

TAZRIA (LEVITICUS 12:1-13:59)

Blood Libel 2005

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

I really didn't want to write this article. Often, the best way to react to negative PR is to ignore it. When you respond to ugly accusations, you sometimes exacerbate the problem by giving a forum to a topic that does not deserve one. I hoped that the story would die down and go away. Therefore, I chose to remain silent.

Ironically, this terrible tragedy has been great for business. I have received phone calls and emails from concerned parents in search for a Mohel who wouldn't "endanger" their child. After a satisfactory conversation, they have been relieved of worry, and happy to utilize my services. Then, someone went too far.

I was examining a baby prior to his Bris. The father asked me about my methodology. When I responded to his questions, he responded, "Good. That's terrible, what that rabbi did to that baby!"

"... what that rabbi did to that baby." The story is not going away. The lies are continuing to be told, and believed. Now, at least within our forum of friends, I feel the need to speak out. You, who are kind enough to read what I have to say on Torah topics, deserve to know the truth.

The truth is that a good man and a holy practice are being maligned in the press. And, as we know all too well, few stories sell as well as those that trash Torah Judaism. (See "Sorry PETA, Pig's Feet aren't Kosher!") I refer, of course, to the *Metzitzah* controversy.

At issue is the question of whether a Mohel has infected twin babies, one of whom died, and other children, with Herpes. As a result, there is talk of governmental agencies regulating the practice of religious circumcision. As an additional result, the country is abuzz with stories about this practice, and ridiculing Judaism with accusations of the worst kinds of perversion.

This week's Torah Portion tells us that an eight-day-old boy needs to be circumcised. That is all it says. There are no instructions in the Written Torah as to how to do a Bris. That is explained in the Talmud.

The Talmud requires that after a child is circumcised the blood should be drawn away from the wound by suction. I have always considered this to be similar to allowing the area of a tooth extraction to bleed in order to carry possible pathogens away from the wound site, thus reducing the risk of infection.

Especially in view of the fact that a knife that LOOKS clean is not necessarily sterile, the requirement of *Metzitzah* (suction) demonstrates the wisdom of the Sages of Israel. It is clear and obvious that the Talmud's intent in insisting upon *Metzitzah* is a safety issue. In fact, the Talmud states that a Mohel who does not perform *Metzitzah* is endangering children and needs to be dismissed from his position.

The most convenient method of applying this suction is orally. (Envision the old cowboy, out on the range, sucking the poison out of a snake bite.) Until a few hundred years ago, this is how every Mohel suctioned the blood away from the wound.

To be sure, the image of a rabbi sucking blood away from a circumcision does not, to say the least, sit well with the average modern American mind set. One may wonder whether a procedure, designed ostensibly to prevent disease, may do just the opposite. In addition, the connotations of such an act certainly seem to fly in the face of a religion that insists upon the avoidance of any appearance of impropriety. Indeed, one newspaper article wonders how "... in a time of concern about pedophilia and child abuse, an adult can be permitted to..." (I won't dignify the remainder of the question with a direct quote)

Many years ago, opponents of religious circumcision used their objections to *Metzitzah* as an excuse to try to ban circumcision entirely. Much of this opposition to *Bris* emanated from assimilated members of the Jewish community. They claimed that circumcision was an antiquated and dangerous practice that modern Jewry should reject.

As a result of this controversy, the *Metzitzah* tube was introduced. The Mohel would place a sterile glass tube over the site of the circumcision, and apply suction to the other end of the tube. This method, which prevents a mixture of bodily fluids, was considered safer for the baby as well as the Mohel.

Many Torah sages embraced this concept as a way of maintaining the tradition of *Metzitzah* without compromising standards of sterile surgical procedure. There were others, however, who saw this as a departure from traditional practices, and viewed the *Metzitzah* tube as a threat to Torah observance.

The debate continues. Many Torah authorities, including those under whom I have studied, see the *Metzitzah* tube as being in full compliance with the Talmud's requirement for suctioning blood away from the wound. Others, especially, but not strictly limited to, those within the Chassidic community, insist upon *Metzitzah b'peh* – oral suction.

A twenty-first century mind such as yours or mine may be tempted to question such a position. After all, with everything we know today about sterility, how can such a procedure be tolerated?

An article recently appeared in a prominent medical magazine calling for the cessation of *Metzitzah b'peh*. The magazine claimed that a number of babies who had developed Herpes had been linked to their Mohels. Many have cited this article as proof that *Metzitzah* must be done with a sterile tube. Many others have questioned the findings of this article.

I am not going to comment on the article either way. I would like to point out a different observation.

A pediatrician who treats many of the members of a particular Chassidic community pointed out that that particular community produces “a new kindergarten class every month.” The Chassidic community, with its high birthrate, G-d bless them, does not, by and large, accept the use of a *Metzitzah* tube.

With the thousands upon thousands of babies being born in that community, one would expect to see a high incidence of *Metzitzah b'peh*-related disease. They are not seeing it! (Some claim that it IS happening, but that it is not being reported. Many respected authorities are skeptical about that claim.)

It has been widely reported that a Mohel in my community has been infecting children with Herpes. Let me state for the record that this man, who has dedicated his career to helping people, is an expert Mohel. He has traveled all over the world, especially to the former Soviet Union, to perform the *Brisses* for Jews who might otherwise not have had access to a Mohel. I have occasionally consulted him for advice on complicated cases.

The story, reported everywhere from the New York Times to Al Jazeera, is that the rabbi circumcised twin boys, both of whom developed Herpes, one of whom died. The Mohel has been under investigation. Meanwhile, the New York City Health Department ruled that he could not do *Metzitzah b'peh*, pending the conclusion of the investigation.

What has been widely reported within the Jewish community, but not picked up in the press, is that the Mohel has fully cooperated with the investigation. It has been reported that one of the babies had a suspicious rash BEFORE the Bris. (This would mean, essentially, that this case is less about the Mohel's alleged irresponsibility, and more about the pediatrician's initial misdiagnosis. But, of course, you'll never see THAT reported in the press!

Rumors abound. So much is being claimed about the details of this case. Eventually it will all come out. I believe that the Mohel will be exonerated. But don't expect the New York Times to report on that. (“All the News that Fits, We Print!”) Where will a decent and righteous man go to regain his reputation?

As you can see, I am on both sides of this issue.

I do not perform *Metzitzah b'peh*. I don't need to. My teachers feel that it is not necessary. When parents have requested *Metzitzah b'peh*, I have respectfully suggested that I will do the *Bris* and the father can do the *Metzitzah*. When parents have insisted upon *Metzitzah b'peh*, performed BY THE MOHEL, I have respectfully recommended that they find another Mohel.

That having been said, I must emphasize that many great authorities whom I greatly respect have advocated continuing to do *Metzitzah* as it was done in the time of the Talmud. Is it safe? I am not an expert. A lot of people who are a lot smarter than I maintain that it is.

I am very concerned about this controversy. While, as I indicated above, it really doesn't directly affect me and my practice as a Mohel, nobody (at least, nobody whom I respect) wants government intervention in religious practice. But that is where we are headed. That's what PETA wants to do to Kosher slaughter, and that's what the anti-circumcision crowd wants to do to *Bris Milah*. They don't want to regulate Kosher slaughter and ritual circumcision; they want to END them. And, all too often, our biggest opponents tend to be Jews.

The word *Bris* means covenant. It is a contract between G-d and Israel. We must do His will, and He will watch over us. May G-d watch over that poor grief-stricken family who lost their baby. May He watch over an honorable Mohel and bless him with continued success. May He protect us from all harm and disease. May He protect us from government meddling into our religious affairs.

And may he protect us from all enemies; from those outside the Jewish community as well as those from within.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz