

## Bris Orientation

Thank you for calling on me to be your guide through the joyous and anxious moment in your life most of us refer to as "The Bris". This brief overview should give you an understanding of the process of the Bris. I hope it is helpful. No letter can possibly address all of the questions that may arise pertaining to your specific level of background and understanding. I have created an elaborate system for phone answering, forwarding to my cell phone and voice mail as is possible with today's technology. Please call me if you need more help.

The traditional format of the Bris is as follows: The baby is brought to the Bris area by his godmother, representing the time when the Bris was held in the synagogue. Since, in the traditional synagogue, there is a separation between the men's and women's sections, the bringer/godmother would pass the baby to her male counterpart, or to the baby's father, through an opening in the divider. The baby would then be placed on the lap of the Sandek, who would sit on a specially elevated chair or bench. During these passings and holdings, special prayers are recited. The circumcision follows this. It usually takes me about 20 seconds to do the circumcision, utilizing a special, state-of-the-art instrument my father designed. About thirty years ago, my father and I also started exploring the use of anesthetics applied to the baby's penis to reduce or eliminate pain. This is rarely done in hospitals. My system is to apply three differently acting topical anesthetics at appropriate times. Some practitioners use injectable anesthetics, but this is fraught with severe dangers. I recommend that the baby not be fed before the Bris, for as long a period as will be comfortable to his specific appetite, so that he can be fed immediately afterwards. There are several reasons for this. I want to give the baby some form of sugar or sugar solution during the procedure because of sugar's analgesic properties. If he is hungry, he is particularly receptive to that distraction. If mom is nursing, it is also best for baby not to bond with her immediately prior to the circumcision when it is likely that she will be anxious and pass that tension on to the baby. This also sets up a wonderful opportunity for mother and baby to be excused immediately following the completion of the ceremony, to spend some quiet together time to relax each other and dissipate the tensions of the day. This methodology has evolved over the 40+ years I have been practicing on over 30,000 babies. Immediately following the circumcision, the mohel and the parents will recite their appropriate blessings and we go on to the naming part of the ceremony. A Kiddush blessing is pronounced over the wine, the Mohel, the family rabbi or other honored officiant recites several paragraphs. These include wishes for the well being of the baby and his family, and those passages in the Torah relating to the establishment of this act. It is at this time the baby's name is announced. Prayers are offered for the speedy recovery of baby and mom. Sometimes, family members or friends are invited to address the gathering on a range of subjects appropriate to the moment. After tasting the wine, mother and baby should be allowed to go off quietly. A "Seudat Mitzvah" or celebratory meal terminating in a special "Grace After Meals".

One of the most troubling issues of the Bris is that of names - it is the naming ceremony. The only action expressly prohibited, according to Jewish law, is that you cannot name two siblings of the same sex the same name. That does not address our family customs and traditions relating to attitudes about the naming of babies after people living or dead or after nobody in particular. Rather than waiting until we're standing at the Bris table to deal with it, try to assemble all information possible regarding Hebrew names for the baby. If he is being named in memory or in honor of someone, have that information available when we discuss the naming portion of the ceremony. Your family, your rabbi or I can help you at the time of the Bris, or prior to it, but it's best not to have to call Bubbie in Florida when all of your guests are hovering next to the food table waiting for that part of the celebration. A major consideration in naming the baby, is the comfort level of other family members. Most naming problems are easily resolved but keep in mind that they can be very emotionally charged.

Mentioned earlier were several honors. Some groups include others. Many American families designate godparents for the baby. This tradition is not based on intrinsically Jewish oriented beliefs. As a people, we have traveled through, and settled in, almost every culture on earth. Consequently, we have absorbed many practices and superstitions more native to those cultures than our own. This does not negate those practices but just gives them a background. Even today, Jews of Eastern European, or Ashkenazic background are more likely to appoint godparents than Mediterranean, or Sephardic Jews. The reasons are as varied as the localities. Some are practical and some are emotional. Some are even religious. As an example - in the not-too-distant past, women had many more pregnancies with fewer surviving babies than we have become fortunate enough to expect. The diversionary shielding of a righteous couple was given to a new baby born to a couple deemed unworthy, as judged by the death of a previous infant. I would be glad to discuss others with you. If you do decide to designate godparents, they can be anyone you choose. They need not be related to the baby or to each other. Many parents appoint more than one person for each honor rather than create political turmoil, such as including all siblings as godparents rather than choosing one pair.

The honor called Sandek is both Biblical and historic. In its simplest form, it is a senior godfather. The Sandek represents several roles. If, for any reason, the father of the baby cannot be present at the Bris, the Sandek is his stand-in. The Sandek is also the representative of the Prophet Elijah, who is the overseer of the covenant and was commanded by God to be present at every Bris. The honor of Sandek is traditionally given to a grandfather of the baby - sometimes both, for "Peace in the House". It is also appropriate to give the honor to a person who is considered to be righteous and exemplary in the community. I have frequently seen a family's rabbi given this honor. At a certain point in the ceremony, the baby is either placed on a chair designated as the "Seat of Elijah, the Prophet" or held in the lap or arms of the Sandek, possibly on a special pillow, while a passage is recited recognizing Elijah's role. It is traditional for the baby to be held and restrained by the Sandek during the circumcision. Even though I am a staunch traditionalist, I prefer to follow the advice of Maimonides and consider the baby's safety. Since I have heard of Sandek's flinching or passing out at THE crucial moment, I provide a dependable, unemotional device for briefly restricting the baby's movement. Many of us have heard of a baby moving or kicking, beyond the Sandek's ability to restrain him, and either the baby, the Sandek or the Mohel sustaining injury. My decision on the issue of how the baby is best protected and immobilized, will be largely guided by the Sandek's preference or experience. I can also combine the two methods.

Where in the house the actual circumcision happens, is determined by the availability of a sturdy surface affording adequate light

and surrounding space for all present to stand by. While it is appropriate for all of the people gathered for this joyous celebration to witness it, nobody will be imposed upon to stay and watch any part of the service they deem uncomfortable. I give plenty of notice for anyone to step away from the table at the moment of the circumcision. Sometimes, the parents request that it be a private moment, and might ask the guests to step away, briefly. There are also those who prefer to totally hide the circumcision part of the service in a space away from the people. This is usually suggested by those who, themselves, have a fear about watching, or by a mohel who does not like to be watched. My feeling is that this conveys the message that there is something dreadful about the procedure. I have spent my professional lifetime educating to the contrary. After all, we have survived as a People for almost four thousand years either in spite of, or because of this ritual - depending on your perspective.

There is a temptation to make the joyous aspect of the Bris an occasion to invite the immediate world to share, but I suggest against it. Mother and baby are both eight days post-partum and this time is a sensitive one, physically and emotionally, for both. Although it is appropriate to celebrate our happy moments with loved ones, too often I see a total disregard of the potentially harmful effects of the exposure and exertion caused by a big party on the principals. I suggest that either the party aspect of the occasion be at a later time, such as at the Pidyon Ha-Ben, if one is appropriate, or in an environment where baby and mom's involvement can be easily controlled or isolated. If none of that is easily attainable, lots of friendly help in setting up the post-ceremonial festivities goes a long way to lessen parents' stress.

Contemporary lifestyles seem to dictate putting a glass of wine in visitors' hands when they walk into your house. Not only is this practice inappropriate for attendance at a religious ceremony, but those who injudiciously imbibe alcohol to bolster their fears are the first ones to fall on their faces, or ruin the sanctity of the occasion with boisterous behavior if they don't. If people have traveled a distance to get to the Bris, it is kind to provide a light snack or non-alcoholic beverage on their arrival.

The Bris is obviously a Jewish ceremony. I am frequently asked if non-Jews may participate, particularly if they are family members. Over the years, with increasingly diverse family blendings, it has been a challenge to maintain the Judaism of the event while providing a positive, cross-cultural and inclusionary atmosphere. When a family calls on me to serve them, I believe it is my obligation not only to make it work within the framework of Jewish law and custom, but for them to understand how and why. My father, who was an Orthodox rabbi of global stature, insisted that I become knowledgeable in every nuance of Halacha, or Jewish law, so that I could appropriately serve anyone who called on me. It was his way. It is mine. Since each family's considerations are different, I cannot, in this format, address all of the possibilities, so please call me.

I will fully instruct all of the baby's caretakers in the ways to treat the circumcision and in keeping him comfortable. As mentioned above, I have an elaborate phone system set up to instantaneously track me, or my voice mail, anywhere in the country. (I was amazed, several years ago, when I fielded a call aboard a ship in the Caribbean.)

In Preparation for the event, please obtain:

A fresh bottle of kosher GRAPE wine (or non-alcoholic grape juice if a family member has an issue with alcohol).

1- 1 oz. tube of Neo-Sporin ointment "plus Pain Relief" - or generic substitute.

1- box of 25 - 3"x3" or 3"x4" sterile gauze pads.

6 - 8 clean cloth diapers or similarly sized hand, face or dish towels.

(these are for use in creating a clean area on the table, not necessarily for baby to wear).

I will provide a Kippah (yarmulke) for the baby in the absence of a family heirloom, traditional or gift Kippah

TRY to arrange baby's schedule so he is hungry-ish going into the ceremony. If he is nursing, it would be a good idea to bring a glucose-water nursing bottle set-up from the hospital or, in a nursing bottle, mix a teaspoon of a sugar into about three ounces of water. (Check with your pediatrician if any family member has a sugar problem!) I have been assured that the few moments of baby's sucking on the latex nursing nipple will not interfere with any natural nursing reflexes, and there are benefits to the sugar-water as mentioned earlier. If baby is bottle-feeding, we give him his bottle during the service.

Photographing and videotaping life-cycle events is important, since they only go by once. I do feel strongly that there be no such activity while the baby is exposed and undergoing the actual circumcision. He obviously has no control over the event and it may be a major embarrassment to him for that moment to be insensitively exploited later in his life. I believe that the intense emotional content of those twenty seconds should be a personal memory of the adult spectators, not a preserved public one. I will also recommend a PG-13 rating on that same portion of the service, but I believe that children should witness those portions of the service when the family is together for the prayers.

When I was starting out and not very sure of myself, I used to call the Bris house for several days after the ceremony. I thought it was good public relations. When people told me that they felt that such follow-up made them nervous that I was worried that I had done something wrong, I stopped doing it. I may spot check occasionally, particularly if I have introduced a new ointment or post-operative instruction, but I have confidence that my elaborate phone networking setup will get you to me quickly if you have any concerns, real or perceived. Please call the above phone numbers any time with any questions.

Just one cautionary note. Some families are advised to apply EMLA cream to the foreskin for an hour prior to the circumcision. EMLA is a good product for specific purposes. Circumcision is absolutely not one of them. In fact, I have had to postpone performing a circumcision on several babies for a few weeks because the EMLA had hardened the foreskin to the consistency of shoe leather, and we had to wait until the effects of the cream wore off. The anesthetics I apply achieve more affective and almost instantaneous numbing and is even more appropriate than injected anesthetics. I can anesthetize and complete a circumcision in the time it takes to inject a painful "ring" or "block" and wait for it to become effective.

I look forward to serving you.