

As a rabbi, I want to know why a Florida man insists on circumcising his son

By Rabbi Benjamin Shalva May 28

It looks as if 4-year-old Chase Ryan Nebus-Hironimus is about to go under the knife. As a rabbi who has officiated at numerous circumcisions and as a father who, back in the day, held a scalpel to his own son's flesh, excising my newborn's foreskin in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I want to ask Chase's father — why?

Why does Dennis Nebus insist on circumcising his son over the vehement objections of Chase's mother, Heather Hironimus? Why, after Hironimus fled with Chase, hiding her son from the scalpel in a domestic violence shelter, did Nebus continue pressing for circumcision, knowing full well that circumcision of a 4-year-old requires general anesthetic, a long, painful period of healing and a risk of medical complications? Is Chase's circumcision really worth all this pain and suffering?

[\[*'Intactivism': Why a Florida mother took her son into hiding to avoid circumcision*\]](#)

When I officiate at a Jewish circumcision, known in Hebrew as a *brit milah* or *bris*, when I chant verses of ancient Hebrew accompanied by the squalls of a newly snipped member of the tribe (pun intended), I don't do so because the World Health Organization, in its ever oscillating wisdom, recommends circumcision to combat the transmission of HIV and other STDs.

When I took a scalpel to my own son's flesh, I didn't do so because, as Chase's father argued, circumcision was "just the normal thing to do." (And by the way, in the South, where Chase and family reside, the circumcision rate is lower than 60 percent — not exactly overwhelming evidence for "normalcy.") Granted, circumcision is the "normal thing to do" in the Jewish world.

But that's not why I cut my son. I'll be damned if I'd submit my son to surgery for the sake of normalcy.

No, when I encourage my congregants to circumcise their sons, I do so *irrationally*. I do so not because it makes sense, not because it's medically advised or socially required, but because I feel *irrationally* called by God,

history and tribe to make the cut.

Part of the potency of religious and spiritual life is that it addresses not only the head, but also the heart. And as anyone knows who has, say, fallen in love, the heart does not operate according to the latest updates from the CDC.

The heart opens and sings in moments of vulnerability and surrender, such as the moment when, at a *brit milah*, a newborn is placed in the lap of his grandparent, the grandparent offering a softly hummed lullaby and a wine-soaked teething cloth to soothe the child who, at this same irrational moment, tastes the sweet wine and feels the searing sting, the sting of knife, of tribe, of family, of a life that, many times over, won't make sense and, as tradition continually reminds us, doesn't have to.

Jews, too, debate the pros and cons of circumcision. A few nights ago, my wife and I hosted an old friend for dinner, a friend who had grown up in a Jewishly observant household but who now insists that, if he has a son, he will not have him circumcised.

Not only do I respect his choice, I understand it. The ritual is primal, bloody, and as one who has attended a good many circumcisions can attest, painful. Attendees at a *brit milah* sometimes faint. Mothers and fathers cry.

Circumcision was born from the ancient Near East's practice of child sacrifice. Judaism rescued our sons from this fate; yet, perhaps demanded by the irrational, passionate heart, Judaism preserved a token offering, a snippet of flesh and blood sacrifice. And such a sacrifice, such a painful, antiquated, irrational sacrifice, is bound to ruffle the feathers of a many modern-minded, scientifically devoted, scripturally suspicious individuals.

Being a modern-minded, scientifically devoted, scripturally suspicious individual myself, I understand why my friend doesn't want to circumcise his future son. His rational arguments make sense. Yet my heart calls me in a different direction, somewhere distant, someplace ancient, to a terrain dotted with blood and saturated with devotion.

But none of this, I believe, applies to Chase Ryan Nebus-Hironimus. None of my heart-based, flowery, spiritual mumbo-jumbo applies to this child, who, in the immortal words of Adam Sandler, is "not a Jew."

When Chase's father insists on circumcising his son, he relies on debatable, ever-evolving research and specious social reasoning. When Dennis Nebus insists that his 4-year-old son is better off snipped, even when it will now require a full-scale surgical procedure, I want to reason with him. Isn't there another, less risky method for reducing his son's risk of STDs? Aren't there other, less traumatic methods for helping his son feel "healthy" and "normal" within mainstream American society?

For Jews, Muslims and other religiously devoted parents who seek a covenant with God and a connection with tribe, who aspire to moments of breathtaking devotion and irrational sacrifice, who believe that their son's destiny is not solely determined by the inherent rights of the individual, but equally by the spiritual demands of the collective, I say — pick up the scalpel. There is benefit to doing things that don't make sense, especially when these things connect us to something that is larger than ourselves (and when, unlike female circumcision, these practices do not pose health risks nor impair the ability to experience sexual stimulation).

For those, on the other hand, driven by secular concerns, who, like their religious counterparts, love their sons and want them to grow up healthy and happy — please, do the research. Consider all the alternatives. And, especially if you've got a terrified 4-year-old whose mother is willing to flee to a shelter rather than submit her son to circumcision, think before you snip.

[Rabbi Benjamin Shalva](#) is a freelance rabbi, author, yoga teacher, meditation facilitator, musician and spiritual guide living and working in the D.C. area. He is the author of 'Spiritual Cross-Training,' which will be published by Grand Harbor Press in January 2016.

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