

Congregation Beth Chaverim

Guidelines
for
Jewish Birth
&
Infant Traditions



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The birth of a child is a life changing event. Judaism marks this event with joy and with ceremony, welcoming the child not only into the world, but into the community of the Jewish People.

These guidelines are meant to inform parents to be, or new parents, about our rich traditions within the context of the Reform Movement. It is not meant as a list to dictate what must or must not be done, but to lay out common options.

Naming:

It is the common tradition these days to give a child two (2) sets of names; a secular or every day name, and a Hebrew name. They can be related, or completely unrelated as the family wishes.

The common view that Jewish tradition is to name to honor a deceased relative is actually only a prevalent tradition among the Ashkenazi, or Eastern European Jewry. The Sephardic or those from the Middle East or Spain, often name in honor of a living relative. Naming after a relative can take the form of the full name, or one inspired by the name of the person honored (for instance, naming a child Michael in honor of Uncle Mandle rather than giving the child a name out of vogue).

In addition, there are many other traditions and inspirations governing the naming of Jewish children, including using biblical names, names popular in modern Israel, and names associated with a holiday or Torah reading near the child's birth. Many parents give their child a "secular name" (which appears on the birth certificate and may be used in non-Jewish contexts), and a "Hebrew name" (which for Ashkenazi Jews may also be Yiddish). Others prefer to give their child a Hebrew name by which they may comfortably be known both religiously and in every day life.

These are traditions, not law. In Jewish tradition there are 3 sources for the name of the child:

- 1) The expression of an idea—Devorah meaning bee, Esther or Mordecai after the heroes of the Purim story, Sinaya after the 6 day war, etc. In other words, the name is the embodiment of a concept you want to celebrate
- 2) Preservation of the name or memory of a relative. This custom seems to be of Semitic origin and dates from around the 4th century BCE. It is the standard Ashkenazi way of naming.
- 3) Traditional names or combinations of secular names with the closest Hebrew/Yiddish equivalent. This would be Jacob given the Hebrew name Yaakov, or Esther be given the name Hadassah.



For formal occasions the child can be styled with their parent's Hebrew name as a last name, with Ben (for a boy) or Bat (for a girl) added. For instance, Deborah, whose father is named Jacob, might have the Hebrew name Devorah Bat Yaakov. Or Joseph son of Aaron might have the name Youssef Ben Aaron.

In Orthodox tradition, other designations such as Ha Levi (the Levite) or Ha Cohen (the Cohan) are added, but these titles are rarely used in Reform tradition.

Boys:

Jewish boys are consecrated to Judaism at the age of 8 days old with the ceremony of circumcision, also known as the Bris.

If you intend to have a formal Bris for your child, PLEASE inform the obstetrician in advance. More than one family has mentioned to their doctor in passing that they wanted the child circumcised, not realizing that this would be taken as medical instructions, and have found that the operation has been taken care of well before the 8 day mark.

The Bris, the covenant of circumcision, is formalized in the Torah. It is clearly laid out in Genesis 17:10, *"You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you"*. It is the writing on the flesh of the covenant between G-d and man and is very important to Jewish theology. Although at times people have tried to move away from it, the Bris is usually viewed as something that is intrinsic to being a Jewish man.

The Bris is held on the 8th day after the child is born even if the day is on Sabbath or Yom Kippur. Since the Bris can be held at any time of day, right before or right after Sabbath is acceptable. If the child's health is at risk, the Bris can be postponed, but if postponed, it is NOT done on the Sabbath or a festival. Traditionally the father has the role of the blessings, as it was laid on Abraham to consecrate his son.

The circumcision is performed by a Mohil. Almost all Mohils are Orthodox. These days most Reform Jews get a doctor to perform the circumcision, while the Rabbi and the parents perform the blessings. Ask the Rabbi what the local arrangements are. He can tell you if there is a formal Mohil or if a doctor usually performs the operation.

The Bris ceremony is one of the rare occasions where even among the orthodox a woman can perform a mitzvah in a minyan. She can recite the Birkat ha-Gomel, or the blessing of thanks after being delivered from mortal danger or after recovery from an illness. A new mother is expected to recite this and it is often done at the Bris ceremony.



The baby is usually held by the father or a male relative, but in Reform synagogues the mother sometimes holds the baby. The baby is given his Hebrew name and blessed. The child is given a sip of wine and then the doctor or Mohil removes foreskin, forever consecrating him as a Jew.

While most Jewish men do not remember their Bris, it is arguably the most important ceremony they will participate in, as it is dictated by the Torah and is one of the defining ceremonies in our tradition.

Girls:

Obviously female babies do not have a Bris. However in modern times a ceremony called a Bris Milah has been created. The Bris Milah or Bris Bat (daughter's Bris) is a special ceremony celebrating the naming and the joy of having a daughter. (Bris means **concecration** not circumcision.)

When a Bris Milah or Bris Bat is held, the daughter's Hebrew name is formally announced and given (according to traditional custom, for the first time) during that ceremony. Sometimes, a girl will simply be "named" during the Torah portion of a morning services (often on Shabbat), either in lieu of a Bris Bat or before it is scheduled. More recently, and especially with Reform, a Brit Bat or Simcha Bat (rejoicing in a daughter) ceremony has been created. They can vary greatly, and can incorporate whatever is meaningful to the parents. Please consult with the Rabbi.

With either boys or girls, it is increasingly common to have a naming/presentation ceremony where the baby is brought up on the Bema, sometimes wrapped in a Tallis, other times just held by the parent, and blessed by the Rabbi using their Hebrew name. This essentially introduces the new member to the community as part of the Jewish people.

Adoption:

Adoption represents a special case in the larger context of welcoming new Jewish babies, with two additional sets of issues.

First, a child who was not Jewish at birth needs to be converted to Judaism. His Bris or her Bris Bat may incorporate part of what is necessary to make this baby Jewish (e.g., circumcision is (if not already performed) required for a boy to be considered Jewish), but the additional requirement of immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) for converts of any age is usually practiced as well.



Second, while there is no Jewish ritual for adoption, many Jewish adoptive parents wish to find ways to mark this particular way of expanding their family in a Jewish manner. Special readings or rituals may be added to the baby's ceremony, or families may wish to find other ways to mark this event in the context of community, e.g., with an aliyah to the Torah, or a party for their congregation.

Feel free to discuss with the Rabbi any ceremony or reading that you feel will be meaningful to your family upon the adoption of a baby or child. He can help you choose the ceremony that is best for your family.

Pidyon Ha'Ben (or Ha'Bat):

Let's move on with traditions for the First Born, the Pidyon Ha'Ben, or redemption of the first born. Many Reform congregations can celebrate a Pidyon Ha'Bat for girls as well. Traditionally those of Kohen or Levite families are exempt from having to redeem their children. If you have questions about Kohen/Levite decent, ask the Rabbi.

The ceremony applies to the first born of the mother. If a man is married more than once, each wife's first born is redeemed.

In the Pidyon ceremony, the baby is given to the temple at the age of approximately 1 month, and then can be 'redeemed' at the price of 5 shekels.

Most Reform temples do not hold the redemption ceremonies, but if it is meaningful to your family, you can discuss the option with the Rabbi.

In closing, while there are approximately nine months to prepare for a birth, and that time goes quickly. Here are the things to remember:

- 1) Make sure that the Rabbi knows the approximate due date so that you will know if he will be available if a Bris is needed.
- 2) Make sure your obstetrician knows your preferences about circumcision.
- 3) Make a friend or relative aware of the arrangements you prefer for a Bris so that the plans, which need to be made with 8 days notice, can go off smoothly. This includes relatives invited to a Bris, and any food you plan on ordering.
- 4) Choose a Hebrew name. If possible know the Hebrew names of the parents, or find a close equivalent if none have been given.
- 5) Schedule the naming ceremony, if desired, for approx 1 month after the baby is born.
- 6) Get lots of rest while you can.