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NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRIS MILAH OBSERVANCE

Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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All quotes are from "The Trend in Jewish Religious Observance in Mid-Nineteenth Century America" by Jeremiah J. Berman, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1893-1961); 1947; 37, *AJHS Journal*, available online at www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm.



Last month's column dealt with the observance of *kashrus* by Jews in

America during the 19th century. Up until about 1870 German Jewish immigrants went to considerable effort to make sure they could eat kosher meat and poultry. Almost every Jewish community of more than 15 families employed a professional *shochet*. Smaller communities were served by volunteer *shochtim*. However, with the spread of the Reform movement in the latter half of the century, Jews began to abandon *kashrus*.

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Indeed, after 1880 it was not uncommon for Jewish organizations to hold banquets at which non-kosher food was served.

Bris milah was another *mitzvah* most Jews observed during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Early American Jews respected the requirement of circumcision. It was in Newport, R.I., sometime after 1770, that a son was born to Samuel and Judith

Lopez. There was no mohel in the town. When five months had elapsed, the parents took their child in a sloop to New York to have the ceremony performed. The practice of circumcision was respected as we may conclude from the many advertisements for *mohalim* (circumcisers) appearing in the Anglo-Jewish press. Not every community had its mohel, or circumciser, however; for it was not easy to obtain one.

The Anglo-Jewish papers during the nineteenth century carried advertisements for religious functionaries who were qualified to serve not just as *mohellim*, but also as *shochtim*, *chazzanim*, and Hebrew teachers.

The smaller towns that did not have a resident *mohel* would have to "import" one when the occasion to make a *bris* arose. A *mohel* who resided in a large city would often travel extensively to perform a *milah*.

Rev. Samuel M. Laski, located at Columbia, in 1855 undertook to go all over South Carolina. Rev. Levy Rosenblatt, serving at Elmira in 1865, would perform the rite in Rochester and Buffalo. Rev. A. Blum of Galveston, we read, went to New Laredo, Mexico, in 1880, to initiate into the covenant the son of Mr. M. A. Hirsch of that place. The *Jewish Messenger* reported the incident as follows:

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New Laredo, Mexico - Rev. A. Blum of Galveston recently visited this city for the purpose of performing the rite of circumcision on the son of Mr. M. A. Hirsch. This is, we believe, the first instance where this ceremony has been performed by a Jewish minister on Mexican soil.

There were times when boys were not circumcised until they were well past eight days old, because no *mohel* was available when the baby was supposed to have his *bris*. At other times there were other reasons, such as parental opposition to the child having a *bris*. In these cases the parents would reconsider and decide to have their son circumcised despite his relatively "advanced age."

In Sept. 1859, the Houston Hebrew Congregation Beth Israel advertised for a hazan, shochet, mohel and baal koray:

Fixed salary \$1,000 per annum, besides perquisites, which if he be a Mohel, will reach a considerable amount, as there is no Mohel in the country.

The congregation had thirty members. On Feb. 21, 1860, the Rev. Z. Emmich, who had served the previous five years in Lafayette, Ind., was elected. On Sunday, March 25th, he performed a circumcision upon an eight-year-old boy. It was explained that "The circumstances of the parents had not before this permitted them to send for a Mohel, on account of the attendant heavy expenses."

In some cases the delay in circumcising a boy was due to the fact that the father had intermarried. Unfortunately, this was not at all uncommon in the middle of the 19th century.

American *mohellim* differed in their expertise to competently perform a *bris*. Dr. Simeon Abrahams (1809-1867), a surgeon with an outstanding reputation, was a strictly Orthodox man who was much in demand as a *mohel* in New York and was one of the most active *mohellim* in the 1860s.

Of course, there were also incompetent *mohellim*. There must have been more than a few, because New York City authorities felt it necessary to issue the following warning on December 29, 1870:

Within about a month some half dozen deaths have occurred in this City from hemorrhage after circumcision of Hebrew infants. I am informed that numerous unskilled and unscrupulous persons have taken to performing this operation for a small fee among the poorer Jews. I write to you to beg that you call attention to those having authority in your denomination to so unwarrantable a sacrifice of human life.

Permit me at the same time to assure you that no one has a greater respect than myself for all religious observances.

CHAS. P. RUSSEL, M.D.
Reg. of Records

Circumcision was one *mitzvah* that continued to be widely observed even into the latter part of the 19th century when many abandoned the observance of most of the other *mitzvos*. A major contributing factor may have been that many gentiles thought there were substantial medical benefits to being circumcised.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.

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