

## Jewish Life

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# An Informed Approach to Choosing a Mohel

By Cantor Mark E Kushner

The Jewish people have practiced *brit milah*, the rite of ritual circumcision, for nearly 4000 years. There is probably no commandment performed more faithfully or celebrated more joyfully. This mitzvah first appears in Genesis, Chapter 17 when Hashem asks Avraham to accept the everlasting covenant of circumcision. In return He promises to make Avraham the father of a multitude of nations and to give the Land of Israel to him and all his generations to come. The Zohar, a Kabbalistic commentary on the Torah, teaches: *To maintain the purity of this covenant is to observe the whole Torah.* (Genesis XIX:197a)

Whenever we fulfill Hashem's commandments, we try to enhance the mitzvah by adhering to the law and carrying it out in as beautiful a way as possible. The commandment of *brit milah* falls upon the father of the newborn son, but in most families a *mohel* is called upon to carry out the procedure. Choosing the right *mohel* can make the difference between a simple surgery and a joyous *simcha*. Below are some guidelines.

**Because you want a spiritually profound as well as a medically precise bris, choose a *mohel* who:**

- is certified by a local brit milah board composed of community rabbis.
- is religiously trained, often a rabbi or a cantor.
- is personally observant, *shomer mitzvot*, and professionally knowledgeable about and adherent to halakha, Jewish law.
- understands the concept of mitzvah, especially with regard to compensation.
- is knowledgeable about various customs related to *brit milah*, especially Hebrew names and naming customs.
- has completed training of the duration of at least a year, usually in the form of an apprenticeship, not a two-day or 35-hour mini-course.
- chooses to perform ritual circumcision as his primary occupation, usually several times every day, not as a second job or an avocation.
- has many years of experience, having performed hundreds, if not thousands, of brisses.
- can perform the actual circumcision in 30 seconds or less to minimize pain and discomfort for the baby.
- performs the surgical procedure with the baby lying on a pillow, held gently by the warm, loving hands of the *sandak*, not tied down by restraints on a molded, plastic body board.
- follows modern aseptic techniques including proper sterilization, usually by autoclave, and the use of surgical gloves.

- has a good working relationship with those in the medical profession, specifically pediatric urologists, with whom he can consult in special cases.
- has a good personal and professional reputation with rabbis, with doctors and with clients.
- is easy to contact, accessible by cell phone or pager.
- has clear follow-up procedures in place.
- is accurate in scheduling, arrives on time and, in the event of inclement weather or traffic, will notify the family in a timely manner of a possible delay.
- will stay after the *bris* and explain aftercare instructions in detail.
- is kind, gentle and supportive of families with newborns, as well as being sensitive to other family issues.

**Because you want the bris to be as painless as possible, choose a *mohel* who:**

- uses the Mogen shield/clamp as opposed to the Bell or Gomco clamps, as it allows him to complete the circumcision in less than one tenth of the time.
- does not cause the baby undue physical and/or emotional stress by restraining arms and legs and uses modern analgesic techniques combined with acceptable anesthesia that are safe and effective in reducing procedural pain. Some facts:
  1. Rabbi Moshe Tendler, Ph.D., professor of medical ethics at Yeshiva University in New York, supports the use of a topical anesthetic cream, if parents feel it is necessary.
  2. EMLA® cream is *contra-indicated* by its manufacturer for children under 2 years of age. LMX®, also a topical cream, is a recommended anesthesia without contra-indications.
  3. The dorsal penile nerve block is a series of shots that are only 50% efficacious and require more time to administer than a circumcision by a skilled mohel.
  4. A proper dosage of acetaminophen is recommended by leading researchers.
  5. A traditional *bris* performed competently using a small dosage of Tylenol®, a topical anesthetic and sweet kosher wine, which helps soothe the baby, is considered effective in addressing the issue of pain.

**Because we want the best medical benefits for our children, choose a *mohel* who knows that:**

circumcision as a medical procedure offers positive benefits throughout a man's life, especially in a world endangered by sexually transmitted diseases such as the HIV virus. The risks of the procedure are minimal while the benefits are great. As reported by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 1999, neo-natal circumcision protects against:

- urinary tract infections
- penile cancer
- sexually transmitted diseases
- balanoposthitis (infection of the glans)
- phimosis (failure of the foreskin to retract)
- ease of genital hygiene

One of the intrinsic values of *brit milah* is that it connects us. It connects us with our history by continuing the covenant Avraham made with Hashem as well as with past generations as we name our children after those who are no longer with us. *Brit milah* connects us with the present by bringing family and friends together for a wonderful *simcha*. And it connects us to the future as we ask Hashem's blessings for the infant, wishing him a life filled with Torah, love and acts of kindness.

