MUSSAF HABRIT: New Ideas for an old ritual

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**Introduction:**

It is almost a given in liberal Jewish circles today, that a baby girl will be named during her own covenant ceremony. These ceremonies have arisen to parallel the ***brit***, thereby giving the baby woman her due entrance into the Jewish community. But what of the ***brit*** ceremony itself? Has it in any way been changed or modified to reflect contemporary feminist values? In what ways are women becoming part of the ***brit*** ceremony, in what way have women claimed their role in the covenanting of their sons? Or have they?

Judaism hands us a powerful ancient tradition of women circumcising their sons. Tzipporah, Moses' wife circumcises her son in Exodus 4:24-26 with the words "You are a bridegroom of blood to me". This has been an extremely difficult passage to interpret and in my opinion, because of this our tradition has seen it as an anomaly that a woman does the circumcision.

Today, generally speaking, the ***brit*** is seen as the father's obligation and usually surrendered to the male lineage of the family. The tradition is based on the passages in Genesis where Abraham circumcises his sons. (Gen 17:25) The ***sandek***, usually a grandfather or other male, is given the 'joy" of holding the child, the ***mohel*** usually a man does the circumcision, while the father ***kvells***. The mother usually stands stoic, wondering why this strange act is being done to her perfect child. Why/How must she participate in this primitive male initiation cult?

It is no wonder that some feminists are doing away with the act of circumcision altogether, while others are creating separate ceremonies for welcoming a the new life. Rabbi Julie Greenberg felt that "it was not a holy act to cut a baby and that it was offensive to say Hebrew prayers while doing a barbaric act." "The idolization of the penis begins with circumcision which is a fundamental building block of patriarchal Judaism," says Julie. Her further rationale is that "fifty percent of Jews have never been cut (women) and they have somehow remained Jews." She feels that "a welcoming covenant is a beautiful egalitarian concept and designed a ritual for her son. It was held on the eighth day and included singing prayers from Hallel to "welcome him into a covenant of praise and honor rather than pain and judgement." She sees her decision as "building a bridge toward the day in a hundred years or so when there will not be any cutting." Most Jews however, have not separated the covenanting from the cutting and the question remains how a women can more fully participate in or "own" the traditional *brit* ceremony as her own.

**What is the brit about anyway and how can the mother relate to it more fully?**

The ***brit*** has been seen for centuries as a "bottom line" Jewish value. Its merit go back first to Abraham then to Egypt when our sources say that it was on account of the circumcision that G-d redeemed the Israelites. [[1]](#footnote--1)1 . Our tradition teaches that Pharoah forbade circumcision, but on the day of the Exodus all the young and old were circumcised. [[2]](#footnote-0)2 It was the blood of circumcision as well as the Passover sacrifice that was spread on the lintels of their houses. The proof text for this is that it says twice in Eze. 16:6 "In your blood live".

We know that blood held - and still holds a key to life and death. We have revered blood sacrifices as part of our tradition and we have been the sacrifices because of circumcision. We kept the commandment of circumcision and the covenant has kept us as Jews. We determine ***kashrut*** by bloodlessness, yet we wound our children when they are yet so fragile to bind them into this covenant of blood. What's a mother to do?

In researching this article, I first went to The Jewish Baby Book, by Anita Diament. She mentions in her section on ***Brit*** that it is the mother's, or her delegates, honor to bring in the baby to the ***mohel***. This person is called a **Kvatter** in Ashkenazi tradition. The Sephardic tradition has the women dancing with the baby as they approach the chair of Elijah. The grandmother was also known to bury the foreskin under a tree.

I asked several women how they enhanced their son's ***brit*** in order to personalize it for them. How did they feminize it, what did they contribute? I received various responses. Before the ***brit***, one woman (Ruth Suker) played two songs that were special to her. As well she brought her midwives forward to say a few words about them - standing them in the tradition of Shifra and Puah. Another woman said that she or another woman, offered the ***Devar Torah,*** or explained the name. Other innovation included one woman, Devorah Bartinoff, starting a ***niggun*** while the ***mohel*** was doing his part. Then the baby was escorted through an aisle of singing, dancing women. Some women said the ***bracha*** of circumcision with their partners; others did not because they felt that they were not commanded to do so. One woman (Vivie Meyer)sang ***Shirat Hannah***, the song that Hannah sings as she dedicates her son to G-d. Some women have created their own separate blessing ceremony. (Marci Gilbert) A lesbien couple also did a foot washing, modeled after Abraham, as a way of welcoming the baby. (Linda Holtzman) I wrote a feminist ***brit*** song to be included in the ceremony. (text following this article).

**Possibilities for other ways a mother can participate:**

In thinking this article through, I wanted to come find other ways a woman could own part of the ***brit*** ceremony. In the traditional circumcision liturgy, there is a phrase- ***b'damai chai*** ("in your bloods- live") taken out of context from the book of Jeremiah . In Jeremiah it refers to a time when God will abandon Jerusalem, babies will live in their blood- there will be no swaddling or salting (ancient practices of caring for a baby). In our context, numerous interpretations of this passage are found, however the most obvious connection can be made to the mother as the one whose blood enabled the fetus to live. This gives her legitimacy for a role in the ***brit*** ceremony.

Although I had my own ideas about new ways to include the mother, I first asked Reb Zalman, a master of creative liturgy, what women could do to enhance the ***brit*** ceremony for themselves. Zalman felt that the woman should take an active part in the ceremony, like Tzipporah, in order to feel ownership of the the ritual of circumcision. He suggested that the woman staunch the blood after the cut, symbolizing her covenant of blood with the child. Her own body bled in order to prepare her for the pregnancy and birth, and now she and the child need to stop bleeding. She declares his (and her) genitals sacred and off limits to each other. She will protect him from incest within the family and from further bloodshed.

I offer two alternative ideas for the mother's inclusion in the brit ceremony. This first idea was inspired by the sentence in the book of Ezekiel (16:4). There it refers to the practice of salting, washing, and swaddling a newborn. The salting was probably done to remove the vernix caseosa that covers an infant at birth. Perhaps the baby could be" salted" in some other fashion, given that by the time of the ***brit***, it has probably been cleaned. Salt could be touched to his lips. His feet could be dipped in salt to feel the grains -like the sand our ancestors walked upon. Saltwater reminiscent of the Pesach seder could also be used, reminding us of our redemption.

The second idea was sparked by the Sephardi women who buried the foreskin. The foreskin and the placenta, although once part of the human body are extraneous in Jewish tradition. Although we are buried with our hair and fingernails in order to remain whole, we are not buried with our foreskins and placenta. In fact it is by discarding these items that we are made holy and whole.

We also have a Jewish tradition a practice of planting a tree for a baby. The tree that is planted is supposed to be a cedar for a boy and a cypress for a girl. Ancient wise woman tradition also teaches us to plant our placentas ([[3]](#footnote-1)3 for as the earth nourishes us, we nourish to the earth. In these days of environmental awareness, it is certainly appropriate to plant a tree to symbolize and to ensure that the earth will flourish for the next generation. Reclaiming our body parts for sacred burial, the foreskin and the placenta - representing the male and female components needed for creating life- is more appropriate to me than leaving them to some hospital administrator or trashman to add to the heap of rampant garbage.

**What are the Sources for Burial of a foreskin?**

According to the Tur, a Medieval commentator, it is a law that the foreskin needs to be buried. Apparently it was the custom to do so, which later became law. The custom for burial of the foreskin is based on a reference in the Midrash Pirke de Rabbi Eliezar, Chapter 29, "The trials of Abraham", dealing with circumcision. "The place where Abraham was circumcised, his blood remained there and an altar was built to mark the spot." Our tradition goes on to confirm that burial is what do we need to do with the foreskins. Midrash Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar continues: "When the Children came into the land, Joshua had to circumcise them again, because they weren't done properly. (Josh 5:2 "And Josh gathered the foreskins into a hill." The Israelites took the foreskins and the blood and covered them with the dust of the wilderness." (The law of covering the of the blood is described by Jubilees 7:30 to Noah who tells his sons, "and work ye a good work to your souls by covering that which has been shed on the face of the earth.) The Babylonian Jews seemed to have used water to cover the blood at the circumcision, whereas the Palestinians used earth to cover the blood and the foreskin. [[4]](#footnote-2)4 Our Sages instituted that they should cover the foreskin with the blood with the dust of the earth [[5]](#footnote-3)5 because they are compared to the dust of the earth as it is said, "Thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth." Gen 27:14. In other words we are supposed to bury the foreskins with the blood. Today this is done by placing the foreskin in a vessel containing dirt or sand. [[6]](#footnote-4)6

The *Midrash* continues with a passage that provides the link between the circumcision and the tree planting: "R. Ze'era said, "There are five [[7]](#footnote-5)7 things uncircumcised in the world; four with reference to man and one concerning trees. Whence do we know these four terms relating to man? Man is uncircumcised of ear, of lips, heart and of the flesh. Ears are mentioned in Jer 6:10, "Behold their ear is uncircumcised"; Lips are mentioned in Ex 6:12, "For I am of uncircumcised of lips"; the heart is mentioned in Deut 10:16, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, For all the nations are uncircumcised and all of Israel is uncircumcised in their heart." Jer 9:26; Flesh is mentioned in Gen 17:14 , "And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in flesh of his foreskin, and you shall be circumcised in foreskin; and Gen 17:11 tells us of the Tree: "And when you shall come into the land and shall have planted all manner of trees for food then you shall count the fruit thereof as the uncircumcision three years shall they be uncircumcised to you." Just as we are required to circumcise our children, so we are required to circumcise our trees. It is by planting the foreskin at the base of the tree that we honor this ancient tradition and turn the wounding of the child into a nourishment for the tree.

Although I was unable to find any Jewish sources for what to do with a placenta, there are precedents for its burial as well. In ancient Sumerian culture the placenta was collected in order that noone would have magical control of the child. In the book The Giving Tree a reference is made to the burial of the placenta. A small triangular marker made of sticks is placed at the spot. Burial of the placenta unlike the foreskin, does not necessarily need to be part of the circumcision ceremony. Its may be saved for a later date(in the freezer) for some other postpartum ritual, or may be buried with the foreskin.

**Why does the mother need bury the foreskin?** The mother needs a stronger role in the *brit* ceremony, in order to symbolize her powerful connection to the child. For as she walks in the steps of Tzipporah, and her blood mingles with her tears, she also initiates her child into the covenant of the Jewish people. The foreskin is a symbol of the mother's previous connection to the child, it was part of her and the pregnancy--something which of no use any longer and must be discarded properly. Just as the child will separate from the mother, the foreskin is honored as a symbol of growth. It is the hope that the child will not discard the mother/parent in the process of maturation. For as relationships change and patterns of behavior are broken, we must learn to honor the the moving cycles of our lives.

The foreskin also serves as a grateful reminder that the child is not being buried. It is a living being and has not been sacrificed. Like Isaac's ram in the thicket, the foreskin has been sacrificed instead. The foreskin is not an abomination to the mother, for it has been part of her. She has had a sacred relationship to it by carrying it inside her body. She must dispose of it with respect, for she acknowledges the cycles of life in which she participates. By returning it to the earth, the woman honors Mother Earth who sustains us.

Burial is considered a sacred act by Jews. Several stories in the Tanach relate its import. Abraham negotiates for the cave of Machpelah; Jacob wanted his bones brought from Egypt to be laid to rest in the Holy Land; and Ritzpah, the concubine of King Saul, is considered righteous for her decision to remain and watch her sons because they were not allowed to be buried. This ritual burial of the foreskin should contain a sacred Jewish perspective. It is with this as a background that I offer the following ritual.

**Mussaf HaBrit: Additional Service for the Burial of a Foreskin**

Materials needed: an earthen vessel containing sand or dirt, a shovel, vessel of water.

After the service for circumcision has been completed, but *Birchat* *Hamazon* has not been said, the mother, takes the vessel containing the foreskin and hands it to a woman friend. Someone else carries the baby if the weather permits. The mother exits the room with, at least, a *minyon* of women. They find the sacred ground in the back yard, preferably under a tree, that has been partially prepared, and gather in a circle.

**The leader/rabbi/facilitator begins:**  We begin this *Mussaf brit* with a few moments of silence as our traditional *Mussaf* service begins for a Shabbat or Holiday. As our *Mussaf* services represents the additional communal sacrifices that were brought to the Temple, we also reflected on the additional sacrifices and joy that belong to the mother before us.

**After a moment the Mother speaks:**  I have carried this child inside me for nine months feeling my body grow and change. I have felt the tightening and stretching of my muscles as I have accommodated the growing life. You were part of me as I was part of you. Now it is time for me to let go of a part of you, that was also a part of me. With this ritual, I bury my need to hold onto you as you were. I set aside what I assume to be perfection, and realize that this child will grow and be perfect in his own way, and it may not always be the way that I determine.

**Rabbi reads/tells of the traditional sources for burial of the foreskin.** (See above; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezar) **and/or says:** Just as our tradition has taught us to honor our body and to bury the foreskin; we too return to the earth what is sacred. We acknowledge that the mysteries and commandment of circumcision are sometimes beyond what we would imagine for our children, but as we have affirmed this ancient tradition of our people, we also affirm the wisdom that has created us and this infant in such perfect harmonious detail. We acknowledge the designs and secrets of the universe that are beyond our grasp as we say together the prayer for blessing the body:

**All say in unison:***Baruch ata Yah, elohaynu Ruach Haolam, asher yatzar et hadam v'hesha b'chochma u-varah bahem n'kavim n'kavim halulim halulim. Galu-iv'yadu-a l'fanai kisay k'vodecha, she'em y'pata'ach achad mahem, o y'sater achad mahem, e efshar l'hetkayaim v'la'amode l'fanecha afilu sh'ah ahat. Baruch atah Yah rofeh cal basar u mapfli la'asot.*

Blessed are You God, Spirit of the World, who fashioned men and women with wisdom and created within them many openings and cavities. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if but one of them were to be ruptured or but one of them were to be blocked it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You even for one hour. Blessed are You God who heals all flesh and acts wonderously. Amen.[[8]](#footnote-6)8

**Rabbi explains:** The midrash teaches Only one of Moshe and Tzipporah's children had been circumcised, for the other had been promised to Yitro to be raised Egyptian. Two angels stopped Moshe and Tzipporah on their way back to Egypt. The angels of black and red fire, Af and Hemah who do G-d's will on earth, were prepared to kill Moshe for this transgression. [[9]](#footnote-7)9 "Then Tzipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, (assumed to be Moshe's), and said 'Surely you ar a bridegroom of blood to me'. So he let him go; then she said," A bloody bridegroom you are, because of the circumcision.

**Mother says:**  I stand before you in the tradition of courageous Tzipporah. Tzipporah who knew that a circumcision was protection from danger.. As Ritzpah, the concubine I stand guard over my child, ready to protect him from harm. I honor the ritualistic drawing of blood as a powerful sign of my covenant with the Jewish people, as well as my dedication to this child. You are my son, my tribal brother and are bound by blood to me.

**Friend hands the mother the vessel with the foreskin and says:** We are bound with you in a sacred circle of women as you choose to honor your son and your tradition in this manner. We bleed with you for the pain of wounding your child, yet as our blood turns to life, may this blood circumcision turn into a life sustaining act.

**Mother takes the vessel and places it in the ground under the tree and covers it with earth.** Others also slowly add a handfull of earth to the pile.

**Rabbi explains:**  In a *Mussaf* service, an extra *Sh'ma* is added to the *K'dusha*. As we return this foreskin to sacred earth, we now also repeat the words of the angels acknowledging G-d whose Glory fills the earth.

**All say:** *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh Adonai Tzva'ot m'lo col ha'aretz k'vodo.*

Holy, holy, holy, the G-d of Hosts, the whole earth is full of G-d's glory.

**All Say:** *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad.*

Sing angels songs as a small marker of twigs, or red thread is placed on top of the pile. [[10]](#footnote-8)10

Psalm 114, traditionally said at the consecration of a new cemetery would also be appropriate here.

**Mother says,** "I am ready to begin this new phase of life with a new life. Just as the women of old made an extra offering upon the birth of a child, I also make this *tz'dakah* offering to the SIDS organization (or some other save the children fund) and say:

*"Baruch Ata Ya Elohaynu Ruach Haolam, Shecheyiyanu, v'kiyaman, v'higiyanu, lazman hazeh."*

**Rabbi:** Just as we wash our hands after leaving a cemetery, we also wash our hands now before we escort the mother back into the house.

* Bilaam says in Parshat Balak (this week's parashah) "Mi manah 'afar Yaakov -- who can count the dust of Jacob?" The Midrash Peliah interprets this verse as referring to Bilaam's having seen in the wilderness a mound of foreskins covered in dust. He the exclaimed: Who can stand against those who have the merit of brit milah ... like those who cover their cut foreskin with dust. From here was established the custom to cover the foreskin with dust.
* The Ketav Sofer on this week's parashah says that Bilaam was recognizing the specialness of Israel in the view of Abraham's statement "I am but dust and ashes" -- i.e., their humility.
* Rav Moshe Itzkowitz asked: First, how does this show humility; and second, if the Children of Israel did not practice circumcision during their 40 years of wandering in the desert, how could Bilaam have seen a mound of foreskins?
* Rav Moshe provided his own answer to his questions by quoting from Devarim 33:9 "u-britcha yintzoru -- and you have guarded the covenant." Rabbeinu Bechaye cites a tradition that although the Israelites did not circumcise their sons during the desert wanderings, those of the tribe of Levi did. But they did not want to embarrass the others, so they covered the foreskins with dust.
* Bilaam thus saw the devotion of the Levites to Brit Milah, their humility and respect for others, and because of the Levites both blessed Israel for their commitment to the covenant and grew afraid of the greatness of their character.
* He then blessed his new grandson to be passionate about and supremely dedicated to mitzvoth while fulfilling them "behatzneah lechet," in a modest way that inspires others rather than embarrasses or imposes upon them.

1. 1 (Midrash Socher Tov- Midrash T'hillim P"B) [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. 2 (PK R. Eliezar p210) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. 3 see Hygiea [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. 4 (Shaare Tzedek 5:10, Tur Yoreh Diah 265 Zohar Gen 95a Menorath Ha maor.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. 5 ( Chiluf Minhagim Muller ed pp18ff Hagadic Commenatry Sekhel Tov 1 p19.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. 6 (Yoreh Deah1, ch 10) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. 7 (1. Gen Rab 46:5 Mishnah and Tosepftah on Orlah and Yerushalmi deals with uncircumcised of trees based on Lev 29:23-25; Mimon Maakhaloth Asurot 10:9 ff.kinds of Orlah ) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. 8 Artscroll, p16 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. 9 Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol2, p295, 308 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. 10 (Ezekiel 39:15 is the Bilical verse will tells us to mark our graves.) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)