

Bodies speak louder than words

Norwegian Jewish parents reflecting on *brit milah*



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ABSTRACT • This article addresses the question: how do Norwegian Jewish parents reflect on *brit milah* (circumcision) in a context where this practice is frequently criticised? The data are derived from twenty-five in-depth interviews. Drawing on the perspectives of Catherine Bell and Joseph Bulbulia, the text explores circumcision as part of social life. The parental narratives uncover ongoing negotiations occurring between parents and the minority/majority population. The article argues that circumcision serves as a rite of passage as much for parents as for the infant. For most parents, circumcision is utilised to strengthen a Jewish identity and as a cultural strategy to recreate a Jewish cosmos, even if it entails a costly signal, owing to ambivalence and/or majority opposition. Some individuals find the costs too high and discontinue the practice. However, they all desire to manifest Jewish identity, whether through bodily adaptation or the lack thereof. In this manner, bodies speak louder than words.

SHOULD CIRCUMCISION OF BOYS be legal for reasons other than medical ones? This question has been a part of the Norwegian public debate for the last decades. Opponents have accused those who practise circumcision of maltreating their children, while proponents have defended themselves by referring to notions of promoting good health, cultural traditions and religious obligations. The debate has also carried political implications, leading to new legislation regulating the practice (for details, see below).

The majority population in Norway does not practise male circumcision, but it is the norm for the Jewish and Muslim minorities, as well as in communities from regions where circumcision is prevalent. Nevertheless, we possess limited knowledge about these communities' sentiments towards the public debate and political discourse surrounding

circumcision. This article aims to provide insights from Norwegian Jews, particularly focusing on a group that has been notably absent from the public discourse: the parents of boys. As we shall see, reasons exist for their subdued voices. With some important exceptions, scholarly research on *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision) has lacked the perspective of parents.¹ This article intends to bridge this gap. We ask: how do Jewish parents reflect on *brit milah* within the context of present-day Norway? How do they explain choosing or not choosing circumcision? Do we observe change or continuity? Furthermore, in a broader sense, how can a specific ritual practice serve to negotiate

1 Hebrew terms are introduced with italics and explanation.



and/or express one's identity in a society where the majority openly criticises or condemns the same practice? The data at hand reveal the parents' complex framing of early male circumcision. This framing encompasses not only religious considerations but also minority/majority dynamics, the role of a secular state and evolving ethical concepts. Mercédesz Czimbalmos, a researcher in comparative religion, has recently incorporated similar inquiries into her examinations of Jewish families in Finland (2021, 2020a, 2020b). This article does not aspire to present a comprehensive overview of the Nordic region, but the Finnish case reveals intriguing parallels that warrant exploration. I will revisit Czimbalmos's studies in my analyses below.²

Within the context of Judaism, the circumcision of boys has deep historical roots. It is regarded as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, tied to the narrative of Abraham in the Torah. Various hypotheses have been proposed to explain why the ritual holds such significance. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz highlights how, during and following the exile in Babylon, the Jewish community is likely to have needed to fortify its boundaries. Their new-born sons were indistinguishable from those of other groups and the circumcision ritual served to affirm membership in the Jewish community (Eilberg-Schwartz 1992). Another interpretation of the ritual, proposed by David Biale, suggests that circumcision might have initially been a fertility rite that evolved into an ethnic marker, potentially as late as in Hellenistic times, when 'male nudity in public baths became commonplace. The Israelite innovation may have been to move the ritual

from puberty to the eighth day' (Biale 2015: 73). While the origins of early circumcision remain unknown to us, the act of circumcising a son continues to signify continuity, kinship and for some also masculinity, in ritual terms back to Abraham. Furthermore, it remains a central ritual in many Jewish families, making it the focal point of my study. To guide my research, I have drawn upon the theoretical frameworks of Catherine Bell and Joseph Bulbulia.

Acting ritually

Positioned at the intersection of social anthropology and comparative religion, I place *brit milah* as a ritual practice that offers insight into contemporary Jewish life. Drawing upon the work of Catherine Bell, rituals are perceived as actions conducted within a collective frame (1992: 7–9). Bell emphasises that rituals should not be examined in isolation or viewed as mere consequences of doctrine. A more effective approach, according to Bell, is to study rituals as aspects of social life. She introduces the term 'acting ritually' and explores how rituals serve as cultural strategies aimed at framing and accentuating a group's distinctiveness.

The largest category of rituals is what Arnold van Gennep called rites of passage (1960). These rituals signify significant changes in the status of a child's or adult's life. An illustrative example is the transition from being a new-born to becoming a recognised member of a community, identified by name. Other classical examples include puberty rituals, weddings and funerals. These moments of change are often fraught with tension, prompting communities to employ rituals to soften the passage. In his study of rites of passage, Victor Turner emphasised how major life changes call for rituals that ultimately, following a liminal phase, establish a new

2 For earlier studies on *brit milah* in Nordic countries, see Schiratzki 2011; Brusa and Barilan 2008.

social status and identity for those involved (1969). While many of Turner's theories have been subsequently revised, his discourse on ritual and identity formation has laid the crucial groundwork for later studies (see St. John 2008). The term 'rites of passage' itself remains relevant, and in her study of such rituals, the historian of religion Cora Alexa Døving underscores that these rites are significant components of family life, even within the secular, Western world, where other forms of ritual activity often dwindle. Her explanation is that this category of rituals fit societies increasingly characterised by both individuality and an ongoing focus on the family unit: rites of passage celebrates not only individuals undergoing a change in status but also the family to which they belong (Døving and Plesner 2009).

Applying Bell's term 'acting ritually', *brit milah* can be examined as a cultural strategy employed to uphold and reinforce a specific identity. This strategy establishes a link between a male child and his surroundings or, as Bell writes, between a 'socialized body and the environment it structures' (1992: 8). This connection (between the child and the environment) should be approached from various perspectives. Thus, this article will not restrict itself to investigating a single day or intra-Jewish conversations; it will also encompass the political and societal frameworks that currently encompass *brit milah*.

Various rites of passage can impose a considerable amount of strain on the participants. This strain, and potentially even pain, may perplex onlookers. When removed from their context, certain rituals may appear paradoxical. A useful term to explore such paradoxes is 'costly signal'. Joseph Bulbulia employs this term to describe signs or symbols that are only employed with significant effort or at a substantial cost (2007). The term also appears in the works of the historian of

religion Scott Atran (2002). Atran emphasises how high-cost bodily signals are upheld because they foster groups with strong internal solidarity and support systems, which are considered highly beneficial. Costs such as external condemnation or demanding organisational systems are embraced because the anticipated rewards are deemed substantial. Within this text, I use the term 'costly signal' to underscore the substantial price that members of a group are willing to pay for something of profound significance to them.

Traditional rites of passage hold not only significant importance but are also conservative structures. The group responsible for organising these rituals carries a collective memory of how things should be done. Ideally, for many, nothing should change. Nevertheless, change is inevitable. Pressures emerge from within the group, from the outside, or a combination of both. The most profound change occurs when the ritual ceases to be practised. The historian of religion Nathal Dessing terms this phenomenon 'ritual attrition' (2001). She emphasises that rituals may cease to function as they once did, leading to their erosion and eventual disappearance. In the subsequent analyses, I will argue that in the case of *brit milah*, attrition should be viewed in conjunction with both continuity and change. Drawing on interview material, I will demonstrate that the ritual is rarely a straightforward matter. Instead, it is a topic of debate and reflection, maybe particularly among the parents of boys. This holds true also within the Jewish community, as presented below.

Methodology

My study is based on twenty-five in-depth interviews with thirteen mothers and twelve fathers residing in Oslo or Trondheim – Norway's two cities with Jewish communities

and synagogues. Additionally, I conducted interviews with representatives of Jewish institutions, including rabbis and a *mohel* (a ritual expert on circumcision). However, the focus will be on the perspectives of the parents.³ Each interview lasted from twenty minutes to two hours. Three interviews were conducted over the telephone, while twenty-two were face-to-face, in accordance with the parents' preferences. To locate parents, I reached out to Jewish congregations and museums. I also used initial contacts from my previous research on the Norwegian Jewish community (Engebrigtsen *et al.* 2020; Stene 2012), and employed the snowball method. My inclusion criterion was to identify parents who had had to decide about *brit milah*. To capture a diverse array of perspectives, I actively sought out parents with varying degrees of involvement in organised Jewish life. Consequently, my group of interviewees encompasses individuals who are engaged with a synagogue and those who infrequently or never attend one. What unites them is their sense of connection to a Norwegian Jewish community, be it through birth, marriage or personal choice. Collectively, these interviews have provided a rich body of qualitative data.

When working with this kind of material, the researcher's relationship with the interlocutor is important, as it influences the information gathered. To those I interviewed, I represented an outsider from the majority population. I believe that the flow of interaction was facilitated by my conveyed familiarity with circumcision and my neutral stance towards it. Initial contacts that recommended

3 Some of the interviews are referred to in previous publications (Stene 2022; Engebrigtsen *et al.* 2020). The present article elaborates on previous research, published in Norwegian, and seeks to make it available to an English-reading audience.

me also contributed to building trust. I emphasised that the project's objective was to present the voices of Jewish parents. Additionally, I assured everyone of anonymity, and that they would be referenced only by pseudonyms.⁴

The significance of anonymity, underscored by Norway's small Jewish population and the sensitive nature of the subject, is the reason why I will refrain from delving into the individual backgrounds of each interlocutor. The quotations used throughout the article will not be systematically linked to sub-groups such as *halakhic* observant Jews (adhering to Jewish religious law), Jews-by-choice or Jews in mixed marriages. When taken as a whole, these narratives still provide a wealth of information about the multifaceted ways in which *brit milah* is negotiated, and they do reveal intriguing patterns. I have managed to organise my findings into a typology, which will be presented below. To provide context for the interviews, a background section introduces the ethnographic material.

Jews in Norway, public debate and jurisdiction on circumcision

The Jewish population of Norway is relatively small, with estimates placing it at around 1,500 individuals. Approximately 900 are members of the country's two modern Orthodox congregations. Notably, there are no Reform or Conservative congregations.⁵

4 The chosen pseudonyms are Norwegian/International names. Interview excerpts are translated from Norwegian by the author. In a few cases interviews were conducted in English.

5 Chabad Lubavitch is present but does not have a Norwegian congregation. Chabad organizes meetings and holiday celebrations.

The members of the synagogues encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from atheists and secular to halakhic-observant individuals. However, the latter constitutes only a small minority (details in Døving 2022).

The congregations report that in Norway, *brit milah* is organised five to ten times a year. On these occasions, the congregations enlist the services of a visiting Orthodox *mohel*, often summoned from London (for details, see Engebriksen *et al.* 2020: 63). A local Jewish medical doctor also participates and is responsible for the follow-up care after the *mohel's* departure. The significance attributed to this ritual is evident in the fact that both the doctor and *mohel* will travel to Jewish families wherever they reside in Norway. Additionally, the congregation to which the family belongs often covers the cost of their services.⁶

Jews are not the sole group in Norway wanting early male circumcision. Beginning in the 1970s, Norway welcomed larger immigrant communities with Muslim backgrounds, leading to a rise in the prevalence of circumcision. However, since the 1980s, opposition to the practice has also gained momentum. Influential entities, including the association of medical doctors and the ombudsman for children, have issued statements against neo-natal circumcision. A public discourse has unfolded across various media platforms, with many voices advocating the criminalisation of early male circumcision (for details, see Døving 2016). In 1999, representatives from a right-wing, anti-immigration party proposed a ban on the procedure. The parliament rejected the

proposal, but a political committee was established to formulate potential regulations. The outcome was new legislation. Since 2015, the 'Law on Ritual Circumcision of Boys' (LOV-2014-06-20-40) has delineated regulations concerning the procedure itself. The law was passed with majority support. However, during parliamentary deliberations, several politicians declared their disapproval of the practice and hopes for its gradual elimination (Vejbjørn Horsford, personal communication). In other words, the practice is legal, but several politicians still emphasise their lack of support for this type of choice.

The Norwegian law of 2015 states that medical doctors should conduct early male circumcision and incorporate the administration of painkillers; both parents/legal guardians must sign consent forms. The procedure should be provided by national healthcare units or, alternatively, outsourced to private clinics. However, it should neither receive prioritisation nor be included in the free healthcare system. The law also specifies that the procedure may be carried out by 'specialists' (such as a *mohel*), but only under the supervision of a medical doctor who assumes responsibility. The Ministry of Health and Care Services explicitly asserts: 'In Norway, we do not consider early male circumcision to have any health benefits for children' (Engebriksen *et al.* 2020: 26, my translation). In essence, the procedure is permitted, but it is not actively promoted.

The law of 2015 did not end public debates. Two political parties, at opposing ends of the political spectrum, have declared their intent to work for a minimum age of fifteen years for ritual male circumcision. Their positions echo anti-circumcision arguments prevalent in international discussions. To opponents, the procedure is unnecessary and irreversible, causing pain and bearing no health benefits, while also carrying the risk of serious

6 The tradition of the Oslo congregation of covering the full cost of the *brit milah*, including the *mohel's* airfare, is unusual in a European setting. It reflects the local collective stakes in the circumcision of an individual, a point suitable for its own follow-up study.

complications. It is also argued that children should possess self-determination over their own bodies (see Frisch *et al.* 2013). This latter phrase echoes a slogan from the women's rights movement, which has shaped much of modern Norwegian society. Some also contend that ritual circumcision enables adults to incorporate children into their own religious universe, and that the decision regarding religious adherence should ultimately be left to the children themselves to decide. This perspective reflects Norway as a secular nation and, to some extent, an incomplete understanding of the connection between circumcision and religious adherence. In her article 'Jews in the news' (2016), Døving emphasises that the rhetoric against the practice can at times be provocative, employing terms like 'horrific', 'barbaric' and 'primitive practice'. Parents are told that the procedure is perilous, uncivilised and ultimately selfish, as adhering to their own traditions restricts their children's autonomy. I will address responses to these arguments in further detail below.

What are the consequences of the new law and the ongoing debate for Norwegian Jewish parents? On the one hand, the law provides 'legal protection' for the ritual of *brit milah*. However, on the other hand, parents face criticism when making a choice that the majority population does not deem proper care of children. This substantial external pressure is perceived as a significant source of strain and shapes part of the narratives of the parents included in this study. In the subsequent sections, I will delve into these narratives.

Parental narratives on *brit milah*

Below, parents are not portrayed as (Jewish) experts or representatives of congregations; instead, they are depicted primarily as parents. I present their narratives in three main categories: the typology of rejoicing,

reconsidering and rejecting. Furthermore, I will compare a portion of my data to the material presented by Czimbalmos. In her insightful studies, *brit milah* serves as just one facet within a broader discussion on 'doing Jewish' in Finland. A noticeable contrast between her interlocutors and mine is that, while very few parents in her studies indicated that *brit milah* would cause significant disagreements between spouses (Czimbalmos 2021: 75), a noteworthy discovery in my research is the extent to which *brit milah* becomes a *topic of debate* between parents. Drawing on the term introduced earlier: for some, it becomes a costly signal. These stories diverge from those that predominantly emphasise the continuity of *brit milah*, a perspective evident in certain earlier studies (see Bolnick and Katz 2012; Lange 2000).

Another noteworthy contrast between Czimbalmos's studies and mine is that nearly all the Finnish mothers underscored the importance of having medical professionals perform the circumcision (2021: 76). Among the fifteen women interviewed, only two had engaged a *mohel* (one of them being a *mohel* also trained as a doctor) (Czimbalmos 2020a: 67). In contrast, all my Norwegian interlocutors had opted to involve a *mohel* and to arrange the ritual through the synagogue (or in a few cases, Chabad). One reason provided was their uncertainty regarding the adequacy of Norwegian medical doctors' experience in performing the procedure. They also expressed the expectation of being turned away if they were to request circumcision at a hospital or conventional clinic. Their perception was that despite the law's explicit provision for safe circumcision through national health-care facilities, this was not a reliable option.⁷

7 An earlier study shows that no Norwegian hospitals today perform neonatal, ritual circumcision. Private clinics do not advertise

Only a single parent mentioned considering a private clinic, while others seemed surprised when asked if they had explored this possibility. Few possessed any knowledge about the existence or location of such clinics. The chosen path forward was rather to engage a well-known *mohel*, accompanied by a local Jewish medical doctor. With their combined expertise, parents felt a sense of security. This feeling of security often emerged through stories highlighting the joy associated with *brit milah*. I will commence my presentation by exploring this facet of the decision to pursue circumcision.

Brit milah, a time to rejoice

Most of the parents I interviewed emphasised the aspect of celebrating *brit milah*, both within their family and their community. To them, the ritual signifies the child's incorporation into the community and aims to strengthen both individual and collective facets of his identity. Elisabeth conveyed this sentiment by saying, 'Having *brit* for our son... it is about our identity. It is more than the procedure itself. It is a sign of belonging to a community.'⁸ Sara and Adam articulated that while religion was important to them, celebrating *brit* extended beyond Judaism; it was a facet of their ethnic identity: 'It is more than Judaism; it is part of an ethnic identity. When circumcised according to Jewish custom, you belong to a community... We

and may be hard to find (see Engebrigtsen *et al.* 2020). It is difficult to assess the number of Jewish parents who make use of such clinics. Jewish leaders estimated their numbers to be negligible (own interviews, 2019). The matter is worth further investigation.

8 Most interlocutors called *brit milah brit* or *bris*. For clarity, I use *brit* throughout the article. Outside of quotations, I alternate between *brit milah* and *brit*.

as parents need to know that we have done our part for our boy to have a connection to this community.' Josef underscored the communal dimension when he stated: 'I do not want him to be a kind of half-Jew, but part of a people. If he is not circumcised, I'm afraid he might think: "Am I really a Jew?" I won't put him through that.' For these parents, the joy of *brit milah* appeared interlinked with such notions of authenticity. The ritual did not define someone as a Jew, but it offered a significant *sign* of Jewishness.

Certain parents emphasised 'tradition' or 'culture'. Eva: 'Circumcision? It's our tradition. It's a weird thing really, but it would not occur to me not to do it.' Similarly, from Isabel: 'It is one of our basic principles that religion, culture and life are woven together. We pass on our culture, like a gift. *Brit* is part of that.' For these two mothers, *brit* was inseparable from what they understood as Jewish tradition and culture. Two fathers highlighted *brit* as the minimum requirement for preserving cultural continuity. Joseph: 'It is difficult to live as a Jew in Norway. Keeping *kosher* and observing the Sabbath is near impossible. However, *brit* is possible. It happens only once. Perhaps that's why it's so important to me.' From Simon: 'For us as a minority, upholding our traditions is especially vital, otherwise we may disappear.' For these parents, *brit milah* offered a sense of assurance regarding continuity. To them, this aspect was integral to their lives, manifested through family rituals.

For many, *brit* appeared tied to the principle of 'like father, like son'. Naomi evoked the continuity of generations: 'We do like father and grandfather and great-grandfather ... This is how we have always acted.' Several parents not only mentioned their immediate relatives but also generations spanning back in time: 'to Abraham' or 'thousands of years'. Rakel employed a poignant metaphor,

remarking, 'Four thousand years of tradition, who am I to break the chain?' This 'chain' was not depicted as a burden; Rakel stressed that it was a source of joy and honour to sustain a Jewish tradition. However, she further mentioned the Holocaust and the significance of staying alive as a community. Kari made a similar connection: 'We know about the Holocaust. We know that there is no guarantee our lives will continue. We owe it to those who perished to carry on.' While not all parents established such links, my interview data reveal a pattern linking the principle of 'like father, like son' to the memory of the Holocaust. It seems for some, *brit milah* also represents a sign of survival.

Brit milah is physical, and it establishes a similarity between sons and fathers (or a portion of them). A boy who has had his *brit* looks like his brothers, cousins and other male relatives. Eric Silverman's interpretation of the ritual (2004) posits that it celebrates the male members of the group and underscores masculine conformity. In numerous parental accounts, a sense of male collective identity becomes evident. For some, this intertwined with familial expectations. Susanne: 'I did not want to disappoint the family. It was especially important to me not to disappoint my father.'

Moreover, a focus on the male body emerged explicitly in statements on aesthetics and sexuality. Shaun remarked: 'I do not remember the circumcision, but I like the result.' From Ola: 'When I was a boy, I used to think the other boys in kindergarten had such sloppy penises. Now I think I have a more beautiful penis than many others do. Such things matter, you know.' During an interview with a married couple, the wife states: 'My husband has no problems. We have no problems together. *Brit* poses no issues in our married life.' Jacob was even more specific: 'Circumcision has no adverse sexual effects.

At least, nothing I've experienced. And I've discussed this with other men as well.' These remarks might be linked to the fact that sexual concerns are among the subjects addressed in the public debate. It may also be connected to notions of an ideal Jewish male body (see discussion below).

Literature on *brit milah* has frequently focused on religious duty (see Dessing 2001). The occasion is a time of rejoicing owing to *halakha*. During my interviews, few parents prominently cited religious duty as their *primary* rationale for choosing *brit*. Conversely, several emphasised that they were not religious and wished to avoid connecting their practice to religion. Nevertheless, seven out of twenty-five interlocutors mentioned *halakha*. Noam articulated it as follows: '*Brit* is about the covenant G-d made with Abraham. It became a *mitzva* [commandment] for fathers to have their sons circumcised.'⁹ Still, for some, the religious aspect held significant importance. Sara: 'For those of us who see *brit* as connected to the spiritual world, it is a law. Something we must do and are happy to do.' Two mothers associated *brit* with feeling close to God. Anne recounted how her son's crying during the undressing had brought her to tears: 'I felt my body retract, as if in contractions. There was so much tension, but also gratitude and relief. We had come full circle. Everybody present ... it was as if we were all one, and one with G-d.' Like Anne, Elise conveyed circumcision as overpowering: 'It is something sacred ... one of the most significant moments of my life. It was more than giving birth. I was so relieved; everything fell into place. I experienced a new sense of closeness to G-d.' Two fathers also characterised

9 G-d is spelled without 'o' in quotation marks out of respect for the most observant of my interlocutors, who prefer to spell the name of the divinity this way.

brit as an existential, religious act, without adding details about their emotions. Jacob: 'It's not just a matter of convenience. It is the foundation itself. You do not build a house without a foundation, do you?' Mikael posed a rhetorical question, 'Why *brit milah*? You might as well ask me about the existence of G-d! Isn't it as basic as celebrating *Shabes* [Sabbath]?'

One narrative delved into the notion of *brit milah* as a religious act involving everyone present. Elise: '*Brit* does not really have an explanation. It is a blessing. It is a moment when you may ask G-d for anything. I know a childless couple who were present at a *brit*. They prayed for a child, and the following year they had twins!' This story appears to intertwine the fulfilment of a halakhic commandment with notions of collective prayer, divine blessings and fertility.

Some parents discussed the promotion of good health through *brit milah*. I had anticipated many addressing the health aspect, given its significance in the public debate. However, few cited health as the primary reason for choosing circumcision. Nevertheless, seven out of twenty-five parents highlighted good health as a by-product of early circumcision. The prevention of diseases and good hygiene was emphasised. Parents noted that penile hygiene is simpler with a circumcised boy. For some, it was also about preventative care, with various diseases mentioned. Elisabeth: 'We knew a boy who often had urinary tract problems. With circumcision, this does not happen.' She stressed that for her, opting for circumcision was a part of ensuring her son's well-being. Perhaps indirectly addressing the argument that it should be the child's right *not* to undergo circumcision (as mentioned above), she added, 'As parents, we must make these decisions for our children. We choose vaccinations and circumcision because we want what's best for our sons.'

For Elisabeth and all the parents who emphasised the joy of *brit milah*, circumcision represented a positive choice, essential for their Jewish lives. They sought continuity, and to act ritually to uphold their community. However, amidst the narratives of joy, another image also surfaced – that of discussions and negotiations taking place within families. This is my next topic.

Reconsidering *brit milah*

Several parents expressed uncertainty and hesitancy regarding *brit*. Some had only agreed after extensive discussions. These sentiments were echoed in a response I frequently encountered during my initial search for parents to interview: '*Luckily*, we only have daughters.' This emphasis underscores circumcision as a challenging decision. Several parents emphasised that couples must engage in conversations about the procedure before the child is born, particularly if they come from different backgrounds. Tobias, who had grown up in a non-Jewish family, stated: 'I had to contemplate it. My family was horrified. Several of them said they wouldn't attend the gathering we had planned. But it was so important to my wife, and looking back, I'm glad we chose to go through with it.' Another father reflected on the circumcision with reservations: 'My wife and I agreed, and all went well. But later, I've been thinking, is this medically necessary? What if the foreskin serves a purpose? Would I do it again? I'm not sure.' Esther, on the other hand, though initially hesitant, had arrived at a different conclusion: 'We wish we didn't have to ... but we would do it again.'

Uncertainty was met in various ways. At an institutional level, local rabbis and leaders informed me that they do not actively promote circumcision (interviews during 2019). The visiting *mohel* emphasised that he does

not publicise his availability; he only responds to requests (own interview 25.10.2019). Simultaneously, leaders were prepared to convey the notion that circumcision holds positive value for Jews. They stressed their belief in the procedure's safety, health benefits, and its status as one of the significant *mitzvot*. The extended family could be a more active promoter of *brit*. Some had clear expectations that the tradition should continue when a new son was born into the family. A young couple revealed that older relatives were genuinely relieved when they announced their intention to hold a *brit* for their son. However, in my material, it's not the extended family but the parental unit that emerges as the most influential in decision-making. The parents (or single parent) are responsible for making the ultimate decision. This point is explored further below. When the two parents do not agree, complications can arise. Levi provided insights into conflicting viewpoints: 'I did not know what to do. My wife was all set against *brit*. She was afraid of pain and complications. It became like a radioactive field between us. I wanted him to look like me and I was scared to tell my mother. Would she think that I no longer consider myself a Jew? In the end, I gave in. There was no *brit*. But it became a non-topic that we cannot talk about.'

Other parents indicated to me that their uncertainties and disagreements had resulted in the planning and cancellation of *brit*, sometimes multiple times. For some, the prospect of *brit* accentuated existing family tensions, leading to either the absence of the ritual altogether or a ritual where a larger gathering was replaced by a smaller circle committed to upholding ritual continuity despite family conflicts.

Both mothers and fathers shared accounts of dreading *brit milah*. Simon and Susanne recounted how they had conducted internet

searches for information before the circumcision, and how their anxiety eased upon meeting the *mohel*: 'He calmed our son down when he held him, and then he calmed us down. We were very nervous.' Like other parents, they added that their relief came after the *brit*; the procedure was quicker than anticipated, and the subsequent joy was great. However, many parents elaborated upon the challenges of *brit* for a parent. Noam: 'You're anxious. It's a tough experience, even when you know it's safe.' Like others, he stressed the significance of the *mohel* using painkillers, highlighting his satisfaction with this being the standard practice within his congregation (elaboration below).

In addition to the anxiety associated with the physical procedure, the ongoing media debate on early male circumcision emerged as another source of distress. One of my interview questions revolved around the interlocutors' reactions to this debate, and this question prompted impassioned responses. Even parents who held uncertainties about *brit*, or rejected it, criticised how the debate had unfolded. Several characterised the debate as uninformed or insensitive. They perceived the arguments against circumcision as stigmatising and sometimes even hateful. As parents, they experienced feelings of upset, provocation or fear. Emotions are evident in a quotation from Isabel: 'The debate affects us very deeply. It's an awful burden. People label us as child-abusers. It makes me very angry. But I don't engage in the discussion. I must shield my own children.' Like others, Isabel believed that publicly advocating circumcision could expose her family to more than they could handle. A sense of powerlessness is also evident in Sara's words: 'How must young (circumcised) boys feel? I worry about them.' Rachel said, 'When I read what they write, I feel like people are looking down on us. Do they want us to leave (Norway)?'

Adam encapsulated much of what I heard: 'The debate is so ugly. People look at you like a freak if you want something different from them. We must protect ourselves as best as we can.'

Several parents shared how they encountered arguments used against early male circumcision. Kari: 'We have extensive experience with circumcision. If it posed a health risk, we would oppose it.' Naomi: 'Some claim it restricts children's religious freedom, but everyone knows there's no contradiction between being circumcised and being ... whatever.' And from Adam: 'They argue that children have a right to protection from such procedures, but children also have a right to belong to a community. And in our community, we practise circumcision.' A postponement of circumcision until the teenage years was viewed as cruel for the boy involved, with only three parents differing (see below), as late circumcision was believed to be both painful and complicated. These counter-arguments demonstrate engagement with the ongoing public debate and may indirectly reflect the parents' process of reconsideration; arguments against circumcision had been evaluated prior to reaching a final decision on *brit*.

Parents who perceive an antisemitic subtext in the public debate should also be taken into consideration (cf. 'Do they want us to leave [Norway]?'). Several parents related that they refrained from discussing circumcision in public. One mother provided an example of the consequences of being 'too open': she had reserved a venue to celebrate a *brit*, but when she revealed the nature of the celebration to the proprietor, the booking was cancelled. This mother, like others, expressed concerns that opposition to circumcision might be linked to conscious or subconscious antisemitism. Other parents dismissed these notions and indicated that arguments against circumcision were more likely rooted

in xenophobia towards the Muslim population. These reflections contextualise the issue of *brit milah* within a broader political framework and emphasise the importance of considering factors beyond religious doctrine when discussing circumcision.¹⁰

Rejecting *brit milah*

Three out of the twenty-five parents I interviewed had made a radical break with the tradition of *brit milah*. An additional two had not had *brit* because of disagreements between the parents. Given the small number, generalising is difficult. Nonetheless, Dessing's concept of 'ritual attrition', introduced in the introduction, appears to be useful. The change seems to arise from a combination of factors, including evolving ethical considerations. Some seem to have incorporated arguments against circumcision from the circumcision debate. One father articulated it as follows: 'Physically altering a child is dramatic and unnecessary. It is irreversible. We can be Jewish without circumcision, in my view.' Other parents emphasised ideas of adaptation and the notion of allowing the child to decide. One mother expressed it thus: 'I prefer my son to resemble other boys, to be like his friends.' Another mother stated: 'He was so tiny and perfect. We thought we should wait a bit. Then arranging *brit* became complicated. Perhaps he should decide for himself, later ...' In two families, parents found themselves on opposing sides of the debate. From one mother: 'Our son was born during heated media debates, and my husband objected. I couldn't convince him.' The outcome in both families was the absence of *brit*, but instead they acted ritually (using Bell's terminology)

10 For a further discussion on antisemitism and perceptions of the Jewish body as 'wrong', see Gilman 1991.

by holding a family gathering where the son's name was announced.

Despite the limited number of cases, it remains intriguing to explore additional influencing factors that may have contributed to the rejection of *brit*. In my study, the parents who opted against *brit* were all married to non-Jewish partners, and some had minimal or no contact with a Jewish congregation. However, among the group of twenty who chose *brit*, there were several parents from mixed marriages and some had only made a (re)appearance in the local synagogue when planning a *brit*. In essence, I have not discovered that marriage patterns or community involvement play a decisive role in circumcision decisions. Another potential factor for change could be a generational shift. To exemplify: two of the fathers rejecting *brit* had not undergone circumcision themselves. Both believed young Norwegian parents of today are more inclined than the previous generation to re-evaluate and reject *brit milah*. More comprehensive insights into the specific reasons behind this form of ritual attrition would necessitate a more comprehensive dataset on the subject.

Nonetheless, it remains a valid question to consider the potential implications of rejecting *brit* for Norwegian Jewish parents and their sons. In terms of institutional impact, congregational membership in Oslo and Trondheim, as well as enrolment in the Jewish kindergarten in Oslo, has remained open to all Jews, irrespective of their circumcision status. This stands in contrast to the situation in Finland before 2018 (Czimbalmos 2021, elaborated below). However, according to the parents I interviewed, there has been a shift in the attitude towards circumcision in Oslo's Jewish kindergarten. While in the past, a non-circumcised boy might have faced disapproval, this has changed over time. Parents who served as kindergarten

assistants mentioned that they had observed several uncircumcised boys, and these cases were never commented upon. As two parents indicated: 'We don't discuss this much. Not everyone knows our decision about *brit*.' And: 'If a boy isn't circumcised, there could be various reasons, and regarding this matter, we keep it very private. Only those who know you well will ask.' In essence, for those who desire a privatisation of ritual practice or even a distinct departure from certain traditions, rejecting circumcision is a viable option without the cost of exclusion from their Jewish community.

I have not come across any Norwegian Jewish groups that actively campaign against early male circumcision.¹¹ Everyone I spoke with stated that diverse choices amongst Norwegian Jews are respected within the community and even those who choose not to circumcise want the procedure to remain legal. It became evident that Norway's law on circumcision provided many with a sense of security. Several interlocutors emphasised that legal regulations concerning circumcision are crucial for minority groups, because they believe that there is limited societal understanding of why this practice is upheld. Conveying the significance of this rite of passage to outsiders has remained challenging. However, a compilation of parental narratives is presented above. In the following section, I will delve into the details of these narratives.

Acting ritually to construct a Jewish identity

According to Jewish tradition, parents are tasked with passing down the teachings they themselves have received. To express Jewish identity, they should socialise their children

11 For an interesting study of anti-circumcision parents in Israel, see Meaded Danon 2021.

and thereby uphold a Jewish cosmos. For some, this entails a religious cosmos replete with *mitzvot*, among which is *brit milah*. Others may assign a lower priority to religion, yet still choose the ritual of circumcision of their Jewish cosmos. In the Norwegian context, circumcisions are typically carried out by a *mohel* as a religious ritual organised by the synagogues. This ritual, known as *brit*, is a significant event where sons are given a body marker and a name. From this perspective, we observe an emphasis on the individual facet of Jewish identity. Each son's (Hebrew) name is incorporated into the circumcision prayer: 'His name in Israel shall be ...'¹²

Nevertheless, employing feminist criticism and drawing on L. A. Hoffman's *Covenant of Blood* (1996), the Norwegian rabbi Lynn Feinberg emphasises that the individual identity underscored in the ritual pertains as much to the father as to the new-born son. It is the father who bears the responsibility of ensuring his son's initiation into the covenant with God. Through the *mohel*, the father transmits group affiliation and male status (Feinberg 2001: 88). This gender perspective, which emphasises the significance of the father, allows for a nuanced comprehension of how the ritual intertwines with social life (also explored in Silverman 2004). However, in the subsequent discussion, I will argue that a comprehensive understanding of the ritual in its Norwegian context necessitates an examination of *both parents'* roles.

Within my Norwegian dataset, I identified a shift in the ritual practise. Employing terminology from ritual studies, I discerned a change from a father's (religious)

obligation to a rite of passage for both parents. According to religious law, *brit milah* remains a *mitzva* for the father. However, in contemporary Norway, it is an obligation that cannot be fulfilled unless father *and* mother agree and choose ritual continuity. The present procedure includes new steps, such as the signing of an agreement statement by all individuals with custody rights. Several factors contribute to this shift. One factor is the legal framework reinforcing the shared responsibility of parents, whether they are a father and mother or a same-gender couple. Another factor is the contemporary societal emphasis on the nuclear family unit rather than the extended family. Consequently, the larger community (relatives and congregation) takes a backseat to the nuclear family. It is the parental unit that must actively decide to construct a Jewish family identity and, in doing so, (re)construct themselves as Jewish parents. If the boy is their firstborn, there is also, in Turner's terminology, a ritual change in status and creation of a new identity. The parents change from being a childless couple to becoming a *barnefamilie* (a family with a child). From this perspective, *brit milah* emerges as a rite of passage not only for the new-born but also for the parents themselves. Revisiting the inquiry about identity, this line of reasoning underscores the family-centric nature of Jewish identity, where the nuclear family occupies a paramount role.

Emphasising *brit* as an identity marker is to be expected. However, shedding light on the uncertainty and hesitancy of many parents, as this article has done, uncovers a multifaceted ritual process. In certain instances, the birth of a son can be likened to a crisis (cf. 'Luckily, we have only daughters'). For those who choose circumcision, a way to navigate this crisis is by ensuring that the day of circumcision is protected. Not only the *mohel's* work, but also the entire day is shielded to

12 The Jewish cosmos naturally also encompasses girls and women. Space does not allow me to include their rites of passage. A comparative study will be of great interest, not least from a ritual study perspective.

prevent trauma for both the new-born *and* the parents. A ritual framework encompassing a communal meal, with its customary jokes and laughter, can be seen as part of the protection. It envelops all participants, striving to mitigate any possible pain or unease. As stated in the introduction, rites of passage aim to render transitions softer, despite a clear-cut contrast between being uncircumcised and circumcised. In earlier publications, we find this 'soft' frame in presentations of *brit* as a day of celebration (Bolnick and Katz 2012; Lange 2000). Drawing upon my interview data, I will instead accentuate the negotiations and solemnity inherent in the parental narratives. The parents had made an important choice, and many of them approached the actual *brit* with a degree of apprehension. In various ways, *brit milah* was a day of solemnity to them. The term 'solemnity-celebration' might be more apt, as it also encompasses the customary expressions of joy and gratitude.

In the Norwegian context, streaks of sombreness associated with circumcision may also be linked to the public criticism of the practice. As mentioned earlier, the Norwegian Jewish community constitutes a small minority. Like other minorities, Jews might find themselves depicted as 'the other'. Part of the majority population disapprove of some of their cultural traditions. For instance, while legislation permits the medical/ritual act of circumcision, opting for this practice can still result in judgements, as it deviates from the norms of the majority. Formulations from the Norwegian discourse, such as 'barbaric practice' and 'mutilation of young children', showcase hostility. Such a choice of language can portray Jews who engage in a traditional rite of passage as not just different, but also as unsuited to care for their own children. How does a community react to such accusations?

A cultural strategy embraced by many within the Jewish community consists of con-

tinuing with age-old traditions despite accusations. Many celebrate the birth of sons by re-enacting their own rituals, irrespective of the price they must pay. A significant part of this price involves public criticism, yet many individuals counter this criticism. They support early male circumcision and present the choice of *brit milah* as a positive and health-conscious way to sustain a Jewish family life and persevere as a distinct community. This approach allows the ritual to serve dual purposes: it acts as a costly signal to convey inner solidarity and unity, while also opposing external influences. As Bell describes, the group structures itself and its relationship with the environment through 'socialised bodies', in this case, the bodies of circumcised males. Consequently, circumcision not only emphasises the individual and family-oriented dimensions of Jewish identity but also underscores its larger, collective nature. The entire group is responsible for upholding the ritual practice.

A collective identity intertwined with changing body appearances has parallels across various religious groups. The extent to which human beings are seen as being born 'complete' is not a given. Markers such as hair, tattoos, clothing or body modifications are used to confer 'wholeness' and establish distinct communities (Silverman 2004; Douglas 1997). For parents who choose circumcision, their son becomes whole through circumcision. After the ritual, he lacks nothing, but is physically socialised and adapted to his (in this case Jewish) environment. Conversely, an uncircumcised boy is seen as having an inappropriate skin fold. In other words, to many, a Jewish boy's body achieves completeness through the removal of this skin fold.

Some critics of male circumcision, often referred to as 'intactivists', challenge these notions of wholeness. They emphasise that circumcision renders the individual no longer

'intact'; a significant and sensorily important part of the body is lacking. In response, Jewish scholars argue that a Jewish boy's body should be changed, because circumcision of the male body is a divine commandment. Only *brit milah* may restore the original state of Adam (own interview with visiting *mohel*, 25.9.2019). Such religious arguments are rarely part of the public discourse in Norway, and as demonstrated, only a minority of parents use religion to support early male circumcision. Still, most perceive Jewish masculine identity as strengthened by the practice of *brit*. They do not view the foreskin as necessary or significant; rather, they see it as something they wish to be without. If not prevented by medical conditions, they desire the same for their sons. Though few want to discuss this kind of body alteration in the public sphere, within the community, the circumcised male body serves as a powerful testament that speaks louder than words.

Continuity and change

An important finding in this study is ritual continuity. Among the twenty-five parents I interviewed, twenty have chosen to uphold the tradition of *brit milah*. For them, the ritual carries distinct advantages. It imparts a physical identity marker to their sons and bolsters their own sense of identity as Jewish parents. It establishes and reinforces connections to a community, and for the religious, to *halakha* and to God. The parents use the ritual as a multi-faceted signal. Externally, it serves as a high-cost signal that they are Jews. Within the Jewish community, it conveys their commitment to act ritually as caring Jewish parents.

Another noteworthy discovery is that in the Norwegian context, ritual continuity encompasses not only the selection of the same ritual as the preceding generation but

also the preservation of the same ritual form. While, as mentioned, Czibalmos notes that nearly all Finnish parents opt for a medical doctor to perform circumcision, Norwegian Jews choose a *mohel* to circumcise in a (modern) Orthodox manner. Thus, the ritual repertoire is relatively limited. In a different context, these same, mostly non-Orthodox, parents might have made alternative choices. The current circumstances, as elucidated earlier, appear to have caused a standardisation of practice.

However, the empirical data also reveal patterns of change. A small yet significant aspect of change has been incorporated into the ritual practice itself: previously, the *mohel* visiting Norway did not use painkillers, whereas now he does. This aligns with legal requirements, but parental attitudes might be equally influential. Most parents in my study emphasise the necessity of using painkillers. While I classify this development as an adaptive change, I must stress that my interlocutors did not frame it as such. Instead, they perceived it as a natural progression of the ritual, aligned with the norms of Norwegian society, particularly the aim of minimising pain during surgical procedures. This fact also extends to their expectations for how their circumcisions should be conducted.

A more radical change is what Dessing labels ritual attrition. The parental narratives reveal that opting for circumcision is challenging or impossible for certain parents. Among those I interviewed, five out of twenty-five parents had chosen not to continue with circumcision, for various reasons. In Czibalmos's studies from 2020, three out of twenty-eight Finnish parents explicitly mentioned that they never wanted circumcision (2020a: 65–6; 2020b: 29), and most of the Finnish women interviewed expressed reservations about the practice (2021:75). While these figures are insufficient for

generalisation, they do indicate that both uncircumcised sons and parents opting against *brit* are present in both countries. These uncircumcised bodies also speak louder than words. Like the circumcised bodies discussed earlier, they visually represent the type of male body some Jewish parents prefer.

Czibalmos illustrates how ritual attrition and new attitudes have led to changes within the Finnish Jewish community. My data also unveil a certain tension, manifested in parents' emphasis on keeping a low profile regarding their decision to abstain from *brit*. One possible reason for this could be loyalty and the size of the community. Few will criticise something that has been and remains significant to many in a small community. Nevertheless, as I have shown, choosing not to circumcise is an option and it does not result in being 'excluded'. In the past, the situation was different in Finland. Czibalmos demonstrates that until 2018, *brit milah* was mandatory for registering boys in Finnish Jewish institutions, including congregations, kindergarten and primary school (2020b: 29). These regulations underscored *brit* as a non-negotiable practice for those wishing to remain 'within' the community. With an even smaller Jewish population, Norwegian Jewish institutions have been open to all Jewish families, regardless of their decision on *brit milah*. In 2018, Finnish Jewish communities adopted the same inclusive approach (for further details, see Czibalmos 2021). To comprehend the factors driving these changes, additional research is needed. A comparison between Finland and Norway unveils the history of two distinct Jewish minorities, yet both minorities have moved towards a more flexible practice, allowing parents to choose *brit* or no-*brit* for their sons. For some parents, an individualised Jewish identity without *brit* is what they desire for their sons. This stance might challenge a collective

identity that prioritises uniform rites of passage. However, it appears that ritual practices such as *brit milah* no longer function as a point of reference for all. In modern, individualised societies like the Nordic countries, this trend is likely to gain in strength.

Brief concluding remarks

My research has presented parents' ongoing reflections on *brit milah*. By employing the concepts of acting ritually and costly signal, I have established and examined how negotiations unfold among parents, across generations and between a minority and a majority population in Norwegian society. By conducting in-depth interviews with parents, I have highlighted *brit milah* as a source of tension, both internally and externally. Some parents have opted to omit circumcision, for a variety of reasons. This choice brings about a notable shift in ritual practice. However, most parents in this study appear to prioritise continuity, actively utilising *brit milah* to articulate and strengthen a Jewish identity. Despite external opposition and prevailing societal disapproval, a distinct form of ritual activity predominates. It functions not only as a rite of passage for the new-born sons but also, as I have argued, as a meaningful rite of passage for the parents who ultimately decide about their sons' *brit milah*. ■



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