

# History of Metzitzah B'Peh Disease Transmission

## A Partial List

**1811.** Dr. Johann Nepomuk Rust. The preeminent physician of his day records an outbreak of syphilis with many fatalities among the newly-circumcised infants in Krakow in his book on cutaneous ulcerations entitled, "*Helkologie oder über Natur, Erkenntniss und Heilung der Geschwüre.*" He attributed the epidemic to the active venereal lesions (syphilis) he personally saw in the oral cavity of Krakow's mohel.

**1837.** Dr. S. Wertheim, the physician in chief of the Jewish Hospital in Vienna, dealt with an epidemic of deaths of newly circumcised babies. Wertheim attributed the deaths to metzitzah b'peh (MBP), because all the dead had incurable rashes on their genitals. (Wertheim asked Vienna's Chief Rabbi Elazar Horowitz for permission to substitute manually applied pressure with cotton gauze for MBP. Horowitz got approval for the substitution from the Chatam Sofer. According to Rabbi Horowitz, once the gauze was used and MBP was stopped, there were no more deaths or incurable genital rashes. Although there was no way to identify the infection at the time, the symptoms indicate that the babies likely died of herpes.

**1873.** The New York City Board of Health investigated four cases of healthy Jewish babies who got genital ulcerations after being ritually circumcised by a mohel who did MBP. Three of the four babies died. Although there was no way to identify the infection at the time, the symptoms indicate that the babies likely died of herpes.

**1879 to 1883.** Five babies who had been circumcised in Baden, Germany contracted syphilis-like symptoms. The transmission was traced by doctors to two mohels who had performed the five rituals using MBP.

**1888.** A mohel in Heidelberg was accused of causing the deaths of a number of babies who died shortly after he did MBP on them at their circumcisions.

**1888.** F. S. Eve's "Communication of Tuberculosis by Ritual Circumcision," is published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* on January 28.

**1888.** Later that year, infants got genital venereal lesions (syphilis) after being circumcised by London's senior mohel, Reverend Saul Levi. Several of the babies died. Community leaders, fearing that the publicity surrounding a mohel giving a venereal disease to babies would irreparably damage the community's reputation, convinced the babies' parents to drop plans to sue Levi. Instead, community leaders paid the parents large amounts of money out of community funds. London rabbis also banned MBP and no further babies got the lesions.

**1899.** Yakov Moshe Aaron Ovitz, who had 40 years experience as a mohel in Vilna, wrote in *HaMelitz*, the leading Hebrew language newspaper in Europe, about information he had received from Vilna doctors about large numbers of cases of cellulitis, syphilis and diphtheria transmitted to the babies by MBP.

**1899.** Dr. Samuel Kohn, who was both a doctor and mohel in Vitebsk Province, wrote a long article documenting the dangers of MBP. It was published in *HaMelitz*, which serialized it over sixteen issues of the newspaper.

**1903.** Kohn publishes "Ot Brit," a scholarly book on Jewish ritual circumcision. It has a 35 page chapter on complications caused by MBP.

**1913.** Dr. L. Emmett Holt, a prominent physician of his era, published an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reviewing 40 cases of MBP-transmitted penile tuberculosis that had been documented in medical literature. (These were not the only such cases; they were the only cases that had been written about in an era when there was often no mandatory reporting.)

**1946.** Dr. Evan L. Lewis publishes a study in the *Journal of Urology* entitled, "Tuberculosis of the Penis: A Report of 5 New Cases, And A Complete Review of the Literature." Lewis found that 72 out of 89 primary cases documented in medical literature came from MBP. "The actual incidence of tuberculosis of the penis following this rite was much higher than a review of the literature would indicate," Lewis noted. And he pointed out that once MBP had been stopped, tuberculosis of the penis became exceedingly rare. "Syphilis and diphtheria have also been contracted through this act. After the turn of the last century *this act was practically eliminated from the ritual so that tuberculosis of the penis is seen only rarely now.*" [Emphasis added]

**2000.** Dr. Philip Lanzkowsky, chief of staff of Schneider Children's Hospital at Long Island Jewish hospital, published an investigation of two MBP-transmitted herpes cases in the *Journal of Pediatric Infectious Diseases*. He and a fellow doctor also contacted New York City health officials and Brooklyn Haredi rabbis to warn them of the danger of MBP-transmitted herpes. But Lanzkowsky and his colleague tried to keep news of the herpes infections quiet. "One of the things we didn't want to happen was adverse publicity in the general media that might affect [ritual circumcision] in general," Lanzkowsky told the *Jewish Week* in 2005 when news of the earlier infections finally became public. "We wanted to deal with it in the local Jewish community."

**2001–2005.** Eleven cases of MBP-transmitted herpes documented in medical literature.

**2003–2005.** Five cases of MBP-transmitted herpes are documented by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. One baby died. One has permanent severe brain damage. Three were hospitalized for extended periods of time, and were still on anti-viral medications in 2006.

**2004.** The medical journal *Pediatrics* publishes a paper on eight cases of MBP-transmitted herpes.

**2006-2011.** Five more cases of MBP-transmitted herpes are recorded in New York City – including one death – making for a total of eleven reported cases in the city since 2000.

**Note:** The *minimum* pre-modern infant mortality rate was 20%–30%. In some years, the rate of infant death was astronomically higher. This made infant death so common that it was rarely studied. Babies were expected to die. But the last decades of the 19th century brought pasteurization of milk, great improvements in the cleanliness of urban water supplies and in waste disposal, and easier access to food, and the infant mortality rate noticeably dropped. When that happened, unusual infant deaths began to be studied. Before germ theory and our understanding of disease transmission took hold, also in the 19th century, disease was thought to come from imbalances in the body's "humors" (Galen), or to generated by bad air called miasma. Before the development of germ theory in the 19th century, the idea that illness could be spread from one individual to another did not exist. (That's one of the reasons Jews were thought to have poisoned wells in the Middle Ages, causing the Black Plague. There was no concept of disease transmission through which to understand the plague, and to end it.)