

The removal of the foreskin: More than a cut

Common practice? Manasseh and Ephraim Seidenberg call for a rethinking



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Removal of the foreskin without consent is common. The suffering associated with this is often taboo. Two brothers want to change that. They became part of a movement for “genital self-determination” – or: intactivism.

The twins Manasseh and Ephraim Seidenberg are close. They talk about a lot of things. But the first time they talked about the issue of circumcision with a critical eye was not easy. Manasseh described the criticism he had encountered on the Internet:

“What if cutting off our foreskin was completely useless – or even harmful?”

Ephraim listened to his brother starting to talk about penis circumcisions seemingly out of nowhere, and at first thought: “What a bunch of bullshit. It's not a problem. Not with me, not with my brother, not with anyone.”

Sometime later, Ephraim became curious after all: with a mutual friend, the two had a conversation about the foreskin. “With his extraordinary body awareness and his open manner, he described to us the pleasurable sensations he experiences with his foreskin. What valuable significance it has for his sexuality. That was completely new for us and also impressive,” Ephraim recalls. For him, this conversation became a turning point.

Having a circumcised penis is considered normal. The brothers didn't know any different, “I thought it was good that it was done to me, that it was also done to others. That was how I had grown up and it was taken for granted,” Manasseh describes. “I didn't have a body image without that injury. I thought my body naturally looked like that, didn't even realize that there was a scar.”

The medical term for penile circumcision [in German] is “Zirkumzision.” It is one of the most common surgical interventions on the cis-male body worldwide: “Every year, approximately 13.3 million males are circumcised worldwide,” according to a US study. In Germany, the proportion of circumcised boys and men is estimated at 15%. The Swiss organization *Pro Kinderrechte* estimates the proportion in Switzerland at 10 to 15%.

In a large part of the studies and sources on circumcision, the term “questioned men” is used, although men with a penis is meant. Because there are also men with other genitals or with neopenis who are not directly affected by the issue of penile circumcision, in this text, where it is not quoted, the reference is to cis-men.

Widespread routine

13.3 million circumcisions per year: that's a lot. A small proportion of these are performed for medical reasons: if the foreskin is narrowed, it is often removed surgically – although treatment methods that preserve the foreskin are usually sufficient, as the German Society for Pediatric Surgery points out. Far more common, however, are two other reasons. Sometimes these are of a religious and cultural nature. In Islam or Judaism, for example, circumcision has a long tradition. Or else, the surgical procedure is what is medically called “routine circumcision”: Babies who are routinely circumcised. In the USA alone, for example, the foreskin is removed from 55% of all penises as a matter of pure routine after birth. In German speaking countries, too, the procedure is often performed without any religious or cultural background.



Twin brothers Ephraim (left) and Manasseh Seidenberg suffer from having had their foreskins cut off as children.

Ephraim and Manasseh wanted to know more about this practice of circumcising babies. And about the consequences. “The foreskin was hardly a topic in medical school,” Manasseh recalls, “with a diploma, you still have no idea about it, except that it should be cut off in certain cases.” And Ephraim notices a speechlessness during the research: “There are few helpful terms in German, compared to other languages.” The word “skin” is inappropriate, he says, given the nerves, muscles, and sensitivity of the foreskin. If so, then rather “back and forth-skin”, as they reflect aloud and point to the mechanical function of the foreskin.

The word “Beschneidung” [German: circumcision, pruning] is also problematic, Ephraim cites. “It sounds like a fruit tree, you cut something off and it grows back. With us humans, nothing grows back: You cut it off and it’s gone. Circumcision is clearly a euphemism.” He therefore uses the terms “cutting off the foreskin” or, rarely, “foreskin amputation.” Because: “It doesn’t sugarcoat anything.” He stays away from the word “mutilation,” which is often used in reference to children with vulvas, in the context of foreskin removal, far from it. “To speak of mutilation here is perceived by many as crossing a line. Furthermore, we don’t want to engage in comparative discussions, but rather draw attention to the fact that everyone is entitled to genital autonomy, regardless of gender.”



Bild: imago images/ Everett Collection

In Judaism, the removal of the foreskin takes place eight days after birth in the ceremonial setting of the Brit Mila.

People have been arguing about the removal of the foreskin for a very, very long time: there were prohibitions and resistance as early as antiquity. Since the procedure became a custom – centuries ago, for example among Aborigines, Egyptians and Hebrews – it has also been criticized within the respective cultures.

A sensitive area of tension

Ephraim and Manasseh, themselves with Jewish roots, are aware of the fear of antisemitism that still arises today in the critical discussion about cutting off the foreskin. “I am aware of this area of tension due to my own experiences of exclusion,” Manasseh says, “and I also used to have reservations, e.g. about looking at the website of German associations for genital autonomy. Who knows, I thought at the time, maybe they have a dubious motivation. By now we have a close exchange with these organizations. So our view has changed for the better.”

In German-speaking countries, there are several associations that campaign against circumcisions that are not medically necessary. Some explicitly distance themselves from discriminatory motivations.

The discussion is loudest in the USA, where the first such organization was founded as early as 1985. In 2008, an international campaign was launched by various associations to oppose a WHO recommendation: The WHO had recommended circumcision as part of HIV prevention. This recommendation is the subject of numerous contradictory studies.

However, the consequences of circumcision are potentially dangerous: Injury to the urethra, secondary bleeding, and infections. Such complications occur in at least one in 50 cases of circumcision. Manasseh adds: “If living, functional tissue is cut away, isn’t that a complication?” Because of the loss of sensitivity that accompanies this procedure, critical physicians even speak of a “complication rate of 100%.”

It wasn't taught to the Seidenberg twins that way. "When cutting off the foreskin used to be an issue, it was only in the context that it was good," Manasseh recalls. "I believed the arguments we kept hearing: A penis without a foreskin is hygienic, safer, more beautiful." That, in turn, implies a lot about the foreskin, he says: "We grow up thinking the foreskin is something dirty or negative. I used to feel that not having a foreskin was not only an advantage, but almost associated it with a sense of superiority."

Speaking of superiority: While there were racist arguments against circumcision at the end of the 19th century, around the same time in the English-speaking parts of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the USA, circumcision was propagated as a prevention against masturbation – and at the same time as a punishment for those who dared to satisfy themselves. It was therefore also a sex-negative morality that spread circumcision in some parts of the Western world at that time, and not exclusively religious motivation on the part of Muslim or Jewish faith groups.

Dropping your pants

In Germany, there is the association "Intaktiv" (from the German "intact"), which advocates genital autonomy; one of its ambassadors is the cartoonist Ralf König. There is also the "MOGiS" association of persons affected, which deals with child protection, children's rights and victim support in general. The Swiss association *Pro Kinderrechte* is mainly active in the legal field. Ephraim and Manasseh are therefore in the process of setting up their own association in order to raise awareness about the foreskin and to be able to network more efficiently. But also to enable self-help: The exchange among affected people, as they call it. Because their own being affected is very present to them. "Removing part of someone's body also means taking away feelings. The sensations that I could have in this part of the body, I can no longer have," Ephraim puts it. "Talking about these things is not easy. It means dropping your pants, the subject matter is shameful. Shame is something that doesn't fit our societal image of masculinity." Sometimes it is also anger that he feels; but shame and pain are less accepted, he elaborates. Pain that is also reflected mentally.

So: ban circumcision? The twins speak about an important misunderstanding. They deliberately argue using the concept of "genital autonomy." It forms a demand: That people can decide for themselves whether and when such an operation is performed on them. "We don't want a new, specific ban against cutting off the foreskin," Ephraim explains, "but believe that every person is already entitled to autonomy. The constitutional state and the authorities are to protect this autonomy."

For this activism the word "intactivists" is circulating on the net. Their own wiki describes them as "human rights activists who protect children's male, female and intersex genitalia from parental ignorance, religious fanaticism, medical greed and cultural myths;" here we find a point of contact with the intersex community, which campaigns for a ban on operations on intersex babies and children. According to the Rainbow Europe organization, there is no additional legislation in Switzerland and Austria that protects intersex babies from non-essential surgeries. Such legislation is in force in Germany, Portugal, Spain and Malta.

Circumcision also finds its way in laws: In Germany, non-therapeutic foreskin removal was legalized in 2012, as part of the "Law on the Scope of Personal Care in the Event of Circumcision of a Male Child." In the first six months after the birth of a child, even non-physicians are allowed to perform such an operation. Years later, the law is still criticized by doctors and child protection associations. The Bundestag's decision was preceded by a legal dispute in which judges had ruled that circumcision was a punishable bodily injury. Since then, organizations around the world have been celebrating Worldwide Day for Genital Autonomy on the anniversary of this court ruling. One of the demands is that people be better informed about the risks and long-term consequences of circumcisions. And that people only have their foreskin removed if they can give their own consent to the procedure, or in medically justified cases if every attempt at therapy that would keep the foreskin intact has been unsuccessful.

"Can't you get it up?"

Their own being affected, the reflection on their own physical autonomy and its violation, made Ephraim and Manasseh become activists. Intactivists. Not because they were primarily looking for political commitment, but because information on the consequences of circumcision was simply to be found predominantly in activist contexts. At urological congresses, for example, circumcision was not present as a topic.

But also broaching the issue in private had to a certain extent politicized them: “Just in order to talk about it in your own environment, you have to adopt an activist stance,” Ephraim reports. Manasseh explains: “Many people react below the belt. There are reactions like: So do you have problems? Can’t you get it up?” – “Of course, people also just don’t want to have this unpleasant discussion,” says Ephraim. “In the past, we would probably have found it strange, too, if someone had focused on the topic of the foreskin like that. And then also on the genitals of babies. For many men, just raising these concerns borders on activism.” So they became activists.

Now, Ephraim and Manasseh are thus part of that intactivism. “Dealing with this issue also triggers an inner confrontation,” says Ephraim. “It takes time.” At the same time, he says, the subject area also allows them to meet sensitive people with a sense for social issues.

“It’s a unifying topic: We talk to people with a Muslim background, to experts, to representatives of Jewish associations,” Manasseh says. “It’s an exciting combination of people you don’t meet in many places.” Facing the topic had also made them reflect on gender images. “Dealing with the issue of the foreskin has also brought me closer to feminist concerns and critical masculinity,” says Ephraim. “When we talk about how men should be more concerned with their feelings, it would be absurd to leave out genital autonomy. As if in the feminist demand for bodily autonomy, there were, pointedly put, a footnote that the foreskin is an exception. No: men should realize that genital autonomy is important for them, too.”

With Ephraim and Manasseh, this realization has triggered more than they would have imagined. Now they hope to make a difference with it.

What is the structure of the foreskin?

[QR code link: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/57/Infografik_Vorhaut_Aufbau_Funktion.jpg] This graphic was developed by the Seidenberg brothers with a scientific illustrator.

Structure and function of the foreskin

