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The Guide to Jewish Washington

Upcoming documentary makes the cut

Deborah Frockt
JTNews Correspondent

It's not unusual for a colleague to say, "Hey, do you want to grab some coffee?" Or, "Hey, how 'bout some lunch?" or even, "Hey, you want to go for a beer later?" But when that colleague says, "Hey, I'm doing a bris. You want to come?" you know you could be in for an interesting experience.



Photo courtesy of "Moyl."

But that's just what certified mohel and former Microsoftie David Bolnick began asking television and film producer Moti Krauthamer a few years ago. Collegially, Krauthamer said yes. Sometimes Krauthamer went along for the ride, but oftentimes Bolnick actually needed his friend. Once, Krauthamer was even given a place of honor as the sendak, when there was no one else available to perform the honored role of holding the baby boy during the ritual circumcision.

IF YOU GO Moyl will air on KCTS-Channel 9 on October 20 at 9 p.m. Moyl is part of KCTS's About Us series, and is also available for purchase through www.nationalfilmnetwork.com.

One day, the storyteller in Krauthamer cast his eye on Bolnick, so he pitched his partner a new idea.

"Dave, your story's kind of interesting," he said. "Let me do a story about you."

Thus was born Moyl, the 50-minute documentary set to air on KCTS this month. Krauthamer's portrait of his friend chronicles the work, travel and philosophy of a consummate modern professional who has assumed a very ancient avocation.

Bolnick's journey to become a ritual circumciser began two decades ago in the Bay Area, when a friend had a baby boy but chose not have a traditional brit milah to circumcise the child and welcome him to the Jewish community. Bolnick later found out that the new parents didn't feel comfortable asking the mohel in the area to come to their home because of the disparity between their religious observance and his.

"If you have another boy, I'll find you someone," Bolnick assured the new father. He was confident that research and time would be on his side in fulfilling his commitment. As Bolnick describes it, "I was pretty naïve and thought there were lists of lots of mohelim."

Bolnick's pledge led him to the mohel that his friends had declined to use. His promise "to find" someone to do the next bris evolved: Bolnick began training "to do" the next one. After observing around 100 circumcisions completed by his mentor, Bolnick began to perform his own.

Moyl opens with a shot that no first-time parents-to-be should spend too much time thinking about. The camera trains its eye on Bolnick methodically sharpening his knife and sterilizing all the tools he needs for circumcision. These opening shots, and a scene in which fathers who performed the "cut" themselves talk about that experience,

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remind the viewer that the ritual of the covenant has not changed in thousands of years. While many other rituals Jews perform today are symbols of some more ancient rite that now operate as metaphor, these scenes are vivid reminders that the sign of the Covenant remains unchanged. Today's fathers — engineers, builders, and tech workers — fulfill their halachic obligation in the same way Abraham did.

In two years of attendance at Bolnick brises, Krauthamer saw the economic diversity of the Puget Sound's Jewish community. As Krauthamer remembers the different families he visited with Bolnick, he notes, "Some [had] multi-million dollar homes. I mean 20, 30-million-dollar homes. Then we went into some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in King County."

Krauthamer noticed that the mohel's vantage point was extraordinary.

"You bump into more people in the Jewish community than any rabbi, any president of any organization," Krauthamer says he told Bolnick. "You cross the Jewish community as far as Orthodox, Reform, Conservative. And then you cross something that no one in the organized Jewish community crosses. You hit the unaffiliated. By definition they're not affiliated, but they call [you] at that moment of their life."

Bolnick concurs with Krauthamer's assessment. "Most other people who function in the Jewish community, function with a segment of the Jewish community," he says, "but as a mohel, you cross all communities — the entire Jewish spectrum."

Across the wide spectrum and from an intimate perspective inside people's homes, Bolnick is in as good a position as anyone to offer comparisons between different segments of the Jewish community.

"There are more similarities than people want to admit," Bolnick chuckles. "The neat thing about the Jewish community is that the family structure is stronger than in most other communities — not always, but it usually is."

"I don't care whether it's Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, unaffiliated, you see the same type of behavior. The family just comes together. There's something deep inside of us that says, when there's a bris, everyone should come together."

The bulk of Bolnick's work is in the Seattle-area, but he travels throughout the Northwest to offer his services. Moyl includes footage of Bolnick in his car, his motor home, a floatplane, numerous ferries and even a commercial flight to Juneau, Alaska. However varied the means of transport, the objective is the same: to come to the aid of families and communities who long to fulfill an ancient and eternal promise.

Krauthamer documents the first brit milah performed by a mohel in Juneau in over a decade. The film captures a holy moment in this tiny community's life, made all the more meaningful because of the lengths the parents went to in order to welcome their son in the quintessential Jewish manner. In the film's final shot, Bolnick surveys the rugged, snowy beauty of this distant, northern-most state. One can't help but be struck by how far the custom of brit milah has traveled and the individual and collective commitment it takes — in each generation — for it to endure.
