

# **BRIT MILAH (Jewish Ritual Circumcision)**

**THE HISTORY OF BRIT MILAH:** "And G-d spoke to Abraham saying: ...This is my covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and thy seed after you -- every male child among you shall be circumcised." (**GEN 17:12**) For 3500 years, since the time of our forefather Abraham, the Jewish people have observed the ritual of circumcision as **the fundamental sign of the covenant between G-d and Israel**. Known in Hebrew as **Brit Milah, "the Covenant of Circumcision"**, it is considered much more than a simple medical procedure. Brit Milah is considered the sign of a new-born child's entry into the Jewish tradition. For millennia, in every country where Jews have lived, they have always practiced this ritual, sometimes at great personal sacrifice. Perhaps more than any other ritual, Brit Milah is the ultimate affirmation of Jewish identity.

Every **Brit Milah** must be performed by a properly trained and certified Mohel (Ritual Circumcisor). A Mohel is formally trained both in circumcision techniques as well as in Jewish law and tradition. While he certainly must be expert in the latest medically approved surgical and sterilization procedures, being a Mohel requires much more than surgical and medical skill. Jewish law sees the moment of Brit Milah as having a great spiritual impact upon the child. The Mohel, therefore, must also be a person of great piety and religiosity. He must be a G-d fearing practicing, Sabbath observant Jew, who performs the Brit Milah in accordance with the intentions as well as the methods of Jewish law. In this way the Mohel is a specialist in the spiritual aspects as well as the medical aspects of circumcision.

The **Brit Milah** of a healthy baby is always done on the 8th day, even Shabbat or Yom Kippur, and only during daylight hours! This 8th day is calculated to include the day of birth. If a baby is born, for example, on a Tuesday afternoon, under normally circumstances the Brit would be the following Tuesday, any time during the day. (There is a tradition to do the Brit as early in the day as possible.) A Brit Milah performed prior to this 8th day, or at night, does not comply with Jewish law, and is not considered a valid Brit.

The **Brit** may be performed in a Synagogue, social hall, or in a private home with complete safety. The baby is brought in to the room, carried by the kvatter and kvatterin, considered by many to be the godparents. Two chairs are prepared for the Brit. The first is for the Sandek, the individual who holds the baby on their knees during the actual circumcision. The lap of the Sandek is considered analogous to the altar of the Temple itself. It is considered a great honor to be the Sandek because there is a Kabbalistic tradition that links the soul of the Sandek with the child. In this way, the Sandek is considered the spiritual mentor of the child. In many instances, one of the grandfathers serves as the Sandek.

The second chair is set aside for the spirit of Elijah the Prophet, the "Angel of the Covenant". According to Jewish tradition, Elijah comes to every circumcision to testify before the Almighty to the commitment of the Jewish people to this great mitzvah throughout the generations. During the ceremony, just prior to the Brit itself, the baby is placed on the chair of Elijah, and the Mohel recites a special prayer asking for the spirit of Elijah to stand over him as he performs the Brit.

After the Mohel has performed the brit, a special blessing is recited upon a cup of wine, and the baby is given his Hebrew name. It is customary to serve refreshments or a meal after the brit, and this is considered a seudat mitzvah, part of the mitzvah. (Obviously all food served should be kosher.) Ideally, a minyan should be present for a Brit, although this is not a pre-requisite.

In the Torah it says that G-d changed Abraham's name from Avram to Avraham at the time of his circumcision. In keeping with that tradition, a Jewish boy is given his Hebrew name at the time of his **Brit Milah**. Judaism places a great deal of significance on a child's Hebrew name. It is often customary to name the child after someone who led a righteous life so that the child will try to emulate that individual. Ashkenazic Jews often name their children after a dearly departed relative, while Sephardic Jews sometimes name their children in honor of living relatives. In the case of someone who died at a young age, another name referring to life, or the name of a person who lived a full life is added.

The Hebrew naming of a baby girl should take place at the first occasion after the baby is born when the father can be called to the Torah. At that time a special prayer is recited on behalf of the mother and the baby, and a Hebrew name is given to the child. The guidelines for naming a baby girl are the same as for naming a baby boy.