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## ***Confessions of a Non-intact Jewish Male***

**By Leonard Fein**

It used to be that the Jewish male's early sacrifice of his foreskin was meant to prevent trichinosis. No, wait a minute: Preventing trichinosis was the purpose of avoiding pork. Circumcision had no parallel scientific rationalization.

Its appeal (as distinguished from its status as commandment) was more aesthetic than scientific. Its aesthetic appeal was getting rid of smegma, a perennial candidate for inclusion on the list of the ugliest words in the English language. (In the opinion of some, smegma leads that list.)

But aesthetic appeal is an insufficient reason to mutilate the genitalia of Jewish baby boys. Moreover, an insult to aesthetics is hardly an adequate explanation for a procedure that long antedates the invention of the insulting word. "Smegma" was still only a gleam — more accurately, a mote — in the eye of its coiner when circumcision was introduced. And its introduction surely had nothing whatsoever to do with aesthetics nor even with science.

Its entire formal justification, at least so far as Jews are concerned, is, of course, cultural and theological. Circumcision is a signifier of membership. (Modify the member, maximize the membership.) That is why it is not properly classified as a form of mutilation.

Except, that is, by its never-say-snip opponents, who must now recast their persistent and annoying argument. As it happens, two studies recently published in *The Lancet* concluded that medically supervised circumcision offers men powerful protection against HIV, reducing the rates of infection by 50% to 60%. This revelation (we're talking theology, aren't we?), joined as it has been with a recommendation for adult male circumcision as an AIDS preventive, is plainly

a setback to the pro-foreskin camp. And, writing as a Jewish male — as what they, in fact, call a “non-intact” Jewish male — I may say it is a pleasure to witness their comeuppance.

Google “circumcision” and you will see why. Learned paper after learned paper informs us that we’ve been irreparably traumatized by our experience; that circumcised infants exhibit behavioral changes after circumcision; that some circumcised men have strong feelings of anger, shame, distrust and grief about having been circumcised; that circumcision disrupts the mother-infant bond, and that some mothers report significant distress after allowing their sons to be circumcised.

You’ll find, as well, fervid argument that the real purpose of circumcision, in its origin, was to inhibit sexual pleasure, to depress the urge to masturbate. Jews, according to that line of reasoning, were early Puritans.

Balderdash. The dogma that there is no stigma to smegma — and if there’s no foreskin, there’s no smegma — appears now much shakier.

But: Read the literature, and you’ll learn that those who defend the practice of neo-natal circumcision are typically described as “culturally biased,” which may or may not be a code term for “Jewish.” Read the literature of a militant anti-circumcision group called the Circumcision Resource Center and you’ll learn that a majority of its board of directors is Jewish, as are a third of its Professional Advisory Board, inevitably inviting the question of whether they, too, are culturally biased. Angry with their parents for having had them circumcised?

Okay. I am not qualified to judge the continuing medical controversy or the motives of those engaged in it. I can’t even say that “intact males” — that really is the term — have more fun. (The use of the term “intact males” sounds to me pretty much like “partial-birth abortion,” a term that is technically true but coined in order to win the argument by stigmatizing those who disagree.)

But this is clearly not merely a medical controversy. The role of Jews in life and in literature has often been sexualized. The “Jewess” as temptress, for example, was a common theme in European literature; perhaps it suited those who themselves yearned to be tempted to imagine Jewish men as erotically wounded.

In America, the European stereotype underwent major transformation. Stereotypes of Jewish men in America (decisively non-sexual, especially in the absence of liver) and of Jewish women (the princess syndrome, sexually frigid) are not merely offensive, they are wounding. They may be a kind of X-factor in prompting intermarriage.

A scientific finding that circumcision is a useful AIDS preventive doesn't directly affect all that. But if the pro-foreskin camp now relents and even retreats from its insistent claim that we Jewish males don't know what we're missing — or that we do know, and that is why we are so neurotic, displacing our reduced libidinal energy onto such asexual concerns as poverty, war, politics and such — well, the study will have helped not only the population on whom it focused, African men, but also serendipitously American Jewish men as well.

Do I sound defensive here? Am I merely expressing resentment because deep down I am among the traumatized? I suppose that's possible.

I don't remember my own circumcision very well at all, but then my memory isn't as sharp as it used to be. (And another thing: My memory isn't as sharp as it used to be.) Maybe I winced; I know I've winced more in recent years when I've been a guest as our newest male arrivals have been inducted.

Or maybe mine was an early learning experience in stoicism. My older brother claims no memory of the occasion; my hunch is that he and my father were dawdling in the kitchen at the time.

The ones who oppose circumcision — call them the “right to foreskin” crowd — say that removing the foreskin is pretty much like extracting a tooth that is perfectly healthy. I think it is more like removing a cataract. And I think that what's really bothering them is circumcision envy.