



mgmbill.org

San Diego, California
comments@mgmbill.org
www.mgmbill.org

Press Release

For Immediate Release – 2/9/2005 • Contact: Matthew Hess, President • comments@mgmbill.org

Jewish Groups Say it's Time to Stop Circumcising Boys

SAN DIEGO, California – The recent death of a baby boy in New York City has prompted some Jewish groups to call for an end to the practice of male circumcision. City investigators believe the boy died after contracting herpes from an infected mohel who sucked the blood from the baby's circumcision wound. Two other boys circumcised by the mohel have also contracted herpes, including the dead boy's twin brother.

Also known as *Brit Milah*, circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin from the penis. Although circumcision deaths in the U.S. are rare, the ritual is facing heavy criticism as it becomes synonymous with genital mutilation.

"What happened to this innocent Jewish baby in New York is especially tragic," said Gillian Flato, Director of Jews Against Circumcision, an international organization of Jews who have re-examined the practice and have found it to be immoral. "I think this is a wake up call for the Jewish community. Are they willing to blindly follow tradition and jeopardize their sons' lives? Circumcision does not make one Jewish. Being born to a Jewish mother makes you Jewish, or a Jewish father in the Reform tradition. Being Jewish is in your heart, not in your penis."

Dr. Ronald Goldman, Executive Director of the Jewish Circumcision Resource Center in Boston and author of *Questioning Circumcision: A Jewish Perspective*, said that many Jewish parents feel pressured to circumcise their newborn sons by family members or others within the Jewish community.

"For a growing number of Jews, circumcision raises serious intellectual, emotional, and ethical conflicts. A lot of parents end up regretting their decision to have their baby boys circumcised, especially if they witness the ceremony," said Goldman. "Those Jews that forgo circumcision are at peace with their decision. Jewish parents who are questioning circumcision have options."

One of those options is a *Brit Shalom*, a naming ceremony that some Jewish families practice as an alternative to traditional circumcision. Growing in popularity, it shares many of the same ceremonial aspects of the *Brit Milah*, but without cutting the genitals. It is similar to the naming ceremony used to celebrate the birth of Jewish girls.

Attempts to protect boys from circumcision have now crossed into the legal realm as well. While girls have been legally protected from circumcision in the U.S. since 1996, a federal bill proposal written by a San Diego group called MGMBill.org would extend that protection to boys. Matthew Hess, the group's president, said that Jewish support for the proposed bill will be critical to its success.

"Efforts to legally protect boys from MGM ("male genital mutilation") will be much harder without the support of Jewish leaders," said Hess. "Many politicians fear that supporting a ban on infant male circumcision will upset their Jewish constituencies and cost them votes in the next election. But those attitudes can be changed if more Jews speak out against the practice - just as Muslim women have changed opinions on female circumcision in Africa."

Hess himself is not Jewish, but he said that feedback and advice received from Jewish members of Congress and their staff have made him more aware of the need to encourage activism in the Jewish community at large. "Concerns about the ethics of circumcision are pervasive," said Hess. "But transforming those concerns into action requires people to speak up."