

A-HED

Face Masks and a Mohel: Parents Figure Out How to Host a Bris During Coronavirus

Jewish families adapt with compromises, technological improvisation



Ben Sass and Aliza Jaffe Sass show their newborn son, Leo, to friends and family tuning in on Zoom during his bris.

PHOTO: SASS FAMILY

By [Gabriel T. Rubin](#)

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Thank you for your feedback!

When Ben Sass and Aliza Jaffe Sass learned in January that they had a baby boy on the way, preparations for a bris started immediately. Along with the rest of the logistical advance work of pregnancy, they now had to decide which family members would have the honors of escorting their new son into the ceremony, who would hold the child during the circumcision procedure, and what they would serve their guests at the reception afterward.



They didn't plan for how they would facilitate a surgery on an infant in their Philadelphia apartment during a global pandemic.

When their son, Leo, arrived in June, all their aspirational plans for the event had already been canceled. The bris would be a gathering of fewer than 10 people, all close family members, all

wearing masks. No conveyor belt of relatives and close friends handing the baby to a grandparent to hold during the procedure, like at Ms. Jaffe Sass's brother's bris a generation ago. And no bagel brunch afterward.

"We live in a first-floor apartment so we thought about having people outside who could participate and we'd throw bagels out the window,"

said Mr. Sass, but the idea was ultimately nixed.



Ben Sass and Aliza Jaffe Sass stand with their son, Leo, during his bris.

PHOTO: SASS FAMILY

A bris, or brit milah, is the circumcision ceremony that welcomes newborn boys into the covenant of the Jewish people. By Jewish law, it is conducted on the eighth day of the child's life, unless delayed because of major health concerns. It is a moment of celebration, traditionally conducted in a home or a synagogue rather than a hospital by a trained professional called a mohel or mohelet who are sometimes medical personnel but often clergy members such as rabbis or cantors.

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Though the procedure is unregulated by the government, Jewish organizations have training programs and certification criteria for mohelim. Many communities rely on one or a

handful of mohelim who may conduct the ceremony thousands of times over the course of their careers.

The pandemic has thrown innumerable aspects of religious life into flux, given the centrality of group gatherings to Jewish and other religions' core traditions. But brises are perhaps affected more than most, given that few other religious gatherings involve a public medical procedure. New parents, families, mohelim, and extended communities are adapting to the current reality with a mix of compromises, technological improvisation, and new traditions as they balance religious duties with virus precautions.



Members of the Sass and Jaffe families and Cantor Mark Kushner (right) at the ceremony in Philadelphia.

PHOTO: SASS FAMILY

Dr. Jennifer Novick, a pediatrician and mohelet from Framingham,

Mass., who conducts brises throughout New England, said much of her time before a bris is spent reassuring parents that the procedure is safe during the pandemic. Her medical background is reassuring to clients, and she emphasizes her sanitary practices, describing the number of times she will wash her hands when she is in their home, wearing a mask constantly, and limiting her time in the house to the ceremony itself.

“Usually I would hang out and have a cup of coffee and schmooze with the grandpa, but now I clean up and get out,” she said.

She recently performed the bris of Ben Park and Kira Sargent’s son, Gabriel, with just the three of them and the baby present. They held the infant, a role that might have gone to close family members otherwise, but their parents and siblings were still able to do readings of Jewish texts via Zoom. There was a small silver lining: Ms. Sargent’s sister lives in the U.K. and would likely not have flown in for a bris (given that the maximum notice given tends to be eight days), but she was able to participate in the ceremony virtually.

In fact, lots of people were able to tune in who might not have otherwise come to the ceremony on a weekday morning in Boston. The invite link was shared among friends and more than 100 people ended up on the call. The family didn’t have time to check just who exactly had tuned in.



Ben Park, Kira Sargent and their son, Gabriel, in Boston, with their dog, Max.

PHOTO: BEN PARK AND KIRA SARGENT

“We continue to be surprised when people tell us they were at the bris,” said Ms. Sargent.

Still, an online presence is an inadequate substitute for the real thing, especially when there is caring for an infant involved.

“When you shut the computer, the parents are on their own,” Dr. Novick said. “I worry about new parents. This is a life adjustment that’s not supposed to happen in isolation.”

Some parents have been asking doctors and mohelim if they can delay the procedure until the pandemic is more under control. While some delay can be managed, mohelim and Jewish clergy worry that delaying a bris might mean ending up not doing one at all.

“The question of delay I was very passionate on—you’re no longer dealing with a circumcision that can be done on a dining room table or in a doctor’s office,” said Cantor Mark Kushner, a mohel who estimates he has conducted around 15,000 brises over 43 years in the area between Philadelphia and New York.



Dr. Jennifer Novick, a pediatrician and mohel, conducts brises throughout New England.

PHOTO: JENNIFER NOVICK

He is most concerned about families who are opting to do nothing. “The worry is the next child where the parents say, ‘Well, Johnny didn’t have a bris, let’s not have one for Tommy.’ We’ll have broken the chain.”

People who are going ahead with the ceremony are finding workarounds. At one recent bris officiated by Mr. Kushner in Manhattan, the parents, unable to host a celebratory meal, left out Russ & Daughters goodie bags with

lox and bagels for would-be guests to pick up.

In a moment of crisis, new traditions are emerging. Rabbanit Leah Sarna, the director of religious engagement at Anshe Sholom B’nai Israel synagogue in Chicago, devised a separate communal ceremony with her husband, Ethan Schwartz, following the birth of their son, Cyrus. After a private bris where only they and the mohel were present and only family and her congregation’s head rabbi tuned in on Zoom, they hosted another virtual event that functioned as a naming ceremony.

Ms. Sarna recited Hannah’s Prayer from the Book of Samuel and Birkat Ha-Gomel, a prayer for someone who has just completed a dangerous journey or recovered from an illness.

The flexibility and improvisation gives Mr. Kushner hope that like other times in the religion’s history, “Jews will persevere and continue to keep the covenant.” Plus, one particularly difficult aspect of his job became markedly easier.

“During March and April you could find a parking spot on any block in Manhattan,” he said.

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