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TRANSITIONING LIFE-CYCLE RITUALS: COVENANT AND BET MITZVOT

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Introduction

During a breakfast at the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis 2024 conference, I sat next to a rabbi who asked me what I was working on for my thesis. I told her I was creating a guide for clergy about crafting rituals for Queer and Transgender Jews. "Oh! How perfect!" she said. "I was just having a conversation before boarding my flight here with a conversion student who is trans." She then proceeded to ask me questions about how to best work with this student. She shared that she wanted to make the conversion student feel comfortable and affirmed, but did not quite know how. This interaction was a perfect example as to why I chose to create this guide for my capstone.

America is undergoing a transformation in the way people understand and relate to gender. Data collected in 2022 states that 1.6 million Americans currently identify as transgender, with 300,000 of these people being youth.[1] While Jews make up only a small percentage of the American population, Reform Jewish communities tend to flow with broader cultural shifts. The need for Jewish communities and clergy to be able to craft rituals and have nuanced conversations around gender is becoming increasingly necessary.

As a nonbinary Jewish person, the moments and places where transgender and gender-diverse people may feel unseen in Reform Jewish spaces and rituals are easy for me to identify. I think about and encounter them daily. I do not, however, feel much internal conflict relating to these two identities. It is in the liturgy and communal resources where my disconnect manifests. I also know that I am not alone. Scholar S. J. Crasnow's research into Jewish ritual innovated by queer and transgender Jews drew a similar conclusion. They write:

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[1] Jody L. Herman et al., *How Many Adults and Youth Identify as Transgender in the United States?* (The Williams Institute, June 2022), https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states/.

> A number of them [research participants] did not express experiences of internal conflicts about their Jewish and trans identities. Instead, these participants described their LGBTQ and Jewish identities as mutually reinforcing and inextricably intertwined. However, issues for participants arose in their confrontations with normative religious institutions, which were not fully inclusive or affirming of their trans identities. The confrontations did not reflect internal tension for participants about their Jewish and trans identities but rather anger or disappointment that their Jewish communities failed to recognize or affirm their trans identities.[2]

Crasnow found frustration among the experience of Transgender Jews with their communities. This frustration is born out of a sentiment that many Reform communities claim to want to be affirmative spaces yet fall short.

Transgender Jews deserve to have affirming communities. They deserve to have clergy who know how to incorporate a more expansive understanding of gender into their rituals and conversations. Throughout my time in Rabbinical School, I have encountered many well-meaning cis-gender Rabbis for whom transgender identity is a blind spot. I have had to educate professors and rabbis who I highly respect on topics that within queer Jewish spaces are basic modes of operation. When I have pointed out something that does not include or affirm Transgender Jews, the first response has often been "huh, I've never thought about that." My classmates and I had to fight for queer experience to be added to our life-cycles course. If we had to fight to add it only three years ago, how are clergy trained before us supposed to be educated on queer and transgender Jews' needs?

I hope that this guide begins to address this gap. I am not able to tackle the entirety of what clergy should know about queer experience. Within recent years, Transgender Jews have begun creating rituals and resources to meet their needs. But, how is a rabbi who does not

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[2] S. J. Crasnow. "On Transition: Normative Judaism and Trans Innovation." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 3 (2017): 406.

know what questions to ask supposed to know how to find these materials? How are they to prepare themselves to engage in conversations with queer Jews who join their communities? So far, they have turned to asking queer clergy to bear the burden of education or find a created ritual and use it without truly understanding why and how the ritual came to be.

This guide is my attempt to provide a resource for that education created intentionally by a soon-to-be clergy person for other clergy people. To create something that addresses all of the aspects of Transgender identity and Judaism is much too big a scope for a capstone. So, I needed to figure out where to focus. First, I decided to focus on Jewish life-cycle rituals as these are places where queer people look to clergy for answers, often not knowing themselves what questions to ask. To tackle all of the rituals would also be too much, so I needed to narrow it further. As one of my primary motivations for the project is to help change the experience for new generations of Jews, I decided that focusing on Covenant[3] and Bet Mitzvah would have the most potential impact.

The guide incorporates much of the phenomenal rituals that have been constructed by Transgender Jews in recent years, drawing particularly on the work of the Nonbinary Hebrew Project[4] and the resources created with it. It explores examples of rituals that have been performed for and with Transgender Jews. Some of these resources are readings and prayers I have created myself while others are rituals that have been constructed by Transgender Jews in recent years.

[3] See the end of the Key Concepts and Terminology section for an explanation of Covenant ritual.
[4] Lior Gross and Eyal Rivlin, Nonbinary Hebrew Project, https://www.nonbinaryhebrew.com/.

The value of this guide is also that it contains more than just the rituals adapted to be affirming for queer people. It includes a background and historical analysis of how the ritual has been adapted, amending the queer perspective into the narrative. My hope is that this guide will be seen as part of the next link in the chain of tradition of adaptation that these rituals have gone through for centuries. In particular, I seek to highlight how feminist adaptation has paved a path that queer ritual has built on/draws inspiration from.

Looking toward Feminism is an ideal place to explore in considering how to create queer rituals around gender, seeing as Feminism is also a movement that raises questions of gender. It also has made a broad impact on Judaism, including on ritual. Rabbi Susan P. Fendrick is a writer and scholar of the evolution of Jewish texts and Jewish education. She explains:

> Jewish Feminism's impact on ritual reaches far beyond "feminist ritual" or "Jewish women's rituals." In addition to the innovations represented by new ceremonies and celebrations, Jewish feminism has substantially influenced longer-standing practices. Arguably, the entire terrain of contemporary Jewish ritual life has been in one way or another reshaped by Jewish women and men grappling with the encounter between pre-feminist traditional Judaism and Jewish feminism.[5]

Fendrick's argument presents a pre/post-feminist framework. I seek to extend this framework further, arguing that the next contemporary grappling is between pre-queer normative Judaism and queer Judaism.

Beyond the historical analysis, this narrative is explored in the guide through questions and considerations it offers for clergy to incorporate into their process and approach to these rituals. These elements are another key piece of the value this guide is meant to bring.

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[5] Susan P. Fenderick, "Jewish Feminist Ritual and Brit Milah," Ritualwell, last modified March, 2005, https://ritualwell.org/ritual/jewish-feminist-ritual-and-brit-milah/.

The discussion of the rituals offered has been sourced from my research into existing queer Jewish organizations and the work they have produced as well as from conversations with clergy. Similarly, the questions and considerations are drawn from the sourced rituals as well as input from clergy who have incorporated queer consideration already into their approach. The historical analysis draws from research into the scholarship and other guides that have been created on the topic of Jewish ritual.

The guide begins with a list of key terminology around gender and queerness. Understanding these terms should help clergy in creating rituals for and with queer Jews. This list is followed by two chapters, one for each of the life-cycle moments focused on in this guide.

Chapter 1 addresses the earliest life-cycle ritual in Judaism, Covenant Rituals. I discuss how these rituals have progressed in recent years. I explore the work of feminist ritual and how it can be a source of inspiration to create queer rituals. I then discuss the role of circumcision in the ritual and the various perspectives queer Jews have on the topic. I discuss Brit Milah, Simchat Bat, and Brit Shalom as separate rituals as well as drawing the links between them. The chapter then transitions from background knowledge to the suggestions for adapting Covenant Rituals for queer Jews. I present questions for clergy to consider, nuances that should be understood, and prayers/blessings used in the rituals written in Nonbinary Hebrew. In this section of the chapter, I explain the choices I made in adapting the Hebrew, including a discussion on God language.

Chapter 2 focuses on the life-cycle ritual that usually follows Covenant, Bet Mitzvot. While there is a discussion of the history and development of the ritual, there is less on queer theory and creating queer ritual since this is addressed in Chapter 1. Additionally, the

comments on considerations and adapting the ritual are focused solely on Bet Mitzvot because the discussion of how to work with families and participants who are queer in Chapter 1 is similar to Bet MItzvot. This chapter includes an explanation of how I came to choose Bet Mitzvot as a term, the elements of the ritual where gender plays a role and how to adapt them, and Nonbinary Hebrew versions of the prayers from the style guide.

I chose to discuss Covenant rituals because gender and sex play such a significant role in the ritual, and it seems to have fewer materials created for it than the other life-cycle rituals. I then added Bet Mitzvot because it is the next chronologically and I hope to continue to build on this project in the future. The naming of the ritual for Bet Mitzvot has also been one of the more prominent conversations in liberal Judaism around queer identity and gender in recent years.

I hope this guide will help clergy feel more empowered and confident in working with the growing population of queer Jews in Reform and Progressive Jewish communities. I also hope that this guide will encourage clergy to continue learning. Much of the information contained within this guide will likely become outdated/need clarification as Queer identity continues to evolve and the knowledge around Jewish relationship to gender continues to unfold. None of the lists/recommendations included should be viewed as an exhaustive list.

Key Concepts and Terminology

The Difference between Sex and Gender

Sex and gender are often used synonymously when they should not be. Sex describes a person's sexual characteristics which are solely physiological. For example, when a form asks for someone's "sex" and lists the options of "man" or "woman." The appropriate sex terms would be "male" and "female" as well as "intersex" for someone who does not fit into the binary. This is because "man" and "woman" refer specifically to people and have a cultural connotation. Male and Female solely reference biological characteristics and can apply to any species. Gender is distinct from sex but is informed and influenced by a person's sex. See the below descriptions of terminology for further explanation on these categories and how they are utilized in this guide.

Terminology:[6][7]

Gender

A classification that describes a person's social role or category, encompassing both gender identity and gender expression. For rituals, gender is often used as the basis for what is performed or included. It is important to discuss with those involved, children and family, if and how they want gender disclosed as part of the ritual and accompanying documentation.

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[6] Any definition of queer terminology is problematic as conflicting information can be found from reputable sources. Queer people are by no means a monolith nor is there one central source for understanding. These descriptions are based on both my research as well as my lived experience as a queer person. I have attempted to address perspectives beyond my own; however, to address all possible viewpoints is beyond the scope of this project and likely not possible. Additionally, there are many more terms which I could have included. Please consult the additional resources referenced and continue learning.

[7] Definitions are my own wording with influence from the resources listed at the end of this section. The order is intentional to build a basis of understanding on how each term relates to one another.

Sex

A classification based on a person's anatomical sexual characteristics. Male, Female, or Intersex are the terms used. Sex might be separate from a person's gender identity or gender expression.[8] A person's sex is often determined first by a doctor at birth; however, this might not be an accurate classification and might not align with the sex of a person at the time of a ritual if the person has undergone any form of transition to alter their sexual characteristics.[9] A person's sex can impact which rituals are performed and the content, particularly around birth or those involving a *mikveh* (see the chapter on covenant rituals for more information). A person's sex is often more private knowledge than gender and should only be disclosed to others when necessary and with permission.

Gender Identity

A person's understood sense of self and lived experience. This might or might not align with a person's gender expression or sex. There are many terms someone might use to describe their gender identity. These include both binary (man/woman) and nonbinary identities.

[8] The relationship between sex and gender is an active conversation in Queer studies. According to a study from 2011, "research indicates that levels of testosterone can be socially modulated."Emma F. Jackson, and Kay Bussey, "Broadening Gender Self-categorization Development to Include Transgender Identities," *Social Development 32*, no. 1 (2023): 19. https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12635.

[9] For more information on medical transitioning and gender-affirming care, see "Get the Facts on Gender-Affirming Care," *Human Rights Campaign*, July, 25, 2023. https://www.hrc.org/resources/get-the-facts-on-gender-affirming-care.

Gender Expression

How a person presents their gender to the world. Gender expression is often defined as possessing some combination of masculine, feminine, or androgynous traits. One's gender expression might or might not align with their gender identity or sex.

Transgender/Trans

A person whose gender identity or sex does not align with what was assigned at birth. Whether a person who identifies with a nonbinary gender or is intersex also identifies as transgender varies from person to person based on how these aspects impact their lived reality. This term is frequently shortened to "trans," but this does not change the meaning.

Cisgender

A person whose gender identity or sex aligns with what was assigned at birth. A person who is nonbinary or intersex might identify as cisgender based on their lived reality. For example, a person born intersex whose sex has not changed from the time of birth would technically fit within the definition of cisgender. However, based on their experience in the world might still identify as queer and/or transgender.

Nonbinary

Nonbinary as a term can be used in two ways, either to describe a person's gender identity specifically or as an umbrella term for categorizing identities beyond man and woman.

Nonbinary identities include, but are not limited to: agender, demigirl/boy, nonbinary, genderfluid, and genderqueer.

Gender Nonconforming

A term used to describe a person's gender expression that does not align with conventional expectations of masculinity or femininity and/or does not align with their perceived gender identity. Not all people with a gender nonconforming expression or who identify as gender nonconforming also consider themselves to be transgender.

Gender Neutral

A term used to describe no one specific gender. This term is rarely used to describe a person's gender identity; however, it is often used to describe God language in liturgy that does not assign a gender to God. In this guide, I use nonbinary or gender diverse as descriptors more frequently as some see the term neutrality as more erasure than inclusion.

Gender Diverse

An alternative to gender neutral, this term specifically brings attention to the plurality of genders.

Androgynous/Genderfluid

A term for describing a person's gender expression or identity. When describing expression, it can refer to someone who limits both masculine and feminine expression or someone who

intentionally mixes masculinity and femininity. It can also be used to describe something as having neither a masculine nor feminine quality. The term (sometimes written as androgyne) is also one potential nonbinary identity used by someone to denote having a gender entirely outside the binary or that the person's gender exists within the binary but not solely man or woman (can also be known as genderfluid).

Queer

An umbrella term to describe a person whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity or expression is not heterosexual and/or cisgender. The term is also used by some as a specific identity the way someone might use gay, lesbian, bisexual, nonbinary, transgender, etc.

Intersex

A person with a combination of male and female sexual characteristics and/or underdeveloped or ambiguous sexual characteristics. This term represents a variety of situations in which a person is born and does not fit into the sex binary of male or female. An intersex person might or might not identify as queer and/or transgender.

Neopronouns

An umbrella term for pronouns used by queer and/or trans people that are not he, she, or they. While these are less common, an increasing number of people are choosing to use them. Some examples include: xe/xyr (commonly pronounced zee/zeer), ze/zir or ze/hir (commonly

pronounced zee/zeer or zee/heer), fae/faer (commonly pronounced fay/fair), ey/em/eir (commonly pronounced aye/em/air), ae/aer (commonly pronounced aye/air).[10]

Covenant Ritual

This is the term I use to refer collectively to the life-cycle rituals of Brit Milah, Simchat Bat, Brit Shalom and other similar rituals. I chose this term instead of Birth rituals (as is used in the CCAR life-cycle guide) because they do not always occur directly after birth. Additionally, aspects of these rituals, such as Hatafat Dam Brit and circumcision, can occur later in one's life. This particularly applies when someone chooses to join into the covenant of the Jewish people (conversion).

Resources for Further Learning:

More Terminology:

https://wou.edu/wp/safezone/files/2014/07/Advanced-Trans-Terminology.pdf

https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/

https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-transgender-people-the-basics

Gender Affirming Care:

https://www.hrc.org/resources/get-the-facts-on-gender-affirming-care

[10] List taken from Scottie Andrew, "A guide to neopronouns, from ae to ze," *CNN*, August 12, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/us/neopronouns-explained-xe-xyr-wellness-cec/index.html.

Intersex people:

https://interactadvocates.org/

NeoPronouns:

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/style/neopronouns-nonbinary-explainer.html

https://www.cnn.com/us/neopronouns-explained-xe-xyr-wellness-cec/index.html

Chapter 1: Covenant Rituals

Brit Milah (meaning: "covenant of circumcision") is the ritual of circumcising male infants on the eighth day of their life. Doing so brings the child into the eternal covenant of the Jewish people with God as established with Abraham in Genesis. The first commandment given to Abraham is that he too must circumcise himself and his household.

> 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. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from kin; he has broken My covenant" (Genesis 17: 10-14).

The ritual holds major significance culturally as well as religiously. As Rabbi Mark Washofsky writes in *Jewish Living*: *A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*:

> The ritual removal of the foreskin (*orlah*) has assumed an extraordinary religious significance for Jews. As the forging of the most physical kind of bond between Israel and its God, it is indelible testimony of our identity as a community set apart and distinguished.[11]

In *Motherprayer: the Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky discusses the significance of the ritual, particularly its cultural importance. The book includes a ritual they created around the theme of "partnership in creation" and meant for the "mother and her partner." She writes:

> The ritual is written also to involve a celebrant and a community, for, even though the decision to bear children is a personal family choice, the birth of a child is a communal event. The community should affirm each couple's choice to have children, witness their acceptance of their duties, celebrate their decision, and offer communal support and

[11] Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice*, (New York: URJ Press, 2010), 143.

> encouragement for their endeavors. Every joyously accepted pregnancy sanctifies all of us. [12]

This ritual from Frymer-Kensky demonstrates one potential way for an expansive approach to birth rituals in Judaism that could be presented as an option. This ritual brings a ritual like the one Frymer-Kensky proposes focusing on the successful completion of a pregnancy, and its broader communal significance, rather than on the sex/gender of the baby.

In her article on how Feminist Ritual has made an impact on Brit Milah, Susan P. Fendrick identifies three categories of change which she says, "Jewish life and practice grow out of or [which] respond to Jewish feminism."[13] These are:

1. Parallelism — the emergence of rituals, practices, and even institutions for women that mirror those traditionally for men
2. Access and integration — the full and complete involvement of women in every aspect of Jewish life
3. Transformation — the reshaping and revisioning of Jewish practice and thought, by both women and men, due to women's involvement and in light of Jewish feminism

Rabbi Fendrick states that these three categories have led to the "transformation" of *Brit Milah* through the inclusion of feminine God language, mothers' prayers, or speeches highlighting complicated viewpoints toward circumcision.

The ceremony typically includes blessings, prayers, and the naming of the child, providing a profound spiritual and communal experience for the family and community. It can be performed anywhere, such as the home, synagogue, hospital, doctor's office, or a communal space. Traditionally, it involves a handful of special roles, such as the *mohel*, *kvatter* and

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[12] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer: the Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*, (New York : Riverhead Books, 1996), 62-68.

[13] Susan P. Fenderick, "Jewish Feminist Ritual and Brit Milah," Ritualwell, last modified March, 2005, https://ritualwell.org/ritual/jewish-feminist-ritual-and-brit-milah/.

kvatterin, a *sandak/sandakit*, as well as a chair designated as Elijah's chair (see later in the chapter for nonbinary terminology). The *mohel* is the person who performs the physical act of circumcision, often a doctor today. The *kvatter* and *kvatterin*[14] are tasked with beginning the ceremony by carrying in the baby on a pillow. After this, the baby is placed upon Elijah's chair, dedicated as such because (as in other Jewish rituals like the *Seder*) Elijah is believed to be 'present' at the ritual.[15] The *sandak/sandakit*[16] is brought in to hold the baby while the *mohel* performs the circumcision. Additionally, the sandak/sandakit may be given additional roles, including offering a blessing. See later in this chapter for nonbinary Hebrew versions of the blessings recited during the ceremony. There are three steps to the circumcision itself: cutting the foreskin (*milah*), cutting the membrane surrounding the glans (*peri'ah, instituted by the Rabbis, see below*), and cleaning the wound of blood (*metzitzah*).[17]

Circumcision:

The role of circumcision in the ritual is not something that all agree with. Rabbi Fendrick explains:

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[14] An honorific role often performed by parents or grandparents. The term is Yiddish, and probably comes from the term "K'fater" which means "like the father."

[15] There are various explanations for why the chair is dedicated to Elijah. One is the idea that he will herald the Messiah and perhaps that is this child. Another is that Elijah is seen as the guardian of the covenant. Some rituals will add or substitute a chair for Miriam, following the lead of Miriam's cup being added to the Passover Seder. See Rachel Adelman, "Chapter Ten. Why Is Elijah Invited To The Brit Milah?," *The Return of the Repressed*, (Boston: Brill, 2009) for more information about these and other reasons.

[16] The origin of sandak (sandek in Yiddish) has two possibilities, according to the Encyclopaedia Judaica. The first is that the root is the word sydicos, meaning patron, which is related to the English word syndicate. The alternative is that the origin is the root synteknos, meaning companion of the father, similar to the role of godfather that has developed in Christian ceremonies. "Sandak." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 10. Vol. 18. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. *Gale eBooks*. https://link-gale-com.huc.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX2587517469/GVRL?u=hebrewuc11&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=0850045a.

[17] Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice,* 145.

> Some feminists engage deeply with the question of whether to circumcise at all, reflecting both a desire to avoid inflicting unwarranted pain on their children and, on the other hand, a belief that there may be irreducible and unjustified male bias and privilege reflected in the institution of ritual circumcision.[18]

In her dissertation *Brit Without Milah: Jewish Responses to Ritual Circumcision in Canada and the United States*, Lindsay Jackson explores Jews who choose not to circumcise their children. She connects these experiences to the lessening impact of ritual over recent decades on all faiths.[19] She writes:

The decision to circumcise or not to circumcise is about more than one ritual decision. It is about how families navigate and negotiate religion. It is about how religious communities respond to change. It is about how religious people find ways of connecting with their religion in innovative and creative ways. It is about how religious people navigate their conflicting identities. And finally, it is about the wider cultural values and trends that impact religious ritual.[20] …By tinkering with tradition, non-circumcision Jews, and the rabbis who officiate non-cutting rituals, are expanding the ways parents can engage with Judaism. They are finding novel ways of maintaining Jewish tradition. Creating new welcoming rituals does not erode tradition; rather, it provides additional avenues for engagement.[21]

Circumcision controversy is not a modern phenomenon. Based on discussions found in both early Rabbinic texts and medieval texts, Bar-Ilan University Sociology and Anthropology Professor Nissan Rubin analyzes the development of circumcision from around the second century BCE to the second century CE.[22] He describes a practice known as *meshikhat orlah* (the drawing down of the foreskin a.k.a. 'decircumcision'). He claims that it was a known practice for Israelites during this time so that they could better assimilate into Hellenistic society. This

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[18] Fenderick, "Jewish Feminist Ritual and Brit Milah."
[19] Lindsey Jackson, "Brit Without Milah: Jewish Responses to Ritual Circumcision in Canada and the United States" (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2002) 47-48.
[20] Jackson,, "Brit Without Milah: Jewish Responses to Ritual Circumcision in Canada and the United States." 132
[21] Jackson,, "Brit Without Milah: Jewish Responses to Ritual Circumcision in Canada and the United States." 142
[22] See *Yevamot 72a* and Rubin, Nissan *Time and life cycle in Talmud and Midrash: Socio-anthropological Perspectives* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008), 53. Additionally, Rubin claims *Kelalei ha-MIlah* by R. Jacob ha-Gozer and R. Gershom ha-Gozer to be the first written mention found of circumcision laws.

practice is what influenced the early rabbinic regulations on circumcision. He writes, "The intention of the Rabbis was to make decircumcision no longer a feasible undertaking for Hellenizing Jews."[23] Despite these early developments, however, Rubin also claims that circumcision became less of a controversial topic. The issue was not raised again after the *Bar Kokhba* Revolt until the *haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) in the late 18th/early 19th centuries.[24]

Brit Shalom:

Brit Shalom ceremonies are rituals where circumcision could be an option for the baby but no genital alteration occurs. Guides for these rituals, as well as a directory of practitioners, have been created and are available online through Bruchim.[25] According to their website, "Bruchim advocates for the open inclusion of those who feel differently about the circumcision tradition."[26] Bruchim's website also addresses the difference between Brit Shalom and a Baby Naming ceremony. They explain:

> Many American Jewish parents have their babies circumcised in the hospital, without any ritual, alongside their non-Jewish peers—a trend that began in the mid-20th century. When we talk about Jewish naming ceremonies for boys, it's generally code indicating that there's been a hospital circumcision. This convention, though it doesn't adhere to Jewish law, is widely accepted in Reform and other progressive movements of Judaism…
> Brit shalom is specifically for babies who are not circumcised. What's the difference and why does the distinction matter? For many non-circumcising Jews, it comes down to spiritual authenticity, honesty and openness.[27]

[23] Rubin, *Time and life cycle in Talmud and Midrash: Socio-anthropological Perspectives*, 53.
[24] Rubin, *Time and life cycle in Talmud and Midrash: Socio-anthropological Perspectives*, 53.
[25] "Mark D. Reiss, M.D. Inclusion Directory," Bruchim, https://bruchim.online/inclusion-directory/.
[26] "Home Page," Bruchim, https://www.bruchim.online/.
[27] "What Is Brit Shalom?" Bruchim, https://www.bruchim.online/what-is-brit-shalom/.

This explanation from Bruchim addresses the significance in how a ritual is marketed and framed. It acknowledges the similarities with Baby Naming ceremonies while also identifying how having a Brit Shalom ceremony specifically adds meaning to the ritual for families.

How Bruchim's site explains Covenant ritual is also a strong example of queer inclusion. In discussing who Brit Shalom rituals are for, they frame the question in a queer-forward manner. Rather than questioning if the ritual is for "boys" they ask, "Is Brit Shalom Just for Babies Assigned Male at Birth?" The answer provided to this question similarly demonstrates queer-inclusive language:

> Absolutely not! Brit shalom was originally conceived to be a male-only alternative to brit milah. However, modern notions about gender and equality are changing the way many of us look at Jewish ritual — and brit shalom is no exception. Some non-circumcising families may wish to have a brit shalom regardless of their child's anatomical gender. Also, some babies are born intersex (have a combination of male and female biological traits). For families of such children, or for those families who prefer not to reference gender, brit shalom is an option.[28]

This is a great example of how to discuss Covenant rituals in a queer-inclusive way. It acknowledges the distinction between sex and gender, even including a discussion of those born intersex.[29]

Simchat Bat/Baby Naming:

While Brit Milah refers to a boy or male-bodied child, the ritual for girls or female-bodied children is today often called either a Baby Naming or a *Simchat Bat* ("rejoicing in a

[28] Bruchim, "What Is Brit Shalom?"

[29] This statement does differ in how I have presented sex and gender in this guide through the use of "anatomical gender." I point this out as an example for how varied the language around queerness can be and that so long as the meaning behind the language acknowledges the complexity around sex and gender beyond traditional binary understandings, it can be a respectful and inviting way to discuss the topic. In these situations, it can be more important for clergy to prioritize an inclusive approach toward language over a hyper-precise approach.

daughter").[30] There is a long tradition of having rituals around naming baby girls; however, the *Simchat Bat* is much more recent. Older rituals went by names such as *Zeved Habat*[31] or *Las Fadas,*[32] dating at least as far back as 1687.[33] *Simchat Bat* performed in liberal Judaism today is attributed to Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso in 1970.[34]

> Before 1970, rituals for naming daughters were male-centered. As Rabbi Ochs explains:
>
> Before there were festive ceremonies for daughters, the baby's father or grandfather was called to the Torah during a morning Torah service, whereupon a prayer for the mother's health and a formulaic blessing stating the baby's name were recited. Quite often, the mother and the baby were not present, and if they were, they played no active role.[35]

What makes the contemporary ritual done by Rabbi Sasso different is turning the ritual into a more celebratory one with the full inclusion of all parents. Rabbi Ochs herself was present at this ceremony. According to her description:

> The new parents washed their daughter's feet and wrapped her in the tallit that had been their wedding *huppah* (canopy). Then they passed her from one grandparent to another—even a great-grandmother!—and each welcomed her into the covenant and struggled through tears to give her their blessings. We smiled when her older brother, a toddler, patted her head. There were the grandparents' tears, the sweet baby, and an intense awareness of life being a fragile, precious gift, one that called for Jewish

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[30] Other common names that may be used include Brit Banot/Brit Bat and Zeved Ha-bat. Zeved Ha-bat had more frequent usage in past decades but still can be found today. See discussion later in this chapter.

[31] "A 'zeved', is a gift, as emerges from the verse in Torah where the matriarch Leah names her son Zevulun, explaining, 'God has endowed me with a good dowry (zeved)' (Genesis 30:20). In the following verse we are told, 'And afterwards she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah'. The word zeved is a contraction of the first two letters of 'Zevulun' and the first letter of 'Dina'. In choosing the name 'zeved', the parents give expression to their sentiment that their daughter is a gift from God."
Also note: Zeved Habat can be used today, particularly in Israel, to refer to a ceremony more similar to a Simchat Bat. From Ochs, *Inventing Jewish ritual*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 23.

[32] A ceremony dating to Medieval Spain. For more information, see Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Historic Rituals for Welcoming Jewish Daughters," My Jewish Learning, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/welcoming-jewish-daughters/.

[33] There is a ceremony for Zeved Habat/Fasas found in a Portuguese prayerbook from 1687. From Dovi Seldowitz, "Zeved HaBat / Simḥat Bat (The Gift of a Daughter): A Ceremony Guide to the Naming of a Jewish Girl," The Open Siddur Project, December, 15, 2021, https://opensiddur.org/?p=41486.

[34] Rabbi Sandy Sasso is the first woman ordained from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the first to serve a Conservative congregation. From Ochs, *Inventing Jewish ritual*, 2.

[35] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish ritual,* 23.

> blessings of thanksgiving. Here, Jews were treating the birth of a girl as a joyous public celebration and not as a nonevent or, worse, a disappointment.[36]

In this description, Rabbi Ochs does more than lay out the events of the ritual. She highlights the emotion present as well as the significance of the event. This ritual is another example of how Feminist Ritual has impacted Jewish tradition and paved the way for the rituals of today.

Simchat Bat ceremonies themselves are unique as an example of Jewish ritual to turn to for inspiration in the crafting of queer ritual because of how they evolved from a place where there was not any ritual like it before. Debra Nussbaum Cohen explains this in her 2001 book dedicated entirely to baby Jewish girls. She writes:

> There is a level of egalitarianism around *simchat bat* ceremonies unlike that around any other Jewish ritual, probably because so few of us, no matter what our denomination or level of Jewish involvement, grew up seeing rabbis lead welcoming ceremonies for girls. We don't feel so much that we are breaking from a Jewish tradition as much as we are building on it, extending it, creating the next chapter of our prayer books. The fact that we are all, essentially, beginners in creating this ritual of celebration and sanctification for our daughters has permitted a great unleashing of liturgical creativity.[37]

Cohen saw her guide as showing the importance of the work surrounding *Simchat Bat*, showcasing what has been created, and aiding others in the further construction of ritual. My hope with this guide is to do the same for Queer rituals. Cohen's guide displays the need for this work as well because, while it has a section devoted to "Gay and Lesbian Parents", there is not a conversation around gender.[38]

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[36] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish ritual,* 22.

[37] Debra Nusbaum Cohen, *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls into the Covenant*, (United States: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 4.

[38] I believe this to be because the popularity and acceptability of the conversations are more recent).

Queer Considerations:

Although Rabbi Washofsky's guide, published in 2010, includes a section on contemporary "special considerations,"[39] queer considerations are not a part of this list. As such, the following section contains special considerations for clergy and communities to take into account. This should not be viewed as an exhaustive list. It will also, undoubtedly, one day become outdated/need clarification as queer identity continues to evolve and the knowledge around Judaism's relationship to gender continues to unfold.

The goal of this section is to provide guidelines for creating rituals that have an open, creative approach to gender. As a categorical term, I am calling this "queer ritual," however, these considerations can (and I believe should) be applied to working with anyone when constructing rituals around birth. Queer parents are not the only people who may desire to raise their children without a focus on gender.[40] Various clergypeople I spoke with in preparing this section shared how a variety of people, including 'straight' individuals, are choosing to limit the use of gender in their ceremonies.

Furthermore, queer people may not desire to have a non-traditional or nonbinary usage of gender in a ritual. Binary notions of gender may be essential for them. For some transmen or transwomen, using binary language is what allows them to see the ritual as legitimizing their

[39] Ochs, *Inventing Jewish ritual,* 146-147.

[40] Examples of ways in which children are raised without a focus on gender include:

- Not using gender specific language such as not referring to the child as a boy or girl
- Not enforcing gender-specific colors or societal norms
- Exposing children to a variety of clothes, media, toys, and friends not limited by gender
- Creating rules based on developmental level rather than seeing any chore or boundary as being gender-specific

identity. For others, their lived experience grappling with gender may lead them to want a less traditional approach.

Often, people seeking the guidance of clergy are doing so because they already feel like they should have access to Jewish communities and spaces. Thus, this is about more than creating simply 'inclusive' rituals. This is about creating experiences that allow people to feel celebrated and affirmed by all aspects of the ritual. The challenge placed before clergy is being knowledgeable and equipped with the ability to address the growing diversity of gender. This means having a variety of options around the language used; both for English and for Hebrew.

When working with anyone seeking assistance for a birth ritual, a clergyperson should first ask a general question about how the petitioner wants to approach gender in the ritual, such as:

1. Have you thought about how traditional or creative you want the ritual to be?
2. Have you thought about the role of gender in the baby naming? If not, let's discuss it a little…

Those seeking clergy usually come in with their assumptions about what may or may not be possible. Raising this question with everyone is important because the needs of a person are not always apparent, and assumptions should not be made. Additionally, there are a growing number of individuals who may present as cisgender (and identify as cis) who use more than one pronoun (i.e. he/they; she/they; any pronouns). These individuals may not think that there are options they can choose from and, were the question not raised, never ask for options. Explicitly inviting gender into the conversation challenges the general association of religion

and traditionalism. It communicates that the clergyperson will not judge them and invites them to bring into the ritual a part of their identity that they may have otherwise left at the door.

As with any conversation or intake around a ritual, it is incumbent upon the clergyperson to be responsive to those in front of them. Based on how someone responds to this initial question should dictate what, if any, of the following questions should be asked. While some of the following questions may not be asked in the conversation, clergy should have a strong sense on how those they are working with would answer..

1. How should we refer to each person with a role in the ritual? (Parent? Mom/Dad? Aunt/Uncle/Other[41] etc.)
2. How should we refer to the child?
3. How should we employ Hebrew in regards to gender? (see comments about Hebrew usage below)
4. Is there anyone who will be present who is not aware of/not comfortable with how we have discussed gender playing a role? Should there be considerations or accommodations made for these people or Is it enough to know this dynamic exists?

Regarding Brit Milah:

1. Does the parent(s) want a circumcision to be performed?
2. If not, has an alternative form of drawing blood (i.e. Hatafat Dam Brit) or other ritual been considered?

[41] There are a variety of names that people choose to be called that do not connotate gender; though no one specific term that I have been able to find with widespread common usage. For a good list of options, see "Language," A Gender Agenda Inc, https://genderrights.org.au/faq_type/language/.

3. Are the parent(s) aware of how not having a circumcision performed may impact the child's acceptance in more traditional communities or their ability to make aliyah?

Hatafat Dam Brit:

Hatafat dam brit is an alternative ritual to circumcision. Traditionally, the ritual has consisted of the drawing of blood from the remnant of a male's foreskin for an already-circumcised male going through conversion. A more recent innovation of the ritual includes drawing blood from anywhere on the body. This allows the ritual to be accessible to those without a penis as well as those with a penis who are not comfortable with blood being drawn from it. Often, this is offered to those undergoing conversion; however, this could also be a potential option for birth. This should be discussed with the mohel/moyel/moheleh about safe options.

A note on Conversion:

Birth rituals are a ceremony and process celebrating a young human's entering into the eternal covenant of the Jewish people. This is a similar goal to rituals surrounding conversion. Thus, turning to how gender has been approached in this process is useful. Conversations around circumcision are also a part of conversion. When or if to require circumcisions is not a settled conversation. The dynamics surrounding sex and gender require additional considerations.

Is circumcision solely about the penis? Is a ritual necessary for "men" regardless of anatomy? Should Reform Judaism move away from connecting rituals affirming the covenant with gender/sex altogether? Is it appropriate for a clergyperson to demand of anyone what be

done to their body? My goal is not to definitively answer these questions, but rather to offer alternative options.

Sha'ar Zahav, a San Francisco synagogue under the leadership of Rabbi Mychal Copeland, encourages all those who go through conversion to consider Hatafat Dam Brit, regardless of gender or anatomy. She explains various ways the ritual can be performed. She writes:

> Individuals with a penis may choose to have the spot of blood drawn from the shaft of the penis or from the foreskin (whether they are circumcised or not). Individuals with a clitoris may choose to have the spot of blood drawn from the hood of the clitoris (being most anatomically similar to the foreskin) or the outer labia, anything in the region except the clitoris itself. An alternative all individuals can consider is to have the spot of blood drawn from the heel of the foot, finger, thigh, or other part of their bodies. While these rituals are strongly encouraged and have deep resonance in Jewish tradition, we respect everyone's choice to participate in these options or not.[42]

While choosing not to circumcise a baby is a more complex decision similar options could be presented to parents as alternatives to a circumcision at birth.

Gender diversity/Gender Neutral Hebrew:

Regarding Hebrew usage in general, it is not necessarily the best practice to make all of the options discussed below available. For those less familiar with Hebrew, it can be daunting to present them with different choices in how to employ Hebrew in a non-traditional way. Rather, a clergyperson should first ask if there is a desire for non-traditional Hebrew and then discern if these options should be presented. Or, if the clergyperson should decide on their own.

[42] From the language Rabbi Mychal Copeland uses with conversion candidates.

Other considerations of familiarity can impact the usage of Hebrew. Someone who desires a non-traditional option should be asked about whether they want this to apply to any prayers or blessings that they wish for either themselves and/or the community to chant or sing. There are some already constructed melodies for prayers using Nonbinary Hebrew[43] and others could be created. However, the reality that it will be more challenging for people to participate should be discussed and understood. One option could be to use non-traditional Hebrew in prayers that will be read and to use traditional Hebrew in songs or sung liturgy. Three common ways of using Hebrew beyond solely masculine or feminine include

1. Nonbinary Hebrew (from the Nonbinary Hebrew Project)
2. 3rd Person Masculine
3. Intentionally mixing gender in conjugation (i.e. masculine noun with feminine verb)

Nonbinary Hebrew:

My recommendation would be to default to using the Nonbinary Hebrew Project. Tools for writing/converting a text into Nonbinary Hebrew are free and easily accessible on the project's website.[44] I recommend this system because it is finding widespread usage, including

[43] Ze'evi Berman, "Maariv Chatimot in Nonbinary Hebrew," https://www.nonbinaryhebrew.com/_files/ugd/301aa6_115c492ec1bd42bda5b852788c846d8f.pdf and Ze'evi Berman," Melody for Maariv Chatim," Video, from 1:09:40-1:10:23, Facebook, October 30, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/BeitSimchatTorah/videos/1249538312069071,

[44] Lior Gross and Eyal Rivlin, Nonbinary Hebrew Project, https://www.nonbinaryhebrew.com/.

in the creation of siddurim[45] and by the CCAR Press.[46] I personally find this affirming because it pushes past the binary of Hebrew. It adds a third grammar system, rather than just creatively using the binary system. However, as discussed, what works for one queer person should not be assumed to work for all. Thus, it is important for there to be other options available.

The Nonbinary Hebrew project system uses the segol (אֶ) vowel as the basis for conjugation. Rabbi Hazzan Gabrielle Pescador offers a beautiful way of approaching the use of segol. She writes:

> The various vowel points have a potent relationship to particular sephirot. The segol relates to chesed, unconditional love. Rabbi Aaron Raskin, who writes on the spiritual powers of Hebrew letters, also sees the 3 dots as a sign in itself and states that just as the segol is made up of three points, the people of Israel are composed of Kohanim, Levites, and Israelites." So this vowel is a symbol of unification, which is so fitting in creating non-binary language.[47]

I have found a variety of routes that others have chosen to take in regard to altering the language surrounding God in regard to gender. For example, some choose to leave Eloheinu seeing it as a formal name for God and less one of gender.[48] Others choose to go with different options based on the Nonbinary Hebrew Project. Some go with Elohimoteinu, treating the word Elohim as 3rd person plural and thus using the nonbinary 3rd person plural ending. Others choose Eloteinu, the nonbinary 3rd person singular form of Elohim, reflecting how words conjugated with Elohim are traditionally written as 3rd person singular.

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[45] brin solomon, *Siddur Davar Ḥadash*, last modified March 31, 2024, https://inclusivesiddur.com/index.html?contrast=standard. and Adam Zagoria-Moffet, Isaac Treuherz, and Noam Sienna, "Siddur Masorti," The Open Siddur Project, March 17, 2020, https://opensiddur.org/compilations/liturgical/siddurim/weekday-siddur/siddur-masorti-2019/.

[46] Rabbi Linda Joseph and Rabbi Evan Schultz, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly,* Fall 2023 (December 2023).

[47] Lior Gross and Eyal Rivlin, "Resources," Nonbinary Hebrew Project, https://www.nonbinaryhebrew.com/resources.

[48] brin solomon, *Siddur Davar Hadash*, xviii.

I have chosen to use the nonbinary form of Eloteinu for God. I use nonbinary Hebrew because it is less familiar. It is easier to change Eloteinu back to Eloheinu if someone does not wish to change the language on God. I decided on Eloteinu because I believe it is more in line with how Elohim traditionally functions. However, this is not an endorsement of this option over other ways of referencing God. The Nonbinary Hebrew Project website, where many choose to publish the resources they are creating using the system, includes many options. I believe God language should be decided by each clergyperson and/or those they are working with.

Ways of referring to God in English:[49]

Spirit of the universe	Spring of life	Awakener, life of all worlds
Sacred flame	Generous Creatrix	Nameless and Infinite
The Way	Holy breath	Fabulous One
Weaver of being	Blazing One	Many Named One

בְּרוּךְ אָתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשְׁתַנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוְתָנוּ...

3rd Person Masculine Plural:

If Nonbinary Hebrew does not work, or another option for consideration is desired, conjugating the Hebrew in the 3rd person masculine plural is an option. Some prefer this

[49] From Rabbi Mychal Copeland, "A Template Baby Naming," brin solomon, *Siddur Davar Hadash*, and Dori Midnight and Randy Furash-Stewart, "Queer Morning Blessings," Video, 4:02, Vimeo, 2021, https://vimeo.com/458381618.

method because it uses the Hebrew equivalent of “they” in a singular context. This also can be seen as a more neutral choice given that it is already used in Hebrew as a non-gendered way to refer to a mixed group.

Mixing Binary Hebrew:

I first came across the method of reverse conjugating binary Hebrew when living in Israel. One of my main hobbies often includes people wearing pronoun patches/badges on their clothing. There were three options made available at events I attended in Israel:

הוא, היא, הוא/היא (he, she, he/she)

This option works well for those fluent in Hebrew.

Additional Terminology:

Man/Woman	Nonbinary	Role
Mohel/Mohelet	Moheleh, mohelimot	Performs body ritual
Kvatter/Kvatterin	Kvattereh, Kvatterimot	Grandparent- holds baby
Sandak/ Sandeket	Sandakeh, Sandakiyot	Godparent - holds baby
Abah/Imah	הוֹרֶת/Horeh הוֹרִימוֹת/Horimot	Parent/Parents
Father/Mother	Birth Parent Nurturing Parent	These are two options to refer to parents in a non-gender specified way and could apply to the variety of avenues a person becomes a parent (biologically, adoption, surrogacy, etc.).

Key Blessings:[50]

Kiddush

Option 1: Nonbinary Hebrew[51] בְּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרַאת פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן Bruche ateh Adonai Elotheinu Malcheh ha'Olam, borat p'ri hagafen Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe who blesses the fruit of the vine.
Option 2: Alternative non-gendered[52] נְבָרֵךְ אֶת עֵין הַחַיִים, אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא/ת פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן N'varech et eyn hachaim, Eloheinu ruach ha'Olam borei/boret p'ri hagafen We bless you, Spring of Life, Our God, Spirit of the universe, who blesses the fruit of the vine.

Shehechiyanu

Option 1: Nonbinary Hebrew בְּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָתָנוּ וְקִיְמָתָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָתָנוּ לַזְמַן הַזֶּה Bruche ateh Adonai Eloteinu Malcheh ha'Olam, shehecheyatenu v'kiyimatenu v'higiyatenu lazman hazeh Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has kept us alive and sustained us and enabled us to reach this season.

[50] Prayers I've chosen to include are derived from Rabbi Mychal Copeland, "A Template Baby Naming," as well as what is included in "Birth," *L'chol Z'man V'eit/For Sacred Moments: CCAR Life-Cycle Guide*, (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2015), 3-58.

[51] Hebrew from "Applied Uses," Nonbinary Hebrew Project. Much of the Hebrew found in these prayers has been drawn from resources found on this site, including R' Sam Luckey, "Sukkah Blessings," Nonbinary Hebrew Project, Noah Lerman, "A Non-Binary Approach to Brit Milah and Baby Naming," 2019, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JrTcG-fZCA_EgYtla3qmSICxMBSRcIl3xgemtxJu57c/edit as well as sources without a listed author. I have also referenced the work of Thursday Bram, *A Haggadah of Our Own*, Thursday Bram LLC., 2019.

[52] Rabbi Mychal Copeland, "A Template Baby Naming," English translation is my own

Option 2: Alternative gender neutral[53]

נְבָרֵךְ אֵת עֵין הַחַיִים, אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה

Nevarech et Eyn ha-Chayim, Eloheinu ruach ha-olam shehechiyanu, v'kiyimanu, v'higianu lazman hazeh

We bless you, Ruler (eye) of Life, Our God, Spirit of the universe, who has kept us alive and sustained us and enables us to reach this season.

Birkat HaGomel

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְכֵּךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַגּוֹמֶלֶה לְחַיָּבִימוֹת טוֹבִימוֹת שֶׁגָּמְלֶנִי כָּל טוֹב

Bruche ateh Adonai Eloteinu Malcheh ha'Olam, haGomeleh, ha-gomeleh l'chayavimot tovimot, she-gamleni kol tov.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who bestows kindness on those who are committed, and who has granted to me all kindness.

The congregation responds:

מִי שֶׁגָּמְלֵךְ כֹּל טוֹב הֶא יִגְמְלֵךְ כֹּל טוֹב סֶלָה

Mi she gamleche kol tov, heh yig'm'leche kol tov, selah.

May the One who has granted you all kindness always grant kindness to you, selah.

Chair of Elijah prayer - *no changes needed*, *all gender is 1st person or 3rd person in reference to Elijah.*

[53] Rabbi Mychal Copeland, "A Template Baby Naming," English translation is my own

Mi Shibeirach for Parent

מִי שֶׁבָּרַךְ אבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ, אַבְרָהָם, יִצְחָק, וְיַעֲקֹב, שָׂרָה, רִבְקָה, רחֵל וְלֵאָה

Mi Shibeirach for Child/Priestly Blessing

יְבָרֶכְךָ יְיָ וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ. יָאֵר יְיָ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָּ. יִשָּׂא יְיָ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם.

Welcoming blessing - child

בְּרוּךְ הַבָּאָה בְּשֵׁם יְיָ. Bruche HaBa’eh b’shem Adonai
In a synagogue continue בֵּרַכְנוּךְ מִבֵּית יְיָ.

Entering the Covenant - Brit Milah

Before circumcision/ritual - this could be used for Hatafat Dam Brit בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשְׁתָּנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוָּתָנוּ עַל הַמִּילָה/לָמוּל אֶת הַגֵּרִים.
After circumcision/ritual בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשְׁתָּנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוָּתָנוּ לְהַכְנִיסָה בִּבְרִיתָה שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ וְשָׂרָה אִמֵּנוּ/עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Washing the feet

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם זוֹכֶרֶה הַבְּרִית בִּרְחִיצַת רַגְלַיִם.

Candle Blessing

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם זוֹכֶרֶת הַבְּרִית בְּהַדְלָקַת נֵרוֹת

Tallit Blessing

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם זוֹכֶרֶה הַבְּרִית בְּעֲטִיפָה בַּצִּיצִת

Mi Shibeirach for newly circumcised child

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אבוֹתֵינוּ אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ שָׂרָה, רִבְקָה, רָחֵל וְלֵאָה, הֶא יְבָרֵךְ אֶת־הַיַּלְדָּה הַרַּכָּה הַנִּמּוֹלָה וְיִרְפָּאָה אוֹתָהּ רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה. וְיִזָּכֶה אָבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לְגַדְּלָהּ ,לְחַנְּכָהּ וּלְחַתְּנָהּ. וְיִהְיוּ יָדֶיהָ וְלִבָּהּ לְאֵלָה אֱמוּנָה. וְנֹאמַר: אָמֵן.

Eloheinu blessing - naming

אֱלֹתֵינוּ וֵאלֹתֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ, קָמָה אֶת הַיַּלְדָּה הַזֹּאת} לְהוֹרֶת/לְהוֹרִימוֹת ,{וְיִקָּרֵאָה שָׁמָּה בְּיִשָּׂרֵאל _____. {יִשְׂמְחָה הָהוֹרֶת בְּיוֹצֵאָה חָלְצֶיהָ וְיָגֵלָּה לְהוֹרֶתָהּ בִּפְרִי בִטְנָהּ} זֹאת הַקָּטֹנָה, גְּדוֹלָה יִהְיֶה כְּשֵׁם שֶׁנִּכְנְסָה לַבְּרִית, כֵּן יִכָּנֶסָה לְתוֹרָה וּלְחֻפָּה וּלְמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים.

Hodu L’Adonai

הוֹדוּ לַיְיָ כִּי־טוֹבָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ. תַּרְבִּינָה שְׂמָחוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, תַּרְבִּינָה בְשׁוֹרוֹת טוֹבוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, תַּרְבִּינָה מִילוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, תַּרְבִּינָה יוֹלְדוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, יִרְבּוּ זְבָדֵי בָנִימוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, תִּרְבֶּה אַהֲבָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה. הַקְּטָנָה יִגְדְּלֶה בַּתּוֹרָה יְחַיֶּה הַיַּלְדָּה לְהוֹרִימוֹתֶיהָ יְהֵא אָחֶת וְהוֹרֶת. כְּשֵׁם שֶׁזָּכִינוּ לַחֲגִיגָתָהּ זֶבֶד הַבַּת, נִזְכֶּה לְהוֹרָתָהּ וּלְחֻפָּתָהּ. הוֹדוּ לְאֵלֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ .וְכֻלְּכֻמֵן בְּרוּכִימוֹת.

Child of Zion

בַּת צִיּוֹן, בַּת בְּרִית, בַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל...בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יי, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם זוֹכֶרֶת הַבְּרִית

Upon Their Birth Piyyut

יְוָנָה, תַּמָּה יְפַהְפִיָּה,
שֶׁנּוֹלְדָה לְזֹאת מִשְׁפַּחְתָּהּ–
יִבָּרֵכֵךְ חַסִינָה יָהּ.
צוּרָה, אֶת הַבַּת תִּשְׁמֹרָה וְחַיֶּיהָ . יִבָּרֵכֵךְ חַסִינָה יָהּ.

וְיִשְׂמְחָה לֵב הוֹרוֹתֶיהָ
בְּגַדְּלָהּ בִּנְעוּרֶיהָ.
יִרְאוּ חֻפָּה אֹהֲבֶיהָ,
בְּשִׂמְחָתָהּ וְטוּב פְּרְיָהּ . יִבָּרֵכֵךְ חַסִינָה יָהּ.

סַנְסִנֵי תָמָר יֹאחֲזוּ.
תּוֹרָתָהּ וּמִצְוָתָהּ יֶחֱזוּ.
יָשִׁישׁוּ גַם יַעֲלֹזוּ
בְּבִרְכַּת רַבָּה עֲלֶיהָ . יִבָּרֵכֵךְ חַסִינָה יָהּ.

Kiddush Peter Rechem

זֶת בֶּתֶּנוּ.
הֶא פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם {לְהוֹרֶת/לְהוֹרִימוֹת,{
}קְדוֹשֶׁה הֶא} לִיְ, בָּכּתוּב:
"קַדֶּשׁ־לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר,
פֶּטֶר כָּל־רֶחֶם, בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,
בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה, לִי הוּא."
וְטוֹב בְּעֵינֵינוּ {לִפְדּוֹתָהּ{
וְהִנֵּה כֶּסֶף {פִּדְיוֹנָהּ וְקִדּוּשָׁהּ.{

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשְׁתָּנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוִּתָנוּ לִרְדוֹף צֶדֶק.

זֶה פֶּ חַת {זֶת},
זֶה חִלּוּף {זֶת},
זֶה מָחוּל {זֶת}.

יִשְׁמְךָ אֱלֹתֵי כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכִמְנַשֶׁה.
יְבָרֶכְךָ יְיָ וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ.
יַאֵרֶה יְיָ פָּנָיֶה אֵלֶיךָ וְיִחֻנֶּךָ.
יִשְׂאֶה יְיָ פָּנָיֶה אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשְׂמֶה לְךָ שָׁלוֹם.

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָתָנוּ וְקִיְמָתָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָתָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

בָּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵאת פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן.

Chomer Lidrosh

גְּדוֹלָה מִילָה, שֶׁאֵין הַתִּנוֹקָה נִכְנָסָה לִמְנַן הַדּוֹרוֹת
אֶלָּא לְמִי שֶׁהָא מָל.

Blessing Between Parents and Children

Children are a Heritage of the Eternal

הִנֵּה נַחֲלַת יְיָ בָּתִים, שָׂכָר פְּרִי הַבָּטֶן.

Chapter 2: Bet Mitzvot

Traditionally, a Bar Mitzvah (meaning "covenant of commandment") is the 'coming-of-age' ritual that acknowledges a Jewish boy reaching the age where they become obligated to all of the commandments of a Jewish adult. In her book, *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted,* Patrica Keer Munro explores the history of the ritual. She writes that the ritual first began to develop in the 12th century where it centered around two components: the father offering a blessing relinquishing his responsibility for his son's religious obligations and the son reciting the blessings surrounding the Torah reading. The 16th century saw the introduction of speeches and accompanying celebrations.[54]

The ritual continued to develop once it reached America being pushed forward by Jewish laity, not by clergy. Munro explains that Jewish leadership initially pushed back, "labeling it [the bar mitzvah] a cliché-driven exercise of conspicuous consumption."[55] However, the ritual persisted. Munro argues that people felt so attached to the ritual because of its ability to bring together American culture and Judaism:

> The ritual itself, including the speech, demonstrated formal loyalty to the Jewish people, explained and interpreted Judaism in the American context, and capped the process of raising a child who was both Jewish and American. The celebration following the ceremony demonstrated another, more obvious, form of success: that of the immigrant who makes good.[56]

Munro presents the ritual as a means of helping Jews who immigrated to America to assimilate into society, providing a touch point between birth and marriage where Jewish parents could feel successful as both a Jew and an American.

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[54] Patricia Keer Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 2.
[55] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*, 3.
[56] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*, 3.

As with Covenant rituals, Munro also identifies feminism to be an influence on the development of the ritual. She writes:

> The effect of second- wave feminism on parents of daughters also had a profound effect on the ritual's meaning. These parents, particularly mothers, wanted their daughters to claim all of Judaism, recognizing that being able to participate fully and equally was not something they could take for granted. Though the nature of the existential concerns have shifted, bar or bat mitzvah still represents a symbolic claim for Jewish identity and affiliation and the bar mitzvah bargain[57] remains central in American Jewish community life.[58]

Munro establishes how the ritual continued to hold significance to Jewish communities up until today. Now, the ritual has evolved to include not only girls but nonbinary children and also adults.

When it comes to looking at this coming-of-age ritual through a queer lens, one of the first questions rests on what to call a ceremony for which bar or bat does not apply. Having a name that affirms the identity of the person at the center of the ritual is key for creating inclusive communities, particularly for a ritual that occurs at such a formative time in a person's life.

Last year, the CCAR took on the task of deciding on a term for the official style guide of the CCAR Press. In an article about this process published in the Fall 2023 edition of the Reform Jewish Quarterly, Rabbis Linda Joseph and Evan Schultz explain well the importance of the task and its place within the formation of Jewish identity. They write:

> We mark their burgeoning independence through ceremony, yet ironically, that ceremony is designed to integrate the child back into Judaism. It is as if to say: you can find your independence—here, in our world. Yet how can that happen when the child

[57] The bar mitzvah bargain is a term Munro uses to refer to how, "rabbis would formally sanction the ceremony with their presence in return for time to educate the children religiously" (Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*, 4).

[58] Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America: Bar and Bat Mitzvah Reinterpreted*, 5.

> does not recognize who they are in the construct of Jewish language? Especially when the words we use do not relate to something as crucial as how the child understands their gender identity? Additionally, how does an adult, who does not identify on the gender binary, affirm their Jewish identity with integrity for an adult ceremony, if our words do not embrace their understanding of self?[59]

The Conservative movement has also identified the need for specific language on this matter. In a Teshuvah on Transgender Jews and Halakhah adopted in 2017 by the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the need for language was included amongst many other comments. It states:

> "Naming and language issues will arise around the time the child reaches the age of mitzvot. Even if we explain that bar mitzvah means "subject to" commandment and not "son of" or "daughter of" anything, the bar mitzvah/bat mitzvah binary is by now so well established that we will need to find a new vocabulary in order to be inclusive of those for whom neither formulation is appropriate."[60]

By mentioning the possibility of keeping the same Hebrew terminology and shifting the emphasis on the translation to be more affirming, this statement gives voice to one of the criticisms against the creation of a new term. However, it also acknowledges the changing landscape of society and concedes that a new term will be needed.

It is difficult to place a timeline on how this conversation and the terms that have been used developed. The above Teshuvah suggests in 2017 the discussion had begun but was still seen as a developing one. The *Times of Israel* reported that the United Kingdom saw the

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[59] Rabbi Linda Joseph and Rabbi Evan Schultz, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly,* Fall 2023 (December 2023): 46-47.

[60] Rabbi Leonard A. Sharzer, "Transgender Jews and Halakhah," Teshuvah from The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, June 7, 2017, 29. https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/transgender-halakhah.pdf.

country's first 'gender-neutral' mitzvah ceremony occur in 2018.[61] In February 2022, the season finale of the HBO series *And Just Like That…* included a "they mitzvah."[62] The CCAR's decision to pose this to the Worship and Practice Committee in 2023 suggests the need for a term had become a pressing issue, the terms in use varied enough across the movement to warrant a standard term, and choosing one required myriad voices.

In the CCAR's quest to find the appropriate term for the style guide, many clergy were surveyed about the terms they used:

> The most popular term seemed to be B'nei Mitzvah, a lot of people used B'Mitzvah, and some used B'rit Mitzvah. Additional names for the ceremony were identified: BeMitzvah (as in be-coming and be-longing); Simchat Mitzvah, Kabbalat Mitzvah, and Nefesh Mitzvah (embodiment of the Mitzvah); Bet Mitzvah (as in the letter bet); Beit Mitzvah (the place of Mitzvah); B'nimot Mitzvah (a compounding of genders); B_ Mitzvah (a fill in the gap option); and B"M. Data was sourced from outside North America as well. In Israel, Rabbi Evan Cohen noted that the colloquial term used is Aliyah laTorah, itself a gender-neutral phrase.[63]

Before I explore the chosen term of Bet Mitzvah, I find it important to discuss the other terms that I did not choose.

I was not surprised to learn the most popular term was Bnei Mitzvah. Before conversations around gender inclusivity arose, it had long been used both to describe a ritual featuring more than one teen or adult as well as a catchall term to describe mitzvah rituals in general. While the term may be the most popular because of this history, some communities have decided to intentionally continue its use and expand the definition. For example, Temple

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[61] Josefin Dolsten, "Non-binary teen celebrates UK's first gender-neutral 'b'nei mitzvah,'" *The Times of Israel*, March 2, 2019, https://www.timesofisrael.com/non-binary-teen-celebrates-uks-first-gender-neutral-bnei-mitzvah/.

[62] Max Gross, "What the 'They Mitzvah' on 'And Just Like That…' Got Wrong About Queerness in Judaism," Hey Alma, February 7, 2022, https://www.heyalma.com/what-the-they-mitzvah-on-and-just-like-that-got-wrong-about-queerness-in-judaism/.

[63] Joseph, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," 47-48.

Bat Yahm in Newport Beach, CA describes Bnei Mitzvah as, "a ceremony for two or more people, the ceremony for someone who identifies non-binary, and it's the generic term for both bar and bat mitzvah at TBY. "[64] However, while some queer Jews do see the term as expansive,[65] others have pushed back against its use.

In the article detailing the CCAR's decision and process. Rabbi Nikki Deblossi[66] is cited for the argument against the use of Bnei Mitzvah. Rabbi Deblossi, "pointed out that inclusive language (such as b'nei) is masculine by default and therefore not inclusive. Additionally, she noted that using both binary genders for someone who is trans may not be accurate to their sense of self."[67]

Brit Mitzvah is another term that the CCAR considered. When I began creating this guide, I favored this term. I thought the connection to Brit Milah created a sense of continuity between the two life-cycle rituals. However, I was swayed by the arguments presented by the CCAR against its use. The main reason cited is the growing aversion to Brit MIlah in Jewish contexts. As discussed in the previous chapter, I've found this to be a relevant challenge, especially amongst queer Jews. I also realized that the continuity approach does not apply to adults who have a bar/bat/bet mitzvah and there are elements of covenant ritual done by

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[64] "B'nai Mitzvah," Temple Bat Yam, https://www.tby.org/bnai-mitzvah.

[65] In their article critiquing the use of "they mitzvah" on *And Just Like That…*, comedian and self-identified queer Jew Max Gross identifies b'nei mitzvah as the term they claim to be widely familiar to Jews and the one which should have been used. They write, "When talking about the "they mitzvah," Charlotte's husband Harry frustratedly exclaims, "Can we please give the old Jews something they recognize?" Actually, we do have something old Jews recognize. A gender-neutral term for bar and bat mitzvahs that already exists: b'nai mitzvah. The Hebrew pronoun "b'nai" is technically plural and masculine, but it serves similarly to how "they/them" in English can be used singularly, too. Even within the gendered language of Hebrew, wiggle room exists" (Gross, "What the 'They Mitzvah' on 'And Just Like That…' Got Wrong About Queerness in Judaism").

[66] Rabbi Nikki Deblossi is identified in the CCAR article as specializing in working with queer Jews (Joseph, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," 49) and she describes her work similarly on her website. Rabbi Nikki Diblsoi, "Home Page," rabbinikki.com.

[67] Joseph, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," 49.

adults as part of conversion. Both of these scenarios are increasingly relevant for working with queer Jews with the growing number of Jews by Choice who are also queer.

Another example of moving away from Bnei Mitzvah is found in a 2022 article published by the prominent, Manhattan Congregation B'nai Jeshrun[68] entitled *B-Mitzvah: A More Inclusive Term for a Jewish Rite of Passage*. The article does not specifically address the problems inherent in the term Bnei Mitzvah, instead highlighting a need for a shift in language:

> We have made the decision to shift some language within our community regarding B'nai Mitzvah. Though Hebrew is a gendered language, we have chosen to implement the term "B-Mitzvah" as a gender-neutral way to refer to the ritual of Bar and Bat Mitzvah (becoming an adult according to a Jewish lens), following in the footsteps of other progressive synagogues that also use the term. In an effort to live our Torah and become an inclusive, welcoming community, we are going to shift the way we speak about one of our most important life-cycle moments.[69]

This statement lays out the positive reasons for changing the terminology but does not offer any reasoning for why B-Mitzvah is the best choice. The discussion of B-Mitzvah in other sources similarly does not offer much reasoning for why this should be the specific terminology.

Bet Mitzvah is the term I settled on because I found it had the strongest support. The CCAR conclusion discussed how Bet Mitzvah serves a similar function to B Mitzvah in being a term that still invokes the familiar bar/bat while broadening the scope of the gender. While it utilizes the Nonbinary Hebrew system which I favor, bet also being the name for the Hebrew letter grounds the term in traditional Hebrew. This is seen through the CCAR also choosing to

[68] The congregation in this article does not discuss "B'nai" still being in the name of the synagogue.
[69] "B-Mitzvah: A More Inclusive Term for a Jewish Rite of Passage," B'nai Jeshurun, June 24, 2022, https://bj.org/b-mitzvah-a-more-inclusive-term-for-a-jewish-rite-of-passage-2/.

go with בMitzvah as an accepted alternative spelling.[70] Ultimately, I decided on Bet Mitzvah because I appreciate how bet is an alternative yet equivalent term for bar and bat.

Queer Considerations:

Aliyot:

While there are not many moments in the contemporary ritual that differ based on gender, how someone is called to the Torah is one of the main places it does. The two most common approaches I have found are to use "m'biet"[71] (from the house of) or "bet" in place of bar or bat in someone's name when calling up someone for an aliyah. I personally prefer the use of bet.[72][73] However, for those who are not as comfortable or in favor of using the Nonbinary Hebrew Project system, m'beit is a strong option. A particular positive of m'beit is that it can be used for anyone regardless of gender.

English Language:

When it comes to referring to the person(s) participating in the ritual, use terms such as adult or teen that do not denote gender unless the gender of the person is clearly known. This includes any family members who may be participating. This can be true even if the person is

[70]Joseph, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," 50.

[71] According to the CCAR article, this practice was first introduced by Dr. Max Strassfield at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, CA, (Joseph, "Finding a New Term: 'Bet Mitzvah'," 48).

[72] Examples for how m'beit and bet can be used include:

1. *Hebrew name* m'beit *Parents' Hebrew Names/*Avraham v'Sarah
2. *Hebrew name* m'beit mishpachah *Parents' Hebrew Names/*Avraham v'Sarah
3. *Hebrew name* bet *Parents' Hebrew Names/*Avraham v'Sarah

[73] Some Jews, particularly queer Jews and Jews by Choice, are electing to use spiritual parental names or include English names of non-Jewish parents in their Hebrew name.

referred to using a traditionally gendered term such as aunt or nephew. There are no universal terms that do not denote gender commonly used. Additionally, parents may not think it safe or appropriate to share information about the gender of family and friends if not prompted.

Terms that can be used:

Gendered	**Gender-neutral**
Sister, brother	Sibling
Mom, Dad	Parent
Son, daughter	Child, eldest, youngest
Ladies and gentlemen	*Chevre*, friends, guests

Gender also frequently plays a role in regard to the inclusion of others within a synagogue or community. Gifts are presented that can be different depending on the gender of the participant(s). Overall, I encourage reconsidering the idea that a gender divide with this custom is needed at all. However, if this is not possible for the community, what gifts are given should be thoughtful. Even if the gender of someone who is not a man or woman is respected in language, the sex or gender assigned at birth can still be used as an influential factor. However, the answer is not to always give a gift that does not align with this. The situation should be addressed on a case-by-case basis with the inclusion of the participant(s).

Tallitot:

Often, tallitot are marketed along gender divisions both in terms of color and style. There are the societal associations of masculine and feminine colors such as blue is for boys and

pink is for girls. The more the tallit strays from the "traditional" black and white, the more feminine it is considered. These include changing the colors and fabrics as well as adding more to the design than only stripes.

In an article exploring the development of tallitot, Rebecca Schulman presents the garment as, "a powerful symbol of the feminist movement in Judaism."[74] Being a heavily male-coded garment, the traditional tallit held an association with male figures and authority. Thus, when women began to wear them, many wanted to make these changes in material and color to deviate from this masculine connotation.

Inclusion of non-Jews in the ritual:

How to be thoughtful about including non-Jewish parents, friends, and family in a Bet Mitzvah is not a new challenge. Each congregation and community has different standards. However, if these non-Jewish individuals identify as queer, it is important to be aware of the heightened impact not being included can have. For many queer people, their relationship with religion may be one of exclusion because of who they are. To then be told they cannot take on a specific role could be especially challenging. Involving them in the ritual as much as possible offers an opportunity for positive religious engagement. For the moments when they are not allowed to participate, this dynamic should at least be understood before having that conversation.

[74] Rebecca Schulman, "Transformation of a Tallitot: How Jewish Prayer Shawls Have Changed Since Women Began Wearing Them," (Women of the Wall, 2016), 17. https://womenofthewall.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-Transformation-of-Tallitot-Rebecca-Shulman.pdf.

Nonbinary Hebrew Adaptations for the CCAR Life-Cycle Guide *L'chol Z'man V'eit*:

Beginning the process

Torah Study Blessing בְּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשְׁתַנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוְתָנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה Bruche ateh Adonai Eloteinu Malcheh ha'Olam, asher kidashtanu v'tzivtanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Presenting a Tallit

Tallit Blessing בְּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשְׁתַנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיהָ וְצִוְתָנוּ לְהִתְעַטֵּף בַּצִיצִית Bruche ateh Adonai Eloteinu Malcheh ha'Olam, asher kidashtanu v'tzivtanu l'hitatef b'tzitzi.

Becoming a Bet Mitzvah and Parent blessing

Scheheyanu בְּרוּךְ אָתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹתֵינוּ מַלְךָ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָתֶנוּ וְקִיְמָתֶנוּ וְהִגִיעָתֶנוּ לַזְמַן הַזֶּה Bruche ateh Adonai Eloteinu Malcheh ha'Olam, shehecheyatenu v'kiyimatenu v'higiyatenu lazman hazeh.

Rabbi's Blessing

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב שָׂרָה, רִבְקָה, רָחֵל, וְלֵאָה, הָא יְבָרְכָה אֶת־___בַּת___ שֶׁהִגִיעָה לְמִצְוֹת, וְעָלְתָה לִכְבוֹד הַמָּקוֹם, וְלִכְבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה.

Conclusion

The next era of liberal Judaism is here and it is queer. I have spoken with clergy from around the world who are noticing a trend in conversion candidates increasingly identifying as queer.[75] Of the rabbis who will be ordained with me this May, three of us are nonbinary and the majority of the class identify as queer. Michigan University created a 2024-2025 fellowship to "promote a tighter integration of queer/trans perspectives and methodologies into Jewish Studies, and contribute to the ongoing softening of boundaries between analyses focused on racial, sexual, or gendered difference."[76] From the academy, to the leadership, to the individual Jew, queerness is present.

The growing number of queer Jews means that clergy need to be able to craft rituals that meet their needs. This guide is one step in the process, covering two of the primary Jewish life-cycle rituals in Covenant rituals and Bet Mitzvot. Chapter One addresses the history and evolution of Covenant rituals, exploring the cultural and religious importance of Brit Milah, as well as the impact of feminist perspectives on the ritual. The controversy surrounding circumcision and alternative rituals to Brit Milah, such as Simchat Bat and Brit Shalom for non-circumcising families, are also addressed. These discussions highlight the evolving nature of Jewish rituals, explaining how these rituals serve as an inspiration for the creation of queer rituals and the importance of inclusivity and creativity in the construction of rituals for different gender identities.

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[75] I have seen this in my work with Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood as has the interim Rabbi, Barry Lutz. Rabbi Shoshana Kaminsky in Adelaide, Australia noted this as did many Rabbis at the 2024 Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis (PARR) convention when I spoke with them about my capstone, amongst others.

[76] "2024-2025 Jewish/Queer/Trans," Michigan University, https://lsa.umich.edu/judaic/institute/themes/2024-2025-jewish-queer-trans-.html.

The chapter then transitions to how clergy can make use of the guide to create Covenant rituals for queer folks. It offers considerations and questions that should be taken into account by clergy and communities to ensure that all individuals feel celebrated and affirmed. Methods for adapting the use of English and Hebrew for queer individuals are presented, focusing on nonbinary Hebrew and the Nonbinary Hebrew Project as a way to be more inclusive in language usage. The chapter ends with easily adaptable nonbinary Hebrew blessings and prayers based on the CCAR life-cycle Guide.

Chapter two follows a similar pattern to chapter one shifting the focus to Bet Mitzvot. It explores the evolution of the ritual, explaining how Bar and Bat Mitzvot became the ceremonies we know today. The naming convention of Bet Mitzvot is then discussed. The reasoning behind the choice to use it in this guide is explained while addressing other potential names. The application element of the chapter highlights the aspects of the ritual where gender is most present, such as tefillot, aliyot, and gifts. The chapter ends with queer considerations, key language, and prayers and blessings of the style guide transformed into nonbinary Hebrew.

There is still much work to be done. Just as the understanding of gender continues to change, so too does the role of family and the approach to life-cycle moments. The average age at which people marry and raise children trends higher than in previous generations.[77] The definition of a relationship is becoming more complicated with open and polyamorous relationships on the rise.[78] These societal changes will likely have a major impact on how

[77] "Median age at first marriage: 1890 to present: MS-2," (United States Census Bureau, 2023), https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf.

[78] A 2021 study found 1 in 6 Americans say they would like to be in a polyamorous relationship. "Polyamory and Consensual Non-monogamy in the US," Kinsey Institute, June 17, 2022, https://blogs.iu.edu/kinseyinstitute/2022/06/17/polyamory-and-consensual-non-monogamy-in-the-us/.

people approach life-cycle moments. The desire to commemorate significant moments in life is not going away, but our rituals will not be able to meet these realities unless we as clergy are willing to adapt and grow our mindsets and liturgy.

The discussions on Covenant ritual and Bet Mitzvot in these chapters focus on the rituals as they currently are, with the intention of opening them up beyond the binaries of Brit Milah/Brit Bat and Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah. They do not specifically address family dynamics such as families with more than two parents or other increasingly common changes in family structure. Many such families will include queer people. To be able to craft rituals that meet their needs will first require an understanding of how to shape rituals for queer Jews and their loved ones.

The standardized cycle of life is becoming less and less standard. What Jews will appreciate and value in these rituals will change. The definition of how a full “life-cycle” looks is shifting, and we will need to continue to design new approaches to meet these new images of life. As always, the ability of clergy to adapt and change is fundamental for the future of liberal Judaism, and I am excited for this guide to be a resource for that growth!

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