

Brit Milah

Summary: Brit milah is a rite of passage taking place eight days after the birth of Jewish males that symbolizes their entrance into a covenant with God through circumcision, or the removal of the foreskin of the penis. This is generally an occasion for a small family celebration. Some Jews hold similar rituals, involving only naming ceremonies, for newborn Jewish females.

The first rite of passage in the life of a Jewish male is circumcision, the ritual removal of the foreskin of his penis. This ritual is called *brit milah*, the “covenant of circumcision.” Many Jews use the more colloquial Yiddish term *bris* for this celebration. It takes place eight days after birth and is symbolic of the child’s entrance into the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants. Traditionally a *minyan*, or quorum, of ten adult males is present at this ceremony, though it can be performed with only the father, the son, and the *mohel*, (circumcisor) present. Jews also believe that the prophet Elijah is present as witness to the covenant, and they provide a chair and place of honor for him.

On a Tuesday morning in the Abrams’ home in downtown Chicago, the father of the newborn nervously moves around the living room greeting his parents and in-laws, his sister, his wife’s siblings and the small group of close friends who have gathered. As the group settles down and takes seats, the baby’s mother begins the ceremony by lighting the candles. When the baby’s aunt brings the son into the room on a pillow, the small congregation rises. They stand while the *mohel*, a man in his sixties who has been a member of the family’s congregation for many years, explains the meaning of the Jewish covenant with God and gives a brief description of what is about to happen. Then the baby is placed in the arms of an uncle who sits with him on Elijah’s chair, symbolizing the aspiration and prayer that he will grow up in a world of peace and righteousness. Finally, the little boy is given to the *sondek*, or the man who has the honor of holding the baby while the *mohel* says a blessing and performs the circumcision. In this ceremony, one of the grandfathers has been given the honor. After the circumcision, the baby formally receives his Jewish name. The gathered family and friends adjourn to the dining room where a *kosher* brunch is laid out, a joyous feast ending with a special grace recited for the *brit milah*.

In America today, similar naming ceremonies for baby girls are becoming increasingly popular. Traditionally, girls would be named and presented in the synagogue thirty days after birth, but today many communities observe a ceremony marking entry into the covenant eight days after birth. Except for the circumcision, it is similar to the *brit milah* and is called *brit ha-hayim*, or “the covenant of life,” in the Reform tradition. Even Orthodox Jews have today developed similar celebrations, but as Orthodox writer Blu Greenberg summarized in *How to Run an Orthodox Jewish Household* (1983): “The ceremony is so new that there is no standard procedure, not even a single name by which it goes. *Simchat Habat*, ‘the rejoicing of the daughter,’ is most widely used.”