

Entering the Covenant

This is another in an occasional series of columns on Jewish life-cycle and rituals that Rabbi Lerner is presenting.

One of the special blessings the rabbinate affords me is to celebrate with parents shortly after the birth of a child. Participating in *brit milah* (covenant of circumcision) ceremonies for boys and *brit bat* (covenant for a daughter) ceremonies for girls allows me to be present with parents, siblings, grandparents, and friends during a most sacred moment. As a rabbi, I work with parents to shape a ritual that contains not only all the traditional elements, but also creative innovations that personalize the ceremony.

Brit Milah, entering the covenant between God and the Jewish people through ritual circumcision, is one of the most ancient *mitzvot* (commandments). Abraham was commanded by God to circumcise his son Isaac on his eighth day of life and that practice continues to this time. While some explanations point to medical benefits (which recent studies have also pointed to), most modern thinkers view it in a spiritual light. Ritual circumcision teaches several critical lessons:

First, Jewish men are given a particular sign that takes sexuality and/or procreation and transforms it into something uniquely Jewish.

Second, it brings the baby into an unbroken chain of tradition and peoplehood, extending back four thousand years.

Third, circumcision reminds us that the sexual act is holy. Especially in a world where there is so much sexual violence and abuse, Jewish men have a constant reminder of the need to infuse sexuality with morality and sanctity.

Later in life, these ideas should be shared with our boys and men, so circumcision becomes an even more powerful reminder of this covenant and how we should act.

I am always moved by this most ancient and powerful tradition that mimics birth itself as life and its fragility come together—this is how I felt at the *bris* (Yiddish of *brit*) of each of my sons and how I feel at every *bris* I attend.

Unfortunately, there is no equally ancient tradition of welcoming our daughters into the covenant. Nor do we have all the records of how girls were named. In the Middle Ages, after the birth of a daughter, the father came to *shul* the next time the Torah was read (on Shabbat, holidays, Mondays, and Thursdays), had an *aliyah*, and his daughter was named—usually without the mother or daughter present. In many traditional circles that remains the custom.

In the 20th century, the *aliyah* was often postponed a few weeks to a Shabbat when the mother and other family members could attend. In the last few generations, new ceremonies called *Simhat Bat* (the joy of a daughter) or *Brit Bat* (the covenant for a daughter) have been developed. These often take place in the home on the eighth day of life or afterwards. Interestingly, in the Sephardic tradition, a home ritual developed for girls called a *Zeved Bat* (the gift of a daughter) which took place on the Friday night after the girl's birth.

The ceremony itself usually utilizes many elements of a *brit milah* including formally bringing

the baby in, naming over a cup of wine, the priestly benediction, singing mazal tov, and a mitzvah meal. For me, the central symbol of a girl's entrance into the covenant is the *tallit*. While some associate the *tallit* with men, in the mystical and kabbalistic tradition, it is considered akin to the *Shekhinah*—the most immanent and feminine aspect of the divine. Parents or grandparents wrap the baby in a *tallit* (often one that is a family heirloom) while we recite verses of Psalms that speak of God's enveloping protection.

Entering the covenant between God and the Jewish people by being encircled by a *tallit* reflects the moment when the Israelites entered God's covenant as a community. While we often think of Sinai as that moment—and it is a significant one—the tradition considers the crossing of the Sea of Reeds the covenantal moment. Just as our people passed through those waters, we pass the baby through the sides of the *tallit*.

Sharon and I opted to have this ceremony for our daughter, Talya, on her eighth day of life as an important values statement that entering the covenant should be equally significant for girls and boys and equally challenging in terms of timing for new parents!

This was confirmed for us during a phone conversation with a family member when Sharon was pregnant with Talya. The nameless family member told us that s/he would fly out to Chicago for the *bris* if we had a boy. And for a girl? “Well, then I'll wish you a mazal tov.” We knew right then that the ceremony should be on the eighth day either way and the ceremonies had to be similarly significant.

I have also incorporated new traditions to make a meaningful ritual including: setting up a *huppah* for a *brit milah* or *brit bat*, adding creative poetry or other texts, having parents present an explanation for the name they choose, having grandparents recite their own prayer, *bentching gomel* (the blessing recited after childbirth or other life and death experiences) and singing other songs or *niggunim* (songs without words). Non-Jewish family members are also included in the ceremony.

For boys, it is our community's standard that they have a *brit milah* on their eighth day of life (with some exceptions based on health that can delay it). The circumcision should be done by a trained *mohel* (ritual circumciser); we have a list of recommended *mohalim* that we use most often. In addition, Rabbi Jacobs or I would like to present to officiate at the naming and to celebrate. Baby boys should not be circumcised in the hospital before the eighth day (which is the optimal day for clotting and marks the beginning of the second week after the first seven days of life). In addition, this is often performed as a procedure and not a covenantal ceremony and does not always have parents and others there to comfort the baby. If a baby boy has been medically circumcised, the only change in the covenantal *brit* is that a *hatafat dam brit*—taking a spot of blood from the place of the circumcision—replaces the circumcision. Please contact me for more information about this ceremony if it is needed.

For girls, I recommend a *brit bat* in the home on the eighth day, although I also understand why some parents may choose to postpone this a little. For some, a ceremony at the Torah with an *aliyah* may still be the preferred option.

After the *brit milah* or *brit bat*, there can be second ceremony. Since it also quite meaningful to celebrate a birth with the larger community at the Torah, I recommend a covenantal naming on the eighth day and then an *aliyah* and *mishbeirakh* prayer on a Shabbat morning a few weeks or months afterwards so the baby can be brought to the Torah.

There are some more complicated situations where our tradition mandates other rituals, such as bringing a child to the *mikveh* for a beautiful ritual immersion. These include when one adopts a child or when the child's birth mother is not *halakhically* Jewish.

Welcoming a child into the covenant between God and the Jewish people is a vital moment when children and parents are embraced by God's love. Rabbi Jacobs and I are always available to work with parents and families to help during this most special and sacred time of life. Often, we meet with parents prior to birth to discuss these various options and to plan together.

We hope to celebrate with you and your families at happy occasions.

Rabbi David Lerner