

# Metzitzta b'Peh

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## Question

Please explain the source and significance of *metzitzta b'peh*.

## Introduction

The mitzvah of *Bris Milah* (ritual circumcision) is one of the most important Mitzvos of the Torah.<sup>1</sup> It is comprised of three steps; *Milah* (circumcision), *periah* (uncovering the corona), and *metzitzta* (suction of the blood).

These steps are mentioned in the Mishna (Shabbos 133a) which delineates the procedure of a *bris* performed on Shabbos.<sup>2</sup> The Talmud states that a *mohel* who does

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(1) משנה נדרים (ג, יא): "רבי ישמעאל אומר, גדולה מילה שנכרתו עליה שלש עשרה בריתות. רבי יוסי אומר, גדולה מילה, שדוחה את השבת החמורה. רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר, גדולה מילה, שלא נתלה לו למשה הצדיק עליה מלא שעה. רבי נחמיה אומר, גדולה מילה, שדוחה את הנגעים. רבי אומר, גדולה מילה, שכל המצות שעשה אברהם אבינו לא נקרא שלם, עד שמל, שנאמר התהלך לפני והיה תמים. דבר אחר, גדולה מילה, שאלמלא היא, לא ברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולמו, שנאמר כה אמר ה' אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה חקות שמים וארץ לא שמתיו."

ברייאת נדרים (לב, א): "גדולה מילה ששקולה כנגד כל המצות שבתורה שנאמר כי על פי הדברים האלה"

(2) משנה (שבת קלג, א): "עושיין כל צרכי מילה [בשבת] מוהליין ופורעיין ומוצצין ונותניין עליה איספלגית וכמוין."



It is important to realize that Halacha views any risk of danger very seriously, and is aware of the risks involved in *bris milah*. Halacha is even more cautious than modern-day doctors when it comes to delaying the *bris* because of health-related issues.<sup>81</sup>

[Rabbi Yonasan Goldberger points out in his book Sanctity and Science: Insights into the Practice of Milah and Metzitzah: "A study in the New England Journal of Medicine (1990) reported a complication rate of 0.19% when circumcision is performed by a physician. When performed by a mohel (a Jewish person expertly trained in the practice of ritual circumcision), the rate falls to 0.13% or about one in 1000. When a complication occurs, it is usually excessive bleeding, which is easily correctable. No other surgical procedure can boast such figures for complication-free operations!"

In a more recent study in 2012, there were reported complications (primarily bleeding) in 4 out of 10,000 *brissim* performed in Israel (mostly by *mohelim*), as opposed to the *brissim* performed in America by doctors where the rate was 1 in 500.]

Obviously, proper precautions are taken, and the *mohel* sterilizes his mouth with antiseptic such as alcohol or Listerine mouthwash.<sup>82 83</sup> If the *mohel* has signs of illness or has open wounds or sores in his mouth, he will refrain from performing the *metzitzah b'peh* himself.

[For further reading on the discussion regarding Herpes, see the articles referenced in the footnote.<sup>84</sup>]

May the merit of upholding this sacred millennia-long practice lead us to the final Redemption through Moshiach Tzidkeinu.

(81) ראה תצהירו של הרב לוי שי' הבר המצו"ב, מוהל מומחה ומחולל התהליך הליגאלי לביטול החוק נגד מציצה בפה.

(82) ראה תצהירו של הרב לוי שי' הבר המצו"ב.

83) Several studies have shown the effectiveness of common mouthwashes including Peridex and Listerine in killing Herpes simplex virus in the mouth. [See: Bernstein, D., Schiff, G., et al., "In vitro virucidal effectiveness of a 0.12%- chlorhexidine gluconate mouthrinse," *Journal of Dental Research*, 1990;69:874-876. Meller, T., Silva, A., Ferreira, S., et al., "Efficacy of Listerine antiseptic in reducing viral contamination of saliva," *Journal of Clinical Periodontology*, 2005;32(4):341-346.]

84) [Consent Forms For Metzitzah B'Peh – Empowering Parents Or Interfering In Religious Practice?](#) By: Dr. Daniel Berman and Prof. Brenda Breuer and Prof. Awi Federgruen

[Is Metzitzah bePeh Dangerous?](#) By: Daniel S. Berman, MD, infectious disease specialist at Albert Einstein Hospital and Montefiore Medical Center

[NYC Admits In Federal Appeals Court: "We Regulated Bris Milah Without Any Real Evidence of Harm"](#) By: Debbie Maimon



# Is Metzitzta bePeh Dangerous?

By Daniel S. Berman, M.D.\*

It has been more than seven years since the reports broke out in the media that the *Metzitzta bePeh* (hereinafter, *MbP*) part of the ritual of Jewish circumcision caused Herpes simplex infection in babies. This became a topic of great concern and much discussion in the Jewish community. One baby tragically died of neonatal (within six weeks of birth) Herpes simplex infection following a Bris which included *MbP*. Also, around this time, a controversial article was published in the journal *Pediatrics*,<sup>1</sup> which claimed to prove that *MbP* was a direct cause of Herpes simplex infection in babies. All of this prompted action by the New York City Department of Health and the New York State Department of Health against one particular Mohel, who had been linked to three cases of Herpes simplex infection. Although

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1. Gesundheit, B., Grisaru-Soen, G., et al., "Neonatal genital Herpes simplex virus type 1 infection after Jewish ritual circumcision: Modern medicine and religious tradition," *Pediatrics*. 2004;114(2):259-263.

reliable, these old reports have no relevance to the question of the safety of *MbP* at present.

With regard to syphilis, which is a sexually-transmitted disease, there have been no reports of syphilis being transmitted through *MbP* in many years. Furthermore, it seems absurd to suspect that the Mohelim in the communities that are doing *MbP* today would have syphilis in their mouths. Accordingly, the likelihood of transmission of syphilis through *MbP* today is highly remote.

Concerning the outbreak of “incurable rashes,” there is no indication that this was directly related to *MbP*. Although in his letter Rabbi Horowitz comments that the doctors attributed the fatal infection to *MbP*, we cannot know if that is true. Perhaps it was related to contaminated surgical equipment. Logically speaking, if these reported rashes were brought as a reason to halt the practice of *MbP*, they also could be presented as part of an argument to stop Bris Milah itself from being done. That would be a frightening suggestion. The fact that there were no further problems after this Viennese Mohel stopped *MbP* does not prove anything, unless it could be established that nothing else was changed in the way that this Mohel did Bris Milah. It is possible that in addition to stopping the use of *MbP*, he also changed or cleaned his surgical equipment. These critical details are apparently unknown.

As to tuberculosis, there have been no reports of any association of this disease with *MbP* since 1946. Obviously, before the days of effective treatment for tuberculosis, it was a common illness. Fortunately, its incidence in the Orthodox Jewish community today is extremely low. There is now no reason to be concerned about the possibility of transmission of tuberculosis through *MbP*. In addition, if there were an association between tuberculosis transmission and *MbP*, this would not be a sufficient reason to ban the practice of *MbP* across the board. After all, if a schoolteacher had active tuberculosis, we would certainly not allow him to teach young children. However, we would not say that there should be no more schools for young children. The more logical recommendation would be to not allow the infected teacher to be at work. In the same way, any Mohel with an active infection, with a risk of transmission, should not be performing *MbP*.