

8. THE CYCLE OF LIFE

Circumcision (*Brit milah*)

Circumcision, in Hebrew *brit milah* (“covenant of circumcision”) or also simply *milah*, is the ritual where the foreskin of the penis is removed. The rite of circumcision is a sign of the covenant established by God with Abraham:

“You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Gen 17:11). Jewish identity does not depend on circumcision, as every child born of a Jewish mother is Jewish.

The ritual is prescribed for the eighth day after birth⁷⁵: “And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations” (Genesis 17:12a). Circumcision is not postponed if the eighth day falls on a *Sabbath* or a Jewish holiday. Postponement of the circumcision is only permitted in the case of health problems of the child.

Although it is the father’s responsibility to circumcise his son - as Abraham circumcised Ishmael and then Isaac - in practice it is rare for a father to perform the circumcision himself. He usually relies on a *mohel*, a trained expert in the ritual of circumcision.

The *brit mila* is traditionally performed in the morning, a sign of the parents’ solicitude for the observance of the commandment. The ritual usually takes place in the synagogue or at home.

It is performed as follows: the newborn baby is welcomed by those present, who greet the newborn with the verses from Psalm 118: *Barukh ha-ba* – “Blessed be he that come.” The infant is then entrusted to the *mohel*, who places the baby for a moment on what is known as “Elijah’s chair”, after which the baby is placed on a cushion on the lap of the *sandak* – “the man who holds.” It is in this position that the circumcision is performed.

When the procedure is complete, the father recites the blessing: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments, and hast commanded us to make our sons enter the covenant of Abraham our father.”

All present respond: “Even as this child has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into the *Torah*, the nuptial canopy (*huppah*), and into good deeds.” The *mohel* then takes a cup of wine and recites over it a prayer for the infant in which the *mohel*

⁷⁵ Should a child for any reason have been circumcised before the eighth day or have been born already circumcised (i.e., without a foreskin), the ceremony of “shedding the blood of the covenant” (*hattafat dam berit*) must be performed on the eighth day, provided it is a weekday, and the child is fit.

gives the infant his Hebrew name.⁷⁶

A festive kosher meal concludes the ritual as a sign of joy and celebration. The *milah* is also one of the requirements for conversion to Judaism.

The ceremony of the naming of girls is not regulated by a precept, but it has been practised with much joy and in various forms for many centuries. The naming of the child takes place in the synagogue on a day when the Torah is being read - Monday, Thursday and *Sabbath* - so that the father, who goes up for the reading, can announce the name of the child. There are also those who alternatively perform a small ceremony at home called *zeved ha-bat* (gift of the daughter). There is no set time, but it is usually done as soon as possible.

The redemption of the first-born son (*pidyon ha-ben*)

When a Jewish woman gives birth to a first-born male child, he must be redeemed thirty-one days after his birth, according to a specific biblical requirement linked to the fact that the Lord caused the first-born sons of Egypt to die, while sparing the first-born sons of Israel, who therefore belong to the Lord: "Every first issue of the womb of any creature, which they present to the Lord, whether of man or beast, shall be yours. However, you shall redeem the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. Its redemption [shall be performed] from the age of a month, according to the valuation, five shekels of silver, according to the holy shekel, which is twenty gerahs." (Nm 18:15-16; cf. Ex 13:15).

The ritual of the redemption of the first-born son, in Hebrew *pidyon ha-ben* - "redemption of the son", stipulates that the father must appear before a *Kohen* - "priest" - with five silver coins in his hand, declaring that neither he nor his wife are of priestly rank, that his wife has given birth to his first-born son, and that he is there to deliver the child to the *Kohen* in accordance with the prescriptions. The *Kohen* then asks him if he wishes to redeem his son; the father replies in the affirmative, and it is agreed that the price of the redemption is the five silver coins. The *Kohen* recites the priestly blessing: "May the Lord bless you and watch over you. May the Lord cause His countenance to shine to you and favour you. May the Lord raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace." (Nm 6:24-26).

After the ritual, the *Kohen* returns the money, which is usually donated to charity.

Coming of age (*Bar Mitzvah* and *Bat Mitzvah*)

A boy reaches religious adulthood and becomes *bar mitzvah* - "son of the commandment" - on his 13th birthday. A girl, on the other hand, becomes *bat mitzvah* - "daughter of the commandment" - on her 12th birthday. The years are counted according to the Jewish calendar. From this point on, a Jew assumes responsibility for the observance of all the commandments and is obliged to fulfil them all.

⁷⁶ The practice of naming the child during the rite of circumcision is an ancient custom, as attested for example in Lk 1:59: "When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father."

The *Mishnah* identifies five stages of maturity for men and the 13th year as the year in which the precepts - the *mitzvot* - are to be fulfilled (*Avot* 5:21).

Midrashic literature gives many references to 13 as a turning point in the life of a young person. In fact, Abraham rejected his father's idols at this age (*Pirqè de Rabbi Eliezer*, 26).

Bar mitzvah

The calling up to the reading of the *Torah* is a symbol of a boy's attaining maturity. He is called to read on the first occasion of public Torah reading, usually on the Saturday immediately after his 13th birthday. This is the first public demonstration of his new role as a full member of the community and, for the past centuries⁷⁷, it is to this occasion that the term *bar mitzvah* has traditionally referred to. When, on the same day, the boy's father is called to read a portion of the Torah, he recites the benediction, "Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this one"⁷⁸.

Traditionally, the rabbi gives a special sermon emphasising the boy's new responsibilities and privileges. In many synagogues, the rabbi ends his sermon by invoking the Priestly Blessing or other blessing, and the *bar mitzvah* boy is given a gift from the congregation. Depending on his preparation and skills, as well as local customs, the boy may be invited to officiate a part or all of the service. After the service, refreshments are often served, during which it is customary for the boy to deliver a *derashah*, a "sermon" based on written and oral Torah texts. The *derashah* is also an opportunity for the boy to thank his parents for their love and care, and to thank the guests for their participation in the celebration.

The major ritual innovation for a boy reaching *bar mitzvah* is that henceforth he will be required to put on the *tefillin* - phylacteries - for the morning prayer along with the *tallit*, the prayer shawl⁷⁹. In addition, he will be counted in a *minyan*, the minimum number of ten men required for community prayer.

Bat mitzvah

The term *bat mitzvah* - "daughter of commandment" is found only once in the Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 15a), in reference to the time when a girl becomes subject to the obligations of Jewish law incumbent on adults. The *Mishnah*, in *Niddah* 5:6, rules that the vows of a girl who is 12 and one-day-old are deemed valid, as are the vows of a boy who is thirteen years and one-day-old.

Prior to the modern era this change in a female's *status* was rarely celebrated in a

⁷⁷ The first mention of a *bar mitzvah* ceremony similar to the one celebrated today dates back to the 16th century. The great Lithuanian teacher and rabbi, Solomon Luria, wrote in his treatise *Yam Shel-Shelomo*: "There is a *Bar Mitzvah* rituals of the Germans, in which they celebrate and praise God for the fact that a boy has reached this age and that his father has lived long enough to see his son fulfil the commandments of the *Torah*."

⁷⁸ This blessing is taken from *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*: "Said R. Elazar b. R. Shimon: 'A man must take care of his son for thirteen years, from then on he should say Blessed is the one who has exempted me from the sins of this'"(62:10)

⁷⁹ In a number of communities, children start wearing the *tallit* even before their *bar mitzvah*.

communal context. It was not until the 19th century that we find indications of a ceremony or public recognition, including a private blessing, the father's *aliyah* – “ascent or going up” of the father for the reading of the Torah, a rabbi's sermon. The *bat mitzvah* understood as a female ceremony equivalent or identical to the male *bar mitzvah* does not occur until the middle of the 20th century. The true nature of this function varies greatly between synagogues and congregations.

Marriage

Marriage is a part of God's plan for humankind. In fact, in Genesis, man and woman, created to be opposite each other (Gen 2:18), are called to be “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Although Scripture does not give specific instructions regarding the procedures of a wedding ceremony, it is clear from many of its passages that marriage, a union of profound spiritual significance, is also understood as a contractual agreement that can be dissolved by divorce. The Torah also offers some practical reflections on marriage, such as that on newlyweds attested in Deut. 24:5: “When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out in the army, nor shall he be subjected to anything associated with it. He shall remain free for his home for one year and delight his wife, whom he has taken.” Since the Talmudic period, marriage is recorded as consisting of three stages: mutual promise (*shiddukhin*), betrothal (called *erusin* or *qiddushin*) and the full-fledged marriage (*nissuin*). The promise of marriage, which is still practised by various groups today, consists of a formal commitment to marry, coupled with a document called a *tenaim* (‘terms’), which sets out matters such as the date and place of the wedding and the amount of dowry and alimony.

The second stage, the betrothal (*erusin* or *qiddushin*), consists of an agreement between the future husband and wife. On this occasion, the groom gives the bride an object of value, usually a ring, and says: “With this ring you are consecrated to me, according to the Law of Moses and Israel.” The moment the bride accepts the ring, she is rightfully considered to be his wife and is forbidden to marry any other man. In ancient times, the bride would return to her parents' house for twelve months, at the end of which the third stage - *nissuin* - would take place. Since the 12th century, betrothal and marriage have been combined into a single wedding ceremony, although they are two distinct moments in the ritual.

In Ashkenazi tradition, immediately before the formal wedding ceremony, the bride is veiled by the groom in the presence of his family and the bride's family in a ceremony known in Yiddish as *Bedeken di Kale* (veiling the bride). The officiating rabbi then says: “Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads” (Genesis 24:60a) and concludes with the words: “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel.” The bridegroom is escorted by his father and the bride's father to the *chuppah*, a wedding canopy that symbolically represents the home of the newlyweds, consisting of a precious square cloth (or *tallit*) supported by four staves and ordinarily held by four attendants at the ceremony. The bride then joins him, led by her mother and the groom's mother. This ceremony is accompanied by words of blessing sung by the officiant or cantor. Two blessings are then said over the chalice of wine.

At this point, in the presence of two witnesses, the groom gives the ring to the bride, saying “With this ring you are consecrated to me according to the law of Moses and Israel.” The marriage contract, called a *ketubbah* in Hebrew, is then read, having been previously signed by the groom (in some groups also by the bride) and two witnesses⁸⁰. A blessing is given to the bride and groom by the officiating rabbi. The wedding ritual continues with the recitation of the *sheva berakhot* (seven wedding blessings) over a second cup of wine.

At the end of the benediction, the groom smashes a wine glass under his foot with a powerful ritual gesture. According to Talmudic tradition (*bBerakhot* 31a), this gesture is intended to dampen the exuberance of the occasion and restore appropriate behaviour. According to another interpretation, the breaking of a glass symbolises the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, and reminds all present that the world is not yet perfect and that rejoicing can suddenly come to an end.

The ceremony can be held anywhere. In many communities it is held in the synagogue, although there are halachic views to the contrary. Often the ceremony is held in the hall where the celebrations take place, while in some communities it is preferred to be held outdoors. The latter custom may be motivated by the fact that celebrating the ritual after sunset, when the stars are already high in the sky, is a reminder of God’s promise to Abraham: “I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven” (Genesis 22:17), a good omen for the new couple. In Western countries, Sunday is the most popular day for weddings; in Orthodox circles, Tuesday is auspicious because “And God saw that it was good” occurs twice in the Creation narrative for the third day (Tuesday) (Gen 1:10, 12). However, marriages may be celebrated on any other day of the week, except on Sabbath and other holidays, as well as in the three weeks between the 17th of *Tammuz* and the 9th of *Av*, and in the period between *Pesach* and *Lag ba-’omer*.

Divorce

Judaism recognises the institution of divorce (*ghet*). While in ancient times it was initiated directly by the husband by serving the wife with the so-called ‘libel of rejection’, starting in the Middle Ages it was preceded by a decision from the rabbinical court aimed at protecting the woman’s position. The rabbinical court prohibits the granting of a divorce against the woman’s consent. The relationship between Jewish law and the various civil laws governing marriage varies between countries.

Death, burial and mourning

Death

Jewish tradition gives special significance to the rituals associated with death, burial and mourning, as evidenced by a number of biblical accounts (e.g. Genesis 47:29-30;

⁸⁰ The text of the *ketubbah* outlines obligations undertaken by the groom, such as providing his wife with food, cloth and conjugal rights, which are inseparable from marriage. It includes the husband’s guarantees to pay a certain sum in the event of divorce.

2 Samuel 21:12-14). The *Mishnah* states that “this world is like a corridor before the World to Come” (Avot 4:16), while the Talmud describes death as the crossing of the portal that separates the two worlds, giving access to a “world that is entirely good” (*bKiddushin* 39b).

There is great respect for the dying and the dead. The last wishes of a dying person are given great consideration: the last wishes and instructions of Jacob (Gen 49:29), Joseph (Gen 50:25) and David (1 Kings 2:1-9) were all faithfully heeded and observed. The Talmud states that a person’s instructions on his deathbed have the same force as a written document formally handed over (*bGittin* 13a).

The dying person should never be left alone, and it is a great mitzvah to be present at the departure of the soul (*yešiat neshamah*). A candle is usually lit at the bedside of a dying person, symbolising the fragility of the human soul. A sick person nearing death is encouraged to confess his sins to God. Such confession must not be made in the presence of women and children, as it would cause them distress and thus upset the sick person. One confession formula reads: I confess before you, O Lord, my God and the God of my fathers, that my healing and my death are in your hand. May it be Your will to heal me completely, and if I die, may my death be an atonement for all the sins, wrongs and rebellious acts that I have committed sinfully, wrongfully and rebelliously before You, and grant me a share in *Gan Eden* (Paradise), and favour me with the world to come, which is reserved for the righteous. (*Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 338.2).

In the last moments of life, the dying person will also pray with the first words of the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4); if he is in a state of unconsciousness, someone else recites it for him.

When death is certain, the eyes and mouth are gently closed by the eldest son or the closest relative.⁸¹

The body is placed on the floor⁸² with its feet towards the door and covered with a sheet, so that the person is remembered as he or she was in life and not in death. In the Jewish faith, the memory of the deceased is very important. In fact, from the moment of death, the name of the deceased is always followed by the expression *zikhronò livrakhah* (“may his memory be a blessing”). A lighted candle is placed near the head of the deceased.

Burial

The body is to be buried only in the ground, in a cemetery that has been properly consecrated. Reference is made to the passage in the Bible, when God says to Adam: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Gen 3:19). Cremation and embalming are therefore not permitted.

Traditionally, it is recommended to bury the deceased as early as possible, preferably on the day of death. Today, however, this is often not possible because family members of the deceased may not live nearby. Therefore, the funeral may be postponed to

81 Jacob was assured by God that Joseph would perform this final filial duty (Gen 46:4)

82 This practice favours the transfer of heat from the corpse.

allow relatives to attend the funeral service. Nevertheless, timely burial is still the rule. The Torah commands that even the body of an executed criminal be buried without delay (Deut 21:23).

Burial rituals vary between communities. Generally, when a person dies, the deceased is placed on the floor of the funeral parlour or cemetery purification room, covered with a shroud. The body is watched over by mourners who recite psalms until the funeral. Shortly before the funeral, the body cleansing ritual is performed by members of the *chevrah kadisha* - “holy society” - who recite special prayers and passages from the Bible. The body is then wrapped in pure linen shrouds, called *takhrikhim* in Hebrew. The man is usually buried with his *tallit*, or prayer shawl. It is the general custom in Israel for the body to be buried directly in the ground, whereas in the Diaspora it is buried in a coffin.

Funerals today frequently take place in special funeral shrines or at the graveside. The funeral ritual usually consists of the recitation of several psalms and poems, as well as a eulogy.

After the service, the body is carried to the grave by members of the *chevrah kadisha* - “holy society”. In some groups, as the casket bearers approach the grave, they stop seven times along the way and recite Psalm 91. The actual burial is accompanied by the recitation of the *Tziduk Hadin* - “Justification of (Divine) Judgement”, a prayer of remembrance, and the *Kaddish*, a doxology in Aramaic in which the mourners affirm their faith in God as they face the reality of death.

For the halachic reason that one who is engaged in performing a *mitzvah* is exempt from other *mitzvot*, those directly involved in the funeral arrangements are exempt from observing other *mitzvot* that might interfere with the burial (cf. b*Berakhot* 11a; 17b).

Frequent visits to graves are not Jewish custom. Instead, it is customary to visit the cemetery not only on the seventh and thirtieth days after burial, but also on anniversaries and certain holidays, especially the eve of *Yom Kippur*. The grave is kept bare, only a stone may be placed on it. As the mourners leave, it is customary to extend the left hand over the grave and say: “Rest in peace until the Comforter, the herald of peace, comes.”

Mourning

Mourning (Hebrew: *avelut*) in Judaism is a combination of customs and commandments derived from the Torah and classical rabbinic texts. There are specific prescriptions for the death of four categories of relatives: parent, sibling, spouse and child. There are four periods of mourning, of increasing intensity: 1) *aninut*, the day of death, generally the period from death to burial; 2) *shivah*, the seven days beginning with the day of burial; 3) *sheloshim*, thirty days after burial (including the first seven days); 4) an additional mourning period of twelve months for a deceased parent.

Normally, the close relatives of the deceased wait until the end of the year to place the gravestone on the grave. The custom is to dedicate the headstone to the deceased with a short ceremony, commonly known as ‘unveiling’, because the ceremony requires family members to remove the cloth or veil covering the inscription on the headstone.