

THE

Reconstructionist

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Judaism and Islam: Dialogues and Trends

Why Do Jews Need to Know
About Islam?

Reuven Firestone

Preparing Rabbis to be Leaders in
Jewish-Muslim Dialogue

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

Interfaith Service Learning: A New Model for
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Saving Each Other, Saving Ourselves

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Circumcising Yourself: Reflections on the Challenges of Jewish Continuity and Authenticity

LEON WIENER DOW

How do we know that a father is obligated to circumcise his son? As it is written, “And Abraham circumcised his child Isaac” (Genesis 21:4). And how do we know that when the child’s father did not circumcise him, the [community’s] court is obligated to do so? As it is written, “. . . You shall circumcise every male child amongst you” (Genesis 17:10). And how do we know that if the court fails to circumcise him, he must circumcise himself? As it is written, “And an uncircumcised male who fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin [shall be cut off from his people, for he has broken my covenant]”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin* 29a

We have here an absolutely astonishing passage of Talmud. Its attentive-but-playful reading of the verses from Genesis is magnificent — but its literary qualities are overshadowed by its message: If no one circumcised me, I have to do it myself. It sounds very demanding — and very painful.

This passage occurs amid a broader discussion of the mutual obligations between parents and children. Immediately prior to this passage, the Talmud quotes an early rabbinic source that offers the following list of what a father must do for his son: circumcise him, conduct *pidyon ha-ben*, the ritual redemption of a first-born son, teach him Torah, marry him off, teach him a trade, and — according

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to some authorities — teach him how to swim. The latter three obligations clearly aim to establish the child's long-term welfare, offering him the tools with which he can survive in the world. The former three obligations, however, entail the father's discharging a different sort of obligation: He must bring his son into the Jewish community, offering him the tools for Jewish survival.

Let us now return to the text cited above. Some consider the crises of Jewish meaning and survival that we encounter today to be unprecedented — and they may be right. But they can at least take comfort in the fact that the first substantive question that the Talmud asks upon citing that list of parental obligations is: What should we do when there is a breakdown of responsibility? That is, the Talmud asks the very same question so many Jewish communities ask today: What do we do when parents have not brought their child into the Jewish fold? In the passage above, the Talmud asks what to do when the parent fails to circumcise the child; in subsequent parallel passages, it asks the same question regarding a parent's failure to redeem the firstborn child or to teach the child Torah (on 29a and 29b, respectively).

All three discussions consist of the same succinct structure. The question begins: If the father does not discharge his obligation to his son, upon whom does the burden fall? The Talmud responds: The community must make amends for the father's failure, and a court must perform the circumcision. Should the community fail to do so, then what? The answer: The child must act on his own — presumably, once he has entered adulthood.

A Deeper Discourse

What appears to be a technical discussion masks a much deeper discourse. For what does it mean for a father to fail to circumcise his son or to teach him Torah? (For the purposes of this discussion, I will ignore the issue of *pidyon ha-ben*, partly because its symbolic meaning is a bit more obtuse, but primarily because it applies only to a firstborn.) It means that the child did not receive a Jewish upbringing, for while the home may have been nominally Jewish, the parents failed to provide that most basic indicator of Jewish belonging (for males, of course!) — circumcision. The parents left no Jewish imprint, so to speak, on their child. They failed to provide their child with a Jewish education — an immersion in Torah — simultaneously the child's means of participation in the Jewish world and the great mechanism of survival for the Jewish community in the larger world.

So, in fact, these conversations are the Talmud's way of getting at the deeper issue: What do we do when there is a crisis of continuity? And this is not just any crisis; it is a deep one, for the failure was not only that of the parents. Their backup — the community and its representatives (the court) — failed, as well. When such a child reaches adulthood, he will realize that the most basic makings of his Jewish existence are lacking. He knows nothing Jewish; he looks like a non-Jew, foreskin and all. He has been failed by the community that wants to claim him as one of its own as well as by the tradition with which he is supposed to provide himself spiritual and intellectual sustenance — and that he, in turn, is expected to pass on. He is left floating in the air, ungrounded in his community or his textual tradition. In fact, chances are that, to him, they don't feel like "his" at all.

This, of course, should sound familiar; it echoes the situation that so many Jews find themselves in today — in the Diaspora, no doubt, and also in Israel. (In Israel, many "secular" Jews — two generations or more after the forging of a secular, nationalistic Jewish identity that rebelled against the existent religious Jewish self-conceptualization — find themselves in a peculiar, Hebrew-Zionist version of the same struggle that Jews of the Diaspora are undergoing.) Tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Jews find themselves to be of Jewish ancestry, but lacking in the most basic elements that identify them as Jews — to others or to themselves, outwardly or inwardly. Continuity does not exist. Here, I refer to "continuity" not as a euphemistic catchword for the survival of Judaism or the Jewish people, but rather in a more literal sense, as an inter-generational shared discourse on issues of identity and meaning. The Talmud is describing a crisis that is spawned by a rupture with the past — a discontinuity.

Many (perhaps most) of the Jews who find themselves in this space feel no emptiness, no sense of loss or crisis. They go about their lives as individuals, joining whichever hegemonic community attracts their allegiance. But for those who struggle with the issue, the pain is indelible. How am I to "recover" what I never had? How am I to "invent" myself as a link in a chain of tradition, when, in fact, I am unattached? How am I to gain a sense of Jewish authenticity when I find myself in a Jewish vacuum? How can I start to "speak Jewish" when I have no knowledge of Hebrew and not the slightest acquaintance with the textual tradition? How can I utter Jewish words of prayer when the words are foreign to me at every level? How can I celebrate Jewish observance when the tradition's guidelines constantly refer me back to a received tradition I did not grow up knowing? Every step toward

establishing some kind of rapprochement with my Jewish past seems enormous. When I dare to traverse the terrain, my footing is slippery; and when I get “there,” it feels uncomfortable, unnatural, artificial — inauthentic.

Jean Amery, one of Europe’s leading intellectuals of the 20th century, an Auschwitz survivor whose father was Jewish, discovered his Jewish identity upon reading the Nuremberg Laws in a newspaper while at a café in his hometown of Vienna. Amery puts it thus:

If being a Jew means sharing a religious creed with other Jews, participating in Jewish cultural and family tradition, cultivating a Jewish national ideal, then I find myself in a hopeless situation. I don’t believe in the God of Israel. I know very little about Jewish culture. I see myself as a boy at Christmas, plodding through a snow-covered village to midnight mass; I don’t see myself in a synagogue. I hear my mother appealing to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when minor household misfortune occurred; I hear no adjuration of the Lord in Hebrew. The picture of my father . . . did not show me a bearded Jewish sage, but rather a Tyrolean Imperial Rifleman in the uniform of the First World War. . . .

Certainly, it could be argued that heritage can be acquired, ties established, and that therefore to be a Jew could be a matter of voluntary decision. . . . I have the freedom to choose to be a Jew, and this freedom is my very personal and universally human privilege. That is what I am assured of.

But do I really have it? I don’t believe so. . . . One can re-establish the link with a tradition that one has lost, but one cannot freely invent it for oneself[;] that is the problem. Since I was not a Jew, I am not one; and since I am not one, I won’t be able to become one. . . . Everyone must be who he was in the first years of his life, even if later these were buried under. No one can become what he cannot find in his memories (Amery, pp. 82-84).

Amery’s claim is a powerful one: We cannot authentically invent a tradition for

ourselves, for beneath — and infinitely more powerful than — the conscious levels of identity that we garb as adults lurk layers of de facto belonging that defined us as children. Our authentic selves are woven out of the fabric of our deepest memories, and so our later, adult attempts to invent tradition will inevitably result in a tear in that fabric — and an accompanying sense of alienation.

The Talmud — in this passage and elsewhere (I am thinking especially of a passage in *Bava Metzia* 58b, based on the Mishnah there, and also of *Brakhot* 34b and *Yoma* 87a) — revolts against this rather ominous vision of how the individual's sense of personal identity and communal belonging are constituted. However, like Amery, the Talmud emphasizes the ineluctable holding power of our memories of "home." That is why the obligations to circumcise and to teach Torah are initially assigned to the parent — and, barring that, to the child's hegemonic community. But to reduce everything that we are — and all that we can be — to what our parents or home-community offered us during our childhood is to underestimate greatly the power of the human spirit to determine and create meaning for itself.

A Bridge to the Past

The Talmud here urges that as adults, we can — and, in fact, we have an obligation — to circumcise ourselves, to teach ourselves Torah. We cannot hide behind the failures of our parents or our community, claiming that a link to the past is irrecoverable. Notice that in saying this, the Talmud has not merely tried to stir us from our laziness. In fact, quite ingeniously, in the very act of making this demand of us, the Talmud has provided us with a bridge to the past — for being commanded is a form of belonging. (I would argue that this is true generally speaking — but regardless of the accuracy of this statement as a general truth, it is certainly irrefutable that the Jewish tradition views being commanded as a privileged expression of belonging.) That is, by commanding us as adults to circumcise ourselves — to teach ourselves Torah — the Talmud has established the very link to the past that our parents and communities have failed to provide.

As we anticipated upon first reading the passage, the process of circumcising ourselves, so to speak, once we have come into adulthood is, of course, extremely demanding, arduous and painful. Yet the Talmud has now assured us that regardless of our feelings of inadequacy or alienation (or perhaps alongside them), our actions are Jewishly authentic.

Of course, I have learned so many things from my father (and continue to learn! *Ad me'ah ve-esreem!*) — about being a person; about being a Jew; and about living a life of integrity, sensitivity and responsibility. But one of the greatest and most inspiring things to have witnessed was my father's assumption of the yoke of Jewish learning as an adult. He grew up in a very Jewish home. His parents, Lily and Harry Dow, lived as Jews ethnically, ideologically and religiously. But deep Jewish learning and a substantial familiarity with Torah were not among the blessings he received from his home or his community. So what did he do? After-hours, late at night, once he had come home from the office and before finishing off more dictations for the next day, he took private Hebrew lessons. He taught himself *Pirkei Avot* and *Talmud*, and he studied the weekly Torah portion, crafting a weekly Shabbat discussion that ostensibly was designed to provide learning for his children, but also, I surmise, to foster intellectual and spiritual sustenance for himself. During the day, he offered us a link in an unbroken chain of tradition. What we did not know or fully understand was that he stayed up working late into the night in order to repair the chain — closing, or inventing, a link of his own. In so doing, he taught me this talmudic lesson on Jewish continuity and authenticity long before I found it on *Kiddushin* 29a.

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