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A mohel who is deft with scalpel and words

By Dawn Fallik
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The screaming started before the bris even began.

Mark Kushner, performing 8-day-old Ethan Jacob Cohen's circumcision, was getting grief because he had refused to use a particular anesthetic cream suggested by a family friend.

"Are you a doctor? Are *you* a doctor?" bellowed the man. "Because I'm a dermatologist and I say it's OK."

The answer was calm and decisive. "I'm a mohel," said Kushner, as the baby snoozed in his hands. "And that cream is unacceptable for babies under age 2 and I won't use it."

Four tools, 22 seconds, and a wine-soaked Q-tip later, Ethan received the mark of the covenant.

"He's always been a member of the team, but now he's just got the jersey," Kushner said.

There are only a handful of full-time mohels in the Philadelphia area who perform the Brit Milah, the centuries-old ritual of circumcision that takes place on the eighth day of a boy's life. The ritual is considered a symbol of the covenant between the Jews and God.

Most mohels, ordained to do circumcision under Jewish guidelines, are men. But women are welcome by some non-Orthodox synagogues.

Once upon a time, either a rabbi or a mohel (pronounced "moyl") performed the circumcision. But now others, particularly doctors, are trying to jump in part-time on a livelihood Kushner believes is more of a calling than a profession, he said.

"A lot of people think it's just easy money, easy work," Kushner said as he steered his car with one knee, fingers maneuvering a Palm Pilot schedule in one hand and a cell phone in the other. "But it's not just being trained medically, it's living a Jewish way of life."

The baby-faced Nebraska native performs baby namings for girls and weddings for Jewish couples, but mostly he does Brit Milah, hundreds of times a year.

Kushner is gentle, he is funny, but mostly he is very fast.

"The last thing you want to do is clamp the baby down and make it look incredibly difficult," said Rabbi Avi Winokur of the Society Hill Synagogue. "He moves quickly and gets it done fast."

Every week, Kushner drives hundreds of miles with a bagful of gauze, prayers, topical anesthetic, and 10 sets of sterilized tools. It can be difficult to find a mohel in North Carolina or Texas, so when someone calls him (the last four digits of both his home and cell phone number spell out *bris*), he goes if he can. Sometimes he refers them to other mohels, but the ceremony can be postponed if no mohel can come on the eighth day.

Kushner, 49, whose father was in the liquor business, grew up in a traditional kosher home. Unsatisfied with his psychology major in college, he applied to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. His teachers suggested Kushner head to Israel to train as a mohel until the new school year began. He was 22.

After finishing his studies in New York to become a cantor, Kushner performed about 30 circumcisions a year. Now, it's 20 times that number. A standard bris or baby naming is \$400 for local calls - more for longer trips, less if the family can't afford the fee.

On a recent Sunday, the mohel had a baby-naming and three bris ceremonies, traveling more than 120 miles from Phoenixville to Reading to Lansdale. Over the years, the busy hours took its toll on his family, said Kushner, who was divorced several years ago and is now remarried.

"Neither of my sons keep the Jewish traditions," said Kushner, who did the bris for his sons. "But I have hope, maybe, when they're older..."

Many couples try to reserve Kushner weeks in advance, but sometimes there are too many babies and not enough time.

"I tell them I should be their third call - the first to her parents, then to his parents, and then to me," he said.

Families are always anxious. And so he zooms with seat-clutching speed along small-town curves to be on time.

At Jaiden Goldstain's house in Reading, his parents, Janice and Nimrod Goldstain, have followed Kushner's pre-bris instructions: Set up a pillow, gauze, diapers, wine and bread, and give the baby Infants' Tylenol an hour beforehand.

This bris has a twist: Because the mother isn't Jewish, the baby isn't considered Jewish, so Kushner does a bris in the name of conversion. In nine months the baby will receive a Jewish ritual bath, much like baptism.

After 27 years, he has learned to handle touchy situations with the same skill with which he wields the knife - adopted babies, multiple attending rabbis, interfering doctors.

The one thing he can't stand is a bad joke.

"Someone always has to come up to me with a joke," Kushner said with a sigh. "So I have a \$5 rule: If I know the punch line, they owe me \$5." (He gives the money to the parents to start a college fund.)

There are no bad ceremonies, Kushner said, but some are more difficult than others. The worst, he said, are the stillborn births. Alone in the basement of a funeral home, he performs the ceremony with the same care and tenderness that he does for the living.

"Those are just heartbreaking," he said.

But that particular Sunday, there was only joy. At each house, Kushner checks the baby when he walks in the door. "An artist has to look at the canvas before choosing a brush," he explained.

Then he rubs his gloved hands together and tackles the crowd, usually filled with a few Kushner "graduates."

"So, is this anyone's first bris?" he jokes. "Really? Me, too."

Kushner usually persuades the parents to stay through the procedure, giving them a poem to read as distraction.

A close friend or family member holds the baby's knees apart - although some mohels use boards or wrap the baby in such a way that he can't move. By the end of the poem, Kushner has used probe, forceps, shield, double-sided scalpel, and anesthetic - and it's over.

The foreskins are considered to be holy and, according to tradition, are buried in the earth at the baby's house or in Kushner's backyard.

Ten minutes later, the parents, the sleeping baby, and the mohel head upstairs for an after-care lesson.

"You'll forget all of this immediately. Don't worry, I wrote it all down for you," Kushner kindly told the couple. "And I'll call you tonight around 9:30 to see how things are."

Then he's gone into the rain. Another 8-day-old boy is waiting.

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