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Rituals for a Brit

By Aliza Berger-Cooper

We added two things to the brit ceremony. First, I drank from the cup of wine (actually grape juice) over which the blessing *Bore pri hagafen* (blesser of the fruit of the vine) was said, something which the mother of the baby does not always do. Second, we revived an old *misheberach* (prayer/request of God) which appears in several sources, mostly from the geonic period. The original *misheberach* is in Aramaic. An English translation is: May a healing of life and mercy be sent from heaven to heal this infant, who needs healing. Also, may a healing of life and mercy be sent to heal the mother of this infant, for she needs healing.

In the original custom, the *misheberach* was said over the cup of blessing and only the mother and baby drank from it. They drank because they were the people who needed healing after the birth.

I found these customs in Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber's book *Minhagei Yisrael*. I consulted with Rabbi Dr. Sperber over the phone about how exactly to implement the *misheberach*. He was pleased that someone wanted to revive this custom. [A female friend recited the *misheberach* just after I said the *gomel* blessing.]

According to Rabbi Dr. Sperber, the reason the custom of the mother drinking the wine and saying this *misheberach* fell into disuse was due to a *psak* (ruling) by one of the *rishonim* (decisors after the geonic period), the Maharam of Rothenburg. The Maharam of Rothenburg ruled that it is preferable for the mother not to be present in the synagogue during the brit. He wrote (my translation), I do not at all approve of the custom in most places, for the mother to sit in the synagogue with the men, and have the baby circumcised in her bosom. It is not proper for a finely dressed woman to enter among the men and before G-d? Whoever has the power to protest [this custom] should protest it, and one who is strict shall be blessed.

The Maharam's opinion was accepted by later Ashkenazic decisors. The Rema, in his commentary on the *Tur Shulkhan Aruch*, *Darkei Moshe*, rules like the Maharam.

Why did the mother's not being in the synagogue lead to her not drinking from the wine? According to Rabbi Dr. Sperber, because the mother is not in the synagogue, she does not hear the blessing over the wine. If the wine is then brought to her, she makes her own blessing over it, and is the only one who drinks from the wine, the result is that the blessing made in the synagogue was a *bracha levatala* (wasted blessing), which is forbidden. Thus, instead of the woman, various other people began to drink ? the one who made the blessing [probably the *mohel* (circumciser)], the *sandak* (godfather), the sexton, boys in attendance, and others.

A simpler explanation seems to me to be one of logistics: the mother was far from the action so no one bothered to bring her the cup.

After we decided that we wanted to revive this *misheberach*, and consulted with my brother, who is a rabbi, and with Rabbi Dr. Sperber, we asked the *mohel* if he would have a problem with us doing this. I was a bit afraid of what his reaction would be. What happened? He told us that he himself is of Yemenite extraction, and that this *misheberach* is said at every Yemenite brit to this day. In fact, they say a longer, more elaborate version of it. This made me feel even more sure that saying this *misheberach* was an appropriate thing to do.