

Brit Shalom is a noncutting, nonviolent naming ceremony for newborn Jewish boys. It may be performed by a Rabbi or an experienced lay leader. If desired, providers can aid parents in devising their own ceremony. It is similar to the naming ceremony for girls.

Covenant of Peace

In the 613 mitzvos, we are commanded to:

- ◆ (N 41) Not imprinting any marks on our bodies (Lev. 19:28)
- ◆ (N 45) Not making cuttings in our flesh (Deut. 16:1)

Loving Kindness

Among the great strengths of Judaism are its rationality, its commitment to learning and scholarship, the tradition of *gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, and the prohibition on deliberately causing pain. Cutting off part of a baby's penis violates all of these traditions and strengths.

The Covenant

The argument that Jewish babies have a *right* to have part of their penises cut off before they are old enough to give or withhold consent, because to do otherwise would deprive them of their heritage, is irrational. Heritage here means *doing what we have done*. It may seem, at first, to insult one's ancestors to do other than what they did, but it is equally an insult to our own and our descendent's intelligence, to cling blindly to customs of the past.

To be meaningful, a covenant must be entered into by a consenting adult who intellectually understands the covenant. A newborn baby is incapable of this understanding. Therefore, if a man decides to be circumcised later in life — based on his adult understanding of the Covenant — only then is the covenant valid.

Additionally, *halacha* provides for the ceremony of *hatifat dam berit* (shedding of a token drop of blood) for babies who can not be circumcised due to health reasons. This is deemed to be completely valid in marking the Covenant.

Even the great Rabbi Maimonides recognized the problems with circumcision:

"...How can products of nature be deficient so as to require external completion, especially as the use of the foreskin to that organ is evident?"

The **bodily injury** caused to that organ is exactly that which is desired...there is no doubt that **circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement**, and sometimes **lessens the natural enjoyment**; the organ necessarily becomes weak when it loses blood and is deprived of its covering from the beginning."

— Rabbi Moses Maimonides,
The Guide of the Perplexed
The University of Chicago Press, 1963

Literalism

Some people believe that God commanded that Abraham circumcise himself, his family and their heirs forever, yet there are many doubts to this belief.

- ◆ What kind of covenant is it that is marked on the body of a baby, who has no choice in the matter and no understanding?
- ◆ Would the Almighty focus on the mutilation of a baby's penis?

Modern Jewish scholars have found that circumcision is not even mentioned in the earliest, "J," version of Genesis, nor the three ensuing rewrites by other authors. Most importantly, the story of Abraham is in the J version in its entirety, **except** the part about the Covenant being "sealed" with circumcision. So do not be afraid of divine punishment. God did not mandate circumcision.

Identity

Being circumcised is not a condition of being Jewish. Girls do not need to be circumcised to receive the gifts of covenant, i.e., being bat-mitzvahed. **A boy is Jewish if his mother is Jewish** from the moment he is born. In fact:

- ◆ A boy may be excused from circumcision permanently if his health would be endangered by it (for example, hemophilia).

- ◆ Jewish boys in countries where routine circumcision is rare, such as Holland, are left intact and still remain Jews in good standing.
- ◆ In Sweden, 60% of Jewish boys are intact.
- ◆ Many Soviet Jews, left intact for fear of communist persecution, have chosen to remain so, even though communism no longer exists.
- ◆ Contrary to popular opinion, an intact boy may have a Bar Mitzvah. As one Rabbi simply put it, "We don't check."
- ◆ Since many American Christians practice circumcision, it does not distinguish the Jewish boys from the non-Jewish.

Thus, the claim that circumcision is essential for the survival of the Jewish people is invalid.

Healing the World

A central purpose of Judaism is *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Much of the pain in the world is a result of repeating old harmful patterns of behaviors. Forgoing circumcision contributes to our healing. As we heal from this pain, we will be better able to heal others, and reach our ethical and spiritual potential.

Medical

Speaking of healing, some people think that circumcision is valid for medical reasons. This is not true. The American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Cancer Society and the equivalent Canadian organizations state that circumcision of healthy babies is not justified.

Hygiene

Another reason incorrectly professed to be a rationale to circumcise is hygiene. Over 85% of the world's males are intact, and cleanliness is not an issue for them. If boys can learn to blow their nose, brush their teeth, clean their backsides after defecating, and shower daily, then they can learn to wash their penises, inside and out, and retract the foreskin after it naturally separates.

Tradition

Many people invoke the power of *tradition*. The following acts are traditionally punishable by death according to the Torah:

- ◆ Cheating on your husband (Lev 20:10)
- ◆ Fornicating — if you're female (Deut 22:21)
- ◆ Homosexuality (Lev 20:13)
- ◆ Blasphemy (Lev 24:16)
- ◆ Insulting one's parents (Exod 21:17)
- ◆ Disobeying one's parents (Deut 21:18-21)

Obviously, we no longer apply capital punishment for committing the above-mentioned acts, since we are no longer a primitive society and we have come to believe in human rights.

Other practices sanctioned by the Torah that we no longer permit, since we have become better educated and enlightened, are:

- ◆ Slavery (Exod 21:1-11, Deut 15:12-18)
- ◆ Animal and human sacrifices (Lev 4:3, 4:23)
- ◆ Divorce for men only (Deut 24:1)
- ◆ Female subservience to men, including obedience to every order, and no right to refuse sex (Gen 3:16)

Many of our traditions have been abandoned, changed or modified over the centuries. Even the tradition of circumcision has been changed over the years.

- ◆ There is some evidence that radical circumcision — *periah* — was not instituted until the second century CE, to prevent Hellenized Jews from concealing their status. Evidence shows prior to that, Milah was much milder — only the removal of a sliver of foreskin from the tip of the penis.
- ◆ *Metzitzah* — sucking the baby's penis to remove blood from the wound by mouth — was a long-standing and essential part of the ceremony until the end of the 19th century, when it became clear that mohels with TB or STDs were transmitting the diseases to the babies, causing many babies to die as a result.

Take Responsibility

- ◆ Do not be afraid to be the first to change and lead your parents, family, and community into modern times! Your primary responsibility is to take care of your son, not to satisfy other people's need for tradition. Your community will eventually see the light.
- ◆ Do not be afraid to think for yourself. Circumcision is barbaric and you are a better parent for not mutilating your son's penis.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to question tradition rather than blindly accepting it. Circumcision continues in our faith because of indoctrination, fear of change, and so-called tradition. Remember that our religious leaders are the products of this same indoctrination.
- ◆ If you were told to circumcise your daughter's clitoris, would you blindly obey? Or would you question the order and choose to protect your daughter? Don't our boys deserve the same consideration and respect?

Celebrants

For a list of Brit Shalom celebrants worldwide, go to: <http://www.circumstitions.com/Jewish-shalom.html>

Text for alternative Brit ceremonies can be found in "Questioning Circumcision, A Jewish Perspective" by Ron Goldman, PhD.

<http://www.circumcision.org/qcjp.htm>

"I should like to suggest to my fellow Jews that perhaps the time has come to redeem the foreskin itself, rather than sacrifice it. Surely some substitute might be found for this rite ... that would be preferable to this assault upon and mutilation of a newborn infant."

— George Wald
"Circumcision," 1975
Harvard Biology Professor
Nobel Laureate in
Physiology and Medicine (1967)

BRIT SHALOM

*A Peaceful
Alternative*

