Brit Without *Milah*: Jewish Responses to Ritual Circumcision in Canada and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Brit Without *Milah*: Jewish Responses to Ritual Circumcision in Canada and the United States

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study that examines contemporary Jewish engagement with ritual circumcision (*brit milah*), with a particular focus on Jewish parents who are choosing not to circumcise their sons. Centered on a handful of key cities in Canada and the United States, this example of circumcision shows the complex interplay of factors that determine the negotiation of religious practice. Family dynamics, community response and acceptance, ethics, bodily integrity, consent, and medical discourse are layered into this decision. Gendered constructions of parenting and perceptions of the ideal male body are also infused in this ritual moment. This study also showcases the delicate interplay between religious traditions and wider societal values, and how shifts at the societal level impact religious praxis. Circumcision encompasses a complex ritual choice and there are multiple layers that are factored into the decision to opt in or to opt out.

I argue that non-circumcision families are not opting out of Judaism; their rejection of circumcision does not represent a rejection of Judaism. Choosing an alternative ritual represents a means of engaging with tradition and affirming one's Jewish identity. The non-circumcision Jews featured in this study have strong Jewish identities, observe Jewish rituals and traditions, and care about raising a Jewish family. They are not ambivalent Jews. They want to welcome their son into the Jewish community via a Jewish welcoming ceremony, and they want this ceremony to be officiated by a rabbi. Families who opt out often agonize over their decision and grapple with the consequences of choosing not to circumcise.

Opting out of circumcision, or put another way, opting *for* an alternative ritual, highlights how contemporary Jews understand Judaism and Jewish practice. Religion is something that can be adapted to conform with one's personal beliefs and values, and this is precisely how non-circumcision Jews are engaging with religion. Rituals deemed problematic are not discarded; instead, they are modified, and this modification allows for Jews to continue engaging with their religion. Non-circumcision Jews are using alternative rituals as a means of engaging with tradition and affirming their Jewish identity.

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It takes one person to write a dissertation, but it is impossible to complete a dissertation without a village of people supporting you along the way. And I have a village to thank. The first person I would like to thank is my supervisor, Dr. Naftali Cohn, who believed in this project from the very beginning. Thank you, Naftali, for your constant support throughout this journey, for your intellectual guidance, for the time you took to read many drafts of this (within a very tight deadline), and most importantly, for your kindness and empathy. You have been my biggest cheerleader, and without your support and reassurance, it is very possible I would not have made it to the end. It's difficult to find the right words to express my deep gratitude for all you have done. Thank you, Naftali.

I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Hillary Kaell and Dr. Norma Joseph. I deeply admire your scholarship, and I am very grateful to have received intellectual input and guidance from you along the way. I am truly grateful for the time you took to read drafts of this work and provide robust and thoughtful feedback. You have made this research stronger and me a better scholar. Thank you, Hillary and Norma.

The Department of Religions and Cultures is a special place, and this has a lot to do with Tina Montandon and Munit Merid. Thank you, Tina and Munit, for shepherding me through the ins and outs of graduate school. Your kindness helped me more than you will ever know. Thank you for all that you do to make the department the special place that it is.

An ethnographic study is made possible by people who are willing to tell you their stories, people who are willing to welcome you into their communities and families, people who are willing to share personal and intimate details of their lives. Although only a handful of stories are shared in this dissertation, every person I met with and whose stories I heard are infused in this research. This project is rich and nuanced because of the people I met who were open and vulnerable and willing to share their stories. As such, I would like to thank every person who was willing to be interviewed for this research. I deeply appreciate you carving time out of your schedules to talk to me, for sharing personal (and sometimes painful) stories, and for contributing to this project. This project would not have been possible with you. Thank you.

One of the main reasons why I was able to complete this dissertation is because of the financial support I received throughout graduate school. More graduate students would complete their studies if they received adequate compensation. Without financial stability completing this dissertation would have been much more difficult, and I am very grateful for the scholarships and funding I received to support me during graduate school. Thank you to the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies, the Azrieli Institute for Israel Studies, the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, the American Academy of Jewish Research, and the Fonds de recherche du Québec—société et culture for funding my research.

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friendship. I am beyond grateful our paths crossed during graduate school, and for the friendship we have created throughout this journey. Thank you, Laurel. The sign of a deep friendship is one that withstands gaps of time. To my dear friend Joseph, thank you for being my rock during graduate school. Our paths diverged some time, but I am truly grateful we reconnected after a gap in our friendship. I appreciate your guidance and wisdom more than you will ever know. Thank you, Joseph.

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The images included in this dissertation are comprised of photographs taken by the author, protest materials obtained by the author, and images from public social media profiles and pages.

INTRODUCTION

To circumcise, or not to circumcise—is that even a question? The very notion that one can *choose* to opt out of circumcision may seem novel and unheard of for many Jews. For some, circumcision is not necessarily viewed as a choice; it is assumed that if one has a boy, he will be circumcised. But in the last two decades, and especially since 2010, Jews have become more critical of circumcision. The gradual shift away from routine infant circumcision, declining rates of circumcision in North America, and diminished support from doctors have prompted some Jews to think more critically about, and even question, circumcision. Shifting perceptions of circumcision at the societal level have invited Jews to think differently about this ritual. Consequently, for some Jews, circumcision is no longer assumed; instead, it has become an active choice. Lisa Braver Moss and Rebecca Wald echo this sentiment in their book *Celebrating Brit Shalom.* They write: "Today's Jewish parents have *choices*—and infant circumcision is one of them. For those who *decide* not to circumcise, the *brit shalom* ceremony is an alternative way to welcome a newborn son, give him his Hebrew name, and bring him into the Abrahamic covenant."[1]

In this dissertation I examine why some contemporary Jews are opting out of circumcision. I analyze the dynamics of this choice, factors that make the decision to opt out more difficult and complex, and the alternative welcoming rituals some people who opt out of circumcision are choosing (or creating). I argue that non-circumcision families are not opting out of Judaism; their rejection of circumcision does not represent a rejection of Judaism. Choosing an alternative ritual represents a means of engaging with tradition and affirming one's Jewish identity. The majority the families I spoke with have strong Jewish identities, observe Jewish rituals and traditions, and care about raising a Jewish family. Jewishness is about more than engaging in one particular ritual or tradition. Jewish identity encompasses a web of different components that when assembled make up one's identity. Although circumcision is often perceived to be an essential Jewish tradition, the families featured in this study demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case. One can opt out of circumcision without rejecting Judaism and other elements of their Jewish identity. The non-circumcision Jews featured in this study are not ambivalent Jews. They want to welcome their son into the Jewish community via a Jewish welcoming ceremony, and they want this ceremony to be officiated by a rabbi. Families who opt out often agonize over their decision and grapple with the consequences of choosing not to circumcise. This is not an easy decision, and parents who face this decision are working through their understanding of maintaining Jewish tradition and their personal views on circumcision. There are many layers of the decision-making process, and parents often consider numerous factors when navigating this decision. This conflict of values is real and often requires considerable mental gymnastics to reconcile. Opting out of circumcision, or put another way, opting *for* an alternative ritual, highlights how contemporary Jews understand Judaism and Jewish practice. Religion is something that can be adapted to conform with one's personal beliefs and values, and this is precisely how non-circumcision Jews are engaging with religion. Rituals deemed problematic are not discarded; instead, they are modified, and this modification allows for Jews to continue engaging with their tradition.

When I speak about identity, I rely on how my interlocuters identify and describe their own Jewish identity. My categorization reflects their own language and how they describe of the strength of

[1] Lisa Braver Moss and Rebecca Wald, *Celebrating Brit Shalom* (Oakland, CA: Notim Press, 2015): back cover. Emphasis added.

their Jewish identity. 92% of my informants described their Jewish identity as "strong." In addition to the way they identify, I also relied on other qualifiers to parse out the strength of their Jewishness. Some of these qualifiers include synagogue membership, engagement with Jewish traditions and practices, the strength of their ethnic identity, connection to the Jewish community, participation in Jewish school and Jewish programs (such as Jewish community centers, Jewish travel programs, Jewish philanthropy), their familiarity with and how they incorporate Jewish foods and values into their lives, and what it means to them to raise a Jewish family, to name a few examples. Jewish identity is indeed complex, and I relied on how they described themselves and how they engage in various elements of Jewish life and culture to categorize the strength of their Jewish identity.[2]

This case study offers an intimate examination of how Jews understand and engage with the ritual of circumcision. Through speaking with Jewish parents, I analyze the nuance and complexity of this ritual choice. Circumcision is indeed a religious ritual, but it involves more than that. It is also a parenting decision. It interacts with the medical opinion du jour. It involves the body and masculinity. For some, it is an emblem of gender inequality in Judaism. It encompasses family dynamics. It involves negotiating with oneself, one's partner, one's family, and one's rabbi. Circumcision is complex, and this ethnographic study examines this ritual decision in its full complexity. This is the first in-depth ethnographic study of ritual circumcision in the Jewish community in Canada and the United States. There are a handful of smaller studies on this topic, but none examined the decision-making process for parents who opt out or parents who choose to circumcise, wider community responses to circumcision, alternative rituals, or the connection to the anti-circumcision movement. This dissertation is the first in-depth study of a small movement in the Jewish community and the wider societal trends that are impacting Jewish engagement with circumcision, both at the individual and community level.

The Jewish parents featured in this study who are choosing not to circumcise are not rejecting Judaism or their Jewish identity. These parents who choose not to circumcise identify as Jewish and want to raise their children Jewish. They actively seek (and sometimes create) alternative Jewish covenantal ceremonies to welcome their child into the Jewish community. They advocate for rabbis to publicly include and welcome non-circumcision families into their congregations and communities. Rather than withdrawing, non-circumcision families are trying to forge a place for themselves in the Jewish community and broaden the welcoming rituals available to Jewish boys. For non-circumcision Jews, there are legitimate ways of welcoming boys into the covenant that do not involve circumcision. Surprisingly, however, the Jewish parents featured in this study are less

[2] As a complex phenomenon, there is considerable scholarship on North American Jewish identity and Jewish identity formation. For more on this, see: Bethamie Horowitz, "Connections and Journeys: Shifting Identities Among American Jews," *Contemporary Jewry* vol. 19, no 1 (1998): 63-94; Laurence J. Silberstein (ed), *Mapping Jewish Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Bethamie Horowitz, "Reframing the Study of Contemporary American Jewish Identity," *Contemporary Jewry* vol. 23, no. 1 (2002): 14-34; Stuart Charmé, Bethamie Horowitz, Tali Hyman, and S. Kness, "Jewish Identities in Action: An Exploration of Models, Metaphors, and Methods, *Journal of Jewish Education* vol. 74, no. 2 (2008): 115-143; and Ari Y. Kelman and Jon A. Levisohn (eds), *Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking Concepts and Imagining Alternatives* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019).

concerned with what Shaye Cohen calls the "egalitarian impulse" of challenging circumcision.[3] Indeed, some parents do recognize the gendered discrepancy inherent in the ritual of circumcision, and some believe *brit milah* explicitly sends the message that Jewish boys are more important than Jewish girls. Despite this recognition, these parents are not opting out to send a message about gender equality in Judaism. This may be a factor, but it is not the most important or relevant argument against circumcision (I examine the reasons people opt out in more detail in chapter one). The parents featured in this study also did not express concern about the gender binary that is created and adhered to with separate welcoming ceremonies for boys and girls. This certainly may be a concern for some parents, especially if their children end up identifying as trans later in life, but the parents I connected with did not express concern about this.[4]

My research contributes to the rich body of work on circumcision by focusing exclusively on the decisions of Jewish parents and the response of Jewish communities to non-circumcision Jews. Some scholars point to contemporary Jews challenging circumcision, but none examine this in depth. Ephraim Tabory and Sharon Erez examine Jews opting out of circumcision in Israel, but this study is small in scope.[5] My study adds to the body of scholarship on the history of circumcision by analyzing the role of this ritual in contemporary Jewish communities.[6] By examining Jews who chose to circumcise, Jews who opted out of circumcision but are not anti-circumcision activists, Jewish anti-circumcision activists, and the response of the family and rabbis to this movement, my study will offer an in-depth examination of the wide spectrum of voices on this issue.

This research lies at the nexus of ritual and gender studies, thus drawing on these two fields of study. I examine how perceptions of motherhood and masculinity impact ritual engagement. I analyze how stereotypes about motherhood and discourse about masculinity are infused in and complicate this ritual decision. Circumcision is not just about circumcision; it is about what it means to be a good mother, what it means to be a bad mother, displaying appropriate masculinity,

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[3] Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 216-217.

[4] In *Celebrating Brit Shalom*, authors Lisa Braver Moss and Rebecca Wald recognized that some parents may indeed care about the gendered nature of welcoming ceremonies and created a gender-neutral *brit shalom* ceremony, which is featured in their book.

[5] Ephraim Tabory and Sharon Erez, "Circumscribed Circumcision: The Motivations and Identities of Israeli Parents who Choose not to Circumcise their Sons," in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite,* ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003): 161-176.

[6] Scholarship on the history of circumcision: Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); David L. Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Elizabeth Wyner Mark (ed), *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003); Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Robert Darby, *A Surgical Temptation: The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of Circumcision in Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Eric Kline Silverman, *From Abraham to America: A History of Jewish Circumcision* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2006).

occupying the "right" kind of body, and what the penis ought to look like.[7] I draw on scholarship on gendered models of parenting to examine the gender dynamics of this ritual decision. I also draw on scholarship on masculinity to analyze the way in which understandings of masculinity and the male body are enmeshed in this ritual. Scholars such as Shane Phelan, Marie Fox, and Michael Thompson argue that the circumcised penis is the quintessential symbol of masculinity. For Fox and Thompson, a circumcised penis is "imagined as erect; ready for penetration."[8] The foreskin, on the other hand, is viewed as penetrable, leaky, and feminine, and by removing the "feminine" foreskin the penis is fully masculinized. Geoffrey Miller examines how physicians used appeals to aesthetics and beauty to promote circumcision. For example, physician William Goodwin considered circumcision a "beautification comparable to rhinoplasty."[9] For Goodwin, the circumcised penis "appears in its flaccid state as an erect uncircumcised organ—a beautiful instrument of precise intent."[10] In other words, the circumcised penis represents the ideal phallic body. I build on this scholarship to examine how discourse about health, hygiene, aesthetics, and intelligibility perpetuate the idea that the ideal male body in North America is a circumcised body.[11] Drawing on gender studies offers a rich avenue to examine the nuances of ritual negotiation and adaptation and allows us to analyze how discourses on motherhood and masculinity impact Jewish ritual engagement with circumcision.

This research also contributes to the scholarship on interfaith families, specifically interfaith Jewish families. My work builds on the scholarship by Sylvia Barrack Fishman, Keren McGinity, Jennifer Thompson, and Samira Mehta, who all examine interfaith marriage in the Jewish context. But the uniqueness of my study lies in examining a phenomenon that impacts both interfaith and endogamous couples. In much of the scholarship on interfaith Jewish families, interfaith families are treated separately from endogamous families. This sends the message that the complexity of navigating religion is unique to interfaith families. But my study demonstrates that endogamous Jewish couples can and do experience similar complexities to that of interfaith families. Endogamous Jewish couples navigate, negotiate, and compromise the religious observance of their families just as much as interfaith families. This study examines a particular ritual moment that can impact *both* interfaith and endogamous couples, bringing these two seemingly "distinct"

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[7] For more on social constructions of motherhood, see: Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (eds), *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Susan J. Douglas and Meredith M. Williams, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined Women* (New York: New Press, 2004); Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[8] Marie Fox and Michael Thompson, "Foreskin is a Feminist Issue," *Australian Feminist Studies* vol. 24, no. 60 (2009): 203.

[9] Geoffrey P. Miller, "Circumcision: Cultural-Legal Analysis," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and Law,* vol. 9 (2002): 544-545.

[10] Ibid., 545.

[11] For more on men, masculinity, and the ideal male body, see: Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999); David M. Friedman, *A Mind of its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis* (New York: The Free Press, 2001). For more on the ideal Jewish body, see: Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

groups together in one study. The questions and quagmires interfaith families face can indeed be similar to endogamous families. This study also makes the case that scholarship on interfaith families need not be treated as completely separate—specific ritual moments offer valuable areas to examine the complexities of religion, for both interfaith *and* endogamous families.

Finally, this study contributes to the robust scholarship of North American Judaism and North American religion. It takes up a single case study to analyze how contemporary Jews practice Judaism, how they understand Jewish rituals and traditions, how rituals and tradition change, and how ritual change is connected to wider societal change. It also examines how a religious community responds to challenges to their traditions and customs from within their own community. Finally, it examines how a minority religion navigates their traditions and customs against the wider culture in which they are situated. It offers a nuanced examination of lived religion and the complexities of practicing religion. It examines how people navigate sometimes conflicting identities and belief systems, and how people reconcile conflicts of values. In essence, this study is about how people practice and engage with religion in North America.

Since the mid-1980s scholars have studied how certain American values and phenomena, such as hyper-individualism (prioritizing the individual over the community), moralism (importance of morals and ethics), voluntarism (emphasis on radical choice), personalism (seeking personal meaning), and what Jack Wertheimer calls "do-it-yourself-ism" (allowing for invention and adaptation) are impacting the way in which Americans practice their religion and have paved the way for new forms and expressions of religiosity.[12] These emerging values allow for people to engage with religion in ways that are personally meaningful to them. People can adapt and tweak religion to suit their beliefs values. People can prioritize their views over the established views of the community to which they belong. These studies also highlight how these characteristics of American culture that create an environment that is ripe for invention and adaptation.[13] My study places Jews at the center of this trend in American religion and examines how non-circumcision Jews are engaging with their religion in ways that are conducive with their values, beliefs, and lifestyle and by extension are creating a contemporary form of American Judaism. These contemporary phenomena of adaptation and individualization among North American Jews have deeper roots. North American Jews have consistently adapted their traditions, customs, and rituals at the individual and community level.[14] As their circumstances changed, as values shifted, and as

[12] Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[13] For more on contemporary religion in North America and "do-it-yourself" religion, see: Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); David D. Hall (ed), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997); Wade Clarke Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999); Melissa M. Wilcox, "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," *Sociology of Religion* vol. 63, no 4 (2002): 497-513.

[14] For more on adaptations to Jewish rituals and practice in North America, see: Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang: 1994); Ailene Cohen Nusbacher, "Efforts at Change in a Traditional Denomination: The Case of Women's Prayer Groups," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's and Gender Issues,* no. 2 (1999): 95-

different elements from the wider American culture influenced Jewish thought and Jews' perceptions of their own traditions, Jews actively adapted Judaism and Jewish practice. Traditional synagogue seating was adapted from separate seating for men and women to mixed seating.[15] The synagogue shifted from a place reserved exclusively for prayer and study to a "synagogue center" that offered services and programs beyond traditional worship.[16] The North American context prompted the expansion of Jewish denominations, with the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements representing truly "American" Jewish denominations.[17] And Jewish law was adapted as living patterns changed. When Jews moved from densely populated urban centers to the suburbs and no longer lived within walking-distance to synagogue, the Conservative movement deemed it appropriate to drive on the Sabbath.[18] Adaptation and innovation are characteristic of North American Judaism and Jewish praxis, and Jews opting out of circumcision and creating non-cutting welcoming ceremonies are continuing and honoring this tradition.

NORTH AMERICAN RELIGION AND NORTH AMERICAN JUDAISM

In recent decades, sociologists of religion have examined the decline of organized religion and created a new category of religious person: "the religious none." "Religious none" describes a person who does not belong to any religious tradition and, according to Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, is the fastest growing category of "religious" identity in North America. Nearly 25% of Canadians and 20% of Americans indicate they do not belong to any religious tradition.[19] These statistics demonstrate the role of religion, and the ways in which North Americans engage with religion, are indeed changing. While organized religion has witnessed a decline in recent decades, a different kind of engagement, an engagement fueled by the growth of individualism, personalism, voluntarism, universalism, and DIY-ism, facilitates a different

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113; Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," in *Women in American Judaism: Historical Perspectives,* eds. Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 223-234; Marlene Bonneau, "Getting Married in Montreal with Two Wedding Rings," in *The Canadian Jewish Studies Reader,* eds. Richard Mekins and Norman Ravvin (Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2003), 164-184; Michelle Shain, Shira Fishman, Graham Wright, Shahar Hecht, and Leonard Saxe, "'DIY' Judaism: How Contemporary Jewish Young Adults Express their Jewish Identity," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* vol. 55, nos. 1 and 2 (2013): 3-25; Nora L. Rubel, "The Feast at the end of the Fast: The Evolution of an American Jewish Ritual," in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America,* eds. Benjamin E. Zeller et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 234-252; Helana Darwin, "Jewish Women's Kippot: Meanings and Motives," *Contemporary Jewry* vol. 37, no. 1 (2017): 81-97; Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[15] Jonathan Sarna, "The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed,* ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 363-394; Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[16] David Kauffman, *Shul with a Pool: The 'Synagogue-Center' in American Jewish History* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999).

[17] Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Traditions in Historical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

[18] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Pres, 2003), 284-285.

[19] Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1.

connection with religion. These widely adopted values allow for people to engage with religions and religious traditions in ways that are meaningful to them. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow points to this shift in religious observance in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Wuthnow argues that religion shifted from a "spirituality of dwelling" to a "spirituality of seeking." For Wuthnow, a spirituality of dwelling "emphasizes *habitation*: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which human too can dwell." On the other hand, a spirituality of seeking "emphasizes *negotiation*: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists […] people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing notions spirituality."[20] A spirituality of seeking, Wuthnow asserts, "is closely connected to the fact that people increasingly create a sense of personal identity through an active sequence of searching and selecting."[21] In other words, religious individualism allows people to search for and create their own connections to religion. Religious individualism allows for unique ways of engaging with religion. And religious individualism provides room for people to create their own identities from their unique understanding of their religious tradition.

Another important area of scholarship in the study of religion is the notion of "lived religion." Lived religion refers to the ways in which ordinary people understand, perceive, and practice religion. David D. Hall, one of the pioneers of this term, asserts that "while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women."[22] Lived religion, then, refers to what ordinary religious practitioners actually do, which can differ from what traditions prescribe. Robert Orsi expands this understanding and argues lived religion is "the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many stories they tell of themselves."[23] In other words, people are the interpreters and curators of their own traditions, and they will engage with religion in a way that makes sense to them. Tradition might prescribe one thing, but what people actually do is where we find lived religion. This is indeed what Meredith McGuire argues in her work. She asserts that scholars must study religion not as it is defined by institutional religions, but as it is lived and experienced in ordinary people. By examining the practices that have been mostly out of the line of sight of scholarship on religion, McGuire offers a more nuanced understanding of contemporary religious praxis.[24] Nancy T. Ammerman examines the ways religion and spirituality are part of the everyday world of work, home, health, and public life.[25] She examines religion where religion happens—within sacred and

[20] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3-4. Emphasis in original.
[21] Ibid., 10.
[22] David D. Hall, "Introduction," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David C. Hall (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii.
[23] Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xxxix.
[24] Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[25] Nancy Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

everyday spaces and places.[26] Religion, according to Ammerman, can be found in all kinds of places and practiced in all kinds of ways. My study provides an avenue to study lived religion within the space of traditional religion. Some Jews are indeed opting out of circumcision, but they are seeking acceptance from rabbis and inclusion in congregational life. They want rabbis to officiate their non-cutting ceremonies. This highlights that lived religion can indeed operate within the boundaries of traditional religion. Lived religion is not always on the outside, operating in spaces where scholars have failed to look (which is where many scholars argue lived religion exists). Indeed, lived religion can be found where traditional religion is. Non-circumcision Jews demonstrate that lived religion can, and does, exist in the spaces we have come to expect traditional religion. Lived religion and traditional religion need not be mutually exclusive.

The rise of individualism (and universalism, moralism, voluntarism, personalism, and DIY-ism) impacts the way religion is practiced.[27] Religious individualism makes room for spiritualities of seeking, which trickles down and impacts lived religion (that is, how religion is indeed practiced). Building off his own theory of spiritualities of seeking, Wuthnow argues the generation after the baby boomers have become "a generation of tinkerers." Drawing on the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, Wuthnow argues that tinkering, or bricolage, is "an apt description of the religion and spirituality of young adults."[28] Wuthnow describes a tinkerer, or *bricoleur* to use Levi-Strauss's language, as:

> A handy person, a do-it-yourself craftsperson who uses the tools of his or her trade and the materials that happen to be at hand to fix things and keep them in good repair. The tools and materials that prove useful today may be different from the ones that were useful yesterday. The tasks of each day nevertheless reflect the past and the lessons one has learned. The objects the bricoleur produces are a *bricolage*—a construction improvised from multiple sources.[29]

In other words, religious bricolage refers to the practice of constructing religion out of "seemingly inconsistent, disparate components."[30] People who engage with religion are resourceful, crafty, and handy. They are not necessarily creating brand new traditions; instead, they are tinkering with what already exists. Should something within their tradition fail to resonate with them, they tinker with it until it does. The idea of bricolage, tinkering, or "do-it-yourself" religion, as some scholars call it, works with the rise of individualism, moralism, voluntarism, and personalism to create rich avenues to study lived religion. People are more empowered to connect with and practice their religious traditions in ways that make sense to them, which in turn affects religious praxis. And

[26] Nancy Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).
[27] For the sake of simplicity, I sometimes refer to this conglomerate of values as "individualism" or "religious individualism" throughout the rest of the dissertation.
[28] Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 15.
[29] Ibid., 14.
[30] Ibid., 15.

religious individualism, spiritualities of seeking, and "DIY" religion are facets of American religion that are indeed impacting the ways in which Jews practice Judaism.[31]

But Jews have been adapting their traditions and ritual long before the rise of individualism, universalism, moralism, personalism, and DIY-ism witnessed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Since the arrival of Jewish immigrants to the English colonies in 1654, Jews have actively and intentionally adapted their traditions to better suit American culture, values, and customs. Jonathan Sarna traces the history of American Jews from 1654 to the contemporary period and argues that American Jews created a uniquely "American Judaism."[32] Throughout Jewish history in the United States, Jewish traditions, rituals, and customs were "Americanized." Jack Wertheimer, David Kauffman, and Karla Goldman examine how synagogues were reformed to conform to Protestant ideals of mixed seating and decorum.[33] Dianne Ashton analyzes how holiday celebrations were adapted and gradually adopted American values of grandiosity and commercialism.[34] Sylvia Barack Fishman and Sharon R. Siegel examine how new rituals were created to include and celebrate women in response to the feminist movement.[35] S.J. Crasnow analyzes how trans Jews are appropriating mikvah immersion to create gender transition rituals.[36] And finally, Samira Mehta examines how interfaith families create new traditions and rituals to reflect their unique family compositions and the religious and cultural diversity in their families.[37] Ritual innovation and adaptation are deeply embedded in the American Jewish experience and parents who are choosing not to circumcise and opting for alternative rituals are following an established history of ritual adaptation and are contributing to the ongoing creation of a uniquely American Judaism.

Non-circumcision Jews, I demonstrate, have embraced American values of individualism, moralism, voluntarism, personalism, and DIY-ism. They are utilizing the DIY ethos of American

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[31] There are other ways scholars describe "DIY" religion, such as "tinkering" and "bricolage." Despite its limitations, I use "DIY," or simply "ritual adaptation" to describe alternative non-circumcision ceremonies. I offer a critique of some of these categorizations, especially "DIY religion," in chapter one.
[32] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[33] Jack Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed,* ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); David Kauffman, *Shul with a Pool: The 'Synagogue-Center' in American Jewish History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999); Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[34] Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
[35] Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Feminism and the American Jewish Community* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1993); Sharon R. Siegel, Sharon R. Siegel, *A Jewish Ceremony for Newborn Girls: The Torah's Covenant Affirmed* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014).
[36] S.J. Crasnow, "On Transition: Normative Judaism and Trans Innovation," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* vol. 32, no. 2 (2017): 403-415.
[37] Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018). For more on interfaith families, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Double of Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (Hanover: The University Press of New England, 2004); Keren R. McGinity, *Still Jewish: A History of Women an Intermarriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Jennifer Thompson, *Jewish on their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

religious praxis to craft welcoming rituals that are meaningful to them. They are embodying the idea of lived religion by actively reinterpreting the meaning of the covenant and the ritual of circumcision. They are making their views on circumcision compatible with their Jewish and American identities. Indeed, Jews have long adapted their traditions to better suit the American context, and this study examines how non-circumcision Jews are embracing certain American values and trends and following this well-established history of adaptation and innovation. Non-circumcision Jews exist at the nexus of an established history of Jewish adaptation and the rise of individualism and other values to create uniquely American ways of welcoming their sons into the Jewish community without circumcision.

THE DELICATE DYNAMICS OF OPTING OUT

The current landscape of religious engagement in North American is one that centers individualism and DIY religion, which gives room to religious people to reinterpret and adapt traditions to suit their values and belief systems. But this does not mean that adapting religion and engaging with tradition in unorthodox ways is easy. Adaption involves much more than "tinkering" or "bricolage." Ritual decisions are intentional, and often involve a process of reflection, negotiation, and compromise. Choosing not to circumcise requires reconciling conflicting sets of values and paradoxical identities. Choosing not to circumcise often involves the family and community in unexpected ways. Opting out may seem like a personal decision, but this is not necessarily the case. This seemingly individual choice has a wider impact; it can elicit conflict with family members and it can affect one's experience within the larger Jewish community. To highlight these dynamics, I turn to one of the many stories I heard throughout the course of my research that encapsulates the complexities of opting out of circumcision.

NAOMI AND SAMEER—"IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAT WE CELEBRATE SHABBAT EVERY WEEK THAN OUR SONS BEING CIRCUMCISED."[38]

Naomi was born and raised in New Jersey. Her parents, both of whom are Jewish, were born in the United States. She was raised in a Jewish household and describes her family's observance as a typical Reform family. They celebrated the holidays, she went to Hebrew school, had a *bat mitzvah*, and participated in Birthright Israel.[39] Like many American Jewish families, her family did not keep kosher or observe the Sabbath.[40] She describes her current level of Jewish observance

[38] Naomi and Sameer are pseudonyms. Naomi, interview with author, May 21, 2019. All quotes from this section are from my interview with Naomi. For more details about my data and interview process, see Appendix B and Appendix C.

[39] Birthright Israel is a free 7-to-10 day trip to Israel offered to Jewish adults between 18-32 years of age. For more on Birthright Israel, see: https://www.birthrightisrael.com/about-us. For a scholarly analysis, see: Shaul Kelner, *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[40] According to the Pew Research Center's study "Jewish Americans in 2020," only 17% of Jews in the United States keep kosher at home and 39% mark the Sabbath in a "personally meaningful way." In other words, most Jews do not keep kosher, and a little more 60% do not observe the Sabbath in any way. Naomi and Sameer's lack of Sabbath observance is in line with what most American Jews do. For more on this study, see: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/.

as less than it was when she was growing up. Her family are members of a Reform synagogue, but Naomi admits they do not go to synagogue often; they mostly go to synagogue for kids' events.

Naomi currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is a scientist with a background in infectious diseases and currently works at a biotech company. Naomi is married to a man named Sameer. Sameer is not Jewish; he was born in Turkey and was raised in a Muslim household. Sameer is not a practicing Muslim and is somewhat skeptical of religion. They have two sons; at the time of my interview with Naomi, their sons were two and five years old. Like Naomi, Sameer comes from a culture that practices circumcision. Muslim boys are circumcised later in life, usually around seven years of age, rather than as infants as they are in Jewish culture. Sameer is indeed circumcised but was very opposed to circumcising their sons. Naomi explains:

> Sameer was very opposed to it. We went back and forth for a while. We researched a lot. I have a lot of pediatrician friends who I talked to. As a scientist I just wanted to see the data. Like, what percentage have more infections. Gut-level, this seemed a little barbaric to do. We had a lot of conversations with the rabbi. We just researched a lot. Sameer was always really opposed so it was more about getting me to come over to his side. I also have a lot of gay male friends, so I had a lot of conversations with a lot of different people. That's how I work. I do a lot of research and then determine a conclusion. I just wasn't convinced that they would be at greater risk. Some of the data on HIV and UTIs is pretty negligible, at least that's how I interpreted it. I also spoke to some Jewish friends who didn't do it, and that helped me not feel bad about not doing it. It was really helpful having a few friends that didn't do it.

Naomi continued to explain her husband's experience with circumcision: "I think he had a pretty a traumatic experience with his own circumcision because he was circumcised at age seven. He remembers being circumcised. He believes the body should be left as is and uses words like 'mutilation' to describe circumcision. He is concerned with the risks of circumcision and has strong feelings about circumcision in general." Sameer's first-hand experience with circumcision, and remembering the trauma of his own circumcision, are the catalysts for his views on circumcision. Experiencing circumcision, and remembering that experience, facilitated his opposition to circumcision. But for Naomi, who does not have this first-hand bodily experience and never considered not circumcising, had to reconcile opting out with her understanding of Jewish tradition. Naomi did a lot of research to determine whether the health benefits of circumcision she often heard were legitimate. She read the medical literature on circumcision and determined the potential benefits of circumcision did not outweigh the potential risks. According to Naomi's reading of the research, the benefits of circumcision are negligible and do not justify opting for circumcision. As a scientist, Naomi is used to reading medical literature and she quickly deduced, from a medical point of view, that circumcision was not necessary.

But this was not the end of the journey. Naomi continued speaking with friends, family, doctors, and rabbis about circumcision. She even spoke with her therapist about this looming decision. This decision was clearly a source of anxiety for Naomi. She explains why the decision was difficult to navigate: "In my gut I knew this was the right decision, but it was the social stigma that came with it that I had to work through." She was worried about how people would perceive her as a Jewish

mom who did not circumcise her sons. She was aware that others may have opinions or judgements about her decision, which contributed to her anxiety. Naomi also explained that growing up, she never met an uncircumcised man. All her boyfriends and sexual partners, Jewish and non-Jewish, were circumcised. This was something she was simply not familiar with. Even though Naomi knew the medical benefits were negligible, other factors were making this decision difficult to make.

Unlike many couples who choose not to circumcise, Naomi and Sameer did not experience dissenting opinions or disagreement from family members. Their families were largely supportive, especially after they explained the medical evidence in support of circumcision is negligible. Naomi's parents also had good friends whose adult children had also chosen not to circumcise. Naomi assumes that having other people in her parents' social circle who were also choosing not to circumcise made their decision easier to accept. This highlights the importance of one's friends and acquaintances. If someone knows other parents who have opted out of circumcision, they may feel comforted in their own decision not to circumcise (as Naomi expressed) or may be supportive of family members who choose to opt out (as was the case of Naomi's parents). Sameer's parents were supportive as well; they were more concerned and curious about what the ceremony they did opt for would be like.

Naomi explained that she and Sameer have different views of religion, and how these differences impacted her decision-making process. Naomi explained that she has a greater appreciation for religion and tradition, while Sameer sees religion has more of a divider. Because of their diverging views, Naomi feels she has to "pick her battles" vis-à-vis the religious observance of her family. Naomi explains: "I was more interested in having some traditional Judaism in our family, but I need to pick and choose with my husband because he's not Jewish. It's more important that we can celebrate Shabbat every week than our sons being circumcised. Given that, I wasn't convinced the evidence was strong enough to justify doing it." The interfaith dynamic of their relationship, and Sameer's skepticism with religion, creates a situation where Naomi needs her negotiate the religious observance of her family. Compromises need to be made, and Naomi feels there are other areas of Jewish observance that are more important than circumcision. In other words, circumcision was not one of the battles Naomi was going to pick.

In the end, Naomi agreed with Sameer, and they opted for an alternative welcoming ritual for their two sons. They met with the rabbi officiating the ritual, who shared a template of the ceremony with them. Naomi and Sameer were not creating a ritual from scratch. They were using an established template, which they edited to craft a welcoming ceremony that resonated with them. She explained the rabbi provided space for their input and was very open to their edits and additions. One of their edits was replacing what Naomi calls "God-talk" with more general language (such as "universe" and "being"). For Naomi and Sameer, the ritual was about welcoming their sons into the Jewish community and revealing their Hebrew names. Naomi appreciated the references to family and community during the ritual; this was the most meaningful part for her. This highlights the importance of family and community in this ritual moment. Not only are family and community central components in the ritual enactment, but also throughout the negotiation process. For their first son, they incorporated a foot washing element to the ritual but decided to forgo this for their second son. Naomi explained that it did not add much value to the ritual. Also, her second son was a toddler at the time of the ceremony and washing a toddler's feet would have been more difficult to navigate, so they simply decided to remove it. The removal

of this ritual action demonstrates how Naomi and Sameer tweaked the ritual for their second son. The foot washing was not the most meaningful part of the ritual and they deemed it impractical to include. Tweaking need not be significant or an area of dispute; Naomi and Sameer determined this action was not necessary and simply removed it from the ritual. It was a simple edit, and as Naomi explained, the most meaningful parts of the ritual remained firmly in place.

Naomi explains how her experience with her rabbi played an important role creating a ritual that they connect with: "I'm grateful that our rabbi was so open. If we couldn't find a rabbi that would officiate a ceremony, we probably wouldn't have circumcised and just not had any ceremony." Having a rabbi who was accepting of their decision to opt out of circumcision, and willing to officiate a ritual that resonated with them, provided Naomi and Sameer with an avenue for connection. Had their rabbi not been willing to officiate a non-cutting ceremony, Naomi thinks they would not have done anything to celebrate the birth of their sons and welcome them into the Jewish community. Accepting alternative ceremonies and giving people the freedom to contribute to "tinkering" with the ritual template facilitates connection and engagement with Jewish community and traditions.

Naomi and Sameer's story highlight important themes of this study. First, circumcision is an active decision parents are required to make for their sons. This decision is often difficult to navigate and takes time to work through. Indeed, this is a decision that comes up with interfaith couples, but it is a decision that in-married (or endogamous) Jewish couples face as well (I examine some of their stories in chapter one). Second, religion is site of negotiation between couples, and between couples and their rabbi. Couples make intentional decisions about the religious observance of their families, and when couples have diverging views on religion, they negotiate and compromise. The negotiation process also applies to rabbis. This was not necessarily the case for Naomi and Sameer, whose rabbi was very open to their ritual choice, but this is not always the case. Some parents are required to engage in a delicate negotiation process to locate a rabbi who is willing to officiate a non-cutting ritual for their son. As representatives of the larger Jewish community in which they are situated, the negotiation process between parents and their rabbi serves as a reflection of the community response to non-circumcision families. Finally, alternative rituals provide a means of connecting with tradition. Had Naomi and Sameer not been able to locate a rabbi who was willing to officiate a non-cutting ceremony, they likely would have not done anything to welcome their sons into the Jewish community. Alternative rituals are not a means of rejecting religion and tradition; instead, they represent and means of engagement with and affirmation of religious identity. Alternative rituals are also meaningful for the families who choose them. Removing the "*milah*" from a "*brit*" ceremony does not remove the significance of the ritual for the families who opt for non-cutting rituals.[41] Families who go through the effort of choosing not to circumcise and opting for an alternative ritual (and often contributing to the ritual, like Naomi and Sameer) find great significance in the ritual they have chosen. Non-cutting ceremonies carry the same significance and meaning for the families that choose them as the traditional *brit milah* ritual does for the families who opt for circumcision.

[41] "*Brit milah*" is the Hebrew term for covenant of circumcision. "*Brit*" means covenant, and "*milah*" means "circumcision." When I say "*brit* without *milah*," I am referring to a covenant ritual without circumcision.

More broadly, Naomi and Sameer's story highlights the ways couples navigate and negotiate religion within their families and local communities. Their story demonstrates the implications of their ritual choice with regards to their understanding of Jewishness. Their story highlights how Jewish practice can be adapted when there is a conflict of values. Their story showcases how rabbinic approval of alternative rituals facilitates a continued engagement with Judaism. Their story showcases how interfaith families negotiate religion. And finally, their story demonstrates how couples actively contribute to the rituals they are engaging in. But without the current context of American religious practice, which is one that values individualism and DIY religion, Naomi and Sameer's experience would likely have been very different.

THE CONTEXT OF CIRCUMCISION IN NORTH AMERICA

Circumcision rates started declining in Canada and the United States toward the end of the twentieth century. According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, 48% of males were circumcised in 1970. By 2007, that number declined to 31.9%.[42] A similar trend was witnessed in the United States. Between 1979 and 2010, circumcision rates declined 10%, from 64.5% to 58.3%.[43] That being said, it's important to note that circumcision rates vary widely within Canada and the United States. For instance, the midwestern part of the United States has the highest circumcision rates, while the west tends to have the lowest.[44] We also see regional differences within Canada; rates in Alberta tend to be the highest, and Nova Scotia has the lowest (44.3% and 6.8% in 2007, respectively).[45] The declining rates of circumcision could be a result of policy statements released by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS). In 1971, 1975, and 1983, the AAP released three circumcision policy statements that argued there was no valid medical reason to perform routine infant circumcision.[46] The CPS released a statement in 1975 that offered the same conclusion.[47] These policy statements had an impact on the medical practice of circumcision, and rates slowly started to decline in the 1970s.[48]

Activism against circumcision in the United States began in the 1980s. One of the first activist groups, the National Organization of Circumcision Information and Resource Center, also known

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[42] "What Mothers Say: The Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey" *Public Health Agency of Canada*, 2009: https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/rhs-ssg/pdf/survey-eng.pdf, page 222, last accessed February 6, 2022.

[43] Maria Owings, Sayeedha Uddin, and Sonja Williams, "Trends in Circumcision for Male Newborns in U.S. Hospitals: 1979-2010," National Center for Health Statistics, August 2013: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/circumcision_2013/circumcision_2013.pdf, page 1, last accessed February 6, 2022.

[44] Ibid., 5.

[45] "What Mothers Say: The Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey," 222.

[46] Ellen Shapiro, "American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statements on Circumcision and Urinary Tract Infection," *Reviews in Urology,* vol. 1, no. 3 (1999): 154-156.

[47] Fetus and Newborn Committee," Canadian Pediatric Society: Circumcision in the Newborn Period," *CPS News Bull,* 1975, 8 (2): 1-4.

[48] It's important to note here that circumcision rates have not consistently declined since the 1970s. In the United States, rates declined until the mid-1980s, increased until 1998, and declined again until 2010. And when we look at rates regionally, we see large variety. Despite these fluctuations, the overall rates of circumcision have declined since the 1970s. For more, see: Owings et al, "Trends in Circumcision for Male Newborns," 1.

as NOCIRC, was founded in 1985. Other prominent anti-circumcision organizations were created in the early 2000s. Saving Our Sons and Intact America were both founded in 2008.[49] Intaction and the Bloodstained Men were founded in 2010 and 2012 respectively.[50] Inaugurated in 1992, Genital Integrity Awareness Week (GIAW) brings together various activist groups for a week-long protest in Washington D.C. every year. [51]

The contemporary anti-circumcision movement has had a direct impact on the Jewish ritual of circumcision. Jews who are questioning circumcision usually resort to the Internet to conduct research and often interact with intactivist spaces online.[52] Engagement with intactivist spaces may be accidental; there are some intactivist groups whose names and/or online platforms fail to directly identify themselves as intactivists.[53] As a result, Jews (sometimes inadvertently) engage with these spaces, and the discourses within these spaces impact their perceptions of circumcision. But Jews are not questioning circumcision in a vacuum; they are actively responding to larger societal discussions about circumcision and shifting perceptions of this practice. They are responding to shifting perceptions of medical procedures and ideas about bodily autonomy. They are responding to stories of "botched" circumcisions and media coverage of circumcision controversies. And indeed they are responding to declining circumcision rates in North America. Declining rates of circumcision in Canada and the United States, and a small but influential anti-circumcision movement offering a critical perspective on the practice, are working together to shift the conversation about circumcision. And these societal shifts are impacting Jewish perceptions of circumcision. For the second half of the twentieth century, Jewish circumcision was compatible with Canadian and American medical practice. Circumcision rates were high in both countries, and doctors advised parents to circumcise their sons. But as rates of routine infant circumcision decline, ritual circumcision offers a site of tension with shifting cultural values and is becoming increasingly, as my interlocuters describe it, countercultural. As circumcision becomes more counter-cultural, this will become another site for Jews to decide whether, and how, to engage with this tradition.

This study about a specific ritual in a minority religion allows us to draw conclusions about North American religion and religious praxis more broadly. It demonstrates how people practice religion, and how lived religion varies from what is understood to be "tradition." It allows us to see how minority communities work through their identities, traditions, and customs in the context of the culture and society in which they are located. It allows us to examine how religious communities respond to people who challenge the status quo. It allows us to see innovation and change as a

[49] Saving our Sons, http://www.savingsons.org/, last accessed February 10, 2022; Intact America, "History," https://www.intactamerica.org/history-advocating-childrens-rights/, last accessed February 10, 2022.
[50] Intaction, "Our Mission, Our Founder, Our Directors," https://intaction.org/about-intaction/, last accessed February 10, 2022; Bloodstained Men, "Founding History," https://www.bloodstainedmen.com/about-us/founding-history/, last accessed February 10, 2022.
[51] Genital Integrity Awareness Week, "About," https://www.genitalintegrityawarenessweek.com/about, last accessed February 10, 2022. I observed the Genital Integrity Awareness Week protests that took place in April 2019.
[52] "Intactivist," or "intactivism," refers to the anti-circumcision movement. Intactivism is the amalgamation of the words "intact" and "activist." Intactivists are advocating for the bodies of baby boys to remain intact.
[53] "Beyond the *Bris*" and "Your Whole Baby" provide good examples of this.

means of connection and belonging. It allows us to see the nuance and complexity of lived religion. Tradition says that Jewish men must be circumcised, but lived religion offers a more nuanced picture of how this commandment is perceived and observed. And finally, it allows us to see how people go about adapting religion and tradition in real-time.

At this point it is important to note what this study does not do. This study is not about the *halakhic* or theological debates about circumcision.[54] This study is not about the history of Jewish interpretation of circumcision. This study does not settle the debate about the medical necessity of circumcision. I do not take a position on the medical efficacy of circumcision; instead, I examine how the parents, doctors, nurses, midwives, and rabbis I've spoken with view this practice. Because I do not attempt to settle the debate about its medical efficacy, I do not provide an analysis of the medical literature about circumcision. This literature certainly exists but is not necessary to examine in this study.[55] Finally, this study does not take an activist approach. I am not advocating for the eradication of circumcision or for the inclusion of non-circumcision Jews in the Jewish community. I am analyzing a phenomenon, not advocating or campaigning for a cause. I am not an anti-circumcision activist, a defender of circumcision, or trying to effect change in the Jewish community. I describe the views of people who identify as such, but my perspective is that of a scholar and ethnographer of religion. The words of the people whose stories and opinions I share belong to them and their inclusion in this study does not signal my agreement or endorsement.

A TYPICAL BRIS[56]

Bris ceremonies take place in the home or at synagogue, most often on the baby's eighth day of life. *Bris* ceremonies that take place in the synagogue are usually not attached to an existing service where community members are in attendance (like some naming ceremonies are performed). They are generally private events; one usually needs to be invited to attend. *Bris* ceremonies are comprised of two distinct parts: the ritual performance and a celebratory meal. The celebratory meal/socializing part of the event generally occurs after the ritual has been performed. It is at the *bris* where extended family and friends are often meeting the new baby for the first time. The mood is celebratory; people are generally excited to meet the baby and welcome him into the community.

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[54] *Halakha* is the Hebrew term for Jewish law.

[55] For a small sample of studies on the medical benefits and risks of circumcision, see: Brian D. Earp, "Do the Benefits of Circumcision Outweigh the Risks? A Critique of the Proposed CDC Guidelines," *Frontiers in Pediatrics,* vol. 3 (2015): https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fped.2015.00018/full, last accessed February 10, 2022; Morten Frisch, Yves Aigrain, Vidmantas Barauskas, Ragnar Bjarnason, Su-Anna Boddy, Piotr Czauderna, and Robert P. E. de Gier et al., "Cultural Bias in the AAP's 2012 Technical Report and Policy Statement on Male Circumcision," *Pediatrics,* vol. 131, no. 4 (2013): 796-800; Brian J. Morris, Sean E. Kennedy, Alex D. Wodak, Adrian Mindel, David Golovsky, Leslie Schrieber, Eugene R. Lumbers, David J. Handlesman, and John B. Ziegler, "Early Infant Male Circumcision: Systematic Review, Risk-Benefit Analysis, and Progress in Policy," *World Journal of Clinical Pediatrics,* vol. 6, no. 1 (2017): 89-102.

[56] My description of a *bris* comes from my own observations of *bris* ceremonies I attended and conversations with rabbis and *mohelim*, who I asked to describe a typical *bris* ceremony in my interviews. The *bris* ceremonies I observed were in a Reform context and may not represent a typical bris ceremony in more traditional communities.

When babies are circumcised in a ritual setting (that is, outside the hospital), it is usually performed by a ritual circumciser, known as a *mohel* in Hebrew. *Mohelim* receive specialized training to be certified as a ritual circumciser, and an important part of their training concerns performing a circumcision in accordance with Jewish law. Some *mohelim* are also rabbis and as such perform the ritual on their own, but it is also common for a rabbi and *mohel* to be present (even if the *mohel* is a rabbi). In this case, the *mohel* performs the circumcision while the rabbi officiates the ceremony, recites the blessings, and so on.

Bris ceremonies tend to follow a blueprint. Although there are variations between each *bris* ceremony, the overall structure of the ritual is similar. The basic order of the ritual is as follows: the rabbi or *mohel* welcomes the guests and explains what is about to take place (this is where the significance of the ritual is likely explained), the baby is brought to the front of the space either by the parents or a designated family member. The baby is given to the *mohel* or to the *sandek*, an honorary role usually given to a grandparent, who will hold the baby during the circumcision. It is also possible that the *sandek* does not hold the baby during the circumcision but stands nearby instead. After the baby arrives, the *mohel* or rabbi recites the blessing "Blessed is the one who has arrived." The father grants the *mohel* permission to circumcise the baby and recites a blessing. Before the circumcision, the *mohel* or rabbi recites a blessing that the commandment of circumcision is about to take place. The baby is sometimes strapped down to a board, and the *mohel* performs the circumcision. The removal of the foreskin is comprised of three steps: (1) removing the foreskin with a knife, (2) folding back the mucous membranes to expose the glands, and (3) suctioning blood from the wound. The final step, known as *metzizah b'peh*, has generated intense controversy within the Jewish community. Many *mohelim* do not perform this step, and if they do, many use a glass tube to avoid direct contact with the baby's penis. The baby's penis is usually prepared in advance of the ritual, allowing for the cutting portion to be efficient and over very quickly. After the circumcision has been performed and the penis bandaged, the *mohel* or rabbi recite a blessing over a glass of wine. The parents drink the wine, and sometimes a few drops are placed in the baby's mouth. At this point, the parents generally address their guests and share the significance of their son's Hebrew name(s). The ceremony ends and the celebratory portion of the program begins. It is believed that the prophet Elijah, the protector of children, is present for every circumcision ceremony. Elijah's presence is acknowledged through the inclusion of an empty chair, also known as "the chair of Elijah." Sometimes the baby is placed in the chair, or the chair remains vacant throughout the ritual. *Bris* ceremonies are typically short—the handful I've been to last around twenty minutes. The celebratory meal that takes place after the ritual is usually longer than the ritual itself.

This blueprint of a typical *bris* also provides a template for other welcoming rituals. Although specific actions are changed, naming ceremonies for boy and girls follow a similar template. The significance of the ritual is explained, family members or friends are given honorary roles during the ritual, certain actions are performed to represent the baby's official entrance into the community (such as wrapping the baby in a tallit, washing the baby's feet, or a symbolic cutting), the name(s) are revealed and their significance explained, and the ritual is often followed by a social gathering over food. Certain details of the ceremony may be different, but the overarching sequence of events and essence of the ritual is the same.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This is a case study; I study a small sample of non-circumcision Jews in a variety of North American cities as a means of examining a specific ritual decision some Jewish parents are making. The focus of this study is San Francisco and Montreal, and I broadened my study slightly by including a small sample of interlocuters from throughout North America. This strategy allowed me to focus on two primary cities, but also include other non-circumcision and their experience opting out in conversation with the experience of parents in San Francisco and Montreal. Because of the small size of my sample and the location of this study, I am not making any conclusions about North American Judaism as a whole. I am not trying to argue that my fieldwork is representative of what is taking place on a larger scale in Canada and the United States. This study is small and specific, and there are many other cities in North America where I could have conducted fieldwork. I chose San Francisco and Montreal for specific reasons (see below for more on this), and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic required me to change course and conduct fieldwork virtually. This combination of visiting specific cities and conducting fieldwork virtually in a sprinkling of other cities allowed for me to examine this trend slightly more broadly and include more informants in my research.

Small case studies are an effective means of studying a particular phenomenon in real-time. A case study may not allow researchers to draw large conclusions, but they indeed provide an avenue for a thorough analysis of a particular phenomenon. When designing this study, I drew inspiration from other ethnographies that examine a case study. Jodi Eichler-Levine and Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada are two such examples. Both study specific a specific community (crafters for Eichler-Levine, Catholic men who belong to a specific church in Williamsburg for Maldonado-Estrada). Despite conducting a relatively small number of interviews, Eichler-Levine and Maldonado-Estrada were able to effectively examine how Jewish women and Catholic men engage with religion in areas outside the purview of "traditional" religion. Crafting, for Jewish women, and physical labor, for Catholic men, represented their means of connection and "doing religion." Although one cannot draw large conclusions about how people "do" religion, these studies nuance and provide insight on how Jews and Catholics practice religion, and how people "do" religion outside the places where scholars normally look for religion.

I also drew inspiration from Eichler-Levine and Maldonado-Estrada's approach to participant-observation, which served to support their small sample size. In addition to interviews, Eichler-Levine attended craft conventions and synagogue knitting circles. Maldonado-Estrada volunteered at the site of her research, the Shrine Church Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and did physical labor alongside the men she was studying. She did not simply observe, she painted, constructed, and did the labor. This method of research was embodied and involved. These deep immersions allowed for Eichler-Levine and Maldonado-Estrada to become "observant participants" rather than "participant-observers." I drew inspiration from both their approaches to participant-observation and approached my own immersion with my research, especially in online spaces, as robustly and deeply.

Hillary Kaell's study on Christian pilgrimage to Israel also provided a model for my methodology. In *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage*, Kaell indeed interviewed Christians who participated in tours to Israel, but she also interviewed people who

were involved in other ways. In addition to interviewing the participants, who were the focus of her study, she also interviewed tour guides, leaders of the trips, and the accompanying clergy. Kaell's approach to the people who surround the main target of her study offered me a model to study the "surrounding" people of my main target population. Including surrounding populations in one's research (in other words, not just non-circumcision Jews, but other populations that surround the target population), allows for a deeper and more nuanced analysis of the target group or phenomenon. Kaell worked with seven pilgrimage groups but focused on two geographical locations (North Carolina and New England) in her analysis on Protestants and Catholics. Kaell also interviewed pilgrims from 37 states in in-person and telephone interviews. This "focused but scattered" approach served as my inspiration for focusing my study on two physical locations while also including a sample of non-circumcision families from outside my two primary geographical locations.

My primary methods of data collection were participant-observation and personal interviews. Participant observation is the practice of immersing oneself with the community under study and observing their practices from within the group environment. This immersive experience provides the researcher with an avenue to observe the group in as natural a state as possible. For the purpose of this study, I engaged in participant observation to observe ritual enactments, anti-circumcision protests, and online communities.

Throughout the course of my research, I was able to observe five *britot milah*, two non-cutting, and three baby naming ceremonies for baby girls. I decided to attend a handful of naming ceremonies for girls to observe the full spectrum of welcoming ceremonies for Jewish babies. Naming ceremonies for boys are sometimes modeled after naming ceremonies for girls, and attending such ceremonies contributed to my overall knowledge of welcoming rituals. My attendance at most of these private rituals was facilitated by rabbis I interviewed for my research. My priority was observing non-cutting rituals, but this proved difficult. Most of the people I interviewed who opted out of circumcision had already done so; by the time I was interviewing them, the decision was made and if they did an alternative ritual, it had already taken place. It was difficult to locate families who were making the decision in real-time. Nevertheless I was able to observe two non-cutting rituals. One ritual I attended in person, and the other was recorded and the family shared the video with me. Even though I only observed two non-cutting ceremonies, I consistently asked my interlocuters to describe the ritual in as much detail as they could (in fact, I did this with parents who chose circumcision as well). When parents or observers describe something that happened in the past, it gives you a good sense of the important or notable parts of the ritual because that's what they remember. People tend to remember what made the most impact. Speaking with people about the rituals they observed or were part of offered a fruitful alternative to observing the rituals myself.

I observed two anti-circumcision protests throughout the course of my research. I observed a portion of Genital Integrity Awareness Week in Washington D.C., which took place at the end of March and beginning of April in 2019. The second protest I attended was a small demonstration by the Bay Area Intactivists at the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco in May 2019. Located in high traffic areas, it was easy for me to blend into the crowd and observe both protests without attracting much attention to myself. Observing these protests allowed me to see the tactics used by these groups, who they seem to be targeting, and the response from passersby to their

demonstration. I also spoke informally with some protesters, who were very happy to speak to someone who seemed interested in what they were doing (they were often heckled by passersby). Being present for these two protests and having the opportunity to speak with some protestors provided me with a unique opportunity to learn more about the intactivist movement and the tactics they use to draw attention to their cause. I also acquired materials from the protest in Washington, D.C., and incorporate them into my analysis in chapters three and four.

Image 1: Protestor on west lawn of Capitol Hill at Genital Integrity Awareness Week in March & April 2019. Picture taken by author.

Image 2: Protestor on west lawn of Capitol Hill at Genital Integrity Awareness Week in March & April 2019. Picture taken by author.

Image 3: Protestors on west lawn of Capitol Hill at Genital Integrity Awareness Week in March & April 2019. Picture taken by author.

Image 4: Bay Area Intactivists Demonstration in San Francisco in May 2019. Picture taken by author.

The final area where I did a form of participant observation was online. Jews who question circumcision often resort to the Internet for research. Jews who are considering opting out also use the Internet to find other link-minded Jews to connect with. Finally, anti-circumcision groups form community online, and do a lot of their activism on social media. As such, I joined several public Facebook groups, such as "Jews Against Circumcision," "Saving Our Sons," "Genital Autonomy America," and "You Whole Baby." For the groups that had public Instagram pages, I followed them on Instagram as well. Immersion in these online groups provided me with an additional avenue of participant observation, and I use some of their online content in my analyses (mostly in chapters three and four). Since anti-circumcision activists are not located in one central area and are scattered all over the North America, they mobilize, strategize, spread awareness, and create community online. As a result, my immersion in these groups and following them online was central to my research. It is important to note that the protest materials and online communities I analyze in this dissertation are not Jewish spaces—these are intactivist spaces that Jews who are questioning (or are opposed to circumcision) engage with. They are not exclusively Jewish spaces or Jewish forms of activism, and I make this demarcation clear throughout the dissertation.

My primary method of data collection was through personal interviews. I conducted a little over 100 interviews with six distinct populations:

a) Jewish parents who opted out of *brit milah*. Most of the parents I connected with opted for an alternative ritual. Only a small handful did not replace *brit milah* with a non-cutting ritual.
b) Jewish parents who chose to circumcise. Most of these parents had their son circumcised in a ritual setting. A small minority opted for a hospital circumcision and had a separate ceremony, usually officiated by a rabbi, for family and friends.
c) Congregational and freelance rabbis who officiate non-cutting rituals.
d) Congregational rabbis who do not officiate non-cutting rituals.
e) Ritual circumcisers.
f) Anti-circumcision activists (Jewish and not Jewish).

Although these populations appear distinct, there was often overlap. Identities are complex and nuanced, and my interlocuters do not necessarily fit neatly into the categorizations I provide above. For example, rabbis often have children, and if they have sons, I asked them about their decision to circumcise (or not circumcise). Some anti-circumcision Jews are also parents, so once again, I would ask them about the decision they made for their sons. And some anti-circumcision activists did choose to circumcise, offering nuance to their lived experience as a parent and activist. Some Jewish parents also fit into multiple categories. For instance, one couple circumcised their first son and did not circumcise their second son. While reading this dissertation, it is important to keep in mind that identities are complex and nuanced, and the people whose stories I share likely fit into multiple population categories I outlined above.

My sampling technique was snowball sampling, and I connected with people through my personal connections or my interlocuters. I would often be connected to other potential interviewees through someone I had already connected with and interviewed. I was also connected to other families through rabbis. With one exception, I was able to observe welcoming rituals through my connections with rabbis, who helped to facilitate my presence at such events. On several occasions

I sought research participants through online groups. I connected with most rabbis and *mohelim* by e-mailing or calling them directly to request an interview. In a few instances I was able to connect with rabbis via a mutual contact. This proved helpful in gaining access to more traditional rabbis, who may have otherwise been put off by my research topic.

Most interviews were one-on-one, open ended, and semi-structured. On a handful of occasions, I interviewed a couple together. Most of my interviews were conducted in person, but some were conducted virtually or over the phone. This allowed for me to broaden my analysis beyond the places I visited to conducted fieldwork and connected me with more interlocuters. Using a combination of in-person and long-distance interviews also allowed me to continue doing fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Locating parents who opted out was more difficult than locating parents who chose to circumcise, so I had to employ several methods to connect with non-circumcision Jews. The method that generated the most interviews were my personal connections. I would interview a couple I knew from my own circle, and then they would connect me with a contact of theirs that also opted out. This was the recruitment method that proved most prolific. Although less common, I also connected with couples through online Facebook groups, and these informants would also connect me with others in their network who opted out. Interlocuters who I recruited from online groups were particularly passionate about this issue. They reached out to me after I posted my general call for interviews, which points to their interest and eagerness at being involved in this research. They wanted to be heard, were eager to tell their stories, and want non-cutting rituals to be accepted in Judaism. This passion and sense of initiative was not always as strong with my personal contacts, who I reached out to directly about being interviewed. But it is important to know that a segment of the non-circumcision Jews included in this research are Jews who feel particularly passionate about circumcision and their choice to opt out. I also connected with non-circumcision Jews through rabbis who officiate non-cutting rituals. Regarding rabbis and *mohelim*, I would contact them directly, usually via e-mail, to request for an interview. Some rabbis were enthusiastic about being involved in this research, but others were hesitant or failed to respond. I also conducted a handful of "off the record" interviews with rabbis who were concerned about remaining confidential. I could not include these interviews in the dissertation, but they provided me with fruitful information and context nonetheless.

My own positionality played an important role throughout the course of my research. As a non-Jewish woman with no children, I was often perceived to be "unbiased" or "objective" by my interlocuters (especially by non-circumcision Jews). When connecting with Jews who had chosen not to circumcise, my non-Jewishness worked in my favor. Many non-circumcision Jews I connected with made clear that they would have felt differently being interviewed by a Jew about their decision not to circumcise. My non-Jewishness allowed some interlocuters to perceive me as non-judgmental about their choice. My sense was that my non-Jewishness and lack of personal involvement in the Jewish community gave interlocuters a feeling of security in sharing their stories and being honest about their views on circumcision. My age and gender also granted me access and connections. It was easy for me to forge connections with young parents, especially mothers, because of our closeness in age and my gender. Another important factor was the fact that I do not have children. I have never been faced with any parenting decision, and most importantly, have never had to make a choice about circumcision. Not being a parent myself

further allowed my informants to perceive me as truly unbiased and objective since I was never personally faced with a similar decision. Had I had a son, this likely would have changed the dynamic of my interviews. My identity as a non-Jew and my parental status was broached in every interview. Every single one of my informants asked if I was Jewish and if I had children. Some interlocuters also asked if I was an anti-circumcision activist (which I am not). These parts of my identity were front and center in many of my interviews, and with a few exceptions, worked in my favor in connecting with potential interviewees and in the interview space itself.

At times, my non-Jewishness served as a barrier to access. When reaching out to rabbis and parents who chose to circumcise, some were skeptical about my project, and my identity as a non-Jew made some who were already skeptical even more skeptical. I had to prove I did not have nefarious motivations for this project, and often had to work hard to gain the trust of potential interlocuters. Circumcision can be a controversial subject, and Jews choosing not to circumcise is indeed controversial, and some did not want to be involved in such a controversial project. And my identity as a non-Jew, and the difficulty some potential informants had in trusting my motivation and position as a scholar, led to some choosing not to be involved in my project. For the people who had difficulty trusting me, I suspect my identity as a non-Jew studying a controversial subject in the Jewish community served as a barrier for their involvement.

The two primary places where I conducted my field research in person were San Francisco and Montreal. San Francisco is the hub of the anti-circumcision movement and there are several active intactivist groups located in the Bay Area, such as the Bay Area Intactivists and Genital Autonomy America. In 2011, anti-circumcision activists in San Francisco lobbied to criminalize circumcision and include it as a ballot measure for the December 2011 municipal elections. Although circumcision did not make it on the ballot, this attempt highlights the strength of the anti-circumcision movement in the Bay Area. No other geographical location in the United States or Canada has attempted to vote on banning circumcision. Because of the anti-circumcision tenor in San Francisco, this setting offered a compelling site to examine Jewish responses to circumcision. Although circumcision rates are lower in the Bay Area, opting out of *brit milah* remains controversial. As a more traditional Jewish community, Montreal provides a contrast to the more liberal-leaning and activist-centered Jewish community in San Francisco. The overwhelming majority of synagogues in Montreal are Orthodox—there is only one Reform and one Reconstructionist synagogue in the city. This contrasts significantly with many other North American cities, where the majority of synagogues tend to be Reform. I wanted to examine circumcision in an array of Jewish communities—from liberal to traditional—and Montreal provides the locale for a more traditional community. Studying this phenomenon in two completely different places allows us to analyze how communities with varying religious beliefs are responding to families opting out of circumcision. Because non-circumcision families are scattered and not necessarily concentrated in specific cities (perhaps with the exception of San Francisco), I also conducted virtual interviews with people located in cities where I did not physically visit to conduct fieldwork. The combination of visiting specific cities and interviewing people virtually who are dispersed throughout Canada and the United States allowed me to connect with and include more informants in my research and examine this phenomenon on a larger scale.

Although not a physical space, another site of my research was the Internet, more specifically, groups on social media. I joined public groups and followed intactivist organizations on social

media as a means of "participant-observation" and gaining understanding of these groups. Because these groups were public, I was able to remain anonymous. This differs from traditional participant-observation, where one's status as a researcher is known and their presence consented to. Although intactivist spaces are not necessarily religious spaces, Jews who are grappling with their religion tend to interact with these spaces, and the Internet more generally. They conduct research and seek community online. In other words, the Internet becomes a central site to which Jews who are questioning circumcision turn. Stephen O'Leary has argued that the Internet serves as a sacred space for religious people and can facilitate significant changes in religious belief, faith, and spiritual life.[57] Since then, a corpus of research has supported his argument by pointing out significant changes in religious power, community, identity, and ceremonies.[58] The Internet allows users to undergo new spiritual and religious experiences that they perceive as enabling expression and identity formation as well as spiritual and social support.[59] In other words, the Internet is central to religious community, engagement, and beliefs, and as such, the Internet served as an important field site for my research. Building off the scholarship that examines the impact of the Internet on religious change, my study highlights the centrality of the digital world in the decision to opt out of circumcision. All of the families who chose to opt out relied on the Internet in some capacity in their decision-making process. They conducted research online, joined parent and intactivist groups on Facebook, and used social media to connect with other Jews grappling with (or who have made) the decision to opt out. Many formed community online, which proved especially important for those whose social circle did not include other parents who also chose not to circumcise. The Internet represents an avenue for research and a means of creating community, and ultimately facilitates the decision to opt out. In the case of circumcision, the Internet is central in facilitating ritual change.

One of my goals throughout the dissertation was the share the stories of families and rabbis, and I tried to do this by sharing as much information and details about them as possible. I dedicate a lot of space to sharing the most complete story of my interlocuters as I could within the limits of protecting confidentiality and the limits of space. This sometimes proved difficult, especially when I was trying to conceal the identities of my informants. When sharing their stories, I tried to be as detailed as I could without divulging so much that they could be identified. This proved more complicated when I was required conceal their location (Rabbi Samuel in chapter two is one example). In these cases, I had to be even more cautious and careful about the details that I shared. And indeed, if I were able to divulge more information or identify where Rabbi Samuel was located (for instance), my analysis would have been different. Another one of my goals was to include interviews that were representative of my overall sample. For instance, I connected with more interfaith families than endogamous couples, so I included more interfaith families in the

[57] Stephen O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 64, no. 4 (1996): 781–808.
[58] Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me that Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) and Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[59] Jennifer J. Cobb, *Cyber Grace: The Search for God in the Digital World* (New York: Crown, 1998) and Charles Ess, Akira Kawabata, and Hiroyuki Kuroskai, "Cross-Cultural Perspective on Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* vol. 12, no. 3 (2007): 939–955.

dissertation. I connected with more women than men, so women's voices are more prominent. I interviewed more Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis, so they are represented in higher numbers than more traditional rabbis. I tried to replicate the characteristics of my sample in the interviews selected to be in included in the dissertation.

In addition to ethnographic method, I also analyze depictions of circumcision in pop culture. Examining how circumcision is depicted in film and television provides an avenue for analysis outside Jewish circles. This allows us to interrogate how circumcision is discussed and perceived on a wider scale, and how these depictions could be impacting (and perhaps reflecting) the Jewish observance of this ritual. Pop culture captures societal views of circumcision and provide further insight into the wider social and cultural perceptions of circumcision in North America.

A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY

I intentionally use what I call "language of choice" to describe parents' choices vis-à-vis circumcision. Some Jewish parents may not see circumcision as a choice; they may say there was no decision or choice to be made and it was assumed they would circumcise. But I challenge this position. Whether someone chooses to circumcise or decides to opt out, this certainly involves an active decision. And there are layers to this decision. Parents who opt for circumcision need to decide if they are doing it in the hospital or in a ritual setting with a *mohel*. If they opt for a ritual setting, they need to select a *mohel*. They need to decide whether they want the *mohel* to use a topical anesthetic, or if they would like a doctor to be present to administer a local anesthetic. If parents choose to have a *bris*, they need to decide where that *bris* will take place and who will be invited. Parents who choose to circumcise in the hospital need to decide whether to have an accompanying ritual to draw blood from the penis and render the circumcision *halakhically* complete. Parents who opt out need to decide whether to opt for an alternative ritual. Indeed, there are a lot of decisions to be made, and opting for circumcision, just as much as opting out, is a choice. I use this language throughout the dissertation to highlight the fact that choosing to circumcise or choosing not to circumcise are both active and deliberate choices parents make for their children.

It is important to distinguish what I mean when I refer to anti-circumcision, intactivism, and non-circumcision Jews. Intactivism refers to the movement that opposes routine infant circumcision. When I use "intactivist" or "intactivism," I am referring to a specific activist movement and people who identify with this movement. Anti-circumcision is a term that intactivists reject, but I use anti-circumcision to refer to people who are against circumcision and do not associate with the intactivist movement. I do not use "intactivism" and "anti-circumcision" interchangeably; intactivism refers to a specific movement and anti-circumcision is a broader term that refers to people who are against circumcision but do not associate with the intactivist movement. For example, if I refer to an "anti-circumcision Jew," this refers to a Jew who is against circumcision but does not identify as an intactivist. It is also important to note that not all Jews who choose not to circumcise would consider themselves to be against circumcision. I refer to these people as non-circumcision Jews.

There are various ways to refer to rituals that do not involve the removal of the foreskin, and I use a number in this dissertation. In general, I use "welcoming, "naming," or "covenantal" to refer to

ceremonies for boys that do not involve the removal of the foreskin and for ceremonies for baby girls. When referring specifically to ceremonies for baby boys that do not involve the removal of the foreskin, I sometimes use "non-cutting," "alternative," or "*brit* without *milah*" to refer to such rituals. I use "welcoming," "naming," and "covenantal" to refer to ceremonies for either boys or girls, but when I reference "non-cutting," "alternative," or "*brit* without *milah*" rituals, I am specifically referring to ceremonies for boys that do not involve the removal of the foreskin. I only use specific terminology, such as *brit shalom*, when the people interviewed use that specific language to refer to such rituals. I adopt the language my interlocuters use to describe the ritual in their own words. But when referring to such rituals independent of my interlocuters, I tend to use more general language (that is, non-cutting, alternative, welcoming or covenantal ritual). Finally, I refer to circumcision rituals as "traditional circumcision," "*bris*," or "*brit milah*."[60]

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

CHAPTER ONE

The dissertation begins with an examination of ritual choice and adaption. I start with an analysis of four families and how they decided to opt out of circumcision. I examine the dynamics of this choice and demonstrate that the decision to opt out begins with what I call an "initiating moment." This initiating moment prompts a process of research and reflection, which gradually culminates with the decision to opt out. I examine the decision-process of the four families, what represents their initiating moment, and how people negotiate the conflict of values between their views on circumcision and their understanding of Jewish tradition, belief, and identity. I also examine how the negotiation process can extend to the family, and the role of family dynamics in this ritual decision. I situate this examination in the context of American religion and analyze how American values vis-à-vis religious engagement facilitate adapting tradition. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze the dynamics of ritual adaption through a *brit shalom* ritual I observed while doing fieldwork in San Francisco. I argue that strategies of interpretation and strategies of action are used to facilitate ritual adaptation and temper divergence from the traditional *brit milah* ritual.

CHAPTER TWO

The dynamics of ritual choice and adaptation is followed by an examination of community responses to non-circumcision Jews. Parents who choose not to circumcise and want to celebrate the birth of their child with an identifiably Jewish covenantal ceremony are then faced with the challenge of finding a rabbi who is willing to officiate such a ceremony. Depending on the Jewish community in which one is situated, finding a rabbi to officiate a non-cutting ritual can be difficult. In this chapter, I examine the process of ritual negotiation at four synagogues in Canada and the United States. Non-circumcision Jews are requesting for the *brit milah* ceremony to be adapted into a non-cutting alternative, and rabbis vary in their willingness to negotiate and accommodate

[60] It is important to note that opting out of circumcision in lieu of a naming ceremony is not necessarily new. The first known *brit shalom* was performed in 1970 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism. And Humanistic Jews reject circumcision. This study examines *brit shalom* (and other non-cutting rituals) beyond the Humanistic community. For more on Humanistic Judaism's stance on circumcision, see: "Birth," *Society for Humanistic Judaism*, https://shj.org/living-humanistic-judaism/life-cycle-events/birth/, last accessed April 27, 2022.

this request. I examine the complex dynamics of negotiation and the nuanced process of accommodating (or rejecting) non-normative ritual. Negotiating ritual change often involves a delicate dance between the personal beliefs of the rabbi and the tenor of their congregation and the wider Jewish community in which they are situated. Similar to the decision made by parents to opt out, the decision to negotiate and accommodate ritual change is complex, layered, and often inconsistent.

CHAPTER THREE

In chapters three and four I pivot from ritual to gender and parenting, and how gender stereotypes impact the decision to circumcise. I examine how discourses on mothering and mom-shaming affect parents' discussions and experiences of circumcising their sons. As many studies have shown, our current construction of parenting is one that assigns mothers as the primary caregivers of children. Because mothers are viewed as primary caregivers, they carry most of the weight and blame when making decisions for their children. I examine how this cultural perception of parenting infiltrates the decision-making process of Jewish parents and how mothers and fathers experience and react to their sons' circumcisions. I also examine how discourse about motherhood is used in the intactivist movement. I argue that stereotypes about motherhood are used and perpetuated by intactivists to convince (and arguably shame) mothers to "save their sons" from the harms of circumcision. An examination of how mothers have internalized gendered stereotypes of parenting and the use of these stereotypes in intactivist discourse demonstrates how stereotypes about parenting persist and operate cross-culturally.

CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter examines another layer of the decision-making process, and this layer concerns the male body. I analyze how notions of hygiene, attractiveness, and intelligibility are central to Jewish perceptions of circumcision. Jews engage with, internalize, accept, and perpetuate these discourses. Conceptions of hygiene and the ideal Jewish body are part of the reason some Jews continue to observe the ritual of circumcision. Circumcision is imbedded with meaning that transcend the original significance of the ritual. In other words, it is not *just* a covenantal ritual; it is also a ritual that encapsulates conceptions of hygiene, attractiveness, and Jewish masculinity. Indeed, circumcision represents a means through which Jewish boys are welcomed into the covenant between God and the Jewish people, but it also serves as a means of transforming the body into an *ideal* (Jewish) body. Through an examination of the depiction of circumcision in pop culture, I also argue that the ideal male body in North America is a circumcised body. Circumcision represents the optimal state of the penis for both Jews and non-Jews. I conclude by examining the counter discourse utilized by some Jewish men who have restored their penises and within the intactivist movement more broadly. For intactivists, an intact penis is the ideal, and I examine how they are actively trying to normalize foreskin and challenge the dominant discourse about circumcised penises.

Altogether these chapters tell an important story about how Jews engage with ritual circumcision. And as these chapters demonstrate, this engagement is complex and nuanced. Many factors are layered into this ritual moment, which requires a careful and deliberate analysis to fully appreciate.

But let’s start at the very beginning, when an individual asks themselves the question that activates a complex web of factors and a complex chain of events: to circumcise or not to circumcise.

CHAPTER ONE
To Circumcise or not to Circumcise? Ritual Choice, Agency, and Agony

Opting out of circumcision begins with a precise moment that initiates a shift in a person's perception of circumcision. Sometimes this initiating moment triggers a gradual journey to the ultimate decision of opting out. The initiating moment can also trigger a sudden shift in perspective; witnessing a circumcision up close, for example, can result in someone feeling strongly opposed to circumcision. For the mothers featured in this chapter, their initiating moments prompted a slow revision of their views on circumcision. They recall the moment that invited them to think differently about circumcision, but their final decision to opt out of circumcision came after a long and arduous period of negotiation. Their journeys demonstrate that the decision to opt out is not easy. They experience a deep conflict of values that takes effort to reconcile. They feel the pull of tradition. They experience the resistance, disappointment, and anger of family members. But despite these hurdles, they were (mostly) able to hold true to their decision and withstand the pressure to conform to the status quo.

This chapter examines the dynamics of the initiatory moment that prompts questioning circumcision. This initiatory moment subsequently leads to a complex process of negotiation that can lead to opting out of circumcision. This chapter also examines how rituals deemed problematic are not necessarily abandoned in their entirety; instead, they are refashioned to suit the shifting values of contemporary practitioners. Adapting and creating new rituals, albeit sometimes controversial, is increasingly accessible in the current landscape of American religious praxis, where DIY (do-it-yourself) religion has become commonplace. Building on scholarly examinations of DIY religion, I contend that some non-circumcision families are utilizing the DIY ethos of American religious practice to calibrate the traditional *brit milah* into a covenantal ceremony that resonates with their views on circumcision. Non-circumcision Jews are actively reinterpreting and emphasizing certain elements of *brit milah* to craft a personalized, but identifiably Jewish, non-cutting welcoming ritual. Differences between *brit milah* and non-cutting rituals are minimized in order establish a palatable equilibrium between tradition and innovation. These deliberate adjustments create a ritual enactment that appears familiar and recognizable, diminishing friction over this unconventional ritual choice. I argue non-circumcision families are not rejecting the traditional circumcision ritual in its entirety; instead, they are adapting it. They are also not rejecting Judaism. They want a Jewish alternative to a traditional *bris*, and they want their child to be brought up in the Jewish community. Rather than inventing a new ritual, non-circumcision ceremonies are adaptations and bear a resemblance to a traditional *bris*, allowing them to mirror the ritual upon which they are modeled.

This analysis will demonstrate that non-cutting ceremonies are not novel innovations; rather, these rituals are adaptations of the *brit milah*. The rituals, at their core, serve the same purpose, utilize similar stories, symbols, actions, and gestures, rendering non-cutting ceremonies familiar and recognizable. Rather than creating a new ritual, the *brit milah* is tweaked and adapted into a non-cutting covenantal ceremony. This showcases that non-circumcision parents want to engage with and be included in this ritual moment. They are not vying for a new ritual to replace *brit milah*; instead, they want to participate in an identifiable *brit* ceremony, but simply without the *milah*.

OPTING OUT: FAMILY CASE STUDIES

Parents come to the decision not to circumcise their son(s) through a period of reflection, research, and discussions with friends, family members, and religious leaders (such as rabbis and *mohelim*). Parents struggling with this decision will often reach out to peers to share their feelings and discuss their dilemma. They will often speak to their rabbi (or several rabbis) when contemplating the idea of not circumcising their sons. Some will broach the topic with their families, while others choose to keep their feelings from their families until they have reached a final decision. The entire process, which begins with an initiating moment and ends with a final decision, is often an arduous one. The gravity of the decision weighs heavily on the couple, and parents rarely make this decision without careful thought. The decision is also generally made over a period of time, allowing for research and discussions to take place. To demonstrate how couples come to the decision to opt out of *brit milah*, I turn to the stories of four families. Their stories are representative of a pattern of negotiation I encountered throughout my research. Hailing from Oakland, California, Montreal, Quebec, Toronto Ontario, and Atlanta, Georgia, these four families identify as Jewish, but their level of religious observance varies. Despite their regional and religious differences, they all encountered various levels of resistance toward their decision to opt out of circumcision.

TIRZA AND ERIN—"THE JEWISH PIECE MADE THE DECISION A LOT HARDER."[1]

Tirza and Erin live in Oakland, California.[2] Erin comes from an interfaith Jewish family, where one of her parents is Jewish and the other is not. Although Erin did not lead an extensively Jewish life growing up—her main exposure to Judaism was through her grandparents—she became more interested in and engaged with Judaism in her early twenties. She had a *bat mitzvah* ceremony in college and became more observant at this stage in her life. She has since backed off her level of observance somewhat, but Tirza considers Erin to be much more Jewishly engaged than she is. Tirza, on the other hand, was raised in a Jewish household. Her parents kept kosher and they didn't drive on the Sabbath. Currently, their family belongs to two congregations (one Reform, one unaffiliated), they do not use electronics on the Sabbath, and their children go to Jewish preschool.[3]

As a pediatrician, Tirza often encounters patients seeking her opinion on circumcision. Parents often wonder whether they should circumcise, and Tirza is consistently approached for her professional opinion on the matter. Tirza explains how she approaches the question when it is

[1] Tirza and Erin are pseudonyms. Tirza, interview with author, May 20, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Tirza.

[2] Almost all the couples I interviewed are heterosexual couples. Tirza and Erin are the only lesbian couple I interviewed in my research.

[3] It is important to note here that the majority of my informants are members of Reform, Reconstructionist, or unaffiliated congregations. As such, there is a denominational element to opting out of circumcision. But it is also important to note that synagogue affiliation is not necessarily an indicator of how one identifies as a Jew. For instance, someone might be a member of a Reform synagogue, but may not necessarily identify as a Reform Jew. Someone might be a member of a synagogue because of their connection with the senior rabbi, the synagogue's position on certain issues, or because of something as simple as the synagogue's proximity to one's home. Similar to the complexity of Jewish identity, denominational affiliation is complex and is not necessarily an accurate indicator of how one identifies as a Jew.

broached by her patients: "There are a couple of medical benefits that are really not compelling enough. So I wouldn't use the medical benefits to justify it. I think for families it's a really personal decision that's really mostly based on culture. If someone comes from a culture that doesn't circumcise or doesn't talk about it, they probably shouldn't do it."

When Erin became pregnant with their first child, they started discussing circumcision.[4] Erin was more strongly opposed to it than Tirza, who grappled with the implications of the decision. Tirza's initiating moment was her own experience as a pediatrician and her medical insight, and her wife's opposition to circumcision. These two aspects of Tirza's experience prompted a shift in her perspective. At the same time, Tirza remained internally conflicted:

> I think my wife felt more strongly about not doing it than I did. I feel a lot more conflicted. She was very much like, 'We're not going to do this' and I was very happy to go along with that because it didn't feel like a big conflict to me. In theory I'm opposed to it, but in reality I was definitely worried about what my family would say. I think there are compelling Jewish reasons to do it, and for my wife and for me, I just don't think they were compelling enough to do it. We definitely discussed it, we talked about it with a friend of mine who is a cantor, who was less supportive than we thought about not circumcising. We were really kind of shocked by how unsupportive he was.

Despite being against circumcision "in theory," Tirza grappled with what she describes as "the Jewish piece":

> For us it's about bodily autonomy. It just doesn't feel right for us to make that decision for our kids. I feel like making a permanent change to someone's body should only be made with their consent. That's very clear to me and very clear to Erin. If there wasn't the Jewish piece there wouldn't have been any question about not circumcising. But the Jewish piece made it a lot harder.

Tirza describes the other elements that complicated her decision and continued to prompt her internal negotiation process:

> We did not know the sex of our baby until birth so there was a lot of denial in my mind that we would even have to make this decision. I think I wasn't fully engaged. I have a hard time making decisions when they're not concrete and it was hard for me to fully engage until it became real. We talked about it and my wife was like, 'I don't want to circumcise,' and then I started thinking, 'What is that going to look like? How do I feel about that?' We have some friends that had chosen not to circumcise so we talked about it with them and talked about it together before we were even having a kid and we decided we were against it. But then I started thinking about it and there's actually a reality to it and I need to consider that when making this decision for my kid. And that was harder because I thought my family was going to flip. My wife was carrying the baby so I was already worried about their connection to the baby because it wasn't a genetic relationship.

[4] Tirza and Erin used a sperm donor, and Erin carried both their children.

Tirza describes that opting out of circumcision may be easy in theory, but upon further thought and reflection, she realized there are implications of this choice. She asked herself, "What is that going to look like?" and "How do I feel about that?" Tirza explains there is a "reality" to the decision of opting out. And on top of these reflections, Tirza was worried about the response of her family. Even though Tirza initially claimed she did not experience a major internal conflict with this decision, her continued reflections and doubts complicated this seemingly easy decision. Finally, Tirza explains how the "Jewish piece" continued to affect her reflection process:

> And then I started thinking about Jewish stories that really stuck with me. And one of them is the binding of Isaac, which is about faith and how we do things we don't understand. There was a piece of me where this felt like a test of faith and then I was like, 'If this is a test of faith, why aren't we doing it to girls? Why are we valuing our love for our boys above our girls?' The fact that it's so obviously a one-sided, one-gendered thing gives not circumcising more credence in my mind because it's obvious that Judaism has evolved where boys and girls have equal value. The fact that there is no equivalent for girls is more justification that this is a tradition that needs to go out.

Despite Tirza having her opinion as a pediatrician and being against circumcision "in theory," she struggled with the decision when it involved her own child. She describes feeling compelled by the story of the binding of Isaac, where Abraham put his faith and trust in God and was about to sacrifice his son.[5] God spared Isaac, but Abraham demonstrated obedience to God in this situation. Abraham is also the first to receive the commandment of circumcision from God, and thus the first to be circumcised and observe this commandment.[6] Tirza wondered if her circumstance, the circumcision of her own son, was her personal test of faith. There was another element at play, namely her family's potential reaction and connection to the baby, that was pulling her towards circumcision. But then she solidified her opinion against circumcision when she considered that Jewish girls are not circumcised. Circumcision, to Tirza, is a one-sided ritual that is representative of the unequal value applied to boys and girls. For Tirza, choosing a non-cutting ceremony affirms equality between Jewish boys and girls. Tirza explains how she continued grappling with the decision: "People have died for their right to circumcise and I'm like, 'I just don't want my boy to feel like I made a decision for him.' People died for this right and I'm giving it up because I think it's distasteful sticks with me as well. That was pulling me back."

Once Tirza made her final decision and agreed with Erin not to circumcise their son, she worried about sharing news of the decision with her Jewish family. Tirza assumed her family would not be happy with the decision. Anticipating a negative reaction, Tirza sent what she characterizes as a defensive e-mail to her parents and grandmother informing them of their decision. Because she wanted to avoid a discussion and potential conflict about their decision, Tirza felt an e-mail would prevent discussions on the matter. The e-mail reads as follows:

> We wanted to let you know that in addition to the naming ceremony we'll have at shul when you're here, we are planning a small ceremony for the baby's 8th day of life, where we will reveal his Hebrew name as well as the significance of his

[5] The story of the binding of Isaac can be found in Genesis 22:1-20.
[6] Genesis 17: 1-27.

> names. Please let us know if you would like to attend over FaceTime (Wednesday at 5pm PST).
> We decided not to circumcise [the baby], and instead to welcome him into the Jewish people and Jewish tradition with an alternative ceremony called *Brit Shalom* (Covenant of Peace). More information on this ceremony and what it might include can be found here: http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/adapted-traditional-bris-milah-ceremony
> In short, while we did wrestle with our personal feelings as well as with Jewish tradition on this matter, we concluded that any permanent changes to our child's body that are not medically necessary will be made with his explicit understanding and consent. We know that he will be welcomed wholeheartedly into his Jewish community regardless.[7]

Although Tirza anticipated a reaction from her parents and grandmother, this did not materialize in the way she imagined. Tirza's parents have never questioned her decision or even broached the topic. They did respond to the e-mail, but only to confirm their presence at the ceremony and did not address the decision not to circumcise. Tirza explains, "They've been nothing but amazing as grandparents" and have accepted her children despite their lack of genetic connection and the boys not being circumcised. Her grandmother, on the other hand, responded somewhat differently. She did not directly address or share her disdain for the decision, but about one month later, Tirza received an article from her grandmother with a note attached saying, "I thought you would find this interesting." The article discussed the medical benefits of circumcision. This subtle pressure from her grandmother was not enough for Tirza to go back on her decision.

In the end, the reaction from her family was overwhelmingly positive, even though Tirza assumed it would be far worse. For Tirza and Erin, the family did not present a strong barrier to opting out of circumcision. In Tirza's case, the strongest hurdle was her own internal conflict of values. As a doctor, she understood that circumcision is not necessary. But her thoughts on "the Jewish piece" kept pulling her back to the pro-circumcision side of the debate. Her inner dialogue centered around medical understandings of circumcision and the pull she felt toward traditional Jewish practice. Because her partner was against circumcising their son, this likely tipped the balance for Tirza. Had she been with a partner who was ambivalent, or wanted to circumcise, Tirza's medical knowledge of circumcision may have lost to the pull of tradition. Once Tirza crossed the barrier presented by her own inner conflict, the decision to opt out was easier to make. Her family, for the most part, did not put enough pressure on her to change her mind. However, as we will see in the following stories, the family has the power to exert tremendous influence and even dissuade a couple from opting out of circumcision.

LAURA AND MICHAEL—"I'M NOT AGAINST CIRCUMCISION, BUT I'M NOT FOR IT EITHER."[8]

For some non-circumcision Jews, the family represents a focal point of conflict and tension over this ritual choice. And this was indeed the case for Laura and Michael, an interfaith Jewish family

[7] Tirza's personal e-mail to her parents and grandmother, shared with me on May 22, 2019.
[8] Laura and Michael are pseudonyms. Laura and Michael, personal interview, April 27, 2016. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in the section are from my interview with Laura and Michael.

from Montreal. Laura was raised in a Jewish household and continues to observe certain Jewish traditions, such as fasting on Yom Kippur, observing Passover, and celebrating the holidays. Michael was raised Catholic and currently identifies as atheist. Prior to meeting Michael, Laura never questioned circumcision: "It was never a question. It was kind of like, this is the way that my family is. This is our tradition. It's what we do. It wasn't going to be questioned for me." Laura only started to look critically at circumcision when the conversation arose with Michael in connection with extending their family. Michael made it clear that he was uncomfortable with circumcision, which prompted Laura to research and explore it further. Like Tirza, Laura's initiating moment was her partner's opposition to circumcision. Unlike Tirza, Laura is not a pediatrician and does not have the medical knowledge that would support her partner's position on circumcision. Laura had to do this research herself. Laura now describes herself as "not against circumcision per se, but I'm not for it either." After doing research Laura felt her decision to opt out was supported by the lack of sufficient medical evidence for circumcision: "I know the research isn't there. I know the science isn't there for actually cutting it. There's no health benefits to it. That I understand and I recognize." Although the research Laura gathered led her to deduce that circumcision was medically unnecessary, the decision to opt out remained a difficult one, primarily because of the reaction of her family. Laura comes from a rather traditional Jewish family, and she knew her parents and grandparents would not be happy with their decision. Opting out also presented an intense deviation from tradition for Laura, who lived a fairly observant Orthodox life throughout part of her adulthood. Laura explains how she grappled with this decision: "It wasn't easy. Even after I gave birth, the few days in the hospital we were still kind of like, not fighting it out, but it wasn't easy and while I was recovering from my C-section we were still discussing it. I even had my 87-year-old grandfather come by the hospital and he was like, 'I wouldn't feel I did my due diligence if I didn't come and try to convince you guys one more time.'"

Laura had spoken with her parents about her concerns with circumcision prior to finalizing her decision. This resulted in many tense discussions and her mother ultimately threatening "to pull support from our family." Her mother made it very clear that if they did not circumcise their son she would not be as readily available to their family as she previously had been. Laura recalls her father saying, "I recommend if you don't want your grandparents to keel over and die just basically do it for them." Upon telling her parents they were going to host a *brit shalom* ceremony, Laura's mother, Judith, made it very clear that they would not help out, financially or otherwise, with the planning of the ceremony. Judith also vowed not to invite any of her friends to the ceremony. Despite Judith's initial refusal to help out with the ceremony, she explains how that did not work out as planned:

> If it were a *bris*, we offered to do a big shebang for her. So when she decided to do *brit shalom* I said, 'Okay, we're out. We're not doing anything.' Then when she told me what she was serving I said, 'Can you add a few more things? We'll pay for the difference.' So that's what we did. We didn't wash our hands of the whole thing. Because I didn't want my family to come and have just a little continental breakfast. They're coming, you know, be something decent. We would never do anything different.[9]

[9] Judith is a pseudonym. Judith, interview with author, February 11, 2016.

When Judith became aware of how Laura and Michael were planning the *brit shalom*, she could not help but become involved with the planning of the ceremony. Her desire to plan a decent event for her family overpowered her disdain toward their ritual choice and resulted in Judith helping organize the event. Judith even attempted locate a rabbi to officiate the *brit shalom* ceremony and became frustrated when this proved to be difficult.[10] The *brit shalom* ritual itself also helped abate Judith's contempt for this choice, and she admitted there was no difference in feeling or significance between *brit shalom* and the *brit milah* that took place for her other grandson. The trajectory of the conflict between Laura and her family highlights that the pressure exerted by the family and the disagreement that stems from the decision to opt out of *brit milah* can eventually dissipate, especially after the ritual enactment. *Brit shalom* and *brit milah* serve the same purpose—to welcome a baby boy into the Jewish community and into the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The symbol of that welcoming is different, but the overall purpose of the ritual is the same. Once the resistant family members see this for themselves, their initial fear and anxiety over such a seemingly drastic change begins to fade away.[11]

Montreal is considerably more traditional than a city like San Francisco, and the "pull" of tradition is likely stronger in more traditional-leaning Jewish communities.[12] Tirza and Laura both felt conflicted by their desire to maintain tradition and their views on circumcision, but the pull of tradition for tradition's sake appeared stronger for Laura and her family. Tirza's family did not have as strong a reaction as Laura's mother. But Judith eventually accepted Laura and Michael's decision, they were able to find a rabbi to officiate their ceremony, and Judith even helped in planning the event. Despite Judith's initial reaction, her eventual acceptance demonstrates that ritual innovation is possible even in the most traditional of communities (I examine community dynamics in more depth in chapter two).

Similar to Tirza, opting out of circumcision represented a strong deviation of tradition for Laura. It was difficult for Laura to forego a tradition she saw as fully cemented in Jewish life. She needed to do a lot of research in order to change her own opinion. Paralleling Tirza's experience, it was Laura's inner dialogue and internal conflict that prompted a complex negotiation process. With the gentle urging of her partner, she did the research required for her to fully accept the decision, despite what her understanding of and connection to Jewish tradition was telling her. And Laura's family's response made for an even more complex decision-making process. Because the pressure only came from one side of the family—Michael's family agreed with the decision not to circumcise—the pressure was not enough. In fact, Judith eventually came around and helped with the planning of the *brit shalom* ceremony. The decision to opt out certainly caused conflict, but this conflict was not permanent. That being said, Judith continued to harbor some resentment over the decision and made the conscious choice not to change her grandson's diaper. It was one thing to let go of her disdain for her daughter's decision, but it was quite another to be reminded of it by seeing her grandson's uncircumcised penis. So long as the uncircumcised penis remained out of sight, her true feelings about Laura's decision remained out of mind.

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[10] I discuss this in more detail in chapter two.

[11] Most of the couples I have interviewed did not have a permanent falling out with family members over their decision not to circumcise. There is one exception to this, but in general the family eventually comes to terms with and accepts the decision.

[12] I examine the community dynamics and demographics of Montreal and San Francisco in more detail in chapter two.

Laura and Michael's story highlights the importance of interfaith families in prompting change to the ritual of circumcision. Although there are Jewish couples who opt out of circumcision (some of whose stories are featured in this dissertation), couples who opt out are more likely to be interfaith. Indeed, 61% of the couples I interviewed who opted out of circumcision are interfaith. Couples where one member is not circumcised or comes from a culture that does not practice circumcision are more likely to prompt the Jewish member of the couple to reflect on this practice. This was the case for Laura. Michael's dissent of circumcision served as Laura's initiating moment. Without prompting from Michael, Laura would have likely circumcised her child. Although not entirely unique to interfaith couples, non-cutting ceremonies are a space where interfaith couples are adapting tradition to harmonize the cultural conflict within their families. And as increasing numbers of Jews are intermarrying, more Jewish traditions will continue to be adapted to suit the unique compositions of interfaith couples and their families.[13] In her book *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States*, Samira Mehta examines how "Americans combine multiple traditions in their lives" and how interfaith families "create their own vibrant moral and ritual-based lives."[14] Similar to the families in Mehta's study, the interfaith families featured in this dissertation are using this ritual moment to create a ceremony that works for both members of the couple, all the while continuing to engage with Jewish ritual and tradition.

TARA AND SHAWN—"I'M NOT WILLING TO CHUCK JUDAISM. IT'S MY TRADITION TOO."[15]

For some non-circumcision parents, the conflict with their families is temporary. With time, the conflict and tension dissipate. And sometimes, disgruntled family members come around and see the value in this alternative ritual choice. But this was not the case for Tara and Shawn. They are one of the few couples who experienced a permanent falling out with one of their family members, and the backlash from family impacted their plans to opt out of circumcision. Tara grew up in a Conservative Jewish family in Toronto, Canada. Born to a Jewish mother and Jewish father, Tara describes her upbringing as fairly observant. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, her family belonged to a Conservative congregation, attended synagogue services monthly, and consistently went to synagogue on the holidays. Her family always had Shabbat dinner, but Saturday afternoon they might go shopping or watch television. Tara's life was unapologetically Jewish—she went to Jewish day school, learned Yiddish, attended Jewish summer camps, and took dance classes at the local Jewish community center. As a result, her social circle, as well as the social circle of her parents, was almost exclusively Jewish. Tara grew up surrounded by Jewish institutions, culture, and community, and Judaism and Jewish practice remains a central part of her life. In her late teens, Tara spent three years in Israel studying at a *yeshiva*. During this time in her

[13] According to Pew Research Center's study "Jewish Americans in 2020," 61% of Jewish marriages since 2010 are interfaith. For more, see: "Marriage, Families, and Children," https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/marriage-families-and-children/, last accessed April 18, 2022.

[14] Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 9.

[15] Tara and Shawn are pseudonyms. Tara, interview with author, July 11, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Tara.

life, she became more observant. This shift was temporary, and when she met her partner, they established a level of Jewish observance they felt suited their family.

Now established with her husband, Shawn, and their two children, Tara describes herself as more observant than she was growing up. Sabbath observance is more protected—they generally do not use their phones, spend money, or use computers on the Sabbath (there are some rare exceptions to this). They say more food blessings than she did growing up and they keep their version of kosher. But in other ways, she qualifies herself as less observant. They go to synagogue less, but mostly because her kids do not enjoy it and she does not want to force them to attend services. Also, she decided against enrolling her children in a Jewish day school. Tara and her family are members of an unaffiliated traditional egalitarian congregation in the Toronto area.

Despite her relatively observant upbringing, Tara recalls the moment where her perception of circumcision began to shift:

> When I was in high school, I remember going to a Jewish feminist conference at the University of Toronto. It was a panel conversation in this big auditorium, and I remember a woman getting up and asking a question about circumcision. I was totally shocked by it because it had never occurred to me to question it before. I could tell that she was totally isolated in the room, everybody was like 'How dare you ask that question.' The panelists were kinder, but they were also like 'We're not talking about that.'

The question posed by the conference attendee, and the response to this question from the other attendees and panelists, represents the genesis of Tara questioning circumcision. The seed had been planted for Tara to view this ritual, which she had never previously questioned, through a different lens. Her subsequent experience while living in Israel cemented her views on *brit milah*:

> I'm in Israel attending all these *brises* and one thing that was so tangible to me was that there were very few other women at the front with me. The moms were never there. Very rarely were the moms anywhere nearby. They were in another room or at the back and they were usually crying. I just started to wonder about it. What is it that we're doing, you know? There are three reasons why I'm not Orthodox, and one of them is because of how *halakha* relates to women. Part of that is about *brit*, part of that is about covenant and whether women are included or not included. There's nothing about *brit milah* that I can make sense of to be what God wants. And if that's what God wants by causing harm and instilling an act of violence as part of the covenant that radically excludes women, then it can't be a God that I believe in. But I'm not willing to just chuck Judaism. It's my tradition too. I'm not willing to just walk away from it. It's mine, just like it is yours or anybody else's who's Jewish. For me it was kind of a big deal to call it into question and to say, 'I'm not going to do this to my son.'

Tara's experiences attending *bris* ceremonies, and noticing the responses of mothers to the ritual, invited her to keep questioning circumcision. Although never bothered by the ritual herself—in fact, Tara often positioned herself at the front and watched the ritual up close—she was bothered

by the other women's and, in particular, the mothers', responses to their sons being circumcised. Seeing them crying in the back of the room, or not in the room at all, invited Tara to ask, 'What is it that we're doing?' Women's exclusion from the ritual, which for Tara represents the epitome of the "boys club" in Judaism, and its violence further cemented her belief that circumcision was not something she would choose for her sons.[16] Tara also interprets circumcision as "causing harm" and an "act of violence," which seems to contradict her understanding of the covenant. She claims she cannot believe in a God that inflicts harm and violence upon children. For Tara, the ethics of circumcision and the violence and harm she perceives it causes is a major contributing factor to her opting out, as it is for many of the parents featured in this study.

By the time Tara met and started dating her current partner, her opinion on circumcision was established. She would not circumcise if she had sons, and she shared her views with her partner very early on in the relationship. Although Tara vowed to opt out of *brit milah*, she does not identify as an anti-circumcision activist. In fact, she's hesitant to identify as anti-circumcision at all. Tara explains:

> I don't always like being opposed to things as much as I like being in favor of things. I mean I think I would love it if the Jewish community broadly speaking decided not to do [*brit milah*] anymore. I think that would be pretty awesome. In some ways I am opposed to it in the very simple sense that it is hurtful to children, hurting children is bad, therefore we shouldn't do it. In some ways I can simplify it to that, but in other ways we live in communities and things are much more complicated than that. Kids get hurt in all kinds of ways, like when they're born we do that heel-prick test which is incredibly painful for them.

Once again Tara alludes to the ethics of circumcision. She understands circumcision to be "hurtful to children," and as such, "we shouldn't do it." But Tara recognizes that this perception may be too simple. Parents make all kinds of decisions for their children, and some may involve temporary pain. But it is clear that the idea of inflicting pain on her sons looms large in her imagination and is central to her understanding of circumcision. Although Tara's opinion on circumcision was established by the time she met her partner, getting pregnant prompted them to do research and continue to reflect about the decision. Tara's certainty about her opinion did not prevent her from reflecting, reading, and talking to people in her social circle about the potential ramifications of

[16] The language of "boys club" is taken from a blog post Tara published on June 9, 2011. The blog post, titled "Circumcising our Son," is no longer available online. With Tara's permission, I have included the post in its entirety in the appendix at the end of this dissertation. Tara's point of view on the gender disparity of circumcision echoes some feminist critiques of circumcision. But feminists also have a complicated view of circumcision. Many recognize how *brit milah* excludes girls and privileges boys and men but continue to see the value in the ritual. For a small sample of feminist interpretations and critiques of circumcision, see: Gail Labovitz, "Do I Have Something Yet? And if so, what?" *American Jewish University,* December 30, 2016: https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/do-i-have-something-yet-and-if-so-what, last accessed February 4, 2022; Elana Maryles Sztokman, "A Woman's View of Circumcision," Lilith, September 12, 2011: https://lilith.org/articles/a-womans-view-of-circumcision/, last accessed February 4, 2022; Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1991): 82-83.

this decision. Tara understood the weight of opting out, and she was especially aware of the reaction of her family would likely have. Tara explains:

> When we got pregnant, we started doing research. We started reading books and talking to a lot of people. We were pretty targeted in the people that we spoke to. People that we had good relationships with who we knew to be emotionally mindful about young people. People who were already parents and we've seen their parenting and liked the way they parented because they allow their children to have feelings and listen to them. And with that, ideally people who were also observant, of various levels. My sister is a Reconstructionist rabbi and we talked to her a lot about it and some of her peers who are deeply involved in Judaism and Jewish identity but are not necessarily *frum*.[17] So we spoke to quite a few people. People who had chosen not to circumcise. People who had thought about it but chose to do it anyway. Shawn had a lot of reservations about it, and I think a lot of his decision to agree to not circumcise was because of my feelings about it and prioritizing that over some of his uncertainty. There wasn't anything compelling him enough to fight the 'yes we should' argument, and his relationship with me pulled him towards the 'okay let's not' side.

Once Tara and Shawn finished reflecting and decided to opt out of circumcision, the next step was to inform their families. Prior to their son being born, they informed their extended families of their decision. Out of all the family members, the grandparents are most likely to have a negative reaction to the decision.[18] This is indeed a pattern I saw throughout my research, and this pattern highlights the impact generational shifts in attitudes vis-à-vis religion and tradition have on the social dynamics within families. It also highlights how families cope with dissonant views and engagement with tradition within their own families.[19] Tara explains how the four grandparents (her parents and Shawn's parents) reacted to their decision not to circumcise:

> So we decided not to circumcise before the baby was born and we took time to talk to our families about it. Of the four grandparents, basically all of them said 'We think you're making a mistake,' but three of the grandparents said, 'Regardless of what you decide we love you and support you.' One of the grandparents was very, very upset by it.

The support of three grandparents gave Tara and Shawn the strength to maintain their position. However, after the baby was born, the three supportive grandparents changed their opinion on the matter and made their shifting opinion clear:

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[17] "Frum" refers to someone who is devout and strictly observes Jewish law.

[18] This is a common pattern that I saw throughout my research. The grandparents of the new baby (i.e. the parents of the person/couple who had the baby) are usually the most opinionated about circumcision. They tend to feel strongly that their grandchild should be circumcised and are not hesitant to share their opinion if their adult child (or child-in-law) is considering opting out.

[19] For more on how families cope with different levels of religious engagement within their families, see Ephraim Tabory and Shlomit Hazan-Stern, "Bonds of Silence: Parents and Children Cope with Dissonant Levels of Religiosity," *Contemporary Jewry* vol. 33, no. 3 (2013): 171-192.

> After he was born we got this wave of, 'No you really have to do this.' The grandparents changed their tune. And we were totally tired and overwhelmed, we just couldn't handle the backlash, and we caved. We did it anyway. For a good time later I felt horrible and like I betrayed my son and the fact that I went through with it was a wedge in my relationship with my son.

The resistance Tara and Shawn received from the grandparents after their child was born resulted in them reluctantly opting to circumcise. They no longer had the energy to fight with their respective parents about their decision. Instead, they succumbed to the pressure exerted by their families and chose to circumcise their son. Tara felt horrible and vowed to opt out should she have a second son. And when she gave birth to her second son, they were able to withstand the pressure and uphold their decision:

> The second time around I was like, 'No for real, we're not doing it this time,' and we didn't. After that Shawn's dad was fuming about it, and went to my parents and said, 'We have to be a united front against the kids to make them circumcise the baby.' And my parents said, 'Not on your life. There's no way we're doing that and if you do that you're likely going to lose your son.' It's pretty amazing that my parents went to bat for us on a decision they disagreed with. After the baby was born and we didn't circumcise him, my father-in-law definitely had some distance and was calling us trying to convince us and I remember arguments on the phone and stuff. And then he went to my parents, and after that he kind of came around and came to visit. He's always had a challenging relationship with Shawn. He's a Holocaust survivor, he hasn't had an easy life.

Tara and Shawn's story captures the family dynamics that are often at play when a couple considers opting out of circumcision. Although Tara began questioning and formalized her opinion about circumcision long before she even met her partner, the pressure exerted by her family was enough for her to reverse her decision and circumcise her first son. In contrast to Laura and Michael, Tara and Shawn had four angry grandparents to deal with. Laura and Michael only had to contend with Laura's side of the family, which made their decision easier to maintain. The fact that Tara and Shawn's parents were unified in their disagreement, expressed their disdain, and Shawn's father's experience as a Holocaust survivor added layers of complexity to their situation that made opting out less accessible. Despite their decision to circumcise their first son, Tara and Shawn vowed not to circumcise should they have a second son. When they did have a second son, they were able to withstand the pressure and opted for a *brit shalom* instead. Tara reflects on the implications of this choice:

> I have one child who is circumcised and one who isn't and there have been implications in our family because of the decision, specifically for my husband, and he's still not settled about it. We both decided if our little one wants one day to have it done we will of course support him. I think the chances of that are quite slim, but I think Shawn is hoping for it.[20]

[20] Ibid. Tara and Shawn are not the only parents to have chosen to opt out after circumcising their first son. For a similar story, see Yagi Morris's piece, "Why We Didn't Circumcise our Second Son," *Tablet*

Even after making the decision not to circumcise their second son, Shawn continues to feel "unsettled" about their decision. Tara also believes that Shawn hopes that their second son will choose to get circumcised later in life. This highlights the difficulty some experience in this ritual choice. That feeling that they did not make the right choice continues to gnaw at some parents well after the baby has been born and the decision finalized. Tara and Shawn's story also captures the influence of family members. The combination of the dismay expressed by Tara and Shawn's parents and their exhaustion as new parents resulted in their opting to circumcise their first son. But this is about more than family influence. The family dynamic is imbedded in this ritual moment. In fact, opting out (or even considering opting out) exposes conflict and fractures within a family unit. Relationships are changed, and sometimes solidified, during the negotiation and ritual performance. Family is inseparable from this ritual moment. And as we will see through the following story, there are times when disgruntled family members experience a shift in perspective, allowing for a more amicable and harmonious negotiation and decision-making process.

EMILY AND JOHN—"WE MADE IT OUR OWN SERVICE."[21]

Emily and John are another Jewish couple who experienced intense resistance from family members, but unlike Tara and Shawn, this initial resistance eventually completely dissipated. External factors facilitated a significant shift in perception with their resistant family members, and by the time their baby was born, their family was no longer bothered by their decision not to circumcise. Emily was born in North Carolina and currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia. She describes her family growing up as "Reformative"—that is, a mix between Reform and Conservative. They were members of a synagogue and celebrated the holidays. Emily's three older brothers had a *bar mitzvah*, and Emily's *bat mitzvah* took place in Israel. After her *bat mitzvah* she participated in a Jewish youth group and attended Jewish summer camp. Throughout her life, she operated in Jewish circles; almost all her friends are Jewish, and she mostly dated Jewish men in her teens and twenties. Emily says she was raised more culturally than religiously Jewish.

Emily describes her current level of observance as comparable to that of her family growing up, but she questions Judaism more than she used to. She is more critical of the religion and does not accept Jewish traditions and practices without careful reflection. Emily is currently married to a Jewish man who she describes as more traditional than she is. They are members of a Conservative synagogue and attend services on a regular basis. They do not fully observe Shabbat, but they often make challah and light candles on Friday night. When I first interviewed Emily, she had one child—a daughter—and was pregnant with her second, and she explained she and her husband are committed to raising their children Jewish. At that point, they did not know whether she was having a boy or a girl.

Emily started questioning circumcision around 2009. She was married to her husband John, but they did not have any children at the time. She was prompted to question circumcision after reading

(March 10, 2020): https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/why-we-didnt-circumcise-our-second-son.

[21] Emily and John are their real names and not pseudonyms. Emily, interview with author, November 28, 2019. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this section are from my interview with Emily on June 6, 2019.

a book of short stories for Jews (she could not recall the title). One of the stories was about a *bris*, and this story and the way it was written invited to ask herself, "Was this something I can question?" Reading this Jewish story is Emily's initiative moment. Like Tara, Emily's initiating moment is prompted by something Jewish. For Tara it was a Jewish feminist conference; for Emily it was a book of Jewish short storis. She subsequently turned to Google, where she admittedly "fell down the rabbit hole." Like most Jews, Emily had never thought to question circumcision until prompted. She was unaware of any circumcision controversies or the contentious history of this practice. "I just knew that what's you did," she tells me. Her research allowed for her to conclude that there is little medical and ethical support for circumcision and subsequently felt very uncomfortable with circumcision. Her husband agreed not to circumcise should they have a son in the future.

Most Jews who question circumcision conduct research. Some inquire about the history of circumcision, some look into the ethical concerns, some dive into the history of Jewish interpretation, and some research the medical benefits and risks. The targets of their research may vary, but they all conduct research while navigating this decision. This trend highlights the access people have to information. With the Internet accessible to most North Americans, most people can look up whatever is on their minds. The availability of information (and sometimes misinformation) is an essential factor in parents' decision-making processes.

Emily and John got pregnant in 2013. At this point, Emily reminded John how she felt about circumcision. John seemed comfortable opting out, but Emily had a strong feeling this would be a problem for their families. Emily's suspicions were correct. She explains: "When our families found out, they absolutely freaked. That caused a whole plethora of issues." This reaction thwarted Emily and John's plan to not find out the sex of their baby prior to the birth. Emily explains: "We weren't going to find out, and then when we told our parents, everyone freaked out. My parents were able to settle very quickly because we went to the science. We showed them how it is not scientifically backed up, it's not medically proven, shared the studies with them. And my parents were like, 'Alright, we're not arguing with you.' They let go pretty quickly." After being confronted with more information about the necessity of circumcision, Emily's parents backed off and their initial reaction tempered. But this was not the case for John's parents. Emily explains: "My husband's parents absolutely lost their minds. I'm close with my father-in-law, and I remember him being so upset with me and saying, 'I don't care how much science you shove in my face. I would still do it.' My mother-in-law was also really upset." Unlike Emily's parents, John's parents did not change their views upon being confronted with the science and medical literature Emily and John shared with them. They felt very strongly that their grandson should be circumcised and did not hesitate to communicate their opinion on a regular basis. This was especially hard for John, who was being pressured privately by his parents. Emily explains the implications of this pressure:

> John doesn't feel as strongly as I do, but he definitely gets where I'm coming from and is on the side of not doing it. But his parents were actively pulling him in the other direction. It became problematic because John didn't want to let his parents down, or his rabbi, or that he was failing them in some way. I think that was what he was being told, by the way, being guilted into it. He knew in his heart it was not the right thing to do, but it became such an issue and so hard that we decided to find

> out the sex. I didn't want to go through the rest of the pregnancy that stressed out. It was bad.

Emily and John were told they were having a girl. After they told John's parents, the pressure to circumcise eased slightly, but the conversations continued. Emily recalls John's parents saying, "Oh that's great it's a girl. But if you have a boy in the future, you should still do it." John's parents calmed down in the moment because circumcision was no longer a pressing issue, but Emily continued to feel the lingering presence and pressure of their dissent. At the time of our first interview, Emily was pregnant with her second child. Her husband knew the sex of their child, but Emily did not. Should they have a boy, their game plan was to have a *brit shalom* on the eighth day and not make a big deal out of it. And Emily was ready should people question or challenge her: "If people want to question me, I'll say, 'We've chosen to welcome our son to the religion in a way that is meaningful for us,' and leave it at that." Emily hoped that after the ceremony, it will no longer be an issue. But then Emily's pregnancy took a turn, and what she envisioned would happen did not come to fruition.

Emily's water broke when she was 26 weeks pregnant (a full-term pregnancy is roughly 40 weeks). She went to the hospital out of precaution, but fully expected to be sent home. She thought she would be advised to "take it easy" for the rest of her pregnancy and was shocked when she was told she would have to stay at the hospital until the baby was born. Emily was admitted to the hospital in July and gave birth via emergency C-section in September. She lived in the hospital for a total of 58 days, and her baby spent 23 days in the neonatal intensive care unit. During her time in the hospital, Emily remained unaware of the sex of her baby but knew they would not circumcise should they have a boy. While she was in the hospital, Emily and John were still discussing circumcision. Although they knew they were not going to circumcise, they were trying to figure out if there was something they could do instead. They inquired about removing a small amount of foreskin. They considered marking the flesh of his penis. Emily explains how they came to their final decision:

> They thought I had gestational diabetes. For a week I had to prick my finger four times a day. While I was doing that, I wondered, 'Why can't we use something like this to draw blood.' The rabbi I was speaking with said, 'Yeah, we can do that. All we need is a drop of blood and it counts as the covenant.' I said, 'Great, let's do that.' I don't love the idea in general, but it is the least amount we can do that everybody feels comfortable with, and by everybody I mean me and my husband more than anyone. In the end that's what we did.[22]

In the end, Emily and John had a welcoming ceremony for their son, drew blood from his penis, and put a mark in his flesh. Emily and John constructed the ceremony themselves. "We made it our own service," Emily told me. A *mohel* was present to draw blood from the penis. Emily continued to feel uncomfortable with this and remembers John "holding me in place so I didn't run away." Even though Emily was not fully comfortable with marking the flesh and drawing blood from her son's penis, she negotiated with her husband to find a middle ground they both felt reasonably comfortable with. Negotiating diverging beliefs and values can be a difficult process, but Emily and John were able to find an alternative to circumcision they agreed on. The ritual was

[22] Emily, interview with author, November 28, 2019.

simultaneously the source of conflict (with the initial reactions of the grandparents) and was part of its eventual resolution. Emily explains: "That was the decision we came to. That's what we felt most comfortable with. We included his family. We did what we felt was right. And at the end of the day, we went through hell this summer, and now we have him home, and he's great and he's thriving thank goodness. But it was hard. The whole thing was hard."[23]

Emily explained how her in-laws' perception of circumcision shifted drastically after she was admitted to the hospital and her baby spent 23 days in intensive care. Her 58-day stay in the hospital allowed for John's parents to shift their view on circumcision. This health-scare prompted John's parents to come to terms with their decision not to circumcise and the priority shifted to Emily's health and the safe delivery of the baby. In this moment, circumcision became less important. Emily described this experience as "going through hell," and with her health and the baby's health in jeopardy, circumcision was the least of their, and her in-laws' worries. The final weeks of Emily's pregnancy eased her in-laws' views on circumcision, which allowed for Emily and John to think about what they truly wanted without the added pressure from their family.

These four families each experienced a unique negotiation process, but we can trace patterns between their stories. First, there is often an internal conflict between one's understanding of Jewishness and opting out of circumcision, and this conflict requires some degree of reconciliation. As a pediatrician, Tirza believes circumcision to be unnecessary, but still needed to harmonize her understanding of Jewish identity and tradition with what it would mean to opt out (this was similar for Laura and Tara, less so for Emily). Second, this negotiation process can extend to family, and this part of the negotiation can be a source of intense disagreement. Laura's mother threatened to pull her support from Laura's family. Tara's parents and in-laws pressured her and Shawn to circumcise, and Shawn had a permanent falling out with one of his cousins with whom he had been very close to. Emily and John also experienced intense pushback from their respective parents, and ultimately decided to find out the sex of their child to potentially evade the discussion (this worked when they found out their first child was a girl). Apart from Shawn's cousin, the family disputes were eventually resolved. Judith decided to help Laura plan the *brit shalom* ceremony and was angry when she had difficulty finding a rabbi to officiate. Tara and Shawn's parents eventually accepted their decision, although there remains some residual tension with Shawn's father. And Emily's in-laws experienced a complete shift in perspective when her pregnancy landed her in the hospital for nearly two months. Finally, they all sought an alternative ritual to welcome their son into the Jewish community, and this ritual was important to them.

These four case studies also highlight that alternative rituals are not a rejection, but an affirmation of Jewishness. Opting out of *brit milah* does not mean one is opting out of Judaism; on the contrary, adapting the ritual provides an avenue to affirms one's Jewish identity and facilitates and active engagement with tradition. And as these stories demonstrate, the process of making this decision can be arduous. For Tirza, Laura, and Tara, choosing not to circumcision represented a paradox that needed to be reconciled with their understanding of Jewish tradition (Emily had less of an issue reconciling her opinion of circumcision with her Jewish identity). But before this paradox was reconciled and their decision made, they needed to be prompted to even think critically about circumcision, and this process usually begins with an initiating moment.

[23] Ibid.

THE INITIATING MOMENT AND DOUBTING CIRCUMCISION

The first step in opting out of circumcision, as we saw with the experiences of Tirza, Laura, Tara, and Emily, is a precise moment that prompts a shift in perception, which I call an initiating moment. After experiencing an initiative moment, the next step is doubting circumcision. Doubt usually creeps in and emerges gradually over a long period of time. For Tirza, Laura, Tara, and Emily (perhaps to a lesser degree) their doubt manifested over time. Their doubt emerged slowly, and gradually developed to the point that it could no longer be ignored. For Tirza, her initiating moment was prompted by her partner's views on circumcision and her own medical training and practice. As a pediatrician, she is aware that circumcision is medically unnecessary, and this knowledge propagated into doubt. The process was similar for Laura, who had never questioned circumcision before her partner informed her of his stance against the procedure. Laura turned to Internet research and came to the realization fairly quickly that circumcision is not medically necessary. Like Tirza, Laura's doubt emerged out of the conclusions she drew from the research she conducted. Even with her knowledge about circumcision, Laura had to grapple with her doubt before finalizing her decision. Tara's initiating moment occurred when someone asked a particularly poignant question at a Jewish feminist conference she attended while in high school. This conference, and her subsequent experiences attending *bris* ceremonies, facilitated the growth of doubt. Finally, Emily's initiative moment occurred when she read a short story that invited her to question circumcision. Before reading this story, Emily had never considered questioning circumcision. For these women, doubt facilitated the eventual decision to opt out, but making the decision was a gradual and difficult process. The exception to this is Emily, who did not appear to have difficulty reconciling her Jewishness with her emerging views on circumcision. Emily did not describe a conflict of values in the same way as Tirza, Laura, and Tara.

Scholars have examined how doubt impacts religious people and communities. Ayala Fader analyzes what she calls "life-changing doubt" in ultra-Orthodox Jews, which she defines "as the kind of doubt that dramatically troubled a person's faith in the truth of all they had grown up believing, maybe even obliterating it for good. Life changing doubt was so profound that it could no longer be contained inside, unspoken, not acted upon. People experiencing life-changing doubt sought out new truths with other doubters, which led them to change how they perceived themselves and their worlds."[24] Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann examines how contemporary Evangelicals use narrative expressions of doubt to solidify belief in God.[25] Religious studies scholar Philip Francis interrogates how Evangelicals experiencing life-changing doubt was facilitated by art—or aesthetic experiences—in the form of music, film, theatre, poetry, and fiction. Francis examines how these aesthetic experiences "took hold of their minds and bodies in ways that unsettled their evangelical identities and sent them careening off in new directions."[26] In his volume *The Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies,* Mathijs Pelkmans underscores the connection between doubt and belief. For Pelkmans, "instead of being

[24] Ayala Fader, *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), 10.
[25] Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).
[26] Philip Salim Francis, *When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience in the Evangelical Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

the opposite of belief, doubt is often implicated in it."[27] According to Pelkmans, "doubt connotes an active state of mind which is directed at a questioned subject, and is unstable in the sense that it pushes for a resolution (which potentially erases doubt)."[28] In other words, doubt prompts action. Doubt requires a resolution. "Rather than leading to inaction (although that is certainly a possibility)," Pelkmans maintains that "doubt may also be a facilitator of action by triggering a need for resolution."[29]

The doubt experienced by Tirza, Laura, Tara, and Emily is not life-changing doubt; their doubt does not prompt them to leave Judaism. Contrary to the ultra-Orthodox double-lifers in Fader's study and the evangelicals who leave their communities and belief systems in Francis's study, non-circumcision Jews are not experiencing a "crisis of faith" or "life-changing doubt." They are experiencing doubt, but not in a way that significantly alters their connection to Judaism or Jewish identity. They are doubting the necessity of a particular ritual while remaining firmly Jewish in their identities and not abandoning the tradition. And the doubt they experience emerges well before the ritual takes place. Doubt emerged for Tirza and Laura upon speaking with their partners about expanding their families. Tara started experiencing doubt in high school, and Emily several years before she got pregnant. For these women, doubt emerged well before the occurrence of the ritual, and simmered in their minds until they got pregnant and were required to act on the doubt they were experiencing.

Mathijs Pelkmans' understanding of doubt resonates with the doubt Jews experience vis-à-vis circumcision. Doubt does not lead to abandoning Judaism and leaving their religious communities; rather, doubt works to facilitate their connection to Judaism. They resolve the doubt they are experiencing by opting for an alternative ritual. They resolve their doubt by reconciling their conflicting views on circumcision and Jewish tradition. They do not abandon Judaism, but their doubt requires action, and the action they opt for is a non-cutting ceremony. The emergence of doubt facilitates the action of opting out of circumcision and is resolved by opting for an alternative covenantal ritual.

DO-IT-YOURSELF RELIGION AND RITUAL CHANGE

Studies demonstrate that millennials tend to be less religiously observant than previous generations and increasingly identify as unaffiliated to any tradition.[30] Changing attitudes towards religion and religious observance is not unique to millennials; scholars have noted a shift in the religious tenor of Americans since the middle of the twentieth century.[31] In addition to diverging attitudes toward

[27] Mathijs Pelkmans, *The Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 4.
[28] Ibid., 3.
[29] Ibid., 4.
[30] I use the Pew Research Center's definition of millennials as people born between 1981 and 1996 (23-38 years of age). For more on these trends, see "US Becoming Less Religious," *Pew Research Center*, November 5, 2013: https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/, last accessed April 25, 2022.
[31] For example, see Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*

religion, there has been a significant shift in the way people engage with and practice religion. Hyper-individualism, moralism, voluntarism, and universalism, values adopted and embraced by many Americans, are drastically impacting religious praxis in the United States.[32] Rejection of traditional religious authority, emphasis on individual choice, and prioritizing ethical and moral concerns, enshrined by the values outlined above, have given Americans license to adapt, innovate, and connect with their religion in a way that makes sense to them. For instance, American Jews observe the Sabbath in ways that are personally meaningful (I discuss this in more depth shortly). Jews develop and observe their own versions of kosher (Tara and Shawn from earlier in this chapter, and Dinah and Jonah in the conclusion provide good examples). And, as we will see shortly, non-circumcision Jews adapt the traditional *brit milah* into a ritual that resonates with their views on circumcision. Jack Wertheimer explains the implications of this ethos on American Jews: "What this has meant is that ever more Jews choose whether they wish to identify as Jewish and then define for themselves what such a decision means."[33]

But these case studies also demonstrate how non-circumcision Jews are making this decision in conjunction with others. They consult with family members. They consult with their rabbi (or sometimes, several rabbis). They seek out guidance from medical professionals. They consider the implications of their choice on their son's future in the Jewish community and his connection with his own Jewish identity. Even though individualism and DIY religion provide an environment for Jews to adapt tradition, non-circumcision Jews rarely act completely individually; the family and community are deeply imbedded and implicated in this ritual choice.

Some scholars have used the term DIY religion to refer to the phenomenon of molding religious traditions to suit one's unique beliefs and worldviews. Shain et al. define DIY Judaism as initiatives that operate "outside the dominant structure of American Jewish life. The common thread linking DIY projects is that they empower participants, allowing them to define their own Jewish identities and create their own forms of Jewish expression."[34] Creating new initiatives and programs outside the Jewish establishment, reinterpreting the meaning of rituals or traditions, and creating entirely new rituals are examples of the ways in which Jews personalize and create their own forms of Jewish engagement. Rather than accepting religious authority and conforming to communal norms, American Jews are increasingly adapting and creating practices that are consistent with their personal values and belief systems. Jack Wertheimer nuances previous examinations of DIY Judaism by adding the trend of "remixing." Quoting video remixer Elisa Kreisinger, Wertheimer claims "with remix, we can reedit tired narratives into more subversive ones or pay homage to the awesome narratives that do exist."[35] In other words, remixing provides an avenue through which practitioners can polish and fine-tune the tradition to their liking.

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). For more on millennials and religion, see: Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[32] Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 257.

[33] Ibid., 258.

[34] Michelle Shain et al., "'DIY' Judaism: How Contemporary Jewish Young Adults Express Their Jewish Identity, *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 55: 1 and 2 (2013): 4.

[35] Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism,* 255.

And this is indeed what many contemporary Jews do; they observe Judaism in a way that makes sense to them. They choose how they observe their rituals, customs, and traditions. They observe what resonates and pass on what does not. And this is not unique to non-circumcision Jews (although they provide a good example). Many Jews, for instance, choose not to observe the Sabbath, or observe the Sabbath in their own unique way. According to the Pew Research Center's study "Jewish Americans in 2020," 39% of Jews in the United States mark the Sabbath in a "way that is meaningful to them."[36] The fact that this qualifier of religious observance is provided as an option in the Pew study highlights the pervasiveness of individualism in American religious praxis. People observe traditions in ways that are meaningful to them, rather than following Jewish tradition vis-à-vis Sabbath observance. Many American Jews may not be *shomer* Shabbat, but Pew's findings demonstrate that more than one-third of American Jews create ways to observe the Sabbath that are personally meaningful to them, showcasing the centrality of individualism and DIY religion in North American Jewish practice.[37]

But religious individualism and DIY religion can cause tension within families. People's choices can elicit criticism from the extended family (as we saw with Laura, Tara, and Emily) and this frustration can be reciprocal. This is precisely what Emily experienced. I asked Emily about her in-laws' level of observance and whether that had to do with their response to Emily and John's decision not to circumcise. I was curious about why her in-laws were so strongly opposed to them considering not circumcising. Negative reactions to the idea of not circumcising can sometimes be experienced by people who consider themselves observant and/or traditional. I have also seen strong reactions in families with Holocaust survivors (as we saw with Tara and Shawn). I wanted to find out whether this was the case for her in-laws. Emily explains:

> They are not religious and that has been brought up. They probably go to Temple less than we do. But they are old-school in the sense of not questioning and doing what they're told. They will have shrimp on their salad or a cheeseburger and tell us we have to circumcise our child. To which I've asked, 'Do you not see the hypocritical thinking there?' And they don't. They really don't see it. I told them I can't stand by picking and choosing from a buffet of Judaism and being told I have to do this thing. That doesn't sit well with me. If a Hasidic Jew from Williamsburg wants to try to tell me I have to circumcise my child, at least they're coming from a different level of Judaism. I still won't listen to them, but they're all in, versus 'Here I am eating my cheeseburger, telling you to circumcise.'

Emily is pointing to what she perceives to be the hypocrisy of her in-laws' ardent support of circumcision while eschewing other Jewish traditions, such as the laws of *kashrut*. Emily sees this as a paradox—how can her in-laws, who "pick and choose" what they will and will not observe, criticize Emily and John for doing the same? Emily is critical of their "picking and choosing from a buffet of Judaism" all the while criticizing her for opting out of circumcision. In Emily's view, her in-laws are in no position to criticize her choices while they eat shrimp and cheeseburgers. Here Emily is making explicit that both she and her in-laws are engaging in DIY religion and

[36] Pew Research Center, "Jewish Americans in 2020," May 11, 2021: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/, page 70 and 73.
[37] *Shomer Shabbat,* Hebrew for "Sabbath observer," refers to an observant Jew who observes the Sabbath in accordance with Jewish law.

highlights the mutual frustrations of their respective choices. Indeed, Emily and John's choice vis-à-vis circumcision, and John's parents' opting to forgo the laws of *kashrut*, is frustrating for both parties. This tension highlights how embracing religious individualism and engaging with religion in a way that is personally meaningful can be a source of conflict within families.

Another poignant example of DIY religion and "remixing" Judaism is Ritualwell, a free website that allows Jews to create, browse, and share rituals.[38] Ritualwell, curated by Reconstructionist Judaism, provides the option for users to create a profile to connect with others and build an archive of personalized rituals. Users can also book a meeting with a rabbi for "personalized guidance."[39] Ritualwell explains its mission: "Contemporary life is rich in moments for which we have no traditional ritual or prayer. But we are certain that you can help us find ways to make the tradition speak—or sing—even in circumstances that our ancestors couldn't have imagined. We are delighted to work with you to craft and share Jewish rituals for the seasons of the year and the cycles of our lives."[40] Ritualwell captures the ethos of contemporary American religion and provides an avenue through which Jews can craft rituals that resonate with their individual experiences and worldviews. One category of rituals provided by the site are lifecycle rituals. Although Jewish tradition provides a variety of lifecycle rituals to celebrate pivotal milestones, not every Jew will follow this trajectory of life. As such, people may want to celebrate different milestones or commemorate hardships not accounted for in the typical Jewish lifecycle. Ritualwell offers a plethora of such rituals, and the tools to craft one's own, celebrating and commemorating a wide range of significant life moments.[41] With the help of Ritualwell, Jews no longer have to fit into the mold provided by traditional Jewish lifecycle rituals; instead, Jews can find and create new rituals that celebrate their unique life course.

DIY religion also allows people with identities and views that conflict with the central tenets of a religious tradition to reconcile their incompatibility. Melissa M. Wilcox examines how the "societal shift toward individualism" provided an avenue through which gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans Christians could "create coherence between their religious and sexual or gender identities."[42] Wilcox examines the strategies LGBTQ Christians use to reconcile these conflicting identities, which include ignoring biblical passages that condemn homosexuality and reinterpreting Christian theology to affirm their queer identities. In this sense, "religion has become a resource, to be utilized when it is expedient and ignored or rewritten when it is not."[43]

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[38] Ritualwell categorizes rituals under the following: life cycles, healing and hard times, everyday holiness, holidays, and Shabbat and daily life. See "Browse Rituals," *Ritualwell,* https://ritualwell.org/browse-rituals, last accessed March 23, 2022.

[39] "Rabbi Connect: One-on-One Time with a Rabbi," *Ritualwell,* https://www.ritualwell.org/rabbi-connect. Meetings with rabbis are one hour long and cost $80, last accessed March 23, 2022.

[40] "About Us," *Ritualwell,* https://www.ritualwell.org/aboutus, last accessed March 23, 2022.

[41] In the section dedicated to lifecycle rituals, for example, Rituawell offers rituals for "starting a family," "sanctifying intimate relationships," "gender and sexual identity," and "ending a relationship." See: "Life Cycles," *Ritualwell*, https://ritualwell.org/lifecycles, last accessed March 23, 2022.

[42] Melissa M. Wilcox, "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," *Sociology of Religion* 63: 4 (2002): 500.

[43] Ibid., 501.

Following a similar path identified by Wilcox, Jews who disagree with circumcision find creative ways of reconciling their views on circumcision with Jewish tradition. Instead of forgoing the ritual altogether, non-circumcision Jews create coherence by replacing one ritual action with another. By replacing the removal of the foreskin with another action, non-circumcision Jews engage with Jewish tradition and welcome their sons into the Jewish community. And this new ritualized action is reinterpreted as the symbol of the covenant. For some, the replacement action is wrapping the baby in a prayer shawl, washing the baby's feet, drawing blood from the penis, or donating blood (to name a few examples). Opting for a different ritualized action allow for non-circumcision Jews to create coherence between their desire to observe Jewish tradition with their views on circumcision. And perhaps ironically, non-circumcision Jews demonstrate that engaging with DIY religion can represent a means of remaining connected with organized, or institutional, Judaism. DIY religion does not necessarily mean one is observing religion on their own and independent from organized religion; indeed, allowing room for creativity can facilitate a connection with institutional Judaism (I explore this in more depth in chapter two).

It is important to note there are limitations to the terminology scholars have used to describe the "pick-and-choose" nature of American religious praxis. Terms like "pick-and-choose," "buffet," "do-it-yourself," and "bricolage" suggest a level of frivolity. The decisions people make about religion are not frivolous; these decisions are often made carefully and after much thought and reflection. Many factors are considered when facing such a decision, and the terms scholars have used do not necessarily capture this detail. "DIY" and "bricolage" conjure an image of a weekend do-it-yourself project, or a child doing arts and crafts. "Pick-and-choose" and "buffet" send the message that choosing how one practices religion is as easy and random as simply picking and choosing what one will eat at a buffet. But the stories shared earlier in this chapter highlight how complicated these decisions can be. These stories capture the complex and complicated feelings one has to navigate while making a decision. And these stories show how families can react and interfere with one's potential decision. These terms, I argue, fail to capture what these families are doing. It is more than "DIY" and "bricolage." They are doing more than merely "picking and choosing." Perhaps the terms that Wuthnow and Wertheimer suggest, "tinkering" and "remixing," capture the nuance, and continued reliance on tradition, that terms like "DIY," "bricolage," and "pick-and-choose" seemingly erase. With tinkering and remixing, the original remains intact, and adaptations are made to adjust the original into something slightly differently or refurbished.

ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION IN NORTH AMERICAN JUDAISM

Non-cutting ceremonies are certainly not the first time a Jewish ritual has been adapted or changed. Although "*brit* without *milah*" may be perceived by some as a drastic ritual change, rituals are constantly adapted, tweaked, and created according to the needs and desires of the people for whom the ritual is intended. And this has indeed been the case for North American Jewish ritual. One of the more drastic periods of ritual change in Judaism was prompted by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As the second wave feminist movement gained traction in North America, Jews were confronted by the lack of rituals celebrating girls and women. In many communities, the birth of Jewish girls was not celebrated with the same enthusiasm as the birth of Jewish boys. Rates of Jewish girls having a public *bat mitzvah* ceremony was lower than that of boys. And girls who did have a *bat mitzvah* were often subjected to different expectations in the performance of the ritual. Jewish women could not be rabbis. Jewish girls and women received

difference levels of Jewish education than their male counterparts. The wider feminist movement invited Jews to look internally at the gender dynamics of their own tradition and prompted Jews (mostly Jewish feminists) to advocate for a more robust inclusion of girls and women in the fabric of Jewish life.[44]

In addition to Jewish feminists, queer Jews have also advocated for and created opportunities for their inclusion in Jewish lifecycle ritual. S.J. Crasnow examines how trans Jews use normative elements of Jewish practice to affirm their trans identity. Crasnow studies how trans Jews use the *mikveh* (ritual bath most often used by women at the end of their menstrual cycles) to mark their gender transition.[45] *TransTorah* is an organization that creates and shares resources, rituals, essays, and liturgy "that speak to our experiences as trans and genderqueer people."[46] They share blessings for gender transition and chest binding procedures, sample rituals for a trans or gender nonconforming wedding, and *mikveh* rituals for any kind of transition (pre-surgery, gender transition, etc).[47] The Queer Mikveh Project is another initiative that seeks to "transform the traditional *mikveh* practice into a communal experience, centering queer Jews of color leading spiritual rituals."[48] Because queer Jews are not represented in the mold provided by traditional Jewish lifecycle rituals, they have created their own rituals and liturgy that speak to their experience, mark important moments in their lives, and affirm their identities as queer Jews.

Ritual and lifecycle are not the only aspect to have experienced change throughout the course of American Jewish history. As I pointed out in the introduction, the role of the synagogue and its physical structure were adapted to conform to emerging understandings of gender equality and Jewish community (hence the development of the "synagogue-center" and adoption of mixed seating). New Jewish denominations, namely Reconstructionist and Conservative Judaism, were developed in the American context. And Jewish law changed as Jews moved to the suburbs and no longer lived within driving distance to their synagogue. Adaptation and innovation are characteristic of North American Judaism and Jewish praxis, and Jews who are opting out of circumcision and creating non-cutting welcoming ceremonies are continuing and honoring this tradition of adaptation and innovation.

But non-circumcision Jews are doing more than following this established tradition of ritual innovation and adaptation. They are wrestling with perceptions of motherhood, masculinity, and

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[44] For more on the impact of the feminist movement on Jewish life see: Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breath of Life: Feminism and the American Jewish Community* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1993); Paula E. Hyman, "Jewish Feminism Faces the American Women's Movement: Convergence and Divergence," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader,* edited by Pamela S. Nadell (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 297-312. For more on naming ceremonies for baby girls, see Sharon R. Siegel, *A Jewish Ceremony for Newborn Girls: The Torah's Covenant Reaffirmed* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014). For more on *bat mitzvah*, see Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," in *Women in American Judaism: Historical Perspectives,* edited by Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan Sarna (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 223-234.

[45] S.J. Crasnow, "On Transition: Normative Judaism and Trans Innovation," *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* vol. 32, no. 3 (2017): 403-415.

[46] *TransTorah,* "About Us," http://www.transtorah.org/aboutus.html, last accessed March 23, 2022.

[47] *TransTorah,* "Resources," http://www.transtorah.org/resources.html, last accessed March 23, 2022.

[48] Rachel Roman, "The Queer Mikveh Project Immerses Marginalized Jews in a Changing Ritual," *The Jerusalem Post,* January 20, 2022: https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-692350.

the ideal Jewish body (see chapters three and four for more on this). They are grappling with their opinions on medical interventions, ethics, bodily integrity, and consent. They are considering the familial and social bonds implicated in their choice. They are utilizing the resources available to them to broaden their knowledge, via research and the Internet, which impacts their opinions on the factors outlined above. This is a full circle—they are invited to think differently about circumcision, which prompts them to conduct further research, which ultimately leads to the decision to opt out. There are many layers at play here that lead to the decision to adapt and innovate. All these factors—an initiating moment, conducting research, responses from family and friends, in conjunction with shifting perceptions of medicine, ethics, gender, the body, and the role of tradition—lead to and shape innovation and adaptation. And this indeed impacts some of the structure of organized religion, particularly in liberal communities and congregations (we will examine this in the next chapter). This study highlights the multiple layers that coalesce to facilitate innovation and adaptation, and showcases the complexity implicated in "tinkering" with religion.

BRIT WITHOUT *MILAH* AS RITUAL ADAPTATION

Non-circumcision Jews tweak the traditional *brit milah* ritual to create a welcoming ceremony that resonates with their views on circumcision. The ritual action deemed problematic—the removal of the foreskin—is discarded and sometimes replaced with another action. And this new action is reinterpreted to blend into the model of a traditional *brit milah*. This process of adapting problematic elements of ritual action and reinterpreting them is not unique to non-circumcision Jews. Irit Koren examines the ways in which religious Jewish brides reinterpret and adapt certain ritual actions in an Orthodox wedding ceremony they deem problematic or unnecessary. Koren divides the way the women approached adapting the ritual in two categories: strategies of interpretation and strategies of action. Strategies of interpretation include rendering a troubling action as merely symbolic or applying an alternative interpretation of the ritual act.[49] Strategies of action include incorporating a parallel act or avoiding a ritual action in its entirety.[50] Elements of the ceremony they find troubling are ignored, reinterpreted, or changed.[51] To counteract what they perceived to be their passive roles in the wedding ceremony, some women created rituals to parallel the ritual actions of the men before and during the ceremony, such as parallel versions of the *tisch* (signing the ketubah), *bedeken* (veiling the bride), and *kiddushin* (betrothal). Women's ritual invention rendered them active agents in a ceremony in which they felt tangential.

I use Koren's analysis of ritual change as the framework for my examination of a *brit shalom* ritual I observed in May 2019. Similar to Koren's interlocutors, parents who opt out of circumcision employ "strategies of action" and "strategies of interpretation" to facilitate adapting the ritual. "Strategies of action" refer to ways ritual action is changed; "strategies of interpretation" allow for people to "impose a personal or invented meaning upon the ritual act" and incorporate a new act to account for their alternative interpretation.[52] In the case of this *brit shalom*, strategies of action and interpretation were employed to personalize the meaning of the ritual and diminish its divergence from tradition. Strategies of action and interpretation were also used to craft a ritual

[49] Irit Koren, "The Bride's Voice: Religious Women Challenge the Wedding Ritual," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 10 (2005): 32-33.
[50] Ibid., 35.
[51] Ibid., 34.
[52] Ibid., 32.

moment that harmonized the parents' views on medical intervention, ethics, and bodily autonomy with their understanding of upholding religious tradition. As we will see, non-circumcision parents engage with tradition through actively employing strategies of action and interpretation.[53]

EZRA AND LEAH'S *BRIT SHALOM*[54]

It was a crisp, sunny day in Berkeley, California when I pulled up to Ezra and Leah's home. I checked the address written on my scrap piece of paper several times before leaving my car and walking up to the front door. I was greeted warmly by Ezra, whom I had not met in person until this moment. I spent forty-five minutes mingling with other guests, walking around their home, and watching the chickens in their coop before the ceremony began. Rabbi Stein arrived, and the thirty or so guests gathered in the living room. The ceremony commenced with a *niggun*, a Jewish melody without words, and the guests enthusiastically followed Ezra's lead and joined in the singing. "That was my mother's favorite *niggun* so I thought it would be nice to start with that," Ezra explained. Prompted by Rabbi Stein, Ezra contextualized the purpose of this gathering to their guests:

> The main reason that we're here is to welcome Doren into our community, our Jewish community and our extended family and friends of any denomination or belief system. And also to welcome Asher in his own right because we didn't get a chance to do this when he was born. A lot of you know this but Asher was born shortly after my stepfather passed away. I'll save more about that when I talk about

[53] Ritual adaptation and innovation are not unique to non-circumcision Jews and the women in Koren's study. In fact, there are many examples of North American Jews adapting rituals, customs, and traditions, and even creating new ones, to suit their unique contexts, shifting views, and personal belief systems. A formidable example of change to ritual, customs, and tradition came with the onset of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. For some examples of ritual adaptation and innovation, see: Laura Yares, "Say it With Flowers: Shavuot, Confirmation, and Ritual Reimagination for a Modern American Judaism," *Shofar,* vol. 35, no. 4 (2017): 1-17; Helana Darwin, "Jewish Women's Kippot: Meanings and Motives," *Contemporary Jewry,* no 37 (2017): 81-97; Patricia Keer Munro, "What are THEY Doing on the Bimah?: How Intermarriage Changes Jewish Ritual," *Journal of Jewish Identities* vol. 8, no. 1 (2015): 95-115; Sharon R. Siegel, *A Jewish Ceremony for Newborn Girls: The Torah's Covenant Reaffirmed* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014). For changes to synagogue ritual and customs, see: Yael Israel Cohen, "Jewish Modern Orthodox Women, Active Resistance, and Synagogue Ritual," *Contemporary Jewry,* no. 32 (2012): 3-25; David Golinkin, "The Participation of Jewish Women in Public Rituals and Torah Study, 1845-2010," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues,* no. 21 (2011): 46-66; Ailene Cohen Nusbacher, "Efforts at Change in a Traditional Denomination: The Case of Orthodox Women's Prayer Groups, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues,* no. 2 (1999): 95-113; Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed,* edited by Jack Wertheimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For changes to holidays see: Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Christmukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 2018); Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

[54] The following excerpts are from the same *brit shalom* ceremony I attended in May 2019 in Berkeley, California. Ezra and Leah graciously allowed me to film the ritual. The quotes and descriptions of the ritual are derived from my fieldnotes and recording of the ritual, which took place on May 23, 2019. Ezra and Leah are pseudonyms.

> Asher's name but we wanted him to have this experience too, even though he just turned 3. This is for Doren and for Asher. Even though we're not very observant religious Jews, we are involved in Jewish community, Jewish life, and Jewish culture. It's an extension of our own personal spiritual practice and what's so important to us is the community, the sharing of food, and music and song and a commitment to justice in the world. That's really what we're welcoming our sons into—this community that is committed to making the world a better place, as a team.

In his introduction to the ritual, Ezra admits that he and his family are not "observant religious Jews." But he explains that they are indeed involved in Jewish community, life, and culture. This is consistent with many of the non-circumcision Jews I interviewed for this project; they may not identify as observant Jews, but they are involved in Jewish life and community. Like Ezra and Leah, welcoming their children into the Jewish community via an identifiably Jewish ritual is important to them. Rabbi Stein subsequently interjected with an explanation of the meaning of the covenant:

> The word *brit* means covenant. I'll just say one thing about the covenant. It's like a promise between at least two parties, and it's an important promise. Unlike in a promise if one side falls down on their promise then the other side can say, 'Well you fell down on the promise so I don't have to do my part of the promise.' But in a covenant, we sometimes do fall down and we just have to get back on and nobody walks away. That's what the covenant of the Jewish people and between the Jewish people and the creator of life is. That's the covenant we are welcoming the boys into and it has justice at its center also.

It is important to note here that Rabbi Stein has not said anything about circumcision. Here, *brit* refers to covenant, not covenant of circumcision. Rabbi Stein also draws a connection between this *brit* ceremony and justice, which we will examine in more depth shortly. Ezra then provided the reason for their choosing *brit shalom*:

> We decided that we wanted to have a *brit shalom.* Traditionally a Jewish family would have a *bris* on the eighth day of the boy's life. A *bris* is a circumcision ceremony and in Jewish culture it usually takes place on the eighth day. We decided that we were going to take a new approach to that. We felt it was more in alignment with how we wanted to treat our sons to not put them through that experience.

Like many non-circumcision parents, Ezra seems to be alluding to the ethics of circumcision. He explains that *brit shalom* "was more in alignment" with how they want to treat their sons and they do not want to "put them through" the experience of circumcision. This bridges a connection to Rabbi Stein's mention of justice; Ezra and Rabbi Stein are drawing clear line between this ritual performance and the ethics of circumcision, and seem to pointing to their view that circumcision is unethical. And indeed, they are framing this as a Jewish decision. Rabbi Stein subsequently expands on Ezra's point and roots the ceremony as a covenantal ceremony. The symbols and actions may be different than that of a traditional *bris*, but the ceremony serves as an official

welcoming of Ezra and Leah's sons into the covenant between God (or in this case, the creator of life) and the Jewish people:

> Let me just jump in and say that the tradition Ezra is talking about is called *brit milah* and *milah* is actually the circumcision. *Brit* means covenant, and *bris* is just another pronunciation of that. So same covenant, different symbols. The symbol of blood, which is a symbol of life, is part of a *bris* and this ceremony because Ezra decided to give blood sometime in the next month or so in honor of the boys' lives and that will be your way of acknowledging the covenant of that symbol of life.

After this brief introduction, the ceremony proceeded with the reading of a poem to honor Ezra's deceased parents, singing a *hinei ma tov*, reciting blessings, wrapping Doren in a prayer shawl, revealing and explaining the significance of the boys' Hebrew names (the longest part of the ceremony), and concluded with *kiddush* and followed by a celebratory meal. The ceremony was approximately 40 minutes long and its overarching structure bore some resemblance to a traditional *brit milah* or naming ceremony for a girl. A typical *bris*, as outlined in the introduction, usually follows a general blueprint: baby is brought into the room, the rabbi or *mohel* makes introductory remarks and explains the significance of the ritual, the seminal ritual action takes place (removal of the foreskin), blessings and other short prayer texts are said before and after, parents give a speech and reveal the Hebrew names, ceremony concludes and is followed by a celebratory meal. With a few adaptations to the sequence of events, Ezra and Leah's *brit shalom* adheres to this blueprint. Despite the structural resemblance, deliberate adjustments were made and reinterpretations were provided to create a unique but recognizable welcoming ceremony.

Reinterpreting the Ritual

In his initial explanation of the purpose of this ritual enactment, Ezra reinterprets the meaning of the covenant. It is no longer about the covenant of circumcision, which traces back to the story depicted in Genesis 17. This foundational text of circumcision is not relevant for Ezra and Leah. For Ezra and Leah, the covenant refers to welcoming their sons into their Jewish and non-Jewish community of family and friends. This is indeed a Jewish ritual for Ezra and Leah, but it also serves to welcome their son into all their communities, not just their Jewish circle. Ezra specifically addresses their "extended family and friends of any denomination or belief system." This welcoming ceremony, therefore, is not only about the Jewish people; it extends to the communities, regardless of religious affiliation or observance, to which Ezra and Leah are connected. In addition, the purpose of officially welcoming their sons into their communities is "to mak[e] the world a better place, as a team." This deviates significantly from the original account of the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17. In the biblical account, *brit milah* represents the covenant between God and Abraham, where God promised to make Abram the "father of a multitude of nations" and blessed Sarai (later Sarah) with a child and declared "she shall give rise to the nations; rulers of people shall arise from her."[55] This foundational text, which is referred to in many circumcision ceremonies, proved irrelevant for Ezra and Leah's interpretation of the ritual and was omitted as a

[55] Genesis 17:4 and Genesis 17:16.

result.[56] For Ezra and Leah, *brit shalom* represented welcoming their sons into their communities, with a commitment to justice as its foundation. This alternative reading of the ritual is affirmed by Rabbi Stein, who subsequently claims the covenant "has justice at its center," without offering further explanation of how that is so. Ezra and Leah's reinterpretation is assumed to suffice. This interpretation of *brit shalom* connects the ritual to ethics and justice; Ezra makes this slightly more explicit when he explains one of their reasons for choosing *brit shalom* was to avoid putting their sons through the experience of circumcision. This statement, along with the repeated mentions of "justice" and "making the world a better place," implies this ritual moment is a means of achieving those ends.

Ezra and Leah also reinterpret the significance of blood in the ritual. Extracting blood from a circumcised penis is a central component of *brit milah*.[57] So central is this element that blood is extracted from babies who were circumcised in the hospital in a ceremony called *hatafat dam* or *hatafat dam brit*.[58] Rather than discarding the extraction of blood from the ritual, Ezra decided to donate blood after the ceremony to honor his sons' lives and acknowledge the covenant as a symbol for life. Retaining this element of the ceremony, albeit enacted in a different way, pays homage to the central role of blood in *brit milah* and maintains its presence in the ritual. Ezra and Leah reinterpreted the meaning of blood and incorporated their alternative reading by creating a different act that allowed for blood to remain part of the ritual enactment. By maintaining the element of blood, albeit incorporated in a different way and at a different time, blood remains the symbol of the covenant. The extraction of blood remains an important element, but in this *brit shalom*, blood is extracted from a consenting adult. Ezra can indeed consent to donating blood to honor his sons. Again, this connects back to the ethics of circumcision. Performing what some perceive to be unnecessary surgery on an infant unable to provide consent is problematic for some families, and Ezra and Leah found a way to keep blood in the ceremony while removing this ethical quagmire. We saw a similar reconciliation in the way Emily and John incorporated drawing blood into their naming ceremony. Ezra and Leah use donating blood as a means of maintaining an element of tradition in a way that is compatible with their ethical concerns with circumcision.

Ezra and Leah's *brit shalom* is indeed a Jewish ritual. Calling it a *brit shalom* marks it as such. Further, it is officiated by a rabbi, they recite Jewish blessing, they refer directly to the covenant, and they sing Jewish songs. By reinterpreting the meaning of the ritual and placing ethics and justice at its center, they made it about more than just welcoming their sons into their communities (although this is indeed important to Ezra and Leah). For them, it is about welcoming their sons in a way that centers ethics, justice, and making the world a better place, and these elements are central throughout the ritual enactment. This demonstrates that the factors that may lead someone to opt out (that is, ethical concerns) are incorporated into the alternative ritual. For Ezra and Leah, ethics are central to the discussion, and as such, are incorporated into and included in the ceremony.

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[56] It is common to allude to the covenant between God and Abraham or include stories about Abraham and Sarah (not necessarily from Genesis 17) in *brit shalom* ceremonies. The absence of circumcision does not necessarily render biblical stories about the covenant between God and Abraham irrelevant.

[57] In ancient times, suctioning blood from the wound was understood to aid in healing. For more on this and the rabbinic construction of *brit milah*, see Cohen, W*hy Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?,* especially 24-26.

[58] Blood is also extracted from the penises of male converts who are circumcised. The extraction of blood renders the *brit halakhically* complete.

EMPHASIZING THE *BRIT* IN *BRIT SHALOM*

Throughout the ritual, Rabbi Stein actively connects Ezra and Leah's *brit shalom* to a traditional covenantal ceremony. Their ritual is not positioned as something entirely new; indeed, Rabbi Stein draws a direct link to *brit milah*. This functions to "traditionalize" the ritual. Rituals are legitimized when they bear resemblance to older precedents. Catherine Bell calls this process "traditionalization," and argues "as a powerful tool of legitimation, traditionalization may be a near-perfect repetition of activities from an earlier period, the adaptation of such activities in a new setting, or even the creation of practices that simply evoke links with the past."[59] Rabbi Stein actively "traditionalizes" the *brit shalom*. Ezra very briefly explains that he and Leah opted for *brit shalom* instead of *brit milah*: "We felt it was more in alignment with how we wanted to treat our sons to not put them through that experience." Immediately following Ezra's explanation of their choice to opt for *brit shalom*, Rabbi Stein elaborates on the meaning of the word *brit*. Through her elaboration, Rabbi Stein effectively disconnects *brit* from *milah*. *Brit* is a covenant, and a covenant can be established through "different symbols." Circumcision is one way, but not the only way. By honing in on the word *brit*, and refraining from using the term *brit shalom*, Rabbi Stein is positioning the ritual as a slight deviation from tradition rather than an entirely new ritual. The main component of the ritual, the *brit*, remains intact, with the only difference being the symbol of that *brit*. By doing this, Rabbi Stein establishes a palatable balance between tradition and innovation. Some changes are incorporated but the structure and purpose are no different than *brit milah*. Rabbi Stein created a ritual space that represented, to use the words of Catherine Bell, an "effective means of mediating tradition and change" by "appropriating some changes while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity."[60] Ezra and Leah utilized strategies of action and reinterpretation to adapt the *brit milah* into a recognizable and familiar welcoming ritual for their sons.

And this is quintessential to the American Jewish experience. As contexts and values shift that prompt adaptation or innovation, traditions are "tweaked" to suit these new circumstances. Indeed, there are times when new rituals are created, but they incorporate traditional elements of Jewish life and culture. We see this S.J. Crasnow's study on trans Jews creating rituals to mark their gender transitions. These rituals, although they are indeed new, use traditional Jewish symbols and objects (such as the *mikveh*) for the ritual enactment. The incorporation of the *mikveh* arguably traditionalizes the ritual; the incorporation of a recognizable precedent roots these new ceremonies firmly in Jewish tradition. This deliberate balancing act between tradition and innovation highlights the limitations of the ways scholars describe North American religion. "DIY religion," "bricolage," and "tinkering," terms that are often used to describe religious praxis in North America, imply a certain level of frivolousness. People are not haphazardly "tinkering" with religion until they find what works for them; these choices are deliberate and well thought-out. They are carefully considered and thoughtful. People intentionally try to balance tradition and innovation because they recognize the value of their religious culture and traditions. And terms like DIY religion, bricolage, and tinkering remove the nuance from adaptation and innovation. They remove the care, intention, and meaning from adaptation. Instead, these terms suggest religious innovation and adaptation are as frivolous as a weekend DIY project. Ezra and Leah's

[59] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 145.
[60] Ibid., 251.

brit shalom demonstrates that there is considerably more significance in adaptation and innovation than is captured in the ways scholars often describe contemporary religious practice.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I examined the stories of four non-circumcision families to analyze how parents come to the decision to opt out of *brit milah*. Through these stories we see how the initiating moment prompts the negotiating process, how couples negotiate opting out, and how *brit milah* is adapted into a non-cutting welcoming ritual. We see the role of the family in the decision-making process, and how dissenting family members can deeply impact one's decision to opt out of circumcision. We also see how dissenting opinions can shift depending on the circumstance. Finally, through an analysis of Ezra and Leah's *brit shalom*, we see that Jewish couples who choose not to circumcise are not rejecting tradition. Instead, they are adapting this quintessential lifecycle ritual into a ceremony that resonates with their beliefs about circumcision. The DIY ethos of American religious praxis provides an avenue through which practitioners can fine-tune religious traditions to suit their individual needs, values, and belief systems. Jewish couples who choose not to circumcise are not rejecting *brit milah*. Instead, they are utilizing this DIY ethos to calibrate this lifecycle ritual into a ceremony that resonates with their beliefs about circumcision. As Ezra and Leah's *brit shalom* demonstrates, alternative rituals simultaneously reinterpret and pay homage to *brit milah*. Instead of foregoing *brit milah* in its entirety, families are adapting the traditional circumcision ritual into an identifiably Jewish non-cutting covenantal ceremony. In this sense, ritual is used as a means through which one can negotiate seemingly paradoxical views and beliefs. By adapting and reinterpreting *brit milah*, non-circumcision Jews are actively finding ways to engage with, not reject, Jewish tradition.

CHAPTER TWO

'We're liberal, but not that liberal': Community Responses to Non-Circumcision Jews

As I argued in chapter one, opting out of circumcision is not straightforward or easy; it is a decision that often takes time to come to and effort to reconcile with one's understanding of Judaism and Jewish identity. The decision to opt out begins with initiating moment that prompts the process. Alternative rituals are a form of resistance *and* conformity; resistance to a specific ritual action (i.e. the removal of the foreskin) and conformity to the ritual system of Jewish welcoming ceremonies more broadly. The decision to opt out is often made more difficult when one's family members are not in agreement. As was the case for the stories of Laura and Michael, Tara and Shawn, and Emily and John, the family can exert significant influence over this decision, and sometimes, even operates to thwart it. The community is yet another factor in the decision to opt out of circumcision. Much like the family, the community can actively deter or even encourage opting out. Because many non-circumcision families want a rabbi to officiate their alternative rituals, how rabbis respond to non-circumcision families is an important layer to examine. It also demonstrates how rabbis, and Jewish communities more broadly, respond to change as it is happening in real time. In this chapter, I examine the dynamic of ritual negotiation at the community level.

According to Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert, "negotiations—understood here as processes of interaction during which differing positions are debated and/or acted out—are ubiquitous in ritual contexts, either in relation to the ritual itself or in relation to the realm beyond any given ritual performance."[1] A "central feature of ritual," negotiations are required when a certain element of the ritual proves to be problematic, and adjustments are requested to be made. Rituals are fluid, processual, and dynamic, and as a result, often involve a process of compromise and negotiation. Sometimes negotiations are simple and straightforward; other times, negotiations are fraught with conflict and tension. The negotiation process often involves disagreements about the way a ritual *ought* to be performed. In the case of non-circumcision, the central ritual action in negotiation is the removal of the foreskin. Can boys be welcomed into the Jewish community without this specific ritual action? Are rabbis willing to offer a ritual without removing the foreskin? Are they willing to do away with this part of the ritual?

In this chapter, I examine the process of negotiation and accommodating ritual change that takes place at the congregational level through an in-depth analysis of five different synagogues and their approaches to non-circumcision rituals. With the exception of one synagogue, whose location I cannot disclose, the synagogues examined in this chapter are located in Montreal and San Francisco. I analyze how these synagogues welcome non-normative ritual, with non-circumcision rituals serving as one example. There are various levels of the negotiation process: (1) between the rabbi and the person/couple requesting the adaptation, (2) between the rabbi and the congregation, (3) between the rabbi/congregation and wider Jewish community, and (4) the rabbis' own personal negotiation. The decision to engage with the negotiation process and offer non-cutting rituals often involves a delicate dance between one or more of the levels outlined above. For some congregations, the decision is simple and requires little to no negotiation; for others, the negotiation process implicates the entire congregation; and yet for others, the negotiation process

[1] Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert, "Introduction," in *Negotiating Rites*, edited by Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

is intimately connected to the tenor of the wider Jewish community in which a congregation is situated. As we will see, ritual negotiation is hardly ever simple and straightforward; much like the experience of couples and their negotiation process, rabbis generally make their decision about offering non-cutting rituals after much thought, reflection, and consideration. This often involves a complex negotiation process with themselves as well. Rabbis are often asked to do things they do not agree with, or would not counsel, and some of the negotiation process involves reconciling their own convictions with what is being asked of them. Negotiation shows how individual engagement with non-circumcision rituals can impact larger local Jewish communities and congregations.

RITUAL NEGOTIATION, POWER, AND CONTROL

Ritual is deeply connected to constructs of power. According to Catherine Bell, "ritualization is a strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations. Hence, the relationship of ritualization and social control may be better approached in terms of how ritual activities constitute a specific embodiment and exercise of power."[2] Since rituals tend to be in the control of ritual experts, ritual tends to preserve the prevailing power structure that secures religious leaders and ritual experts in positions of authority. But ritual negotiation destabilizes this power dynamic. The simple act of resisting the "dominant ritual system" and requesting an adaptation is an act of insubordination.[3] According to Michel Foucault, power cannot exist "without the means of escape or possible flight."[4] Power is constantly moving and pivoting between parties. For Foucault, "every power relationship implies, at least in *potentia*, a strategy of struggle, in which two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other kind a permanent limit, a point of possible reversal."[5] In the case of non-cutting rituals, there is often a power struggle between rabbis and parents. People who desire to create an entirely new ritual, or request adjustments to an existing one, are often dependent on ritual experts to accept their request and officiate their ritual. Most parents I interviewed who opted for a non-cutting ceremony wanted a rabbi to officiate their ceremony. Some of them specifically said this would legitimize their ritual choice in the eyes of disgruntled family members. As such, non-circumcision families who want their ceremony officiated by a rabbi are relying on rabbis to accommodate their choice.

Ronald Grimes offers a theory that is similar to Foucault's understanding of power. Grimes argues that rituals are inherently paradoxical and ritual functions to simultaneously empower and disempower people.[6] For Grimes, "ritual is closely entwined with the swinging pendulum of power balances and imbalances."[7] Rabbis hold power over parents who are dependent on them to officiate

[2] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 170.
[3] "Dominant ritual system" is a term used Ronald Grimes. In this context of my study, circumcision represents the dominant ritual system. See Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 303.
[4] Michael Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics,* second edition, edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 225.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies,* 302.
[7] Ibid. 303.

their ritual of choice. Religious leaders have the authority and power to accept or reject ritual change, and ordinary people are dependent on religious leaders to accommodate their requests. This power structure would appear to position religious leaders as the ultimate authority and remove agency from ordinary people. But inasmuch as ordinary Jews are dependent on rabbis for ritual matters, rabbis are simultaneously dependent on their members, resulting in a pendulum of power that tilts and shifts depending on the situation. When parents ask rabbis for a ritual accommodation, it swings the pendulum (to use Grimes' metaphor) and destabilizes this traditional power structure. By asking a rabbi to officiate a non-cutting ritual, parents are actively destabilizing the traditional authority paradigm in a fundamental way (even if they do not realize or recognize this). When parents want the traditional power structures to be involved in their ritual choice, they are putting pressure on these structures to accommodate their choice. The parents in this study generally do not opt out quietly; in other words, without seeking an alternative ritual from a rabbi. By requesting an alternative ritual from a rabbi, parents are not only bucking a quintessential tradition in Judaism, but they are also exerting their power. The seemingly simple act of asking a rabbi to officiate a non-cutting ritual shifts the pendulum of power to the parents, and rabbis are forced to make a decision. When rabbis are asked to officiate an alternative or adapted ritual, they must decide whether to officiate this ritual. And this decision can be complicated. The rabbis' personal feelings about circumcision, their relationship with the parents requesting this accommodation, the tenor of their congregation and the larger Jewish community, and their desire to include families with diverse belief systems into their congregations and Judaism more broadly are all factored into their decision. The simple act of requesting this ritual sets off an elaborate chain of events and destabilizes the traditional power structure between rabbis and regular Jews. Most of the rabbis I spoke with claim they do not like alienating people with their decisions. For the most part, they do not like saying no. But there are more elements at play here.

In recent decades, the synagogue has become increasingly insignificant for North American Jews.[8] As Jack Wertheimer demonstrates, many Jews are not members of a synagogue, and if they are, do not attend on a regular basis.[9] In fact, several studies demonstrate how Jews "do" Judaism in contexts outside formal institutional settings. Jodi Eichler-Levine examines how Jewish women engage with Judaism through crafting and needlepoint.[10] Rachel B. Gross argues that scholars of religion have "look[ed] for Judaism in all the wrong places."[11] For Gross, Jews experience "religion" in all sorts of ways, such as through visiting museums or eating a pastrami sandwich. Gross argues that "buying a pastrami sandwich from a deli is an ordinary activity, but many American Jews understand the sandwich as a connection to other Jews past and present […] The nostalgia inspired by a pastrami sandwich […] is part of American Jewish religion."[12] Outside the Jewish context, Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada examines how Catholic men practice devotion outside

[8] Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 33-39.
[9] Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism,* 8, 18, 183-210. In fact, several studies demonstrate how Jews "do" Judaism in many contexts outside formal institutional settings.
[10] Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
[11] Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 8.
[12] Ibid., 7.

the usual places and spaces scholars tend to look for and measure religion. Maldonado-Estrada reminds us that "the stuff of Catholic devotion may not always be rosary beads, prayerful petitions, and pews, but might include table saws and spectacular displays of strength."[13] Maldonado-Estrada demonstrates how "devotion can be found in tattooed skin, in wearing costumes and reenacting the lives of saints, and in mundane acts like painting and woodworking."[14] Because institutional settings of religion are less relevant for North Americans, religious leaders are finding themselves in a precarious position. As institutional settings lose their significance, the leaders of these institutions are losing their significance as well. Rabbis want to maintain their membership numbers and choosing not to accommodate ritual requests could alienate members and cause people to leave the congregation. This flips the power structure and places the ordinary Jew in the driver's seat. Ritual is indeed a paradox; at times rabbis are empowered and ordinary people disempowered, but at other times, rabbis are disempowered and ordinary people empowered. Power is not a constant; it ebbs and flows. Power is in constant motion. Power oscillates.

Throughout American Jewish history, Jews have taken rituals matters into their own hands and forced change from the ground up. When the people at the top of the hierarchy refuse to accommodate change, ordinary Jews exerted enough pressure to compel change, effectively usurping the dominant power structure. A poignant example of this naming ceremonies for baby girls (outside Sephardic and Mizrahi communities), mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, naming ceremonies for baby girls were not commonplace in many Ashkenazi communities. The birth of a baby girl was sometimes acknowledged in synagogue through an *aliyah*, but this was a minor ceremony in comparison to the celebration of a *bris*. Prompted by the feminist movement, many Jews noticed this discrepancy and began creating naming ceremonies for their daughters. And many of the first naming ceremonies performed in the 1970s were conducted by ordinary Jews, and collections of sample rituals were also created by Jews who did not assume typical leadership positions in the Jewish community. A good example of such a book is *The Jewish Catalogue: A Do-it-Yourself Kit,* compiled by Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, and Richard Siegel and published in 1973. This guidebook to Judaism, notably not written by congregational rabbis, shares practical knowledge about how to live a Jewish life.[15] It offers instructions on how to build a *sukkah*, outlines Jewish death rituals and customs, what blessings to say when eating and drinking, and how to affix a *mezuzah*, to name a few examples. In the second edition of the catalogue, naming ceremonies for baby girls were included. This type of guidebook bypasses institutional authority and provides Jews with the information they need to live a Jewish life. And as the subtitle implies ("A Do-it-Yourself Kit"), the book is designed to be a reference and not a prescriptive list of *mitzvot* one must observe. Deemed by Marc Oppenheimer a "countercultural book on how-to Judaism," *The First Jewish Catalogue* and its subsequent

[13] Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, *Lifeblood of the Parish: Men and Catholic Devotion in Williamsburg, Brooklyn* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 2.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Siegel was a rabbinical student at the time the book was compiled. Michael Strassfeld eventually did become a rabbi, but not until 1991 (almost twenty years after the book was first published). Subsequent editions of the book were published in 1976 and 1980.

editions capture how this historical context facilitated the transfer of power from rabbis and Jewish institutions to ordinary Jews.[16]

Another example that captures oscillation of power between institutions and ordinary Jews is the *havurah* movement. The *havurah* movement consisted of Jews who rejected institutionalized Judaism. They did not go to synagogue and criticized Jewish institutions for being "sterile, impersonal, and divorced from Jewish tradition."[17] Instead of praying in synagogue, *havurot* usually met in small groups at people's homes. They rejected the synagogue, but not Judaism. According to Riv-Ellen Prell, "Its members rejected denominations, impressive buildings, and other imitations of American society and Protestantism. They did not, however, reject Judaism, only their parents' version of it. Instead they created small, homogenous groups that prayed, usually weekly rather than daily, studied, and provided a community to share personal events and the holidays of the Jewish year. The members of the groups were usually close friends. They were committed to maintaining their small size and complete independence from large institutions."[18] *Havurot* admonished Jewish institutions, rejected prayer in synagogue, and sought connection through smaller groups. Even though this type of setting emerged as a rebuke of the synagogue, synagogues started forming their own *havurot*. What was once subversive and a rejection of institutional Judaism became part of synagogue culture.[19] The examples of naming ceremonies for girls and the *havurah* movement capture the oscillating nature of power in religious communities, and how ritual can become a site where power is usurped from the hands of religious leaders and institutions.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF MONTREAL AND SAN FRANCISCO

Before examining the responses of synagogues in Montreal and San Francisco to non-circumcision Jews, it is important to briefly set out the demographic particularities of these two communities. The first Jews arrived in Montreal in the 1760s. Shearith Israel, Montreal's first synagogue, was founded in 1768. Shearith Israel (also known as the Spanish Portuguese) was also the first synagogue in Canada and remained its only synagogue for 75 years.[20] Montreal's second synagogue, the Ashkenazi Shaar Hashomayim, was founded in 1846.[21] The Jewish community in Quebec remained very small until the end of the nineteenth century. In 1871, the number of Jews in all of Quebec was around 500. When Jews from Eastern Europe started immigrating to North America, the number of Montreal Jews increased 800%. Between 1901 and 1931, the Quebec

[16] Mark Oppenheimer, "DIY Judaism: 'The Jewish Catalogue'—a quasi-hip countercultural book of how-to Judaism—was all the rage in seventies. How does it hold up now?" *Tablet,* February 27, 2017: https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/diy-judaism, last accessed March 8, 2022.
[17] Sharon R. Siegel, "Jewish Welcoming Ceremonies for Newborn Girls: The Modern Development of a Feminist Ritual," *Modern Judaism* vol. 32, no. 3 (2012): 336.
[18] Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 16.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Maxine Jacobson, "Struggles and Successes: The Beginnings of Jewish Life in Canada in the Eighteenth Century," in *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit,* edited by Ira Robinson (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 24.
[21] Shaar Hashomayim, "Mission and History," https://www.shaarhashomayim.org/mission-history, last accessed March 24, 2022.

Jewish community increased from 7,000 to 60,000, with most residing in Montreal. The 1940s and 1950s represented another important immigration period of Jews coming to Quebec. Many Holocaust survivors immigrated to Quebec in the late 1940s, contributing significantly to the growth of the Jewish community in Quebec. In the 1950s, Jews from North Africa immigrated in large numbers to Montreal. These distinct immigration patterns, which differ from the waves of immigration experienced in the United States, had a significant impact on the composition of the Montreal Jewish community.[22]

The Montreal Jewish community is unique in its ethnic, denominational, and cultural composition, and this uniqueness has very much to do with the immigration patterns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first major wave of Jewish immigration took place between 1840 and the 1880s, when tens of thousands of Jews from Central and Western Europe immigrated in large numbers to the United States. "By 1877, there were an estimated 280,000 Jews in the United States, the vast majority the product of a German migration. In Canada, the total Jewish population as of 1881 numbered only 2,456."[23] Sociologist Morton Weinfeld attributes the small Jewish population in Canada at this time to the lack of Reform presence in Canadian Jewry. Weinfeld explains: "Perhaps because these early numbers were so small, a Germanic/Reform stamp on the nascent Jewish community was far weaker than in the United States. Reform never achieved the dominance in Canada that it established early in the United States."[24]

In 2011, the population of the Montreal Jewish community was 90,780, comprising 2.4% of the total population.[25] Sephardim (including Mizrahi Jews) comprise 24.5% of the Jewish population.[26] Montreal has a high number of Holocaust survivors; a little over 33% of Jewish seniors over 66 years of age are Holocaust survivors. At the time of this report, 5,795 Holocaust survivors were living in Montreal.[27] Seniors comprise 20.4% of the Montreal Jewish population. 16.7% of marriages and partnerships are interfaith marriages.[28] 21.9% of Montreal Jews identify as Orthodox. This represents "the highest rate of identified Orthodox Jews of any major city in

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[22] Ira Robinson, "Historical Introduction to the Jewish Community of Quebec," *Federation CJA:* https://www.federationcja.org/en/jewish_montreal/history/#:~:text=The%20first%20Jews%20arrived%20in,near%20the%20Port%20of%20Montreal, last accessed March 24, 2022.
[23] Morton Weinfeld, *Like Everyone Else But Different: The Paradoxical Success of Canadian Jews* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 56.
[24] Ibid., 57.
[25] Charles Shahar, "2011 National Household Survey Analysis: The Jewish Community of Montreal," *Federation CJA,* September 2014: https://www.federationcja.org/en/jewish_montreal/demographics/, last accessed March 24, 2022.
[26] Shahar, "Part Seven: The Sephardic Community," https://www.federationcja.org/media/mediaContent/2011%20Montreal_Part7_Sephardic%20Community_Final-E.pdf, last accessed March 24, 2022, page iii.
[27] Shahar, "Part 10: Holocaust Survivors," https://www.federationcja.org/media/content/2011%20Montreal_Part%2010_Holocaust_Survivors_Final%20Report.pdf, last accessed March 24, 2022, page iii.
[28] Shahar, "Part 6: Intermarriage," https://www.federationcja.org/media/mediaContent/PAA-15101_National%20Household%20Suvey%20part%205%20and%206.pdf, last accessed March 24, 2022, page iv.

North America."[29] 63.6% of Montreal Jews are members of a synagogue, almost 88% of households host a Passover Seder every year, 36% of households light Shabbat candles (the highest rate in North America), 44% of households claim to have separate dishes for meat and dairy. When compared with other cities, it is clear that Montreal Jews appear to be highly observant across a variety of traditions and rituals.[30]

Jewish settlement in San Francisco began with the Gold Rush in 1848. The majority of Jews arriving in San Francisco in the mid-nineteenth century were German-speaking Jews from central Europe.[31] The earliest congregations were founded in 1851—Emanu-El and Sherith Israel. The original intention was to create one congregation, but the deep rifts and disagreements between the mostly Bavarian and Polish Jews resulted in the creation of two distinct congregations.[32] Both congregations remain operational, are two of the largest congregations in San Francisco, and are affiliated with Reform Judaism.

A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life and Communities is a study that sought to measure key demographics and characteristics of the Bay Area Jewish community. According to the study, there are approximately 350,000 Jews in the Bay Area, representing the fourth largest Jewish population in the United States.[33] The total population of the Bay Area is approximately 7 million.[34] Jews between the ages of 18-29 represent 24% of the Jewish population.[35] 41% of Bay Area Jews identify as non-denominational, 37% identify as Reform, 13% identify as Conservative, 3% as Reconstructionist, and 3% as Orthodox.[36] Jewish engagement in the Bay Area lags behind national levels. For every measure of Jewish engagement (such as attending a Passover seder, attending services on the High Holidays, lighting Shabbat candles, the importance of their Jewish identity), rates in the Bay Area trail national levels. For example, 50% of Bay Area Jews will attend or host a Passover Seder compared to 73% of Jews measured by the national Pew survey.[37] 66% of married Jews between the ages of 18-34 are intermarried; 59% of married Jews between the ages of 35-49 are intermarried.[38] The study found that 25% Jewish households include a respondent or spouse that is not white—Hispanic, Asian-American, or of mixed or other ethnic or racial background.[39]

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[29] Morton Weinfeld, "Jewish Life in Montreal," in *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit* edited by Ira Robinson (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 161-162.
[30] Ibid., 162.
[31] Fred Rosenbaum, *Cosmopolitans: The Social and Cultural History of the Jews of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1-2.
[32] Rosenbaum, *Cosmopolitans,* 15.
[33] *A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life and Communities,* "Primary Analysis," https://jewishfed.org/sites/default/files/Bay_Area_Portrait_2.27.2018.pdf, page 20-21, last accessed March 24, 2022.
[34] *Bay Area Census,* "San Francisco Bay Area," http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/bayarea.htm, last accessed March 24, 2022.
[35] *A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life,* "Primary Analysis," 28.
[36] Ibid., 59.
[37] Ibid., 57. It is important to note that here that *A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life and Communities* was released in 2018 and the Pew Research with which they are drawing comparisons was released in 2013.
[38] Ibid., 54.
[39] *A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life,* "Race and Ethnicity Demography," 2.

There are several poignant differences between the Jewish communities in Montreal and the Bay Area that are worth highlighting.[40] First, Montreal is more traditional and observant. 29.1% of Montreal Jews identify as Orthodox compared to 3% of Bay Area Jews. 88% of Montreal Jews will host or attend a seder compared to 50% of Bay area Jews. The intermarriage rate in Montreal is 16.7%; in the Bay Area, 66% of married Jews between the ages of 18-24 are married to a non-Jewish partner. Montreal Jews are also considerably older; seniors comprise 20.4% of Montreal's Jewish population. In the Bay Area, Jews 18-29 years of age represent 24% of the Jewish population. Finally, Montreal has a large population of Holocaust survivors (33% of seniors are Holocaust survivors) and Sephardic Jews (24.5% of population), which contribute to the more traditional leaning of the community. These demographic differences are important factors in the process of negotiating and accommodating non-normative ritual more broadly, and non-circumcision Jews more specifically.

MONTREAL, QUEBEC

TEMPLE EMANU-EL BETH SHOLOM

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom (TEBS), Montreal's only Reform synagogue, with over 1000 member families, was founded in 1882. First known as Temple Emanu-El, it eventually merged with sister congregation Beth Sholom to become Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom in 1980. One of the tenets of TEBS is inclusion: "Here at Temple, our efforts are guided by our commitment to promote *inclusion*, engage the community, and *eliminate barriers*. We have a committee made up of leadership, professionals, parents, and other congregants who are dedicated to working together on our collective *Inclusion journey*."[41] The emphasis on inclusion continues when outlining the values of the congregation: "We are dedicated to providing meaningful, *inclusive*, and inspirational religious services, as well as pursuing our mission of *Tikun Olam* (repairing the world) and working toward peace and social justice for all."[42] Perusing TEBS's website allows one to see that inclusion is indeed an important tenet of the congregation. The website clearly indicates TEBS officiates wedding ceremonies for same-sex and interfaith couples, and much of their inclusion efforts are aimed at people with special needs and mobility constraints. Senior rabbi Lisa Grushcow was recently named one for 33 most inspiring rabbis in America by *Forward* magazine for the inclusion efforts of her congregation.[43]

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[40] It is important the note that *A Portrait of Bay Area Jewish Life and Communities* was released in 2018, while Charles Shahar's "2011 National Household Survey Analysis: The Jewish Community of Montreal" was released in 2011. This difference in the dates of both studies indicates that these figures may be different if they were measured in the same year. Despite the differences in the years in which the studies were conducted, they give us a general sense of the demographics of these two Jewish communities.

[41] Temple Emanu-El-Beth-Sholom, "Inclusion at Temple," https://www.templemontreal.ca/inclusion-at-temple/, last accessed January 31, 2022. Emphasis added.

[42] Temple Emanu-El-Beth-Sholom, "Our Mission and Values," https://www.templemontreal.ca/mission-values/, last accessed February 18, 2022.

[43] Jane Eisner, "America's Most Inspiring Rabbis: 33 Men and Women Who Move Us," *Forward,* 2015: https://forward.com/series/rabbis/2015/?utm_source=Copy+of+March+23&utm_campaign=E-blast+March+9&utm_medium=email, last accessed February 18, 2022.

TEBS's own emphasis on inclusion, its' position as the only Reform congregation in Montreal, and the spotlight placed on Rabbi Grushcow for being the only female senior rabbi of any major congregation in the city places pressure on TEBS, and Rabbi Grushcow, to include every person and idea in her congregation. It is common for other congregational rabbis who encounter people who are questioning circumcision or considering opting out to refer them to Rabbi Grushcow—without even knowing whether she officiates non-cutting ceremonies. The expectation of acceptance and willingness to perform said rituals extends to people in search of an officiant. In chapter one, I detailed the story of Laura and Michael, who opted out of circumcising their son. They chose a non-cutting ceremony, and Laura's mother, Judith, made her disdain for their choice known.[44] Although Judith was very upset with the decision, she decided to help Laura and Michael plan the *brit shalom* for her grandson, and even tried to locate a rabbi to officiate the ceremony. Judith called five different rabbis from Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations with no success. Judith explains her struggle to find a rabbi to officiate *brit shalom*:

> I called up five different synagogues in the city. I didn't think my Orthodox one would do anything but believe it or not he was the one that called me back and spoke to me. I called up the Reform and she never had the decency to call me back. Conservative spoke to me but said, 'No, call the Reform. Maybe they'll do something.' And I called another Orthodox one too and he was amazing. He married my son and daughter-in-law. And he called me back and said, 'Please tell them they're free to call me. I'd love to speak to them.' They never did.[45]

Judith went on to explain her frustration and disappointment when she never heard back from TEBS and thus assumed they would not officiate a *brit shalom* for her grandson:

> First of all, the Reform rabbi is a female rabbi. She's gay. And my answer was, 'I don't understand. She married my friend's daughter to another woman. She's okay officiating a wedding between two women as opposed to doing *brit shalom*?' I didn't buy it. Of course it made me angry. I mean, how could you do that, you know? If you could marry two women you could do *brit shalom*.[46]

Judith is not the only person to reach out to Rabbi Grushcow about performing an alternative *bris* ceremony. As a result, Rabbi Grushcow has had to determine her response to requests for non-cutting rituals. Rabbi Grushcow explained to me where she, and by extension her congregation, stands on the issue of non-cutting ceremonies. We began by talking about how she counsels parents who have questions about circumcision:

> I would never want a situation in which a parent felt like they were being coerced into this in any way. That's not something I could be a part of. I do speak about the fact that for me, having officiated scores upon scores of *brit milah* ceremonies, if I felt like there was harm being done to the child, if I saw kids or families where there were problems, if I felt like I were involved in something that was harmful, it

[44] See chapter one for more on the family dynamics and implications of Laura and Michael's decision to opt out.
[45] Judith, interview with author, February 11, 2016.
[46] Ibid.

> wouldn't be something that we would do. We talk about where it comes from, why it's significant, we talk about the fact that a child when they're born they're born Jewish no matter what, but what the *brit milah* does is separate from that. It has to do with bringing a child into the covenant. I'll sometimes say it's not a ritual we would invent today. If we came up with a new ritual to welcome a baby we'd probably come up with something that looks a lot more like the baby namings we do for girls. But part of the power of *brit milah* has to do with its antiquity, has to do with the fact that Jews have held onto it for thousands and thousands of years. I think anytime you opt into a tradition that is older and bigger than yourself, there are going to be certain pieces that you look at and say, 'Alright, it's not how it would be today, but we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.' As a feminist, would I create this ritual? Not in a million years. But do I understand where it comes from and why it's important and why it should be continued? Yes.[47]

By stating *brit milah* is not a ritual that would be invented today and she would not create this ritual, Rabbi Grushcow offers a subtle admission of her own discomfort with the ritual. She acknowledges that a naming ceremony would likely be the ritual of choice had *brit milah* never existed. Despite this admission, Rabbi Grushcow explains why she does not offer alternative non-cutting ceremonies for baby boys:

> As a rabbi I really do think *brit milah* is an important ritual and I'm not in a rush to create or advocate for an alternative to that, because I don't see it being on par as a ritual. I mean we sometimes do create new rituals when you don't have much in the tradition to rely on. But when you do have something that exists and is very clearly biblically mandated that's been carried through thousands of years, it's hard for me to look at that and say, 'Let's just do something easier because this makes us uncomfortable.'[48]

It is important to consider how the Montreal context, in Rabbi Grushcow's case, affects her decision to adopt certain innovations for her congregation. If TEBS was not the only Reform synagogue in a sea of more traditional congregations, her decision could be different. Grushcow explains the implications of the Montreal context:

> I think for the vast majority of the other synagogues in town, *brit milah* is an unquestioned requirement and expectation. For us to do otherwise would be seen, I think, in many of their eyes as another example of being off the deep-end with our liberalism, which I have no problem doing for things that I believe in. I don't care what another more traditional rabbi in the community might think about my officiating at a same sex marriage or doing a conversion for a baby whose mother isn't Jewish or other things that I believe in really strongly. I think it's important

[47] Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, interview with author, March 29, 2016. I interviewed Rabbi Grushcow on two separate occasions, and I share quotations from both interviews throughout this section. As such, I include a footnote with each quotation to clearly indicate which interview I am drawing from.
[48] Ibid.

> for us to be in a place that can say yes to those things. For me and for this community, I don't think *brit shalom* is on that level.[49]

Rabbi Grushcow explains how she navigates the demands that come with being one of the few liberal congregations in Montreal:

> The fact that we're liberal doesn't mean that we say yes to everything. If we say yes to everything we have no integrity. You might get the trappings of religion if you have a rabbi or a synagogue that's going to do everything you ask. I hate saying no to people. It pains me. I don't go out of my way to do it. But I'm also responsible to this tradition that is thousands of years old, and I need to teach it and live it in a way that I think has integrity. And if I just automatically say yes to everyone who comes in, I lose that and I do a disservice and I have no business being a rabbi. But it's true, I think that when you are on the liberal end of the spectrum people are offended and amazed if you say no to anything.[50]

Although Rabbi Grushcow made clear in our initial interview that she does not offer alternatives to circumcision, when interviewed three years later, her position changed somewhat. TEBS still does not offer an official alternative to circumcision (such as *brit shalom*), but they will perform a baby naming for a baby boy who is not circumcised. Rabbi Grushcow explains the reasons for this choice and how, in her mind, what she offers is not an official alternative to *brit milah*:

> We will never deny a child a naming ceremony, but we won't do something that is explicitly a replacement for or alternative to *brit milah*. There are certain ceremonies that have been developed specifically for that and we don't do those. We would do a naming for a boy who is not circumcised, just like we would if a baby boy was circumcised in the hospital and not through a *brit milah*. Or let's say a child was adopted older and the family decides for whatever reason not to do *brit milah* we won't keep that child from having a Hebrew name. But we won't have an explicit replacement of *brit milah*.[51]

Rabbi Grushcow goes on to explain that naming ceremonies for baby boys take place in the synagogue during a Shabbat service, and the family members are called to the Torah and to announce child's Hebrew name(s). Although she would officiate a baby naming for a girl outside the synagogue setting, for instance, in someone's home, Rabbi Grushcow will only officiate a naming ceremony for a baby boy in the synagogue. She explains: "I want [the ceremony] to take place in the context of connecting formally to the Jewish community."[52] Naming ceremonies for boys take place during a Shabbat service exclusively because Rabbi Grushcow "wants the family to be connected to the community in that way."[53] Rabbi Grushcow seems to be suggesting that families who choose not to circumcise are more at risk of straying from the community and require a connection to the community. To ensure the family is connected with the community, Rabbi

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, interview with author, December 11, 2019.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

Grushcow will only officiate naming ceremonies for boys during Shabbat service. This difference distinguishes naming ceremonies for baby boys from naming ceremonies for girls. Although Rabbi Grushcow is reticent to offer an official alternative to *brit milah,* she has made room for other notable ritual adaptations. This highlights the sometimes complicated and nuanced dynamic of choosing what to support and what not to support. Rabbi Grushcow has clear boundaries for the naming ceremonies she performs for baby boys and does not support official alternative rituals, but is more open to adaptation for other lifecycle rituals. For example, Rabbi Grushcow will officiate funerals for Jews who opted for cremation. We discussed this in our second interview, and Rabbi Grushcow also wrote about this in an article for the *Canadian Jewish News.* She writes:

> My own belief is that there is great comfort, beauty, and meaning to be found in the return of the body to the earth. But over the years, I have encountered reasons in favor of cremation that I could never—and would never—contradict, such as the Holocaust survivor who wants to be cremated so he can feel united with family members burned in the ovens at Auschwitz, or the young woman, a victim of anorexia, whose grieving parents chose cremation to free her from her body at last. I believe it is our community's responsibility to be there in those situations, and to respond with compassion and care.[54]

The pain of losing a loved one, and the reasons people share for opting for cremation (some of which are outlined above), prompted Rabbi Grushcow to reflect and eventually negotiate and offer her services at funerals where the dead is cremated. This negotiation goes even further—TEBS has a section for cremated remains and graves at their cemetery, which they call their "cremation garden."[55] Their stance on cremation is also made clear on their website: "Traditionally, cremation has not been a normative Jewish practice, out of respect for the integrity of our bodies, given by God. However, we do not believe that any practice involving the bodies of our deceased can impact upon their souls. For those who choose cremation, we officiate at their funerals, and we encourage burial of their remains."[56] When I asked Rabbi Grushcow why she accommodates families who opt for cremation and does not fully accommodate those who opt out of circumcision, she shared two reasons. First, there is a clear biblical commandment *to* circumcise Jewish boys and men, but Rabbi Grushcow would argue that there is no biblical prohibition *against* cremation. Second, the fact that cremation takes place at the end of one's life, rather than the beginning like circumcision, plays a role in her decision. Rabbi Grushcow explains: "For a lot of Jewish families, doing a *bris* or baby naming is that first act of actively committing to a Jewish life for their children and has all kinds of implications for how that child's life is going to unfold and the choices that family is going to make. Whereas if you're talking about cremation you're talking about the end of life, and the question simply becomes: are you there for that family or are you not there for that family? But it's the end of a story, it's not the beginning of a story, and that for me is a significant, significant difference."[57] This is an interesting way of understanding death and death rituals since

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[54] Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, "Cremation, Compassion and Choice," *The Canadian Jewish News,* Dec. 1, 2016: https://thecjn.ca/perspectives/opinions/cremation-compassion-choice/, last accessed January 31, 2022.
[55] Grushcow, "Cremation, Compassion and Choice."
[56] Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, "Death and Mourning," https://www.templemontreal.ca/life-cycle/death-mourning/, last accessed January 31, 2022.
[57] Grushcow, interview, December 11, 2019.

the death and burial of a Jew is indeed the beginning of a new story—the story of resurrection. Jewish bodies are prepared and buried very specifically in anticipation of the coming of the messiah and bodily resurrection. Here, Rabbi Grushcow's interpretation as death as the "end of a story" seems to be contradicting a central belief in Judaism that physical death is indeed not the end. This paradox highlights how ritual negotiations are often idiosyncratic. For Rabbi Grushcow, her understanding of death as the end of one's story, even if this is in contradiction with Jewish beliefs about death, allows her to negotiate and make adaptations to traditional burial practices. But her interpretative flexibility does not extend to circumcision, and as a result, she is less willing to negotiate in that ritual context.

Inclusion of non-normative rituals and customs will continue to be requested of rabbis, regardless of their leaning and denominational affiliation. And sometimes these requests, and the shifts in synagogue policy that ensue as a result, can come as a surprise. Regardless of the adaptations or innovations rabbis do incorporate into their congregations, they cannot escape the context of the community in which they are situated. Not only do they have to answer to their members, but the context of the wider Jewish community in which they are situated will inevitably be implicated in their decisions. This is, and will always be, a delicate dynamic to manage and balance. Rabbi Grushcow highlights this dynamic when explaining how she goes about making decisions for her congregation:

> And then there's the question of *kol Israel*, the entire peoplehood of the Jewish people. Is what I'm going to do, do I understand it as being helpful or harmful in that broader context? How do these different, and often conflicting, values play into one another? I would say that nothing that's done is done lightly. And in a certain situation I might reach out to colleagues or reach out to a formal body and say, 'Here's something I'm grappling with. What have other people done? What's your rationale or your understanding in the context of Jewish texts and history about what to do?' It's never totally individual and it's never cavalier.[58]

Offering non-cutting rituals as a recognized alternative to *brit milah* can be a complex process for a congregation. Individual synagogues and their rabbis, while unique and singular, are never totally separate from the wider Jewish community in which they are situated. The decisions rabbis make are generally not haphazard, but intentional and well thought-out. Over the course of three years, Rabbi Grushcow negotiated her stance on naming ceremonies for baby boys. When I initially interviewed her in 2016, she did not mention that she offers a ritual for parents who opt out of circumcision. In our interview in 2019, she explained that TEBS does offer a naming ceremony for boys but does not recognize it as an official alternative to *brit milah*. There is no mention of this on TEBS's website; in fact, in the lifecycle section, *brit milah* is presented as the only option for baby boys: "For baby boys, the covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*) takes place on the eighth day following birth. For baby girls, a naming covenant (*brit bat*) usually takes place within the first year, in the context of being called to the Torah."[59] Not only did Rabbi Grushcow have to negotiate with her own personal feelings on circumcision, in which she is in favor, she also felt compelled to negotiate her decision with the wider Montreal Jewish community in mind. She is

[58] Gruschow, interview, March 29, 2016.
[59] Temple Emanu-El-Beth-Sholom, "*Brit Milah* and Baby Naming," https://www.templemontreal.ca/life-cycle/brit-milah-baby-naming/, last accessed January 31, 2022.

aware that other rabbis may see her as "being off the deep-end with our liberalism," and she does not want to garner this reputation for this particular ritual. That being said, there are other causes that she is willing to be seen in this way (such as accepting cremations), but circumcision (or non-circumcision) is not one of them. Rabbi Grushcow had reached the limit of her negotiations vis-à-vis naming ceremonies for baby boys.

SAN FRANCISO BAY AREA, CALIFORNIA

TEMPLE SINAI

Temple Sinai, located in Oakland, California, is largest and oldest congregation in the East Bay area. Established in 1875, Temple Sinai (then called the First Hebrew Congregation of Oakland), was more traditional in its inception. When Marcus Friedlander was hired as rabbi in 1892, he guided the congregation slowly toward the Reform movement.[60] Temple Sinai currently serves nearly 1000 member families and Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin is senior rabbi. Located in downtown Oakland, Temple Sinai is an impressive building and stands out amongst its neighbors. Prominently etched into the exterior walls of the entrance is the statement "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." It appears as though Temple Sinai is making a bold statement about inclusion by proclaiming "all" are welcome. This proclamation is not embedded deeply on their website, only visible to those who seek it out; it is permanently etched on its façade for all to see. But the context of the quotation sends a more nuanced message. "A house of prayer for all people" is a direct quotation from Isaiah 56:7. In the context of the text in which this quote was extracted, "all people" refers more specifically to those who observe the commandments. More specifically, Isaiah is declaring that foreigners who "keep," "hold," and "attach," action verbs that denote observance of the commandments, are welcome in the community. For Isaiah, "all people" does not really mean *all people*; he is specifically referring to people who observe the commandments. Isaiah states:

> As for the foreigners, who attach themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants—All who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, and who hold fast to My covenant—I will bring them to My sacred mount, and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.[61]

[60] Temple Sinai, "History," https://www.oaklandsinai.org/history, last accessed January 31, 2022.
[61] Isaiah 56: 6-7.

The underlying message behind this quotation, even if Temple Sinai understands or uses it differently, is that there are boundaries around inclusion. Only certain people, who meet specific criteria, can be considered for inclusion. The original text makes it clear that certain conditions must be met to be included in God's house of prayer.

Image 5: Entrance to sanctuary at Temple Sinai, with the excerpt from Isaiah 56:7 visible. Photo taken by author.

Temple Sinai is one of many synagogues in the Bay Area to include a clear statement about naming ceremonies for boys on their website. Their website states:

> If you are awaiting the arrival of the little one, feel free to call and discuss some preliminary details with us. We can start to shape a meaningful ceremony even before the baby is born. If your child is female, we can plan the naming when it works for your family, either during a service or in your home. If your child is male and you plan to circumcise him on or around the eighth day, we can help you find a *mohel* in the area. If you plan to circumcise him in the hospital, *or you do not plan to circumcise, then we can do a naming, in your home or during a Shabbat service, at any time that is convenient.*[62]

[62] Temple Sinai, "Welcoming a New Baby," https://www.oaklandsinai.org/birth.html, last accessed January 31, 2022. Emphasis added.

Although such a statement is not as unique for a synagogue in the Bay Area as it would be in Montreal, the process of including this statement on Temple Sinai's website illustrates that non-circumcision rituals can be a sensitive and fraught topic, even in liberal areas. Rather than simply changing the wording on the website on her own, Rabbi Mates-Muchin decided it was best to seek approval from the appropriate people before making any statement about offering non-cutting rituals. Lisa Braver Moss, who advocates for the open inclusion of non-circumcision families in the Jewish community, is a member of Temple Sinai and pushed for non-cutting welcoming ceremonies for boys to be included on the website. Rabbi Mates-Muchin explains how the process began:

> Lisa Braver Moss is a member of the congregation and this is a big thing for her. She was the one who came and said 'We need to take a look at this.' It must have been 3, maybe 4, years ago when we decided to make the language open-ended to what I think actually reflects our practice. We don't require children to be circumcised to be in our preschool, to have *b'nai mitvah*, to be confirmed, or any of those kinds of things. If a family came to us and had said they decided not to circumcise their child they could still fully participate. So all of those things have been in practice, and Lisa urged us to put it in writing because that would make it appear like families won't be shamed, this is something that must be kept secret or can't be talked about. This is a decision that we know people make.[63]

Like the experiences of the families outlined in chapter one, Rabbi Mates-Muchin is describing the initiating moment her congregation was invited to look at circumcision differently. Their more open inclusion of non-circumcision was prompted by Lisa Braver Moss. This demonstrates that communities, and not only individuals, can point to an initiating moment when their approach to non-circumcision families started shifting. By including ceremonies for families who do not plan to circumcise as part of the birth rituals they offer on their website, Rabbi Mates-Muchin is simply putting in writing what their community is already doing. Despite the fact that the statement represents the current practices of the community, there was a process to go through and some resistance to its inclusion. Rabbi Mates-Muchin explains:

> It was a process, because I obviously wanted buy-in from all members of the senior staff and to have that sense that everybody felt okay with including this on the website. I am positive we ran it by the president, we may have also brought it to the board in general to say that this is the language that we want, but I can't remember our conversation about it, which means there wasn't any objection and everyone was ok with it.

Rabbi Mates-Muchin went on to explain how the specific wording of this statement was well thought-out and intentional:

> Lisa really likes the term *brit shalom* for the ceremony when a family chooses not to circumcise their child, which I find critical. I think we can celebrate whatever choice people make without having to criticize the decisions that other Jews have

[63] Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin, interview with author, May 14, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Rabbi Mates-Muchin.

> made. If this is a covenant of peace, then the other is not a covenant of peace. I have a very strong feeling against that particular terminology, especially when we can just do a baby naming. There's no need to use the term *brit shalom*.

For Rabbi Mates-Muchin, the term "*brit shalom*" is problematic because of what it implies—if naming ceremonies are referred to as *brit shalom* in Hebrew, which would render its meaning to "covenant of peace," then it would inherently suggest that *brit milah* (Hebrew for "covenant of circumcision") ceremonies are *not* covenants of peace. The language of "*brit shalom*," according to Rabbi Mates-Muchin, is antagonistic to those who choose to circumcise. Inherent in this word choice is criticism and judgement of those who opt for *brit milah*. Naming ceremony offered a more neutral way to refer to such ceremonies. But *brit shalom* is not a new term. In fact, it is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible when God awards Phinehas a covenant of peace (notably after he commits an act of violence.).[64] Regardless of its biblical roots, the term *brit shalom* is too charged for Rabbi Mates-Muchin. It has taken on a different meaning which, for her, requires this interpretative move.[65]

Rabbi Grushcow also expressed discomfort with this language. Rabbi Grushcow explains: "We will never deny a child a naming ceremony, but we won't do something that is explicitly a replacement for or alternative to *brit milah*. There are certain ceremonies that have been developed specifically for that and we don't do those. We would do a naming for a boy who is not circumcised […]."[66]Rabbi Grushcow seems to be avoiding using any specific terminology here; she simply alludes to it. She elaborates: "There are ceremonies that have been developed as official alternatives, that are often a part of the anti-circumcision movement, and that's not something that I have any interest in supporting. I still believe the appropriate way for a baby boy to be brought into the covenant is through *brit milah*. If the family for whatever reason chooses not to do that I'm not going to push them away from the Jewish community."[67] For both Rabbi Mates-Muchin and Rabbi Grushcow, the language used to describe what they are doing with naming ceremonies is important, and both deem monikers such as "*brit shalom*" inappropriate for use in their congregations.

Despite their intentional choice of wording and seeking approval from synagogue leadership, this addition to the website was challenged by some members of Temple Sinai. Rabbi Mates-Muchin was approached by some members who were troubled by the outward acceptance of *brit* without *milah* rituals. Rabbi Mates-Muchin describes what she believes to be the root of this resistance and her position on the inclusion of non-normative rituals more broadly:

> Yes, there was resistance. The question ultimately becomes: what are we condoning? I think that is ultimately what this becomes. If we say this is what we do, and we say it so blatantly, does it mean that we are condoning making this choice [to opt out of circumcision]? My feeling is that there are no ritual choices

[64] Numbers 25: 10-13.
[65] It is important to note here that Lisa Braver Moss wrote a book called C*elebrating Brit Shalom*, and she is an active opponent of circumcision. For Rabbi Mates-Muchin, *brit shalom* has taken on a different meaning given her proximity to Braver Moss and the anti-circumcision movement more broadly.
[66] Grushcow, interview with author, March 29, 2016.
[67] Ibid.

> that we do or don't condone, outwardly. Our families are all over the place with their ritual observance, and part of who we are as Reform Jews, means we don't look at anybody and say, 'This one's okay, but that one's not.' From my perspective this is a ritual matter, it's not an ethical matter. I know that some people see it as an ethical matter, on one side or the other, but I see it as a ritual decision. I think there are still people who are uncomfortable. I am sure that if the entire congregation knew it was written like this there would be other people who would feel uncomfortable about it. I had a couple who decided not to circumcise their child, and the child's grandfather, who's also a member, felt really uncomfortable and wanted to talk to me about what are we doing here. I know this is not representative of the entire community, even in the place that we live, but feeling okay with people making the choice is probably representative of another side of the congregation.

San Francisco is more liberal than Montreal, has a deeply rooted hippie and counterculture history, and is politically active with a strong tendency toward activism. Circumcision is also a more heavily debated topic, and much of the anti-circumcision movement originated in the Bay Area. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, including a short statement on its website about *brit* without *milah* ceremonies proved to be an issue for some members of Temple Sinai. Rabbi Mates-Muchin offers an interesting perspective on parents who choose to opt out of circumcision. She sees this decision as a "ritual decision" rather than an ethical one, despite the fact that many parents who opt out do indeed see their decision as an ethical one. By distancing naming ceremonies from, or even denying the connections to ethical concerns, Rabbi Mates-Muchin is actively downplaying the nuance of this ritual decision. But by distancing herself from the ethics of circumcision, she is further distancing herself from any association with the anti-circumcision movement. She mentions that their member families are "all over the place with their ritual observance." How then, from her point of view, can she determine that one ritual is legitimate and another is not? For Rabbi Mates-Muchin, her role as a Reform rabbi is not to determine which rituals are worthy of accommodating and which ones are not. She believes her role is to accommodate the ritual choices of her members. Rabbi Mates-Muchin presents herself, and Temple Sinai, as open to ritual negotiations and claims "there are no ritual choices that we do or don't condone, *outwardly*."[68] Rabbi Mates-Muchin elaborates on why she accommodates families who choose not to circumcise:

> Making a decision that goes against whatever we think the norm is, is far more difficult than the default. As a Reform Jew, I wish everybody was making well-informed and intentional decisions about all areas of ritual practice. In some ways that makes it much more difficult to say 'No, you can't do this' when families have looked it up and figured out what are the biblical references, why we do this, what has this meant to Jewish community over time. It's a very well-informed decision and I think that's how Jewish decisions should be made.

Rabbi Mates-Muchin recognizes that choosing a ritual that is not the norm is more difficult than opting for the status quo. As we saw in the previous chapter, this is indeed the case. Families who opt out of circumcision spend a lot of time deliberating, and sometimes agonizing, over the decision. Opting out is not easy. Because choosing not to circumcise runs counter to what it means to be Jewish, families who are considering it often research the topic profusely. They read up on

[68] Emphasis added.

the origins of circumcision, the history of circumcision in the Jewish community, what it means to not be circumcised vis-à-vis Jewish law, and its medical benefits and risks. These families are well versed on the topic. Rabbi Mates-Muchin sees this in her own congregants who opt out; this is a well informed and intentional decision. For Rabbi Mates-Muchin, this is precisely how Jewish decisions *should* be made, and as a result, is willing to accommodate families who make their decisions in this way, regardless of how seemingly subversive those decisions are.

CONGREGATION BETH AM

Congregation Beth Am is located in Los Altos Hills, approximately 40 minutes from downtown San Francisco. Nestled in a quiet suburban area, Beth Am offers a unique synagogue setting. Its various buildings are scattered throughout the natural landscape, and navigating the space requires walking through their beautiful grounds. As I walked around the complex on a crisp day in May, with the sun shining and birds chirping, I was immediately struck by the uniqueness of this synagogue. Beth Am offered almost an inverse of a typical synagogue building; there were several buildings scattered throughout the grounds, and offices and the sanctuary were accessed directly from the outdoors. During the summer months, Shabbat services on Friday evenings take place outdoors. Their indoor sanctuary is surrounded by glass walls, providing congregants with a view of the outdoors during services. But the glass-walls of the sanctuary have a greater significance: "Our beautiful glass-walled sanctuary reflects our openness to the world around us, and our commitment to welcome all people with warmth and respect."[69]

Beth Am is a large Reform congregation that serves approximately 1600 families. Beth Am's team consists of four full-time rabbis, one cantor, and a team of twelve staff members. I met with Rabbi Sarah Weissman, one of the associate rabbis at Beth Am. I initially reached out the Rabbi Weissman because her name was listed as an officiant of *brit shalom* on the "Celebrants of *Brit Shalom*" website.[70] This website shares the names of rabbis around the world who are willing to officiate *brit* without *milah* ceremonies. Rabbis who wish to be featured on the site are required to reach out to the site manager and request for their name to be included. I asked Rabbi Weissman why she wanted her name listed publicly on this website and she explains:

> I just want people to know. My take on a lot of these things is an open-door policy and welcoming people as much as I possibly can. I understand why people don't want to circumcise their sons and I wouldn't want that decision to mean that they weren't part of the Jewish community. If people think this is the dividing line and because of that didn't think they belonged, it would be a sad reason to leave the Jewish community.[71]

Rabbi Weissman is alluding to the idea that change to Jewish tradition is a two-way street; sometimes change is initiated by rabbis, and other times it is initiated from ordinary Jews. Synagogue practice can serve as a reflection of what is taking place on the ground. One example

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[69] Congregation Beth Am, "Mission and Values," https://www.betham.org/mission-and-values.html, last accessed January 31, 2022.
[70] Rabbi Sarah Weissman is the only rabbi from Beth Am that was listed on the website.
[71] Rabbi Sarah Weissman, interview with author, May 24, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Rabbi Sarah Weissman.

of this (which I've mentioned in this and in previous chapters) is the *havurah* movement. The *havurah* movement rejected the synagogue setting. American Jews in the late twentieth century felt disconnected from the synagogue and this setting of prayer. As such, prayer was moved out of the synagogue, and smaller prayer groups were organized out of people's homes. This change was facilitated by ordinary Jews, but as rabbis noticed this shift in practice, began incorporating *havurah* groups into the synagogue setting. What was once a rebuke of the synagogue, facilitated by ordinary Jews, was being incorporated into synagogue practice. This highlights the delicate and complex interplay between what people are doing on ground (in other words, lived religion) and how rabbis and communities respond.[72]

It is important to note that Rabbi Weissman is not the only rabbi at Beth Am who will officiate a naming ceremony *sans* circumcision for a boy; all the rabbis at Beth Am are willing to officiate such ceremonies, and to her recollection, this has been the status quo since she was hired at Beth Am in 2008. To Rabbi Weissman's knowledge, the decision to officiate naming ceremonies for boys did not involve debates and discussions in the vein of what took place at Temple Sinai; at Beth Am it simply is not a big deal. Rabbi Weissman also assumes many of the congregants at Beth Am are unaware that they offer and officiate such ceremonies. In fact, naming ceremonies are common at Beth Am because many congregants choose to have their children circumcised in the hospital. When parents opt for a hospital circumcision, a naming ceremony takes place in lieu of a *bris*. Rabbi Weissman explains that when she officiates a naming ceremony, she often does not know the circumcision status of the baby; the baby could have been circumcised in the hospital, or the parents could have opted out entirely. At Beth Am, it is sometimes not even discussed. Naming ceremonies for baby boys are treated the exact same way as naming ceremonies for girls The ceremony takes place in the synagogue or at someone's home, and the ceremony is understood and treated as a covenantal ceremony. This offers a contrast to Rabbi Grushcow's approach, where naming ceremonies for boys are clearly distinguished from naming ceremonies for girls.

Although Rabbi Weissman will officiate naming ceremonies for boys and wanted to be listed on the "Celebrants of *Brit Shalom*" website, she still sees the value of circumcision and continues to advise parents to circumcise. Rabbi Weissman explains:

> If someone is asking for my opinion, I say do it and then I explain why. I'm pretty clear about that, but I also say, 'I have an agenda. I'm a rabbi and I think this is an important ritual.' But we will fully accept him into our community, and he can have a Jewish education, and all of those things if they decide not to circumcise.

To get a sense of where Beth Am falls on the spectrum of liberal congregations, I asked Rabbi Weissman about their policy on interfaith marriage. She explained that the vast majority of the weddings they currently officiate are interfaith, but they only started permitting interfaith weddings about a decade earlier (around 2009). This was a long and thoughtful process spearheaded Rabbi Janet Marder, the senior rabbi of Beth Am at the time (Rabbi Marder retired in 2020). Rabbi Weissman explains: "We've made our peace and want to welcome people in and celebrate their decision and desire to be a part of the Jewish community in whatever way that is." When I asked

[72] For more on the *havurah* movement, see Riv-Ellen Press, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah Movement in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

if she would co-officiate with a clergy of another faith, Rabbi Weissman responded, "No. We're liberal but not that liberal."

Liberal-leaning rabbis, and the congregations they represent, are constantly managing and negotiating their "liberalness." Rabbis are perpetually navigating and confronting what they are willing to do and not do, who is included, and when boundaries are erected and enforced. This negotiation is present even for a congregation like Beth Am, where non-circumcision seems to be a non-issue. Rabbi Weissman explains:

> It occupies a lot of our time trying to figure out those boundaries, and not just about ritual things or who's in and who's out. But things like, you know, families who want their child to have a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* but don't want to come to Hebrew school. We have these decisions about including and welcoming and saying yes, and we want to have standards and be who we are. It's a constant negotiation. It comes up all the time.

Rabbi Weissman elaborates on one "boundary marking" policy at Beth Am, for which they occasionally receive some resistance from their interfaith families:

> For *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, if the child has a non-Jewish parent, they come up with the Jewish parent for an *aliyah*, at the Torah, but they don't say the *aliyah* blessing. It's the only time we really make a distinction between the non-Jewish and Jewish parent. And so they read an English translation of the *aliyah* blessing, but it doesn't include the words of "who has chosen us from all peoples," et cetera, et cetera. That works for most families. They either don't care or they're fine with it, but occasionally there are families who have a non-Jewish spouse who are really offended by it and find it hard to have what they consider to be exclusion of the non-Jewish parent.

Even in the most liberal congregations, boundaries are consistently monitored, negotiated, and enforced. Congregational rabbis need to decide whether they will offer unorthodox rituals and how to include (or not include) interfaith families in their congregations. For Beth Am, the negotiation process for non-circumcision rituals was rather simple, but their negotiations are slightly more complicated for interfaith families. And with rising rates of interfaith marriage, this area will remain a point of negotiation for the rabbis at Beth Am.

Navigating these types of decisions at the congregational level can be complex, and this complexity is often felt within families as well. As we saw in chapter one, the impact of opting out of circumcision within the context of a family unit can be fraught with conflict. Grandparents of the uncircumcised baby are often disappointed with the decision, and it can be difficult to navigate this disagreement with their children (or children in law). The rabbis at Beth Am noticed how it can be difficult for Jewish parents to navigate the relationships of their children who have married outside the Jewish community and created a "support group" called the "Grandparent Circle" to help Jewish parents welcome their non-Jewish children-in-law. Rabbi Weissman explains:

> A few years ago, we had what we called the 'Grandparent Circle,' which was for parents of adult children who had married non-Jews and had kids who were either being raised Jewish or semi- Jewish, or not Jewish. It was sort of a support group for the grandparents because they found it so hard. It helped them have positive relationships with their kids and their sons and daughters in law that aren't Jewish and how to avoid alienating them. It ran for several years, but eventually petered out. But there's a lot of angst among some grandparents and we wanted to help them find a way to have a positive relationship, which can sometimes be challenging.

Negotiating can be difficult. Whether we are talking about negotiating ritual, or negotiating inclusion, boundaries, and belonging more broadly, this can be arduous process for families. This explains the need for the "Grandparent Circle" support group—in essence, to help parents process the decisions of their adult children and accept their non-Jewish spouses. Even in congregations where not circumcising is generally a non-issue, negotiations in other contexts remain complex. And interfaith marriage is often a site, even in the most liberal congregations, for a fraught negotiation process.

ELSEWHERE IN CANADA

Opting out of circumcision can be a sensitive topic in the Jewish community. Rabbis who offer alternative rituals are often concerned about being "outed" as someone who officiates non-cutting ceremonies and accepts non-circumcision families into their communities. In some instances, rabbis who officiate alternative rituals have declined to be interviewed, or only agreed to speak with me "off the record." Others agreed to be interviewed, but only if I could guarantee confidentiality and protect their identity. This is the case with Rabbi Samuel, a senior rabbi of a liberal synagogue in Canada. Rabbi Samuel explains: "I think I want to be as anonymous as possible. The fact that I have to say that really bothers me. On the one hand, I want to step out and be different, but I also want to keep my job."[73] Rabbi Samuel's fear of professional repercussions captures the tenor of the circumcision debate in Jewish circles in Canada. Most, if not all, the US-based rabbis I spoke with were not concerned about maintaining confidentiality, damaging their reputations, or losing their jobs; in Canada, these were common concerns through which my interlocuters felt required to navigate.

BETH OR CONGREGATION

Rabbi Samuel is the senior rabbi of Beth Or, a liberal congregation in Canada with approximately 500 member families. Rabbi Samuel was born in the US, and prior to accepting the position at Beth Or, he was the associate rabbi of a liberal congregation in the Pacific Northwest. Rabbi Samuel explains that the congregation in Canada is much more traditional than the one in the US: "In terms of services, we have seven *aliyot* like an Orthodox synagogue, when most liberal congregations have three. Much more Hebrew. It's a more Hebrew and Jewishly knowledgeable congregation, which changes the dynamics. I wouldn't say resistant to change, but change is a much more sensitive process here." Upon being hired at Beth Or, Rabbi Samuel decided it was time to entertain the idea of changing their policy on interfaith marriage. Prior to Rabbi Samuel's

[73] Rabbi Samuel and Beth Or are pseudonyms. Rabbi Samuel, interview with author, August 30, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Rabbi Samuel.

hiring, interfaith marriage was not permitted at Beth Or. Rabbi Samuel explains his position: "I made it clear that I can't ethically be a rabbi and not welcome interfaith couples. It's good for Jewish community. It's good for continuity. I said that very clearly and I think that could be part of why I was hired. Through a community decision making process, we finally decided to allow interfaith marriage. That was a very heated few months when we decided to bring that in." Rabbi Samuel's first target of negotiation was changing Beth Or's policy on interfaith marriage. Although Rabbi Samuel officiates interfaith ceremonies and welcomes interfaith couples at Beth Or, he maintains some boundaries:

> I will only do a wedding for people who agreed to raise their children as Jews, that's if they have children. Because I don't care who you fall in love with, but I care what kind of family you're creating. I will not co-officiate with a clergy member of another faith. If I'm doing a Jewish wedding, it's a Jewish wedding, and for me, it doesn't feel like it's honoring that when you have another clergy member. I don't expect conversion, although I always suggest this as a possible option. The wedding has to be primarily Jewish. I don't allow non-Jewish poems or other things, but I'm very flexible. I really do try to honor both of their life stories. I officiate on Saturday evenings and I'm a little bit flexible about what that means. If it's not quite sundown, I'm usually fine with that.

Despite Rabbi Samuel initiating the change at Beth Or, he maintains certain stipulations around interfaith weddings. He is willing to negotiate, but only with certain parameters in place. He will only officiate if the parents agree to raise their children as Jews, will not co-officiate, and does not permit non-Jewish elements into the ceremony. In addition to interfaith weddings, Rabbi Samuel is also willing to perform naming ceremonies for baby boys and is public about this ritual inclusion. He explains his position on non-circumcision families:

> I really feel for the survival of the Jewish people, there need to be communities and rabbis that are 'yes' rabbis. What that means is if a couple comes in and they have strong values about something, I need to be able to say I accept the choices that they've made, whether that means they married a non-Jew, or they've decided against having a *bris*. Yes, I will do an alternative to *bris*. If you can really sell this to me, if you can tell me why you're bothered by it because you've read the text, you've done some research, then I'll think about it. The problem is that some couples have come in and said they just don't want to do it. So I essentially say that's not a good enough reason. But my goal is to create a community that welcomes and accepts people for the choices they make. I know from experience, and you look at the statistics, especially in the US, if a rabbi in the community says, 'I love you for the choices you've made, you are part of our family Jewish family,' they will feel accepted and they will say we want to be part of this community.

In order for Rabbi Samuel to consider negotiating, the couple needs to demonstrate that they have reflected on their decision, conducted research, read the source material, and have made an informed choice. Without evidence of this, Rabbi Samuel is not willing to officiate an alternative ritual. But at the same time, Rabbi Samuel contends that "yes" rabbis, that is, rabbis who say "yes" and are willing to accommodate unorthodox requests, are required for the survival of the Jewish

people. Even though he sees the value in being a "yes" rabbi, Rabbi Samuel requires certain conditions in order to engage with the negotiation process. Rabbi Samuel explains how he counsels couples who come to him for guidance on this decision, and how his own views on the matter are complicated:

> This is where I do have to step beyond my own personal feelings, because I have a lot of hesitations. We circumcised both of our sons and I knew that was going to happen and there was no other option. I mean, if you had interviewed my wife, she would say she had a lot of hesitation, but she said, 'You're the rabbi, and you're the man.' Which is also strange because I'm a feminist liberal rabbi. It's very problematic that I'm supportive of doing circumcisions. These are the things I'm often wrestling with. So when a couple comes in the first thing I do is stay positive. I explain the reasons why we circumcise and I don't just say 'The Lord God commanded us, commanded Abraham to do this, and that and we've been doing it for generations.' I mean that that works for some people. But I talk about it being an identity marker. I talk about the mystery of our traditions and upholding what our ancestors have done. Unless I know that the couple is more religious, I don't say this is commanded by God because that could actually be something that turns them off even more. I ask them what their hesitations are and we try to work through them. I try from the beginning to be positive and to push them to do it, not push, but guide them to see how this is a ritual that they should feel comfortable with. If I see that the conversation or the questions are much stronger and they're feeling very uncomfortable with it, then I'm willing to move the conversation in a different direction.

It is clear Rabbi Samuel holds several views about circumcision. He circumcised his own sons, and tries to gently guide couples toward circumcision, while at the same time recognizing the problematic nature of this ritual. Circumcision challenges his values as a feminist egalitarian rabbi. Rabbi Samuel's complicated views on circumcision tip the balance in favor of negotiation. He is able to negotiate with couples and offer non-cutting alternatives because of his own doubts about circumcision. Rabbi Grushcow also expressed some doubt about circumcision, but Rabbi Samuel's doubt is more firmly rooted. His doubt began to fester upon the birth of his first son. Rabbi Samuel explains:

> When my wife and I had our first son, we had months and months of conversations about it. I was in rabbinical school so I had conversations with my classmates about it also. I'm not fully sure I can explain why I did it for my sons and why I still support it as a rabbi. Because I don't believe in a supernatural God. I don't believe there is that God around me when I pray. I am praying to the godliness around me and 'God' is a verb that we all work together to create. I don't believe that there was a God who told me to do this. Do I believe that Abraham existed? Possibly. Do I believe that we should circumcise our children because Abraham did? I believe that the story holds a lot of power and that is part of it, but the primal nature of it is something, and the fact that it can't really be explained and that we just do it is important.

Rabbi Samuel has difficulty explaining why he and his wife chose to circumcise their sons. He makes clear that he and his wife spoke extensively about it, and he even broached the subject with some of his classmates at rabbinical school. This inability to sufficiently explain why folks opt for circumcision is quite common; in many of my interviews with parents who chose to circumcise, they often couldn't fully explain it either. "It's tradition" and "it's what we do" are the most common ways people explain their decision. In other words, engaging with tradition for tradition's sake. As a parent, Rabbi Samuel experienced much of the same feelings that many Jewish parents have they are expecting a baby. Because of his own lived experience, he can relate to parents who question circumcision since this is precisely what he did. And as a result, Rabbi Samuel is able to consider negotiating with parents and offer an alternative ritual to a traditional *bris*. Rabbi Samuel also explains why he thinks it's important to accept Jews who choose not to circumcise:

> More doors that are closed, the fewer people want to connect with Judaism, and I believe it's the same with a *bris*. No is never the answer. I will never, ever say no to a couple until we've had a conversation. That is absolutely unethical and destroying the Jewish community. You can say no. After you've gotten to know the couple and inspired them with the greatness of Jewish life, and then it usually leads to yes.

Circling back to what he mentioned earlier, Rabbi Samuel is open to negotiating, and will only say no if he feels the person/couple has not reflected thoroughly on the matter at hand. But in his experience, speaking to people and trying to understand where they're coming from usually leads to accommodation. The negotiation process begins with a conversation, and more often than not, that conversation leads Rabbi Samuel accommodating the couple. And in his belief, refusing to accept people for their differences will lead to fewer people practicing Judaism. For Rabbi Samuel, "no is never the answer."

But this willingness to say yes and accommodate unorthodox requests does not come without consequence. Rabbi Samuel explains how he feels about people in the wider community knowing about his stance on circumcision:

> On the one hand I'm proud that word is getting out that we're doing something that is not what the mainstream Jewish community accepts. If people reach out to me because of that, that makes me really proud. On the other hand, I have a feeling some of the other rabbis are saying, 'Rabbi Samuel is turning into the liberal crazy who does whatever people want.' But that's not what this is. I think it's unethical and cruel to force people to do something they don't want to do. My wife reminds me that it's not my role to tell people how to do things. If I were to tell people that I can't officiate their wedding but they're welcome in the community, they'll say, 'Screw you and screw Judaism. I don't want to be part of this community.' So if I say I can't help out a family who doesn't want a *bris* they're going to say the same thing. My goal is to create a community that welcomes and accepts people for the choices they make, *if I can*.[74]

[74] Emphasis added.

Echoing Rabbi Grushcow's concerns, Rabbi Samuel is aware that some of the other rabbis in town may perceive him as a "liberal crazy" for his stance on circumcision. But at the same time, he says he is proud if he becomes known for this in the Jewish community. Knowing that people are reaching out to him for help when few other rabbis are willing to accommodate is a source of pride for Rabbi Samuel. But the caveat, "if I can," that Rabbi Samuel slips in at the end indicates that there remain barriers to negotiation. Some things simply cannot be accommodated.

THE PENDELUM OF NEGOTIATION

Thus far I have examined how Jewish couples who opt out of circumcision navigate finding a rabbi willing to officiate a non-cutting ceremony, and how rabbis accommodate ritual change and/or a ritual choice they do not agree with. Most of the rabbis I interviewed, including the handful profiled in this chapter, believe Jews should circumcise their sons. They believe that circumcision is a commandment that should be observed and advise parents to circumcise. Officiating a naming ceremony for a boy who is not circumcised represents a diversion from their personal beliefs about circumcision, and for some, requires a delicate negotiation for them to feel comfortable officiating such a ceremony. Now I turn to the story of a rabbi whose negotiation process offers a different perspective. This is the story of a rabbi who is against circumcision.

TEMPLE ISRAEL

Rabbi Nancy Stein, who we met as the officiant of Ezra and Leah's *brit shalom* in chapter one, was one of the rabbis at Temple Israel, a large Reform congregation in San Francisco.[75] Rabbi Stein worked at Temple Israel from 2004 to 2017, and she continues to work with the Reform movement.[76] Rabbi Stein is against circumcision, and hopes that with time, Jews will "grow out of" this ritual. Rabbi Stein explains why she is against circumcision:

> Circumcision never made sense to me. My understanding of God tells me that it doesn't make sense for people to be born with something wrong with their bodies. That every boy would be born with something that's not right or not healthy. What did make sense to me was hearing one rabbinic perspective that circumcision is a way of replacing human sacrifice. That makes sense in terms of ancient history. Sure, it's a lot better than human sacrifice. But it doesn't make sense anymore. I also think it functions as a hazing mechanism so that you go through something painful and then you then get certain privileges as a Jewish male, and that serves as something really bad for men and really bad for women.[77]

Rabbi Stein offers three reasons why circumcision never "made sense" to her. First, she alludes to the function of the foreskin. Most boys are born with foreskin, and as such, bodies with foreskin are perfectly normal and healthy. She cannot imagine a scenario where all Jewish boys are born "with something wrong with bodies," and this "wrong" requires correction. Second, Rabbi Stein refers to circumcision serving as a replacement for sacrifice. This may have made sense in other

[75] Temple Israel is a pseudonym.
[76] To protect Rabbi Stein's identity, I cannot be more specific about what her current employment is.
[77] Rabbi Nancy Stein, interview with author, October 11, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Rabbi Stein.

historical contexts, but for Rabbi Stein, this interpretation is no longer relevant. Finally, she views circumcision as a hazing ritual that bestows Jewish men with privileges that are inaccessible to women. Here she is pointing to the patriarchal and exclusionary nature of circumcision. Rabbi Stein subsequently talked about her discomfort with making an irreversible unnecessary medical decision for someone else, the harm in telling boys that there was something wrong with their bodies that required correction, the pain involved with foreskin removal, and the use of wine during the ceremony. When Rabbi Stein gave birth to her son, she and husband unsurprisingly decided not to circumcise and opted for a naming ceremony instead. Rabbi Stein used her son's naming ceremony as a template when creating naming ceremonies for other non-circumcision families.

Given Rabbi Stein's views on circumcision, I was curious about whether she would officiate at a *bris* ceremony. She explained her position to me: "I would officiate, but unhappily. I am truly against it. I truly think we need to grow out of it, but I don't think we're going to grow out of it by people yelling about it. We're only going to grow out of it by people feeling confident that they can make this decision, that they can still be free to have their Judaism and their Jewish community going forward." Rabbi Stein makes it clear that she is against circumcision and hopes to see Jews "grow out" of this ritual. She also makes it clear that the way to "grow out" of circumcision is to make Jews confident that they can indeed choose to opt out. That they are "free" to make their own decisions about their Judaism and their community will not abandon them for making this choice. For Rabbi Stein, phasing out circumcision is unlikely without Jews developing the confidence that they can indeed make the decision to opt out. Despite being against circumcision, Rabbi Stein explains why she continues to officiate *bris* ceremonies:

> I think it's important to show up for people. I don't take a stand that I won't go because I want to show up and be with people and I don't want to shun people for their decisions. I think everyone is in a different situation regarding tradition and family. But I find it painful the kind of dissociation I see from some parents. How they can dissociate from what's happening. The kind of dissociation that people have to make to pretend that we're happy about the whole thing. Because we're so happy about the baby being born and being welcomed into the community. The *bris* part is just really painful to get through.

Rabbi Stein does not believe in shunning people for their decisions, which is why she will "unhappily" officiate a *bris* ceremony. She recognizes that for some, choosing not to circumcise is not a possibility. In certain families or communities, opting out of circumcision is not a choice one can make, and Rabbi Stein does not want to reject or alienate anyone for their ritual decisions. For Rabbi Stein, it is through accepting people's ritual choices, having open conversations, and providing options that she hopes Jews will slowly gain more confidence in themselves to make unconventional ritual choices. Shunning and shaming will not provide a space for Jews to look internally and question elements of their tradition that they previously would not have questioned. Rabbi Stein will officiate a *brit milah*, but only if the parents are willing to comply with her stipulations. First, Rabbi Stein will not officiate a *brit milah* if the baby is given wine. She also expects both parents to be in the room. She will not officiate if one of the parents prefers to remain in another room. Finally, the parents need to remain with and hold the baby throughout the procedure. Rabbi Stein explains: "I find the use of wine wrong. I would point out to parents that they are not going to give their baby anything else to eat or drink besides milk. It's really important

to give the baby the message that if they're going to go through something hard, you will be completely present with them. I would coach them to hold the baby the whole time, they're going to talk to them and reassure them." Rabbi Stein's stipulations require the baby and parents to be fully present during the procedure. The baby's mental state will not be altered with wine, and the parents are to be with their child throughout the ritual. Rabbi Stein seems to be trying to prevent parents from dissociating from their decision. It is certainly easier for parents to not be in the room while their son is being circumcised, and many parents (especially mothers) do indeed make this decision. But Rabbi Stein wants parents to be connected to and understand the implications of their decision, and the best way to accomplish this is for parents to be present and supporting their child during their circumcision.

Rabbi Stein is not the only one to include "stipulations" in her process of ritual negotiation. Rabbi Samuel requires parents to prove they have done sufficient research and demonstrate they have reflected on their decision before he would consider officiating a non-cutting ceremony. Rabbi Samuel has a problem with couples who say "they just don't want to circumcise" without providing what he considers a sufficient reason and an acceptable period of reflection. By presenting conditions that parents are required to fulfill and adhere to, Rabbi Samuel and Rabbi Stein are maintaining their positions of authority and power. They are in control, and the conditions they present to parents represent their means of maintaining their control. This brings us back to the idea of ritual and power. Rabbis are ritual leaders, and for many of the Jews I interviewed, having a rabbi officiate a non-cutting ritual for their son was important to them. This dependence on religious authority works to affirm and maintain rabbinic power and control. But this power dynamic is delicate. Congregational rabbis are dependent on their congregants, and with synagogue membership decreasing in recent years, rabbis are acutely aware that the synagogue is diminishing in relevance for many North American Jews. This puts power (perhaps unknowingly) back in the hands of congregants. Rabbis do not want to lose members, so congregants do indeed have some leverage when making requests of their rabbis. But as Rabbi Samuel and Rabbi Stein's conditions demonstrate, rabbis do maintain some of the power and control over ritual matters. Indeed, rabbis have veto power. But this power dynamic is perhaps more delicate than some ordinary Jews may assume.

CONCLUSION

Negotiating ritual adaptation and inclusion can be a complicated process. Non-normative ritual takes many forms: interfaith weddings, cremation, and *brit* without *milah* ceremonies are only three discussed in this chapter. Each rabbi will have a different response to requests for non-normative ritual and offer unique rationales for their choices. Some negotiations are simple and straightforward, while others are much more complex and layered. And responses to requests for non-circumcision ceremonies vary widely as well. At Beth Am and, to a certain degree, Temple Sinai, naming ceremonies for boys are a non-issue; such rituals are offered as recognized alternatives to *brit milah*. Naming ceremonies are also offered at Beth Or, but only if Rabbi Samuel is satisfied with his conversations with the parent(s) and feels they are making a thoughtful and informed choice. On the more conservative end of the spectrum, Rabbi Grushcow will officiate naming ceremonies for boys, but does not recognize such ceremonies as alternatives to *brit milah*. She also has stipulations about how and when these ceremonies are performed. Despite Rabbi Grushcow's conservative stance on non-circumcision ceremonies, she is more open to other non-

normative practices, such as cremation. And finally, on the other end of the spectrum, Rabbi Stein will only officiate a *bris* ceremony if the parents agree to be fully present during the ritual and pledge to not give the baby wine. An examination of how rabbis accommodate ritual adaptations (or in Rabbi Stein's case, an established ritual she is against) captures the complexity of the negotiation process. This process is not straightforward; it has various layers that we need to carefully peel back to fully understand and appreciate its nuance.

CHAPTER THREE
'Real Women Protect Babies': Women, Motherhood, and Circumcision

Pamela Nadell writes that throughout American Jewish history, Jewish women have consistently and repeatedly united in solidarity when circumstances arose that "jeopardized their ability to feed, clothe, and shelter their families."[1] Women were on the frontlines of mobilizing and organizing protests when the price of kosher meat skyrocketed in New York City in the early 20th century.[2] Women also protested debilitating rent increases[3] and dangerous working conditions in the garment industry.[4] Women eagerly took to the streets in protest when circumstances threatened the security of their families and children. In addition to fighting for their own well-being and the well-being of their families, Jewish women have led the charge in demanding change within the Jewish community. Jewish women were the leaders in advocating for and creating rituals to celebrate pivotal moments in the lives of girls and women that previously went unnoticed. The creation of *bat mitzvah* and baby naming ceremonies, Rosh Chodesh rituals, and women's prayer groups are a small sample of rituals and traditions initiated by women for women throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[5]

American Jewish women's history of activism and protest highlights their propensity for advocating on behalf of their families and children. Jewish women did not hesitate to mobilize and act when their family's security or well-being was at risk. "Turning Jewish mothers into political activists," asserts Nadell, "was not hard when there were babies. Mothers would do almost anything to get a better life for their children."[6] This history of political engagement and activism on behalf of their families and children paved the way for contemporary Jewish women to question, challenge, adapt, and advocate against circumcision. My respondents are overwhelmingly Jewish mothers. Much more than Jewish fathers, Jewish mothers are troubled by circumcision and actively question the ritual, even if they ultimately choose for their son to be circumcised. Jewish mothers are advocating for congregational rabbis to openly accept and offer non-cutting alternatives to *brit milah*. Some mothers have created alternative ceremonies and self-published books of sample ceremonies for parents and rabbis.[7]

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[1] Pamela S. Nadell, *America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), 198.
[2] Paula Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader,* edited by Pamela S. Nadell (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 116-128.
[3] Nadell, *America's Jewish Women,* 146-147, 194, 198-199.
[4] Ibid., 136-145, 194, 198-199.
[5] Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," in *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives,* edited by Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2001): 223-234; Sharon Siegel, *A Jewish Ceremony for Newborn Girls: The Torah Reaffirmed* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013); Ron H. Feldman, "'On your New Moons': The Feminist Transformation of the New Jewish Moon Festival," *The Journal of Women and Religion* 19/20 (2003): 26-51; Aileen Cohen Nusbacher, "Efforts at Change in a Traditional Denomination: The Case of Orthodox Women's Prayer Groups," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, no. 2 (1999): 95-113.
[6] Nadell, *America's Jewish Women,* 198.
[7] An example of such a book is *Celebrating Brit Shalom* by Lisa Braver Moss and Rebecca Wald.

I do not mean to imply that no Jewish men are advocating against circumcision; indeed, some are. Norman Cohen, whom I introduce in chapter four, is one of them (although he no longer identifies as Jewish). Marc Reiss was the creator and curator of *Celebrants of Brit Shalom*, a website that listed all the officiants of *brit shalom* worldwide.[8] Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon, a self-proclaimed "Jewish rebel" and outspoken challenger of circumcision, produced the documentary film *Cut: Slicing Through the Myth of Circumcision*.[9] Ronald Goldman has published several books challenging circumcision.[10] But these men are atypical. In my conversations with Jewish parents, Jewish men rarely verbalized discomfort with circumcision. Time and time again I interviewed Jewish mothers who were bothered by circumcision. Jewish mothers describe visceral responses to witnessing a circumcision. Jewish mothers express discomfort in their own decisions to circumcise their sons. They describe how difficult it is to inflict harm on their child. And Jewish mothers are the ones actively advocating for change from within the Jewish community. In this chapter, I focus on women and mothers, and analyze how women's bodily experiences (or lack thereof) and the social construction of motherhood impacts how Jewish mothers perceive circumcision. Because women are not circumcised, they cannot rationalize the decision to circumcise in the way some Jewish men can. Also, because parenting stereotypes dictate that women are the primary caregivers and nurturers of children, Jewish mothers (and mothers more broadly) are the ones who feel the responsibility to protect their children from harm.

Gendered constructions of parenting, and the stereotypical roles assigned to mothers and fathers, are evident in parents' experiences and understandings of circumcision. Circumcision is a site at which gendered discourses and stereotypes about parenting are ubiquitous, and reactions to circumcision are gendered. Throughout this chapter I argue that the construction of mothers as the primary caregivers, nurturers, and protectors of children is the foundation of gendered responses to circumcision. Women are more critical and troubled by circumcision because it represents a violation of their imposed role as the protector of their children and, as primary caregivers, women carry most of the responsibility, blame, and shame over their parenting choices. Through an analysis of mothers' accounts of their decision to circumcise their sons, I argue that mothers have internalized this stereotypical model of parenting and carry most of the burden of their perceived "bad" parenting decisions, while fathers remain mostly absent and absolved from responsibility. I also argue that intactivist literature exploits and perpetuates these gendered constructions of parenting to manipulate and shame mothers into opting out of circumcision.

MOTHEROOD, FATHERHOOD AND GENDERED PARENTING

Constructions of gender dictate the appropriate roles and behaviors for men and women in society, and these stereotypes extend to parenting. Sociologist Sharon Hays argues that what she calls "the

[8] The original form of the website is no longer available, but now can be accessed through *Bruchim*'s website: https://www.bruchim.online/inclusion-directory/, last accessed April 15, 2022.
[9] For more on Eliyahu Ungar-Sargon's work, see: https://www.eliungar.com/, last accessed April 15, 2022. I contacted Ungar-Sargon but was unsuccessful in securing an interview.
[10] A few of Goldman's works include *Questioning Circumcision: A Jewish Perspective* and *Circumcision* (Vanguard Publications, 2015) and *The Hidden Trauma: How an American Cultural Practice Affects Infants and Ultimately Us All* Vanguard Publications, 1997).

ideology of intensive mothering" is firmly rooted in North American perceptions of parenting.[11] Intensive mothering dictates that there should be one primary caregiver of children, and this responsibility falls on the mother. Hays contends that "there is an underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job."[12] In addition to assuming the role of primary caregiver, intensive mothering directs mothers to expend extensive time, energy, and resources on their children. "A mother must," Hays argues, "recognize and conscientiously respond to all the child's needs and desires, and to every stage of the child's emotional and intellectual development."[13] This requires mothers to acquire knowledge on child-rearing, which in North American society is expert-driven, spend copious amounts of time and money accessing and learning expert-advice, and incorporate what they have learned in their child-rearing practices. In sum, this gendered model of child-rearing is "construed as *child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive*, and *financially expensive*."[14]

Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels expand on Hays' notion of intensive mothering and introduce the idea of "new momism," which they define as "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children."[15] For Douglas and Michaels, new momism has become ubiquitous and unavoidable and perpetuates a set of standards that is nearly impossible to achieve. New momism dictates what makes the "best" kind of mother:

> The best mothers always put their kids' needs before their own, period. The best mothers are the main caregivers. For the best mothers, their kids are the center of the universe. The best mothers always smile. They always understand. They are never tired. They never lose their temper […] Their love for their children is boundless, unflagging, flawless, total. Mothers today cannot just respond to their children's needs, they must predict them […] They must memorize verbatim the books of all the child-care experts and know which approaches are developmentally appropriate at different ages. They are supposed to treat their two-year-olds with 'respect.' If mothers screw up and fail to do this on any given day, they should apologize to their kids, because any misstep leads to permanent psychological and/or physical damage.[16]

Despite the ubiquity of new momism, Douglas and Michaels recognize the role and expectations of fathers has changed throughout the last several decades. Prompted by the feminist movement,

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[11] Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). It is important to note that Hays developed her theory based on work with heterosexual couples. It would be important to examine if and how this ideology applies to same-sex couples. With a few exceptions, the majority of my informants are heterosexual couples.
[12] Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood,* 8.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid. Emphases in original.
[15] Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and how it has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 4.
[16] Ibid.*,* 6.

fathers "tend to the details of child-rearing in ways their own fathers rarely did."[17] Fathers are more involved in childcare and child-rearing than in previous generations, but this involvement and the expectations imposed on fathers "pales in comparison to the new momism."[18] Shifting conceptions of fatherhood and fathers' involvement in the lives of their children have not emancipated mothers from the burden of new momism; indeed, "a dad who knows the name of his kids' pediatrician and reads them stories at night is still regarded as a saint; a mother who doesn't is a sinner."[19] For Douglas and Michaels, the responsibilities of child-rearing and taking care of the emotional and physical needs of children falls disproportionately on mothers.[20]

Gendered perceptions of parenting work in conjunction with shifting perceptions of childhood and the understanding that "children are innocent and pure, […] have a special value, […] [and] deserve special treatment" to impose the role of ultimate protector of children upon mothers.[21] The idea that children are innocent, pure, and in need of protection reinforces the idea that someone, in most cases the mother, is responsible for ensuring innocent children are protected from harm.[22] Cultural constructions of motherhood and the perception of childhood innocence and purity coalesce to create a gendered understanding of parenting and codes particular attitudes and behaviors as the appropriate embodiment of "motherhood" and "fatherhood." Within this system, mothers are primarily responsible for the protection of their innocent children and bear the brunt of the responsibility when their children experience perceived pain or suffering. And as we will see, this parenting model is ubiquitous in discourse about circumcision within the intactivist movement more broadly, and amongst Jewish mothers more specifically. The ideology of intensive mothering and new momism have indeed infiltrated these spaces and directly impact the ways in which mothers and fathers experience and react to circumcision.

GENDERED RESPONSES TO *BRIT MILAH*

Given the pervasiveness of these gendered constructions of parenting, it should be of no surprise that Jewish parents have absorbed gendered constructions of parenting, which impacts their experiences with circumcision. Jewish mothers frequently describe, to varying degrees, discomfort with circumcision. It is not uncommon for mothers to refuse to be in the room while their son's *bris* is taking place. When mothers choose to be present, many recall becoming emotional and crying during the ritual. Some mothers describe the experience as extremely unpleasant and felt a strong sense of relief when the ritual was over. Despite their discomfort with circumcision, many mothers would claim they did not have a choice in the matter; opting out of circumcision was never a viable alternative and was not considered. Some mothers considered opting out, but reluctantly

[17] Ibid., 7.
[18] Ibid., 8.
[19] Ibid.
[20] It is important to note that the studies conducted by Sharon Hays, Susan J. Douglas, and Meredith W. Michaels focus on white, heterosexual, cisgendered, and middleclass women. They are presenting a notion of motherhood that is deeply connected to whiteness and socioeconomic stability.
[21] Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, 8.
[22] For more on the shifting perceptions of children and childhood in American culture, see Vivian A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York; Basic Books, 1985); Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

chose to circumcise. Although quite rare, a few mothers even delayed the *bris* beyond the 8-day time frame to give themselves more time to come to terms with the decision. My interviews with rabbis and *mohelim* support my findings—in heterosexual Jewish couples, it is more likely for women to be uncomfortable with and question circumcision, and rabbis and *mohelim* often speak at length with anxious mothers to ease their nerves about the ritual. While women openly share their discomfort with circumcision, it is less common for Jewish men to express similar levels of discomfort; instead, men often describe feeling comfortable with the decision to circumcise and at ease during the ritual.

Because Jewish women experience circumcision as witnesses and do not have their own bodily experience with circumcision, they are not always able to rationalize circumcision in the same way that some circumcised Jewish men are able to. Circumcised Jewish men who have not experienced negative side effects of their own circumcision, are often able to project their experience onto their child. In other words, some Jewish men assume their child will be fine, because *they* are fine. David, a Jewish father who circumcised his son, tells me: "I'm circumcised and I'm fine, so it made sense to me to circumcise my son. I just didn't see it as a big deal."[23] But women do not have this bodily experience or knowledge. They cannot look to their own bodies and make comforting assumptions about their son's experience. And this can sometimes result in women having strong visceral reactions to circumcision.

Lois, a Jewish mother from Montreal who currently identifies as an intactivist, attended a *bris* where she was given an honorary role in the ceremony. This role required her to be next the baby during the ritual. Lois describes the experience:

> And then he took this instrument he pulled the foreskin, like I can't even explain, unnaturally, unnaturally far, and immediately the child started to scream. And he said, 'He doesn't feel pain, he's feeling cold. He's fine.' And then he snipped. And a scream I've never heard in my life. And I immediately saw all the blood rush into the penis. It was obviously like a wound and the baby was screaming. And he was going 'No, no he's fine. He doesn't feel pain. It's just because he's being handled. Pick him up he'll be fine.' And I was like, I'm going to swear sorry, 'Fuck you, he felt that. That is bullshit.' And in my head right there I changed [snaps her fingers]. It started – the seeds of intactivism.[24]

This reaction to witnessing a circumcision is very common amongst the Jewish women I interviewed. Women's only experience with circumcision are as witnesses, and for many women, observing a *bris* up close is uncomfortable, distressing, and can lead to questioning and opposing the practice. Because Jewish men experience circumcision for themselves (although most would say they do not remember being circumcised) they are more likely to able to set aside any feelings of discomfort they experience when witnessing a *bris* or when deciding to circumcise their own child. If Jewish men do not experience any problems because of their circumcisions, they can rationalize that their baby will be fine since they did not suffer any negative consequences from the procedure. Because women lack this first-hand experience, they have more difficulty setting aside their feelings of discomfort. And watching a baby experience pain, hearing their screams,

[23] David and Hannah. interview with author, December 11, 2016.
[24] Lois, interview with author, February 19, 2016. Lois is her real name and not a pseudonym.

and observing the procedure up close often elicits a strong reaction from women. Because they lack personal experience with circumcision, they have a more difficulty ignoring or rationalizing what they have witnessed.

Jewish women also experience the circumcisions of their sons differently because of gendered models of parenting. Abigail, who gave birth to her child in January 2021, tells me: "I heard his screams and in that moment I felt like such a bad mom. It was truly awful. My husband wasn't bothered, but I was. It took some time to stop replaying the sound of his screams in my head."[25] Deborah, a mother two boys now in their thirties, recalls how she felt the day her sons were circumcised. Deborah was uncomfortable with the ritual, did not want to think about it, and refused to be in the room during the ritual. Deborah does not recall her husband having any issue and he was present during the *bris*. Although she never questioned the ritual, Deborah explains she did not like it: "I didn't like handing over a one-week-old baby. It was an uncomfortable feeling. It was a scary feeling. And, you know, you just had a baby and you do this. It was not a pleasant experience."[26] Deborah did not like relinquishing control and "handing over" her baby to be circumcised. In this moment, she was required to temporarily abandon her role as protector of her newborn infant and "hand him over" to be circumcised. Deborah's statement: "You just had a baby and you do this" suggests there is something wrong or unnatural with circumcising an eight-day-old infant. Perhaps what she means here is that it is unnatural for a mother to set aside her protective instincts and hand over her baby to be circumcised. Instead of protecting her baby, she relinquishes control and allows for the circumcision, and by extension, the harm, to take place. Deborah explains how she felt the day of the *bris*:

> I was upstairs. There were people coming and going. And they came to get the baby, whoever's going to hold the baby. I was thinking, I don't want to hear this. I don't want to see this. This is a barbaric custom. I have to hand over my newborn baby to this. I know it'll be fine and that was it. And I did it. They brought back the baby to me right away and I breastfed the baby and moved on.[27]

The experience of David and Hannah, a couple who gave birth to their first son, Levi, in October 2016, parallels that of Deborah and her husband. Although they were fairly certain they were going to circumcise their son, they debated the issue before coming to a final decision (I examine their decision-making process in more detail in chapter four). They decided they were going to circumcise their son via a *bris* and invited approximately 80 people to the ceremony. They used this ritual moment to celebrate the arrival of their first son. This was especially meaningful to Hannah, who spent the last months of her pregnancy on bed rest. David and Hannah saw this gathering as a celebration of Levi's arrival and Hannah being freed from the confines of her difficult pregnancy. Despite choosing to circumcise their son and understanding their reasons for doing so, Hannah was deeply upset during the ritual. David and Hannah describe their reactions and feelings during the *bris*:

> Lindsey: Were you both present in the room while the cutting was taking place?
> Hannah: Yep.

[25] Abigail, interview with author, March 1, 2021.
[26] Deborah, interview with author, April 30, 2016.
[27] Ibid.

David: Yes.
Lindsey: Tell me a bit more about that.
Hannah: It was awful.
David: It was nothing.
Hannah: I got in my head a lot about it and I was like, 'Why are we doing this? We shouldn't be doing this. Why are we cutting him?' So I didn't like it at all.
David: I can do it where I can turn it off in my brain and was like, we're circumcising him. This is what's happening now. And I didn't think about it and I didn't care. He didn't cry that much and it wasn't that hard. And it was over real quick. And then Hannah took him and [pause] she cried a lot.
Lindsey: [Question directed at Hannah] Did you expect to feel the way you felt about it during the ceremony?
Hannah: I expected to cry. I didn't expect to think, 'Oh no, we've made a terrible mistake.'
Lindsey: Is that how you felt in that moment?
Hannah: I felt we were needlessly harming him. I didn't think about it much ahead of time. I knew I would cry, but I'm a crier so that was not a surprise. In the moment I regretted it, but I don't regret it now.[28]

Hannah and David describe vastly different experiences of and reactions to their son's *bris*. Their respective descriptions of the ritual, "It was awful" and "It was nothing," capture the highly gendered reaction to circumcision I saw repeatedly throughout the course of my research. Witnessing her son's *bris* was very distressing for Hannah, who cried throughout much of the ritual. Being present for the *bris* resulted in Hannah questioning their decision and provoked feelings of regret, which eventually subsided. Hannah and Deborah's reactions to and descriptions of their sons' *bris* ceremonies are common amongst mothers, who are very open and frank about their discomfort with circumcision. Jewish men I interviewed, on the other hand, rarely express distress or discomfort with circumcision. As David aptly explains, "I didn't think about it and didn't care." But David's response here may be bound up with his performance of masculinity. He could very well have felt uncomfortable with circumcising his son, but gendered expectations of men and their expression of emotions may have affected his performance (during the ritual and our interview). Even though David told me he was not bothered, his response and inner dialogue may have been more nuanced and complicated than his performance offered. Hannah's emotional response offered a stark contrast to David's indifference, and their respective performances capture how gendered expectations of parenting, and the display of emotions more broadly, are woven into this ritual moment.

JEWISH MOTHERS AGAINST CIRCUMCISION

Lisa Braver Moss and Rebecca Wald are two of the most well-known Jewish critics of circumcision. Although their reasons for opposing circumcision are similar, they came to this position from different trajectories. As a result, their advocacy work and goals take on different forms. Through writing articles, speaking publicly, publishing books, and, in Braver Moss's case, directly confronting rabbinic authority, Braver Moss and Wald have opened the conversation and

[28] David and Hannah, interview with author, December 11, 2016.

created space for Jews to question, challenge, and adapt *brit milah* into a ceremony that resonates with their views on circumcision. Discourse about motherhood and women as the protectors of babies are central to the way they perceive their activism.

LISA BRAVER MOSS – "I'M DOING THE WORK TO MAKE AMENDS."[29]

Lisa Braver Moss was born in Berkeley, California in 1955. She grew up the Bay Area in what she calls an assimilated Jewish family. Growing up her family celebrated Hanukkah and Passover, were not members of or affiliated with a synagogue, and did not celebrate any other holidays or festivals. Her husband came from a more observant Jewish family, and Braver Moss currently describes herself as "more involved and more observant now. I do light Shabbat candles, and I do turn off my computers for Shabbat, and that's an important practice every week. And I do go to synagogue and I belong to a Reform synagogue in Oakland. I'm much more involved. My husband's on a few boards of Jewish organizations. He's very involved too, in that way. We have a lot of Jewish organizations that we support and are affiliated with." Braver Moss first experienced discomfort with circumcision when her sons were born. Braver Moss and her husband circumcised their sons, but Braver Moss felt deeply uncomfortable and distressed by this choice. Braver Moss explains: "I wanted to follow tradition, and agreed to it with my boys, but I certainly didn't feel it reflected my spirituality—quite the contrary, it upset me deeply. I had to choose between belonging and protecting my sons. I believe that was a false choice, a choice no one should have to make." The "false choice" between belonging to the Jewish people and protecting her sons that Braver Moss felt she had to make propelled her to advocate for change within the Jewish community. Although Braver Moss identifies as an intactivist, the entirety of her activist work is directed toward the Jewish community.

Braver Moss published her first article about circumcision in 1990, the year she points to as the start of her activist work. Since 1990, Braver Moss has written dozens of articles,[30] spoken publicly at a variety of conferences, synagogues, and Jewish organizations, and self-published two books, *Celebrating Brit Shalom* (co-written with Rebecca Wald) and *The Measure of his Grief. Celebrating Brit Shalom,* published in 2015, is a reference book for parents and rabbis that offers a variety of alternative non-cutting ceremonies. The root of Braver Moss's activism can be traced to her personal experience circumcising her sons and the "false choice" she felt she had to make. To prevent other parents from feeling similarly to Braver Moss, she advocates for rabbis to include non-circumcision families in their congregations and openly offer alternative rituals. She wants families to know that there are Jewish alternatives to circumcision so one else makes the "false choice" she feels she made. Braver Moss also perceives her activism as her way of righting the wrong she committed when she allowed for her sons to be circumcised. She explains:

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[29] Lisa Braver Moss, interview with author, May 23, 2019. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from in this section are from my interview with Lisa Braver Moss on May 23, 2019

[30] The following are a small sample of articles Braver Moss wrote for HuffPost in 2014 and 2015: "*Brit Shalom* Families: Where's the Controversy?", June 26, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brit-shalom-families-jewish-controversy_b_5534080; "Controversy or No Brainer? Proposing a New Rhetoric on Jewish Circumcision," September 30, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/noncircumcising-jewish-fa_b_5898242; "*Brit Shalom* Families: A New Reality," May 19, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brit-shalom-families-a-ne_b_7292968.

> In those days, in 1986, which was when my first son was born, it was not standard to use anesthesia. I can't even bear to think about it. I can't even bear it. I've sort of come to terms with that over the years, thinking, well, I can't bear to think about certain aspects of this or I may not be able to see certain films about this, but I'm going to let myself off the hook because *I'm doing the work to make the amends*. I figure, what I'm doing is enough. I do let myself off the hook there in terms of getting too upset by the whole thing. I don't want to go back there because that will derail me from my purpose.[31]

Retelling the story of her sons' circumcisions was emotional for Braver Moss. She tells me she "can't bear to think about it." She then explains that she lets herself "off the hook" because she is "doing the work to make amends." In other words, Braver Moss is channeling the guilt she carries into her activism, and she sees her activism as a means of atonement. Braver Moss blames herself for choosing to follow tradition and failing to protect her sons and is now dedicated to ensuring that other parents are not faced with this "false choice." Braver Moss makes no mention of her husband's role in their decision, effectively placing the blame entirely on her shoulders.[32] And now she channels her regret into her activism and has made it her life's work to protect as many babies as possible from the harmful procedure she failed to protect their own sons from.

These feelings of blame and guilt are not unique to Jewish mothers; some non-Jewish mothers express a similar activist trajectory to that of Braver Moss. Marilyn Milos, a non-Jewish women who is one of the pioneers of the intactivist movement, shares a similar perception of her activism. Milos explains:

> Three of my sons suffered torture and mutilation because some doctor lied to me. If I stopped doing this work—oh, I'm going to cry—if I stopped doing this work, I think about my babies on that board, so…How do you apologize to children for doing this? How could you possibly say enough 'I'm sorrys'? You can't. So I do the work, and in that is the healing. I don't know. It's not healing. You don't get over this. You don't get over it. But you can make a difference.[33]

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[31] Emphasis added.

[32] The tendency to blame and shame mothers for parenting decisions and the outcomes of their children is not unique to Braver Moss; indeed, mother-blaming is pervasive in North American constructions of parenting. For more scholarship on constructions of motherhood and mother blaming, see: Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale, "Mother-Blaming in Major Clinical Journals," *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* vol. 55, no. 3 (1985): 345-353; Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (eds), *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Debra Jackson and Judy Mannix, "Giving Voice to the Burden of Blame: A Feminist Study of Mothers' Experiences of Mother Blaming," *International Journal of Nursing* 10 (2004): 150; Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Susan L. Johnson and Kristen E. Benson, "'It's Always the Mother's Fault': Secondary Stigma of Mothering a Transgender Child," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 10 (2014): 124-144; Bethany L. Johnson and Margaret M. Quinlan, *You're Doing it Wrong!: Mothering, Media, and Medical Expertise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

[33] Marilyn Milos, interview with author, May 13, 2019.

Like Braver Moss, Milos feels apologizing is not sufficient. Instead, she "does the work, and in that is healing." Braver Moss and Milos channel the blame and guilt they feel about their choice to circumcise their sons into their activism. Their advocacy work is the avenue through which they can atone for the sin of transgressing their role as the protector of their children. Because they failed to protect their own children, they do the work to protect others.

REBECCA WALD –"I FELT THE DESIRE TO PROTECT JEWISH CHILDREN FROM AN UNNECESSARY, PAINFUL, AND DAMAGING PROCEDURE."[34]

Rebecca Wald was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1973. Born into a Jewish family, describes her Jewish upbringing as "somewhat observant" and currently considers herself to be an "active member of my congregation." She attends synagogue a couple of times per month, celebrates Shabbat and the holidays with her family, and participates in synagogue life. Wald does not maintain a strong belief in God and identifies as a secular or cultural Jew more so than a religious Jew.[35] Although Wald does not reject the term "intactivist," she prefers to label herself a "circumcision critic" or "circumcision questioner." Wald traces the genesis of her criticism of circumcision to conversations she had with her father, who is a physician and psychiatrist. She recalls her father expressing his belief that "circumcision was not a good thing to do to children." By the time Wald attended college and law school, she felt certain that if she had a son she would likely opt out of *brit milah*. When Wald was dating her future husband, she made her feelings about circumcision clear and shared her desire to forego circumcision if she were to have a son. Wald's husband is a physician and understood first-hand what she calls "the brutality" of circumcision. Opting out, for Wald's husband, was a logical choice. Wald gave birth to a baby boy in 2005, and in lieu of *brit milah*, they hosted a welcoming ceremony for their son.

After the birth of her son, Wald felt compelled to become more involved in the intactivist movement. In addition to co-writing *Celebrating Brit Shalom* with Lisa Braver Moss, Wald launched a blog called *Beyond the Bris* in 2010.[36] Prior to launching the blog, Wald was working on a book for Jewish parents choosing not to circumcise. Wald explains how her book plans shifted and she transformed her book project into a blog: "I had been working on a book, which was going to be titled *Beyond the Bris,* and the idea was that it was going to be a resource for Jewish parents choosing not to circumcise. But then blogs started getting popular and I thought, listen if I write a book, it's a static, unchanging thing. I think it was my husband who gave me the idea for it because a blog can be very up-to-date, and of the moment, you can add new material." Wald subsequently stopped her book project and launched the blog *Beyond the Bris* in December 2010. The purpose of the blog is to provide a forum for Jewish people to connect, document, share stories, and educate others about circumcision. Wald is not the sole contributor to the blog; she encourages other voices from within the Jewish community to share their stories and contribute to "the living, growing document of the Jewish movement that's questioning circumcision." Wald created *Beyond the Bris*

[34] Rebecca Wald, interview with author, May 15, 2019. All quotes in this section are from my interview with Rebecca.
[35] Not believing in God is rather prevalent amongst Reform Jews, many of whom are ambivalent about God and do not connect with God-centric language in synagogue services. Jack Wertheimer examines this phenomenon in his recent book *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018): 27-33.
[36] *Beyond the Bris*, http://www.beyondthebris.com/

to provide a resource to Jewish parents who are likely to locate very few resources or information about other Jews questioning or opting out of circumcision within their own communities. In many cases, Jewish parents who are questioning circumcision feel isolated and are often unsuccessful in locating other like-minded Jews to whom they can connect. As a result, many Jewish parents rely on the Internet to gather resources and create community with Jews who feel similarly to them. Wald created *Beyond the Bris* to fill the void of information and sense of loneliness that many Jewish parents feel when struggling with this decision.

Wald's activism is noticeably different from that of Braver Moss. Wald's opposition to circumcision was first introduced by her father who, as a physician, expressed his disdain for the practice. Braver Moss's activism comes from her own experience circumcising her sons, and she wants to prevent parents from making the "false choice" she felt she had to make. Because Wald did not circumcise her son, she does not harbor the guilt that Braver Moss does. Wald's activism is not her means of atonement. But her motherhood and the desire to protect children is central in her activism. Wald explains the genesis of her activism: "I felt the desire to protect Jewish children from an unnecessary, painful, and damaging procedure, and to educate Jewish parents about a harm they may have not recognized or considered."[37] Here she leans into her role as protector of children; she succeeded in protecting her own son from the harms of circumcision, and now it is Wald's mission to protect other Jewish children from harm. And Braver Moss and Wald are continuing to do just that. They have joined forces once again and created an organization called *Bruchim,* whose mission it is to "advocate for the open inclusion of those who feel differently about circumcision."[38] In other words, they are advocating for Jewish spaces to openly welcome non-circumcision families. This new venture allows for Braver Moss to keep "doing the work to make amends" and provides a new avenue for Wald to keep protecting children from the harms of circumcision.

MOTHERHOOD & THE INTACTIVIST MOVEMENT

The intactivist movement is not a Jewish movement; there are some Jewish intactivists (such as Lisa Braver Moss and Rebecca Wald), but most intactivists are not Jewish. And not all Jews who opt out of circumcision identify as intactivist or consider themselves against circumcision. Regardless of where Jews who opt out of circumcision fall on the "anti-circumcision" spectrum, most who question circumcision engage with (mostly non-Jewish) intactivist spaces. When Jewish mothers start researching circumcision, they often start with the Internet. They often become members of intactivist groups on social media and read intactivist blogs. Oftentimes this engagement is inadvertent; not all intactivist spaces make it clear they are a group advocating for the eradication of circumcision. As a result, what is being said in intactivist circles matters. In this section I analyze how tropes about motherhood are used by some non-Jewish intactivist groups. Intactivist discourse utilizes and perpetuates a gendered parenting model and stereotypes about motherhood in their activism. The notion of mothers protecting babies from unnecessary harm is the foremost rhetorical strategy of the intactivist movement. Intactivism is often framed as a child-saving campaign and rests on the idea that innocent baby boys are being mutilated and require saving from this harmful procedure. This framing, in conjunction with North American perceptions of mothers as the sole protectors of children, requires mothers to assume a particularly

[37] Rebecca Wald, e-mail correspondence, February 21, 2016.
[38] *Bruchim* homepage: https://www.bruchim.online/, last accessed April 15, 2022.

important role in protecting children from circumcision. Images of women cuddling babies are ubiquitous in intactivist posters and leaflets and propagate the idea that "good mothers" and "real women" protect babies. Women are often displayed cradling their pregnant stomachs or cuddling and kissing babies. Although rare, there are posters of men cradling babies, but these posters are usually accompanied by hyper masculine tropes.

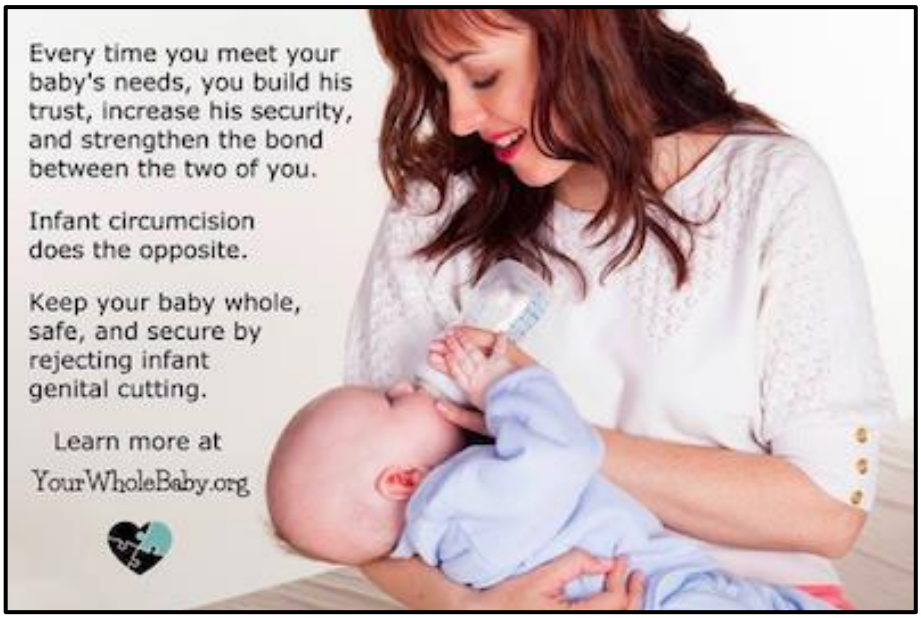

Image 6: Your Whole Baby Instagram Post (#1), posted November 16, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CHqXLNKA6Kf/, last accessed February 14, 2022.

Embedded in the above image are the essential doctrines of new momism. First, mothers are the primary caregivers of their children. The mother in image 6 is seen feeding and looking lovingly at her child, with no father or man shown or alluded to in the accompanying text. Second, mothers are the ones responsible for their children's needs ("every time *you* meet your baby's needs…"). Since the mother is depicted alone in this image, the "you" in the statement is directly addressed to mothers. The burden of caring for their child's every need is placed solely on the mother. Third, mothers are expected to keep their children "safe" and "secure." The decisions mothers make can affect their child's safety and security. And indeed, "circumcision does the opposite" of increasing a child's security and strengthening the bond between mother and baby. In essence, mothers are the primary caregivers of children, mothers are responsible for the decisions made about their children, mothers are responsible for protecting their children from harm, and any "wrong" decision made by the mother can lead to long-term physical and psychological damage and trauma. Mothers and women as protectors of children is central in intactivist discourse. Mothers are supposed to protect babies from harm, and their role as protector places them in an optimal position in the fight against the harms of circumcision. It is *their* decisions that could lead to children experiencing harm and pain. Good, nurturing, protective mothers "can't bear the thought" of harming their children (see image 7).[39] Should mothers make a "wrong" decision, or they make a

[39] It is interesting to note that Lisa Braver Moss uses the same language when thinking about the circumcisions of her sons. Braver Moss explained she "can't even bear to think about it." See page 89 for more.

decision that indeed harms their child in some way, even if that harm is temporary, their status as a "good mom" can immediately come into question.

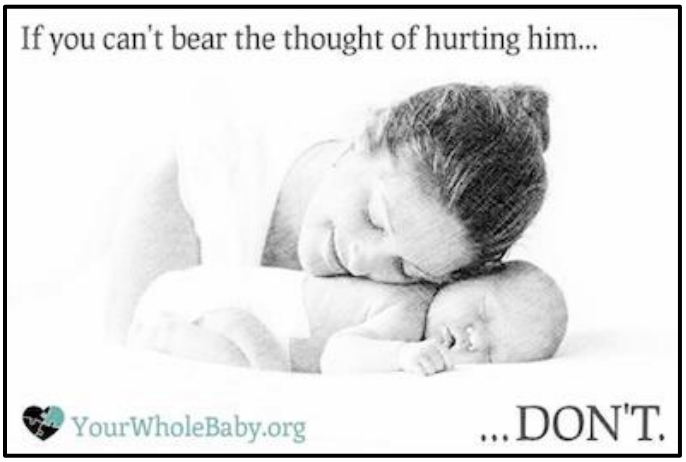

Image 7: You Whole Baby Instagram Post (#2), posted September 5, 2020: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEw-uuQAUxV/, last accessed February 15, 2022.

Image 8 is explicit in its message that women are the protectors of babies. In this image, a woman resembling "Rosie the Riveter" is holding a baby under the title "Real Women Protect Babies." Instead of flexing her right arm like the original Rosie the Riveter, the woman in this image is using her arm to hold the baby. The use of Rosie the Riveter is intriguing since the original image was used to encourage more women to enter the labor force during the Second World War. Rosie the Riveter was eventually adopted by the feminist movement and became a symbol of second-wave feminism. The use of this symbol in intactivist protest materials suggests there is a connection between feminism and circumcision. The suggestion here, I argue, is that true feminists would never choose to circumcise their sons. It also sends the message that "real women" are on the frontlines of protecting their children. The enemy is no longer an external foreign power; the enemy are those who harm children, and real women are the ones who use their bodies to defend and protect their children from harm. Image 9 builds on the idea of mothers as protectors by demonstrating the outcome when mothers fail to protect their child. One image shows a pregnant woman cradling her belly. In the subsequent image, a woman is cradling and kissing her newborn. The following images show a baby strapped to a circumcision board, being circumcised, and crying. The progression of images, and the dichotomy between the bottom and top of the poster, send the message that it is the mother's decisions that have a lasting impact on their children, and it is the mother's decisions that could lead to their child experience harm and trauma. By neglecting to include a father figure in the image, fathers are once again absolved from this responsibility.

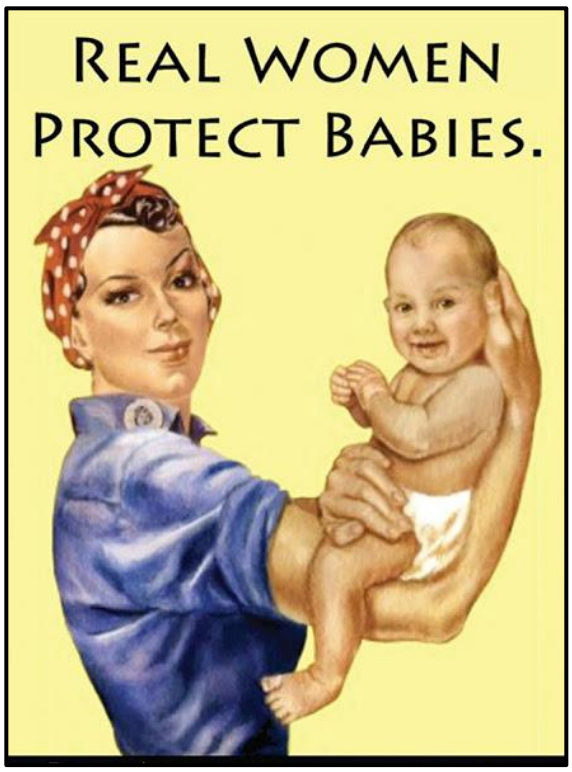

Image 8 (left): 'Real Women Protect Babies' sign used at the Genital Integrity Awareness Week protest in Washington, D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. Picture retrieved from www.savingsons.org. Image 9 (right): 'You Wait 9 Months to Meet Him' sample protest sign by provided Saving Our Sons. Picture retrieved from www.savingsons.org.

"Parental instincts" is another discourse that permeates intactivist literature. As image 10 articulates, "Trust your parental instincts and protect your son from the harm of forced genital cutting." I argue that the seemingly neutral "parental instincts" is a guise for maternal or "mommy" instincts. Image 9 does this directly by only featuring a woman in the picture with the accompanying text "trust your parental instincts." Image 10 also features what appears to be a mother, along with the text "Listen to your heart and your instincts." Parental instincts come naturally to mothers, who should simply "know" what is in their children's best interests. Indeed, this is an important element of new momism: "Mothers today cannot just respond to their children's needs, they must predict them."[40] Predicting what their child needs is an advanced level of knowledge that requires mothers simply know and anticipate what their child requires at any given time. Since fathers are once again absent from these images, the use of "parental instincts" is a masquerade for "maternal instincts." The creators of these leaflets may have used "parental instincts" to appear neutral, but with a closer look, the association with mothers is clear.

[40] Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth,* 6.

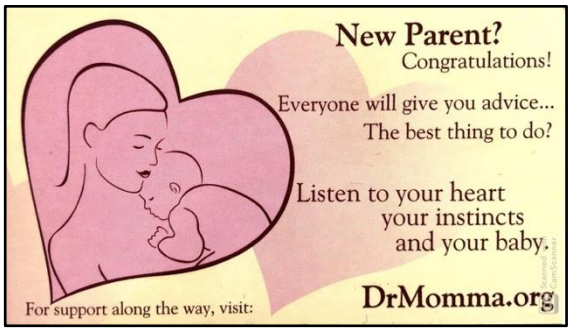

Image 10 (left): "New Parent?" leaflet. Image 11 (right): "Congratulations!" leaflet. The above leaflets were distributed at the Genital Integrity Awareness Week protest in Washington, D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. Leaflets are part of my personal collection.

REGRETS MOMS & MOTHER-BLAMING

Connected to the ideology of intensive mothering and new momism is mother-blaming. Because mothers are understood to be the primary caregivers of children, mothers are often blamed and shamed for their parenting choices and for the outcome of their children, even when such decisions are made in conjunction with their male partners. Mother-blaming is a pervasive form of sexism that holds mothers "responsible for the actions, behavior, health, and well-being of their (even adult) children."[41] In their study on mother-blaming in clinical journals, Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale examine the tendency of medical professionals to blame mothers for a wide variety of physical and mental health issues of their children, such as schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety.[42] Susan L. Johnson and Kristen E. Benson examine the blame imposed on mothers of transgender children.[43] The term "refrigerator mother," coined in the 1950s, was used to describe the belief that autism was caused by lack of maternal warmth. Cold,

Image 12: Screenshot, Your Whole Baby tweet, December 21, 2019.

[41] Debra Jackson and Judy Mannix, "Giving Voice to the Burden of Blame: A Feminist Study of Mothers' Experiences of Mother Blaming," *International Journal of Nursing* 10 (2004): 150.
[42] Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale, "Mother-Blaming in Major Clinical Journals," *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* vol. 55, no. 3 (1985): 348.
[43] Susan L. Johnson and Kristen E. Benson, "'It's Always the Mother's Fault': Secondary Stigma of Mothering a Transgender Child," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 10 (2014): 124-144.

unaffectionate mothers, according to this theory, cause autism in children.[44] On the other end of the spectrum, mothers who were too affectionate were blamed if their male child turned out to be gay.

Mother-blaming is utilized and perpetuated through intactivist discourse. A stark example of this is the term "regret-moms," parlance used in intactivist circles in reference to mothers who regret their decision to circumcise their sons. The more neutral "regret-parents" or even "regret-fathers" are seldom used, and when they are, they continue to be associated with mothers. Your Whole Baby is an intactivist organization with a relatively large social media following.[45] On December 21, 2019, Your Whole Baby posted a simple question, "Are you a regret parent?" on their Twitter feed in response to their own post from November 18, 2019 (see image 12).[46] Despite their attempt at neutrality, the hashtags they attached to this post, #mommytobe, #newmomma, #boymomma, #momlife, and #MomKnowsBest connect the neutral "regret parent" to mothers.

The widely used terminology of "regret-moms" and the direct association between "regret parents" and mothers perpetuated by intactivists puts the onus, responsibility, and the blame exclusively on mothers for circumcising their sons. Stereotypes about motherhood tell us that mothers are supposed to protect their babies, and for intactivists, choosing to circumcise represents a breach of this motherly responsibility. Opting for circumcision represents a failure in doing the most natural thing mothers are supposed to do, and that is protecting their children. And even when rhetoric about "regret parents" isn't used, intactivist material often associate mothers with the decision to circumcise (see image 13). Fathers are seldom held responsible.

Image 13: Your Whole Baby Instagram Post (#3), posted on June 28, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQq-SsHA40E/, last accessed February 14, 2022.

[44] Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 33-63.
[45] Your Whole Baby currently has 3,797 followers on Twitter, 8,456 followers on Instagram, and 62,000 followers on Facebook. I most recently checked these numbers on April 16, 2022.
[46] Your Whole Baby, tweet on December 21, 2019: https://twitter.com/YourWholeBaby/status/1208412590688423937, last accessed February 18, 2022.

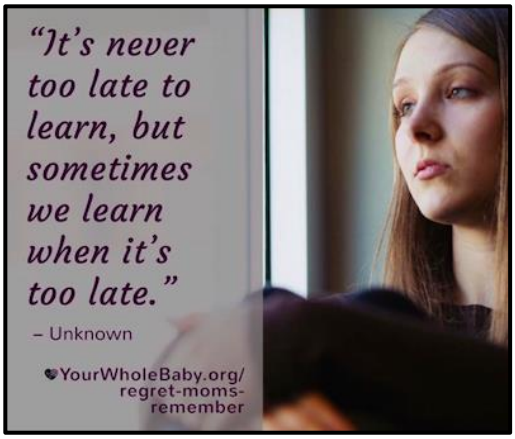

Image 14 (left): Your Whole Baby Instagram Post (#4), posted on December 21, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/CXziDYlgHDT/, last accessed February 14, 2022. Image 15 (right): Your Whole Baby Instagram Post (#5), posted on March 4, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/CMA3wC-AaBi/, last accessed February 15, 2022.

Image 16: Screenshot, Your Whole Baby Retweet, "Where is my Foreskin, Mother?"

Intactivist discourse perpetuates the message that parental, and arguably maternal, love for one's children is connected to the decision one makes for their children. Images 17-20 are not necessarily directed towards mothers, but they clearly send the message that if one loves their baby, they should not circumcise him. The conclusion is that parents who do, in fact, circumcise their children do not love them. This places an enormous burden on parents, and the message is clear: parental love for children is measured by individual decisions made for one's children. And according to intactivists, choosing to circumcise represents a demonstrable measure of a parent's lack love for their child. And because the burden of parenting decisions is placed more forcefully on mothers, it is *their* parenting decisions that serve as a barometer of their love for their child. It is no wonder mothers such as Lisa Braver Moss and Marilyn Milos feel guilty about their decision; the circles within which they operate repeatedly tell them that they are solely responsible for their child-

rearing decisions. They are also told it is their role and responsibility to protect their children, and because they chose to circumcise, they failed to uphold that responsibility. They are told because *they* decided to circumcise they must not love their sons. This discourse is harmful to women and exposes the cleverly disguised misogyny and sexism imbedded the intactivist movement.

Image 17 (top left): "Babies are for loving, not cutting" sticker. Image 18 (top middle): "Just love him, don't cut him" sticker. Image 19 (top right): "Love Babies?" The above stickers were distributed at the Genital Integrity Awareness Week protest in Washington, D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. Stickers are part of my personal collection. Image 20 (bottom): "Love all of me," Your Whole Baby Instagram Post (#6), posted on July 2, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ1HF66j8I9/, last accessed February 15, 2022.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I analyzed gendered responses to circumcision from within and beyond the Jewish community and how these responses connect to gendered parenting models more broadly. New momism and the ideology of intensive mothering are embedded in North American child-rearing practices and dictate that children should have one primary caregiver, a responsibility imposed mostly on mothers. The firmly rooted stereotype of mothers as the protectors and nurturers of children, coupled with the tendency to blame and shame mothers much more than fathers, puts mothers in a precarious position when facing any decision for their children. This

precarity is made evident through the anxiety and distress described by mothers featured throughout this chapter.

Intactivist groups capitalize on and perpetuate stereotypes about motherhood as a means through which to propel their message forward. Intactivists also, directly and indirectly, assign most of the blame to mothers when parents choose to circumcise their sons. This enormous pressure placed on mothers, through the tactics employed by intactivist groups and cultural constructions of motherhood more broadly, results in mothers carrying the responsibility of protecting children from harm and bearing the blame when they fail to honor that responsibility. This rhetoric is harmful to women and highlights the sexism and misogyny that permeates the intactivist movement and discourses about motherhood and parenting more broadly.

An examination of gendered responses to circumcision is about much more than circumcision—it captures how gender stereotypes operate cross-culturally. Women and mothers are believed to be instinctively more nurturing and caring for others, especially children. Women and mothers are believed to be intrinsically more connected to and protective of their children, and because of these "mommy instincts," they bear the brunt of the blame and shame in their parenting decisions. And as we saw from the responses of Lisa Braver Moss and Marilyn Milos, some mothers have internalized this gendered parenting philosophy and continue to perpetuate it. An in-depth examination of this discourse in the intactivist movement and amongst Jewish parents grappling with circumcision allows us to see that gender stereotypes organize affective and domestic labor and, perhaps not surprisingly, women and mothers are mostly responsible for this labor. According to this gendered model, real women do indeed protect babies.

CHAPTER FOUR

Making the Body Beautifully Jewish: Health, Hygiene, and the Aesthetics of Circumcision

Jewish parents factor many elements into their decision to circumcise their sons. They consider what Tirza (from chapter one) calls the "Jewish piece"—in other words, the religious implications of the decision. They think about what opting out would mean for their own understanding of Judaism and the covenant, and what potential implications this could have for their son's Jewish identity. They consider the family and community elements of the decision. They reflect on how their families will react should they choose not to circumcise. They wonder if their rabbi will accept their decision and would be willing to officiate an alternative ceremony. Some consider the opinions of medical professionals and statements provided by medical governing bodies, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics of the Canadian Paediatric Society. Some consider the ethical implications of circumcision and the bodily integrity of their child. Some may consider the gender dynamics of this ritual. To put simply, there are many layers of the decision-making process, and parents often factor numerous elements when navigating this decision.

This chapter examines another layer of the decision-making process, and this layer concerns the male body. I analyze how notions of hygiene, attractiveness, and intelligibility are central to Jewish perceptions of circumcision. Jews engage with, internalize, accept, and perpetuate these discourses. Conceptions of hygiene and the ideal Jewish body are part of the reason some Jews continue to observe the ritual of circumcision. Circumcision is embedded with meaning that transcends the original significance of the ritual. In other words, it is not *just* a covenantal ritual; it is also a ritual that encapsulates conceptions of hygiene, attractiveness, and Jewish masculinity. Indeed, circumcision represents a means through which Jewish boys are welcomed into the Jewish community and the covenant between God and the Jewish people, but it also serves as a means of transforming the body into an *ideal* (Jewish) body.

Circumcision transforms an unideal body into an ideal Jewish body. Circumcision transforms a "dirty" body into a "clean" body. It transforms an "ugly" body into an "attractive" body. And finally, it transforms an "unintelligible" body into an identifiably Jewish body. Circumcision inscribes Jewishness onto the bodies of Jewish men all the while transforming the body into a desirable and sexually attractive Jewish body. A circumcised body is a virile body, which represents a stark contrast to the stereotype of the "effeminate," "weak," and "bookish" Jewish man. As such, circumcision is imbued with meaning that goes beyond the religious and cultural nature of this ritual. In addition to being a symbol of male Jewishness, circumcision allows for the penis to appear as it ought to. A circumcised body is an identifiably Jewish and attractive body, whereas an uncircumcised Jewish body is an unintelligible and unattractive body. Circumcision allows for a Jewish body to be read and recognized as Jewish *and* attractive. Uncircumcised Jewish bodies are bewildering bodies.

Throughout this chapter, I examine how Jewish parents, rabbis, and *mohelim* incorporate discourses on hygiene, attractiveness, and intelligibility to frame their discussions on circumcision. The people included in this chapter engage directly with these discourses, underscoring their centrality in Jewish understandings of circumcision. I also examine representations of circumcision in pop culture to demonstrate that discourse about health, hygiene, and attractiveness extend beyond the Jewish community and are perpetuated within North American culture more

broadly. Finally, I conclude the chapter by examining how some Jews, and the intactivist movement more broadly, are challenging and attempting to subvert this model of the ideal male body.

CIRCUMCISION AS THE IDEAL BODY

Discourse about circumcision perpetuates the idea that a circumcised body represents the ideal male body. For Jews who have absorbed these discourses, the ideal male Jewish body is one that is clean, attractive, and identifiably Jewish. Circumcision transforms a dirty, unattractive, and unintelligible body into the ideal male Jewish body. Jewish parents, rabbis, and *mohelim* engage directly with these discourses, emphasizing their significance in this ritual. Notions of health and hygiene, masculinity and attractiveness, and intelligibility are infused in this ritual moment, demonstrating that circumcision is not solely a covenantal and life cycle ritual. Through interactions with the wider culture in which Jews are situated, circumcision is embedded with additional significance that impacts how Jews engage with this ritual.

HEALTH AND HYGIENE

"Dirt," according to anthropologist Mary Douglas, "is essentially disorder."[1] Classifications of "dirt" and "pollution," Douglas contends, "exist in the eyes of the beholder," and much of human behavior can be understood in terms of "cleaning or avoiding dirt."[2] And dirt-avoidance behaviours, such as tidying and cleaning, function to "re-order" the disordering effect of dirt. Using this model, I argue that circumcision functions to "re-order" the body. It transforms the body from dirty to clean. It removes the potential for dirt and disease. Foreskin pollutes the body, and removing the foreskin eliminates the potential for bodily pollution. Intact penises represent dirt and disease, and circumcision transforms the body into a model of hygiene and cleanliness.

Jews engage directly with discourses on health and hygiene when discussing circumcision. Judith does not deny the Jewishness of uncircumcised Jewish men, but she does question their hygiene: "They're still Jewish, but if you ask me they're less clean."[3] Deborah also connected circumcision with cleanliness: "Circumcision didn't come out of nowhere. It was based on beliefs about healthier ways of living. And those health reasons continue to this day."[4] Abigail circumcised her son "because it's cleaner. I've heard of boys having issues with their penises and having to get circumcised later in life, and I wanted to protect my son from having to do that in the future."[5] Rabbi Reuben Poupko, an Orthodox rabbi in Montreal, referenced health and hygiene in our conversation about circumcision: "The idea that you are inflicting pain on your child is intolerable for some women, which I understand, even though the American Academy of Pediatrics now encourages circumcision for everybody because it is healthier. Again, that's not why we do it, but it's certainly helpful when the AAP says you're supposed to do it. Certainly helpful."[6] Rabbi

[1] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966): 2.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Judith, interview with author, February 11, 2016.
[4] Deborah, interview with author, April 30, 2016.
[5] Abigail, interview with author, March 1, 2021.
[6] Rabbi Reuben Poupko, interview with author, December 4, 2016.

Poupko went on to say, "It's a good sign when you have the doctors and rabbis agreeing on something. You have the doctors, Jewish tradition, Jewish law, and Jewish practice lining up here." To clarify Rabbi Poupko's interpretation of the AAP's policy statement on circumcision, the AAP does not recommend circumcision for every newborn male. The AAP offers a slightly more nuanced statement: "Although health benefits are not great enough to recommend routine circumcision for all male newborns, the benefits of circumcision are sufficient to justify access to this procedure for families choosing it and to warrant third-party payment for circumcision of male newborns."[7] But the AAP indeed establishes a connection between circumcision and the eradication of disease: "Benefits include significant reductions in the risk of urinary tract infection in the first year of life and, subsequently, in the risk of heterosexual acquisition of HIV and the transmission of other sexually transmitted infections." This discourse on health and hygiene is not unique to Jews. According to *The Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey*, the main reason Canadian parents choose to circumcise their sons is health. 44.4% of respondents indicated health and hygiene, followed closely by to be like father and peers (35.6%) and finally religion (17.3%) as the main reasons why they opted for circumcision.[8]

The connection between hygiene, cleanliness, and circumcision occurred at a particular moment in American history. According to historian David Gollaher, the late nineteenth century represented a time when norms about cleanliness were changing in the United States. In the early nineteenth century, Americans rarely bathed; by the end of the nineteenth century, "cleansing with soap, brushing one's hair, clipping's one's nails, and other acts of personal grooming" become commonplace.[9] Urban centers were also subjected to enhanced standards of cleanliness. It is no coincidence, that during this historical context where cleanliness was becoming more important in American culture, that "doctors decided that the circumcised penis was more sanitary than uncircumcised."[10] Over time, intact penises came to be associated with infection, disease, and death. Circumcision eventually "signified precisely that aversion to dirt—and not just dirt, but vulgarity, nasty habits, and diseases—that symbolically set one on a higher plane. Undoubtedly this was the enduring core of its appeal to ordinary people."[11]

Circumcision is not the only Jewish ritual to be associated with health and hygiene. Historian Beth Wenger examines how laws of family purity were supported (and promoted) by doctors in the early twentieth century. According to Wenger:

> Between 1920 and 1940, the medical community joined religious commentators in advocating abstention from intercourse during a woman's menstrual flow, as dictated by Jewish law. Physicians and scientists observed that Jewish women

[7] "Policy Statement on Circumcision," *American Academy of Pediatrics, Pediatrics* vol. 130, no. 2 (September 2012): https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/130/3/585/30235/Circumcision-Policy-Statement, last accessed April 1 2022.
[8] "What Mothers Say: The Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey" *Public Health Agency of Canada* (2009): https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/rhs-ssg/pdf/survey-eng.pdf, last accessed April 1, 2022, page 223.
[9] David Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 86-87.
[10] Ibid., 86.
[11] Ibid., 107.

> suffered from cervical cancer less frequently than their non-Jewish counterparts. Attributing these statistics to Jewish ritual observance, medical experts found rational grounds for supporting the maintenance of religious custom. At the same time, Jewish leaders seized the opportunity to proclaim Jewish law as not only divinely ordained but also scientifically sound.[12]

Scientific support of the laws of family purity were short-lived and began to decline in the mid-twentieth century, when religious and moral support of observing *niddah* usurped arguments touting its supposed medical benefits.[13] But the scientific support of circumcision has lasted considerably longer than its support for *niddah*. This support, and the implications of better health and hygiene, are central in discourse about circumcision. Scientific studies linking circumcision with the prevention of disease indeed bolsters the argument for and support of circumcision, effectively fusing the observance of this Jewish ritual with science and medicine.

MASCULINITY AND ATTRACTIVENESS

The penis serves as a symbol of masculinity. In many cultures, the penis represents attributes such as strength, dominance, virility, and power. According to David Friedman, "From the beginning of Western civilization, the penis was more than a body part. It was an idea, a conceptual flesh-and-blood gauge of a man's place in the world. That men have a penis is a scientific fact; how they think about it, feel about it, and use it is not."[14] And how men feel about their penis, and by extension their masculinity, depends largely on how their penis looks. Like any body part, penises come in many shapes and sizes, and the ideal penile shape, size, and appearance changes over time. And it can be distressing for men when they believe their penis does not adhere to the aesthetic ideal du jour. For instance, "small penis syndrome" (also known as "locker room syndrome"), is a form of body dysmorphic disorder that is defined as "an anxiety about the genitals being observed, directly or indirectly (when clothed) because of concern that the flaccid penis length and/or girth is less than normal."[15] Small penis syndrome is experienced by men with normal-sized penises who believe that their penis is too small. Men who suffer from small penis syndrome often suffer from "emotional distress and behavioral impairment," such as sexual disfunction, difficulty maintaining relationships with others, poor body image and self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety, generalized anxiety, and depression.[16] Small penis syndrome demonstrates how distressing it can be when one believes their penis fails to measure up to what it ought to look like.

Not only has the penis been invested with meaning, so has the foreskin. For instance, Robert Darby examines how the "demonization of the foreskin" led to increased rates of routine infant circumcision in Britain starting in the nineteenth century. David Gollaher offers a similar analysis

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[12] Beth Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine: Gender, Assimilation, and the Scientific Defense of 'Family Purity,'" in *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives,* edited by Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2001): 201.
[13] Ibid., 216-218.
[14] David Friedman, *A Mind of its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis* (New York: Free Press, 2001): 6.
[15] Kevan R. Wylie and Ian Eardley, "Penile Size and the 'Small Penis Syndrome,'" *BJU International 99* (2007): 1449.
[16] Wylie and Eardley, "Penile Size and the 'Small Penis Syndrome,'" 1451.

of routine infant circumcision in the United States. They both examine how foreskin removal was initially understood to curb masturbation and control sexual urges. Circumcision was also associated with hygiene and the prevention of disease. Foreskin was subsequently perceived to be a useless piece of skin that served no purpose. And for some doctors, circumcision was viewed as a form of "beautification." For example, physician William Goodwin praised circumcised penises because "it appears in its flaccid state as an erect uncircumcised organ—a beautiful instrument of precise intent."[17] The implication here is that the uncircumcised penis is unattractive and in need of correction through surgery. Shane Phelan pushes this further by arguing a foreskin-less penis is the phallic ideal, "whereby men's bodies are imagined in complete and absolutely opposition to women's."[18] Women's bodies are passive, penetrable, and leaky. Men must be virile, always ready to actively defend themselves and others, never willing to be victimized or dominated. And a circumcised penis represents dominance and virility. By removing the foreskin, the ideal masculine body is realized.[19]

As we will see shortly, some Jewish parents and *mohelim* engage directly with discourse on attractiveness when discussing the circumcisions (or non-circumcisions) of their sons. Through an analysis of Jewish engagement with tropes on attractiveness, in conjunction with an examination of pop cultural depictions of circumcision, I argue that circumcised penises are indeed perceived to be more attractive than uncircumcised penises. And this perception looms large in the decision-making process of some Jewish parents.

INTELLIGIBILITY

Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix," a sex-gender-sexuality tripartite model, "accounts for how we make assumptions of what we see based on normative frameworks in society."[20] With Butler's theory, a person's sex and gender are "known" to the viewer through their gaze, which allows the viewer to "read" and ultimately assume a particular sexuality for the person being gazed upon.[21] Judith Butler asserts that:

> The term heterosexual matrix […] designate[s] that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I […] characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is

[17] Geoffrey P. Miller, "Circumcision: Cultural-Legal Analysis," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law,* vol. 9 (2002): 545.
[18] Amanda Kennedy, "Masculinity and Embodiment in the Practice of Foreskin Restoration," *International Journal of Men's Health,* vol. 14, no. 1 (2015): 40.
[19] For more on this, see Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001): 41-43 and Marie Fox and Michael Thompson, "Foreskin is a Feminist Issue," *Australian Feminist Studies,* vol. 24, no. 60 (2009): 195-210.
[20] Kristi Tredway, "Judith Butler Redux—The Heterosexual Matrix and the Out Lesbian Athlete: Amélie Mauresmo, Gender Performance, and Women's Professional Tennis," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport,* vol. 41, no. 2 (2014): 164.
[21] Ibid., 168.

> oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.[22]

In other words, people are made intelligible through the gaze of others. Bodies are read, and the information provided and gathered allows the viewer to make a conclusion about the person's sex and gender. For example, a person viewed as male and masculine is understood to be heterosexual. A person viewed as female and feminine is understood to the heterosexual. A person viewed as male and feminine, or female and masculine, are understood to be gay or lesbian. The matrix allows for bodies and behaviors to be read, understood, and categorized. People are made intelligible through the gaze, and the matrix provides a framework for making sense of others. But when someone is not decipherable through the heterosexual matrix, they are unintelligible. Their sex and gender are incomprehensible to the viewer, who cannot determine their sex and/or gender.

I use Butler's model of intelligibility to frame my analysis on Jewish parents' concerns with their sons' bodies. Although Jewish parents are not expressing concerns about their child's gender or sexuality, they are concerned with their children occupying intelligible bodies. They are concerned with how their child's body will be viewed and subsequently interpreted. The future gaze of others in communal settings (such as summer camp and locker rooms) and sexual experiences looms large in their imagination. For some parents, an uncircumcised body is not a Jewish body. A Jewish man who is uncircumcised is bewildering, and they do not want their son to occupy a bewildering body. An uncircumcised body is confusing and unintelligible; a circumcised body is clearly read and interpreted as a Jewish body. Circumcision transforms an unintelligible body into an identifiably Jewish body, and this idea is important for some Jewish parents as they navigate this decision.

The gaze of others is powerful in the imagination of some parents. They express concern over their child potentially being bullied or ridiculed by their peers because of their circumcision status. They imagine that their child's genitals will one day emerge from their protection of invisibility and be the target of ridicule. The fear of the gaze is not unique to Jewish parents considering circumcision; Suzanne Kessler examines how the gaze and potential teasing impacted parents' decisions about their intersexed children. Kessler explains:

> Teasing is not an insignificant construct in theories about gender. Philosopher Ellen Feder exposes the way psychiatry uses testimony about teasing not only to justify treatment of Gender Identity Disorder in children but also to define it. Feder notes that what alarms teachers and parents about a child's cross-gender behavior is not the behavior per se but the other children's reactions to it. Teasing and name-calling are one the manifest symptoms of child gender disturbance. Children on the playground are treated 'as a kind of natural tribunal,' and the medical profession imbues this with authority, rather than treating teasing and the institutions that tolerate it as in need of correction. Obviously, the same could be said of the management of intersex. Much is made of the possibility of teasing, but documentation is not provided for how teasing has negatively impacted those rare people whose intersexed genitals were not 'surgicalized.' Nor is there a discussion

[22] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 194, note 6.

> in the medical literature about procedures for counteracting (or curing) the teasing.[23]

In other words, the idea that someone will see their child's genitals and determine them ugly or abnormal and subsequently bully their child is a scary thought for some parents. The gaze of others is a threat to their child's well-being. Changing for gym class at school, communal living at summer camp, and sexual experiences will subject their child to the gaze of others. Parents cannot protect their child from the gaze, but some believe they can protect their child from potential future bullying and embarrassment. And some parents choose to circumcise their child for precisely this reason.

MAKING THE BODY BEAUTIFULLY JEWISH

Discourse about health, aesthetics, and intelligibility permeate discourse about circumcision. Jewish parents, rabbis, and *mohelim* engage with this discourse, demonstrating how central these ideas are in Jewish perceptions of circumcision. In this section, I will focus mostly on aesthetics and intelligibility. Parents are concerned with appearance and want their children to have aesthetically conventional bodies. The prospect of potential teasing, ridicule, and exclusion looms large in the decision-making process of some parents. Intelligibility is another important element. Parents want their male children to have identifiable Jewish bodies. They do not want their sons to occupy a bewildering body, and an uncircumcised Jewish body is indeed a bewildering body. Some Jewish parents choose circumcision because they want their child to have an aesthetically appropriate and identifiable Jewish body. For some, an uncircumcised Jew is a paradox, a contradiction that is difficult to reconcile. And parents want to protect their child from occupying what they understand to be an unintelligible body.

DAVID AND HANNAH—"I WOULD FIND IT WEIRD IF SOMEONE TOLD ME THEY WERE JEWISH AND UNCIRCUMCISED."[24]

I introduced David and Hannah briefly in chapter three, but now I examine their story in more depth. David and Hannah do not identify as religious Jews, are not members of a synagogue, do not go to synagogue on the High Holidays, and do not keep kosher. But they do celebrate some aspects of some of the Jewish holidays. They have a Rosh Hashanah dinner, "sometimes" fast on Yom Kippur, break the fast (even when they don't fast), and have a Passover seder. They identify as culturally Jewish and being a part of the Jewish community is important to them. Growing up, Hannah and her family were members of a Conservative synagogue, went to synagogue on the High Holidays, but did not keep kosher (although they made a point to avoid eating bacon in the house). Hannah attended a Jewish elementary school and had a *bat mitzvah*. David's family was not particularly observant, but he had a *bar mitzvah* and attended Jewish schools for his primary and secondary education. David and Hannah had a Jew-*ish* wedding; their wedding was minimally Jewish but incorporated the necessary elements to ensure it was a legitimate Jewish wedding. Hannah sometimes fasts on Yom Kippur, and David admitted that he currently does not but hopes

[23] Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998): 34-35.

[24] David and Hannah are pseudonyms. David and Hannah, interview with author, December 11, 2016. All quotations in this section are from my interview with David and Hannah.

to in the future. David explains: "It is the same answer to the bigger question, but there is a spirituality lacking that I don't really seek in religion but I do miss, and so fasting on Yom Kippur may be a thing to do to keep in touch with myself." As David and Hannah expand their family, they are thinking more about their connections to the Jewish community and how to incorporate more Jewishness into their lives. Despite their lack of connection to the religious dimension of Judaism, they identify as cultural Jews, have a strong connection to their Jewish identities, and value belonging to the Jewish community.

David and Hannah had their first son, Archie, in the fall of 2016. They did not know the sex of their child in advance but discussed circumcision in depth ahead of the baby's arrival. They initially did not feel strongly one way or the other, but they did feel it was an important decision to make. Even though David expressed his feeling that circumcision is a "horrible, barbaric practice that I can't really defend," he leaned more towards circumcision because, as he explains, "I guess because I am, it seemed like the thing to do." After discussing the issue at length, and subsequently giving birth to boy, they decided they would indeed circumcise. Hannah admits their reasons are not "super good and sound, but they were enough for us to say, 'Okay, let's do it.'" Hannah explains their reasons in more depth:

> I guess there's three main reasons. The first is that his father is circumcised and so, you want to look like your father and I don't want him to have any kind of complex about 'Why am I different? What's this extra thing?' Similarly, he's going to grow up in the Jewish community and will likely go to summer camp. At my Jewish summer camp, the counsellors that weren't circumcised, all the kids I think were circumcised, the counsellors that were not were bullied a little bit in the shower house so I didn't want him to have any kind of experience like that. Finally, a big reason was that given he'll be raised in the Jewish community, if he decides he wants to be Jewish, which requires him to be circumcised, I didn't want him to do it later in life when it would probably be a lot more painful.

While circumcision is a clear biblical commandment, circumcision is not a prerequisite for Jewishness. If a child is born of a Jewish mother (or, for some communities that recognize patrilineal descent, a Jewish father), that child is Jewish regardless of their circumcision status. Baby boys who cannot be circumcised for health reasons, such as hemophilia, are indeed Jewish. I subsequently asked them whether, from their point of view, a man must be circumcised to be Jewish, and David responded: "I would find it weird if somebody told me they were Jewish and uncircumcised."

David and Hannah's story captures a particularly common trend in Jewish observance for North American Jews: they are not religious, are not members of a synagogue, do not observe many Jewish traditions (besides certain holiday meals and "sometimes" fasting on Yom Kippur), do not keep kosher, but circumcising their son was important to them. Circumcision is often important even to the most ambivalent of Jews.

The reasons David and Hannah provided for circumcising their son concern navigating difference and belonging. Should their son have a penis that looks different from his father's, will he grow up with a "complex"? Will he be insecure about his penis? Will he wonder why he has extra skin

when his father does not? Hannah continues by telling a story that uncircumcised counsellors at her Jewish summer camp were bullied because of their intact penises. Hannah wants to protect her son from the potential bullying she assumes would occur in the Jewish circles she envisions her son being a part of. Instead of guiding her son through the taunts of his peers, Hannah figured it would be best to avoid the situation altogether, which for her meant to circumcise him. Circumcision offers protection from bullying and ridicule that would inevitably happen should they have chosen not to circumcise. Finally, should their son choose to get circumcised later in life, which, in their estimation, is required to be Jewish, they wanted to avoid the pain of an adult circumcision. They further explained that to be Jewish and uncircumcised is "weird." Thus, circumcising their son represents their way of insuring he belongs to the Jewish community, and erases what they assume to be a contradiction of being Jewish and uncircumcised. Jewish men who are intact complicate the Jewish male body. Because intact bodies are not read as Jewish, these bodies are strange and undecipherable, and occupy a "weird" space. Their son will not occupy a "weird" body; he will have an undeniably Jewish body, and in moments where his nakedness may be on display, his Jewishness and his masculinity will never come into question.

Even though David and Hannah chose to have Archie circumcised in a *bris* ceremony, they did away with some of the other elements of the ritual, such as giving Archie a Hebrew name. David explains why they omitted this part of the ritual: "It's such a stupid, stupid thing. What does that mean 'a Hebrew name'? Does he have a French name? Does he have a Chinese name? Does he have an Arabic name? No. His name is Archie in every other language on the planet, except in Hebrew where people think he needs a Hebrew name." For David and Hannah, giving their son a Hebrew name was not nearly as important as circumcision. But for many of the other families I connected with, choosing a Hebrew name was very meaningful. They were proud to explain its significance to their family and friends. Some felt the Hebrew name drew a direct link to family lineage and the Jewish community. But this was clearly not the case for David and Hannah. This captures the complexity of following tradition and norms; they are often observed in ways that make sense to the individual people or couple observing them. David and Hannah did not see the significance of giving their son a Hebrew name, so they didn't give him one and omitted that part from the ritual. While they chose to circumcise, they omitted other parts of the ritual that were not meaningful to them.

Rachel and Seth—"When I grew up, not being circumcised was something we made fun of people for."[25]

Rachel and her husband Seth gave birth to their first son in spring 2019. Rachel was raised in a Jewish household and she describes her family growing up as active Reform Jews. She was enrolled in religious education until tenth grade, was involved in her synagogue's youth group, and sometimes lit Shabbat candles with her family on Friday nights. Rachel describes herself as less observant now, but she continues to observe the High Holidays and Passover. Seth's father's family is Jewish, but he was not raised in a Jewish household and does not identify as Jewish. The topic of circumcision was broached within six-months of Rachel and Seth dating. They were not pregnant, or expecting to get pregnant anytime soon, but it came up within a broader conversation about religion and their respective visions for the lives and future.

[25] Rachel and Seth are pseudonyms. Rachel, interview with author, June 7, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Rachel.

Seth felt strongly that circumcision is a personal decision. He is not opposed to circumcision, but because it is irreversible, Seth believes this decision should be made by the individual. He does not feel comfortable making this decision for his son. Rachel explains her response to his views on circumcision: "It's really confusing for me because I never really considered not doing it until I was dating my now husband. It was just something that, Jewish or not Jewish, everybody I knew growing up was circumcised. It was very hard for me to come around on it. It was the only disagreement we really couldn't see eye to eye on."

Rachel and Seth's views on circumcision appeared to be irreconcilable. Someone would have to give in to the other person's position. There was no room for compromise here; they either chose to circumcise or not. Rachel explains how she decided to "come around" to her husband's position: "I think eventually I came around mostly because I felt like if I had gotten my way, it would have ruined my relationship. I actually really cared a lot more that my son was raised Jewish, that he had a *bar mitzvah*, and got to experience the same Jewish upbringing that I experienced, and my husband is on board 100% for that. He felt this [not circumcising] was the one thing he really wanted so that was in the end what we decided to do."

Rachel decided that she cared about other things, such as raising her son Jewish, more than him being circumcised. She also anticipated a strain being put on her relationship if they decided to circumcise, and deduced this potential was not worth it. But Rachel continues to have concerns about her son's circumcision status: "I never worried that this would not make my son Jewish. That never came up for me. I just think when I grew up, not being circumcised was something we said 'Ew, gross,' and made fun of people for. I still had that bias."

Rachel admits that aesthetics of circumcision are important to her. Her lived experience was one where uncircumcised boys were teased and made fun of, and she wants to protect her son from this potential teasing. And this "bias," as she calls it, was the main factor that made this decision difficult for Rachel. It was not the "Jewish piece," as highlighted with Tirza, or the feminist critique as we saw with Tara (both described in chapter one); Rachel was mostly concerned with their son being bullied because of his physical appearance.

While Rachel was grappling with her own inner dialogue and bias about the aesthetics of circumcision, her oldest friend invited her to her son's *bris*. She describes the experience of observing the circumcision up close: "It was awful. I'm sure I'd been to a *bris* before, but I've never watched an 8-day old boy have this done and it was really awful to watch. That helped me to realize I don't need to do this. Also, I'm feeling like fewer people are doing it now compared to when I was born, so I started to feel a little less concerned that he would be made fun in the locker room at school." Indeed, witnessing a circumcision—especially when the person is female—often prompts people to question circumcision more vociferously. After watching her friend's son's *bris*, Rachel came to the conclusion that she did not need to choose this for her son. Her experience of watching the procedure—she described it as "really awful"—shifted her perception. But she remained concerned with the aesthetics of her son's body. She explained how decreasing rates of circumcision offer reassurance in their decision to opt out. Because fewer people are choosing to circumcise, Rachel feels slightly less concerned that her son will be made fun of in the locker room. Rachel's perception of circumcision and her concern with her son's physical appearance are important factors in her internal thought and decision-making process.

Rachel and Seth ultimately decided not to circumcise and opted for a naming ceremony instead. Rachel describes how she feels about their final decision:

> On the eighth day of his life I was like, 'I couldn't even imagine doing that right now.' I think I appreciate that it's the same thing I would have done for a girl, which I like because I feel like there is this sort of sense that when it's a boy we do this whole thing for him, but if it's a girl we have this made up thing that we do and it doesn't matter when we do it. I also appreciate my body my choice. I guess my only issue is cosmetic. I don't care how it looks now, and maybe folks in his generation will feel differently about it, but when I see that it's not something that looks attractive to me. Not on him, not my son's, in a man my age. I don't know, maybe if I fell in love with somebody who wasn't circumcised I wouldn't feel that way.

After her son was born, Rachel explains how she could not imagine circumcising him. She also explains how she appreciated the gender equity of opting for a naming ceremony for their son. But once again, lurking in the background is her perception of cosmetics. Rachel admits she does not find uncircumcised penises to be attractive. She seems to be suggesting that since she does not find uncircumcised penises attractive, other people may not find her son's penis attractive either. But she offers hope for her son when she says, "Maybe folks in his generation will feel differently about it." Indeed, that seems to be what Rachel is hoping for her son.

Rabbi Shimmell—"I have to make sure my work looks good."[26]

Parents are not the only ones who are concerned about aesthetics and engage in this discourse; *mohelim* are also aware of the aesthetic component of their work. As ritual circumcisers, *mohelim* are responsible for ensuring the circumcisions they perform adhere to Jewish law. They need to ensure a specific procedure is followed and the correct instruments are used to render the *brit* legitimate. They are the legal experts and the ones responsible for ensuring the foreskin is removed in the prescribed manner. But they are not only legal experts. They are not only responsible for ensuring the ritual is performed correctly. They are also responsible for producing penises that "look good," and they understand this to be their responsibility.

Rabbi Shimmel has been a practicing *mohel* since 1991. He was trained over the course of three or four months, and after his training period, was technically allowed to start working as a *mohel*. But Rabbi Shimmel did not feel comfortable with this: "I wasn't good. I wasn't confident. I didn't have enough hands-on experience for me to be able to say, 'I'm confident doing it.'" As a result, Rabbi Shimmel sought out more training from another *mohel*. He spent an additional four months assisting the *mohel* with the three to six circumcisions he performed daily. Rabbi Shimmel observed the procedure many times, learned each step of the procedure, and slowly began to perform the procedure step by small step. Rabbi Shimmel explains the depth of this process:

[26] Rabbi Shimmel is a pseudonym. Rabbi Shimmel, interview with author, February 19, 2017. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Rabbi Shimmel.

> So when you're learning surgery, you watch it 100 times, and then the surgeon, and I've watched this myself. I've been there during practice, and I see the surgeons work with their students. I know that's how it's done everywhere. He'll allow him, her, to do the simplest part. Ok that's enough, we'll continue. Now this simplest part. So, he doesn't try the whole surgery. He'll do the simplest parts in 10 spots in the surgery consistently for a while. And then they'll do it in 20 spots. Easier spots. And slowly but surely, you close the gap and you can do one part of the surgery completely. Slowly. Never letting him do more than he's already done very well, plus one little thing. And when you always add just one tiny step, it's not a problem. And the chances of any danger are minimal because with one little thing there's not much harm you can do. If you mess up the whole thing you can, but never do you have the chance to mess up the whole thing. And slowly but surely the students do more and more and more parts of the surgery until finally the hardest part is what they'll do last.

Learning to circumcise involves a step-by-step learning process that is slow and gradual. Once the student performs one small part of the procedure many times and does it well, they are given a tiny more to do. When they master that small addition, a little more is added, until they've mastered the whole procedure. Learning to circumcise under the supervision of a responsible teacher is a step-by-step process and takes time to master. Students slowly inch towards being able to perform the procedure on their own.

Rabbi Shimmel explained that a typical circumcision procedure is divided into four parts: the preparation (separating the foreskin from the glands), applying the clamp or guard, removing the foreskin, and bandaging. In Jewish tradition, a guard is more commonly used than a clamp, which is what is used in circumcisions performed in a hospital setting. This is because the procedure must entail the removal of live skin tissue. If the skin has been cut off from its blood source, as is the case when a clamp is used, the skin is considered dead and the circumcision has not been performed in adherence to Jewish law. Traditional *mohelim* will use a guard instead of a clamp because a guard does not cut the skin off from its blood source. Rabbi Shimmel explains the other benefits of using a guard instead of a clamp: "When we don't use the clamp, it ends up being the best from both the pain point of view and from the cosmetic point of view." According to Rabbi Shimmel, using a guard results in "less pain," "no scar tissue," and "cosmetically it looks nicer." Although *mohelim* are specialists in performing circumcisions in accordance with Jewish law, their role in producing a cosmetically appealing penis is an important part of their role and skill set.

Mohelim are expected to perform circumcisions in accordance with Jewish law, meaning that they must follow a specific procedure, use certain instruments, and remove a specified amount of skin.[27] "Turtle-necking," which Rabbi Shimmel claims is a common outcome of medical circumcisions, refers to the skin that remains around the head of the penis after the foreskin is removed. This ring of skin bears resemblance to a turtleneck, hence the moniker "turtle-necking." Leaving this ring of skin around the penis would render a Jewish circumcision invalid, and extra precision is required to remove this unwanted skin. Rabbi Shimmel explains:

[27] For more on the surgical requirements of a valid Jewish circumcision, see Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism*, 24-26

> If I took off too little, I'd be left with the same problem that they have. A little turtleneck around, because the foreskin will come up, it'll push the inner membrane up, and I'll have the same problem. So we take off a little bit more than we should. A little bit. One millimeter. The smallest little bit. And that's part of the skill. Just take the smallest little bit more than I should. I mean to say more than would technically be necessary.

Not only does this technique produce a kosher circumcision, but it is also safe to say that this leftover skin is not the aesthetic ideal. The ideal circumcised penis is symmetrical, smooth, and with little to no scar tissue or extra skin. Despite his extensive experience, Rabbi Shimmel explains that he is sometimes called back by parents to "touch up" his work:

> I have had times where it was asymmetrical. I left a little too much on the side here, and then I tell the parents, 'Don't worry about it. If it doesn't look exactly good, wait until all the swelling goes down, until everything is healed, as long as the circumcision is okay.' In other words, from a traditional point of view it's okay. But *cosmetically it's not*. I'll freeze it with Emla…I'll clamp it, cut it with scissors, no blood, no pain. I'll do it at their convenience, no cost of course because I have to make sure my work looks good.[28]

The best circumcisions are ones that are performed in adherence with Jewish law *and* produce attractive penises. Extra skin, asymmetry, and scar tissue are not ideal. And Rabbi Shimmel prides himself on his experience and endeavors to earn a good reputation for his work. Rabbi Shimmel explains:

> And my mission, if you want to call it, is in my mind, ever since I started this, is that I want that people should come to Rabbi Shimmel to do circumcisions because he's better than the doctors. Not because he's more religious or he's doing it the Jewish way. I want everyone to know that the way we do it, is better. Aside from the fact that we give them nicer care, better care, maybe a nicer fellow I hope, but I want them to know that our way is really technically also, the best way.

Rabbi Shimmel makes it clear that he wants to be known as better than doctors— not because he performs circumcisions the correct "Jewish way," but because he also provides better care and his technique is superior. Although he doesn't say it explicitly here, Rabbi Shimmel previously explained that his technique produces less scar tissue and looks better aesthetically than the technique used by doctors. When Rabbi Shimmel says he wants to be known as better than doctors, we can safely deduce that he wants to be known for producing better looking penises than circumcisions performed in a hospital setting.

CIRCUMCISION IN POP CULTURE

Discourse about hygiene and the aesthetics of circumcision are also perpetuated through pop culture. Most often utilized for comedic purposes in television sitcoms, the "defining motif" of

[28] Emphasis added.

depictions of uncircumcised penises, according to Leonard Glick, is that of "unease."[29] But I argue these depictions communicate more than "unease." Penises with foreskin are viewed as unattractive, unhygienic, and abnormal. These television shows actively demonize the foreskin and perpetuate a clear idea about what a healthy penis ought to look like. The ideal penis is very clearly a circumcised penis.

In *Seinfeld*'s "The *Bris*" episode, friends of Jerry and Elaine ask them for help with their son's upcoming *bris*. They ask Jerry to be the one holding the baby during the ritual, and they asked Elaine to hire the *mohel* to perform the ritual (it is unusual for parents to ask a friend to find a *mohel* for them; parents usually do this themselves). Elaine and Jerry are complaining about their respective responsibilities, which prompts them to have an honest conversation about circumcision:

> Elaine: Hey Jerry, you ever seen one?
> Jerry: You mean that wasn't…
> Elaine: Yeah.
> Jerry: No, you?
> Elaine: Yeah.
> Jerry: What'd you think?
> Elaine: [Shakes her head] It had no face, no personality. It was like a Martian. But hey, you know that's me.[30]

Elaine makes her disdain for intact penises known. She claims it looked like a "Martian" and had "no face" or "personality". The conversation continues with George and Kramer joining in. Throughout the episode, Kramer provides the counterpoint, calling *brit milah* a "barbaric ritual" and claims foreskin "makes sex more pleasurable." When George asks, "Isn't it a question of hygiene?" Kramer responds by saying "It's a myth." It is certainly intentional that Kramer, "known as a somewhat unstable character given to erratic behavior," acts as the counterpoint throughout the episode.[31] Using Kramer as the means through which to present the arguments against circumcision allows the audience to dismiss and ignore this perspective. The counterarguments are present, but the fact that Kramer is the voice against circumcision delegitimizes this point of view. While not as overtly disgusted with foreskin as Elaine, George also suggests that intact penises are bizarre and atypical, something that one needs to "get used to":

> Jerry: Hey George, you ever seen one?
> George: Yeah, my roommate in college.
> Jerry: Yeah? What'd you think?
> George: [Pauses] I got used to it.[32]

Seinfeld clearly sends the message that circumcised penises are more hygienic and attractive, with attractiveness being the central topic of conversation between Elaine, George, and Jerry. The

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[29] Leonard Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 242.
[30] *Seinfeld,* "The *Bris*," season 5, episode 5, 5:10-5:40.
[31] Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America,* 265.
[32] *Seinfeld,* "The *Bris*," 8:10-8:20.

demonization of the foreskin is also present in *Sex and the City.* In the episode entitled "Old Dogs, New Dicks," Charlotte is dating a man named Mike, who Charlotte learns is uncircumcised just as they are about to have sex for the first time. As Charlotte unzips Mike's pants, the narrator explains: "But just when Charlotte had become comfortable with the penis, she got a very unexpected surprise."

> Charlotte: Oh! You're…it's…
> Mike: Uncircumcised. Is that okay?
> Charlotte: No! Sure…of course it is.

As Charlotte removes her hand from Mike's penis, the narrator interjects by explaining: "It was not okay. The only uncut version of anything Charlotte had ever seen was the original *Gone With the Wind*."[33] The scene ends here, and the audience is left assuming that Charlotte and Mike did not have sex. The following scene captures the conversation Charlotte has with her girlfriends about her experience:

> Charlotte: There was so much skin, it was like a Shar Pei!
> Carrie: You've never seen an uncircumcised one?
> Charlotte: I'm from Connecticut.
> Miranda: Reminder, you're dating the guy, not the penis.
> Charlotte: Aesthetics are important to me.
> Samantha: It's not what it looks like it's what they can do with it.
> Charlotte: Well, I don't need one that can make its' own carrying case!
> Samantha: Personally, I love an uncircumcised dick. It's like a tootsie pop. Hard on the outside, with a delicious surprise inside.
> Miranda: I don't like surprises. I like it all out there where I can see it.
> Charlotte: Same here. I'm sorry it is not normal.
> Carrie: Well, actually it is. Something like 85% of men aren't circumcised.
> Charlotte: Great. Now they're taking over the world!
> Carrie: Honey, it's a penis not Godzilla.
> Miranda: Hey! If 85% aren't circumcised, that means I've only slept with 15% of the population tops!
> Carrie: Wow, you're practically a virgin.
> Charlotte: You know, he's a nice WASP-y guy—what when wrong?
> Carrie: Well maybe his parents were hippies and just didn't believe in it.
> Miranda: I am so circumcising my kids.
> Carrie: I think you can pay people to do that now.
> Miranda: I don't ever want to know that there's a woman out there calling my son a Shar Pei.
> Samantha: All I'm saying is that uncut men are the best. They try harder. I should know. I slept with five of them.
> Charlotte: Out of how many?
> Carrie: Infinity.[34]

[33] *Sex and the City,* "Old Dogs, New Dicks" season 2, episode 9, 4:01-4:39.
[34] Ibid., 4:39-5:54.

In this scene, hygiene is not mentioned directly, and aesthetics and attractiveness are the focus of the conversation. For Charlotte, the "aesthetics" of circumcision are important to her. She claims that "there was so much skin, it was like a Shar Pei." A Shar Pei is a type of dog with deep wrinkles and overlapping skin. She also says she does not want to interact with a penis that can "make its own carrying case." Miranda agrees with Charlotte, and she claims she "likes it all out there where I can see it." Carrie does not offer her opinion of circumcision but puts this North American trend into a global perspective. By mentioning that most men are not circumcised, Carries is highlighting that circumcision is not the norm on a global scale. Adding this perspective highlights that high circumcision rates in the United States is an anomaly. Finally, Samantha offers the counterpoint. Similar to Kramer, Samantha is the most over-the-top of the main characters in *Sex and the City*. Her outrageousness is on full display when she claims, "I love an uncircumcised dick. It's like a tootsie pop. Hard on the outside, with a delicious surprise inside." Like Kramer, Samantha's viewpoint on circumcision provides the lone counterargument, but the dominant voices are the ones of Charlotte and Miranda, who loudly express a clear preference for circumcised penises.[35]

Mike and Charlotte continue dating throughout the episode, but Charlotte makes excuses to avoid having sex with him. Mike eventually explains to Charlotte: "What happened the other night, you're not the first woman to react like that. I've gotten that most of my life." Consequently, Mike has "decided to do something about it. I've been uncomfortable for too long. So…I'm getting circumcised."[36] Mike undergoes the procedure and after his penis is healed, he and Charlotte engage in their second attempt to have sex. Upon seeing Mike's new and improved penis, Charlotte gasps and says, "It's perfect." The narrator adds: "It was like her birthday and Christmas rolled into one." After Mike and Charlotte have sex, Mike explains to Charlotte that he does not want to be in a serious relationship with her: "I just feel like I can't be tied down right now. There's a whole new me happening and I feel like I should get out there and share it." Charlotte, dumbfounded, asks, "You want to share your penis?" Mike responds: "Well…yeah. I mean I feel like I owe it to myself to take the doggy out for a walk around the block." The narrator explains: "Charlotte never saw Mike again. She realized you could take the Shar Pei out of the penis, but you could never take the dog out of the man."[37] Because Charlotte and Mike only have sex after Mike is circumcised, the message here is that circumcision leads to a more positive and satisfying sex life. Circumcision is also associated with higher self-esteem. Mike was uncomfortable and ridiculed as an intact man. And as a circumcised man, he wants to "take the doggy out for walk around the block." Mike wants to experience sex as a circumcised man and does not want to be tied down in an exclusive relationship with Charlotte. Mike's circumcision has set him free.

Broad City offers a more nuanced perspective than *Seinfeld* and *Sex and the City,* both of which communicate the idea that uncircumcised penises are not normal, aesthetically unpleasant, and in *Sex and the City,* a deterrent to positive sexual relationships. In contrast, *Broad City* describes an

[35] For a more detailed account of the preference and impact of circumcision on a man's sexual partners, see: Jennifer A. Bossio, Caroline F. Pukall, and Katie Bartley, "You either have it or you don't: The impact of male circumcision status on sexual partners," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* vol. 4, no. 2 (2015): 104-119.

[36] *Sex and the City,* "Old Dogs, 8:57-10:10.

[37] Ibid., 20:35-22:10. Adding an interesting layer to her disgust with foreskin, Charlotte eventually converts to Judaism and marries a Jewish man later in the series.

uncircumcised penis as "gorgeous." The two main characters, Ilana and Abbi, are at a party with their gay friend Jaimé when they strike up a conversation about his penis:

> Jaimé: You know how I have a gorgeous uncircumcised penis?
> Abbi: Well, I do now.
> Ilana: How have I not told you about his gorgeous uncircumcised penis? You're not listening.
> Jaimé: But I love it. I love it because it has so much more savor, sensitivity, than normal cut penises do.
> Abbi: Oh really?
> Ilana: Oh yes. Circumcision exposes the penile head, decreasing sensitivity over time. The tip becomes calloused, leaving cut penises with like 5% of the pleasure experienced by intact men. Pullback gang all damn day.
> Abbi: How do you know so much about this?
> Ilana: Honestly Ab, if you don't read a book soon, you're gonna forget how.
> Jaimé: The problem is, because of my particular pH balance, I am prone…
> Ilana: It's ok.
> Jaimé: I am prone to having the yeast infections.
> Ilana: He has one now.
> Jaimé: That's why I'm wearing this skirt. But the thing is, I know I look good, but I don't *feel* sexy. So I've been thinking it's time for me to cut my pepito.
> Abbi: Whoa, that's heavy. Should we drink?
> Ilana and Jaimé: YAS![38]

Jaimé and Ilana both describe his uncircumcised penis as gorgeous. Jaimé explains that he loves his penis, and he believes uncut penises are more sensitive and have more "savor" than "normal cut" penises. Despite Jaimé's "love" for his penis, his use of language suggests that circumcised penises are the norm ("I love it because it has so much more savor, sensitivity, than normal cut penises do"). Jaimé subsequently explains how he is prone to yeast infections, establishing a connection between intact penises and infection, and because of this he has decided to "cut my pepito." But he explains there is an additional reason for wanting to be circumcised: "But the thing is, I know I look good, but I don't *feel* sexy." Despite Jaimé's claim that he "loves" his "gorgeous" penis, he does not "feel sexy." His body image issues are a result of his intact penis. The implication here is that if he were circumcised, he would indeed feel sexy. Similar to Mike in *Sex and the City,* Jaimé's intact penis is a source of anxiety about his body, and instead of managing this anxiety and shifting his perception about his body, he decided the best course of action is to change his body through circumcision.

The discourse in these episodes of *Seinfeld*, *Sex and the City*, and *Broad City*, series with Jewish characters and connections to Jewishness, depict intact penises as unhygienic, abnormal, bizarre, ugly, and the cause of men's poor body image.[39] Uncircumcised penises are a source of chronic medical issues, embarrassment, and require surgical intervention to correct. In *Sex and the City* and S*einfeld,* women are overwhelmingly depicted as preferring circumcised penises. The discourse in these television sitcoms sends a strong message about the aesthetics of circumcision

[38] *Broad City,* "Just the Tips," season 4, episode 3, 8:50-10:00
[39] These three episodes originally aired in 1993, 1997, and 2017 respectively.

and the abnormality of intact penises. Indeed, a healthy, desirable, and sexy body is a circumcised body.

SUBVERTING THE CIRCUMCISION IDEAL

For some men who were circumcised as infants, circumcision does not represent the ideal body that has been accepted by some Jews and within North American culture more broadly; instead, circumcision represents brokenness and mutilation. When they look at their penises, they see a deformity. They see scars. They see the pain, trauma, and harm they believe was inflicted upon them. The process for men to view their circumcised penises in this way, as broken and mutilated, is usually an arduous one. Most men do not want to admit that there is a "problem" with the fundamental symbol of their masculinity. Admitting there is something wrong with one's penis inadvertently suggests that this "problem" extends to one's masculinity. A broken penis represents broken masculinity. But some men have dedicated themselves to mending their broken penises, subverting the aesthetic ideal forced upon their bodies, and piecing their masculinity back together.

NORMAN COHEN—"YOU TOOK SOMETHING FROM ME, AND I'M NOW TAKING IT BACK FROM YOU."[40]

Norman Cohen was born in 1962 in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up in a typical Conservative Jewish household; they had separate sets of dishes to maintain the laws of *kashrut*, observed the Sabbath, went to Jewish preschool and kindergarten, and went to Hebrew school starting when he enrolled in public school in first grade. As the son of a Conservative rabbi, Cohen felt the pressure to be a pious Jew and uphold the image of a rabbi's son. But he began to disconnect from Judaism during his teenage years. As he exposed himself to philosophies and worldviews that diverged from Judaism, he found it increasingly difficult to identify as a Jew. This culminated in Cohen formally severing ties with Judaism and identifying as an atheist late in his teenage years.

Although Cohen questioned Judaism, one tradition he did not question was circumcision. As is the case for many, circumcision is just not something that people give much thought to without being prompted. Most people only start to think critically about circumcision after being nudged to do so. The most common "prompt" is when a couple starts to think about having kids or they get pregnant. For Cohen, he was first invited to look more into circumcision when he and his then-wife were thinking of having children. Cohen was prompted yet again when he happened to be walking by an anti-circumcision demonstration and was handed a flyer about circumcision. For some reason the flyer caught his attention and provoked him to seriously question circumcision. This was the seed that started Cohen's journey to becoming an intactivist. Prior to these two events, Cohen never questioned circumcision. It was something he never thought much about.

After learning more about circumcision, it is common for some circumcised men to go through a period where they process what happened to them. This is especially the case for men who experienced, or continue to experience, the negative side effects of circumcision. Once they learn that being circumcised could explain some of the problems they experience with their penis, some

[40] Norman Cohen, interview with author, May 9, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Cohen. Cohen agreed to be named in this research and is not a pseudonym.

men may go through a period of denial while they process this information. Cohen explains how he processed his own circumcision after learning more about it:

> I was angry, there's no doubt about it. A lot of men go through this. I went through a period of being angry. This is messed up. This is very disturbing, because then I could begin to connect things in my personal life, my personal experience of sex, with what the pamphlets were telling me. It just opened my eyes.

As he read more about the possible side effects of circumcision, Cohen started to connect the dots with his own personal experiences. He explained that the first erections he experienced as a boy were painful, and these painful erections continued into his teenage years. His first experiences with arousal are associated with pain (although he did explain that this pain subsided over time. He deduces this to the natural stretching of the skin of his penis). He also claims to have a decreased sensitivity and has what he calls "ugly scarring" on his penis. As Cohen started to research and learn more about circumcision in his late twenties, he had a difficult time reconciling what he was learning with his own perception of his penis. Cohen explains:

> This is not just like an ear piercing. This was damage done to a very cherished organ of my body that as a 27-year-old, I really did not want to hear about. I really didn't want to hear any bad news about my penis. I did connect that with some of the scarring. I have a skin tag and I have some scarring that I would say would be excessive and I realized this is not a good thing. This wasn't done for me. This did not benefit me.

Even though he could see parallels between what he was learning about circumcision and his own personal lived experience, it was nonetheless difficult to learn about the potential damage inflicted to his penis.[41] Cohen admits he did not want to hear "bad news" about his penis. Knowing that circumcision may have negatively affected the quintessential symbol of masculinity on his body was, at times, too difficult to confront. Cohen explains some of the feelings he experienced while learning more about circumcision:

> I did go through a period of feeling angry about having been circumcised, but that didn't last very long. Just a few years. It was a relatively short period of time where I felt like some kind of veteran of a war and I'd been injured in battle and lost something in battle. I'd look at the scar and all that, studied it, went through that period. But fortunately I didn't stay in that place.

Even though his emotions passed and he did not remain in a state of anger, Cohen decided to restore his foreskin. Foreskin restoration refers to the process "restoring" the penis to its natural state, as in a penis with foreskin. Men who restore their foreskins generally do not resort to surgery; instead, they choose a method of stretching the skin of the penis to form a new foreskin. Tension is applied to the penis, usually via a "DIY" contraption, and over time, enough new skin is created

[41] For a first-hand account of the negative side effects of circumcision, see: Gary Shteyngart, "A Botched Circumcision and its Aftermath," *New Yorker,* October 4, 2021: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/11/a-botched-circumcision-and-its-aftermath.

and it appears as though the penis has foreskin.[42] For Cohen, it took about six years for his penis to be restored to a state he was satisfied with. He felt he "owed it to himself" to try restoring, even though he was quite skeptical it would work. Cohen explained that restoration provided an avenue to defy the tradition that took something away from him. He explains: "It's kind of a fuck you to my *mohel*. You took something from me, and I'm now taking it back from you." For Cohen, restoration was a way to rebuke and reject Judaism; Jewishness was inscribed into his body, and restoration erased this physical identifier of his male Jewish identity.[43]

Inasmuch as circumcision is a transformative ritual, so is foreskin restoration. Restoration transforms what is believed to be a mutilated penis into an intact one. Restoration removes the physical and psychological scars left by circumcision. Restoration mends the broken penis, and by extension, the damaged masculinity. Restoration transforms a mutilated penis back to its natural and pure state. Cohen explains the outcome of his restoration: "Is it as sensitive? No. Is it as good? No. Does it look like foreskin? Yes. It functions as what we would expect. It covers the head of the penis and it's useful in sexual activity." The penis and masculinity are mended, as much as they can be, through the process of restoration.

INTACTIVISM AND THE IDEAL MALE BODY

As we saw in chapter three, the intactivist movement uses stereotypes about motherhood to appeal to women and mothers and convince them not to circumcise their sons. Appeals to masculinity are used to invite people to question this practice as well. Intactivists are actively subverting the aesthetic appeal of circumcision and in an attempt to challenge the idea that a penis with foreskin is inherently unattractive. As we will see through (non-Jewish) intactivist protest materials, intact bodies are "normal," "natural," "perfect," and the way the body ought to be. Intact bodies are indeed normal and the most attractive type of body.

One of the most prominent tropes in intactivist literature is the idea that foreskin is normal and natural. Most boys are born with foreskin and as such, penises with foreskin are normal, natural, and the way the body *ought* to be. Because this is the natural state of the body, removing the foreskin is not only unnecessary, but it also renders the body broken. Natural bodies are perfect bodies, and as a result, circumcision (and presumably other supposedly unnecessary medical interventions) damages the body. Babies are born "perfect," the way "nature" intended, and unnecessary medical interventions pollute and corrupt the body. Although not shown here, "Boys are not born broken" is etched on several protest items I acquired.[44] Intact bodies are perfect, and circumcision damages a perfect and natural body.

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[42] There are various methods and devices one could make or buy to restore the foreskin. For some examples, see "Restoration Methods," *National Organization for the Restoration of Men*: http://www.norm.org/devices.html, last accessed January 25, 2022.

[43] Although some Jewish men harbor resentment over Jewish tradition and Judaism as a religion, and even reject it, because what was done to them via their circumcision, not all Jewish men who restore feel this way. Some Jewish men who restore still identify as Jews and are active in the Jewish community. But in my research I found it to be more common for Jewish men who believe they were harmed by their circumcision to feel anger and resentment towards rabbis, *mohelim*, and Judaism as a whole.

[44] Some of these items include a pen, reusable water bottle, and lanyard.

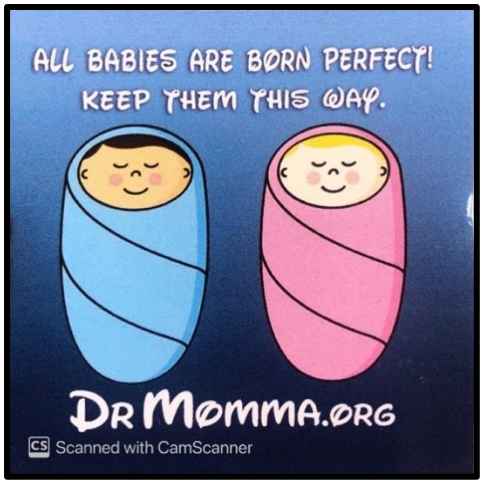

Image 21: "All Babies are Born Perfect" Sticker. Acquired at Genital Integrity Awareness Week Protest in Washington, D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. Sticker from my personal collection.

This discourse, that the body is perfect and the way nature intended, is also used in protest materials directed specifically to Christians (see images 22 and 23). God creates the body, and the body as it is born is a Godly body. God arranges and assembles the body the way God intended, implying that unnecessary human intervention represents an act of subversion against God's creation. Not only are intact bodies perfect, normal, and natural, they represent a Godly body. God creates bodies with foreskin, and these perfect, Godly bodies should not be tampered with.[45]

Image 22: First Corinthians 12:18 sticker. Image 23: "If you believe what God creates is natural and normal" sticker. Acquired at Genital Integrity Awareness Week protest in Washington D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. Stickers from personal collection.

[45] It is interesting to note that there is more protest literature directed towards Christians than Jews. There are several reasons for this. Intactivist groups are aware that some Jews may accuse them of anti-Semitism should they direct their protests to Jews. To avoid this, non-Jewish intactivists tend to avoid directing their message to Jews. Some intactivists have rightfully been accused of anti-Semitism, and to avoid such accusations, intactivists tend to avoid speaking directly to Jews. It is also important to note that intactivists are more concerned with challenging routine infant circumcision (i.e. circumcisions performed by doctors in a hospital setting) than the Jewish ritual of circumcision.

Intact bodies are normal and natural, but they are also the aesthetic ideal. Inactivist literature attempts to challenge the idea that circumcised penises are more attractive. To do this, they tend to picture muscular, chiseled bodies in their protest materials. Men are often pictured without shirts, putting their hyper muscular bodies on full display. Not only are intact penises the aesthetic ideal, but the bodies attached to them are as well. The attractiveness of a natural, intact penis transcends the penis and transforms the entire body into a hyper-masculine and hyper-muscular body. Babies with foreskin are perfect and normal, and intact babies develop into attractive men. Circumcised penises are also depicted as aesthetically unpleasant (image 24). "Genitals should not have unnecessary scars," and below this title is a banner displaying pictures of seemingly "unsightly" circumcision scars. In the background is a hyper-muscular male body. Intact men, according to this messaging, do not have these unattractive and unsightly scars. Not only is the penis more attractive, the entire intact body is as well.

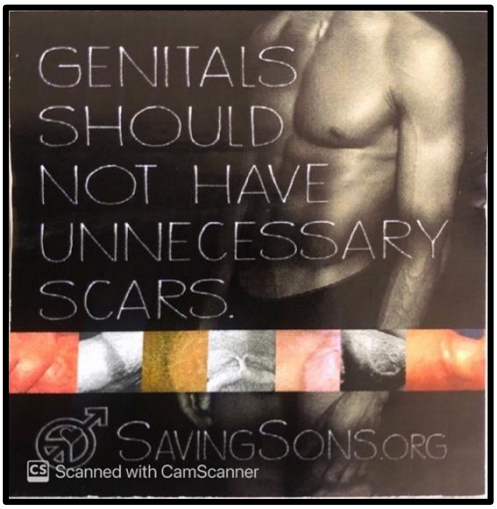

Image 24: "Genitals should not have unnecessary scars" sticker. Acquired at Genital Integrity Awareness Week protest in Washington D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. From my personal collection.

Natural bodies are perfect bodies, and natural bodies mature into attractive bodies. In addition to representing the aesthetic ideal, intact men provide their partners with a more satisfying sexual experience. Circumcised bodies are lacking, whereas "an intact partner has it all there where it counts" (image 25). Once again, a chiseled muscular body, with a sheet barely covering the model's genitals, is pictured. An intact partner is indeed the answer to "sublime sensuality," which inadvertently suggests that circumcised men cannot offer such sensuality. Circumcised men are not only lacking foreskin, but they also lack the ability to have satisfying sex with their partner.

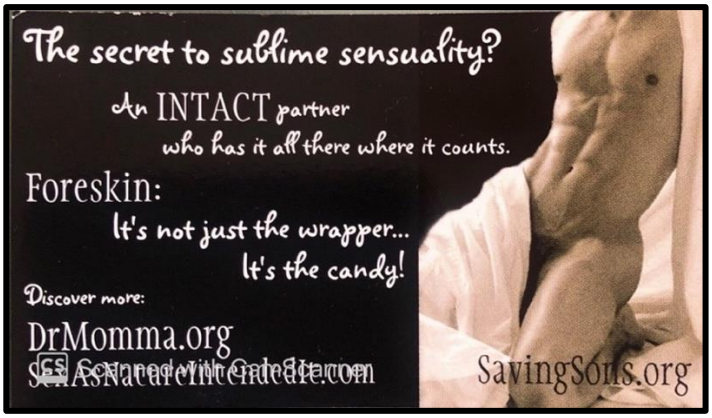

Image 25: "The secret to sublime sensuality?" sticker. Acquired at Genital Integrity Awareness Week protest in Washington D.C., March 28-April 3, 2019. From my personal collection.

Finally, intactivist protest materials make reference to supposedly intact (and of course, conventionally attractive) male celebrities.[46] These men are usually pictured topless, and in some cases, in little boxer briefs, putting their muscular bodies on full display. Celebrities such as Mario Lopez, Justin Bieber, Colin Farrell, Chris Hemsworth, Liam Hemsworth, Will Smith, Hugh Jackman, John Mayer, Idris Elba, and Harry Styles are featured on these posters. By claiming that these hyper masculine and attractive men have foreskin, they are drawing a clear connection between masculinity, attractiveness, and being intact. Just as "real women protect babies" (as we saw in chapter three), the message here is that real men have foreskin. An intact body is the ideal body. Circumcised bodies are unnatural, broken, and scarred. Men who are intact are better sexual partners than circumcised men. Intact men have bodies as "nature" intended.

Image 26: "Intact Mario Lopez." Retrieved from www.savingoursons.org

Image 27: "Intact Justin Bieber. Retrieved from www.savingoursongs.org

[46] It is unclear how *Saving Our Sons* knows about the circumcision status of the celebrities featured on their posters. They do not disclose how they acquired this information, or whether they were granted permission to feature these celebrities on their posters.

CONCLUSION

Circumcision is not simply a religious ritual; it represents a means of transforming a dirty, unattractive, unintelligible body into a clean, attractive, and identifiably Jewish body. The ideal male body is a circumcised body. Discourse about hygiene, attractiveness, and intelligibility are utilized and perpetuated by some Jewish parents, rabbis, and *mohelim*, underscoring their centrality in Jewish understandings of circumcision. Circumcision is imbedded with meaning that transcend the original significance of the ritual. It is not *just* a covenantal ritual; it also serves as a means of transforming the body into an *ideal* male body. I examined how this discourse is infused in Jewish understandings and pop cultural depictions of circumcision. By examining some examples from pop culture, I demonstrate how these perceptions of circumcision are not unique to Jews and are absorbed into North American culture more broadly. Finally, I examine how some Jewish men and the intactivist movement are subverting the dominant discourse about circumcision and argue that a "natural" body is an ideal body.

CONCLUSION

The decision to circumcise or not to circumcise is about more than one ritual decision. It is about how families navigate and negotiate religion. It is about how religious communities respond to change. It is about how religious people find ways of connecting with their religion in innovative and creative ways. It is about how religious people navigate their conflicting identities. And finally, it is about the wider cultural values and trends that impact religious ritual. The stories shared in this dissertation capture the broader significance of this ritual moment and allow us to interrogate the wider implications of Jews questioning and opting out of circumcision. It is only through the stories of families that we can analyze the depth of this ritual moment. Stories are the backbone of this research, and it is only appropriate to conclude this dissertation by sharing one final story of a non-circumcision family.

Avra was born, raised, and currently lives in Washington D.C. Avra's parents are Jewish, and she describes her family as an observant Reform family. They were members of a synagogue and they attended services on the holidays. Avra was an active member in the synagogue's youth group, and she attended Friday night services every month as part of the youth group's program. Avra describes herself as less observant now than she was when she was younger; she is currently not a member of a synagogue (although she is trying to find one that is the "right fit"), but she celebrates the holidays. Raising her children in a Jewish household is important to her. Avra's husband, Dev, is of South Asian descent. He was born in the United States, but his parents were born in India. While Dev was raised with some level of Hindu observance growing up, he is not currently a practicing Hindu.

Avra and Dev gave birth to their first child in 2018. They did not know the sex of the baby ahead of time and made sure to discuss circumcision and finalize their decision well in advance of the arrival of their baby. Avra explains their decision-making process:

> My husband is not circumcised, and when we opened up the conversation, I really posed it to him as a question. I would have likely circumcised my son just because it is what I am used to and because it is part of my culture. But I felt really strongly that this was a decision that we should make together. Weighing the cultural aspects in it as well, ultimately the reasons my partner had for not doing it outweighed any sense of why we should.[1]

Avra admits that without being prompted to think critically about circumcision, she would have likely chosen to circumcise her son. Being in a partnership with someone who is not circumcised and for whom circumcision is not a part of their culture invited Avra to research circumcision. This trajectory is similar to that of Laura and Michael, whose story we examined in chapter one. Michael is not Jewish and is not circumcised, and he prompted Laura to research circumcision in more depth. Laura's research made it clear to her that the medical benefits of circumcision do not outweigh the risks. Avra and Laura are also the ones who made the final decision. Avra

[1] Avra and Dev are pseudonyms. Avra, interview with author, June 3, 2019. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Avra.

experienced a similar trajectory in her opinion on circumcision, and she explains why she ultimately agreed with her husband:

> Primarily those reasons were, one, it is a form of what we consider genital mutilation. It is not a necessary surgical procedure so why subject someone to that. Because my husband isn't circumcised it would have been a very different experience from what he had. And ultimately the idea from Judaism that this is a covenant with God is not really an answer for why you would have someone do that. We decided if our son is interested in becoming circumcised, ultimately he can make that choice on his own. That would be a decision we would support but didn't want to make it for him.

Avra lists four reasons why she decided not to circumcise her son. First, she considers circumcision genital mutilation. Second, circumcision is not medically necessary. Third, circumcision represents a stark cultural diversion from the culture and experience of her husband. Finally, the theological significance of circumcision was not enough to support doing it. Like most couples, Avra and Dev did research the medical benefits and risks of circumcision. They also spoke with their pediatrician and other clinicians about it. Through their research they found there was not enough substantial evidence to support circumcising their son. They also read some books and articles about progressive ways to raise a Jewish family. Avra admits she felt "comfort in the fact that there is more literature about having a space for non-circumcised men in Judaism." Avra was also comforted by the fact that circumcision rates are declining more broadly. She explains: "It was important to know that our kid was not going to be one out of one thousand who isn't. We didn't need him to feel as an "other" in any way, and it's very clear that's not the case." The sense that her child would not be made to be an "other" because of his circumcision status was a source of comfort for Avra, just as it was for Rachel (see chapter four).

I asked Avra if this was a difficult decision for her to make because of its significance in Judaism:

> Less so perhaps than I would anticipate. I think there are many things I feel strongly about in relation to my Judaism that I would really push harder for if Dev pushed against, but this one I truly believed I had nothing to say. I had no good reason to share for why we should do this. We had an interesting conversation with my mom where this played out and my mom was like, 'Oh my gosh, what do you mean you're not going to do this?' Because ultimately saying something is a covenant with God when none of us really believes in God at this table, is not a legitimate reason to do something. That's just firmly what I believe. I equate this to keeping kosher. We don't keep kosher. The reasons that I see within Judaism and the way it is presented within Judaism for keeping kosher are nonsensical to me, so we don't do it. Saying something's a covenant with God is a very strong thing, it's very powerful, it's a great idea, but it's not a reason to make a decision for another human being without them being able to make that decision themselves.

Avra compares circumcision to keeping kosher. Following the laws of *kashrut* are nonsensical to her, so she simply does not follow them. Circumcision is also nonsensical because, according to Avra, it is not medically necessary, and permanently altering someone's body to uphold the

covenant is not a sufficient reason to circumcise. In lieu of a bris, Avra and Dev had a naming ceremony for their son. It was officiated by the cantor of the synagogue to which Avra belonged when she was growing up. They also incorporated a small Hindu ritual into the ceremony, which was organized by Dev's parents. The ceremony took place at Avra's home with about 20 people in attendance. A unique circumstance of Avra and Dev's situation is that most of their family and friends did not inquire about whether their son was circumcised. Avra attributes this to people assuming their son was circumcised in the hospital or were perhaps too uncomfortable to ask. Even her father's side of the family, who are Orthodox, did not ask about their son's circumcision status. This lack of inquiry made the interactions with their Jewish friends and family much easier for Avra and Dev; no one, besides Avra's mom, who made a small comment, questioned or challenged their decision. Avra and Dev were able to make their decision without interference or unsolicited opinions from family or friends. Avra continues to feel comfortable with their decision and claims she does not have concerns about her son being uncircumcised:

> I don't have any concerns about it. I certainly don't have any concerns with how he'll be received in the Jewish community. I think it's going to be a really interesting part of his Jewish identity and something for him to explore and talk about. He will be raised Jewish. We are intending for him to explore his Judaism as much as he wants to, but we'll be there for the cultural and religious elements of our family life. It'll be interesting to see how it comes up. My husband is southeast Asian and as of right now my son presents as a typical Jewish person would. Not to be really stereotypical, but he is as light skinned, if not lighter skinned than I am. He's got dark curly hair. He won't be going into synagogue or Sunday school presenting as an 'other,' which we thought he might and that would be a part of his identity. In some ways it'll be interesting that this is an element that will probably come up as part of his Jewish identity and what that means. I'm interested and excited to explore with him what that means to him and see where it goes. In that sense I don't think this is the end of the conversation about circumcision in our family. I imagine that there will be questions about it, and I think that's a really exciting prospect.

Instead of feeling concerned about how her son's circumcision status will affect his Jewish identity, Avra anticipates that it will be an "interesting part" of his identity. Indeed, Avra made it clear that she thinks circumcision status has little to do with one's Jewish identity: "In our eyes he's no less Jewish and doing something to your body does not make a person more or less Jewish." But Avra does anticipate future inquiries and questions from her son about his circumcision status and is "excited to explore" this with him. Avra seems to be suggesting that this is something he'll have to work through and potentially reconcile, but she is not daunted by this. Rather, she is excited to explore this with her son.

An important layer in Avra's decision-making process is her marriage to man who comes from a culture outside Judaism. Indeed, Dev's views on circumcision are connected to his experience in a culture that does not practice circumcision. Because of this, Dev presented Avra with the idea of opting out of circumcision. The idea of not circumcising never occurred to Avra, and they needed to reconcile their different perspectives on this practice. Navigating religion is important for many

couples, and this is especially the case for interfaith couples and in couples where one person is more religious than the other. Avra explains the implications of this in her own marriage:

> My husband is not Jewish. It's important to me that we, my mother and I, don't turn him off from Judaism. It is really important to me that he enjoys participating in Jewish ritual and culture because it is extremely important to me, and he knows this, that we raise a Jewish family and that our son is Jewish. I am very conscious of elements of Judaism that make you say, "Uhm, that's strange," and how he would perceive them. That enables to me rethink some of my Judaism through the lens of "why do we do that?" One of the things I always stress to him about Judaism is the amount of flexibility that exists in the way in which I practice and the way in which you can think about your relationship with God, or Torah, or *mitzvot*.

Avra's relationship with a non-Jew makes her more aware of the "strange" elements of Judaism and she does not want to alienate her husband from the tradition that remains important to her. In our conversation Avra made it clear there are other Jewish traditions she would "push harder" for if Dev resisted them, but after doing her own research, circumcision was not one of those traditions. Avra deemed this ritual moment an appropriate place to negotiate and compromise with her husband.

For many of the families featured in this study, Avra and Dev included, the complexity of this decision stems from the interfaith context of the relationship. Dev is not Jewish and does not come from a culture that practices circumcision. Circumcision, then, becomes a site of negotiation between the couple. And this is indeed part of the tapestry of the North American Jewish experience. Increasing numbers of North American Jews are marrying non-Jews, and as a result, interfaith couples are negotiating religion in ways to make compatible their diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. According to the Pew Research Center's study, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 42% of married Jews are married to a non-Jewish spouse.[2] And for some interfaith families, circumcision has become one of the many sites in which religion is negotiated.[3]

Avra and Dev's story, and the countless stories told throughout this dissertation, revolve around three primary themes vis-à-vis North American religion and religious praxis. The complexity of engaging with circumcision, and all the layers interwoven in this ritual moment, provide an avenue to examine how contemporary North Americans practice religion. Navigating religion can be complex. It involves negotiation and compromise (with oneself and others). It involves thinking outside the box and sometimes adapting religion. It involves praxis that appear to conflict with religious tradition. Indeed, this is a complex process, and an examination of non-circumcision families highlights how people navigate complex phenomena.

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[2] "Jewish Americans in 2020," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/marriage-families-and-children/

[3] For more on Jewish-Christian interfaith couples, see Samira Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of Chapel Hill Press, 2018). For another analysis on interfaith families, see Jennifer Thompson, *Jewish on their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

NEGOTIATING RELIGION

Examining how parents navigate the decision to circumcise highlights the process of negotiating religion with oneself and others. By negotiating religion, I mean the process whereby an individual or couple determines what elements of religion they observe, what elements they omit, and what elements they adapt to make sense for their individual circumstance and families. Many of the families I interviewed for this study needed to "figure out" how they would engage with Judaism. These decisions were often well thought-out, intentional, idiosyncratic, and sometimes contradictory. But they make sense for these families.

The act of negotiation is a consistent theme in this study. I first introduced negotiation in the context of Robert Wuthnow's theory of spiritualities of dwelling and seeking. For Wuthnow, a spirituality of seeking "emphasizes negotiation," where individuals "have to negotiate among complex and confusing notions spirituality."[4] For Wuthnow, negotiation concerns how people search for and create their own connections to religion. First, I examined how people negotiate religion with themselves. The stories of Tirza, Laura, Tara, and Emily showcase how people navigate religion when it conflicts with other aspects of their identity and values. Tirza, Laura, and Tara (less for Emily) wanted to opt out of circumcision, but they needed to reconcile this with their Jewish identities, and this negotiation required work and effort.

Indeed, negotiation is not unique to couples opting out of circumcision, or even interfaith families. Endogamous couples are also faced with complex negotiations. And sometimes, negotiating is an ongoing process. The negotiation vis-à-vis circumcision tends to be finite; it often ends once the ritual has been performed. At this point, the decision is officially finalized. But there are other decisions that require ongoing negotiations. And negotiating religious praxis is a complex process for families. To highlight this, I turn to a story of a Jewish couple from Montreal. Dinah and Jonah got married in 2018 and welcomed their first son in 2020. They are both Jewish, were raised in Jewish families, are members of a synagogue, and want to raise their children Jewish. Dinah was raised in what she calls a traditional Jewish family, and Jonah's parents are Orthodox. When they first started dating, they had similar levels of Jewish observance, but over time, Jonah has become more observant than Dinah. Because they do not have the same views on the level of Jewish observance they envision for their family, religion is a consistent topic of conversation in their household. Their differing levels of observance requires ongoing and constant negotiation.

The observance of kosher practices is one of the topics they broach the most, and this became more pressing to "figure out" after the birth of their son. Jonah wants to observe some level of *kashrut*, but Dinah is not in full agreement. Dinah explains: "If you decide to only eat kosher meat that's fine, but if I'm out for dinner with my son and he wants chicken fingers, I'm not going to say no to him. My sister's very close to me and if he goes to my sister's house and he's having dinner with his cousins and they're all eating chicken fingers, I don't ever want him to be in the position where he says, 'I can't eat this.'" [5]

[4] Wuthnow, *After Heaven,* 3-4.

[5] Dinah and Jonah are pseudonyms. Dinah, interview with author, January 31, 2022. All quotations in this section are from my interview with Dinah.

Dinah is not bothered by Jonah making the decision to only eat kosher meat. Dinah is a vegetarian, so this decision makes no difference to her. But she does not want her son to "be forced into" observing kosher. Dinah also said she would not "force" her son to be a vegetarian because she has chosen to not eat meat. This logic parallels how some parents perceive circumcision. Some parents opt out because they do not want to make this decision for their unconsenting child. Dinah, similarly, does not want to "force" her vegetarianism or Jonah's observance of kosher onto her son. Dinah's sister does not keep kosher, and she wants her son to be able to eat at her sister's house with his cousins. She also does not want her son to be limited in what he can eat when at restaurants. For Dinah, Jonah's decision to only eat kosher meat is just that, *his* individual choice. Dinah explains how they have broached the conversation: "My husband knows that our son eats meat at my sister's house. The first time he got upset and I was like, 'We've spoken about this. I told you this was going to happen.' I think he's kind of come to terms with it. I think he often doesn't realize sometimes. We'll take our son to [our local deli] and he'll have the matzah ball soup there, which is chicken soup, our son will eat that. There's just bending."

Jonah and Dinah are constantly "bending" to find the level of Jewish observance that works for them and their family. They compromise, adapt, and negotiate to find the balance they are both comfortable with. This also requires a certain degree of "choosing one's battles." Jonah does not like that his son eats non-kosher meat, but as Dinah explains, he's "come to terms with it." Dinah also points out the hypocrisy of Jonah's observance of kosher meat. Dinah explains: "In our house we only have kosher meat, but we'll eat that meat on the same plate that we eat shrimps. There's no…none of this…religion, I've realized, you just take certain things and none of it makes sense."

Even though Dinah may not fully understand Jonah's idiosyncratic interpretation of eating kosher meat, she agrees to follow his system in the house. She will avoid buying and preparing non-kosher meat for their son at home. Eating kosher meat is important for her husband, but the way Dinah sees it, eating kosher meat is his individual choice (similar to her choice to be vegetarian). For Jonah, eating kosher meat is an important element of his Jewish observance, and this element of Jewish praxis is not as meaningful for Dinah. But Dinah's lack of commitment to the laws of *kashrut* does not represent a lack of commitment to Judaism. According to Dinah, "It doesn't make me less of a Jew, or our son less of a Jew because we're not doing these things." This commandment is not meaningful to Dinah so she simply does not observe it. Dinah's idiosyncratic understanding of Judaism may also be confusing to her husband, but for their relationship to work, they need to "bend" and negotiate. This "bending" is not unique to Dinah and Jonah; as we saw throughout this dissertation, many families negotiate and observe religion in the way it makes sense to them.

INDIVIDUALISM, INNOVATION, AND ADAPTATION

In addition to negotiating religion, this study highlights the relevance of individualism and innovation in North American religious practice. People engage with religion in ways that is meaningful to them. In other words, people *choose* how they observe religion. They choose the elements of religion that make sense for them to believe and observe, and they simply omit the elements that do not. Of the elements they choose to observe, they may adjust or adapt the tradition to make sense for them and their family. We saw this with Tara and Shawn, who observe what they describe as their own version of *kashrut*. We saw this with Hannah and David, who chose not

to give their son a Hebrew name. We saw this with Emily and John, who opted to mark the flesh of their son's penis in lieu of circumcising him. These couples made a choice about how to engage with tradition, and their choices reflect their unique interpretations and understandings of the tradition. Circumcision is one practice within a larger matrix of practices around which individuals and couples negotiate their religious observance.

And when there is a gap in ritual moments to celebrate or commemorate events in one's life—an area where something is "missing"—people innovate. People create rituals and traditions that speak to their unique life experience. Lifecycle rituals in Judaism, for instance, do not mark every monumental event in every Jewish person's life. Sure, Jewish lifecycle rituals provide a sample life course, but this is not path a taken by every Jew. As such, people create lifecycle rituals that speak to their experience. For example, for trans people, transitioning is a significant life event. As S.J. Crasnow demonstrates, some trans Jews are creating *mikveh* immersion rituals to mark and celebrate their transitions. In the 1960s and 1970s, Jews also noticed a ritual void for celebrations for baby girls. The response was not to simply leave the void, it was to create rituals for baby girls to fill the void.[6] Innovation is not unique to lifecycle ritual; when historical events take place, holidays, rituals, and traditions are created to celebrate or commemorate the event. An example of this is Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day. This commemorative day is observed in many Jewish communities worldwide, and as a relatively new day of commemoration, synagogues commemorate Yom HaShoah in different ways.[7] Some incorporate different liturgies in services on Yom HaShoah or have a separate commemorative service. Some light specific Holocaust memorial candles to honor and remember the dead. Some host a commemorative seder. The example of Yom HaShoah demonstrates that holidays and days of commemoration, and the rituals and customs that are derived from them, are created to mark significant events in the course of Jewish history as that history unfolds, and these innovations become important traditions in the Jewish calendar.

While innovation refers to the practice of creating something new, "tweaking" refers to the practice of adapting something already in existence. This is indeed what some non-circumcision families perceive what they are doing with naming ceremonies for their sons. They are taking the traditional *brit milah* and adapting one ritual action for another. Some people do create entirely new ceremonies, but most understand they are adapting the *brit milah*. For instance, Ezra and Leah replaced the removal of the foreskin with donating blood. Others simply omit the removal of the foreskin and do not replace with another action. In lieu of removing the foreskin, Emily and John opted to draw blood and mark the flesh of their son's penis. Adaptation is not unique to non-circumcision Jews; as lived realities change, Jewish law can be adapted to be in harmony with these new lived realities. A stark example of this is the use of cars on the Sabbath. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, increasing numbers of Jews moved to the suburbs and as a result, no longer lived within walking distance to their synagogues. The response of the Conservative movement to

[6] I discuss these examples in more depth in chapter one.

[7] For more on Holocaust memorialization and Yom Hashoah, see: James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). For more on the creation of other Jewish days of commemoration, see Don Handelman and Elihu Katz, "State Ceremonies of Israel: Independence Day and Remembrance Day," in *Israeli Judaism: The Sociology of Religion in Israel,* edited by Shlomo Deshen, Charles S. Liebman, and Moshe Shokeid (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1995): 75-86.

this trend demonstrates that, at least for some, Jewish law can be adapted to accommodate Jews' lived realities. Instead of maintaining the prohibition on driving on the Sabbath, the Rabbinical Assembly (the governing body of the Conservative movement), determined that driving on the Sabbath for the purpose of attending synagogue services is not in violation of the Sabbath. In fact, the Assembly determined that driving to synagogue on the Sabbath represents "an expression of loyalty to our faith."[8] In this case, a clear violation of Jewish law was reinterpreted as an "expression of faith." This example demonstrates how Jewish law, one of the more difficult aspects of Jewish tradition to change, can indeed be adapted to suit the lived realities of Jewish people.

THE PERCEPTION OF CONFLICT IN RELIGIOUS PRAXIS

The final theme of this study concerns the perception of conflict in religious praxis. This study underscores the idea that people can, and do, engage in actions that would *appear* in direct conflict with their religious and/or cultural identities. And despite engaging with these seemingly conflicting practices, people can continue identifying with their religion and culture. People can reconcile their actions with their identities, even if they seem incompatible. In other words, a Jewish man can be uncircumcised and still identify as Jewish. A Jew can eat bacon and still identity as Jewish. A Jew may not believe in God and still identify as Jewish. And this appearance of conflict applies to people who are part of other religious traditions as well. Abortion is forbidden in Catholicism, but there are Catholics who are pro-abortion and actively advocate for abortion rights.[9] There are LGBTQ people who continue to identify as Christian, despite the existence of biblical verses condemning homosexuality and the Vatican recently announcing that priests cannot bless same-sex weddings.[10] Many Evangelical Christians eschew the teachings of the New Testament and have sex before marriage.[11] Some Sikh men have abandoned the custom of growing their hair and taken to cutting their hair.[12] And there are Muslims who are also against circumcision and choose not to circumcise their sons.[13] People can make compatible seemingly incompatible actions with their religious identities.

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[8] Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 285.
[9] One such advocacy group is *Catholics for Choice*. See: https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/, last accessed March 30, 2022.
[10] For more on this see, Melissa Wilcox, "When Sheila's a Lesbian: Religious Individualism Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," *Sociology of Religion,* vol. 63, no. 4 (2002): 497-513. For more on the Vatican and Pope Francis's views on LGBTQ Christians, see Rachel Savage, "Pope Francis's LGBTQ+ Views, as Vatican Opposes Same-Sex Blessings," *Reuters* (March 16, 2021): https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vatican-lgbt-unions-idUSKBN2B82MN, last accessed March 30, 2022.
[11] David J. Ayers, "Sex and the Single Evangelical," *Institute for Family Studies* (August 14, 2019): https://ifstudies.org/blog/sex-and-the-single-evangelical#:~:text=They%20hold%20to%20a%20simple,1%20engage%20in%20premarital%20sex., last accessed March 30, 2022.
[12] Amelia Gentleman, "Young Sikh Men Get Haircuts, Annoying their Elders," *The New York Times* (March 29, 2007): https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/29/world/asia/29turban.html, last accessed March 30, 2022.
[13] Youssra el-Sharkawy, "Egyptian Anti-Circumcision Group Calls for an End to 'Male Genital Mutilation,'" *Al-Monitor* (December 11, 2019): https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/12/egyptians-dispute-necessity-of-circumcision.html, last accessed March 30, 2022. Also, I explored an example of this in the story of Naomi and Sameer in the introduction

These three themes—negotiation religion, individualism, innovation, and adaptation, and the perception of conflict in religious praxis—that are encapsulated in this case study of Jews opting out of circumcision, are also central to American religions and American religious praxis more broadly. Being a person who identifies as religious, or with a particular religion, can be a complex experience. Religion is a part of one's life that often requires negotiation and compromise. Elements of one's religion can conflict with certain facets of North American culture, and these conflicts of values may require effort to reconcile. People may disagree with certain elements of the religion with which they identify. People who identify as belonging to a particular religion may not see their life experience reflected in their tradition, creating the need for adaptation and innovation. And finally, people engage with practices that can be seen as in direct conflict with their religious and cultural identities. But people reconcile and make sense of these conflicts. Religious praxis is hardly neat and tidy; rather, it involves a complex web of factors that nuance the way in which people engage with their traditions.

NON-CIRCUMCISION JEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF NORTH AMERICAN JUDAISM

What do non-circumcision Jews tell us about North American Judaism and North American religion more broadly? What are the implications of a small number of Jewish parents opting out of circumcision and opting for alternative welcoming ceremonies? Why is this study important for the study of Judaism? First, it demonstrates that Jews are embracing certain trends in American religious praxis (such as individualism and "do-it-yourself" religion) and applying them to their engagement with Judaism. Instead of abandoning problematic rituals, Jews are "tinkering," to use Robert Wuthnow's descriptor, with what exists to create a ritual that aligns with their view on circumcision. Non-circumcision Jews are accepting their discomfort with circumcision and finding unique ways to engage with this ritual moment without subjecting their child to circumcision. As a result, this study demonstrates how innovation and adaptation are a means of engaging with tradition. Adapting ritual allows people who disagree with some aspect of the ritual to continue engaging with tradition. The Jews showcased in this study want to engage with conventional forms of Judaism. They want to participate in lifecycle rituals, and they want their rituals to be officiated by a rabbi. While choosing not to circumcise is unconventional, non-circumcision families are engaging directly with conventional forms of Judaism. This is where my study differs from other recent works on Judaism, which examine expressions of Jewishness and Judaism in unconventional places and spaces. Non-circumcision Jews are engaging with Judaism in the traditional places, via traditional rituals, in synagogues, and with rabbis. They are not creating a new subversive way of engaging with Judaism (like the *havurot* movement); they are not inventing entirely new rituals (like some trans Jews are to mark their gender transitions); they are not engaging with Judaism in unorthodox ways (like through crafting and needlepoint); they are not "finding" Judaism in seemingly unconventional places (like in a pastrami sandwich or at a museum).[14] They are adapting an existing ritual to conform to their unique beliefs and values and

[14] I examine these examples in more depth in chapter one. For more, see: Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); S.J. Crasnow, "On Transition: Normative Judaism and Trans Innovation," *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* vol. 32, no. 3 (2017): 403-415; Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Painted Pomegranates and*

engaging with Judaism right where we would expect, but perhaps in an unexpected way. Similar to Riv-Ellen Prell, S.J. Crasnow, Rachel Gross, and Jodi Eichler-Levine, I show that Jews are extending what religion and religious practice means, but I also demonstrate how these extensions can remain connected to traditional spaces and expressions of Judaism.

This study also nuances recent studies that highlight the diminished role of institutions in Jewish and religious life. In this study, parents want rabbis to be accepting of their ritual decisions. They seek out rabbinic guidance and approval. They want rabbis to officiate whatever ceremony they choose for their sons. Unlike those involved in the *havurah* movement, who rejected the synagogue and institutional Judaism, non-circumcision families are engaging directly with institutional Judaism. For those on the activist side of the spectrum, they are advocating for alternative rituals to be accepted as official options by liberal denominations.[15] For the Jews featured in this study, the synagogue is not as irrelevant as some sociological studies suggest. There is nuance in the way contemporary Jews engage with and rely on Jewish institutions and traditional models of authority. While this study is not a large quantitative survey, it does demonstrate that some Jews do continue to value the synagogue and the role of rabbis in the community. They are not eschewing institutional Judaism; instead, they are engaging directly with it, and in some cases, even changing it. Sociological surveys trace large trends in religious communities, but an ethnographic study can nuance our understanding of the experience of religious people in a way that is not possible for large surveys. And this study indeed nuances some of the recent findings that religious institutions are increasingly irrelevant for religious people more broadly, and Jews specifically. For non-circumcision Jews, traditional Jewish institutions and modes of authority remain extremely relevant, and they depend on rabbis for their approval. Synagogues and rabbis are central figures in this story, highlighting their continued relevance for some North American Jews.

This study also demonstrates how shifts in the wider culture in which Jews are situated impact Jewish praxis. Shifting perceptions of circumcision at a societal level are indeed infiltrating Jewish spaces and affecting how Jews understand and engage with this ritual. Religion does not exist in a vacuum, protected from outside influence. Religion indeed interacts with culture, and this interaction can cause anxiety, distress, and tension, and ritual is one of the spaces where Jews are actively working through this tension. As values shift and some North Americans are starting to rethink how they feel about medical interventions, bodily autonomy, consent, and their parenting philosophies, some Jews are also reassessing their beliefs and values. And for some, their shifting values, which are precipitated by shifts in the larger culture in which they are situated, are changing the way they are engaging with Jewish tradition and practice. But Jews are not abandoning tradition; rather, they are "tinkering" with their traditions to make them compatible with their shifting beliefs and values.

Jonathan Sarna concludes his seminal text, *American Judaism: A History*, by challenging the idea that "Judaism in America is doomed," as many have come to believe.[16] The rise of interfaith marriage, the perception of the "ambivalent" American Jew, and the fear of assimilation coalesce

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Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

[15] Individual Reform congregations do offer alternatives to brit milah, but some activists want to see this broadened to the Reform movement as a whole.

[16] Sarna, *American Judaism,* 374.

to create the sense for some that Judaism is bound to vanish. But an analysis of American Jewish history tells a different story and Sarna maintains that "American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism."[17] By tinkering with tradition, non-circumcision Jews, and the rabbis who officiate non-cutting rituals, are expanding the ways parents can engage with Judaism. They are finding novel ways of maintaining Jewish tradition. Creating new welcoming rituals does not erode tradition; rather, it provides additional avenues for engagement. Non-circumcision Jews provide one example of ordinary Jews expanding Jewish practice as a means of maintaining tradition, and I think it's safe to say they will not be the last.

[17] Ibid.

APPENDIX A: TARA'S BLOG POST

Circumcising Our Son—Thursday, June 9, 2011

I recently gave birth to a boy. Early in my pregnancy, my partner and I embarked on a journey to explore *brit milah* (Jewish circumcision) and decide if we would perform the ritual should our baby be male (which we wouldn't know until birth).

We read extensively. We spoke to people around the globe. We navigated the vast spectrum of our own feelings about it. We discussed our thinking about it.

Brit Milah is both a symbol of the child's covenant with God and it is the child's entrance into the Jewish community. For either of these functions, it is a ritual that is far outside the parameters of my understanding of God and of community, and a far distance from how I lead my Jewish life.

The ritual is only performed on boys, and not just that, but it is on a boy's sex organ. This sets up covenantal relationship as exclusively patriarchal in the extreme with a built-in sexual piece that doesn't make sense to me. It is the epitome, perhaps even the creator, of the "boys club" and there is nothing sacred or covenantal about it. If this is really the symbol God wants, then it is a God I cannot believe in. And, it is a symbol of covenant that is entered into by a non-consenting (and unaware) infant.

Further, and even more troubling for me, it is a violent act. It is a violent act that the community gathers to witness. The trauma is not only sustained by the infant, but also by all those who witness it. The Jewish people have had so much trauma and violence in our recent history that voluntarily adding to it under the guise of celebration doesn't make any sense to me. It's not good for us. It doesn't help us. Our people need healing, not additional hurts. This initiation rite does not support a healthy and vibrant Jewish community. It makes it harder for our community to thrive because it's so emotionally taxing.

Of the many mothers of circumcised boys that I've spoken with over the last several months, most had such a difficult time at the *bris* they couldn't even be in the room and most of the remaining moms were in the room physically, but sat at the back crying surrounded by friends, almost always female friends. A mother must close her heart to her son in order to allow a *brit milah* to happen. It is never good to close our hearts.

So we have a patriarchal ritual that physically and religiously banishes and traumatizes women, that invokes violence on an infant, that traumatizes men, and that marks a boy's penis as the central marker of what is meant to be a sacred covenant.

For me, *brit milah* is neither sacred nor about community.

My partner and I had decided that we would not circumcise our son. We had told our parents and a small number of friends about our decision. At the time, there were very few questions asked.

And then he was born.

And with his birth came an immense and powerful wave of emotion about *brit milah* from the adults surrounding us. The feelings were enormous. Most of what came at us was fear—fear our son will be made fun of, fear he won't feel Jewish, fear he won't be Jewish, fear he won't be accepted by the community, fear that synagogues won't allow him to have a Bar Mitzvah or get married. Many discussions were had, all with non-compelling arguments about why *brit milah* is a good thing (or at least not such a bad thing).

My partner and I were expecting feelings to come up. And we were expecting that our son would need to navigate social encounters as he grew older - encounters we would be mindful and skillful to help him navigate. What we weren't expecting was the forcefulness and magnitude of the upset.

I lived in Jerusalem for three years and in New York City for five. In both of those places, I was part of Jewish communities that were vibrant, creative, engaging, invigorating, and dynamic. I moved back to Toronto almost three years ago and it was clear that the Toronto Jewish community is very conservative, and that many vibrant and lively discussions and debates that occur in other communities just don't happen here. Circumcision is one of them. Here, the idea that we wouldn't circumcise our son was shocking for people, as if it was a concept they had never before encountered.

Given that my partner and I intend to live here, possibly forever, it suddenly felt as if not doing a *brit milah* might set our family up for a constant battle—a scenario that felt too big for us to take on alone.

And so, against our values and beliefs, against our thoughtful Jewish practice, against our true desires to teach our son to fight for what he believes to be right, we succumbed to social pressure and had a *brit milah* performed on our 8-day-old son.

It was a private event. It was awful. He screamed through most of it. My partner and I were both in tears through all of it. We are both upset that we did it—and we know that not doing it felt like it would be worse.

I don't know how the Toronto community would react had we not done it. But I do know that I'm ready to open this conversation.

APPENDIX B: DATA OVERVIEW

This appendix provides a summary of the data I collected throughout my research. The populations included in this section are non-circumcision families, families who chose to circumcise, rabbis who are willing to officiate alternative rituals, and rabbis who are not willing to officiate alternative rituals. The tables in this appendix provide more detailed information about the geographical location, denominational affiliation, family compositions, and synagogue membership of the families I interviewed, along with other details about their ritual choices.

NON-CIRCUMCISION FAMILIES

Total number of interviews: 52

Table 1.1: Geographical Distribution

Location	Number of Interviews	Percentage
San Francisco Bay Area, California	24	46.15%
Montreal, Quebec	10	19.23%
Toronto, Ontario	4	7.69%
New York, New York	3	5.77%
Washington, D.C.	3	5.77%
Vancouver, British Columbia	2	3.85%
Miami, Florida	2	3.85%
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	2	3.84%
Atlanta, Georgia	1	1.92%
Houston, Texas	1	1.92%
TOTAL	52	

Table 1.2: Characteristics of Non-Circumcision Families

Heterosexual Couple	Interfaith Couple	Synagogue Membership	Chose Alternative Ritual	Consulted a Rabbi
98.07%	61.54%	76.92%	92.31%	71.15%

Table 1.3: Denominational Affiliation

Reform	Reconstructionist	Conservative	Orthodox	Not Affiliated
57.69%	17.31%	5.77%	0%	19.23%

Table 1.4: Process of Choosing not to Circumcise

Easy, not a difficult to make decision	Somewhat easy, required some reflection but decision was made quickly	Difficult, required reflection and took time to make decision	Very difficult, required extensive reflection, experienced anxiety over decision
7.69%	13.46%	38.46%	40.38%

Table 1.5: Family Responses to Opting Out

In agreement with decision	Ambivalent / no reaction	Somewhat upset but accepted decision quickly	Very upset, tried to intervene, eventually accepted decision	Upset / no longer speaking with couple
9.62%	7.69	25.00%	55.77%	1.92%

Table 1.6: Finding an Officiant for Alternative Ritual

Had no problem finding officiant	Own rabbi officiated, but required a process of negotiation	Somewhat difficult, spoke with a few rabbis before finding officiant	Very difficult, spoke with multiple rabbis before finding officiant	Could not find officiant	Did not want any ritual, no need for officiant
28.85%	23.08%	28.85%	13.46%	1.92%	3.85%

CIRCUMCISION FAMILIES

Total number of interviews: 19

Table 2.1: Geographical Distribution

Location	Number of Interviews	Percentage
Montreal, Quebec	11	57.89%
San Francisco Bay Area	8	42.10%
TOTAL	19	

Table 2.2: Characteristics of Circumcision Families

Heterosexual Couple	Interfaith Couple	Synagogue Membership	Bris Circumcision	Hospital Circumcision
100%	26.32%	57.89%	63.16%	36.84%

Table 2.3: Denominational Affiliation

Reform	Reconstructionist	Conservative	Orthodox	Not Affiliated
36.84%	15.79%	21.05%	15.7%	10.53%

Table 2.4: Process of Choosing to Circumcise

Easy, not a difficult to make decision, experienced little to no anxiety	Somewhat easy, required some reflection and discussions but decision was made quickly	Difficult, required reflection and took time to make decision	Very difficult, required extensive reflection, experienced anxiety over decision	Did not feel like there was a decision to be made (circumcision was assumed) but felt unsure or anxious about it.
10.53%	15.79%	21.09%	21.05%	31.57%

RABBIS

Total number of interviews: 30

Table 3.1: Geographical Distribution

Location	Number of Interviews	Percentage
San Francisco Bay Area, California	13	43.33%
Montreal, Quebec	12	40.00%
Toronto, Ontario	3	10.00%
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	2	6.67%
TOTAL	30	

Table 3.2: Denominational Affiliation

Reform	Reconstructionist	Conservative	Orthodox	Unaffiliated / Freelance
43.33%	23.33%	10.00%	10.00%	13.33%

Table 3.3: Officiate Alternative Ceremonies

Will not officiate alternative rituals	Will officiate alternative ritual	Will officiate a baby naming, but does not recognize as alternative to *brit milah*
36.67%	60.00%	3.33%

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRES

This section includes general questionnaires I used to guide my interviews. I created separate interview questionnaires for parents who chose to circumcise, parents who opted out of circumcision, rabbis who officiate non-cutting rituals, rabbis who do not officiate non-cutting rituals, *mohelim*, and intactivists (although there was often overlap). I began each interview with questions about basic biographical information and the person's level of religious observance. I subsequently share my specific interview questions for the six distinct populations I interviewed throughout this project.

1. Questionnaire for parents who chose not to circumcise

What are your views on circumcision? Have you always felt this way? Was there a certain event that triggered this shift in perception?

Do you know the origins of circumcision? Can you tell me where this ritual is derived from?

Did you know you were having a boy before your son was born? Had you discussed circumcision with your partner prior to your son being born? If so, what did that conversation look like?

How did you come to the decision not to circumcise your son? Was this a difficult decision to make?

How did your families react to your decision? Did you share your concerns with your family prior to making your final decision? Did any of your family members express concern or disappointment over your decision? If so, can you elaborate on that? Did the decision to opt out of circumcision affect your relationship with your family? Has the conflict over the decision gone away?

Did you speak to any rabbis about your concerns with circumcision? If so, how did they respond? Were rabbis generally helpful and empathetic to your situation?

Did you speak with doctors about your concerns with circumcision? If so, how did they respond? Were the doctors you spoke with helpful?

Have you been to a bris? If so, can you tell me about that experience?

Can you talk more generally about your parenting style? What is your parenting philosophy? Did you have a have a homebirth? What are your views on vaccines?

If the couple is interfaith, I ask the following questions:
(Directed to the Jewish member of the couple) How did your family feel about you marrying someone who isn't Jewish?

Describe your wedding ceremony. Was it an interfaith ceremony? If so, how did you negotiate that? Was it difficult to find a rabbi to officiate? Was it co-officiated, or officiated by a rabbi?

Did you choose to have an alternative ritual instead of a traditional *brit milah*? If so, what was the ritual? Describe what took place during the ritual.

Was the ritual officiated by a rabbi? If so, how did you locate a rabbi to officiate the ritual?

Did you create the ritual with the officiating rabbi? Or did the rabbi have a ritual already prepared?

Did you replace the cutting of the foreskin with another ritual action? If so, what? Why did you choose this action? If not, why did you decide against replacing the cutting with another action?

What memories and/or feelings stand out from the ritual?

How did your families react to the ritual?

Do you have daughters? If so, did you have some sort of ceremony to celebrate the birth of your daughter? If so, can you tell me more about that? If not, why not?

Would you identify as against circumcision? If so, what does that mean to you?

What do you hope to see from the Jewish community vis-à-vis circumcision?

Would you attend a bris if you were invited to one? Why or why not?

How do you reconcile your views on circumcision with your Jewish identity? Do you think being against circumcision or opting out of circumcision is incompatible with being Jewish?

What makes someone Jewish?

Why is circumcision such a significant ritual?

Is it important for you to raise your children in a Jewish household? If so, what does that mean to you?

How do you choose which Jewish customs and traditions to observe and which not to? Is this something you discuss, or does this happen organically?

Do you have any concerns about your son(s) not being circumcised? If so, what are some your concerns?

2. Questionnaire for parents who chose to circumcise

What are your views on circumcision?

Did you know you were having a boy before he was born? Had you discussed circumcision with your partner prior to your son being born? What did that conversation look like? Had the thought of not circumcising your son crossed your mind?

Do you know the origins of circumcision? Can you tell me where this ritual is derived from?

How did you come to the decision to circumcise your son? Was this a difficult decision?

Have you been to a bris (prior to your son's)? If so, can you tell me more about that experience?

Was your son circumcised in the hospital or in a ritual setting?

Describe the ritual. What took place? Where did it take place? How many people were in attendance? Describe the sequence of events.

Were you in the room when the cutting was taking place?

How did you feel throughout the ritual?

What memories and/or feelings stand out from the ritual?

How did your families react to the ritual?

What are the benefits of circumcision? What are the risks?

What concerns, if any, did you have about circumcising your son?

If you have a rabbi, did you speak to him/her about your concerns? If so, how did your rabbi respond?

How do you choose which Jewish customs and traditions to observe and which not to? Is this something you discuss, or does this happen organically?

Do you have daughters? If so, did you have some sort of ceremony to celebrate the birth of your daughter? If so, can you tell me more about that? If not, why not?

What makes someone Jewish?

Why is circumcision such a significant ritual?

Is it important for you to raise your children in a Jewish household? If so, what does that mean to you?

How do you choose what rituals and traditions to observe and which ones not to observe?

3. Questionnaire for rabbis who offer alternative rituals

Tell me about your path to becoming a rabbi.

Where did you go to rabbinical school?

When did you graduate from rabbinical school?

How long have been a practicing rabbi? Which congregation(s) have you worked at (in a rabbinic capacity) and what were your job titles?

Can you tell me about your current congregation? How many members are there? Who are they? How would you describe your congregation and congregants?

Would you be willing to officiate a non-cutting ritual for a family should they request it? Why or why not?

How many baby naming ceremonies for baby boys do you perform per year? In total?

Is there a high demand for this ritual? Have you noticed an increase of parents questioning or choosing to opt out of circumcision in recent years?

What is your stance on the ritual of circumcision?

Describe the parents who are questioning and /or choosing not to circumcise their baby boys. What are their concerns? Do they tend to be interfaith families, or a mix of both interfaith and endogamous couples?

How do you counsel parents who are anxious about or questioning circumcision?

Why do parents choose a naming ceremony rather than the traditional *brit milah*?

Do parents reach out to you for help with this decision? If so, how do you counsel them?

Is this decision easy or hard for parents to make? What is the most difficult part of opting out of circumcision?

What are the benefits of circumcision?

What are the risks of circumcision?

Do you have children? If yes, are any of them boys? If yes, are they circumcised? If yes, how did you come to this decision?

Do you have a sample ritual that you usually use? Or do you create a new ritual for each family?

Can you walk me through a typical baby naming ceremony?

Did you invent this version of the ritual? Or did you acquire it from somewhere?

What takes place after the ritual?

What elements of the ritual are regarded as especially meaningful?
Why did you choose the elements that you did to include?

What is the overall feeling of naming ceremonies? Are they similar in feeling to a bris?

Have you ever encountered family members who were resistant to the ritual?

Have you experienced resistance or criticism from the wider community for offering to officiate this ritual? If so, what were those critiques? How did/would you respond?

How do you preserve tradition while adapting to the needs of your members?

Is there something that you would not compromise? If so, can you give me an example?

What makes someone Jewish?

How do naming ceremonies celebrate and embrace Jewish identity?

When was the last naming ceremony you officiated?

How do you ensure that new rituals are just as meaningful and significant as rituals that are rooted in ancient Jewish practice?

4. Questionnaire for rabbis who do not offer alternative rituals

Tell me about your path to becoming a rabbi.

Where did you go to rabbinical school?

When did you graduate from rabbinical school?

How long have been a practicing rabbi? Which congregation(s) have you worked at (in a rabbinic capacity) and what were your job titles?

Can you tell me about your current congregation? How many members are there? Who are they? How would you describe your congregation and congregants?

Would you be willing to officiate a non-cutting ritual for a family should they request it? Why or why not?

How do you feel about some Jewish parents choosing not to circumcise?

Do parents reach out to you with questions and concerns about circumcision? If so, how do you counsel them?

Describe a typical bris ceremony.
How do most parents react during the ritual? Do parents sometimes choose not to be in the room?

What is your stance on the use of anaesthetic during a bris? Is this something you allow? Why or why not?

What is your stance on metzizah b'peh? Will you officiate a bris ceremony where this is performed? Why or why not?

Do you think metzizah b'peh should be omitted from bris ceremonies?

Do you have children? If yes, are any of them boys? If yes, are they circumcised? If yes, how did you come to this decision?

Do you perform naming ceremonies for baby girls? Why or why not?

Describe a typical naming ceremony.

How many of your congregants opt for a naming ceremony for their daughters?

What makes someone Jewish?

What ritual adaptations are you willing to make for your congregants?

How do you balance maintaining tradition while adapting to change? Is this a difficult balance to achieve?

What is your stance on interfaith marriage? Will you officiate an interfaith wedding ceremony? If not, why not? If so, under what parameters will you officiate an interfaith wedding?

Describe the dynamics of being a rabbi in this community.

What is the hardest part of being a congregational rabbi?

Have you ever made a decision for your congregation that your congregants disagreed with and were vocal about their disagreement? If so, describe the situation.

5. Questionnaire for mohelim

How long have you been a *mohel*?

Why did you decide to become a *mohel*?

Where did you get your training? How long was the program? Are you also a rabbi or a medical doctor?

How many circumcisions have you performed throughout your career? Do you mostly perform infant circumcisions? Do you also perform adult circumcisions? How does the procedure change for an adult who is being circumcised?

How many *mohelim* are there in (CITY)? Are you a full-time *mohel*? Are there other full-time *mohelim* in (CITY)?

Which synagogues/communities do you perform circumcisions for? Do you serve all synagogues, or a handful? Is there a community (or communities) you serve more than others?

Are there differences in the procedure depending on the community you're serving? If so, what are those differences?

Are you normally hired by the couple? Or the synagogue?

How much does a typical *brit milah* cost for the couple?

Can you walk me through what you learned about circumcision in your training? What elements were emphasized? Did you learn about the advantages and risks with regards to this procedure? Were you taught mostly about the procedure or the ritual as well?

As part of your training, did you practice the procedure before performing it on a live baby? If so, how did that work?

Was there an "apprentice" period where you accompanied another *mohel* before going about it on your own?

Do you remember the first circumcision you performed? How did you feel? Were you nervous, scared, at ease?

Can you walk me through the steps of the procedure? How exactly do you circumcise a baby?

What do you do with the foreskin?

Do parents ever call you directly to discuss the procedure? Do parents ever express discomfort or anxiety about the procedure? If so, how do you respond? What do you tell parents who are nervous? In your experience, what are parents most nervous about?

Have you ever spoken with a couple that was questioning circumcision in some capacity? Have you ever spoken to parents who were considering not going through with the ritual? If so, how did you counsel them?

Have you noticed common characteristics or a typical profile of the parents who express discomfort or are questioning the ritual?

How do you feel towards parents who are questioning circumcision? Do you feel empathy, frustration, ambivalence?

Can you walk me through a typical *brit milah* ceremony?

Do you use anesthetic? If so, why? What type of anesthetic? If not, why not?

Are you flexible in the way you perform the procedure? If parents really want to use a local anesthetic, for example, would you accommodate them? Are there certain things you would not compromise? If so, what are they? How do you choose what to be flexible with and what to not?

What is your stance on *metzizah b'peh*? Do you perform *metzizah b'peh* with direct contact? If not, why not? If so, why? Did you ever perform *metzizah* with direct contact? If so, why don't you do it anymore? Would you perform a circumcision is parents did not want *metzizah* to be performed?

How do most parents react during the ritual? Do parents sometimes choose not to be in the room?

How do you feel when performing the procedure? Do you ever feel uncomfortable or queasy? Or is it routine for you at this point?

Have you ever heard of a circumcision going wrong? Are you ever concerned that this will happen with a circumcision you're performing? Have there ever been complications in a circumcision you performed? If so, can you tell me more about that?

Is there a part of the procedure that is difficult for you?

There are some people who believe infant circumcision should not be done due to the fact that the child does not give consent to the procedure. How do you respond to that critique?

What are the benefits of circumcision?

What are the risks of circumcision?

Do you have an opinion of parents who are choosing not to circumcise their sons? If so, can you share your thoughts on that?

There has been increased media attention surrounding circumcision, both in defense of and in critique of it. Have you noticed this? How do you feel about this attention? Has it had an impact on your practice?

Why is circumcision such an important ritual?

Do you have children? If yes, are any of them boys? If yes, are they circumcised? If yes, how did you come to this decision?

6. Questionnaire for intactivists

What is your stance on circumcision? How did you come to this position?

Do you have any sons? If so, are they circumcised? How did you come to this decision? Was it difficult to make at the time?

If son(s) are circumcised: How do you feel about your son (or sons) being circumcised?

Do identify as an intactivist? If so, what does that mean to you?

Do you engage in any forms of activism? If so, describe that to me.

What do you hope to accomplish as an intactivist?

If the person is Jewish: What do you hope to see vis-à-vis circumcision in the Jewish community?

Do you think circumcision should be banned? Why or why not?

Would you classify circumcision as genital mutilation? If so, what does that mean?

Parents make all kinds of decisions for their children without their consent. What makes circumcision different from other parenting decisions?

Are you a member of any intactivist groups? If so, which ones?

Do you ever attend genital integrity protests? If so, which ones? What do you hope you accomplish with these protests?

What elements of your activism do you find most effective? How do you measure your effectiveness?

Why are you an activist?

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