

NEW YORK: Rabbis: Circumcision Death Investigation Could Force Mohels Underground

Written by Ben Yakas
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This week, the Brooklyn district attorney confirmed that prosecutors are investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of a two-week old infant who died last fall in Brooklyn after he contracted herpes from a religious circumcision at Maimonides Medical Center. Now, rabbis are worried that the investigation may send mohels who perform the metzitzah b'peh ritual into back alley circumcisions: "The worst thing that could happen is if the authorities regulate this practice, then it could go underground," Rabbi David Zwiebel, the executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America, told the Times.

"I think the practice would continue, but there could be significant difficulty in gathering evidence. I would hope that our government officials take steps in conjunction with the community," he said. The cause of death for the boy, who died last September, was listed as "disseminated herpes simplex virus Type 1, complicating ritual circumcision with oral suction."

The case sounds eerily similar to that of Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer, a Rockland County mohel who was found to have given three babies herpes through the ritual. The Times says authorities have not determined the identity of the mohel in the most recent case, but it is not believed that Rabbi Fischer is under investigation for this death.

Rabbi Zwiebel believes roughly two-thirds of newborn boys in the city's Orthodox communities are circumcised through metzitzah b'peh, in which a rabbi or mohel removes blood from the wound with his mouth. He added that Orthodox community leader, who are loathe to work with police on these matters, are aware of the risk of herpes from the practice: "We're not oblivious to what's going on."

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