

# *JEWS AGAINST CIRCUMCISION*



Alþingi  
Kirkjustræti  
150 Reykjavík

Efni: Umsögn um frumvarp til laga um breytingu á almennum hegningarlögum (bann við umskurði drengja), 148. löggjafarþing, 114. mál

25 March 2018

Ágæta Alþingi / Dear Members of the Parliament:

We, the undersigned, are members of the group **Jews Against Circumcision**. We are writing in support of your proposed ban on non-therapeutic involuntary circumcision of minors. We are also writing in rebuttal to letters that you have received in opposition to the proposed legislation from several prominent Jewish organizations including the Anti-Defamation League, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and the Belgian Federation of Jewish Organizations. We want it to be known that, on the matter of involuntary circumcision, these organizations do not speak for all Jews and they do not speak for us.

First, a word about who we are and what we believe in. We are men and women who come from different walks of life and different parts of the world but who are united in two important respects: our identification as Jews and our unwavering opposition to male genital mutilation ("circumcision"). Some of us are secular Jews, identifying as Jewish ethnically and culturally, and some of us are religious Jews for whom Judaism is central to our beliefs and values. Some of us have been subjected to involuntary circumcision and others have not. Some of us were subjected to involuntary circumcision within the context of the *brit milah*. Other members of our group were subjected to it merely because we were born into a particular time and place and so were swept up in the tide of medicalized (but still customary) involuntary circumcision that has inundated and warped the practice of neonatal medical care during the past one hundred seventy-five years or so. Those of us who *have* been subjected to involuntary circumcision declare unambiguously that we object to having been subjected to it without our consent. We were violated, harmed and deprived of our fundamental human rights and dignity.

We emphatically do *not* reject our Jewishness and, for those of us who are religious, we do not reject Judaism: what we reject is involuntary circumcision. We reject it and we oppose it on the following grounds:

**First**, we reject the proposition that involuntary circumcision is essential to the practice of Judaism for the individual himself. It isn't. Jewish women are not subjected to involuntary circumcision and they are no less spiritual - nor do they regard themselves any less beloved by Him (or Her) who they believe to be the Creator of the universe - than their Jewish fathers, brothers, sons and husbands who were. More to the point, there are countless Jewish boys and men the world over - no less spiritual and no less devout than our Jewish brethren who have written to oppose the involuntary-circumcision ban - who were not, as neonates, subjected to this ancient and barbaric ritual.

**Second**, we reject the proposition that involuntary circumcision is essential to the survival of Judaism as a cohesive religion. It isn't. Religious Jews around the world, in ever-increasing numbers, are replacing the brit milah with the brit shalom, a non-violent, non-harmful religious ceremony that serves exactly the same spiritual and communal purposes as the brit milah but without the harm, without the blood, without the pain, without the trauma, and without the human rights violation.

**Third**, we reject the proposition that involuntary circumcision is essential to the continued existence of the Jews as a distinct people. It isn't. The Jewish people existed long before the advent of involuntary neonatal circumcision as a religious mandate, we existed longer still before involuntary circumcision was expanded into the radical prepucectomy (*peri'ah*) that is practiced today, and we will continue to exist long after involuntary circumcision has gone the way of various other strict religious mandates that are no longer followed by the majority of Jews, such as certain dietary restrictions, the proscription against intermarriage, and post-menstrual ritual bathing. And we will continue to exist long after it has gone the way of other long-discarded and long-rejected customs and acts that were once practiced by our forebears contemporaneously with involuntary circumcision including polygyny, death by stoning, and slavery.

**Fourth**, we reject the proposition that involuntary circumcision is a necessary part of being Jewish. It isn't. A Jewish boy born to a Jewish mother is no less Jewish by

virtue of not having had part of his penis cut off. Jewishness is a product of one's genes, one's heritage, one's family life and upbringing, one's values, one's traditions and culture and, in the case of Judaism, it is a product of one's religious beliefs.

**Fifth**, we reject involuntary circumcision because we regard *all* genital cutting of children without their consent as a violation of the fundamental human right to have one's body unmolested and unharmed. We believe that every human being has an inherent right to grow up with all of his or her body parts intact. Perforce, that means that every human being has an inherent right to grow up with the genitals that she or he was born with. This belief is inseparable and inextricable from our values as Jews and from the ethical and moral beliefs that we, as Jews, hold dear. Our fervent opposition to involuntary circumcision, then, is not *in spite* of our Jewish beliefs and values but *because* of them.

**Sixth**, we reject the broad assertion that the movement to ban involuntary circumcision - and the specific assertion that the proposed legislation banning it that is before this committee of the Alþingi - is nothing more than a thinly veiled attack on Jews or Judaism and that it is anti-Semitic. It isn't. We Jewish opponents of involuntary circumcision regard this movement as a progressive human-rights struggle and we regard this legislation as a long-overdue inclusion of boys - including Jewish ones - within the protective ambit of the already-existing legal framework under which female genital mutilation has been banned in Iceland and throughout much of the world. We regard the proposed legislation not as an attack on Jews but as the inevitable logical conclusion of contemporary and increasingly universal standards regarding human rights and children's rights as articulated in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948) and in the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and ratified in 1990), and specifically as articulated in *Article 37, part a* of the latter which states that "No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

**Seventh**, we reject the assertion that the right to subject an infant or child to involuntary circumcision is a fundamental right that comes under the rubric of "religious freedom." While we recognize that the freedom to *believe* (or not to believe, for that matter) is fundamental and, therefore, absolute and illimitable, we reject the extension of that principle to the assertion that the freedom to *act* is likewise fundamental and, therefore, absolute and illimitable. We believe that one

person's right to practice her or his religion ends where another person's body begins. We believe that one person's fundamental right of religious liberty is delimited by every other person's even more fundamental right not to be physically harmed. We believe that the only person who has a right to cause to have his or her genitals (or any other body part) mutilated, deformed, scarred, or surgically altered in any way is the individual himself or herself. No one else has a right to decide what parts of a boy's penis he gets to keep and what parts get cut off. We do not consider that a radical or even a controversial position, much less an anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim one. On the contrary, we consider it to be simply and rather obviously in accordance with contemporary norms regarding fundamental human rights and human dignity. We believe that no one has the right to cut off part of an unconsenting child's penis as a religious rite, for reasons of culture, for reasons of cosmesis, for reasons of convenience, for reasons of conformity, for reasons of tradition or on the basis of dubious and specious justifications related to health or hygiene when perfectly efficacious non-invasive, non-harmful, non-painful and non-permanent alternatives are readily available (such as soap and water).

Having stated all of the foregoing, we also wish it to be known that neither do we oppose circumcision under all circumstances. While we may not approve, we subscribe to the right of a man to choose circumcision for himself for whatever reason he may have once he is an adult and of an age at which he can make informed choices about his own body. Once he is capable of exercising informed consent, we endorse, on the principle of autonomy and self-determination, his right to have his body altered in accordance with his own beliefs and values - whether these beliefs have their origin in religion or anything else. It is *his* body and that is why it should be *his* choice.

We also acknowledge the social context in which opposition to this proposed legislation by the aforementioned Jewish organizations has arisen. We are fully aware of the history of anti-Semitism and the persecution of our ancestors throughout so much of European history. And we acknowledge that that persecution has manifested itself in circumcision prohibitions in generations past. But when these earlier prohibitions were enacted, they were part of explicitly anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish government programs. It is understandable, especially with the memory of the Holocaust still fresh in our minds, that some Jews would hear ominous echoes of Europe's dark anti-Semitic past in the current effort to prohibit involuntary circumcision. Such fears may acquire even greater validation

and urgency given the alarming recrudescence of nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism that has occurred on both sides of the Atlantic during the past few years (and especially during the last year and a half).

But as Jews, ourselves, who oppose involuntary circumcision, we vigorously reject the assertion that the modern genital autonomy movement (which seeks to ban *all* genital cutting: of girls as well as of boys) is nothing more than a resurgent manifestation of anti-Semitism. Indeed, we are offended by that assertion. Circumcision prohibitions from centuries past that were anti-Jewish in design and the contemporary movement to ban involuntary circumcision are as different as night and day. Although they may coincidentally culminate in and intersect at the point of banning involuntary circumcision, they are fundamentally dissimilar both in origin and purpose. Previous prohibitions originated in ethnic and religious hatred while the modern genital autonomy movement originates in respect for the body-rights of the individual and in a philosophical objection to violence and to the needless causing of pain and suffering to infants. Previous prohibitions sought to ban an ancient, involuntary blood-letting ritual not because of what it is but because of who practiced it. The modern genital autonomy movement seeks to ban the same ancient, involuntary blood-letting ritual not because of who practices it but because of what it is.

We also reject the assertion that the effect, if not the stated purpose, of the proposed involuntary-circumcision prohibition would be to make Jews (or Muslims) *personae non gratae* in Iceland. As Jonathan Greenblatt of the ADL put it, "Such a ban would mean that no Jewish family could be raised in Iceland, and it is inconceivable that a Jewish community could remain in any country that prohibited *brit milah*." That assertion completely discounts the thousands upon thousands of Jews who abhor the *brit milah* and who would be only too happy to raise their families - and to raise them as proudly Jewish - in a country where *brit milah* is prohibited by law. How many new Jewish parents have been pressured - against their natural maternal and paternal instincts, against their inmost beliefs, and against their better judgment - into subjecting their offspring to circumcision? Time and again we learn of the extent to which it is the social pressure on behalf of involuntary circumcision that is brought to bear on new parents by *their* parents, relatives or others in their community that is chiefly and ultimately responsible for the perpetuation of this reprehensible practice. The paradox is that, contrary to Mr. Greenblatt's supposition - that the involuntary-circumcision ban must necessarily result in an exodus of Jews from Iceland - such a prohibition could just as likely

have the opposite effect: an influx of Jews who would gladly raise their families in a country where they are free of the pressure to subject their children to genital mutilation.

There is nothing in the text of the proposed bill that could lead anyone to fairly conclude that it is motivated by anti-Jewish (or even anti-Islamic) sentiment. The bill has sponsors from the Progress Party, the People's Party, the Left-Green Movement and the Pirate Party. And while the Progressive Party and the People's Party have recently been linked with populism and the espousal of anti-immigration sentiments, the bill is also co-sponsored by MPs from parties that are associated mainly with environmentalism, feminism and pacifism (the Left-Green Movement), and direct democracy (the Pirate Party).

We are thus left to weigh the merits and potential significance of the proposed legislation against the historical backdrop of anti-Semitism and against the contemporary backdrop of xenophobia and anti-immigrant nationalism that have swept across much of the northern hemisphere. We are left, further, to weigh, as best we can with the information that is currently available to us, whether the proposed legislation has roots sunk deep within nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic soil, as some have claimed of this and of similar proposed legislation elsewhere or, as we would like to believe, that it is the flowering of the same humanist and progressive impulses that inform the genital autonomy movement of which **Jews Against Circumcision** is a part.

Having done so, we wholeheartedly and enthusiastically endorse this legislation. The proposed circumcision prohibition would ban all non-therapeutic involuntary genital cutting of boys, no matter what reasons are entertained by the child's parents for wanting to subject their child to circumcision, no matter what that child's parents' religion or ethnicity happens to be and, for that matter, even irrespective of any ulterior or merely unfairly impugned motives on the part of the bill's sponsors. This opportunity is too important not to seize. The right of every child to be free of genital cutting is an idea whose time has come. The proposed circumcision ban, as we see it, represents the inevitable and irresistible march of human progress toward greater respect for the rights of the child and the rights of the individual. We endorse that progress and are proud, as Jews and consistent with our Jewish ethos, to be a part of it.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of *Jews Against Circumcision* by,

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2.4.2018

Regarding the proposed legislation banning non-therapeutic circumcision.

Ágæta Alþingi / Dear Members of the Parliament:

Last week, I sent a PDF document to you on behalf of the organization *Jews Against Circumcision* in support of the proposed ban on involuntary circumcision of minors. Attached to this current email is a document containing the names of several additional co-signers who requested that their names be added to the original letter after it had been sent. I am requesting, therefore, that the document enclosed herein be accepted as an addendum to the letter from *Jews Against Circumcision* that you received last week.

Thank you for your consideration,

David Balashinsky,  
Binghamton, NY, U.S.A.  
*Jews Against Circumcision*

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Efni: Umsögn um frumvarp til laga um breytingu á almennum hegningarlögum (bann við umskurði drengja), 148. löggjafarþing, 114. mál

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