

Jewish foes of circumcision sit out attempts to ban it

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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(RNS) Though national and local Jewish groups have strongly condemned San Francisco's proposed ban on infant circumcision, a small but vocal movement of Jews is trying to convince more of their own to abandon the practice.

What they won't do, however, is join the San Francisco push to outlaw the practice in their pursuit of a circumcision-free world.

"It was a big mistake," said Dr. Mark Reiss, executive vice president of Doctors Opposing Circumcision and an active member of his San Francisco synagogue. "We are experiencing a tremendous backlash from the Jewish community."

Reiss said the coercive nature of the measure, which is slated to go before San Francisco voters on Nov. 8, recalls for many Jews the history of Jewish suffering as a religious minority. "They feel threatened," he said.

Major Jewish denominations consider circumcision a religious obligation that welcomes a Jewish baby boy into the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The vast majority of Jewish men are circumcised, as are about 80 percent of all American men, one of the highest rates in the developed world.

But Ronald Goldman, a Massachusetts psychologist who founded the Jewish Circumcision Resource Center in 1995, said that more than ever, Jews are open to the idea that circumcision is not mandatory.

"This is an act that inflicts pain and trauma," he said. "No longer are we hiding all the emotional, intellectual and ethical conflicts

connected with circumcision in the Jewish community."

Still, Goldman, too, finds the San Francisco proposal problematic. "This is so much more complicated than a legal question," he said.

"We can't control what other people do."

Education, he said, is the best way to help Jews who are bothered by circumcision to consider an alternative for their sons -- a ceremony that welcomes a Jewish baby boy into the community without cutting his foreskin.

Major Jewish groups including the Anti-Defamation League and the Union for Reform Judaism have condemned the proposed ban as a violation of the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom.

A group of Jews and Muslims, who also consider circumcision a religious obligation, recently filed a joint lawsuit to remove the question from the ballot.

"It's a primary commandment," said Rabbi Julie Pelc Adler, director of a Los Angeles-based program to train Jews to perform what in Hebrew is called "brit milah," or the covenant of circumcision. She also took issue with opponents' claims that the practice is cruel.

"There is no evidence of significant pain," said Adler. She called the complication rate "miniscule."

Recent trends, noted by the Centers for Disease Control, show waning circumcision rates in the United States. Advocates for the practice cite health benefits, including decreased incidents of penile cancer and sexually transmitted infections. Opponents dispute the health benefits, however, and say risks include infection, psychological trauma and decreased sexual sensitivity.

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that while some studies have shown some medical benefits to circumcision, they are not sufficient for the group to recommend it. Instead, it calls on parents to decide.

Under the San Francisco proposal, anyone who performs a circumcision on a male less than 18 would be subject to a \$1,000 fine, a year in jail or both.

Further fomenting the debate, especially for Jewish Americans, is a series of cartoons, widely available on the Internet, that depict "Foreskin Man," a superhero who saves infants from the claws of the bloody "Monster Mohel." (A mohel is a person trained to perform a Jewish ritual circumcision.)

The comic was created by Matthew Hess, a San Diego activist who seeks local and national laws to outlaw circumcision. Opponents of the proposed ban have likened it to Nazi cartoons that vilified Jewish religious practices.

Hess, whose initial villain in "Foreskin Man" was a doctor, not a mohel, said the depiction of the mohel is no more anti-Semitic than the first issues were anti-doctor.

"It's true that all the villains in 'Foreskin Man' are drawn to look evil," Hess said. "'Foreskin Man' is anti-genital mutilation of children, not anti-Semitic."

Rebecca Wald has noted the offense many Jews have taken to the San Francisco proposal, and their feelings that anti-Semitism may be motivating some of its proponents.

A self-described "typical Jewish mother" from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Wald last year launched "Beyond the Bris," an online forum for Jews opposed to circumcision. ("Bris" is a Yiddish word for the Jewish circumcision ceremony.)

"When I first heard about the San Francisco proposal, I was excited because I knew this would get people thinking and talking about infant circumcision," she said.

But the political firestorm surrounding the measure led Wald to question whether it is hurting or helping her efforts to encourage Jewish people to rethink newborn circumcision.

"My fear is that the San Francisco initiative will turn otherwise receptive people off," she said.

"People are going to be much less willing to explore the idea in an open and honest way if they feel their decision-making capabilities are being taken away from them."