

Bar Mitzvah (or Son of the Commandments)

Coming of Age for a Jewish Man

Bar Mitzvah is the celebration when a Jewish boy becomes a man and takes on the responsibilities of a man before GOD and Israel.



In Jesus' day boys of twelve had their **Bar Mitzvah** and were, in many cases, tested on their knowledge and belief in the Temple. Look at the story of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2 v41-52) in this light. He had come up to Jerusalem for his first Passover, and may well have had his **Bar mitzvah** while the family was there. In Jewish culture, the quality of a persons questions is seen as the best measure of his understanding and maturity. Remember how the scribes were amazed at his questions!

Nowadays a young man has his **Bar mitzvah** on the Shabbat after his thirteenth birthday. He has to recite a portion from Torah, read and pray.

"*Shema Israel*" is an important scripture for this day. It starts, "*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*" "Hear O Israel, the LORD your God The LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6 v4-9) It goes on to exhort Israel to love GOD wholeheartedly and teach their children well. It also speaks of binding GOD's word to ones arms and forehead. The young man will do this pictorially as part of the service with his **Tefillin**, which are the small black boxes on long leather straps which contain portions of the "Sh'ma Israel" passage.

A father is responsible for his son's actions until his **Bar mitzvah**. During the ceremony he says, "Praised be he who released me from punishment for the actions of this one." This led to a famous quote, "Until the thirteenth year I talk to my son about God; after his **Bar mitzvah** I talk to God about my son."

Nowaday many young women celebrate **Bat Mitzvah**. (Daughter of the commandments)

Jewish males have other rites before **Bar mitzvah**.

Circumcision - Brit Milah

All, healthy, Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day. It marks their entry into the covenant. Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day and given the name *Yeshua* (God saves) as his parents had been instructed by the angel. (see Matt 1 v21 for the instruction and Luke 2 v21 for the occasion when it was carried out)

This was not the occasion when Simeon and Anna saw him, as was previously stated here. Luke 2 v22 is separate and refers to both **Redemption of the Firstborn** after thirty days, and the Purification of a mother forty days after childbirth. (See Jewish New Testament Commentary by David Stern)

Circumcision is the ceremony whereby a Jewish male infant enters into a sacred relationship with God and the Jewish community. This occurs on his eighth day.

The **Milah** is one of the two symbols of the covenant; Shabbat being the other (Genesis 17 v11-12). It is one of the first rites attacked in times of persecution and its neglect in history was a sign of the abandonment of the faith.

The Ceremony

Brith Milah or **Bris Milah** is covenant of circumcision – often just referred to as **Bris**.

Some families will invite the neighbouring children round the night before to see the baby, say the "Shema" and sing some songs. Sweets are given out. (This is a joyous event and food plays its part)

There must be a **minyan** (ten adult men) present. The circumcision is performed by a **mohel** (pronounced moyle), who will very likely be both a doctor and a rabbi.

The boy is welcomed, "**Baruch haba**" - blessed is he who comes. (See Psalm 118) Elijah the Prophet is included in this welcome as rabbinical tradition holds that the prophet participates in every **milah** as witness and protector.

The **Sandek** (Godfather) hands the baby to the **mohel**, who may put the boy on "the chair of Elijah" before handing him back to the **sendek** who then holds him firmly. The **mohel**, the boy's father and those present join in blessings and prayers while the circumcision is carried out. The prayers ask that all will go well, acknowledging how much we all need God's help. After dressing the wound, the **mohel** says the blessing for wine and gives the boy a drop or two with his finger. Remember the symbolic use of wine to represent blood and blood covenants. The **mohel** stresses the sanctity of this covenant before saying

the final prayer, during which the lad is given his Hebrew name. " . . . Just as this little one has entered the covenant, so too may he grow up to attain the Torah, marriage and good deeds." This Hebrew name is more than just a label – it is an adjective – it says something about the boy – like the names in the *Tanakh*.

The medical side of Circumcision

Circumcision is the cutting off of the foreskin from the penis. As this skin covers the head of the penis it can be difficult to keep clean and thus a breeding ground for infection. The removal of the foreskin is thus of benefit in terms of hygiene. For this reason Cervical cancer, venereal disease etc are much rarer among the wives of circumcised men. For this reason, among others, circumcision is not exclusively a Jewish practice. The lack of a foreskin will have no detrimental effect on sexual intercourse when the lad is grown up and married.

The *mohel* performs the procedure by stretching the foreskin past the head and then sliding it into a slot in a stainless steel plate, similar to one used by a soldier so he can polish his brass buttons without polishing the fabric of his uniform. The foreskin can then quickly and safely be sliced off.

One might think that trauma and bleeding would be a problem for one so young, but medical science shows that the eighth day is the ideal time. The blood of the newborn infant has a very high level of infection fighting antibodies, which it gets from its mother. Also in the blood there are clotting agents prothrombin and vitamin K, that prevent bleeding which might otherwise be a problem with a procedure like circumcision. While the level of antibodies starts very high and falls off, the level of anti-bleeding agents rises from a very low level (to 110% of normal for prothrombin by the eighth day). On the eighth day the level of both is at the optimum level for a minor surgical procedure.

The above is the standard view of the medical side of circumcision. The author is not qualified to hold a position on medical questions, and since there is a body of opinion that disputes these views those wishing to pursue the matter are advised to carry out their own enquiries. www.norm-uk.org is suggested as a source of the "intactivist" viewpoint.

It is a principle of Jewish life that performing mitzvot is not done for practical benefits. However the mitzvot often have positive benefits. This is true of circumcision as well as the hygiene instructions.

The spiritual side of circumcision

When Abram circumcised himself aged 99, God added the letter *heh* to his name making it Abraham. *Heh* is part of God's name, so giving it to Abraham indicates a covenant through which the human has an added dimension of spirituality - has entered into a covenant relation with God.

It is said that circumcision is a sign for a Jewish man of who he is and the covenant to which he belongs. It is not a sign for the world to see, but a personal sign. It is a sign of identity, which cannot be laid aside to allow a Jew to act in a way that is not Jewish. There is a lesson that we are not born perfect, but you can change that. You can be disciplined and cut off those wrong things – don't let them rule your life. This is particularly true of sex drive, making the *milah* a particularly appropriate sign in the flesh of the self control that must be exercised in life.

Scripture refers to having our hearts circumcised. The parallel here is that our hearts should have "flesh" cut off taking with it the contaminating influences of "self".

Information and comments from . . . The Jewish Kitchen by Judy Jackson ([Books](#)), "I am a *mohel*" by BBC TV featuring Rabbi Lionel Solomon and a feature by Rabbi Shraga Simmons on www.aish.com.

Note

Female circumcision or female genital mutilation is not comparable to Jewish male circumcision. It is practiced in some African and Islamic countries but not among Jews. Female genital mutilation can have severe effects for the woman in terms of sexual satisfaction and even passing urine.

However, there are arguments on the issue of circumcision, even in Jewish circles. See article on www.aish.com

Redemption of the Firstborn *Pidion ha-ban*

This ceremony applies to a son who is the firstborn of his mother.

The firstborn of Israel who were redeemed from the tenth plague were consecrated to the service of God. (Exodus 13 v2)

After the Golden calf incident in which Israel went astray, the firstborn lost their position and were replaced by the sons of Levi who were fiercely loyal to God. (Numbers 8 v14-19 & Exodus 32?)

In remembrance of the original consecration, the *bechor* (firstborn) is redeemed thirty days after his birth. The father presents him to the *cohen* (descendant of Aaron, who was a descendant of Levi and the first *cohen gadol* - high priest) and says that he wishes to redeem his son and pay five silver shekels. The *cohen* declares the boy redeemed and blesses him. (Genesis 48 v20 & Numbers 6 v24-26)

Yeshua was redeemed by his parents after he was thirty days old, as recounted in Luke 2 v22-39. It was as *Yeshua* was being presented to God in the Temple, that *Shim'on* and *Hannah Bat-P'nu'el* (Simeon and Anna met the family and responded to their revelations concerning the child. (It appears that *Miryam* and *Yosef* combined this occasion and *Miryam's* purification (after 40 days) in one stay in Jerusalem See Jewish New Testament Commentary by David Stern) See Isaiah 40 v1, 49 v13, 51 v4 & 52 v9 for the *Tanakh* verses quoted by *Shim'on* under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, noting especially

the significance of Jesus' Hebrew name - *Yeshua*; God's Salvation. "... for I have seen with my own eyes your *Yeshu'ah*, which you prepared in the presence of all peoples - " (v30)