

# Central Rabbinical Congress of United States and Canada

## Agudath Israel of America

### International Bris Association

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#### **Rabbinical Leaders to Mayor De Blasio: Infant Safety is Our Mutual Concern**

<http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Rabbinical-Leaders-to-Mayor-De-Blasio--Infant-Safety-is-Our-Mutual-Concern.html?soid=1116045723924&aid=FTk9zblqZuI>

NEW YORK –Three prominent rabbinical figures with extensive experience with Jewish circumcision and the ritual known as *metzitza b'peh* (“mbp”), or oral suction, have written New York Mayor Bill de Blasio to stress their communities’ continued readiness to abide by the entire agreement reached with the mayor in 2015 to reduce the risk of – and accurately identify the source of – herpes simplex virus (HSV-1) infection of newborns.

The rabbis, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Cohen, Rabbi Abraham S. Blum and Rabbi Isaac Eichenstein, representing the Vaad L'mishmeres Ha'bris – a broad-based rabbinical group that has been involved in the ongoing dialogue regarding mbp – state at the start that they fully share the goal of doing everything possible to safeguard the health and wellbeing of children, while at the same time respecting the religious freedom of those for whom the millennia-old practice of mbp is an essential component of their sacred religious tradition. The two goals, they insist, are entirely compatible.

The 2015 agreement, they reminded the mayor, established a clear protocol in cases of HSV-1 infection of an infant. HSV-1 is the common “cold sore” virus that causes harmless lesions in adults but can be life-threatening to a newborn – although cases of infant infection from circumcision are extremely rare, and although the prognosis in the rare cases of infection is greatly improved with early diagnosis and treatment. The investigative protocol includes immediate testing of the *mohel*, or ritual circumciser, for presence of HSV-1 antibodies, which would

indicate a previous or current infection with the virus, and then DNA testing to ascertain if the source of the infection was in fact the *mohel*. And if it was, the *mohel* would desist from practicing mbp.

Unfortunately, the rabbis note, when they endeavored to follow up on implementation of the protocols agreement, they were informed that the City Health Department refused to commit to terms of the agreement. Several subsequent attempts were made to revive the agreement, but the Health Department refused to abide by its terms.

The DNA testing, the rabbis explain, is vital, as there have been clear cases where a *mohel* was suspected of being the source of a baby's infection but where such testing showed conclusively that the virus had been transmitted by someone else. Accurately confirming the source of the infection is imperative – whether it be the *mohel*, a parent or another caregiver – in order to prevent subsequent transmission of such infections.

The letter decries a recent Health Department alert implying that six *mohelim* associated with cases of infant herpes infections were the source of the infections, although no DNA testing was done, and none offered by the department.

The rabbis end their letter with an urgent request that the protocol agreed upon two years ago finally be implemented, and that they and their communities look forward to working with City Hall to “bring to fruition our historic agreement that protect[s] both religious freedom and the health of our precious children.”