



Joining the tribe: adult circumcision among immigrant men in Israel and its traumatic aftermath

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ABSTRACT

Neonatal male circumcision is closely tied to Jewish identity and is socially normative in Israel. Soon after the mass arrival of secular, uncircumcised Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the state sponsored mass circumcision campaigns for adolescents and adult men enabling them to join the Jewish collective, socially and religiously. Some two decades later, these men break the silence exposing their traumatic experiences in the wake of this body-altering surgery. This paper builds on the narratives of these men, belonging to Generation 1.5 of Russian Israelis, emerging in online forums, media features, live events and personal interviews. Driven by social pressure and the need to belong, most young men (and their parents) consented to the operation without proper counselling and unaware of its ramifications. Men share their intimate memories of the rapid surgical procedure, painful recuperation, and their belated regrets, both aesthetic and sexual. The willingness to expose their lingering trauma signals evolving concepts of masculinity and vulnerability among these former Soviet men. Their voices join the local and international movement opposing medically-unnecessary genital surgeries of any kind – on men, women and intersex people.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 November 2020

Accepted 18 January 2021

KEYWORDS

Adult male circumcision; ex-Soviet immigrants; informed consent; Israel; sexuality; social inclusion; (post)trauma

Introduction

Most Israeli men are circumcised, reflecting the Biblical commandment to perform *brit mila* – Convent with G-d – for Jews and religious tradition for Muslims and Druze (Wyner Mark 2003). From time immemorial, this symbolic ritual carries multiple connotations, as a masculine rite of passage and an embodied sign of ethnic or religious affiliation. Across history and populations that practised it, there have been broad variations in the extent and techniques of prepuce removal, from the minor ‘snip’ of protruding foreskin among ancient Jews to full exposure of glans penis, with respective variance in pain, complications and long-term impact on men’s bodies and sexualities. Some Jewish sages argued that *brit* may curb male sexual drive, thus limiting promiscuity and illegitimate births. In warfare, conquerors often forcibly circumcised the defeated men for punishment and humiliation. Today, an estimated one-third of men

are circumcised globally, mostly Muslims and Jews but also those surgically circumcised as neonates in the USA and elsewhere (Aggleton 2007).

The late 20th century witnessed heated medical and public-health debate about the preventive value of male circumcision against urinary tract and sexually transmitted infections, with no conclusive evidence of its benefits vs. risks and a concomitant decline in routine neonatal circumcision in the USA. More recently, a moderate protective effect of adult, voluntary male circumcision against heterosexual HIV transmission was reported in randomised studies in sub-Saharan Africa; yet the relevance of these data to the routine or religious circumcision of new-borns in Western countries is contested (Frisch and Earp 2018). Some clinical and psychometric studies have tried to measure the alleged traumatic aftermath of infant operations and its impact on adult sexuality (Earp 2015; Miani et al. 2020), as well as unintended sexual consequences among men circumcised as boys or adolescents during mass HIV prevention campaigns in Africa (Krieger et al. 2008; Earp 2015). With few exceptions (Adams and Moyer 2015), these studies have used structured metric tools and offer little insight into the subjective experiences and emotional worlds of men circumcised in adulthood (Earp and Darby 2017).

Meanwhile, important voices in the global campaign against medically unnecessary, non-voluntary genital cutting/mutilation of any kind come from within the fields of bioethics (Earp 2015; Townsend 2020) and human rights advocacy (DeLaet 2009). Viewed from the legal perspective, irreversible genital alterations on non-consenting minors (male, female and intersexed) violate their bodily integrity and personal autonomy and may constitute an assault (Svoboda, Adler, and Van Howe 2016; Möller 2020). Recurrent legal moves to regulate or ban ritual circumcision among European Jews and Muslims have caused the politicisation of this allegedly private matter (Merkel and Putzke 2013). Reflecting these global trends, a small but growing group of Israeli parents refuse to perform *brit* on their sons; yet the majority, including secular parents, conform to this ancient tradition for social reasons (Tabory and Erez 2003).

This article casts a critical sociological gaze on the unique campaign of mass circumcision of young immigrant men from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel during the 1990s - viewed through the eyes of participants. Their memories of the circumstances under which they underwent *brit*, the authorities involved, and the unintended consequences of adult *brit* form the core of this paper. The Israeli setting offers a rare perspective on the effects of mass genital surgery performed on young adults, who can compare their lives before and after the intervention. Uniquely, these operations were sponsored by the government, with the intention to 'normalise' Jewish men who had not been circumcised in the atheist USSR/FSU. Thus circumcision, voluntary but strongly recommended, became a gateway to national belonging and citizenship in the Jewish state. The few published studies on the mass *brit* operations in Israel are largely epidemiological, focusing on surgical techniques and short-term complications (Walfisch, Ben-Zion, and Gurman 1994; Ben Chaim et al. 2005). This study examined the *brit* affair through a socio-cultural lens, asking: 1) how did genital surgery imposed on young men as part of their 'integration contract' affect their identity and sexuality; and 2) how do they understand this life-changing event many years later, as more mature individuals?

Theoretical framing

I view these men's narratives through the combined optics of immigrants' insertion into a new society and rites of passage into normative Israeli masculinity. I am also interested in memory reconstruction by these men, now in their 30s and early 40s, viewing their past through the lens of post-trauma of their altered bodies and sexual selves. To my knowledge, this is the first sociological exploration of adult-male ritual circumcision in the context of immigration and quest for social inclusion. Lacking established theoretical tools to use, I borrowed from the thesaurus of immigration, masculinity and (post)trauma studies.

Although local cultural constructions of proper manhood may differ, they are typically anchored in *hegemonic masculinity* as assertive, competitive, sexually proactive, unemotional and averse to showing weakness (Connell 2005). Across time and culture, hegemonic masculinity has been phallogentric, rendering the look and function of penis, and hence circumcision, crucial for men's body image and self-esteem (Adams and Moyer 2015; Earp and Darby 2017). In the Israeli context, hegemonic masculinity is intertwined with militarism, nationalism and ethnic hierarchies, resulting in more complex and controversial *cultural repertoires* of masculinity (Kaplan 2006; Hirsch and Grosswirth-Kachtan 2018). Israeli-Jewish masculinities increasingly diverge along lines of age, class, religiosity and sexual identity. Yet their common denominator is adherence to the Judaic canon in everyday life based on the Jewish calendar, holidays, food customs, and lifecycle rituals. Within this canon, most Israeli-born men (including those who identify as secular) are circumcised and circumcise their sons on the 8th day after birth. Among veteran immigrants hailing from diasporic communities in the Americas, Europe and Middle East, most had been circumcised in infancy as part of the Jewish communal routine. With the addition of circumcised Israeli Muslims, intact male genitalia are uncommon in this country and often perceived as weird or deviant. The circumcised penis remains a powerful cultural symbol - of the Jewish collective membership, historic victimisation (by the Nazis and other anti-Semites), and subsequent victorious Israeli masculinity (Tabory and Erez 2003).

Where do ex-Soviet immigrant men fit into this complex and dynamic picture? Scant research on (post)Soviet masculinity points to its largely conservative nature resistant to change; generations of Soviet men born between the late 1950s and early 1980s typically conform to traditional masculine scripts, exclude and ridicule 'sissies' and homosexuals in line with current state policy under Putin. Post-Soviet millennials in metropolitan areas express more flexible views on gender roles and sexuality, but hegemonic masculinity predominates in all post-communist societies. Social discourse on the body and sexuality, silenced during the Soviet era, has emerged as part of a new consumer culture but everyday sexual expression is still constrained (Temkina 2008; Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2013). (Ex)Soviet Jewish men had been socialised in the same milieu and shared hegemonic gender ideology, despite their higher levels of education and white-collar occupations. Raised without religion, 50-80% of ex-Soviet Jewish men married non-Jewish women and the vast majority were uncircumcised, helping them to blend in and avoid antisemitic insults (Remennick 2007).

When post-communist mass Exodus brought them to the Jewish State, younger cohorts of ex-Soviet *olim* (new immigrants) carried a clear sign of their embodied

alterity. Although it had hardly bothered them before, in Israel they received a clear message from agents of their re-socialisation (absorption officials, teachers, rabbis) that they must comply with the bodily norm to become Israelis. In the early 1990s, the religious and medical arms of the State rapidly mobilised to put together the 'adult-*brit* assembly line' to align tens of thousands of these new citizens with the national-religious norm. A mass campaign for correcting ex-Soviet Jewish masculinity was mounted without a shadow of public criticism or concern for these vulnerable newcomers' psychological wellbeing and changed body image, let alone human rights (Walfisch, Ben-Zion, and Gurman 1994).

Typical of late-modern societies, clinical psychology and therapeutic discourse have created a new source of intellectual and moral authority, with the Israeli media and public space saturated with pop-psychology references (Illouz 2008). Given Holocaust legacies, universal draft, recurrent wars and security threats, the lived experience of Israelis constantly nourishes (post)trauma discourses (Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 2007). Combat veterans suffering of PTSD, survivors of Palestinian terrorist attacks, Gaza settlers evicted from their homes in the 2005 Disengagement, residents of the kibbutzim and towns next to the Gaza border suffering from recurrent rocket shells – indeed, thousands of Israelis are commonly construed and presented in the Hebrew media as traumatised subjects in need of care (Friedman-Peleg 2017). Beyond the military-terrorism-security domain, the language of (post)trauma and victimisation is increasingly used to frame social issues – children in foster care, lonely elders, victims of sexual violence, transgender youth, etc.

In the wake of mass *aliyah* of the 1990s, a new stream of research has focused on stress and psychological adjustment among the ex-Soviet adolescents (Mirsky 2007; Plotkin-Amrami 2008). Yet no study has explored the transition from the (ex)Soviet to Israeli gender-sexuality-virility nexus among these emerging men, including the sensitive issue of circumcision and its traumatic aftermath.

Informants and methods

Given the paucity of Israeli social research on adult circumcision, this study used qualitative data from multiple sources, including both informants and media platforms, and can be described as multi-site ethnography. From early 2018 onwards, I read multiple forum posts on Facebook, interviewed activists and bloggers, and conducted 24 online and live interviews with ex-Soviet men who immigrated to Israel after 1990 and underwent *brit* between the ages of 10 and 27. Nine men left Israel and were interviewed via Skype or Zoom. I also attended a stand-up comedy event in which young men with a Russian immigrant past shared their painful *brit* memories wrapped in irony and black humour. I took ethnographic notes during these performances and talked with the performers. Incorporated in my analysis are selected quotes from media coverage (a recent feature on late circumcision from *Haaretz* newspaper), as well as their expansions in follow-up interviews with some of the men. Other than several actual names from the *Haaretz* article, all informants are quoted under aliases. I will start to present this empirical tapestry by describing the social media activism of the major protagonist of the *brit* saga: Generation 1.5 of ex-Soviet immigrants in Israel.

Generation 1.5: gendered traumas of insertion in Israel

Over the last decade, a new voice has entered Israeli social discourse, belonging to Generation 1.5 of the ex-Soviet immigrant wave of the 1990s and early 2000s (Remennick 2003). These young adults, around 25-40 years old today, migrated as older children or adolescents having started life in Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries but coming of age in Israeli schools, military units and colleges. To consolidate their collective identity, young Russian Israelis have established several communities, both virtual and live. The first one was the *Fishka* club in Tel-Aviv (2007–2013), followed by several Facebook platforms: *Generation 1.5*, *Parents to Sabras*, and more. Some groups are mixed, while others are mostly female or male. Despite their different agendas, together they express the claim at visibility, belonging and/or protesting – twenty-five or more years after their arrival in Israel (Remennick and Prashizky 2019).

Much of the online content analysed here centres on ‘venting’ difficult memories of the initial years of ‘absorption’ in Israel for the writers and their families. Notably, many social media initiatives of Generation 1.5 are led by young women, perhaps reflecting a heavier resentment they have accumulated facing Israeli sexism and harassment towards their mothers and themselves (Remennick 2018). Men’s online groups are more diffuse and do not have clear leadership or agenda: they post visuals, jokes and responses to current events, but seldom tell personal stories. Yet in passing some men recount their memories of peer hostility, conflict with officers during army service, cultural gaps with their local friends and dates. Often these negative memories are presented in an ironic or humorous tone to downplay their traumatic impact. Many immigrant adolescents grew up in Israel’s social and geographic periphery, among working-class Jews hailing from Muslim countries (*mizrahim*) and had to adopt elements of their Levantine habitus. Mixed ethnicity and tenuous Jewish identity of ex-Soviet newcomers (inscribed on their intact genitals) reinforced their negative stereotyping and conflict with the surrounding traditional and religious *mizrahi* milieu (Remennick 2007). While female 1.5ers actively share their ‘becoming Israeli’ stories, similar stories by men remain untold, reflecting their discomfort in discussing emotions and weakness. This gendered lacuna in the collective immigrant narrative of Russian-Israeli Generation 1.5 became the point of departure of this study.

Breaking the silence around *brit-mila*

Reflecting overlapping taboos on discussing the body, sexuality and intimacy in the Russian-Soviet masculine ethos, *brit* memories have been silenced for almost three decades. Their recent exposure in the Hebrew media was initiated by native journalists and bloggers as a ‘human curiosity’ story relating to their immigrant friends and partners. As most Israeli men are circumcised in infancy and rarely meet intact men, the Russian immigrant story of the adult *brit* has recast this local routine in a new, critical light. The spell has been broken, and the flood of memories rushed into different media channels. Riding this new wave, in the fall of 2019 activists of *Generation 1.5* movement organised a stand-up comedy event in Tel Aviv where brave volunteers

shared their *brit* stories, exposing the ironies of their in-flesh encounters with Israeli Judaism.

Adding to the mounting pool of evidence, a long feature article was published by the intellectual-leftist *Haaretz*, based on the reporter's interviews with 50 such men (Glazer 2019). The article mainly focused on the health effects of late *brit* and its influence on men's sexual lives – as many of them had had prior sexual experience and described the changes after removal of the foreskin. Informants (quoted under real names and some with photographs) were remarkably outspoken about their bodies and sexuality, manifesting a notorious shift from Russian-Soviet muteness, a clear impact of their Israeli re-socialisation. Although opinions differed, the majority in this small survey said that the exposure of *glans penis* gradually lowered sensitivity, reducing pleasure both in intercourse and masturbation. In hindsight, many informants regretted their consent to undergo *brit* under social pressure.

Later, I traced ten *Haaretz* informants and steered my follow-up interviews to address Jewish identity, acculturation and perceived trauma. The themes below emerged in a combined analysis of online and live narratives. Except for the forthcoming *Haaretz* informants and some Generation 1.5 activists, live interviewing of rank-and-file men was slow and tedious. Despite my flexibility in terms of language, coverage of sensitive issues, and the promise of full discretion, many men found it difficult to discuss the matter with a co-ethnic but female researcher.

The motivation to be circumcised

All but a few men were propelled to the decision to be circumcised by the social drive to become Israeli, not to differ from their peers in settings of nudity and physical exposure (gyms and showers, medical examinations, and sexual encounters with local women). Soon upon arrival and starting Israeli schools, most adolescents (and their parents) realised that their genitals looked different. During the years of mass immigration from the USSR/FSU (1989–94), the budding Russian-language media published articles and government-sponsored ads explaining the importance of ritual circumcision for confirming one's Jewishness and becoming proper Israeli. Russian-speaking rabbis and absorption officials lectured about this delicate topic in *ulpanim* (Hebrew classes), community centres in immigrant-dense areas, and parents' evenings at schools to spread the message. Soon enough, most immigrant families were convinced that undergoing *brit* was a necessary condition of acceptance into Israeli society. Hebrew media discourse about Russian-speaking Jews was rife with allegations of their dubious Jewishness, common intermarriage, ignorance of the Jewish traditions, non-kosher diets, etc. This propelled many male *olim* to prove their true Jewishness 'in the flesh,' as a gateway into Israeli citizenship and collective belonging. While men of the fathers' generation were typically more reticent, many encouraged their sons to 'show grit - submit to *brit*'. For instance, Zhenia, who immigrated from Moldova in 1990 as a 16-year old, recounted:

Having *brit* as soon as possible was on our to-do list as new immigrants, along with getting all kinds of papers for schooling, medical and social services, etc. It was apparent that every guy in my generation had to do it. Otherwise you felt like you didn't belong

here, kids at school kept asking if I was Jewish at all... Our Aliya often faced suspicion and even rejection; both adults and children felt the need to prove their worth as Jews and Israelis... I don't recall any discussion of the matter at home, my parents simply went to the local religious council and signed my brother (age 12 then) and me for the operation. All my Russian classmates got it done within one school year, so it became a common trope for teasing and jokes...

Alex, who came to Israel from Ukraine in 1991 at the age of 15, recalled that his parents consented to his *brit* under pressure from a religious absorption worker, who suggested that their social and welfare entitlements hinged on their son's being 'normalised.' Until this day he believes he was compelled to comply to help his family. Alex recalls *brit* as one of his most traumatic experiences that started a chain of frustrations, eventually leading to his leaving Israel for Europe. He was especially disappointed that losing part of his body did not narrow the social distance to native Israelis and to Judaism, thus not delivering on the promise of belonging in his adopted country. He framed his story as one of medical violence perpetrated by the state and facilitated by the agents of Israeli re-socialisation – social workers, rabbis, teachers, etc.

Since all but a few informants had been raised by secular parents and knew little about Judaic rituals, religious motives were less salient, despite the outreach of religious agents. In hindsight, they saw the religious framing of the ritual (performed by a doctor-*mohel* or with a rabbi present and saying a traditional prayer) as an exotic expression of Israeli customs. Only a few older men who decided to be circumcised in their 20s or 30s referred to a spiritual calling or wished to study Judaism and subsequently became religious. Most men spoke about the perceived local norm of the circumcised penis as important for finding sexual partners; some even mentioned being rejected by their Israeli dates. Thus, most men consented to *brit* in response to the social pressure to conform to Israeli standards of male body appearance.

Meeting the targets: big numbers, quick cuts, no support

Reported from a medical standpoint, the mass *brit* campaigns were presented as great success, completely ignoring the men's experiences beyond serious complications. The earliest report stated that in Negev area hospitals between 1990 and 1992, close to 3,000 circumcisions were performed on immigrant men between the ages 10-64, 75% within six months upon arrival (Walfisch, Ben-Zion, and Gurman 1994). Schenker and Gross (2007) reported that close to 22,000 *brit* operations were completed between 1998–2006 on Russian-speaking immigrants, with medical complication rates of under 2%. Ben Chaim et al. (2005) published an even lower rate (0.34%), with no difference between hospital surgeons and *mohels* in the community. All three reports present adult circumcisions as safe, efficient and medically uneventful.

At the time, many 'subjects' also viewed this intervention by state agents as unproblematic, especially in view of its common performance. Most men recalled how an absorption official escorted them to a clinic, often as a group of young men from the same neighbourhood or Hebrew class, or soldiers of an army unit. If they were minors, a consent form (in Hebrew which they did not understand) would be signed by their parents – who also had only a vague idea about the procedure and its

aftermath. Without a clear explanation of what was about to happen, the young men were taken to surgery, placed on operating tables and given painful anaesthetic shots. After a short wait, a surgeon would move from one table to the next cutting off the 'redundant' body part and an attending rabbi would say a prayer, welcoming them to the fold of the Jewish people. During a second round, the surgeon would stitch the skin around the wound, by which stage the local anaesthetic would often have worn off and many patients would jerk under the needle. The key challenge for these young men was to show no fear and brave the pain. Thus, Dima quoted in the *Haaretz* feature (now 36, circumcised at 16) recalled in a follow-up interview:

I was fully awake and recall feeling how the skin down there was pulled too strongly, I jerked and cried but the four men who were working on me (three of them holding me down and the fourth cutting) went on without stopping ... In the recovery room I cried and was ashamed of my weakness ... The following days were a nightmare: the crude scar with surgical thread was hideous, and it hurt like hell during erections that I couldn't stop ... I was really crushed, hiding for days in my room, refusing to go to school or even take a shower. These moments still flash back in my nightmares ...

After a few hours spent in a recovery room, with no psychological counselling or clear instructions about post-operative care, the young men were sent on their way. Typically, they would be given a few days' medical leave from school or army and expected to quickly return to their normal duties. Like Dima quoted above, many described tight bandaging, ugly stitches and painful erections weeks after the surgery, with no-one to turn to for advice but their friends who had undergone the same ordeal. Most young men tried not to involve their parents and avoided complaining or showing pain. Vlad (now 29, circumcised at 17) recalled that in his high school class, with 30% Russian immigrants, every other day a guy would turn out in loose sports pants with hands close to the crotch in instinctive protection of the sore wound, while others would tease him, well-aware of his secret. He said, "Because so many of your friends underwent the same procedure, it became kind of normal, a source of boys' camaraderie, a chance to show stamina and grit. By and large, it's wasn't that big a deal."

Yet, other informants emphasised the harm done to their young selves, being put through this ordeal with an unclear purpose and with no adult standing up to protect them, including their own parents. Many stressed that no-one had asked their explicit consent, hence the feelings of helplessness and victimisation at the hands of the medical and religious agents of the state (e.g. Dima's memory of three men holding him down while the fourth was cutting his flesh). Arik (now 33, operated at the age of 10) recalled feeling betrayed by his parents and being angry at them during the weeks of painful recovery. The teenage drive for independence and embarrassment about nakedness, genitals and budding sexuality entailed further mental turmoil. Stas, 35, who had undergone *brit* at the age of 14, recalled his deep discomfort, being brought to the clinic by his mother and then having to take off his clothes in front of female nurses merrily chatting in Hebrew that he did not understand. Anton, now in his late 30s, who at the time lived with his mother and sister in a small flat with a shared bedroom, recalled how he slept for many days after surgery in his sister's summer frock – to avoid pressure on the wound and nudity in front of the two women. "Can

you imagine that kind of humiliation for a 16-year-old guy?" he recounted. Like Anton, many immigrant adolescents were raised by single mothers in shared living quarters and had neither privacy nor an adult man to confide with. Most tried to avoid the attention of their concerned mothers and coped with their pain and fear on their own.

And so, across the 1990s, with the mass influx of uncircumcised male immigrants, the medico-religious conversion project continued non-stop. In 1996, an official charged with the task at Chief Rabbinate proudly reported about 60-70 thousand of completed circumcisions among FSU immigrants. He boasted that during some months they 'corrected' up to 3,000 immigrants, literally using a Fordist method of a medical assembly line, first limited to public hospitals but later including also private ones. Reimbursed by the government for each operation, these hospitals competed for their share of the *olim* 'brit market' (Glazer 2019). Doctors and surgeons interviewed for the *Haaretz* feature said that sometimes they had to perform up to 50 daily operations non-stop, tired and running out of supplies – because surgical facilities were only available for a limited time. Initially most operations were done under general anaesthesia (Walfisch, Ben-Zion, and Gurman 1994), but over time many clinics switched to the use of local anaesthetics to reduce costs and patient recovery time (Glazer 2019).

In hindsight, the doctors interviewed by *Haaretz* admitted that this 'circumcision industry' was ruthless and largely ignored the needs of the immigrants who hardly understood what was being done to them. While doctors and nurses were overworked and had to meet the targets, social workers and counsellors were rarely part of the picture back then. Thus, the task of talking to these young men fell upon the attending rabbis, who mostly cared about the religious aspect of the ritual and typically did not speak Russian. While recovering from surgery, many newly circumcised men heard rabbi's suggestions that they change their Russian names to Hebrew ones. Many felt they had to comply and changed Igor to Yigal, Vladimir to Ze'ev, Misha to Moshe, and Ilya to Elihu, while most older men resisted this symbolic change and kept their original names (Glazer 2019). Thus, the hasty ritual/trial of joining the tribe was over, with a lifelong load of consequences waiting ahead.

Delayed realisation of altered sexual pleasure

Most interviewed men noted that they became aware of the altered spectrum of sexual sensations gradually, through masturbation, oral sex and intercourse. Thus, Pavel, circumcised at 22 during his military service, mused:

The operation was quick and painless as I was anaesthetised, and the wound healed in a week ... It was much later that I realised how my response to sexual stimuli has changed. Like I was no longer excited about getting a blow job, it became a routine part of a sexual act ... And in regular intercourse too, the sensuality and sharpness of pleasure have dimmed down ... Israeli guys who lost their foreskin in infancy have no idea, nothing to compare it to ... The thing is, when glans penis loses its soft and humid cover, its exposed gentle skin grows coarse due to constant friction with the clothing ... it's like when you train in the gym without gloves, you'll first get sores on your palms and then corns will form. The foreskin used to serve as a glove, and without it my glans grew

coarse and shrunk over time. With an intact penis, when it gets touched a moment before you come – it sends a shock wave to your whole body ... but I almost never enjoy this feeling anymore. So the impact goes much beyond this severed skin fold.

Over two thirds of the men in the *Haaretz* sample described a similar loss of penile sensitivity and altered sexual response. Dima, circumcised at 16, recounted:

The realisation that you have suffered an irreversible physical and psychological damage dawns upon you gradually, in my case it took about a decade to fully understand what's happened to me. You no longer enjoy masturbation, it takes you ages to come, and sex with a partner is also much bleaker, so you don't even seek it that much. I heard other guys speaking about problems with erection, but for me it's not getting it up but rather enjoying the process ... I often imagine how I could live a fuller life if this body part hadn't been severed, the lingering sadness is always there.

Alex, 37, called his penis "his personal ground zero" that left mental scars and reduced his self-confidence long after surgical scars had healed. He was sure that *brit* at age 13 had thwarted his sexual development: caused him to avoid for years sex with live partners, relying instead on porn and masturbation.

In contrast, other informants saw the lowered sensitivity in their now-naked glans penis as a benefit increasing their sense of control. Before *brit*, their penis was overly sensitive to touch, they got excited too easily and ejaculated quickly. The reduced sensitivity helped them keep erections and sustain intercourse much longer than before, which they deemed an improvement in their sex lives. Yet others described being proud about passing with courage this painful rite of passage to Jewish manhood and saw themselves post-*brit* as improved men, with more aesthetically looking and 'normalised' genitals. They also mentioned how their female partners enjoyed sex with them better due to their exposed *glans*. These positive interpretations were typical for about every fourth man interviewed by *Haaretz* (Glazer 2019) and have also surfaced in some of my follow-up interviews.

Retrospective framing of the *brit* experience as trauma

It was common among the men who 'came out' with their late *brit* stories to frame them in hindsight as traumatic. Lingering insecurity about their penis (particularly the surgical scar) and flashbacks or nightmares about the operation and painful recovery were commonly construed as signs of post-trauma. Those circumcised in their teenage years often referred to the lack of true informed consent, which they could not really give as unwitting minors. Others spoke of the exploitation of their naiveté by the Israeli absorption and religious agencies driven by the political agenda of rapidly 'normalising' newcomers. Thus, 39-year old Ilya (12 at the time of his *brit*) recounted:

Nobody really cared about us, our fears and pain, we were pawns in reaching the targets of mass 'correction' of the 'defective' ex-Soviet Jews ... One day a few boys from my school (me included) were taken by bus to a clinic and everything happened so quickly ... there was no time for asking questions or raising doubts. I expected it to be sort of a vaccine shot or a tooth extraction – that kind of thing, unpleasant but fleeting. What a fool! To the very end I didn't realise they were going to cut off part of my most intimate member ... and then it was too late.

Valery, 36 now and 14 at the time of *brit*, seconded:

Afterwards I was really pissed off about not resisting, or at least demanding an explanation. This feeling of helplessness in the face of the Hebrew-speaking authoritative adults in white coats, a doctor and a rabbi, who took control of your body and basically harmed it... Why didn't I run away from the waiting room? I was a big enough lad and rather smart... yet I didn't realise it was my right to say no and just leave the clinic... The general climate of ridicule around *olim* boys compelled us to comply with whatever it took to become a proper Israeli...

Both men were traumatised and humiliated by the external authority undermining their agency in making an informed decision to undergo a painful and irreversible intervention. They described the context surrounding mass *brit* operations as one of ideological or religious compulsion targeting both their parents (who had to give a formal consent) and themselves. In most cases, the parents remained passive, perceiving the ritual as inevitable and not giving it too much thought, nor discussing it with their sons. Like Ilya and Valery, several other informants mentioned being sure at the time that they had no say in the matter, that undergoing *brit* was as mandatory in Israel as going to school and military draft. Some of their parents were also convinced (wrongly, as it turned out later) that refusing to submit their sons to *brit* would entail losing vital economic and social rights as new citizens – subsidised housing, unemployment benefits, etc. In other words, they believed that circumcision was an indispensable part of the deal between the State and newcomers. It was only years later that these men deemed themselves as victims of coercive surgery which they had a full right to reject. Framing their narratives as collective trauma inflicted on the young immigrants by the omnipotent State added to their perceived moral power, although few respondents used the language of victimhood.

None of the informants in this study turned to professional counselling or therapy to alleviate their distress, nor did they seek support from their families. The matter remained closeted for many years, in line with Soviet culture shrouding intimate matters in silence and paucity of language to discuss emotions. In many stories, it was the girlfriends and wives of these men who prompted the reconstruction of the *brit* event as unnecessary and traumatic. This was particularly true about the non-Israeli born female partners of my informants who did not believe that all penises should be circumcised. Alex, who later married a European woman and left Israel, mused:

It was my then girlfriend (now wife) who first made me see *brit* as my rights violation, without proper consent and psychological support. She saw the whole event as cruelty and state-imposed violence, probably because she was a human rights lawyer at the time... Maybe she exaggerated, but her anger made me re-examine what's happened many years ago in a new light.

Anton seconded:

My first steady girlfriend was shocked when I told her that I lost my prepuce at age 15, it made her angry at the harm done to me... she also came from Ukraine during middle school and had a very hard time acclimating in Israel. My *brit* story made her recall all the shit she and her mum had to take from her Israeli classmates and teachers, how much she wanted to return to her hometown and old friends... It was kind of a trigger that symbolised for both of us all the negative load of surviving Aliya as kids.

Women's role in these men's belated trauma awareness is not surprising, as women often manifest greater introspection regarding their past and migration memories.

Wives and girlfriends served as amateur shrinks in the lives of these men – who typically scorned psychotherapy and remained detached from their inner selves. Raised by their Soviet parents, many young men were prone to stoicism, self-reliance and denial of weakness. If in the past they had construed their late *brit* as an act of courage, women helped their partners reinterpret it as damaging. These reconstructions also reflect informants' exposure to the (post)trauma discourse in the Israeli media and, for a small minority, their therapy experience many years later, usually for other reasons. The later framings of their 'absorption' (and coercive *brit* as its part) recast the whole journey of becoming Israeli in a critical light. Being a wrong kind of a Jew, or a Gentile imposter, was a common adage Russian-speaking *olim* heard from their mates at school, gym or military unit. Remaining intact meant revealing their alterity and non-belonging in every situation involving nakedness. To quote Pavel, circumcised as a young officer at 22, "I definitely underestimated the price I was going to pay for my conformism... If I knew back then what I know now, I'd rather resist the pressure from my friends and commanders."

Concluding thoughts: Immigrants and Israeli rites of passage

Drawing on the tapestry of personal narratives from different sources, this article adds to critical discourse on non-therapeutic genital surgery from a new perspective, merging cultural constructions of masculinity with the immigrant quest for inclusion. It highlights the ramifications of adult male circumcision when performed for the sake of national belonging. So far, critical discourse on the integration saga of Russian Israeli Generation 1.5 has been largely led by female activists (Remennick and Prashizky 2019), and it is time to hear men's side of the story. Their narratives suggest that *brit* was one of the formative experiences casting a long shadow over subsequent integration in Israel, as it typically happened soon after arrival, when these young men were disoriented and knew little Hebrew. Lacking support from their families and helping professionals, they had to adjust to this dramatic change on their own. Soviet-type masculinity encouraged many young men to construe painful genital surgery as a test of their courage, and they were proud to endure it without complaining. Yet in retrospect, many men wished they had resisted social pressure and kept their genitals intact. They construed their lost foreskin – and concomitant sexual pleasure – as a cruel 'price tag' for their required Israelisation.

Since Israel's foundation, Zionist vision and the melting-pot imperative have implied that Jews should do whatever it takes to return to their historic homeland, become normative Israelis and contribute to the nation-building. Every mass *aliyah* has been subjected to painful rites of passage to Israeliness by the rapid switch from Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Arabic etc. into Hebrew, severing ties to the homelands, and taking up arms to defend the state. Typically, Jews from Arab countries (*mizrahim*) had higher dues to pay for joining the collective compared to their European brethren, as the purpose of the early Israeli polity was to lift all non-white Jews to the Ashkenazi standard (Halamish 2018). Many of these rites and sacrifices were of embodied nature and imposed by medical agency (Davidovich and Shvarts 2004). Thus, Yemenites and other North African Jews submitted to painful treatment for their stigmatising infections

(e.g. scalp shaving and X-raying to eliminate ringworm, with long-term physical and psychological consequences); Ethiopian Jewish men had to undergo *nikuz dam* (minor bloodletting) in order to 'standardise' their circumcision in the eyes of the Israeli rabbinite; and many Ethiopian women received contraceptive injections before and after *aliya* to ensure they do not bear too many children (Nesher 2013).

For many newcomers *aliyah* and becoming Israeli entailed multiple losses and cumulative adversity (Remennick 2002; Halamish 2018), yet this perspective has rarely been applied to the previous *olim* generations. Today, elements of (post)trauma narrative are brought to a spotlight by the third-generation *mizrahi* cultural entrepreneurs, whose recent documentaries, blogs and poetry readings highlight the mistreatment of their elders in the hands of the early Ashkenazi establishment: through coercive settlement in desert frontier areas, forced treatment of stigmatised diseases, and perhaps the most traumatic of all – the mass 'disappearance' of Yemenite Jewish children secretly adopted by childless Ashkenazi couples in the early years of the State (Gamliel and Shifris 2019). In this historic context, the saga of ex-Soviet Jewish men losing their foreskin in the quest for integration fits into the series of similar (or harsher) sacrifices made by generations of *olim* at different points of Israel's immigration history. Although this rite of passage was perceived at the time as a fair price to pay for 'joining the tribe', subsequently many men saw the life-changing event as traumatic and not really delivering on the promise of integration.

It often takes temporal distance and critical insight to realise the unfair and traumatic nature of state-driven medical interventions justified as 'dire measures in dire times.' Deemed by *olim* youths as necessary and inevitable in the name of higher goals, *brit* was later reinterpreted by them as violation of human rights and informed consent. A changing *Zeitgeist*, with the emerging critical discourse on the downside of *aliya* and marginalisation of *olim* (Remennick and Prashizky 2019) has encouraged some of these men to break the silence and expose their old wounds. Over the last 20 years, Israeli society has made significant strides towards curbing state coercion, recognising post-traumatic experience and training multiple helping professionals (social workers, counsellors, etc.). In an era of decentralised authority and omnipotent social media, mass medical interventions are hard to implement. Yet, a recent affair also comes to mind: WHO-supported campaigns for the voluntary male circumcision of African boys and young men aimed at curbing the heterosexual transmission of HIV. To boost compliance, some organisers have promoted the circumcised penis as a symbol of new African masculinity, while ignoring men's legitimate concern about sexual harm (Adams and Moyer 2015). As in other public-health drives with set targets and timelines, critical studies have uncovered lacking informed consent, shortcuts, sub-standard clinical care, confusion/trauma and belated regret among participants (Gilbertson et al. 2019). Both cases add powerful evidence to the global movement against non-therapeutic genital surgeries, despite their declared noble goals – of national belonging, cultural/gender conformity or public health.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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