

Religion, History, and Culture
Selections from The Encyclopedia of Religion

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Judaism

A People and Its History



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Two modern institutions are Yom haSho'ah (Holocaust Day) on 27 Nisan, marking the destruction of six million Jews during the Nazi period, and Yom haAznai'ut (Independence Day) on 5 Iyar, the celebration, especially in the state of Israel, of the Israeli declaration of independence on that date. In many religious circles this day is treated as a full *yom tov*, and the *Hallel* is recited.

[For more detailed discussions of specific Jewish holidays, see Shabbat, Rosh haShana, and Yom Kippur; Passover, Shavu'ot, Sukkot, Purim; and Hanukkah. For more on Jewish traditions, see Judaism, article on Judaism in Asia and Northeast Africa.]

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— RITES OF PASSAGE —

PETER S. KNORR

Judaism has a highly developed series of rites that mark both initiatory and transfor-mative moments in the lives of Jews. The Jewish people has preserved both the individual and the community to experience in an orderly and regular manner the changing status of the Jew's relationship to other individuals and to society as a whole. Although some of the rites may have originated in other neighboring cultures, once adopted they were thoroughly Judaized. Their meaning for the Jewish people is to be sought first in their origin but in their function in Jewish society. Some rites have changed little in their origin but have been radically transformed. In this section we shall describe the rites as they are currently practiced, with special emphasis on the Jewish context in North America.

In general, the rites are rooted in biblical *(mitzvot)*, "commandments" that were refined and standardized in the Talmudic and medieval periods. Although Jewish law (*halakha*) defines the essential elements in each of the local customs (*minhagim*) provide some degree of variation from community to community.

During the last century and a half, Judaism became divided into four streams, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist, and this has created an in-coherence in the liturgy and ritual of life cycle ceremonies. The greatest divergence occurs in Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism. In addition, the growth of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s had a significant impact on life cycle ceremonies in the non-Orthodox movements. There have been cre-ated specifically for women and some standard rituals have been modified to ac-commodate the inclusion of women as equal participants or by the removal of sexist language.

CIRCUMCISION, NAMING, REDEMPTION OF THE FIRST-BORN

The male initiatory rite is *berit mila* ("covenant of circumcision"). It involves the surgical removal of the foreskin of the penis and the recitation of prayers that wel-come the infant into the Jewish people by naming him into the covenant of Abra-ham (*Gen. 17:11ff.*). The rite takes place on the eighth day after birth, counting the day of birth as the first day. So significant is the ceremony that even if it falls on the Sabbath or a festival, the circumcision is not postponed.

Circumcision was practiced by other ancient Near Eastern peoples, probably as a fertility rite, but among Jews it became the physical sign of belonging to the Jewish people [see Circumcision]. In the Hebrew Bible, circumcision is first mentioned in the injunction proclaimed by God to the ninety-nine-year-old Abraham, that instructed him to circumcise himself and the male members of his household:

God further said to Abraham, "Is for you, you, and your offspring, to come throughout the ages shall keep my covenant. Such shall be my covenant between me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and thus shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. . . . Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact."

(Gen. 17:9-13)

In Jewish law, it is the father's responsibility to circumcise his son. As a practical matter, however, it is rare for a father to perform the actual operation. Generally, he appoints a specially trained ritual circumciser, a *moheh*, to perform the rite in his stead. Jewishness does not depend on being circumcised, since any child born of a Jewish mother is a Jew. (In Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, a Jew is anyone born to either a Jewish mother or father, who is raised exclusively as a Jew.) However, because over the millennia the rite has assumed an ethnonational significance in addition to its religious one, it is observed almost universally even by highly assimilated and secular Jews, though the latter may have their sons circumcised by a physician with the aid of anesthesia.

The preferred time for *berit milah* is in the morning, to demonstrate that the parents are as eager as Abraham was to fulfill the commandment. Although circumcision is never performed before the eighth day, it may be postponed or in rare cases omitted for medical reasons. If, however, the child was circumcised before the eighth day or was born without a foreskin, the ceremony of *hatafat dam berit* (taking a drop of blood) is mandated for the eighth day.

Whereas the circumcision ceremony used to be held in the synagogue, it is now conducted in the home. The parents are seated, and the *moheh* stands behind the infant, who is taken from his mother by the grandfather, the godfather, or another male. The circumcision is to take place. She hands the infant to the godfather, who in turn hands him to the *moheh*. As the child is brought into the room, he is welcomed by those present with the greeting (usually in Hebrew) "Blessed be he that comes." The father then formally declares his willingness to have his son circumcised in fulfillment with the divine commandments. The *moheh* takes the child and places him on the lap of the *sanitad* ("holder"). (When circumcisions were regularly performed in the synagogue there was a special chair for the *sanitad* called the Chair of Elijah, the prophet of the desert, who is believed to have been the forerunner of the angel of the covenant in *Midrash* 31.) The *moheh* then declares that the prophet is present at every circumcision and is considered to be the guardian of the child as he enters the covenant of circumcision.)

The surgical procedure consists of three steps: (1) *milah*, the removal of the foreskin, (2) *peri'ah*, the tearing off and folding back of the mucous membrane to ex-

pose the glans, (3) *metzubah*, the suction of the blood from the wound. During this procedure, the infant's legs are held firmly by the *sanitad*. After the *milah*, the infant is placed on a surgical restraining board, which renders the *sanitad's* role symbolic. The *moheh* removes the foreskin and recites the blessing over the rite of circumcision. The mucous membrane uncovered, it is torn down the center as far as the corona. *Milab* and *peri'ah* may take place in a single step. After the blood is suctioned from the wound (*metzubah*), the father recites the blessing: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments, and has brought our sons into the covenant of Abraham our Father." Those present respond, "Hear, O Lord, and answer our prayer." A blessing is then recited over wine, and a prayer is said for the wellbeing of the child and his family. The child is given a little wine and is formally named, and the wine is then given to the parents. The child is returned to his mother, and the ceremony is concluded. In the Reform ritual, either parent or both parents together may take the role traditionally assigned to the father.

It is customary to name a boy at the *berit milah* ceremony and a girl in the synagogue. In 1978, Reform Judaism, in accord with its long-held principle of the equality of men and women, responded to the growing desire on the part of parents to formally initiate their infant girls into the covenant by adopting a new rite called *berit ha-Akheym*, "covenant of life." It follows the liturgical outline of the traditional *berit milah* service, but involves no surgery. The ceremony, as described in the Reform movement's *Gates of the House* (1977, pp. 114-115) proceeds as follows: the infant is welcomed with the words, "Blessed is she who comes to the Universe; by whose *mitzvot* we are hallowed, who commands us to sanctify life." Her mother lights a candle and recites the blessing, "Blessed is the Lord, whose presence gives light to all the righteous, and who has sanctified us and enabling us to reach this day of joy." After a prayer invoking the covenant is said, the child is formally named. Although only Reform Judaism has adopted a specific ritual, many individuals of the other movements have written and performed their own initiation service.

There are no normative rules regarding the naming of children in Judaism. Although there are many names among Ashkenazic Jews to name a child after a deceased relative but not after a living person, among Sephardic Jews a child can be named after a living person. Outside the synagogue, it is common to give a child two names—a secular one, which is used for most purposes, and a Jewish or Yiddish name, which is used for occasions of religious significance, for example, when the child is invited to read from the Torah in synagogue or when a marriage contract (*kiddush-bon* ("son of"), father's name, for a girl, name, *bat* ("daughter of"), father's name, in non-Orthodox naming ceremonies, it is becoming common practice to include the name of the mother as well as the name of the father.

Pedyn ha-ben, the name of the firstborn of the firstborn, takes place on the thirty-first day following the birth of a firstborn male child to qualify for the rite, the male child must literally be the firstborn child of his mother. A child born by

Canaan section is not eligible, because he has not opened his mother's womb. The firstborn son of a *kohen* or a Levite (descendants of the ancient priestly class) is exempt from the rite, as is the firstborn son of the daughter of a *kohen* or a Levite.

The requirement to redeem the firstborn son is found in the Bible: "The first issue of the womb of every being, man or beast, that is offered to the Lord shall be yours, but you shall have the firstborn of man redeemed. . . . Take as their redemption price for the firstborn of man, the money equivalent of five shekels, as you have valued him by sacred weight" (Num. 18:15–16). The *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony is also mentioned in Mishnaic times (c. 200 c.e.). The father makes a declaration affirming that the child is the firstborn son of the mother. A *kohen*, selected by the father, asks him whether or not he wishes to redeem his son. The father responds that he does, then holds five silver coins in his hand and recites the following blessings: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us concerning the redemption of the firstborn son. Blessed is the Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, for granting us life, sustaining us, and bringing us to this time." The father then recites the *shehechiyanu* prayer, who passes them over the child, declaring that the coins are the price of redemption. The *kohen* then raises his hands and recites what is known in Jewish tradition as the Priestly Benediction: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his countenance shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance to you and grant you peace" (Num. 6:24–26). After the rite, the *kohen* returns all or part of the money, which is then usually given to charity. In the United States, it is customary to use either silver dollars or silver medals minted in the state of Israel specially for use in the redemption ceremony. Reform Judaism has eliminated the monetary aspect of the ceremony, and Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism do not recognize a hereditary priesthood or believe that firstborn sons should be differentiated in any way from firstborn daughters. Some individuals have created a rite for firstborn daughters, but no movement has adopted such a rite.

BAR AND BAT MITZVAH, CONFIRMATION

A boy reaches religious majority, becoming *bar mitsvah*, on his thirteenth birthday and a girl reaches it on her twelfth birthday. A girl takes on the name of her mother, becoming *bat mitsvah*, on her twelfth birthday according to the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. *Bar mitsvah* ("son/daughter of the commandment") means a person who is subject to the commandments (*mitzvot*), that is, a person responsible for observing them. The term also refers to the ceremony marking the child's coming of age. The ages of thirteen for a male and twelve for a female were chosen because they mark the onset of puberty. Most congregations perform the ceremony at age thirteen for both boys and girls.

For males, *bar mitsvah* is usually celebrated by the boy's formal participation in the biblical readings and the *shema* prayer, and by his reciting the *shema* prayer and recite the blessings over the Torah, reading and reciting the *shema* prayer (*shema yisrael*). The boy is often assigned the *maftir*, the final brief reading of the weekly Torah reading. Depending on the boy's training and skill, as well as on local custom, he may be invited to conduct all or part of the service, to recite an original prayer, or to give a learned discourse on some biblical or Talmudic subject. The occasion is then usually celebrated with a festive meal or party.

In the post-World War II period, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jews developed the celebration of a girl's becoming a *bat mitsvah* in counterpart to that of a boy's becoming a *bar mitsvah*. The exact nature of the girl's participation varies of a local congregation, but the practice has become an important part of the Jewish world from synagogue to synagogue and from community to community. There is a general egalitarian trend in non-Orthodox Judaism, so that in many communities *bar* and *bat mitsvah* are indistinguishable.

Among the Orthodox, where women are not counted in the *minyan* (quorum of ten) necessary for public worship, and are not permitted to lead the service or to read from the Torah at a public worship service where men are in attendance, no *bat mitsvah* celebration has developed.

In the nineteenth century, Reform Judaism in Germany instituted the ceremony of *bat mitsvah* as a group ceremony for boys and girls, and later for girls alone, at the Jewish festival of Shavu'ot. Shavu'ot is a festival of the wheat harvest, and the festival of Shavu'ot is a festival of the wheat harvest, and the festival of Shavu'ot is a festival of the wheat harvest. It was chosen because it celebrates the Jewish people's commitment to the Torah, and was seen, therefore, as an appropriate time for young people to affirm their commitment to Judaism. The age of confirmation was set at sixteen or seventeen, because at that age the confirmands are better able to understand the implications of the commitments they are affirming. In the 1950s and 1960s, as *bar* and *bat mitsvah* were reintroduced as standard practices in Reform congregations (in addition to confirmation), many Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations added confirmation to their life cycle ceremonies.

MARRIAGE: QIDDUSHIN AND NISU'IN

In Judaic tradition, marriage is the ideal human relationship, ordained by God in the creation narrative: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a fitting helper for him. . . . Hence a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife so that they shall be one flesh'" (Gen. 2:18, 24). Marriage is a legal contractual relationship. Therefore, even though it is a sacred relationship, it can be dissolved through divorce.

In the Bible, the marriage ceremony is not described in any detail. In the Talmudic period, marriage took place in three stages: engagement (*erusin*), betrothal (called either *erusin* or *qiddushin*), and wedding (*nissuin*). Engagement (*erusin*) was a formal commitment to marry at which time a document called *ketubah* ("conditions") was drawn. It was a legally binding agreement which stipulated such things as the time and place of the wedding as well as the dowry and maintenance. Today engagement has become largely a social occasion at which the bride and groom are announced. Originally the act of betrothal and wedding were separated by at least a year. The bride and groom were joined into a single marriage ceremony and are thus enacted at the same time. In the Talmudic period, the wedding ceremony was a formal ceremony, and the bride and groom were joined into a single marriage ceremony immediately prior to the formal wedding ceremony, the groom in this ceremony called *bedeken*. The officiant then says, "Our sister, may you grow into myriads" (Gen. 24:60), and concludes with the words, "May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel," and recites the Priestly Benediction. The bride and the groom are then led to the wedding canopy (*huppah*) by their parents, where words of blessing are recited by the officiant. Next, two betrothal blessings are recited over wine:

was established to avoid embarrassing the poor at the time of death. In addition, funerals were considered inappropriate times to display one's wealth. A man is usually buried with his prayer shawl (*tallit*). Reform Jews often omit the ritual washing, and they dress the deceased in street clothes. After the body has been properly prepared and dressed, it is placed in a plain wooden coffin in preparation for burial in the ground. The use of wooden caskets and burial in the ground is in fulfillment of the biblical verse, "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (*Gen.* 3:19). Jewish tradition prohibits both embalming (except when secular law or circumstantial exigencies so demand) and cremation. Reform Judaism permits both cremation and the embalming of the deceased in a mausoleum, but burial remains normative Jewish practice.

Jewish tradition recommends that burial take place as soon as possible, preferably on the day of death. Today, this is often not possible, because members of the family may not live in close proximity to one another; therefore, burial may be delayed out of respect for the dead, to permit a mourner who lives at a distance to attend. Timely burial is still the rule, however.

Part of the mourning ritual is the rending of a garment (*garb'ah*). In some instances, the rending of a garment is replaced by the symbolic rending of a shawl or of a special black ribbon, which is attached to the coffin cloth for this purpose.

The rending is done standing, and is preceded by the blessing, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, Judge of Truth."

Today, funerals often take place in special funeral chapels or at graveside. In some communities, funerals are also held in synagogues. The liturgy for a funeral usually consists of the recitation of several psalms, a eulogy, and the memorial prayer: El Male' Rahamin ("God full of compassion").

O God full of compassion, you who dwell on high! Grant perfect rest beneath the sheltering wings of Your presence, among the holy and pure who share the brightness of the heavens, unto the soul of . . . [the deceased] who has enjoyed eternity and in whose memory charity is offered. May his/her repose be in the garden of Eden. May the Lord of Mercy bring him/her under the cover of his wings forever and may his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. May the Lord be his/her possession and may he/she rest in peace. Amen.

After the funeral, the deceased is transported to the cemetery. The casket is borne to the grave by the pallbearers, who make seven stops along the way while Psalm 91 is recited. The coffin is then placed in the grave and covered with earth. Most Reform rabbis omit the practice of stopping seven times during the procession to the grave and do not have the casket lowered and covered with earth until after the interment service is completed. The interment service consists of the recitation of Psalm 130, which is an acknowledgment of God's justice; a memorial prayer; and Qaddish, which is a declaration of God's greatness and the deceased's need for divine forgiveness. A tradition based on a story about a condemned man's soul rescued from the punishment of Gehenna by 'Aqiva ben Yosef's recitation of Qaddish has assigned an unnecessary role to the recitation of Qaddish. After the service has concluded, the people in attendance form two lines through which the mourners pass. Those present comfort the mourners as they pass, saying, "May God comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

The completion of the funeral marks the end of the first mourning period, *aninut*, and the beginning of the second period, *shiva*. The mourner returns to his or her home (usually to the home of the deceased), the mourners kindle a candle, which is lit in honor of the whole seven-day period. The flame is a symbol of the soul of the deceased, and the candle is the lamp of the Lord. (*Proverbs* 20:27) Then the mourners are served a meal of consolation (*se'udat ha-neizah*), which is prepared by friends and relatives; it traditionally includes round foods such as eggs, a symbol of life and hope.

During *shiv'ah* the mourners remain at home and do not attend to business or engage in social activities. Traditionally, they sit on special low benches, refrain from wearing leather shoes, and do not wear hair, tanning or anointing themselves for pleasure (though they may do so for hygiene). The practice of abstaining from sexual intercourse by Reform Jews.) A *minyan* (quorum of ten) gathers at the house of mourning for twice-daily services—morning and evening. During *shiv'ah*, friends and relatives have an obligation to visit the mourners to comfort them. When *shiv'ah* ends, the mourners return to work but continue to avoid social gatherings until the thirtieth day after burial. When one is mourning the death of a parent, the restrictions are observed for one year.

At the anniversary of a person's death, is observed by the mourners' lighting a memorial light, which is kept lit in the deceased's memory, and by giving charity in the deceased's memory; and by attending services to recite Qaddish. The erecting of a tombstone is an ancient custom. Usually the mourners wait one year following the death before having the monument put in place at the gravesite. A common practice is for the mourners to dedicate the tombstone in a brief ceremony, popularly called an "Unveiling," because as part of the ritual a cloth covering the tombstone is removed by the family.

On Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), on the last day of Pesah (Passover), on Tu B'Shvat (the New Year of the Trees), and on the last day of Sukkot (Tabernacles)—a memorial service, popularly called a *Yom Kippur service*, is held in the service. A memorial light is lit at home, and the deceased is remembered as pur and on the last day of Passover.)

CONVERSION

Conversion may be considered a rite of passage since through the process a person changes his or her religious identity from non-Jew to Jew. The history of proselytism in Judaism is complex and is beyond the scope of this study. For a more detailed study, see Bamberger's classic study, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (Chicago, 1989). Candidates for conversion must come of their own free will without ulterior motive. Therefore, a person who comes for the purpose of marriage is automatically disqualified. However, this stricture is observed only by the Orthodox. Once the sincerity of the prospective convert is ascertained, there is a period of instruction during which the candidate is taught the basic principles and practices of Judaism. Once the candidate has completed this education and accepts the obligation to observe *mitzvot* (commandments), he or she is considered a *ger* (a rabbinical court consisting of three rabbis or other observant Jews). Proselytes and converts are then immersed in a *mikvah* (ritual bath) and males are circumcised by

a *nishet*. If the male had been previously circumcised by a doctor, as a child, then only a symbolic circumcision (*hatafat dam bery*) is required. The Reform movement does not require immersion or circumcision although an increasing number of Reform rabbis require the traditional rites. In addition to the appearance before the rabbinical court, immersion, and circumcision, a public ceremony of welcome has been introduced into many Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist congregations. [For further discussion of the development of Jewish law and tradition concerning these rites, see Conservative Judaism; Orthodox Judaism; Reconstructionist Judaism; and Reform Judaism.]

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DOMESTIC
OBSERVANCES

SHLOMO DESHEN

Besides the synagogue, the home has traditionally been a main focus of religiosity both for the Jewish family as a unit and especially for women. Women were traditionally excluded from the duty of Torah study, which for men was, and to some extent remains, a major focus of spirituality. Moreover, women were not obligated to observe many of the religious practices that bound men. In particular, their place in child-rearing and education was paramount. Consequently, domestic rituals, and especially those governed by women, are a central part of Jewish life. For all Jews, certain ritual customs (*minhagim*) and rabbinic laws (*halakhot*) require a domestic setting. These rituals may be divided into those that are held on specific occasions of the Jewish calendar and those that are a constant presence in daily life.

PERIODIC DOMESTIC OBSERVANCES

The annual festival cycle begins in the spring with Passover, which focuses on two major domestic activities: the thorough cleaning of the home to remove leavened food, and then the Seder, the Passover eve feast, which has traditionally been led by the father and requires the participation of the children. Shavu'ot, in early summer, is accompanied by only minor domestic customs, such as decorating the home with flowers and partaking of dairy foods. The period of mourning for the destroyed Temple and the ensuing fasts of the Ninth of Av and the Fast of Esther, and the festivals of Tu B'Shvat, Purim, and Hanukkah, are observed in the home. Tu B'Shvat, in general, are restricted. The fall holy days start with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which are primarily synagogue-centered occasions but which include secondary domestic activities. On Rosh ha-Shanah, foods symbolizing good fortune are served at the family meal, and on Yom Kippur, family elders bless the young. During the week-long Sukkot festival the domestic focus is again pronounced. Temporary booths or huts (*sukkot*) are erected near or adjacent to each family home. Meals are eaten there, and some males follow the rabbinic tradition of sleeping in the booths at night. The festival of Simchat Torah, generally a joyous occasion, is usually kindled in the home, and special holiday foods are prepared. Hanukkah also has major