

A SIDDUR FOR BRIT MILAH

Commentaries and prayers governing the
circumcision and naming of Jewish boys



The circumcision is a physical sign confirming
the child's covenant with God.

The Hebrew name is a spiritual sign binding
his life to the Jewish people.

Ronald Buckman, *Mohel*
Trent Rosenbloom, *Mohel*
Rabbi Ronald S. Roth
Cantor Stanley B. Weinberger

Al Ha-mi-la

עַל הַמִּילָה

BRIT MILAH KODESH

The holy covenant of circumcision

God further said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant that is between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days....And if any male ... fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant." *Genesis 17:9-14.*

The Hebrew word for the divine covenant is '*brit*' (or '*bris*'). A covenant requires the active participation from both members. Each makes a pledge; each accepts an obligation. Through their mutual aspirations a binding relationship is formed.

The *Torah* specifies three lasting covenants between God and man. The first is the covenant of the rainbow, which signifies God's promise never again to destroy life upon the earth:

"When I bring clouds over the earth, and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." *Genesis 9:14-15.*

The second covenant is *Shabbat*, which serves as a sign of the creation and of man's potential for holiness. The covenant of Shabbat is an act of consecration of granting man a measure of the Divine of allowing man to acquire holiness by his active participation in that which is holy.

"You must keep My *Shabbat*, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that I the Lord have consecrated you.... The Israelite people shall keep the *Shabbat*, observing the *Shabbat* throughout the ages as a covenant for all time." *Exodus 31:13-16.*

This acquisition of holiness lies at the heart of the Jewish practice of *mitzvot*: by following God's commandments, we become sanctified holy thus every blessing in Hebrew contains the words '*ki-d'-sha-nu b'-mits-vo-tav*', which means 'sanctifies us by the practice of His *mitzvot*'. In a sense, one becomes holy by acting holy. Viewed in this light, the *mitzvot* are not burdens, nor arbitrary rules which confine behavior; rather, they are opportunities given to us by the Lord to enable us to share in His divinity.

It is fitting that the supreme mitzvah is also the third of God's covenants: the *mitzvah* of the *brit milah*, the covenant of circumcision. Unlike the rainbow and *Shabbat*, the sign of this covenant is marked in our very flesh. It is an inescapable reminder of the Jewish people's unique relationship with the Lord, for by means of this covenant we enjoy a partnership with the divine. Circumcision serves as a physical sign of our devotion to the Lord.

To Jews and even non-Jews the *brit* has served as a powerful symbol of all that is Jewish. *Brit milah* has been practiced in an unbroken fashion by Jews for over 4000 years. Circumcision stands as a testimony to the longevity and invincibility of the Jewish people. It is for this reason that circumcision is usually among the first practices banned by those who have oppressed us. Our history is full of tales of heroism and martyrdom, in which simple Jews have placed their own lives, and those of their children, in great jeopardy in order to fulfill their part in the covenant with God.

There is a story told by a man who survived the death camps of the Nazi holocaust. He tells of a woman who approached him one day as he was on a work detail outside of the camp. She demanded a knife. Before he could respond a guard approached, yelling out "Was machst du hier? (what are you doing here?)". She saw an army field knife protruding from the guard's pocket, and boldly demanded that he give it to her. Taken aback by her complete disregard for his authority, he gave her the knife. She walked over to a previously unnoticed bundle lying some twenty feet away and quickly unwrapping a small child, performed a crude circumcision. She returned to the guard, handing him both the knife and her child, saying quietly "Now we can both die as Jews." Despite adversity, the practice of *brit milah* has remained unbroken throughout the generations.

Circumcision is central to Judaism, preeminent among mitzvot. *Brit milah* takes priority over *Shabbat*, Jewish Holidays (including *Yom Kippur*), funerals and weddings. It is often the only *mitzvah* practiced by non-observant Jews. The observant, rushing to perform a *mitzvah* at the earliest possible moment, practice *brit milah* as a part of their morning prayers. Whenever possible, this supreme *mitzvah* is an occasion for celebrating the joy and sanctification of life with friends and family.

Brit milah is an act of completing, in partnership with God, the act of creation which is repeated at the time of every birth. It is a mark upon the organ of reproduction, that the seeds of the next generation are intimately related to the covenant of all those generations which have gone before.

IT IS A PERMANENT SIGN MARKED UPON OUR FLESH OF GOD'S LASTING COVENANT WITH US. BUT IT IS UP TO US TO DAILY REAFFIRM OUR COVENANT WITH GOD THROUGH ACTS OF MITZVOT, AND STUDY, AND PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE RITUALS CONCERNING BRIT MILAH

The *brit milah* is performed by the *mohel* (Pronounced 'mo-hel' in Hebrew, 'moyl' in Yiddish). The *mohel* has received intensive instruction in the *halakah* (laws), *minhagim* (customs), *brit* (entry of a child into the covenant), and *milah* (surgical technique of circumcision). Any observant Jew who has mastered these skills may become a *mohel*; one need not be a physician, nor a Rabbi.

At the start of the *brit milah* ceremony the baby will be brought into the room by the *kvatterin* (usually mistranslated as 'Godparents'). The guests greet the baby in Hebrew with the words '*Bah-rooch hah-bah* (Blessed be he who enters)'. The baby is held by one of the *kvatterin* during the introductory prayers.

The *kvatterin* hold a position of honor and need not and usually are not the legal godparents of the child. In order to increase the number of people honored during the *brit*, it has become common for pairs of close friends or relatives (such as maternal and paternal Grandparents) to serve as *kvatterin*.

The baby is now handed to one of the most honored people in the room: the *sandek*. The *sandek* has the privilege and the responsibility of assisting the *mohel* during the circumcision. The *sandek* should be an observant Jew who can testify that the *brit* was performed in accordance with Jewish law. The high esteem that is placed on the *sandek* is manifested by a special blessing and a position of honor standing next to the chair of Elijah.

It is the religious obligation of the father to perform the circumcision. The *mohel*, due to his specialized surgical skills, acts on behalf of the father in actually performing the surgery. Medical knowledge is required to place the circumcision clamp. The placing of the clamp does not remove the foreskin; this must be performed with a knife. Excising the foreskin constitutes the actual *mitzvah* of the *milah* and requires no special training. A father with exceptional fortitude and religious fervor performs a most wonderful *mitzvah* if he uses the knife and removes the foreskin himself.

After the circumcision is completed and the baby has been dressed, a brief naming ceremony will be performed. During this ceremony several prayers of thanksgiving are recited. Wine symbolizes the blood of the covenant (in other words, the physical act of circumcision), the forces of creation, and the sweetness of life. In receiving a Hebrew name the child is welcomed into the community of the Jewish people.

The *brit* is concluded with the *bir-chot koh-hah-nim* (the priestly blessings of the *Kohanim*), using the words which Aaron blessed the children of Israel after they received the revelation at Mount Sinai.
(Numbers 6:24-26).

Unfortunately, Grace is often not said after the *brit* meal, which is understandable given the high emotions and general confusion which seems to accompany any important life cycle event. I have taken the liberty of inserting several of the more inspiring blessings from the Grace into the body of the *brit milah* ceremony.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN JUDAISM

Jewish law absolutely forbids any mutilation of the human body. The foreskin is not considered to be a part of the completed male body; it is an extra covering provided by God in order that man may, by its removal, participate in the act of creation. Women lack this extra skin and are treated by Jewish law as if born in a complete and perfect physical state. The excision of any skin from a baby girl is judged to be mutilation and is abhorrent to Judaism. Under Jewish law women are considered to be born circumcised.

Upon casual reading this appears to be a rather arbitrary distinction in which religious meaning is conferred upon anatomical necessity. A closer reading of Jewish law should dispel this mistaken belief.

Women determine the eligibility of the child to enter the *brit* (Covenant of Abraham). The child is automatically born a Jew only if the mother is Jewish. Circumcision serves as an external sign of the Covenant upon the flesh of Jewish males; the womb is an internal sign within the flesh of Jewish women. Thus, Jewish women do not require an additional mark upon their skin.

The seed of every generation passes through one sign of the Covenant, coming to reside and grow within another.

In modern Jewish practice baby girls receive their Hebrew names during a special ceremony called the *Simchat bat*. With their Hebrew names they assume their places as valid and equal members of the Jewish community.

INFORMATION FOR THE FAMILY REGARDING THE BRIT

Mazel tov! It is my sincere desire that you and your family are able to focus on the *simchah* (joy) of this greatest of mitzvot. A few simple preparations on your part will minimize your anxiety and ensure the least discomfort to your child.

A basic understanding of the medical aspects of the circumcision will hopefully allay your fears regarding the comfort of your son. Children younger than three months old lack the cognitive processes required to feel emotions. They cannot form memories at this young age, and are therefore unable to experience the adult emotions of "anxiety" and "fear". To your son,

the circumcision will be a "non-event" a brief moment of discomfort without any lasting imprint on your child's future development or behavior. Similarly, infants are incapable of being embarrassed by the fact that others will observe an act which to adults is very personal and private.

Infants do experience comfort and discomfort. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that anesthesia be used during all circumcisions to reduce discomfort. For these reasons I will make every effort to provide an environment which is as comfortable as possible and recommend acetaminophen and an anesthetic block. Your child may cry simply from being undressed and exposed to the coolness of room air. We will also ease his discomfort by dipping 'sugar gauze' into wine and letting him 'drink' as much of this wine as he desires (this amounts to only a few drops; your son will not get drunk!).

Lastly, the skin on the end of his penis will be red for several days after the circumcision. Small amounts of blood may ooze from the site during this time. These changes are a natural part of the healing process and are not causes for alarm. Covering the penis with a small gauze pad which has been coated liberally on one side by petroleum jelly (avoid antibiotic creams as these may result in allergic reactions) each time you change his diaper will speed up the healing process. Do not be afraid to touch his penis after the circumcision! Regular cleaning and dressing the area will help prevent infection; pushing back any residual foreskin tissue will improve the cosmetic effect. Complete healing takes several weeks.

What you need for your *brit milah* ceremony:

- Vaseline
- 3x3 or 4x4 gauzes
- Kiddish cup
- Tallit for the Sandek
- Tallit for the Father
- Special Kippah for the baby is optional
- Kippahs for your guests
- Pillow and pillowcase
- Sweet Kosher wine
- Extra baby blankets and diapers
- Brown or cubed sugar to dip in the wine
- Two chairs, one for the *Sandek* and one for Elijah
- A *minyan* (ten Jewish people) is not necessary, but is preferred
- Candlesticks and candles, preferably not Shabbat candles - one for each member of your family are optional

Special Assignments:

- Sandek* – This is the person who holds the baby in their lap during the ceremony. This is the most honored role during the *brit milah* ceremony. Typically a grandparent fills this role. The *sandek* should be an observant Jew.
- Kvatter/Kvatterin* – These are the godparents who bring the baby in to the room where the *brit milah* ceremony is to be held. These can be friends or family and are customarily a married couple.
- Pacifier – This is the person specifically assigned to keep the child content during the *brit milah* ceremony. The Pacifier will stand behind the *sandek* to give the child wine as needed.
- Father – The father is commanded to perform the circumcision. The *mohel* is a trained stand-in for the father for this task. Once the *mohel* applies the ceremonial clamp, the father may safely perform the *mitzvah* of circumcision, if he chooses. Otherwise, the father will assign *this responsibility to the mohel*.
- Kisei Shel Eliyahu* – A special chair which can be decorated or covered with a *tallit* and a special pillow will serve as the "throne of Elijah." This is placed right next to the *sandek's* seat.

Additional Notes:

- Please inform me as soon as possible upon the baby's birth and whether the pediatrician has diagnosed any illnesses. Illness may lead to postponement of the *brit milah* ceremony.
- The *brit milah* ceremony is performed on the eighth day even if that day is *Shabbat* or a Jewish holiday. We count the day of birth as day one. A child born on Monday, for example will have his *brit milah* the following Monday. However, days are counted by the Hebrew calendar and a new day begins at sunset. A child is born on Monday after sunset will have his *brit milah* the following week on Tuesday. The *brit milah* may be postponed for reasons of the baby's health.
- Under the following circumstances we delay the *brit milah* ceremony for one day: if the child is born by a C-section and the eighth day is *Shabbat* or a Jewish holiday.
- The *brit milah* ceremony must occur during the daylight hours.
- I request that the baby's parents read and sign the release of liability and insurance forms and turn them in prior to the ceremony.
- I do not charge for my ceremonial services. If you are pleased with the *brit milah*, you may consider making an appropriate contribution to the Education Fund at Congregation B'nai Israel, or the Synagogue or Jewish charity of your choice. The fees for *brit milah* around the country are commonly \$500 - \$1000.

Reimbursement for extensive travel time is expected and appreciated.

- It is a tradition to dress the child in a new outfit.
- A head covering or *kippah* is not required, but would serve as a beautiful reminder of this day.
- It is customary to provide a feast in honor of the child and his parents called the *seudat mitzvah*. Due to the sacred nature of this ceremony and its feast, only kosher foods should be served. A meal consisting of milk products avoids the need for a kosher catering service. Please consult with your Rabbi for help in arranging for this feast.
- Formal grace, before and after the feast, should be recited.
- It is acceptable, but not required, that your Rabbi attend the *brit* and co-officiate with the *mohel*. It is fine for the Rabbi to preside over the naming of the baby if you would like.
- It is my personal opinion that photography and video tape recording detract from the religious beauty of the *brit*; however, Jewish law does not strictly forbid these activities. Jewish custom does forbid any photographic record being made of the actual act of cutting the foreskin and will not be allowed.

The day of the *brit milah* ceremony:

- Please feed the baby immediately before the ceremony.
- You may give infants acetaminophen drops, 0.8cc, 20 to 30 minutes before the ceremony, or according to your pediatrician's instructions.
- I urge you to call me, or your pediatrician, immediately if you have any questions.

Ronald Buckman, *Mohel*
RonBuckman@CTMohel.com
www.CTMohel.com
 860-646-0649 (work or pager)
 860-871-1818 (Cong. B'nai Israel)