

The Orthodox
Jewish Woman
and Ritual:

*Options and
Opportunities*

Birth

WELCOMING ALL OF OUR CHILDREN

We must acknowledge that in the past the birth of a boy was considered the central event in the Jewish family. It was the boy who could be expected to support his family, while a girl had to be supported until a husband could be found for her. Today we feel equally blessed by the addition of a son or a daughter, and desire to express our joy within a religious setting. We wish to welcome a baby girl into the Jewish community with a meaningful ritual. Commonly referred to as a *zeved habat* or *simchat bat*, a welcoming ceremony for a girl is not *halachically* equivalent to a *brit milah*. Circumcision is a basic law of Judaism, while welcoming ceremonies for girls are certainly permissible, but optional in nature. This difference in *halachik* status does not detract from the religious significance of welcoming ceremonies for girls.

Crafting a ceremony for girls is both a challenge and an opportunity for parents. There are historical precedents for such ceremonies, but there is also much room for personal expression and creativity. Many parents strive to include elements of both new and old in ceremonies for their daughters, ensuring that the ceremony is a unique event that does not “mimic” a *brit milah*.

This issue outlines some historical precedents of welcoming ceremonies for girls, and considers models that are being practiced today. We also consider ways in which a mother may express her feelings of gratitude after giving birth, as well as opportunities for a mother to participate at a *brit*. With an understanding of rituals past and present, we are truly blessed to welcome *all* of our children to a life of Torah, *chupah*, and *maasim tovim*.

The Editors



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et sculpit.

Kirchliche Verfassung der heutigen Juden by Johann Christoph Georg Bodenschatz, 1749. Depiction of a birth. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS OF WELCOMING CEREMONIES FOR GIRLS

by Jennifer Breger

Throughout Jewish history it was the birth of a boy that was marked by ritual. Greeted with a *brit* and often a *Shabbat Zachor* and *pidyon haben*, the boy's entrance into the covenant was a marked, public event. According to the Gemara in *Brachot*, (59b) the blessing *Hatov Ve'Hameitiv* is recited only after the birth of a boy. Traditionally, a baby girl was greeted only with the blessing of *she-hechyanu*. (However, there is a view quoted in the name of Rabbi Nachum Rabinowitz of Maaleh Adumim that today parents of girls feel the great joy that warrants recitation of this blessing.)

What are the historical precedents for welcoming girls into our community? In Ashkenazi communities, a baby girl was named in the course of a regular synagogue service, as the father was called to an aliyah on the first Shabbat or Monday or Thursday following the birth. However, there is historical precedent for more elaborate welcoming ceremonies for girls, particularly within the Sefardic and Italian rites.

A Sefardic and Italian ritual called a *zeved habat* dates back to the seventeenth century. The name of the ceremony is derived from *Bereishit* 30:20. Following the birth of Zevulun, and preceding the birth of Dinah, Leah states, "*Zevadani Elokim oti Zeved Tov*," "God has granted me a gift." Thus the term *zeved habat* should be translated as "gift of the daughter." Special melodies were sung at the ceremony, and verses from the Song of Songs were recited (see text below).

In various Sefardic communities, the welcoming ceremony for a baby girl was known as "*las fadas*." The term probably derives from the Spanish "*hadas*," meaning fairies, since it was a Spanish belief that a baby was blessed by good fairies. At the ceremonial feast the Rabbi held the baby girl on his lap, recited a blessing, and announced her name. Passed from hand to hand among the guests, the baby was showered with individual blessings. In Turkey it was customary for an embroidered silk veil to be placed over the heads of the mother and baby at the *las fadas*. Lifted after the naming, the veil continued to be worn by the mother throughout her life, and then by the daughter at her wedding ceremony.

Also dating back at least to the seventeenth century is a beautiful *Misheberach* to be recited upon the naming of a girl, which is found in various Italian and Sefardi prayer books. Appropriately, this *Misheberach* invokes the matriarchs and other Biblical women (see text below).

There is a fascinating custom that developed in the South German and Swiss Jewish communities called the *Hollekreisch* ceremony. Described by Simcha of Vitry in the thirteenth century, the ceremony was greatly influenced by German folk customs. When the baby was about a month old the mother brought her to synagogue on Shabbat. The baby was welcomed with song, and her father was called to the Torah. After services, family and friends went home to celebrate this occasion. Children surrounded the decorated cradle of the baby, raising the cradle three times with cries of “*Holle, Holle, what shall this child’s name be?*” The children then called out the secular name of the girl and received sweets from the parents. In some parts of Germany this ceremony was performed for both boys and girls, but as boys were welcomed with a brit, it was more commonly observed for girls.

The origins of the name of the ceremony are uncertain. Some have suggested that the name is connected with the German demon *Holle* who menaced infants. There is also evidence from German and Austrian folk rhymes of a *Frau Holle*; an ancient mythological goddess who brought children to earth. The name may also be derived from a combination of the Yiddish word “*hole*” (like the Hebrew word *hol* for secular) and the German word “*krieschen*” (to shout), referring to the declaration of the infant’s secular name. Interestingly, this custom was preserved in small rural areas of Germany, even as it was abandoned in larger communities and cities. Apparently the *Hollekreisch* ceremony was still practiced in Strasbourg in the 1950’s, but today has faded into memory.

Jennifer Breger writes on Jewish women’s liturgy and literature, and on Hebrew printing. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

THE ZEVED HABAT CEREMONY ACCORDING TO THE SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE CUSTOM

Taken from *Book of Prayer: Daily and Sabbath* by Rabbi Dr. David De Sola Pool

סדר זבד הבת

יִזְנֶתִי בְּחַגְוֵי הַסֵּלַע בְּסֶתֶר הַמְדְּרוֹנָה. הֲרֵאִיתִי אֶת
מְרֵאדֶיךָ. הִשְׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת־קוֹלְךָ. כִּי־קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב. וַיִּמְרָדֶךָ
בְּאֵנָה:

ואם היא הבת הראשונה יאמר

אֶחָת הִיא יִזְנֶתִי תַּמְתִּי. אֶחָת הִיא לְאִמָּהּ. בְּרָה הִיא
לְיִזְלֶדְתָּהּ. רְאוּהָ בְּנוֹת הַיְּאֻשְׁרוֹנָה. מְלָכוֹת וּפְלִיטוֹשִׁים יְהַלְלוּהָ:

From the Song of Songs:

“O my dove in the rocky clefts,
In the covert of terrace high,
Let me see thy countenance,
Let me hear thy voice,
For sweet is thy voice
And thy countenance comely.”

If the child be the first born, add:

“One alone is my dove, my perfect one,
The darling of her mother,
The choice one of her who bore her.
Daughters saw her, they acclaimed her,
Queens and consorts, they sang her praises.”

מִי שֶׁבְּרַךְ שָׂרָה וְרֵבֶקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה. וּמִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה
וְאַבִּיגַיִל. וְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בַת אֲבִיחַיִל. הוּא יְבָרַךְ אֶת
הַיְלָדָה הַנְּעִימָה (הַזֹּאת). וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמָהּ סְלוּיָהּ בַּת סְלוּיָהּ בְּכִזְל
טוֹב וּבְשִׁעֵת בְּרָכָה. וַיְגַדְלָהּ בְּבְרִיאוֹת שְׁלוֹם וּמְנוּחָה. וְזָכָה
אֶת־אֲבִיהָ וְאֶת־אִמָּהּ לְרֵאוֹת בְּשִׂמְחָתָהּ וּבְחֻפְתָּהּ.

May the One who blessed our mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Miriam the prophetess, Avigail, and Esther the Queen bless also this darling babe. In happy augury may her name be called....daughter of....May God bless her to grow up in health, peace and happiness. May God give her parents the joy of seeing her happily married, a radiant mother of children, rich in honor and joy to a ripe old age. May this be the will of God, and let us say, Amen.

CRAFTING A WELCOMING CEREMONY FOR GIRLS TODAY

by Jennifer Breger

Today there are many different models of celebrations which welcome baby girls into the community. In Askenazic communities, modern welcoming ceremonies are referred to as *simchat bat* (rejoicings over the daughter), while in Sephardic communities the tradition of *zeved habat* (gift of the daughter) is still practiced. The *zeved habat* is an elaborate naming ceremony for a girl which takes place the first time the mother brings the child to synagogue. In Ashkenazic families, the new ritual of *simchat bat* does not replace the traditional naming of the girl in synagogue which takes place the first week after she is born.

There is an obvious *halachik* difference between a *brit*, which is a required ceremony for a boy, and the optional ceremony of *simchat bat* for a girl. While *simchat bat* is an optional ritual, it is certainly permitted within the realm of *halacha*, and can be a very meaningful event.

As there is no binding formula for a *simchat bat*, many Orthodox families enjoy the challenge of crafting a personally meaningful ceremony. Others would like a more universally agreed upon text. Some synagogues do have suggested services for a *simchat bat*. More Rabbis, synagogues and women's organizations should create resources for this ceremony. Many expecting parents would like to have suggested texts to follow or at least to use as a springboard for their own ideas.

As welcoming ceremonies for girls are not required by *halacha*, there is no specific date on which these celebrations must occur. Thus the mother has the leisure of waiting until she is fully recovered so that she may play an active role in the ceremony. Some families do make an effort to celebrate the *simchat bat* when the girl is eight days old, to parallel the *brit*. Others celebrate at fourteen days, signifying the cessation of the period of impurity for the mother after the birth of a girl. Still others celebrate on the thirtieth day, paralleling the date of *pidyon haben*, and marking the age at which a child was counted as part of the census. A particularly nice custom is to celebrate the *simchat bat* on *Rosh Chodesh*, a holiday traditionally connected with women.

The *simchat bat* may take place in a synagogue or private home. What should the ritual components of this ceremony be? The *simchat bat*

is a good opportunity for the mother to recite *birchat hagomel*, and for the parents to say *shechyanu* or *hatov vehameitiv*. Many Ashkenazic families use the *zeved habat* as a paradigm for the *simchat bat*, reciting the verses from the *Song of Songs* included in that ceremony. The seventeenth century *Mishaberach* prayer for the naming of a girl found in various Italian and Sefardic prayer books may also be recited. In order to stress that the girl is entering the Covenant of Sinai and the Covenant of the Plains of Moab many read the verses in *Devarim* 29,9-11, "You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God, your leaders, your tribes, your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, and your wives, in order that you may enter into the covenant of the Lord your God." Another source which may be incorporated is *Sotah* 11b, "In the merit of the righteous women who lived in that generation, our foreparents were redeemed from Egypt." Many families incorporate other favorite verses or songs, and involve the siblings of the new baby in the recitation. Some families prepare for the birth of a child by studying a book of *tanach*, or a *masechet* of *gemara*, and thus add the ritual of a *siyyum* to the *simchat bat* ceremony, with the recitation of the *hadran* and the *kaddish*. As the Talmud (*Gittin* 57a) mentions that a pine tree, signifying strength and beauty, should be planted upon the birth of a daughter, some have adapted this custom and plant a tree at the *simchat bat*.

A *simchat bat* can be a special time to honor different generations of family and friends. Often the baby is passed among honored guests during the ceremony, symbolizing the child's entrance into the community. At the *seudat mitzvah* following the ceremony, the parents speak of the baby's namesake, as well as of biblical or historical figures bearing the same name. One new tradition is to form an acrostic of the girl's Hebrew name using biblical verses. The *birchat hamazon* following the *seudah* may include a special *harachaman* written for the *simchat bat*. It is fitting to conclude the ceremony with recitation of the blessing given to girls on Friday night which evokes the virtues of the biblical matriarchs.

At the same time as we welcome a girl into the family, we also welcome her into the larger community. The ceremony of the *simchat bat* should thus reflect the personal aspirations of the family, as well as the ideals of the community. Many families who have had successive *simchat bat* have found they have developed their own family tradition, and synagogues are beginning to develop ceremonies as well. Combining tradition and innovation, the *simchat bat* is a paradigm of the values we wish to transmit to our daughters; commitment to Torah and *mitzvot*, and the desire to infuse religion with personal meaning.

Jennifer Breger writes on Jewish women's liturgy and literature, and on Hebrew printing. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

WHEN SHE ARRIVES

by Jon Levisohn

Performance of ritual demands, at least in part, surrendering autonomy: we perform a ritual because we have received a tradition, because someone else says we should, because it has always been done this way. This is a simplification, to be sure, but in general, we experience ritual ready-made. Ritual waits patiently for us to arrive, as it were, and the very heteronomy of the observance contributes to its meaning.

But what if we arrive at a moment - a moment that calls for sanctification through ritual, such as the birth of a daughter - and do not find such a ritual waiting for us? Some will argue that the very absence of ritual is conclusive, but this is both historically inaccurate and philosophically disingenuous. Instead, we find the resources within the tradition to satisfy the obligation as best we can. Each of us may see that obligation differently, and ritual models may proliferate. However, what is significant is not that proliferation, in itself, but the fact that the absence of an established practice denies us the heteronomy that contributes meaning to ceremony. Nothing is waiting for us when she arrives.

So when Ariella arrived, Emily and I assembled a ritual to fulfill our obligation. Within broad *halachik* parameters, we asked ourselves what seemed right, knowing well that the very question is an uncomfortable one to ask about religious practice. We crafted our *simchat bat* out of a variety of liturgical elements, borrowed from *tehillim* and various Sephardi traditions, following the traditionally liturgical structure: *shevach*, praise; *bakasha*, request; and *hoda'ah*, thanksgiving. These three themes captured our experience of wonder and amazement, powerlessness but hope, joy with gratitude. But these themes were about our experience, not about this newborn. We wanted, as well, to acknowledge Ariella through ritual, to mark her acceptance into the covenantal community - but we found no comfortable way to do so.

And yet, when the day arrived, I found that the newly crafted ceremony seemed to take on a life of its own. As we performed the script that we ourselves had written, the ceremony, which I had worried was so artificial, became genuine. The reliance upon traditional liturgical structures, which had seemed wooden, became meaningful. And significantly, the *tefillah b'tzibbur* itself, the gathering together of friends to hear and join our words of prayer, became the ritual element I feared was missing.

It would have been easier to arrive at the moment and find the ritual waiting, without having to make choices about what was right for us and for our community. Something is undoubtedly missing from ritual that is constructed consciously, rather than simply received and accepted. And yet, in the process of weighing our obligations and considering how to draw upon the tradition to satisfy them, something may also be gained as well: an intimate connection, a genuine encounter, a depth of commitment. *Brucha haba'ah* - blessed is she who has arrived.

Jon Levisohn is a doctoral student in philosophy of education at Stamford University.

ALL JEWISH CHILDREN ARE OUR GUARANTORS: A MOTHER LOOKS BACK AT HER CHILDREN'S WELCOMING RITUALS

by Dr. Adena K. Berkowitz

“*Zeh hakatan gadol yihye.* May this child grow into manhood”. These words recited at every *brit milah* have reverberated through the ages. And for every mother and father who recites them, they evoke a range of emotions and hopes, expectations and dreams. When I brought our son Menachem Lev into the synagogue for his *brit* 7 years ago, I felt the flow of Jewish history — from Zipporah, Moshe’s wife, who personally ensured that her sons were circumcised, to all the Jews who risked their lives throughout history — during the persecutions of the Syrians, Romans, and Crusaders, to ensure that baby boys had a *brit milah*. Indeed, the continuum of this tradition stretches back to Abraham. There are few rituals that connect us so deeply to our origins as Jews.

Did I feel excluded as a woman in any way? With the usual span of eight days separating his birth and his *brit*, I was just glad that I had made it in time, and that everything proceeded smoothly. Given the proximity between time of birth and time of *brit*, I was relieved that a *brit* is an established ceremony, as I had no time to plan creative alternatives. The sheer newness of everything was overwhelming. I did not feel

left out from this moving event. My voice was heard later at the *se'udat mitzvah* at which I spoke, sharing memories of my paternal grandfather, after whom my son's middle name was chosen.

After my daughter Lizzy was born I reveled in the luxury of time I had to plan a *simchat bat*. Because I saw no need for the *simchat bat* to take place on the eighth day, I had a few weeks after the birth to consider what kind of ceremony would be both personally satisfying and within *halachik* guidelines. I found it very exciting to be part of a process that was free flowing and allowed for creativity and spirituality. The *simchat bat* proved to be a joyful and spiritually uplifting experience for me and all who participated in it. Passing our daughter among the female members of our family was a powerful symbol of the continuum of tradition, stretching from our foremothers to the present day. It was a public recognition of the centrality of women in our community. As we said the *birchat hagomel* and heard our guests respond to it, we concretized the ceremony as a religious ritual.

Our guests ranged from across the Jewish religious spectrum, including, Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Hasidic, Reconstructionist, and also members of other faith communities. The ceremony engendered a sense of community, as well as a satisfaction that what seemed so new was so old, and that this “innovation” functioned within a *halachik* framework. Many people remarked that this was the first time they had attended such a ceremony, and wished they had welcomed their own daughters in the same way. The opportunity for communal *chinuch* was not lost on us!

Zev and I have been blessed with two more daughters, and have welcomed each with a *simchat bat*. At each ceremony we have followed the same format; passing the baby, *birchat hagomel*, readings from rabbinic literature, concluding with speeches and singing. We have explained whom the baby is named after, which adds an element of historicity to the joy of the day. We have sought to incorporate our older children into the *simcha* to welcome the new baby.

I realize that my daughters will grow up in a world where this kind of ceremony is a given; where they will be able, please God, to establish themselves within a *halachik* community that recognizes *Zelem Elokim* in both male and female; the need for dignity to be paid to women and men alike.

We are blessed to live in an age in which we can acknowledge the importance and vibrancy of all of our children. The *Midrash* tells us that before God gave us the Torah, God demanded guarantors. God only agreed to give the Torah when *B'nei Yisrael* said “Our children are our guarantors.” God responded “For their sake I give the Torah to you” (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, 1:24). May God bless us all with guarantors and many happy opportunities for communal ceremony and joy.

Dr. Adena K. Berkowitz is a community liaison to New York City Public Advocate Mark Green and a consultant to Hadassah. She lives in New York with her husband Zev Brenner & four children.

A SINGLE MOTHER WELCOMES A BABY

Having grown up in a traditional Jewish home, I envisioned myself marrying at a young age and raising a large family. Over the years I have learned to accept that things do not always turn out as we expect them to. When I turned forty, I decided to act on a long-harbored dream and adopt a child. I knew from the outset it would be difficult. There were the communal fears - as an Orthodox woman, I was defying all the stereotypes by setting out to raise a child on my own. And there were the personal fears - what would the Shabbat table look like without a father? Could I really handle a job and a child all by myself?

In many ways, the months I spent waiting for my daughter's adoption to come through were analogous to the nine months of pregnancy. While I experienced no physical cramps or labor pains, the emotional stress of waiting was indeed a burden. When I finally held my one-year old daughter in my arms, I realized that the effort I had put in to adopt her allowed me to immediately feel that she was my own.

I wanted to welcome my daughter into the community in a special way. As she was born into a non-Jewish family, she first had to undergo a conversion. Following the conversion ceremony we celebrated her "rebirth" with a *simchat bat* attended by family and friends. The juxtaposition of the conversion and *simchat bat* was extremely meaningful, as it truly symbolized her entering into the Jewish community. Following the *tefilla* at the *simchat bat*, I announced my daughter's name - Yael Bracha. I named her Yael after my grandmother, a woman of great strength and kindness, and Bracha because this new addition to my life is truly a blessing. At the *seudat mitzvah* guests showered my daughter with their own personal blessings. Welcoming my daughter with ritual was a way of expressing to her - and to the community that she is truly part of a family. When I feel daunted by the task of raising her alone, I look back at her *simchat bat* and find comfort in the fact that she was not only welcomed into my family, but into the larger family of *klal yisrael*.

PRAYERS RELATING TO CHILDBIRTH

The feelings of thanksgiving experienced by mothers following childbirth are reflected in Jewish women's prayers throughout the ages. Books of *tchinas*, Yiddish prayers of Ashkenazic women, contain prayers for a mother to say following childbirth and after a brit. In manuscript prayer books written for Italian women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we find Hebrew prayers dealing with events surrounding pregnancy, childbirth and delivery. These prayers do not only express the mother's feelings of gratitude, but also her hopes and fears about raising a child. Written in previous centuries, the prayers are still relevant to women today. May these personal prayers help us express our own thanks and supplication to God.

PRAYER TO BE RECITED WHEN A WOMAN NURSES FOR THE FIRST TIME

From a book of prayers presented to Yehudit Kutscher Coen in 1786

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יי אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי שְׂתוּמִין
מוֹזֵן עֲבָדֶךָ הַתִּינוּק הַזֶּה בְּרַבּוּי חֶלֶב דִּי מַחְסוּרוֹ
אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לוֹ. וְשִׁים בְּלִבִּי הָעֵת שְׂצָרֶיךָ לְהַנְיָקָהוּ
כְּדִי לָתֵת לוֹ. וְהַקֵּל מֵעַלֵּי הַשָּׁנָה. וּבָעֵת שִׂיבָכָה פִּתַח
אָזְנִי כְּדִי לְשָׁמְעוּ מִיָּד. וְהַצִּילֵנִי שֶׁלֹּא תִפּוֹל יָדַי עָלָיו
בְּעֵת הַשָּׁנָה וְנִמּוֹת חֵם וְשָׁלוֹם: יְהִי לְרְצוֹן אִמְרֵי־פִי
וְהַנְיִין לְבִי לְפָנֶיךָ יי צוּרִי וְגוֹאֲלִי:

May it be Your will my God and the God of my forefathers that You ready the food of this baby, Your servant with an abundance of milk so that he will not lack anything that he requires. Place in my heart the patience it

takes to nurse him, so that I may provide for him. Allow me to sleep lightly, and open my ears so that at the moment he cries I will immediately hear him. Spare me so that I do not fall on him while he is sleeping and cause him to die, God forbid. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable to You, God, my rock and my redeemer.

TCHINA FOR A WOMAN WHEN SHE GOES TO SHUL AFTER GIVING BIRTH

written in the seventeenth century by Sarah bas Tovim

Lord of the whole world, when the temple still stood in Jerusalem, a woman who had given birth would leave her bed to come to bring a sacrifice. Now, because of our sins, there is no temple. We now fulfill our obligations with prayer in the synagogue, which is a *mikdash me'at* - miniature temple. I come to shul to thank and praise You dear God, for all the kindness that You have done for me until now. And I pray that You will continue and not stop your loving kindness to me.

RECITATION OF THE GOMEL

Childbirth, a particularly dangerous time for women, is also a time to turn to God in supplication and gratitude. The *birchat hagomel*, the prayer of thanks recited after surviving a dangerous ordeal, is thus an appropriate prayer to recite after childbirth. In most Orthodox synagogues husbands recite this prayer on behalf of their wives as they are called up to an *aliyah*. However, there is no reason that a woman may not recite this blessing herself. The Talmud in *Brachot* 54b lists four categories of people who have been delivered from danger who are required to make the blessing, including someone recovering from an illness. The categories are not restricted to men, and a woman after childbirth is considered to be recovering from an illness. Throughout the centuries, authorities have puzzled over why women do not recite *birchat hagomel* themselves. Apparently, there existed a sentiment that it was not modest for women to recite the blessing in front of ten men in synagogue. Authorities such as Rabbi Moshe Sternbach and Rav Ovadiah Yosef have ruled that there is nothing immodest about a new mother reciting this blessing in synagogue. Today, Lubavitch women routinely recite the blessing in synagogue after the Torah portion. Some

synagogues in Israel have adopted this practice as well. A woman may recite this prayer from the women's section of the synagogue after her husband has been called up for an *aliyah*. The prayer may also be recited during the *simchat bat* or at the *brit*. Our communities should be more open to the idea of women reciting this blessing, and mothers should accustom themselves to reciting it. Recitation of the *gomel* is a beautiful way for a mother to publicly express her feelings of gratitude to God.

ADOPTION RITUALS

Today, adoption allows some parents to fulfill their dream of having a child. Just as we welcome biological children into our community with ritual, we celebrate the arrival of an adopted child with ritual. The Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 19b tells us that “whoever raises a child is to be considered the parent.” In the Bible, we find two examples of individuals who “adopted” children into their families. Our leader Moses was rescued from the river by the daughter of Pharaoh, who raised him in the palace. On Purim we read of Mordechai, who welcomed his orphaned relative into his home and raised her as a daughter.

A *simchat bat* can celebrate the arrival of an adopted baby daughter, complete with prayers and a *seudat mitzvah* at which the name of the baby is explained. Parents may wish to personalize the ceremony by including special readings which celebrate the unique occasion of adoption. An appropriate text to read is Psalm 180, which gave us the modern Hebrew word for adoption - *ametz* - “to strengthen.” Parents can then express their special wishes for their adopted child, welcoming her into the Jewish community. This beautiful poem was written for the welcoming ceremony of Bonnie Lauren Schwartz in 1996:

Not flesh of my flesh
Nor bone of my bone
But miraculously my own
Never forget for a minute
You didn't grow under my heart
But you grew in my heart!

(Courtesy of Jewish Women's Resource Center,
National Council of Jewish Women)

WEANING CEREMONIES

When we think of ritual, we often think of events external to our own bodies. We celebrate *simchat bat*, *bat mitzvahs*, and weddings, but not menarche, the onset of pregnancy, or menopause. Created *b'zelem Elokim*, in the image of God, we should celebrate the cycles of our own bodies and mark them with religious significance. Creating a ritual for weaning is one way to commemorate the significant shifts in our bodies.

The weaning of a child is an important life-cycle event within a family. Weaning marks a permanent shift in the relationship between mother and child. There is Biblical precedent for weaning ceremonies in the feast that Avraham made for Yitzchak when he was weaned. The biblical Hannah offered prayers of thanksgiving when she weaned her son Shmuel. Throughout Jewish history various communities have celebrated this important event. Syrian and Iraqi Jews celebrated weaning with a large feast, serving wheat cooked in sugar and cinnamon as a symbol of sweetness. In Eastern Europe a neighbor would deliver the baby's first food as the mother prayed that this would be the last time the baby would rely on the kindness of outsiders. Thus the weaning ceremony celebrated a future life of independence for the child.

Today, the event of weaning may be marked privately within a family, or publicly with friends. It is appropriate to read the biblical stories of the weaning of Yitzchak and Shmuel at the ceremony. A mother may write her own prayer for her child. The ceremony may include a *seudah* at which personal blessings for both mother and child are recited.

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT AT A BRIT: HISTORICAL NOTES

by Jennifer Breger

It was not until modern times that women began attending the ceremony of a *brit*. Historically, women sat outside the room in which the *brit* took place, preparing the food, and waiting for the

ceremony to conclude. Although women were not present at the actual ceremony, they participated in the *simcha* in a number of ways.

An eighteenth century book of *minhagim* from Furth describes the custom of “*yidish-kerts*,” or circumcision candle. During the three days before and after the *brit*, female friends came to the mother’s house to light their own home-made candles. The custom was to light twelve candles representing the twelve tribes of Israel. A similar custom was practiced in the Early Middle Ages, as women gathered in the mother’s home to light an oil lamp following birth of the child. Both customs play upon the connection between light and children; the candles celebrate the new light the mother has brought into the world.

A custom dating to sixteenth century Germany involved fashioning the swaddling cloth used at the *brit* into a wimpel- a binder for the Torah scroll. The wimpel was then presented to the synagogue when the child came to services for the first time. The mother painstakingly embroidered the cloth, which constituted a wonderful record of the birth of the child. Traditionally, the wimpel included the Hebrew name and date of birth of the child, along with the blessing that the child should grow up to a life of Torah, *chuppah* and *maasim tovim*. The origins of this custom may be found in the writings of the Maharil (14th c.), who stated that a binder may be removed from the Torah scroll to wrap the baby and then returned to its use as a binder. In some communities, this custom is still practiced today. The wimpel may include personal details relating to the family and community into which the child is welcomed. As the child grows, the wimpel may be used at the boy’s *Bar Mitzvah* and *aufruf*.

A different, but related custom practiced in Italian and Sefardic communities was the donating of a *mappah* or “*fascia*” to mark the birth of a boy. This Torah binder was embroidered by the mother and used during daily synagogue services. Today, Torah binders may be dedicated to honor the birth of a girl as well.

The women of Libya practiced a different custom related to *brit milah*. On the night before the *brit*, women came at dusk to prepare perfumes in the house of the new mother. The women sang a variety of songs expressing their longing for Redemption and the return to Eretz Yisrael. Set to Arabic folk melodies, the songs connect the birth of a new child with ultimate hopes for redemption.

Jennifer Breger writes on Jewish women’s liturgy and literature, and on Hebrew printing. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

ROLES FOR WOMEN AT A BRIT

According to *halacha*, the *mitzvah* of circumcising a son falls on the father rather than the mother of the child. Even if the father is not alive, the *mitzvah* falls upon the community or upon the child himself as he grows up. Traditionally, mothers were almost “invisible” at the *britot* of their sons. Engravings from the eighteenth century show the mother and other women waiting outside the door of the synagogue during the ceremony. An important woman would be designated as “*qvatterin*” to bring the baby to the portal of the synagogue, where the baby would then be passed over to the men. In one book, the *mohel* is instructed to review the relevant laws of circumcision during the period when the women “sometimes delay in bringing the child in.”

Today, both women and men are present in synagogue when the *brit* takes place. As women are beginning to adopt more public roles in Jewish ritual, we must consider whether there are significant roles that may be played by women at a *brit*.

The most public of figures at a *brit* is the *mohel*. May women perform the important act of circumcision? In the Bible (*Shemot* 4,25-26), we hear of Zipporah, who took a flint and circumcised her son on her own accord (although some claim that Zipporah didn’t actually perform the circumcision herself, but only gave the order for it). The Talmud cites the argument between Rav and Rabbi Yochanan (*Avodah Zarah* 27a) about whether women may perform circumcisions. Following the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan, the *Sheiltot* rules that a woman may perform circumcisions. *Tosafot* and later Ashkenazic authorities follow the opinion of Rav in prohibiting women from performing circumcisions. However, there developed a *halachik* view that a woman may perform a circumcision in absence of a man. If a male *mohel* is exceedingly delayed, it may be preferable for a female to perform the circumcision so that the *brit* may be executed in accordance with *zrizim makdimin l’mitzvot* - zealalousness in performance of *mitzvot*.

While we do know of female *mohalot* in Renaissance Italy, the issue never became a public one because generally women did not have the appropriate training for the task. At present, women do not serve as *mohalot* in the Orthodox community. Rabbis are cautious to permit female *mohalot* as the status of the *mohel* affects the *halachik* status of the child. However, as more Orthodox women become surgeons, and therefore have the necessary expertise to perform circumcisions perhaps this

will change. As Blu Greenberg has said, “Zipporah performed a *brit milah*. Female surgeons are trained to do circumcisions and to the extent that this is *halachically* permissible, *kol hakavod* to women who want a part in this central *mitzvah*.”

A second major figure at a *brit* is the *sandek*, or *baal habrit*, the person who holds the baby while the *mohel* performs the circumcision. Usually this honor is given to a grandfather, great-grandfather, or important community figure. Can a woman act as *sandeket*? The first *halachik* objection to this custom was voiced by Rabbi Meir of Rotenburg in the thirteenth century. Before this time, a woman was able to act as a *sandeket* or *baalat brit*. Later Ashkenazi authorities disapprove of a woman acting as *sandeket* out of fear of intermingling of the sexes. Today, when women and men do interact at both secular and religious events there is room to be lenient with this objection. However, Rabbis may be more stringent with laws regarding intermingling of the sexes when the *brit* is set in a synagogue, and some *mohalim* may be uncomfortable with the idea of a female *sandeket*. In the final analysis, the role of *sandek* is honorary and symbolic and does not affect the status of the child. Certain Orthodox Rabbis today do permit a woman to act as *sandeket*, and individual Rabbis should be consulted regarding synagogue policy. Clearly it would be very meaningful if a grandmother or another significant female figure could act as *sandeket*.

While the roles of *mohelet* and *sandeket* are fraught with some *halachik* contention, there are other, less contested roles women may play at a *brit*. It is customary that honored friends and family escort the baby into and out of the room in which the *brit* takes place. There is no reason why women should not be given this honor as well. If the mother is feeling up to it, she may recite a *Dvar Torah* at the *seudat mitzvah*, and explain the name of the baby. While the *mitzvah* of *milah* does not apply to women, it is important that *all* members of the community of Israel are involved in welcoming a baby into the covenant.

ROLES FOR WOMEN AT A PIDYON HABEN

The *pidyon haben* is a ceremony in which the firstborn son of a mother is “redeemed” from a *kohen*, as ancient law indicates that all first-born children or animals initially “belong” to God. In that the *pidyon haben* is related to the firstborn of the mother rather than the father, is there any role for the mother in this ceremony? In some Sefardic and Middle Eastern communities, it is customary for the mother to dress in her wedding gown or veil for the ceremony. In some Ashkenazic communities the baby is placed on a special tray and the mother and other women place jewelry on it. In some Moroccan communities the *kohen* explicitly asks the mother to affirm that this is her first child and the child of her husband. The *pidyon haben* is usually accompanied by a *seudat mitzvah*, at which the mother may recite a *Dvar Torah* and explain this fascinating ritual to the guests.

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JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

459 COLUMBUS AVENUE, SUITE 329

NEW YORK, NY 10024

TEL: 212.752.7133 • FAX: 212.753.6054

E-MAIL: JOFA@RCN.COM