

THE GIFT OF
PUBLISHERS

CIRCUMCISION

*Brith
or
Surgery?*

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Sources

"This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your children after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of a covenant between Me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised . . ." (Genesis 17, verses 10-14)

"G-d spoke unto Moses saying: "If a woman . . . bear a man child . . . on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Leviticus 12, verses 1-3)

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The Covenant

The Jewish religion requires that every healthy Jewish male be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. The proper fulfillment of this precept, the oldest and most sacred rite in Judaism, is called *Brith Milah* or, more popularly, a *Brith*. Because our patriarch Abraham was the first to perform it, it is known as the *Covenant of Abraham*.

Circumcision, was commanded us as an *אוֹת ברית*, a sign of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people. With it, we carry upon our bodies the indelible mark of our Jewishness, a constant reminder that we are dedicated to G-d, to the Torah, and to the high moral code which this dedication imposes upon us.

Although medical science has proved beyond doubt that circumcision carries with it many hygienic advantages, we Jews circumcise ourselves solely for religious reasons. We would continue to practice it even if there were no medical arguments in its favor.

The knowledge about its physical benefits which medical research has now given us, thus serves only to lend additional strength to the Biblical assurance that "the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes . . . for our good always, that he might preserve us and keep us alive."

Kiddush Hashem

In every age, Jews have, at all costs, meticulously observed the precept of Milah. Our history records innumerable instances when its practice meant sacrifice and danger; the forfeiture of life itself.

During the Greek occupation of Judea, when circumcision was prohibited, our ancestors laid down their lives in its defense. During the terrible persecutions under the Emperor Hadrian, during the horrible days of the inquisition in Spain, at every time when tyrants arose to uproot the Jewish faith, Jews were ever ready to sacrifice themselves rather than desecrate the holy covenant of Abraham. Even to-

day, with the unfortunate weakening of Jewish observance in some circles as a result of modern materialism, few indeed are the Jews who do not practice the rite of Milah.

Our Sages tell us that a Jew who voids the covenant of Abraham has no share in the world to come. But Jewish life and Jewish historical experience has supplemented and given added meaning to that statement. It emphatically declares that one who voids the covenant of Abraham not only has no share in the world to come, but has forfeited the privilege of being identified with the Jewish people on this earth as well.

The Mohel

Performance of the circumcision act is primarily the responsibility of the father of the child. However, since not all Jews are religiously or medically capable of performing a Brith, it has become customary that a Mohel (trained circumcisor) act as the father's agent.

The Mohel must be an observant

and pious Jew, well versed in the laws of Milah and capable of performing the surgery involved according to the finest aseptic and surgical techniques known to medical science. Only men who meet these requirements and who possess the necessary credentials which attest to their ability, may act as Mohalim. (In the City of New York, Mohalim must pass a special Milah Board made up of prominent rabbis and physicians.)

Physicians?

It follows, therefore, that a physician, although he may be a member of the Jewish faith, is not ipso facto qualified to be a Mohel. He may be a Mohel only if in addition to his medical knowledge, he is an observant Jew and an expert in the laws of Milah. A license to practice medicine is, by itself, insufficient to give one the privilege of acting as a Mohel.

Furthermore, the recitation of the ritual by a rabbi, while a Jewish or non-Jewish physician performs the opera-

tion, is completely meaningless and a travesty of Jewish tradition. Unless the doctor possesses the qualifications mentioned above, the operation which he performs can under no circumstances be considered a Brith which meets the requirements of Jewish law and tradition. The rabbi's "Brochos" cannot change an improper circumcision into a Brith Milah.

It must be stated again that Milah is not solely a health measure. We know it as the holiest ceremony in our faith. When a physician usurps the place of the Mohel, the "Brith" ceases to be a sacred religious ceremony and becomes nothing more than a minor surgical operation.

Even in the surgery involved, there is a vast difference between a circumcision and the Brith Milah required by the Jewish religion. A circumcision, according to the medical definition and practice consists of "cutting enough of the foreskin (prepuce) to permit its free retraction beyond the glans penis". This does not meet our religious requirements. Jewish law insists that the

entire glans be uncovered and completely exposed.

The belief that a physician can perform a circumcision better than a Mohel has no basis in fact. Recognizing that the Mohel is a specialist in his field, many physicians call Mohalim for the Brith Milah of their own children. The surgery involved is so simple and safe that any reputable Mohel may be trusted without fear.

It is worthy of mention in this connection, that following the tradition of the Royal House of England which requires circumcision of all male children, it was the Jewish Mohel of London rather than the Royal Physician who was called to circumcise the son of Princess Elizabeth.

The Ceremony

The Brith is a most inspiring ceremony, full of the beauty and sanctity typical of Jewish ritual. As the child is carried into the Brith Room, all the assembled rise and remain standing for the duration of the ceremony. The

Mohel takes the child, places him on a special chair or table known as the *Chair of Elijah* and commences to recite the ritual. The *Sandek* holds the child upon the *Chair of Elijah* while the Mohel performs the circumcision. Before the circumcision, the Mohel recites this benediction in Hebrew:

"Blessed art thou O Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by His commandments and enjoined us the rite of circumcision". He then performs the circumcision. The father of the child immediately says the Hebrew blessing:

"Blessed art thou O Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by His commandments and bidden us to enter him into the covenant of Abraham our father". The child is then given his Jewish name amidst prayers for his welfare and future accomplishment.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, a feast is held. This feast should, if at all possible, be conducted elaborately at home. Prayers are included in the *Grace after Meals* for the child, his

father and mother, the Sandek and the Mohel.

General Rules

1. The circumcision of a normal, healthy child must be held on the eighth day after his birth, even if that day be a Sabbath or Holiday. If the child is delivered by Caesarian operation, however, the Brith may not be held on a Sabbath or Holiday. Postponement for convenience or for any reason other than the health of the child is a violation of a positive Biblical command. However, if there be the slightest possibility of danger to the child, the Brith *MUST* be postponed until such time as all signs of danger subside. A postponed Brith, however, may not take place on a Sabbath or a Holiday.


2. The Brith may be held only during the daytime.

3. Whenever possible, it is appropriate that a minyan, a quorum of 10 men, be present. This, however, is not required.

4. If a child is born without a prepuce (born seemingly circumcised), was circumcised by a physician or circumcised at night or prior to the eighth day, or if any questions arise concerning his circumcision, an Orthodox Rabbi should be consulted to determine the status of the child and to advise his parents of necessary action.

5. Every effort should be made to assure the presence of a Rabbi at the Brith in order that the ritual be conducted with dignity and in accordance with Jewish Law.

6. One whose parents did not carry out their duty for the performance of this sacred rite, must himself arrange to be circumcised as soon as possible.



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