

# Bruchim Podcast – EPISODE 3

## Episode 3-Belonging with Lisa Braver Moss

In this episode, Eli is joined by Bruchim's President, Lisa Braver Moss. They talk about Lisa's experience of regret after circumcising her two boys and how this catalyzed a lifetime of activism on the subject of Jewish circumcision. They discuss Lisa's writing of a novel and a book of Brit Shalom alternative welcoming ceremonies, as well as what it's like to be a Jew in the Genital Autonomy Movement and general ideas about effective activism on sensitive topics.

### Show Notes

Lisa's novel The Measure of His Grief:

<https://a.co/d/88Ietmm>

Celebrating Brit Shalom:

<https://a.co/d/3ayHUCd>

Eli's review of Celebrating Brit Shalom in Tikkun Magazine:

<https://www.tikkun.org/kickstarter-judaism-a-book-review-of-celebrating-brit-shalom/>

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 Oakland, California, is our President Lisa Braver Moss. Lisa, welcome to the podcast.

LISA BRAVER MOSS:

Thank you so much, Eli. Thank you for having me, and I'm delighted to be here.

EU-S:

It's great to have you here. I can't wait to pick your brain about some pressing issues.

So I guess the first thing that I want to ask you is what I'm asking all of our team members, which is what brings you to the topic of circumcision? What is your personal story? How did you come to awareness around this subject?

LBM:

Oh, wow. Well, this has gone on now for decades. I was never really comfortable with the circumcision tradition, but I married a Jewish man and circumcision was just a given to him. And having been reared with little in the way of Jewish observance or community, I was very eager to be part of that tradition. Part of my own tradition. I come from a Jewish family myself. So I agreed to the circumcisions of my two sons. Of course I had two sons, but it took me a while to come to this.

But I realized I had really felt coerced both times, and I wondered if there was a way for me to articulate my discomfort with this tradition while being Jewishly thoughtful and adding something to the Jewish conversation about this.

So around the time my boys were born, I was doing a little freelance work for Dr. Dean Edell, who's a Jewish physician who was an award-winning broadcaster and author. I was doing some work for him and he said, "Well, why don't you write about this?"

And I thought, "Oh, nah, I'm not going to do that." And of course, the next thing I knew, I was doing a deep dive into Judaism really and Jewish law to see if I could articulate some arguments against circumcision that were consistent with Jewish thought. That was one goal that I had.

And I also had the goal of not being dismissed as inflammatory or unpleasant or bombastic in the tone of these articles I was writing, because it became clear to me very quickly that what I was saying was going to raise hackles. And no matter how I said it, it was probably going to raise hackles.

EU-S:

You were one of the pioneering Jewish voices in this space. And I want to get to your work on this topic.

But before we get there, I would love it if you could walk our audience through the emotional landscape that you were inhabiting in the lead-up to the circumcision of your sons and in the feelings that developed afterwards. I want to sort of linger there for a second to sort of really understand what that was like and what happened.

LBM:

Yeah, of course. Thank you for that probing question! I had a very difficult childhood myself, grew up with domestic violence and other very traumatic things happened. This is something I've written about. I have an autobiographical novel called *Shrug* that came out and it's about growing up in Berkeley in the 60s and early 70s in this kind of chaotic household and a chaotic city.

And I was very eager to belong Jewishly. And so I knew, okay, okay, I've got to do these circumcisions. But the first time I thought, well, I certainly don't want a bris, so I'll agree to this, but we'll do it in the hospital and there won't be any fanfare.

It's probably the worst decision that we could have made because it takes away the Jewish content and makes it a surgical intervention, an unnecessary, I might add, surgical intervention.

So it's taken me some time to get over the kind of the shame of making that decision, which was cowardly, I feel, because I didn't watch it. And I don't know whether my son was given anesthesia or not. I suspect not because in those days it was not standard. This is '86.

The second time around, sure enough, another boy, I thought, well, this is silly. At least we should have a bris and we should have anesthesia. So at that time, the Reform Movement had started this program, the Berit Milah Program of Reform Judaism. They were training physicians who were already doing circumcisions in the liturgy and so on, Jewish physicians.

So we did that and I made sure there was anesthesia. And it still, it wasn't enough to make me feel comfortable. I think really the bottom line for me is that I don't believe this is what God wanted me to do. I didn't believe this was what God wanted me to do.

It really had more to do with my caving to an expectation that would make me feel part of a community that I had kind of always longed to be a part of in my very difficult childhood. I was very interested in Judaism, but that lack of community that I experienced was really something I thought about more and more as the years went on, that this was something I wanted.

EU-S:

So 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?

LBM:

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.

I feel very fortunate in that my sons, they're in their thirties now, both support my work. And I now have two intact grandsons.

And although my sons themselves, I think don't feel aggrieved, there are people who do. And I feel very, very fortunate that my sons are on board with the kind of work that I do, because if they weren't, if they felt it called attention to them in a way that made them uncomfortable, I think it would be much harder for me to do this work.

EU-S:

So tell me a little bit about that transition from, I mean, what might be characterized as a sense of regret to becoming a sort of active, like a kind of

shift from the emotion of regret to a kind of, you know, active force in the world trying to raise people's awareness about this subject.

LBM:

Yeah, that was, that was quite a transition. I was a technical writer in the computer industry out of college. I was an English major and thought, oh, I'd better get practical and learn something about computers. So I was doing technical writing.

It never occurred to me that I wanted to be a writer. And one thing I've learned is that as a writer, you don't choose your topics, not to engage in a cliché, but your topics really do kind of choose you. And I wouldn't have chosen this because in my community, at my synagogue, and even not in a Jewish context, it's kind of difficult to be known as, you know, the penis lady or something.

EU-S:

So you wouldn't have chosen this, but it chose you, to use your language. How has that changed your relationship to the Jewish community? You talked about this desire for belonging. And I'm wondering if this has created problems in terms of your acceptance in the Jewish community? You know, what, like, how did it all go down?

LBM:

[laughter] Yeah, funny you should mention that. Well, it's interesting. I started off with these two goals of wanting to write articles. My first article was in *Tikkun* magazine, but even that article, which in a very progressive magazine, was carefully edited and to some extent, watered down before I could get it in there. Because it's just a very threatening topic.

So that was one goal, was to have a non-inflammatory kind of statement. And then the other goal was to articulate these arguments that couldn't be dismissed as anti-Jewish, that were Jewish in basis.

So I was very focused on those two things, tone, which is something I learned as a writer only through doing this topic, and also these halakhic arguments that I made, which really kind of hadn't been made before.

And over the years, you know, then I thought, "I wonder if I could write articles about something other than this topic."

EU-S:

[laughter]

LBM:

So I did publish some articles in *Parents* magazine and *American Health* magazine, and went on to other topics and really enjoyed being an essayist. And this thing just, I kept thinking, "I'm done with circumcision," and a new idea would come to me.

This issue has gotten me more engaged in Judaism and Jewish scholarship than anything else. Sure we have Shabbat dinners, we have our candle lighting, I have a modified Shabbat observance personally, we go to services, we sing in the choir and all that. But yeah, this has affected my sense of Jewish belonging because it was only through this topic that I really began to do a deep dive into my Jewish life and into Judaism. So because that was kind of a paradox, I thought, "Hmm, this would make for an interesting story." So I started thinking about a character. I started thinking about writing some fiction about this, and the fact that in kind of going about a campaign against the practice of circumcision, I had become more deeply engaged in my Judaism than ever before.

And I thought, "That's kind of an interesting story." So I began to imagine a main character in a novel who would wage a campaign against circumcision and become more deeply involved in Jewish life as a result of it. And that character turned out to be male and a physician. And that turned into the novel *The Measure of His Grief*, which came out in 2010.

It's a story of a Jewish doctor from Berkeley who wages a campaign against circumcision, and what it costs him in terms of professional standing, his marriage, his family life, and so on, and what it also brings him in terms of Jewish engagement.

So I already was thinking a lot about Jewish engagement at that time and how the circumcision topic had brought me into the Jewish conversation, really.

EU-S:

Yeah. And for listeners, we'll have links to Lisa's incredible books in our show notes, so you can read these wonderful works for yourself.

So it would seem to me, from my experience, that the kind of natural people who would be very quick to embrace your work would be genital autonomy activists or sometimes known as intactivists. What has your experience been like with that world? And what has your experience with talking about the ethics of circumcision been like?

LBM:

Yeah. I had a relationship with the intactivist movement since the get-go because there was no real Jewish movement to question circumcision in those days. It was 1990. It was a while ago. There was some occasional mention of people talking about this issue, but it was really not on the radar.

So I spoke at the Second International Symposium on Circumcision, as the conference was called at that time. This was in '90 or '91. I can't remember exactly.

And it was a very difficult experience for me. It was mostly a non-Jewish audience, of course, of the people who were against circumcision. There were a few Jewish women there who kind of tried to embrace me, but it was an uneasy embrace because I had done this thing and they were against it.

And then there was a discomfort for me Jewishly because there was just a kind of a ... there was a little bit of an anti-Jewish sentiment among some of the people there, it seems to me.

One experience I had at that conference was getting into an elevator with someone who [laughter] kind of accosted me after my presentation and said, "I knew a Jewish rabbi once and he was a terrible person," and this kind of thing.

And so it was not really comfortable for me as a Jewish person. I knew I needed to have a very Jewish- positive message with that audience, and I did, but it's been a challenge in some ways.

I haven't felt entirely comfortable in the intactivist movement because of being Jewish and feeling that a lot of the anger about circumcision sometimes is

directed against Judaism when Jewish people make up such a small proportion of circumcised people in the world, it's kind of crazy.

I think there's 7 million circumcised Jewish people in the world. There's about 7 million Jewish men in the world.

So it's such a small amount compared to, let's say, Muslim practice where I think there's something like 1.4 billion Muslim people.

EU-S:

Yeah, there seems to be a kind of disproportionate association, I think a disproportionate cultural association between Judaism and circumcision that goes back a long time, but it's still sort of tangible in the world.

And I think you're right. I think you were picking up on something in the intactivist movement that is just sort of a reflection of general culture, that if you think about for a second, a news program wants to have someone on to talk about the subject of circumcision, there's going to be an immediate association in the producer's mind between circumcision and Judaism.

So they're probably going to be more likely to call on a Jewish person to talk about circumcision, even though as you rightly state, in terms of absolute numbers, we're a tiny percentage of the circumcised and circumcising people in the world.

LBM:

Yes, exactly. Exactly.

I have felt support from the intactivist movement, but it's been a slightly uncomfortable affiliation because of my love of Judaism.

EU-S:

Which leads me to your great insight that led to the founding of Bruchim, which I think deserves some attention.



You had a kind of insight after talking about the ethics of circumcision for a long time that maybe that angle, that approach, that vector was not the most productive way of doing the work you wanted to do. Can you talk a little bit about that “aha” moment and how you came to it?

LBM:

Sure.

Yeah, this happened about, this started about 10 years ago. My longtime synagogue was going to hold a lay-led service, so we were going to write a service. Each one of us would take a little part of it and we would create our own service for a few months later.

And I thought, "Oh boy, this would be great, if I could do a little thing on Brit Shalom," which is of course the ceremony for non-circumcising families in Jewish life. So I went to the committee and I said, "Can I do this?" They said, "Sure, sure, no problem."

I went home, I was assigned the Birkat Shalom, and so I wrote a little thing about a woman who's bringing her baby in for Brit Shalom or something like that.

And these were presented in a circle. We all kind of met and shared what we had come up with.

There was dead silence when I read mine. [laughter] It was kind of funny in a very sad way. Everybody had gone around the room and read their beautiful prayer about this or that. It came to me, I was toward the end, and it was really hideous.

No one wanted me to do it. [They asked] couldn't I write about something else? Couldn't I redo it and tone it down? And this was already very toned down because I had gotten a friend to help edit it so that I wouldn't be walking into a gaffe.

And It was really bad. It seemed like each person had a different criticism of what I came up with. One of them was, "You know, we have six days a week to make trouble. On a Shabbat service, it's not about making trouble."

So basically, I was told, "No, you can't do this," after I had already been given the green light. OK.

EU-S:

And just to be clear, it was just the mere association with the taboo subject of circumcision that people were reacting to, right?

LBM:

I think so. I don't exactly remember what – I think the Birkat Shalom that I had written just mentioned the word circumcision, that this family had decided not to circumcise and they were having a Brit Shalom.

And it was very upsetting. I'm a little ashamed of how hard I took it because I went home and I cried for a day. [laughter]

Because – this is the punchline – the theme of this service was diversity. I am not kidding. I am not kidding. [laughter]

EU-S:

Wow.

LBM:

So I was really upset and then we went back and forth. I kind of pushed back a little bit and said in an email, "Just because you disagree with me doesn't mean my feelings don't count," and blah, blah, blah.

OK. And then I realized from this experience, this is about belonging! This is really an inclusion issue. It's not just that I'm being excluded. It's that these families are being discounted. Families that opt out, families that decide this is not for them. It's just crazy.

So that's when I realized that we have an inclusion issue. That informed a lot of my subsequent work.

After the novel came out and after I had spent years articulating halachic arguments against circumcision and so on, this was really the thing that kind of changed my view.

Because here's the thing, Eli, people are very well defended about circumcision. Because if I'm saying circumcision is harmful, then I'm saying I've harmed my

children. My husband is harmed. My father was harmed. My brother, I don't have a brother, but my brothers are harmed. And it's just too much. It's human nature to be well defended on something like that.

And I think what the intactivist movement maybe doesn't, not everybody in the intactivist movement understands is that some of this is too upsetting to take in.

It's like hearing every single day, "You're living on a fault line. You're living on a fault line." "Well, I know, but I have my earthquake supplies." Right, but you're still living in some denial even with your earthquake kit, right? You're living in some denial.

People don't really want to see the harm. And it's even true of me that it took me a long time to go from, "Oh, maybe there's Jewish arguments against this tradition," to, "Oh, this is actually a harmful practice."

It takes people a long time. And I think people need to be given slack and need to be given a way to save face over this because it's that deeply entrenched a tradition. It's a very emotional topic.

EU-S:

I think this is a really deep and profound insight. And I want to linger with it for just a minute here because I think this is an aspect of the topic broadly that gets ignored or dismissed because this is kind of a larger, broader issue for anyone who's an activist, I think. And I've engaged on multiple issues in different communities, and I see this across the different issues that I'm involved with.

But the idea that the psychological reception of information about a disturbing topic should be a part of the way you think about talking about it if you care about this topic, I think is something that's just not widely enough appreciated. Again, across different issues. I do think that there's a tendency to underestimate the depth that this issue goes to.

So when I think about a typical way of approaching a subject, an activist thinks to themselves, "I have this information about sensitive topic X that other people don't have. If only I just share this positive information with people about this topic, they will come over to my side."

And it's just not how human psychology works, and it's definitely not how human psychology works around something as deeply-seated and traumatic as circumcision.

LBM:

Yeah, yeah. Beautifully put. Yeah.

EU-S:

So did this insight come before or after you and Rebecca wrote *Celebrating Brit Shalom*?

LBM:

This was in ... Let's see. I think it was right around the time we were planning the book, as I recall. It was right around that time. Yeah, because we touch on this in the book, in *Celebrating Brit Shalom*. We touch on this issue of inclusion and that these families should still be Jewishly engaged and so on. We talk about that a little in the book.

EU-S:

So the book was maybe the first project that came out of this insight.

LBM:

I think so, yeah. It's something that Rebecca and I had talked about. Yeah, the book, *Celebrating Brit Shalom* which came out in 2015, definitely incorporates the idea that this is an issue of inclusion and even ritual diversity, really.

EU-S:

So tell our audience a little about the book and what your intention was with it and how you feel it's been received.

LBM:

Yeah, that book, we're very very proud of it, we're very very happy about it and it's a book of three original ceremonies that we wrote, each with a slightly different theme.

EU-S:

Sorry to interrupt, but just so people understand, this is a book of alternative welcoming rituals for Jewish families who don't want to circumcise their sons, but do want to welcome them into the Jewish people.

LBM:

Yes, exactly, Eli. Thank you. Yeah, *Celebrating Brit Shalom* consists of these three original ceremonies and some information that parents would need to have their own service if they don't want to have an officiant. These ceremonies can be either rabbi-led or family-led. We designed it with that in mind, because some people can't get someone to officiate at a Brit Shalom ceremony easily. And it has a checklist of things you need for the Brit Shalom and so on.

And then we also thought, "Oh, we should have some music. We should create some original music." Well, my son, Reuben, my younger son, is a songwriter and musician. And I wrote some lyrics and Rebecca wrote some lyrics and Reuben put it all to music. We have these beautiful and beautifully produced four songs, which Jason Paige, a wonderful, wonderful singer who has the unique talent of being able to imitate anybody in singing, produced these, which was a wonderful contribution to our project. So we have the ceremonies and the music.

EU-S:

Yeah, and I reviewed this book for *Tikkun*, and I'll leave a link to my review in the show notes. But my takeaway and the thing that most impressed me about it was just how richly informed by the Jewish tradition the ceremonies are. This is new liturgy that you and Rebecca created, but it has that familiar feel. If you've ever engaged with Jewish liturgy or Jewish ritual, it draws on the richness of that language and it feels right at home. So it really is quite an achievement.

LBM:

Oh, thank you, Eli. Thank you. Yeah, we're very proud of it.

EU-S:

All right, so that was in 2015. Fast forward, what are we going to say, five years?

LBM:

Well, I had presented at one of the intactivist conferences in 2014 about this idea that this is an inclusion issue within the Jewish world. And so Rebecca and I spent a few years just talking about what we wanted to do with that idea.

And eventually, we formed Bruchim, and we really thought, "No, we need an actual organization to help people and to gather people together." Now, we had no idea at the time we formed Bruchim that it would become a Jewish community in its own right. That has really surprised, I think, all of us. I think I'm speaking for you too, Eli.

EU-S:

Absolutely.

LBM:

Yeah, that people come to our meetings and will say things like, "Oh, I had no idea. I just felt so alone. I've just always been ostracized for my beliefs about circumcision, and I can't talk to my family about it," and so on.

So we're really providing that, which is very exciting, and original content, and we help people on an individual basis. So we're really very thrilled with how it's all been unfolding so far.

EU-S:

Yeah, we're firing on all cylinders right now. But like you said, we went into this wanting to advocate on behalf of these families in the institutional Jewish world, and I don't think any of us could have predicted that we would eventually end up creating a community of people and a communal Jewish space for people who feel differently about circumcision, where they can be in touch with their Jewish identity in a way that they have never been able to before. That's just something that emerged as a kind of delight.

LBM:

Yes, exactly.

EU-S:

I think for a lot of people in the Jewish world, when they hear anti-circumcision, or critical of circumcision, or questioning circumcision, the first thing that their mind leaps to is antisemitism.

And I'm just wondering what you think about that association and what kind of a role Bruchim can play in dispelling it.

LBM:

I think we are, first and foremost, a Jewish organization. I think that's tremendously important, that we're not an intactivist organization. We do not take a stand against circumcision per se.

Individually, we may be writing articles or creating content in some way that does take on the circumcision practice, but the main purpose of Bruchim is, you can be Jewish and still object to this tradition, and still have a positive feeling about Jewish life and Judaism. And I think that speaks volumes. I think making Judaism the first thing about Bruchim is really, really important in all this.

EU-S:

Yeah, and I think we all agree that we have a zero-tolerance policy towards anything antisemitic or anti-Jewish. We're living in a time where, unfortunately, antisemitism is on the rise by any metric that you might look at in the United States in a way that it has never been in my lifetime. It's a really disturbing trend to be watching and observing.

And for some people, especially those of us Jews who are outwardly identifiable as Jews through religious garb or by other means, we stand against antisemitism in all its forms, including when it comes in the guise of people who are critical of circumcision.

LBM:

Yes.

EU-S:

This is very important to all of us here because the bottom line is we are proud Jews, and we think that antisemitism is one of the most corrosive social contagions that we all have a responsibility to stand up against and to fight. And we do what we can on our issue around antisemitism to stand up against antisemitism, and also to educate in a healthy way about what Judaism is and what it is not.

LBM:

Yeah. And I think educating in a healthy way is part and parcel of participating in the intactivist movement. For me, when I'm in an intactivist setting or when I go to a conference or something, I feel that I want to model, "Oh, I'm an actively engaged Jewish person." That's how I want to show up. That's primary.

The fact that I'm there because I have some of the same feelings as other people about this particular practice is secondary. And I think that's why I think there's an argument to be made for engaging in the intactivist community because if it can be in a Jewish positive way, I think that sends a message that's possibly even more powerful than an anti-antisemitism message, if you follow what I'm saying.

EU-S:

I think it's also important to mention that Jews are disproportionately represented in the anti-circumcision or genital autonomy or intactivist movement. We are disproportionately represented, which is something that I think people forget sometimes when they still have that cultural association we were talking about between Judaism and circumcision. This is just a fact. We're disproportionately represented in the movement.

Not all of us feel the same way about our Jewish identity, which is to be expected – you know, two Jews three opinions – but we are disproportionately represented. I think for some people who feel differently about their Jewish identity, showing up with a positive attitude towards Jewish identity might be challenging on some level, but that's just part of the natural diversity of what it means to be a Jew in the world.

LBM:



Yes, exactly.

EU-S:

All right, Lisa, I think this covers it for now. Do you have anything else that you'd like to share with our audience before we call it?

LBM:

Yeah, I think, above all, I'm a pragmatist. We don't take a stand against circumcision per se at Bruchim, and we don't have to. We need to shine a light on the families that are making this decision and really make this a question of authenticity.

You see, that's something we haven't really talked about, that in a way, all these diversity and inclusion efforts throughout the US and maybe even throughout the world, arguably, they're really saying your authentic self is welcome.

If you're gay, if you're trans, if you're a Jew of color, if you're an interfaith family, whatever it is, we want your authentic self because that's how we maintain and build our sense of vitality as a Jewish culture.

And I think that's what I was hoping for in doing what I've done so far, is that my authentic self would have been welcomed, that no one would have wanted me to go through the motions of a ritual that I didn't believe in. That my relationship with God, who was telling me this is not what I want you to do, should have played a larger role. I think, for vitality of our culture, for the vitality of Judaism, it would be really important to let people know that their authentic selves are welcome

And we're already doing a great job of that in many, many ways, in many arenas, but this is an issue that also needs to be addressed.

EU-S:

Lisa, thank you so much for being with me on the podcast.

LBM:

Oh, thank you, Eli. I've just had a delightful time and I've really enjoyed our conversation.

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

Next time on the Bruchim Podcast...

MARK OPPENHEIMER:

By the way, I have literally no sense of anything, dislike, disgust, discomfort with people who I suspect or know did not circumcise their boys. Full Jews on both sides who did not circumcise their boys.

It's not, look, there's all sorts of ways in which I think all of us are privately judgmental, where we tell our spouses or partners or friends things that we wouldn't want broadcast because they're super judgmental. And I can tell you that this is actually not an area in which I'm super judgmental. I absolutely understand sincere points of view and choices on both sides.

EU-S:

But you don't think that there's an ethical problem with the practice, is that right?

MO:

You know, I think like all practices, a lot of it is in the specifics. So no, as a general rule, I'd say no, I don't think there's an ethical problem. Or I don't think there's, every issue has some small ethical problems, right? Like having a child has ethical problems, eating has ethical problems, but by and large, I would say no.

EU-S:

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