

Parents' Guide to Ritual Circumcision

Shalom

The Brit Milah of your son should be a heartfelt and joyous experience. It is written in the Book of Proverbs: “May your mother and father rejoice; and may the one who bore you be filled with joy.” (*Proverbs 23:25*). Remember, this is your event. Please let me know of any customs, traditions, music, or additional readings that will help make this special and meaningful for your family.

The Tradition

Brit Milah is one of the oldest rituals in our nearly 4,000 year history. Brit Milah literally means “Covenant of Circumcision,” and is an everlasting bond between G-d and the Jewish people. In the Torah, G-d says to Abraham, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your children after you, throughout all generations, as an everlasting covenant ... every male among you shall be circumcised.” (*Genesis 17:7-11*).

Brit Milah is the common thread that connects us to our community, our history, and our tradition. Our Rabbis understood this, as it is written in the Talmud, “Great is circumcision for it is equal to all the mitzvot (commandments) in the Torah.” (*Nedarim 32a*)

Who Should Perform the Brit Milah?

Every Jewish parent is obligated to circumcise their sons, just as Abraham circumcised his own son, Isaac. Since most parents are not versed in the Jewish laws concerning Brit Milah, nor are they trained in the technique of circumcision, they traditionally delegate a Mohel to perform this act. As a certified Mohel, I have studied the texts and laws of Brit Milah and have experience with the circumcision procedure.

As a Mohel, I am capable of performing the entire Brit Milah ceremony on my own, and many families who are not affiliated with a particular synagogue or Rabbi may choose this option. If you are a member of a synagogue, I would be honored to work with your Rabbi to create a beautiful and meaningful experience. In general, the Rabbi officiates and I am responsible for the procedural portion. Every family has different needs and

concerns, so please let me know if you have any specific requests or thoughts about this arrangement.

When to Have the Brit Milah?

G-d commanded the Jewish people to circumcise their male children at eight days of age, “He that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generation...” (*Genesis 18:12*).

This mitzvah is so extraordinary that it may be performed on Shabbat or any other Jewish holiday including Yom Kippur (*Shabbat 106a, 132a; Sanhedrin 59b*). A Brit Milah may only take place during daylight hours.

Only certain circumstances justify the delay of a Brit Milah. Above all, a child that is not well may not be circumcised, “It is possible to circumcise later, but it is not possible to restore life” (*Yad Milah 1:18; Yoreh Deah 262:2*). You should not delay a Brit Milah for convenience nor may it take place before the eighth day. Although delaying a Brit Milah for the sake of the late arrival of a family member is discouraged, it is permissible. Jewish ideology is clear that family peace is paramount and can justify the limited delay of a Brit Milah, “He who makes peace in his own house is as if he made peace in all Israel” (*Abot de Rabbi Nathan 28:3*). If a Brit Milah is delayed for any reason, it may not take place on Shabbat or a holiday.

Where to Have the Brit Milah?

Some families choose to have their Brit Milah in a Synagogue Sanctuary or Social Hall. Many families feel more comfortable having their Brit Milah at home. A well-lit room that is large enough to accommodate everyone comfortably is really all that is needed.

There are some special considerations if the Brit Milah is to take place on Shabbat or other Jewish Holiday, especially if the ceremony will be held in Synagogue. We will cover those possibilities ahead of time if the situation arises.

Who Comes to the Brit Milah?

For most parents, a Brit Milah is a joyous event (*simcha*), which they want

to share with friends and relatives. A *minyan* of 10 Jewish adults is preferred but not required. All are encouraged to attend regardless of age, gender, and/or religious affiliation.

Many parents are concerned that a Brit Milah may be inappropriate for their young children to witness. In general, children do just fine (usually better than their parents). Being honest and positive about the importance of this *simcha* is the best approach.

Announcing the Brit Milah

It is important that you and I clearly agree upon a time and date before announcing the Brit Milah. Once established, it is proper to inform your friends, relatives, and members of the community of the time and place of the Brit Milah rather than specifically inviting them. Since attending a Brit Milah is such an important mitzvah, no one should be put in the position of refusing to attend if they are unable.

Day of the Brit Milah

Before the Ceremony

Plan to feed your baby about 30-45 minutes before the ceremony starts. We do not want the baby to be hungry, but we also don't want his belly too full right before all of this excitement.

Just before the ceremony starts, while your son is still in a private room, I will examine him. Rarely (less than 5% of the time), I may discover an abnormality that precludes my ability to safely perform a circumcision on that day. If this does occur, we will still proceed with an appropriate ceremony including a naming. We can then make arrangements for a circumcision in the hospital using a different technique that is more suitable for his anatomy.

I may also cleanse his genital area with an antiseptic scrub, administer local anesthetic to numb the area, and release any adhesions. This preparation requires a few minutes.

While I am preparing for the Brit Milah, family, friends, and community are gathered in the communal space.

As a sign of reverence for the impending covenant, it is appropriate for parents (traditionally the father, though the mother may as well), the *Sandek*, and me to don *tallitot*.

Candle Lighting

The ceremony starts with a friend or family member lighting the candles (no blessing is recited). The origin of this tradition likely comes from a time when circumcision was prohibited. A lit candle in a window signaled to the community that a Brit Milah was to take place (*Ketubot Yerushalmi 1:5*). On a more spiritual level, a lit candle represents the spark of life as a new soul enters the Jewish community. As it is written, “the candle of G-d is the soul of man” (*Proverbs 20:27*). Lighting the candles is a special honor that can be given to a family member or close friend.

The Kvatter/Kvaterin

The ‘*kvatter*’ and/or ‘*kvaterin*’ will carry the baby into the room. This honor is often given to grandparents, but it may be given to anyone. It is considered good luck for a couple seeking to have their own baby to be given this honor.

As the baby enters, everyone stands and greets him with the words, בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא *Barukh Habah!* (“Blessed is the child who comes to enter the covenant.”)

The Chair Of Elijah

The baby is then placed on the chair set aside for the prophet Elijah, Angel of the Covenant. Elijah is traditionally our protector in times of danger, and is present at every Brit Milah to safeguard the well being of the child. Since Elijah prophesied about the importance of circumcision, G-d granted him the privilege of being a witness at every Brit Milah to confirm that the Jewish people are still fulfilling this mitzvah (*Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 29*). To honor the Angel of the Covenant, there is a custom of decorating the Chair of Elijah and reserving its use for three full days. While a loved one steadies the baby, I recite a blessing that greets Elijah and requests his assistance and protection during the circumcision. The designated parent takes the baby from the Chair of Elijah and personally hands him to me.

I will place the baby on a safety board, and request that all guests sing a tune such as ‘*Eliyahu Hanavi*’ while I am preparing for the procedure. It will keep the crowd engaged while I perform the actual circumcision.

The Sandek

The *Sandek* is the person who holds the child during the circumcision. The role of *Sandek* is considered an extraordinarily spiritual honor, more important than the Mohel, Rabbi, or parents. For this reason, the *Sandek* must be Jewish. Usually, one of the grandfathers is chosen, but you may honor any friend or family member. In some communities, the Rabbi or father is so honored. The *Sandek* holds the baby while I recite the blessing and perform the circumcision.

Milah (Circumcision)

The entire circumcision procedure, including bandaging, takes less than 3 minutes. To calm the baby, a gauze pacifier soaked with sugar and sweet wine is used. This is a simple operation that involves the removal of the foreskin that sheaths the head of the penis. I perform circumcisions with a special shield-like clamp called the Mogen clamp. The Mogen technique is notable for its quickness and safety.

Immediately before the *Milah* I will recite the following blessing- “Blessed are You, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign of the Universe, who has sanctified us by Your commandments and commanded us regarding circumcision.”

Once I complete the *Milah*, any parent or family member (though traditionally the father) recites the blessing of the covenant of Abraham:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהִכָּנֵס
בְּבְרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ

“Barukh atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha’olam asher kid’shanu b’mitzvo-tav v’tzivanu l’hakhniso b’vrivo shel avraham avinu.”

“Blessed are You, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign of the Universe, who has sanctified us by Your commandments and commanded us to have our sons enter into the covenant of Abraham our father.”

The gathered guests declare their collective responsibility to raise this child in a meaningfully Jewish way by exclaiming:

כָּשֶׁם שֶׁנִּכְנָס לְבְרִית כֵּן יִכְנֵס לְתוֹרָה וְלִמְעֻשֵׁים טוֹבִים

“K'shem shenikhnas la'brit, ken yikanais l'torah ul'chupah ul'ma'asim tovim. Amen”.
“Just as he has been entered into the covenant, so may he embark on a life of study, symbolized by the Torah, a life of love, symbolized by the *chuppah* or wedding canopy, and a life of *ma'asim tovim* or doing good for his fellow human beings. Amen”

The baby is swaddled and handed to a designee (traditionally the mother, but can be any parent) for the naming and additional blessings.

Giving the Name

Following the *Milah*, the child will be given his Jewish name. Traditionally, the child's Hebrew name is kept secret by the parents up until this point. If you are unsure which Hebrew name to choose, or if you have any questions about selecting an appropriate Jewish name, please ask me or consult with your Rabbi.

Traditionally, to symbolize the mother's integral role in the Covenant of Abraham, she holds her son for his naming. Some families will honor a different grandparent or important family member with this privilege. This person may be called the “*Sandek Omed Al HaBrachot*” (“The Sandek of Blessings”).

A Parents' Blessing

After the naming ceremony, parents may want to take a moment to welcome their guests and talk about the name they have chosen for their son. I strongly recommend writing out your thoughts ahead of time. Many parents take this moment to affirm their commitment to the Covenant of Abraham and to their baby, and may do so with this optional blessing (or one of their choosing):

“Our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, we thank You for the precious gift of life and the blessing of parenthood. Eternal Creator, we ask Your continued blessing. Grant our child length of days and vigor of body and mind. Endow us with understanding and love, that we may rear our son, [son's name], to manhood filled with love of Torah and the performance of *ma'asim tovim*-good deeds. May we be privileged to bring him to the wedding canopy. And let us all say Amen.”

Se'udat Mitzvah (Festive Meal)

After the naming and blessings, we will say *Hamotzi* (the blessing over challah). Since Brit Milah is a precept that Jews accept with joy, it is celebrated with song, dance and, most importantly, a festive meal (*Shabbat 130a, Yoreh Deah 265:12*). This meal can

range from the minimal challah and kosher wine to an elaborate feast depending on the family's wishes and means. It is traditional to have sweets and other foods that are associated with a *simcha*. There is no *seu'dat mitzvah* on a religious day of fasting, such as Yom Kippur or Tisha B'Av.

Orlah (foreskin)

After the Jewish people wandered in the desert for 40 years, and right before entering the Promised Land of Canaan, Joshua circumcised the Israelites according to G-d's commandment. The Israelites buried their foreskins and blood of Brit Milah in the earth (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 29; Yoreh Deah 265:10*). It is still customary to bury the foreskin which I will give you after the ceremony.

Since Brit Milah is the parent's responsibility, I encourage them to be as involved as possible. This would include the act of burying the foreskin. The foreskin may be buried anywhere in the ground. A beautiful custom is to bury the foreskin under the roots of a young tree which you are planting for this event or even at the gravesite of the person for whom the baby has been named. Though no blessing is recited when burying the foreskin, it is a good time for parents to reflect on the significance of Brit Milah and their son's place in the Judaic continuum.

Healing

Healing is usually rapid and can be viewed in several stages. Like any other cut, there are many factors that influence healing. Please remember that every child heals differently.

First, the cut edge seals and bleeding ceases within minutes. Within hours, maybe a day, the area just behind the glans (especially the underside) will become swollen. This inflammation will subside within a week or two.

In a day or two, there may be an off-white or yellowish, patchy appearance of the glans. These patches are a type of scab and are associated with normal healing. You will also notice that the glans is red and shiny. Do not worry that the head of the penis is raw or bruised. The skin covering the glans and the glans itself are a mucous membrane (like the skin inside your cheek). Once exposed, the mucous membrane will toughen, and in about a month, will take on a normal appearance (like the skin of your lip).

Complications

Every surgical procedure has potential risks. Thankfully, circumcision is associated with few and infrequent complications. The most common problem after circumcision is persistent bleeding. In almost all cases, bleeding is controlled by direct pressure.

There are reported cases of infection, although these are rare amongst ritually circumcised children. Common signs of infection include: a pus-like discharge, a foul smell, excessive swelling or redness, local warmth, a fever, or a rash anywhere in the area of the penis. With any of these signs, please call me or your child's physician without delay.

Each year, with over a million circumcisions performed in the United States, there are only a few rare cases where complications are sufficient to require hospitalization or are considered life threatening. In fact, circumcision is regarded as one of the safest routine operations in practice today.

Appearance

Aside from direct complications, the most common concern of parents is related to aesthetics. It should be remembered that penises come in all shapes and sizes. While most penises 'look normal' within days of the circumcision, some do not take on a 'completely normal appearance' until after the penis starts to grow.

Furthermore, the penis may appear smaller after circumcision. Do not be alarmed. This appearance is mostly due to the relaxation of skin surrounding the penis, which prior to circumcision holds the penis more erect.

On occasion, a poor aesthetic result occurs when too little or too much skin is removed, or more likely when the cut edge of the skin attaches too high or too low along the length of the penis. The latter is sometimes caused by normal penile erections. In nearly all cases the penis will heal properly and in time take on a normal appearance. You can help the healing process by gently pushing down on the skin around the base of the penis with every diaper change. This will make sure that the skin does not reattach itself to the glans of the penis.

Even though complications are rare, do not hesitate to call me or your child's physician if you have questions about the appearance of the penis. Remember, early treatment (if any is needed) is always best.

Commonly Asked Questions

What about photos and videos?

Both video and still photography are permissible (except on days where they are otherwise prohibited, such as Shabbat and Holidays) during the preliminary preparations and during the festivities afterwards. Please do not take photos or video during the actual ceremony. Instead, focus your attention on being present and fully experiencing this joyous event.

Do other parents feel as nervous as I do?

It is normal to be anxious about your son's Brit Milah. All parents experience some level of fear and stress. As strange as it may seem, the triumph over these feelings will make your son's Brit Milah a more powerful and heartfelt experience.

Will the baby feel pain?

Newborns feel uncomfortable just being exposed and having their legs held. They may cry during the circumcision even if they are not actually experiencing any pain. Prior to the circumcision, I will use some combination of a topical anesthetic cream and an injectable local anesthetic to numb the nerves around the penis. You will likely notice that as soon as the circumcision is completed, and the baby is clothed again, he is usually quiet and comfortable.

What are the benefits of performing circumcision?

Besides the religious importance, there are health and hygiene benefits to performing circumcision. According to the American College of Pediatrics, "Benefits include significant reductions in the risk of urinary tract infection in the first year of life and, subsequently, in the risk of heterosexual acquisition of HIV and the transmission of other sexually transmitted infections...the benefits of circumcision are sufficient to justify access to this procedure..."

(<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/130/3/585/30235/Circumcision-Policy-Statement?autologincheck=redirected>).

Penile cancer and other mechanical and infectious issues related to the foreskin (phimosis, paraphimosis, balanoposthitis) are very rare in circumcised males according to the American College of Urology.

What should a Mohel do to ensure the safety of the circumcision?

This is a very important question, and one that you should ask your chosen Mohel about. Preventing infections and other complications by using proper equipment and sterilization techniques is paramount to ensuring the safety of your baby. I have invested heavily in equipment which meets or exceeds hospital and clinic standards for sterility and safety. Everything I use has been purchased from reputable and licensed medical equipment companies. My autoclave for sterilizing reusable tools such as clamps and hemostats is hospital grade and is evaluated several times a year by an outside company to make sure that it is functioning properly. Your baby's safety is my utmost concern.

What about Pidyon Haben?

If neither parent is a Cohen or Levi, and this is the first ever vaginal opening of the mother's womb, you will want to have a Pidyon Haben (redemption of the first-born son) when your son is 31 days old. Please consult your Rabbi for further information. If you are not affiliated with a synagogue, or if you need further direction, please do not hesitate to ask me.

What if one of the parents is not Jewish?

Circumcision does not make a male child Jewish. He is Jewish if his mother is born Jewish or if she has converted by the time of his birth (*Kiddushin 66b, 68b; Yoreh Deah 268:6*).

If the mother is not Jewish, according to the Conservative and Orthodox Movements of Judaism, the baby is not considered Jewish without a formal conversion ceremony. In such instances, a Rabbi who is knowledgeable in the Jewish laws of conversion should be consulted. **Please don't let this dissuade you from having a Brit Milah.**

We can still perform a Brit Milah *L'shem gerut* (as the first step of conversion to Judaism), which is almost identical to a traditional Brit Milah with some additional prayers and blessings. This would provide your child with the greatest breadth of

options for exploring his Judaism as he gets older. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about this issue. I would be happy to talk through all of the options with their benefits and down-sides.

What if a surrogate was used to deliver the baby?

Laws about surrogate birth and need for conversion are constantly evolving. According to the Conservative Movement of Judaism, if the baby's surrogate is Jewish, the baby is Jewish and does not need to undergo conversion at the time of the Brit Milah ceremony. If the surrogate is not Jewish, a Brit Milah *L'shem Gerut* can be performed as the first step in conversion to Judaism (please see above). For more complicated scenarios, it is best to consult a Rabbi who is knowledgeable about these laws.

What if I want my Rabbi to officiate?

As a Mohel, I am capable of performing the entire Brit Milah ceremony on my own, and many families who are not affiliated with a particular synagogue or Rabbi may choose this option. If you are a member of a synagogue, I would be honored to work with your Rabbi to create a beautiful and meaningful experience. In general, the Rabbi officiates and I am responsible for the procedural portion. Every family has different needs and concerns, so please let me know if you have any specific requests or thoughts about this arrangement.

What if I have additional questions?

I encourage you to reach out to me and/or talk to your Rabbi to find out more about Brit Milah. For further reference, "Guide to Ritual Circumcision and Redemption of the First-Born Son" and "Brit Mila in the Reform Context" are well written, easy to read books. The video "Circumcision? or Bris! Surgery? or Simcha!" does a good job of contrasting medical circumcision from Brit Milah.

Mazel tov! May your son grow into a life of Torah, chuppah, and good deeds!

Daniel Klaristenfeld, MD. Mohel
(858) 367-3161
daniel@sandiegobris.com