

COVENANTAL NAMING CEREMONIES IN JEWISH TRADITION

Compiled and Edited by Rabbi Harry Rosenfeld

INTRODUCTION

The [Midrash](#) tells us that, when a child is conceived, there are three partners: man, woman, and God. Indeed, there is nothing more compelling than this as evidence of God's existence. We express our covenant with God through procreation. As God created the world, so we add to that creation.

Giving birth is a wonderful miracle. Adopting a child is a wonderful miracle. In Judaism, adopting a child is considered one of the most important *mitzvot* - commandments that one can perform.

In either case, the raising of a child as a Jew is an awesome responsibility, one that requires a great deal of sensitivity, knowledge, and awareness.

A Jewish child is brought into a 4000 year old heritage. That child is a link in the chain of our people and our faith. Judaism is not merely a religion; to be a Jew is to be a part of the people. Parents have a wonderful opportunity to raise their children as Jews and enrich their lives by beginning with a meaningful ceremony.

Judaism has a particular purpose; to bring perfection to this imperfect world. Being Jewish gives us a unique way of looking at life and the world, reflecting our partnership with God. Raising children in that partnership adds a unique dimension to our lives.

BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY

The very first mitzvah in the Bible is "[P'ru u'rvu - Be fruitful and multiply.](#)" ([Genesis 1:28](#)). Of the 613 mitzvot, it comes first in the book of Genesis. This is an affirmation of life and an expression of gratitude. Those who cannot conceive or choose not to have children, have a parallel obligation to help the community support the education and training of children.

While Reform Judaism has been sensitive to the concept of zero population growth, we are also aware of the fact that we are a continually shrinking community. Therefore, we Jews have a responsibility to bring children into our families and help support those who do have children to raise and educate them.

On the other hand, while taking this responsibility seriously, we should remain aware and sensitive to the fact that there are other considerations. Reform Judaism should not perpetuate the attitude that the primary role of women should be baby producers and child raisers. We know it is possible to successfully combine parenthood, education and career. In two parent homes, both parents have equal responsibility for raising a child. We cannot assume that parenthood is appropriate for all families. These are serious questions for liberal Jews.

As Jews, we believe that, along with the obvious reason to rejoice in the very birth of a child, there are many deeply spiritual concepts evident in creation. We learn about our partnership with God in a most concrete way. We think about our parental responsibilities as God's representatives in the life of our child, and we stand in awe of the marvel, the miracle and the wonder of life itself.

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WE ARE ALL EQUAL

The birth of a child is an occasion for great joy. Although our ceremonies for celebrating the birth of girls and the birth of boys may differ, both are equally joyous. When a boy is born, a *Brit Milah* (Covenant of Circumcision) is planned. When a girl enters the world, a naming ceremony *Brit Chayim* (Covenant of Life) should also be planned.

THE VALUE OF CEREMONY

The ceremonies we observe as Jews are in no way intended to be magical, but are important symbols and vehicles for eternal values. What takes place in the years that follow a birth is much more significant. Nevertheless, ceremonies are critical in our celebration as Jews. Ceremonies can help set the mood for what follows in life.

When the ceremony takes place in the home, it creates a family occasion. It is a perfect way to make a *simcha* - a joyous celebration. The years pass quickly, people scatter in all directions, and all that remains is the sparkling memory of such occasions.

PLEASE LET US KNOW

When a child is born and the family has been notified, contact the Congregation Albert office (505-883-1818) so that we can share your joy. The Rabbi and Cantor will be pleased to visit you (if you're feeling up to it) and help you plan an appropriate ceremony to welcome this child into your family and into our community.

CHOOSING A NAME

As prospective parents, beginning to think about names, you will find that our [Congregation Albert library](#), the Rabbi and the Cantor have resources to help you with your choice. Jews of Ashkenazic background have observed the custom of naming their children after deceased relatives who have played an important role in the life of their family. Sephardic Jews name their children after living relatives, particularly grandparents, as a sign of honor to those still alive. Girls do not have to be named after other females, nor boys after other males. Many people honor multiple relatives by using different Hebrew and English names.

The giving of a name expresses the hope that our children will grow with the same kind of qualities and values of the people for whom they were named. It is a way of honoring those whose lives and values gave shape to our own. It is not superstitious but realistic. When we keep people alive in our memories, it is an affirmation that life and family values endure. The naming ceremony can be performed in your home, at the hospital or in the synagogue.

THE EIGHTH DAY

The eighth day is a very significant day in Jewish tradition as it marks the beginning of human responsibility in the partnership with have with God. Since the first seven days are days God created, our responsibility begins on the eighth day. We take up where God left off. It is, therefore, appropriate to have the *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim* on the 8th day of your child's life.

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A *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim* is more than just a celebration. It is a sanctified means of Jewish identity. Just as a wedding ceremony marks the covenantal relationship of husband and wife, so the *Brit Milah* or naming ceremony is an expression of the relationship between parents and God. It marks the emotional promise that parents make with regard to their child. They have been given a gift to raise, not only physically, but spiritually into a mensch, a Jew with values, hopes and dreams.

The eighth day is so important that, even on a *Shabbat* or *Yom Kippur*, a *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim* is performed. The only one reason one should postpone it is for the health of the child.

THE MIXED MARRIED HOUSEHOLD

Although tradition has held that a child is Jewish only if the mother is Jewish Reform Judaism recognizes the equal validity of patrilineal descent as a pre-requisite of Jewish identity of a child born into the family and accepts as Jewish the child of a Jewish father as well as of a Jewish mother if the child is raised as a Jew. A child's Judaism is only presumed at birth. It becomes affirmed through public acts that link that child to Judaism and the Jewish people. Such acts are, enrollment in religious school, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation etc..

Therefore no distinction is made at a *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim* for a child born of one Jewish parent or the child of two Jewish parents **as long as the intention is to raise that child as a Jew**. That child is fully Jewish and is welcomed in the same manner. However, because of the difference with Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, it is imperative that Reform Jewish families understand the impact of the historic definition and our different definition. This is especially important if you desire to use an Orthodox *Mohel* for the *Brit Milah* ceremony. The Rabbi or Cantor will be pleased to talk with you about your specific situation.

DIVERSE HOUSEHOLDS

In our society today, it is not uncommon for single adults, LGBTQ couples and straight couples to bring children into their families through birth or adoption. Following the principles of our Reform Jewish practice, we are fully committed to helping everyone welcome children into their home and into the covenant of the Jewish people.

ADOPTION OF NON-JEWISH CHILDREN

Our tradition teaches that one who adopts a child is regarded as that child's parent in all matters. Our sages stress that we have a communal obligation to take in and care for any child who is orphaned or abandoned. We therefore celebrate with those who choose to bring these children into their homes and lives.

Our naming and covenantal rituals serve, not only to welcome a child born of non-Jewish parents into their new family, but also as a conversion ceremony making the child Jewish in the eyes of our community. Please consult the Rabbi or Cantor for more details about these issues.

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PIDYON HABEN

The traditional ceremony of *Pidyon Haben* (the redemption of the first born son) is generally not observed in Reform Judaism. It is only performed for first born sons and not daughters and therefore is in opposition to our Reform Jewish principle of egalitarianism. In addition, it perpetuates the class distinctions of *Kohen* (Priests), *Levi* (Levites) and *Yisrael* (all other Jews), that are not acknowledged as relevant to Reform Judaism since the ancient Temple-based hierarchy is no longer valid.

However, there are many families which still have an emotional connection to performing *Pidyon Haben*. An egalitarian modern rendition of the ceremony can be arranged with the Rabbi or Cantor.

FAQ'S

1) Why should there be a ceremony for a girl?

The birth of a child is a blessing. Not to honor the arrival of our new daughters with the same fervor and joy as we do our new sons, is to demean our daughters. Therefore in the last decades Reform Judaism created the *Brit Chayim* ceremony. This ceremony is equivalent in all aspects, except circumcision, to a *Brit Milah*.

2) How ancient is the ceremony of *Brit Milah* (commonly referred to as “*Bris*”)?

Brit Milah is the very first ritual in Jewish history. It links us more than any other ceremony to our ancestors and our descendants. In Genesis, Abraham used a flint to circumcise himself, his sons and all the male members of his household. Today, but like Abraham, we take the covenant of *Milah* seriously. Today we follow Abraham's example with Isaac, circumcising our male children on the eighth day.

3) How do we count the eighth day?

The day of the child's birth is the first day. Thus, the eighth day comes on the same day of the week on which the child was born, the next week. Naturally, in Jewish counting, if the child is born after sundown, it is reckoned as the next day.

4) Why does the *Brit* include circumcision for males?

Judaism has always recognized the intertwining of body and soul. We therefore have a healthy attitude toward our bodies and their functions. They are seen within the context of holiness. In addition, circumcision connects us to our ancestors all the way back to Abraham and Isaac.

5) Is it true that medical findings prove that circumcision is a health advantage to the child?

No matter what the medical world discovers about the advantages or disadvantages of circumcision, their conclusions will be somewhat irrelevant as far as the value of *Brit Milah* as a religious ceremony. Jews have never observed *Brit Milah* for health reasons. We, among all people who circumcise their sons as infants, always did so for spiritual reasons, as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

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Please feel free to consult with your physician about any health concerns or issues.

6) Should we use a *Mohel* or a doctor?

It is the responsibility of the parents to perform the circumcision. Most parents do not care to exercise this responsibility themselves and instead, delegate the *mohel* or doctor as their agent. We are blessed in our community to have Dr. Gwenn Robinson and Dr. Joel Berger who are certified *mohalim*. The Rabbi and Cantor will co-officiate with them. You can reach Dr. Robinson or Dr. Berger directly through their respective offices.

7) Why shouldn't we just let the child be circumcised in the hospital and get it over with?

The hospital procedure is icily clinical. It has none of the warmth of a family gathering to celebrate the *simcha* (*joyous occasion*). The sacred mood, cannot be captured in such an environment. The *Brit Milah* is not a clinical procedure, but a spiritual family ritual. When the *Brit Milah* does take place in the hospital, it is important to strive to create the mood and environment conducive to such a religious occasion and to schedule a naming ceremony on the 8th day.

8) How is Elijah the prophet a part of the *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim*?

At the ceremony, there is an extra chair set aside called the *Kisei Eliyahu* - the chair of Elijah. Just as on Shabbat and Passover, Elijah plays an important role by pointing to the Messianic age, so too, at a naming ceremony, Elijah testifies to the coming of that time. The birth of a child is an affirmation of life and a belief that the world is a good place in which to live.

9) What should we do about godparents?

It is a Jewish custom to appoint godparents, people to whom you are especially close and who would in an emergency take over the responsibilities of raising your child. These godparents should be chosen with the understanding that their obligation would also include raising the child in consonance with Judaism. Godparents should be selected because of the values they espouse and by which they themselves live. Parents should make clear to godparents the extent of the trust which is being asked, to enter the child into religious school, to witness Bar or Bat Mitzvah etc. Traditionally the godparents hold the child during the ceremony.

10) Why should we have a ceremony at all?

Having a child is as significant as marriage, Bar/Bat Mitzvah or any other life-cycle occasion. A wedding is the union of two people. Welcoming a child to the family and Jewish people is the union of humanity with God. A ceremony marks a promise to God and the child that the parents, family and godparents will do all they can to raise the child as a Jew. To do otherwise is to deprive the child of that which is rightfully his or hers. A ceremony helps us to become more conscious of the meaning of life. It also helps us to create *simcha* - happiness. Through these *simchas*, we create

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memories that will be cherished for years and generations to come.

11) What other ways can we celebrate the birth?

Besides the Brit Milah or *Brit Chayim* on the eighth day, it is especially appropriate to sponsor an [*Oneg Shabbat*](#) (reception following services) at the synagogue on a *Shabbat* evening or *Kiddush* (reception following services) on a *Shabbat* morning when family and friends can attend services together. A public naming ceremony can take place during the service itself. Even if you have already had a private *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim* the public ceremony allows our congregation to celebrate with you.

12) Can I see a copy of the *Brit Milah* or *Brit Chayim* service?

Of course! Just call the Congregation Albert office (505-883-1818) and we will send you one.

13) How do I arrange the ceremony?

First call Congregation Albert (505-883-1818) and the rest will be easy.