

Mohel Joel Shoulson
610-525-3393
1-800-700-JOEL (5635)
www.MohelJoel.com

"The Controversy Over Circumcision"

Rabbi Peter H. Grumbacher

Once again physicians are debating the issue of circumcision. The New York Times, in an article on March 16, presented the pros and cons that appeared in a medical journal. The point they were making is that parents should weigh everything with regard to the surgical procedure as well as the benefits and complications, which may be involved.

One of the more significant points made in the article is that the problems arising from circumcision are minimal, and while I have not heard of too many traumatic consequences of circumcisions at which I have officiated, articles such as this one will surely cause parents to think about whether to circumcise their newborn sons. Only once do I recall (and I recall quite vividly) "a botched up" job. This was when a supposed urologist in Salisbury, Maryland, performed a horrific circumcision. I told him that should there be any complications, I would testify against him if the parents asked me to. I never received a telephone call from the parents. Other than that, I do not recall being present at a questionable circumcision.

Jews have been circumcising infant sons ever since Abraham was commanded to do so. Perhaps there were hygienic reasons behind this mitzvah, but we know that there is a significant religious position which underscores the commandment. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant between God and the children of Israel l'dor va-dor, from generation to generation. Somebody once said, "Why didn't God just ask for an ink spot on the ear?" which certainly would have made mothers and fathers far less uncomfortable. Be that as it may, circumcision is part of our tradition, and for it we have a special expression...brit milah. That expression translates "the covenant of circumcision." Therefore, it is not merely the surgical procedure but the understanding that a contract is established between God and the Jewish people, a contract/covenant affirmed on the eighth day following birth.

I certainly understand that no parent wants her or his baby to be hurt, but I have never heard of a man who has any recollection of his Bris.

Of course who performs the circumcision makes a big difference. With all due respect to physicians, this is not really a surgical procedure in the true sense of the word. Just as most people look for "the best" doctor when they need medical attention, a competent mohel is "the best" person to call for a brit milah. Years ago a friend of mine called Joel Shoulson and asked him, "why should I use you instead of a doctor?" Joel replied, "Because my entire livelihood and reputation is based upon one procedure. I cannot afford to make a mistake." This was good enough for my friend and it is a point truly worth considering. The urologist I wrote about earlier in this column took at least 30 minutes; when Joel Shoulson does it, it takes a matter of seconds. His father circumcised my two sons and Joel learned from the best. I know there are other mohalim in the area, some of whom are very good. I am only mentioning Joel Shoulson's name because I know him and I know his work. I also know that he is a great comfort especially to first time parents and his brit milah service (with or without a rabbi present) is superb.

The controversy continues with regard to circumcision, but for Jews there should be no question. Circumcision is a time-honored tradition that should not be compromised. Of course, if there are any health considerations precluding circumcision on the eighth day or at all (a rare situation indeed), then that is another matter. Otherwise, I would hope that this remains a non-issue for Jewish parents.

Mohel Joel Shoulson • 610-525-3393 • 1-800-700-JOEL (5635) • www.MohelJoel.com