

Have Bris, Will Travel

Rabbi Sruly Koval | Parsha Chukat | July 8, 2022

Whenever I travel, my family knows that I will often need to make changes to accommodate my bris (ritual circumcision) schedule. The challenge is that I rarely get more than a week's notice, because most deliveries (births, that is, not Amazon:) are not scheduled. So, over the decades, I have modified, canceled or rescheduled almost every scheduled trip.

Last week we had planned to drive to New York for our (personal, family and JFX) friend, Noah Fleeter's wedding. Attending Noah's wedding would have been extra meaningful as it would be my first non-family "from bris to wedding" celebration with Noah. As my mazel would have it, I was privileged to have three bris calls for that weekend, and my family had to go to the wedding without me.

I met them in New Jersey later in the week. On Sunday we all celebrated a 70th birthday party for my mother-in-law. My plan was to drive back home right after the party. Then my brother called me to say that he had become a grandfather! His son gave birth to his oldest child, a boy.

Normally I would not travel in for every family bris, but in this case, I was already in the area, and this would allow me the opportunity to perform the bris for my great-nephew. I was excited to be there for this special family simcha. Plus, this would be my very first father-son bris opportunity, as I had performed the bris for the baby's father (my nephew), 23 years ago! So, after driving my wife to JFK airport for her flight to Israel on Sunday evening, I stayed in New Jersey until after my great-nephew's bris on Tuesday morning.

Why am I so committed to trying my best to be able to perform every bris that I get called upon for, often to the chagrin of my family? Honestly, I'm not sure. Especially since it is not always an easy job to have. Performing a delicate surgical procedure on a week-old infant, often under the watchful eye of a concerned Jewish grandmother has definitely had its harried moments for me over the years. However, it has also become an integral part of my identity.

But perhaps there is something deeper pulling me towards this mitzvah. My great-grandfather was also a mohel, and I almost feel a sense of personal responsibility to continue this hallowed tradition. At every bris ceremony the baby's father recites the traditional blessing, thanking G-d for the opportunity of the mitzvah of the "bris of Abraham." This ritual is the only one in all of Jewish tradition that is attributed to our Patriarch Abraham, as well as referred to as a bris, which means "a covenant."

This mitzvah is actually a reenactment of the original treaty that G-d made with Abraham 4,000 years ago, promising him Jewish continuity in honor of this act of self-sacrifice. The Talmud teaches us that this mitzvah is so powerful that Jews throughout the generations are committed to seeing it through with joy and passion. I have personally been blown away by the fact that even some of the most assimilated Jewish families opt to have a bris performed on their 8-day old baby.

I will always remember one particular story that I witnessed over 10 years ago. There was an adult Jewish man from the former Soviet Union who never received a bris as a baby, because the communist regime forbade it. He came to Cleveland as an adult, and lived an extremely secular lifestyle. In spite of all that, he contacted me to have a bris performed for him. Being that he was an adult, I worked together with a surgeon to help with this mitzvah. I'll never forget how this man asked the surgeon to perform the procedure without giving him any anesthesia. I asked him why, and he answered, incredibly: "For 40 years I've been living as a gentile. I want to feel this mitzvah."

Don't worry, the surgeon did not allow him to go through with the procedure without anesthesia. But after seeing commitment like that, how can I reschedule a trip when I am granted the privilege to facilitate this sacred covenant?