

Bruchim Podcast – EPISODE 5

Episode 5-As Yet Unscarred with Rebecca Wald

In this episode, Eli is joined by Bruchim's Executive Director Rebecca Wald. They talk about Rebecca's decision not to circumcise her son and the consequences of that decision. They move on to discuss Rebecca's website Beyond the Bris and the circumstances in which it became one of the premier Jewish websites on the subject of circumcision in the world. They also talk about Rebecca's book Celebrating Brit Shalom and the founding of Bruchim. Here they clarify the unique position that Bruchim occupies in the world and talk about some of the unique challenges that come our way. Eli also shares the dramatic story that led him to thinking critically about circumcision.

Show Notes

Beyond the Bris

<https://www.beyondthebris.com>

Celebrating Brit Shalom

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

Eli's Debate with Rabbi Shmuley Boteach

<https://youtu.be/-R852-AViBY?si=v0p6BW6dz4dqszPY>

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

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

[music playing]

Welcome back to the Bruchim podcast. I'm your host, Eli Ungar-Sargon. Joining me today from Boise, Idaho, is our executive director, Rebecca Wald. Rebecca, welcome to the podcast.

REBECCA WALD:

Hi. Thank you. Good to be here. And it is Boy-see, by the way.

EU-S:

Boy-see. Thank you for the correction. Boy-see.

RW:

Yes. If you live in Boise, that's one of the first things that you learn. It is not pronounced Boise. I don't know why, but that's the way it goes.

EU-S:

No, this is very valuable information. I appreciate the correction. So, Rebecca, tell me how you come to this strange topic of circumcision.

RW:

Well, that's a good question. I would have to say I probably come to it from a background of having parents who were very thoughtful and cared a lot about infants and children. My mom is a very loving person and was always involved with children for her whole life as a nanny and a caregiver. And she helped in the raising of my children when they were young. And my father was a psychiatrist who cared a lot about the emotional well-being of children.

So children and infants were something that were often the subject of conversation in our home and talking about ways to raise children, to give them freedom and love and respect.

EU-S:

Interesting. So you grew up with a kind of built-in suspicion towards the practice of circumcision. Is that right?

RW:

Well, I'm told that if I was a boy, my parents would not have circumcised me. Actually, I recall as a teenager hearing that and hearing my parents' objections to circumcision and thinking they were really out there because everybody that I knew who was Jewish and was male was circumcised. So when I went to go, you know, babysit or change a diaper, you know, that's what I was used to.

But it certainly made sense once my parents introduced me to the idea that this was not a good thing to do to a child. And it made sense right away for me.

EU-S:

And when you had children, you decided not to circumcise your son, right?

RW:

Yes. And it was actually a very easy decision. I remember I was out on one of my first dates with my future husband and the subject came up and I said, yeah, you know, if I have a kid, I don't think I'm going to be circumcising him.

And my future husband said, "you know, I think I agree with you. I saw some circumcisions in medical school and it's not something that I'd want to do to a kid either."

EU-S:

Wow. So you had the conversation that early in your relationship, huh?

RW:

I did. You know, it's something that I was passionate about in a way, even when I was a younger person. And I did bring the subject up. I brought it up with many of the guys that I dated and I dated a lot of Jewish guys. And to be honest, they were all on board.

EU-S:

I think it's actually really smart that you did that. And I think a lot of people, because of the taboo nature of the subject, leave the conversation until much later in the relationship, which can cause all kinds of strife and problems. So I think that probably worked out really well for you.

RW:

Probably. I mean, it goes to the very heart of what you believe as a human being about how other people should be treated. And, you know, an approach to child rearing is certainly something that two people should be on board with right from the beginning if they do plan to have children.

EU-S:

Absolutely. I think, you know, it's one thing to be raised with these humanist values that you were raised with and make this decision not to circumcise your

son. But it's quite another thing to be public about it in the way that you've been. So can you talk a little bit about that? How has that worked out for you? What kinds of reactions do you get to your public stance on this issue?

RW:

You know, it's funny. I'm not the kind of person who is easily scared off by what other people think of me. So I think that has probably played a role in the fact that I felt comfortable being public about it. But it also surprises me in a way that other people are content to make the decision not to circumcise. And yet they don't want to discuss it at all. They don't want to discuss it, you know, in their peer groups or, you know, publicly in any way. And I kind of don't understand it. I think that if you see something and you feel strongly about it, you should speak up.

EU-S:

I think that's a great attitude to have. And if I may be so bold as to suggest that's a very Jewish attitude to have as well.

RW:

Well, you know, I'm lucky. I'm very lucky. The stars have aligned for me in many ways that, you know, have allowed me to, you know, have this voice and not be afraid to use it.

EU-S:

I think a lot of people listening to this are going to be wondering at this point, 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?

RW:

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.

EU-S:

Yeah, our audience should also know, I would be remiss if I didn't bring this up, that before co-founding Bruchim, Rebecca started a blog called *Beyond the Bris*. And *Beyond the Bris* is one of the most important online sites for airing Jewish voices that are critical of circumcision. So how did the decision to start that blog come about? And what was the experience of running it all these years? What's it been like?

RW:

Well, my husband, David, would probably not want me to give him credit for this because he likes me to take credit for everything, even if I'm not the one who should be getting the credit.

EU-S:

[laughter]

RW:

But he came up with the idea that instead of writing a book for Jewish people who are opting out of circumcision, I should start a blog. And that's what I did. I started the blog when my son was about three years old. And it was a place, it was and is a place, where Jewish people who object to circumcision or have stories that they want to tell related to circumcision can post their original essays.

EU-S:

Yeah, I published a piece on there back in 2011 when I debated Rabbi Shmuley Boteach on the subject of circumcision. And you were kind enough to publish my opening remarks at that debate, which people can still listen to, by the way.

It's, if you want to hear a rabbi get drubbed in a debate by yours truly, I recommend it. It's a fun lesson.

RW:

It certainly is.

EU-S:

So I published there and many other people have published there. And I think the site functions also to kind of shine a spotlight on Jews who are opposed to circumcision. And I've discovered many people who I never would have known about without *Beyond the Bris*.

So I wanted to thank you, take the opportunity to thank you for the work that you did on that.

RW:

Yeah, you know, the site has sort of been overtaken, I think, by my work with Bruchim lately. I haven't been posting on that site as often as I should. And I haven't been encouraging people to write and submit their essays. But it's still around and I'm still posting.

So if anybody wants to share something on the *Beyond the Bris* site, please take a look at it and then reach out to me and we'll get it up there.

EU-S:

You and our co-founder, Lisa Braver Moss, published a book called *Celebrating Brit Shalom*. That was a very exciting project. So can you talk a little bit about that?

RW:

Well, it's the first book that's ever been published that has to do with alternative Brit ceremonies for babies who will not be circumcised. And it's a great little book. Of course, it's great. I wrote it.

EU-S:

[laughter]

RW:

With Lisa. But it's a little book. It has three ceremonies, three different takes on a Brit Shalom ceremony. And it's a great place for people who are interested in looking at liturgy options. You can also just, you know, right off the rack, order a copy for everybody who is, you know, at your ceremony and they can follow along. It's meant to be used by families who want to host a Brit Shalom on their own, or it can be rabbi-led. It's a great place to start for people who are interested in learning more about Brit Shalom.

EU-S:

Absolutely. It's a wonderful guide and original work of liturgy, which I think is super exciting. And I can't recommend it highly enough.

That brings me to the fact that both you and I have had extensive contact and have worked in the space of the genital autonomy movement, sometimes known as the anti-circumcision movement or the intactivist movement, if you're into portmanteaus.

And I'd say, you know, we're veterans of the circumcision wars, and to use a Star Wars reference.

RW:

As yet unscarred.

EU-S:

Well, one of us anyway. Yeah, and I think this is a good opportunity maybe to clarify something about our organization, because I think we are confusing in two directions.

We're confusing in the direction of the Jewish community, which sometimes regards us with some degree of suspicion, because we don't explicitly oppose the practice of Brit Milah, of circumcision.

And so they hear that and they think, "Oh, these are people who are pretending not to be opposed to circumcision, but it's really just a Trojan horse for a radical agenda to transform Judaism."

And on the other hand, I think we're confusing to people in the genital autonomy movement who look at us and say, "Why aren't they more explicitly opposing circumcision? What kind of soft-peddling nonsense is this?"

And so I think we should take this opportunity to really clarify why we have taken the position that we have taken on this issue and where we stand on these things.

RW:

Yeah, you know, people just don't know what to make of us. And I can understand the confusion. You know, circumcision is a pretty complicated topic, and Bruchim is like a complicated organization in a way. But, you know, at the end of the day, our mission is in the service of supporting the full range of non-circumcising Jews. And many are not activists. Many are religious. Many don't necessarily have strong feelings about the correctness or incorrectness of circumcision. They might not be circumcising for entirely different reasons.

For example, maybe their partner has strong feelings against it, or maybe their child was born with some anatomical difference that makes circumcision out of the question.

As an organization, we strive to be a trusted authority and a place where Jewish people of diverse beliefs on this can feel comfortable seeking our guidance and our advice and our efforts at problem resolution.

EU-S:

Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And the point that I want to drive home just a little bit more is the fact that we are an advocacy organization, and we feel that any kind of stand taking about, you know, these sorts of issues, whether it's should circumcision be illegal, is circumcision unethical, kind of compromises our ability to properly represent and advocate for our constituency.

RW:

I mean, I do like exploring these kinds of things. You know, Bruchim has some special events that we do throughout the year, and there are opportunities within the umbrella of Bruchim to talk about these kinds of issues.

But I really like the fact that Bruchim is a place where people can feel comfortable, even if they don't agree with us 100% about everything, or where people can have different views.

EU-S:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that that perspective and understanding where we're coming from as an organization, it's not like— it's very important for me that people not think that we're being in any way dishonest, right? We as an organization, this is very important to us. We are not opposed to circumcision.

We are here to support people who have chosen not to circumcise, not to circumcise their children, people who think critically or differently about circumcision. These are the people that we serve.

And as you mentioned, we have a diversity of opinion on a range of topics, and that's just part of the complexity of who we are.

RW:

Yeah, I mean, look, there's some very angry Jewish people when it comes to this issue, and they have every right to be angry. But it's not our mission to be a megaphone for their, you know, rage and their feelings of distress, no matter how valid those feelings are. That's for a different place. That's for *Beyond the Bris*.

EU-S:

So I want to transition to a little bit of a conversation about some of the unique perspectives that we get at Bruchim, serving people who are dealing with this issue. And I was wondering if you could share some of the stories from behind the scenes of what we do.

RW:

Well, unfortunately, we've had some very difficult situations, situations where people have been thrown out of their Jewish communities because they have a child who is intact or because they intend not to circumcise, and that becomes

known. We've had some situations where parents or spouses feel differently than the person who chooses, who does not want to circumcise.

So those are always challenging when they come up, and it always makes me glad that we exist.

EU-S:

Yeah, I mean, I feel like, you know, your average, even very well-educated, very well-connected Jewish person is unlikely to have come across the sorts of things that come through our email box on a regular basis.

And that just sort of speaks to the need for Bruchim because, again, the taboo kicks in here, and these sorts of situations get suppressed. People don't hear about them.

But in the meantime, you know, an entire section of the Jewish population is being either alienated or, in some really terrible cases, you know, actively persecuted for taking this stand against circumcision. And those are the people and those are the situations that, you know, really bring home the importance of our organization in the world.

RW:

Yeah, whenever we get those emails, you know, I'm always surprised. But for me, I think the most surprising thing is that more Jewish people and institutions aren't strongly supporting us and that still, you know, relatively few Jewish people fail to be concerned with the harm of circumcision. I personally – I just don't understand it.

EU-S:

Yeah, when a practice is as pervasive and as deeply culturally rooted as circumcision, people have a tendency to just accept it as part of the ambient temperature of life, right?

When you hear about a horrible thing happening to a baby during a circumcision, you don't think about it as something that was done to the baby due to poor reasoning or something like that. You think of it more as like a natural disaster or something, right? Like, it's almost like the human agency

gets sucked out of the equation because it's so pervasive and it's so ambient that it might as well be an earthquake or a tsunami. Does that make sense?

RW:

Yeah, I mean, growing up in Philadelphia in the 1980s, you know, we would turn on the news every morning and find that, you know, five murders had taken place and so many gunshots. And you become immune to it.

And I guess what you're saying a little bit is that, you know, we're immune to it because we're just so used to it being part of, you know, the way things Jews have always done things. But what gets me is I'm surprised that parents can treat their own children so poorly over this.

You know, we get situations where, you know, parents haven't spoken to their kids in years because the kids decided not to circumcise. They cut them off. And this is because these loving parents don't want to injure their kids. And like that spouses and partners, you know, can insist on circumcision over the heartfelt objection of the other parent.

EU-S:

Yeah. And again, because it's a taboo, these are not things that are typically discussed or even at the level of cultural awareness.

RW:

Yeah. And, you know, so you asked me a little bit about my origin story, but I don't really know your origin story.

Like, I know that you did the film, but like, what was it for you that sort of flipped that switch and said, you know, this circumcision thing, I think there's something that's not quite right about it.

EU-S:

Yeah. So I was growing up in Israel. My family moved there when I was 13 years old. My family's very religious, very orthodox. So b'rit milah and circumcision was kind of a part of, you know, day to day life. Someone would have a baby, there'd be a circumcision. Eight days later, you go to the circumcision. And I think I was 17 when I was given this very big family honor of being the sandek at a cousin's bris.

And the sandek is the person who holds the baby during the circumcision ritual. And it's usually an honor that's reserved for like a family elder. But I think I had gotten into medical school and people were really happy about that. So I was given the honor.

So this is the first time in my life I've been this close to a circumcision. I had never like actually held a baby during a circumcision. And here I am and I have this huge pillow. And on top of the pillow is my newborn cousin, my newborn first cousin.

And the mohel says the blessing and he cuts the foreskin. And then he bends down and puts his mouth on the wound and sucks on it and comes up. And there's a little dribble of blood on his beard. And I had never known that this was a part of the rite. This is a part of circumcision of Brit Mila that's called metzitzah b'peh. Suction by the mouth is what it means. It comes from a kind of Galenic medical concept of, originally it was instituted because they thought it was a safer way of doing the procedure.

But in any event, I didn't know that this thing even existed and there I was and it was in my face and the trail of blood on the mohel's beard. And it just, that experience shocked me into thinking differently about circumcision.

I was always sort of of a skeptical mind when it came to religious practices. I was thinking about things like the role of women in the Orthodox world and all kinds of other things that had bothered me about my upbringing and the traditions that I was being raised with.

But this experience and this image of the blood on the mohel's beard just shook me into thinking differently about circumcision. And I did go to medical school for three years. I learned how to read scientific papers and I learned about medical statistics. And I started looking into circumcision from a medical perspective. And what became very obvious very soon was that all of the medical justifications for circumcision were just kind of weak window-dressing for a cultural practice. That the science behind the claim to health benefits was incredibly statistically weak.

And so when I left medical school and went to art school to pursue a career in film to learn how to be a filmmaker, my first film coming out of art school that just sort of made sense to me was about circumcision and Jewish identity and that's where *Cut* came from.

RW:

Well, thank you for sharing that.

EU-S:

Yeah, it was, so it's a bit intense, my awakening to this issue.

RW:

Yeah, but still, there's many people who go to the bris and they see something very similar and they don't have the awakening that you had. So clearly there was something within you that allowed you to recognize it.

EU-S:

Yeah, and I mean, to this day, I try and stay in touch with that sort of basic humanist approach to this issue, which is at the root of everything is a person suffering. And I think that's an important perspective to stay in touch with, even as you get into sort of highfalutin ethics about the topic.

RW:

Right, at the end of the day, it's a baby and a scalpel.

EU-S:

Rebecca, this has been a real pleasure. Thank you so much for joining me.

RW:

Thank you so much for having me on the *Bruchim Podcast*.

[gentle music]

ELI UNGAR-SARGON:

Next time on the *Bruchim Podcast*.

EU-S:

You could come at this from the side of saying, circumcision is not an ethical violation and there are philosophers who try to make that argument. And in that way, if those philosophers are right, then it isn't a conflict because the Jewish tradition is recommending something that is not ethically problematic. My problem is I don't find any of those arguments persuasive. Are you, you know the people I'm talking about here, right?

MAX DUBOFF:

Totally, yeah. No, I don't find those persuasive as well. I mean, for a few different reasons, but as is often discussed, I think, in the literature on this, or at least in conversations, and certainly in both of our circles, attempts to find medical justification for circumcision have been a large part of cure in search of a disease. You know, that, you know, the kind of what the proposed medical benefits of circumcision are have shifted so much and seem to be really socially informed in problematic ways.

And you really can't escape, I think, this basic issue of imposing a surgical procedure with risks on someone who's not directly benefited and who's not really able to give their consent.

EU-S:

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