Bruchim Podcast – EPISODE 1

Episode 1-Jews Opposed to Circumcision?
In this inaugural episode of the Bruchim Podcast, Eli Ungar-Sargon is joined by Bruchim's Director of Strategic Initiatives Max Buckler. They discuss whether being a Jew opposed to circumcision is a contradiction in terms and explore the complexity of Jewish identity. They talk about the need for an organization like Bruchim and why we don't accept the don't ask don't tell status quo. And Max shares how he first became interested in the subject of circumcision.

Show Notes
Bruchim's website:
www.bruchim.online
Harold Kushner "When Bad Things Happen to Good People"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When_Bad_Things_Happen_to_Good_People
Harold Kushner vs. Christopher Hitchens debate from 2009:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xx_ov2NiNo4

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

This is The Bruchim Podcast, the only podcast in the world dedicated to Jews who think differently about circumcision.

♪ (THEME MUSIC PLAYS) ♪

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

Welcome to The Bruchim Podcast. I'm your host, Eli Ungar-Sargon, and I'm sitting here in sunny Los Angeles. Joining me today from Hong Kong is our director of strategic initiatives at Bruchim, Max Buckler. Max, it's so good to kick off this new podcast with you.

MAX BUCKLER:

Hey, Eli, great to be here with you. Really excited to be a part of this first inaugural Bruchim Podcast.

EU-S:

Yeah, super exciting. This has been in the works for a while. So, for people who don't know us, we're Bruchim. Bruchim in Hebrew has a kind of dual meaning. It literally means "they who are blessed." But it's also part of the Hebrew phrase "bruchim habaim," which is how you say "welcome" in Hebrew. At Bruchim, we advocate for the open and welcoming inclusion of Jewish circumcision objectors and their children in Jewish spaces.

Now, before we go any further, I think people listening might have a few questions about this. Chief among them would be, "Jews opposed to circumcision? Isn't that just like a contradiction in terms? Like, being a Catholic opposed to communion, or a Muslim opposed to fasting or something like that? How can you be a Jew opposed to circumcision?"

So, what say you to this, Max?

MB:

Right, Eli. "Jew opposed to circumcision" does kind of have a contradictory sound to it. Jews are famous for their propensity to disagree with one another. So, you know, it's two Jews, ten opinions is a common phrase. But circumcision is one of the things where people tend to assume, inside the community and out, that there's only one opinion, and that's "do it." You know, people might do it for different reasons, but a lot of the times that's kind of the assumption that people have, and they're not aware that actually throughout Jewish history, there has been pushback to circumcision. And certainly right now, with this group, we're seeing more and more people who are, you know, at least concerned about this, or actively eschewing it for their children. So, one reason why it can't be a contradiction of terms is because it already exists. You know, here we are.

EU-S:

Absolutely. We are living proof that being Jewish and being opposed to circumcision is not a contradiction in terms. But I think a lot of the confusion for people when they first encounter the idea of a Jew opposed to circumcision is that their kind of model of religious tradition comes more from Christianity, the sort of dominant religion in our culture. Generally speaking, being a Christian or being a Muslim is subscribing to and committing to a certain set of beliefs. Right? So, if you're a Christian, you're committing to the belief that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, for example. And that's a defining characteristic of what it means to be a Christian. And without that, you're not a Christian.

But with Judaism, it's a lot more complicated than that. Right? Because there are all of these different aspects that go into what people take to mean Jewish identity. Right? So, first of all, there's an ethnic component to what it means to be Jewish. Right? So, there's this hereditary component of being Jewish. It's being descended from Jewish ancestors. And that's one part of what it means to be Jewish.

There's also a cultural aspect to Jewish identity, various parts of Jewish culture, which is rich and goes back centuries and millennia. And notice that both of these components are independent of belief. Right? So, you can be born to Jewish parents or a Jewish parent or have Jewish ancestors, and that has nothing to do with belief, but you still identify as Jewish.

And you can also be a part of Jewish culture and not necessarily subscribe to or commit to any particular kinds of Jewish beliefs. And you're still-- that's still-- you still consider yourself Jewish.

MB:

Right. And sometimes those intermingle. You know, for example, you know, something that people could perceive as a purely religious element could also be, you know, experienced by Jewish people as a purely cultural element. For example, a lot of people do a Passover Seder. That's a very enduring tradition that a lot of Jews participate in. But for some people, that's a deeply religious event. And for others, that's their cultural adhesion to Judaism. You know, which-- so which kind of-- which is what I'm asking. Those are-- the lines get blurred even with things that appear-- you know, watching Seinfeld, that's something you would say, "That's purely cultural. We can't describe that to religious sentiment."

But even aspects of Jewish practice, which some people would think of as religious, are-- could also be experienced as cultural.

EU-S:

And all of this is to say that when you think about Jewish identity, even Jewish religious identity, right, what we're actually talking about is this amalgamation of different kinds of things that don't really properly map onto the normal model that we use to think about religion in our culture.

MB:

What you're raising is a really complicated element of this whole conversation, which is not even the question of, like, what and who is Jewish, but, like, what is Jewish religion compared to, say, other normative conceptions of religion.

Like, if someone says, "I'm Jewish," that doesn't tell you necessarily about their beliefs, the same way as if someone said, "I'm Catholic" does.

You know, if someone's saying, "I'm Jewish," first of all, you don't know if that person's religious at all, you know, whether that means belief or practice. It could simply mean identity, which is the case for lots and lots of Jews around the world.

EU-S:

Yeah, there are all of these other aspects that go into what we call Jewish identity. And I may blow our listeners' minds just a little bit when I say that not only is this true of ethnic identity and cultural identity, but I think even when we get down to Jewish religious identity, the idea that Jewish religious identity is a commitment to a certain set of beliefs doesn't really map properly.

MB:

There are a number of things, you know, which we could definitely say are pretty canonized. You know, the idea-- Every Hebrew school student learns that the most important prayer is the Shema, which is talking about, you know, God-- you know, there only being one God, and that is one of the core beliefs that's ascribed to, you know, to the Jewish community over history.

But when someone within the religious Jewish community says, "I'm religious," that more indicates to fellow Jews that they observe a breadth of Jewish practices with some serious commitment.

So I think when I think of who is a religious Jew, I think more about who's committed to, you know, a certain set of practices than beliefs. So that's true.

EU-S:

I think we've done a fairly good job of explaining how being a Jew opposed to circumcision isn't a contradiction in terms.

But if you're a religious Jew, isn't it true that you should at least be committed to the practice of circumcision, Max?

MB:

Well, Eli, what I'll do is relate it to the religious education that I got. And I actually have had the opportunity to be educated in a lot of different bands of the Jewish tradition. I went to an Orthodox day school. I've been involved in the Conservative movement. And I've been involved in many Reform spheres. So I've gotten an answer on this from a lot of different folks.

One of the things you'll see in the Jewish world is that questioning and challenging is really, really important. And that can be applied to even some of the most important practices in the Jewish tradition and in the spectrum of Jewish practice.

So even something as historically important as circumcision, the way I perceive what's important Jewishly is to take something that is potentially really important, put it on the table, and say, do we need this? Why did we do it before? And should we keep doing it going forward? And I think that's a very natural Jewish question to ask. And I think one of the problems I have with this issue is that the Jewish community is not applying those modes to circumcision. They are not looking at it critically enough. It's in many ways taken for granted.

Even if you end up with the determination that you should keep doing it, which I personally wouldn't agree with, you should at least be scrutinizing it and taking a look in and understanding the issue and raising the conversation. And if circumcision is so important, it should be important enough to be in the discussion.

EU-S:

The sort of core idea of struggling with things that cause us ethical discomfort, it's seen throughout the entire history of the Jewish tradition. There's actually no point in Jewish history where Jews weren't struggling with some aspect of the tradition from an ethical perspective.

And that brings me to the sort of need for Bruchim in the world. Why is there a need for Bruchim in the world? And I think what both you and I have noticed, having been engaged with this issue over time, is that as a result of circumcision being a somewhat culturally taboo subject, the normal operating procedure of questioning and challenging and engaging with the ethical challenges of various Jewish practices, as has been done for issues having to do with the role of women and the role of homosexual Jews, and do we ordain rabbis who identify as homosexual? Do we ordain rabbis who are female? Right?

These are all things that various denominations in the Jewish world have struggled with. And this is the normal way of doing things in the Jewish tradition and throughout Jewish history. But circumcision has somehow been relegated to a place where we don't really have these conversations in the same way. And I think you and I were both disturbed by this. And it's a big kind of motivating force behind why we've engaged so deeply on this issue.

MB:

Yeah, and I know this is something you've written about, whether specific to the reform movement, and a concern that we have is that it seems that if this were elevated to a more prominent discussion, intra-community, then there'd be a lot more opposition to the practice. And one of the reasons why it's so prevalent is because there isn't that robust discussion.

And I think that that is one of the great aspects of Bruchim, is making this safe space to take this issue out and take a look at it carefully and sensitively for people within the Jewish community.

EU-S:

That's definitely, for me, a key part of what we're doing at Bruchim, is creating, as you say, a safe space for Jews of all stripes to question circumcision from an ethical perspective and still remain within their Jewish identity. To me, that's sort of a key component of how we do things and why we do things, right? It's this idea that central to the Jewish tradition throughout history, if something is bothering the Jews of that generation from an ethical perspective, there are mechanisms within the Jewish tradition to deal with that. And in fact, that's how the Jewish tradition evolves, that's how the

Jewish-- and I'm talking about this not just from a cultural perspective. This is religious. What I'm saying now is how the religious Jewish tradition has evolved over time. It's ethical challenges that people of a generation have that they bring and engage with the tradition. And there are mechanisms, legal mechanisms, and other religious mechanisms, for dealing with those areas of conflict.

And that's how you can see all kinds of things moving into the past, into the rearview mirror. So Temple Judaism, when the Temple was destroyed, Judaism had to make a massive shift to community-based, synagogue-based, learning-based forms of religion. And with that, the entire sacrificial system went out the window. The entire religion sort of had to undergo a revolution. And there have been multiple revolutions of that nature over the course of Jewish history.

MB:

And it's the exact kind of thing where if you said to people in the era of sacrifices that in another 1,000 years, people will think of sacrifices as so unethical to the point that they wouldn't even consider bringing them back, they'd say, well, then, there won't be any more Judaism. If you attach a specific practice to the entire identity, then you're kind of asking for trouble in this particular group, because almost everything will get taken out and changed.

EU-S:

Yeah. So one of the unique challenges that Jews who are opposed to circumcision face in the modern period is that for a certain contingent of religious Jews, circumcision objectors are a threat to Jewish identity. And that can manifest in pretty punitive behavior towards Jewish objectors to circumcision. And what I mean by that is that there are certain rabbis and certain religious leaders who see a rejection of circumcision as a rejection of Jewish identity in toto. And they believe that it is their role to use this as a kind of leveraging point. And they will make examples of Jewish objectors to circumcision by ostracizing them from the Jewish community.

And this is another area where we at Bruchim feel that we can play a role. We hear from some of these Jews.They contact us. And we serve as a go-between between them and their rabbi or them and their community, trying to ascertain

and advocate on their behalf for their place in their Jewish communities. And if all else fails, finding them other communities where they can feel comfortable, where they will be welcomed.

MB:

Right. And we've seen some of these real situations when sort of on the ground level that folks have had terrible experiences with community leaders where they've been turned away from the organized community for their position, whether or not that's a position they've been public about or just that they've expressed their concerns to the rabbi.

And then comes down to a conversation in the rabbi's office where they're like one of those terrible, "you'd be more comfortable somewhere else" situations. And kind of one of the reasons some of that has happened is that there hasn't been an organized voice for people in that position, like Bruchim. And once there is, it's much more difficult for community leaders to take a hard line like that when that person has community to lean on and has resources.

And that can be a very alienating experience when you're just being told, oh, something you've done is disqualifying you from participating here. When now you can kind of say, like, hey, I actually am entering this conversation with education from the people at Bruchim about why you should not exclude me. And then it changes the whole candor of the conversation.

I think that there's another element that Bruchim adds in terms of those practical on the ground situations of someone feeling pushed out or of rabbis, as you mentioned, looking to kind of protect Jewish identity by not letting this conversation in, which is that there are many rabbis who wouldn't necessarily take that hard line that you described, which is that they're saying you're not welcome and you're sort of dismantling the Jewish identity. But they also don't want to outwardly say, I'm accepting Jews who take this position into my community. So they're kind of taking this line that's saying, like, well, I wouldn't exclude someone, but I also don't support it or something.

And I think that's a really crucial part of what Bruchim does is in terms of saying in those kind of situations, well, are they or aren't they? For certain Jews in this situation who may be looking to be involved in the community, the problem is they just don't know if they're welcome or not.

EU-S:

We don't believe in don't ask, don't tell at Bruchim.

MB:

Exactly.

EU-S:

This just does not work. And I think this is a really important point because I think listening to this, a reasonable person why can't whose business is it, who's circumcised and why can't people just keep it to themselves and no one has to know. And we have a don't ask, don't tell situation. And we are very strongly against don't ask, don't tell for the simple reason that it ultimately ends up defaulting to alienating people.

Because when people don't know where they stand on this issue, they will ultimately just fall off the map and not participate in Jewish life and feel alienated from their Jewish identities.

And so we strongly believe that communities and synagogues and rabbis and summer camps and Jewish institutions need to openly welcome and proactively welcome these Jews back into the community who, for obvious reasons, feel very deeply alienated from Jewish life and sometimes from their Jewish identity.

MB:

There's a huge difference between an open, warm welcome and a begrudging, well, I'll allow it, you know, situation. And I think that there would be a lot of benefits. I know that that is a conversation that's come up a good amount in interfaith marriages. And we're actually dealing with some news now that Hebrew College in Massachusetts now formally accepts rabbinical students who are in interfaith relationships. I believe they're only the second rabbinic institution, educational institution, to do that after the Reconstructionist movement.

And that's a statement that you're not just, you know, to not only rabbinical students, but to the whole community where many people are intermarried,

that you're not just a part of a community, but an integral part of the community and the future of the Jewish people.

EU-S:

Yeah, intermarriage is a very interesting sort of analogy to make here. There are some obvious differences, but the similarities are super interesting to me because intermarriage also touches on some of these taboo Jewish identity type issues. And that is an issue that is starting to get some traction in the Jewish world, people thinking about it critically. There's still a lot of work to be done, I think, around accepting interfaith families. And there's a lot of the sort of toxicity that we see around this issue, too, unfortunately, with interfaith marriage and interfaith families. But some progress is being made.

MB:

I think it's really similar in terms of the ways-- and not the issues themselves, but in terms of the ways that community authorities have viewed it as a threat to the future of Jewish identity. And then also in terms of saying, like, well, once you have people who are in that situation, how do you integrate them in the community? And what we're arguing for is that when people have different views, even if they're minority views within the community, the community is just much richer when you have those people in the mix and have them not just tolerated, but as a full member of the community.

EU-S:

I'm wondering if you would share with our audience, Max, your personal journey to this issue. How did you first start thinking critically about circumcision? Why has it become such an important part of your life? Tell us about how you came to this.

MB:

Yeah, so this is a question that comes up. For anyone considering speaking publicly, you're going to be asked about your origin story. For me, what's funny is I'm not really 100% sure the exact moment when I became concerned about circumcision. It kind of grew on me over time through conversations within the community.

But what I can say for sure is that I know the moment when I kind of went over the top, so to speak, in terms of kind of being on red alert, being like, I need to start getting involved. I need to start doing more reading, which was when I saw a very popular video on YouTube, I think over a million views, of a debate between Harold Kushner, Conservative rabbi, very well-known Conservative rabbi, and Christopher Hitchens, who is a very well-known kind of atheist who spent the last, I'd say, decade of his life kind of going after religion and doing a lot of debates with religious people of all stripes.

EU-S:

And Kushner's the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, is that right?

MB:

That's right. Kushner is an amazing figure in terms of showing the way of what a liberal, religious, ethical thinker can do. I mean, he wrote books. He thought deeply about a lot of different moral issues and came up-- he was great.

But the problem here is that in this debate, Hitchens brings up circumcision. And he's saying, I would never go after a child with a sharp stone. And what if I was cutting a little girl? And kind of like a very basic attack on circumcision.

[Christopher Hitchens:]

There are things that are morally normal, even if a morally average or mediocre person would not unprompted do. For example, hold down their daughter at the age of six, tear off her underwear, and cut her genitalia with a sharp stone. They wouldn't do that if they didn't think God was telling them to do it. Or the Mullahs, or if it's a boy, the rabbis weren't telling them to do it. One of the reasons why I have the lurid subtitle I do in my book, *Religion is a Poison*, is that it makes ordinary moral people, compels them, forces them, in some cases orders them, to do disgusting, wicked, unforgivable things. There's no expiation for the generations of misery and suffering that religion has inflicted in this way and continues to inflict. And I still haven't heard enough apology for it.

MB:

No, it's not for me so much that in that debate that Hitchens was so compelling. But what's telling is how poorly Kushner responded to it and how unprepared he was. And I want to say how intellectually dishonest he is in his answer.

[Kushner]:

Christopher, I've got to call you down on referring to circumcision as genital mutilation. My son cried more at his first haircut than he did at his bris. And statistically--

[Hitchens]:

You weren't doing it right then.

[Kushner]:

Statistically, the only long-term effect that it seems to have on people is it increases their chances of winning a Nobel Prize.

MB:

I mean, he's responding basically with dad jokes. You know, he's basically just dismissing concerns over cutting off part of a child's genitals. And I don't think you can dismiss those concerns with just dad jokes.

[Hitchens]:

I can't find the compulsory mutilation of the genitals of children. No subject for humor in that way or flippancy in that way. Maimonides says very plainly that it's designed to repress sexual pleasure, to deprive a male child as far as possible of the opportunity of that. The full excision, not just the snip or the-- the full mandatory covenant is fantastically painful, leads to trauma, leads to the dulling of the sexual relationship, and can be in itself life-threatening at that moment. We have the records-- I can show them to you-- of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds in the United States of boy babies who've died or had life-threatening infections as a result of this disgusting practice. That you, a person as humane as yourself, can sit here and think of that as a fit subject for humor shows what I mean. Religion makes morally normal people say and

do disgusting and wicked things. And you've just proved my point there. [applause]

MB:
So when I see that someone who is even as deeply morally concerned as Kushner just responding that way, what that to me indicates is that there's a greater hole in the community for understanding why we're doing this issue. That even someone who is that high up can't even defend it on a basic level.

And it was after I saw that interview that I kind of went on red alert. And I started learning more about the topic and getting more serious about talking to people. And just to throw in one more note about that debate, I also use that as a point of empathy when I'm having conversations about circumcision. Because when I see that even someone like Harold Kushner could struggle so much to engage on this topic against someone criticizing it, I kind of think, what chance does your average just Jew on the street have? And people haven't had the time to think about this deeply. And if even Harold Kushner struggles, then this is just something that needs education. Because what Kushner is responding to in his defense isn't so much circumcision. It's Jewish identity in total. He's saying you can't go against circumcision because then you're just going against the Jews. And that's a very deeply held identity point that's common in the community. So I think there's a lot we can learn from that interaction. And for me, it's my first time that I said there's a major problem.

EU-S:

Thanks for sharing that. It must have been a really distressing moment for you, especially given what is obviously a lot of respect that you have for Harold Kushner and his work.

MB:

So I always believe in pursuing great intellectual integrity on this topic. So for people who are really entrenched in defending circumcision, what they have on their side is a very deep history of Jewish thinkers placing a great importance on circumcision. That is there. So for us, for Jews who are opposing circumcision, we can't deny that long thread of importance.

But at the same time, even for the most observant Jews out there, it's never been the case that a non-circumcised Jew is not a Jew or that a person who opposes circumcision ceases to be Jewish.

What we have mostly is two problems. One is that a non-circumcised Jew cannot partake of the Paschal Lamb sacrifice, a practice which has been out of order, you could say out of fashion, for thousands of years and is now irrelevant. And also a punishment known as karait, which applies to actually a number of transgressions, which also is debated in terms of what it actually means. But it's never been the case that you're not Jewish. And that's a really important point for people to understand when they're dealing with this issue.

EU-S:

Yeah, I think it is important.

Max, thank you so much for joining me today.

MB:

All right.

[Next time on the Bruchim Podcast...]

Eli Ungar-Sargon:

Next time on the Bruchim podcast.

And what was your reaction when your father came to you at seven years old and said, you know, we need to cut a part of your penis off?

Gary Shteyngart:

Yeah, you know. I honestly can't remember what it was. And I've been interviewed for a documentary that I'm participating in about this. And we keep trying to go back to it. I imagine not fully comprehending everything that this entails. I mean, how do you? Because it's not like somebody says, well, we're going to cut off your fingernail. And you know what that is, right? But it's

not. Because the penis is so private that the whole idea of it probably was not discussed. You know, I'm sure it was glossed over in some ways. But also, I do remember that the idea was that I was going to become Jewish, that this was going to be a huge part. That I do recall. And I think the feeling was it had to be done. It had to be done.

Thank you for listening to the Bruchim podcast.

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Stay safe, stay healthy, and lehitraot. (upbeat music)

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