

THE EREZ SERIES

RABBI ADIN  
EVEN-ISRAEL  
STEINSALTZ

A CONCISE GUIDE TO  
**HALAKHA**

AN OVERVIEW OF JEWISH LAW

*A Concise Guide to Halakha*

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## The Erez Series

Dedicated in loving memory of

*Joseph "Erez" Tenenbaum*

Whose love of learning, endless curiosity and zest for life  
Survived the Destruction  
And found full expression in his ultimate return to Zion.

By his son Zisman Tuvia



סדרת ארז

מוקדש לעלוי נשמת

יוסף צבי בן טוביה זיסמן טננבואם

(המכונה ארז)

"אוד מוצל מאש"

שלא נכבה בו אהבת לימוד, סקרנות אין-סופית, ושמחת חיים

ע"י בנו זיסמן טוביה



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## Foreword

This volume is an up-to-date survey of the commandments, prohibitions, and customs practiced by Jews today. Halakhic literature in general, beyond the commandments stated in the Torah itself, begins with the Mishna, which is in essence a book of *halakha*. After the Mishna, many halakhic rulings appear in the Talmud, as well as in the writings of the Sages of subsequent generations, the *geonim*. Thereafter, numerous halakhic books were written in a variety of styles; throughout the generations, the material was updated from time to time. This includes the *Halakhot Gedolot*, the Rif, and the Rambam, and afterward the *Beit Yosef* and the *Shulḥan Arukh*. Typically, the later books, each in its particular style, were based on the material of the earlier generations, and were updated by the inclusion of all the discussions and rulings of the subsequent generations.

This volume is a brief, modern presentation of practical *halakha*. Although it does not presume to be a book of authoritative halakhic rulings, it nevertheless offers a survey of *halakha* as it is practiced today. Accordingly, it was written not as a commentary on other books but as an independent work, written in a modern style, in a language we hope will be clear and straightforward for every reader. Since we have striven to make the book current, we have dealt as much as possible with contemporary problems, while also attempting to include at least a summary of the various customs practiced by the different ethnic communities inside and outside of contemporary Israel.

Due to the great scope of Jewish law, one small volume could not possibly cover all the important issues, and certainly it could not touch upon all the details and nuances that pertain to the subjects at hand. For this reason, the book is not a substitute either for halakhic works that are defined as such or for those specific problems and questions that should be presented to scholars and rabbis with whom one can speak in person.

The book is divided into several sections:

One section, entitled “Life Cycle,” focuses on the major milestones of life, from pregnancy and birth to illness and death. The second section deals with the Jewish calendar year, with its holidays, festivals, fast days, and other special days. Another section discusses the *halakhot* of Shabbat and major festivals. The fourth section analyzes the relationship between man and his fellow man, both with regard to those actions that one should pursue in this regard and those that must be avoided. A further section presents the daily

routine of a Jew, from arising in the morning to retiring at night. In addition, there is a section on miscellaneous issues that a Jewish person might encounter, whether in daily life or in special circumstances.

We have aimed to keep the translation as true to the original Hebrew as possible. However, as the Hebrew edition was composed for an Israeli audience, it often was missing *halakhot* that are unique to the Diaspora, such as those relating to the additional day of the festival celebrated outside of Israel. We have therefore added material to address these topics and render this survey relevant also to Jews living in the Diaspora.

We have included the original Hebrew, along with a translation and a transliteration for passages which are ritually recited on various occasions. For texts that one should recite in the language he knows best, transliteration is not included.

A detailed table of contents appears at the beginning of the book, which lists all the topics contained within.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

## Introducing the Erez Concise Guides

A Jewish home, at any time or place, cannot be maintained based on the mere identity of its residents as Jews. Whether they conceive of themselves as religious, traditional, or secular, people need to have access to written expression of their tradition through which they can come to know, understand, and “enter” their tradition.

“To enter the tradition” can mean something different for each person. Some are simply curious, others have a particular interest, and there are undoubtedly many Jews who just do not want the worlds of the Jewish spirit to be closed to them. People therefore require bridges and gates to gain access. There is no obligation to use these, but their existence makes it possible for anyone – when that person so desires – to enter, or even to glance within; the way is clear and he or she can do so.

We have thus produced the Erez series which provides different gates by which one can enter the Jewish tradition. Just as it is told about Abraham’s tent that it was open from all four directions in order to welcome guests from everywhere, these books allow anyone, whenever he or she feels like it or finds something interesting, to enter into the tradition.

There are thousands of books that cover, in various ways and at different levels, the materials presented here. However, most of them require prior knowledge and no small amount of effort to be understood. In these volumes, we have striven to give anyone who seeks it a paved road into the riches of the Jewish world. More than merely a gate, we hope that these books can be said to offer their readers a “ride” into the tradition. Each person can get off whenever he or she desires and continue traveling when their interest is reawakened.

These volumes contain some of the fundamentals of Judaism. In each of them there are elements that can be considered hors d’oeuvres that can be snacked upon and others that are more comparable to entrees, that require more time for digestion. In either case, the invitation offered by *A Concise Guide to the Sages* in Proverbs (9:5) is relevant: “Come, partake of my bread, and drink of the wine that I have mixed.” The books were deliberately designed to be accessible to everyone, whether he or she is highly educated or someone whose source of intellectual stimulation consists in occasionally reading the newspaper. Anyone can enjoy something, whether by means of an occasional taste, or by sitting down to a hearty meal. The way is open and anyone can find the gate appropriate for him or her, without effort.

We have aimed to keep the translation as true to the original Hebrew and Aramaic as possible. As some of these texts are not easy to understand, we have added clarifying comments in square brackets where appropriate. Further explication is appended in notes at the end of certain passages. When we have felt it appropriate to use a transliteration, the term transliterated is first explained and then followed by the transliteration in square brackets. At the end of each book we have provided a glossary of Hebrew terms mentioned in the series. Some of the terms found there may not be found in this book, as we have used the same glossary for all the volumes of the Erez series. *The Reference Guide to the Talmud* has a more extensive glossary as is necessary for that work.

Given the antiquity of the texts collected here, there are many occasions where it was impossible to avoid gendered usage and we have followed the texts themselves in using the male gender as the default.

Each of the volumes in this series stands alone, with only occasional citations connecting them. The first volume, *A Concise Guide to the Torah*, contains the translation of the Torah taken from the *Steinsaltz Humash*; we have abridged the commentary that can be found there. One can take this volume to the synagogue but also peruse it in the comforts of one's home.

The second volume, *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, is an anthology of rabbinic literature, organized by topics. One part includes rabbinic thinking associated with the Torah, while other topics are also addressed: the cycle of the Jewish year, the cycle of life in rabbinic eyes, as well as other topics where a person can find something that fits his or her needs.

The third volume, *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, addresses spiritual matters. It contains an anthology of non-halakhic literature from the Jewish spiritual tradition: Kabbala, Jewish philosophy, the Musar tradition, and hasidic writings. Here too, the texts are presented in a manner that is accessible to all, in clear English. This volume addresses a broad array of topics: Besides comments and explanations on the Torah, there are sections devoted to the cycle of the Jewish year, the life cycle, and fundamental questions of human life such as parenthood, marriage, and death. There are many other topics addressed in this volume and one can open it at random and find wisdom that touches the soul.

The fourth volume, *A Concise Guide to Halakha*, is a survey of practical *halakha*. It does not delve into the sources of *halakha* and provide an opportunity for intensive study but serves rather as a guidebook to what the *halakha* instructs one to do in various situations. In this way the book offers

a summary of the *halakhot* of Shabbat and the holidays, of life cycle events, and of those mitzvot that any Jew is likely to encounter. If one wishes to act in accordance with the *halakha*, he or she will know what to do with the help of this volume. It is written in clear English with a minimum of technical language so that it is accessible to anyone, man, woman, or child. And if he or she decides to act accordingly, may he or she be blessed.

The fifth volume, *Reference Guide to the Talmud*, is a reprint of the work that was issued as a companion to the *Koren Talmud Bavli*. It is an indispensable resource for students of all levels. This fully revised, English-language edition of the *Reference Guide* clearly and concisely explains the Talmud's fundamental structure, concepts, terminology, assumptions, and inner logic; it provides essential historical and biographical information; it includes appendixes, a key to abbreviations, and a comprehensive index.

For improved usability, this completely updated volume has a number of new features: topical organization instead of by Hebrew alphabet, re-edited and revised text to coordinate with the language used in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, and an index of Hebrew terms to enable one seeking a Hebrew term to locate the relevant entry.

These books are certainly not the entire Torah, but they are beneficial for any Jew to have in his or her home. If one finds something interesting, or is curious about something, these books offer a resource to investigate that topic. Even if one opens one of these volumes by chance, he or she will gain from reading them, both intellectually and spiritually. In short, these are books that it is convenient to have in one's home.

Our thanks are extended to all the people who participated in the project of writing these books, editing them, and finding the sources therein. We likewise would like to thank the publisher, and those first readers who offered helpful criticism and advice, and finally to those good people whose donations made it possible to create these books.

The Editors



# Life Cycle





# Birth of a Son

## First month

The Torah, which literally means “instruction” or “guidance,” is sometimes referred to as a “Torah of life,” as it leads us through every step of our lives. This is especially true of the momentous occasions in life: birth, circumcision, bar and bat mitzva, weddings, etc.

This chapter, the first in the “Life Cycle” section, deals with the first month of a newborn son. It introduces the laws and customs that apply to the time of birth, continues with the practice of the days before circumcision, moves on to the circumcision itself, and concludes with the ceremony of the redemption of the firstborn [*pidyon haben*].

### Birth

Birth is a miraculous event that unfolds before our very eyes. When all goes well, the parents of the newborn are often filled with a fervent desire to thank God for the gift of life and parenthood which He has bestowed upon them.

### Prayers and Blessings

During the birthing process, it is commendable, when possible, to read from the book of Psalms, praying for the welfare of the mother and the baby. There are several psalms from which to choose that are especially appropriate for childbirth: 1, 2, 3, 4, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 33, 47, 72, 86, 90, 91, 92, 93, 104, and from 112 until the end of Psalms.

Following the birth of a son, the parents give thanks to God and recite the blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
הַטוֹב וְהַמְטִיב. *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh  
ha'olam, hatov vehametiv.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who is good and imparts good.”

After the mother has recovered from the birth, it is customary for her to recite the blessing of “...who bestows good” [*HaGomel*], like any other individual who has safely emerged from a position of danger. The *HaGomel* blessing must be recited in the presence of a *minyan*. If she gave birth to a son, it is common practice for the mother to recite the blessing at the

circumcision [*brit*] ceremony, after the circumcision itself, as there is usually a *minyan* present.

The blessing is as follows:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
הַגּוֹמֵל לְחַיִּיבִים טוֹבוֹת, שְׂגַמְלָנִי כָּל טוֹב.  
*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh  
ha'olam, hagomel lahayavim tovt, she-  
gemalari kol tov.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who bestows good upon the culpable, who has bestowed all goodness upon me.”

Ashkenazim respond:

אָמֵן, מִי שְׂגַמְלָךְ כָּל טוֹב, הוּא יִגְמְלָךְ כָּל  
טוֹב סְלָה.  
*Amen. Mi shegemalakh kol tov, Hu yig-  
malekh kol tov, sela.*

“Amen. May He who bestowed all goodness upon you always bestow all goodness upon you, Selah.”

Sephardim respond:


אָמֵן, הָאֵל שְׂגַמְלָךְ כָּל טוֹב, הוּא יִגְמְלָךְ  
כָּל טוֹב סְלָה.  
*Ha'El shegemalakh kol tov, Hu yig-  
malekh kol tov, sela.*

“Amen. May the God who bestowed all goodness upon you always bestow all goodness upon you, Selah.”

The husband may recite the blessing on behalf of his wife. In such a case, he should do so in his wife's presence, and the blessing is recited in the second person:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
הַגּוֹמֵל לְחַיִּיבִים טוֹבוֹת, שְׂגַמְלָךְ כָּל טוֹב.  
*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh  
ha'olam, hagomel lahayavim tovt, she-  
gemalakh kol tov.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who bestows good upon the culpable, who bestowed all goodness upon you,” and his wife responds: “Amen.”

 **Further reading:** For the *halakhot* of birth on Shabbat, see the chapter that deals with the laws of medical treatment on Shabbat, p. 439.

## Circumcision

The commandment of circumcision was given to Abraham, the first Jew, as it states: “God said to Abraham: And you, you shall observe My covenant, you, and your descendants after you throughout their generations. . . . You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a mark of a covenant between Me and you” (Genesis 17:9–11).

Circumcision is also the first commandment that is experienced by every Jewish male after birth. This commandment, more than any other, symbolizes the eternal bond between the Jewish male and his Creator; it is carved into his flesh and accompanies him everywhere, in all circumstances.

 **Further reading:** For more on circumcision and its meaning, see *A Concise Guide to the Torah*, pp. 34, 142, 277; *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, p. 144; *A Concise Guide to Mahshava*, p. 9.

### Preparations for the Circumcision

It is advisable to contact a certified circumciser, or *mohel*, immediately after the birth, to arrange for the circumcision in a place of the parents’ choosing. (A *mohel* is the most skilled person at performing circumcisions, even more than doctors, as this is the *mohel’s* specific area of expertise.) In Israel, the website of the Chief Rabbinate has a list of certified *mohalim* who are licensed by the Department of Health. It is also advisable to consult with friends who have used the services of a *mohel* for their sons’ circumcision. The *mohel* will keep an eye on the baby’s welfare and check to see if he is fit for undergoing circumcision. Sometimes he will wish to examine the boy the day before the circumcision.

There are three minor events that may be held between childbirth and circumcision, in accordance with the customs of the various communities: welcoming the newborn male child [*Shalom Zakhar*], the recitation of *Shema*, and the Covenant of Isaac [*Brit Yitzhak*].

*Shalom Zakhar*: It is customary, mainly in Ashkenazic communities, to host a *Shalom Zakhar*, a gathering of friends and family on the first Shabbat evening following the birth. Members of the family, along with friends and neighbors, come together in the newborn’s home (or in a nearby synagogue) after the Friday night meal and sit around the table for a short while. Light refreshments are served and the guests bless the parents that they shall merit to raise the child to partake of “Torah knowledge, the wedding canopy, and good deeds.” It is customary to serve, among other items, cooked chickpeas [commonly called *arbes*] at this gathering. The event can be held even if the infant has not yet been released from the hospital, or when he and his mother are recovering.

Recitation of *Shema*: On the night preceding the circumcision, it is customary to invite children to come to the home, stand together around the infant's crib, and recite the verses of *Shema*, the text of the priestly blessing, and the verse: "May the angel who delivers me..." (Genesis 48:16). The purpose of this ceremony is to provide increased protection for the infant during the night before his circumcision. The full verses that are recited are as follows:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, אֲדֹנָי אֶחָד: *Shema Yisrael: Adonai Eloheinu, Adonei ehad.*

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ  
וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים  
הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם, עַל לִבְבְּךָ:  
וּשְׁנַנְתָּם לְבִנְיָךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם, בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ  
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלַחְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:  
וְקִשְׁרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ, וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפוֹת בֵּין  
עֵינֶיךָ: וְכִתַּבְתָּם עַל מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:  
*Ve'ahavta et Adonai Elohekha bekhkol levavekha, uvkhol nafshekha, uvkhol me'odekha. Vehayu hadevarim ha'eleh asher anokhi metzavekha hayom al levavekha. Veshinantam levanekha, vedibarta bam beshivtekhā beveitekha uvlekhtekha vaderekh uvshokhbekha ukumekha. Ukshartam le'ot al yadekha vehayu letotafot bein einekha. Ukhtavtam al mezuzot beitekha uvi-sharekha.*

וַיְדַבֵּר אֲדֹנָי אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶת  
אֲהָרֹן וְאֶת בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר: כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם: יְבָרַךְ אֲדֹנָי וַיְשַׁמְרֶךָ:  
יָאֵר אֲדֹנָי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶךָ: יִשָּׂא אֲדֹנָי פָּנָיו  
אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם: וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמֵי עַל  
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֲנִי אֲבָרַכֶם:  
*Vaydaber Adonai el Moshe lemor. Daber el Aharon ve'el banav lemor, ko tevarekhu et benei Yisrael, emor lahem: Yevarekhekha Adonai veyishmerekha; ya'er Adonai panav elekha vihuneka; yisa Adonai panav elekha veyasem lekha shalom.*

הַמְלֶאֶךְ הַגָּאֵל אֶתִּי מִכָּל רָע, וַיְבָרַךְ אֶת  
הַנְּעָרִים וַיִּקְרָא בָהֶם שְׁמֵי וַשֵּׁם אֲבֹתַי  
אֲבָרָהָם וַיְצַחֵק, וַיְדַגּוּ לָרֹב בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ:  
*Hamalakh hagoel oti mikol ra yevarekh et hane'arim, veyikareh vahem shemi veshem avotai Avraham veYitzhak, veyidgu larov bekerev ha'aretz.*

"Hear, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. These matters that I command you today shall

be upon your heart. You shall inculcate them in your children, and you shall speak of them while you are sitting in your house, and while you are walking on the way, and while you are lying down, and while you are rising. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for ornaments between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house, and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: So shall you bless the children of Israel, say to them: The Lord shall bless you, and keep you. The Lord shall shine His countenance to you, and be gracious to you. The Lord shall lift His countenance to you, and grant you peace. And they shall place My name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them” (Numbers 6:22–27).


“May the angel who delivers me from all evil, bless the lads and let my name and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, be called upon them and may they proliferate like fish in the midst of the earth” (Genesis 48:16).

*Brit Yitzhak*: Sephardic communities have a custom of gathering friends together on the night before the circumcision to recite selected passages from the book of *Zohar* (from *Parashat Lekh Lekha*). For those who follow this practice, it is recommended that the study session be conducted by at least ten males [*minyán*]. The order of the study session can be found in books that deal with circumcision and the preparations for it, or in special prayer books for this night.

The reason for this gathering is twofold: to enhance the honor of the mitzva of circumcision that will be performed the next day, and to provide extra protection for the baby. Even if no gathering can be arranged, it is customary for the father of the son to recite the relevant sections of the *Zohar* himself.

### Choosing the Name

Although a child’s name is entirely the choice of his parents, according to kabbalistic sources, a name is not merely a technical matter, but a “channel” through which a person receives his life source. Therefore, it is important for parents to select for their child a Hebrew name that has a positive significance, not one that expresses an undesirable message or the name of a negative historical character.

 **Further reading:** For more on the calling of a name and its meaning, see *A Concise Guide to the Sages*, p. 7.

### Date of the Circumcision

On which day is the circumcision performed?

The Torah specifies that the circumcision should be performed on the eighth day following the birth of the baby. The day of birth itself is included in the eight days, and therefore, the circumcision is ordinarily performed on the same day of the week as the birth. For example, if the baby was born on a Tuesday, his circumcision would take place on the following Tuesday.

In all matters of *halakha*, nighttime is considered part of the next day. Consequently, a baby born on the night between Tuesday and Wednesday is considered to have been born on Wednesday, and his circumcision will be performed on the Wednesday of the following week.

If a baby is born during the twilight hours, that is, between sunset and the emergence of the stars, his date of circumcision is calculated the same as that of a baby born after dark. The reason is that there is halakhic uncertainty as to whether twilight is part the previous day or the following one, and in a case of doubt the circumcision may be performed a day late, but never earlier than the eighth day. Accordingly, a baby born during twilight on Wednesday, a time which may be considered either Wednesday or Thursday, will be circumcised on Thursday a week later.

A baby born on Shabbat will be circumcised at the regular time, i.e., on the following Shabbat. That is, the commandment of circumcision overrides the prohibition of Shabbat desecration.

### Unusual Cases

The circumcision of a baby born during twilight on Friday evening will be postponed until the Sunday of the following week. This is because circumcision supersedes Shabbat only when it is certain that Shabbat is actually the eighth day from birth. If there is any doubt, as there is in the case of a twilight birth, the sanctity of the Shabbat takes precedence and the circumcision is postponed to Sunday.

Even when the baby is born on Shabbat itself, if he was born by Caesarean section the circumcision is not held on the following Shabbat, but is postponed until Sunday. There are halakhic opinions that a baby conceived via artificial insemination is not circumcised on Shabbat either, even if he was delivered by regular birth on Shabbat.

In any case of uncertainty about the date of the circumcision, a rabbi should be consulted.

If the baby is unwell or is jaundiced, and circumcision might endanger his health, the circumcision is postponed until he recovers. Many *mohalim* have extensive experience and a broad understanding of this matter, and therefore it is recommended to consult the *mohel*, together with a doctor.

### At What Time?

A circumcision may be performed only in the daytime, between sunrise and sunset. Although the entire day is valid for the performance of a circumcision, it is preferred to try to hold it early in the morning, in accordance with the halakhic principle that “the vigilant perform mitzvot early,” that is, it is best to perform a mitzva as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, the *halakha* does take other factors into consideration. For example, if the early hours of the day are inconvenient for the invitees, and they would rather come after work, it is permitted and even advisable to postpone the time of the circumcision, in accordance with the principle that “in the multitude of people is the glory of a king” (Proverbs 14:28). This rule, which applies to other mitzvot as well, means that performing a mitzva in the presence of a large gathering serves to honor the King who has commanded us to perform that mitzva.

### The Functionaries at a Circumcision

These are the main roles in a circumcision ceremony:

*Mohel*: The *mohel* performs the actual circumcision, and is almost always in charge of running the ceremony as well.

*Sandak*: The *sandak* is the person who holds the baby on his knees while the circumcision is performed. This is an important role that is given to a close relative or a dignitary. It is customary to honor one of the grandparents, a respected member of the family, an important rabbi, or someone of similar status. According to custom, the same person should not serve as *sandak* twice in the same nuclear family. In other words, if a grandfather on the father’s side was granted the honor of being the *sandak* for the first child, he should not be given the same role again for the second child. Instead, it would be offered to, say, the maternal grandfather. However, some maintain that a great rabbi can be a *sandak* more than once for the same family.

*Kvatter*: In Ashkenazic communities, the couple who carries the baby from the mother to the father is called the *kvatter*. The mother hands the baby to

the wife, who hands him to her husband, who then passes the baby to the father.

There are other functions with which one can honor family and friends, although the *mohel* or the father of the baby can perform these tasks themselves: (1) Placing the baby on the “chair of Elijah” (see below). (2) Lifting the baby from the “chair of Elijah” and placing him on the lap of the *sandak*. (3) After the circumcision, holding the baby while standing during the recitation of the blessings and the naming of the baby. (4) Reciting the blessings and announcing the baby’s name. At times, the blessings and the name are recited by two different honorees.

It is customary that all the functionaries at a circumcision (apart from the couple serving as *kvatter*) should wear a ritual shawl [*tallit*]. Some have the custom for the father of the child and the *sandak* to also don phylacteries [*tefillin*].

 **Further reading:** For how to don a *tallit*, see p. 583; for how to don *tefillin*, see p. 592.

### The Ceremony

The circumcision begins when the baby is brought to the place where the ceremony will be performed, with the congregation standing.

The text presented below is the one accepted by most Ashkenazic communities in Israel. There are only minor variations in the Sephardic version, except for one significant change, which involves the recitation of the blessing, “...to bring him into the covenant of Abraham.” This difference will be noted below.

The *mohel* announces:

בְּרוּךְ הַבָּא!

“Blessed be the one who has arrived.”

The *mohel* then recites:

אַשְׁרֵי תִבְחָר וּתִקְרַב יִשְׁכֵּן חֲצֵרֶיךָ (תהילים סה:ה).

“Happy is the one You choose to bring near You to dwell in Your Sanctuary” (Psalms 65:5), and the congregation responds with the conclusion of that verse:

הַקְהֵל מְשִׁיב: נִשְׂבְּעָה בְּטוֹב בֵּיתְךָ קֹדֶשׁ הַיְכָלְךָ (תהילים סה:ה).

“May we be sated by the bounty of Your House, the holiness of Your Temple” (Psalms 65:5).



After the baby has been handed over to his father by the *kvatter*, the father, followed by the congregation, recites these verses out loud. (Ashkenazim outside Israel do not recite these verses):

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, אֲדֹנָי אֶחָד  
(דברים ו:ד). *Shema Yisrael: Adonai Eloheinu, Adonei ehad.*

אֲדֹנָי מֶלֶךְ, אֲדֹנָי מַלְאֲךְ, אֲדֹנָי יְמִלְכֵּנוּ לְעוֹלָם  
וָעֶד. הַקְהָל חוֹזֵר. *Adonai melekh, Adonai malakh, Adonai yimlokh le'olam va'ed. Congregation repeats after him.*

אֲדֹנָי מֶלֶךְ, אֲדֹנָי מַלְאֲךְ, אֲדֹנָי יְמִלְכֵּנוּ לְעוֹלָם  
וָעֶד. הַקְהָל חוֹזֵר. *Adonai melekh, Adonai malakh, Adonai yimlokh le'olam va'ed. Congregation repeats.*

אֲנָא אֲדֹנָי הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא (תהילים קיח:כה).  
הַקְהָל חוֹזֵר. *Ana Adonai, hoshi'a na. Congregation repeats.*

אֲנָא אֲדֹנָי הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. הַקְהָל חוֹזֵר. *Ana Adonai, hoshi'a na. Congregation repeats.*

אֲנָא אֲדֹנָי הַצְּלִיחָה נָא (תהילים קיח:כה).  
הַקְהָל חוֹזֵר. *Ana Adonai, hatzliha na. Congregation repeats.*

אֲנָא אֲדֹנָי הַצְּלִיחָה נָא. הַקְהָל חוֹזֵר. *Ana Adonai, hatzliha na. Congregation repeats.*

“Hear, Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).  
Congregation repeats after him.

“The Lord reigns, the Lord reigned, the Lord will reign forever and  
ever.” Congregation repeats.

“The Lord reigns, the Lord reigned, the Lord will reign forever and  
ever.” Congregation repeats.

“Lord, save us, we beseech You!” (Psalms 118:25). Congregation re-  
peats.

“Lord, save us, we beseech You!” Congregation repeats.

“Lord, grant us success, we beseech You!” (Psalms 118:25). Congrega-  
tion repeats.

“Lord, grant us success, we beseech You!” Congregation repeats.

Some *mohalim* add the following verses at this point:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֲדֹנָי אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הַשֵּׁיב אֶת  
חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכָם וְלֹא כָלִיתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
בְּקִנְאָתִי: לָכֵן אָמַר, הֲנִי נֹתֵן לּוֹ אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם (במדבר כה, י-יב).

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Pinhas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest, has caused My wrath to be withdrawn from the children of Israel, in that he was zealous on My behalf among them, that I did not destroy the children of Israel in My zealotry. Therefore, say: Behold, I am giving him My covenant of peace” (Numbers 25:10–12).

The father places the baby on “the chair of Elijah,” which is where the *sandak* will sit while holding the baby on his knees. This chair is dedicated to Elijah the prophet, who according to the Sages is called “the angel of the covenant [of circumcision],” because he is present in spirit at every circumcision.

The *mohel* declares:

זֶה הַכִּסֵּא שֶׁל אֵלִיָּהוּ הַנְּבִיא זְכוּר לְטוֹב. לִישׁוּעָתְךָ קוִיִּתִּי אֲדֹנָי, שְׁבִרְתִּי  
לִישׁוּעָתְךָ אֲדֹנָי, וּמִצֻּוֹתֶיךָ עָשִׂיתִי. אֵלִיָּהוּ מְלַאֵךְ הַבְּרִית, הִנֵּה שֶׁלְךָ לְפָנֶיךָ,  
עֹמֵד עַל יְמִינִי וְסִמְכָנִי. שְׁבִרְתִּי לִישׁוּעָתְךָ אֲדֹנָי, שֶׁשׁ אֲנֹכִי עַל אִמְרָתְךָ כְּמוֹצֵא  
שָׁלָל רָב. שְׁלוֹם רָב לְאַהֲבֵי תוֹרָתְךָ וְאִין לְמוֹ מְכָשׁוּל. אֲשֶׁרִי תִבְחַר וּתִקְרַב יִשְׁכַּן  
חֲצִירֶיךָ, נִשְׁבְּעָה בְּטוֹב בֵּיתְךָ, קֹדֶשׁ הַיְכָלְךָ (בראשית מט, יח; תהילים קיט, קסו,  
קסב, קסה; שם סה, ה).

“This is the chair of Elijah the prophet, may his memory be a blessing. ‘For your salvation, I await, Lord’ (Genesis 49:18). ‘I await Your salvation, Lord, and I have fulfilled Your commandments’ (Psalms 119:166). Elijah, angel of the covenant, behold what is yours is before you, stand on my right side and support me. ‘I hope for Your salvation, Lord’ (Psalms 119:166). ‘I rejoice at Your sayings, as one who finds great spoils’ (Psalms 119:162). ‘Those who love Your teaching know great peace; for them there is no obstacle’ (Psalms 119:165). ‘Happy is the one You choose to bring near You to dwell in Your Sanctuary. May we be satiated by the bounty of Your House, the holiness of Your Temple’” (Psalms 65:5).

At this point the baby is placed on the lap of the *sandak*, and the circumcision is performed while he is lying there. Since the obligation to perform the circumcision is incumbent upon the father of the infant, the father should

appoint the *mohel* as his agent to circumcise his son for him. Some have the custom to state this explicitly:

הִנְנִי מְמַנֶּה אֹתְךָ בְּשִׁלְיַח מִצְוַה לְמוֹל  
אֶת בְּנִי. *Hineni memaneh otekha kishliaḥ mitz-*  
*va lamul et beni.*

“I hereby appoint you as an agent for fulfilling my mitzva to circumcise my son.”

The *mohel* finishes preparing the baby for the circumcision, and recites the blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל הַמִּילָה.  
*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh*  
*ha’olam, asher kiddeshanu bemitzvotav,*  
*vetzivanu al ḥamila.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning circumcision.”

The *mohel* then cuts the foreskin, and immediately afterward, before the *mohel* starts executing *peri’ah* (the removal of a thin layer of skin), the father recites the blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַכְנִיסוֹ  
בְּבְרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ.  
*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh*  
*ha’olam, asher kiddeshanu bemitzvotav,*  
*vetzivanu lehakhniso bivrito shel Avra-*  
*ham avinu.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Abraham.”

The father then adds the *Sheheheyanu* blessing. However, outside of Israel, Ashkenazic custom is not to recite this blessing. In Sephardic communities in Israel, the accepted custom is for the father of the infant to recite this blessing before the baby is placed on the lap of the *sandak*.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
שֶׁחַחֲנֵנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה.  
*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh*  
*ha’olam, sheheheyanu vekiyemanu*  
*vehigi’anu la’zeman hazeh.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time.”

Congregation:

אָמֵן. כֶּשֶׁם שֶׁנִּכְנַס לְבְרִית, בֵּן יִכְנֵס לְתוֹרָה  
וְלַחֲפָה וְלִמְעֵשִׁים טוֹבִים. *Amen. Keshem shenikhnas la'berit,  
ken yikanes leTorah ulhupa ulma'asim  
tovim.*

“Amen. Just as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into Torah knowledge, the wedding canopy, and good deeds.”

The *mohel* continues to care for the baby and soothes him. Meanwhile, the recitation of the blessings resumes. One of the congregants is given the honor to hold the baby while standing, and another is called upon to recite the blessings. The *mohel* himself may be the one who recites the blessings.

The individual who recites the blessings holds a cup of wine in his hand and says:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
בוֹרֵא פְרֵי הַגֶּפֶן. *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh  
ha'olam, boreh peri hagafen.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.”

According to the Sephardic custom, he also recites a blessing over spices:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
בוֹרֵא מִיְנֵי בְשָׂמִים. *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh  
ha'olam, boreh minei vesamim.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates various spices.”

He continues with the following blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשׁ יְדִיד מִבֶּטֶן, וְחַק בְּשָׂאוֹ שָׁם  
וַצֵּא צֵאָיו חֲתָם בְּאוֹת בְּרִית קִדְשׁ, עַל  
בֵּן בְּשֶׁכַר זֹאת אֵל חַי חֲלֵקְנוּ צוּרְנוּ, צוּה  
לְהַצִּיל יְדִידוֹת שְׂאֵרְנוּ מִשַּׁחַת לְמַעַן בְּרִיתוֹ  
אֲשֶׁר שָׁם בְּבִשְׂרֵנוּ, בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי, כּוֹרֵת  
הַבְּרִית. *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh  
ha'olam, asher kidash yedid mibeten,  
vehok bishero sam, vetze'etza'av hatam  
be'ot berit kodesh. Al ken biskhar zot,  
El hai, helkenu, tzurenu, tzaveh lehatzil  
yedidut she'erenu mishahat, lema'an  
berito asher sam bivsarenu. Barukh ata  
Adonai, koret ha'berit.*

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified the beloved one [Isaac] from the womb, marked the decree in his flesh, and gave

his descendants the seal and the sign of the holy covenant. Therefore, as a reward for this, the living God, our Portion, commanded to deliver the beloved of our flesh from destruction, for the sake of His covenant that He set in our flesh. Blessed are You, Lord, who establishes the covenant.”

The baby is then blessed and named. The one reciting the following blessing pauses after the words: “And his name shall be called in Israel...,” at which point the father whispers the name of the baby in his ear or hands him a note on which the name is written. The person reciting the blessing then says the baby’s name out loud and continues with the recitation of this paragraph:

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, קַיִם אֶת הַיֵּלֶד  
הַזֶּה לְאָבִיו וּלְאִמּוֹ וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל  
[הַשֵּׁם שֶׁנִּבְחַר] בֶּן [שֵׁם הָאָב]. יִשְׁמַח  
הָאָב בְּיוֹצֵא חֲלָצוֹ וְתִגַּל אִמּוֹ בְּפְרִי  
בִטְנָהּ, כַּפֶּתוּב: יִשְׁמַח אָבִיךָ וְאִמְךָ וְתִגַּל  
יולֶדְתְּךָ (מִשְׁלֵי כג, כה). וְנֹאמֵר: וְאֶעֱבֹר  
עֲלֶיךָ וְאֶרְאֶךָ מִתְבוֹסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶּיךָ, וְאֶמַּר לְךָ  
בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי, וְאֶמַּר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי (יחזקאל  
טז, ו). וְנֹאמֵר: זָכַר לְעוֹלָם בְּרִיתוֹ דָּבָר  
צְוֵה לְאֵלֶיךָ דּוֹר, אֲשֶׁר פָּרַת אֶת אַבְרָהָם  
וְשִׁבּוּעָתוֹ לְיִשְׁחָק, וַיַּעֲמִידָהּ לְיַעֲקֹב לְחֵק  
לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִית עוֹלָם (תהילים קה, ח-י).  
וְנֹאמֵר: וַיִּמַּל אַבְרָהָם אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנֹו בֶּן  
שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים כְּאֲשֶׁר צְוֵה אֱתוֹ אֱלֹהִים  
(בראשית כא, ד). הוֹדוּ לַאֲדֹנָי כִּי טוֹב, כִּי  
לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדוֹ (תהילים קיח, א).

*Eloheinu velohei avoteinu: Kayem et hayeled hazeh le'aviv ul'imo, veyik-areh shemo BeYisrael [baby's Hebrew name] ben [father's Hebrew name]. Yismah ha'av beyotzeh halatzav vetagel imo bifri bitnah, kakatuv: "Yismah avikha ve'imekha vetagel yoladtekha"; vene'amar: "vae'evor alayikh va'erekh mitboaset bedamayikh, va'omar lakh bedamayikh hayi, va'omar lakh bedamayikh hayi"; vene'amar: "zakhar le'olam berito davar tziva le'elef dor, asher karat et Avraham ushvuato leYishak vaya'amideha leYa'akov lehok, leYisrael berit olam"; vene'amar: "Vayamol Avraham et Yitzhak beno ben shemonat yamim ka'asher tziva oto Elohim." "Hodu ladonai ki tov, ki le'olam hasdo."*

“Our God and God of our fathers, preserve this child for his father and mother, and his name shall be called in Israel [his Hebrew name], son of [father’s Hebrew name]. May the father rejoice in his offspring, and his mother be glad with the fruit of her womb, as it is written: ‘Your father and your mother will rejoice, and she who bore you will be happy’ (Proverbs 23:25). And it is stated: ‘I passed by you and I saw you wallowing in your blood, and I said to you: In your blood, you shall live; I said to you: In your blood, you shall live’ (Ezekiel 16:6). And it is stated: ‘He remembers His covenant

forever, the word that He ordained for a thousand generations, which He made with Abraham; and His oath to Isaac. He set it for Jacob as a statute, for Israel as an everlasting covenant' (Psalms 105:8–10). And it is stated: 'Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him' (Genesis 21:4). 'Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His kindness is forever'" (Psalms 118:1).

The congregation repeats:

הוֹדוּ לַאֲדֹנָי כִּי טוֹב, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ. *Hodu l'adonai ki tov, ki le'olam hasdo.*

"Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His kindness is forever."

The one reciting the blessing continues:

[שם התינוק] בֶּן [שם האב] זֶה הַקָּטָן גָּדוֹל [Baby's Hebrew name] *ben* [father's Hebrew name], *zeh hakaton gadol*  
 יְהִיֶּה. כֶּשֶׁם שֶׁנִּכְנַס לְבְרִית, כֵּן יִכְנַס לְתוֹרָה וְלַחֻפָּה וְלַמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים, אָמֵן. *yiheye. Keshem shenikhnas la'berit, ken yikanes leTorah ul'hupa ulma'asim tovim.*

"May this small child [baby's name], son of [father's Hebrew name], grow and become great. Just as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into Torah knowledge, the marriage canopy, and good deeds."

The one reciting the blessing then drinks from the cup of wine in his hand. The *mohel* proceeds to recite a prayer for the health of the baby and the woman who gave birth. At the conclusion of the circumcision ceremony, many have the custom to recite the *Aleinu* prayer, which can be found in all prayer books at the conclusion of each of the three daily prayers.

After the circumcision, the *mohel* instructs the parents on the proper care for the baby. Many *mohalim* will return in person to examine the circumcision wound and remove the bandage.

### Circumcising Two Babies

When two babies are circumcised in immediate succession, as with twin boys, the above blessings need not be recited more than once.

Many have the custom in such cases to perform two completely separate ceremonies. If so, there should be some sort of break between the two circumcisions; they should not be carried out one immediately after the other.