
Honey from the Rock: A Brit Bat for Our Daughter

Ketura Persellin

When we were expecting our first child, a son, we faced relatively few decisions about how we would welcome him into the world. It was a totally different matter with our daughter, born two years later. The road map was unclear, but our starting point for composing a ritual was the brit milah.

Before we figured out how to welcome her, my husband, David Waskow, and I had decided on two things. We wanted to welcome her with a naming ceremony on the eighth day of her life. Since that is when boy-children are inducted into the covenant, we reasoned, why not girl-children, too? There was also an emotional element to our decision to hold our ceremony on the eighth day. The first week of our son's life had been a time-out-of-time, an exhausted, adrenaline-driven high that reached its peak at his bris. Part of the drama of the first week came from our families' and friends' willingness to suspend their lives—whether by traveling at the last minute or being late to work with little notice—to mark the baby's introduction into the covenant. We wanted the same sense of urgency for our daughter.

We also knew that we wanted her simchat bat—or whatever we would decide to call it—to be covenantal and physical. Baby boys are brought into the covenant on the eighth day, and that moment is marked upon their body. But the familiar girl ceremonies, though beautiful in their own right, seemed inadequate in this regard. (We consulted *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter*, by Debra Nussbaum Cohen, and ArtScroll's *Bris Milah/Circumcision* by Rabbi Paysach J. Krohn, an excellent source of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions for welcoming boys.)

We found our answer by serendipity. A few days after our daughter's birth, I was having second thoughts about the name we'd chosen, and so, as we

faced the challenge of developing a ceremony, we did some additional study on our daughter's name, Shifra Hadar. As it turned out, her name led us directly to the texts that inspired our ceremony.

David looked for texts that commented on the biblical passage about Shifra, the midwife of the Israelites in Egypt, and found this:

[When the mothers of Israel gave birth in Egypt:] Then from the heights of heaven the Holy One sent an angel who cleansed the infants and massaged their bodies as a midwife does to make a child look beautiful... Then God selected for each of them two breast-shaped stones, one filled with honey and the other with oil, as it is said, "And God made them suck honey out of the crag, and oil out of the flinty rock." (EXODUS RABBAH 1:12)

We loved the image of the angels acting as midwives and massaging—in Hebrew, the word comes from the same root as Shifra—the newborn Israelite babies' bodies. The breastfeeding nurturance implied by the passage appealed to us, too.

When we looked up the proof-text for this midrash, we found a passage that contains God's promise of a covenant with the people Israel:

For the Lord's portion is the people, Ya'akov is the lot of God's inheritance. He found them in a desert land, and in waste howling wilderness; God led them about, instructed them, and kept them as the apple of God's eye. As an eagle stirs up her nest, broods over her young, spreads abroad her wings, takes them, bears them on pinions, so the Lord alone did lead them, and there was no strange god with them. God made them ride on the high places of the earth, and they ate the produce of the fields; and God made them suck honey out of the crag, and oil out of the flinty rock. (DEUTERONOMY 32:9-13)

These passages satisfied our need for texts that would recall the covenant, but how could we translate them into a ritual that would mark this covenant physically? We both felt that the milah itself—the physical act of circumcision—is crucial to the drama of the brit milah, and we wanted something that would convey a sense of that drama.

In our reading, we came across the idea of anointing a baby girl's lips, ears, and heart with oil, a gesture that recalls the Torah teaching that the people Israel is to be a nation of priests. Drawing on this idea, we realized

that the passages we'd read suggested a similar ritual: ...*and God made them suck honey out of the crag, and oil out of the flinty rock.* We would anoint our daughter with honey and oil.

We used two small, pretty bowls, one filled with honey, another with oil. The morning of the ceremony—which we were now calling a brit bat—we asked a family member to find two nice, smooth, small stones, reminiscent of the “breast-shaped stones” in the Mishnah. (If we'd planned this ahead of time, we could have collected two stones during a hike or on a trip or asked our mothers to do so.) We keep these two stones on the tray where our Shabbat candles sit.

Two years earlier, David wrote three short blessings for our son's brit milah that drew upon biblical passages that refer to circumcision metaphorically. We incorporated them into the brit bat. David's mother held our daughter as we anointed her—one of us using honey, the other, oil. As we did, we blessed her:

“Ha-rachaman, Compassionate One, may You open this child's heart.”

We touched the stones to her heart.

“Ha-rachaman, may You open this child's ears to the voices of all creation.” We pressed them against her ears.

“Ha-rachaman, may You open this child to loving with all her being.”

We anointed her forehead, the center of her being.

We bracketed this central ritual with prayers and readings drawn from the traditional brit milah—including *birkat ha-gomel* (the blessing for safe passage from danger), her naming itself, and *birkat ha-cohanim* (the priestly blessing). In addition, we read a passage from Song of Songs taken from the traditional Sephardic *zeved ha-bat* and incorporated a few other short readings. We strove for the tone of a brit milah: short, solemn, and joyous, with little explanatory interruption.

A few hours after the ceremony, our two-year-old son, Elior, approached his new sister with one of the covenantal stones and touched it gently to her forehead. May he and Shifra grow into a world that rejoices in its new baby girls by recognizing and ritualizing their unique relationship to God's covenant.

Ketura Persellin is a writer and editor who lives in Washington, DC, with her husband and two children. The full text of the brit bat is available at www.shalomctr.org/content/resources/brukha.pdf