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Birth to B'nei Mitzvah: Raising a Mensch

Between the bris and the bar or bat mitzvah, a lot goes into raising a Jewish child. In this class, we'll discuss the joys and oys of Jewish parenting.

Mensch (noun, "a person of quality")

Some Middot (Character Traits) of a Mensch

ambition	faith	idealism	obedience
bravery	flexibility	imagination	patience
compassion	generosity	integrity	perseverance
courtesy	gratitude	intelligence	respect
creativity	honesty	kindness	self-discipline
curiousity	honor	love	service
determination	humility	loyalty	strength
excellence	humor	morality	trustworthiness

Which of these traits do you consider most important in a mensch?

Related Terms

Menschlichkeit

A word that refers to ethical behavior in general — the characteristics and qualities of a mensch. An act of kindness might be described as "demonstrating a person's menschlichkeit."

Lamed Vavnik

"36-ers" — Jewish tradition teaches that there are, at any given time, at least 36 truly righteous people in the world, and that we are sustained through their merit. A truly wonderful person might be described as a "real lamed-vavnik."

Key Terms:

Brit Milah/Bris

Simchat Bat

Hebrew Name

Mohel

Sandek/Kvatter/Kvatterin

Chair of Elijah

Pidyon ha-Ben

Circumcision

Genesis 17:9-14

Then God said to Abraham, "You must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner — those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

STATEMENT FROM THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (August 27, 2012)

New scientific evidence shows the health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks of the procedure, but the benefits are not great enough to recommend routine circumcision for all newborn boys, according to an updated policy statement published by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The revised policy, like the previous one from the AAP, says the decision whether or not to circumcise should be left to the parents in consultation with their child's doctor.

Since the last policy was published, scientific research shows clearer health benefits to the procedure than had previously been demonstrated. According to a systematic and critical review of the scientific literature, the health benefits of circumcision include lower risks of acquiring HIV, genital herpes, human papilloma virus, and syphilis. Circumcision also lowers the risk of penile cancer over a lifetime, reduces the risk of cervical cancer in sexual partners, and lowers the risk of urinary tract infections in the first year of life. The AAP believes the health benefits are great enough that infant male circumcision should be covered by insurance, which would increase access to the procedure for families who choose it.

RABBI JOSHUA RATNER, "TO SNIP OR NOT TO SNIP?" (Published on MyJewishLearning.com, May 2014)

Alicia Silverstone, the Jewish actress and vegan activist, recently came out with a book on parenting in which she expresses why she chose not to circumcise her son:

"My thinking was: If little boys were supposed to have their penises 'fixed,' did that mean we were saying that God made the body imperfect?"

My response is an unequivocal: "Yes!" To assume that God made us physically and mentally perfect at birth not only belies reality, it also belies theology. If we already were perfect, what would be the point of our existence? The task of living, as I see it, it to try to improve ourselves and the world around us, to partner with God rather than to expect God to take care of everything for us. Circumcision thus serves as an early reminder of our need to inject ourselves as parents into the crucial, if arduous, work of raising our children, of combining nurture with nature to guide our 8-day-old boys into becoming the best men they can be.

Interview with the Mohel

WHAT IS A BRIT MILAH?

Brit milah is a ceremony, performed on the 8th day of life, during which Jewish boys are circumcised and given their Hebrew names. The ceremony usually takes place in the home or synagogue.

HOW IS THE PROCEDURE DONE?

Circumcision entails separating the foreskin from the head of the penis, applying a specialized device, and then removing the foreskin with a scalpel. When performed on a baby, the procedure requires no suturing and rarely results in any significant blood loss. Several different devices can be used to perform circumcision — the most commonly used techniques take anywhere from 30-to-45 seconds.

HOW DID YOU BECOME A MOHEL?

I took a course that taught the religious background of brit milah, as well as the specifics of conducting the brit milah ceremony. I learned circumcision technique as part of my medical training.

ARE THERE MEDICAL BENEFITS TO CIRCUMCISION?

Circumcision has many medical benefits, and has a very low rate of complications. Some of these benefits include decreased rate of pediatric urinary tract infections, decreased transmission of STDs, profound decrease in rate of adult penile cancer, and prevention of any future infections/scarring of the foreskin. There has been much debate about these issues in the medical and lay literature, but currently neonatal circumcision (i.e. for babies) is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and most medical practitioners.

IS A HOSPITAL CIRCUMCISION THE SAME AS A BRIT MILAH?

From a technical view, there is no difference between a circumcision performed in a hospital compared with one performed in a home. However, a hospital circumcision is merely a medical procedure; brit milah is a religious ceremony, which includes the circumcision, the appropriate blessings, and the baby naming.

IS IT DANGEROUS/TRAUMATIC FOR THE BABY?

Babies certainly feel some pain during circumcision, but they usually recover quickly. We minimize trauma for the babies by giving them wine/sugar water during the procedure, as well as feeding them prior to the ceremony to make sure that they aren't hungry. In addition, some mohels will give the baby a local anesthetic prior to the circumcision. The procedure is of minimal danger for a baby.

HOW DO YOU FIND A MOHEL?

The best way to locate a mohel is by word of mouth, through a variety of online resources, or by asking your synagogue for recommendations.

WHAT IS HATAFAT DAM BRIT?

Hatafat dam brit (HDB) is the practice of using a small needle to take a drop of blood from the penis in order to make a circumcision "kosher." This is performed for anyone who did not have the appropriate prayers said at the time of their circumcision. There are several indications for HDB, most commonly for a previously circumcised male who is in the process of converting to Judaism.

Dr. Andrew I. Shpall graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles David Geffen School of Medicine in 1999. Dr. Shpall is affiliated with Kaiser Permanente Woodland Hills Medical Center and specializes in urological surgery. He also works independently as a mohel across Los Angeles.

So, You're Going to a Brit Milah/Simchat Bat

A new life means infinite possibility. A child may grow up to be a brilliant scientist, a great parent, a talented artist, or a world peace-maker. No matter what they grow up to become, they represent one more link in a 3000-year-old chain of covenant, and we celebrate that miracle with communal ceremony.

WHEN DOES IT HAPPEN?

A boy is brought into the Jewish People through the ancient rite of Brit Milah (more often referred to simply as a "bris"), which takes place on the eighth day of life and includes the ritual circumcision, as God commanded Abraham in Genesis 17. A girl is welcomed into the community through the more modern ritual of Simchat Bat, which may take place anywhere from a week to a month following the birth.

WHERE DO I GO?

A Bris or Simchat Bat most often takes place in the home, though sometimes it will happen at a synagogue or the home of friends or family members.

HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

The whole ceremony lasts about 30 minutes, though it may be slightly longer or shorter. At a Brit Milah, the actual circumcision takes less than a minute.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

Dress is generally casual, especially if the ceremony will take place at home. In an Orthodox or Conservative ceremony, or if the ceremony happens in a synagogue, kippot will usually be provided.

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN?

The baby is brought into the room either by the parents or by specially honored friends or relatives *(kvatter/kvatterin)* and everyone will say: *"Barukh ha-ba,"* meaning "Blessed is the one who enters." The baby is then briefly placed on a chair designated for Elijah the Prophet, who is said to signal the coming of the messianic era.

At a Brit Milah, the circumcision will generally happen right away. The baby will be held on the lap of the *sandek*, most often an older male relative, and the actual procedure will be conducted by a specially trained *mohel*. After the circumcision, the baby will be given his Hebrew name with a special blessing, either by the *mohel* or by the family's rabbi, and both baby and parents will receive additional blessings. Since the Simchat Bat ceremony is much newer, its structure is less formally defined. After the baby is brought in, she will usually receive her Hebrew name and the baby and parents will receive blessings. The family may also choose to include other creative rituals, like wrapping the baby in a *tallit* (prayer shawl) or lighting a special candle.

WHEN DO WE EAT?

There is almost always food provided after a Brit Milah or Simchat Bat.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW?

People often get nervous going to a Brit Milah because it is, frankly, pretty unusual to witness a surgical procedure done in a home or synagogue. Once you've seen it, though, it really isn't a big deal. Mohels are experts at their procedure (many today are also MDs) and the actual circumcision takes only a few seconds, involves very little or no bleeding, and heals completely within a couple of days. Infants generally cry more when their diaper is removed (because they easily get cold) than with the actual procedure. If you are uncomfortable, understand that unless you are right up front it is unlikely that you'll see anything at all and please resist the urge to make awkward jokes or outward signs of nervousness, as this will only make the parents more tense.

Simchat Bat Prayer

written by Sarah and Kathryn Levy for their daughter, Mimi:

Torah

May you delight in learning and reading and discovery.
May you search for what it means to be human.
May you search for that which is, was, and forever will be.
May you find comfort in tradition, and hope in change.
May you find hope in ancient wisdom and comfort in new ideas.
May you grapple with what it means to be Jewish, asking difficult questions, and considering complex answers.
May you be a participant — in community, celebration, democracy and revolution.
May you sing — unless you prefer visual arts. Then, may you paint.
May you paint — unless you prefer to groove. Then, may you dance.
May you dance — unless you seek a harder path in life. Then, may you write.
May you write — until you discover that you're really good at math. Then, may you build.
May you build skyscrapers, solar panels and microscopic medical marvels that will eradicate polio, cancer & AIDS.
May you learn for the sake of learning, and share your wisdom with the world.

Chuppah

May you love.
May you love and be loved and give love.
May your life be filled with love — big love, intense love, overwhelming love, the kind of love that comes from family and friends, strangers and neighbors, your communities and colleagues.
May you suffer heartbreak — but only once, and only for a short period of time, and only to discover you were too good for that chump.
May you meet the love of your life, your *b'shert*, someone who feeds your mind, nourishes your soul, and challenges you to be a better person.
May you have a family.
May you suffer very little — only enough to discover that life has ups and downs, and resiliency is your best armor.
May your life be filled with goodness and light, good food and great people, inspiring conversation, laughter, beautiful sunrises and transcendent sunsets.
May you lose track of time.
May you be present.

Gemilut Hasidim

May you dedicate your life to tikkun olam, healing the world.
May you understand that there is happiness in service and service in happiness.
May you have the best of everything — and may you spend your life helping to make sure others can have the best of everything, too.
May you be inspired by those who worked to heal the world before you — your great-grandparents, grandparents, great uncles and aunts, teachers, cousins, and parents.
May you be daring and thoughtful.
May you experiment — legally and safely.
May you be blessed with practical skills, like changing a light bulb or unclogging a drain.
May you help others change their light bulbs so that everyone may have a home filled with light.
May you always create light in the midst of darkness.
May you compete and win. And when you don't win, may you be graceful in loss.
May you live — may you live and love, and live and laugh, and live, and may each day be a blessing.

And may we say, AMEN.

So, You're Going to a Bar/Bat Mitzvah

In some cultures, the transition from childhood to adolescence is marked by sending the young person off to survive alone in the wilderness for a period of time, or ritually piercing or scarring them.

Jews make our awkward teenagers stand up and chant ancient Hebrew with a cracking voice in front of everyone they have ever known. You decide which is more terrifying.

WHEN DOES IT TAKE PLACE?

Boys become Bar Mitzvah at thirteen; girls become Bat Mitzvah at twelve — though many will not celebrate until they reach thirteen, as well.

WHERE DO I GO?

A Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony generally takes place in the family's synagogue, though the reception may take place at another location. You will receive an invitation.

HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

A Shabbat morning service generally lasts 2-3 hours, depending on the family's denomination. It is usually not necessary to be there immediately when it begins, though you should count on staying until it is over (typically around noon). Receptions may occur immediately following the service, or in the evening.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

Dress depends largely on the custom of the synagogue. In general, professional dress for men and women is expected. Evening receptions may be more formal.

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN?

The way that an adolescent demonstrates their readiness to take on adult rights and responsibilities in the Jewish community is by taking part in leading a Shabbat morning prayer service. Their role may include leading a portion of the prayers, chanting from the Torah and the Haftarah (books of the Prophets), and delivering a *d'var Torah* (sermon) based on their portion from the Torah. While a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a celebration of the young person, it takes place in the context of an ordinary Shabbat morning service. Some people will be attending specifically to honor the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child, while others are just attending the weekly service and may be celebrating other lifecycle events.

WHEN DO WE EAT?

There is generally a *kiddush* lunch provided following the service. This may either be just light food, or it may be a full meal. In addition, there may be an invitation-only reception after the *kiddush* or in the evening with a larger meal.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW?

Bar and Bat Mitzvah receptions range from tasteful celebrations to gawdy, completely over-the-top birthday blow-outs. When it is your child's turn to become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, avoid the temptation to hire the Laker Girls to perform or putting on a 45-minute-long, Hollywood produced tribute video to your adorable, yet acne-ridden 13 year old. Your restraint will benefit your child and society in the long term. Trust us.

The Meaning of Thirteen

Rabbi Edward Feinstein

Thirteen is recognized as the beginning of a new phase of moral and spiritual life. According to *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, thirteen was the age when Abraham smashed his father's idols. It was at that age when Jacob and Esau separated — Jacob to a life of Torah and Esau to the practice of idolatry. Thirteen is the age Levi was when he and his brother Simeon attacked the people of Shekhem to avenge their sister. And thirteen was the age at which Bezalel gained the artistic skill to build the *Mishkan*, the tabernacle. Each of these images is remarkably suggestive. Together, they describe a vivid picture of adolescence:

1. Like Abraham's experience, adolescence is a time of rebellion. To find his own truth, the young person must smash the idols of conventional wisdom and accepted custom. The youngster sees himself or herself as a pioneer, the first to set foot on new moral territory. He or she seeks ideals, a sense of mission, a clear voice of conscience to follow. Teens have little tolerance for the false, the compromised, the superficial.

2. Like Jacob's life, adolescence is a time of spiritual search and a quest for identity. Somewhere out there is a truth waiting for him or her. God is waiting at the end of the wilderness. But the quest demands we leave home and endure a journey fraught with peril and uncertainty.

3. Like Levi, adolescence is a time for moral absolutes. There is good, there is evil, and there is no ground between. Evil must be encountered and destroyed. Compromise, accommodation, gradualism are not acceptable. Judgmental, intolerant, demanding, teens can also be deeply loyal, passionately dedicated, and aggressive in their pursuit of a better world.

4. Like Bezalel, adolescence is a time when every creative impulse flowers. Practicality and realism will come later in life. For now, no dream is beyond realization, no plan is out of reach. In adolescence, each of us dreams of building a dwelling place for God in the world in our own way.

For the complete article see intro.aju.edu/readings

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Tallit & Tefilin

Aliyah

D'var Torah

Grow: 10 Ways to Share Judaism with Your Kids

Insist on family Shabbat dinner

One of our favorite Bubbes (Jewish grandmothers), Wendy Light, remembers: "Our children weren't allowed out on Friday nights BUT they could invite any of their friends to join us for Shabbat dinner, where we always served two desserts!"

Grow your collection of Jewish children's books — for FREE!

Sign up for the PJ Library (pjlibrary.org) to receive a hand-picked Jewish children's book each month, absolutely free. You'll also learn a lot and build wonderful memories by reading with your kids.

Cook Jewish foods together

Purchase a Jewish cookbook, and spend time in the kitchen together baking challah, frying latkes, shaping hamentaschen, or preparing a special Shabbat dinner.

Decorate your home for Jewish holidays

Festoon your house with your children's artwork, festive centerpieces, ritual items, picture books, and cute holiday decorations. With a Jewish holiday practically every month there is always a reason to decorate.

Take Shabbat on the road

When you travel together, pack candlesticks, grape juice, and a challah. Make Shabbat memories together and teach your kids that Judaism will be with them wherever they are.

Affix mezuzot to kid's bedrooms

What do the Lakers, Barbie, and Batman have in common? They can all be found on *mezuzot* specially made for kid's bedrooms. Allow your child to pick out a *mezuzah* that suits them and put it up together.

Make a "Sha-box" for little kids

Work with small children to fill and decorate a shoebox with their Shabbat kit (kid-sized yamulke, Kiddush cup, candlesticks, challah cover, etc). Bring it out each week as you get ready together to welcome Shabbat.

Prominently place, and fill, tzedakah boxes

Place a tzedakah box in a visible location, and together with your children put your spare change in it whenever you can. Once it is full, decide together on a worthy cause, and start the process over again.

Get way into the Jewish holidays

Bake a "happy birthday world" cake for Rosh Hashanah, build a sukkah and sleep out in it, fry latkes together for Hanukkah, take a hike on Tu B'Shvat, take a family costume photo every year on Purim, throw amazing Passover seders, stay up late eating ice cream and reading Jewish books on Shavuot. Christmas comes but once a year … but there is almost always a Jewish holiday to celebrate!

Send your kids to Jewish camp

There is no more powerful place for building Jewish identity than summer camp — where basketball games, moonlit hikes, and first kisses are all Jewish experiences.

Additional Readings

Books

- Anita Diamant, *The New Jewish Baby Book*
  A complete, highly accessible resource to the traditions and rituals for welcoming a new child into the Jewish community.

- Anita Diamant and Karen Kushner, *How to Raise a Jewish Child*
  Explores the practices, customs, and values that go into creating a Jewish home and raising children within the traditions of Judaism. Full of fun and practical suggestions for incorporating Judaism into all aspects of family life.

- Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*
  Drawing on teachings from the Torah and Talmud, Dr. Mogel presents common-sense strategies for raising ethical, compassionate, and self-reliant children.

- Jeffrey Salkin, *Putting God on the Guest List*
  The classic guide to finding spiritual meaning in one of American Judaism's most misunderstood ceremonies — the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Websites

- *Kveller (kveller.com)*
  A popular online forum on parenting "with a Jewish twist."