

Plus

Enacting an old tradition far away from Israel

After more than 50 years, the Jewish circumcision rite, 'Brit Milah' is performed here by a 'mohel' especially flown in from Israel

By Smriti Daniel, Pix by Bertie Mendis

"Blessed art thou, o Lord our God, who has commanded us to bring this baby into the covenant of Israel," Ravi Nessman intones in Hebrew, as he tenderly cradles his newborn son. Within minutes of his father's blessing, tiny Justice Max Nessman wails loudly – his part in the ancient Jewish ritual known as the Brit Milah is complete.



It is a moment of tremendous significance to the little community gathered there – this is the first time in at least half a century that the Brit Milah, or the Jewish covenant of circumcision, has been carried out in Sri Lanka. "The Milah is one of the oldest Jewish traditions and rites that we have – it goes back 3,000 years to the time of Abraham," says Dr. Ari Greenspan, the 'mohel' baby Justice's parents flew down from Israel for the ceremony. Dr. Greenspan's presence was required, because while

The Rabbi and the Mohel (R) Dr. Greenspan perform the ritual.

some Rabbis can perform the Brit Milah, most families procure the services of a mohel such as he – a person who is trained in the practical aspects of Jewish law, and who is a specialist in circumcisions. The process itself is in strict adherence to Judaism. In Genesis, chapter 17, verses 1-14 circumcision is established as a mark of the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham:

"Throughout all generations, every male shall be circumcised when he is eight days old...This shall be my covenant in your flesh, an eternal covenant. The uncircumcised male whose foreskin has not been circumcised, shall have his soul cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

In Leviticus, another book of the Bible (Old Testament), it is established that the circumcision must occur on the eighth day of the baby's life – which is how old Justice was. While it may inspire a sympathetic wince, the ceremony is clearly a testament to enduring faith and a celebration of new life. Key to the ritual are the several blessings spoken for the child and in the joyous gathering of friends and family there is a sense of continuity – a covenant if you will, between parent and infant, family and wider community, and at its heart, with God. Still, it is apparent from Justice's mother's expression, that this is far from easy for her.

Ravi and his wife Hallie Ludsin are already the proud parents of 22-month-year old Elia. Both American nationals (she is from Cleveland and he from New Jersey) they moved to Sri Lanka when Ravi took up his post as the local Bureau Chief for Associated Press. Hallie is a qualified human rights lawyer, though she is not currently

practising. "Here, you have an amazing thing, the parents were so concerned, and they wanted so much to have this done properly, that they were willing to fly me in," says Dr. Greenspan. Back in Israel, this mohel is a practising dentist. He says he has learnt his skills as a mohel from other mohelim, and has participated in over a 1000 Brit Milahs.

The actual ceremony itself begins with welcoming the baby, says Dr. Greenspan. The baby is handed to the father who then says one of the most important prayers in Judaism. "It is called the Shema, and the Shema is a sentence, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.'" The baby is then placed in a specially designated chair, known as Elijah's chair.

"According to ancient lore, Elijah the prophet comes and visits every baby and gives him a blessing..." Someone, in this case Rabbi Mendi, is then chosen to hold the baby on his lap during the Brit Milah. The actual cut, which is accomplished with the aid of specific, sterilised instruments, is quick and hopefully not as painful as one would imagine. "Jewish custom for 3,000 years has been to give the baby a little drop of red wine. The wine is first sanctified in a ceremony known as Kidush. In fact, I just read a scientific article that said that a little drop of wine, particularly the sugar in the wine, causes the baby to release anti-pain hormones," says Dr. Greenspan, adding that, "most doctors feel that a baby under eight days does not yet have a fully developed nervous system and so his pain senses aren't what they will be."

Rabbi Mendi and his wife Talia Crombie were key participants in the ceremony. The Rabbi who brought his family to Sri Lanka three years ago, says that the Brit Milah is one of the most important events in a boy's life. The second is, of course, the Bar Mitzvah, where children are said to come of age and are



The Brit Milah in progress: Dr. Greenspan and Ravi Nessman hold baby Justice

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considered responsible before God for their own actions.

“With the milah, the point for us is to make the circumcision when the child still does not understand – because his relationship with God is above understanding.”



The circumcision which has some proven benefits health-wise is also said to reduce a man's pleasure during intercourse, explains the Rabbi. This particular ceremony is another milestone for Rabbi Mendi, who along with his wife was responsible for founding the first Sri Lankan Jewish centre in 2005. Currently, he presides over a small congregation of 30 - 40 people and aside from a venue for religious events, his centre in Colombo 3 also offers the congregation other services that include catered Kosher food and classes in Jewish history and law.

They also have a website (<http://www.chabadsrilanka.com/>) By the end of the evening, little Justice, oblivious to his initiation into a tradition that had unfolded over many thousands of years, is fast asleep.

Hallie holds him close, as she and Ravi explain that had he only been born in Israel like Elia, they needn't have taken such extreme measures. After all, Milahs there are common enough. In Sri Lanka, however, it remains something of a historic event for a relatively

Justice gets a cuddle from his grandmother

isolated Jewish community. For Ravi and his wife though this, understandably, “would be historic no matter what”.

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