

Bruchim Podcast – EPISODE 2

Episode 2-A Complicated Complication with Gary Shteyngart

In this episode, Gary Shteyngart joins Eli to talk about growing up as an immigrant and his memories of being circumcised at the age of seven. He talks about the very painful complications from his circumcision and how it eventually came back to haunt him as an adult. Gary talks about the decision to go public with his story to the *New Yorker*, the reception of his article, and his feelings about the practice of circumcision in general.

Show Notes

Gary Shteyngart's article in the New Yorker:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/11/a-botched-circumcision-and-its-aftermath>

Gary Shteyngart on the Evolve podcast:

<https://evolve.fireside.fm/31>

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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 back to The Bruchim Podcast. I'm your host, Eli Ungar-Sargon, and joining me today from Manhattan, New York is my special guest, Gary Shteyngart.

Gary Shteyngart is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the memoir *Little Failure* and the novels *Super Sad True Love Story*, the winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize; *Lake Success*; *Absurdistan*; and *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, which is the winner of the Stephen Crane Award for first fiction and the National Jewish Book Award for fiction. His books regularly appear on “best of” lists around the world and have been published in 30 countries.

His latest novel, *Our Country Friends*, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller and was named one of the best books of the year by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Kirkus Review*, and others.

He holds an honorary doctorate from Amherst College and teaches at Columbia University.

Gary, welcome to the Bruchim Podcast. It's an honor to have you here.

GARY SHTEYNGART:

Great to be here. Thank you.

EU-S:

So I wanted to start with your childhood. What kind of Jewish background do you come from and what was it like growing up in the Shteyngart household?

GS:

Well, I came to the United States when I was seven years old. I was born in Leningrad, USSR and migrated. We came here in '79. We were part of this generation of what they called grain Jews, which is Jimmy Carter and Brezhnev, the Soviet premier, had reached an agreement to trade tons of grain, which the Soviet Union lacked at the time, for around 50,000 Jews. So I was essentially exchanged for a baguette or a croissant.

EU-S:

[laughter]

GS:

I don't know who got the worst part of the deal there. But 50,000 of us washed ashore in America, many in the New York area, and we settled in Queens.

Brighton Beach is where everyone thinks I come from, but we actually settled at first in Kew Gardens and then further east. And I attended a school that possibly some of your listeners may be familiar with, the Solomon Schechter School of Queens, a Hebrew day school in the middle of Queens, which I attended for eight years until high school, really from first to eighth grade. And I described this in my memoir, *Little Failure*, in excruciating detail. It was not a great experience, I have to say, as much as I would like to say otherwise.

Academically, the school was not great in the subjects that ex-Soviets are traditionally good at, like math, etc. There was no chess club, for sure.

And at the same time, there was a lot of prayer and things that felt a little bit out of tune with my experience. One funny anecdote, which I think kind of summarizes the relationship between Soviet Jews and their newly found Jewish experience, was we loved eating kielbasa, which of course is not all that kosher. And I was eating it with a little friend of mine and a rabbi burst in. We were eating in the bathroom because we're trying to find a place to eat it without being caught. And the rabbi came in and burst into the stall and said, "It's because of you the Holocaust happened."

EU-S:

Whoa.

GS:

Which took me so long to unpack, but I'm still unpacking it. Yeah, time travel, etc.

EU-S:

[laughs]

GS:

But also it was a difficult experience, I think, because we were so new, not just to Judaism but to America and to a capitalist society.

We were incredibly poor. We had government cheese, the whole schmear, if you will. And at the very beginning of this experience was another one that of course is the basis for the *New Yorker* piece that I'd written about my circumcision, which was the circumcision itself, which happened when I was

seven years old. Just very, maybe a month or even less after arriving in America, some Hasidic Jews had come to our house and said, "You have to do this. This is great. It'll make him a Jew and it's really healthy."

So the experience was one of intense pain and shame because there was an infection from the very beginning. Then there were other complications which haunted me for the next four decades. Well, to the very present day, I would say.

So on the one hand, I was sort of mildly disfigured by this surgery, but I was also sort of anathema to the kids in school, the Russian stinky Russian bear, etc. So it was this kind of weird double burden to bear, one of being ostracized by the kids for being poor and an immigrant and Soviet or Communist, as the kids would say.

And the other part of it, this big secret between my legs that I couldn't quite talk about until I revealed all to the *New Yorker*.

EU-S:

So if we can step back for a second. So your father, it was important to him that you get a Jewish education because he was sending you to a Jewish day school. Talk to me a little bit about what went into this decision to have you circumcised. You mentioned that there were some Hasidim, some Chabadniks that sort of approached him, but what was his process like? And then also, what was your reaction when he told you that this was what was going to happen?

GS:

Well, first of all, my father, so my parents are quite different in their approaches to Judaism. My mother, in fact, is half Jewish. Her mother is Jewish. Her father was not Jewish, as was the case in many Soviet families. So she was not that invested in the idea of Hebrew school.

My father, of course, very much was. He was even in the Soviet Union, he would, you know, march outside the synagogue in Leningrad demanding rights for Jews, which was a very tricky thing to do, obviously, at the time. So he was much more invested than my mother.

And he had been circumcised himself, which was very rare in the Soviet Union, but he, of course, was from a much older generation. Circumcision was conflated by the Soviet state into a religious practice that was discouraged, obviously, because all religion was discouraged. So that's why I wasn't circumcised, but he was.

But the decision about circumcision, well, I think, I mean, I can't enter my father's mind. I know that he was wholeheartedly into Judaism. There was a Hasid that went around telling us to get circumcised, but also people in his Orthodox, not Hasidic, but Orthodox synagogue were telling him that this was what he should do. So there were a lot of, everyone was on team circumcision here.

I think they made this case that it was, and probably, again, I'm just guessing here, but I would imagine my mother would like the fact that, you know, it's healthier, because I think circumcision has been an American, as well as a Jewish phenomenon for so long. And we can talk about the genesis of that, which goes back to Victorian England, you know. But it was, I'm sure the health aspect was mentioned. "It's healthy, it's clean." But the other part of it, I think, was that it was considered by my father, I would imagine, as a ultimate proof that you are a Jew. And maybe you are kind of an incomplete Jew without it, which I think is something that carries on, even among, you know, Reform Jews.

EU-S:

And what was your reaction when your father came to you at seven years old –

GS:

[laughter]

EU-S:

– and said, you know, we need to cut a part of your penis off?

GS:

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, I imagine not fully comprehending everything that this entailed. I mean, how do you? You know, because it's not like somebody says, well, we're going to cut off, you know, 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 of it. That I do recall. And that, I think, the feeling was it had to be done. It had to be done.

But what I do remember, and what I recount both in my memoir and in the subsequent *New Yorker* piece, was the procedure, the way, because it has to be performed under anesthesia at this stage of life, and at a hospital.

And you know, I think the hospital, which was Coney Island Hospital, which consistently ranked and ranks as not a great hospital by any standard, I think it was done, it was done under anesthesia. And I remember very much the scary part of being put under anesthesia at that age, having to count backwards, but also all the doctors were speaking English, and you know, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, even that I think was difficult for me at the time.

I remember waking up in intense, and the pain slowly assembling, and I remember there were Hasidic people praying and celebrating, I guess, in the room next door. I remember that.

And then they took me home, but it was impossible, the pain was so high that it was impossible to have any contact with anything else. So bedsheets, so my mother, I think, had made a bedsheet with a hole in it, you know.

And I remember relatives coming and being so confused, because there, you know, there was this bloody thing between my legs, and everyone was looking at it and looking at me. It felt, there were so many degrees of sort of humiliation that were built in that I think I've spent decades trying to unpack and trying to overcome in some ways. And then the pain just continued.

In the article I talked to a lot of people who've had botched circumcisions, and there was one guy, an Italian-American, whose parents came from Italy, where these are not performed at all, or very rarely. And as a baby, they made him do it. And he was constantly in pain, and peeing was especially hard, as it was for me then, and as partly as for me now. And everyone was telling him to man up,

you know, or the Italians were making jokes about it, you know, macho jokes about it. Because again, this whole thing is so freighted with masculinity.

In doing my research about this stuff, so many incidences of botched circumcisions came up. I was at a dinner with six very well-heeled people, probably most of them not Jewish, and my article had just come out, and they all, each of them, each couple had a story about something that had gone wrong with their child's penis after circumcision. In fact, at that dinner, everyone realized they had the same urologist at Cornell Weill, a pediatric urologist with the amazing name of Dick Pappas.

EU-S:

[laughter]

GS:

You can't see...

EU-S:

You can't make this up.

GS:

As a satirist, like, if I did that, people would be like, "Oh, he's going too far." But Dick Pappas –

EU-S:

Too much on the nose.

GS:

Too much on the nose, if you will. But Dick Pappas is real, and he's wonderful.

So this isn't—the reason it's not something that we talk about a lot is because everyone's too ashamed, especially the men are too ashamed to talk about it. I had somebody in the article who told me about his experience, and he said, "Please don't mention my name." And then he said, "Please don't mention the country I come from." And this is a country of 150 million people, you know?

EU-S:

[laughters]

GS:

But the shame was so great that he couldn't even, you know—I'm allowed to say it's in Southeast Asia, but that's it, you know?

EU-S:

Which is probably why we don't hear more about this. I want to get to that in a little bit, but I want to pull on one thread that you mentioned before, which I think is really fascinating, which is this idea that it's part of an immigrant experience. It occurs to me that Bruce Lee, when he came to the United States, also got circumcised as a teenager. And in his mind, in the biography that I read of him, they were saying that it was part of becoming an American.

He came from a culture that didn't circumcise, and sort of making his body American, circumcision was a part of that. And so it's interesting to me that you frame this as kind of part of your immigrant experience in that way.

GS:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Yes, yes. Part Jewish, part American.

It was interesting, as I was researching circumcision—this didn't make it into my article—but, you know, in America, circumcision traces its way, its path back to the Victorians, but it was seen as a way of—I mean, first it was prescribed for lunacy, quote-unquote "lunacy." It was prescribed for excessive masturbation, all the things that neo-Victorian culture hated with a passion.

And then after the war, I read an amazing address—I think it was to the American Medical Association, I could be wrong—but it was amazing in that it said, it contrasted Jews and African Americans. And it said that Jews were—I'm paraphrasing here, but something along the lines of a studious, or scholarly people, lovely, lovely people, and it was because they were circumcised. Whereas, I guess, "Negroes" was the term they were using, were a promiscuous people, and some other adjectives, I think, too, because they were not circumcised.

So the idea of being clean, of being upper class, that has always been tied in with the idea of circumcision in America. And then when the insurance companies started covering it, and after the GIs came home and had many, many children, the boomers, it became a huge part of American society, but not a huge part of most other Western or Eastern industrialized societies.

And then, of course, I think the presence of so many Jewish doctors certainly didn't hurt the idea that this was something they would also champion because of religious or cultural reasons. So it all melded together to create this sort of circumcision industrial complex in America.

EU-S:

So your circumcision, the trauma of it wasn't just that you were seven years old and fully conscious in a way that, I guess, infants aren't, although—

GS:

Well, studies go back and forth.

EU-S:

I like to question this. There's a kind of common idea that you hear, which is that infants can't remember or it's not as traumatic for an infant. And I feel like infants don't have language. So right there, we already have a barrier.

GS:

Absolutely. And I would say there are studies that show difficulty or more difficulties with latching when breastfeeding comes into play among circumcised boys than uncircumcised boys. So I think on some level—and that's an interesting almost metaphor because it requires a level of trust and closeness and maybe some of that—and again, here we really are speculating. I'm not a medical professional, but that is something that other medical professions have pointed to in studies.

EU-S:

Yeah. It's a difficult thing to compare, and I think it's ultimately—it's not a productive conversation, but it's something that people tell themselves. But I'm saying even from that perspective of people who think that having it done

at a later age is more traumatic, your circumcision in particular was botched in some way that compounded the trauma. So can you talk a little bit about that?

GS:

Yes. Yeah. In circumcisions, two kinds of mistakes can be made. One is too much is removed, and one is too little. And in this case, I think it was too little because what—and not only that, but also after it was too little, it didn't heal properly, which again could have been a part of the infection. But what had happened is it had formed a skin bridge. And what this is is a completely extraneous piece of skin that I think usually comes from the glans to about the midpoints of the shaft of the penis.

And I've tried to describe—I've spent so much time describing this, but it's so hard to describe. It looks like the cable of a suspension bridge, a mozzarella cheese stick.

EU-S:

[laughter]

GS:

I can't—there's so many—for this documentary that I'm a part of, I have to actually just draw it for them because it's so—I mean, I remember me and the *New Yorker* editor just kind of going over so many iterations of this and being like, "Eh, there's no perfect way to describe it." It's really weird.

But part of the pushback that I got from mohels was, "Well, this happened because he was seven, and infant circumcisions, this wouldn't happen." But that's actually 100% not true. Urologists tell me that skin bridges arise from infant circumcisions as well. So absolutely not. That's absolutely not the case.

EU-S:

Pediatric urologists, one of the top things that they deal with are so-called circumcision revisions.

These are stats that most people don't know about, but that would indicate that actually these sorts of things are much more common than we would know.

GS:

So common. Very, very common. I mean, look, there are statistics from 0.2% to 10% that I think both are probably inaccurate, or probably somewhere, I don't know, 1%, 2%.

But good Lord, 2% of children have problems from this, what I think is a fairly unnecessary procedure. That's a huge amount. That's no joke. Because of the sensitivity of this, this isn't having your pinky cut.

So what happened was the skin bridge remained. And because of it, I had difficulty, especially after puberty, I had difficulty of seeing myself as a male sexual person, because it was so strange. I began to realize, just from seeing, that this is not what this should look like. There was this third thing.

I once met a woman when I was already in my 20s who had a third nipple, and it had really destroyed a lot of her life. It wasn't anything bad about it, but she was just, just the feeling that you are not the way you're supposed to be is so difficult.

But in this case, I remember, I remember even before puberty, when my parents would leave and I'd be alone for a little bit, I would drop my pants and sort of put my penis between my legs and try to imagine what it would be like not to have one, because I thought, you know. And it's interesting, the Italian American gentleman I spoke with also said, without my prodding, he said, you know, that he felt like he was some kind of weird third gender because of all the difficulties that he had after a botched circumcision.

And then I remember the movie *Silence of the Lambs* came out, which I know is a movie that many gay Americans, LGBTQ Americans have issues with because of the portrayal of its gay serial killer.

EU-S:

Buffalo Bill, yeah.

GS:

Buffalo Bill, yes. But he also, I remember seeing that and being like shocked because he did this, I don't know if you recall, he would put his penis between his legs and pretend that he had, I guess, a vagina because he had the pubis above it. So it was sort of that, I remember seeing that and being like, oh my God, am I a serial killer or am I not? I really need to do that.

And I think it really messed up a lot of my relationships, sexual relationships, but also sexual relationships leading into just romantic relationships in general. It took a long time for me to make peace with it.

And maybe in some ways I never made peace with it. But in some ways, you know, after I got married and had a lovely marriage and had a lovely child, I was sort of, you know, you move on.

And then just as, just as I think, you know, what's that line from *Godfather 2*, is it "just as I thought I was out, they pulled me back in."

EU-S:

[laughter]

GS:

I, this was in 2020, so the year of the pandemic, around August, what had happened was, so there's this cable, right? That is the skin bridge, this extraneous thing hanging, hanging off my penis.

EU-S:

And that just healed that way. So even after the infection was gone and after everything subsided, you just had a skin bridge.

GS:

Yes, I just had this, like a third limb, if you will, you know, this thing. And again, completely not uncommon. The doctor that performed that I saw after this happened said that he had, you know, it's just patients that come in with a skin bridge.

But what happened to me was that this hair, I don't know from where actually, but this little hair had wrapped itself around the skin bridge and began to strangle it to the point where there was sort of pus coming out of it because, you know, this large piece of skin.

And it became more and more uncomfortable. I wouldn't say painful, but uncomfortable. I swim a lot. I love swimming. And I would sort of, as I swam in the pool, there was this constant feeling that something isn't right.

So I went and we tried tweezers. We tried different ways of getting this skin, this hair off, but it was tight, very tightly, like a bow. My wife looked up, you know, because this is a thing. She was looking up like getting hair off of, you know, skin bridges or whatnot. You know, I think she read somewhere Nair, which is a hair remover, right? That women sometimes use, or I guess men too. And so she tried that. We tried everything. We were really into operation, you know, "get this hair off my skin bridge."

So I spent half a year in upstate near Rhinebeck and I went to the Rhinebeck Emergency Center. And this was during the pandemic and there was a kind of triage situation going on.

So I was telling this young nurse or nurse's assistant, I don't know who she was, about my part, trying to explain it because it's such a weird thing to explain, right? And she said, "Oh honey, it must hurt so bad to have something go wrong in your Gentile area."

EU-S:

[laughter]

GS:

And that became the title.

EU-S:

That's where the title came from.

GS:

Yeah, the title was *My Gentile Region*. Maybe she said Gentile Region. Yeah, *My Gentile Region*. It was just great. And I remember the moment she said it, I was like, if I'm ever writing about this, this is going to be the title.

See, this is the good thing about writing is you can always, everything's material.

And so then I went to a urologist that my doctor recommended in the city and he got the hair off. He was very, he was like, "I'm amazing." He was so happy.

And he said, "Look, this thing has strangled this skin bridge to such an extent that it could literally break into two parts. And if that happens, you'll have these two things really like hanging off like, I mean, I think in the article I compared them to clothing pins hanging off of, you know, like two things just flapping off of it in the breeze, you know, because the skin bridge was tight. At least it was like a, you know, like a taut cable on a suspension bridge.

Now it was just two pieces of shmatas basically hanging off your schlong, if you can imagine that. So he said, you know, aesthetically that might not be the most attractive look. So if that happens, come and we'll remove them.

And then lo and behold, a couple of days later, it happened. And it wasn't, you know, I'm in my fifties now, or I wasn't then, I was in my late forties, but I was like, all right, I'm not exactly showing my schlong off to the nation here. So I didn't care aesthetically about it, but it actually felt very uncomfortable, you know, because as you would swim, these two pieces, they were sort of rubbing against the swimming suit. It was, it wasn't great.

So I said, all right, I'm going to go down and he's going to do it. So the way they do it, they give you a bunch of Valium. Then they inject lidocaine into the tip of the penis, which is unbelievably painful, as one can imagine. And they gave me a squeeze toy, which I think I almost broke.

EU-S:

[Laughter] Oh, gosh.

GS:

And this doctor, you know, urologists are kind of like the cowboys of the medical profession. And he was like, "oh, you're such a lightweight." I'm like, you're putting a giant needle into the tip of my penis here.

And then what happens is they, oh God, fulgurate, I'm bad with these terms, but they essentially it's like at a weenie roast, they actually burn off the skin with using a [bovine?] knife to make an incision. But then there's this, you actually see smoke coming off of your genitals as these parts are smoked off, so to speak.

At this point, you're not feeling much because the lidocaine has been inserted into the tip, but it's, it is the strangest thing you can ever imagine. I mean, I just, I have no words for it.

EU-S:

Were you at this point anticipating the pain that was to come or were you just sort of in the weirdness of the experience?

GS:

Oh, I thought it was – in fact, I, after it was over, I said, hey, you know, should I, you know, go home and rest? And he's like, nah, you're good. You know, you can do it.

EU-S:

So in your mind, you're like, I just dealt with the thing.

GS:

It's over. It's done. No, I remember I went out with my friends. I had like a lot of vodka. I was just so happy. It was like, you know, a second circumcision, a second, uh, I had done two mitzvahs now.

EU-S:

[laughter] So you're thinking, you're thinking I'm free of this issue.

GS:

I'm free of this. It's over.

But immediately the whole thing, I mean the places, the termini, the two places where the skin bridge had existed, one at the head of the penis and the other in the middle of the shaft, immediately there, the one in place on the bottom was hugely inflamed and covered in a kind of soot because of the burning. Right. So it looked bananas. The whole thing looks crazy, but according to the doctor, you know, that was just a part of it and it would all go down and everything would be fine. And for a couple of days there wasn't pain. It looked weird.

And then it started to hurt terribly. Like I can't even describe it. Well again, like clothes pins, but now with, with a hot center at them. And remember that the penis constantly sends signals via the spinal column to the brain. The penis is

like, hi, I'm excited. I'm erect or I'm, I'm not excited. You know, or I'm going to, you're going to pee through me now. So this is going to happen. And it's covered in nerve endings. The whole thing is a giant nerve if you think about it.

So when you fuck it up, if I may use that language, it's not happy. And your brain, it's, this is the problem. The main problem is that it's just an endless sensory experience when it is in pain. There is no end to it. Even sleeping becomes almost impossible.

So now I had gone back to almost the same experience as when I was a kid, which is that certain parts of it could not touch anything else. So the doctor said, all right, this is unusual, but he gave me this lidocaine patch, which had to be wrapped around it and then held with a kind of bandage.

But the problem is, you can bandage your arm, and it had petroleum jelly on it and some other stuff. And I guess lidocaine, but the problem is the penis is not like a limb or where, you know, you could just bandage it or apply a band-aid. It's constantly moving and it's constantly losing – it's never the same shape for long. Even in a non-erect state, it's not always the same.

So applying a bandage and to try to walk around with it is almost impossible.

EU-S:

God, so now in addition to the pain that you're experiencing, you're now layering on top of that, the discomfort of having to constantly adjust the bandage.

GS:

Constantly adjust the bandage. So I would try to go for a walk or something, because I walk a lot. I couldn't swim anymore because that would be impossible, but I tried to at least walk to get some endorphins going because I was so miserable that I would sort of, thank God this was the pandemic because, you know, everyone was dressed like shit and had a mask on, but I would wear these athletic pants and I would kind of put both my hands in them so I could hold onto the bandage as I walked.

EU-S:

Oh my gosh.

GS:

My mother, I remember when I interviewed her for *Little Failure*, she said, "We didn't know. We didn't know what would happen," which I thought was very kind of her to say, "We didn't know."

But now my wife was in charge and she was funny about it. She said, "You poor man, it looks like you're wearing that Elizabethan collar that dogs wear around their necks."

EU-S:

[laughter]

GS:

And then the other part of it is also this, that doctors don't have a full understanding of what some of these things can lead to. As my friend Mary Karr, the memoirist, said, she said, "I'm so amazed, doctors know what to do with boobs. They'll put them between two plates of glass, but here you can't even get a scan of it." She's like, "As much as people are crazed about dicks, we still know so little about them."

And I thought that was incredibly true because I ended up seeing literally a dozen urologists and they all had conflicting opinions. The scariest diagnosis was that of a penile neuroma. And a neuroma is a horrifying thing that happens to nerves, but often happens in the toes or the feet. And you can imagine how bad it is there, but on a penis, it's almost unimaginable. It's hard to treat. It's hard to get a full, to be fully healed from it.

So this doctor said, "Well, I think over time you'll get 80% better."

And I was like, "80%?"

When I told David Remnick about writing this article, he said, "Well, how are you feeling?"

I'm like, "I'm about..."

This was a long time after the time I'm speaking now.

And I said, "Well, I'm about 85, 90% better."

And he's like, "That's not good enough when it comes to the penis."

"That's not good enough." So that scared me. Another doctor said, "Try putting cortisone on it." I mean, there were so many opinions, but also it was terrifying because, I mean, literally half of New York had seen my penis at this point. And it looked so crazy.

The whole thing looked so insane that there was a nurse, a young nurse, who passed out upon seeing it. Now, for a man to have a woman pass out upon sight of one's penis, it sort of confirmed everything I thought about it since I was a kid and I had this gigantic Buffalo Bill thing on it where I thought, "I'm a freak. There's something incredibly scary about my penis that other men don't have."

EU-S:

This is not something any man wants to happen to them.

GS:

Not a good thing.

EU-S:

When they "drop trou" and someone passes out.

GS:

And someone passes out.

So this went on for a while. And I mean, I'm not a suicidal person or even one who suffers depression. I'm an anxious person for sure. And anxiety obviously was driving this. But there were moments when the pain would increase where I just thought, "How am I going to go through life like this? How am I going to be a father to my son? How am I going to travel?"

I kept thinking, you know, he had some cute graduation coming up and I thought, "I can't even go to that thing."

Finally, a friend of mine, a writer, told me about this gynecologist he knew in San Francisco who dealt with pelvic pain a little bit. And he, interesting, right, that it was a gynecologist, not a urologist, who was more attuned to my issue.

And he knew, I think she was the head of the pain clinic at Stanford who then knew a doctor at Northwell in Great Neck or Lake Success.

Yeah, in Lake Success, which weirdly enough is the title of one of my novels, a guy who specialized in also in pelvic pain. And he was great in that he wasn't like these urologists, half of whom were like, "Oh, it's all in your head. You know, never mind," you know.

You know, he said, "Yeah, this happens." And he prescribed an ointment that had all kinds of things in it. But the ointment was basically designed to cut off the signal from the penis to the spinal column.

And this was also, also I was taking Pristiq, which is a tricyclic antidepressant that also does something similar. And which I'm still taking.

So I'm still on one drug, but I'm not using the other, the ointment anymore. And what's remained is not pain per se, but still some discomfort continues. This is now what, over three years since this happened. And the discomfort happens almost exclusively after urination.

And at this point, it's hard to say if it's any physiological factor or if it's just this cycle of reporting from the penis, constantly saying, "Hey, remember me? This horrible thing happened to me."

So although when I touch the shaft of it, there is still, it's almost like a little P, P-E-A, that's in there. And that shouldn't be there. After the removal of the skin bridge, it should be completely smooth, you know, like any other shaft. But that's still there. And that makes me think that maybe the guy I call Dr. Neuroma was correct in his assessment that that is a neuroma, because that could be what a neuroma feels like.

EU-S:

So this crazy thing happened to you, and we've covered the fact that this probably happens a lot more frequently than people know. But talk to me about the decision to go public in a very big way with the story, because that must have been a big decision.

GS:

Well, yes and no. [laughter] I mean, in my novels, I've written about very uncomfortable things. I think very uncomfortable things is where it's at in terms of why we have literature to begin with. We write to try to figure out what the human experience is.

For me, I'm not a practicing Jew, but Judaism, I'm culturally very Jewish, but for me, Judaism has certainly had an impact. You know, it certainly has been a huge part of, certainly of my early life. But as we see, you know, this, it has had an impact physically and psychologically way beyond that. Even after Hebrew school, you know, everything it represented for me was over. Even after I'd created an entire life for myself and my family that didn't emphasize Judaism as a religion, certainly as a cultural entity, but not as a religion, it came back to be a part of my life again.

So I wanted to write about it for a couple of reasons. One, obviously, because it made for a great story. Now, theoretically, this could have been fiction, but it's so outlandish that fiction would have diluted it somewhat.

And the second part of it is I just wanted other people to know that this was a possibility of circumcision. So for me, that's why it became, you know, so after a while I said, okay, it's not just going to be about my penis and I'm going to try to expand it, if you will, to other things.

And that's when I started asking my friends, oh, do you know anyone who's had a botched circumcision? And that's where the shocking part was that all these voices started saying, oh yeah, oh yeah.

And it was really amazing because somebody had told me when I was a kid that other people had suffered this, I would have felt so differently about the skin bridge and all of the shame that it represented and the origin of it – lying there with my genitals exposed as relatives came by, all of that, you know.

And I thought, well, maybe it would be helpful for others to know about this.

EU-S:

Absolutely.

GS:

And maybe it would especially be helpful for mothers to know about this because I know that both parents obviously make the decision. But what I think often happens is that the father, who is circumcised, and I'm not even prioritizing Jews over non-Jews, but the father will be circumcised because in America that's how we do. And he'll be like, well, I want him to look like me. And it's weird with that, you know, and the mother will be like, all right, if it means that much to you.

But I just wanted to put out there in a very, you know, this isn't me yelling from the mountain, but this is me saying, hey, this stuff happens and you should know about it and you should have it factor in your decision.

EU-S:

I would say that the *New Yorker* is a kind of mountain to be yelling from.

GS:

[laughter] That's funny. That is funny.

No, and then, I mean, the interest in it was incredible. So I just, you know, I spoke to Johns Hopkins University, which circumcises a lot of men in Africa in a bid to prevent AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. And that was very interesting too, because, and I had to do a lot of research. The good thing about writing to the *New Yorker* is whatever research you do really does get peer reviewed quite a bit. The *New Yorker* is very scared of being wrong about things and is very rarely wrong for that reason. So often fact checking takes longer than the actual writing of the article, which is both annoying but also I guess helpful for the reader.

But in this case, you know, I was looking at just the statistics and it seemed like the one thing that may be circumcision helpful for in this kind of scenario is against certain kinds of diseases, but specifically in countries with inadequate healthcare systems.

So if we're comparing, you know, developed, I don't even know what the correct term is anymore, but advanced industrialized nations, I guess. And if we compare East Asia, Europe and America, which circumcises quite a bit, the instances of problems arising from a lack of circumcision are truly negligible.

Penile cancer, all this stuff is, this isn't real stuff. You know, all these arguments, they make no sense.

EU-S:

Yeah.

GS:

And in fact, most pediatric associations have already around the world have either said that we shouldn't be doing this and, or, you know, it's up to the parent, whatever. I think that's the American Pediatric Association.

EU-S:

Yeah, the United States has higher rates of HIV than Europe and Europe doesn't circumcise.

GS:

Yeah. Exactly. And I mean, there, you can also say it's because we're scared of sex education and other things too, but just in general, yes, it's absolutely true that, that this does not seem to be helping the U.S. in any way, shape or form. So that was interesting.

And then I also discovered other terrible things in my research, including the racist component. I wrote about, I think he was 19, 20 years old, this young man who had to have it for some reason. Well, he didn't have to have it. He was talked into it by a doctor in Canada and it was botched.

And what was fascinating was that he was suffering exactly the same symptoms that I was at age 47, or was it, or 48? The fact that, and he was a, he was an athlete before that. He was, I can't remember, he was a snowboarder or something like that. And his whole life had just fallen apart. He couldn't do anything because the, it was constantly being reinforced in his mind that he had this pain or discomfort and he killed himself. He took his own life.

And at that point I was, you know, at a stage where I was thinking, Jesus, you know. And he wrote a note to his mom explaining why he did it. And it was just, it was just so very, very sad.

It was also sad that, I mean, he wrote her the note, but he couldn't even tell other people about what he was going through because I think there was such a sense of shame about what had been done to him.

So all this stuff, again, reinforced my desire to write this article. And of course the usual, you know, mohel blowback, as you can imagine, all quoting scripture.

EU-S:

I was just going to ask you about that. What was the reaction like? Like, how would you characterize the reaction to your, to your article coming out? And this was in October of 2021.

GS:

Is that right? I can't – time goes so weirdly for me. Yes, I'm probably right.

So the reaction among the people that I wanted to react to it was pretty good. So there were all these women, Jewish and not, who would come up to me and say, you know, I made a decision not to do this after I read your article. So I was like, all right, you know, that, that sounds great.

People were saying that, you know, certain rabbis were now saying, instead of saying you should do it, we're saying it's your decision or something like that.

Again, I don't have statistics or any accuracy about it. But I also said to others, you know, well, if you want me to talk to more to your community, I'm, I'm happy to do it. I'm not a practicing Jew, but I certainly know about Judaism after eight years of Solomon Schechter and I, and I, you know, I've been to Israel many times. I can talk to it from not an entirely ignorant position.

And I did also, you know, read and do research into what some of the Jewish aspects of this are. I was also surprised by a lot of it too. Surprised. I, you know, I always thought, for example, that the circumcision originated with the Jews, right? Because we're so clever that even thousands of years ago, we knew this was such a healthy procedure that we – but no, no, not at all. The Egyptians were doing it before the Jews and they were doing it to teenagers, to noble teenagers as part of this rite of passage that entailed being manly enough to have this done to you without passing out.

So, you know, it had gone from, oh, the Jews were so medically advanced to, oh, a bunch of Egyptians wanted to see, you know, how much pain their kids could stand.

But I think I did expect more that organized Judaism, particularly the Reformed branches or Reconstruction, whatever, you know, that they would be more interested in having me speak to their communities or their synagogues, which, you know, usually I charge a hefty fee for speaking to anyone, but I thought I would do this pro bono, if you will. But you know, nobody really wanted any of that.

I think it's again, kind of a third rail, if you will, for, for there wasn't that much interest in the topic or, and then I remember. I was asked to talk to a, to a podcaster about the subject and I did and spoke about it as I'm speaking with you.

And then the next podcast, he had a mohel, a fairly progressive mohel come on and speaking about, and he was talking about how much he loved circumcision, et cetera. And he wouldn't even, what I thought was interesting about the second podcast was how he didn't even address my pain or address what had happened to me, which should have been the topic, you know, partly the topic here. He wouldn't address the medical or psychological or any other aspects.

EU-S:

We're talking about the Evolve Reconstructionist podcast where you were on with my colleague Max Buckler. Yes, yes. I remember that, yeah.

GS:

Well, I thought, well, what am I doing this for? You know, if all we're going to do is, you know, and I'm fine with being, you know, you can be pro circumcision, that's absolutely fine. But to completely sort of gloss over or discount what I had to say was fascinating to me.

It was almost like there were blinders on him, you know, like a horse blinders where he could only see one answer and the answer was circumcision and there was nothing else that could be entertained.

And to me, and maybe, you know, maybe the one reason I'm not involved with Judaism on a religious level is because I've always seen it as a very blinkered

entity, a very blinkered faith when it comes to so many subjects, you know, that it's just, it's this way or there isn't – and if you don't follow scripture or stricture, their exact strictures, then you're not Jewish.

This is the interesting part to me, I think, because the mohels that did respond from the Orthodox, right, were saying, well, if we, there was this one argument, it wasn't just an argument, it was a whole essay about how if we stop circumcising, Judaism will cease to exist.

And I think to a lot of people, even, you know, Reform, et cetera, Jews, I think somehow that is buried deep inside their soul, this idea that if you don't circumcise boys, you are not making a full Jew. And then if you're not making a full Jew, you are letting, you are yourself causing a great deal of shame and tragedy to come upon the Jewish people. And that's why you need to do it.

And I am fascinated by that because to me, I see so many, so much of Judaism, I see becoming outside of the Orthodox sphere, outdated for so many people, you know, obviously there's a whole thing about Israel, I don't even want to discuss that.

But you know, even in small things like the idea, or not so small things for me, the idea, you know, should we do this or not?

Even the Reform and progressive parts of Judaism are like, you can't, gotta look away, you know? –

EU-S:

Yeah, well at Bruchim, we're working overtime to change –

GS:

I know you are.

EU-S:

– that reality for sure.

GS:

I know you are.

EU-S:

I wanted to circle back for a second to your article because something that really stood out to me that I'd really love to get your take on is that when I think about the role of humor in this subject, it's often used to distract from the discomfort that people have around circumcision. But my sense of the way it functions in your work is that it seems to somehow manage to do the opposite. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the role of humor in your writing about this issue

GS:

Absolutely. So my sense is, and I teach a course at Columbia on humor writing in which we kind of use this formula where humor allows you, it buys you almost credits or chips from the reader to get the tragedy to them in a different way. So once the reader, once you've reeled the reader in and says, look, we're at a bar, we're having a beer, and I'm gonna tell you a funny story, but it's not gonna be that funny in the end, but it'll be pretty funny as I tell it, you know?

And that allows for this, I mean, imagine if I just sat you down and said, look, I'm gonna talk about my dick now and horrible things were done. But what I'm trying to also do is subvert the idea that penises are inherently funny because Judaism has like a hundred funny words, you know, the shmegeggy, the schlong, the schmekel, you know, it just goes on and on and on.

It's almost like if we make the penis a thing of humor and fun, then we can do whatever we want to it, you know, because it's like this ridiculous appendage that probably needs to be cleaned up anyway if we're gonna, you know, because almost the laughter at it is the idea that there's something not right about it or something dirty about it or shameful about it. So we have to make all these jokes.

So what I wanted to do is I wanted to take all of the humor that I know I'm capable of and that has been sort of, you know, the defining, I guess, feature of my novels and other writing. And I wanted to use that humor to get the reader safely ensconced within this subject and then to give them all the horror of what had happened to me and to other men.

Now, having said that, after the piece came out, I did get a lot of women saying I was cracking up and laughing and loving this piece. And my husband was just sitting there, you know, with his knees clenched together and, you know, he couldn't get through it or whatever.

So yes, gender matters, I think, when you approach this piece.

EU-S:

Yeah, no, but like you say, and I think this is so important because, you know, you spend enough time around mohels and you've heard all of the bad circumcision jokes, but this is a really important thing, which is like mohels use humor to try and distract people from their discomfort. And my feeling about how you used humor in the article, and I think how you use humor generally was it's the opposite. You're trying to make people feel comfortable to accept uncomfortable truths.

GS:

Exactly. No, thank you for putting it better than I have.

Yes, and one of the things that I focused on, the mohel that went bananas after the article and published, you know, piece after piece about it, I looked at his Instagram and he had this photo that he had taken of a boy, an infant crying, screaming his head off and his T-shirt says, "It's my bris and I'll cry if I want to."

And I thought, holy crap, you know, I mean, it's, yes, it's humor meant to distract, but also to maybe make the parents more comfortable, but it's also making fun of a child's first, hopefully first and hopefully last, but not really intense, intense experience of pain. And perhaps even though a child may not reason in this way at eight days, but of also a kind of betrayal. So that I thought was incredible. And I thought that is, that crosses the line from bad humor to a kind of sadism almost.

EU-S:

Yeah.

So through your work on this subject, I imagine that you've encountered a number of activists in the intactivist movement. I was wondering if you could share your impressions of that movement and the people who are active on this.

GS:

You know, I think we have to, I do want – look, I love doing podcasts like this.

I love speaking, you know, to Johns Hopkins, to any other entity that wants to hear more about this.

But I think what I'm trying to do is to not make people feel, Oh no, what have I done? What am I doing? But to feel like, look, this has been done for a long time. This has been a part of certainly Jewish tradition, but also of American tradition. It's not going to go away overnight. We have to be respectful of people who feel different ways about this. All I want is for you to know a little bit of my experience and what the truth around it is.

Some intactivists or whatever you would call them are, you know, they see this as a guerrilla action to stop everything from happening. And I don't know if they attract too many followers because, you know, I don't think what they do, what some of them do, I shouldn't paint them all with the same brush. Some are a lot more thoughtful about it, you know, but it does feel to me like it's become a kind of strange, you know, male movement that, that is not, and I do really think that here that it really is – and I hate this, you know, cause it sounds like I'm minimizing the role of fathers and clearly fathers have quite a bit to do with this – but I do want to speak to mothers because I think they have an almost, you know, at eight days or at any days, they still have an almost like their spines are still connected in terms of pain to their, to their babies. And it's important for them to know what it feels like as somebody who can tell you what it felt like, given that I had it done not at eight days.

EU-S:

What are you working on now? And do you have any plans on making more work on this topic?

GS:

Yeah. You know, I remember after I'd written that article, I thought, Oh my God, you know, this was, I'm very critical of my own work, but I thought this was, I don't know about his contents, but it was pretty well written and it was interesting to write. And it, it was interesting to write in the sense that it made me uncomfortable, probably made readers uncomfortable, but you know, and whenever my uncomfortable meter goes off, I'm pretty happy.

But then I remember sitting down with my editor and I said, you know, I may have a book about this in me. And he's like, yeah, like think about that, relax a little bit, you know?

And I think he's right. I think a book might be dangerous in that it might go into, into a kind of almost activism which is not exactly what I want to do here. I'd rather have smaller things, but that have a creative impact and also, but also, you know, just get the conversation started.

I was thinking about a one-man play about it because I think this really lends itself to a very short one-act, one-man play. And I wrote a version, I've been showing it to some people, getting very nice responses. My friend Jonathan Safran Foer had some really good notes on it because that's something that we talk about with him and he really liked that article. So that's a possibility.

You know, I just finished working on a novel that has nothing at all to do with this. The main character is a 10 year old girl. So yeah, no circumcision is going to happen there.

But it's a possibility that now that I finished with this and I have some time, I may return to looking at those, that script. And I've never done theater. I've done some little film roles, but it would be an interesting change of pace. But it would also be interesting to see what that would be like, you know, and try to recreate all these experiences on stage.

EU-S:

Gary, thank you so much for your time and for your generosity of spirit and for all of the wonderful writing. I really like, I just want to, I'm a fan.

And when that *New Yorker* piece came out, it actually just by happenstance coincided with the launching of Bruchim –

GS:

Oh!

EU-S:

– and it gave us a lot of energy. And so I should express appreciation for that. And where can people find your work?

GS:

Well, in bookstores, I guess, or Amazon, I put in my name. There's a bunch of novels. I think you've listed them before. And I write sometimes for the *New Yorker*. And yeah, that's about it.

EU-S:

It's been a real pleasure. Thank you so much.

GS:

Thank you very much. Take care.

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

Next time on the Bruchim podcast.

What I'm hearing, Lisa, is that belonging was a big part of your motivation in the first place for the circumcisions. Am I getting that right?

LISA BRAVER MOSS:

Yes, I think you're right. I think belonging was tremendously important to me. I wanted to have a more functional life in terms of interacting within a community and you know, marrying a Jewish man and having a Jewish household. These things were very important to me.

EU-S:

And the irony, of course, is that you became one of the leading Jewish voices opposing circumcision in the United States.

LBM:

[Laughter] Yes, it is. I live with these ironies. Yes.

EU-S:

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[MUSIC PLAYING]