Mazaltov

It's a boy!

A Guide to enjoying your wonderful Simcha

Rabbi Anthony Gerson

Mazaltov on the arrival of your son. May you be blessed to enjoy much nachas and joy.

Since the time of Avraham our forefather, boys have been welcomed into the covenant of Avraham through the fulfilment of the mitzvah of bris milah.

The mitzvah of bris milah is an awesome spiritual experience charged with emotion and excitement. To help make this simcha a memorable one, I have compiled some notes as a guide to the salient aspects of the preparation leading up to the ceremony, as well as a guide to the ceremony.

As you merit bringing your son into the Jewish nation, so too may you merit to give him a Jewish education, accompany him to the chuppah and witness him perform good deeds

With Torah blessings

Rabbi Anthony Gerson

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A Wonderful Blessing

Before a child is born, one blesses a pregnant woman by saying **b'sha'ah tova u'mutzlachat** (may the birth be at a good and auspicious time)

Almost immediately a baby is born, he is blessed by his parents. (Shulchan Aruch 223:1).
On the birth of a boy, they recite the bracha

Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-heinu melech ha'olam hatov v'hametiv

On seeing his daughter for the first time after her birth, the father recites the bracha (Mishna Brura 223 Seif Katan 2).

Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-heinu melech ha'olam she'hecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigi'anu la-zman hazeh

When a woman attends shul for the first time after having given birth to a son or daughter it is customary for her husband to receive an aliyah to the Torah (Biur Halacha Siman 136 B'Shabbos).

Greeting the Happy Parents

The appropriate greeting on hearing of the birth of a child is mazaltov. One may add v'tizku legadlo/legadla l'Torah l'chupah ul'maasim tovim (may you merit to nurture him/her in the ways of Torah, to enter into marriage and to perform good deeds)

What's in a Name?

The Choice for a Lifetime

Much care and discussion should go into naming a child. Our Sages teach that a person's character may be known from his or her name, and that a name is the essence of the soul. We believe that the name is chosen with Divine inspiration (ruach Hakodesh). The Maharal points out that the words shem (name), and sham (there) have the same letters, indicating that one's name signifies where he is. The Gemorah (Brachot 7b) tells us that names have an influence on their bearer.

The Midrash (Tanchuma, parshat Ha ‘azinu) warns that one should be careful that the name one gives one’s child is befitting an upright person, since the child’s name can influence his destiny. The influence of a name can transcend worlds.
Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk writes that it is important to name a child after someone righteous, since there is a bond between the neshamah (soul) of the child and the neshamah of the person for whom he is named.

Making This Vital Decision

The parents have sole rights to choosing a name and should make the final decision regarding it. After all, if the parents are old enough to have a child, they are old enough to name him or her! Grandparents and family may give suggestions but not criticism.

The most important criterion for naming a child is shalom bayit (peace in the home). It should not become a power struggle or lead to unpleasantness. Any conflict arising from choosing a name can be dangerous to the unborn child and detrimental to his or her spiritual well-being. It is wiser to compromise rather than take this risk.
The chosen name for the child is kept confidential by the parents until the naming of a daughter in shul or until the bris for a son.

If there is no family custom as to who chooses the name for the first child, the prevailing custom is for the mother to name the first child, the father the second and so on (Igros Moshe Yoreh Deah vol 3:101).

Where a conflict may arise regarding the choice of names, it is suggested that the Hebrew name come from one side of the family and the English from the other (Shearim Hametzuyim Behalacha vol 4 p 390).

Four scenarios present themselves to a guide the parents in choosing a name for a son

- If both grandfathers are alive, the mother may choose the name.
- If her father has passed away, she may choose the name.
- If his father has passed away, he may choose the name.
- If both their fathers have passed away, the paternal grandfather’s name comes first.

Four scenarios present themselves to a guide the parents in choosing a name for a daughter

- If both grandmothers are alive, the mother may choose the name.
- If her mother has passed away, she may choose the name.
- If his mother has passed away, he may choose the name.
- If both their mothers have passed away, the paternal grandmother's name comes first.

Some Further Points To Consider

- One may name a child after a relative who has passed on in the hope that the departed will have a positive influence on the child during his lifetime.
- If the child is named after a person who has two names, it is acceptable to use only one of the names. For example, if the name of the person who passed away was Moshe Shmuel, then the newborn can be named either Moshe or Shmuel.
- A person named after two people should use both names, lest one be forgotten.
- When naming a child after someone who died young , tragically or childless, it is suggested that
  - an additional name be added (Igros Moshe Yoreh Deah 2:122). For example if the name of the person who passed away was Moshe, then the newborn can be named Moshe Chaim or Yosef Moshe.
  - one use some or all of the letters of the original name to form a new name. For example Shlomo can become Shalom or Shmuel.
  - one give the name with the intention of naming the child after some great person who had the same name. For example if her name was Rivka one can name the child after Rivka Imenu (Matriarch)
- One should not give a child the same name as a parent.
- The Ashkenazi custom is not to name children after a living parent or grandparent.
- The Sefardi custom regards it as a great honour to name a child after a living grandparent.
- One may name a child after the same person for whom their own siblings or cousins are named; however it is advisable to discuss this with the person first to prevent any unpleasantness. For example if the name of the great-grandfather was Yonah, the grandchildren and great-

grandchildren may all be named Yonah, but siblings may not.

- Generally one does not name a boy after a female relative or vice versa; however one can give a name that will remind one of the relative. For example, Chana becomes Chen, Leib becomes Lieba or Ariella.
- One may choose an appropriate traditional name that has significance according to the time of year, the parshat ha'shavua or the circumstances surrounding the birth.
- One should not give a child an unusual-sounding name that may be subject to ridicule or derision. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzsky is quoted to have said that parents should give a name that the child can be proud of. It is unfair to saddle a child with a name that will embarrass him or her.

Age old Customs

Shalom Zochar

There is a minhag (custom) to invite family and friends to ones home for a shalom zochar party (literally welcome to the male child) on the first Friday night evening after a boy is born. This takes place after the regular Shabbat meal. While originally the seuda would originally take place wherever the baby was, today it is customarily held at the family home - even though the baby might still be in the nursing home.

Some reasons for the shalom zochar are:

- As thanksgiving meal in honour of the birth of the child
- As a meal in honour of the boy's first Shabbat
- That the child should experience a Shabbat before having his bris
- To gather to mourn the Torah that the boy has forgotten. This is based on the Gemorah (Niddah 30b) which teaches that while a boy is in the womb he is taught the entire Torah; but when he is born, a malach (angel) taps him on the mouth causing him to forget all he has learnt

Customary foods served at a Shalom Zochar:

- Beer and other liquor for making a l'chaim
- Cakes, cookies and other sweet delicacies

- Chickpeas, which are more usually eaten by mourners, are served as a sign of mourning for the Torah which the child has forgotten upon his birth.

Vacht Nacht/Leil Shimurim (The night preceding the bris)

It is customary for the father to remain awake the entire night before a bris, or at least until midnight. This has its basis in mystical reasons - to act as a shomer (guard) for the mother and son and to ward off any evil interference with the bris. During this time the father should study a selection of Chumash, Shulchan Aruch, Talmud and Midrashim.
A second custom is for young children to come to the house after sunset and recite the first paragraph of the **shema** (Artscoll Siddur page 288) and the verse **hamalach hagoel osi** (Artscoll Siddur page 292 middle) next to the baby. The youngsters are given sweets to increase the simcha surrounding the birth and the bris.
Some make a special celebratory meal.

The Bris – An Eternal Covenant

A father is commanded to circumcise his son and so bring him into the Covenant of Avraham. If for some reason the father fails to do so, then the Beth Din are obligated to have boy brissed.

"...My Covenant you shall keep – you and your descendants after you for all generations. This is my Covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you – circumcise all males. And you shall circumcise the flesh of the foreskin and it shall be the sign of the Covenant between Me and you. And at eight days old every male shall be circumcised throughout all of your generations ... My Covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:9-13).

The words bris milah (or brit milah in Sephardic pronunciation) mean the Covenant of circumcision. The Covenant is bi-directional: the Jewish people undertake to fulfil G-d's laws and in turn G-d watches over us. The circumcision is the sign of the Almighty's Covenant with Avraham to make his descendants into a great nation and to give them the Land of Israel.

Why has this mitzvah survived in strength while so many other mitzvot have fallen to the wayside by otherwise minimally observant Jews? Perhaps the answer is found in the 2000-year-old words of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, "Every mitzvah that the

Jewish people accepted upon themselves with joy … they still perform with joy." (Talmud Shabbos 130a). Deep in our collective psyche we know that the Jewish people are eternal, that we have a mission to be a Light Unto the Nations and to perfect the world, that the Almighty loves us and watches over us – and that it is our great joy and privilege to be part of that Covenant!

The Sefer HaChinuch derives a vital lesson from the mitzva of bris milah. Just as the Almighty gave us the ability to perfect our physical side - our bodies - through the removing of the foreskin we likewise have the ability to perfect our spiritual side - our personality, our behaviour and our beliefs.

In Hebrew the word used for foreskin is orlah, which means a barrier.

- On a mystical level, it is a impediment to spiritual growth and understanding.
- On a physical level, the removal of the orlah is a reminder to control our passions for the higher calling of guaranteeing our continuity – rather than to be drawn by impassioned lusts which can degrade and cause the downfall of a man.

The goal in life is to be like G-d. We must utilise and elevate the physical aspects in the spiritual quest. One cannot orgy by night and be a tzaddik (righteous person) by day.

Removal of the foreskin is a religious act, not a surgical procedure.

When a father brings his son into the Covenant with the Almighty, he should get the most competent and righteous person to perform the circumcision. A certified mohel is an expert's expert. He is professionally trained in all the physical aspects of the procedure As a G-d fearing person, he also fully understands the spiritual implications and requirements necessary for fulfilling the mitzvah properly.

The bris is performed on the eighth day after the birth.

- This includes the day of birth, which is day one
- The day is counted from sunset to sunset
- If the child is born in the evening, ie after sunset, the count begins from the following day
- Twilight may be the end of a day or the beginning of the following day; It is necessary to consult your Rabbi or the mohel regarding when the bris is to be performed

Preparing for the Day of the Bris

1. Call the mohel to book the day, time and venue for the bris.
2. He will come to examine the child, record details and discuss the bris ceremony with you.
3. Please make sure to have the parent's Ketubah (or a copy) available
4. You can discuss the choice of appropriate names for your child with the mohel.
5. The father may prepare a dvar Torah and a short speech to explain the choice of name.
6. The food served at the seuda (party) must be kosher; the mohel can guide you about kosher caterers and outlets.

Yarmulke and Tallis

According to some opinions, because a boy should always have his head covered, it is advisable for the baby to wear a yarmulke or hat for the bris.

The obligation to wear tzitzit begins when the child is three years old. So while it is not obligatory for the child to wear a tallis for the bris, it is cute! And it makes for such a nice photo!

Who to Honour…

The parents can choose to honour as many (or as few) people as they choose during the bris ceremony – although it is important to remember that, with a small baby, sometimes less is more!
During the course of the bris, there are several essential roles that possess special honour (and are usually given to family members or close friends):

The Kvaterin – the woman who takes the baby from the mother and passes him to the kvater.
The Kvater – the man who passes the baby to the man who will place the baby on the Chair of Eliyahu.
The Man Who Places the Baby on the Chair of Eliyahu – before passing the baby to the seated sandek.
The Seated Sandek – the man who holds the baby (on a pillow on his lap) during the circumcision.
The Standing Sandek – the man who holds the baby while he is being named.
After this, the kvater takes the baby from the standing sandek and gives him to the kvaterin. The kvaterin returns the baby to his mother.

The Rabbi – traditionally is honoured with naming the child.

And They Shall Merit to Have Children – The Kvater and Kvaterin

The kvater and kvaterin are usually a husband and wife who have not yet been blessed with a child. They are given the honour of bringing the child from the mother to the father to have his bris, and it is hoped that in the merit of their effort to bring this child to his bris, they may be blessed with a child of their own in the near future.

There are a number of commentaries as to the origin of the term kvater.

- One opinion holds that it is similar to the German word for friend - gevatter. This word is also translated as “godfather”, hence the misunderstanding that the kvater and kvaterin are the legal guardians of the child (Rabbi Krohn). In fact they do not have any legal responsibility to the child or to the parents, although they are given the choice of accepting the legal responsibilities of godparents in acting as guardians or in loco parentis should something happen to the parents.

- An alternative interpretation is that the couple would buy the nappies and blankets which are used to wrap the baby for the bris - the word for these items is kapitorin which evolved into kvaterin (Bris Avos Siman 5).

The Throne of Eliyahu the Prophet

The honours associated with the throne of Eliyahu are given to respected family members or friends. They are thereby connected to the extraordinary commitment that Eliyahu had towards G-d and the exemplary manner in which he performed mitzvoth.

A special chair, which is called the throne of Eliyahu, is set aside for placing the baby on before the bris. Some have the custom of beautifying the chair with a cover.

Eliyahu was blessed by G-d for his unrelenting effort in ensuring that Jewish boys were entered into the covenant of Abraham which, at the time, was punishable by death under a decree issued by Queen Jezebel.

The story of Jezebel is told in Melachim 1(Kings 1). In the 9th century BCE Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, married King Achav (Ahab) and became Queen of Israel. She turned Ahab away from Hashem towards the worship of her god Baal and the couple allowed temples of Baal to be opened in Israel. Jezebel used her control over Ahab to subject Israel to tyranny. After she slaughtered the Prophets, the Prophet Eliyahu confronted her and charged her with abominations. Her response was to threaten to kill him as well. She then decreed the death penalty for anyone performing a bris. Despite her threats, Eliyahu ensured that all newborn boys were brissed on the 8th day and, as a reward for his efforts, Hashem blessed him to be spiritually present at every bris performed.

The Sandek

The Sandek - he who holds the baby while the bris is being performed - becomes a partner in the mitzvah of performing the bris. Hence the origin of the word from the Greek **suntekos** which means companion of the child.

The first choice for the honour of Sandek is one of the grandfathers, then the Rabbi of the community and thereafter a relative or friend.

Although it is customary not to have the same sandek for brothers, if the Rabbi of a community always or often is given the honour of being the sandek, he may be the sandek for brothers (Rama Yoreh Deah 265:11). The reasons are based on the comparison of the Sandek to a Kohen. The Kohen was permitted to perform the ritual of the ketores (daily incense) on the altar only once in his lifetime. This was a segulah (merit) for wealth. Once performed, he would give another Kohen a chance. The Kohen Gadol, however, could perform this mitzvah whenever he wanted, hence the opinion that the Rabbi of the community (compared in this instance to the Kohen Gadol) may perform the mitzvah of Sandek for siblings.

There are authorities who disagree with this ruling - in the event of a potential feud, it is advisable to discuss the matter with the Rabbi!

Tefillin

When a bris takes place immediately after shacharit, the father the sitting and the standing sandek leave their tefillin on until after the

bris. The Shach (Yoreh Deah Siman 265) states that the custom not to remove the tefillin until after the bris is because tefillin are a sign of the Covenant between G-d and the Jewish people and the bris is also a sign of this Covenant.
(However if the bris takes place later, whether in a shul or another location, one should consult with one's Rabbi as to what should be done)

Blessings and Naming the Child

These honours are given to the Rabbi of the community. Should there be other Rabbis present, the honour of reciting the brochos should be given to the senior Rabbi, while the honour of naming the child is given to another Rabbi. It is advisable to discuss the honours with the community Rabbi or with the mohel to ensure that professional protocol is observed.

Birkat Hagomel (Blessing of Thanksgiving)

The blessing Birkat Hagomel is customarily recited by one who has been through a dangerous life threatening ordeal. Some are of the opinion that childbirth falls into this category and require the mother to recite this blessing. Others feel that the mother is not considered to be in the category of being obligated to do so, and that this blessing should not be recited. You should consult your Rabbi about what to do.

Birkat HaKohen

A custom of asking a Kohen to bless the child has evolved. While there is no source for this custom, there is no directive to prevent a Kohen from blessing the child. The family should be guided by the custom in their congregation.

Kaddish

In the presence of a minyan, mourners kaddish is recited after the Aleinu prayer at the conclusion of the ceremony.

The Day of the Bris– A Countdown to the Ceremony

Before the bris, the parents must have the following items ready

- Calpol or Panado Paediatric Syrup.
- A 5ml plastic syringe (without the needle) to give the syrup dose
- Medicated powder or ointment for aftercare (the mohel will advise you on the brands)
- The mohel will supply everything else necessary to care for your son after the bris

1 hour before

- bath the baby (a sponge bath might be suitable for a baby of this age)
- feed baby
- if the baby is unsettled, you may give an additional comfort feed during this hour

30 minutes before

- Give the recommended dosage of Calpol or Panado.

15 minutes before

- The mohel will arrive at the venue
- Ensure that all the participants in the ceremony are present and ready to take part

5 minutes before

- Family photos should be completed

After the Bris (Care, Questions and Problems)

The day of the bris…

At the time of the bris, the mohel will place a dressing on your son. This dressing will stay on until the following day.

If you did not give the child any medication before the bris ceremony, the mohel will help you give your son a dose of Calpol or Panado shortly afterwards.

If your son is still showing signs of discomfort several hours later, you can give the child one additional dose – taking care not to exceed the recommended dosage, and not sooner than four to six hours after the first dose.

Nursing your child on demand following the bris ceremony will also provide him with comfort – he may feel unsettled for several hours or even a full day following the ceremony.
Your child should pass urine within a few hours after the bris (please call the mohel if he has not passed urine within six hours). The first time the baby urinates may sting him a little but he should not experience any discomfort from urinating after that.
It is normal to notice a little blood in the nappy when the baby passes urine – you may notice a pink stain. If you suspect any active bleeding (lots of bright red blood or clots on the dressing) place pressure on the penis with a piece of gauze and call the mohel.

The day after the bris…

The mohel will come and remove the initial dressing and replace it with a gauze wrap (wrapped around the penis) and a gauze cover (placed over the penis).
Both the wrap and the cover will eventually fall off – this can happen after a few hours, or even the following day.
If the new dressing (applied by the mohel) has not fallen off by the second day after the bris you will need to bathe the baby and let the entire dressing get saturated with water. Then gently peel off the gauze cover and unwind the gauze wrap. Dab the area dry with a soft cloth. When the wrap and cover fall off, you will need to do the following

If you are using powder

- Sprinkle powder over the shaft of the penis
- Place a smear of clear vaseline onto the clean gauze (the gauze is supplied by the mohel)
- Place the gauze over the penile area as directed by the mohel

If you are using medicated ointment

- Place a smear of ointment on clean gauze (supplied by the mohel).
- Place the gauze over the penile area

This procedure should be followed at least twice a day for two days – you may need to repeat the procedure more often if the dressing gets soiled. After two days, no further dressing needs to be applied

What should you do if you see any bleeding?

It is normal for there to be small amounts of blood on the dressing and in the nappy especially if you have to soak the mohel's second dressing and peel it off.

If you see any active bleeding, please call the mohel immediately for advice.

The Healing Process
It takes about a week for the incision to heal. It is normal to see some yellow discolouration (serus fluid) on the shaft of the penis – it can take even longer (two to four weeks) for the fluid to be absorbed into the body. Do not attempt to rub the yellow fluid off.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **Must the bris be on the 8th day?**

   "And Abraham circumcised (brissed) his son Yitzchak when he was 8 days old as G-d commanded him"

   The eighth day after the boy is born is the ideal time for his bris. If he is healthy, weighs more than 2.5 kg and shows no signs of jaundice, there is no reason to postpone the bris.
   When calculating the days, day one is the day the child is born (note the day begins at nightfall of the previous day).
   eg A boy born on a Monday during the day will have his bris the following Monday. If he is born on Monday night (after nightfall) his bris will be the following Tuesday

   According to halacha, if a child is born by caesarean the bris may not be performed on Shabbat or Yom Tov, but is postponed to Sunday or the day after Yom Tov. If there are any medical indications for postponement, the bris must be postponed until the doctor declares the baby well. Depending on the condition, there may be an obligatory seven day waiting period after the baby is declared healthy before the bris is performed.

2. **Can a bris which is due to fall on Shabbat be postponed to Sunday?**

   No, unless the baby was born on Shabbat by caesarean section or the baby is jaundiced or ill.

3. **How do we word the "invitation" to the bris?**

   Invitations are not issued to attend a mitzvah - the reason is that if a person declines (or is unable to accept) the invitation it may appear that he or she does not want to be present at this important mitzvah.
   One therefore announces that the bris will take place on a certain date and time which leaves the choice of attending up to the individual.

If you are friendly with your Rabbi it is polite to inform him.

4. **Is it necessary to have a minyan present at the bris ceremony?**

   It is preferable to have a minyan present at the ceremony. However if for some reason a minyan is not present, the bris must still take place.

5. **Do we need a special chair for the bris?**

   Some have the custom of using a chair designed specifically for the bris while others use an ordinary chair and place a cover over it to make it special.

6. **Must we use wine or grape juice**?

   Either is suitable. The baby is comforted by the sucking motion and by the sugar in the wine or juice - and not by the alcohol in the wine.

7. **Who gets to choose the name?**

   See the section on naming.

8. **Must we name the child after a deceased relative?**

   No. See section on naming.

9. **Can we have two godparents?**

   You can include as many or as few people in the ceremony as you wish to pass the baby along from the mother to the father.

10. **Can we add people to the list of honours?**
    You can include as many people as you like (although sometimes less is more)

11. **Can we have the same sandek for brothers?**

    Preferably not; refer to the section on sandek for a fuller discussion.

12. **Do we need a Kohen at the bris?**

It is not essential; but if there is a Kohen present he may be called upon to bless the baby.

13. **Is there a role for ladies at the bris?**

Yes; ladies can pass the baby from the mother to other ladies until the kvaterin passes the baby to the kvater.

14. **How long does the ceremony take?**

It takes about 10 minutes from the time the baby is brought into the room until he is returned to his mother.

15. **Is it permitted to video and/or take photographs at the bris ceremony?**

It is permitted to video and photograph the ceremony on days other than Shabbat and Yom Tov. It is not permitted to video or photograph the actual bris procedure. “Nappie is off camera is off!”

16. **What happens to the foreskin?**

The Mohel will place the foreskin in earth or sand. (Yoreh Deah 265:41)

17. **Do we need to have a full meal after the bris?**

There are a variety of options -

- ideally there should be a constituted seated meal similar to a Shabbat or Yom Tov meal
- Some have the “kichel and herring menu” for all those at the bris and later on family and close friends are invited to a formal meal
- However most people host a meal that is obviously a celebration and considered a “party”
- Hamotzi is made at the party after the bris and Birkat Hamazon (grace after meals) is recited before all the guests leave.

18. **Do we need a nurse at the bris?**

The mother must decide whether or not she needs help at this time. If so, I do have a list of nurses who can be present at the bris to offer help and advice.

19. **How long will the circumcision take to heal?**

Approximately a week.
Yellow discolouration is normal and will disappear in time.

20. **Can we use anaesthetic?**

The baby can be given 1.2ml of Calpol or Panado; I am happy to discuss the pros and cons of topical anaesthetic preparations.

21. **Does it hurt the baby when he urinates?**

The first time the baby urinates it may sting, but thereafter he should not experience any pain.

22. **Hyperspadius – a highly unusual occurrence**

When there is an abnormality in the anatomy of the penis, a bris may not be performed until after consultation with a surgeon and the mohel. In such an unusual case, it is necessary to wait until the child is 12-18 months old.

However, the child should be given his Hebrew name as soon as possible after his birth. This is done when the father receives an aliyah in shul, and a mi she'beirach (blessing for recovery) is made for the mother and her son. In addition, and in order to alleviate undue pressure and stress on the parents, it is suggested that as soon as possible a seudat hoda'ah**,** a meal of thanksgiving, be given for the safe delivery of the child and to celebrate the mitzvah of **ushmartem me'od lenafshoteichem** (being careful with regard to one's health and well-being). Since the surgeon has postponed the bris until the child is ready, we acknowledge the parents' desire to fulfil G-d's commandment of looking after their baby's health.

When the surgeon and mohel decide that the time is right, the procedure is done in theatre under general anaesthetic with the mohel performing the bris part of the procedure and the surgeon doing the necessary surgery to correct the abnormality.

The brochos associated with the bris are recited by the mohel and the father in theatre and one should then have a seudah (celebratory meal) on that day.

Strong Warning:

Do not make any decisions regarding surgery before consulting the mohel. You may save yourself unnecessary stress and distress.

Pidyon HaBen

The positive commandment of Pidyon HaBen (redemption of the first born) is one of the five commandments a father is obligated to perform for his child (Kiddushin 29a). The mitzvah is based on the verse in Bamidbar 18:14-16.

Pidyon HaBen is performed when

- A male child is the mother's first child.
- The child was born naturally (not by caesarean section).
- The child's mother is not the daughter of a Kohen or Levi, and his father is not a Kohen or Levi.

The Pidyon HaBen should take place on the 31st day after birth. The day of birth is counted as the first day. If the 31st day is a Shabbat or Yom Tov, the Pidyon is done on the following day.

A short history

- When the Egyptian first-born males perished during the 10th plague all Jewish first born males were saved (Shmot 12). G-d commanded Moshe (Bamidbar 13:2) "sanctify to me all first born males".
- When the tribes of Israel were wandering in the desert, they angered G-d by worshipping the Golden Calf which rendered them unfit to serve G-d. The only tribe that did not worship the idol was the tribe of Levi and G-d sanctified the Levi'im and appointed them to serve in the Tabernacle and Beit Hamikdash.
- Since all first-born Jewish males were originally designated as holy but were now unable to fulfill their intended role, it became necessary to release them from their sanctity through a redemption process.
- Since kohanim and Levi'im are able to carry out their sacred work, it is not necessary to redeem their first-born males.

<u>The Ceremony</u>

The mitzvah of Pidyon HaBen applies to any son who "opens his mother's womb"; therefore a boy born after the mother has had a

miscarriage or abortion is not considered the “opener” and does not require a Pidyon.

The first-born infant is redeemed in exchange for 5 silver coins that the father gives the Kohen. The money is a gift to the Kohen, with the understanding that the Kohen is free to do with it as he pleases. In many cases, after the Kohen receives the coins, he returns them to the parents as a gift from him and a memento of the ritual. (Indeed there are Kohens who are invited to so many redemption rituals that they have a set of redemption coins which they grant as a gift to the father who later gives them as a gift to the Kohen at the time of the ritual.) All of these are accepted practices but remember that at the moment the gift is given, the Kohen may not be asked to return it. The coins belong to him and he has the choice of what to do with them.

The value of the redemption is 5 silver shekalim. The weight of the 5 shekalim is 105 grams of pure silver (Most half crowns and R1 coins (pre 1967) have 14g of pure silver). Special coins have been minted for the express use of a Pidyon HaBen ceremony.

The Pidyon HaBen mitzvah is not dependant on the bris. Therefore, if the bris is delayed beyond the 31st day after birth, the Pidyon HaBen must still take place.

On a fast day, the Pidyon is done during the day and the celebratory meal is eaten after the fast.

If a first born child was not redeemed by his father, he must redeem himself after his Barmitzvah (Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 305). In such cases a custom evolved of placing a necklace on the child inscribed with the words “Ben Bechor” to remind him to redeem himself after his Barmitzvah (Maharil).