YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)

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**Laws of Conversion and Circumcision**

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**The Night Before the *Brit*, the *Kvatter*, *Kisei shel Eliyahu*, and *Sandak***

**Introduction**

In the [previous shiur](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shalom-zakhar), we began discussing the various preparations for a child’s circumcision.

We learned that on the Shabbat before the *brit mila*, it is customary in Ashkenazic communities to hold a small meal on Friday night, known as the “*Shalom Zakhar*.” Although the Talmud (*Bava Kama* 80a) alludes to a celebration related to the *brit* of a son (*shavu’a ha-ben*), the custom of gathering on Friday night before the circumcision first appears in the early 14th century (*Orchot Chaim*) and is later mentioned by the Rema (YD 265:12).

Some (*Terumat Ha-Deshen*, 269, *Yam shel Shlomo*, *Bava Kama* 37) explain that this gathering is an opportunity to publicize the miracle of birth. The *Taz* (YD 265:13, based on the *Derisha*) explains that the community gathers to comfort the child, who is "mourning" the forgotten Torah (see *Nidda* 30b). In addition, the *Taz* relates this gathering to a *Midrash* (*Midrash Rabba*, *Parashat Emor* 27:2) that explains that just as an animal can only be offered as a *korban* after it has experienced a Shabbat (i.e., an animal must be at least a week old before it can be sacrificed), a child must similarly experience a Shabbat before he is circumcised. The *Taz* suggests that this mini-celebration marks the Shabbat that the young child experiences before his circumcision.

This week, we will discuss the night before the *brit*, and then begin to study the *brit mila* ceremony and its various components.

**The Night Before the *Brit Mila*: *Vach Nacht* and *Brit Yitzchak***

The Zohar (*Lekh Lekha*) relates how a group of people stayed up the entire night before a circumcision studying Torah:

At night, the landlord gathered all his friends together. They studied Torah all that night, and nobody slept. He said to them, "I ask of you all that each person give a new explanation about the words of the Torah.”

This passage is apparently one of the sources for the ancient custom in numerous communities to learn Torah the night before a *brit mila*.

A number of reasons are given for this practice. R. Moshe ben Avraham of Przemyśl (1550 – 1606, Poland) writes in his Mateh Moshe (7:4):

The *satan* intends to harm the child and to prevent him from [fulfilling] the *mitzva* of *mila*, because it is difficult for him that the Jewish People fulfill the *mitzva* in the merit of which they are saved from Gehinnom. Support for this may be found in the verse (*Bereishit* 17:9), “*ve-ata et briti tishmor*,” “and you should keep my covenant” – at the time of the circumcision he [the child] requires protection (*shmira*).

This is also the source of the custom to gather children in the house of the infant to recite the *Keri’at Shema*. The recitation of the *Shema* by young, innocent children surely keeps the child from any harm (*Mat’amim*, *Yoledet* 6).

In many communities, it is customary to hold an evening of Torah study the night before the circumcision. In Sephardic communities, this is known as the "*Brit Yitzchak*," while in Ashkenazic communities, it is known as the "*Vach Nacht*" (watchnight). The Torah study is not only meant to protect the child the night before and during the circumcision; it also sets the context and tone for the child’s entry into the covenant, beginning a life of Torah and *mitzvot*.

**The *Kvatter***

Before the *brit mila*, the child is first brought to and into the sanctuary (or place where the *birt mila* will occur). The Maharm Mi-Rotenberg (cited by the Maharil, *Hilkhot Mila* 22) relates that a woman would take the child from the mother until the entrance of the *beit* *kenesset*; the child would then be taken into the *beit kenesset* to be circumcised. The Leket Yosher (15th century, p. 52) records that the mother gives the child to the "*kvatter*," who brings the child to the *brit mila*.

The *Sefer Otzar Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim* offers different interpretations of the word "*kvatter*." Some say that since the *kvatter* serves as an agent of the father, he is a "*kefatter*" – like the father. Others say that the word *kvatter* originates from the word "*koter*" – i.e., the one who offers the incense offering (see below). The word "*koter*" over time was pronounced as "*kvatter*."

It is customary to offer this honor to a married couple. Some honor a childless couple, as participating in the *brit mila* is a "*segula*" for fertility. This may potentially cause discomfort to a childless couple, however, and therefore the utmost sensitivity should be employed. The child is taken and placed on the *Kisei shel Eliyahu*. The child is then taken from the chair and placed on the *sandak's* lap.

**The *Sandak***

The Rema (YD 265:1) writes that "it is customary to make a special effort to perform this *mitzva*, to be the *sandak*, to house the child [while] circumcising him." This practice first appears in the Hagahot Maimoniot (*Hilkhot Mila* 3), who writes:

[The practice of] coveting and desiring to hold the child on the knees and to be the “*ba'al ha-brit*” is supported by the Midrash Shochar Tov on the verse "all my bones shall say [God who is like You]" (*Tehillim* 35:10):  “I praise you will all my limbs, and perform *mitzvot* with each of them…. With my knees, I am a *sandak* for children during their circumcision."

The *sandak* holds the child on his knees while the *mohel* performs the circumcision.

It appears that the *sandak* is not simply the surface upon which the circumcision is performed. Indeed, the Rema (ibid.) insists that the *sandak* is even more important than the *mohel* (“*yafeh ko'ach ha-sandak mi-ko'ach ha-mohel*"), and he therefore has priority for receiving an *aliya la-Torah*.

What is the significance of the *sandak*, and is his role really more important than the *mohel*? The Rema (ibid.) cites the Maharil (*Hilkhot Mila*), who explains that the *sandak's* *mitzva* is greater than the *mitzva* of the *mohel*, as the *sandak's* knees, upon the child is circumcised, are like the *mizbeach*. He equates the *sandak* to the *kohen* who offers the *ketoret* in the *beit ha-mikdash*. The Noda Be-Yehuda (YD 86) notes that this comparison to the incense offering is derived from a *midrash* (*Yalkut Shimoni, Lekh Lekha*) that relates that when Avraham circumcised his household, as the sun shone on the piles of foreskins, "their aroma went up before God like the incense offering and the *olah*, which is completely consumed."

R. Yitzchak Isaac Chaver (1789-1852), in his Binyan Olam (YD 53), insists that the *mohel's* job is clearly the more important; the Rema means that the *sandak* should receive the *aliya la-Torah* in order to emphasize that he too fills an important function.

Other *Acharonim*, however, disagree. The Chatam Sofer (OC 159), for example, suggests that while the *mohel* circumcises the child, the *sandak* performs two tasks: he assists in the circumcision and functions as the altar upon which the ceremony is performed.

Who should be appointed to serve as a *sandak*?

Some (See Leket Yosher, p. 52; see also Divrei Malkhiel 4:86) suggest that the father of the child should be the *sandak*. This is especially appropriate because the child's father is commanded to perform the *brit mila*. Therefore, although he will not actually circumcise the child, he should "assist" in the circumcision through serving as the *sandak*. Others (Ohr Zaru'a, *Hilkhot Mila* 97) suggest that a "*Yehudi tov*" (a good Jew), or even a *tzadik* (Rema ibid., Levush 264) should serve as the *sandak*. Some write that it is customary to honor the child's paternal grandfather to serve as the *sandak* for the first son, and the maternal grandfather to serve as the *sandak* for the second son. When possible, some even suggest that a great grandfather should be honored, in accordance with the popular saying, "one who serves as a *sandak* for his great-grandson will not see the fires of *gehinom*" (Leket Yosher, ibid.).

May a woman serve as a *sandak*(it)?

R. Shimon ben Tzadok, in his Tashbetz Ha-Katan (397), cites a responsum from his teacher, the Maharam Mi-Rotenberg. The Maharam (Germany, 13th century) recounts that it was customary during a circumcision in most places for women to sit among the men in the *beit he-kenesset* and for the *brit* to be performed while a woman was holding the child. The Maharam relates how his strong protests (“*tza'akti yamim rabim*”) went unheard.

The Maharam objected to this practice for two reasons. First, he believed that it was improper (“*lav orcha*”) for an adorned women to mingle among men before God. Second, it is improper for the *mohel* to circumcise the child while in the women's arms.

The Maharil (*Hilkhot Mila* 22) also cites the Maharam Mi-Rotenburg and describes the beginning of the ceremony:

The woman, who is the *ba'alat ha-brit*, [who] takes the child from the mother to take him to the *beit ha-kenesset* to be circumcised, should take him to the entrance of the *beit ha-kenesset*, and should not enter in order to be the *sandak* to have the child circumcised on her knees, as it is immodest for a women to walk among men.

The Maharil appears to relate only to the first reason, i.e., the women's presence in the *beit ha-kenesset* during the ceremony.

The Rema (ibid.) cites this stringency:

A woman should not serve as a *sandak* when it is possible to be given to a man, because of immodesty (*peritzut*). However, she assists her husband and brings the child to the *beit ha-kenesset*, and then the man takes the child from her and serves as the *sandak*.

While the Rema cites the reason of "immodesty," he does not specify which aspect of the women's participation in the circumstance is inappropriate.

Others suggest more fundamental reasons to preclude a woman from serving as the *sandak*, based on the various explanations of the "*sandak*" offered above. For example, R. Malkiel Tannenbaum, in his Divrei Malkiel (4:86), writes that since, according the Rema, a woman should not perform a *brit mila* (as we discussed elsewhere), she should also not participate in the circumcision ceremony by serving as the *sandak*. Similarly, R. Yosef Chaim of Bagdad (Rav Pe'alim 4:11) writes that since the *sandak* is viewed as bringing the incense offering, a woman should not perform these tasks in the *beit ha-kenesset*.

Although is many communities women enter the *beit ha-kenesset* in order to observe the *brit mila*, it appears that a women should not serve as a *sandak*, in deference to the Rema, for reasons of modesty, and in order not to cause discomfort to the *mohel*.

May a person serve as a *sandak* numerous times?

The Maharil, based upon the idea that the *sandak* functions as an altar, cites Rabbeinu Peretz, who asserts that the same person should not serve as the *sandak* for different siblings. This stringency is based on a Talmudic passage (*Yoma* 26a; see also *Eiruvin* 63a) that teaches that once a *kohen* would offer the incense, he would never offer the incense again, in order that different *kohanim* should merit the "*segula*" of becoming wealthy, a result of offering the incense. This is cited by the Rema (ibid.).

A number of *Acharonim* take issue with this ruling. R. Yechezkel Landau, in his Noda Be-Yehuda (ibid.) reluctantly addresses this issue, adding, "I am uncomfortable responding to a question relating to a topic that has not roots in the Talmud." He concludes that this custom has no firm basis and is certainly not the established custom. He relates that in all of Poland and its surroundings (“*kol medinot Polin*”), this custom is not observed, and in many places the rabbi always serves as the *sandak*.

The Vilna Gaon also disagrees, and argues that according this this rationale, a person may not serve as *sandak* more than once in his lifetime, and that is certainly unheard of. He does suggest, however, that this custom is based on the "Will of R. Yehuda Ha-Chasid" (40), who writes that serving as a *sandak* for two brothers may invoke the "*ayin ha-ra*." The Arukh Ha-Shulchan (YD 265:34) argues that this custom is based on mystical reasons, and it is therefore inappropriate (“*eino mei-hara’ui*”) to violate the ruling of the Rema.

As noted above, it is customary to rabbis to be honored with serving as the *sandak* multiple times. It appears that most *Acharonim* are lenient regarding serving as a *sandak* for more than one sibling.

***Kisei shel Eliyahu***

The Zohar (*Lekh Lekha*) relates that Eliyahu the prophet participates in each and every *brit mila*:

R. Abba continued: When a man brings his son forth to elevate and initiate him to the covenant, the Holy One, blessed be He, calls upon His retinue, the angels of Heaven, and declares, “See what a creature I have made in the world.” At that time, Eliyahu is invited, flies over the entire world in four crossings, and then appears there.

Therefore, we have learned that a man should prepare a chair in honor of Eliyahu, and should say, "This is the chair of Eliyahu." If he does not announce this, Eliyahu will not appear in that place nor ascend and testify about the circumcision before the Holy One, blessed be He.

The Zohar further explains why Eliyahu is meant to participate in each and every *brit mila*:

Come and behold: It is written first, "What are you doing here, Eliyahu?" (I *Melakhim* 19:13), and "I have been very jealous for *Hashem*...because they have forsaken Your covenant..." (Ibid. 14). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Eliyahu, "As you live, you shall be present in every place that My sons shall imprint this holy sign on their flesh. And the mouth that testified that Yisrael had forsaken the covenant shall now testify that Yisrael observes it!" Thus, we have learned why Eliyahu was punished by the Holy One, blessed be He – because he accused His sons by saying that the children of Yisrael "have forsaken your covenant."

God reprimands Eliyahu for falsely accusing the Jewish People of forsaking the covenant, and therefore decrees that he must participate in and testify each time the Jewish People affirm the *brit*. It is therefore customary to for the *mohel* to designate a special chair for Eliyahu, known as the "*malakh ha-brit*" (the angel of the *brit*), at the *brit mila*. The Rema (YD 265:11) records this practice as well.

The child is then taken from the *Kisei shel Eliyahu* and placed upon the *sandak's* knees, before the circumcision begins.

Next week, we will discuss the blessings recited at the *brit mila*.