When Israel stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, the Holy One said, “I am prepared to give you My Torah, My prized possession. In return, you must give Me a guarantor.”

Israel said, “Our ancestors are our guarantor.”

The Holy One said, “Your ancestors are not suitable as a guarantor. Give Me a better guarantor.”

Israel said, “The prophets are our guarantor.”

The Holy One said, “The prophets too are not suitable as a guarantor. Give Me still a better guarantor.”

Israel said, “Dear God, our children are our guarantor.”

And the Holy One said, “Your children are a good guarantor. It is for their sake that I give the Torah to you.”

—from Shir Hashirim Rabbah

To hold a newborn in our arms is to behold a miracle. “Where did you come from, little one?” we wonder as we gaze upon the face. “Where are you going? How long is your journey? What gifts do you carry? What songs will you sing?”
The Uniqueness of Every Child

The rabbis teach us, "When governments mint a coin, they use one mold, and all the coins come out the same. When God makes humans, God, too, uses the same mold, Adam and Eve, yet everyone is different. Therefore, each of us should say, 'For me, the world was created'" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

To hold a newborn in our arms is to behold the power of life. How could such a tiny thing be so vigorous, so insistent? How can the mother’s body be ripped apart and yet be whole moments later? How can life give forth life, changing from emptiness to fullness to emptiness? How can a process so carnal feel so divine?

To hold a newborn is to behold the birth of prayer. "You are so small and the world is so big," we say as our arms tighten around our child. "How can we help you find your way? There is so much left undone; the world is so needy; we are all still learning. What must we teach you? What will you teach us?"

We turn our eyes away, seeking the unseen presence that fills the room. "God, Parent of all, You know. Please, guide our steps. And protect our child throughout life."

Who are the Parents?

The one who carries a child and not the one who merely beget him is the parent of a child and not of mother (Exodus, Rabbeinu.”) Whether by biology, marriage, adoption, or mothering, our families are blessed by the tradition of the past. Our families are blessed by parents, grandparents, and extended family members, by loving and caring teachers, schools, and other organizations that educate our children. Our communities are blessed by the parents and organizations in our community who care for our children. Each of us is blessed.

There are few pains or joys greater than those brought to us by our children. A steady hand, a stout heart, and a sturdy compass are tools that serve a parent well. The stories and the rituals of Judaism—bolstered by the homespun wisdom of our families and friends—can provide us with other essential tools for building a home that gives our children roots and wings.

The Torah confirms how hard yet how sacred is the task of parenthood. God appears as the very first parent, struggling with children who are rebellious (Adam and Eve, the Israelites in the wilderness), skeptical (Lot, Jacob), challenging (almost all of the women), even too obedient (Abraham). We see that as the parent gives birth to the child, so, too, does the child give birth to the parent, teaching the parent new skills, opening the way to new experiences. The opening prayer of the Amidah reads, "Blessed are You, Adonai… God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob," as if to remind
us constantly that each child has a unique relationship with his or her parent. We are a different parent to each of our children. The Jewish people’s relationship with God is reborn with each generation. We, too, are reborn as new parents with each child. If the Torah depicts parenting as a struggle and a joy for God, why should it not be for us?

Yet our tradition does not leave us bereft of guidance. When I was pregnant with my first child and working for a national Jewish organization, a co-worker asked me how I planned to make Judaism a part of my child’s life. Married to a rabbi—though not yet a rabbi myself—I thought the question as odd as asking: How do you plan to bring a sense of gender to a locker room or a sense of curiosity to a reporter? Thinking there was some secret of parenthood I had not yet fathomed and at which I might therefore never excel, I hardly knew how to answer. I turned to her and said, “I will sing Hebrew songs to him, feed him Jewish foods, celebrate Shabbat with him.”

“Is that all?” she sniffed.

And in that moment, I thought, “No, that is not all. That is everything.”

Celebrating the Birth

We begin the journey of parenthood in celebration. There are foods to be prepared, people to be called, announcements to be made, invitations to be extended, religious leaders to be notified. The family is swaddled in attention and rituals. A private matter becomes a communal event, for at the celebration the child, the family and the people Israel are bound together as one. The congregation gathers, as friends and family but also as representatives of the community that the child will soon enter. The ceremony is twofold: covenantal and personal. It enacts the child’s entry into the Covenant of Israel and it enables the parents to proclaim publicly the child’s name.

Every child has at least two names: a first name, designating the child’s uniqueness; and a second name, designating the child’s family. The wisdom of conferring two names weaves the child within family and community from the earliest moments of life. It echoes the knowledge that sociologists impart: it is only within society that we
How We Are Known  

"A person is known by three names: the one he is called by his father and mother, the one he is called by others, and the one that is recorded in the book of deeds." (Kohelet Rabbah 7:3).  

Adoption  

More and more Jews are adopting babies, some from Jewish birth parents, many not. In addition to being welcomed into the community with a covenant ceremony, children of non-Jewish birth parents undergo a conversion ritual—generally immersion in a mikveh, a ritual bath.  

Adopted children are known by their adoptive parents' names. That is, a child named Joseph with adoptive parents Miri and Ben is known as Yosef ben Binyamin v'Miriam. Adopted children who are converted become Jews in all ways. This was established a thousand years ago, when a convert wrote to Maimonides and asked, "May I recite the opening blessing of the Amidah, which says, 'God of my ancestors,' for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not my ancestors?" And Maimonides responded that he could for they were. We all stood at Sinai; we all have the same ancestry.  

achieve the fullness of personhood; it is only within relationships with others and through the norms and practices of our culture, whose performance confers meaning on the chaos of the cosmos, that we fully become ourselves.  

Covenant in Hebrew is brit. While generically brit can be any promise or any agreement, in the Jewish tradition it has come to mean one special promise, the one that the Jews made to one another and to God at the foot of Mount Sinai 3,500 years ago. It was there that the Jews pledged—individually and together—to be God's people and God's partner in creation.  

Every Jew, tradition tells us, who has ever lived or is yet to be born was present that day at Sinai and was a partner in that promise. "It is not only with you that I make this Covenant," said the Eternal One, "but also with everyone here who stands before God this day and all those who are not with us here today" (Deuteronomy 29:13-14). Every Jew who is born, every child who is adopted into a Jewish family, and every person who converts to Judaism is formally inducted into the Covenant between God and the Jewish people, for they, too, are part of the Covenant of Sinai, made so many years ago.  

The act of entering into the Covenant involves body as well as soul, so the ceremony is markedly different for boys and for girls.  

Brit Milah: Covenant of Circumcision  

Boys are brought into the Covenant today just as the first Jew, Abraham, was: through the ceremony of a brit milah, a covenant of circumcision.  

Since the time of Abraham, brit milah has been the symbol marked on the bodies of Jewish males to reconfirm the eternal relationship between God and the Jewish people. On the eighth day after birth, as long as the baby is healthy, the circumcision is performed. Even if the eighth day is Shabbat, even if it is Yom Kippur, the brit milah is held. Family and friends come from all over to celebrate. A mohel, a Jew—male or female, not necessarily a rabbi—who has been trained in the ancient laws and in the modern methods of circumcision, performs the quick but delicate surgery.  

The brit milah is a commandment, and tradition tells us that we should be eager to perform commandments. So, we perform them
A Prayer to Be Said upon Entering the Ninth Month of Pregnancy

When said as part of a traditional prayer service, this prayer—which comes from a prayer book that was written in Italy in 1786—is inserted after the Amidah and before May the One Who Makes Peace.

I thank the Lord with all my heart that I have carried the full nine months and that up to now God has spared me from all afflictions that could harm a pregnant woman and her child. Surely God’s tenderness is unending. Again, I seek God’s kindness so God will be with me and support me when my child is pressing to be born, and so that God will give me strength to bring forth my child.

—Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman, edited and translated by Nina Beth Cardin

A Prayer to Be Said upon Entering Labor

Jewish women in Italy would recite the following prayer when labor pains began:

May the exalted, mighty, and awesome God, who in times of trouble answers those who fear You, accept my prayer and the pleas of Your entire people, the House of Israel. And amidst their company, may You remember and tenderly care for a woman bound up and struggling as she bears her first child. From within this struggle, through her pains and labor, her heart trembles and calls out. So it is with me today as I sit upon the birthing stool. My gate is fixed on the Lord, my God. May You see my pain and my tears, and grant my petition. May my prayer be welcome. In Your mercy, You will deliver me. In Your compassion, God, release me. Return my health and vigor and well-being. Restore my former strength. May my body once again be refreshed.

—Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman, edited and translated by Nina Beth Cardin

Special Needs

Sometimes our dreams for a healthy child are not realized. Sometimes a child is born with disabilities. Too often we feel our tradition demands perfection and is less accepting of those who are different. But Jacob became lame when touched by the angel. Moses, we are told, was born without a voice.

All life is precious. All our children are children of Israel. Many synagogues and communities have programs that assist families whose children have disabilities. We have done much, and there is much more to be done. Local Jewish Federations are often good sources of information about relevant programs. They also can serve as advocates for the funding and creation of additional services.

A Prayer Recited at the Celebration of the Birth of a Child

May God give you eyes to see joy in the world, may God give you ears to hear the chirping of the birds, may God give you a nose to smell the fragrance of the flowers, may God give you a mouth to utter praises and wonder,

Arms to embrace those you love,
Feet to run and jump and dance,
A heart to feel delight
and love and hope,
And a soul to experience the world around you.

May God also grant you eyes that see the world’s pain,
Ears that hear the cry of those in need,
A nose to sense the changes in the air,
A mouth to speak out both in protest and in support,
Feet to go quickly to the aid of others,
A heart to feel concern and commitment,
And a soul that seeks to better the world around you.

Hélène Lieberman
Elijah

Some families set aside a chair at a brit ceremony for Elijah, the biblical prophet who lived in the ninth century BCE. Tradition has it that Elijah never died but, rather, was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. He comes back to earth, so we are told, disguised as a beggar or a wanderer to help Jews in need. He is said to visit every seder table and every brit milah. It is thought that Elijah will be the herald of the Messiah, the harbinger of peace and goodness. By setting aside a chair for Elijah at every brit milah, we are saying, “Maybe today Elijah will come; maybe this child is the one who will bring peace.”

at the first possible moment. Although the first possible moment is the sunset that ushers in the eighth day (for the days of the Jewish calendar begin in the evening), Jewish law says a brit should not take place at night. (In olden times, it was often too dark to risk the procedure.) The first possible time, then, is early morning. (Morning is easier on the parents, too. The anxiety lasts only a few hours rather than all day.)

The brit milah ceremony is composed of two parts, the circumcision and the naming of the baby. Although the ceremony can be held anywhere, many people prefer holding it at the synagogue or at home. No matter where it is held, it always begins with the guests gathered in one room, the baby and his attendants in another. When everyone is ready, the baby makes his entrance, carried by the sandek, or, in Yiddish, kvaterin, the godmother—a grandmother or other beloved woman. Everyone rises as if the baby were a king or a great scholar. They greet him by saying, “Blessed is the one who comes!”

Sometimes the baby is passed over the chair of Elijah. Other times the baby is placed directly on a table or on the lap of the sandek, the godfather, the person honored with holding the child during the ceremony. The mohel begins the ceremony with a prayer that designates the entrance into sacred time and with a blessing: “Blessed are You, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us through Your mitzvot and commands us regarding circumcision.” The circumcision, the cutting away of the foreskin in the ritually prescribed fashion, takes just a few seconds. Technically, it is the father who is responsible for circumcising his son, so many a mohel, in a grand and precise gesture, publicly asks the father whether he wishes to circumcise his son or delegate the mohel to act in his stead. The knife rarely changes hands. The parents recite, “Blessed are You, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us through Your mitzvot and commanded us to enter this child into the Covenant of Abraham.”

With the circumcision done, the naming ceremony immediately begins. A guest may be given the honor of reciting the blessing over the wine, the symbol of happiness and holiness. The prayers continue: “Blessed are You, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who
sanctified this little one from the womb and had us mark the sign of the Holy Covenant on his flesh. ...Blessed are You, who established the Covenant."

The one who is given the honor of naming the child then recites:

Our God and God of our ancestors, protect this child and help his mother and father raise him well. Let his name be called in Israel..., son of... [the father's name] and... [the mother's name]. May his father be delighted with his offspring and his mother be overjoyed with her baby.... Praise God, for God is good; God's kindness endures forever. May this little child one day be great.

The ceremony is concluded. The guests are invited to a se'udat mitzvah, the meal of celebration. The child snuggles in his parents' arms. The tension is broken and the Jewish people have grown by one.

**Brit Banot: Covenant of the Daughters**

The ceremony to welcome a daughter into the Covenant is relatively new. The Bible does not prescribe the way in which to celebrate the birth of a daughter or welcome her into the Covenant. The rabbis do not offer a way either. It has been only in the last century or so that Jewish parents have begun to develop ways to name a daughter. And it has been only since the 1970s that Jewish parents have developed ceremonies to welcome a daughter into the Covenant.

In recent centuries in Ashkenazic (eastern European) communities, a newborn daughter, if formally named at all, was named in the synagogue. Days after the baby's birth, often while mother and daughter were still indisposed, the father would be honored with an aliya. Afterward a special blessing thanking God for God's kindness would be recited. The daughter's name would then be announced. The men of the community capped the celebration with schnaps—whiskey.

Sephardic Jews created a somewhat more elaborate and formal way of celebrating the birth of a daughter. (The ritual can be found in the Sephardic prayer books.) The family would convene a zevad habat (the gift of the daughter), with the community gathering at

*Time Flies*

Immediately after the circumcision, while the baby is being quieted with a pacifier soaked in wine, everyone present responds, "Just as this child has entered into the Covenant, so may he be blessed with entrance into a life of study, marriage and deeds of lovingkindness." In a gesture that reminds us that those events are not as far away as we think, my husband's family has a tradition of selecting an unopened bottle of whiskey from among those used to make a l'hadmim (a toast) at the brit, writing on the label, "for the bar mitzvah of... [the name of the child]" and putting it aside to be opened 13 years later.

*Although the ceremonies for welcoming a daughter into the Covenant may vary, they all serve to sanctify the occasion of a new life begun in the family and Jewish community.*

Birth: Affirming the Covenant ~ 199
Judaism is an Evolving Tradition

Esther and Mordecai decreed the holiday of Purim. The Maccabees created the celebration of Hanukkah. The kabbalists created the liturgical tradition of kabbalat Shabbat, the Tu B'Shevat seder and tikkun leil Shavuot. The Israeli government added four new holidays to the calendar: Yom Hashoah, Yom Hazikaron, Yom Ha'atzma'ut, Yom Yerushalayim. The bar mitzvah celebration itself is probably not more than a few hundred years old. Today we live in one of the most fertile eras of Jewish ritual and liturgical creativity. Jewish girls and women are both the prime authors and the main beneficiaries of that creativity.

Raise the Cradle

In some towns, the neighbors would gather at the home of the newborn, encircle the cradle, raise it three times, and in unison ask, “What shall the baby be called?” The parents would then say the name of the baby, and sweets would be given out. That ceremony was called hole kraasach, a term generally thought to come from the French, haute la crèche, meaning “raise the cradle.”

The baby's home. The daughter would be welcomed into the community, although not explicitly into the Covenant, with the coaxing, reassuring words from the Song of Songs: “Little dove hidden in the rocks of the cave, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.” Sweets would be eaten, and the baby would be blessed and given her name.

Today, many families are choosing to celebrate the birth of a daughter with a ceremony called simhat bat (joy of a daughter) or brit habat (covenant of the daughter). Like a brit milah, the ceremony is composed of two parts: the covenant and the naming.

Many families choose to hold their brit habat ceremony in the synagogue on a Shabbat morning soon after the baby's birth. During the Torah reading, the parents are honored with an aliya. The child is brought forward and held in front of the open ark. The rabbi or cantor recites the blessings of Covenant and gives the baby her Hebrew name. The parents may speak words of gratitude and hope. They may also sponsor the kiddush—often a buffet with hallah and wine, cakes, fish, cheeses and fruits—in honor of their child.

Some parents hold the ceremony at home on a Sunday or during the week. The women of the family may light candles in honor of the newborn and recite biblical verses that contain or spell out the child's Hebrew name. The parents may then save the candlesticks that are used at the candlelighting to give to their daughter upon her becoming a bat mitzvah. Other parents wrap their daughter in a tallit, to symbolize the comforting arms of God, and then save the tallit to give to the daughter upon her becoming a bat mitzvah. Still other parents pour water over the child's feet in a symbolic gesture of welcome and as a suggestion of the connection between women and the life-giving attribute of water.

Each of these ceremonies reflects the tastes of the family and the community but every one has several elements in common. Each is constructed like a drama, for that is what it is. The daughter is ceremoniously brought in by grandparents or friends, presented with pageantry to the kahal, the community. Her parents stand at the front of the room, eager to receive the precious child. A song or a prayer of welcome is recited by the community, often the same one found in the Sephardic tradition. As in the brit milah, so here the
child is brought within reach of the parents, but they do not yet take her. First, she awaits her community's embrace.

My daughter assisted us at her covenant ceremony. When she was one month old, we gathered our community together for a ceremony that we called hachnasat habat. The sound itself is a poem, for all the vowels are pronounced “ah,” the open sound of joy and amazement. The words mean “bringing in the daughter.” More than just joy, they hint at the task of Covenant itself, for the Hebrew letters of hachnasat can also be read as habnaiset, a reference to the gathering of Jews who welcomed our daughter into their covenant. The phrase also resonates with a phrase associated with Jewish women: The escorting and outfitting of a bride is called hachnasat kallah.

We chose to wrap our daughter in a tallit, believing that the transition into Covenant we wished to effect was best achieved by involving her whole body. From the moment she was brought into the synagogue by the sandeket, her godmother, to the moment before the final fold of the tallit was secured around her, she wailed. Through song and psalm, she wailed. But when the last fold of the tallit was around her, with the swaddling finally complete, when she was secure in the symbol that defines the Jewish people, she stopped crying. Here was a child with an inborn instinct for drama.

At any brit habat, after the covenancing, a guest is honored with the naming of the child. With a cup of wine in hand, the person recites words that declare the infant a participant in the pageantry of the patriarchs of Israel. This is one such blessing:

May the One who blessed our ancestors, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Miriam the prophetess, Deborah, Abigail and Queen Esther, grace this sweet child with good fortune and abundant blessings. And may her name be called among the daughters of Israel…, daughter of… [the father’s name] and… [the mother’s name]. May she be raised in good health, peace and tranquility. Grant that her parents watch her grow in happiness, wisdom and prosperity. And may they be blessed with the merit of escorting her to her wedding canopy. May this be God’s will, and let us say, “Amen.”

Adding Drama

Many feel that despite the excitement of the birth of a daughter, the simhat bat ceremony often lacks the tension and the drama of a circumcision. Indeed, sometimes it does. When this rite was first performed, there was a suggestion to mark the sign of the Covenant on the body of the young girl, to bring parity to the two covenant ceremonies. Fortunately, those efforts failed. Still, some of the drama of the circumcision can be achieved through the use of music and song: A cantor or a lay musician can swell the emotions that are already present.

Choosing the Time

With no time-honored laws or traditions, the brit habat (singular of brit banot) is usually held anytime from eight days to a few months after birth.
Words may be spoken about her namesakes, the grandfathers or
grandmothers, great-aunts or great-uncles, for whom she has been
named and whose spunk or dignity or wit or graciousness the parents
hope she may yet come to possess.

The moment is sealed with wine and blessings. These are some
favorite blessings:

Blessed are You, Sovereign of the universe, who continues the
work of Creation. Blessed are You, Sovereign of the universe, who
has created such beauty in the world. Blessed are You, Sover-
eign of the universe, for everything is created with Your glory.

Because the ceremonies are new and may be unfamiliar, families
often prepare programs for the guests to encourage their participa-
tion. A few enterprising families append drawings and prayers of
welcome written by the baby’s siblings. Contact your rabbi or local
chapter of Hadassah, Jewish Women International or National
Council of Jewish Women for guidance.

The ceremony ends with the guests invited to join in a festive
se’udat mitzvah as the daughter snuggles in the arms of her parents.

Pidyon Haben: Redeeming the Firstborn
The Origins of the Tradition
For some firstborn sons, the celebration of their birth does not end
with the brit. According to tradition, certain sons have an additional
celebration, a pidyon haben, a ritual of redemption. They are the
ones who are their mother’s firstborn, are delivered through the
birth canal, and are not grandsons of priests (kohanim) or Levites
(Levi’im). If all these criteria are met, then when the son is one
month old, he is to be “redeemed,” that is, released from service to
the Temple and the priests. Two reasons are offered for that tradition,
and as is the case with the pilgrimage holidays, one is historical and
one is agricultural.

According to the historical explanation, the final plague of the
Exodus was the death of all firstborn sons in Egypt. The Israelite
sons were saved, however, if their families dabbed the blood of a
lamb on their doorposts. As a way of thanking God, all firstborn
Jewish sons were to be dedicated to God. That means that they
were to work at the Temple, in the service of the kohanim. It is likely that that never happened. Instead, the Torah required that the sons be redeemed, released from their service and returned to their families. In their place, money was given to the Temple.

According to the agricultural explanation, all life is a gift from God. In ancient times, Jews would offer their thanks for a year of bounty by dedicating to the Temple service the firstborn of their cattle, sheep and all other herds. Likewise, on the three pilgrimage holidays (Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot), they would take the first of their fruits to the Temple. Firstborn children are also special to God, but to dedicate them to the Temple service would have been to uproot them from their families and to fail to distinguish them from the rest of Creation. Instead, the Torah commands that they should be redeemed and their value in money be given to the Temple. Grandsons of priests and Levites are not redeemed, because they are forever in service to the Temple.

**How We Celebrate**

To mark the redemption of the firstborn, family and friends gather once again on the child’s 31st day of life. This time it is not a mohel or a rabbi who leads the ceremony but a kohen, a priest. (If there is no priest to officiate, a rabbi may do so.)

The father approaches the kohen and says, “This is my firstborn whom God has commanded that I redeem.”

The kohen asks, “Which would you prefer? To give me your firstborn or to redeem him for five shekels?”

The father replies, “I would prefer to redeem my son.”

Today the father gives the kohen five silver dollars in place of five shekels. And most often the kohen gives the money to tzedakah.

The parents then recite this blessing: “Blessed are You, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us through Your mitzvot and who commands us to redeem our firstborn.”

The ceremony ends with the reciting of the Sheheheyanu blessing and the blessing over wine.

**New Traditions**

Some Jews who are attracted to the agricultural aspect of the ceremony are developing redemption services for firstborn daughters, and egalitarian traditions involve both the mother and father in the act of redemption. Sometimes additional sums of money are dedicated to worthy causes in the child’s name.
Each of Us Has a Name

This poem is by an Israeli poet, Zelda (1914–1984). It was translated by Marcia Falk.

Each of us has a name given by God and given by our parents.
Each of us has a name given by our stature and our smile and given by what we wear.
Each of us has a name given by the mountains and given by our walls.
Each of us has a name given by the stars and given by our neighbors.
Each of us has a name given by our sins and given by our longing.
Each of us has a name given by our enemies and given by our love.
Each of us has a name given by our celebrations and given by our work.
Each of us has a name given by the seasons and given by our blindness.
Each of us has a name given by the sea and given by our death.

The Importance of Names

Last names are a window into the history of families. O'Donnell, Chung, Cohen, Giordano—all reveal a story about ethnic identity. First names also open a window into our past. They tell us something of our parents, their sense of identity, their memories and their hopes. Whether we name our sons Ashton or Joshua and our daughters Morgan or Elianna, we reveal a complex set of personal and social responses: memories of long-lost high school sweethearts, degrees of Jewish and American identity, the influence of the social icons of the day, our assessment of the future security of Jews in the Diaspora.

Most of that is unconscious. We are attracted to names that have meaning for us and whose sounds and associations we like. Ashkenazim have a tradition of naming their children after relatives who have died. Sephardim have a tradition of naming their children after living relatives. Sometimes a child is given two first names.

Wherever they come from, whatever they represent, names are sacred vessels. A most difficult part of parenting is choosing our child’s name. It is much too awesome a task for mere humans. God named the patriarchs and Sarah in a primordial act of covenant. I always thought God should have named my children too. They should have come into this world with their names stamped on their feet, in ink that would rub off with the wear of my affection.

And while we are at it, God should have included instructions on their care and insights into their souls: "Durable but sensitive; stroke gently to reveal full luster. Do not wring." Perhaps somewhere in the packaging that the doctors threw away after their birth were my children’s names and handling instructions.

In the absence of divine guidance, we name our children as best we can with names that are witnesses to those who came before them or to dreams we have for their future. Children love hearing stories about relatives they were named after and what they were like when they were little. Shower your children with memories of the past, and they will grow to fill their names as only they can. For if we are blessed, the ceremony of birth is only a beginning. The best is yet to come.
A Prayer Written for Parents of a Child with Disabilities

This prayer was written by Rabbi Geoffrey Haber:

O God, from the depths I cry to you, help me to feel that the ways of Your providence are wise and good, though we understand them not.

In this moment, my full soul feels but little strength to pray. Yet You have given the miracle of life, and now we ask for the miracle of hope. Give us hope and strength that we may see the light at the end of this dark night. Give us the love and the commitment to advocate on behalf of our son/daughter's... needs and provide for him/her the best care, a loving home, the brightest future that we can.

May the light of love that my child, [child's name], son/ daughter of [name of father] and [name of mother], kindled within my heart continue to burn brightly so that as I regain strength of soul, I may bring cheer unto all my dear ones. Praised are You, O God, who gives strength to the weak, who raises the lowly who comforts the mourner, who gives hope to those in despair. Amen.

Yearning for a Child

The most famous patriarchs of the Bible suffered from infertility. Sarah, Rachel, Leah and Hannah. Yet the Bible leaves unrecorded their prayers beseeching God for a child and berating God for the condition visited upon them. The Talmud dares to imagine what Hannah said as she prayed to God during her desperate pilgrimage to Shiloh, the place of Eli the priest, before the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Book of Samuel tells us that Hannah fell upon the steps of the shrine in grief and moved her lips, but no sound came out. The rabbis filled in her words:

Sovereign of the universe, of all the parts of woman that You created, not one was made in vain. Our eyes You made for seeing; our ears You made for hearing; our noses, for smelling; our mouths, for eating and speaking; our hands, for working; our legs, for walking; our breasts, for nursing. But these breasts You gave to me, God, why do I not nurse them? Give me a child, God, so that I may nurse.

—(Brachot 31b)

Prayer for an Adopted Child

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso wrote a prayer that parents of an adopted child might add to the covenant ceremony:

Adoni is mindful of us, will bless us; will bless the house of Israel; will bless the house of Aaron; will bless those who revere Adonai, the little ones and the big ones together.

—After Psalm 115:12-13

We have been blessed with the precious gift of this child. After so much waiting and wishing, we are filled with wonder and gratitude as we call you our daughter/son. Our daughter/son, our child, you have grown to life apart from us, but now we hold you close to our hearts and cradle you in our arms with our love. We welcome you into the circle of our family and embrace you with the beauty of a rich tradition.

We pledge ourselves to the creation of a Jewish home and to a life of compassion for others, hoping that you will grow to cherish and emulate these ideals.

God of new beginnings, teach us to be mother and father, worthy of this sacred trust of life. May our daughter/son grow in health. May she/he be strong in mind and kind in heart, a lover of Torah, a seeker of peace. Bless all of us together beneath your shelter of shalom (peace), and grant our new family, always the harmony and love we feel today.

A Prayer for Nursing

In Italy, when a mother would first bring her child to her breast to nurse, she would say: "May it be Your will, Lord my God and God of my forebears, that You provide nourishment for Your humble creation, this tiny child, plenty of milk, as much as [my child] needs. Give me the disposition and inclination to find the time to nurse [my child] patiently until [my child] be satisfied. Cause me to sleep lightly so that the moment [my child] cries I will hear and respond. Spare me the horror of accidentally smothering my child while I sleep, God forbid. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, my Rock and my Redeemer.

—Out of the Depths I Call to You: A Book of Prayers for the Married Jewish Woman, edited and translated by Nina Beth Cardin
Most references to the significance of the age of thirteen come

(Shimon, Avo 5:24)

when I have been a different person.

Eleanor of Amsteldam, my grandmother

When I became bar mitzvah, my grandfather

Pleading God on the Guest List

From Teffrey Salzin,
Abraham smashed the idols in his father's house (Midrash, Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer 16). At thirteen, the twins, Jacob and Esau, went their separate ways—Jacob to the worship of God, Esau to idolatry (Midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 63:10).

**Thirteen: The Age Of Choices**

As the years progressed, a certain prayer, Baruch she-peterani ne-ousho shel zeh ("Blessed is the One Who has now freed me from responsibility for this one") was recited by fathers when their sons became bar mitzvah. While the true meaning of this blessing has been debated for some time, most agree that it means that the father is no longer responsible for his son's sins.

But it is also a kind of cosmic sigh—an admission that even sincere, competent, highly committed parents are limited in what they can do with their children. The rest is up to the child himself or herself. When parents say Baruch she-peterani, they say, in effect, "Whatever this young person does now, he is legally and morally culpable. Thank God, it's not my responsibility."

Thirteen was the age of spiritual and moral choices. The midrash says that at the age of thirteen, Abraham looked into the heavens and concluded there was a God. Some rabbinic sources say that only at the age of thirteen is a youth first able to make mature choices, because at that time the child becomes endowed with both the yetser hatov (the good inclination) and the yetser hara (the evil inclination), the dueling forces that Jewish theology places within the human psyche.

Thirteen was also the age of religious achievement. According to the Talmud, Bezalel, the architect of the Tabernacle and namesake of Jerusalem's famous art school, was thirteen when he designed the desert sanctuary. The thirteen-year-old child could help constitute a minyan (the quorum of ten adult men needed for communal prayer).

Thirteen also became the age of a kind of legal maturity. The Mishnah, the code of Jewish law compiled around 200 C.E., considers the vows of a boy aged thirteen and a day as legally binding. At thirteen, a youth could be a member of a beit din (a Jewish court), and could buy and sell certain items of value, though apparently not real estate.

The age of thirteen was therefore the crossroads of spiritual, moral, and religious maturity.

There is yet another opinion about the origin of bar mitzvah. Bar mitzvah may have its roots in the berit milah (ritual circumcision) ceremony that occurs when a boy is eight days old. At that ceremony, the father says, "As we have brought this child into the covenant of Abraham, so, too, will he be brought into the study of Torah, the chupah [the wedding canopy] and the performance of good deeds." Bar mitzvah was, therefore, the occasion when the community confirmed that the father had fulfilled the first part of the promise. Ideally, the same people who had attended the berit would also be present when the child became bar mitzvah.

Bar mitzvah, therefore, was a passage not only for the child, but also for the father. In modern times, it is a passage for both parents. It meant that they had fulfilled their Jewish responsibility to the child and to the Jewish community.

**How Did Bar Mitzvah Customs Evolve?**

A child who was younger than thirteen years old performed mitzvot as options. Once he turned thirteen, they were performed as obligations. As the Talmud taught, "It is better to do something when you're commanded to do so than to do something when you're not commanded to do so." The idea of mitzvah also implies responsibility and obligation. It connects us to the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and of all Jews who preceded each thirteen-year-old. It is sacred and it deserves celebration.

Jews sensed this, and during the early Middle Ages, practices began to change. In the twelfth century, the religious rights of minors began to disappear. We are not sure why this occurred. Perhaps it was because the carnage of the Crusades had created a shortage of men, and Jewish communities wanted to give them top priority in ritual matters.

By approximately the late Middle Ages, minors could no longer wear tfilin (phylacteries) or be called for aliyyot to the reading of the Torah. Since those rituals became the defining elements of Jewish
A Custom, Not a Commandment

Not all communities observe Shabbat or observe it in the same way. In some communities, Shabbat is observed as a day of rest and reflection, while in others, it is observed as a day of work and study. However, in the Jewish community, Shabbat is observed as a day of rest and reflection, and it is considered a commandment.

Putting God on the Guest List

Beyond Today's Man
some kind of financial help for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, rather than a pen-pal relationship.

Another manifestation of this secular Jewish religion is holding the bar and bat mitzvah ceremony in Israel. There is no question that such ceremonies create an unbreakable bond between the child and Israel. For many years the favored site was the Western Wall. This has become less popular because of the enforced separation of women at the Wall. An increasingly popular site for the ceremony is now the excavated synagogue at Masada, the Herodian palace overlooking the Dead Sea where the last Zealots held out against the Romans (73 C.E.). Masada symbolizes Jewish continuity in the face of hatred.

In many quarters of American Jewish life, bar and bat mitzvah still primarily means a youth can participate in rituals and he or she is responsible for mitzvot. As an Orthodox rabbi noted:

If their bar mitzvah speeches are any indication, my students really do believe that they are now supposed to perform mitzvot. I hear them saying, "Once I would try to fast as long as I could on Yom Kippur as an option. Now I do it as a responsibility." They now have to wear tefilin. They can now help make a minyan. Becoming bar mitzvah has a sense of immediacy with my people. There's a tangible change in status.

But in the less traditional American Jewish circles, bar and bat mitzvah have other meanings. These may not be explicitly theological. But bar and bat mitzvah means, in all forms of contemporary Judaism, that Judaism survives in this family and by implication, in the world at large. Making that survival coherent and meaningful is our task.

How Did Bat Mitzvah Begin?

Starting in the second or third century of the Common Era, Jewish girls at the age of twelve had a legal responsibility to observe mitzvot. It was not until centuries later, however, that families would begin celebrating the girl's new status with some festivity.

By the 1800s, some families held a seudat mitzvah (a festive meal for a ritual occasion) on a girl's twelfth birthday. Sometimes the girl would deliver a talk and her father would recite the traditional Baruch she-petarani prayer.

Bat mitzvah has always been controversial among Orthodox Jews. Some believe that its status should be less than bar mitzvah because girls must be more demure than boys. Others realize that sound educational arguments support the custom of bat mitzvah.

In mainstream Orthodoxy, the bat mitzvah ceremony is basically a sermonette on the Torah portion, followed by a festive meal. Sometimes the girl does the dvar Torah in the sanctuary, sometimes in the social hall. Girls are seldom allowed to read directly from the Torah scroll. In some Orthodox synagogues, girls lead the service and read from either the Prophets or Writings sections of the Bible. In Orthodoxy, bat mitzvah services may be held on Friday evening, Saturday evening, or Sunday morning, or even after the regular weekday morning service.

The first bat mitzvah ceremony in North America was Judith Kaplan Eisenstein's, the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism. It happened in May, 1922, when, she later recalled, she was "midway between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays."

Years later, she would remember that the night before the event, her father had still not decided the exact form of the ceremony. The next day, as usual at a Shabbat service, Rabbi Kaplan read the mas'ir (the concluding portion of the Torah reading) and the haftarah. Then his daughter, "at a very respectable distance" from the Torah scroll, recited the first blessing and read the Torah selection from her own chumash (a book containing the Pentateuch).

"That was it," she later wrote. "The scroll was returned to the ark with song and procession, and the service was resumed. No thunder sounded, no lightning struck. The institution of bat mitzvah had been born without incident, and the rest of the day was all rejoicing."

Neither Reform Judaism nor Reconstructionist Judaism liturgically distinguish between bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah. In Conservative Judaism, practices range from the girl leading the service and reading from the Torah scroll to simply reading the haftarah. The time of the
What, Finally, Does It All Mean?

In the final line of Judaism, in a way that they could not do when they were children in Judaism, it offers the opportunity to attain their unique religious, educational, and emotional identity. Judaism becomes an integral part of the community.

Usually, adults who become bar or bat mitzvah lead a service of the whole service. The remaining minyan of Jewish and Hebrew study and become bar or bat mitzvah. In particular, adult women, who were not bar or bat mitzvah, in particular, do not have the formal bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, and thus do not have a service of the whole service.
During a conversation on other matters, the talk suddenly turned to plans for a bar mitzvah ceremony to be held in two years. My friend heaved a massive sigh. "It's really terrible," she said, "being under this much pressure to put on a big show, to keep up with what everyone else is doing. The caterer's first question for me was, 'What theme do you want?'"

Every Jew in America has a "Can you top this?" tale about the Worst Bar Mitzvah Party of the Year. We need not list the contenders here. Someday, when the definitive volume of American Jewish Folklore is written, such fables of unmitigated ostentation will constitute a large and (almost) funny chapter.

The bar and bat mitzvah party has been much criticized over the years. And for good reason. Yet, most Jews do not know that the party is an integral part of the bar and bat mitzvah ritual. The first mention of the bar mitzvah party is in the Shulchan Aruch (the classic sixteenth-century code of Jewish law): "It is the religious obligation of the father to tender a festive meal in honor of his son's becoming bar mitzvah, just as he might do when the boy marries."

From a halachic (Jewish legal) point of view, then, the party has a proud lineage. But references to bar mitzvah parties go back even further. Scholars have a field day in locating the genuine seed of the custom.

Some say it goes back to Isaac's weaning. Genesis 21:8 says Abraham threw a feast to celebrate that event. One ancient source suggested that Isaac was weaned at the age of thirteen (Midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 53:10)! Therefore, the party, and, therefore, the connection to the age of thirteen.

Elsewhere, the Midrash suggests that Abraham regretted that he had rejoiced and made others rejoice at the feast for Isaac, yet did not make an offering to God. God said to him: "I know that even if I commanded you to offer your only son to Me, you would not
Celebration of Conspicuous Consumption

A Choice:

mitzvah and he would lead the group after the meal. But the meal did not discern the customs of par
mitzvah. If the meal did not discern the customs of par
mitzvah, what we would do is the Passover dinner to enhance the theme of the
Passover dinner. Therefore the meal became a Passover dinner.

This is the first time when Jews were first

Jewish family. Some historians suggest that these laws keep the Emanuel

22.

The dissection of our ancestors who let the Land of Canaan

Beyond this, I suspect that the Habbos wanted their families to

do wedding rains keep alive, which would mean so long would have to

The table of the middle ages eventually ended the laws that

(Baba Kamma 7:2)

"let us just for the purpose of satisfying the fuller. (Yoma 93b: Shulman)

The mitzvah is not only the first time to consider the other

*The Passover* (Baba Kamma 9:4). This mitzvah teaches the idea of

Beneath the table, the middle ages eventually ended the laws to hint

Rites and Wrongs of Passage

Putting God on the Guest List
The Ethics Of Jewish Celebration

Soon, the materialism that had become attached to bar mitzvah was decried. In 1938, the noted Orthodox rabbi, H. Pereira Mendes, insisted that the bar mitzvah “not be allowed to deteriorate into merely a day for perfunctory observance or for merry-making or gifts.” Twenty-six years later, the Central Conference of American Rabbis condemned the
deterioration in the character of the bar mitzvah “affair.” The extravagant consumption, the conspicuous waste, and the crudity of many of these affairs are rapidly becoming a public Jewish scandal. The lowering of standards as reflected in many bar mitzvah celebrations is in direct violation of the teaching of the Torah. The trend toward the abandonment of aesthetic standards can lead to the abandonment of ethical standards as well.

Concerns about the taste and aesthetics of bar and bat mitzvah are with us today. But there is a larger issue of the Jewish ethics of celebration. Such ethics help us understand the way that Jews view the world.

In his classic, Paganism, Christianity, Judaism, Max Brod taught that there were essentially three religious ways of viewing the world: paganism, Christianity, and Judaism. Christianity—particularly early Christianity—believed that man should behave as an angel. Reject good food, fine wine, and possessions. Enter a monastery to be ascetically sealed away from the temptations of the world. Paganism believed that man was an animal. Seek pleasure, good food, fine wine, and possessions. Live your life like the second reel of Fellini’s Satyricon.

Early Christianity still has a voice in our world. We heard it in the Prohibition movement, and now in certain quarters of the anti-abortion movement. Paganism also still shapes our world. We find it in beer commercials, in Food and Wine magazine, in the Playboy ethic, in the rampant consumerism of American society.

Judaism’s great contribution to the moral vocabulary of the world was that it produced a middle way between those extremes, the way of mitzvah and kedushah. God made us a little lower than the angels, but much higher than the animals. Judaism says that we neither reject nor hoard pleasure. We sanctify pleasure. We sanctify what we eat through kashrut (dietary laws), what we own through tzedakah (holy giving), what we drink by kiddush (blessing the wine), and by drinking moderately on Shabbat, on Pesach, or somewhat immoderately on Purim. We touch a drop of wine to the lips of the newborn baby. We remember the exhortation that goes with the lifted cup: Leshayim. Wine makes our life sweet, but should not be used to the point that it becomes addictive.

Modern Judaism (and by extension, all modern liberal religions) faces the dilemma of the split self, by which I mean: “This is my religious self. That is my non-religious self. I will let religion enter certain areas of my life. But there are many areas of my life that religion will not enter. I will not let religion enter those places because I have arbitrarily ruled that those areas are off-limits to religion.”

The split self says of the bar and bat mitzvah: “The religious part of this moment is what happens in the sanctuary that morning. But then comes the closing song of the service. We say shabbat shalom to each other. We leave the sanctuary. We are in profane territory, and profane comes from pro fanum, meaning ‘away from the sanctuary.’ Then we can do anything we want. For a few moments, we were in the world of text, Torah, and holiness. But beyond those moments, we are back in the real world, when the lessons and Torah of the real world will be heard in all their glory.”

This is not far, really, from those who say, “I don’t care what the Torah says about treating your employees. When I want to hear Torah, I’ll come to the synagogue. In my business, I don’t want to hear Torah.”

A genuine pity. More than a pity—a Jewish scandal. When I attend such affairs, I ask myself, “I don’t want to be puritanical, but is this really about a sacred Jewish passage? Why are these children being pushed into this pseudo-adulthood of tuxedos and strapless dresses? What are we teaching them?”

We must remember that everything we do with our children teaches something. It gets taught without our even knowing it, perhaps even through osmosis. When we split ourselves between Judaism and
"How about Judaism?" the minister,肺炎 to be expected, asked the group.

"A friend told me that when a car door is not closed, "What's the point?"

"If you live your life in a way that is not the best, and you can stomach the pain behind the door, then you should not care."

"Ultimately, these are the answers to: why should we celebrate? Are the celebrations of significant value? Should we celebrate at all?"

"Perhaps we need to redefine our priorities. What is important to us?"

"In this regard, the question is: How do we define success?"

"For some, success means wealth. For others, it means happiness. For still others, it means making a difference in the world."

"We need to ask ourselves: What is important to us? What brings us joy?"

"In the end, it is not about the celebration, but about the people we celebrate with."

"Let us celebrate with love, and let the love shine through."

"Celebrations and Good Times: How To Sanctify Our Life"
Putting God On the Guest List

It's a good answer, simple yet elegant.

What are some of the things that you might do to "put God on the guest list" at your celebration? Write some of your ideas here.