

Birth and the First Month

Birth and Jewish Tradition

Because life is cherished in Jewish tradition, pregnancy is considered to be a special spiritual time for a couple. In traditional communities, the pregnancy is generally not announced (outside of close family members) until after the fifth month, when a woman is showing. Some women will visit a mikvah (ritual bath) during the last month of pregnancy. In some communities, friends will create a “blessing circle” for a pregnant woman, gathering to offer her good wishes and support.

Choosing a Name

Names carry great importance in Jewish tradition. In the Ashkenazic (Jews from Central and Eastern Europe) tradition, Jewish parents name their children after a close relative who has passed away. The belief supporting this tradition is that passing on a name allows a loved one’s memory—and spirit—to live on.

Sephardic Jews (originally from Spain or Portugal and having spread through communities in North Africa and the Middle East) have a tradition of naming a baby after a grandparent, whether that person is living or deceased. In Sephardic communities, it is more traditional to name boys after male relatives and girls after female relatives.

In most non-Orthodox Jewish communities, parents give their children both a secular name for general use in society and also a Hebrew name for use in synagogue. The names may start with the same syllable (such as “Sarah” in Hebrew and “Sally” in English) and are often in memory of a loved one. In recent years, Biblical names (like Jacob, Benjamin, Sarah, etc.) have been making a popular comeback as both secular and Hebrew names.

Waiting to Fill a Nursery

In traditional Jewish communities, a nursery is not filled until the baby is born; baby showers with gifts for the baby do not take place during pregnancy. Of course, in tight-knit traditional communities, there is lots of support once a baby is born and friends and families help the new parents to set up for a new baby upon his/her arrival.

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Many non-Orthodox Jewish women today do have baby showers and prepare a nursery in anticipation of a baby's birth.

Ceremonies To Welcome A Baby

Brit Milah

Brit Milah (commonly called a 'bris') takes place on a baby boy's eighth day of life. Family and friends usually gather in a home (though it could take place in a synagogue) and a professionally trained *mohel* circumcises the baby's penis (removes the foreskin). Blessings are recited by the *mohel* and the parents and the baby's name is formally announced; he is welcomed into the Jewish community. Following the bris, family and friends stay for a festive meal.

The tradition of circumcision goes back to the mention of Abraham's circumcision in the Torah. The ritual of brit milah is a deep symbol of covenant between people and God; many Jewish people who are not generally observant want to have a bris for their newborn baby.

Pidyon HaBen

This Jewish tradition is mostly practiced by Orthodox Jews today. In the Pidyon Haben ceremony, a firstborn male child is "redeemed" from being in the service of the ancient priests. It is generally a small, private ceremony.

Choices For A Girl

Historically, a baby girl's naming would take place during the Torah service after she was born; her father might have an aliyah (the honor of going up to read the blessings before and after the Torah reading) and would receive a special blessing on his daughter's behalf.

In the last twenty-thirty years, with the rise of feminism in Jewish tradition, there has been a wealth of creativity in creating welcoming rituals for baby girls. Often called a *simchat bat* (happiness in a daughter) or *brit bat* (covenant for a daughter), these ceremonies may include prayers for the child and parents, innovative or traditional rituals and the sharing of the baby's name.

Both brit milah and simchat bat are ways of connecting the baby's life to the larger Jewish community, so that he/she no longer belongs only to the parents, but is a part of

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an ancient tradition that is moving forward in time with each new baby that enters the world.

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