

Bruchim Podcast – EPISODE 10

Episode 10-Generative Violence with Na'ama Carlin

In this episode, Eli and Max are joined by Dr. Na'ama Carlin to discuss her book *Morality, Violence, and Ritual Circumcision*. They talk about Dr. Carlin's distinction between Manichaen violence and generative violence. They discuss the contemporary circumcision debate and how Jewish circumcision resists its logic. They talk about Derrida's book *Circumfession* and how Na'ama leans on it for her understanding of Jewish circumcision.

Show Notes

Dr. Carlin's book

<https://www.routledge.com/Morality-Violence-and-Ritual-Circumcision-Writing-with-Blood/Carlin/p/book/9780367551957>

The Benatar and Benatar article

<https://philpapers.org/rec/BENBPA-2>

Rachel Bloom's Foreskin Angels

<https://youtu.be/LyqutExm-jw?si=M7XVraz3Fz3HLXuE>

Derrida's Circumfession

<https://a.co/d/e6lsf8P>

Eli Ungar-Sargon:

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 my co-host and our Director of Education at Bruchim, Max DuBoff. Max, it's always a pleasure to talk with you.

Max DuBoff:

Eli, such a pleasure as always.

EU-S:

And joining us today from Sydney, Australia, is our very special guest, the author of *Morality, Violence, and Ritual Circumcision*, Dr. Na'ama Carlin. Dr. Carlin, welcome to the *Bruchim Podcast*.

Dr. Na'ama Carlin:

Shalom. Thanks for having me. I'm speaking to you from unceded Bidjigal land in so-called Australia. Thanks.

EU-S:

So why don't we start with introducing you, Dr. Carlin. Who are you and how did you come to the topic of circumcision?

NC:

Well, I'm a sociologist working at the University of New South Wales. I was born in Israel. I'm a Jewish woman. And my interest in circumcision goes back to – I kind of almost stumbled onto this topic as a topic of research.

What interested me when I was approaching my research as an honor student, as an undergraduate student, was the body as a site upon which the individual and society exfoliate. So how can we think of the body as carrying this relationship of the self and other social individuals and these maybe tensions and differences?

And through different engagements of, you know, thinking about different topics, to me, growing up in a Jewish place, Jewish upbringing, so I was brought up Masorti in Israel. You know, circumcision is not something that you actually think about as a phenomenon. It's just something that you do, right? Unquestioned. Although these days, there's of course, a more robust movement, an intactivist movement, but also within the Jewish community, a Brit shalom movement.

And I was encouraged to explore circumcision. And I suppose that working within a country that doesn't have a big Jewish population, we are, you know, 0.02 [percent] of the population, very small. The topic of circumcision was appealing to my supervisor. And I suddenly thought about reflecting on my own culture and what really drives us to circumcise.

What interested me about circumcision coming from also from a perspective of, you know, looking at language as something that is meaningful, circumcision as a Brit Milah, really drew my attention, where Milah doubles as a, of course, circumcision, but also a word. And it was interesting to me to think about what this word is and what are its implications.

And then thinking of circumcision, which I do in my Ph.D., and then I do in my book, where I reflect on the process of circumcision as a rite of passage, but also as a “write” with a W – and write then serves as an inscription, but also as an inscribing into.

EU-S:

Yeah, I should state in full disclosure that Dr. Carlin opens her book with an excerpt from my film *Cut: Slicing Through the Myths of Circumcision*. Of course, I'm deeply flattered by the reference.

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about why you chose that particular part of my film and how it resonated with your work.

NC:

I love that film. I watched it. It's from 2007. And I was at a point of my Ph.D. where I was like trying to find resources, Jewish resources on circumcision. And I love this vignette. And I actually spoke at a conference just a couple of days ago, and I used this conversation as well. So it's one of my favorite anecdotes, or I guess entries.

So in this scene, Eli, you are talking to Rabbi Hershy Worch, and you're speaking to him about circumcision. And something really interesting happens where this rabbi, who's an Orthodox rabbi – you also interview other rabbis who have other less strong words to say about circumcision – but Rabbi Worch says:

"It's painful. It's abusive. It's traumatic. And if anybody who's not in a covenant does it, I think they should be put in prison."

And this is so striking because this really comes into this narrative of circumcision, which the intactivist movement, the anti-circumcision activist movement, use to talk about circumcision. It is abusive. It is non-consensual.

And here we see a rabbi, a man who has no doubt undergone circumcision himself and attended many others. And he also offers a defense of circumcision further on. He says that it's an abusive thing:

“I don't think anybody has an excuse for mutilating a child, depriving them of their glands, penis, and all. I mean, we don't have rights to other people's bodies. And a baby needs to have its rights protected. I think anybody who circumcises a baby is an abuser, unless it's absolutely medically advised.”

Is he effectively saying that he is an abuser or that we are abusers?

EU-S:

How is it that being in this covenant somehow exempts you from that term? How can you not call yourself an abuser just because –

Rabbi Hershy Worch:

I'm an abuser. I do abusive things because I'm in covenant with God. And ultimately, God owns my morals. He owns my body. He owns my past and my future. And that's the meaning of this covenant, that I agreed to ignore the pain and the rights and the trauma of my child to be in this covenant.”

And it brings in this relationship where we think about, why do we do these violent things? Circumcision is violent. And this is a position that I take very strongly in my book. And I don't disagree with the rabbi. Circumcision is a violent act. It is a violation of someone's body. However, in Judaism, it is still practiced.

Judaism creates an intervention into the logic of circumcision discourse or the secular discourse that we see playing out whereby for intactivists, circumcision is violent and therefore it is immoral and unethical and should not be done and children should be protected from.

On the other hand, you have those who advocate for circumcision as a public health measure. They say circumcision helps reduce chances of transmission of HIV. It is a public health measure. It helps protect against STIs. It is a moral imperative to circumcise because it protects us socially from these sexually transmissible infections. And with HIV, it can be quite a serious disease. And so it is moral.

What Judaism does, it says, actually, it's none of those things. It is both violent and it also is a moral imperative. It kind of transgresses these dualist notions of what it is and what we should do and not do.

So how do we still practice something that we know is violent? We know when we have a circumcision that it's going to be painful for the baby. It's going to be painful for those around who are watching, and yet we still practice it.

And this is what I'm interested in. Why do we practice something that we know that is violent, that we know, in the rabbi's words, is abusive, and yet it is lasting for centuries and a core component of our Jewish identity?

MD:

Yeah. So there are so, so many really rich and deep threads here, which we'll continue to explore, I think, throughout our conversation.

I would love to just ask you to say a little bit about the notion of generative violence. I think you were starting to touch on some of that. But when you talk about generative violence in your book, what does that mean?

And maybe what are some of the possibilities of that, especially as compared to what you call maybe Manichean conceptions of violence, where there's someone external imposing on someone else?

And then also, it would be great to just hear a little bit about some of the intellectual influences on your work, so our audience can also get an idea of what kinds of sources you're drawing on.

NC:

What I try and do in my book and in my work is create an intervention into the logic of how we think about violence from a sociological perspective.

So sociology as a discipline has tended to theorize violence through symbols and structures, right? It's how violence operates at the state level, structural level. It's less focused on the physicality of violence. We can think of that more as like in criminology or psychology, but sociology is focused on the structural implications.

And it tended to conceive of violence as having this notion of externality, I mean, which I think, which I argue is about externality. So violence is understood as generally having these dualistic attributes, whereby there's an intrusion of an external other upon this already integral individual or

community, and this intervention shatters or compromises the integrity of that community with that person.

And I use this notion of Manichean violence, which as a political concept has been introduced or championed by Frantz Fanon in his work. And Fanon, of course, writes about Manichean violence in the logic of settler colonialism.

So we can actually think of this in context of a contemporary political example, which I don't know, this is something that really struck me as an example of what Manicheanism is, when in the context of Israel's current war in Gaza, which is something that is a frame of reference for me a lot now, I can't stop thinking about it. I'm sure many people aren't. So this is, as the time of time of talking, this happened, this quote came in October of 2023.

Israel's president, Yitzhak Herzog, said that the war Israel is engaged in is in the war between the children of light and the children of darkness. And this is the Manichean logic playing out, right? It's this dualistic light, dark, good, bad, moral, and not just immoral, but devoid of morals. And it's this devoid of morals, human, non-human, you know, when I'm saying these dualistic things, dualistic categories, they're not weighted equally. One is given precedence over the other.

And it's this precedence or weight that legitimizes being able to speak for, or on behalf of, or against the other category, right?

So white privilege over black, good privilege over bad, morality over violence, and so on. So we see Manichean logic playing out in this example, but also politically. This is why these conversations are really important to be having, right? But the concept of violence, although my work is theoretical and conceptual, is playing out right now in world politics.

So as Fanon employs it, and as I kind of use Manicheanism in my work as well, the de-externality and imposing on the other, is only possible because the colonizing or imposing force dominating is seen as the one that contains the morals and the values, and the colonized are portrayed as impervious to any ethics and morals. And so they're not only portrayed as not possessing morals, they are the negation of values, and these are the values of the colonizer, right?

We are the children of light, the children of darkness.

And it's because colonizers perceive themselves, or people who have these, you know, the top category, the male, white, privileged, see themselves as having these morals that they justify violence towards the other category.

But we also see it playing out, I don't know, in animal welfare, right? So animal welfare activists will say that, you know, human speciesism, right? Humans are imposing their violence over the non-human animal because we see them as devoid of morals, devoid of a voice, devoid of identity, right?

And it's this primordial violence of the animal and the human that justifies a logical violence towards non-human species.

EU-S:

Max, on the analytics side, Peter Singer does some of that work, right?

MD:

Yeah, no, totally. Certainly, Peter Singer really helped to popularize the term speciesism, yeah, which has now entered the sort of standard lexicon.

NC:

But I'll just go to the generative violence. My response is that these views of violence, as they're being theorized in sociology and in politics or in other fields, are reductive because they don't actually, they still work on this dualism.

But as we've seen in the Jewish case of circumcision, it is both violent and a moral imperative. So it kind of goes against or intervenes into this dualistic logic.

So the way that I frame or analyze circumcision is as a generative violence, meaning it is a force that is meaning-making and conducive to identity. And in this way, we can think of violence not as something that needs to be guarded against – although there are certainly forms of violence that need to be guarded against – but rather to kind of theorize why and how Jews for centuries, for millennia, practice something that is violent, but is also moral.

And it is because I argue that it is in this meaning-making process where circumcision is inscribed and inscribes the Jewish body into Jewish male

lineage, that it makes the body legible. And this brings with it the generative force of it. It is tied in with identity and meaning-making.

MD:

Yeah, so that's super helpful.

And one worry that I perhaps have is that if we come to see violence in some of the ways you're describing, do we lose some of the opportunity and ability to talk about victims and victimhood in ways that we might feel like we have to in order to call out forms of injustice?

I mean, so certainly we don't want to paint a group or something like that as only victims, right? That's really dangerous as well. But how do we maybe strike some of this balance?

NC:

Maybe you can clarify a bit what you mean. So you're just saying that through the notion of generative violence, we do away with the notion of the victim?

MD:

Well, right. So if we can't talk at least to some extent about someone who is on the receiving end of an action, except from the context of after that action or with the assumption that that action is happening, then it seems like it could be difficult to say that someone is worse off based on something happening to them or really to really have criteria of condemning types of violence that are generative.

I mean, maybe this is something we might want to, Eli, you can tell me this is something we might want to dig into a little bit more later, but I was a little bit worried that some of the aspects of what you were discussing sort of assume an Orthodox perspective on the possible meaning or value of circumcision instead of maybe leaving space for more moral ambiguity.

NC:

The truth is that circumcision isn't practiced just by orthodox Jews. This is the crux of it. Secular Jews or even atheist Jews will still practice circumcision. It's like the one thing, right? Circumcision and eating pork. And for many Jews, they would still eat pork if they're not at home, right? So it's like the final

frontier. It's almost not questioned that you will circumcise your son. And so it doesn't really matter if you're orthodox or if you're observant, if you're secular, right?

The rates of circumcision in Israel are in the 90-something percent and the society there aren't all orthodox. There are many non-orthodox and secular Jews in the same way in the U.S.

So it's not just tied into the notion of orthodoxy. The notion of generative identity is that it's because it goes beyond the connection to a particular sect of Judaism. I think that the idea of a generative violence doesn't do away with the notion of the victim. However, I'm very careful to impose my view on what a victim is and someone who might not identify as a victim.

And here's something that I can give you maybe an anecdote of something, a conversation that happened when I was in the very early stage of researching my Ph.D. I might've just even finished my honors thesis that was also on circumcision, but I took a different approach to it.

And I was having a conversation with a friend and I was using the language that intactivists use of mutilation. And some activists say that people have been circumcised and have been sexually assaulted. And I was using this language to talk about circumcision.

And my friend just said to me, "Do you really think that I'm mutilated? Have I been mutilated?" And it was in this moment where I realized that it's not my position to tell someone that they are mutilated if they don't think that they have been mutilated or this is not their experience of their body.

And actually it can be a very dangerous thing psychologically to tell someone, "Well, actually, yes, your body is mutilated and you should think that way about your body." It's not my place. I've changed my language completely around this.

I use a language of modification to talk about these processes because I don't want to come with that imposing kind of moral judgment on someone else's body.

In the same way with the notion of a victim, I think that we need to create the space for those who feel that they have been a victim or have undergone a trauma to navigate this. But I don't think that everyone who has gone through

a circumcision is a victim or has gone through a trauma. No, I don't think that way. And I don't think it's my place to tell them that.

EU-S:

There are so many threads here I want to pull on and we're not going to have time to get to everything because it's just such a rich conversation. But I do want to press on one point that I think is really interesting, which is when you talk about generative violence.

So I think you're allowing for the possibility that, you know, not everyone is going to experience their circumcision as generative in the way that you're describing.

But I wonder if you think that the manner in which the meaning is generated is different depending on what kind of a Jew is doing the circumcision. And I just want to press, because you were saying that this is sort of a wall-to-wall, all Jews do it. But from my perspective and where I'm standing, an Orthodox Jew, like your concept, the way you describe generative violence in your book, to me sounds very Orthodox. But the rest of the Jewish world, it doesn't really fit so well for me in terms of how I know people think about their circumcision.

It's not that it's not constitutive in some way of their identity, but it's definitely not, it doesn't have the Kabbalistic overtones, it doesn't have the kind of sort of deep, traditional, you know, metaphysical and spiritual context that an Orthodox person would come to. It's a very simple kind of identity marker as opposed to like this more complex generative one.

So I'm wondering if, what you think about that. Do you think we can distinguish between how it applies to different kinds of Jews?

NC:

I think it's interesting because, you know, I use these, you know, Kabbalistic, you know, and kind of Talmudic examples to look at how words, letters, how these different elements, I look at the Sephirot, for instance, to look at how bodies that can actually be inscribed and legible and read.

So while I take your point that not every Jew will have this Kabbalistic reflection on their circumcision, in my work, I kind of say, well, actually, by the fact that we are, it is a Brit Milah, it is an inscription of text on body, right? It's

a writing, it's a writer passage. This meaning is already being written. And so it is written, it is embodied, it makes the body legible.

Whether one might think, might carry this feeling of having this symbolic notion of like, oh, I feel very strongly connected to my circumcision, or I feel less connected to it. It is the tool that makes, it allows us to read circumcision, I suppose, in a way that gives it, or in a way that gives it this meaning.

So you're right that some people kind of have circumcision and don't really think about it. They have the Brit Milah ceremony and they don't give it the surplus meaning.

Although I really don't think that people kind of go through Brit Milah and don't give it that meaning because it is meaningful. And I think that kind of many people, I don't want to say like every person, but it is something you go, oh, even if you just plan, like, you know, what do we say? What do we name? Because naming is another big part of the ceremony, right? It's part of the Brit Milah process. And I talk about naming quite a lot.

It is also the thing that makes the child legible, gives them a name, gives them an identity, brings them into the Jewish community, another part of it.

MD:

This is really interesting, right? So, you know, I grew up in the Conservative movement in the United States, right? And circumcision just was really mundane, right? I never thought about it at all, my own, anyone else's, you know, and no one really ever talked about it. You know, I went to some, to some britot, but it wasn't something where the circumcision itself was particularly remarked upon.

The naming is a big deal. I mean, and I think that maybe one thing that's worth doing sometimes is separating out, you know, the naming from some of the elements of the Brit Milah that are involved with cutting. And that's something that I'd be curious for your thoughts on.

But, you know, the other big question is, who's doing this reading, right? And I think that's where I worry with some of the possible Ortho-normativity that I think Eli was alluding to as well, right? That the sort of ways of reading maybe that we might think are most embedded within circumcision are ways of reading which are associated with some kinds of Orthodox perspectives rather

than seeing a sort of broader array of relationships with Jewish identity, which might sort of weaken the role of circumcision in crafting Jewish identity.

EU-S:

Yeah, I also just want to add a quick point here, which is, and it's something that I try to bring people's attention to. When we talk about the meaning of circumcision, it's almost always the people doing the circumcision. It's not the person who's had it done to them.

And I think that's a really important and interesting distinction to make, right? That like Max and I are both circumcised. If this weren't an area of intellectual interest for us, if we didn't have this like kind of crazy focus on this tiny little niche area, we literally would not be thinking about our circumcisions.

But surely in the time that our parents were making the decision to circumcise us, it was meaningful to them. And I think that's an important distinction.

MD:

No, and I'll just say briefly, I think when my parents were deciding to have my brother and me circumcised, it just wasn't a question, right? And it wasn't particularly meaningful. It wasn't non-meaningful. It was just the thing you do.

And maybe that does back up some of the points about inscribing Jewish identity, but it doesn't have to feel meaningful maybe in order for this to be the case.

NC:

This is exactly my point, right? This is exactly what I, and I'm listening to you talk about, we do it and it's not – but here you are and you've kind of dedicated your lives. Like Eli, your documentary was like almost 10 years ago. And I think you've been doing work about circumcision even prior to that. Maybe that was the start of your thing. And here you are, you're still focused on this topic so passionately.

And yet you say it was just done, like no one thought about it. And you, that's also just done.

But yet it is meaningful, right?

It has done something transformative.

EU-S:

Don't underestimate how weird we are. I mean, this is an important point here that I'm trying to make that we are unusual. I try and bring people's attention to how weird I am on a regular basis. This is a strange obsession, but yes, please, sorry, go on.

NC:

But even if you two are weird, the fact that people still do it or practice circumcision, even if it is not, as you say, they just do it, it is not with meaning. And I don't think that's just true. I think every ritual is meaningful. Like even if you just light your Shabbat candles every Friday and maybe you're distracted one week and you mess up the bracha or whatever, it is still meaningful, right? It is still a ritual and a rite of passage, and in circumcision's case, it's a rite of passage.

So even though you just done, it's done with that, you know, the philosophy or the Kabbalistic reflection or the Talmudic engagement, it is still a meaningful practice. You have, you think about which family you want to have there, which friends you want to have, what shul are we going to go to, who's going to say the bracha, who's going to be the mohel, who's going to be the sandek, right? It's still part of that process of meaning making.

MD:

Yeah, no, so one of the topics that interests me most, and I've written a little about this, is the phenomenon of hospital circumcisions, right? So, so many American Jews, and we don't really know how many, there aren't good statistics on this, but so many Jews, at least in the United States, are not having a ritual for circumcision, but they're having their kids circumcised.

And so maybe this sort of writing that you're talking about is still happening in a way, but it seems like it's happening in a substantially different way than if, as you're saying, friends and family are there, and you're kind of thinking about how to craft a ceremony and ordering bagels, et cetera.

NC:

The bagels in the circumcision is such a cliché, it's so funny.

MD:

Bagels are important, you know?

EU-S:

Come on, we're Jews, the food is very important, people.

It's not so often that we get a scholar on to talk about the state of the circumcision conversation. And I feel like you did this in your book, you have like a bit of a sort of survey of the contemporary debate, and you had some really interesting things to say about it.

So in particular, you brought up this idea that the two sides of the contemporary circumcision debate resort to these kinds of trump card arguments. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that and your sense of the current state of the circumcision discourse.

NC:

Yeah, absolutely. So as I was kind of reading and engaging a lot of the intactivist literature, I think that I'd also like to maybe reflect on the language of intactivists, because I talk about language a lot in my book, and I really kind of stay with this like the Derridian analysis.

So the intactivists' word is really amazing, because what it does is that it changes the language from like uncircumcised, because uncircumcised indicates already that un- indicates an absence or lacking already, that if you're uncircumcised, you are already lacking in something, where the circumcised is the whole kind of like, almost like the whole integral state.

And they bring in this language of "intact" to try and challenge this idea.

So they've tried – even changed the language of how we think about this, which I think is really fascinating, and shows how significant the terminologies and the ways we talk about, you know, circumcision and why I avoid using the language of mutilation, because it is generative, right? Language words are generative and meaningful.

So intactivists focus or use the argument of “first do no harm,” this is like the medical imperative, they claim that circumcision is harmful and medically unethical, because it amputates a healthy tissue, which is the foreskin, from a healthy body part.

And it compromises, you know, one's body physically, it can reduce sensitivity, it also is an amputation. And others, intactivists go as far as to argue that circumcision traumatises the penis and the male organ, and it qualifies as sexual abuse.

They have an intactivist who have said that some stuff that is quite outrageous, like AIDS, is a consequence of circumcision.

And others have said something, this is a quote that I use a lot, where they have said that circumcision may not always kill the child, but it always and intentionally kills part of the child.

And I think this is really kind of the work that shows the urgency in which intactivists feel that they operate, but also some of the challenges of like engaging this work in a way that is, you know, it's not very nuanced, and doesn't really provide for that, you know, this is why I kind of try and look at circumcision in Judaism. It's complicated, if you were to tell in, say, in Judaism, or think of in Judaism as always already intentionally killing part of the child, then this has deep moral implications for, you know, every Jewish man who has been circumcised.

And I don't think it's true. I don't think that it does that. I don't think it's fair to say that that circumcision is a sexual abuse. And I don't think it's fair to say that if that were the case, then, you know, we would have to look at sexual abuse in a very different light. And also, it's not my place to impose this, you know, this argument onto every single circumcised body.

So what they do is then they use this language of autonomy and integrity, which is linked to this liberal argument, liberal argument of autonomy, you know, goes back to John Stuart Mill's notion of liberty, and say that these are the most valued things that position imposes on them, this is the trump card.

So effectively, it's not only an unnecessary surgical procedure, it violates autonomy and bodily integrity. And this trumps all other decisions around circumcision. Doesn't matter if you if you need to do it because of your Jewish heritage or any other cultural heritage, as it's a violation of bodily integrity and

autonomy. This is the trump, right? And no other reason can come close enough.

Conversely, we have the and I've also worked in sexual health for a long period of time. And I know that from those who look at circumcision as a medical imperative – and I'm also Australian and Brian Morris is, I'm sure who's work you're familiar with is also Australian. And he's working operates at different universities to me.

EU-S:

He's in your neck of the woods.

NC:

Yep. And, you know, he's one of those who is the – he is – on his book, on his first book, the quote was, he's a man on a mission to rid the world of the foreskin. This is the quote about Brian Morris.

EU-S:

I'm gonna take back what I said about us being weird, because that is really weird.

NC:

But from the perspective of the medical view of circumcision, the medical language is that it is a health imperative.

So because it is a necessary, viable, recommended surgical procedure, and a public health measure, and medical science is used to justify this claims, it's kind of reason to the moralization of sexual health and fear of HIV transmission.

Health becomes a social responsibility. And this underpins the medicalization of circumcision. And so health is presented as a trump card that serves to moralize conduct and shut down debate.

So basically, it means doesn't even matter if you do it for any religious reasons, everyone should do it because it's an important public health measure, it can help prevent rates of transmission of HIV, it can, you know, asterisks, you

know, for whom and who does apply to it can help prevent transmissions of STIs, again, asterisks, you know, who does this apply to different caveats.

And, you know, as Brian Morris would be happy, keen to say, it helps reduce the rates of penile cancer, which is a very rare form of cancer, very low rates anyways, but it's a public health measure.

And so this is the way, but in Judaism, the Jewish ritual doesn't fit into either of these, because we don't practice circumcision for medical reasons, right. And as the Rabbi, Rabbi Worch tells us, we practice circumcision, despite the fact that it's a violation, despite the fact that we know that it's violent, we don't do it for medical reason, we do it because, as you've just said before, we just do it, we don't even think why we're doing it, we just do it.

And I'm curious as to like, why do we actually do it, even without thinking that it's important, we just do it.

EU-S:

Yeah, I find the way you frame this in the book really interesting, and I think valuable, right? I had never thought really about the kind of pro-circumcision side as framing this quite the way you did, but they do, they use public health as a trump card. And it makes a lot more sense to me now, sort of post-COVID-19 pandemic, to think about the ways in which public health can be used as a trump card.

And I'm not saying this to, I think actually, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was an important trump card. And I was very much on the side of public health measures to prevent the spread of a deadly virus.

But it is interesting to think about this sort of two sides of the debate, both using trump card moral arguments and Jewish circumcision not quite fitting into that paradigm and requiring some kind of broader perspective on what this practice could actually be considered, right?

NC:

So you've read my book, I mean, this is exactly the thing that interests me. I use one of the texts of Benatar and Benatar, who are two philosophers. And this text has also been used a lot in amongst intactivists and been responded to and talked about in response to Benatar and Benatar.

And that's kind of really where you see the trump card argument playing out, but they look at it as a cost benefit analysis, like, you know, should we delay until adulthood? Well, in adulthood, then the risks are higher. So what are the cost benefit analysis?

But we see this play out as I see it in the way that advocates and intactivists are called the pro camp of circumcision advocates and the anti-intactivists in the ways that they kind of rely on different trumps to justify their claims.

So in the pro camp, in the advocates camp, you know, health relates to the state, the body state of wellness, but it's also in a broader sense about public health. So health is actually moralized, and it's necessary as a public health measure.

And so this is what sort of the call to action, whether it's the intactivists, you know, autonomy and integrity are moralized, and that's the individual's autonomy and integrity. And so to protect the child, to protect the infant, we need to not circumcise. It's less about the social and more about the individual, that kind of liberalized idea of autonomy and integrity.

Whereas in brit milah, it's not about the, it's about also, I guess, the individual and the social, because it's about the individual being written, having that right of passage. And it's about the social, right? Because it's about Jewish identity.

EU-S:

But I wonder if, and I'd love to hear what you have to say about this, because when I was reading this part of the book, I was thinking to myself, it's not an either or, it's a yes and. I feel like – and this is true, I think, of the more subtle arguments against circumcision, even among intactivists – and I think there are certain intactivists who make more nuanced and subtle arguments about this.

I'm going to say this applies to Jewish circumcision as well, is that it's layered meaning, right? So like you have at the same time, the generative violence that you're talking about and the ethical violation, and it's layered onto the same person when that person is experiencing a Jewish ritual circumcision.

NC:

I absolutely think that it's layered. Like, I don't think that it's a, it's an either or, I think that we need to choose. And I don't think that it's very easy to say, which is the whole problem, right? It is layered and it can certainly contain the notions where it is a violation, but it's also a moral imperative. Like it is all of those things. It is also a cultural act, but also done by secular people. It is also a meaningful practice, but done without any surplus thought or intention, right?

It is those things. It's not a yes or no. And this is my problem with the current discourse. So the ways that debate circumcision is being discussed in the, I suppose, the secular world. And I'm being very mindful also that I'm also being reductive by positioning these two arguments saying, oh, it's health and it's autonomy.

Because as you say, there are some nuanced arguments, the notion of like cultural relativist arguments, they try and be a bit more nuanced and talk about assimilation and integration and multiculturalism and so on and so forth. But also there, ultimately Jewish circumcision or Brit Milah makes things a bit more complicated, I think, because it does have these layers. It does have these, you know, as you say, the yes and it is all of those things.

And yet it is violent. And yet it is moral. And yet it is an imperative. But also it's like immoral, right? It's all of those things at once, which complicates that nice little boxes of, you know, violence and nonviolent self and other. It's really about the creation of meaning. And that's always going to be messy.

MD:

One way to expand a bit on some of what Eli was saying is, in your view, why shouldn't we see Jewish circumcision advocates as having a different sort of trump card? Be that God, or be that a certain kind of allegiance to a chain that's thought to be unbroken, or some kind of obligation to ancestors, right?

Because it definitely seems like one way of characterizing Rabbi Worch's quote that we were talking about earlier would be something like, look, like this would be wrong in another context, but it's okay because of our commitment to divine command, or something like that.

Is that something that you'd be willing to accept that some of these Jewish perspectives are a different trump card? Or are you hoping to move away from the idea of trump cards at all for some sorts of Jewish perspectives?

NC:

It's a good question and absolutely [one] I've thought of, but as you say, you know, circumcision is practiced also without connection to God. Because of the nature of my research, I've had conversations with people who want to get counsel and advice like, I'm a secular Jew, I don't really do anything, we're expecting a baby, what should I do? Should I circumcise? I've had so many of these conversations.

Ultimately, as I say, it's not my place to tell someone what they should do or not do. I just give them some of the facts, you know, oh, you're Jewish or you're partner [is]. Here's how Jewish lineage can, according to the halacha and the Talmud, not that I'm too observant or whatever myself, but here's the things that you need to think about.

And as secular Jews, they'll go, well, you know what? I don't believe in God. And I had this conversation with someone who just said, you know what? I don't believe in anything, but it would have broken my mother's heart if I didn't do it. So I just did it.

And so I don't even know that the trump is God, like it's...It can't be! Because he still is being done without connection to the divine in many ways without this moment of like, I do it because I believe in the covenant.

So it's something else. And this is the generative part of it. It kind of transcends this need for a trump card because it is being done despite, you know, thinking of all these different decisions.

I know it's right. I know it's wrong, but I'm still going to do it because it is this moment of because it is, I think, in my view – and I'm drawing here on the sociology of religion work – because it is a ritual, and it offers a way for community to come together and shared experience, complicity, enjoyed action. It creates a sense of identification in the case of circumcision.

It marks the infant's passage into Jewish male lineage. That's really important because blood is gendered and it demarcates them from other non-Jewish communities. So it makes the body legible by those who are Jews and non-Jews as well. And it's, it's this reproduction so that the production of a body and reproduction of a body, right? It kind of is always enduring.

And that's why I think it's kind of not really about the, the trump card re God because it is still done, as you said before, by secular people in hospitals, like in

the U.S. hospitals, it just is common. So God isn't the trump. It could be for someone like, like, like Rabbi Worch who says God owns my morals.

But as you continue, you speak to another Rabbi, right? So I have a quote from another Rabbi, you know, that further on in the book, in the introduction, who doesn't really reflect about God in that, to that capacity.

So it's, it's, it can be a motivation for some people, but it is not the trump.

EU-S:

I don't think sort of the Jews who just perform circumcision kind of rote are thinking in terms of moral trumps. And I don't think, I mean, I think for, for Rabbi Worch, that is true. I think he does have a trump because he just comes out and says it right. Like he says, God owns his morals. So that's his trump.

But generally speaking, that framework, I think is not particularly useful for thinking about why the average, for example, American Jew decides to circumcise their son in a hospital. I think there's something else going on there.

I just wonder to what extent the generative violence concept applies in that case. Because again, like, someone doing something because – and you brought this example up before – because their mother or their grandmother would be upset if they didn't, to me is not generative violence. That's just kind of social cowardice or something.

NC:

I mean, I, I kind of disagree with you. Like, I don't think, I don't, I don't think that, that this is necessarily cowardice, right? It's not really – it's about them making a decision to, to reproduce identity. And so –

EU-S:

– But is it really reproducing identity if the reason they're doing it is because they're worried about how someone else is going to think if they don't do it? That doesn't seem to me like a, like an active, you know, generating-identity thing. That seems to me like I'm worried about what my mother's going to think if I don't do this thing.

NC:

Maybe I think that the notion of generative identity, of generative violence is worth kind of unpacking here and reflecting on. Like, I don't think that it is a, something that is consciously, we say, I'm going to engage in generative violence in this moment.

What I try and use in my texts is use it as one way of thinking of violence beyond this Manichaeian or dualistic frame as being violence is necessarily needing to have the imposition of an external other that compromises the self-same, kind of the opposition of the good, bad, black, white kind of dichotomy. And as a conceptual tool, you know, it allows us to think of why Jews, you know, practice something that can be for some, you know, violent or some no issue, or for some really meaningful.

And it is, you know, kind of our argue because it is about creating meaning. It's meaningful. And generative doesn't necessarily mean that we go on and we kind of meaningfully say, I'm going to act in this way that is violent. I think that it's done regardless of whether we think about it or not. It's a way of thinking about violence. It's a way that you can, you know, behave in a violent way and not really realize that you're behaving in a violent way until someone tells you, well, I think that this is what you've done is actually violent to someone else.

It's a kind of logic, you know, I think if you were to tell Herzog, oh, you've used a Manichaeian logic here, he'd be like, what are you talking about? Right?

So we use these as conceptual frameworks to try and understand, you know, the logic that underpins different behaviors. That doesn't mean that people act in a conscious way. Herzog didn't wake up and say, I'm going to draw on Fanon's work of Manichaeianism to discuss how, you know, we are the people – these are theoretical frameworks, really. We don't actually use them in our everyday life.

In my work, what I think that it does that I think is meaningful is that it shows us how, in a sense, the world does dangle at the edge of a foreskin, right? Circumcision divides opinion. And I think there's something really interesting about it as being a cut that divides opinion and it brings a cut that also brings someone into a fold.

So it incises as well as it brings in. And it's this kind of like, also this kind of notion where it's not this or that, it is both. It operates as a cut that makes whole, right? That's kind of my whole argument.

And I think this is why it's so meaningful and why we practice it despite the fact that it might not have meaning to some. It's because it doesn't matter. It still contains meaning through its action and through its removal and excision.

MD:

I wonder if this would be a good point to transition to talking a bit about Derrida. So you discuss a lot Derrida's extended essay, "Circumfession," in the volume with Geoffrey Bennington called "Jacques Derrida," right? And Derrida – correct me if I'm wrong – didn't circumcise his son, right?

And he says, as you discuss at one point in that extended essay, that everything he's written has been about circumcision, but at other times he denied that sort of his Jewish identity really had anything to do with his work. And so I take it that Derrida represents maybe some of these tensions of circumcision, both being everything about identity and nothing about identity.

And so I'd love to just hear you talk a little about the ways that you think Derrida's relationship with circumcision can be helpful for folks today in thinking of identity as related to this practice and ritual.

NC:

"Circumfession" has to be one of my most favorite texts. I think it is such a wonderful little, little book.

Derrida grew up as a Jew in Algiers and grew up as, he says, a little black and very Arab Jew. So we see the sense of tension during – he's kind of like, the tensions of the dualism is also coming into his identity. I think that's really beautiful because it shows us here that there's a deeply rooted sense between circumcision and the self. And so it takes my body, it's my size, it takes my body, it transgresses the pathological.

And this is my kind of response to the pathologizing arguments around circumcision that come from the intactivists and the activists where it pathologizes, which is why I mentioned the anecdote before about my friend who said, you know, "Why are you pathologizing me, effectively? Why are you saying that I have been mutilated?"

Because these pathologizing arguments already come with a sense of moral understanding. So in "Circumfession," I think it is very fair to note Derrida,

while he was circumcised, did not circumcise his two sons. And there are other writers.

EU-S:

Freud didn't circumcise his boys.

NC:

So, I mean, these are really interesting examples. I think that what's interesting to me is the fact that the thread of circumcision, in a sense, hasn't been broken, right? Despite that these people have not circumcised, and they've made a decision not to.

And with circumcision, we might also say that when the child turns 13 and becomes bar mitzvah, they can choose to be circumcised, right? They can take the mitzvah on themselves.

This is the debate in Judaism, right? Whose mitzvah? When you circumcise at a brit milah, who gets the mitzvah, right? Is it the baby or is it the parent? The rabbis have debated this, and the parent gets the mitzvah. So, or some say you can split the mitzvah, but when you're 13, you will get the whole mitzvah.

So there's still an opportunity for you to enter into the covenant while you are still Jewish.

You know, Derrida's work is really been important to me because he says that circumcision kind of like haunts him. So the trace of it remains. And I would argue that despite the fact that his sons haven't been circumcised, the traces of it remain in his sons as well. They are still haunted by the circumcision, because to not circumcise is also an act.

It's also an act to remain the penis, you know, kind of intact or integral, to use the language of intactivists. It is also a decision that will then, you know, a circumcision will still haunt them. The ghost of the circumcision that has never been done to them.

And then they might say when they get to be 13, you know, "Papa, why didn't you circumcise me? Now I need to do it and it's going to be painful." And, you know, Papa will tell them, "Well, you know, tough. You have to make this decision for yourself." So this, whatever, it's a theoretical, whatever, I'm just kind of, but the specter of circumcision will still haunt them.

EU-S:

I love it. Imagining what Derrida's children said to him when they grew up. I love it.

NC:

I know, I know. But the specter of it is still going to be there. Yeah.

MD:

The comedian Rachel Bloom has a joke song about this called "Foreskin Angels," where she imagines the foreskin of someone who's been circumcised, like protecting them and all sorts of, protecting their penis in all sorts of different environments.

[music] "A foreskin angel, it's kind and brave and quick. Foreskin angel, protector of your dick."

It's a ridiculous song, but I think it maybe illustrates some of these ideas of, you know, the sort of lingering power of circumcision.

I do worry that if we sort of generalize from Derrida though, and see this practice as inherently meaningful, that that's sort of imposing on the experience, on the perspective of those who don't really see this as particularly constitutive to their Jewish identity or particularly meaningful.

NC:

So I guess you're concerned that in saying that circumcision is meaningful, you know, there are some people who think that their circumcision is not meaningful and that, you know, I don't think that that's, you know, an issue. Like to me, it's not about whether the individual thinks that it's a meaningful act or not.

Like what interests me is how can we account for the enduring place of circumcision in Judaism, despite the fact that, as you say, for some people it's not meaningful and yet they still do it. That's what interests me. It is enduring.

And the fact that, you know, for some of us we do it for whatever our individual motivations are, in my work as a sociologist, what I'm trying to think about is how can we account for this enduring legacy of circumcision?

I say, use it as a thread that weaves Jewish tapestry, right? It kind of continues. And how can we actually account for that thread?

So when I say that the whole world dangles at the edge of a foreskin, it's like also like a rhetorical kind of phrasing, but also not really. It kind of tells us how, you know, these conversations are had over and over.

And while I think that for some people it's, yes, as you say, not really a meaningful thing and you just do it without thinking, to me, that's even more interesting. Like why would you do something like that without thinking? That's most significant. Like someone like Rabbi Worch, we kind of know why he takes, why he acts in this way and he has his own individual motivations.

It's those people who would still do it, even though they don't really care about it, that I think, and like, well, this is why, like, this is the generative violence at play. This is the reproduction, because you don't need to think about it.

EU-S:

Yeah. But this is where I'm wondering for you, where the boundaries are of generative violence, because if we think about it in terms of absolute numbers, Jews are a tiny fraction of a tiny fraction of the people who practice circumcision in the world.

So I'm wondering, like for you, because it seems to me, based on how you've reacted to some of the things I've said, that you have like a broader concept of whom this applies to, of whom generative violence applies to, even if they're not buying into it, even if it's not the meaning that they would consciously be aware of.

So my question to you is, given the fact that Jews are a tiny group, do you see this generative violence meaning somehow spreading to non-Jews who practice it? Does it spread to Muslims who practice it? Like, is it meaningful for an American person who has no connection to any of these religious traditions to circumcise their child in a hospital?

NC:

I think it's a great question. And I think the way that I think of generative violence, or the way that I think of violence in this way is that I think that violence is deeply tied in with our humanity, with our human identity. There's something about human identity that is violent.

And it's sort of where I link my reflections to the work of the German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky, or the anthropologist René Girard, or even someone like Freud, who – these are the people who I can look at my work elsewhere – who look at how the very foundations of religion or religious order or ritual are deeply embedded in violence.

And even ritual that is being done from a secular perspective, like hunting – these were conducted as social rituals, they are deeply violent, but they're about community making.

So there's something about violence, which speaks to our specific humanity. And in this way, I think generative violence has broader implications. That's why it's more than about circumcision.

Circumcision is one example, or Brit Milah is one example, of how we can articulate or look at generative violence as a case study. Specifically, I say it's a case study. But the framework of violence that I look at or present in my work is another way to think about violence unshackled from the binaries of the Manichaeian logic.

EU-S:

But just to be clear, you don't think that that Gentile getting circumcised in Kansas in a hospital is engaging in generative violence, right?

NC:

I mean, I think it perhaps, I think it's an interesting question. But I think that in one sense, potentially, yes. But I think that the meaning of the violence would be different to the meaning that happens in a Jewish ritual circumcision.

So I think there was generative violence to the, you know, Gentile, the non-Jew who's undergoing a circumcision because it's just customary and is common in the U.S., you know, also is violence. And I think also is generative in that sense, because that really is done without thinking like, why would you even do that? Right? There's no need for it. Like, there's not even a thought about like – but you know, then I think that notion of the health trump card comes in as well.

But it is generative, but in a different way. We read it, it's legible in a different way than a brit milah is legible.

What is it generating?

EU-S:

Yeah.

NC:

I think it's again, it reproduces on the body, this kind of logic of circumcision as the cut that is needed, you know, because it is, baby needs to look like their dad, right? That's kind of the logic, right? I want my child to look like me, you get that kind of line all the time.

So it kind of ties into like needing to look like someone or, you know, being similar to. Also kind of linking in a bit to identity, but it generates, it reproduces violence.

EU-S:

Do you think the ethics there are different?

NC:

I think so. Yes. I think that the ethics will be different and the ethical response will be different. I think that it's still, you know, in one sense, while it would be generative, we can also read it through the trump of health, right? Because, you know, we want to do it because it's healthy, it's neater, it's easier to clean, right? These are still the arguments that come in.

But I think, because you can look at all these different aspects with Judaism, as you said, or as we kind of discussed, it's less about health. It's not really about health. It's not really about, you know, it's easier to clean. Or for some people, it's not really about God at all. As you said, you know, people do it because they just do it. It's without really thinking. It's part of our Jewish culture and tradition. So it's how we read this violence that I think is interesting.

MD:

Yeah. And in terms of where this leaves us, I mean, I agree with you, Na'ama, that, you know, folks who are reproducing circumcision and without thinking, you know, that's really fascinating and important to think through as a phenomenon.

I think a lot of what folks at Bruchim are looking to do is get conversations going and get folks, you know, engaging with this topic more and thinking about it.

NC:

And I love that. And I think that, you know, we need more organizations like this that are also rooted in, you know, Jewish values to speak to the Jewish community who is not really sure about what to do.

Like, I would love to have a resource to send people to – Jews who are coming to ask me about circumcision because inevitably, if they read my book, they won't get an answer, right? They won't get an answer to should I or shouldn't I? I mean, I don't tell you what you to do. You just hear. I just try and complicate the question for you. But if they're looking for resources.

EU-S:

Oh, boy, do I have a website for you!

[laughter]

Dr. Na'ama Carlin, thank you so much for your time. What are you up to these days and where can people find your work?

NC:

I'm working on my second book, which is on the power dynamics of the Australian oncology system. So it's an auto-ethnographic text, but also drawing on 25 qualitative interviews with carers, patients and healthcare providers who have encountered cancer-world in some way, and working on it with two colleagues. One of them has passed away recently from ovarian cancer. And so we're engaging in that work.

Hopefully it will be, you know, coming out at some point in 2024. Otherwise, yeah, just trying to enjoy the fact that I've finished and published this book.

And otherwise my work can be found in a whole bunch of places. You can Google me. And find me on social media where I am under the handle Dairy Delicious. And you can talk to me about circumcision or about other things. But yeah, that's where I am.

Thank you so much for having me. I think your work is so important. I'm really happy to be here.

EU-S:

Thank you. And we'll have a link in the show notes for where people can buy your book. And thank you so much for the time and the wonderful conversation.

NC:

Thanks. My book is very expensive. Just ask your library to buy it. It's a, you know, academic books are very – they're prohibitively expensive. So just get your library to buy it.

MD:

It's been a super fascinating conversation. Thank you so much. And your Twitter handle has to be one of the best I've ever seen.

NC:

Thanks!

EU-S:

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Stay safe, stay healthy, and lehitra'ot.