

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>
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Topic: Birth and *Berit* (Circumcision)

Key Idea - The awe of the physical act of bringing new life into the world is shared by nearly every culture, as is the existence of particular rituals to mark the birth of an infant and make it part of the community. In Jewish tradition, procreation the mitzvah of “be fruitful and multiply” (*peru-urevu*) is the first commandment given in the Torah, not only to all humanity but to all creatures.

In Judaism the primary ritual for welcoming a male child is circumcision (*brit milah*). Why is this particular ritual regarded as having such significance? How does its normativity in defining a Jew affect attitudes toward the birth of daughters? How is increasing appreciation of gender equality being recognized and celebrated in Jewish birth rituals?

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Genesis 1:26-28. The first commandment given to Adam and Eve is *peru-urevu* (“Procreate and multiply”).

Text 2: Mishna Yevamot 6:6; Talmud Yevamot 61b – How many children fulfill the *mitzva* of *peru-urevu*?

Text 3: Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 19b. Does adoption fulfill the *mitzva* of procreation?

Text 4: Genesis 17:1-4. The biblical basis for *berit milah* and why “circumcision” is an inadequate translation.

Text 5: Midrash Rabbah on Genesis 11:6. Circumcision perfects the human body.

Text 6: Rambam (Maimonides) (Guide of the Perplexed III:49). Circumcision counteracts excessive lust. .

Text 7: Sefer Ha-Chinuch 2. Circumcision the distinguishing mark of separation from other nations, placed on the organ of procreation.

Text 8: Berakhot recited on the *mitzva* of performing *milah*.

Text 9: Dr. Ronald Goldman. Circumcision a Source of Jewish Pain. Is circumcision an unnecessary infliction of pain on an infant if one does not truly believe that God commands it?

Text 10: Harvey E. Goldberg. Reconizing Gender: Birth, the First Born and Naming. An overview of various practices to celebrate the birth of girls.

Text 11: Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub. Birth Rituals. The need to recognize females as being part of the covenant historically defined by a ritual exclusively for males.

Text 12: CCAR (Reform movement) Central Conference of American Rabbis) - central blessing in the "Covenant of Life" ceremony. In place of a blessing over the act of circumcision, a blessing over the covenantal responsibility to sanctify life is recited.

Suppl. text: Entering the Covenant: What are our options for welcoming our new baby girl? <<http://www.faqs.org/faqs/judaism/FAQ/12-Kids/section-9.html>>

...Traditionally, a baby girl is named the first time the father attends synagogue after the birth. In some communities, the mother recites a blessing of gratitude for her health and well-being after childbirth; and the father is called to the Torah. In other communities, there are more elaborate ceremonies. In the Sephardi communities of Turkey and the Balkans, infants are clothed in elaborate dress and jewelry. The ceremony has no fixed date, but is usually held sometime between seven and thirty days after birth, and is conducted by a rabbi, usually at home but sometimes in the synagogue. Several Central Asian Jewish communities celebrate the first time an infant girl is laid in her cradle. In Bokhara, for example, small children are called to participate in snatching away the sweet treats that have been placed around the baby in the cradle.

In the Bene Israel community in India, the naming ceremony usually takes place on the twelfth day after a girl is born. Held in the home, the ritual is intended primarily for the women and children of the family. A special new garment is sewn for the child, and her cradle, decorated with flowers and colored paper, is placed in the middle of the house. Cooked chickpeas, peeled pieces of coconut, and cookies are arranged along the inner edges of the cradle. In the *Yishuv HaYashan* (the community of Ashkenazic Jews who settled in Jerusalem beginning in 1811), the celebration took place on the eighth day, and the baby girl's ears were pierced.

In liberal congregations, a number of new ceremonies have been developed to symbolically parallel the *berit* ceremony; these new ceremonies serve to welcome the infant into the covenant of Judaism.

There are a number of approaches to these *berit* ceremonies. Some are based on the ceremonial washing of the infant's feet, based on Sarah washing the feet of Abraham. Others involve the use of seven blessings, paralleling the seven blessings of the wedding ceremony... These ceremonies usually take place in the home, anywhere between 7 days and 30 days after the birth of the daughter. In Israel, they are often held in a hall, as the whole family and most of the community is invited. There is often a public naming at the synagogue approximately 30 days after the birth of the infant.