



Brit Milah and Pidyon Ha Ben

By Steve Cohen

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The Brit Milah (Yiddish: Bris)

One of life's great joys is the birth of a new child into a young family. It is no different for a Jewish family, too. Yet when the child born is male and a first-born, certain traditional responsibilities fall on the parents to fulfil God's laws.

On the eighth day, the baby is to be presented for Brith Milah – circumcision of the foreskin of the penis. Why? Because God said so!

The origin of brit milah can be traced back to Abraham, who was the founding patriarch of Judaism. According to Genesis, God appeared to Abraham when he was ninety-nine years old and commanded him to circumcise himself, his thirteen-year-old son Ishmael and all the other men with him as a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." -- Genesis 17:9-14

Typically a bris will be held in the morning because Jewish tradition says that one should be eager to perform a mitzvah (as opposed to leaving it until later in the day). However, it can take place any time before sundown. In terms of venue, the parents' home is the most common location, but a synagogue or another location is also fine.

One reason why there are so few complications involving bleeding may be that the major clotting agents, prothrombin and vitamin K, do not reach peak levels in the blood until the eighth day of life. Prothrombin levels are normal at birth, drop to very low levels in the next few days, and return to normal at the end of the first week. One study showed that by the eighth day, prothrombin levels reach 110 percent of normal. In the words of Dr. Armand J. Quick, author of several works on the control of bleeding, "It hardly seems accidental that the rite of circumcision was postponed until the eighth day by the Mosaic Law."

Circumcision - Token of the Covenant

The rite of circumcision was given by God to Abraham as "*a token of the covenant between Me and you*" (Genesis 17:11-13), which is also called an "everlasting covenant." In rabbinic literature this is also called brito shel avraham avinu (the covenant of Abraham our father) (Avot 3:11).



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You can make one very obvious connection of circumcision with the covenant when you see that a covenant is cut, just as the foreskin is cut in circumcision. Perhaps the best explanation is tied to the future generations. The vehicle for begetting is marked as a reminder, a warning, and a promise.

It served as a reminder of the Abrahamic Covenant and of all that God connected to it, including the warnings and the promises. It further served as a reminder that the sin of Adam passes by sexual begetting to the next generation. The warning was that one risked being completely and forever being cut off from God if he forsook the covenant. The promise was in the blessing to Abraham and his offspring, particularly his promised Seed who would bless all nations — the coming Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pidyon Haben

According to the traditional rabbinic interpretation, in the early part of the Bible, as recorded in the Book of Genesis, the duties of a priest fell upon the eldest son of each family. The first-born was to be dedicated to God in order to perform this task.

Following the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, after the nation had sinned with the Golden Calf, the priesthood was taken away from the first-borns, and given to the tribe of Levites, specifically to the Kohanim, High Priest Aaron, his children, and their descendants. At the same time it was instituted that the first born of each family should be redeemed; i.e. they would be 'bought back' from the dedication to God that would previously have been required of them. Levites were substituted for the first-born and wholly given to Divine service:

And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons; they are wholly given unto him from the children of Israel. And I behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every first-born that opens the womb among the children of Israel; and the Levites shall be Mine. For all the first-born are Mine: on the day that I smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto Me all the first-born in Israel, both man and beast, Mine they shall be: I am the LORD.' -- Numbers 3:9, 12-13

The Mother's Cleansing

A requirement for the mother's cleansing is also specified:

When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean. -- Leviticus 12:6-8

This requirement was also carried out by Mary, Y'shua's mother:

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived. When the time came for the purification rites



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required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." [for Mary's cleansing] -- Luke 2:21-24



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