
Brit Banot

Covenant Ceremonies

for Daughters

Debra Cantor and Rebecca Jacobs

ALTHOUGH JEWISH WOMEN THROUGHOUT HISTORY WERE SURELY GRATEFUL WHEN THEY GAVE BIRTH TO HEALTHY DAUGHTERS, NEITHER THE BIRTH OF A DAUGHTER NOR HER COMING OF AGE WERE MARKED with the public ritual and festivity devoted to the birth and coming of age of a boy. Instead, a newborn girl's father was usually called up to the Torah for an aliyah, following which a *Mi-Shebeirakh* for the health of the mother would be recited, and the girl's Hebrew name announced. This was paralleled in the Sephardic tradition by a naming formula called *Zeved ha-Bat*. But an aliyah on a Monday or Thursday morning, in the presence of the regular morning minyan—and in the absence of mother and baby—pales in comparison with the communal joy and pride, the sense of both celebration and seriousness, attendant upon a *brit milah*.

In our era, radically different conceptions of women's place in religious and communal Jewish life have profoundly affected almost every group in the Jewish community, shaping the way we look at rituals that

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involve women. As girls are encouraged to study Torah and to assume leadership roles with the same commitment as boys, they, too, have come to be seen as full inheritors of the *brit*, the covenant between God and the Jewish people. During the past twenty years, Jewish parents have begun to mark the birth of daughters with baby naming ceremonies. In many Jewish circles, these ceremonies have become standard practice, routinely expected upon the birth of a daughter.

When the Rabbinical Assembly began the work this year of preparing a new edition of its Rabbi's Manual, a subcommittee of women was appointed to review existing materials and prepare new texts incorporating a sensitivity to women's concerns not present in the earlier manual, developed in the 1960's. We were asked to develop a ceremony for baby naming.

Our ceremony would have to be "generic," easy to follow and comfortable for rabbis or parents to use. But while working to create a standardized text, we were very much aware that in terms of the history of Jewish liturgy and ritual, the naming ceremony for baby girls is in its infancy. It seemed too early to canonize or calcify either the wording or the ritual of such ceremonies.

We liked the spare and direct wording of the traditional *brit milah* ceremony, and decided to retain its basic structure. The elements of welcome to the community, naming the child over a cup of wine, the hope that the parents raise their child to a life of *Torah*, *huppah* (marriage canopy) and *ma'asim tovim* (meritorious deeds) all seemed appropriate.

Of course, references to blood and to Abraham's circumcision would be deleted. Once they were gone, though, what remained? We discovered, to our pleasure, that we were left with the very powerful concept of *brit*. It then took only some assiduous work with a biblical concordance to assemble verses that express the truth that all Jews, male and female, share in that ancient *brit* made between God and Abraham—and that *milah* (circumcision) is not the sole content of that *brit*.

Although occasionally we found ourselves making grammatical "repairs" on selected verses, one does not have to be a textual contortionist to make the point that women are also part of the *brit*. The biblical verses that describe God's covenant with Abraham are richly endowed with values and ideals that embody the covenant—beyond the context of circumcision. "Walk wholeheartedly before Me...I will be your God and your

children's God forever..." seemed perfectly suited to the occasion, in harmony both with tradition and with our contemporary sense of women's place in that tradition.

Rather than derail the centrality of *brit* (as some liturgists have done, invoking, for example, the *sheva brakhot* of the marriage ceremony) we chose to stay within the borders of the theme of covenant. For this reason, too, we called this ceremony *Brit Banot* (covenant of daughters) rather than *Simchat Bat* (celebration of a daughter): we wanted to emphasize its covenantal content.

A *brit milah*, we noticed, is spare—almost silent. It focuses our attention on one central act, the act of circumcision. Too many of the naming ceremonies for girls that we've read or witnessed are almost painfully wordy, as if only torrents of speech could fill the space that circumcision leaves behind. For a ceremony to be effective, something needs to happen. Recent ceremonies offer some possibilities. Many parents give the baby a gift of some ritual object. Others focus on a theme like Shabbat, *tzedakah*, or a holiday that occurred in close proximity to the birth. Again, however, we did not want to set in concrete what is still a delicate evolutionary process. Therefore, we developed three distinct themes—light, Torah, and tallit—for three different "*brit* actions."

We then structured three alternative ceremonies that rabbis and parents can choose from: lighting seven candles (corresponding to the days of Creation), lifting the baby to touch her hand to a Torah scroll, and wrapping the baby in the four corners of a tallit. Each ritual is accompanied by appropriate Biblical verses and a short paragraph employing the motif of light, Torah, or tallit, respectively.

We have made a start. And after a while, who knows? How long will it take before a new ceremony begins to feel not artificial and contrived, but holy and familiar?

Zot ha-ketannah gedolah tehiyeh: All those who use these rituals are partners in their creation. If you would like to suggest changes or modifications to these ceremonies, or if you have developed themes, images, texts, and rituals of your own, please contact the Rabbinical Assembly's Publications Committee so that the next edition of the Rabbi's Manual can present the next generation with the growth and development of the *Brit Banot* ceremony.

ברית בנות *Brit Banot*

The *Brit Banot* ceremony is usually held within the first month after the baby's birth. The following ceremony offers three options—light, Torah, and Tallit (marked A, B, and C) within a liturgical frame. Optional readings appear in *italic* type.

As the baby is brought into the room,
all rise and say:

מי-זאת הנשקפה
כמו-שחר
יפה כלבנה ברה כחמה.
*Who is she who shines through like the
dawn
Beautiful as the sun, radiant as the
moon? (SONG OF SONGS 6:10)*

יונתי בחגוי הסלע בסתר המדרגה
הראיני את-מראיך השמיעני
את-קולך כי-קולך ערב
ומראיך נאוה.
*My dove in the cleft of the rock
In the shelter of the cliff
Let me see your face.
Let me hear your voice.
For your voice is sweet and your face is
beautiful. (SONG OF SONGS 2:14)*

אחת היא יונתי תמתי
אחת היא לאמה
ברה היא לילודתה
ראוה בנות ויאשרוה
מלכות ופילגשים ויהללוה.
*My little dove is unique
Her mother's radiant child.
Women see her and acclaim her.
Queens and consorts sing her praises
(SONG OF SONGS 6:9)*

Mother says Birkat ha-Gomel
(In the case of an adoption or conver-
sion, parents say: "We have brought
our daughter to mikvah and welcome
her to the Jewish community.")

הביטו אל-אברהם
אביכם ואל-שרה תחוללכם.
Look to Abraham your father and to
Sarah who bore you. (ISAIAH 51:2)

וירא יהוה אל-אברם ויאמר אליו
אני-אל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים.
והקמתי את-בריתי ביני ובינך ובין
זרעך אחריו לדרתם לברית עולם.
להיות לך לאלהים ולזרעך אחריו.
God appeared to Avram and said to
him: I am El Shaddai; walk wholeheart-
edly before Me... Then I will establish a
Covenant between Me and you and
your descendants who come after you:
A Covenant in which I will be your
God and your children's God for ever
and ever. (from GENESIS 17:1, 7)

A. BRIT RITUAL: *Candles*

Several participants—grandparents, aunts, uncles, special friends, etc.—are given candles and form two lines facing each other. The parents, or other honored guests, carry the baby in between the two rows of candles. The candles may be already lit as they are given to the participants, the flame may be passed down each line (from generation to generation, perhaps) as the baby is brought through, or the candles may be lit one by one as the following six verses (corresponding to the six days of Creation) are read, and then placed in candlesticks that have previously been arranged on a table. It would be especially nice to use cherished family candlesticks.

נר-לרגלי דברך ואור לנתיבתי.
Your word is a lamp unto my feet,
a light for my path. (PSALMS 119:105)

כי-אתה תאיר נרי
יהוה אלהי יגיה חשכי.
You are the One who kindles my lamp;
the Lord my God lights up my
darkness. (PSALMS 18:29)

קומי אורי כי בא אורך
וכבוד יהוה עליך זרח.
Arise, shine, for your light has dawned;
God's radiance shines upon you!
(ISAIAH 60:1)

ועליך יזרח יהוה וכבודו עליך יראה.
May the Lord continue to shine upon
you and God's brilliant Presence sur-
round you. (ISAIAH 60:2)

שאי-סביב עיניך וראי
 כלם נקבצו באו-לך
 בניך מרחוק יבאו ובנתיך
 על-צד תאמנה.
 Lift up your eyes all about you and
 behold: They have all gathered around
 you; your sons shall be brought from
 afar, your daughters like babes on your
 shoulders. (ISAIAH 60:4)

יחנונו ויברכנו יאר פניו אתנו סלה.
 May God be gracious to us and bless us.
 May God's face shine upon us. Selah.
 (PSALMS 67:2)

Parents lift up the baby so she is facing the lighted candles. The following is said by the parents or the rabbi:

Light was the first of God's creations; as light appeared, it brought with it the possibility of all the wondrous things to follow. We, too, kindle lights—of hope, of understanding, of celebration, of countless new possibilities. This little daughter with whom we (these parents) have been blessed has already brought light into our (their) lives. May God's radiance continue to shine upon us (them). May she grow to be a source of light to all those around her. May her radiance illuminate the world. May the light of Torah and mitzvot be reflected in her shining deeds. And may she help bring the light of Redemption to the world. Amen.

(continue on page 54)

B. BRIT RITUAL: Torah

This ceremony is suitable for Shabbat as well as weekdays. If it is done as part of the Shabbat morning service, the rabbi may wish to incorporate it into Hakhnasat ha-Torah, immediately preceding Etz Chayim Hi.

The following verses may be recited by grandparents or other participants:

לכו ונעלה אל-הר-יהוה
 אל-בית אלהי יעקב ויורנו
 מדרכיו ונלכה בארחתיו.
 Come and let us go up to the mountain
 of the Lord and to the House of the
 God of Jacob. And God will teach us of

כי מציון תצא תורה
 ודבר-יהוה מירושלם.
 His ways, and we will walk in God's
 paths. For the Torah shall go forth from
 Zion and the word of the Lord from
 Jerusalem. (MICAH 4:2, ISAIAH 2:3)

תורת יהוה תמימה משיבת נפש
 עדות יהוה נאמנה מחכימת פתי:
 פקודי יהוהי שרים משמחי-לב
 מצות יהוה ברה מאירת עינים.
 The Torah of the Lord is perfect, renew-
 ing life; The testimony of the Lord is
 enduring, making the simple wise. The
 precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing
 the heart. The commandment of the
 Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
 (PSALMS 19:8–9)

Rabbi and parents (and grandparents and/or other participants) face the open Ark. Holding the Torah, the rabbi faces the congregation and recites the following verses:

ויקם עדות ביעקב ותורה שם
 בישראל אשר צוה את אבותינו
 להודיעם לבניהם: למען ידעו
 דור אבנים יולדו יקמו ויספרו
 לבניהם: וישימו באלהים כסלם ולא
 ישכחו מעללי-אל ומצותיו ינצרו.
 God established a decree in Jacob and
 appointed a teaching in Israel charging
 our ancestors to make Torah known to
 their children; so that future genera-
 tions might know, and even children
 yet to be born—and in their turn tell
 their children as well. That they might
 put their confidence in God and not
 forget God's great deeds, and keep
 God's mitzvot. (PSALMS 78:5–7)

Mother recites:

הורני יהוה דרך חקיך ואצרנה עקב.
 Teach me, O Lord the way of Your laws
 and I shall treasure them always.
 (PSALMS 119:33)

Father recites:

הבינני ואצרה תורתך
 ואשמרנה בכל-לב.
 Give me understanding and I shall trea-
 sure Your Torah; I shall keep it whole-
 heartedly. (PSALMS 119:34)

ידיך עשוני ויכוננוני
הביניני ואלמדה מצותיך.
Parents recite together:
Your hands have made us and fashioned us. Give us understanding that we may learn your commandments.
(PSALMS 119:73)

Parents hold up the baby to the Torah scroll and place her hands upon it, as they recite (or the rabbi recites):

אשא-כפי אל-מצותיך
אשר אהבתי ואשיחה בחקיך.
I will lift up my hands and reach out to your commandments which I love; Your laws will be on my lips.
(PSALMS 119:48)

As this little child has touched the Torah, so may the Torah touch her life, filling her mind with wisdom, and her heart with understanding. May we (these parents) who have brought her here today always strive to bring her close to the ways of God and of our people. May we (they) teach her Torah every day through our (their) words and our (their) deeds. May we (they) raise our (their) daughter to a joyful life of learning, and to deeds of loving kindness.

(continue on page 54)

C. BRIT RITUAL: Tallit

The baby is placed at the center of a large tallit. Each of the four corners of the tallit is held by the parents or by honored guests, and is folded over, enwrapping the baby. The following verses are said, by the rabbi or the participants themselves, one by one, as each corner is folded.

מה-יקר חסדך אלהים
ובני אדם בצל כנפיך יחסיון.
How precious is your constant love O God; you shelter us under your wings.
(PSALMS 36:8)

ברכי נפשי את-יהוה יהוה אלהי
גדלת מאד הוד וחדר לבשת:
עטה-אור כשלמה
נוטה שמים כיריעה: תשלח
רוחך יבראון ותחדש פני אדמה.
Let all my being praise the Lord who is clothed in splendor and majesty; wrapped in light like a garment, unfolding the heavens like a curtain. You send forth your spirit and there is creation. You renew the face of the earth. (PSALMS 104:1 and 30)

ישב בסתר עליון בצל שדי
יתלונן. אלהי אבטח-בו באברתו
יסך לך ותחת-כנפיו תחסה.
O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the protection of Shaddai...my God in whom I trust will cover you; you will find shelter under His wings. (from PSALMS 91: 1-4)

יהוה שמרך יהוה צלך
על-יד ימינך: יהוה ישמרך
רע ישמר את-נפשך: יהוה ישמך
ובואך מעתה ועד-עולם. מכל
צאתך
The Lord is your guardian. The Lord is your protection at your right hand. The Lord will guard you from all harm; He will guard your life. The Lord will guard your going and coming now and forever. (PSALMS 121:5, 7, 8)

Rabbi or parents: Our God and God of our ancestors, we thank you for the gift of this child (our daughter), whom we welcomed into God's Covenant today. May she grow to maturity embraced by God's love and the love of all who know her. May the Shekhinah, God's sheltering presence, be with her always. May the words of Torah surround her. Clothed in majesty and honor, may she always look to the future with joy.

(Resume here)

Parents:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם,
אשר קדשנו במצותיו
וצונו להכניסה בבריתם
של אברהם אבינו ושרר אמנו.

O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who sanctifies us with Your mitzvot
and commanded us to bring our
daughter into the Covenant of Abraham
our father and Sarah our mother.

Participants:

כשם שנכנסה לברית, כן תיכנס
לתורה ולחפה ולמעשים טובים.

As she has entered the Covenant, so
may she attain the blessings of Torah,
marriage under the Huppah and a life
of good deeds.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
בורא פרי הגפן.

Praised are You, Lord our God, Ruler of
the Universe, who creates the fruit of
the vine.

אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו קים
את הילדה הזאת לאביה ולאמה
ויקרא שמה בישראל

Our God and God of our ancestors,
sustain this child. We declare that her
name shall be

_____ daughter

_____ of _____

_____ and _____.

ישמח האב ביוצא חלציו
ותגל האם בפרי בטנה ככתוב;
ששון ושמחה ימצא בה
תודה וקול זמרה.

May the father rejoice in his offspring;
may her mother delight in the fruit of
her womb. As it is written: Gladness
and joy shall abide with her; thanksgiv-
ing and happy song. (ISAIAH 51:36)

בריתי היתה אתה החיים והשלום.
God makes a Covenant with her;
a Covenant of life and peace.
(based on MALACHI 2:5)

ויתן יהוה לי את-שאלתי
אשר שאלתי מעמו.

As it is written: This is the child for
whom I prayed; God has granted my
desire. (I SAMUEL 1:27)

הודו ליהוה כי לעולם חסדו.

O praise our God, Whose goodness
endures forever.

זאת הקטנה

May this little one,

_____ become great.

כשם שנכנסה לברית, כן תיכנס
לתורה ולחפה ולמעשים טובים.

As she has entered the Covenant, so
may she attain the blessings of Torah,
marriage under the Huppah, and a life
of good deeds.

ונאמר אמן.

Let us say Amen.

Additional Options

Psalm 8

Birkat Kohanim

