

Bruchim Podcast – EPISODE 4

Episode 4-Value in Stuff That's Endured with Mark Oppenheimer

In this episode, Eli is joined by Bruchim's Director of Education Max Duboff and Mark Oppenheimer. This episode was recorded two days after the October 7th Hamas attack against Israel and the conversation starts with reactions to the news. The discussion then moves to the role of antisemitism in Jewish-American identity, the importance or lack thereof of denominations, and the right of a community to set its own identity boundaries. Mark shares his process for deciding to circumcise his son and talks about his impressions of Jews who have chosen to forego circumcision.

Show Notes

Mark's book:

<https://a.co/d/9mUk3cs>

The Pew Research Center Reports

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020>

Medicalization and the Mainstreaming of Circumcision in Mid-twentieth-century America by Elizabeth Reis

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/840015/pdf>

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

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

♪ Welcome back to the Bruchim Podcast. I'm your host, Eli Ungar-Sargon.

And joining me today from New Haven, Connecticut, is our Director of Education, Max Duboff. Max, always great to talk to you.

MAX DUBOFF:

Such a pleasure.

EU-S:

And joining us also from Connecticut is our special guest today, Mark Oppenheimer. Mark is the Director of Open Learning at American Jewish University and the author of *Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood*.

You may also know Mark from his podcast [Unorthodox](#), which he hosted from 2015 to 2023, and "*Gate Crashers, the Hidden History of Ivy League Jews*."

Mark, welcome to the *Bruchim Podcast*. It's really great to have you here.

MARK OPPENHEIMER

Thank you for having me.

EU-S:

So, before we get started, I just thought that it was important to mention that we're recording this podcast in the wake of one of the most horrific attacks against Israel in the history of the state.

A few days ago, on October 7th, Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched a massive coordinated attack on the south of Israel, killing, terrorizing, and taking military and civilian hostages back to the Gaza Strip.

The numbers are being revised as I'm speaking, but some 1,000 Israelis, I think, were killed and another 2,000 injured, and around 150 people have been taken hostage. Israel has started bombing the Gaza Strip, killing hundreds of Palestinians and displacing hundreds of thousands of others in what seems to be the lead-up to an inevitable ground invasion.

And I know this is a heavy way to start a conversation about Jewish continuity, but it's important context, I think, for where my mind is certainly right now, and I presume for your minds as well. So I guess I just wanted to start with a quick check-in. How are you guys doing?

Do you have family members that are in Israel? Is everyone safe? Is everyone okay?

MD:

Yeah, well, so I don't have many direct loved ones in Israel, but definitely sort of loved ones of friends and thinking about a lot of folks and just a lot of conflicted feelings also about sort of relationship with the state and about sort of US responses and about really how to best experience grief and really support those who have been so devastated by this attack.

EU-S:

Yeah, Mark, do you have any connections, any thoughts?

MO:

Well, I do. I've only been twice, but most recently, I guess several years ago, with my then 10-year-old daughter. She's now almost 17, so it was a while ago now. But my mother's first cousin made Aliyah in 1970, and so she's married to a fellow who was among the founders and organizers of the Masorti movement in Israel, and they have five children and dozens of grandchildren.

And so many of my second cousins are in the army and being called up, and obviously, like both of you, many friends. So no, I'm not-- This was not like Pittsburgh, where I actually have very close relatives whom I feared for the morning of that attack. That was one where I thought, "Is someone I know dead?" I was a step or two removed in this case in terms of personal exposure.

But obviously, I'm deeply upset, and I often find that in situations, my grief is delayed a few days. I tend to go a little bit numb at first. Maybe that's the journalist in me. And then a few days later, I'll be walking somewhere, and the enormity of it all will hit me.

EU-S:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I feel like this particular event was such a shock. And it's still sort of developing, so all the facts aren't entirely in yet, in terms of how many people even are being held hostage. Are there still Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists wandering around in the south of Israel right now? I'm hearing conflicting reports about that even.

So it's almost like the event hasn't become concrete yet in the world. It's still sort of in flux. It's still a developing situation. But I have a first cousin who's been called up to the IDF to serve up north, actually, and I have family, close family and friends. And I actually have acquaintances in Gaza, too, echoing a

little bit of what Max was talking about, about having a sort of conflicted feeling about what's going on here.

MD:

Yeah, no, I mean, I'll just also add, for folks who are offline for the holiday, for Shabbat, and then for Simchat Torah the next day, really the sort of drip of news that I heard at shul and the sort of responses of folks at shul and otherwise in the community, just, you know, made things very strange.

I know a lot of communities were grappling with how to celebrate Simchat Torah and whether to do a lot of the traditional dancing, whether or not to. And there were many, many different responses of kind of whether and how to celebrate. And, you know, I mean, in some ways, this gets to core questions and difficulties about our lives as Jews.

MO:

I have to say, I think I probably share some of your conflicts about geopolitical questions and the state of Israel and nation states. I'm not particularly conflicted about my ethical response to what's happened.

Targeting noncombatants, targeting civilians, which, you know, Hamas clearly did, and is in keeping with their stated philosophy that all Israelis are combatants, that there's no such thing as a civilian, is real moral turpitude.

And the way to talk about that is not to say, "Well, you know, at some other point in time, there was moral turpitude on the other side," or to say, "What about this or what about that?" That leads to real ethical breakdown, right?

Because there's a context for every crime. We wouldn't be able to pass judgment on any criminal if we always kind of resorted to a kind of contextual nihilism.

And, you know, what can you say about people who, you know, who send in sharpshooters to murder children? I mean, it's some... You know, there has to be a kind of ethical clarity about, "Well, that's wrong."

EU-S:

Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. I think that's a really important perspective, and I think it's a perspective that, sadly, some on the left have lost over the last few days, right? That there's a sort of side taking that really does descend into kind of moral anarchy, where you can't bring yourself to condemn what is just so obviously morally reprehensible.

And I really don't want anyone to get the impression that I in any way think that you can contextualize the ethics of the situation out of the situation. I don't think that.

But I do also keep in mind that it's a cycle of violence, and ultimately, the people who end up paying for these convulsions of violence are the innocents on both sides, and that is something that is very... it's weighing very heavily on my heart right now.

MD:

Definitely.

Yeah, no, I appreciate, Mark, what you said, and, Elie, what you said as well. And there are times when providing some forms of context is profoundly unhelpful and even wrong, and that's really important to recognize.

MO:

You know, and I also think...

And by the way, I also think that we always want to know more rather than less, so there's nothing inherently wrong with adding facts, context, history.

We want to do that. Ignorance is never preferable.

But, you know, I think it's been enormously clarifying for some people on the left about where the hearts and minds of certain activists stand. I mean, I'm 49 years old. I've been into my adult clothes long enough to be able to spot the kind of hidden smirk of some people on the left who think this really is a situation of just desserts, and they can be very careful and wily about how they talk about it, but, you know, let's not kid ourselves.

And then the question is, well, how do you do business with people who would be so cavalier about your own murder? So I think it's very tricky, and it's also, by the way, one reason I'm happier as a journalist than as an activist. -Hmm.

MD:

No, absolutely. I mean, and I think one aspect of this, which is really still being worked out, and this might provide a bit of a transition to some of what we wanted to talk about today, is how a lot of the events and the horrible attack in Israel right now affect American Jewish life. And particularly, I have a lot of friends who are really concerned about a possible uptick in antisemitism in the wake of this. And it's really hard to tell. I mean, and-- But it's concerning.

Mark, I don't know if this is something that maybe you have some thoughts on just to begin, of maybe trends and how this might affect some antisemitism and antisemitic violence we already see in the U.S.

MO:

Sure. I mean, I think it turns out that everything-- There's nothing that reliably causes a downturn in antisemitism. Everything is either neutral or causes an uptick, right?

So it turns out that being murdered by Hamas militants, that having, you know, seeing a thousand Jews, you know, beheaded, raped, slaughtered, shot at, causes an uptick in antisemitism, right? That, you know, this is before the, no doubt, kind of, you know, shock and awe, incursion into Gaza is to come.

This is a moment when clearly, you know, the death toll of Jews is higher than death toll of, you know, Palestinians. Not that that's the relevant question, but it's a moment of Jewish suffering when a lot of people see it as an excuse to be antisemitic.

So I don't spend a lot of time worrying about upticks in antisemitism. I don't really think I can do much for antisemites. And I actually think it's not really my job to.

EU-S:

It's interesting, though, to note there's a kind of unavoidable cycle where things flare up in Israel-Palestine and you get a flare-up of antisemitic attacks

in the diaspora against Jews and Jewish communities. And I don't actually, I think what you're saying, Mark, is actually analytically correct, right? It's analytically correct that this is not something that we have any control over.

And so to a certain extent, you know, what are you going to do about it? But on the other hand, it's impossible to ignore, right? Like, there is some kind of weird connection between things happening in Israel-Palestine and the way that Jews are treated around the world.

And, you know, this is why in my neighborhood, in Pico-Robertson in Los Angeles, which is a Jewish neighborhood, immediately we had police patrols on Saturday going around and security was amped up at all the synagogues.

And so there's a kind of reality or like a realism that you have to take about these things also, just in terms of how to protect the Jewish communities here.

MO:

There is, but I also, and I think it's unavoidable, inevitably we have to take into account what seems to be a causal relationship between strife in the Middle East and antisemitic attitudes and actions abroad. But it's very hard to trace the one-to-one connection. And I think a lot of it ends up being security theater, where we do a certain amount, we hire some guards to reassure ourselves and protect ourselves.

In the United States anyway, the worst attacks have not come in the heat of some sort of Gaza conflict or war with Lebanon. They've come when they've come.

And so I do have a sense of helplessness about it, even as I concede your point entirely.

EU-S:

So it's interesting, I think, to think about this from the perspective of American Jewish identity. And I'm wondering, you've done a lot of work on, you wrote a book about the Pittsburgh shooting, and I'm wondering if you can illuminate us a little bit from your perspective on the role that antisemitism plays in the formation of Jewish American identity.

MO:

Yeah, there are people who have studied this and scrutinized this more carefully than I, and I think are more theoretically sophisticated than I am. I tend to come at things as a journalist who was once upon a time an aspiring historian.

And, you know, seen in that light, it's clear that the history of Jewish identity formation since World War II has been heavily influenced, probably overly influenced by the Holocaust, at the expense of other positive forms of Jewish identification.

There are definitely people, hundreds of thousands of them in the American Jewish community of five or six million, who are much more interested both personally, but also ideologically and intellectually in antisemitism in all its forms, how it affects their personal security. They're interested in it as a historical question. They want to see Holocaust movies and read Holocaust books. It's the most important thing they want to teach their children about being Jewish, and are less interested in the content of Judaism aside from antisemitism.

And that's understandable. It's completely comprehensible, and yet troubling, because it's not a great foundation on which to form identity. I mean, it's both intellectually problematic, and I don't think it leads to the flourishing and thriving of Jews as individuals or as communities.

MD:

That's really helpful and interesting. Thanks, Mark. I mean, there's a lot to say also about American Jewish connection with Israel and how that functions in Jewish identities. And this is something I've, of course, been thinking about a lot in the wake of Hamas' attack.

And so it's partly interesting to see different responses by different communities of sort of what language is being used around standing with Israel or supporting Israel versus kind of language of grief and support.

And certainly, I'm not necessarily criticizing folks for whom Israel is a big part of their Jewish identity, but sort of grounding that in something more specific seems important to me in many cases for being able to then have sort of a robust Jewish life in the context of America as well.

EU-S:

I want to just jump in here for a second and point out that we've slipped a little bit from the role of antisemitism in the formation of Jewish-American identity to the role of Israel in the formation of Jewish-American identity. And I know that those two, the line between those two things are often blurred, but I think of them very separately.

MO:

Yeah, I do too. I mean, they're related, but it's a slippage I try to avoid, which you can continue to chide Max for.

MD and EU-S:

[laughter]

MO:

[laughing] It's, you know, but well, I actually think there are more things that could be foremost in your Jewish identity, but three of them are antisemitism as a problem, right, and the history of Jewish suffering; the Holocaust specifically; and knowledge and/or practice of Jewish, you know, holiday, liturgical, or other religious functions and customs. There are others, right? Some people would say that their Judaism is principally about food. Some would say their Judaism is principally about the Yiddish language. There are all sorts of others.

But I think that three of the people I know, if I took a poll, I think number one, two, and three, in some order, if you said, like, what's important to you about being Jewish, would be Holocaust, antisemitism, and Judaism as a religion.

I can think of one person who would also, who would say instead, the American Jewish intellectual tradition, like, you know, mid-century partisan review, New York intellectuals, American socialism, etc., and the robust influence of Jews on that tradition. That would be a fourth.

But yeah, I think these are all different ways to ground your Jewish identity.

MD:

Yeah, no, Eli, I mean, I appreciate your caution there about slippage, right, from the role of antisemitism in Jewish identity to the role of Israel in Jewish identity.

And what I was thinking is along the lines of what Mark was saying, that these are possibly different aspects that might be more or less central in one's Jewish identity, and certainly are not the same thing.

And, I mean, you know, maybe partly here, there's this question of a sort of danger, though not a criticism, of centering anything sort of too much in one's Jewish identity. But this is maybe getting into somewhat shifty territory, right? I mean, certainly it's folks' prerogative. They want to center certain kinds of things in their Jewish identity to do so. And I don't mean to criticize that.

Certainly for me, it's very important to kind of have a variety of things. And I'm very influenced by Mordecai Kaplan's view of Judaism as a civilization that encompasses all these different aspects, but certain folks are always going to center certain things, and that's really great.

EU-S:

Yeah, I mean, I think this conversation is reminding me of the first time I read the Pew Report in 2013, which was – for our listeners, that was probably the biggest and most accurate poll that had been done to date before that time, before 2013 and the Pew Report. We relied heavily on the non-profit Jewish world to give us statistics about Jewish Americans.

And there were a lot of shocks in that first 2013 report. There was a follow-up report in 2020, but they asked questions like this about, you know, what is essential to your Jewish identity? And it was really, you know, sort of Jewish observance was very, very low on the scale. Leading an ethical life, I recall, was a very sort of high, had a very high number. Of course, Holocaust, remembering the Holocaust was also a big part.

But what I want to bring your attention to, gentlemen, is that no one has as of yet mentioned the word Jewish denomination or Orthodox or Conservative or Reform, which I think is interesting, because from an academic perspective, if you were to describe the, you know, the sociology of the Jewish American community, that would probably be near the top of how you started describing people. Oh, well, there's a breakdown of people. We have Orthodox Jews and conservative Jews and reform Jews and Reconstructionist Jews.

But we're not talking about that. And I think we're not talking about that because all of us, I'll speak for myself, certainly, I think that those denominational differences and like the sorts of, you know, the nerdy differences between what is, you know, left-wing Orthodox and right-wing Conservative ideas about the Jewish religion are actually not super relevant to the average Jewish American.

MD:

Yeah, no, I mean, that's fascinating. Certainly, I think denominational labels and sort of ideas often fail to capture a lot of what's relevant. So for some folks, they capture more than for other folks. And some of that has to do with sorts of communities in which one was raised. And I think especially sometimes the sort of knowledge base, maybe, that one has.

But yeah, I mean, right, there are all these different sorts of ways of describing folks' connections with Judaism, which don't necessarily have much to do at all with denominational labels. I mean, and I think we also have increasingly seen a sort of convergence of practices among some liberal Jewish, that is, non-Orthodox communities.

So for example, the Reform world has become a little bit more interested in some kinds of traditional practices and aesthetics, although there are, of course, important differences between communities and their practices that remain.

And of course, for folks who don't really primarily affiliate with a synagogue community, a lot of denominational distinctions don't make a lot of sense to talk about.

MO:

Yeah, I think there's, right, Max is right, that there's been a collapsing of Reform and Conservative Judaism into each other somewhat. I would say Reform has brought back a lot of Hebrews since World War II, among other things. It, for a long time, was primarily an English language practice in the United States when they used the old Union Prayer Book.

And that has changed, and of course, all three denominations have become more Zionist since the founding of the State of Israel. So there's been resemblances there.

Look, the people I know who are most interested in denominations, and I don't say this to denigrate the denominations, which increasingly, I think, do important and useful work, but the people most interested in them are people on what you might call, for lack of better terms, the left and the right.

There are, I know, some Orthodox people, not all by any means, a minority, but I do know Orthodox people who are very insistent on their Orthodoxy and the kind of Orthodoxy they have, and they want to talk about it. Most Orthodox would just say, "I'm a Jew," or, "I'm a Torah Jew," or, "I'm a traditional Jew." They're not interested in the denominations. But some people are.

And then, you know, nobody is more evangelical than a Reconstructionist Jew. I mean, there's a certain kind of Jew who wants you to know, "I am Reconstructionist or Secular Humanist or Worker's Circle," or, I mean...

And often, it's not always, but often, it's to assure you that they are not sexist, they're not Zionist, they're not anything that's bad on the left. If they belong to a congregation, they want you to know how progressive their congregation is. And I would probably find myself at home in many of those congregations, but I hope I would be less insistent on telling people about it.

You know the joke about, you know, "How do you know if someone's a vegan?" Right? Because they'll tell you.

MD and EU-S:

[laughter]

MD:

Indeed.

MO:

[laughing] I've heard the joke about people who are vegan and people who are polyamorous. How do you know if someone's poly?

MD:

[laughter] Oh, no.

MO:

They'll tell you. So, you know, there's something about...

EU-S:

So, how do you know if someone's a Reconstructionist Jew? They'll tell you.

MO:

Yeah, they'll tell you. And that's just, you know, that's my own experience as a journalist, too, is people in certain left and right-wing circles are much more insistent on telling you, on splitting the hairs for you, than people in the kind of broad middle.

EU-S:

So, I want to press a little bit on this point that you made earlier, Mark, about how, for you, the idea of building a Jewish identity around antisemitism is not a sustainable or rich way to build a Jewish identity.

What comes to mind for me is the historian David Myers wrote a short introduction to Judaism, and one of the central theses in that short introduction was that Jewish history, in many ways, can be seen as a kind of pinballing between antisemitism on the one hand and assimilation on the other. And if you want to understand Jewish history, you need to understand those two poles.

And I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit more about why you feel that the antisemitism pole is not a great way to build up Jewish identity.

MO:

Well, I think analytically, the way David Myers treats it, it's a useful way of looking at Jewish history. But in terms of the internal experience of being Jewish, and by the way, I would say the same thing about the experience of

being Black, I imagine, or queer, or Hispanic, or, you know, trying to think of some other, you know, or any sort of identity that what you wish for yourself and others is that the central way you think about that identity is one of great joy and pride, that you got to be that.

I'm reading a book, I'm reading Andrew Leland's book about going blind, and there's a lot of talk about his, you know, his hard work to become somebody who thinks of blindness not as a total gift, but as a sort of complicated experience that has upsides and has gifts in it. Among them, one such gift would be the solidarity with other people who have that condition.

So, you know, I think that what I wish for myself and people in other marginalized groups is that there's an identity that is bigger than and supersedes the very real knowledge that one has been and may be, again, victimized.

So I'm really talking about the internal, kind of phenomenological experience of Judaism, which is that one of the things we learned from the ethnic pride movements of the '60s, and Jews have learned this and relearned this throughout history, is that ultimately, you know, it's a lot more joyous to think of your birthright, whatever it is, as a good thing than as, you know, a handicap. It's not a very profound thought. It strikes me as a kind of obvious and intuitive one. I'm almost ashamed to state it as if it's some sort of insight.

MD:

No, no, I mean, that all sounds really important. I mean, I'm thinking in particular of a couple different ways that the Holocaust is invoked in Jewish spaces, and often tragedy and oppression, right, is used in service of some sort of communal goal that at least some folks have, and often in like pretty coercive ways. So I'm thinking of pronatalism, for instance, that's explicitly framed as a response to the Holocaust.

I'm also thinking of in some Haredi communities, the way that the Holocaust and especially the sort of establishment of Haredi communities in the US, that is ultra-Orthodox, is seen as a response to the Holocaust. And then the obligation is to keep the communities going and sort of make sure that certain forms of Jewish practice and belief don't perish from the world. So curious for folks' responses there. I mean, because one problem that emerges is then if something like antisemitism or oppression is playing a very central role, then

it seems to me like it can become easier for some of these coercive narratives to emerge.

MO:

I think the questions you're raising are important and best discussed kind of in specific cases. I actually feel like the anti-natalist case, even though it's in a debate team setting, it would be like, I'm in the affirmative, go have more babies, would be the crude, you know, reductionist spin people would put on the natalist position.

I almost feel like your case of the sympathy for anti-natalism, if in fact that's where you were coming from, is almost the affirmative case, because it seems to me to cut against a lot of, you know, tradition and human nature.

I mean, I think, and certainly Jewish teaching and Jewish tradition. So I guess I would throw back at you, like you seem discomfited by the idea that anyone would talk about why it's a positive good to have children. And tell me if that's a profound misreading of what you think.

MD:

No, that's helpful.

No, I mean, my thought was more something like that it's really important for us as Jews to foster the Jewish agency, we might call it, of other Jews, educationally and communally, where that means sort of folks shaping their own Jewish identity in some way. Obviously, they're not doing that in isolation. They're doing that, ideally, in community, broadly defined.

And I worry about when narratives emerge that are something like, you have to do this because of something that happened in the past, right?

MO:

Yeah, I've never heard anyone say, you have to go have babies because of Hitler. I know that there was a time when that was said. I mean, I've talked to people whom I trust, who are giving me memories that are not second or third hand. And often all of us, certainly me, incorporated to our certainty, things that it turns out on closer scrutiny, we never heard, but we think we heard.

But I've heard people who I reliably believe heard a rabbi say, or a parent say, or an aunt say, or an uncle, you know, we have to have babies because of Hitler, or have a third child for the **nots**. The third child was because of...

We had two, and then we decided to... The third one was a thumb in the nose of Hitler.

I'm not hearing a lot of that dialogue now. I'm not hearing a lot of people being shamed into having babies. I certainly think there's a lot of rudeness out there of people asking insensitive and invasive questions about the fertility of people of childbearing age, particularly women, but sometimes men get hit with those questions as well. But I don't know. Does this strike you as a problem that there's a lot of people being goaded into having babies by the religious establishment?

EU-S:

Not to prematurely bring this back to the central topic of the podcast, but I do hear, actually, a lot of people invoke that sort of rhetoric around circumcision. And I think that might be a better example, because, frankly, the natalism argument is not something that I hear often outside of the academy.

MO:

Yeah, I've been in very few conversations about circumcision. It's something I thought a lot about when my son was born, after four daughters, after having to dodge the question for four consecutive children. You know what, I believe you. I certainly take your word for it.

When I've talked with friends who had sons before I did, I did hear a couple men say, "I feel my son should look like me," which didn't strike me as a particularly powerful... It didn't resonate with me. It never entered my thinking.

But you mean, Eli, that they say we should do it because it's a link to a tradition that Hitler tried to stamp out?

EU-S:

Yeah, and, I mean, of course, there are actual empirical things that people point to, that during the Holocaust, people's circumcisions were used to persecute them. And so, in a way, it's a kind of thumbing a nose at antisemites

and at antisemitism, beyond just the other argument, which is that Jews have done this forever, and it's part of Jewish identity.

MO:

I think, you know, I hate to kind of roll over and play dead, and I hope that doesn't kill the podcast, but to agree with you, to prematurely agree with you, to be a premature anti-Stalinist or something. But, no, anti-fascist, that was the term. Evidence of your communism was that you were a premature anti-fascist in the '30s.

But I'm not moved by the argument that one should do anything to spite Hitler, who isn't around to be spited. And the idea that anything you do will work its way into the knowledge of your local Nazi and make them feel bad, or be taken as a rebuke to them. I don't know, I don't mean to mock it, but maybe I do mean to mock it.

It's obviously a kind of metaphysical claim, right? The claim is not that any particular white supremacist, or fascist, or Nazi, or antisemite will have second thoughts, or feel confronted because you circumcised your son. The claim is somehow that in the kind of metaphysical balance sheet, you've scored something good.

EU-S:

I would qualify it as a quasi-ethical kind of argument to, or claim, right? I think part of the impetus for that is that you owe it to Jewish history on some level. I think that's where that's coming from.

MD:

Yeah, no, exactly, yeah. So, I mean, Mark, I agree with a lot of what you're saying there. And Eli, thank you for bringing that up.

I mean, here are a couple considerations, maybe. So, one is that I'm not just concerned about some of the overt dialogue around natalism or circumcision, but also more subtle social pressure. So, Mark, I think you're right that a lot of those more explicit pushes to something like have Jewish babies are a little less common than they used to, or maybe a lot less common.

But the setup of communities, for example, maybe having certain kinds of family programming, but not creating spaces that feel welcoming for folks

without children, that's a sort of social pressure, a sort of making folks feel like there's something that they ought to do in order to engage with the community.

And certainly, maybe some of the forms of rude questions for instance, about folks' fertility is not specifically framed in a Jewish way, although there feels like there's something about it that's Jewish nonetheless. But I think it's also just something that's common to a lot of minority groups. So, that's one thing.

And then the other is building on what Eli said, and also, Mark, to use your term metaphysical, there's, I think, a sense in which folks think that gratitude for Jewish tradition or something like that is a compelling reason to then have more kids or circumcise. And there's, again, all these sorts of social pressures that add up there as well.

But then it's certainly an empirical question, and an interesting one, what's motivating folks? Is it something like a sense of gratitude for what came before, like we owe it to our ancestors, or is it a bunch of other more subtle factors? And I do think for many folks, especially many non-Orthodox folks, there's a lot of these more unconscious factors.

But when push comes to shove, it does seem like there's a lot of folks who are persuaded, at least in part, by the consideration that there's something problematic about not circumcising or not having Jewish kids, et cetera.

MO:

I mean, I would separate these two out pretty profoundly. I mean, circumcision is, you know, technically speaking, right, it's a mitzvah. I mean that in the kind of literal sense of, you know...

MD:

So is having kids.

MO:

Yeah. Right, right. I know, I know. But I want to separate this out, right? It is a mitzvah that many people choose to incorporate into their practice, particularly in Orthodox and conservative communities. Well, particularly in all communities, and in America, that is losing favor in some Jewish circles for various reasons that we can talk about and that, you know, are understandable.

But it strikes me that while, if you're being very **machmir** about it, very sort of strict about it, it's, you know, mitzvot are all pretty much on the same level, right. And so you could say, "Well, so is having kids, you know, so is not murdering."

Sure, but, especially speaking to non-Orthodox Jews, right, speaking to what you might broadly call liberal Jews, the conversation about having kids is not operating as a requirement or a demand to honor a specific mitzvah. They're not making a religious claim, by and large. It's not... Even the people pressuring other people in crude ways, wherever they may be, to have children or rudely insinuating themselves into their, you know, children's or children-in-law's fertility situation, [laughs] are not speaking the language of commandment, I don't think.

I think they want relatives and grandchildren, and they want the people who might have babies or might not to experience the joys that they've known as parents. So I guess it's just not anthropologically helpful to me to sort of talk about them as two sides of a coin. I'm happy to do it. You know, I just think they feel very... The reasons that the debates exist and the reasons that people do or don't do these things feel mostly different to me.

Including, by the way, in the frum communities, where a lot of Orthodox families are now limiting their family size to three or four children, where once they might have wanted nine or ten, but they're still circumcising their sons. Like, it operates differently there as well.

EU-S:

So, Mark, you mentioned that after four girls, you had to grapple with the question of circumcision. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share the story and the sort of internal process that you went through in having to make that decision.

MO:

Yeah, I absolutely will. But can I linger on something Max said for a moment, just because I don't want to let go of it, and then you can bring me back to that.

Max, I guess, you know, I wonder, sort of, what your notion of community is in which there are no implicit social pressures to do anything.

MD:

[laughter]

MO:

Is that what we're going for here? Is one in which everyone feels maximal comfort with personal choice at all times? Because it's not that I don't want that community. I'm not saying that... I'm not making a virtue out of discomfort.

I'm claiming that it's pretty utopian to think that it could be otherwise. And it strikes me that this is a strain on the cultural or religious or political left. The, you know, having solved so many problems, we're now going to make a devil out of people who say, you know, who want there to be more babies around. Because the quest for babies implicitly pressures people who don't want babies or can't have babies, and therefore makes them uncomfortable. And God forbid you have family programming, because somebody who doesn't have what's traditionally considered family might feel othered by that.

I mean, can you imagine a world that escapes all of that, those frictions?

MD:

No, definitely. That sounds awful. No, thank you. Thank you for asking and for clarifying this, right? And so having values at all in a community does require some forms of social pressure, and that's not a bad thing, right? So I'm definitely not saying that social pressure is bad.

I'm basically trying to avoid situations where folks are made to feel alienated for making a choice which is sort of an expression of their Jewish identity, or which is, you know, sort of something that they see as separate from the norms of the community. And there certainly might be situations in which that's justified. There might be some kinds of lines, and that certainly does make sense.

But my sense, and maybe many agree, my sense is that the ways that communities have been set up have, in many cases, specifically, not really seemed to include consciously folks who don't have kids or unconsciously. And then that sets up certain kinds of -- of important pressure.

MO:

Well, look, I mean

EU-S:

No, no, but I think this is actually a really important point that Max is making. And I think it requires us to distinguish this point from the overall academic conversation about whether it's ethical or not to have children, which is that however you feel about natalism and anti-natalism, the fact of the matter is that most religious Jewish communities are not really built for individual members who don't have children. I don't think that that's debatable. I think that that's just a fact of the way these communities are structured.

MO:

Well, certainly, and I'm not in an orthodox community, I think all communities are fairly obsessed with people with singles in their 20s and 30s and getting them to join and getting them to marry each other. So, more specifically, I think what you're saying is that for people who chose not to marry or never married, or people who are married and choose not to have children, it's not that a 23-year-old without children is not wanted in the community. They're badly wanted in the community so that the community can make a match for them, right?

EU-S:

Yeah, but that causes a kind of-- And this is what I think Max is getting at. It causes a sort of sense of alienation. And you're right to point out the single versus coupled, 'cause I think that's also a dynamic that's at play.

MOL

Yeah, yeah, it is.

EU-S:

It's a very important one. But I also think that the idea of structuring a community around people versus structuring a community around families is

also very powerful, and it has its own kind of dynamic. But I think all of these things are real problems.

MO:

Yeah, look, here's what I want to say about this. Nobody should be made to feel individually bad about their choices or their non-choices, right? People who are unattached or unpartnered, who want to be, are Jews, or if not Jewish, human, and deserve maximal respect and love. And I don't say compassion or pity. I recognize-- All of us should be honored for the situation we're in with maximal love and respect. And that goes for those who are married, unmarried, people who are partnered but not legally married. It goes for people who have children, don't have children.

I think where I draw the line is I'm probably a little more comfortable with a community having an affirmative sense that babies are a positive good. I'm unclear how you decenter that without losing a kind of-- I mean, look, it's just like anything else. It's like kashrut, it's like keeping kosher, it's like respecting the Sabbath. Other choices, they're going to alienate people who dissent from those choices.

Communities have to be something. Liberal Protestantism is facing the problem that it's increasingly not anything, except its liberal politics.

So, and look, I think that it sounds to me also, Eli, like you're talking about specific social structures within orthodoxy that exclude certain classes of people. And that's wrong. I think we're all in agreement there, right?

EU-S:

Yeah, I don't think it's limited to the orthodox world, but I do think it's a particularly sharp problem in the orthodox world that they're even aware of, right? Like there are these terms that get bandied about, like the Shidduch crisis and so forth.

MO:

No, they doubt, but wait a second, in the reformed conservative worlds, I mean, childbearing is at below replacement rate. I mean, is it like people are having by and large one in two children if they're having children? So it's, I'm not sure what to make of the claim that it's some sort of fertility cult, you know?

EU-S:

No, no, no, no, no. Again, I tried to make this distinction before, and I think it's important. Like there's the conversation about whether or not we value having children or the ethics of having children.

And then there's the manner in which a society is structured or a religious community is structured vis-a-vis people who, for whatever reason, don't. And I think those are two separate things.

MD:

Mark, I just want to say, I really appreciate your point about how to center things that we really believe and care about as Jews and how to talk about them, while also welcoming folks who have, you know, different sorts of views and respecting that. That's really crucial, and that's sort of my takeaway.

MO:

Thank you. Let me say one more thing, and then I promise, Ellie, I'll let you bring me back to penile questions, which is that I do-- When I talk about the difference between Judaism and Christianity to people who don't know anything about religion, one of the things I say is that Judaism believes that we should not be alone, that the family-- And the family can be flexibly construed, right? It could be people living together and committing to each other and loving each other without the benefit of historical, formal or heterosexual marriage, right?

But the idea that we're better together, that it's better if we pray together, if we eat together, the fact that with very few exceptions, we don't have a monastic tradition in Judaism, we don't tend to exalt people who go off into the wilderness to study by themselves, we don't think that's what scholars should do, or anybody, like, that's real. You know, the communal nature is real.

So I think that, you know, there is sometimes a sense of like, we should love and honor all people's choices, and on an individual level, we should, but as a communal value, I think saying that people are better off in family as it fits them is really important. I mean, don't you think?

EU-S:

I do. I don't think anyone would disagree with that. I don't think Max does. I don't think I do either. I think, and I think, again, like, it's super important to recognize and validate what you're saying here about the right of a community to have a kind of identity built around some of these ideas.

I just think that there's also a kind of underbelly sometimes to this that gets underappreciated or under-noticed.

MD:

Yeah, and that's super helpfully put, Mark, but also it's a matter of thinking about how our Jewish values and how we think of those interacts with other sorts of social trends. Sometimes, you know, they're negative social trends. Sometimes they're things we're worried about, sort of for independent reasons.

And then there's a lot to say about how to think about the social forces that we inherit as Jews and how they interact with our Judaism.

MO:

So, Eli, I promised to talk penile matters.

So, I mean, if the question is, what did we decide? My son was circumcised. He had a bris. It was on second day Rosh Hashanah, '57 something, 2018. It was actually very lovely because people were in shul for second day Rosh Hashanah.

It was the afternoon, after morning services, so you could sort of leave services. And then in a smaller room, we had the bris. It was performed by a mohelet, Dr. Emily Blake, who, as it turns out, was the daughter of my childhood pediatrician, Arnold Blake, of the greater Springfield, Massachusetts area. So, there was this interesting connection where his daughter, who is now a full-time mohelet, but had been, I think, an obstetrician, was performing the procedure on my son.

You know, my wife and I talked about it. I actually don't remember exactly where she came to... Obviously, she wanted to do it, but I don't remember, like, the conversations back and forth between me and her. We were exhausted parents of a two to seven, you know, one to seven day old.

So, I don't want to represent in any way, like, she thought this, I thought this, because I just don't remember. But I do remember ultimately thinking that I was overthinking it, that it felt like the right call. I wasn't concerned about, you know, adverse health effects. I wasn't concerned about the negative stuff that the intactivists talk about. And it seemed like a special thing to do.

So, I ultimately let myself go with what I thought my inclination was, which was this is the thing to do.

EU-S:

Did you feel that this was a religious obligation? Is that how it was being framed in your mind?

Or was it that and something else? Or was it something completely different?

MO:

You know, I tend not to think in terms of obligation a lot. I'm not a particularly fideistic or pious person. I tend to think in terms of belonging and community and tradition. I have a kind of reverence for tradition that doesn't extend to, you know, all traditions, obviously.

It doesn't extend to like bad ones that we've, you know, dispensed with. But in principle, my default position is that there's value in stuff that's endured. So, I think it felt like partaking of a meaningful tradition.

MD:

Yeah, I mean, I think just picking up on something you said, Mark, there is something really powerful about this sense of, you know, ultimately, this is what we do, you know, and that is a reason to do it. And I think that builds on some of what we were discussing earlier as well about sort of, you know, that we're not looking to excise communal pressure from our communities.

And then, you know, of course, there are questions that can be asked in different cases about what sorts of traditions and practices that does or doesn't apply to.

EU-S:

So, Mark, if you had felt that there was a moral problem with circumcision, how would that have come into play? Like, is it the sort of thing that you would have said, "Well, I have a moral concern about this practice, but the weight of tradition overrides it"?

MO:

Maybe. Maybe. You know, I do have concerns about the rights of children that are pretty strong. I'm also aware because, you know, I think about this a lot in terms of homeschooling. I think about this every time I read an article in *The Times* about, you know, Hasidic education and what they're teaching kids. You know, my own academic background in American religious history acquainted me with all the law on, you know, when Amish parents could take their children out of school because they were afraid that teaching them secular subjects would destroy their Amishness, right?

So, and we obviously understand the contrary to that is, you know, but you're then depriving them of the ability – at a young age, taking away their best tools for leaving the community, right? So, I'm aware of all of those questions.

You know, I thought a lot about people who pierce their children's ears and people who send their children on, you know, various hero quests in other cultures and people who insist that their children have b'nai mitzvah that they don't want. We would not have forced our children to go through a long study period and ritual if they had objected. As Max knows, at least one of my daughters was super enthusiastic.

MD:

Indeed.

MO:

So, these are not, you know, these to me are not open and shut cases. I think there's really interesting, there are really interesting questions to ask all up and down. And 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.

It's not, look, there's all sorts of ways in which I think all of us are privately judgy, where we tell our spouses or partners or friends things that we wouldn't want broadcast because they're super judgy. And I can tell you that this is

actually not an area in which I'm super judgy. I absolutely understand sincere points of view and choices on both sides.

EU-S:

So, but you don't think that there's an ethical problem with the practice. Is that right?

MO:

You know, I think that, I think like all practices, a lot of it is in the specifics. So no, as a general rule, I would say no, I don't think there's an ethical problem. Or I don't think there's, you know, 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. I think a lot of the devil's in the details. You know, in my book on Pittsburgh, I reported about a community that a tangent to the history of the community was that an incompetent mohel had sliced off a boy's penis. You know, that's bad. The risks of any procedure are worrisome.

I'm horrified by parents who encourage their daughters to get nose jobs. And I put that out there just not to establish my bona fides in any way, except to say there's an analogous kind of sort of somewhat invasive, serious procedure that millions of mostly girls have had, often with their mothers' encouragement. And it's not something alien to the Jewish community, as we know. And I think it's like sick.

MD:

Well, and also in the UK, there's been a lot of debate specifically about hymenoplasty and efforts to ban it, I know. But, Mark, I just want to elevate something that you said, which is, you know, sort of thinking about a general framework of what we owe to children and how we can sort of promote the flourishing of kids in our communities.

And I think that's a note that is a good takeaway from a lot of different aspects of our conversation, you know, and caring about children in our communities and welcoming that and just sort of thinking as broadly as we can about how to create communities that are as great as possible for everyone, -including children.

MO:

Yeah, absolutely. I also think this is something that could evolve. I mean, already, I suspect that I'm in the minority among even conservative Jews whom I know who have had sons, in that our son was circumcised, and especially that it was done in a religious tradition, you know, in a religious rite. I actually know a couple Jews, pretty serious Jews by any measure, who wanted their sons to be circumcised, but only by a doctor. They thought that a public bris was barbaric, but they asked the pediatrician to circumcise their newborn boys, which was so interesting to me, right?

Like, to them, circumcision was important, but bris was this kind of weird, you know, exotic, ultra-Orthodox thing, which would never occur to me anyone would come at it from that direction. So I'm not at all turned off by the conversation. I don't think it's an inherently antisemitic conversation, despite the outsized number of antisemites who enjoy the conversation. I don't think that's you guys.

EU-S:

[laughter] Thanks for that, Mark.

MO:

Sure. But what I was trying to say was, you know, I wouldn't be shocked if, like, 50 years from now, the version of me that exists in an alternate universe in 2070 feels differently about it. Like, I think things do evolve, and then certain things return, right? In Judaism, things that were kind of cast out or unimportant kind of roar back, like Sukkot, which was a really, really minor American holiday 50 years ago.

EU-S:

You bring up a really interesting and important point about the medicalization of circumcision in this country and the kind of double-edged sword [laughs] -I can never avoid those metaphors.

MO and MD:

Ooooh, man.

EU-S:

But let's-- What should we call it? The kind of unanticipated conflict that that put Jewish Americans in. Because this happened in sort of mid-20th century, where it really started to become, like, a general practice in the United States that was fully medicalized.

And there was a tension for Jewish Americans about this, because on the one hand, you know, obviously, it's gonna be seen as more normal in society, which has benefits if you're a Jew in a non-- you know, if you're a minority in a majority society.

But on the other hand, there was this feeling that-- and I think what you're talking about, the friends that you had that considered the bris barbaric but wanted it done in a hospital very much started at this point when it became medicalized in the United States, which is, "Oh, well, then we want it to be, you know, in a full surgical theater, and we want it to be, like, fully medicalized."

And rabbis were sensing this. You can go back into the 1950s and see some of the really interesting conversations that were happening about this, where rabbis were kind of like,

"Well, wait a minute. You know, we're moving it from the mohel to the ob-gyn, and something is getting lost in that process."

MO:

Yeah, I think there's such an incredibly rich interplay. And by the way, I can absolutely imagine if I lived in a society where anti-circumcision had become one of those kind of covers for antisemitism, as I think has happened in certain parts of Europe, where I could imagine falling into a mindset of like, "We're gonna do this for my son just to spite the antisemites next door." Not to spite dead Hitler, but to take a stand in society.

I'm not saying I would, but like all of us, I'm totally vulnerable to and sensitive to all kinds of social maelstroms and trends and pressures. So I think it's really hard to disentangle those things.

MD:

Absolutely. Well, I'll mention also that there's a great paper called "Medicalization and the Mainstreaming of Circumcision in Mid-20th Century America" by Elizabeth Reis, that we can link in the show notes, that discusses some of these topics.

But I think we should bring this in for a landing. Mark, thank you so much for coming on. This was such a fascinating conversation.

EU-S:

Thank you, Mark. This was a real pleasure.

MO:

I feel like there's more to do. Well, I'm happy to come back anytime.

MD:

Thanks so much.

MO:

Take it easy, gents.

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

♪ (MUSIC PLAYS) ♪ Next time on The Bruchim Podcast.

Did you or your son suffer any kind of consequences for, A, choosing not to have the circumcision done, and B, being so public about it, in terms of, like, acceptance in family, or extended family, or the Jewish community? Like, what have the consequences been of this decision that you made?

REBECCA WALD:

Well, the consequences have only been positive. My son is very proud to be Jewish. He is tremendously, tremendously grateful that I did not remove a sensitive part of his penis when he was born. So, I think in that sense, it's all

been good. We've aligned ourselves with communities that have been open and welcoming to us.

And although I have lost a few friendships over this, along the way, at the end of the day, I don't think those are really friendships that were worth maintaining.

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

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Stay safe, stay healthy, and lehitraot.

[Music]