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Scholars and the Challenge of Modern Medicine:
The Debate on Sucking the Blood During the
Circumcision Rite**

This paper concerns the interaction between Jewish law and modern medicine in the Lithuanian environment at the turn of the 20th century, as it is reflected in the case of sucking the circumcision blood by mouth. Changes in the medical viewpoint about the importance of maintaining hygiene in medical procedures challenged the common custom to suck the blood by mouth. We find four elements that played an important role in our topic: (a) the halakhic basis for sucking after circumcision; (b) the attitude toward modern medicine; (c) the effect of secularization on decision making; and (d) adherence to the procedure of sucking by mouth. The paper describes a variety of opinions among scholars concerning each of the elements, with a strong correlation between them. Concerning the halakhic basis, at one end of the spectrum were those who considered sucking an inseparable part of the mitzvah of circumcision. At the opposite end were scholars who based sucking on pure medical reasons, and between the two extremes can be found various approaches.

In particular, we group the opinions of the scholars into three main approaches to modern medicine: complete acceptance, complete rejection, and limited acceptance with various nuances. We also find three main approaches to the procedure of sucking: strict adherence to sucking by mouth, indifference about the procedure, and limited adherence with various nuances.