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The First Rite of Man

THE MOHEL performs ritual circumcision on male babies eight days old.

by Steven Levy

What he does for parents and assembled friends is even more delicate

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HE day is hot, but the mohel's Oldsmobile diesel station wagon is air-conditioned. The car is a concession to his comfort and, especially, to his image, which had threatened to get out of hand. The sports cars and vintage motorcycles that he collects and restores in an eight-bay garage alongside his tree-shaded house on Philadelphia's Main Line are fine for many things, and they give him his second-greatest pleasure. (His greatest pleasure comes from his two children, aged six and eight.) But sports cars are no longer for working. People had come to call him the Jaguar mohel. He prefers to be known simply as the mohel (pronounce it

oil with an *m*). If you address him as Mr. Shoulson or Joel, that is all right, too. Just don't make jokes about his work.

His work is sensitive, and it depends on people's trusting him. So it is important to him not to appear footloose and fast-driving. He has earned respect and takes pains not to jeopardize it. But nothing he does will eliminate the jokes. They are a hazard of his rare occupation: his is a public function, yet many of his audiences are unprepared—physically, spiritually, and emotionally—to witness what he does.

What he does is this: he performs ritual circumcision. He removes the foreskins of eight-day-old Jewish males. He recites Hebrew blessings, he names the children, and he fulfills the covenant between God and Abraham: "You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin."

It is no insignificant pact. Abraham's circumcision of Isaac with a sharp stone marked the boy as a Jew; though circumcision was not unknown then, the rite had been performed mostly on adolescents, as a pagan coming-of-age ceremony. Performing this act ritually upon infants represents a blood commitment to monotheism. The officiating mohel, as circumciser, literally makes Jewish males Jews.

It is the Fourth of July. A secular holiday. Jews and gentiles alike have postponed their labors in order to celebrate America's independence. The mohel works. Jewish law holds that nothing—not the sabbath, not even a high holiday—supersedes the obligation to perform circumcision on the eighth day of life. Exceptions are granted only in case of the infant's poor health or prematurity. Not for Firecracker Day.

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As is customary, the parents of the baby open the house to guests for the *bris*, or circumcision (the word means, literally, "covenant") ceremony. In the past, mothers would maintain an all-night vigil, staying by the cribside to ward off any evil that might bedevil the boy on the fateful day. Now, instructions to the parents are less exotic: Have handy a box of four-by-four gauze pads. Extra diapers. Some Betadine antiseptic ointment. A tiny bottle of formula or glucose solution. And a hungry baby.

"There is something incredible about the biblical command to circumcise on the eighth day," Joel Shoulson muses. "Because that day is ideal—hemostatically and dermatologically—for the operation." Shoulson prides himself on his expertise in both the liturgical and the medical aspects of his work. In the latter, he is so proficient that he frequently acts as consultant to doctors in correcting faulty hospital circumcisions—of which there are more than the medical profession would like to admit. Though no formal medical training is required of mohels, Shoulson survived a rigorous apprenticeship with a master teacher, a man who has helped modernize the circumcision procedure with new tools, new research, and a new compassion. The teacher was Rabbi Morris Shoulson, Joel's father and circumciser.

Joel Shoulson was born to his role but was reluctant to assume it. For generations the Shoulsons had been rabbis and mohels. The pressure was great for Joel to follow and take his place in the hereditary mandala. As soon as the youngster was tall enough to see over the circumcision table, he would observe the rite. He would accompany his father to *bris'n*, setting the table with the appropriate tools. One day, at a hospital *bris*, the elder Shoulson made the usual announcement that no one was required to stay for the surgical part of the ceremony. Everybody left but the rabbi and sixteen-year-old Joel. Morris Shoulson stepped back from the table and said to his son, "You do this one."

"Was I nervous?" recalls Joel with a smile. "Yes."

Morris Shoulson was not. "I have trained over a hundred and fifteen mohels," he later explained. "And there comes a time in the training of every one of them when they ask, 'Rabbi, excuse me for being blunt—but how do you know how much to take off?' Joel was different. He was the only one to ask the right question. 'Daddy,' he said to me, 'please tell me: how do you know how much to leave on?'"

But the intensive training to become one of the nation's few full-time mohels (the vast majority are part-timers) had to wait. Joel was doing other things. Playing guitar and waiting on tables at a local folk-music club. Joining the Army as a photographer and marching in the Fort Monmouth Drill Team ("That's right, with those shiny white rifles. We were on *Ed*

Sullivan"). Taking rabbinical training but deciding against ordination. It was not until it looked as if Morris Shoulson would turn to another as his successor that Joel straightened out. On hearing that his uncle would carry on the family business, Joel banged his hand on the table—an unusually violent gesture for the pacific youngster—and said, "No! I want it!" And he would have it, after another year of learning the fine points, the details that make him a craftsman and an authority.

"There are so many things to go wrong," he says. "And the scandal is that some mohels are . . . butchers. People just don't know; they take more care in choosing a podiatrist. The local Board of Rabbis certifies mohels for competence, but some don't bother to take the tests and they perform anyway. It's perfectly legal."

Joel Shoulson has tried to restore sensitivity to the rite. It is not an ingredient of many ritual Jewish circumcisions, in which the mohel is a strange and ominous visitor, cloaked in orthodox garb, rigidly performing an archaic ceremony. Joel Shoulson himself realized that his performances were emotionally inadequate when, several years ago, "I looked over the table and realized that those people had no idea why I was there." This feeling was reinforced when he circumcised his own son and, for the first time, empathized with the fears and confusions of the parents. He resolved to contemporize the ceremony, to make it relevant to the participants—and to the mohel.

In the process, he elevated himself from a technician to a respected figure in the Philadelphia area. Since many of his clients are people who haven't been in a synagogue for years, the mohel meets a larger public than most rabbis do. And in the religious community, the mohel has come to be regarded as a special figure.

This mohel is a compactly built, slightly tanned man with a neatly trimmed beard. He wears no tie—only an informal sport coat, a Mickey Mouse watch, and an unobtrusive black yarmulke, or skullcap. He carries both his religious and his secular authority with distinction. Unlike many in his profession, this mohel does not just perform the rite and run. He explains his actions forthrightly and precisely, even as the parents watch him take a scalpel to their newborn boy.

This change was difficult—and important—because the prevalence of circumcision throughout America had created a fuzzy idea of the religious rite among American Jews. For gentiles, the procedure is similar only in a raw surgical sense. The site is a hospital, not a home. The baby is strapped—arms and legs—to a plastic form-fitted board for long minutes, waiting for the doctor. Often, hospitals will line up several babies—all the males in the nursery from three to five days old—and when the doctor arrives

(the wait varies from a minute to the better part of an hour), he or she performs the task mechanically, lingering over no infant. No anesthetic is used. Parents are not present. Many obstetricians avoid performing this low-status, nonlucrative operation, and it is the interns and residents, relative novices, who have circumcised most of America. The procedure is optional, and though doctors give the impression that circumcision is as routine as cutting the umbilical cord, it is illegal to circumcise a child without his parents' specific permission. Of course, the prophylactic rationale for the operation has prevailed in this country, and circumcision is the norm. But some gentile doctors, knowing the haphazard quality of hospital circumcisions, choose to have experienced mohels perform the procedure on *their* children.

In Philadelphia, Joel Shoulson is the one the doctors usually turn to, though gentile babies form a tiny percentage of his cases. He has conducted clinics for doctors wishing to improve their own circumcision skills. Shoulson has performed his ritual task more than twenty thousand times. His witnesses have included an audience of several hundred in a hospital observation chamber and thousands of others attending some of the twenty *bris'n* he performs each week. He also performs circumcisions on adult converts to Judaism. His oldest case was seventy-two years old. All this, and when asked if he has ever harmed a patient, he replies, "Not to my knowledge, and I would have known." He relies on keeping his record perfect: carrying insurance would mean raising his rates from the average cost he now charges. Working without a liability net does not bother him: "I'm doing second-generation circumcisions now. I must be doing something right."

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E pulls up to a split-level house in the suburbs, where a sloping lawn is dotted with people holding plastic cocktail glasses. Some are wearing suit jackets; others, casual wear. The mohel opens the rear car door and removes a black doctor's bag. He enters a living room filled with people making lively chatter—a summer party—and seeks the parents. The mother is almost slim again. The father is wearing a clean white shirt and jeans. A couple in their late twenties, they are doing well.

Apparently this is not a day the mother has been looking forward to. Her smile is

one of forced bravery as Shoulson leads them into the kitchen. "Now, I'd like to warn you," the mohel says, "that several things are going to make the baby unhappy today. Not the circumcision itself, because, unlike his parents, he doesn't know what's going to happen, and he's unable to localize pain at his age. But he will be restrained and on his back, and babies don't like that. Also, the spray I use to freeze the area is cold, and he'll respond. But that's why he'll be crying—not because of what I'm going to do with the surgical tools." The mother nods with a trace of skepticism.

The circumcision area must have light and space for observers to crowd around; the surface for the baby to lie on must be firm and high. Almost always, this means the kitchen or dining room table. When the mohel approves the kitchen table here, the mother resists.

"Really, it's best for me," he gently insists.

"I'll never eat again," she says.

The mohel sets the table with his own sort of silverware. From a small sterilizer he removes two scissorslike hemostats, a scalpel, an odd-looking, squarish metal clamp, and a bottle of Cetacaine dental anesthetic. Other tools include a can of Skin-Freeze, some maroon-colored Betadine ointment squeezed on a gauze pad, and a folding board upholstered in blue. This circumcision board was designed by Joel and Morris Shoulson. It will allow the baby to lie down as comfortably as possible, his legs restrained by soft straps stabilized by Velcro strips.

A bottle of wine and a special cup are brought to the table. The mohel leaves to wash up.

In his absence, there are jokes. People drift into the kitchen, amiably discussing whether they will stay in the room to see the mohel work. "I been there once already," one man says, too loudly. As the men enter, they put on shiny black yarmulkes with practiced solemnity. Some previously gregarious guests fall into a throat-clearing silence. The parents exchange distracted small talk as the mohel returns, having replaced his sport jacket with a white smock. He nods to the guests, smiling reassuringly. A few nod back, acknowledging his command of the situation, recognizing that from this point, the stage is his.

A grandmother enters, carrying the baby.

The tiny newcomer senses something is up. His pinched, hobbitlike face twitches with what seems like pained annoyance. He is handed to his mother, and the onlookers *ooh* and *ahh*.

"I'd like everyone to stay in the room," says the mohel, "at least for the nonsurgical part of the ceremony." More guests enter; there are about thirty people in the normally roomy kitchen. Giggles escape from this middle-aged congregation.

"There are three parts to this," says the mohel, his voice automatically rising to precisely the level required to hold the attention of all. "And I certainly would recommend that you stay for the first. The second is the surgical part, which takes about twenty seconds, and you're all welcome to stay for that, too." He turns to the mother. "I strongly recommend that you stay for that," he says, and she nods slowly. He repeats what he had said to the parents about what might make the baby unhappy, and after explaining that the third part of the ceremony—the naming—will require everyone's presence, he begins.

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IRST the mohel recites blessings as the baby is passed to the godparents, to the parents, and to the sandek, a man chosen as the honored elder patron. In the past, the sandek was responsible for holding the child on a pillow nesting in his lap during the actual circumcision. Joel Shoulson, like all but the most orthodox mohels, does not favor that custom. Instead, the mohel carefully lowers the baby to the blue padded board and rests the child's head on a blanket, under which he tucks the baby's arms. He wraps the soft straps on the board around the baby's legs. The board may then be placed on the sandek's lap, although this time it is not. By now, the child is whimpering.

A few faces turn gray, and one or two people leave the kitchen. Joel Shoulson has seen people pass out while watching his handiwork (seldom women, almost never the parents) and can recognize a spectator in distress. Once, after completing a circumcision, he tried to help a woozy godfather by telling him his shoe was untied. The idea was to get the man's head down. "I'm wearing loafers," the man said, and he promptly fainted.

Everything is smooth here, though. Working without hesitation but deliberately, the mohel removes the baby's Pampers and slips clean cloth diapers around the groin, leaving the shaft of the penis exposed. ("The circumcision table," Shoulson has noted, "is the first place you see that all men are not created equal.") He sprays the shaft with the Skin-Freeze. Then he takes a hemostat and grips the foreskin with it.

Why must the foreskin go? According to Jewish law, it is unclean, not kosher. Some uncircumcised males have problems in cleaning underneath the foreskin, and for this reason, most American males are cir-

cumcised. A controversy still stews over its necessity, even though retention of the foreskin has been linked with cancer. In Judaism, the reason is not health: it goes back to Abraham's covenant, an act of faith that has spanned centuries.

The keeper of this covenant now dips a hemostat in the maroon ointment and slips it underneath the foreskin, stretching the skin to separate any stray membranes attaching it to the head of the penis. This second hemostat, fastened opposite the first, is used to hold the foreskin away from the head. Moving fluidly, the mohel takes the metal clamp—it is called a Mogen (Hebrew for *shield*) clamp and was partially designed by Morris Shoulson—and angles its open jaws to trap the foreskin. When the clamp closes, the head remains on the clamp's underside while the foreskin is pushed above. With an almost imperceptible movement of his hand, the mohel slices off the foreskin with his scalpel, quickly whisking it away. (Later, it will be discarded.) As he cuts, he recites a Hebrew blessing in a low voice. It has, indeed, taken only twenty seconds.

Removing the clamp, he pulls back the skin bunched around the top of the infant's tiny shaft. Shining and red—not with blood, since the firm-closing Mogen clamp has prevented any significant bleeding—a perfect glans is exposed. There are murmurs of approval. There is intense wailing from the owner. The mohel sprays the area with the Cetacaine, and in ten seconds the anesthetic takes effect. The baby accepts the glucose formula, and Joel Shoulson holds the baby.

"You can take pictures now," he says. "Not of the table, though. In twenty years, the boy might not appreciate it."

From his bag, the mohel extracts a tiny white yarmulke and places it on the newly circumcised child. The women cluck with approbation. The mohel smiles. He is nestling the baby with what looks like genuine affection. His smile is restoring the party atmosphere to a room that had been enveloped in a tense silence. He begins his spiel, an explanation of the origins of the ceremony. Then he recites the prayers that will give the child his name.

Finally, the kiddush—the drinking of wine. The mohel dips a gauze pad in the wine cup and puts it to the infant's lips. The lips twist with displeasure, then take the droplets in. The mohel nods in delight, and everyone laughs. The healing has begun, and not only with the child. No one makes jokes now.

"He's Jewish now," says the mohel. The mother holds her son, probably not hearing. Eight days, and the baby has taken a step toward manhood.

The mohel has three more cases today, the fourth of July, 1980; the twentieth of Tammuz, 5740. The day is hot, and he misses his own children. But the job has its rewards. **G**