

PARTICIPATION OF NON-JEWISH PARENTS OR GRANDPARENTS IN HOME RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES

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This paper was approved by the CJLS on June 14, 1995, by a vote of seventeen in favor, two opposed, and two abstaining (17-2-2). Voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Ben Zion Bergman, Stephanie Dickstein, Elliot N. Dorff, Jerome M. Epstein, Myron S. Geller, Arnold M. Goodman, Judah Kogen, Alan B. Lucas, Aaron L. Mackler, Lionel E. Moses, Mayer Rabinowitz, Avram Israel Reisner, Joel E. Rembaum, Joel Roth, Gordon Tucker, and Gerald Zelizer. Voting against: Rabbis Samuel Fraint and Gerald Skolnik. Abstaining: Rabbis Susan Grossman and Paul Plotkin.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

שאלה

What role, if any, may a parent or grandparent who is not Jewish assume in the ברית מילה, שמחת בת, or פדיון הבן for their children or grandchildren when the ceremony takes place in the home?

תשובה

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has previously dealt with the issue of the role of non-Jewish parents in ceremonies for their children. Several responsa were adopted by the CJLS at a meeting on March 10, 1982. Responsa by Rabbi Kassel Abelson and Rabbis Joel Roth and Daniel Gordis specifically considered these concerns in the context of קירוב and intermarried families.

Over the past several years, the role of non-Jewish parents in various aspects of Jewish life has been further considered and, at times, reevaluated by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards because of the significant rise in the rate of intermarriage and the concomitant reactions by the Jewish community.

Most of the recent responsa, including two by this author (CJLS 1989 and 1993), urged that the synagogue consider both policy issue implications and integrity of ideology in addition to halakhah in determining the role of the non-Jewish parent in various aspects of synagogue life. Although there are occasions when halakhah may permit (or

may not forbid) certain behaviors, it does not necessarily mean that the actions would be appropriate from a policy perspective.

One issue that must be raised in connection with this שאלה is whether we should draw a distinction between that which is done in the synagogue and that which is done in the home in which the particular celebration is taking place. While a rationale for such a distinction between synagogue and home practice could be (and has been) advanced by those wishing to advocate a more liberal approach to non-Jewish parents, every attempt to do so creates its own problems. Those who maintain that one is communal and one is private will find the issue complicated by small functions in the chapel of a synagogue being more private than large home functions. Those who argue that the presence of clergy is the determinant will find the issue complicated by the fact that clergy often are present as officiants and guests whether the ceremony is at the synagogue or the home. Those who argue that the presence of the “congregation” is the determinant will find the issue clouded in that at many celebrations a significant percentage of the congregants, including leadership, may be present at a home ceremony and in a particular synagogue ceremony where the edifice is being used for convenience, there may be a paucity of congregants. Thus, there is a strong rationale to call for a consistent policy between “mitzvah fulfillment” in the synagogue and “mitzvah fulfillment” in the home. The religious guidelines that govern the one should govern the other. We must maintain our integrity as a Movement based on halakhah.

ברית מילה

The role of the father in the ברית מילה is “to bring his son into the covenant of Abraham.” Since a non-Jewish father has not entered “this covenant” himself, it is not appropriate in the instance of a בן ישראלית for him to “bring his son into the covenant.” It is also improper for him to recite any of the b'rakhot. Since the recitation of a b'rakhah by a non-Jew does not reflect reality, such recitation would trivialize and distract from the solemnity of the ceremony and, indeed, Judaism itself. Similarly, because of the symbolism attached to it, it would be inappropriate for anyone but a Jew to serve as סנדק (also referred to as בעל ברית) because his role is to hold the baby and thus assist the מוהל. Having not entered the covenant himself, it is difficult to conceive that he can fully appreciate the symbolism of this event. The סנדק is more than a functionary. The *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* states, ויש לאדם לחזור אחר מוהל וסנדק היותר טוב וצדיק, “The father should be careful to choose a מוהל and סנדק who are the best and most righteous available” (163:1). However, on the condition that the father has agreed that the child will be raised as a Jew and permits him to enter the covenant, the father may have some ancillary, peripheral and non-halakhic role in the ceremony. While the ברית מילה does have great significance, it has also come to be perceived as a “birth ritual.” Thus, to entirely exclude a parent who wishes involvement in this ceremony seems unnecessarily harsh. Some role may be given. Perhaps, the recitation of a personal prayer, a relevant selection from the תנ"ך or a suitable reading might provide an appropriate role. Such a prayer, selection or reading would neither be part of the formal liturgy of the ברית מילה itself nor imply in any way that the parent is Jewish. On the other hand, this recitation may have significance to any parent and may serve the function of helping the parent feel part of this important ceremony. As an alternative, the father or grandfather might explain the significance of the names which the child is given.

ברית בנות) שמחת בת

The prevalence of the *שמחת בת* ceremony has grown in the past number of years. In many cases, this ceremony takes place in the home and provides an opportunity for parents and grandparents to celebrate the female birth in a manner similar to the way in which a *ברית מילה* has become an occasion for celebration of a male birth. While there are no traditional sources to govern parental roles in such a ceremony, specific roles may be found for non-Jewish parents and grandparents. These roles should *not* include the recitation of a *b'rakhah*. They may, however include appropriate readings, selections from the *תנ"ך*, recitation of a personal prayer or an explanation of the significance of the names which the child is given. The caveats expressed above regarding the *ברית מילה* obtain with equal force here as well. The absence of traditional sources should not be perceived as a license for *איש כל הישר בעיניו יעשה*.

פדיון הבן

Although there is ample evidence that “where the natural father does not take part in the *pidyon haben*. . . that the child should not have a *pidyon haben*, until he attains majority and redeems himself” (Rabbi Joel Roth and Rabbi Daniel Gordis, CJLS 1982), there are a significant number of instances today when a *pidyon haben* does take place although the natural father is not Jewish. In such instances, it is precluded that the father, himself, redeem the child. Although it is inappropriate for the non-Jewish father to recite a *b'rakhah*, provide the “redemption sum” or transmit it, he may, however, be offered a role and participate by reciting a personal prayer, selection from the *תנ"ך* or suitable reading outside of the formal liturgy of the ceremony.

Conclusion

The parent who is not Jewish may not assume a role in the prescribed religious framework or liturgy of the ceremony relating to the birth of his or her children. It is important, however, that appropriate avenues should be sought for suitable roles for involvement in the ceremony should the parent so desire. These roles should affirm the individual's vital position as parent, but must not misleadingly convey any sense that the person is Jewish. While it may be argued that such a position will not entirely satisfy the non-Jew nor enhance our *קירוב* endeavors, it will clearly demonstrate the concern of Judaism to recognize the importance of parenthood, while affirming the spiritual and theological integrity of the religious ceremony.

With this in mind, there should be no distinction in the role of a non-Jewish parent in a religious ceremony relating to the birth of his or her children, whether that ceremony is in the home, the synagogue or elsewhere.