual rich in meaning. The rabbinic and later Jewish treatment of the significance of brit milah shall be our next step in discerning what significance brit milah holds in Reform Judaism.

B. The Significance of Brit Milah
As Reflected in Rabbinic
and Later Jewish Literature

Introduction

The rabbinic literature is full to overflowing with material on the subject of brit milah. Perhaps as a consequence of the crusade against circumcision led by Paul who along with other Christians and heretically minded Jews based their opposition to a large extent on their own interpretations of scripture, the rabbis of that same period felt the need to defend the validity and importance of circumcision with their application of scriptural evidence. In so doing, the rabbis and later Jewish authorities of the past, not only exalted and magnified the rite, to the extent that it was later recorded as "The commandment which is greater than any other positive commandment,"(39) but also expounded at length on the various meanings of the venerable rite. The significance of brit milah is taken up over and over again in rabbinic and later Jewish writings and what is revealed is a multifarious array of insightful commentaries on the "true nature" or essence of brit milah.

It shall be the intention of this author to sort through the veritable cornucopia of ascribed or excised meanings of brit milah as presented in rabbinic and later Jewish

literature and arrange them in accordance with major recurring themes. These meanings along with those gleaned from the preceding biblical treatment, as well as the accepted contemporary view of brit milah, shall form the standard by which we judge what significance brit milah can have in Reform Judaism. Before examining each theme independently as related to the significance of brit milah, it would be valuable to our attention to Mishnah Nedarim 3:11 along with the accompanying Gemara (Nedarim 31b) wherein the superior nature of this mitzvah is greatly expounded. We find in Mishnah Nedarim 3:11 the following testimonial to the greatness of circumcision.

"Great is circumcision," Rabbi Ishmael declared, "for 13 covenants were made therein." (40) Rabbi Jose said, "great is circumcision for it overrides the Sabbath." (41) Rabbi Joshua ben Korha said: "Great is circumcision for the neglect of which Moses did not have his punishment suspended even for a single hour." (42) Rabbi Nehemia said: "Great is circumcision for it supercedes the laws of leprosy." (43) Rabbi said, "Great is circumcision, for despite all the precepts Abraham fulfilled, he was not designated perfect until he circumcised himself, as it is said, 'Walk before Me and be perfect' (Gen. 17:1)." Great is circumcision since but for that, God would not have created the universe as it is written, "Thus says the Lord, but for my covenant (44) by day and night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth." (Jeremiah 33:25)

In the Tosefta to Nedarim (2:6) this litany of praise for circumcision is continued. Herein we find: "Great is circumcision for it is equal to all the works of creation mentioned in the Torah, as it is said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord made with you in agreement with all these words' (Exodus 24:8) (45) Finally in Tractate Nedarim 32a the greatest ascription of praise is ascribed to circumcision as it is written: "Great is circumcision for it is equal to all the other precepts of the Torah, as it is written, "for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." (Exodus 34:27). (46) With this introduction, we are now prepared to delineate the various meanings embedded in the rite of brit milah as culled from rabbinic and later Jewish literature.

Brit Milah As An Allusion to Ritual Sacrifice

The literature is replete with numerous analogies comparing circumcision to ritual sacrifice. Whether or not what is reflected here is a genuine echo of an earlier age when circumcision may have served as a substitution for human sacrifice(47) or is simply an allegorical interpretation of the rite, cannot be stated unequivocally. That Jewish tradition intended that a close connection be drawn between brit milah and the Temple cult is undisputed as the following evidence indicates.

In many communities, after the Mi-she-berach (מִשֶּׁבֶּרַח) blessing on behalf of the child, the mohel and the father

together recite the following prayer which comes immediately before the Alenu prayer.

"Master of the Universe, may it be your will that he be worthy, favored, and acceptable before you as if I have offered him before the throne of Your glory, and may you in your abundant mercy, send through Your holy angels a holy and pure soul to _____ who has now been circumcised for the sake of your great name. . ."(48)

This benediction clearly alludes to circumcision as if it were a ritual offering unto God in the Temple. It evokes images of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) and/or the offering of incense upon the altar in Jerusalem. The connection is explicit; the image is clear. Dr. Ben-Zion Wacholder in an interview on the subject similarly declared: "Brit milah is also a Korban a sacrifice. Brit Milachah (work) but is still performed at its due time even if that be on the Sabbath, likewise brit milah is considered Malachah (work) and is still performed at its designated time, even it be on the Sabbath."

This image is further conveyed with reference to the festive meal.

"Some perceive the father's act of bringing his son into the covenant of circumcision akin to bringing an offering upon the altar. Just as one celebrates the Temple offering with a festive meal, so does one celebrate the milah "offering" with a festive meal." (Yalkut Shimoni, Lech Lecha, 81)(49)

In Shir ha-shirim Rabbah 4:6, the following Midrash

continues this theme.

"When Abraham circumcised himself and his entire household, he left the foreskins in the sun. Although they rotted, God considered their odor to be like the fragrance of frankincense that was burned with offerings upon the altar. God said, "When the descendants of this man commit transgressions and evil deeds, I will remember this odor in their favor and will be filled with compassion for them and convert the attribute of justice into the attribute of mercy."

Even the number eight, which is itself symbolic of brit milah, for on the eighth day one is circumcised, has been equated with the Temple service. "The high priest wore eight special vestments; eight musical instruments accompanied the Levites in the singing of the psalms; animals could only be offered as sacrifices only after they were eight days old (Leviticus 22:27); there were eight poles for carrying the vessels in the sanctuary; and there were eight varieties of spices used in making anointment oil."(50)

Finally the same correlation is more elaborately expressed in the following passage, which also gives the view that circumcision is a partial substitute for the former Temple sacrifice.

"Come and see how cherished the commandment of circumcision is before God; for every Israelite who brings his son to be circumcised in the morning, is accounted as

though he were bringing the "continual offering" of the morning on that day, and the blood of the circumcision appears to God as the sacrifice of the two he-lambs that were offered continually on the altar, one for the morning and one for the evening. And his son is more perfect as a he-lamb a year old without blemish, and it is concerning him too, that scripture writes, 'He shall offer it a male (זכר) without blemish (תמים)' (Leviticus 1:3). Therefore through circumcision of his male genitals is the child made without blemish as it is said, 'Walk before Me and be perfect.' for this reason is the commandment of circumcision cherished."(51)

Clearly, while it is true that since the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. many ritual aspects of Jewish life have been correlated with the Temple cult,(52) it nonetheless is noteworthy that the rite of circumcision has been so easily equated with the sacrificial cult. The message here, I believe, is that just as the blood of the sacrifice was efficacious in obtaining God's favor, so too the covenantal blood of circumcision is seen as especially pleasing to God who has bequeathed the sacred gift of new life to the covenantal community. The circumcision of the foreskin serves as a perpetual recognition of God as the divine giver of life. One cannot deny, try as one may, that the brit milah ceremony does not lend itself to the idea of ritual sacrifice. A body part is severed, blood is shed, God is asked to receive the "offering" as if the child were offered

up to God as a ritual sacrifice, and in some communities the blood is sprinkled upon the Foreheads of the witnesses and so on. It is only natural that the rite of brit milah be interpreted allegorically as the symbolic equivalent of a ritual thanksgiving offering to God on behalf of this new life. Brit milah in this sense serves as a distinct physical reminder sealed in the flesh that man and woman alone do not create life; rather with the help of God is life generated and sustained. By making the "sacrifice" of a part of the procreative member, this message is transmitted from generation to generation.

Brit Milah As A Means to Perfect Oneself

Physically, Morally, and Spiritually

The rabbis went to considerable lengths in commenting on the expression in Genesis 17:1. "Walk before Me and be perfect." Out of their comments they produced the only rationale for circumcision in the whole of the Talmudic and Midrashic literature.(53) The foreskin was a blemish and its removal brought about bodily perfection. This was the meaning of God's command to Abraham to walk before Him and be perfect. This idea of circumcision leading to bodily perfection is expressed in a number of rabbinic Midrashim.

"It is comparable," said Rabbi Levi, "to a lady to whom a king said, 'Pass before Me.' She passed before him and she was made to feel ashamed. She said to him, 'Is there, perhaps, some worthless object to be found on me?' He said

to her: 'There is no worthless object on you except the nail of your small finger which is about the size of an amulet; remove it and the blemish is gone.' Thus God said to Abraham: 'There is no worthless object on you except the foreskin. Remove it and it is gone: Walk before Me and be perfect.'"(54)

In a similar vein Rabbi Judan said, "Just as a fig tree has no worthless matter except the peduncle; remove it and the blemish is void; so the Holy one blessed be He, said to Abraham: You have no worthless object on you except this foreskin. Remove it and the blemish is void: 'Walk before Me and be perfect.'"(55)

In Tanhuma Lech Lecha 16 occurs the interesting proof by means of gematria that Abraham's circumcision brought about his physical perfection.

"When God said to Abraham, 'Walk before Me and be perfect' (and at the same time told him to become circumcised), Abram said: 'At present I am perfect (whole) but if I circumcise myself I will be lacking in one of my limbs (and hence will no longer be perfect).' To this God said: 'Did you think you were actually perfect? You are lacking in five of your limbs. While you are uncircumcised your name is Abram (אַבְרָם),(56) the gematria of which is 243, and the number of limbs in a man is 248. Circumcise yourself and become perfect (whole).' And when he did become circumcised God said to him: 'Your name shall no longer be Abram but Abraham (אַבְרָהָם) (57),' and by adding the letter

hay to his name, God added to him five more limbs, to total 248. Therefore 'be perfect';" (i.e., by means of the circumcision Abraham received five more limbs to total 248, which is the gematria of the name Abraham, and at the same time the number of limbs in a perfect man).

Similarly in Nedarim 32b (top) Rabbi Ammi ben Abba taught: "At first Abram is written, then Abraham. At first God gave him mastery over 243 limbs and then mastery over 248, the additional ones being the two eyes, the two ears and the membrum."

The preceding comment by Rabbi Ammi ben Abba illustrates another level of perfection attained by circumcision, moral perfection. The eyes, the ears and the membrum all entice one to immorality, but now by becoming circumcised Abraham received mastery over those limbs and the will power to resist looking upon or listening to sin, as well as the will power to control his sexual desires. Thus he became the perfect man from a moral standpoint.

Moses Maimonides (Rambam), lends support to this view that circumcision girds one with moral strength, leading to moral perfection. He writes in the Moreh Nevuchim (3:49), that the removal of the foreskin lessens the desire for sexual gratification. Milah thus represents the potential within every Jew to dominate his physical desires and direct them toward the purpose for which God intended them. Circumcision as understood by Rambam represents man's loftiest purpose--to sublimate that which has the inherent

tendency toward immorality and direct it toward the heights of moral and spiritual perfection.

Circumcision has also been interpreted as a means of achieving spiritual perfection as well.

"A philosopher once asked Rabbi Hoshayah, "if circumcision is so favorable in God's eyes, why isn't man born circumcised? Rabbi Hoshayah replied that everything that was created requires development. Plants must be sweetened, wheat must be milled and even man needs to be perfected."(58)

Thus the message of brit milah according to this lofty interpretation is that man must strive, improve, refine, and perfect. The Jew, through brit milah, from the very beginning of his life is taught the importance of adding his efforts to God's in pursuit of physical, moral and spiritual perfection. Man was not created perfect or whole (as symbolized by the unnecessary foreskin) so as to teach him the moral necessity of constantly striving to better himself. The actual act of removing the foreskin imbues the Jew with a keen sense of his own need to constantly strive for the heavens.

In even a more spiritual vein, one might even say that circumcision as a mitzvah is a paradigm for the moral imperative to perfect the world through good deeds and righteous acts. Brit milah as a symbol provides the Jew an opportunity to participate with God from the start in the perfection of the human condition by removing all that is

imperfect, impure, and defective. Brit milah is the first symbolic effort to perfect oneself and serves as a life-long reminder of this duty embedded in the flesh. Brit milah as a means of improving or perfecting ourselves is also in consonance with the only stated purpose of circumcision in the Bible: "Walk before Me and be perfect."

God in his infinite grace has given the Jew the opportunity to be a co-worker in the work of perfecting this world. Brit Milah, as a symbolic ritual, prepares the Jew for that task and reminds him that perfection is achieved through the removal of personal excesses, the excesses of pride, arrogance, greed, and avarice.

Brit Milah As A Unifying Symbol of Jewish
Identity and An Indelible Sign of One's Loyalty
to God and Israel

Because of the physical nature of the rite of brit milah it naturally serves as a powerful sign of one's Jewish identity. At a time when the vast majority of peoples did not circumcise the flesh of their foreskins, circumcision served as a unique declaration of one's Jewish identity and loyalty to the covenant of Abraham. The circumcision mark symbolized the entrance of the child into the covenant with God established through Abraham. One might be devoid of all other outward signs of identity, but circumcision remained in the flesh as a token of relatedness to God and Israel. This is the sense of the Midrash expressed below.

The Talmud relates that King David felt secure surrounded by seven Mitzvot: The Mezuzah on the doorpost,

the two Tefillin on his hand and head, and the four fringes of his Tzitzit. But when he entered the bath house, there was no Mezzuzah and he could not wear his tefillin or tzitzit. Suddenly he felt insecure, devoid of mitzvot. Then he remembered the eighth mitzvah, that was always with him--brit milah. When King David emerged from the bath house he exclaimed, "To Him who causes victory because of the eighth" (Psalms 12:1)--i.e., the mitzvah of milah (in which the number eight figures so prominently) is indelibly sealed on his body forever.(59)

The Jew through the fact of being circumcised expressed his loyalty and conscious decision to remain united with the Jewish people. Conversely, any Jew, even today, who does not circumcise his sons is announcing the limitations of his loyalty to the faith. Why, one might ask has the rite of brit milah taken on such great importance as a sign of one's allegiance to the Jewish people? Rabbi Paysack J. Krohn in his work entitled Bris Milah, gives three reasons.

First, he cites the statement made in the work (פירוש רמב"ם לברית) wherein it is written: "The imprint of circumcision remains with him forever, stamps him as a partner in the covenant and identifies him with his Jewish bretheren throughout the world."

Secondly, he cites Maimonides who wrote: "There is an empathy of mutual love and assistance among people who are united by a sign they consider the symbol of the covenant."(60)

Finally, writes Krohn, brit milah serves as the parent's first act of initiation into Jewish parenting. It expresses before the eyes of the covenant community the parent's commitment to the child that he will be reared Jewishly. The act of circumcising one's child, of bringing him into the covenant of his people, is a primary sign of one's allegiance to the community of the Jewish people.

Perhaps, however, it could be argued that the primary force that transformed brit milah into such a powerful statement of ethnic-religious identity was not integral to the rite itself but was rather influenced by forces not germane to the rite itself. In this case the course of history determined to a large extent the significance of brit milah as a rite practiced by Jews. Historical events endowed this ritual, already infused with great religious value, with a powerfully new dimension. When in 586 B.C.E.

Nebuchadnezzar exiled the Jews to Babylonia and Temple worship could no longer act as a uniting link, it was circumcision that, next to Shabbat observance, held the Jews together as a badge of unity. The rite came to express the wish and will to be conscious of one's Jewish heritage.

When, centuries later, Hellenist Jews fell subject to the forces of assimilation, ashamed of their faith, they tried to cover up their Jewishness. They not only changed their names, but underwent painful surgical procedures to remove the "seal of Abraham" from their bodies, since they took part in physical exercises in the Greek gymnasias, which

were performed in the nude. Despots aiming at the extinction of the Jewish state felt the necessity to prohibit circumcision. For its preservation, the Jews were prepared to die the death of martyrs. In 168 B.C.E. the forces of Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria executed "The women that had circumcised their children. . .and they hanged their babes around their necks and destroyed their houses." However, the Maccabees undauntedly followed the examples of those valiant mothers. Wherever they went in their underground fight for freedom, they circumcised the Jewish children.

When three centuries later in 135 C.E., Emperor Hadrian of Rome in his turn decided to exterminate the Jewish faith, he not only changed Jerusalem into a pagan city, banning the keeping of the Sabbath and the giving of religious instruction, but made circumcision an offense punishable by death. Secret agents and informers roamed the country to discover offenders. Yet Jews defied the decree all the more and continued to introduce their children into the covenant of Abraham. Circumcision, from a merely religious institution and a bond of unity, had become a symbol of the fight for freedom and a mark of Jewish loyalty. Hundreds laid down their lives in defense of this rite. Centuries later, the danger of being circumcised was again experienced in the life and death struggle under the Spanish Inquisition, and then in Hitler's Third Reich.

Clearly, the history of Jewish oppression and of willful neglect on the part of some Jews, added a new layer of

significance to the rite of brit milah. Brit milah took on a new meaning. Brit milah became a badge one wore in order to proclaim one's identity as a Jew and one's loyalty to the Jewish people. It was a significant token of one's bond of unity with his people.

This seemingly new meaning, due largely in part to forces tangential to the rite itself, was actually present all along in the rite from its attested biblical significance. The punishment for not being circumcised is Karet, excommunication from the "fold." The one who does not bear the sign of the covenant is excommunicated; "He shall be cut off from among his people." (61) He does not, at least on the biblical level, belong to the covenantal community. It is important to note that it is the one not circumcised, the one who does not bare the sign in his flesh, that is excommunicated according to the biblical injunction, and not the father who may be negligent in his duties. From this we conclude that the fact of being circumcised itself is part and parcel of being bound to one's people through the covenant with God. Not the act of being circumcised, but rather the fact of being circumcised is efficacious of attaining membership in the covenantal community.

By force of the biblical liability of Karet for not being circumcised, by reason of the Rabbinic Polemic emphasizing the unique nature of brit milah as an indelibly sign of one's Jewish devotion, and by the sheer course of historical events, circumcision became a unifying symbol of

Jewish peoplehood and a perpetual sign of one's loyalty to God and Israel.

Brit Milah and Its Connection With
The Giving of The Land of Israel

While this author has uncovered very little in the rabbinic or later Jewish literature which expounds on the theme of circumcision and its tie to eretz Yisrael, it would nevertheless be an oversight not to mention this theme. The connection of brit milah and the inheritance of the land of Israel is explicitly stated in Genesis 17:7-11.

"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and between your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant: to be a God unto you, and to your seed after you. And I will give unto you, and to your seed after you, the land in which you sojourn, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said unto Abraham, But you, for your part, shall keep My covenant, you and your seed after you, in their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and between you, and between your seed after you: Every male among shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and this shall serve as a token of the covenant between Me and you."

It is clear that as a condition for keeping the covenant of circumcision, Abraham and his descendants would merit the possession of Canaan. God makes a covenant with Abraham, "I

have given this hand to your descendants" (Genesis 15:18); the fact is accomplished. In return, circumcision is the seal his descendants affix to themselves. It is brit milah, the symbol of that covenant; it cannot be eradicated.

The halachic code the Arba'ah Turim (ארבעה טורים) reflects this connection to the land as noted below. "And Abraham was not considered perfected until he was circumcised, and by this he merited the making of the covenant concerning the giving of the land. . ."

The tie to the land may also be inferred biblically from the book of Joshua Chapter Five, wherein the wandering Israelites are all circumcised prior to entering the land. Genesis Rabbah (46:9) points out that the circumcision was performed at Gilgal in accordance with the promise made to Abraham, "I will give to you and to your seed after you the land of your sojourning" (Genesis 17:8) "on condition that you shall keep my covenant (ibid. v.9). Since Gilgal was on the border of the land, Joshua said to the people: 'Did you think you would enter the land uncircumcised?' and speaking thus, he circumcised them."

Similarly in Genesis Rabbah (46:9) God is reported to have offered the condition that if they accepted circumcision they would enter the land, and if not, they would not enter the land.

The point of all this seems to be that in circumcising the descendants of Abraham, yet another significant theme emerges. Brit milah is symbolic of the Jewish claim to

Canaan. Here brit milah takes on the significance of a nationalistic motif, and association with territorial possession. Brit milah as a rite is symbolic of the Jews perpetual connection to the land of Israel. It is a reminder sealed in the flesh that because of the merit of being circumcised, Abraham and his descendants may lay claim to a homeland. This too is another level of meaning embedded in the rite of brit milah.

Brit Milah As A Guarantor of Personal Salvation

In the rabbinic struggle against those Jews who attempted to abandon circumcision and also against the Christian polemicists opposing the religious value of brit milah, the rabbis countered by attributing salvific powers to the rite itself. Circumcision according to the rabbis, had a saving effect on the life beyond the grave and delivered one from Gehinnom (hell). According to Rabbi Nachman ben Isaac, an infant was eligible to enter the future world only from the time of his circumcision.(62) "At the gate of Gehinnom," Rabbi Levi taught,(63) "Abraham sits and will not permit a circumcised Israelite to descend into its midst. But for those who have sinned more than their share, he transfers to them the foreskins of infants who died before they could be circumcised and (since they now appear to be uncircumcised) brings them down into Gehinnom. Thus it is written, 'He puts forth his hands against them that were at peace with him, he destroys the covenant' (Psalms 55:21).

Similarly in Tanhuma (Lech Lecha 20), it is stated that God made the promise to Abraham that none who were circumcised would descend into Gehinnom. But all the uncircumcised nations mentioned by Ezekiel (Chapter 31, 32,) will descend there as Ezekiel promised. And as for the heretics and sinners in Israel who deny the existence of God and follow idolotrous practices, despite the fact that they were circumcised, God draws out their foreskins and they fall into Gehinnom. In the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer the Modaite, one who breaks the covenant of circumcision, even though he may have many good deeds in his favor, is worthy of being thrust out of the world.(64)

That circumcision was cherished by the patriarchs because they knew of its saving powers could be proved from Scripture. "Even Jacob, when he adjured Joseph, said to him, 'Put I pray thee, my hand under your thigh' (Genesis 47:29). Why did they cherish circumcision? Because they knew in the future it would save them from Gehinnom, and because they had undergone the rite, bring them into the world to come, as it is said, 'The netherworld has enlarged her desire and opened her mouth without measure.' (Isaiah 5:14). What is the meaning of "without measure" (לֹא מִדָּה)? 'measure' (מִדָּה) can only mean circumcision, for it is said, 'The covenant which he made with Abraham. . .and he established it unto Jacob for a statute (לְעֵלְמָה)'(Psalms 105:10). (Therefore [לֹא מִדָּה] means circumcision, and for those without (לֹא מִדָּה), i.e., circumcision, the netherworld opens her mouth wide). But the

Israelites since they are circumcised escape from it, as it is said, 'When you pass through the waters I will be with you' etc. (Isaiah 43:2).(65)

A story is told(66) of a non-Jew, Ketiah ben Shalom, who, because he defended the Jews and thereby shamed the Emperor, was ordered to be cast into a furnace. While he was being led away a Roman matron said to him, 'Pity the ship that sails toward the harbor without paying the tax.'(67) Forthwith, Ketiah ben Shalom circumcised himself and exclaimed, 'I have paid the tax, I will enter paradise.' As he was being cast into the furnace he bequeathed all his possessions to Rabbi Akiba and his friends. A Bat Kol (heavenly voice) then exclaimed: 'Ketiah ben Shalom is destined for life in the world to come.' Thus for the single act of circumcision, Ketiah ben Shalom was privileged to enter Paradise. Rabbi, upon hearing the story remarked that one person may acquire eternity in a single hour, another only after many years.

From the above passages it would seem that the rabbis in general felt that there was no room in the world to come for anyone who did not undergo circumcision, whether Jew or non-Jew. This same theme is conveyed in tact many centuries later in the halachic code the Arba'ah Turim. There it is stated: ". . . He saves us from the judgement of Gehinnom as it was said by the sages, "Abraham our father sits at the portals of Gehinnom and does not allow anyone to enter who has been circumcised. The foreskin is repugnant and idol

worshippers are condemned by it as it is said: "for all the other nations are uncircumcised and all who violate the covenant of Abraham our father by not circumcising or by extending the prepucce to disguise a circumcision, even though he may possess the merit of study of the Torah and good deeds, he will not have any part in the world to come."(68)

What is expressed here in these passages is a strong appeal on behalf of the continuing merit of brit milah by way of the promise of personal salvation. Even Torah and good deeds are not enough to enter heaven if brit milah is not performed. Conversely, if circumcised, Abraham himself will thwart the judgement of Gehinnom.

While certainly this additional layer of significance is secondary to some of the other more basic meanings gleaned from brit milah, it nevertheless is an attendant theme which simply underscores the remarkable idealogical evolution of the controversial rite.

Brit Milah As A Symbolic Statement of Jewish Spirituality

Because Scripture has ordained that brit milah should take place on the eighth day after birth, a host of imaginative allusions have been associated with the rite. The tradition has accorded the number eight great significance. Primarily by virtue of the fact that eight is one more than seven, anything connected with the number eight is accorded higher spiritual value. The number seven

represents completion, fullness and perfection. The seventh day is a day of completion, wholeness and perfect rest. One plus seven equals an even higher order of spirituality, a graduated degree of holiness.

Mordecai Kaplan in his book entitled The Greater Judaism in The Making brings to light the insight of Samson Raphael Hirsch. He writes:

"In the rite of circumcision, for example, Hirsch found two important rules, one of which was stated in the Written and the other in the Oral law. The first rule is that the rite must be performed on the eighth day; the second rule is that it must be performed only during the day. "Why the eighth day?" Hirsch asked. He noted in that fact the evident purpose to differentiate this rite from those in which the number seven figured prominently, as in the case of the Sabbath, the Sabbatical year, the New Year, etc. Moreover, if the eighth day of the newly born infant falls on the Sabbath, the law is that the rite must take place on it, even though it involves infraction of many Sabbatical prohibitions. Hirsch tried to arrive at the significance of the eighth day by first trying to discover the meaning of the number seven, which was associated with other ritual observances.

Hirsch rejected as un-Jewish the usual explanation that seven had a mystic significance. He maintained that the meaning of that number must be the one which is assumed in the Bible itself. This led him to make a close study of the different contexts in the Bible in which the number seven figured. He then discovered the particular significance which each context derived from its association with the number seven. He finally concluded that common to all of them was the idea of completion, or rounding out, of some matter of import. The Sabbath day thus marked the completion of the six-day creation of the physical world. The additional, or seventh day, was thus dedicated to the awareness, the creation as a whole, and each part in it, would have remained unfinished and incomplete. It achieved completion through the observance of the seventh day as Sabbath. The Jews, however, represented a higher order of creation. They were subject not only to the laws

that governed the physical world which belonged to the lower order of seven-day creation. The rite of circumcision was, therefore, set for the eighth day, to indicate the higher sphere of existence into which the life of the Jewish child must be ushered."(69)

This higher sphere of existence is indicated by other allusions to the number eight. But eight can only be explained in light of seven. The Talmud(70) teaches that the harp of the Messiah will be of eight strings, as opposed to the conventional harp used in the Temple which was of seven strings. To understand the significance of the additional string one must first comprehend the meaning of seven.

From marriage which is celebrated with seven blessings on each of the seven days following the wedding, to death which is observed with seven days of mourning, a cycle that is complete is represented by the number seven. The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 32:7) relates that, for seven days prior to the flood, God himself mourned the impending destruction of His creations. A week is seven days; the Shmittah cycle is seven years; there are seven heavens; the counting of the Omer is seven times seven days and so on.

In the physical world, a cycle, a full measure, is measured in sevens. In the metaphysical world, the higher spiritual plane is represented by eight. In the Messianic era the world will attain spiritual perfection when man's evil inclination ceases to exist. The future epoch will herald a sublime existence far and beyond the life we now know. It will be an existence superior to that which the

number seven represents; it will be perfect, like things represented by eight. The additional string on the harp of the Messiah represents the new rapture that will be enjoyed by Jews in the Messianic era. Israel will be free to dedicate itself to a purely spiritual life.

The number eight as previously illuminated betokens things related to the Temple service. The High Priest wore eight vestments; animals could be offered as sacrifices only after they were eight days old and so forth. "It was for this reason that the inauguration of Aaron and his sons as priests took place on the eighth day of the Tabernacle's dedication. Aaron and his sons learned in seven days all that was necessary to know regarding the performance of the Divine service. It was only because of the inherent holiness of the eighth day, that their inauguration was held then. Eight thus indicates an elevated level of life dedicated to God and the Jewish nation."(71)

Similarly, because of the inherent holiness of the eighth day, and associations with things related to the number eight, Jewish males are inaugurated into the covenant with God and their people on that day. The number eight as it applies to brit milah adds an extra dimension of significance to the rite of brit milah. Brit milah, in the words of S. R. Hirsch, indicates "the higher sphere of existence into which the life of the Jewish child must be ushered." Brit milah signifies that lofty life of holiness for which Jews are to forever strive.

Having categorized the various interpretations of brit milah as gleaned from rabbinic and later Jewish literature into six distinct categories of significance, it is appropriate here to summarize our findings. Before proceeding in this manner, however, one other issue needs to be discussed. In order to fairly apply these traditional meanings of brit milah to the stated and unstated criterion of Reform Judaism so as to discover where they mesh and where they differ, the issue "initiatorial rite" vs. "non-initiatorial rite" needs to be explored. In other words, what status, if any, does circumcision halachically confer upon the child to be circumcised?

Some Halachic Questions Pertaining to
Brit Milah and the Status it Confers

"The actual role played by the rite of circumcision, as far as the halachah is concerned is quite complex." (72) Whether or not brit milah serves as a sacramental rite of initiation is a complicated matter. Certainly from the biblical perspective one who is not circumcised is cut off from his people. He encounters the punishment of Karet - excommunication. As much scholarly work has proven, circumcision initially amongst the ancient Israelites was certainly a ceremony of initiation into the covenant with the tribal deity, and through that deity with every other member of that clan or tribal union. One who was not circumcised was considered outside the community, i.e. "that soul shall be cut off from his people." With this scenario, one would

certainly agree that brit milah at one time was an initiatory rite. The idea, however, is still preserved in the modern day brit milah ceremony which is expressed in the second blessing.(73) as the mohel performs the circumcision.

"Blessed are you, O'Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with his commandments, and has commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Abraham our father."

The sense of this blessing preserves the former significance of brit milah as an initiatory rite efficacious of entry into the faith of Israel. This blessing along with other popular customs has preserved the primary significance of the rite with respect to the bestowal of covenantal identity.

An example of such popular customs preserving this initiatory view of circumcision is brought out strongly in Kabbalistic Literature. Thus Rabbi Abraham Azulai, basing himself on a passage in the Zohar(74) writes:

"Know that a man is not called by the name of man except through ritual circumcision. Without it he is called an evil spirit and not a man. . .As long as the evil forces have a hold on the foreskin and uncleanness of man, it is impossible for the higher soul to alight on him. Therefore he cannot be called an Israelite. For this reason we have the custom not to announce his name except after the circumcision, since then the foreskin and uncleanness have been removed. . . Then he may be called an Israelite man. .

.Thus it has been explained that he is called an Israelite through the mitzvah of circumcision."(75)

The custom of not announcing the name of the child until the advent of circumcision is still widely practiced to this day." In this case, writes Alan Unterman, as elsewhere in Judaism, it would seem that the Kabbalah and popular customs have preserved or re-created a more archaic level of Jewish practice in which circumcision is an initiatory prerequisite for membership in the community, while the halachah has spiritualized or rationalized the function of the rite and in the process de-sacramentalized it."(76)

How and why did brit milah change from a rite efficacious of membership in Israel without which one could not belong, to simply an important rite of passage incumbent upon all males born to Jewish mothers? The halachah as noted previously simply states that although every Jewish male must be circumcised, the uncircumcised Jew is, for all that, still a Jew and accepted as such by the community."(77)

There may have been a number of reasons why the rite lost its initiatory character. First, when the line of descent changed from the biblical patrilineal model to the rabbinic matrilineal paradigm and in so doing defined a Jew as any child born of a Jewish mother, brit milah as a ceremony of induction became superfluous. Either one was born into the covenant by virtue birth or one attained that status through a rite of initiation. When birth to a Jewish mother became the accepted definition of a Jew probably

sometime in the late rabbinic period (C.A. 500 C. E.), brit milah lost its impact as an indispensable rite efficacious of bestowing identity. Brit milah remained a hallowed rite not to be abrogated, but was no longer considered to be absolutely indispensable, at least from the halachic point of view.

Another reason why brit milah may have come to be construed as an initiatory Rite is due to the rabbinic preoccupation with the importance of life. If brit milah in any way would threaten the health and safety of the child, it was to be postponed or put off indefinitely. A Jewish child whose two older brothers had died after circumcision, perhaps through haemophilia, was not allowed to be circumcised until considered fit enough, if at all, yet his status as a Jew was not to be doubted or disputed.(78) If for reasons of health one could remain uncircumcised and nonetheless remain a Jew accorded all the same privileges and obligations incumbent upon any other circumcised Jew, then of what initiatory significance was brit milah? The rabbis wittingly or unwittingly undercut the former initiatory nature of the rite and in so doing de-sacramentalized it. Even Rashi, obviously bothered by the incongruity of the biblical and rabbinic understanding of the rite, interpreted the biblical injunction of Karet for non-performance of brit milah to mean that one was not cut off from his people but rather that the uncircumcised one would be punished by God with an untimely death and die childless.(79) That is to say that Rashi tried

to harmonize the two conflicting views by maintaining the rabbinic view that the uncircumcised Jew did indeed still remain a Jew despite his uncircumcised status, but nevertheless would suffer at the hand of God the biblical punishment of Karet. Rashi interprets the punishment to mean that the uncircumcised one would indeed be cut off from his people by suffering an untimely death and dying childless. Up until that undisclosed time when God would exact the penalty of Karet, he was to be considered part of the community.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the gentile male convert to Judaism must undergo circumcision, or if already circumcised, must undergo a symbolic re-circumcision by the shedding of a drop of blood from the penis, as a necessary condition of his conversion to Judaism. Without the ritual the would be convert is not considered by the halachah to be a Jew at all,(80) although there is a minority view in the Talmud which does not hold the rite to be a prerequisite of conversion. Since underlying conversion is the idea that the convert has been born again once he becomes a Jew,(81) circumcision does have overtones of initiation in this instance. All this makes for a very complicated picture of the halachic nature of brit milah.

In summation, while noting that the standard halachah recognizes anyone born of a Jewish mother to be a Jew regardless of whether he is circumcised or not, the evidence with respect to the biblical nature of brit milah complicates

that definition. At one time it was an initiatory rite, later it was not. However, because of the long standing history of the ancient rite and its biblical import as an initiatory act, as well as the sheer power of the rite itself and the force of collective memory and tradition, elements of that essential initiatory character remain embedded in the social understanding of the rite to this day. This is noted in the prerequisite of circumcision for converts, the double blessing recited at the brit milah, and popular customs such as not giving the name to a child until circumcised. This non-halachic understanding has also been fostered no doubt in recent history by the equation of brit milah with the Christian sacrament of baptism. As noted in the previous chapter, one or the other was deemed necessary by the government for conferring religious identity in nineteenth century Germany and elsewhere.

So is brit milah an initiatory rite or not? Strictly speaking in terms of the current halachah, the answer is decidedly negative. In terms of the popular, social, liturgic and even halachic understanding (with respect to brit milah for converts), we must admit that brit milah has retained its initiatory character. Of what significance is this dual nature with respect to the place of brit milah in Reform Judaism? This is a question soon to be explored.

Summary

In the long evolving history of brit milah, from earliest times to the present, the rite has undergone numerous interpretations which have altered and re-defined its significance within Jewish law and tradition. The six themes or strands of significance embedded in the meaning of brit milah reflect the major areas of religious thought that define Judaism. That is to say that these themes embody the principles of religious devotion, moral striving, ethnic unity, national identification with the land of Israel, and spiritual elevation.

In the theme of circumcision as a form of ritual sacrifice with its significance as a thanksgiving offering unto God, in recognition of God's part in the creation of new life, as well as in the theme of circumcision as being efficacious of personal salvation in which by virtue of being circumcised one attains heavenly bliss,(82) the principle of religious devotion is at work.

The theme of circumcision as a means to perfect oneself is bound up with the principle of moral striving and the pursuit of living an ethical life. Brit milah serves as a symbolic reminder in the flesh that the Jew is to always aspire to moral perfection, living a life dedicated to the moral and ethical ideals of Torah.

The theme of circumcision as a universal symbol of identification with the Jewish people is tied in with the principle of peoplehood. Brit milah has and continues to be

a rite unequalled in Judaism as a phenomenon that by its very nature unites one with his fellow Jews.(83)

The theme of circumcision as a symbol of the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel, (for through the act of circumcision Abraham merited the land) is a manifestation through ritual of the Jewish principle and commitment to a return to Zion.

Lastly, circumcision as a statement of Jewish spirituality, is in accord with the principle of choseness in which the Jew is called upon to sanctify his life so as to be worthy of his noble calling as a light unto the nations.

The ceremony of brit milah clearly incorporates many of the major areas of Jewish concern. Devotion to God, i.e., the religious dimension, ethics and morality, Israel the people, Israel the land, and the spirituality of choseness all find expression in one form or another in the manifold interpretations of brit milah. In some cases the interpretations of brit milah hearken back to some basis or allusion to the biblical understanding of the rite such as in the treatment of brit milah as an act of sacrifice and in some cases the interpretations are clearly independent of any previous basis of interpretation as in the case of brit milah as a means to personal salvation. It is no wonder that this rite, considering its rich history of interpretation, perhaps more than any other rite has been accorded the high standing it enjoys on the list of "must" rituals in Jewish life through the millenia.

The question at hand, however, is why did this ritual in particular spark so much controversy in Reform Judaism and why has it been retained by a movement that easily dispensed with such seemingly less objectionable practices such as covering the head and for a time even Bar Mitzvah? What about brit milah caused the early reformers and some Reform Jews in our own day to react so violently against it, and of what significance does and can brit milah hold today in Reform Judaism?

C. The Correlation of Reform Jewish Principles
And Values with the Rite of Brit Milah

Introduction

In order to attempt to describe here in qualitative terms the gestalt or value system of Reform Judaism would be presumptuous to say the least. Not only does the subject require much more attention to detail and documentation than this particular treatment of the subject merits, but because of the very nature of the movement which is dedicated to the very idea of perpetual evolution makes such a study complex and difficult. Since the time of the Pittsburgh Platform passed in 1885 through the Centenary Perspective in 1976 up to the present, Reform Jewish values and commitments have certainly undergone numerous stages of development and change. One need look no further than the subject of Zionism to discern the vast changes of approach the movement has taken with regard to the issue of peoplehood. Point number five in the Pittsburgh Platform states in part that "we consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine. . . ." In 1976 in the Centenary Perspective the following statements with regard to Jewish nationalism are expressed.

"We have both a stake and a responsibility in building a State of Israel. . . We encourage Aliyah for those who wish to find maximum personal fulfillment in the cause of Zion."

While the above example certainly epitomizes the extremeness of ideological change, in most other areas

ideological or valuational change has come more slowly or not at all. It is possible in other words, to identify certain broad areas of Reform ethos that still define the Reform movement in the way that it does. Of course, these rubrics of definition are sometimes more implicitly felt than explicitly stated, and likewise there are no qualitative descriptions monolithic for all Reform Jews at all times in the history of Reform Judaism. Nonetheless, the task here will be to nail down with some sense of certitude the gestalt or criterion with which Reform Judaism judges the significance of brit milah. Basing my findings and comments primarily on the three major documents of stated Reform principles (84) those being the Pittsburgh Platform 1885, the Columbus Platform 1937, and the Centennial Perspective 1976, I will try to indicate where brit milah fits in with Reform Jewish values and principles.

The Value of Esthetic Appeal

One of the areas regarding Reform's approach to its understanding of Religion is the idea that religious observance should be decorous, esthetically pleasing, and spiritually uplifting. The Pittsburgh Platform in point number three states that "today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization."

In 1937 the Columbus Platform echoed the above

sentiments but tempered the negative tone by deleting any reference to what it rejects. Under the subheading of Religious Practice the following principle is stated:

"Judaism as a way of life requires. . .the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value. . ."

For the first time, appearing in the 1976 Centennial Perspective, is the importance of celebrating life-cycle events explicitly stated as a religious obligation. It is listed as such because of an ostensible Reform concern that the ceremony or ritual necessarily be of great inspirational or esthetic value.

"The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion, life-long study. . .celebrating the major events of life. . .and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence.

While one can certainly discern a distinct, albeit slow, evolution of thought with respect to the esthetic appeal of ritual, one realizes that the statements do not always, if ever, reflect a changed attitude, but rather a changing attitude. That is to say that change is a dynamic process which is always in a state of flux. Therefore even though in 1976 the Reform Movement perhaps appears less concerned with the esthetic appeal of ritual, it nevertheless is in part

defined by its former attitude. The Reform Movement while it is certainly moving towards a greater acceptance of "traditional" customs and practices with less emphasis on these having to meet some pre-determined criterion, it nevertheless retains its image as a religious movement that adheres to the value that the display of ritual should be spiritually elevating at all times.

Indeed these were the grounds upon which brit milah had been attacked in the past and is still criticized for today. As demonstrated in the previous chapter Abraham Geiger had no particular fondness for the rite. One of the reasons that Mordecai Kaplan cites for Geiger's displeasure with the practice was precisely because of its primitive, barbaric, and therefore esthetically unappealing nature. Kaplan notes:

"The one point on which he (Geiger) displayed least scruple about breaking with the past and with deeply ingrained sentiment was the rite of circumcision. There he allowed himself to be swayed by the purely logical inference from what he believed was the history of the rite. He assumed, in the first place, that it had originally been intended as a substitute for human sacrifice."(85)

If as Geiger believed brit milah was a barbarous holdover from primitive times, then it surely was not in consonance with the views and habits of modern civilization. Brit milah in his eyes, as well as many other Reformers, was hardly decorous or able to stimulate "modern spiritual elevation."(86) In our own day as well there are those who

continue to oppose the ritual because of its "primitive" nature. Nelly Ballonoff who began a legal suit against a mohel in California who circumcised her son reported:

"Any thinking Jew who has questioned and rejected aspects of Judaism that seem archaic, oppressive, brutal, and repugnant has to grapple with the issue of whether we have the moral right to mutilate a child's genitals without his consent."(87)

Because of the high value that Reform Judaism places on the principle of decorum with respect to religious practices juxtaposed with the unavoidable bloody nature of brit milah, one can see why the rite was naturally disposed to controversy in Reform Judaism.

The Value of Enlightened Religion

In a similar vein because of another highly esteemed Reform Jewish value, brit milah met with Reform antagonism toward the rite. In the Pittsburgh and Columbus Platforms this value is expressed as the desire to be an enlightened religion. Point number six of the Pittsburgh Platform plainly states: "We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason."

Similarly in the Columbus Platform it is written that: "Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as cultural and social life."

As in the case of the preceding principle, Geiger also criticized the rite because it did not develop spiritually. He continued to see the rite as a baseless carry-over of a previously unenlightened age. Kaplan describes Geiger's view thusly.

"Secondly, he (Geiger) assumed that the Deuteronomist who represented the Judaic and accordingly, the more spiritual conception of God, had deliberately omitted all reference to the rite of circumcision. Against this background, Geiger concluded that circumcision could be eliminated without any loss to Judaism. . . He did not hesitate to characterize circumcision and the dietary laws as barbaric relics. That they might have taken on in course of time a spiritual significance did not count with him."(88)

In our own day as well there are those within Reform Judaism who feel the incongruity between an ancient bloody rite which increasingly is losing its medical penchant for continuance and the postulates of a progressive enlightened "humane" religion which should not resort to the cutting of a body member in the name of some religious purpose. Theodore Gaster summed it up best when he wrote: "The early reformers were motivated. . . by an excess of nineteenth century rationalism and by an obstinate inability to recognize symbol behind form, and were thus inclined to regard it (brit milah) as a somewhat barbarous institution long since outmoded."(89)

On this level, too, brit milah has had to fight for its existence in Reform Judaism.

The Value of Universalism

Thirdly, brit milah has been denigrated in Reform Judaism because of its inately particularistic nature. Oddly enough, however, as will soon be discussed, exactly because of its particularism, brit milah today is finding greater acceptance. Nevertheless, up until recent times, because brit milah did not measure up to the Reform principle of universalism, it was severely criticized. The Pittsburgh Platform reflects this value in point number five.

"We recognize in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect the approach of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the Kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men."

The Columbus Platform continues this emphasis on the universal versus the particular in Judaism by stating:

"We regard it as our historic task to cooperate with all men in the establishment of the kingdom of universal brotherhood, justice, truth, and peace on earth. This is our Messianic goal."

Certainly these lofty principles are not unbecoming of Jewish thought, but when applied to religious practices that by their very nature are particularistically ethnic or "groupish" those religious practices are scrutinized for their message.

Again summing up Geiger's objection to brit milah, which in turn is representative of many others, Kaplan writes:

"They (circumcision and dietary laws) emphasized Jewish individuality and therefore had no place in a Judaism which aimed to be universal."(90)

The Value of Egalitarianism

Lastly, although not articulated in any of the three major documents, is the Reform commitment to egalitarianism between the sexes. The Reform Jewish emphasis on equality in religious practice has created a unique problem for the rite of brit milah. With other practices such as bnei mitzvah, covering the head, reading from the Torah, etc., the perceived inequality could be easily rectified. With respect to brit milah, obviously, it is not that simple. Up until the recent creation of brit ha-bat ceremonies in which the daughter is welcomed into the covenant of her people with the same sort of liturgic pomp and circumstance accorded a son at a brit milah, the question of brit milah as an initiatory rite was of particular concern. For if a male was entered into the covenant of Abraham through circumcision, what about the female. How was she to be entered into the covenant? The answer seems to be in the giving of the name, which in the case of the female was usually an occasion of minor importance compared to the great event of brit milah for the male. On the other hand, if brit milah is not considered an initiatory rite, and all children male and female are entered into the covenant merely by being born to a Jewish mother,

then brit milah simply becomes a male rite of passage like a bar mitzvah and pidyon ha-ben. Also both birth rituals, brit milah for boys and brit ha-bat for girls become ceremonies in which the entrance into the covenant is simply publically witnessed and affirmed. Their status as Jews is unaltered, even if no brit milah or brit ha-bat takes place. The only difference is that the male undergoes a surgical procedure in accord with the sustained tradition of the Jewish people.

The Reform brit ha-bat creation notwithstanding, the problem of sexual inequality in early birth ceremonies in Judaism, only added another obstacle to the unqualified acceptance of brit milah in Reform Judaism.

With all these complicating factors, that is to say the Reform Jewish principles of esthetic appeal, progressive enlightened religion, universalism and sexual equality, one is compelled to ask the question how and why was brit milah retained in Reform Judaism? With so many apparent strikes against it, how did brit milah survive when so many less "objectionable" rituals were easily discarded? Why does brit milah persist as a hallowed rite amongst Jews even in Reform Judaism?

Why Brit Milah Continues to be Embraced
Reform Jews: Medicine and Ethnic Identity

I believe it is abundantly clear that the reason why brit milah, or at the very least routine medical circumcision has persisted among Reform Jews is twofold. First, because medicine seems to validate the necessity of circumcision,

Reform Jews who otherwise would feel quite uncomfortable with the rite have continued to circumcise their sons. Depending upon their level of religiosity and or connection with the Jewish community these Reform Jews would either engage a mohel or a Jewish doctor and perform a brit milah on the eighth day or would simply agree to have their children routinely circumcised. While certainly a routine medical circumcision is not by any means considered a brit milah, still many of those Jews who opt for a non-religious circumcision do so out of some Jewish pretext. Hidden in the recesses of their minds or the depths of their being is the sentiment that Jews should be circumcised, if for no other reason than to be able to fit in socially, culturally or ethnically with other Jews. Religiously it may be devoid of all purpose for a large number of secular Jews, but ethnically it still produces a viscerally positive response. The challenge for these Jews, however, is approaching as the medical community reverses its stand on the necessity of routine medical circumcision. In the past secular and even religious Jews were comforted and perhaps even convinced of the merits of brit milah by the fact that it was good and medically advisable anyway. The rite of brit milah from a Reform perspective was indeed in accord with the postulates of a modern, enlightened civilization. It also was not a particularistic rite, because everybody in America circumcised their male children. A Jew could feel comfortable circumcising his son. As Dr. Eugene Mihaly

states: "I'm convinced that medicine saved circumcision for Reform Jews."

Although presently there seems to be a gradual change of opinion with regard to the wisdom of routine medical circumcision, one must conclude that up to this day at least, medicine certainly has played a major role in retaining the practice of brit milah in Reform Judaism.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume that only because of the support of a non-traditional element unrelated to the religious significance of the rite itself was brit milah saved from the clutches of non-observance. Rather one cannot overlook the immensely powerful statement that brit milah conveys with respect to maintaining one's link with the Jewish people. Leopold Zunz stated that the binding force behind brit milah is its significance as "a symbol of the unity and eternity of Israel." He argues that the act exemplifies in concrete form the inheritance of God's law from the past and the transmission of it to the future. He states:

"To abrogate circumcision, therefore, amounts to repudiating the past on the one hand and renouncing the future on the other. It is to sever the thread of Jewish continuity. It is suicide, not Reform."(91)

In Kaplan's The Greater Judaism in the Making in his chapter on early Reform theologies, he mentions that due to the fact that the Reform principle of universalism in which the Messianic ideal of Israel's mission to serve humanity was

emphasized, the idea of Jewish peoplehood was reduced to invisibility. He claims that Reform theologians deprived Jews of outward and visible means of maintaining their group identity. In other words because the principle of Israel's being a "light unto the nations" was so highly touted, Israel's light unto herself had dimmed considerably. Because Reform theologians wished to create a religion free of beliefs which offended neither reason nor universal morality, many distinctive and particularistic rituals, ceremonies and practices were abandoned.

After a while, however, it became apparent to leading Reformers that the Messianic ideal of universal monotheism based upon a religion of reason, despite its grandiose design was by itself not sufficiently capable of giving a corporate unity to the Jews. They instead began to look to ceremony and ritual observance as a means of symbolizing various aspects of the Messianic ideal, thereby bringing it repeatedly to mind. At the Frankfurt Conference, David Einhorn said: "The idea of the Messiah is most closely connected with the whole ceremonial law." According to Kaplan, "that principle supplied the leaders of Reform with the criteria which they needed for determining the place of Hebrew, the Sabbath and the festivals, circumcision, and the regulations governing marriage and proselytism, in the scheme of Jewish living. "Perhaps," continues Kaplan, "the clearest evidence of their subconscious desire to retain the sense of ethnic solidarity is to be found in their insistence on

remaining within the frame of the organized local community."

The desire to remain within the framework of the recognized Jewish community motivated Reformers to reconsider the particularistic rite of brit milah. On a popular level, too, those Reform Jews who had for a time abandoned the rite or reluctantly acceded to it, began to reassess the significance of the rite. Many times, couples such as the one with which we began this chapter, are torn between the medical virtues of the rite, their own visceral feelings about the ceremony, and the pull of tradition which cannot even imagine an uncircumcised Jew. In fact, returning to Hank and Gretchen's letter to Rabbi Lelyveld in which they pleaded for some advice on how to proceed as Reform Jews, Rabbi Lelyveld tells them that all four of his sons were circumcised and that he supports the practice wholeheartedly. In his particular response to the questions, "What is Reform's viewpoint and would anyone ever require our son to be circumcised as an adult in order to be a practicing Jew," Lelyveld hones in on the main reason why Reform Judaism did not abandon the practice of brit milah and perhaps by extension explains the primary significance of brit milah for Reform Jews. Lelyveld writes:

"However, Reform Rabbis do not generally require the circumcision of adult male converts, although there is some slight pressure to do so in order to make Reform converts acceptable to the religious establishment in Israel. In this connection, we were surprised to learn the deep, affective

content which circumcision has for non-religious Jews in Israel. Members of left-wing parties who own no membership to the synagogue, cannot conceive of an uncircumcised Jew. It is probably this deep affective content that has kept Reform Jews from discarding the rite, as well as the fear of separating from the rest of the Jewish community."(92)

I submit that it is exactly this deep affective almost subconscious yet innately felt attitude that a male Jewish child should be circumcised that has kept the rite of brit milah within the mainstream of Reform Jewish life. The desire not to cut ourselves off and the fear of losing in a very physical way our sense of connectedness with other Jews, compels the Reform Jew to circumcise his son. Rabbi Lelyveld, not only responded on his own to Hank and Gretchen's letter, but solicited the help of his colleagues as well. One of those was Dr. Eugene Mihaly who agreed that Rabbi Lelyveld said practically everything that can or needs to be said on the subject and then added his own response wherein he quoted Claude G. Montifiore. Montifiore in this paragraph, like Lelyveld, notes the powerful argument of religious/ethnic identification with the rest of Israel.

"Liberal Jewish congregations do well, I think, in temporarily retaining this unattractive rite for infants. . .the reason for this retention is not religious and it is not hygienic. . .the rite may justifiably be temporarily retained for reasons of a social and juridical order. . .it is not desirable that any Liberal Jew should be under

disqualification or stigma in the eyes of their Orthodox bretheren. That might lead to difficulties in the case of contemplated marriage between 'Liberal' Jew and an 'Orthodox' Jewess."

Finally even Hank himself ironically unbeknown to himself answered his own question with regard to the accepted significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism. He pens in his last paragraph the following words:

"Thanks very much for taking time to read all this. By the way, we aren't sharing these concerns with my parents, who would be horrified."

The fear of being the first to cut oneself off from one's roots as a Jew by refusing to circumcise one's child, is the most significant reason why brit milah has persisted in Reform Judaism. Brit milah more than anything else has been and continues to be the sine qua non of one's Jewish identity. At the very least, a Jew is circumcised. If he is not, by virtue of any reason other than health, he has unequivocally signalled wittingly or unwittingly his desire not to be considered a Jew. If this is not his intention, it is nonetheless perceived as such, and it is exactly that feared perception that propels many Reform Jews to circumcise their sons.

Summary

Therefore, I believe the twin forces of medicine and ethnic identity have ensured the survival of brit milah in Reform Judaism against the storm of philosophical and theological assaults that by any reasonable measure should have done it in long ago. Even these forces, however, which have "saved" brit milah for Reform Jews are not enough to ensure its survival in the foreseeable future. As the change of opinion from the American Medical Association continues to trickle down into the masses and more and more Jews begin to question the medical merits of brit milah, the observance of the rite will decrease. Likewise as the rate of assimilation increases amongst American Jews, fewer and fewer will feel the force of tradition tugging at their hearts reminding them of their religious and ethnic ties to the Jewish community. As these factors become more apparent, the practice of brit milah will wane significantly among Reform Jews. Even the more traditionally-minded Jews within Reform and from without will be faced with the dilemma to circumcise or not. Unless the rite is invested with new meaning or reinterpreted in creative ways to the Reform Jewish community, I fear that more and more people like Hank and Gretchen will question the significance and validity of the practice. Reform Judaism, if indeed it deems the rite worthy of continuance, must be prepared to defend the important significance of the rite. The question is how?

Conclusion and Analysis

Based on the results of this study of the significance of brit milah in Reform Judaism, I offer the conclusion that brit milah in Reform Judaism is nothing more and nothing less than a life-cycle ceremony of public initiation into the community of Israel. It is a public affirmation on the part of Jewish parents to raise their child Jewishly. The question remains, however, how does the Reform understanding of brit milah comport with the traditional interpretations presented in this chapter and of what significance can these have for Reform Jews if understood in a Reform context?

Obviously the one area of absolute congruence between a Reform understanding of brit milah and other traditional interpretations is the theme of circumcision as a symbol of identification with the Jewish people. The desire of Reform Jews to remain part of Klal Yisrael, the community of Israel, is expressed most powerfully through the rite of brit milah. As such this particular significance of brit milah should be highlighted, emphasized and taught most forcefully at Reform britot milah. While it should be understood that brit milah is not a ceremony that confers status which can only be obtained at birth, it should on the other hand be noted that brit milah and brit ha-bat ceremonies serve the purpose of publically reaffirming that status attained at birth. In the same way one becomes bar or bat mitzvah at 13 with or without a public ceremony, likewise one is a Jew from birth, with or without the ceremony of brit milah or brit ha-bat. With this

desacramentalized understanding of the rite, brit milah becomes the vehicle by which Jewish parents demonstrate to the faithful community their commitment to raise their child Jewishly. They do this by publically affirming the Jewish status of that child through the hallowed rite of brit milah. Through the act of brit milah, Jewish parents concretize through symbol and ceremony, the otherwise amorphous concept of identity. Jewish parents demonstrate from the start, that without forms in which to concretize an idea such as Jewish identity, such ideas remain vague and unrealized. Brit milah serves as the ritual par excellence in recognition of the idea that identity must be rooted in concrete acts or more specifically in this case, sealed in the flesh.

What of the other traditional themes attributed to the significance of brit milah?

The theme of circumcision as a form of ritual sacrifice, as one would imagine, would find little in common with Reform values. The idea of ritual sacrifice remains to this day outside the realm of Reform theology. So any allusion, therefore, to brit milah as a form of ritual sacrifice, would hinder its cause in Reform Judaism rather than benefit it. On the other hand, if understood allegorically, there may yet be some significance for Reform Jews. The word sacrifice in Hebrew is Korban (קָרָב) which is derived from the root meaning to "draw near" or "come close." If one understands brit milah to be a time when Jewish parents "draw near" to God in grateful recognition of God's part in the creation of

that child by symbolically "offering up" a piece of the generative part, then perhaps this would be an acceptable interpretation within the framework of reform values. Even this broad interpretation, however, would be stretching the limits of Reform's distaste for the sacrificial cult.

More difficult, is the theme of circumcision as a means to achieving personal salvation. Since Reform Judaism cares little for the concepts of Gehinnom and Gan Eden (hell and heaven), (93) this ascription of significance would fall on virtually deaf ears.

The theme of circumcision as a binding symbol of Jewish ties to the land of Israel also presents difficulties despite Reform's Zionist commitments. While it may indeed signify in the flesh one's personal and by extension communal commitment to Eretz Yisrael, although it's not usually thought of in that manner, the idea is problematic for a Reform theology that does not recognize divine bestowal of the land to the Jewish people. If Reform Judaism does not accept divine revelation at Sinai, then certainly it does not accept the idea that by merit of brit milah, Jews automatically gain the inheritance of the land. It simply is not an idea that would easily mesh with Reform values and principles as they are presently understood.

Circumcision as symbolic of a Jewish spirituality that elevates the Jew to a higher calling, could on the other hand find acceptance within a Reform value system. The early reformers conceived of themselves as fulfilling a universal

mission to the nations of the world. They understood that to be chosen did not conote superiority but rather a calling to fulfill that for which they were created: to be a light unto the nations, a beacon of religious inspiration transmitting the idea and ideals of ethical monotheism. If brit milah can embody these concepts, as the traditional motif seems to suggest, then this too can be a significant factor in infusing the Reform practice of brit milah with additional meaning.

Finally, the idea of circumcision as being a means to perfect oneself morally and ethically is a theme that resonates well with the ideals of Reform Judaism. Perhaps second only to circumcision as a symbolic bond between Jews, this theme corresponds the most naturally with Reform values. With the hallmark of Reform Judaism being the pursuit of individual virtue leading to the establishment of a morally just society and the advent of the Messianic Age, brit milah can serve as a meaningful reminder in the flesh symbolic of that obligation. In a sense this is the only significance of brit milah that can unequivocally be gleaned from Scripture itself. The biblically stated purpose of brit milah is so that "you shall walk before Me and be perfect." A Reform Jewish interpretation of brit milah would do well to accent this understanding of the moral significance of the ancient rite.

While brit milah as a symbol of Jewish identity probably commands the most compelling significance of that rite in

Reform Judaism, there are others that could be cited which would dove-tail nicely with Reform Jewish values. Brit milah as a religious experience in which one recognizes God as the creator of new life, brit milah as a symbol of Israel's chosenness to bring the blessings of divine wisdom to humanity, and brit milah as a reminder in the flesh of one's duty to strive toward personal moral perfection,--are all valid interpretations of brit milah within the value system of Reform Judaism. Perhaps now with the establishment of the Reform Brit Milah Board a concerted effort can be made on behalf of Reform Mohelim to endear this powerfully symbolic mitzvah to the Reform Jewish community. This is the direction Reform Judaism must pursue if it aims at retaining this most ancient of rites found among our people.

NOTES

(1) Silverman, William B., Basic Reform Judaism, Philosophical Library, Inc., New York, 1970, p. 267.

(2) Report of the Ad Hoc Task Force on circumcision delivered by the committee on fetus and newborn to the American Academy of Pediatrics. This report is published in Pediatrics, Volume 56, No. 4., October, 1975, pp 610-611. See Appendix for copy of document.

(3) Some of the books and articles that have appeared in recent years include:

Carter, Nicholas, Routine Circumcision: The Tragic Myth, Londinium Press, London, 1979.

Tractenberg, M., La Circoncision: Un Estudio Psicoanalitico Sobre las Mutilaciones Genitales, Editorial Paidos, Buenos Aires, 1972.

Wallerstein, Edward, Circumcision: An American Health Fallacy, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1980.

Articles:

"To Circumcise or Not?", Newsweek Magazine, October 1, 1979, p. 40.

"Misbeliefs Perpetuate Practice of Circumcision", by Jane E. Brody. Reprint in Cincinnati Enquirer from the New York Times, August 21, 1985.

(4) These documents were generously shared by Dr. Eugene Mihaly, Executive Dean of HUC-JIR, who was asked by Rabbi Lelyveld to respond to Hank's letter.

(5) See Appendix for enclosure. #14

(6) Herodotus, ii, 36.

(7) Stele of uha (23rd Century B.C.E.); Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 1950, p. 326.

(8) Tomb of Khonsu (21st Dynasty): Klebs, Reliefs, i, Figure 10; S.A.B. Mercer, The Religion of Ancient Egypt, 1949, p. 359.

(9) Herodotus, ii, 37, 104. The "Syrians" of Palestine is interpreted by some as referring to the ancient Israelites.

(10) Weiss, Charles, "Motives for Male Circumcision Among Preliterate and Literate Peoples," The Journal of Sex Research, Volume 2, No. 2, July, 1966, pp 69-88.

(11) Ibid., p. 76.

(12) Gaster, Theodore H., The Holy and the Profane, William Sloane Associates, Publishers, New York, 1955, p. 47.

(13) Weiss, (Above N. 10) p. 69.

(14) For an excellent resume of the various hypotheses, C. F. Gray, in Hastings, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics III, 659-670; also

Sasson, Jack M., "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East", The Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 85, 1966., pp. 473-476.

Toy, Colt, Introduction to the History of Religions, Boston, 1913, pp 68-74.

(15) Gaster, (Above N. 12) p. 47.

(16) Ibid., p. 47.

(17) Ibid., p. 48.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Weiss, (Above N. 10) p. 71.

(20) Ibid., p. 70.

(21) Ibid., p. 70.

(22) Ibid., p. 83.

(23) The Stele of uha (Above N. 7) indicates that the one who was circumcised did so as part of a large group. The inscription describes the ritual from the point of view of one who was circumcised. Also this mass circumcision ceremony done at the time of the seasonal festival seems to correlate with the mass circumcision of proselytes right before the Passover festival.

(24) Gaster, (Above N. 12), p. 49.

(25) Ibid., p. 50.

(26) Weiss, (Above N. 10), p. 76.

(27) Sherman, Charles. "Circumcision" The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge Funk and

Wagnalls, Co., New York and London, 1909, pp. 117-119.

(28) Wellhausen's view is described in full in his book Reste des Altarabischen Heidentums, Berlin, 1897.

(28a) Rabbinic interpretations of Exodus 4:24-26 fail to clear up the numerous obscurities in the cryptic text. The sheer multiplicity of explanations points up the difficulty in understanding the traditional exposition of the text. Rabbinic comments on this passage are found in Mekilta Amalek, Chapter Three, Yerushalmi Nedarim 3:9, Nedarim 31b, Exodus Rabba 5:8 and Yalkut Shimoni 81. A highly fantastic interpretation is given in Exodus Rabba 5:8 and a similar account is given by Rashi in his commentary.

"Precious is circumcision for it was not to be suspended by Moses for even a moment. Therefore, when he was on the way and stopped at the lodging-place, and neglected to circumcise Eliezer, his son, immediately, 'The Lord met him and sought to kill him'. Whence did Zipporah know that Moses had endangered himself because of the matter of the circumcision? The angel came and swallowed Moses from his head to his membrum. When Zipporah saw that he had swallowed him up only to the membrum she recognized that he was being endangered because of the matter of circumcision, and she knew how great was the power of circumcision, for he was not able to swallow him beyond that. Immediately 'she cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his feet'; and she said: 'Surely a bridegroom of blood are you to me'; (that is), she said: 'You are my bridegroom; you are given to me through the merit of this blood of circumcision; for behold I have fulfilled the commandment. Immediately, the angel let him alone.' Then she said: A bridegroom of blood in regard of the circumcision'; (that is), she said, 'How great is the power of circumcision, for my bridegroom was guilty of death because he neglected to perform the commandment of circumcision, and were it not for it (the fact that the circumcision took place) he would not have been saved.'"

(29) Morgenstern, Julian, Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites, HUC Press, 1966, p. 56.

(30) Beena Marriage: As abundant evidence indicates, beena marriage was a type of marriage practiced primitive Semitic peoples in the earliest stages of their cultural evolution, and which persisted among the Arabs until shortly before the time of Mohammed (CF. Robertson Smith, Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia, pp 63ff). In Beena Marriage the concept of fatherhood was unknown, or at least totally disregarded. Kinship was traced solely through the mother, and the basic social unit was the clan-mishpocha. All children male or female, born to a woman under the conditions of beena marriage belonged to her clan, as did likewise the

children of her sisters and of her daughters, continuing through the generations. The head of the clan was always the senior uncle or brother of these women. Marriage within the clan, i.e., endogamy, was abhorrent and strictly forbidden. A man would leave his own clan for a time to live with a woman of another clan and thus satisfy his sexual instinct. Such a marriage might endure for a single sexual act and be known to only its two participants. This specific type of beena marriage was called by the Arabs Mota'ah Marriage or the union might endure over a protracted period, even for years. This was the normal form of beena marriage. In such a beena marriage the husband lived openly with his wife's clan and shared the regular activities of their daily existence. But this made him in no way a member of that clan, nor did it affect in any way his membership in the clan of his mother, to which, as a rule returned sooner or later. Ibid., p. 214.

(31) Ibid., p. 57.

(32) "The Akikah Rites is an ancient semitic ceremony which today is still practiced in some Moslem societies in Saudia Arabia. It is easily identified as a taboo rite and is usually performed upon the seventh or sixth day after birth, although the custom seems to vary somewhat in different locales. It is frequently associated with the important rite of naming the child. The complete Akikah ceremony consists of two rites, though occasionally one or the other is partially or entirely dispensed with. The first rite is the cutting off of the infant's first hair. The Arabic word for this is Akikah. From this, the ceremony derived its name. The second rite is the offering of a sacrifice, also traditionally known as Akikah. The Akikah sacrifice is unquestionably the same as that offered upon the seventh and eighth day after birth by certain Bedouin tribes. This sacrifice serves as a redemption (fedu) for the child. The ancient Arabic form of the sacrifice is described concisely by Wellhausen: "For the birth of a male child a sacrifice was brought after a little time, generally seven days. It consisted usually of a sheep or goat. Just as the hair was cut at every sacrifice, so at this sacrifice, the first hair, with which the child was born, was cut off. Furthermore, the forehead was sprinkled with blood; hence the name Akikah. The Akikah was taken over by Islam and is still one of the most frequent occasions for sacrifice in Arabia. It is practiced, however, only at the birth of a boy, and never at the birth of a girl." Ibid., p. 36.

(33) Ibid., p. 48.

(34) Ibid., p. 58.

(35) Exodus 22:29; Leviticus 22:27.

(36) Leviticus 19:23.

(37) Morgenstern (Above N. 29) p. 63.

(38) Genesis 17:10-12.

(39) This statement of superiority is found in Jacob ben Asher's The Arba'ah Turim (14th Century), Yoreh Deah 07, as well as in Joseph Karo's Shulchan Aruch (1565), Yoreh Deah, hilchot milah, (67). The statement in the Arba'ah Turim reads as follows:

"It is a positive commandment for every Israelite to circumcise his son and it is greater than any other positive commandment, for it carries with it the punishment of excommunication. The statement in the Shulchan Aruch reads as follows: "It is a positive commandment for the father to circumcise his son and this commandment is greater than any other positive commandment."

(40) The term "brit", covenant, occurs 13 times in the passage enjoining circumcision on Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17.

(cf. also T. B. Shabbat 132a top).

(41) Circumcision, though entailing work is performed on the Sabbath.

(42) This is a reference to Exodus 4:24-26 where Moses is "attacked" for not circumcising his son. This is discussed in the Gemara of Nedarim 31b.

(43) It is forbidden to cut off a leprous spot, but if it is on the foreskin it may be removed together with it. (cf. Shabbat 132b).

(44) "Covenant" here is taken to refer to circumcision.

(45) Tosefta Nedarim 2:6. The phrase "in agreement with all these words," in the Hebrew בְּרִיתָם כְּכָל אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים, which may also be translated "over all these things," i.e., "Behold the blood of the covenant. . . is over (greater than) all these things (the works of creation)."

(46) Nedarim 32a. "After the tenor of all these words" is taken to refer to all the laws of the Torah, while "covenant" is taken to refer to circumcision. The fact that the two are in juxtaposition to each other indicates that they are equated.

(47) Morgenstern, (Above N. 29), pp 63-65.

Here Morgenstern presents an argument that supports the idea that circumcision served as a substitute for child sacrifice among the ancient Israelites, maintaining that the

sacrificed part redeems the whole.

(48) Krohn, Rabbi Paysach J., Bris Milah, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Brooklyn, 1985, p. 137.

(49) Ibid., p. 84.

(50) Ibid., pp 62-63.

(51) Kasher, M. M., Torah Shelamah, Vol. III, Jerusalem, 1932, p. 691 (On Genesis 17:1) Genesis Rabbah 46.

(52) Consider the daily festival prayer schedule which is based functionally upon the Temple services of the Second Temple period.

(53) Klein, Joseph, The Religious Significance of Circumcision in Judaism, Rabbinic Thesis, HUC-JIR, 1939, p. 90.

(54) Genesis Rabbah 46:4; Yalkut Lech Lecha 81.

(55) Genesis Rabbah 46:1; Yalkut Lech Lecha 80.

(56) Alef=1; Bet=2; Rashe=200; mem=40; a total of 243.

(57) Alef=1; Bet=2; Rashe=200; hay=5; mem=40; a total of 248.

(58) Genesis Rabbah 11:6;

(59) Menachot 43b.

(60) Maimonides, Moses; The Guide of the Perplexed, Tr. by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969, Chapter, 49.

(61) Genesis 17:14.

(62) Sanhedrin 110b.

(63) Genesis Rabbah 48:8. cf also Yalkut, Genesis 82; Tanhuma Tazria 5; Exodus Rabbah 19:4.

(64) Sifri Shalach 112. There are 36 commandments in the Torah, of which the failure to observe is punishable by excommunication, Karet. Of these, two are positive, circumcision on Passover. (M. Keritot 1:1)

(65) Tanhuma Lech Lecha 20; also Exodus Rabbah 19:5.

(66) Avodah Zarah 10b.

(67) The Roman matron was saying that Ketiah ben Shalom who was giving up his life for the Jews, was going to the hereafter without having conformed to the Jewish rite of circumcision 50 Rashi.

(68) Jacob Ben Asher, Arba'ah Turim, 1476 (Yoreh Deah).

(69) Kaplan, Mordecai, The Greater Judaism in the Making, The Reconstructionist Press, New York, 1960, pp 330-331.

(70) Arachin 13b.

(71) Krohn (Above N. 48), p. 63.

(72) Unterman, Alan, Jews: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston, 1981, pp 136.

(73) Because of the relative unique nature of reciting two distinct blessings for one commandment many commentaries have been written. Most of the commentaries have been supplied by the Bayt Yosef and the Bayt Chadash found in the Tur, Yoreh Deah 265. The first blessing by the mohel is obvious, since it is no different from the blessing recited before the performance of other commandments. The commentators suggest a host of reasons for why the necessity of a second blessing. Everything from providing a blessing for each of the two parts of the ritual, chituch (excision) and the unique act of per'ah (uncovering the glans) to suggesting that in the ritual there are two levels of responsibility, one for the father and one for the mohel--are given as reasons for this anomolous situation. All this suggests is that confusion abounds with respect to the nature of the rite itself. I believe that the second blessing is indicative of the biblical strata signifying a rite of initiation into the covenant of Abraham, while the first blessing is representative of the Rabbinic transformation of the rite into a non-initiatory rite of passage, based upon the Rabbinic definitions of who is a Jew and who is party to the covenant.

(74) Zohar 2:86a.

(75) Chesed Le-Avraham 2:52.

(76) Unterman (Above N. 72), p. 138.

(77) Shulchan Aruch: Yoreh Deah 264.

(78) Shulchan Aruch: Yoreh Deah 263:2.

(79) Rashi's commentary on Genesis 17:14.

(80) cf. Maimonides, Yad Ha-chazakah: Isurei Biah 13:6.

(81) TB Yebamot 48b.

(82) One Midrash, using Gematria, equates the mitzvah of

brit milah with the sum total of the other 612 commandments. The word brit (בְּרִית) numerically is equivalent to 612. Milah, then is the one mitzvah equal to all the rest, and therefore that alone is enough to save the one who is circumcised from Gehinnom.

(83) Consider the term "Ben Brit" - Son of the Covenant as another way of saying that one is Jewish.

(84) See Appendix for copies of the three documents. Documents Numbers 15, 16, 17.

(85) Kaplan (Above N. 69) p. 240.

(86) This phrase is quoted from Point #4 of the Pittsburgh Platform.

(87) Joseph, Nadine, "Rabbis Wife Sues to Block Future Britot," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, San Francisco, April 26, 1985, p. 1.

(88) Kaplan (Above N. 69), p. 242.

(89) Gaster (Above N. 12), p. 53.

(90) Kaplan (Above N. 69), p. 242.

(91) Gaster (Above N. 12), p. 53.

(92) Letter from Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld to Hank dated November 25, 1975. Letter gratefully obtained from Dr. Eugene Mihaly.

(93) Point number seven of the Pittsburgh Platform states in part: "We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (hell and paradise), as abodes for everlasting punishment as reward."

CHAPTER THREE

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14. A.M.A. Report to the Ad Hoc Task Force
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15. The Pittsburgh Platform 1885
16. The Columbus Platform 1937
17. The Centenary Perspective 1976

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Translation.

Savannah.

On July 11, 1733, 41 Israelites arrived here from London, 26 of whom were males and 15 females. Among them was a Dr. Nunis, and especially the families Nunis, Henriques, Bornal, Oliver, Depass, Morando, Cohen, Sheftall. They were the first Jews in this part of the country, they brought along a Scroll of the Law and a circumcision case which a London merchant by the name of Lindo, had presented to them for use in the congregation they wanted to build up. This was the second boat that left for Savannah, after the first one had arrived there on the first of February 1733 with 130 persons (no Israelites). It was after October 13th, 1735 that a third boat arrived with 220 persons (no Israelites). Thus the Israelites belong to the first settlers in that part of the country. Out of those first Jewish settlers, there are only the descendants of three families still living there: the families Sheftall, Minis and Delyon.- By the end of July 1733 they already opened their Synagogue which they called K.K.Mickva Israel. On July 12, 1737 they Congregation received as a gift from Mr. Benjamin Mendez in London a Scroll of the Law, a Chanukka lamp and a number of books. In the years 1740 and 1741 the Congregation was dissolved as these Israelites emigrated to Charleston in South-Carolina.

(Zeitung des Judenthums, 1844)

Record of named guests
of Seidling's

Presented to Lewis Allen Powers

May the late great Merchant of Richmond Virg.

המלך את הגרים מבדד

ברוך אתה יי אל הינו מלך העולם
אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו למעלה את הגר

ברוך אתה יי אל הינו מלך העולם אשר
קדשנו במצותיו וצונו למעלה את הגרים
ולהטיף בלהם דם ברית שאיל מלך
ברית לא נהקמה שמים וארץ שגמלה
אם לא ברית יונם ולילה הקדש שמים
וארץ לא שמה :

והקהל ענין

כעת שנכנס בברית של אברהם
אבינו כך השם פלחם נלל ונכנס
לחנה ולחופה ולמעשים טובים

אברהם :



מקדש

למנוח

נמלאו אבותינו ברוח אלהים
והיה להם חלק עולם

והיה להם חלק עולם
והיה להם חלק עולם

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והיה להם חלק עולם

List of places and years recorded in the Barnard Jacobs
circumcision book.

Philadelphia	1754
Lancaster	1758
Reading Town	1759
Philadelphia	1760
Heidelberg	1761
Heidelberg	1762
Heidelberg	1770
Philadelphia	1770
Philadelphia	1772
Philadelphia	1773
Philadelphia	1773
Easton	1773
Yorktown	1765 (Hebrew date is 1762 - 5522)
illegible	
Heidelberg	1762
Yorktown	1770 (Hebrew date 1767)
Philadelphia	1767
Philadelphia	1770 (Hebrew date 5529 - 28 Kislev = 1768)
Philadelphia	1774
Lancaster	1774
Philadelphia	1776
Lancaster	1776
Heidelberg	1777
Lancaster	1777
York	1778
Philadelphia	1779
Lancaster	1779
Lancaster	1779
Easton	1780
Lancaster	1782
Lancaster	1782
Lancaster	1782
No place name	1790

The text of the letter follows:

[Abraham I. Abrahams to Moses Seixas]

New York June 1st 1772

Mr. Moses Seixas

(at Newport R. I.)⁵

Sir

At the desire of your father, who informs me you have an inclination to become a Mohel, and as it is necessary you shou'd have a more proper one at your place than you have now, have offer'd him to send you what instructions I am master of, and hope you may profit by them, so as to become a proficient in that holy office.

The first and principal thing is, to have a good heart, to perform the operation with courage intermix'd with tenderness.

2^{dly} When ever you are to Circumcise a Child, you must go to see it a day or two before the Circumcision, and examine the Prepuce,⁶ that you may know how to prepare your plaisters⁷ according to the bigness of the same.⁸

3^{dly} You must feel and rub the skin to loosen it⁹ and to know if it is a double ערלה¹⁰ or skin w^{ch}¹¹ sometimes will happen and occasion a difficulty in making the פריעה¹² which is tearing a thin skin that covers the Prepuce.

4^{thly} When the Child is brought in and laid properly in the Godfather's lap¹³ (the Ceremony before that you know without doubt), you open the Child¹⁴ which shou'd be dress'd quite loose, then take a fine clout¹⁵ or sof[t] linen doubl'd, and lay it on the Child's bag¹⁶ for safety, then fix your pincers, taking good hold of the skin you are to cut off pushing the Nut back¹⁷ w^{ch}¹⁸ as soon as you have sure, say the Prayer & cut off the

⁵ The address of Seixas "at Newport, R. I." is in different handwriting and was added by a later hand.

⁶ Foreskin.

⁷ Bandages.

⁸ The mohel had to cut his own bandages to size.

⁹ See the postscript to the letter, *infra*, p. 62.

¹⁰ 'Orlah Hebrew for "foreskin." The foreskin consists of an outer and inner skin, like a tube within a tube, the inner being shorter and often adhering to the gland tightly.

¹¹ Which.

¹² Peri'ah, the disclosure of the head of the penis by retracting the inner membrane, sometimes by incising as the writer explains.

¹³ In the Ashkenazic ritual, the sandak holds the child; the godfather's function (*kvatter*) is different.

¹⁴ Remove the child's diaper.

¹⁵ Cloth.

¹⁶ Sac containing the testicles.

¹⁷ Glans penis, head of the penis.

¹⁸ Which.

skin at once¹⁹ and immediately fix your Nails to tear the thin skin so as to discover²⁰ the Nut, about a quarter of an Inch or a little better will be sufficient,²¹ be careful to do it quick before the blood covers it, or it will be difficult to make the פריעה²², also you must not put both Nails to y^e skin at once, but the right one first and then the left, keeping them close together to prevent your tearing too much,²³ and be sure to tear above the Nut and not below it,²⁴ observe if you do not make y^e פריעה²⁵ it will grow again as if it had never been cut,²⁶ then the child when well, must undergo another operation.

5^{thly} After you have made the פריעה²⁷ you must fix your mouth to y^e wound and suck the blood well two or three times,²⁸ holding the skin back with your two fingers and thumbs, and spit the blood into the Cup or Glass called כוס של מצוה²⁹ then throw plenty of dragons blood on the wound to stop the bleeding,³⁰ after which lay your plaisters³¹ one on the other well smear'd with Balsam Capior³² (or Turlington) and a little dragons blood thrown on them through y^e holes of the top of y^e bottle that contains it,³³ let y^e Plaisters be well warm'd, be careful to fix that hole that y^e Nut may come through it, let it not be too large that y^e plaisters may stick fast.³⁴ Then lay the cloth that you secur'd the bag with, upon the Nut, lay the Child's legs across, and tie them tight but

¹⁹ The first step: cutting the prepuce called *hituk*.

²⁰ Uncover.

²¹ This is the second step called *peri'ah*, the disclosure of the glans.

²² Peri'ah.

²³ Which would lead to excessive bleeding.

²⁴ The *frenum* or connective tissue between the shaft of the glans and its head, on the under side,— if torn, such bleeding could be mortal.

²⁵ Peri'ah.

²⁶ The skin will come forward to cover the glans again.

²⁷ Peri'ah.

²⁸ The third step in the circumcision called *mezizah*. Jewish tradition (comp. Mishna *Shabbat* 19:2) implies that the purpose is to constrict the blood vessels so as to control the bleeding. The sucking however is an historical memory of swallowing the blood wherein the child was accepted into the kinship of the Jewish people through the blood covenant. See the present writer's article, "The Origin and Significance of the Jewish Rite of Circumcision" in *The Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 2 (April, 1951), pp. 103 f.

²⁹ Cup for the extracted blood.

³⁰ Dragon's blood: a bright red resin taken from the fruit of a palm *calamus draco*, used as an astringent.

³¹ Bandages.

³² See the manuscript; probably Balsam Copaiba is meant, an extract, from trees *genus Copaifera*, used formerly as a treatment for wounds.

³³ The ivory bottle is also preserved and is in the aforementioned Collection of Captain N. Taylor Phillips.

³⁴ The writer unwittingly skipped a process in his description. After the bandages were applied, and in order to keep them from unrolling, another strip of cloth, 3 inches by 3 inches say, with a hole made in the middle, was pressed on with the bandaged penis coming through. This method was an effective constricture to hold the bandages in place.

tenderly to prevent his kicking,³⁵ then put his clout over the wound without pinning, adjust his clothes and the operation is done. be careful to let his head lay somewhat lower than his heels. Let him lay till you have said the usual prayers in which you name the child, and when you come to the words *וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדִמְיָי*³⁶ which you repeat twice, dip your little finger into the cup or glass you spit y^e blood & drop a little into y^e child's mouth each time,³⁷ after that take the cup of *בִּרְכָה*³⁸ and finish y^e prayers.

6^ל See that care is taken not to shake the Child and gently examine it now & then if it bleeds which if [it] shou'd you must throw more dragons blood or get a stiptick³⁹ from y^e Doctor to stop it, and in about four or five hours after the Circumcision give him a fresh warm clout⁴⁰ and another about bed time & no more till next morning. lay them on only loose. Then you untie his legs, and let him kick off the plaisters, or take them off with the cloth and put a fresh one smear'd with Syrup or Honey of Roses.⁴¹ repeat them as often as they come off when clouted, if they don't come off freely, then smear y^e Syrup with a feather over the plaister, or lay a fresh one over the other, but don't pull them off until you know it is healing. If it don't heal soon, use Turna Cerat (?)⁴² spread thin on y^e plaisters 'till it is quite well. This is all that can at present remember, if at any time, you want further instructions, will readily give it. May the Lord prosper your undertaking and grant you success is the wish of

Your friend and hum^{le} Ser^t

ABR:^m I: ABRAHAMS

6 Note, have given you no directions in regard of the Instruments, if you want a set made, will give my directions at any time.⁴³
I forgot to mention when you loosen the Skin to do it with a silver pin.

So far the letter. The memorandum is as follows:

Memorandum of those circumcized by Moses Seixas — 1775⁴⁴

1. Benjamin Seixas born..... 6: June 1775.
2. Jacob Polock..... 4: Nov. 1775. dead

³⁵ To prevent further bleeding, the wound has to be still.

³⁶ "And I said unto thee, 'Live in thy blood.'" *Ezekiel* 16:6, a quotation from the prophet designed to apply to the situation.

³⁷ In the ritual today, wine,— a substitute for the blood that the father gave the child in the older ritual is now given. See F. Zimmerman, *supra*, note 28.

³⁸ *Brakah* (blessing).

³⁹ An astringent for stopping the bleeding.

⁴⁰ Cloth: heat was presumed to be beneficial.

⁴¹ Soothing emollient.

⁴² Not identified; perhaps a preparation of calamine, wax, woolfat, and petrolatum called (misquoted) Turner's Cerate.

⁴³ See *supra*, note 3. The instruments were made by Myer Myers.

⁴⁴ See *PAJHS*, vol. XXVII, pp. 348-350 for the more detailed memorandum and

→ Publication of J. M. T. H. Soc.,

3. Samuel Mendes..... 3 Feby — 1776
4. David Polock..... 21 Nov. 1777
5. Judah Levy..... 18 June 1778 dead
6. Myer Hart..... 2 June 1779. dead
7. Isaac Seixas..... 28 July 1779. dead
8. Samson Isaacks son of Ja.⁴⁵..... 27 Dec. 1779. dead
9. Raphael Jacobs..... 23 Jan 1782
10. Jacob Henry..... 18 Aug. 1782
11. Samson Isaacks son of Ja:..... 13 June 1783. dead
12. Isaac Jacobs..... 17 July 1783. dead
13. Isaac Mendes..... 8 Jan. 1784. dead
14. Gershom Seixas⁴⁶..... 30 Sept. 1784. dead
15. Jacob Isaacks..... 25 April 1785. dead
16. Isaac Mendes..... 11 Aug. 1785
17. Benjamin Jacobs..... 24 May 1786. dead
18. Moses Cohen Dazeveda⁴⁷..... 9 Octo. 1786. dead.
19. Jacob Rod: Rivera..... 28 Aug. 1790 circumcized 10 Nov. 1790 dead
20. Jacob Hays..... 5 June 1791
21. Samuel Rivera⁴⁸..... 22 April 1796 died 20 feby 1797 dead.

compare with this list for variants in spelling and additional data on parents and date of death.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, referred to as Samson Mears, son of Jacob and Rebecca Issacks. "Ja." is obviously an abbreviation of "Jacob."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 349, referred to as "My son."

⁴⁷ Spelled D'Azevedo, *ibid.*, p. 349.

⁴⁸ Here the first name given is Samuel but *ibid.* it is listed as Manuel.

הוא היה בדרות הראשונים דור דור והפשי
ננו התורה לכל פרטיו אשרי העם שככה לו
ולמן הדסד ארוננו הקסר עבד-אל-עזיז טלבו
שר ביטאם מאשה משלו ב'סיהם חושע יאודה
נאל בירא.
הק' מנחם פרחי ס"מ.

אמריקא

ה' תרכ"ה. זה ימים גם הרשים חלפו ועמי נאלם
ה' עתה בני יקר! תשמע קולי דובר באזניך
ים. כן חף מיסטיפי במחוזות אמריקא
דבני קרא לך ולעוזך ולספוריך ולכל דורשי
! ידעתי כי כל כפרי דברי יום כשלון ערובים
כך לרעת תהלוכות אחבי' הרחוקים. יהודי
הקרא ואירופא כלם כבני מרון יעברו לפניך
ד כל הביצאיה אותם מטיב ועד רע, וכשופר
הוצב לב וקרב אחינו, ולא-השקוט עד אם
בת עכך יגדר הפרץ ויהוק הדק; בכל זאת
סוף גם היום להקטיב כבני דבר מה ארות
הה' אמריקא. ואחרי הביאני ד' הלום
י כי אעלה המצפה לראות את אחי איד' הם
ד ואתבונן בהם ואדעה מה לספר באוני
פי השיבוני: חכה כמעט נאל תבהל ברוחך
עת כל דבר בעץ פקחה, ועל כן הביתי עד

דביתים ולא יעמטן, והכבדתיים ולא יצערו!
ולם. אם תשית לבך למסלה דרך הלכתי סעיר
מה רבו ומה טובו אחלי יעקב ומשכנות
זים במחוזות חדשות רק מאתמול נושבות
זה או נחלה, נמשו אחבי' את אהליהם כל
וקצין ידם הרה, וההצלחה מסתקת לפניהם.
לכך להבין איד' פרצו ישראל לרוב בקרב
ספר, וברכות סספרם כן ירבה מספרם;
אם שם גם שרשו ויעשו פרי לגאון ותפארת,
:: כן הוא כאשר רוח הקודש אומרת: ..

בלבד לאסר: אין קנאה אין תחרות על
ין סחב עמל ושטנה ולא יחרץ עוד כלב
ל ולכלל שם תפארתו. לא-כן הוא! השרם
יצרים אשר רובם כנארות מלאי "רשעות"
בבפן ומים הולדם עד יום מותם שורש
דש בלבם, וגם כל ספרי הענקל וקאנט
יהיו לא יזיו שנתאם על ישראל מלבבם
בזאת העובבים ארצות מולדתם באשכנז
באים לאליהם ורבותות לאמריקא, ארץ
השעות זרים למשקו מה אחר איד' על הלמס
לא הסבנו באלה מסמול שלשים זמורה
ה' מיום שהיה דם חוק אחר לכל בעלי
אכן עתה הראה גם בנידי חדשות לבבות
זרי בכל ומקסימים לקול אשכנזי-מחרף
! שנים ויתמים נשמשו דבר דרוך ולצוף
זל בני הרכות שפחותיהם נקסיים. והנה
ישראל לתתן ולאבד כל דבר סקר
י ב' מה את קולם, ובד-הקה מים
ובזנאי אדם וכל לשון רסית בל חקום
החלות לבי' מה. אתה ידעת מאז ומראש
י ראבי: באסוף יחד סכסר רב כבי' או
ש להם סדרים ויבחרו דרם מורה ודרשן
כל ה', ואז עתה תבין לפנייהם וקחתם
הבי' רבים שמה תוספה קהלות רבות
ה' הוכיח או גרועה מננה, וממלא
יגדל הסקן הרבנים החונים והמורים,

הכל אל נכון.
העיר אשר אנכי יושב בתוכה עיר צעירה לימים היא ולפני
ש'שים שנה רק כפר קטן היתה ועתה רבים יושביה לערך שני
מאות אלפים איש והעיר הווא היתה, לאם ועיר מחוזות המערב
(רעידענק דעם וועטמענס). סכסר היהודים יעלה לערך חמשת
אלפים איש — ולפני חמש עשרה שנה נמצאו בתוכה לערך חמש
מאות איש. הקהלות הגדולות מה הם שתיים, רוב היהודים הם
סידרי הערצאנזהום פאזען, סידרי ביערן, כעמטען וגם סידרי
האללאנד ומעט סידרי פאלען. רובם ככלם אנשי מסחר, וכסף
הועפות להם ועד היום הזה לא מצאנו בהם משפחה כעניה בעני
ובדורם להם. הקהלה אשר-אנכי נבחרתי להיות להם למורה
ולדרשן היא, "קהלת אחדות ישראל", מרי שבת בשבתו הגני
הורש דבר ד' פעם בלשון ענגליש ופעם בלשון אשכנזית, ובכל
עת אשר אני דורש בענגליש ירבו האמריקנים הערלים מאדיו
העם לבא לשמוע לדברי. זה ימים לא רבים והפרזירנט לינקולן
צוה עד העם לבא להצרות ד' ולשפך תודה על איוה נצחונות
הצפון, או או נראספן גם ב'. בבית תפלותיהם וגם אני בבית
תפלתו הטפתי מיום על דבר האחרות (אנוניא) ועד דבר החירות
(עמאנציפאציען דער סלאווערייא) ועל דבר הפאליטיק הצפונות
בכלל, ובי' כי מאציל העם מראשי שופטי העיר (דנצורים)
הרבו ההלה נגדה נא לכל העם ודבריו היו להתפאר, ועיזו שסתי
כבוד על שם ישראל פה.

עוד לא שבת קול ענות מלחמה והקרא והזכר דברי על דבר
אמריקא אשר דברתי בהסניד זה שלש שנים יאמר עתה: כי
הנרתי האותיות מראש ולא נפל דבר ארצה וגם עתה עוד לא
נוכל לקוות עד גמר המלחמה בקרוב. ואל ד' ויעלה ארובה לשבר
אמריקא והפרת ותך שרשה כלבטן כמאז ומקדם.
ח"ג וידאווער. הלוי.

חדשות שונות

סאן פראנציסקא. מתב העתי לבי' בשם Gleaner הויל
בעיר הנל' מדוע כי בעיר ההיא נמצא
איש יהודי אשר לא נתן בניו הבורים הנולדים לו למול בשר
ערלתם, ובנה היו לו ארבעה בנים וזכרים כלם ערלים. לשוא שפכה
אשתו דמעות במים לפני בעלה בכל פעם אשר ילדה לו בן זכר,
לעשות לפני במנה כתי משה וישראל; בעלה כפרן חרש אשם
אזני לקול בכיותיה ואנחותיה באכרו. (בכל אלה מכת האשם
בבני עמנו החכמים בעיניהם) כי דבר כזה לא יתכן עוד בזמן
החרש הזה. והנה אשתו יראת ד' נמרת בלבה להפיק חצצה
בשעת הכושר נגר רצון בעלה. ויהי בימים האלה ובעלה לא ה'
בביתו. וגם כדרך החוק, שנמסר אשת חלל היתה בעיו. מתניה
ותקרא לטיהל ויסר את כל ארבעה בניה הערלים והכניסם בביתו
של אבהם אביו. כשם האב לביתו התקצף סאר על התועבת
הזו. (לפי העתה הנבערת) ויכלה חסדו על אשת חוק וראת ד'
וחמתו בערת בו גם על המטהל ויצעק עליו חסם באוני השופטים,
וגם על כל האנשים אשר היו בביתו. בעת נמולו בניו, ולמען
מצוא תואנה להתחיל על המטהל, אמר אל השופטים כי נמולו
בנו. שרא ברן תורת ישראל מפני כי לשו ה'ת' מציבים להיות
נמולים. לשמנת ימים ועתה עברו עליהם ימים ושנים ויהי חזול
השם גדול עי' המלועל הזה. הקרא עצמן בשם משביל ונאור
מרת הומן החדס. אך שפתי אסת תבין לעד וכליות נסתה פני
היהודי העפארמער הזה, כי השופטים ורצו משפטם כי המטהל
עשה כרת ואת אשר לא נמולו בניו ליום "הקצוב" עפי' דת הוא
באשמת האב אשר בודן לבנו הפריעם מחוק היהדות וענשי אותו
לשלם כל הצאות המשפט הזה. עכ"ל סע הנל. מזה נראה עד
היכן מבילת דרך החדשים רעפארמער מבני עמנו המזרחיים כל
קדש, ומשכיתים עי' עלילותיהם את שלום ביתם לפעמים וסחללים
שם שמים רבבים, ותחת כבוד אשר (לפי העתם הגלוה) ינחלו
מהוצרים בזה שמתרמים לררכיהם, עוד משנה קלון ירשו, והגם
לא נוצרים ולא יהודים, וכאסם ואין נחשבו.

הוא וכל הדור
כני רבאורות
כרס נראשית
חלוג המלכות
הער בשבר לרנו
נעין הלא הם
בכסוק ראשון
טרם שחידק וס
ייעולם אחר גדול
לגור בלחן נלו
תדוע ערש נעמו
הם המה הנדונים
החלח כנדל עולמם
ארצות קודש לנחור
זולם האמת יורה
עלמנו זה, תכל
לחם ולחם נציב
ככני המים וכסליהם
לנו כחם הם ככני
ויצרו יוני וירלו
כלו המדע למ
החלשים אשר לך
נכי מרומי השם
הדשים והמה מדע
ומקשים לת השם
הלה עד הן קן
אחר נהרין לים שני
בהערים החמורים
(1884) חילי, והכנס
אותם מלאים כל פיו
גדולה, לא יגדלו יותר
לח שני ויראה מכלל
זום שני, ויהי לל
מן 41 חילין פרמל
וכוכב סכל הנראה
מרחקו מלחמו יותר
נשכתי הראות ידעו
תמרה לנ קטנה כמו
היותם כלם שמים כש
כמו כוכבי לכת, וכל
עומס מותם. — והנה
וספרו ונראים לנו
שנו "חוק ראוות"
אותם מלאים מוכנסים
(נענטלעקען) הלה
הלך הרקוקים תחל
כל המועל תחין לל
עכ"ל זום לנן.
Poelitz, um-
Luebau und
Dritter Band, II.
neuzehnten Jahr-
Seite 633 — 635
ללמדנו צריחת הסעלה
והתם רבים עד הן
כל העולמות סלליה
לשלה ולא קיימת לל
סכל וכלל לשחחיות
אזר לין מספר לשם
ההוא חזונס ונעל
וגדל עולמנו, הסעו
הסחם הלה החלית
הלחן סולח, היתם
לוחם ותקבלים חיש
חחח מחללת עוד
הסחם נלחן שחחח
והחיש העקורים סלל

שנת תר"ו	שם	שם	No
שנת תר"ו	שם	שם	No
מלתי ביום	אביו ואמו	הילד	
משה יהודה	משה יהודה	אהרן	נ
בקר בחקותי	Lewenstein		50
יוסף	יוסף	מנחם	נא
בקר בחקותי	Lewenstein	Emmanuel	51
מאיר	מאיר	נפתלי	נב
	Struss	Henry	52
אדשבעות	נתן	שמואל	נג
	Waltham		53
נפתלי	נפתלי	דוד	נד
בהעלך	Rosenberg		54
אליעזר	אליעזר	שלמה	נה
קרן	Lipser		55

שנת תר"ו	שם	שם	No
שנת תר"ו	שם	שם	No
מלתי ביום	אביו ואמו	הילד	
שלמה	שלמה	יהודה	נד
פילד: אביר	Guns	Livy	44
נפתלי	נפתלי	ייסף	מא
Struss			45
משה	משה	בנימין	מז
Rosenthal			46
יהודה הנמן	יהודה הנמן	דוד	מז
הרעמצורע	הרעמצורע		47
אברהם	אברהם	אברהם	מח
Rosenbaum			48
שלמה	שלמה	צדוק	מט
Rosenthal			49

Agreement to Establish a National Program for the Training of
Mohalim by the Reform Movement

1. The HUC-JIR, CCAR and UAHC agree to establish a program for the training of Mohalim by the Reform Movement.
2. The purpose of the program is to develop a cadre of qualified Mohalim, with the appropriate medical knowledge and religious learning to serve the needs of Reform Jews and the Jewish community generally.
3. All official documents of the programs shall read "A Joint Program of the HUC-JIR, CCAR and UAHC (names to be fully written).
4. The three institutions agree to establish a body to supervise and be responsible for this program. This body shall be known as the Reform Brit Milah Board. The Reform Brit Milah Board shall consist of a Chairperson, who is an M.D., either a Rabbinic Director of the program or a Rabbinic Co-Chairman, a designated number of representatives from the three institutions (my suggestion is two from each), and a designated number of physicians (my recommendation is three, one from the West Coast, one from the Mid-West, one from the East Coast). The Reform Brit Milah Board shall be responsible for determining national standards for certification of Mohalim, certification procedures, continuing evaluation, continuing education, promotion of the program and liason with the three institutions. Doctors certified by the Reform Brit Milah Board shall be listed in the National Directory of Reform Mohalim, and their names made known to Reform Rabbis, Reform congregations and the Jewish Community at large.
5. The three institutions agree to:
 - a. Appoint representatives to the Reform Brit Milah Board.
 - b. To provide travel expenses for these representatives for an annual meeting of the Board, commencing 1985.
6. The HUC-JIR agrees to offer initial experimental courses for training Mohalim on each of the three American campuses for a two year period commencing Spring, 1985 (three years for Calif., the first of which occurred Spring, 1984). The duration of the course is to be one semester, 15 weeks, 2 hours per week. The curriculum will include such areas as the history, liturgy, theology, law and customs relating to this ritual. In addition, contemporary related issues of Jewish identity, sociology, psychology and the positions of Reform Judaism shall be covered. (The course outline and reading list developed at the California School may serve as a model for this.) Relevant medical issues will be discussed by a medical expert. (However, since, during the initial years of this

1985

THE BRIT MILAH BOARD OF REFORM JUDAISM

Announces the Course

"An Introduction to Brit Milah"

This course is designed for doctors who seek to become certified as Mohalim by the Brit Milah Board of Reform Judaism. The course will introduce the doctor to the sources and history of Brit Milah, and the theology, law and folklore of Jewish circumcision ceremonies and practices. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of the Mohel in the Reform/liberal Jewish religious context. Each session is a self-contained unit and will be taught by members of the Hebrew Union College faculty and guest lecturers.

Place: Stephen S. Wise Temple
15500 Stephen S. Wise Dr.
Los Angeles, Ca. 90077

Time: Monday evenings: 8:00-10:00 P.M.

Registration fee: a \$50 non-refundable fee is required of all participants.

Tuition fee: for doctors in training programs: \$300.
for practicing physicians: \$500.

Arrangements for payment of tuition may be made at the first class meeting.

Requirements for certification as a Mohel by the Brit Milah Board of Reform Judaism:

1. Completion of course requirements.
2. Valid medical license.
3. Evidence of competence to perform circumcision of new-borns, as an obstetrician, pediatrician, family doctor or urologist.
4. Membership in a Reform Congregation

Applications for those desiring certification will be available at the first class, or by contacting course coordinator at Hebrew Union College, 3077 University Ave., Los Angeles, Ca. 90007 or the Brit Milah Board of Reform Judaism, c/o Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 838 Fifth Ave., Room 200, New York, New York 10012.

CLASS SCHEDULE

<u>Dates</u>	<u>Session</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1/14/85	1	Introduction to the Course, and Liturgy of Brit Milah
1/21/85	2	Social and Psychological Implications of Circumcision/Brit Milah in Contemporary Society
1/28/85	3	Jewish Identity and its Theological, Ritual, and Social Roots

- 1 -

2/4/85	4	Folklore and Art of Brit Milah
2/11/85	5	Circumcision in the Biblical Period
2/25/85	6	Circumcision in the Rabbinic Period: Midrash and Aggadah
3/4/85	7	Circumcision in the Rabbinic Period: Halakhah
3/11/85	8	Attitudes Toward Circumcision: Jewish and Non-Jewish Perspectives in Antiquity and the Middle Ages
3/18/85	9	Circumcision in Codes and Responsa
3/25/84	10	Introduction to Reform Judaism
4/15/85	11	Reform Judaism and the Concept of Covenant
4/22/85	12	Brit Milah Issues in Modern Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism
4/29/85	13	Educational Perspectives on Brit Milah
5/6/85	14	Medical Issues and Brit Milah

Brit Milah Board of Reform Judaism

Dr. David James, Chair

Rabbi Lewis M. Barth Co-Chair

Rabbi Daniel Syme, Staff Coordinator

Course Coordinator: Rabbi Lewis M. Barth

Faculty:

Dr. Isa Aron, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education

Rabbi Lewis M. Barth, Ph.D., Professor of Midrash

Rabbi Stanley F. Chyet, Ph.D., Professor of American Jewish History

Rabbi William Cutter, Ph.D., Professor of Education and Hebrew Language and Literature

Rabbi David Ellenson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Jewish Religious Thought

Dr. Stanley Gevirtz, Ph.D., Professor of Bible

Rabbi Richard N. Levy, M.A.H.L., Lecturer on Jewish Religious Thought.

Rabbi Norman Mirsky, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Contemporary Jewish Studies

Rabbi Stephen Passamaneck, Ph.D., Professor of Rabbinics

Dr. Bruce Phillips, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Jewish Communal Service

Rabbi Sanford Ragins, Ph.D., Lecturer on Jewish History and Thought

Rabbi Michael Signer, Ph.D., Professor of Jewish History

Dr. Michael Zeldin, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education

A JOINT PROJECT OF
THE INSTITUTIONS OF REFORM JUDAISM
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS
UNION OF AMERICAN HEBREW CONGREGATIONS

Introduction to the Ceremony of Brit Milah
A Course for Physicians

This course is designed for Jewish physicians who seek to become certified as Mohalim and to be listed in the National Directory of Reform Mohalim. The course will introduce the physician to the sources and history of Brit Milah, and the theology, law, folklore and contemporary issues relating to Jewish circumcision ceremonies and practices. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of the modern Mohel in the Reform Jewish religious context. Each session is a self-contained learning unit. However, there is a progression of material to be mastered and a developmental sequence which builds from the beginning to the final session.

(The course outline is an elaboration of the first course taught for Reform Mohalim in Los Angeles in the Spring, 1984. The bibliography for each session is meant to be suggestive, and not exhaustive. Suggestions for alternate selections or additional bibliography will be gratefully received. This outline is for the use of HUC faculty. Please send reactions and comments. Thanks.)

Session 1-2. The Ritual of Circumcision: Traditional and Reform.

1. Article "Circumcision" in Encyclopedia Judaica.
2. Cohen, Rabbi Eugene J., Guide to Ritual Circumcision and Redemption of the First-Born Son (KTAV, New York:1984).
3. Klein, Isaac, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice (Jewish Theological Seminary, New York:1979), Ch. XXIX, Ritual Circumcision, pp. 420-432.
4. Mass, Ronald S., Berit Milah: a Manual for Jewish Physicians, (Unpublished manuscript, UAHJ-CCAR Joint Commission on Jewish Education, New York).
5. Hertz, Dr. Joseph, ed., Daily Prayer Book (Block Publishing Co., New York:1955), Service at a Circumcision, pp. 1021-1032.
6. Stern, Chaim, ed., Gates of the House (CCAR, New York:1977), The Covenant of Milah, the Covenant of Life, and Naming a Child, pp. 111-119.
7. Harlow, Jules, ed., A Rabbi's Manual (Rabbinical Assembly, New York:1965), pp. 9-12.
8. Rabbi's Manual, Revised Edition (CCAR, New York:1961), pp. 9-13.

Session 3. Social and Psychological Implications of Brit Milah in Contemporary Society.

1. Bolands, Robert P., M.D., "Ritualistic Surgery - Circumcision and Tonsillectomy", The New England Journal of Medicine, Vol. 280, No.11 (Mar. 13, 1969), pp. 591-596, and responses, Vol. 280, pp. 1076-77, Vol. 281, pp. 621-22, Vol. 292, p. 538.
2. A series of short articles on circumcision in Sh'ma, 12/227 (February 5, 1982), pp. 49-55.
3. Hazaz, H., "The Bridegroom of Blood", trans. I. M. Lask. Suggestions for other stories?
4. Weiss, Charles, " A Worldwide Survey of the Current Practice of Milah (Ritual Circumcision)", Jewish Social Studies, Vol. 24 (1962), pp. 30-48.

Session 4. Jewish Identity and its Theological, Ritual and Social Roots.

1. Author ?, "Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier", American Jewish Year Book, Vol. ? (), pp. .
2. Hertzberg, Arthur, "Jewish Identity", Encyclopedia Judaica.
3. Ellenson, David, "The New Ethnicity, Religious Survival, and Jewish Identity: The "Judaisms" of our Newest Members", Journal of Reform Judaism, Spring, 1979, pp. 47-60.
4. Vogel, Manfred H., "Some Reflections on the the Question of Jewish Identity", Journal of Reform Judaism, Winter, 1983, pp. 1-13.

Session 5. The Folklore, Art and Objects of the Mitzvah of Circumcision.

We had a good session on this, but could use bibliographical assistance. Any suggestions? This is a good time to do some practicing or roll playing with the class.

Session 6. Circumcision in the Biblical Period.

1. Genesis, Ch. 17.
2. Other biblical selections according to choice!

Session 7. Circumcision in the Rabbinic Period: Midrash and Aggadah.

1. Genesis Rabba, Ch. XLVI, Soncino trans., pp. 389-398.
2. Selections of other aggadic passages, suggestions welcome.

Session 8. Circumcision in the Rabbinic Period: Halakhah.

1. Mishnah Shabbat, Ch. 19.
2. Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 29a, Soncino trans., pp. 137-138.
3. Other selections. Suggestions?

Session 9. Circumcision in the Inter-testamental, Rabbinic and Medieval Periods: Jewish and non-Jewish Historical Perspectives.

1. The ancient world:
Herodotus, Historiae, II:104:1-3.
Diodorus, Bibliotheca Historica, I:28:1-3.
Petronius, Satyricon, 102:13-14.
2. New Testament: Romans 3:21-4:25.
3. Jewish Hellenistic material: Josephus or Philo?
4. Medieval Jewish material, non-halakhic. Anti-Christian literature:
Sefer Nizzahon Vetus, Sections 12, 13, and 224, in D. Berger, The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages.

Isaac ben Yedaiah, Commentary on Aggadah, Numbers Rabba, Ch. 12,8.

Session 10. Circumcision Issues in Traditional Codes and Responsa.

1. Goldin, Hyman, HaMadrish, Rabbi's Guide (Hebrew Publishing Company, New York:1965), Ch. IV., Laws Concerning Circumcision, pp. 27-32.
2. Maimonides, Yad HaHazakah, Hilkhoh Milah, various English translations.

Sessions 11-12. Modern Orthodox and Reform Issues Regarding Circumcision.

1. "Report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent on the Status of Children of Mixed Marriages", adopted by the CCAR, 1983.
2. "Statement of Maram: CCAR Report on Patrilineal Descent", Israel Council of Progressive Rabbis.
3. Divre Geruti: Guidelines Concerning Proselytism, CCAR, 1983, pamphlet.
4. Jacobs, Walter, ed., American Reform Responsa, (CCAR, New York:1983), Responsa numbers 54-71, pp. 149-242.
5. Edelheit, Joseph, "Children of Mixed Marriages: a Non-Linear Approach", Journal of Reform Judaism, Winter, 1983, pp. 34-42.
6. Ellenson, David, "Accommodation, Resistance, and the Halakhic Process: A Case Study of Two Responsa by Rabbi Marcus Horovitz", in Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies in Honor of the 100th Birthday of Mordecai Kaplan, ed. Ronald Brauner, () pp. 83-100.
7. _____, "The Development of Orthodox Attitudes to Conversion in the Modern Period", Conservative Judaism, Vol. XXXVI:4, pp. .
8. _____, "Representative Orthodox Responsa on Conversion and Intermarriage in the Contemporary Era: A Sociological Interpretation", Paper presented at Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, 1983.
9. Levine, Robert N., and Ellenson, David, "Jewish Tradition, Contemporary Sensibilities, and Halacha: A Responsum by Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann", Journal of Reform Judaism, Winter 1983, pp. 49-56.
10. _____, "Rabbi Z. H. Kalischer and a Halachic Approach to Conversion", Journal of Reform Judaism, Summer, 1981, pp. 50-57.

Session 12. New Sources and Ideas for Circumcision Ceremonies.

Need suggestions for reading material for this one. Might include such things as selections from the New Jewish Catalogue, original and creative Brit Milah ceremonies and naming ceremonies, etc.

Session 13. Discussion of Issues, Medical Matters, and Evaluation

This is where a good lecture from a physician belongs, to bring together the medical knowledge which all the members of the class have and use, and relate it to the context of a religious ceremony.

Some final thoughts on this course. The original course was 12 weeks, two hours per week. At an evaluation session, the physicians recommended that it be expanded to 15 weeks, two hours per week. The syllabus suggested above only has 13 sessions, and I'd like your help on this. The physicians felt that one of the areas they need more exposure to is "Reform Judaism". That is to say, we have to find a way to systematically introduce adult learners who are very serious, to our basic religious orientation. We need to plan a two hour session on this, with an appropriate reading list. While I could draw up a list, I would prefer to get a consensus on what should be included. The "Reform Judaism" session might fit nicely at Session 13, make 14 the concluding teaching session and 15 the exam. The only disadvantage is that the physicians' schedule might preclude them taking time immediately to review. Please let me know what you think.

The sessions have to include, along the way, some practice or role playing. We found time especially in Session 4, and again during the last Session. The emphasis in these was to go through a typical process, from the first phone call to the conclusion of the ceremony. This should be practiced a) as if the Mohel were doing the ceremony in conjunction with a Rabbi who probably knew the parents, and b) as if the Mohel were doing the ceremony solo. Regarding the teaching content of the other sessions, this is really up to the instructors, as long as we stay more or less within the same general framework. We should plan for a final exercise or exam, and I have attached the one we are trying this first time. The exam aspect should be coordinated, and this can be discussed later. Please keep me informed as to how it goes, and any suggestions you have and would like to pass along. Again, please let me know whatever changes you might make in the reading material.

Thanks and best wishes,



Lewis M. Barth

Final Examination: Course for Reform Mohalim

The questions on this exam are either multiple choice or short essay form. Please do the exam at your own pace, but be sure to return it to me by Aug. 15, 1984. If you have any problems with this date, please let me know. If you would like to substitute one question of your own choosing for one of the below, please do so.

1. As a Mohel, you will be asked why Jews did, do or should fulfill the Mitzvah of Brit Milah. Answer this a) from the perspective of Jewish tradition and literature and b) from a contemporary or personal perspective. For the a) part be sure to use Genesis 17, and selections from early Rabbinic literature, Mishnah, Midrash and Talmud, for your answer.
- 2) Describe the factors in the modern world which have made the issue of Jewish identity such a complex one. (See David Ellenson's article: "The New Ethnicity, Religious Revival, and Jewish Identity", Journal of Reform Judaism, Spring, 1979). Why, in light of some of these factors, does Professor Vogel insist, in his article in the Journal of Reform Judaism, that it is all the more imperative to preserve the traditional halakhic definition of identity, while most Reform leaders feel otherwise (see the other articles in the JRJ, Winter, 1983).
3. Is there any Jewish legal basis for a Mohel performing a circumcision ceremony for the son of a couple where the mother is an unconverted gentile and the father a Jew? (See Ellenson's article in Conservative Judaism, and the Zlotowitz and Edelheit article in JRJ, Winter, 1983).
4. Describe what would take place from the time you are called to perform a Brit Milah until the conclusion of the ceremony and the festive meal which follows. Be as complete as possible, and include as much detail as you can.
5. Choose the best completion for the following: the rules and regulations governing the precepts of circumcision
 - a. come from the Bible.
 - b. are one aspect of a total Religious-Legal system.
 - c. have no modern validity at all.
 - d. reflect medieval superstition.
 - e. are subject to modification as a Mohel sees fit.

The next questions require that you review the two texts of legal material from Maimonides and HaMadrish.

6. Which statement is false?
- a. When a circumcision is not performed on the eighth day, it is not to take place on the Sabbath or Festivals.
 - b. The circumciser must examine the infant prior to circumcision very carefully.
 - c. If a woman has lost two sons because of the effects of circumcision, sons born to her subsequently are not ever to be circumcised.
 - d. In traditional Jewish practise, it is preferable to perform circumcision in the presence of ten male adults.
 - e. If a Mohel is in mourning, the Mohel is still permitted to dress in festive clothing and perform the ritual surgery.
7. Which statement is false?
- a. In ritual circumcision, the entire foreskin is removed so that the entire glans is exposed, and then the mucous membrane beneath the foreshin is divided with the fingernail and turned back until the flesh of the glans is completely exposed.
 - b. If, after the operation, the greater part of the glans (lengthwise) is still masked by the foreskin, the infant is regarded as uncircumcised.
 - c. As long as the Mohel is occupied with the operation, the Mohel is to remove any shreds of foreskin, whether or not such shreds, or filaments, would invalidate the circumcision.
 - d. Even preliminary preparations for the circumcision may be undertaken on the Sabbath, according to traditional Jewish practice.
 - e. A very fat baby, who, after the ritual surgery, appears to be uncircumcised, is to be examined during an erection; if the infant then appears to be circumcised, nothing further need be done.

Please return to me the following material by Aug. 15, 1984, so that we can have all necessary documents to present to the Reform Brit Milah Board to complete the certification process:

- 1. The completed exam.
- 2. The completed "draft application."
- 3. Supporting documents for the application, including:
 - a) evidence of competence to perform the medical procedure "circumcision".
 - b) your personal statement on why you applied for certification as a Mohel.

Good Luck!
Lewis M. Barth

Union of American Hebrew Congregations

PATRON OF HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
838 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10021 (212) 249-0100 CABLES. UNIONUAHC
NEW YORK FEDERATION OF REFORM SYNAGOGUES

June 4, 1985

Rabbi Bernard M. Zlotowitz
Director

Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor
Assistant Director

Hon. James Tallon
Room 822
Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248

Dear Assemblyman Tallon:

I am deeply appreciative of the call from Mr. Jim McGlynn of your staff alerting me to the proposed legislation which would amend the New York State Public Health Law to add a section on circumcision - "A circumcision performed by a non-religious practitioner does not satisfy the religious requirements of any faith." I find this news to be very disturbing.

I object to it on two grounds: (1) it is a violation of the principle of separation of church and state and (2) it flies in the face of Jewish law!

In this country (with the exception of a small minority of Moslems), circumcision is a religious requirement for Jews alone. Therefore, the wording of the proposed change is a euphemism for discrediting non-Orthodox Jewish Mohalim. This is a clear violation of the principle of separation.

According to Jewish law, anybody may perform a circumcision. Jewish law clearly states:

"All may perform circumcisions - even a slave, a woman, a child and an uncircumcised Jew whose brother died as a result of circumcision. But if there is an adult Jew who knows how to circumcise, he takes precedence over all the above.

An idolater, even if he is a Mohel, is not permitted to circumcise but if he did, the circumcision is valid."
(Yoreh Deah 264:1)

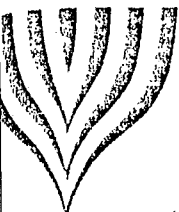
I am available to answer any further questions on this matter and I would be more than happy to meet with you and also to testify before any Public Hearing. The proposed legislation is a clear violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution and in direct conflict with Jewish law.

Warmly,

Bernard M. Zlotowitz
Rabbi Bernard M. Zlotowitz
Director
BMZ:jmc

cc: Rabbi Alexander Schindler
Albert Vorspan
Leonard Spring

#13



איחוד
ליהדות
מתקדמת
באמריקה

ERS
H. Spring
Vice Presidents
Bobroff
W. Sampliner
Silver
Vice President
Bashe
Gutenebaum
Hertz
Levey
Padam
Treasurer
Goodman
Secretary
Braun

are to be counted from the day the head came out or from the day they heard him cry.

RAMA: "... but if the mother says that the child was laying in her stomach, the same as always, and she had no labor pains at all, even though they heard the (baby) crying, you count from the day of birth..."

263:1 A child that is green, it is a sign that the blood is spoiled and he is not to be circumcised until the blood is no longer spoiled and the natural color comes back like that of other babies. Also, if red is the color of the child, it is a sign that the blood did not enter into his limbs but between the skin of the flesh and he is not to be circumcised until the blood enters (his limbs). It is essential that in such situations great care be taken not to circumcise an infant when there is a hint of sickness for danger to life overrides observance of all precepts for it is possible to circumcise at a later date, but impossible to restore life after death.

263:2 A woman who lost her first son as a result of a circumcision that weakened his condition and the same resulted with a second son ... The third son may not be circumcised until he is grown and is strengthened.

263:3 This is the law: if a woman circumcised her son and he died because of the circumcision and the same happened to her sister's son, the other sisters may not circumcise their sons until they are grown up and are strong enough.

263:4 If a child is born circumcised, you draw drops of blood.

264- Who may circumcise? With what kind of instruments may a circumcision be performed and how is the circumcision to take place?

264:1 All may perform circumcisions - even a slave, a woman, a child and an uncircumcised Jew whose brother died as a result of circumcision. But if there is an adult Jew who knows how to circumcise he

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THE LAWS OF CIRCUMCISION
(in accordance with the Yoreh Deah)

260:1 It is a positive commandment for the father to circumcise his son. This is a greater mitzvah than other positive commandments.

261:1 If the father doesn't circumcise his son, the Beth Din (Rabbinic Court) is required to circumcise him. If the Beth Din doesn't circumcise him, he is required to have himself circumcised when he grows up. If he doesn't have himself circumcised, he is deserving of Karet (divine punishment by premature death).

262:1 One may not circumcise until the sun rises on the 8th day of his birth. It is permissible to circumcise any time during the day but the zealous hasten to perform the mitzvah of circumcision in the morning; and even if the brit is not at its appointed time, one is not permitted to do it except during the day.

262:2 A sick child may not be circumcised until he is healthy and then you wait from the time of his recovery 7 full days - this in matters where there is fever and the like which affects the entire body. However, if he is sick in one of his limbs, e.g. infection of the eyes and the like, the brit is to be postponed until he recovers. After he recovers, the brit is performed immediately.

262:3 A hermaphrodite and he who has two foreskins and is abnormal is circumcised on the 8th day.

262:4 If (a child) is born at twilight the days are to be counted from the night and he is circumcised on the 9th day because it is a doubtful 8th day. And if the head came out while it was yet day or they heard him crying even if he was born several days later, the days

takes precedence over all the above.

An idolater, even if he is a Mohel, is not permitted to circumcise but if he did, the circumcision is valid.

64:2 A circumcision may be performed with any kind of instrument including a rock, glass, or anything that cuts except the skin-like membraneous envelope of any fruit peel) of the stalk, reed, (arm bone?) because the charms (from divination [sorcery] jump off from it and bring about an early death. It is a better mitzvah to circumcise with iron, be it either a knife or shears (scissors) but it is preferable to use a knife.

64:3 How do you circumcise? Cut the foreskin, all the skin, the covering, the corona of the virile member until the corona is uncovered, then tear the soft membrane of the corona, which is under the skin, with the finger nail and draw it back until you see the flesh of the corona; then suck out the blood so that no danger results. The Mohel who does not suck out the blood commits a transgression. After the blood is sucked out, apply a poultice or a compress or a medicinal powder which stops the bleeding.

64:4 A circumcision without splitting the soft membrane of the corona is like no circumcision (see Introduction for reason).

66:2 A circumcision that is to be performed at its proper time (i.e. on the 8th day) takes precedence over the Sabbath and holidays. But if it is not at its proper time, it may not take place on the Sabbath holidays.

6:11 If a baby is born in the 7th month (and the birth falls on a Sabbath) he may be circumcised on the Sabbath even if his hair and nails are not completely developed. But if the baby is born in the 8th month, he may not be circumcised on the Sabbath unless his hair and nails have

fully developed. If there is a doubt whether it is the 7th or 8th month, he is not to be circumcised on the Sabbath except if his hair and nails have fully developed.

266:12 A Jew who became an apostate and a son was born of a Jewess, the child is to be circumcised on the Sabbath (if that is the proper time).

266:13 A Jew who has a son born to him of a non-Jewish woman is not permitted to be circumcised on the Sabbath.

(Reform Judaism permits such a circumcision to take place on the Sabbath if the parents promise to raise him in the Jewish Faith.)

Report of the Ad Hoc Task Force on Circumcision

The Committee on Fetus and Newborn of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated in 1971 that there are no valid medical indications for circumcision in the neonatal period. The present Committee has undertaken a review of data to support arguments "pro" and "con" circumcision of the newborn, and finds no basis for changing this statement.

Nevertheless, traditional, cultural, and religious factors play a part in the decision made by parents, pediatrician, obstetrician, or family practitioner on behalf of a son. It is the responsibility of the physician to provide parents with factual and informative medical options regarding circumcision. The final decision is theirs, and should be based on true informed consent. It is advantageous for discussion to take place with the parents well in advance of delivery, when the capacity for clear response is more likely.

The following is a summary of factors relating to neonatal circumcision which may be presented to parents for their consideration before deciding on the procedure:

PREVENTION OF PHIMOSIS

A diagnosis of phimosis cannot be made with assurance in the newborn period because the cleavage plane between the glans and the deep preputial layer of the penis is not developed at birth. There is a real need for research which will improve diagnostic accuracy in this area. It therefore follows that "phimosis of the newborn" is not a valid medical indication for a circumcision. Circumcision performed later in life in the approximately 2% to 10% of males with true phimosis has a disadvantage of anesthetic risk and increased cost. Circumcision done after the

newborn period should be performed during years when trauma to the genitalia is least likely to induce psychologic problems (*e.g.*, before the boy starts school).

FACILITATION OF HYGIENE

Circumcision, properly performed, eliminates much of the need for careful penile hygiene. If circumcision is not elected, the necessity for lifelong penile hygiene should be discussed with the parents, preferably before birth of the infant. Factors such as climate, the social and emotional reaction of prospective parents to penile cleansing, and the ability to understand and facilitate good hygiene, etc., should be taken into account when recommending whether circumcision should be performed.

CARE OF THE PENIS

There is evidence that carcinoma of the penis can be prevented by neonatal circumcision. There is also evidence that optimal hygiene confers as much, or nearly as much, protection. Although circumcision is an effective method of preventing penile carcinoma, a great deal of unnecessary surgery, with attendant complications, would have to be done if circumcision were to be used as prophylaxis against this disease. Promulgation of the principles of adequate penile hygiene is an alternative prophylactic measure.

CANCER OF THE PROSTATE

There is presently no convincing scientific evidence to substantiate the assertion that circumcision reduces the eventual incidence of cancer of the prostate.

CANCER OF THE CERVIX

A review of existing literature indicates that noncircumcision is not of itself of primary etiologic significance in the development of cervical cancer in women.

BALANITIS AND VENEREAL DISEASE

Balanitis, infection of the foreskin, is painful and occurs only in uncircumcised males. If this occurs, staged surgical corrections may be necessary—first a dorsal slit to allow inflammation to subside, and then a secondary circumcision.

Adequate studies to determine the relationship between circumcision and the incidence of venereal disease have not been performed.

SURGICAL RISKS AND AFTERMATHS

Circumcision is a surgical procedure that requires careful aseptic technique, systematized postoperative observation, and evaluation after discharge from the hospital.

The immediate hazards of circumcision of the newborn include local infection which may progress to septicemia, significant hemorrhage, and mutilation. Incomplete removal of the prepuce may eventually result in phimosis.

Neonatal circumcision predisposes to meatitis, which may lead to meatal stenosis. The incidence of this complication is unknown, since the diagnosis of "meatal stenosis" is seldom made on objective grounds. Meatal stenosis is seldom, if ever, associated with hydronephrosis or other objective evidence of urinary tract obstruction, such as a diminished urinary flow rate. Meatitis undoubtedly results in painful urination, but "meatal stenosis" appears benign except in rare instances.

CONTRAINDICATIONS TO CIRCUMCISION

Prematurity, neonatal illness, any congenital anomaly (especially hypospadias), or bleeding problems are absolute contraindications to neonatal circumcision. The procedure is also contraindicated in the immediate neonatal period or until complete neonatal physical adaptation has occurred (usually 12 to 24 hours). The avoidance of circumcision in the delivery room immediately after birth is particularly important because neonatal disease is not always apparent at birth. In addition, it entails protracted exposure of infants to significant cold stress.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no absolute medical indication for routine circumcision of the newborn. The physician should provide parents with information pertaining to the long-term medical effects of circumcision and noncircumcision, so that they make a thoughtful decision. It is recommended that this discussion take place before the birth of the infant, so the parental consent to the surgical procedure, if given, will be truly informed.

A program of education leading to continuing good personal hygiene would offer all the advantages of routine circumcision without the attendant surgical risk. Therefore, circumcision of the male neonate cannot be considered an essential component of adequate total health care.

AD HOC TASK FORCE ON CIRCUMCISION
HUGH C. THOMPSON, M.D., *Chairman*
LOWELL R. KING, M.D.
ERIC KNOX, M.D.
SHELDON B. KORONES, M.D.

Letters and telegrams expressing regret of inability to attend and wishing the Conference success in its contemplated work, were received from the following rabbis: Dr. M. Landsberg, Rochester, N.Y. (who above other things urged the adoption of a platform as a basis of cooperation); Joseph Silverman, Galveston, Texas; J. S. Goldammer, Nashville, Tenn.; H. M. Bien, Vicksburg, Miss.; James K. Guthcim, New Orleans, La.; Joseph Stolz, Little Rock, Ark.; S. Hecht, Montgomery, Ala.; Henry Iliowizi, Minneapolis, Minn.; H. Berkowitz, Mobile; Isaac Moses, Milwaukee; Louis Grossman, Detroit; M. Messing, St. Louis; W. J. Messing, Indianapolis; Dr. J. Schwab, St. Joseph, Mo.; Dr. Emanuel Schreiber, Los Angeles, Calif.; M. Spitz, St. Louis; J. Wechsler, St. Paul, Minn.; Dr. L. Wintner, Brooklyn.

Dr. Mayer, in brief but hearty words welcomed the brethren who had come from a distance to attend the Conference. It was moved and seconded that Dr. Kohler's circular should head the minutes of the Conference. Carried.

As a basis whercon to work Dr. Kohler read the following paper, setting forth the aims and objects of the Reform work incumbent upon the representatives of Progressive Judaism and offering ten different propositions to the Conference.

PREPARING OUR PLATFORM (*Kaufmann Kohler*)

Kohler had begun his career in Germany where he was born in 1843. While he was a pupil and life-long admirer of orthodox Samson Raphael Hirsch, his intellectual position may be traced to the influence which Abraham Geiger had over him. In the United States where he moved in 1869, he became the leading theoretician of classical Reform. Gifted with great learning and the power of precise expression, he was the natural choice to succeed I. M. Wise as President of Hebrew Union College. Kohler's *Jewish Theology* became the standard work in the field. He died in 1926.

The following is excerpted from his address to the Conference.

First of all, in order to show that Judaism is a religion of life and not a matter of the past, a system of living faith and practice which offers the guarantee of endurance and strength, it seems to me, we ought to unite on a platform which excludes none of the most radical Jews, which countenances and recognizes every honest opinion and does not denounce modern research, whether on the field of science or on the field of comparative religion, ethnology and Biblical criticism, but at the same time positively asserts the Jewish doctrine, a platform broad, comprehensive, enlightened and liberal enough to impress and win all hearts, and also firm and positive enough to dispel suspicion and reproach of agnostic tendencies, or of discontinuing the historical thread of the past.

We can no longer be blind to the fact that Mosaic-Rabbinical Judaism, as

based upon the Law and Tradition, has actually and irrevocably lost its hold upon the modern Jew. Whether they have justificatory reasons for doing so or not, the overwhelming majority of Jews within the domain of modern culture disregard altogether the Mosaic-Rabbinical laws concerning diet or dress, concerning work or the kindling of light on Sabbath, or any other ancient rite.

A Decalogue-Judaism will not do, for it is either too vague or too narrow; in fact, both. Too vague, for it fails to include some of the most genuine and most important Jewish laws. Christianity also stands upon the Decalogue, and, as far as the same presents the laws of morality and humanity, it is the universal religious truth, implied in pre-Israelitic history. On the other hand, it is too narrow, for as an authentic record of Divine Revelation it is like the entire Bible too much subject to critical inquiry to form a firm and lasting basis for our entire religious system. For have we not a double version of the Decalogue? Or do the various historical and moral reasons given for its commandments to-day offer the highest standard of morality? Judaism is a historical growth, and we must find the focus for all its emanations and manifestations, the common feature in all its diverse expressions and forms. We must accentuate and define what is essential and vital amidst its ever changing forms and ever fluctuating conditions. We must declare before the world what Judaism is and what Reform Judaism means and aims at.

THE PITTSBURGH PLATFORM

In view of the wide divergence of opinion and of the conflicting ideas prevailing in Judaism today, we, as representatives of Reform Judaism in America, in continuation of the work begun at Philadelphia in 1869, unite upon the following principles:—

First—We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite One, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man. We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages. We maintain that Judaism preserved and defended amid continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation this God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race.

Second—We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as priest of the One God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age and at times clothing its conception of divine providence and justice dealing with man in miraculous narratives.

Third—We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and to-day we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

Fourth—We hold that all such Mosaic and Rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

Fifth—We recognize in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect the approach of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the administration of the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

Sixth—We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason. We are convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with our great past. Christianity and Islam being daughter-religions of Judaism, we appreciate their mission to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth. We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity of our age is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission, and therefore we extend the hand of fellowship to all who co-operate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men.

Seventh—We reassert the doctrine of Judaism, that the soul of men is immortal, grounding this belief on the divine nature of the human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (hell and paradise), as abodes for everlasting punishment or reward.

Eighth—In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation which strives to regulate the relation between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

DISCUSSION AT PITTSBURGH

After the reading of the Platform, the President, Dr. Wise, said: "Gentlemen, what are you going to do with this Declaration of Independence?"

Dr. Moses: I hail with great joy this able and wonderfully liberal declaration. The platform is admirable and I accept it with both hands, and I move its adoption by this meeting.

Dr. Wise then put the question and the platform as a whole was accepted unanimously, with the understanding that it should be subjected to careful examination by the convention, sentence by sentence. The re-reading of the platform then took place and various amendments and verbal corrections were accepted.

To paragraph 2 of the platform Dr. Kohler moved that his original word "of Divine Revelation and" be inserted before "consecration."

Dr. Hirsch: I would not use the word, for it stands for an idea which I do not hold. I do not believe in revelation, if thereby is meant what is generally supposed to have occurred at Sinai. Nor does my congregation. They have been taught by myself as well as by my predecessors, that religion is the result of evolution.

Dr. Moses: The word revelation leads us into the domain of mysticism.

Dr. Hahn also objects to the term, stating that the various Jewish philosophers were not clear on that term. "It is a philosophic question which ought to have no place here. The recognition of our priestly mission implies the idea of revelation." #51

Rabbi Weil: If Judaism is not a revealed religion, what is it?

Dr. [Michael] Machol wants a definite expression on revelation.

Dr. Kohler: I confess, I am an evolutionist, but I believe in revelation, and am bold enough to say that *Torah min ha-shamayim* which is revelation, must always remain one of the foundation stones of Judaism. Of course, I do not believe that God stepped down in person from heaven and spoke on Mount Sinai, but when a new truth, instead of being sought for, seeks its instrument taking hold of a single person or a people and impelling them to become its herald, this is revelation, and in this sense I want to have it understood and accepted.

Dr. Sonneschein: Revelation is, like socialism, a tabooed word, truly beautiful in significance, but poorly understood, and for this reason it should be avoided in the platform.

Dr. Hirsch: Revelation through genius, individual or collective, organically developed, none of us rejects, but the technical term does not convey this meaning.

Dr. Kohler: Seeing that the question is not a matter of principle, but that all agree as regards the acceptance of the idea of revelation, and that only the

they forget the human being, save that they disregard the commandment regarding man. We do not oppose them as long as they do not dispossess morality, as long as they would not have the depths of religion sealed. We know what history has spoken to us and what we have to say. We fight the Jewish fight, this fight for the world of men, the world of God's children, fight for it with the strength of what is ours. Therefore we must be Jews, must hold the ground, must keep the way, must widen the outlook. That is our task in the post-war world, the task of Progressive Judaism.

3. THE COLUMBUS PLATFORM

Fifty years after the Pittsburgh meeting the world of 1885 had irrevocably disappeared. America was now the center of the Diaspora, Zionism was a spiritual and political force, Hitler was in power, one World War had been fought and a second was in the making. Most Reform Jews had moved away from their anti-Zionist position (see p. 144). The new "Columbus Platform," adopted in 1937, although it avoided a clear-cut pro-Zionist position, reflected the new thinking of American liberals. The Jewish people and its traditional ways had once again become significant factors in the ideology of the movement. Felix A. Levy presided over the conference, the first avowed Zionist to occupy the chair.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF REFORM JUDAISM

In view of the changes that have taken place in the modern world and the consequent need of stating anew the teachings of Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis makes the following declaration of principles. It presents them not as a fixed creed but as a guide for the progressive elements of Jewry.

A. JUDAISM AND ITS FOUNDATIONS

1. *Nature of Judaism.* Judaism is the historical religious experience of the Jewish people. Though growing out of Jewish life, its message is universal, aiming at the union and perfection of mankind under the sovereignty of God. Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as to cultural and social life.

Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or

deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man's will, heart and mind to the service of God and of humanity.

2. *God.* The heart of Judaism and its chief contribution to religion is the doctrine of the One, living God, who rules the world through law and love. In Him all existence has its creative source and mankind its ideal of conduct. Through transcending time and space, He is the indwelling Presence of the world. We worship Him as the Lord of the universe and as our merciful Father.

3. *Man.* Judaism affirms that man is created in the Divine image. His spirit is immortal. He is an active co-worker with God. As a child of God, he is endowed with moral freedom and is charged with the responsibility of overcoming evil and striving after ideal ends.

4. *Torah.* God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Revelation is a continuous process, confined to no one group and to no one age. Yet the people of Israel, through its prophets and sages, achieved unique insight in the realm of religious truth. The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel's ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law. It preserves the historical precedents, sanctions and norms of Jewish life, and seeks to mould it in the patterns of goodness and of holiness. Being products of historical processes, certain of its laws have lost their binding force with the passing of the conditions that called them forth. But as a depository of permanent spiritual ideals, the Torah remains the dynamic source of the life of Israel. Each age has the obligation to adapt the teachings of the Torah to its basic needs in consonance with the genius of Judaism.

5. *Israel.* Judaism is the soul of which Israel is the body. Living in all parts of the world, Israel has been held together by the ties of a common history, and above all, by the heritage of faith. Though we recognize in the group loyalty of Jews who have become estranged from our religious tradition, a bond which still unites them with us, we maintain that it is by its religion and for its religion that the Jewish people has lived. The non-Jew who accepts our faith is welcomed as a full member of the Jewish community.

In all lands where our people live, they assume and seek to share loyally the full duties and responsibilities of citizenship and to create seats of Jewish knowledge and religion. In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.

Throughout the ages it has been Israel's mission to witness to the Divine in the face of every form of paganism and materialism. We regard it as our historic task to cooperate with all men in the establishment of the kingdom of

ed, of universal brotherhood, justice, truth and peace on earth. This is our messianic goal.

B. ETHICS

Ethics and Religion. In Judaism religion and morality blend into an indivisible unity. Seeking God means to strive after holiness, righteousness and goodness. The love of God is incomplete without the love of one's fellowmen. Judaism emphasizes the kinship of the human race, the sanctity and worth of man life and personality and the right of the individual to freedom and to pursuit of his chosen vocation. Justice to all, irrespective of race, sect or class is the inalienable right and the inescapable obligation of all. The state and organized government exist in order to further these ends.

Social Justice. Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teachings to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to national and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife. It advocates the promotion of harmonious relations between warring classes on the basis of equity and justice, and the creation of conditions under which human personality may flourish. It advocates the safeguarding of childhood against exploitation. It champions the use of all who work and of their right to an adequate standard of living, as well as to the rights of property. Judaism emphasizes the duty of charity, and strives for a social order which will protect men against the material disabilities of old age, sickness and unemployment.

Peace. Judaism, from the days of the prophets, has proclaimed to mankind the ideal of universal peace. The spiritual and physical disarmament of all nations has been one of its essential teachings. It abhors all violence and relies on moral education, love and sympathy to secure human progress. It regards justice as the foundation of the well-being of nations and the condition of lasting peace. It urges organized international action for disarmament, collective security and world peace.

C. RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

The Religious Life. Jewish life is marked by consecration to these ideals of Judaism. It calls for faithful participation in the life of the Jewish community in which it finds expression in home, synagogue and school and in all other agencies that enrich Jewish life and promote its welfare.

The Home has been and must continue to be a stronghold of Jewish life, governed by the spirit of love and reverence, by moral discipline and religious observance and worship.

The Synagogue is the oldest and most democratic institution in Jewish life. It is the prime communal agency by which Judaism is fostered and preserved. It links the Jews of each community and unites them with all Israel.

The perpetuation of Judaism as a living force depends upon religious knowledge and upon the Education of each new generation in our rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

Prayer is the voice of religion, the language of faith and aspiration. It directs man's heart and mind Godward, voices the needs and hopes of the community, and reaches out after goals which invest life with supreme value. To deepen the spiritual life of our people, we must cultivate the traditional habit of communion with God through prayer in both home and synagogue.

Judaism as a way of life requires in addition to its moral and spiritual demands, the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music and the use of Hebrew, together with the vernacular, in our worship and instruction.

These timeless aims and ideals of our faith we present anew to a confused and troubled world. We call upon our fellow Jews to rededicate themselves to them, and, in harmony with all men, hopefully and courageously to continue Israel's eternal quest after God and His kingdom.

DISCUSSION AT COLUMBUS (*From the Transcript*)

*Rabbi Samuel Schulman:** I rise to speak on the substitute motion that instead of adopting the report as presented by the Chairman of the present Commission the Draft of Principles drawn up by the former Chairman of the Commission together with the draft drawn up by the present Commission be recommitted to a new Commission to be appointed by the President. If this motion prevails my draft of the Platform would then be officially before the Conference which now it is not. The reason I believe this substitute motion should carry is my strong conviction that unless you send forth a stronger statement than the one which is at present before the house, you should not send forth any statement at all.

If we are going to make a statement it should be a ringing challenging statement on the living issues of the day. First, we must courageously confront the issue of absolute and unlimited individualism in our own body; but if there are such absolute individualists, then let us continue without a platform because platforms, while they seemingly unite, also divide if they are written with strength. Therefore, I wrote the paragraph on authority. Individualism had to be met; therefore I said that science is not self-sufficient, that it does not cover the whole of life, it is not the whole of truth.

I felt that a ringing word should be proclaimed against the humanity-demoralizing theory of the worth of man based on blood and on race. The whole theory of race and blood as deciding the worth of a human being is wrong. I contrast spirit and religion with race all through my document. I am a lover of my people—I know what the people of Israel means but I felt

* Then Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Emanu-El of New York. He was one of the most respected and scholarly liberals of his time. In 1907 he first used the term "melting pot" to describe America. He was born in Russia in 1864 and died in 1955.

what rabbis say about reform judaism

The Central Conference of American Rabbis has on special occasions described the spiritual state of Reform Judaism. In commemoration of the centenaries (the 100th anniversary) of the founding of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform rabbinate published a "Centenary Perspective." It is not a binding platform but reflects a consensus of the rabbis about the state of the Reform movement of 1976. The last such statement was issued in 1937. Here are some selections from this important 1976 document.

GOD: The affirmation of God has always been essential to our people's will to survive. In our struggle through the centuries to preserve our faith we have experienced and conceived of God in many ways. The trials of our own time and the challenges of modern culture have made steady belief and clear understanding difficult for some. Nevertheless, we ground our lives, personally and communally, on God's reality and remain open to new experiences and conceptions of the Divine. Amid the mystery we call life, we affirm that human beings, created in God's image, share in God's eternity despite the mystery we call death.

THE PEOPLE ISRAEL: The Jewish people and Judaism defy precise definition because both are in the process of becoming. Jews, by birth or conversion, constitute an uncommon union of faith and peoplehood. Born as Hebrews in the ancient Near East, we are bound together like all ethnic groups by language, land, history, culture, and institutions. But the people of Israel is unique because of its involvement with God and its resulting perception of the human condition. Throughout our long history our people has been inseparable from its religion with its messianic hope that humanity will be redeemed.

TORAH: Torah results from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The record of our earliest confrontations are uniquely important to us. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis and teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE—OUR OBLIGATIONS: Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life, the means by which we strive to achieve universal justice and peace. Reform Judaism shares this emphasis on duty and obligation. Our founders stressed that the Jew's ethical responsibilities, personal and social, are enjoined by God. The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion, lifelong study, private prayer and public worship, daily religious observance, keeping the Sabbath and the holy days, celebrating the major events of life, involvement with the synagogue and community, and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence. Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.

OUR OBLIGATIONS—THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND THE DIASPORA: We are privileged to live in an extraordinary time, one in which a third Jewish commonwealth has been established in our people's ancient homeland. We are bound to that land and to the newly reborn State of Israel by innumerable religious and ethnic ties. We have been enriched by its culture and ennobled by its indomitable spirit. We see it providing unique opportunities for Jewish self-expression. We have both a stake and a responsibility in building the State of Israel, assuring its security and defining its Jewish character. We encourage aliyah for those who wish to find maximum personal fulfillment in the cause of Zion. We demand that Reform Judaism be unconditionally legitimized in the State of Israel.

At the same time that we consider the State of Israel vital to the welfare of Judaism everywhere, we reaffirm the mandate of our tradition to create strong Jewish communities wherever we live. A genuine Jewish life is possible in any land, each community developing its own particular character and determining its Jewish responsibilities. The foundation of Jewish community life is the synagogue. It leads us beyond itself to cooperate with other Jews, to share their concerns, and to assume leadership in communal affairs. We are therefore committed to the full democratization of the Jewish community and to its hallowing in terms of Jewish values.

The State of Israel and the Diaspora, in fruitful dialogue, can show how a people transcends nationalism even as it affirms it, thereby setting an example for humanity which remains largely concerned with dangerously parochial goals.

SURVIVAL AND SERVICE—OUR OBLIGATIONS: Early Reform Jews, newly admitted to general society and seeing in this the evidence of a growing universalism, regularly spoke of Jewish purpose in terms of Jewry's service to humanity. In recent years we have become freshly conscious of the virtues of pluralism and the values of particularism. The Jewish people in its unique way of life validates its own worth while working toward the fulfillment of its messianic expectations.

Until the recent past our obligations to the Jewish people and to all humanity seemed congruent. At times now these two imperatives appear to conflict. We know of no simple way to resolve such tensions. We must, however, confront them without abandoning either of our commitments. A universal concern for humanity unaccompanied by a devotion to our particular people is self-destructive; a passion for our people without involvement in humankind contradicts what the prophets have meant to us. Judaism calls us simultaneously to universal and particular obligations.