

Bris Shalom

an alternative Bris ceremony for concerned Jewish parents

My heart and flesh will sing with joy to the living God.

Psalms 84:3

Introduction

Many Jewish mothers and fathers have long recognized the painful, harmful, and dangerous aspects of the surgical procedure of circumcision. Many have wished for some alternative to traumatizing their little boy on the eighth day of his life, while still welcoming him into the Covenant of Abraham. Unlike the *Bar Mitzvah*, *Bris Milah* is not a spiritual experience for their son. Furthermore, it entails surgical pain and trauma, medical risk and long-term harm. It is a violation of their child's body and his sexual organ.

In response to these concerns, several alternative *Bris* ceremonies have been created which fulfill the spiritual and communal obligations of Jewish circumcision without its traumatic effects or violation of rights. These ceremonies lovingly welcome a Jewish boy into the community of Jews while maintaining his bodily integrity and his human rights.

What follows is one such alternative ceremony, and it borrows from the others. This one is based largely on the traditional *Bris* service and carefully maintains its integrity, devotion, and spirit, while sharing the wisdom of this modern age.

While the text of this ceremony specifically refers to a baby boy, this ceremony could, and should, be modified and applied for a Jewish baby girl.

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Background

Since the medical and hygienic merits of circumcision have now been disproved, little can be found to justify its continued practice by most American Jews.

Circumcision cannot be claimed as a symbol of Jewish identity. By Jewish law, any child born of a Jewish mother is a Jew. Furthermore, Judaism did not invent circumcision. According to Ashley Montagu, a renowned anthropologist, the practice was well-established in ancient Egypt over 6,000 years ago. The Moslem world also circumcises. Sixty-percent of non-Jewish boys in the United States are circumcised. Who then, can claim circumcision as either the source of Jewish identity or of its strength?

Circumcision can not be redeemed by American Jews with medical or hygienic claims. According to Jewish law, circumcision simply cannot be justified for any reason other than as an act of faith. Circumcision performed in a hospital by a doctor does not meet the ritual standards required by Jewish law and is therefore invalid as a *Bris Milah*.

In Hebrew, the foreskin of the male is called the *orlah*. Whenever the term *orlah* is used in the Bible, it refers to a barrier standing in the way of a beneficial result. The Bible refers to a person's resistance to holiness as the *orlah of the heart*. In Judaism, the foreskin came to symbolize all of man's barriers to holiness.

Jews have had to acknowledge that the real barriers to their faith were the ones they themselves created or perpetuated. Changing these barriers to Judaism has involved Jews changing their traditions as well as themselves. This process began over 150 years ago and continues today. *Bris Milah* is only one of many traditions that has changed as Jews take personal responsibility for their faith.

Rejoice!

The covenant between God and the Jewish people will continue after the symbolic token—circumcision, is abandoned. No one who truly understands the spiritual depth of Judaism can say otherwise. Rest assured, Judaism *will* continue forevermore.

It shouldn't hurt to be Jewish. No Jew has the right to blame you for following the dictates of your conscience by foregoing a bloody ritual against your son.

Relax, and rejoice in the birth of your wonderful, intact son!

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The Ceremony

A group of invited family and friends assemble at the parents' home for the occasion.

The honored participants, in order of appearance:

- the Jewish Leader (*Chazzan*) of this ceremony
- an honored guest (*Sandak*): often he is the grandfather or sometimes the father, a patron of the child
- the mother and father
- godfather (*Kvatter*): passes the baby from the godmother to the *Sandak*
- godmother (*Kvatterin*): carries the baby into the room
- the baby boy, on his eighth day of life

The participants standby in a separate room. Family and friends wait in the main room for the participants to appear. An empty chair is provided as a symbol for the presence of the prophet, Elijah. A cup of wine is poured.

The Leader enters the room by himself and begins with the following passage from *Genesis 22:10*:

Abraham stretched forth his hand and took a knife. And the angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham!'

And Abraham said: 'Here am I.'

And the angel said: 'Lay not your hand upon the lad nor do anything to him.'

A procession of the other honored participants begins. The baby is brought in last.

All rise and say:

Ba-ruch Ha-bah! Blessed is the one who has come!

The Leader says:

Ba-ruch Ha-bah! Blessed is the one who has come for the Covenant on the eighth day!

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Blessed are You the Lord, our God, Creator of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments.

We assemble now to welcome this newborn into Your Covenant and into the community of Israel.

Each of the parents then say:

Blessed are You the Lord, our God, Creator of the Universe, who has granted us life and sustained us and permitted us to reach this season!

Blessed are You the Lord, our God, Creator of the Universe, who has commanded us to welcome our son into Your Covenant.

This child, created in Your image, is whole, complete and perfect.

We give to him Your Covenant of Peace.

Amen.

The *Sandak* points to the chair of Elijah, and says:

This is the chair of Elijah the prophet, who is remembered as the protector of children.

The baby is passed from the godmother, to the godfather, and then to the *Sandak*. The *Sandak* now sits with him on the chair of Elijah. He says to all:

from Leviticus 19:28:

And the Lord said, 'You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor imprint any marks upon you'.

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Everyone says:

Let this boy be happy in this world,
In the goodness of this home,
In the holiness of this place.

The parents say:

Blessed it is that we are made holy with commandments and are charged to keep the Covenant.

Blessed it is that we are made holy with commandments and are charged with welcoming our child into the Covenant of Sarah and Abraham.

Everyone says:

As he enters into the Covenant, so may he enter
into Truth,
into Love,
and into Happiness.

The Leader holds up a cup of wine and says:

Ba-ruch ah-ta Ah-do-nai, el-o-hey-nu mel-ach ha-o-lam, bo-rey pri ha-ga-fen.

Everyone says:

Blessed are You the Lord, our God, Creator of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Amen.

The Leader passes the wine to the godparents. The godparents take a drink of the wine and share it with the parents.

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The Leader says:

Blessed is the way of the universe which makes children holy and beloved as their birthright, which keeps the laws of the world in our flesh, and seals our offspring with a mark of holy promise.

The parents say:

We pray that our son grow up in a world free of violence and with great joy and peace.

Everyone says:

Blessed are all who are assembled here and who join in this holy Covenant.

The *Sandak* holds up the baby and says:

Give thanks to our Lord, for He is good. His kindness endures forever!
This little one, may he become great!
Go forth, you are perfect!

The *Sandak* passes the baby to the mother and father.

The godparents say:

May this child thrive with his mother and with his father.

Let his name be known among us as: <the boy's full name>

son of: <the parents' full names>

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Everyone says:

As he enters into the Covenant, so may he enter
into Truth,
into Love,
and into Happiness.

The Leader says:

May the Lord bless us and keep us. May He make His countenance shine upon
us, and be gracious unto us. May the Lord turn His face unto us and give us
Peace.

Amen.

And all say:

Mazel Tov!

Great rejoicing takes place. Food and drink are served. (*party!*)

This ceremony may be freely copied and distributed. For further information on this *Bris* ceremony,
on its theological basis, and on the history of Jewish circumcision, please contact:

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Norm Cohen on *Bris Milah*

Jewish Law

- Modern-day Jews cannot justify circumcision on medical or social grounds—circumcision is a Jewish act of faith.
- Circumcision does not make a boy Jewish; by Jewish law, a son born to a Jewish mother is a Jew, even if he is not circumcised.
- There is a saying from the Talmud: “*If you ask me before you do it, I’ll say “no”; if you tell me after the fact, I’ll say, “all right”.*”

Jewish History

- Moses Maimonides wrote in 1190, “Circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement.”
- Jews are disagreeing with the tradition and have been since the founding of the Reform movement, over 150 years ago. Many Jewish traditions have changed over time as Jews continue to take personal responsibility for their faith.
- Theodore Herzl did not circumcise his son.

Conformity

- America is already a circumcising culture. Hence, neither assimilation nor intermarriage can be reduced by continuing circumcision.
- It is ironic that the last practice secular Jews cling to for claiming Jewish identity is the same practice performed by American non-Jews and Muslims.
- Sixty-percent of non-Jewish boys in the United States are circumcised. The entire Moslem world also circumcises. Who then, can claim circumcision as either the source of Jewish identity or of its strength?
- This symbol of Jewish “uniqueness” has indeed lost its uniqueness. Because of the meddling of American medicine, it has also lost its meaning as a sacred act.
- What began as an act of faith, now survives for many Jews on peer pressure in the locker room and old-fashioned, 19th century medicine.
- What many Jewish mothers are telling me is that they are coerced into circumcision by their Jewish husbands, their in-laws, and their parents. Rather than being a day of joy, the day of *bris milah* becomes for them an awful day of fear and regret.

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Norm Cohen on *Bris Milah*, continued

Female Genital Mutilation

- Both circumcision and female genital mutilation raise the same human rights concerns: the rights of vulnerable children to physical integrity, self-determination, and security of person.
- For those who would dismiss this comparison by contrasting the degree of mutilation, U.S. law does not permit such distinctions. The slightest cutting of a girl's genitals by her community is a felony.

Jewish Community

- The *Bris Shalom* ceremony follows closely the traditional ceremony in the spirit of the Covenant of Abraham and lovingly welcomes a Jewish boy into the community of Jews while maintaining his bodily integrity and his human rights.
- As the American circumcision rate continues to drop, this controversy will become more of an issue in the Jewish community.

Public Challenges

- NOCIRC will strongly challenge anyone in the Jewish community, including Jewish doctors and nurses, who make fraudulent health claims about circumcision.
- We would like to generate a dialog within the Jewish community surrounding the ethics of, and harm from, the surgery.
- I would like to call on the local mohalim to start documenting and publishing circumcision complication rates. These rates should then be disclosed to all parents in preparation for the procedure. Added to these complication rates should be various sexual problems reported in adulthood.
- I would like to ask the local rabbis if they would *bar mitzvah* Jewish boys if they are not circumcised. If not, then will rabbis start inspecting the genitals of all their bar mitzvah boys or should parents just keep their conscientious objection a secret?

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