

BRIT MILAH

We are told in Genesis 17:10-14 that every male Jewish child is to be circumcised on the 8th day after birth. A moyel, who is a Jewishly knowledgeable person skilled in performing circumcision, usually performs this procedure as a proxy for the parents.

The words "Brit Milah" mean the covenant or contract of circumcision, which is the removal of the foreskin. The Brit Milah (also called "Bris") is performed on the 8th day, even if that day is Shabbat or Yom Kippur. The day of birth is counted as the first day. Thus for a boy born on Wednesday, the Brit Milah would be the following Wednesday. However, if he were born after sundown, a new day on the Jewish calendar has begun, and the Brit Milah would be the following Thursday. Please note that the Bris is delayed if there is any question about the child's health.

The service is usually composed of three parts. We begin with a brief explanation of Brit Milah and several prayers. We then adjourn to another room where the actual circumcision takes place. Guests may join us there, or wait in the first room, where we will return for the concluding blessings. At this time we bless the wine, give the baby a Hebrew name, and offer prayers for his good health, and a life filled with Torah, marriage and good deeds.

You do not need a minyan for a Brit Milah service, but there are two special roles that should be filled by friends or family members. One is a position of honor, called the Sandeck. This person will hold the baby during the circumcision procedure. In fact, the baby is usually placed on a changing table, card table, or bureau surface and the Sandeck will help hold the baby still during the procedure. Generally the Sandeck is a Jewish male.

Another special person is needed to give the baby some sweet wine at the time of circumcision. This person can be a man or woman, Jewish or not.

There are no strict rules regarding the child's Hebrew name. Ashkenazic Jews (from Eastern Europe) generally name their children after a deceased family member, to preserve that person's memory. Sephardic Jews (from the Middle East) tend to name their children in honor of living relatives. People often give a Hebrew name that is closely linked to the secular name. In fact, they may be the same name (for example, David).

Typically people serve food at a Brit Milah, to make the occasion festive and to celebrate in the company of family and friends. Often brunch or deli food is served.

If you are a member of a synagogue, I encourage you to invite a member of the clergy to officiate. This provides an ongoing relationship with your synagogue at this special time in your family's life. I will gladly work with that person, although I am also qualified to conduct the entire ceremony by myself. I am open to incorporating special music or prayers that you may wish to include in order to personalize the service.

Generally I am available to perform a Bris in the morning, or after office hours. The entire ceremony and circumcision generally last a half-hour or less.

There is a topical anesthetic which is worth considering called Emla cream. It can be prescribed by a pediatrician or by myself. I am a Board Certified Obstetrician / Gynecologist active at all the San Francisco hospitals. I will perform a Brit Milah ceremony when one partner is not Jewish, if the family's intention is to raise their son as a Jew in a Jewish home.

I hope this answers all of your questions. Please feel free to call me at (415) 397-2331 if you have further questions. The Union of American Hebrew Congregation/UAHC Press is an excellent resource for current books on Judaism, Brit Milah, or the Jewish home. They are located at 878 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10021-7064, (212) 249-0100.