

Tradition cuts to the present

By RUTH OSTROW

"AND God said to Abraham: You shall keep My covenant, you and your children after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your children after you; every male among you shall be circumcised." Genesis 17: 9-10

The little boy is screaming. I am clutching my mother's arm, burying my head in my husband's shoulder, shuddering, looking away, and back again in fascination. It is my first circumcision. Though I had grown up Jewish, a faith where it is customary to circumcise every male child at eight days, it's the first time I've ever been at the religious ceremony which entails a "mohel" or a rabbi cutting the foreskin of the baby.

"I'm glad you're here," says my close friend, squeezing my arm, as the baby is brought out from his room.

I've flown to Melbourne specially to support her. But it's been a huge journey. Not just in miles, but a journey through spiritual confusion as I've come up against everything I was taught both in the past and the present, in a bid to reconcile two vastly different philosophies.

Where I now live, in ecologically friendly Byron Bay, circumcision is considered an act of barbarism. "It's mutilation, pure and simple," said a male friend angrily, on hearing where I was going. "I'm going to chain myself to the rabbi's arm," said another, who has lain across a road to stop trees being felled, let alone a penis being logged.

"I'll bring placards and we'll stand outside and picket the guests," said a midwife girlfriend, getting quite flushed.

This is where I reside. Among the spiritualists, yoginis and followers of nature's laws. Where I choose to be.

But where I have been, where I've come from - my Jewish background - circumcision is a beautiful ritual. An act of devotion to a higher source. An acknowledgment of God. One that symbolises the ongoing commitment to the Creator. To His laws. To the Ten Commandments and a way of being which is humanistic, compassionate and fair.

Ironically circumcision is the very way Nazis identified Jews during the Holocaust to send them off to concentration camps and, as such, for Jews it remains an act of symbolic defiance against racism and genocide, a rally for freedom and religious expression.

As history would have it, circumcision is now practised universally as a way of reducing disease. But it's an option for non-Jews. For a Jewish mother of sons there is no question of not fulfilling these vows.

I was spared the hard decision by having a daughter. My girlfriend, living in a community that upholds tradition, laments she hasn't got the luxury of choice.

Circumcision is an act of sacrifice between man and God. This is my sacrifice to a dear friend. To validate her in her time of need against my own instincts, as she sacrifices her child to tradition, probably against hers.

The baby is lying there, getting prepared. And I think of the Indian Sadhus or holy men holding one arm up in the air for 10 years until the fingernails are down to the ground, or sitting in lotus position until moss grows on their laps, as evidence of their spiritual devotion.

Since God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and well before, there have been austere practices, trials, as ways for people to show their devotion to a higher source. Human and animal sacrifice, scarification, fasting, baptism, celibacy, flagellation. In Buddhism, adepts lie prostrate on the floor or spend years meditating in a cave.

The knife appears. It all feels so fire and brimstone. So biblical. And yet I know there is something sacred that we in this spiritual vacuum called the modern world - with our preoccupations with having it all - cannot fathom.

It is that something always has to be given up, in order for something greater to be gained.

The cut is made. The baby screams. My girlfriend cries. I cry. We are women of another generation, another time, humanists, naturalists, bowing to words said to have been spoken 2000 years ago, by a paternalistic force named God.

And yet as we look into each other's eyes, we both know there isn't really a contradiction in it at all.

"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your children, to love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Deuteronomy 30:6

We have both offered our children to a higher spiritual life. My friend's commitment is symbolised by this act.

For ultimately, there is a point where all religious practices meet. In sacrifice. In surrender to Source - whatever be Its name.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 16 JUN 2001