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In Israel, some Jews rebel against circumcision

Reuters (28.11.2012) - Circumcision is one of Judaism's most important laws and for generations of faithful it has symbolized a biblical covenant with God.

But in Israel, more and more Jewish parents are saying no to the blade.

"It's such a taboo in Israel and in Judaism," said Gali, nursing her six-week-old son, about the decision not to have him circumcised.

"It's like coming out of the closet," she said, asking to be identified by her first name only because she had not told her relatives yet.

Nearly all baby boys in Israel are circumcised. Be their parents ultra-Orthodox or totally secular Jews, it is by far the most common choice. Most Israeli-Arabs also keep with a practice that is widespread in the Muslim world.

Jewish circumcisions are done when the baby is eight days old. The majority are performed by a mohel, a religious man trained in the procedure carried out in a festive religious ceremony called a "brit", Hebrew for covenant.

But an increasing minority fear it is a form of physical abuse.

"It's the same as if someone would tell me 'it's our culture to cut off a finger when he is born'," said Rakefet Kaufman, who also did not have her son circumcised.

"People should see it as abuse because it is done to a baby without asking him," she said.

When Gali learnt she was carrying a baby boy it was obvious to her that he would be circumcised. But she started to think again after a conversation with a friend whose son was uncircumcised.

"She asked me what my reason was for doing it, was it religious? I said no. Was it for health reasons? No. Social? No. Then it began to sink in. I began to read more about it, enter Internet forums, I began to realize that I cannot do it."

Phenomenon growing

"The phenomenon is growing, I have no doubt," said Ronit Tamir, who founded a support group for families who have chosen not to circumcise their sons.

"When we started the group 12 years ago we had to work hard to find 40 families ... They were keeping it secret and we had to promise them we'd keep it secret," she said. "Then, we'd get one or two phone calls a month. Nowadays I get dozens of emails and phone calls a month, hundreds a year."

Tamir believes Jews in today's Israel find it easier to break religious taboos.

"People are asking themselves what it means to be Jewish these days," she said, and that leads some to question rules of all kinds, including circumcision.

In societies around the world who circumcise boys for non-religious reasons, out of habit or tradition or because of the perceived health benefits, the practice can be controversial.

Rates of circumcision in Europe are well under 20 percent, while in the United States, according to 2010 statistics cited by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), more than half of newborn boys continue to be circumcised.

The American Academy of Paediatrics said in August that the health benefits of infant circumcision - potentially avoiding infection, cancer and sexually-transmitted diseases - outweighed the risks, but said parents should make the final call.

But where the decision is ultimately a matter of personal choice for many families around the world, for Jews who question the tradition, it is more complicated.

"It is the covenant between us and God - a sign that one cannot deny and that Jews have kept even in times of persecution," said one well-known mohel who has been performing circumcisions in Israel for more than 30 years. He asked not to be named to avoid being connected to any controversy.

He pointed to the Book of Genesis, where God said to Abraham: "And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins; and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

It is this covenant that, the mohel said, that "keeps the people of Israel together".

The Bible goes on: "And the uncircumcised male child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Scholars have differed over the years what this means in practice.

Being different

Tamir is unswayed by the ancient verses.

"This edict is painful, irreversible and maims," she said. The Internet was helping to spread the word, she said, allowing parents to find information about circumcision and seek advice anonymously.

Some Jewish groups in the United States which oppose circumcision offer alternative religious brit ceremonies that do not include an actual circumcision.

"There is definitely a growing number of Jewish families in the U.S. who are choosing not to circumcise," said Florida-based Rebecca Wald. In 2010 she started a website to connect parents who are unsure about what to do.

"Since then, in phone calls, emails, and on social networking sites I have connected with hundreds of Jewish people in the U.S. who question circumcision," she said in an email interview. "Many of them have intact (uncircumcised) sons or plan to leave future sons intact."

Wald's son was not circumcised.

"I have a very strong sense of Jewish identity and, believe it or not, having an intact son has only deepened it," she said.

In Israel, where the vast majority are circumcised, the dilemma may be particularly difficult.

Although she is confident of the choice she and her husband made, Gali still has one concern.

"The main issue which still troubles me a little is the social one, that one day he may come to me and say 'Mom, why did you do that to me? They made fun of me today'," Gali said.

The Health Ministry does not keep records on circumcisions but estimates about 60,000 to 70,000 are held in Israel every year, which roughly corresponds to the number of boys born in 2010, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics.

The ministry said it treats about 70 cases a year of circumcisions gone wrong, mainly minor complications such as excessive bleeding.

Kaufman said "people were shocked" to learn that her son is not circumcised.

"In Israel everybody does it, like a herd," she said. "They don't stop and ask themselves about this specific procedure which has to do with damaging a baby."

Watching her son rummage through a stack of toys, Kaufman said: "The way he was born is the way his body should be."

Israeli police intolerant of Christianity

The Daily Telegraph/National Post (08.09.2012) - The Israeli authorities are growing increasingly intolerant of Christianity in the country, responding inadequately to violent attacks against the faith by Jewish extremists, a senior Vatican official in Jerusalem has warned.

Police inaction and an educational culture that encourages Jewish children to treat Christians with contempt has made life increasingly "intolerable" for many, said Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Custodian of the Holy Land.

Fr. Pizzaballa's intervention, unusually outspoken for a senior Catholic churchman, came after pro-settler extremists attacked a Trappist monastery in the town of Latroun in a so-called "price tag" attack.

The door of the monastery was set on fire and its walls covered with anti-Christian graffiti that denounced Christ as a "monkey."

The incident is the latest in a series of acts of arson and vandalism in places of worship. Fr. Pizzaballa, the head of the Franciscan Order in the Holy Land, and fellow senior clergymen of other denominations have criticized the failure of police to identify the culprits.

The Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land issued a statement asking, "Why are Christians still in the crosshairs?"

"What is happening in Is-raeli society to the point that Christians are the sacrificial lambs of such violence?"

"Those who left their hatefilled graffiti expressed outrage at the eviction of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But why are they taking it out on Christians and their places of worship?"

But the most important issue they say Israel has failed to address is the practice of some ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools that teach children it is a doctrinal obligation to abuse anyone in Holy Orders in public.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, including children, spit at members of the clergy on a daily basis, Fr. Pizzaballa said.

"Sadly, what happened in Latroun is only another in a long series of attacks against Christians and their places of worship," Christian leaders, including Fr. Pizzaballa, said in a statement. "What kind of 'teaching of contempt' for Christians is being communicated in their schools and in their homes?"

The National Catholic Reporter newspaper points out that the phrase "teaching of contempt" was deliberately chosen, since critics have long charged that Christianity fostered a teaching of contempt about Judaism over the centuries.

"Today, the bishops appear to be suggesting the shoe is in the other foot," writes John Allen in the paper.

The paper also points out that the Latroun monastery is known for fostering dialogue with Judaism, and welcomes hundreds of Jewish visitors every week.

"Price tag" attacks are called that because the vandals claim they are extracting a price for the dismantling of settlements.

Ultra-Orthodox stage mass anti-draft rally in Jerusalem

AFP (16.07.2012) - Around 5,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews demonstrated in Jerusalem on Monday to protest against plans to make them serve in the Israeli army or do some other form of national service, police said.

"Some 5,000 people gathered in the ultra-Orthodox quarter of Meah Shearim to protest against plans to compel them to serve in the army or perform national service," spokeswoman Luba Samri said, indicating that the demonstration had gone off without a hitch.

Most of the demonstrators were young students enrolled in religious seminaries, known as yeshivas, who waved banners reading: "We will never surrender to the government which wants to impose a civil or military service on us," an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

Some demonstrators, all of whom were wearing the traditional black suits of the ultra-Orthodox, were handcuffed together to demonstrate their anger over the government's plans to expand compulsory military or national service.

The new draft arrangement, which is still being debated by the government, is also expected to apply to Israel's Arab community, which numbers around 1.6 million, or one fifth of Israel's entire population.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government is currently locked in a dispute over the wording of legislation to replace the so-called Tal Law, which allowed thousands of ultra-Orthodox men to avoid military service, which is otherwise largely compulsory for all Israelis.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court ruled that the law, which is set to expire on August 1, was unconstitutional and failed to ensure an equal burden of service for all, ordering that the legislation be rewritten.

Arab Israelis are set to stage their own mass protest against the proposed changes to the law on Wednesday with a rally in Nazareth in the north of the country.
