

Discussion Guide *Moyl*



National Film Network
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Introduction

When we think of America, we tend to measure things in terms of years or maybe tens of years. If we bother to scratch the surface, we will find an America rich with traditions and cultures dating back hundreds and even thousands of years. The documentary *Moyl* (rhymes with oil) is a glimpse of one such tradition; a thread that is part of the American fabric.

Moyl is about the joy, anxiety, spirituality, laughter, and sense of belonging experienced by a community of people in America still performing the nearly 4000 year old ritual of circumcision. The ceremony is more than just a circumcision; it is the continuation of an ancient tradition of welcoming a baby into the community. This ritual is observed by more Jews than any other Jewish religious practice.

The film follows a traveling ‘moyl’ (ritual circumciser), David Bolnick, from family to family and community to community as he helps parents initiate their sons into this ancient Jewish rite.

The film also delves into the more modern aspects of ritual circumcision, from maintaining the ritual even when corrective surgery preempts the traditional ceremony, to fathers choosing to make the ‘cut’ themselves. The film even acknowledges the circumcision jokes that have become part of American culture.

Audience

This documentary is suitable for a general audience, 12 years of age and older. It was designed for broadcast, institutional, and private viewing.

Courses

Diversity, Anthropology, Sociology, Social Studies, Comparative Religion, Jewish Studies, World History, World Cultures, American History, Medical, Nursing, Midwifery, and Social Work.

Remarks

It is sufficient for the teacher to present something like the ‘Introduction’ provided above. Depending on the nature of the course, the teacher may want to present the terms and concepts listed page 3 and 4 before showing this documentary; that is, this documentary would serve as a visual presentation of the subject matter.

Reviews

“Moyl” does a wonderful job of presenting the way an ancient Jewish ceremony continues in modern times. I particularly like the way the film elicits the feelings and emotions of the various participants in the ritual. I would love to show this documentary to my introductory college students, and I’m sure it would do well in many classroom settings from middle school to college.

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Age/Grade

High School, College, and Professional Schools.

Children 12 to 15 may find the subject matter embarrassing and should view this documentary with a teacher, parent, or adult supervisor and within the context of the subject matter such as sociology, comparative religion, anthropology, world cultures, etc. Those over 15 should find this documentary to be a sensitive and informative presentation of the subject matter.

Instructions/Advice

The teacher should carefully view this documentary once or twice before presenting it to students. The teacher should know that even though scenes of actual circumcisions are included, the penis is always masked and is never visible. For 12 to 15 year old students, the teacher should be prepared to pause the video to offer appropriate commentary or to answer questions as they arise. The teacher should never attempt to answer a question that s/he is not well versed in. Questions about Jewish ritual circumcision may be directed to: moyl@brismilah.com (David Bolnick, Certified Mohel) or other subject matter experts.

Important Features

Understanding

Jewish ritual circumcision is called *bris milah* (or *brit milah*) which literally means 'covenant of circumcision' and may be the oldest Jewish ritual. The Bible tells of God giving a commandment to Abraham: "I will sustain My covenant between Me and you, and between your descendants after you ... every male among you shall be circumcised." And so it is that nearly every Jewish male is circumcised. Despite a common misconception, circumcision does not make the child Jewish; circumcision is simply one of the religious duties (commandments) of a Jew that has been faithfully followed one generation after another for nearly four thousand years. Jewish ritual circumcision is not done for reasons of health, hygiene, or cosmetics as might be the case of a medical circumcision; it is done to fulfill the commandment.

Elements of the *bris milah* ceremony:

Bris milah is possibly the oldest ritual in the nearly 4,000 years of Jewish history. It is rich with many beautiful customs. Every mohel, every community, and every family have their own special way of celebrating a *bris*. Below is only a taste of some of those traditions.

On the eighth day is when a *bris milah* should preferably take place. This directive comes from the Bible where God said to Moses: "...on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised..." and so the rabbis instituted that a *bris* can not take place before the eighth day and should only be delayed past the eighth day for extenuating circumstances or if the child is in poor health: "It is possible to circumcise later, but it is not possible to restore life."

A community gathering is common for a *bris milah*; often people come in from out of town and even from around the world. All are welcome: male, female, Jew, non-Jew, young, old -- everybody.

Lighting a candle offers a point of focus. The Talmud refers to the practice during a time when circumcision was prohibited; a lit candle in the window signaled to the community where and when a *bris* was to take place. A more spiritual origin may be that a lit candle represents a spark of life, a new soul entering the Jewish community. As it is written: "... the lamp of God is the soul of man" (Proverbs).

Bearers of the child bring the baby to be circumcised - the *kvatter* & *kvatterin*. As the baby is brought into the room, everyone stands and honors him with a greeting, "*baruch habah*" (May the one who enters be blessed!). This honor is often given to a young couple wishing to have their own baby.

The sandek holds the child during the circumcision. This role, usually given to a grandfather, is considered holy. For many, the experience of passing the covenant from one generation to the next is extraordinarily spiritual. Like the emotional bond of a mother providing nutritional sustenance for her suckling baby, there exists an emotional bond of a *sandek* providing spiritual sustenance for the baby at his *bris milah*.

Every Jewish father is obligated to circumcise his own son. However, most fathers are not trained to circumcise. So he will invite a *moyl* (*mohel*) to serve as his stand-in. A *mohel* is an observant Jew who has studied the texts and laws of *bris*

milah; the anatomy, physiology, and pathology of the penis; and the techniques of circumcision. Upon the completion of the cut, the father recites the Hebrew blessing of entering his son into the 'Covenant of Abraham' (another way of saying *bris milah*).

The Ritual Circumcision is a simple operation that involves the removal of the foreskin-the skin that sheaths the head of the penis. The entire circumcision (including bandaging and diapering) takes less than a minute. Sugar water or sweetened wine is often given the child to calm him during the circumcision.

The excised foreskin is immediately placed in a vessel containing soil. Following the *bris*, the foreskin should be buried. A beautiful custom is to bury the foreskin under the roots of a young tree, then harvest branches from the tree for the child's marriage canopy. This gives the child a sense of where he came from and where he is going to.

A Jewish Name is given immediately following *milah* (the circumcision). Up to this point the child has no Jewish name. Most parents name their child after a deceased loved one; this adds a powerful component to the *bris* ceremony. Other parents name their child after living relatives or pick names of people who had an impact in their lives. Some simply pick names they like that have no connection to the past or present. The key in Jewish culture is that the name is an important representation of the child in both the physical and spiritual world. In many communities, therefore, it is a custom to give a little explanation about the origin of the child's Jewish name and namesake.

Jewish names are composed of a first/middle name followed by the name of the father; e.g., the *moyl's* Jewish name is: Dovid Avraham ben Yehuda Leib halevi. The word 'ben' means son of; 'bot' for a girl. In many communities, the mothers name is also included. This name written in Hebrew would look like this: דוד אברהם בן יהודה לייב הלוי

We celebrate a *bris milah* with joy. The Talmud states that since Jews accepted *bris milah* with joy, it is celebrated with joy-singing, dancing, and most importantly, a festive meal. To honor the parents and their new baby, a nice custom, seen in the film, is to dance around them while singing 'si-mon tov u'mazel tov' (a good sign and good luck).

Difficult references

Many people desire a tangible reason for a ritual practice like circumcision. It is hard for them to understand why Jews have held this practice so dear to their hearts. The seventeenth century Jewish philosopher Spinoza, an opponent of ritual circumcision, understood its importance to the Jewish people: "The sign of circumcision is, as I think, so important, that I could persuade myself that it alone would preserve the nation for ever" (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, Chapter 3, 1670). Yet, It is a story about Rabbi Akiva (ca

100) that may best demonstrate a human way to understand the spiritual realm of circumcision: An inquisitor once asked Rabbi Akiva: "If God had intended man to be circumcised, would he not be born circumcised - is man's handiwork superior to God's?" Rabbi Akiva answered by holding in one hand raw grain, as God had given it, and in the other hand baked goods, as man had perfected it. We learn that we are endowed with form and spirit, and empowered with the capacity and the responsibility to perfect it.

Vocabulary

Bris, Brit - A covenant. Bris is the Eastern European pronunciation. In modern Hebrew it is pronounced b'reet. Colloquially used to mean the ritual circumcision ceremony.

Izmel - A ritual knife used for bris milah.

Halachic - Pertaining to the Jewish laws that govern the proper way of observance (pronounce the 'ch' as in Bach).

Kodesh - Holy. Sometimes the mohel will pronounce 'bris kodesh' (holy bris) to let everyone know that the circumcision has begun.

Mitzvah (pl. mitzvot) - A commandment of God. Colloquially used to mean a good deed.

Mogen - Shield. A shield used to protect the penis during circumcision. A mogen with a clamping arm is called a Mogen Clamp.

Mohel, Moyl (pl. mohelim) - Ritual circumciser. Moyl (rhymes with oil) is the Yiddish pronunciation and has better name recognition in North America. Mohel (mow-hell) is the Hebrew pronunciation.

Torah - A hand calligraphed scroll of parchment containing the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) written in Hebrew.

Trayf - Food that is not kosher and not eaten by many Jews (e.g., pig, shrimp, etc.).

Activities

The student should understand what male circumcision is before viewing this documentary. This will help the student better focus on the cultural aspects of "Moyl."

Things to Think About / Discussion Questions

Are there any traditions in your family? How old are they? How do you feel about them?

What role can extended family and community play for new parents?

Have you ever attended a bris? What did you think about it?

After seeing this film what do you think is the difference between a medical circumcision and a bris?

What did you think about the fathers who made the "cut" themselves?

What role do ancient customs play in modern times?

What role do rituals play in defining a people?

Why do you think this tradition has lasted for nearly 4,000 years?

Is a bris a family event or a community event?

Does humor have a role in ritual? In this ritual?

Is this a ritual for the parents or the child or the community?

Do you think mothers and fathers react differently to this ritual?

How does this tradition fit into the American culture?

Why do you think Jews today still give their children Jewish names?

Are you named after someone? If so, who? Why were you named after him or her? What do you know about that person?

