

# Did Hadrian Ban Circumcision & Does It Matter?

## האם גזר אדריינוס קיסר על המילה, והאם זה משנה?

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### 1) Talmud Bavli, *Shabbat* 130a (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE)

תניא, רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: כל מצוה שמסרו ישראל עצמן עליהם למיתה בשעת גזרת המלכות, כגון עבודת כוכבים ומילה - עדיין היא מוחזקת בידם, וכל מצוה שלא מסרו ישראל עצמן עליה למיתה בשעת גזרת המלכות, כגון תפילין - עדיין היא מרופה בידם

It is taught: R. Shimon b. Elazar says: Any commandment for which the Jews offered themselves up to death during the time of a royal decree [banning the fulfillment of said commandment], such as idolatry and circumcision, it is still held tightly. But any commandment for which the Jews did not [do so], such as [laying] phylacteries, it is still grasped weakly.

### 2) The *Historia Augusta* and the Ban on Circumcision

[Ps-]Spartianus, *Historia Augusta*, Hadrian 14.2 (ca. late 4<sup>th</sup> century CE)

At that time the Jews also waged a war because they had been forbidden to practice circumcision (*mutilare genitalia*).

[Ps-]Lampridius, *Historia Augusta*, Elagabalus 28.4 (ca. late 4<sup>th</sup> century CE)

And sometimes at his banquets he served ostriches, saying that the Jews had been commanded to eat them.

### 3) The Position of R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus (*Tanna*, 1<sup>st</sup> generation)

Mishnah, *Shabbat* 19:1 (ca. early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE)

רבי אליעזר אומר: אם לא הביא כלי מערב שבת - מביאו בשבת מגולה. ובסכנה מכסהו על פי עדים

R. Eliezer says: If one did not bring the utensil [i.e. the knife used for circumcision] on the eve of Shabbos, one brings it on Shabbos uncovered. And during a time of danger, one covers it in front of witnesses.

Talmud Bavli, *Shabbat* 130a (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE)

תניא אידך: מביאו מגולה ואין מביאו מכוסה, דברי רבי אליעזר. רבי יהודה אומר משום רבי אליעזר: נוהגין היו בשעת הסכנה שהיו מביאין מכוסה על פי עדים

It is taught in another [*beraita*]: One brings it uncovered, but does not bring it covered. These are the words of R. Eliezer. R. Yehuda [b. Ilai, 4<sup>th</sup> generation] says in the name of R. Eliezer: They were accustomed in a time of danger to bring it covered in front of witnesses.

#### 4) The Practice of Epispasm

Mishnah, <i>Avot</i> 3:11 (ca. early 3 <sup>rd</sup> century CE)		Tosefta, <i>Shabbat</i> 15:9 (ca. mid 3 <sup>rd</sup> century CE)	
רבי אלעזר המדעי אומר המחלל את הקדשים והמבזה את המועדות והמלבין פני חברו ברבים והמפר בריתו של אברהם אבינו עליו השלום והמגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה אף על פי שיש בידו תורה ומעשים טובים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא	R. Eleazar of Modiin says: One who profanes sanctified things, and denigrates the festivals, and publicly embarrasses his fellow, and who nullifies the covenant of Abraham our father, peace be upon him, and who interpret the Torah not in accordance with the Law – although such a person possesses Torah knowledge and good deeds, he does not have a portion in the World to Come.	המשוך צריך שימול ר' יהודה או' משוך לא ימול מפני שהוא מסוכן אמרו לו הרבה מלו בימי בן כחבא והיו לו בנים ולא מתו	One who has undergone <i>epispasmos</i> must [re-]circumcise. R. Yehudah says: one who has undergone <i>epispasmos</i> need not be [re-]circumcised, because it is dangerous. They [the Sages] said to him: many underwent [re-]circumcision in the days of Ben Koziva [i.e. Bar Kokhba] and they had children and did not die.

#### 5) Jewish Concealment of Circumcision

1 Maccabees 1.11-15 (ca. late 2 <sup>nd</sup> century/early 1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE)	Philo, <i>On the Migration of Abraham</i> 92 (20 BCE – 50 CE)	1 Corinthians 7:17-19 (ca. 52-56 CE)
11 At that time [i.e. Antiochus IV's reign] there appeared in Israel a group of renegade Jews who incited the people. "Let us enter into a covenant with the Gentiles round about," they said, "because disaster upon disaster has overtaken us since we segregated ourselves from them." 12 The people thought this a good argument, 13 and some of them in their enthusiasm went to the king and received authority to introduce non-Jewish laws and customs. 14 They build a <i>gymnasium</i> in the gentile style in Jerusalem. 15 <b>They made themselves uncircumcised</b> and repudiated the holy covenant.	It is true that receiving circumcision does indeed portray the excision of pleasure and all passions, and the putting away of the impious conceit, under which the mind supposed that it was capable of begetting by its own power; <b>but let us not on this account repeal the law laid down for circumcising.</b> Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shown us by the inner meaning of things.	17 But as God has distributed to every man, as the Lord has called every one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all churches: 18 Is any man called being circumcised, <b>let him not become uncircumcised</b> ( <i>me epispastho</i> ). Is any called in uncircumcision, let him not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.