

BIRTH

VOCABULARY

BERIT MILAH

BERIT HABAT (BERIT B'NOT YISRAEL)

MOHEL

KVATTER, KVATTERIN

SANDAK

SEUDAT MITZVAH

MI SHEBERACH

PIDYON HABEN

KIDDUSH PE'TER RECHEM

from *Living Judaism*, Rabbi Wayne Dosick,
Harper San Francisco, 1995

JEWISH LIFE CYCLE

BIRTH

1. הַבְּרִית בְּיָמֵינוּ BRIT MILAH

(literally, "covenant of circumcision") popularly known as *brit* or *bris*,
and also as *milah*, is ritual circumcision.

When Abraham declared his belief in the One Lord God, he was commanded by God to circumcise himself (remove the foreskin of his penis) as a physical sign of the spiritual covenant (Genesis 17:10 ff). In affirmation of the covenant between God and Abraham—and thus between God and the Jewish People in every succeeding generation—every Jewish male is circumcised on the eighth day of his life.

Wherever Jews have been—during times of peace and prosperity, or during times of torment and persecution, when circumcision had to be done in secret or in hiding—this ritual ceremony has been performed by the Jewish People, virtually unchanged, for almost 4,000 years.

Today, when so many male children, Jewish or not, are medically circumcised—often in the hospital, a day or two after birth—circumcision is not considered very unusual. But throughout the last four millennia, when circumcision was almost uniquely a Jewish ritual, a circumcised male was distinct and distinguished from the other men around him. Circumcision was a clear, visible, permanent, identifying mark; a statement literally "cut into the flesh" that this person is a member of the Jewish People, in covenant with God.

The Jews did not invent circumcision. It was a ritual practiced by many of the ancient Semitic nations.

Originally, a number of pagan tribes sacrificed firstborn males in the hope that if the firstborn son were offered as a sacrifice to the gods, then the gods would be satisfied and would permit all subsequently born sons to live full lives.

Eventually, human sacrifice was stopped; and instead of offering up a whole body to the gods, a small body part was offered—the tip of the finger or the foreskin of the penis.

Other Semitic tribes used circumcision as a rite of sexual initiation when a boy reached puberty.

Judaism took this popular folk ritual and internalized it, Judaized it, sanctified it, and gave it new meaning and new purpose. Circumcision became and endures as the sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish People.

The circumcision takes place on the eighth day of a boy's life, counting the day of birth as day one. Thus, for example, if a child is born on a Tuesday before sundown, the *brit milah* takes place on the following Tuesday. If, however, the birth takes place on Tuesday evening after sundown—which is the next Jewish day—then the *brit milah* takes place on the following Wednesday.

The *brit milah* is so important, so central to Jewish life, that it takes precedence over everything else—including Shabbat and even Yom Kippur. If the eighth day of a child's life falls on Shabbat or Yom Kippur, that is when the *brit milah* takes place.

However, medical consideration always supersedes religious law. If the health or safety of the baby would be in any way jeopardized by having the circumcision on the eighth day, the *brit milah* is postponed until a physician certifies that the baby is healthy enough for the procedure.

The Torah gives no reason for the choice of the eighth day of a child's life for the *brit milah*. Some scholars speculate that Judaism simply used the same day for the circumcision as did the pagan tribes. According to this theory, the pagans chose the eighth day of a child's life for the sacrificial offering to appease the gods because, they reasoned, if the gods permitted the child to live for a full week, it was most likely that the child would be protected from harm or death. The circumcision-offering on the eighth day—after one full week of life had passed—was the final act of supplication and appeasement in order to assure a child's life and health.

Since there is no real evidence to support this theory, it remains only speculation, and the eighth day seems to be an arbitrary choice for the *brit milah*.

Yet modern medical science has taught that there is a sound medical reason for the choice of the eighth day: In a newborn, there is a factor in the blood that gives the blood the ability to coagulate and clot, and which does not mature until approximately the eighth day of life. Babies who are cut or who bleed before the eighth day might very well bleed to death. Only after the eighth day of life has this factor in the blood developed enough so that proper clotting takes place if bleeding occurs. Thus

the ancients must have learned—through painful trial and error—exactly when the circumcision procedure could take place without jeopardizing the life of the baby.

Modern medicine has also learned that vitamin K is responsible for the clotting factor. Thus, newborns who must undergo any kind of surgical procedure (including non-Jewish babies who are circumcised before the eighth day) are given an injection of vitamin K, which results in the blood being able to clot.

The *brit milah* most often takes place in the morning, observing the custom to "arise (get up early) to do (eagerly perform) a *mitzvah*."

The *mitzvah* of circumcising his son is to be performed by the father. However, most fathers do not have the expert medical knowledge or skill necessary to be a competent circumciser.

So certain men (and in modern times, in liberal Judaism, some women as well) train to become a highly skilled expert in the art of ritual circumcision. This expert is called a *ḥayy mohel*, a ritual circumciser. The father appoints the *mohel* as his agent, to circumcise his son and to recite the proper prayers and blessings.

Today, when a *mohel* is not available, liberal Judaism permits a Jewish physician—who is familiar with the ritual as well as the medical aspects of circumcision, and is an observant Jew—to perform the *brit milah*.

Assisting the *mohel* at the *brit milah* is the *ḥayy sandak*, who holds the baby during the circumcision. The special honor of being the *sandak* is usually given to the baby's grandfather, uncle, or a close friend of the family.

Although it is not a Jewish requirement to have godparents for the baby, many families choose to honor a close relative or friend with the designation. The godfather and godmother—called *kvater* and *kvaterin* (from the German/Yiddish)—participate in the *brit milah* by carrying the child into the room where the ceremony will take place.

At the *brit milah* ceremony, it is custom to set aside a special chair, which remains empty. This chair is known as *כִּסֵּא שֶׁל עִלְיָהוּ* *keesay shel Eliyahu*, the Chair of Elijah. By setting aside this special chair, the prophet Elijah is, symbolically, invited to the *brit milah*—just as he is to the Passover *seder*.

Two explanations are given for this quaint custom. Some say that Elijah is invited to the *brit milah* since he was a fiery prophet—always chastising the people for forsaking God's *mitzvot*. Here he is called to witness and be heartened that God's people are continuing to fulfill God's commands.

Others contend that the birth of this baby—representing hope and faith in the future—is evidence that the world is moving closer and closer toward perfection, toward messianic times. Since Elijah will be the one to announce the coming of the messiah, he is invited to the *brit milah* to witness the ongoing progress toward the transformation and perfection of the world.

Prayers and blessings are recited as part of the circumcision ceremony, indicating that this circumcision is taking place not merely as a surgical procedure, but for the purpose of entrance into the covenant with God.

Immediately following the procedure, announcement is made—with appropriate prayers and blessings—of the child's Hebrew name, the identity by which he will be known among the Jewish People. According to the Torah, originally, Abraham was called אַבְרָם Avram, and his wife, Sarah, was called שָׂרָי Sarai. With the establishment of the covenant and the *brit milah*, they were given their new names—אַבְרָהָם Avraham and שָׂרָה Sarah—new identities as partners in the covenant (Genesis 17:1-16). By giving children their Hebrew names as part of the *brit milah* ritual, modern Jews continue this custom of affirming Jewish identity as covenant partners.

The *brit milah* is often followed by a festive meal. Family and friends congratulate the newborn baby and his parents, and rejoice in the continuation of the age-old covenant, originally made between God and Abraham and renewed in each Jewish generation.

Under certain circumstances, ritual circumcisions do not take place in the usual way.

These instances might include: (1) Babies who are born without a foreskin (highly unusual but nevertheless possible); (2) babies who were medically circumcised before the eighth day, or without the proper prayers and blessings; and (3) older children and adult men who convert to Judaism and must be circumcised as part of the conversion ritual, but who were medically circumcised as babies. In these circumstances, the circumcision has taken place (either naturally or medically) but the procedure was not done for the purpose of entering into the covenant.

Jewish law provides a way to turn a medical circumcision into a proper ritual circumcision called *דַּת הַמַּעַרְת* *ha'atfat dam*, (literally, "drawing of a drop of blood"). A drop of blood is drawn from the skin behind the head of the penis, and the proper blessings are recited.

In this way, the circumcision is no longer considered simply medical, but meets the ritual requirements of a proper *brit milah*, done for the purpose of entering into the covenant.

2. BABY NAMING CEREMONY

Boys are given their Hebrew names at the time of the *brit milah*.

Since there is no circumcision ceremony for girls, traditionally, girls are given their Hebrew names at a synagogue service on a day when the Torah is read (Monday, Thursday, or Shabbat morning, Shabbat afternoon, or a festival morning). The

father is called to the Torah to recite the blessings, and the rabbi recites special prayers, naming the newborn baby girl. In modern times, in liberal Judaism, the mother comes with the father to the Torah and often the baby is brought, so that she can be blessed as part of the naming ceremony.

As an alternative, many liberal Jews are now having "at-home" naming ceremonies for girls. Reasoning that there should be no inequality in the celebrations for newborn baby boys and newborn baby girls, many parents are opting to have large celebratory ceremonies in their homes for the naming of their daughters, just as they have large celebratory ceremonies for the naming of their sons at the times of the *brit milah*.

A number of very beautiful ritual ceremonies for the naming of a baby girl have been written in recent years. In this way, girls and boys are welcomed into the covenant with the same sense of privilege, responsibility, and joy.

3. NAMING A JEWISH CHILD

At the *brit milah* or baby naming ceremony, a Jewish child is given a name, known as a Jewish or a Hebrew name—the identity by which he or she will be known in the Jewish community.

At one time, the Hebrew name was the only name a Jewish person ever had. Today, however, it is customary for a Jewish person to have a secular name as well.

For the past several hundred years, a secular name usually includes a first name, often a second or "middle" name, and a "family" or last name.

A Hebrew name includes a first name, sometimes a second or "middle" name, and the designation "son of" or "daughter of" the father (and in modern times, liberal Judaism, the mother as well). Thus a typical Hebrew name for a boy would be *Yitzhak* (Isaac) *ben* (son of) *Avraham* (Abraham) (and, in modern times, in liberal Judaism, *Sarah* [and Sarah]). For a girl, a typical Hebrew name would be *Rivkah* (Rebecca) *bat* (daughter of) *Avraham* (Abraham) (in modern times, in liberal Judaism, *Sarah* [and Sarah]).

Some children are given Hebrew names (most often taken from the Bible) that also serve as their secular names, such as *Sarah* or *David*. In Israel, a Jewish child is given one name that serves both in the religious and the secular communities, although, in these modern times, an Israeli name also includes a last or "family" name.

The Hebrew name is used during religious ceremonies and rituals—at the time of birth and naming, on being called to the Torah for an *aliyah*, on the marriage document, and at the time of death as part of a special memorial prayer. Then the Hebrew name is engraved on the gravestone, marking a person's final resting place.

There is no Jewish law about choosing a name for a child, but there are differing customs among Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews.

Sephardic Jews most often name children after a living relative. So, if a child's grandfather, *Ya'akov*, is still alive when he is born, the child will be named *Ya'akov*. Following the Hebrew name formula, he will be called *Ya'akov ben* (son of) *Shlomo* (Solomon), his own father. *Ya'akov's* fondest hope is that when he grows up, his own father, *Shlomo*, will still be alive when his grandson, *Ya'akov's* own son, is born. Then *Ya'akov* will name his son *Shlomo* (honoring his father, the baby's grandfather) *ben Ya'akov* (his own name as the baby's father).

Ashkenazic Jews most often name children after a deceased relative. If the child's grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other relative, or a close friend, dies before the child is born, the memory of that relative is honored by giving the newborn child that relative's Hebrew name. If Grandpa's name was *Shmuel* (Samuel), the child is given the name *Shmuel*.

Normally, that would be sufficient to honor Grandpa's memory; but many parents want to also give their children a secular name that is somewhat similar to the Hebrew name. The perfect solution, in this case, would be to give the child the secular name *Samuel*, a direct translation of the Hebrew name *Shmuel*.

But some parents may think that *Samuel* is an "old-fashioned" name, and so they try to find secular a name that "sounds like" or "begins with the same first letter as" the Hebrew name. Thus a generation ago, a child given the Hebrew name *Shmuel* might be given the secular name *Stanley*, and in this generation he might be named *Shawn*.

Some may wonder, "What kind of Jewish name is *Shawn*?"—or *Amber*, or *Kimberly*, or *Christopher*, or the many other very secular, "non-Jewish-sounding" names that Jewish children have been given in recent years. Yet when the giving of names to Jewish children is by custom, not by law, it is understandable that some parents want to reflect the society in which they live. They choose secular names that they feel will help their children fit comfortably into their everyday world.

This is not a new phenomenon in Jewish life. One of the sages quoted in *Mishnaic tractate Pirkae Avot* is *Antigonos of Socho*, who lived in the first half of the third century before the common era. His name clearly reflects the influence of Hellenism and Greek culture on his parents, who named him.

It is never an easy task to choose a name for a newborn child, for there are so many (sometimes conflicting) needs to be met—Jewish custom, the desires of the parents, the sensibilities of two families, and the expectations of many assorted relatives.

Yet the giving of a Hebrew name is cause for great joy and happiness, because it means that another precious child has been born into the Jewish community and has entered into the sacred covenant with God.

4. כִּדְיוֹן הַבֵּן PIDYON HABEN

is the redemption of the (firstborn) son.

The release of the Hebrew slaves—the Children of Israel—from Egyptian bondage came, finally, as the result of the tenth plague—the death of all the firstborn Egyptian males. Though that plague was necessary to secure the freedom of the Hebrew slaves, there is no rejoicing in the knowledge that others suffered and died.

As eternal remembrance and atonement for the death of the firstborn Egyptian males, God decreed that all firstborn Jewish males, in every generation, would be designated for Divine service, for working in and for the sanctuary and in the religious life of the Jewish People (Exodus 13:15).

According to the story, when Moses was atop Mt. Sinai receiving God's law, the people—feeling abandoned and alone—lost faith in their leader and in their God. They prevailed on Aaron, the High Priest, to build an idol, a golden calf, which they could see and worship (Exodus 32).

God saw that all the people—including the firstborn of all the tribes—participated in the worship of the golden calf, and He decided that He could not have as His servants those who lost faith so quickly. God also saw that only the members of the tribe of Levi refrained from worshipping the golden calf.

So God decided to make a trade (Numbers 3:11 ff): God told Moses that it would be the Levites, instead of the firstborn of all the tribes, who would be sanctified to Divine service.

God told Moses to count up the number of firstborn and the number of Levites. According to the count, there were 22,273 firstborn, but only 22,000 Levites (Numbers 3:44 and 39). Thus there were not enough Levites for an even trade, so the extra 273 firstborn had to be somehow redeemed from the obligation to Divine service, since they were "left over" from the trade.

God commanded the firstborn to make monetary compensation to the Levites to balance the trade, using money to make up for the fewer number of people. The money would serve to equalize the trade, and all the firstborn would be released from their obligation to Divine service. The price was set at five *shekalim* (the plural of *shekel*, the monetary unit of the time) for each of the 273 extra firstborn (Numbers 3:47). The money was given to Aaron, the High Priest, the head of the tribe of Levi.

Though the reason, setting, and obligation of the firstborn or the Levites to a life of Divine service has long since passed into history, the ceremony of redeeming the firstborn from Divine service—called *pidyon haben*—is still practiced by traditional Jews today.

On the thirtieth day of his life, or any time thereafter, parents bring their firstborn son to a Kohen or Levi (the modern descendants of the ancient tribe of Levi) to redeem him. The reason that the thirtieth day of life or later was designated is that the rabbis decided that after thirty days, the infant mortality rate declined enough so that the child had a good chance of surviving.

The Kohen or Levi asks the parents if they wish to give over their son to Divine service, or if they wish to redeem him. To redeem him, the parents give the Kohen or Levi five *shekalim*, the redemption price set in the Torah. In the United States, parents used to use five silver dollars. But since real silver dollars have become so rare, and since the monetary unit of the modern State of Israel is now the *shekel*, many parents now obtain five Israeli *shekalim* for the *pidyon haben* ceremony. If *shekalim* or silver dollars are not available, other coins are used.

With the acceptance of the coins by the Kohen or Levi (which he may keep, give back to the parents or child, or give to *tzedakah*), and with appropriate prayers and blessings, the redemption ceremony is complete.

In actual practice, very few parents and children participate in the *pidyon haben* ceremony because the requirements for those who must be redeemed are very narrow and limited. The ceremony takes place only for a child whose mother or father is neither a Kohen or a Levi. The child must be male, and must be "the first issue of the womb" (Numbers 3:12), meaning that the ceremony does not take place if a girl is the firstborn and a boy is born later. It also does not take place if the mother had a miscarriage or an abortion before the first birth, or if the child is born by Caesarean section.

Yet for those who are obligated to be redeemed, the ceremony is considered important enough that if parents forget to redeem their son at the proper age, they are to do so as soon as they become aware that the child is not yet redeemed. And if parents never redeem their son, he is obligated to redeem himself, as soon as he learns that he was not redeemed as an infant.

While many consider this *pidyon haben* ceremony to be outmoded—especially since children are no longer mandated to Divine service—this ceremony serves to link modern Jews to the beginnings of the Jewish People, when the Children of Israel came out of Egypt. It also reminds us of our continual obligation to serve God with a full heart. It is a ceremony of history and of humility.

The Meaning of Thirteen

Rabbi Edward Feinstein

Thirteen is recognized as the beginning of a new phase of moral and spiritual life. According to *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, thirteen was the age when Abraham smashed his father's idols. It was at that age when Jacob and Esau separated — Jacob to a life of Torah and Esau to the practice of idolatry. Thirteen is the age Levi was when he and his brother Simeon attacked the people of Shekhem to avenge their sister. And thirteen was the age at which Bezalel gained the artistic skill to build the *Mishkan*, the tabernacle. Each of these images is remarkably suggestive. Together, they describe a vivid picture of adolescence:

1. Like Abraham's experience, adolescence is a time of rebellion. To find his own truth, the young person must smash the idols of conventional wisdom and accepted custom. The youngster sees himself or herself as a pioneer, the first to set foot on new moral territory. He or she seeks ideals, a sense of mission, a clear voice of conscience to follow. Teens have little tolerance for the false, the compromised, the superficial.

2. Like Jacob's life, adolescence is a time of spiritual search and a quest for identity. Somewhere out there is a truth waiting for him or her. God is waiting at the end of the wilderness. But the quest demands we leave home and endure a journey fraught with peril and uncertainty.

3. Like Levi, adolescence is a time for moral absolutes. There is good, there is evil, and there is no ground between. Evil must be encountered and destroyed. Compromise, accommodation, gradualism are not acceptable. Judgmental, intolerant, demanding, teens can also be deeply loyal, passionately dedicated, and aggressive in their pursuit of a better world.

4. Like Bezalel, adolescence is a time when every creative impulse flowers. Practicality and realism will come later in life. For now, no dream is beyond realization, no plan is out of reach. In adolescence, each of us dreams of building a dwelling place for God in the world in our own way.

For the complete article see intro.aju.edu/readings

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Tallit & Tefilin

Aliyah

D'var Torah

Grow: 10 Ways to Share Judaism with Your Kids

- Insist on family Shabbat dinner**
One of our favorite Bubbes (Jewish grandmothers), Wendy Light, remembers: "Our children weren't allowed out on Friday nights BUT they could invite any of their friends to join us for Shabbat dinner, where we always served two desserts!"
- Affix mezuzot to kid's bedrooms**
What do the Lakers, Barbie, and Batman have in common? They can all be found on *mezuzot* specially made for kid's bedrooms. Allow your child to pick out a *mezuzah* that suits them and put it up together.
- Grow your collection of Jewish children's books — for FREE!**
Sign up for the PJ Library (pjlibrary.org) to receive a hand-picked Jewish children's book each month, absolutely free. You'll also learn a lot and build wonderful memories by reading with your kids.
- Make a "Sha-box" for little kids**
Work with small children to fill and decorate a shoebox with their Shabbat kit (kid-sized yamulke, Kiddush cup, candlesticks, challah cover, etc). Bring it out each week as you get ready together to welcome Shabbat.
- Cook Jewish foods together**
Purchase a Jewish cookbook, and spend time in the kitchen together baking challah, frying latkes, shaping hamentaschen, or preparing a special Shabbat dinner.
- Prominently place, and fill, tzedakah boxes**
Place a tzedakah box in a visible location, and together with your children put your spare change in it whenever you can. Once it is full, decide together on a worthy cause, and start the process over again.
- Decorate your home for Jewish holidays**
Festoon your house with your children's artwork, festive centerpieces, ritual items, picture books, and cute holiday decorations. With a Jewish holiday practically every month there is always a reason to decorate.
- Get way into the Jewish holidays**
Bake a "happy birthday world" cake for Rosh Hashanah, build a sukkah and sleep out in it, fry latkes together for Hanukkah, take a hike on Tu B'Shvat, take a family costume photo every year on Purim, throw amazing Passover seders, stay up late eating ice cream and reading Jewish books on Shavuot. Christmas comes but once a year ... but there is almost always a Jewish holiday to celebrate!
- Take Shabbat on the road**
When you travel together, pack candlesticks, grape juice, and a challah. Make Shabbat memories together and teach your kids that Judaism will be with them wherever they are.
- Send your kids to Jewish camp**
There is no more powerful place for building Jewish identity than summer camp — where basketball games, moonlit hikes, and first kisses are all Jewish experiences.