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CUT TO THE CHASE

Son follows father on religious road as mohel

by Shelly Kapneck Rosenberg
(From the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, 1999)

It is the "family business" yet it is so much more than a business. "It is the single most important religious act in Judaism," says local mohel Joel Shoulson of circumcision, the ceremony that members of his family have conducted for eight generations.

He is, he says, the last of the line.

"Circumcision takes precedence over Shabbat, over Yom Kippur. A healthy male cannot be officially Jewish and recognized as such if he is uncircumcised. It is a symbolic act, symbolic of the covenant between God and Abraham," Shoulson explains.

He learned its intricacies, both medical and religious, at his father's side, while still quite young himself. "My qualifications are hereditary. The nucleus of my family migrated to Palestine in 1807, and my father was born in Jerusalem. There were mohels on both sides of my father's family. It was, he always told me, 'a great heritage.'"

Shoulson's father, Morris, who was an Orthodox rabbi as well as a mohel "knew more about Jewish Law regarding brith milah, circumcision, than anyone in the world," Shoulson says.

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

The younger Shoulson, 64, studied with his father as he traveled around the city, and at the Jewish Hospital (later Einstein Medical Center), where he was the rabbi. "This was our father-son bonding. I got hands-on experience handling the instruments, setting up the table. At the hospital, I scrubbed-in, witnessed surgery and learned sterile techniques."

When they drove around the city, Shoulson recalls, he sat with a book on his lap, and he and his father drilled each other on the laws relating to brit. He remembers his father telling him, "You must know legally how to make it work. Don't ever say 'no' to someone."

The elder Shoulson was so expert that he forever changed the practice of circumcision by inventing a revolutionary clamp that is still considered the state-of-the-art, both medically and ritually, the son explains. Originally, circumcisions were performed "free-hand," and both Shoulsons learned to perform the ritual that way.

In the 1930s, the Gompco clamp was invented. That tool, however, was clumsy and difficult to use since it comes in four pieces. It can even, Shoulson explains, leave uneven results.

His father, who he says, was the first to apply a ligature, that is, to tie off a bleeder during a circumcision, invented a new clamp in the 1950s. He called it the "Mogen" (Shield) and, to this day, it is the preferred method.

Shoulson did his first circumcision at the age of 16, while still in High school at Akibe Hebrew Academy. He recalls that it took place in a hospital where only five people were allowed to be present and all had to be gowned and scrubbed.

When his father asked the family if they wanted to remain and observe the proceedings, a practice the younger Shoulson continues. They all decided to leave. When they were alone in the operating room, his father turned to him and said, "This one is yours,"

SHAKE, RATTLE AND MOHEL?

"I had handled the instruments. I had cut. You didn't say no to my dad. I didn't have time to get nervous, and I did my first circumcision."

Thirty years later, Shoulson explains with a chuckle, he met the recipient of his novice handiwork. The operating-room nurse had told the parents what had happened, and the mother, while not upset, never forgot. When she saw Shoulson at another brit, she took the opportunity to introduce him to her son. Shoulson says he took the opportunity to ask how things were.

Joking aside, Shoulson takes his work very seriously. He is the only full-time professional mohel in the area and, he says, the last of the family dynasty. He has a 24-year-old son who has chosen a career, and an 11-year-old son. But he says he doesn't want his son to follow in his footsteps because of his concern for the turn the profession has taken.

"I knew the commitment - seven days a week - because I grew up with it. That (it) is the 'family business' allows me to have the knowledge and the feeling to do it. It's a dedicated position, one which means something to the community. The person who performs the brit must be someone who is recognized in the Jewish community as a religious functionary. People need to have the right spirit and spirituality to do it. I feel that's lacking in the profession today among people who are trained in quickie courses.

My father trained over 130 people, and I've trained people. My first questions are about their religious background and about why they want to become a mohel. I am concerned with how a person presents himself. It must be someone who is a mensch."

Although he is traditional in his personal religious practices, Shoulson sees himself as contemporary in how he conducts the ancient ritual. In a traditional brit, prescribed prayers welcome the baby and wish health for mother and child.

Historic passages recount God's commandment to Abraham to circumcise Isaac on the eighth day. A specific blessing confers the child's Hebrew name, and the kiddush, the blessing over the wine, is recited.

"This was in the 1960s and I was the first person, to my knowledge to address the inclusion of English and women into the ceremony," he explains.

He also encourages parents to add prayers and creative readings and to explain the origin of their child's name. "The ritual and the baby are the most important. I'm just a guide for the people who are there. It is an emotionally charged ceremony, both medically and spiritually; the person conducting it is both a rabbi and a psychologist," he says.

The Shoulsons worked as a team for forty years. "We were in touch on a daily basis because dad wanted to be in charge of scheduling,"

Joel Shoulson remembers.

"The only problem was that he had no sense of time and didn't realize how long it would to drive from place to place. So I often had to reschedule things."

Morris Shoulson worked until he had a stroke in 1990. He died later that year at the age of 80. Before he died, He told his son that he, Joel, had achieved recognition in their field that no one had achieved before. High praise from a man who was himself recognized as an expert.

And, the son explains, "I'm able to do what I do because I got it from my dad."

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