Comments on "**Abraham as the Great (Un)Circumciser :** A Surprising Midrashic Portrait of Abraham, by Malka Z. Simkovich[1]

"Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised on the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." So said God to Abraham, establishing the covenant of circumcision, a covenant "between me and you and your descendants after you"

Genesis 17:10,14

Then Saul said, "Thus shall you say to David, 'The king desires no marriage present except a hundred foreskins of he Philistines, that he may be avenged of the king's enemies'." … Before the time had expired, David rose and went, along with his men, and killed two hundred of the Philistines; and David brought their foreskins, which were given in full number to the king, that he might become the king's son-in-law

I Samuel 18:25

Foucault announced "the death of Man"—the abandonment of belief in a human essence which could function as a yardstick for social progress. The postmodern subject had no identity, or rather, had as many identities as there were discourses in which to participate.[2]

Reading the following article I was intrigued as to how hermeneutically sealed are the walls of the academy and how the midrash reflects a deeper archetypal reflection of the darkness of the human soul ignored by both Simkovich as well as the Professor critiquing her study.

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[1] www.torah.com/ parshat . http://thetorah.com/abraham-circumcision/

[2]Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969). London: Tavistock, 1972.

Reading this midrash for me evoked mythic tropes regarding the human body, ritual cutting, triaging entry to hell and the exclusivity of the clubs men form. However in modern times these tropes have exacted a huge price int terms of human sacrifice torture and mutilation.

Malka Simkovich cites an intriguing Midrash about Abraham standing at the gates of hell as a urologist providing circumcisions for males under 8 days who died prematurely at the same time re-attaching foreskins to sinners. This dark midrash has a long cultural history that requires unpacking. May we start with the whole cultural debate regarding circumcision in the late antique period.

[CIRP Note: επισπασμοσ, epispasmos]

For centuries, Jewish boys have regularly been circumcised when they are eight days old (Genesis 17:12). An unusual challenge to circumcision developed, however, in the Hellenistic period (after about 133 B.C.E*).[3]

Hellenistic and Roman societies widely practiced public nakedness. But they abhorred baring the tip of the penis, called the glans. To expose the glans was considered vulgarly humorous, indecent or both. This combination of attitudes could be—and often was—devastating for circumcised Jews. Enjoying oneself in a Greek gymnasium or Roman bath, where nudity was de rigueur, was a popular and stylish pastime. Here politics was discussed and business deals concluded. Athletic contests and exhibitions were also conducted in the nude. Participation in athletics was often a prerequisite for social advancement. Yet a circumcised penis effectively precluded this participation.

Consequently, for hundreds of years some Jews underwent a surgical procedure known as ***epispasm****—an operation that "corrected" a circumcised penis. Some might call it circumcision in reverse. From references and allusions to the procedure in classical and rabbinical*

[3] Hall RG. Epispasm: circumcision in reverse. Bible Review 1992; August: 52-7.

literature, it appears that epispasm reached its peak of popularity in the first century C.E.

The New Testament reveals bitter conflicts over circumcision among the followers of Jesus, conflicts expressed also in attitudes towards epispasm practiced by Jews. Paul, who thinks circumcision useless, nevertheless forbids epispasm: "Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision," he advises the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 7:18).

Numerous written sources from the second century B.C.E. to the early sixth century C.E. speak about epispasm and attitudes toward it.
During these centuries, foreskins assumed an importance they have rarely had before or since. The Roman emperor Hadrian (117-138 C.E.) loathed circumcision as much as castration—both were unnatural, an offense against the Greek idea of natural beauty of the human body—and outlawed both.1

Males who wished to conceal an exposed glans had several options. Dioscorides, a first century C.E. physician to Nero's troops and master of herbal lore, helped those who, though not circumcised, had a defectively short foreskin. He suggested applying thapsia, an herb that causes swelling.2 this would not work, Dioscorides recognized for those who were circumcised.

Soranus, author of a second-century C.E. medical text, prescribed a different method for correcting defectively short foreskins in infants: The baby's nurse should pull the foreskin forward over the glans and tie it with a thread. "For if gradually stretched and continuously drawn forward, it easily stretches and assumes its normal length an covers the glans and becomes accustomed to keep the natural good shape."3

"If the glans is bare and the man wishes for the look of things to have it covered, that can be done," Celsus assured his readers.7 It was a variation of an operation recommended for congenitally short foreskins. For congenitally short foreskins, the surgeon would tie forward the foreskin, Soranus recommended, and cut the sheath of

skin around the penis just in front of the pubic bone. When the wound healed, the surgeon would remove the twine.

Epispasm on a circumcised penis required a somewhat more difficult operation: The surgeon would cut around the glans freeing the sheath of skin surrounding the shaft of the penis, pull the skin forward and dress the wound carefully so that the skin would reattach to the glans leaving a foreskin. At a time before effective anesthesia, a man inclined to try this procedure had Celsus' assurance that it was "not so very painful."

Epiphanus, the fourth century C.E. churchman, tells of a man who was circumcised twice, once as a Samaritan and again as a Jewish proselyte. In the course of the discussion, Epiphanus mentions a spouthisteros, a special implement for performing epispasm. He tells up, "If you can make circumcision uncircumcision, do not marvel at some being circumcised twice."

Some Jews probably submitted to epispasm because they shared the common Greek and Roman revulsion toward circumcision. Even if they did not, however, societal institutions and attitudes exerted strong pressure against remaining circumcised. Jews of means naturally wanted to participate in gymnasium and bath. Not only were these a chief means of recreation, they also functioned as hubs for business.

If Jews exercised or bathed while circumcised, they offended their gentile neighbors and submitted themselves to incredulous ridicule; if they did not attend, everyone knew why—and talked about it. Either way their business would suffer.

Other factors also encouraged epispasm.

Athletics constituted a chief avenue of social advancement for underclass boys. Greek cities competed with each other to grant citizenship to promising boys and to sponsor them at the games. Since athletes exercised and competed without clothes, this avenue was denied to those who were circumcised. What city would sponsor an obscenity?

After the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 C.E., punitive measures against Jews were more easily enforced against those who could be identified because they were circumcised. Suetonius tells of an old man claiming exemption from the most hated of these measures, a two drachma tax to fund the worship of Jupiter. The court stripped the old man in court, found him to be circumcised and fined him.10 A Jewish man could escape such oppressive measures and the stigma attached to them by submitting to epispasm.

Obstacles to citizenship in Greek cities like Alexandria also encouraged Jews to undergo epispasm. In Alexandria and perhaps in other cities formed on the Greek model, citizenship and the important privileges that went with it were granted only to ephebes, those trained for citizenship in the ephebaion. Since local law forbade Jews becoming citizens and since ephebes regularly exercised naked in the gymnasium, a Jew who appeared naked with a circumcised penis was unable to circumvent the law. Some Jews did evade the law, however; a Greek delegation from Alexandria complained about this to the emperor.

Greek and Roman abhorrence of circumcision produced a variety of predictable reactions among Jews. Those who stood vigorously against Greek culture asserted the necessity of circumcision in stronger terms than ever. The Jewish author of Jubilees interpreted Greek culture as the product of the demonic world; circumcision he tells us, lifts Jews out of the evil realm and places them directly under God's rule.

Other Jews who accepted Greek culture attempted to explain circumcision to the Greeks—and to themselves. A certain Jew named Artapanos (third to second centuries B.C.E.) took a novel approach: Moses founded the religion of Egypt and gave circumcision to Ethiopia. If Egyptians and Ethiopians in following their ancestral practices still keep the teachings of Moses, why should Hebrews not keep them as well?

The first century C.E. Jewish philosopher Philo defends circumcision in Greek terms by listing physical and allegorical advantages. Circumcised men are more fertile, less vulnerable to disease and being cleaner, are more fittingly set aside as a nation of priests. In addition the heart begets the thought, which is the highest human excellence; therefore penises should be circumcised to resemble the godly heart. Moreover, circumcision represents the excision of the pleasure of sex, which bewitches the mind.

Some Jews, faced with overwhelming societal repugnance toward circumcision, probably neglected it. Many of these Jews ceased to practice Judaism at all and quietly faded into the surrounding culture. Other neglected circumcision but actively claimed their Jewish heritage. The evidence for uncircumcised yet practicing Jews is indirect but unequivocal.

For example, Ananius, after successfully convincing Izates, prince of Adiabene, to become a Jew, argued that he should not be circumcised. The Jewish author of the Fourth Sybylline Oracle urged gentiles to repent and immerse themselves in water but found no need to mention circumcision.

Rabbis debated whether circumcision or immersion in water really made a proselyte. Philo tells us that the real proselyte circumcises not his foreskin but his passions. Such statements are readily explained if some authorities were contending that a person could be or become a Jew without being circumcised. Philo rebuked Jews who allegorize the law to abolish Sabbaths, feasts, the Temple and circumcision. The Jews interpreted the Torah to justify their neglect of circumcision, which suggests that in their own eyes they remained observant Jews.

Both confirming that many Jews neglected circumcision and affirming the rabbinic commitment to it, the Talmud tells us that Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the Temple was destroyed because Jews "broke the covenant by failing to circumcise their sons."[4]

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[4] Talmud, Menachot 53b

Some Jews practiced a form of circumcision that did not show. The reaction can be seen in the Mishnah's requirement that valid circumcision must bare the glans.[5] The need for this ruling implies that some Jews practiced a form of circumcision—perhaps by simply nicking the foreskin—in a way that did not bare the glans. Removing only a little of the foreskin might obviate the need either for infibulation of epispasm. Jews who circumcised in this manner did not set out to abrogate the covenant of circumcision; they merely tried to keep the covenant without offending their gentile neighbors by baring the glans.

That epispasm was fairly widespread among Jews also seems evident from 1 Maccabees 1:11-15, where we are told that some built a gymnasium in Jerusalem and "made themselves uncircumcised."

As might be expected, the rabbinic references to epispasm condemn it (while at the same time reflecting that it must have been a fairly widespread phenomenon).

"The one who voids the covenant of Abraham has no portion in the world to come." [6]
According to the Talmud, even Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, cannot eliminate the transgression of epispasm.[7]

In various midrashim several notorious biblical sinners, such as Jehoiakin,[8] Achan[9] and Adam,[10] are said to have submitted to epispasm.

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[5] Mishnah Shabbat 30.6

[6] In Mishnah Avot 3.16,

[7] Talmud: Yoma 85b

[8] Midrash, Leviticus Rabba 191.6

[9] Sanhedrin 38b

[10] Sanhedrin 44a

As late as the 12th century, The Rambam (Moses Maimonides) stated that "anyone who elongates his foreskin [to conceal his circumcision]" is denied a share of the world to come.[11]

On the other hand, some talmudic rabbis are less harsh. They consider whether one who has undergone epispasm (a mashuk) should be recircumcised when rejoining the rabbinic fold:

"Rabbi Judah says, `One who has his prepuce drawn forward [i.e., who has submitted to epispasm] should not be recircumcised because it is dangerous.' They said to him, `Many were circumcised [after epispasm] in the time of Ben Koziba and they had children and did not die."[12]

The references to epispasm here date from the second century B.C.E. to early in the sixth century C.E. As we have seen, however, epispasm was only one reaction to the Greco-Roman abhorrence of circumcision. Some Jews who rejected Greek culture heightened the religious and social importance of circumcision: Circumcision delivered one from evil. Others, like Philo, impressed by Greek philosophy, used arguments consonant with Greek presuppositions to support the practice of circumcision. Still others thought their religious obligation was fulfilled if only a minute part of the foreskin was removed. Those who interpreted the Torah by Greek methods and sensitivities, argued that the law, when properly understood, did not require literal circumcision. Such a wide spectrum of views allowed plenty of room for Jewish men to practice epispasm while still living as Jews. Many of these men never thought they had violated the covenant. They only wanted to live in both worlds. They had received circumcision; the second operation only made their circumcision less conspicuous.[13]

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[11] Maimonides Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuva 3.6

[12] Tosefta Shabbat 15.9

[13] R.G.Hall, "Epispasm and the dating of Ancient Jewish Writings," Journal for the study of Pseudepigrapha 2 (1988) 71-86;

Remember how central the debates over circumcision were to the development of early Christianity. Since the early church was part of the Jewish community, the Christian debate can be seen as part of the Jewish discussion about circumcision. Like the Jewish community at large, the church was divided between those who required circumcision and those who did not. Many Christians despised the arguments of those who in their view sought to gain the approval of their gentile neighbors by neglecting the covenant of Abraham. If circumcision defines the sphere where God acts on behalf of his people and uncircumcision defines the sphere of demonic control, then Jesus must act among the circumcised; circumcision is required.

When Paul in Galatians (6:15) claims that circumcision is irrelevant or when Luke asserts that gentiles entering the people of God need not circumcise themselves (Acts 15:19-29, they enter a debate that has already solidified. All the arguments have already been made and answered; the two sides glower at one another across an unbridgeable gulf. Merely repeating well-known arguments would hardly convince anyone. Paul and Luke can persuade only by transcending the former arguments; they can obtain a hearing only from the party whose arguments they adopt.

Paul enters the fray accepting the arguments of the circumcision party. Paul agrees that the world has been divided into two spheres, the sphere of the circumcised where God has acted, and the sphere of the uncircumcised "gentile sinners" where demons rule (cf. Galatians 2:15). But for Paul the world is where this distinction rightly applies is passing away: "[Christ] gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil world according to the will of God the Father" (Galatian 1:3-4). Distinctions between circumcised and uncircumcised, proper to the old world, do not apply in the new. Since in Christ Christians are leaving the old world, circumcision has no relevance for them: "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Galatians 6;14-15).

This article cited from Hall sets the cultural and religious-political backdrop for the debate regarding circumcision and epispasm and Simkovich's claims regarding the midrash below:

Genesis Rabba:

אמר ר' לוי: "לעתיד לבוא אברהם יושב על פתח גיהינם ואינו מניח אדם מהול מישראל לירד בתוכה, ואותם שחטאו יותר מדיי מהו עושה להם, מעביר את הערלה מעל גבי תינוקות שמתו עד שלא מלו ונותנה עליהם ומורידם לגיהינם, הה"ד: 'שלח ידיו בשלומיו חלל בריתו' (תהלים נה כא)."

Said R Levi, 'In the age to come Abraham will sit at the gate of Gehenna [hell], and he will not permit a circumcised Israelite to go down there. Then what will he do for those who sinned too much? He will remove the foreskin from infants who died before they were circumcised and will place it over [Israelite sinners] and then lower them into Gehenna.

Gen Rabba Vayera 45a.

The Talmud also mentions Abraham who acts as triage for those who will or will not be sent to hell.

ההוא דמחייבי ההיא שעתא בגיהנם, ואתי אברהם אבינו ומסיק להו ומקבל להו, בר מישראל שבא על הגויה דמשכה ערלתו ולא מבשקר ליה

[The wicked Jews] "are at that time under sentence to suffer in Gehenna, but our father Abraham comes, brings them up, and receives them, except

such an Israelite as had immoral intercourse with the daughter of an idolater, since his foreskin is drawn and so he cannot be discovered”

Eruvin 19a

This drawing of the foreskin refers to Epispasm:

"In Hellenistic times, Jews encountered the mockery of Gentiles who believed circumcision to be an unnecessary and unseemly mutilation and circumcision was widely neglected (Jubilees 15:3334). Many Jews who wanted to participate nude in the Greek games in the gymnasia underwent painful operations to obliterate the signs of circumcision (epispasm). [...] After the Bar Kokhba revolt the rabbis apparently instituted periah (laying bare of the glans), probably in reaction to attempts to obliterate the Seal of the Covenant by epispasm." [14]

Simkovich continues:

The Hellenistic period marked the transition between the Greek classical era and the emergence of the Roman Empire. Both celebrated and encouraged the nude form in art and sport, however, the baring of the glans penis in the circumcised male was viewed with distaste, vulgar and considered indecent. This posed a challenge to the circumcised Jewish population who were ostracized and excluded from contest and exhibition. Through his treatise ‘De medicina’, we re-live first century Greek encyclopedist Aulus Cornelius Celcus’s contribution to urology with specific reference to the social, political and historical development of epispasm, the surgical technique for de-circumcision.[15]

The reverence of complete nudity during exercise, sport and council in Greece and Rome motivated those who were circumcised to undergo epispasm. Often this was the only way to escape persecution or to improve the social and economic status of the male in question. Although many rudimentary techniques were used to pull and tie excess preputial skin over the glans penis, it was Aulus Celsus who described in ‘De medicina’ a

[14]Encyclopedia Judaica

[15] Nair, R., Sriprasad, S.,Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust, Dept. of Urology, Datford, United Kingdom, Poster

surgical technique to de-circumcise a male. Celsus described two techniques of reconstruction in his treatise. The first involved stretching the prepuce around the glans and tying it in position. The skin overlying the penis distal to the pubis is incised circumferentially and the prepuce is slid forward. The space between the incision was bandaged and said to 'fill and grow with flesh.' The second technique involved raising the prepuce from the underlying penis by circumferential incision around the glans (akin to a de-gloving incision of the corona). Celcus described this as 'not so very painful' for 'once the margin has been freed, it can be stripped up by hand as far back as the pubis, and in doing so 'there is no bleeding.' The prepuce is then freed and can be stretched forward beyond the glans penis where it is tied. Bandages are applied and the penis is kept cold to allow for healing over subsequent days. De-circumcision is said to have enhanced he chances of public success and economic improvement in those who were circumcised and it is thought that second generation Hellenized Jews probably abandoned circumcision entirely.[16]

In the first chapter of 1 Maccabees, a Jewish book that became part of the Catholic cannon, notes:[11]

In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, "Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us." 12 This proposal pleased them, 13 and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. 14 So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, 15 and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil. (NRSV)

As late as the fourth century, the Christian historian Epiphanus mentions epispasm. Even Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:18 tells converted Christians not to "remove the marks of circumcision" (NRSV). It is possible, although far from certain, that this midrash in Genesis Rabbah is rebutting those Jews who are separating themselves from the Jewish community by uncircumcising. To those Jews, perhaps the midrash says, they needn't bother uncircumcising: Abraham will do it for them.

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[16] http://www.uroweb.org/events/abstracts-online/?AID=39707

Abraham as Protector of Pious Jews or Pious Christians? In the midrash from Genesis Rabbah, Abraham acts as the advocate and protector of righteous Jews, whereas he has no pity whatsoever for sinners, who are thrown out of the covenant.

A parallel but reverse depiction of Abraham occurs in Luke, a gospel directed primarily at gentile converts to Christianity, in which he has no mercy for a rich sinful Jew who is tortured in hell, who in his lifetime did not help a poor man named Lazarus. According to Luke 16:24-31,

[The rich man said], "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue…" but Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony…those of us who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

[The rich man said,] "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house…that he may warn them…" Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." (NRSV)

In this passage, Abraham also plays a role as protector of the righteous and the downtrodden, but in this story, circumcision plays no role in differentiating between righteous and unrighteous. There is no clear distinction between Jew and non-Jew; In Luke, Abraham seems to care primarily about charitable behavior and faith.

Now Simkovich makes claims criticized by her scholar nemesis Prof. Chaim Millikowsky.

Whether or not Genesis Rabbah knows the story of Luke 16, it is clear that the author of this midrash does not place good works at the core of one's religious identity, as it is in Luke, but circumcision. If you are not circumcised, the author implies, you are not a real Jew. This would have been read by Jewish Christians, those many Jews who remained observant but believed in the messianic role of Jesus, and who were being encouraged by Christian leaders to stop circumcising, as a clear demand: You're either in or you're out. It's either Jew or non-Jew, it's either heaven or hell.

It may be impossible to ascertain the exact historical context of this midrash, but the dichotomy that it presents between those circumcised and uncircumcised is clear. What's more, Abraham may have been placed in a more fanatical, exclusionary role in this midrash as a response to early Christian appropriations of the figure of Abraham.

The ancient controversy regarding which religion had legitimate claim to Abraham and the midrash about Abraham sitting at the gate of Gehenna [hell] un-circumcising sinful Jews, helps us to understand the final blessing that is made at a brit milah ceremony:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified the beloved one from the womb, set His statute in his flesh, and sealed his descendants with the sign of the holy Covenant. Therefore, as a reward of this (circumcision), the living God, our Portion, our Rock, has ordained that the beloved of our flesh be saved from the abyss, for the sake of the Covenant which He has set in our flesh. Blessed are You Lord, who makes the Covenant.

Our father Abraham is there to save us, but only if we observe his covenant. Sinners who undo their covenant will be overlooked, and sinners who anger the Patriarch will be returned to their state of uncircumcision. In this sense, the brit quite literally cuts both ways.

From Prof. Millikowsky:

I have serious problems with the interpretation(s) offered in this piece and even more with its rhetoric.

1. The main thrust of the passage in Bereshit Rabba, as well as the passage in Bavli Eruvin is that Abraham has the power/desire/ function to keep Jews who should be entering Gehenna from indeed entering it. I suspect (those this point cannot be proven – or refuted) that that was all R. Levi's statement originally claimed. This itself is the most fascinating part of the midrash: Abraham

> has become not simply a lover of his fellow men, as can only be the case in any reading of the biblical story, but a lover specifically of Jews, those who have the mark of covenant upon them, as does he also. This mark, the circumcision, becomes the fulcrum by which Jews are not allowed to enter Gehenna. To this central point was added the query that this implies the total salvation of all Jews; but it is inconceivable that there are no Jews who have sinned to such a degree that they must enter Gehenna, and to that the midrash adds that indeed some enter. How can this be done – once we have determined that circumcised penis cannot enter Gehenna? There can only be one way: this great sinner of a Jew is uncircumcised.That Abraham is the one who uncircumcises is simply a result of his being the one who in the main thrust of the midrash stops all other sinning Jews from entering Gehenna. And indeed, most importantly, in a number of other midrashim, an alternative tradition, which I suspect is more original, attributes this uncircumcising to G-d himself or to G-d by means of an angel. It is inexcusable that this alternative tradition was not mentioned in the context of this essay. The rhetorical portrait then of "Abraham as the Great (Un)Circumciser" is quite misleading.

2. There are no points of contact between the Bereshit Rabba midrash and the passage in Luke, other than the very minor fact that both use an image of Abraham appearing in a future reward/ retribution context. I do begin to see what the author can possibly mean by stating "Whether or not Genesis Rabbah knows the story of Luke 16 …", thereby implying there is some close similarity between these two texts.

3. The next statement by the author has even more problems: "it is clear that the author of this midrash does not place good works at the core of one's religious identity, as it is in Luke, but circumcision" (let's ignore the continuation of this claim, with its own problems). This is simply not correct: let us remember that only those who sinned too much and thus CANNOT not enter Gehenna are uncircumcised: good and bad works are the crucial consideration and circumcision is the formal criteria.

The enigmatic parallel in Luke presents the classic (Jewish and Christian) understanding of future reward and punishment (ignoring for our purposes elements of predestination in early Christian thought), and focuses – strangely – upon the impossibility of any future changes in status after death; there can be no repentance in Gehenna. The midrashic passage in Bereshit Rabba also has this understanding at its base, but it adds the classic rabbinic notion of G-d's grace to the Jewish people (I purposefully use the Christian term here), and channels this notion through Abraham and the circumcision.

In response Simkovich claims:

*..But the article's content is explicitly concerning the **character** of Abraham and the way in which early Christians and the rabbinic authors depicted him. It is possible that the midrash in Bereshit Rabbah is taking a popular tradition – that God or an angel uncircumcises souls destined for Gehenna – and makes Abraham the uncircumciser instead, for reasons addressed in this article.*

I too am more impressed by character analysis and themes that permeate the plots than in the academic formal critique of textual historicity. Abraham gets a new role in the rabbinic imagination hitherto as patriarch and progenitor of the people of Israel, and spokesman for conscience. Now he is seen in a darker role, that of triage in the gates of hell.

I find it so ironic that in many ways and in modern times Hitler has come to represent a dark divine demonic figure whose impact in our theology is only now coming to light as we take stock of our relationship to the divine. Having awoken from the shock of this horrific episode in our history to the nightmarish landscape of a post genocide world where ongoing mass killings and torture are now

accepted on the daily doses of CNN and media outlets, where we have become numb to the daily atrocities carried to our cellphones via You tube, we now look back at such academic interpretive practices and the scholarly discussions of Abraham and ask ourselves, whether a practice such as epispasm must be viewed differently? Can the role of Abraham be seen as an archetypal pattern that is manifest even in our own times? Epispasm was used during WWII, the triage role of who goes to hell and who does not is also played out albeit but the most unlikely of ani-heroes.

I quote fro Dr Leonard Tushmet, a physician from NJ who wrote with an acute eye on medical-ethical issues.[17]

The plight of the Jews under the Hitler terror, however, made ***uncircumcision*** *no longer a question of social conformity but a matter of life and death. Escape from the Ghettos set up by the Germans in Poland was difficult but possible. On the "Aryan side," life for the Jews remained dangerous. No matter how "good" the visage nor how well-forged the Kennkarte, (identification documents), the male Jew carried with him incontrovertible proof of his origin.*

The blackmailers and the extortionists know as schmaltzovniks (from the Polish word "szmalec," meaning "fat") used the circumcision as the criterion of Jewishness. Bernard Goldstein, a Bundist leader who lived on the "Aryan side," describes their activities vividly:

"These scum would approach their victims with the words, 'Hand over your fat.' They were a terrible plague upon the Jews who lived on the Aryan side. In addition to the Gestapo, SS men, and others who hunted them relentlessly, the Jews lived in constant danger from these dregs of Polish morality, who made a business of Jewish lives. Hundreds were engaged in this hateful occupation--searching out the unfortunates who now lived under the protection of Gentiles . . . Jews who had nothing and were not profitable were handed over to the Nazis. Others had to pay monthly blackmail. When they finally had nothing left for the blood tax, they were handed over to their fate . . .

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[17]MEDICAL TIMES, Volume 93, Number 6: Pages 588-593, June 1965.

They operated in gangs . . . They would pull their victim into a doorway or alley and rip open his trousers, looking for the fateful sign . . [18]

Even Christians became their victims. Respectable Poles, when asked to expose themselves, tried to give the hooligans who surrounded them money to avoid the disgrace; such actions merely incited their tormentors further; they tore open their trousers and finding an intact prepuce, beat up their hapless prey in their chagrin. Those Catholics who took Jewish children into convents and orphan asylums also feared the schmaltzovniks.

"*They sent back Dr. E. Ringelblum's son (who had a good visage--i.e., he didn't look Jewish) because they feared to keep circumcised boys.*" [19]

After the mass deportations from the Ghettos to extermination, the Gestapo continued its job of rooting out Jews in the towns and villages where they might be hiding.

"*One day the Gestapo raided the villa. Tolla and her husband were discovered: their appearance and their documents were of no avail. The beasts examined her husband physically, discovered he was a Jew, and immediately shot both of them."*[20]

Through illegal sources, Jews could sometimes obtain documents, stating that circumcision had been performed because of phimosis resulting from a chancre or infection secondary to venereal disease. Obviously such documents were valueless for children, as well as repugnant to many adults. Furthermore, although such papers might convince the laymen, they were regarded with great skepticism by the German doctors. The latter prided themselves on their skin in distinguishing between circumcisions performed in infancy (and

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[18] Goldstein, Bernard: The Stars Bear Witness, New York, p. 208.

[19] Turkow, Jonas: In Kamf farn Lebn, Buenos Aires, 1949, p. 372, Turkow, Jonas: Azoi iz es Geven, Buenos Aires, 1948, p. 372.

[20] Goldstein, op. cit., p. 228.

hence ritual) and those done in adult life.[21] *Ingenious surgeons devised methods of reforming the prepuce to answer demands for such operations.*

"*There was at least one doctor who, for tremendous sums, performed plastic operations to restore the appearance of a foreskin. The operation was extremely dangerous, but some were desperate enough to try it.*" [22]

The famous actor, Jonas Turkow, describes what happened to his nephew: Before placing the boy with Christians, his sister-in-law had to arrange for an operation to wipe out the sign of his Jewish origin.

"*She had already come to an agreement with a certain Dr. G----------, former major in the Polish Army. I knew this individual well from the Warsaw Ghetto . . . He had now become a go-between for the surgeons who dd these operations and the Jews who wanted the operations.* ***Tens of thousands of Jews had already had these operations.*** *Several doctors on the Aryan side made a good living from this ...Major G--------- asked for this operation large sums of money which he split with the surgeon . . . The fee had to paid in advance . . . A few days after the operation, it appeared that it had been unsuccessful . . .*"[23]

The same sum was demanded for another operation. It was done by another doctor,

"*. . . in a meadow because the doctor didn't want to work in his house. The second operation was also unsuccessful. Yurek became very sick after this operation . . .*"

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[21] Rawicz, Piotr: Blood from the Sky, New York, 1963, p. 365.

[22] Goldstein, op. cit. p. 209.

[23] Turkow, In Kamf .op cit . ., p. 174.

Tushmet then curiously quotes Dr Tennebaum[24] as if his macabre recommendation received his approval!

“Doctor Joseph Tennebaum, president of the World Federation of Polish Jews, after a visit to that country in 1946 discerns a better future for his people.

"*Circumcision certainly proved a boon for the Nazis. Jews could dye their hair, assume an Aryan flair and learn to chant Catholic hymns, but they could not hide the mark of the covenant . . . being a surgeon myself, my professional curiosity made me interview dozens of doctors and examine the end results of these operations. The latter were either unsatisfactory or mutilating. One of the physicians, who himself underwent several plastic operations to undo the irreparable, said to me in great bitterness: "Jews have had all kinds of international conferences, from Zionist congresses to Esperanto conventions, but though Jewish doctors, starting with Professor Israel in Berlin and Zuckerkandel in Vienna, were pioneers in the speciality of urology, not one Urological Congress was called for the purpose of standardizing the circumcision repair technique.' He now had an obsession to call a congress of Jewish urologists* ***for the purpose of devising a proper operative procedure to safeguard the children of Israel from the circumcision hounds of a future Hitler.”***

Through the eyes of modernity the classical midrashic tropes on Abraham have now a new lens by which to mirror the darkest side of humanity. Hitler now becomes the divine arbiter of life and death through the agency of Dr. Mengele the dark Abrahamic figure standing at the gates of hell in Auschwitz. Not only experiments within his hospital on innocent children but the thousands who underwent surgical procedures to avoid the exposure to the Nazi tormentors, brings to focus the tyranny of oppressors and the lengths to which minorities will go to be acceptable, whether in the late antique period or in modernity.

Erich Fromm in Sane Society (I read at 17 with glee!) sees society around him as one of unremitting awfulness: the "man in the street", with whose

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[24] Tennebaum, Joseph: In Seach of a Lost People, New York, 1948, p. 298.

existential welfare he is so concerned, appears to him like a creature from another planet. Only the culture of his own class—culture with a capital "C"—is true culture: the rest is scathingly dismissed by Fromm as an "opiate". "Modern man" appears to (neo-Marxist) Fromm as a robot. But for Fromm culture is *kultur*, and we see his romantic hampering back to the high german culture of pre war Europe. However, through the lens of post modernism, we see just to what an extent the whole enterprise of modernity has a direct link with Auschwitz. Fromm reads naively positivistic.

In this cute academic debate between Simkovitch and Millikowsky, biblical figures such as Abraham are retold as portrayed by the Rabbis, now as a character who would determine the fate of others for eternity. Hauntingly modern it echoes the darker side of the tradition, whereby the body, ritual etching and cutting, hell damnation and eternity, those inside the club and those barred from the club. Surely the lesson to learn from all of this is to expose culture, religion and modernity as little changed from the psychic determinants that keep reoccurring in the human soul.

Little has changed since the late antique period. The forces of the dominating culture are overwhelming and clash with the minority rituals and praxis. Violence is the end result of all such collectives.