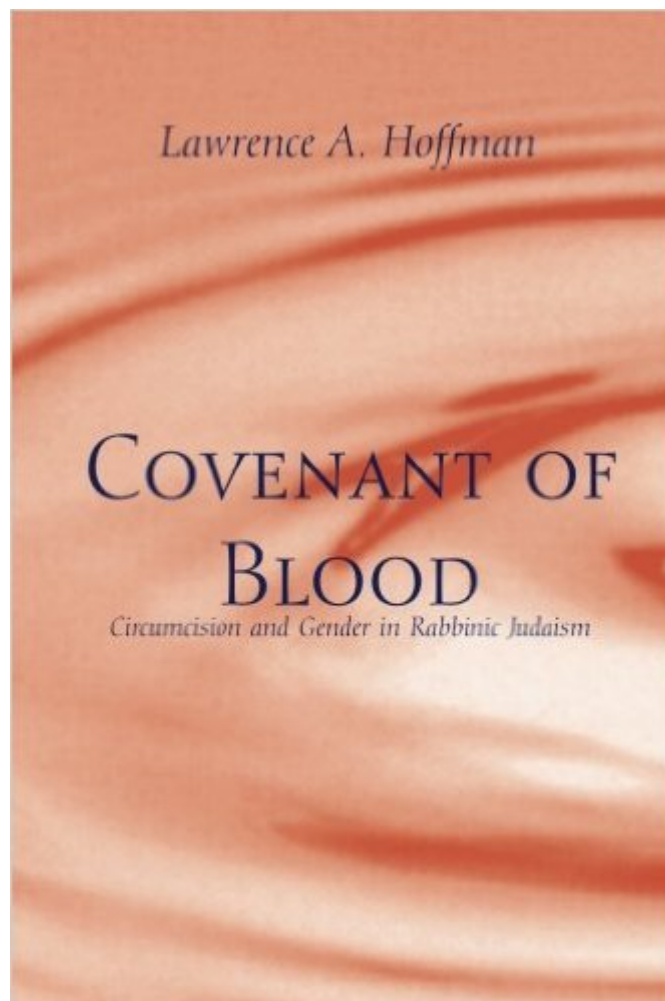


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# Covenant Of Blood: Circumcision And Gender In Rabbinic Judaism (Chicago Studies In The History Of Judaism)



## Synopsis

Central to both biblical narrative and rabbinic commentary, circumcision has remained a defining rite of Jewish identity, a symbol so powerful that challenges to it have always been considered taboo. Lawrence Hoffman seeks to find out why circumcision holds such an important place in the Jewish psyche. He traces the symbolism of circumcision through Jewish history, examining its evolution as a symbol of the covenant in the post-exilic period of the Bible and its subsequent meaning in the formative era of Mishnah and Talmud. In the rabbinic system, Hoffman argues, circumcision was neither a birth ritual nor the beginning of the human life cycle, but a rite of covenantal initiation into a male "life line." Although the evolution of the rite was shaped by rabbinic debates with early Christianity, the Rabbis shared with the church a view of blood as providing salvation. Hoffman examines the particular significance of circumcision blood, which, in addition to its salvific role, contrasted with menstrual blood to symbolize the gender dichotomy within the rabbinic system. His analysis of the Rabbis' views of circumcision and menstrual blood sheds light on the marginalization of women in rabbinic law. Differentiating official mores about gender from actual practice, Hoffman surveys women's spirituality within rabbinic society and examines the roles mothers played in their sons' circumcisions until the medieval period, when they were finally excluded.

## Book Information

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In a private letter to Leopold Zunz, the nineteenth century scholar and advocate of the "Scientific Investigation of Judaism," the Reform leader Abraham Geiger commented on the rite of

circumcision as follows: "I cannot comprehend the necessity of working up a spirit of enthusiasm for the ceremony merely on the ground that it is held in general esteem. It remains a barbarous bloody act. . . . The sacrificial idea which invested the act with sanctity in former days has no significance for us. However tenaciously religious sentiment may have clung to it formerly, at present, its only supports are habit and fear, to which we certainly do not wish to erect any shrines." Notwithstanding Geiger's private views on the subject, his public position was quite different when, in 1843, a group of Frankfurt laymen formed the Society for the Friends of Reform and declared, among other things, that the long-standing rite of circumcision was null and void. Like other members of the emerging Reform rabbinate of mid-nineteenth century Germany, Geiger could not consider abrogating the rite, even though every other aspect of Jewish religious practice was subject to reconsideration in the light of modernity. As Lawrence Hoffman notes in the opening chapter of "Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism," when discussing the actions of the German Reform rabbinate in response to the Frankfurt laymen and during three historic meetings in the period between 1844 and 1846: "Rabbis apparently found it possible to commit nothing less than liturgical surgery on their time-honored prayer book; they could cancel age-old mourning and wedding customs; they even declared the Talmud no longer binding."

Rabbinical scholar Lawrence A. Hoffman has written that rarest of books: A learned, well-referenced, thoughtful academic work on a very focused topic that nevertheless manages to engage, even grip the reader. Circumcision, Hoffman notes, has long been the sine qua non of Jewish identity. Yet even that apparently simple statement is more complicated than it appears, both because obviously it does not speak to women's Judaic status, and also because the state of one's penis is technically irrelevant to one's membership in the religion. Hoffman, so troubled by his findings that it took him eight years following his completion of his research to actually publish *Covenant of Blood*, proves a thesis so sweeping and yet so simple that it is shocking that no one has breached the issue before him: Circumcision symbolizes a covenant between the males being circumcised and God. The practice thereby expresses the awkward (by today's standards) truth that in traditional rabbinical thought, Judaism, despite its matrilineal passage of religious identity, equates "man" with "Jew," allotting women an appendage-like role. Circumcision made possible and even embodied an analogy that Hoffman shows was implicit in Judaism: man was to woman as Jew was to non-Jew. And how did a male Jew demonstrate that he belonged and was of the covenant? By going under the knife. "One eternal verity... endures in Jewish culture: a tenacious grasp on circumcision to the point where opposition to it was considered a taboo." It is important to realize that

things were not this way from the inception of Judaism.

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