



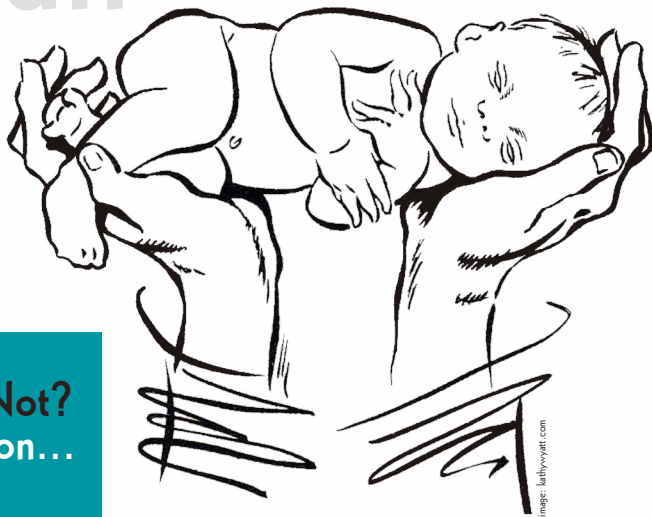
To
Circumcise^{or} Not

that is the question

18 DOORS

Unlocking Jewish

brit milah



To Circumcise or Not? That is the Question...

“Brit Milah is Judaism’s oldest continuous ritual, practiced by Jews throughout the ages and across cultures. Throughout Jewish history, Jews of all backgrounds and beliefs have fulfilled what may be the most difficult of all biblical commandments. Even when it was illegal and dangerous – as in the days of Antiochus (the villain of the Hanukkah story) and in the time of Hitler – Jews have circumcised their sons.”

[How to Raise a Jewish Child, Anita Diamant with Karen Kushner]

Why Do Jews Circumcise Their Sons?

The Religious Answer

Circumcision is a physical confirmation of an agreement, made four thousand years ago, between God and Abraham.

The Hebrew term for circumcision, *brit milah* (also known as a *bris*, which is the Ashkenazi or Yiddish pronunciation of “*brit*”), literally means the “covenant of circumcision.” It is a ceremony that welcomes a baby boy into the Jewish community through ritual circumcision. In this ritual, the parents confirm their family’s participation in the eternal commitment between God and the Jewish people and their affirmation of Jewish life for another generation.

The ritual of circumcision is the symbol of the parents’ commitment to bring their son into the Jewish community. The decision to follow this commandment challenges the parents to clarify what this means for them – as individuals and as a family – and what they are hoping it will mean for their son.

The Historical Answer

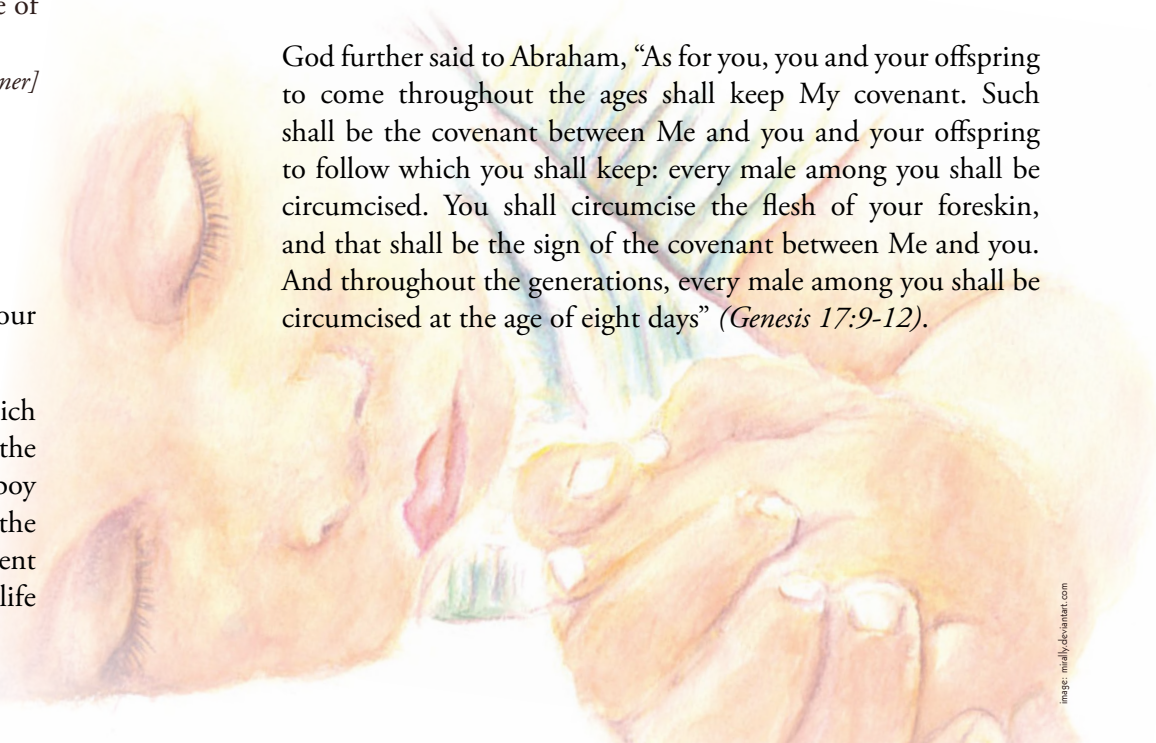
Abraham circumcised himself (at 99 years old), along with all the men of his household, including his son, Ishmael, who was 13 years old (*Genesis 17:1-14*). Because he followed this commandment, *Abram*’s name was changed to **Abraham** and *Sarai* became **Sarah** (*Genesis 17:5, 17:15*). The Hebrew letter added to their name is “*hey*,” which is shorthand for God’s name. The name change indicates they accepted God’s covenant for their family.

Following Abraham’s example, boys are given their names as part of the circumcision ceremony.

Isaac, the first son born of a circumcised Jew, was circumcised on his eighth day. This set the precedent for all boys having their brit milah on the eighth day.

Here are the verses from the Torah about 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 between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days” (*Genesis 17:9-12*).





Is It Safe?

For many years in North America, virtually all boys, regardless of religion, were circumcised in the hospital a day or so after birth. The medical community has shifted several times as to whether or not to endorse circumcision, with recent studies indicating that circumcised men are less likely to contract HIV.

The American Academy of Pediatrics updated its policy in 2009 to state:

Circumcision has potential medical benefits and advantages, as well as risks. The existing scientific evidence is not sufficient to recommend routine circumcision. Therefore, because the procedure is not essential to a child's current well-being, we recommend that the decision to circumcise is best made by parents in consultation with their pediatrician, taking into account what is the best interests of the child, including medical, religious, cultural, and ethnic traditions.

Though there may indeed be medical benefits to circumcising an infant, Jewish parents circumcise their sons because they believe it is a consecrated act and that it is their religious obligation. Although many others may perform circumcision for hygienic purposes, it is not done as a health measure by Jews.

A Sociological Answer

This commandment has been central to Judaism. For most Jews, circumcision is an important signifier of Jewish identity which makes a physical distinction between Jews and others. (Muslims, descendants of Abraham and his son Ishmael, also circumcise their sons as did many of the Near Eastern communities of ancient times.)

The great Jewish philosopher Spinoza noted that **“the sign of circumcision is ... so important ... it alone would preserve the nation forever.”** And so, Jews continue to perform this ritual, bringing their sons into the community with a celebration for friends and relatives.

It is only after the circumcision that the boy is officially given his name; a first name designating his uniqueness and a second name designating his family. From the very beginning, the child is joined to the community through his family.

Perhaps because this ritual has a four thousand year history, not only observant Jews but also secular Jews have followed this difficult commandment.

An individual who performs ritual circumcision, known in Hebrew as a *mohel* for a man and *mohélet* for a woman, adheres to the same sterilization techniques used by all physicians, including heat-steam autoclaving instruments and wearing surgical gloves during the procedure.

In the Jewish tradition where life and health are sanctified, no procedure which endangered children would be tolerated, let alone endorsed.

Don't forget, Jewish sons have survived this ritual for four thousand years.





Will My Baby Suffer?

A mohelet or mohel has been trained in the laws of brit milah and in surgical hygiene, before performing the circumcision. Some *mohelim* (plural of mohel) are physicians who have received additional training in this ritual.

The mohel or mohelet will examine the baby before the bris. If there is even the slightest question about the child's health, in accordance with Jewish law, the circumcision will be postponed.

The mohelet or mohel performs the minor surgery quickly and delicately. Most apply a topical anesthetic before the ceremony. The surgical procedure takes about 30 seconds.

The baby is examined again after the circumcision and the parents are given instructions on how to care for his penis. The mohel or mohelet is then on call for any questions or concerns of the parents.

Wouldn't It Be Easier On The Baby To Have The Circumcision Done In A Hospital?

Many times parents are not notified of when the circumcision is taking place in the hospital; it is routine for babies to be turned over to interns who need to practice doing a circumcision. The mohelet or mohel is an expert at the profession, and may have the opportunity to perform more circumcisions in a month than some doctors do in an entire year.

In order to immobilize the baby boys in the hospital, they are held to a board with Velcro straps for as long as fifteen or twenty minutes as the doctor makes the rounds in the nursery, circumcising all the boys. And there is no one to hold or comfort the baby after the procedure.

Although a medical circumcision may look the same in the end, the intension to bring the boy into the Jewish community and join him to the covenant of his ancestors is absent in the hospital.

What Happens At A Brit Milah?

The first two parts of the ceremony take only five to ten minutes. In the first part, there is a blessing, the circumcision itself and a second blessing. The second part begins with Kiddush (the blessing over wine) and a prayer where the boy's name is given. The third part of the ceremony is the celebratory meal, called a *seudah mitzvah*. Yes, it is required to celebrate with friends, family and food!

Many parents like to talk about the baby's name and those he was named after. This can take place as part of the naming or can be part of the celebration. Remembering those for whom the baby is named is a way to speak about the qualities that the parents hope the baby boy will be blessed with.

A newer custom is to have guests offer personal blessings for the baby:

“May he be an artist like his mother.”

“May he grow into a world that is free of war.”

“May he enjoy good friendships and a sense of community like his parents.”

Can My Parents Participate In The Ceremony?

The celebration provides an opportunity to honor relatives and close friends with very special roles in the ceremony.

The *kvaterin* (a Yiddish word, often translated as “godmother”) may be a grandmother or another beloved woman, who carries the baby from his mother and gives him to the *kvater* (Yiddish for “godfather”) who carries him to the chair of Elijah (*kisei Eliyahu*). Jewish tradition holds that the prophet Elijah is present at every brit milah. Elijah is considered a protector of little children, in effect the “guardian angel.” Jews therefore set aside a special chair for Elijah at the bris, and the baby is placed in the chair briefly before the circumcision.

The *sandek* (Hebrew, also for “godfather,” the word is specific to this role during a brit milah ceremony) holds the baby on his lap or on a table while the baby is being circumcised. This is the highest honor given in the ceremony.

What If My Parents Aren't Jewish?

This may be the first demonstration that you are serious about raising your children as Jews. It may be disappointing to your parents and even feel like a rejection, so try to be understanding of their emotions. They may even be worried about the immortal soul of their un-baptized grandchild. Be sure to let them know that their values will be an important part of the baby's upbringing.

Be patient and explain the meaning of the ritual. If you and your parents are comfortable, have them take part in the ceremony. If not, encourage them to share their hopes and prayers during the celebration.

The joy of a new grandchild often supplants any awkwardness and fears, bringing an extended family together in new closeness.





Where Does The Brit Milah Take Place?

A brit milah can be held anywhere. Many people prefer to have it in the warmth of their home, while others choose a synagogue or other community space.

Here is a step by step guide to a conventional bris:

- 1** The mother gives her baby to the kvaterin, who then takes him to the kvater.
- 2** Everyone says **“Barukh Ha’bah!”** (Hebrew for “Blessed be he who comes”) together, welcoming the baby to the community.

3 The infant’s parents then say a prayer indicating their acceptance of the responsibility for bringing their son into the covenant, the brit.

4 The kvater briefly places the baby on the special chair for Elijah and then gives him to the sandek.

5 The mohel or mohelet recites the following blessing: *“Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheyenu Melekh ha’olam, asher kidishanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu al ha’milah.”* It translates as: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us regarding the circumcision.”

6 The mohelet or mohel then performs the quick but delicate circumcision.

7 During the circumcision itself, the parents recite the following blessing:

**BA-RUKH ATA ADO-NAI,
E-LO-HEY-NU MELEKH HA’OLAM,
A-SHER KI-DI-SHA-NU B’MITZ-VO-TAV
V’TZI-VA-NU L’HAKH’NISO BIV’RITO
SHEL AVRAHAM AVINU.**

It translates as:

*“Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
Who has sanctified us through Your commandments
and has commanded us to bring our sons into the covenant
of Abraham our father.”*

8 Once the circumcision is complete, the baby naming ceremony begins. The mohel or mohelet chants the blessing over the wine, a symbol of happiness and holiness, then the mohelet or mohel, sandek, rabbi or other officiant gives the baby his Hebrew name:

“ May He who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless [baby’s Hebrew name], son of [father’s and mother’s Hebrew names]. Just as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into the **STUDY OF TORAH** the marriage canopy and the performance of **GOOD DEEDS**”

...the celebration begins!



18Doors mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

18Doors offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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