

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Brit Milah



Context

Circumcision regularly appears in secular discourse as an example of a problematic religious practice. Those viewing Judaism from outside – and, indeed, many within – often struggle to understand how a medical procedure can be a religious obligation. In many ways, it appears to be a classic example of modern sensibilities in conflict with religious tradition. And yet, it remains one of the most tenacious practices, even within non-Orthodox Judaism.

*In this essay, **Dr Joshua Plaut**, a mohel from the **Association of Reform and Liberal Mohelim**, and a member of Finchley Reform Synagogue, traces the origin of milah, and what is distinctive in our approach to this practice.*

Content

The 'bris' or 'brit' – one of the oldest of Jewish customs, has the power to conjure up strong emotions and responses for contemporary Jews. Memories of being huddled into the corner of your great uncle Sidney's front room at a very early hour, or if you are a woman, perhaps being huddled out of the room and banished somewhere 'else'. A strange bearded elderly man with a briefcase leaving as quickly as he arrived... and a crying baby.

Just over 10 years ago, my wife gave birth to our son, Louis Emanuel and for the first time since 1976 I was about to attend a *brit milah*. My first question was "who does this?" My second question was "who does this?" Fortunately, our experience was a truly Reform one with our *mohel* being a member of our own community, and he made the event a moving, inclusive, calm experience. So much so that I decided as a qualified doctor to start training as a mohel (ritual circumciser). For the past 5 years I have travelled throughout Britain helping families who want a progressive *brit milah*.

Brit milah means 'covenant of circumcision' and is the second *brit* (covenant) described in the Torah. A covenant can be described as a contract or bargain which has an ongoing relevance and with responsibilities placed on one or both parties. The first occurs after the Great Flood when God promises never to attempt to destroy life on earth again. As a sign of this covenant, in Genesis 9, God creates the rainbow. A few chapters later God makes a covenant with Abram (and in doing so he is given a new name Abraham). In this covenant, God promises to make Abraham the father of many nations, to give Abraham and his descendants the Land of Canaan, and to be God to Abraham and his descendants. But this covenant, which signifies the origin of Judaism, the Jewish People and the connection with Israel has a different sign. "... 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" (Gen 17: 11-12). Circumcision and *brit milah* continue to this day amongst Jewish families as a direct connection with that covenantal relationship with God that has defined who we are through the generations.

Circumcision is not particular to Judaism. Many cultures and ethnicities have practised it for centuries. Egyptian hieroglyphs depict the practice long before the descendants of Abraham adopted it. Islam, which traces its origins to Ishmael, Abraham's first son, also dictates that boys are circumcised. In some cultures it marks a rite of passage to adulthood, a sign of sexual maturity. Neonatal circumcision changes the emphasis away from the sexual to the spiritual. Due to modern medical understanding, we also now know that the human blood clotting system is fully matured by 7 days – perhaps giving a further understanding as to why *brit milah* is carried out on the eighth day (or slightly later if the baby is not physically healthy, for example if they are underweight or jaundiced).

This reflects the fact that circumcision is a medical procedure. In fact, it is the most widely carried out operation in the world. It involves removing the foreskin of the penis, leaving the glans (head) exposed. In respect of *brit milah*, numerous customs, traditions and specifications have arisen to dictate what should be done and in what order. For generations this has been carried out by the *mohel* – the member of the Jewish community trained and honoured to perform this *mitzvah* on behalf of the father (who is supposed to carry out the procedure!). Reform Judaism recognises that this is a medical procedure and stipulates that anyone who carries out *brit milah* must be a registered medical practitioner and a member of the Association of Reform and Liberal Mohelim (ARLM). Risks and complications of circumcision are rare, but the *mohel* should be available for all queries and follow up.

Pain relief is important and the ARLM insists that as a minimum, local anaesthetic is used. Most *mohelim* also advise the use of paracetamol before the procedure to help alleviate pain. *Mohelim* who represent the Reform and Liberal movements will not perform circumcision without anaesthetic. *Brit Milah* will usually take place in the home, but it can also take place in a synagogue or other community building. Some *mohelim* may have the facility to carry out *brit milah* in their place of work (eg GP surgery)

As important as the medical procedure, is the opportunity that this ceremony gives to welcoming a new baby into the family. In the *brit milah* ceremony we wish three specific blessings for the new baby – we wish personal fulfilment and happiness, we wish for spiritual fulfilment and we wish for ethical and moral fulfilment. In Hebrew the blessings are ‘*to know torah, chuppah and ma’asim tovim*’ and we understand the importance that Judaism places on education (*torah*), meaningful relationships (*chuppah*) and good deeds (*ma’asim tovim*).

Just as Abraham was given a new name, this is also traditionally the time when a Hebrew name is given to a baby. Various customs surround the choice of names used: in Ashkenazi tradition, a deceased relative is often honoured by using their name, in Sephardi tradition, it is just as common to use the name of a living relative. The construct of a Hebrew name is the **child’s name** son of (or daughter of) the **parent’s name**. Reform communities encourage the naming of children with both parents’ names so my Hebrew name is *Yehoshua ben David v’Yehudit* (Joshua, son of David and Judy). The *mohel* or Rabbi will be a good source of advice for those unsure about Hebrew names. Following the giving of a name, the ceremony ends with the ‘priestly blessing’ - *May God bless you and keep you, may God’s face shine upon you, and be gracious to you, may God’s face turn towards you, and give you peace.*

While the core of the ceremony can be found in any siddur, it is not uncommon for parents to also choose a reading or blessing that has special relevance to them, and this can be incorporated into the ceremony.

Though there cannot, of course, be *brit milah* for a girl, Progressive Judaism encourages the idea that a baby girl be welcomed into her immediate family and the Jewish family with the same importance as a boy. As such, ceremonies have arisen such as *brit bat* (covenant of the daughter). When my daughter was born, we invited friends and family for a ceremony in our house where we made kiddush, recited the same priestly blessing and gave her a Hebrew name. There are many traditions that are particularly appropriate for such ceremonies and your Rabbi will be able to help create the right ceremony if you wish. Both boys and girls can also be welcomed with blessing ceremonies in a community Shabbat morning service.

Reform Judaism views *brit milah* as an integral lifecycle event. Recently, making the decision to celebrate a Brit has been less straightforward for families. This is particularly true when one parent is not Jewish or has converted, or is in the process of conversion.

Brit milah can be alien, strange, difficult and can add to an otherwise stressful time for new parents. Members of the ARLM are particularly used to talking through these decisions with parents – as are our community rabbis. For many families, *brit milah* remains an essential but difficult lifecycle event. Our ability to rationalise the practice is limited, but despite this, even for the most secular Jews, it remains one of the hardest rituals to relinquish.