

Circumcision ban infringes on rights

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Freedom of religion, enshrined over two centuries ago by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, is now subject to a vote with the certification in San Francisco of the referendum on circumcision for the November ballot. The vote will empower a secular majority to impose its will, and ban one of the oldest religious traditions known to humanity. When religious belief and practice become subject to vote by the majority of a city council, government agency or referendum, it endangers all of our rights and freedoms.

The proposal's backers are trying to deceive the voters by labeling it a "ban on genital mutilation." Honesty would have demanded they called it a ban on circumcision. By using such a toxic term as mutilation, they hope to garner support from an unsuspecting public. As written, the measure would make circumcision on anyone under 18 a misdemeanor and punishable by a \$1,000 fine and up to a year in jail.

The Hebrew word for ritual circumcision, *bris*, literally means "a covenant." It is a covenantal act that Jews have practiced since the time of the Patriarch Abraham more than three-and-a-half millennia ago. It reflects a commitment to monotheism that reaches back to the dawn of observance practiced even under religious oppression. The holiday of Chanukah emerged after the Greeks banned circumcision, which led to a bloody revolt. The Romans banned circumcision after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. Defying death, Jews secretly followed their tradition.

Circumcision is based on a Biblical commandment that required that Jewish males be circumcised eight days after birth. Jews, from the most observant to the most secular, follow this tradition.

Circumcision may provide certain medical benefits. It represents a surgical vaccine against a wide variety of infections, adverse medical conditions and potentially fatal diseases, and also protects their sexual partners. Public health benefits include some protection from urinary tract infections and sexually transmitted HIV. For women, circumcision of the male partner provides some protection from cervical cancer, genital herpes, bacterial and other infections.

The United States was the first country in history to guarantee all faiths religious freedom. Now, two centuries later, this cherished freedom is being put up to a popular vote. The framers of the Constitution were concerned that the tyranny of the majority would infringe on the rights of minorities. It is not just the tradition of circumcision that is being voted on in November in San Francisco, but the right for any person to follow the religious faith they treasure and the right of a parent to educate a child in the values they hold dear.

If the backers succeed in banning ritual circumcision, then the city will be compelled to defend this unconstitutional measure in a long, expensive court battle. Hopefully the voters of San Francisco will stand up for religious freedom, see beyond the phony labeling of the proposal and defeat it at the ballot box.

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