

AN ORTHODOX SIMCHAT BAT - by Joseph C. Kaplan

When my wife, Sharon, gave birth to our first child a short time ago, we were overjoyed that our prayers appeared to be answered and that we were blessed with a healthy baby. In addition, the fact that our firstborn was a daughter had, at this time in our lives, an additional special personal and religious significance; it gave us the opportunity to express our joy and our thanks, on this most joyful and thankful of occasions, in a religious ceremony of our own choosing and design. As Orthodox Jews, we of course confined ourselves to work within the halachic tradition, but we felt certain that we could still prepare and perform a simchat bat in a manner that would be within the traditional framework while still giving expression to our own deeply felt emotions, thoughts and desires.

And so we did. On the Sunday following Thanksgiving (a singularly appropriate day), we celebrated, together with about 100 of our relatives and friends, a simchat bat in honor of our daughter Micole Seanne (or in Hebrew, Sara Michal). Although we consulted with our rabbi, Steven Riskin, as to the appropriateness of the ceremony and received his approval, it was our ceremony, saying what we wanted to say, and bringing our daughter into the covenant between God and the Jewish people in a way that we hope she will appreciate as she grows older.

The following outline (written for the sake of clarity in the third person), is a summary of the ceremony as it was actually performed

1. Micole was brought into the room by her grandmothers, and was then passed from her aunts and uncles to Joseph's grandparents who, as the senior members of the family, ceremonially presided over the simcha. Her voyage to the front table (where she was laid on a white pillow upon an antique silver platter) was accompanied by her uncle's singing of two verses from the Bible which, by starting and ending with the first and last letters of her Hebrew names, symbolize them:

(a) Hatred stirs up wrath, but love covers all transgressions (Proverbs, 10:12).

(b) How good are thy tents O Jacob, thy dwelling places O Israel (Numbers, 24:5).

The tree symbolizes life

2. Joseph explained the section of the Talmud (Gitin, 57a) which recounts a custom in ancient Israel. Upon the birth of a daughter, her parents would plant a pine tree, with the prayer and the hope that their daughter too would grow strong and fragrant. And the tree they planted would not be cut until their daughter was engaged to be married, so its branches could be used for the chupah under which she and her beloved would stand.

In order to perpetuate this ancient, beautiful and very meaningful -although unfortunately neglected- custom, it was announced that ooth sets of Micole's grandparents planted a tree in Israel in her honor, in the hope and prayer that she would be raised to be a source of pride to her family and the entire Jewish people, and that all who celebrate at her simchat bat would be together once again as she stands under the chupah.

3. As we planted for the future, Sharon thanked God for the past and present by reciting the two blessings symbolizing this gratitude: the birchat hagomail, thanking God for bringing her through this wonderful experience in good health, and the birchat shehechivenu, thanking God for bringing all to that day of joy and simcha.

4. Sharon then compared Micole's birth to the blessings over the Torah. Before the Torah is read, we refer to it as "His Torah" (toratg); only after it is read, after we have had a personal experience of Torah, do we call it a "Torah of Truth, a tree of life" (torat emet, chayai olam). So too with Micole. While we appreciated and loved our many nieces, nephews and children of friends and relatives, it took the birth of Micole, our own child, for us to understand and appreciate more deeply what it means to care for, raise and love a child.

Meaning is created through prayers and blessings

5. Sharon, her sister, Joseph's sister and their sister-in-law (all mothers), then read from the prayer of Hannah (Samuel I, 2:1-10), whose words of gratitude to God upon the birth of a firstborn are one of the most striking and touching prayers recorded in the Bible.

6. Although all of Israel is a nation of priests, since Joseph is a kohayn, Micole was born into a family of priests, and thus was privileged to be blessed by her paternal grandfather with the traditional Priestly Blessing (Numbers, 6:24-26).

7. Micole's maternal grandfather, a practicing rabbi, then recited the special prayer from the Song of Songs, and the mi shebzyrach (with certain minor emendations) found in the Spanish and Portuguese Prayer Book. Once again, her name was proclaimed as a true daughter of Israel (as was her namesake, Sharon's paternal grandmother). While the aforesaid was being recited, Sharon inscribed Micole's name into a family tree prepared especially for this occasion, so Micole could take her rightful place in the family, and hopefully follow in the tradition that was set for her.

8. Joseph again thanked God for all the good he bestowed upon them by reciting the blessing of hatov vehameytiv (the God who does Good).

9. The blessing was recited over the wine (which was shared by Micole and Joseph), words of Torah were spoken by Rabbi Riskin and Micole's grandfathers and great-grandfather, and, as in all traditional Jewish ceremonies, a sumptuous homemade spread, indeed a yom tov feast was enjoyed by all.

This was our ceremony; it said what we wanted and felt should be said. Others need not follow it; they should say and do what they want and feel. But if they truly appreciate their daughter and her relationship to the People of Israel and its covenant with God, they must say and do something; they must sanctify her birth and her becoming part of that covenant with a religious ceremony of gratitude to God.