

## JEWISH LITERACY

Michael Lotker

Life Cycle:

**Brit Milah, B'nai Mitzvah, Marriage (& Inter-Marriage), Divorce, Funerals**  
(see Handbook pp 380-384 for Life Cycle Checklist)

### I. General Comments About Life Cycles:

- A. Contact with Torah, covenant with God
- B. A time when even the least observant will focus on minor details (in the words of Rabbi Harold Schulweiss, “hatched, matched and dispatched”).
- C. A time when we step back from the canvas to compare and appreciate our lives and the lives of our families

### II. Birth

- A. Jewish attitudes towards children
- B. *Brit Milah* (or *Bris*) - “covenant of circumcision” (Gen: 17:10) [Lotker p 111, Handbook p 222]
  - 1. 8<sup>th</sup> day, even on Shabbat or Yom Kippur, only delayed if baby’s health is jeopardized.
  - 2. Symbol of entering into the covenant - does not make the boy Jewish
  - 3. *Mohel* may lead service or rabbi may lead
  - 4. Child held by a *Sandek*, the child’s father says a blessing for bringing him into the covenant of Abraham our father, attendees pray for a life of Torah, marriage and good deeds. A Hebrew name is bestowed.
  - 5. Chair of Elijah: Sign of Messianic hope and as a lesson to Elijah who despaired of Jewish survival
  - 6. Male converts to Judaism need to be circumcised or have a ritual drop of blood drawn if already circumcised. This is not mandatory in Reform
- C. For girls, the Reform Movement has instituted a similar baby naming ceremony. [Handbook, p 226]
- D. Jewish Names
  - 1. Moshe ben Chonon v’Kroisha or Batya bat Moshe v’Sarah
  - 2. Tradition of naming after a dead relative (and not after a living one) Eastern European (Ashkenazi) only. Reason: superstition that the Angel of Death might call the child rather than the adult. Often there is a beautiful link between the child and the departed relative.
  - 3. Naming will take place at the *Brit Milah*, at a home ceremony or at a Friday night ceremony
- E. *Pidyon Haben*: Redemption of the first issue of the womb if male on the 31<sup>st</sup> day of life. [Handbook p 229]
  - 1. Father makes a payment to a Cohen to redeem his son.
  - 2. Origin in Numbers 3:11; 5 shekels in Num. 3:47
  - 3. If the father or the mother is a Cohen or Levite, no ceremony necessary.
  - 4. Not common in Reform families since males and females treated the same and Cohanim are not given special roles.

### III. *B'nai (Bar or Bat) Mitzvah* [Lotker p 101]

- A. Son or daughter of commandment, literally meaning “son/daughter of commandment” [or “Mitzvah Man/Woman” or “responsible man/woman”]

1. Not a verb, I don't "bar mitzvah" anyone
  2. Note "Bar" is Aramaic
  3. Responsible for observance of Jewish law.
  4. Ironic that (alas) often this is the end of Jewish study and practice.
  5. Boys at 13, girls at 12 (originally at appearance of 3 pubic hairs)
  6. In Reform, both at 13
- B. Theoretically takes place at specified age, no ceremony required
  - C. Today, the Shabbat service celebrates the fact that the child can be called to bless and read the Torah and Haftarah, lead the congregation in prayer.
  - D. Ceremony dates to 14<sup>th</sup> century for men and 1922 (Judith Kaplan - died in 1996) for women.
  - E. All too often, having a son or daughter "bar mitzvahed" is the only reason families join a synagogue.
  - F. Adult B'nai Mitzvah classes.

#### IV. Confirmation

- A. Introduced in 19<sup>th</sup> century Reform extending to girls – now adopted by some Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations
- B. Group rather than individual
- C. 15-16 year olds
- D. Linked to Shavuot

#### V. Marriage [Lotker p 117]

- A. Two parts to the ceremony
  1. *Kiddushin* or holiness or sanctification. Betrothal. Exchange of rings "By means of this ring. You are sanctified to me, according to the law of Moses and Israel."
  2. *Nisuin*: the marriage including the *Sheva Berachot* the 7 blessings followed by a brief period of isolation (*yichud*).
  3. Fulfills the three Talmudic requirements of marriage gift, contract and cohabitation (any one of which suffices).
- B. Symbols
  1. *Chupah* -- of home – often made with a tallit
  2. Ring: of continuity – also an exchange of clear value
  3. Sharing a cup of wine – sharing a single destiny
  4. *Ketubah* an Aramaic pre-nuptial agreement and divorce settlement. Protects the economic rights of wives.
  5. Breaking a glass – reminder that the Temple is in ruins – originally probably to scare away spirits.
- C. Not performed on Shabbat (since it is a legal act) and also traditionally not on some other periods of time – especially times of mourning.
- D. Interfaith marriage
  1. Forbidden in Conservative and Orthodox movements
  2. Matter of personal conscience of the Rabbi in Reform
    - a) About 2/3rds of Reform rabbis will conduct – I will after talking with bride and groom.
    - b) But CCAR is opposed

- c) Many rabbis require a commitment to establish a Jewish home and to have the non-Jewish partner study Judaism
  - d) A very small number of rabbis will co-officiate with non-Jewish clergy.
- E. The interfaith couple
  - 1. May have problems in Conservative and Orthodoxy
  - 2. Generally welcomed in Reform – special programming
  - 3. The question of raising the children
- F. Divorce
  - 1. Traditionally the husband grants wife a *get* (Jewish divorce) [see Handbook, p 302]. Woman may be unable to marry in a Conservative or Orthodox setting without a *get*. Problem of *agunah* (“chained” women).
  - 2. Reform accepts civil divorce as binding.

## VI. Death [Lotker p 119]

- A. Burial
  - 1. Traditionally, burial takes place within 24 hours delayed only by the Shabbat or need for relatives to attend. In practice, this is commonly delayed.
  - 2. Casket and ceremony should be simple
  - 3. Donations rather than flowers (note that the reason flowers became traditional was to mask the smell of decomposition due to a delayed burial).a
  - 4. Cremation is discouraged: messianic resurrection and the holocaust issues
  - 5. Funerals short accompanied by the *keriyah* (cutting of clothing or a ribbon) ceremony.
- B. Mourning [Handbook p 249, 250]
  - 1. From death to burial, focus is on respect and care for the dead. Mourners are exempt from time related Jewish practice.
  - 2. After burial, a seven (*shiva*) day period is observed. Derived from Job.
    - a) Sit on low stools, daily worship, don’t leave home, visitors come, some families cover mirrors
    - b) Not observed on Shabbat, holiday ends *shiva*
    - c) Sometimes observed for 3 days
  - 3. *Sholshim*: ribbon still worn, refrain from parties, etc. Derived from the 30 days of mourning for Aaron (Num. 20:29) and Moses (Deut. 34:8).
  - 4. *Shanah* : say daily mourners’ kaddish for 11 months.
  - 5. Unveiling of the monument usually after a year
  - 6. Observing *yahrzeit* each year on the anniversary (Hebrew or secular calendar) of passing.
  - 7. Recite *yizkor* prayers on Yom Kippur and on the last days of Passover, Sukkot and Shavout.
  - 8. The rituals emphasize the reality of death and the importance of the community for comfort.
  - 9. **THE RULE: ALWAYS CALL – ALWAYS GO!**

**Next Class: Jewish Community: Conversion, Movements, Synagogue Life. Etc.**

Read Lotker: 27-28, 65, 79-82, -92-93; Handbook 404-405, 512-515.