HOW DOES THE RITUALIST CONCEPTUALIZE THE EDUCATIONAL ELEMENTS AROUND THE BRIT MILAH PROCESS?

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Cantor Eric L. Wasser, Certified Mohel, October 1, 2012.
Abstract

How does the ritualist conceptualize the educational elements of the *brit milah* process?

Jewish educators function in diverse roles and venues. Teachers formally instruct in classroom settings, camp counselors informally teach in the bunk or dining hall and clergy teach about our Jewish tradition by carefully planning experiential education programs, preaching from the *bimah* (podium), chanting from the lectern and carrying on their daily activities in synagogues. In accord with an expansive vision of Jewish education, I suggest that ritualists too, through language and action, teach fundamental aspects of Jewish life as they interact with others in the context of guiding families through life-cycle events.

This dissertation examines the interactions of the ritual leader or circumciser referred to as the *mohel* during the life-cycle rite of passage of ritual circumcision or *brit milah*. I examine the *mohel’s* educational work by describing his interactions with celebrant families and their guests before, during and after the ritual ceremony. After reviewing aspects of ritual theory and educational theory, I employ Schwab’s four commonplaces of education as the lens through which to determine how ritual affects pedagogy and, as a corollary, how pedagogy is affected by ritual structure. This study explores the conceptualizations of seven prominent *mohalim*, three of whom were studied in-depth over a seven month period. I used a mixed methods qualitative research approach by conducting in-depth interviews, observing *mohalim* in their natural settings and conducting follow-up interviews. In addition to material gathered from these interviews, data collection included field notes, transcription recordings and artifact collection.
The data analysis shows that mohalim employ a number of teaching styles and orientations and accommodate multiple meanings during the brit milah process. Additionally, through their interactions, mohalim implicitly teach about both ritual structure and Judaism in general.

A conclusion of the research shows that both through their actions and use of ritual language, it is the educational goal of mohalim to present and communicate a vision of Judaism as a morally sound way of life, and that by fostering feelings of connectedness, to family, generations, spiritual ancestors, community, the people of Israel, or the heritage of Judaism, people’s lives become imbued with great meaning and significance. As two practical implications of the study, I propose nine pedagogic principles of ritual engagement and the expansion of collegial interaction which may serve as useful tools for mohalim as they become more reflective regarding their educational responsibilities. Additionally, this work implies a new way to orient the educational thinking of ritualists in general as they approach their work as a potentially transformative experience found along a continuum of Jewish encounters with celebrant families.
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How does the ritualist conceptualize the educational elements around the brit milah process?

Chapter 1

Introduction

Overview of the Study

Research in Jewish education is an exciting and still emerging field which provides an analysis of opportunities and challenges inherent in passing the richness of our religious heritage to children, adults, families and communities at large. Many studies have focused on the educational impact and effectiveness of day schools, congregational education and even Jewish camping. Units of analysis have included a wide range of stakeholders including teachers, principals, lay-leaders, students and rabbis. Research covering both formal and informal settings has proliferated over the last number of decades.

Ritual practice is often a central theme, a curricular consideration, even a stated or implied goal, of many of the aforementioned educational settings. Furthermore, Judaism is replete with traditional life-cycle rituals or rites of passage from birth through death which mark inevitabilities of physical life. Birth, puberty, marriage and death all are marked by ceremonies which guide families and individuals through these various life passages. Liberal Jews with even the most minimal involvement in Jewish life, often seek to observe these passages within the framework of tradition, often guided by a trained clergy practitioner. Participation in these events is potentially educative for both celebrant families and gathered
guests. With the exception of studies on the life-cycle rite of passage referred to as b’nei mitzvah which marks an adolescent’s transition into adulthood, almost no literature focuses on presentation of life-cycle events from an educational perspective.

This study focuses on ritual circumcision, called brit milah (alternatively bris or brit), and the role of the ritual circumciser referred to as the mohel (alternatively moyel). This investigation offers insight as to how practitioners define and execute their role as both ritualists and Jewish educators during interactions with families and assembled guests. I conducted field-based qualitative research with three mohalim to record and describe their full interactions with families before, during and after the brit milah. I present their performance practice, teaching styles, ritual choices (inclusions and exclusions) so as to offer an insight into their work as ritualists and educators in this highly particular context. Data collection involved interviews of seven well respected and experienced mohalim with a concentration on three specific participants who agreed to be observed in their natural settings while interfacing with families before, during and after the brit milah.

**Statement of the Problem**

Ritual practice in the twenty-first century has experienced a noticeable revival and re-emergence of late (Seligman, Weller, Puett & Simon, 2008). Reform Judaism has reintroduced many rituals previously thought outdated (Freedlander, Hirsch & Seltzer, 1994) and the proliferation of orthopraxies defined in part through ritual action has certainly found its hold not only within Orthodox Judaism (Danzger, 1989) but as well in other traditions, including Islam and even neo-Confucianism which focuses on li, ritual in a broad sense, including acts of
worship and interpersonal rituals (Weller, 1998). Within the centrist denomination of Conservative Judaism, this re-embracement of ritual life, coupled with an ongoing commitment of adherence to Jewish law, implies that life-cycle events will continue to be observed and honored. The sanctity and authority of Jewish law, coupled with a reverence for tradition and concern for continuity of Jewish practice insure the ongoing practice of Jewish life-cycle ceremonies for the foreseeable future. So central to our religion is participation in these life-cycle ceremonies that candidates for conversion to the faith, according to the rabbi’s manual of the Rabbinical Assembly (Rank, 1998) are required to state their intention to circumcise their future male progeny and participate in other Jewish life-cycle ceremonies, ostensibly as a precondition to admittance into the faith.

While many rituals are practiced individually, lay people often reach out to trained professionals to guide them through life-cycle rites-of-passage. As such, these ritual enactments represent a unique opportunity for our most well-trained and well-respected leaders to interact with members of the Jewish community. I suggest that these highly charged encounters represent an exceptional opening for clergy to impact the spiritual and even educational lives of members of their community. Jewish ceremonies, which expose participants to the customs of our heritage and present Judaism in a meaningful and relevant manner, may even have future implications for involvement in institutional and personal religious life. Participation in ritual events for families with young children, some suggest, may even impact future marital contentment (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary & Schwagler, 1993).
While ritual firstly entails function, little is known about how mohalim consider their educational responsibilities surrounding their interactions with celebrant families. My study is an attempt to understand the interface between ritual and education by examining how mohalim function as educators while guiding families through the brit milah process. I employ elements of ritual theory to analyze the idiosyncrasies of their pedagogic work while identifying emergent themes of practice. I borrow from educational and ritual literature to analyze their overall approach to brit milah and consider ways to strengthen self-reflection and collegiality in practice. I also consider the proliferation of physician practiced circumcision and suggest what that may imply for mohalim as they consider their work from an educational perspective. Most importantly, I suggest that the phenomenon of ritual as educative is real and therefore merits our research attention. As such, this study has implications not only for brit milah but other life-cycle rituals as well.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides an opportunity for mohalim to consider their work in light of the interface between ritual and educational theory. This study offers an adaptation of a ritual matrix for understanding the choice points that educators emphasize during ceremonial presentation and is a first effort to describe the present-state of educational experiences that the mohel fashions for assembled communities and families surrounding the enactment of a specific life-cycle rite of passage, namely brit milah. Certainly, this study will heighten the awareness of ritualists to their own pedagogic philosophy and approach during the performance of, and interactions with families preceding and succeeding, life-cycle events.
Furthermore, it is arguable that in a climate where many liberal Jews now turn to physicians to perform circumcision, it is only through offering a unique educational experience that the clergy practitioner can maintain ongoing involvement in this ritual.

For ritual practitioners in general, including cantors and rabbis, *mohalim*, as well as ministers, priests or other functionaries who service religious communities by guiding members through life-cycle passages, this study will accentuate the need to view these events as educational opportunities, and thus consider performance practices and choices through a pedagogic lens. Christian educators have long argued the importance of seeing all aspects of church life as educative and educational (Martin, 2003). So too, Jewish life-cycle ritual, I suggest, must be viewed as an educational opportunity.

For educators in general, this study offers us an opportunity to broaden our thinking about ritual practice as an educational encounter. In the same manner in which academics chose years ago to intensively study congregational schools, arguing that this is where the majority of the population educates their children (Pomson, 2010), similarly, given a re-embrace of ritual practice in general and life-cycle ritual as public display in particular, we should now comprehensively analyze ritual encounter through an educational lens. Finally, Jewish educators can use the findings of this study to guide their own classroom lessons as they teach life-cycle ceremonies and consider a plethora of issues such as the inherent tensions involved in ritual innovation and traditional practice.
Research Questions

Primary research question.

How does the ritualist conceptualize the educational elements around the brit milah process?

Secondary research questions.

Employing Schwab’s (1970) perspective, I consider the four commonplaces of education to guide my analysis as to how the mohel conceptualizes the brit milah process as an educational phenomenon. Therefore, my secondary questions surround the content, the learner, the instructor and the milieu that make up the commonplaces of the encounter.

a) Content: What comprises the mohel’s curriculum for brit milah?
b) Learner: How does the diverse nature of parents, families and guests affect the mohel’s educational work during the brit milah process?
c) Instructor: How does the mohel exercise his educational role before, during and after the ceremony?

4) Milieu: What constraints do mohalim encounter while fashioning an educational experience during a brit?

Personal Background

I was invested at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America over twenty years ago and was the first cantor to complete a master’s degree in Jewish education while fulfilling the
requirements of the Cantors’ Institute. I have served two large metropolitan areas in my pulpit career and have witnessed or actively guided thousands of families through what I hope have been meaningful, educational and memorable life-cycle ceremonies. In 1998 I spent my Sabbatical in Jerusalem and had the opportunity to study the art of *brit milah* under the tutelage of Rav Yosef Halperin, of blessed memory. Halperin, who succeeded his father as the Chief Mohel of Jerusalem, was one of the few qualified professionals in Israel ready to train liberal Jews to perform *brit milah*. His name is worthy of mention not only because of the respect that is demanded by a revered teacher but also because, as one of the sole trainers of liberal *mohalim*, Halperin effectively shaped much of the field of *brit milah* as it exists in America today. Of the seven *mohalim* that I interviewed, no fewer than four, plus myself, learned under his auspices. To this day, I remember fondly sitting in Halperin’s tiny office intensely reading and translating numerous volumes pertaining to customs and laws of circumcision. I remember rotations at two Jerusalem area hospitals, my visits to Chassidic neighborhoods including *Meah Shearim*, my participation in adult circumcision for teenage Russian yeshivas students recently emigrated from the former Soviet Union, and extensive field-work driving around various Jerusalem neighborhoods. My training as an educator and certified *mohel* provided me with an insider’s knowledge for this study as I analyzed life-cycle ceremonies as educational opportunities.

My most salient distinction which is foundational to my research is as follows: When Halperin performed circumcisions he would go into the house, check the baby, recite the blessing, perform the circumcision, quickly sing the *aleinu* (the concluding prayer of the afternoon service), recite the doxology in memory of the deceased and grab a cookie or
beverage before heading out. In Israel, Halperin simply performed a function. Here in America, a completely different process takes place.

In my practice of brit milah, there is always a pre-bris meeting or phone call which takes place and the ceremony itself, typically a public event, is conducted with deliberately chosen inclusions and exclusions, as well as elaborate explanations and commentary. During the ceremony, I have a clear intention to educate and elucidate, to somehow fashion a meaningful, memorable and educational Jewish experience. Whereas in Israel, Halperin was a functionalist, my instinct and personal practice as a mohel, coupled with my ongoing observations of colleagues in the field, suggest that American mohalim see these encounters as opportunities for Jewish education. After all, if this ritual event is induction into the covenant, acceptance of responsibility as a Jewish parent, a ritual celebration of family and heritage, an opportunity to expose adults to customs and law, or even perhaps, a conduit to future Jewish affiliation and involvement, how can one not consider the ritual process and the actions of the mohel through a pedagogical lens?

From the time I first sat with Dr. Stephen Brown, the dean at the William Davidson School of Jewish Education and later received a fellowship to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, I have voiced a desire to study life-cycle ritual from an educational perspective. I have asked myself as a clergy practitioner and educator the fundamental question as to how the mohel conceptualizes the educational elements of the brit milah process. As I reflect on Fox, Scheffler & Marom (2003) and their six visions of education, I have asked myself if there is an existing model or vision of Jewish education that is applicable to
ritual performance, or does ritual in this context require a new framework, perhaps a frame
akin to principles of ritual engagement? As I consider speech used in this context, I question if
there is a paradigm for describing the language and actions of ritual enactment. As I reflect on
models of religious education in general, I ask myself if this public ritual fits neatly into existing
models of family education or adult education. Most importantly, are life-cycle rite of passage
as presently practiced by mohalim considered a key time for passing on values and identity and,
if so, what does that imply for the practitioner? Finally, how does the mohel come to balance
the various and complex relationships among the four players of ritual performance referred to
by Schechner (1991) as a quadrilogue between spectators, performers, authors and directors?

Background of the Study

Ritual practice is the functional enactment of observable religious belief. It is where
religion comes to life. For centuries Christians have explained their repeated enactment of the
Holy Eucharist as a fulfillment of Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, “Do this in remembrance of
me” (Luke 22:19). Jewish tradition similarly recognizes the importance of observable action in
the famous dictum, “We will do and we will understand” (Exodus 24:7). Judaism is
fundamentally characterized as a religion of deed rather than belief. These deeds or actions are
represented by the performance of rituals or mitzvoth.

Within Jewish tradition, actions of religious ritual impact all temporal rhythms of
eexistence. Daily rituals include washing of hands upon rising, as well as donning of tallit and
laying of tefillin each morning. Weekly rituals center on preparing for Sabbath, recitation of
kiddush, blessing of the children, separation of havdalah and, for many, synagogue attendance.
Monthly rituals include visitation to the *mikvah*, publicly announcing the new month, sanctifying the new moon under the evening’s skylight called *kiddush levannah* and even participation in women’s *rosh chodesh* study groups. Seasonal rituals include the observance of agriculturally based pilgrimage holidays including *pesach*, *succot* and *shavuot* and the celebration of post biblical holidays such as *hanukkah* and *yom ha-atzmaut*. In our contemporary setting, Cohen & Eisen (2000) argue that traditional ritual practice has come under critical scrutiny. In an attempt to imbue old actions with new meanings and significances, autonomously motivated American Jews generally shy away from authorized clergy support while attempting to guide themselves through many of these daily, weekly, monthly and seasonally repeating rituals.

Periodic and significant life transitions are similarly impacted by ritual practice. Despite the aforementioned propensity towards ritual independence, many in the community are still typically guided by a ritual specialist, often a rabbi or cantor, through significant ceremonial rituals including *simchat bat*, *brit milah*, *b’nei mitzvah*, weddings and funerals. It is arguable that, the combination of the inherent complexity, non-repetitive nature and public display of these specific rituals during crucial life passages leads even autonomously motivated Jews to seek assistance in the enactment of these ceremonies. Such brief yet emotionally charged encounters therefore represent an exceptional opening for clergy to shape the spiritual and even educational lives of members of the community with whom they interact.

As an invested *hazzan* and certified *mohel*, I have participated in thousands of these life cycle events during my professional career. Personal observation reveals startling contrasts
between performance practice of life-cycle ritual in Orthodox and liberal settings. In particular, when liberal communities gather to mark these significant occasions, ceremonies are accompanied by detailed description, nuanced explanation and critical commentary. It is this extra feature of performance practice, coupled with interactions before and after the ceremony, which I suggest takes on educational significance. I expect in fact that most clergy would offer that it is the very lack of familiarity with ritual traditions and biblical narratives which serves as the impetus for sharing detailed explanation and descriptions during life-cycle ceremonies. Such assumptions would concur with the findings of Anderson & Fowley (1998) who offer that, “one can no longer assume even the most general knowledge of the fundamental stories of Judaic or Christian traditions (Anderson & Fowley, 1998, p.4).” Those who regard themselves as practicing Christians and Jews are often biblically illiterate and likely to know more about the life of an entertainer or sports hero than about heroes of faith. In response to this void, I suggest that ritual specialists view life-cycle events as an opportunity to explain, elaborate, enrich and educate. Fortunately during the time of my study, my assumption was validated in no less a popular source than the New York Times that ran an article highlighting the contributions of a specific mohel within the Jewish community. “I’m there to fulfill a Torah commandment, to educate and to let them know what the significance is (of the brit milah ritual),” (New York Times, Feb 2, 2012, p.A22).

The potential influence of such commentary and explanation during the performance of life-cycle ritual should not be underestimated. Whitehouse (2004) argues that ritual invites exegesis and opens the floodgates to an infinite flow of possible interpretations which can minimally foster curiosity, and encourage the formation of new questions and maximally,
illuminate the entire cosmological landscape while transmitting relevant religious teachings. Furthermore, Cohen (1992) describes family life-cycle events as crucial entry points when Jews are most open to an educator’s intervention. These intense life passages are amongst the times when people look to religious communities, institutions and experts for guidance and instruction. Meaningful and educationally powerful interactions can leave lasting impressions and even lay the groundwork for important life-long shifts in Jewish involvement. Whitehouse and Cohen’s assertions highlight the necessity therefore of filtering ritual performance through strong educational conceptualizations.

While I believe it is incumbent upon clergy to offer meaningful and relevant life-cycle rites of passage when given the rare opportunity to interface with members of our faith community, I believe it is equally crucial to examine the pedagogical realities and educational complexities or even potentialities inherent in this specific context. To guide the reader in understanding the nature of the Jewish ritual practice of *brit milah*, I offer now an overview of the common elements of traditional circumcision ritual including the qualifications of the ritual practitioner, the *mohel*.

**The *brit milah* process and ceremony**

Judaism is a religious tradition centered on the performance of ritual actions. Jewish tradition stipulates six hundred and thirteen commandments which are divided into a number of categories, the most basic of which are positive and negative commandments; that is commandments that either require a positive act by the participant or require refraining from certain actions. Of this larger group of six hundred and thirteen, sometimes referred to by a numeric acronym as the *TaR”YaG Mitvoth* (the 613 commandments), there is a group of
commandments related to the service in the Holy Temple that are no longer actively practiced but nonetheless remain a remnant of collective Jewish consciousness. Of the remaining observed commandments, some are practiced daily or even numerous times per day while others are performed but once in a lifetime. The commandment of circumcision falls into this latter category. The study of ritual circumcision deserves attention not only due to its unique status as a once in a lifetime commandment but also because it is literally the oldest recorded Jewish ritual practice in existence.

_Brit milah_ or the covenant of circumcision as recorded in the bible is based on God’s demand for fidelity as manifested through the act of circumcision in exchange for the arrangement of an ongoing partnership between God, Abraham and his descendants.

As for me, this is the covenant with you; You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile and make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan as an everlasting holding. I will be their God. God further said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep; every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact (Genesis 17:4-14).
It is of note that the procedure of circumcision, which is not explicated in the bible itself, was likely known to the communities of the time in the surrounding areas. Sarna (1989) suggests the practice was well-known in divergent cultures from Anatolia to Western Sudan, from the Australian Aborigines to the Masai of East Africa, and from the Polynesian cultures to kingdoms in Southern Africa. The observance of the rite is central to biblical life as evidenced by it being a precondition of marriage (Gen. 34:14-17), participation in the Passover ritual (Ex. 12:43-48) and entrance into the Land of Israel (Josh. 5:4).

Post-biblically, as with other ancient practices, rabbinic tradition has developed over the millennia various rituals embellishments before, during and after the circumcision itself, resulting in a rich ceremony which expands upon the performance of this commandment.

The ritual of circumcision actually begins the night before the ceremony which is referred to in the Zohar as the Night of the Guarding. In Sephardic communities this is referred to in Hebrew as leil shimurim, whereas in Ashkenazic communities the pre-circumcision night is referenced in Yiddish as the voch nacht (Krohn, 1985). Based on a teaching that the performance of circumcision potentially saves the Jewish people from purgatory, the assumption is made that in heaven, the Accuser will try to interfere with the circumcision. Therefore, adults gather to literally watch over the infant while the males study biblical and talmudic passages related to the performance of this commandment. The merit of such study will ensure that the commandment is properly fulfilled the next morning. Biblical passages reviewed, all pertaining to circumcision, include Gen. 17, 21:1-8, Ex. 4:24-26, Lev 12:1-3, Num. 23:10, 25:10-12, Deut. 10:16, 30:6, 33:8-11 and Joshua 5:1-9. Legal codes delineating the
practice which are also reviewed include chapters from *Yoreh Deah* 260-268 and *Orech Chayim* 331. Talmudic passages studied include *Shabbat* 130a-137b, *Nedarim* 31a-32b and *Yevamot* 70a-74a. Finally a compilation of texts are studied from *Midrash Rabbah* as follows: Gen. 45,47 and 48, Ex. 15:12, 17:3 and 19:4-5, Lev. 27:10, Num. 12:8, 14:12 and 15:12 and Deut. 6:1.

While this custom today is centered on the serious male-centered study of various passages, it is of note that this custom, during the Middle Ages in Italy and Central Europe, offered a vastly altered sociological perspective of Jewish observance which reflected the twin themes of intermingling of nocturnal fear and freedom as well as the co-mixing of the sacred and profane (Horowitz, 1989). Only with the emergence of European sensibilities alongside internal developments in Jewish society did the observance of this custom, according to Horowitz, appropriate a fully sacred and predominantly patriarchal character. In its original form, the all-night celebration as described, involved abundant food, cards, dice, singing and story-telling by female friends and relatives in an effort to allay the mother’s fears concerning potential harm to the infant. It was only a few of the pious men, who during this gathering, engaged in the study of texts relating to the commandment of ritual circumcision.

In addition to study of related passages on the origin and laws of circumcision, there is also a custom to have children recite biblical verses (Gen 48:16) by the crib-side and for the father to place the knife for the ritual under the infant’s pillow, both actions to protect the newborn from harmful demons (Krohn, 1985).

The day of the ceremony is highlighted by the participation of three ritual designees referred to as the *kvatter*, the designee who carries the baby into the room; the *sandek*, the
honoree who holds the baby during the procedure and the *mohel* or ritual circumciser. The *ba’al habrit* (the master of the circumcision) or alternatively, the *ba’al simcha* (the master of the celebration) is a reference to the father of the baby. The term *kvatter* is unclear in origin and derives from either the German *gvatter* meaning intimate one, that is to say a close friend of the family (Zocher Habrit 19:1), or may be based on an allusion to the priest who burned incense in the Temple. The sacrifice of circumcision is metaphorically akin to the smoke of the Temple sacrifice which burned and ascended to heaven. The Hebrew term *koter* (meaning burn) may have been mispronounced to form the new term *k’vatter* (Yoreh Deah 265:35). The second honoree, the *sandek* is designated to hold the infant on his knees during the performance of the procedure. The term is likely based on the Greek *suntekos*, meaning companion. In some communities it is considered an honor to approach the *sandek* after the *bris* and receive a blessing from this designee. The third ritual character involved is the *mohel* or ritual circumciser. It is the *mohel* who in contemporary settings often guides Jewish families through this life-cycle rite of passage and will function as the unit of analysis in my study.

During the day of the ceremony, morning prayers are embellished by an antiphonal chanting between the *mohel* (the ritual circumciser) and the congregation. To emphasize liturgically the Divine gift of the Promised Land in exchange for the act of circumcision, the passage “and you established the covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite to his offspring” is chanted back and forth between the two parties on the morning of the gathering. Additional liturgical additions include special mystical prayers recited by the *mohel*, the father and the *sandek*, all of which are recited before the ceremony begins.
As the ceremonial service commences, the entrance of the baby is accompanied by words of two liturgical pieces. The baby is first welcomed with the proclamation, “Blessed is he who comes into the covenant on the eighth day”, and then the mohel recites a passage from Numbers 25:10-12 referencing the biblical character Pinchas who is blessed by God with a covenant of peace.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Phinehas, the son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion’. Say, therefore, I grant him My pact of friendship (briti shalom).

Today the service continues with an addition from the Middle Ages which marked the point in history where personal moments of transition were increasingly shared with community. Marcus (2004) argues that as Jewish rites of passage became more public, collective symbols were added to personal ones. Here, as a family welcomed a newborn into its rank, so too, the community celebrated and affirmed its collective identity. The chair of Elijah was considered a symbol of messianic redemption to be embraced by the entire people and its inclusion into the service placed the onetime event in the life of this child into a cosmic framework. In the Italian rite the child is welcomed as if he himself may be the messiah. This inclusion was possibly a reaction to the post First Crusade expectation of the second coming in the Christian world.

As the infant is placed on the symbolic Throne of Elijah, words from Genesis (49:18) and the book of Psalms (119:166, 119:162) are recited by the mohel or another honored guest.
“This is the Throne of Elijah the Prophet who is remembered for good. For your salvation do I long, I hoped for your salvation and I performed your commandments. Elijah, angel of the covenant, behold, yours is now before you; stand at my right hand and assist me. I hoped for your salvation God. I rejoice over your word like the one who finds abundant spoils. There is abundant peace for the lovers of Torah and there is no stumbling block for them. Praiseworthy is the one you choose and draw near to dwell in your courts; may we be satisfied by the goodness of your House, your holy Temple.”

Whereas the religious obligation of fulfilling this commandment falls upon the father of the infant, there is typically here a verbal or physical assignment of agency by the father to the mohel who is thus given the honor and responsibility of fulfilling the biblical commandment of circumcision on the father’s behalf. The father and mohel then recite an introductory petition called hinneni which demarcates their readiness to fulfill the biblical commandment of circumcision.

Two blessings are next recited. In the Sephardic (Western European and North African) custom the father first recites, “Praised are you Lord, King of the Universe who has sanctified us by your commandments and commanded us to bring our son into the covenant of Abraham our forefather” followed by the mohel’s recitation of the blessing, “Praised are you Lord our God King of the Universe who has sanctified us by your commandments and commanded us regarding circumcision.” In the Ashkenazic (Eastern European) tradition the order for these blessings is reversed.
The actual medical procedure consists of three parts. First the foreskin is surgically removed with a two-sided knife or izmal. This is referred to as hittukh and milah. Then, the inner lining of the prepuce is firmly held and torn down as far as the corona to expose the glans and the corona. This second process called periah is often done today with surgical instruments at the same time that the foreskin is first removed. A rite called metzizah is now performed as blood is sucked from the wound as a means of disinfection, either with the aid of gauze, a swab or glass tube (Sarna, 1989). After the mohel performs the circumcision, the assembled formally respond in a liturgical manner by exclaiming, “As he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into the study of Torah, the marriage canopy and the performance of good deeds.”

The liturgy continues with two additional blessings recited by the mohel. The first is the traditional blessing over the wine followed by a blessing praising God for establishing his covenant with the people of Israel.

The second main section of the rite is the assignment of the Hebrew name. According to Ashkenzic tradition, the naming of a newborn often involves remembering a deceased relative. In contrast, Sephardic tradition allows naming the baby after a living relative, also here as a sign of respect and honor. During this prayer, the verse b’damyaich chayi (by this blood you shall live) is recited and wine is placed on the baby’s lips with sterile gauze. The liturgy includes a prescription for the continuance of religious behavior often recited by all present which reads, “As he has entered the covenant, so too may he enter a life of Torah, be blessed to stand under

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1 New York Times, September 12, 2012: Infectious disease experts widely agree that the oral contact, known in Hebrew as metzitzah b’peh, creates a risk of transmission of herpes that can be deadly to infants, because of their underdeveloped immune systems. Between 2004 and 2011, the city learned of 11 herpes infections it said were most likely caused by the practice. Two of those babies died; at least two others suffered brain damage.
the marriage canopy and lead a life marked by the performance of good deeds.” A brief prayer for recovery for the infant is next recited. Some include hereafter the prayer for thanksgiving referred to as the shechiyanu and the recitation of the priestly benediction taken from Numbers 6:24-26 which reads, ‘May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord deal kindly and generously with you. May the Lord bestow his favor upon you and grant you peace.’ The third part of the service concludes with a segue into a festive meal termed the seudat mitzvah, for which the grace after the meal includes special additions in honor of the occasion and its honorees.

Who is the mohel

The legal obligation of performing circumcision rests upon the father so as to parallel God’s command to Abraham to circumcise himself, his sons and his future male progeny. When not qualified to perform ritual circumcision, which is typically the case, the father appoints someone who is proficient in the practice (Caro. J., Yoreh Deah.265:9). The mohel is specially trained in the theory and practice of circumcision. In contemporary society, the mohel is typically certified by a hospital or board of rabbis attesting to his piety as well as his knowledge of the rules concerning circumcision (Klein, 1979). In many communities the mohel is an ordained cantor or rabbi.

Summary

In our contemporary setting the mohel often interacts with families before, during and after the brit. He may teach various aspects of Jewish life in general and Jewish ritual in particular while he guides families through this special time of life. Likely, the practitioners’
conceptions shape the interactions with families and experience of the assemblage during the ritual encounter. Through this study we will be offered firsthand insight as to how mohalim function as both ritual leaders and Jewish educators.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

My dissertation includes six chapters. The first chapter offers an introduction to the study by presenting the primary and secondary research questions as well as an overview of the traditional components of the *brit milah* ritual. Chapter two shares a literature review which considers the structure of life-cycle rites of passage, elements of ritual, consideration of both ritual knowledge and ritual meaning, frameworks of Jewish and general education, the implications of the presence of the ritualist and the potential interface of ritual and pedagogy. In the third chapter, I introduce the participants in the study and share the utilized methodology. Chapter four includes my descriptive findings of the *mohel*'s work and identifies emergent themes in practice. In chapter five I analyze my findings through the use of a ritual matrix for mapping *brit milah* and offer an in-depth discussion. Finally in chapter six, I share my insights and conclusions, suggest implications for *brit milah* and ritual in general and recommend areas for future research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

New York Times Feb 2, 2012  page A22. “I’m there to fulfill a Torah commandment, to educate and to let them know what the significance is...”.

Overview

This literature review guides the reader to a consideration of the problem introduced in the first chapter of the text. I begin by offering an outline of some of the characteristics of ritual in general and life-cycle rites of passage in particular. I introduce the concepts of the ritual matrix, ritual knowledge, ritual meaning and ritual language which will provide the basis for charting the performance of *brit milah* in a liberal setting. I review the extant ways of considering ritual and education and move on to suggest a significant gap in the literature. I then expand on the thinking of ritual and education by offering frameworks that are typically considered in other educational contexts but have yet to be written about in the context of life-cycle ritual performance. I suggest how the consideration of these frameworks is applicable to the study of this particular life-cycle rite of passage.

Characteristics of ritual

A widespread, accepted anthropological definition of ritual is taken from Roy Rappaport (1999) who offers neither a functional nor substantive definition thereof but rather gives primacy to the central performative features of ritual phenomenon. Performance is essential to ritual, for as Rappaport suggests, if there is no performance, there is no ritual. He posits that ritual is the performance of a more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers. Kapferer (1983) expands Rappaport slightly by adding that
ritual is a series of culturally recognized and specified events, the order of which is known in advance of their practice and which are marked off spatially and temporally from the routine of everyday life. Both suggest that participation in predetermined ritual patterns demonstrate the establishment of convention and the sealing of a social contract. Religious ritual furthermore invests what it encodes with morality while representing a paradigm of creation and generation of the concept of the sacred. In religious ritual, through the sanctification of conventional order and evocation of a numinous experience, participants grasp the holy and construct orders of meaning transcending the semantic.

**Life-Cycle Rites of Passage**

Rites of passage (Bell, 1997) are ritual ceremonies that accompany and dramatize such major events as birth, coming of age initiations for boys and girls, marriage and death. Sometimes called life-crisis or life-cycle rites, these rituals culturally mark a person’s transition from one stage of social life to another. While these rites may be linked to biological changes, they frequently depict a sociocultural order that overlays the natural biological order without being identical to it. Rather, scholars suggest that there exists a deep human impulse to take the raw changes of the natural world and, according to Levi-Strauss (1969), “cook” them into cultural realities so as to exert some type of quasi-control over physical inevitabilities.

Intrigued by the universal nature of these types of rites, Van Genep (1960) suggested that the life of an individual in any society can be seen as a series of passages from one stage to another, one age to another or one occupation to another. Rites de passage ceremonies mark transitions between recognized social situations. Such life transitions imply negotiating an
unknown, dangerous or difficult predicament while establishing new boundaries, expectations and commitments. These changes are transforming not only for the individual but for the community as well. Cross-culturally, these life crises include territorial transmigration, pregnancy, birth, initiation, betrothal, marriage and death. Van Genep presents a three-fold spatial metaphor for all such ceremonies, schematically including separation, transition and incorporation or re-aggregation.

During such passage, the person who enters a status at variance with the one previously experienced becomes sacred to others who remain in a profane state. Metamorphosis to the desired status calls for rites performed followed by the eventual incorporation of the individual back into the group, returning him/her to the customary routines of life. Separation is marked by the physical removal of the individual. Transition is the liminal stage during which some action is performed or words are spoken. Incorporation is the communal denouement or re-aggregation of the transient into the collective. The effect of ritual passage is to transform both the individuals who undergo them and the communities that design and perpetuate them. Van Genep’s trifold structure is recognizable in both familiar and exotic Jewish life-cycle ceremonies.

The ancient circumcision ritual begins with removing the infant from the mother (separation), continues with the placing of the baby on the lap of the sandek/kiseh shel eliyahu for the procedure (transition) and concludes with the incorporation of the child into community through a naming ceremony and festive meal (re-aggregation). Similarly, bar mitzvah involves separation, as the student spends months of study with a qualified teacher, transition, during
which biblical selections are chanted from the *bimah* and finally incorporation which involves the communal celebration associated with the conclusion of the *simcha* (the joyous occasion). Traditional marriage rites consisted of separation (as the bride officially left her father’s home) followed by transition (represented by the couple’s presence under the canopy and arguably the brief period of togetherness called *yichud*) and re-aggregation (the celebratory week during which special meals are prepared and blessings are recited by the community to honor the couple referred to as *sheva berachot*). Classical mourning rites fit the trifold pattern in a prolix manner through the rending of garments upon hearing of the passing of a loved one (separation), the indeterminate legal status between receiving news of the death and the burial of a loved one called *onenu* (transition) and the walk around the block to indicate cessation of the seven day mourning period called *shivah* (reincorporation).

In a less familiar ceremonial context there exists written evidence that Jews of Northern France and Germany created an innovative school initiation rite for five or six year old boys. This *Shavuot* (Pentecost) enactment was likely a polemical response to the Eucharist, and gained widespread popularity for a short period of time beginning in the twelfth century. This school initiation ceremony similarly follows Van Genep’s three-part outline.

Marcus (1996) describes that on Pentecost morning the boy is wrapped in a coat or *tallit* (prayer shawl) and carried from his home to his new teacher’s home or school (separation). Sitting on the teacher’s lap, the boy recites the letters of the alphabet forward, backward and as symmetrically paired dyads at the prodding of the teacher. The boy then licks honey off the board and ingests virgin-baked cakes and hard-boiled eggs on which are inscribed biblical
sentences (transition). After an incantation against the prince of forgetfulness is recited, the boy is led to the riverbank (incorporation) and told that his learning, like the flow of the river, will be eternal.

Turner (1969), who lived among the Ndembu tribe of Zambia for four years, extended and expanded Van Genep’s earlier framework by concentrating on the middle/transitory stage of these ceremonies. Transition, he argues, involves a cessation of mundane activities, a mimetic enactment of some type and most importantly, the elaboration and challenge of the structures of everyday life. Turner offers fascinating comments regarding the liminal person or groups experiencing ritual transition. The unique bonding which often occurs between co-participants, he labels communitas.

Liminal people exist in the interstices of social life. As people of indeterminate status, they are homogeneously conceptualized as having no status. The absence of a structured understanding of their predicament opens pathways for the collective to imbue the individual or group’s situation with powerful myths, symbols and wisdom from the repository-wealth of the tradition. In Jewish ceremonies, this liminal status is embodied by the baby on the lap of the sandek, the couple under the chuppah and the child on the teacher’s knee on the first day of school. Often in this context, mythical figures who have the potential to restore ethical and legal equilibrium or even universal human values into the world (such as Abraham at a wedding and Elijah at a circumcision) are introduced into the ceremonial enactment. Jointly passing through these altered states, liminal individuals experience communitas, a unique sense of being and connection with others. Anti-structure (the absence of defined social roles and
hierarchy by wealth) begets comradeship and community through a unique recognition of an essential and generic human bond. The immediacy of communitas, its sentiments and dedication to collectively transmitted ideals, seldom is maintained because individuals are sociologically predestined to return to the context of a structured existence. It is during this liminal phase that practitioners like mohalim have the opportunity to build bonds amongst participants and share teachings from the tradition.

Elements of Ritual

Ritual theorists posit an interpretive framework or schematic map to chart the performative elements of all ritual enactment. Such ethnographic coordinates enable an outsider to follow the actions of a particular ritual and record or recall the specifics of ritual practice so as to provide a basis for comparative discussion and criticism. All of these coordinates may be manipulated by the specialist in order to create an idiosyncratic ritual performance. While not yet studied in detail, many of these coordinates can be presented by and attended to by the mohel so as to have significant pedagogic implications.

Grimes (1995) postulates the existence of eight coordinates which he refers to as ritual space, ritual objects, ritual time, ritual sound, ritual language, ritual identity, ritual action and ritual interpretation. Space refers to features of where the enactment occurs and describes many of the physical settings of the ritual. Analysis of ritual space asks whether the setting is indoors or outdoors, a special/holy or random place, a physically high vs. low place, an accessible vs. secluded setting? Is the place permanent or temporary? Is there a required shape or size? Ritual objects note the number and physical characteristics of objects associated with
the rite. Ritual time charts the temporal dimensions of each ritual enactment. The use of non-linguistic features is referred to as the coordinate of ritual sound. Ritual language determines if the rite presupposes literacy on the part of the participants and how that affects the ritual performance. Ritual identity notes the roles and offices operative during the enactment. Are there ritually conferred names amongst participants? How are roles determined? Who receives ritual recognition? Do these roles extend indefinitely or are they circumscribed by the performance of the ritual itself? Ritual action deals with actions performed as part of the rite and notes the order in which they occur. Who are the central actors? What meaning do they ascribe to their actions? Are parts of the rite framed theatrically? Is activity or passivity most pronounced? Finally, these constituent parts lead to the most important category of ritual interpretation, which aims to synthesize the meanings of the complete ritual performance.

Theologian Jean Corbon (1988) cites ritual coordinates as permanently constitutive elements of all ecclesial celebrations, regardless of denominational identity. He suggests that eight elements represent a common morphology of the Catholic Church’s ritual celebrations. These coordinates include the presence of an assembly, the participation of an ordained minister, the offering of the gift of the body of Christ, the word of God proclaimed by the minister, the performance of symbolic actions, the offering of song, and the structural constants of a certain time and space. Driver (2006) expands Corbon’s work by delineating fifteen performative liturgical actions that are part of taking Holy Communion. These include invoking the presence of God, giving praise to God, noting the world’s oppression, passing the peace, calling upon those who came before, reading scripture, preaching, sermonizing, responding to the preacher, singing/dancing, offering, praying, breaking bread and telling
stories. It is my contention that each of these actions, elements or coordinates, as well as their inclusion, emphasis or exclusion, is reflected in a particular pedagogic consideration by the mohel as he guides families through the life-cycle rite of passage of brit milah.

Ritual Knowledge

An understanding of “knowledge that ritual presents” in the very nature of its performative context is that offered by Jennings (1982) who cedes that ritual forms, as a basic component to religious life, are intrinsically tied to theological reflection and thus imply the sharing of types of knowledge. Yet the uniqueness of ritual is that, akin to Schechner (1993), through the combination of action, words, witnessing and texts, ritual as form, is neither subsumed by the study of literature, the anthropology of religion or the paradigm of biblical criticism. As opposed to addressing the mythic or narrative aspects symbolic in ritual, Jennings assumes that the knowledge shared in ritual is that experienced and demonstrated in ritual participation itself. This knowledge falls into three unique noetic functions, potentially inherent in moments of religious encounter.

Firstly, ritual is a means of gaining knowledge or of coming to know. Whether through variation, inclusions or exclusions, Jennings suggest, ritual generates a sense of self-understanding through engagement in physical activity, not through detached observation or contemplation, but rather through action. In a physical sense, the doing of or participating in ritual while learning the fitting actions is a type of knowledge gained. This physical learning of the appropriate sequence of actions represents engagement in ritual and alters or transforms the actors themselves and transforms the world in which the action takes place. During the
Eucharist the holding of the chalice and knowing what to do therewith is a kind of coming to know, while at the bris, the parent who holds a knife in his hand and then either removes the foreskin or alternatively appoints a mohel to remove the foreskin of his son’s penis and then recites the blessings as an act of Jewish faith has learned the fitting action or the designation of agency through action.

Due to the fact that actions however cannot take place absent our connection from the world in which we live, Schilbrack (2004) builds on Jennings (1982) by suggesting that ritual should also be seen as a form of metaphysical inquiry, as a source of knowledge about the most general contexts of human existence. Ritual thus teaches knowledge-of-being in the world in which an organism transforms its environment to pursue its purposes. Schilbrack continues by offering that those participating in a pilgrimage to Mecca come to know not only the appreciation of the trip to Mecca, but that life itself is a pilgrimage. Similarly, during the ritual of brit milah, participants come to know not only the appropriate actions to take during the ritual enactment, but especially during the liminal phase, come to understand the concept of covenant and what it implies regarding their place in and their actions towards the world itself.

Secondly, ritual through repetition is the structure through which to transmit knowledge of our way of being and acting in the world, referred to as pedagogic mode of ritual. Herein Jennings describes how ritual enactment fosters both imitation and response and thus models future patterns of action in similar ritual settings. That is to say, the act of doing the ritual teaches the ritual and provokes imitation of the ritual in the future. Simply stated, the performance of the bris teaches what is involved in the bris ceremony and makes the ritual
distinguishable from and recognizable in other ritual settings. It is this repetitive nature and pedagogic knowledge of ritual that carries implications for ritual performance and ritual innovation.

Thirdly, the responses of those observing the ritual which complete the ritual action similarly provide models of response to the participants for future ritual encounters, whether responses are performed in the ritual space or elsewhere. A ritual participant is thus exposed to the knowledge of how to celebrate in a Jewish context, how to extend words of mazel tov, or even how to behave in other ritual contexts. Knowing of paradigmatic ritual response can provide a model for fitting action in contexts or situations not yet ritualized. The mohel's idiosyncratic organization of the brit milah process and enactment of the ceremony therefore teach these three noetic elements of this particular life cycle rite of passage.

**Ritual Meaning**

The ritual specialist understands that as a dramatic performance, rites are inevitably scrutinized by those participating, interpreted by those attending, and evaluated in terms of perceived meaning. From a post-positivistic lens, a plethora of meanings are potentially present at any ritual occasion. Hoffman (1993) and Kahn & Hoffman’s work (1996) on polysemy prove instructive when considering aspects of ritual meaning.

Hoffman (1993) posits that official meanings are the meanings assigned by experts. These authorized explanations are often age-old interpretations espoused by clergy, recorded in liturgy and published in church documents. For example, the authorized meaning of the Passover Seder is the reenactment of the exodus from Egypt. These institutionally based and
denominationally situated messages are invariant across time and space and hold true for all performers in all generations. Public meanings, on the other hand, are agreed upon meanings shared by a number of participants even though they are not officially preached by experts. Today, the Passover Seder ritual has a shared meaning of importance as an occasion for family reunion. Additionally, rites have private idiosyncratic meanings based on personal interpretation. A patient recovering from chemotherapy may interpret the Passover Seder as a personal milestone marking her exodus leaving the hospital or concluding treatment protocols.

Rappaport (1999) similarly distinguishes between different types of messages transmitted during ritual performance. He differentiates self-referential from canonical messages. Self-referential messages serve to express the individual’s status in the structural system in which he finds himself in the time-being, including the current physical, psychic or social situation. These messages represent the immediate aspects of events. Additionally, canonical messages are those messages not encoded by the performers but rather by the tradition or the text itself. These messages and meanings represent what he refers to as the general, enduring or even eternal aspects of universal orders, often conveyed through the invariant nature of ritual performance.

In an attempt to fashion a meaningful experience, it should be the goal of the sensitive ritualist to borrow and shape language and literature from the cultural heritage so as to tap into various meanings present at a given ritual enactment. The attentive practitioner would be wise to note the personalist cast of ritual meaning in our contemporary setting. Cohen & Eisen (2000) suggest that it is the personal, not prescribed meaning which is paramount for
moderately affiliated Jews who select autonomously from a potential ritual menu often choosing simply what feels right. They maintain an “insistence that each ritual take on a meaning which the person observing it has supplied (Eisen & Cohen, 2000, p.93).” It is arguable that the attentive practitioner need acknowledge, reflect and pedagogically consider the possibilities of such meanings during the presentation of life-cycle ceremonies. What account of these various meanings does the mohel bring to bear as he interacts with families and attempts to construct a meaningful service?

**Ritual Language**

The use of language occurs in many diverse contexts. In order to understand the use of language in ritual, it is necessary to differentiate such language from language used in other settings. Conversational language is that body of language used in everyday settings, whereas literature on religious language concerns itself with how to assess the truth value of theological propositions. Ritual language, on the other hand, is a third classification system describing utterances shared specifically in the context of ritual performance (Wheelock, 1981).

The study of everyday language was pioneered by Austin (1962) who distinguishes between constatives, utterances that act to represent a situation, and performatives, utterances that act to effect a situation by the mere fact of their being announced. Constatives include statements and assertions whereas performatives include promises, bets and official pronouncements.

At the same time, all speech acts inherently contain a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act. The locutionary component of speech represents the phonetic,
syntactic and semantic characteristics of a given statement. The illocutionary act represents the effect the speaker intends to produce on the hearer and the perlocutionary act is the actual effect the sentence has on the hearer. To fully appreciate a speech act, Austin (1962) suggests one need go beyond the locutionary act and its content and examine the social setting in which it is uttered. Searle (1969) expands on Austin’s work while agreeing that the illocutionary act is the most important concept for understanding speech. For a speech act to be successful, Searle adds that one must go beyond the utterance’s propositional content and consider the pragmatic component of speech, which he refers to as the preparatory conditions, the contextual features of the situation and the sincerity of the speaker’s intentions.

Searle (1969) postulates that all speech acts fall into five categories. These include assertives whose function is to commit the speaker to the truth of an expressed proposition; directives, which aim at getting the hearer to do something; commissives, whose point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action; expressives, which express some psychological attitude towards a state of affairs and finally declarations, whose function is to bring about a state of affairs by the fact of their being announced.

Wheelock (1981) defines ritual language as the set of utterances intimately and essentially connected with both the action and context of ritual. Ritual language involves an inseparable combination of articulate speech and purposeful action. “It is the liaison with language and the world of ideas that sets ritual activity apart from ordinary pragmatic behavior (Wheelock, 1981, p. 50).” He suggests that ritual language differs from the norms of ordinary language in at least six ways and hence demands its own classification system.
Ritual language is distinguished from everyday language whose primary purpose is informational. Firstly, ritual language features an oscillation between citing words to be spoken from a predetermined text and giving directions for the action to be performed. Secondly, it is often the case that words in ritual language cannot at all be understood by those present, as they are often spoken in an unfamiliar priestly or sacred tongue. Thirdly, ritual language can be unclear unless one is to look at an accompanying statement made by a non-verbal action, namely the ritual act. Fourthly, unlike regular discourse, ritual language often references a second-person party not present, often a deity, without introduction or explanation of the referent and certainly not with the expectation of response which is a fundamental characteristic of ordinary speech. Next, because texts are in theory known by the performers in advance, the predetermined nature of ritual language, suggests that the speech itself may convey no actual new information, something again uncharacteristic of regular speech. Finally, ritual language violates the principle of perspicuity through its use of metaphorical phrases which are not intended to give the most lucid possible exposition to an untutored audience. Combined, these contradictions of ordinary conversational speech lead Wheelock (1981) to propose that ritual language should be regarded as situating rather than as informing speech.

The term situating speech indicates that ritual language is used to create and allow participation in a known and repeatable situation. The language used in ritual in effect presents a situation, facilitates the recognition of the situation, expresses the recognition of a situation and helps create the situation itself. Wheelock (1981) suggests that ritual language, by being
spoken, can be categorized as rhetoric which presents the characteristics of the ritual, presents requests inherent in the ritual, shares intentions of the ritual or presents attitudes intrinsically tied to the ritual action.

My study expands upon Wheelock’s classification of ritual language by building a framework for classifying the additional elaborative and expositional ritual language characteristically employed by mohalim during the brit milah ceremony.

Additionally, work in the area of ritual criticism, which presupposes the possibility of ritual failure is relevant to the presentation by the ritual specialist. Grimes (2010) describes ritual failures by citing biblical examples of infelicitous performances, ritual enactments that simply do not accomplish what they set out to do. Borrowing from Austin’s (1962) speech-act theory, he shares a list of no fewer than nine types of mistakes that the ritual leader could make, all of which would lead to what he refers to as ritual disappointment. Misfires, abuses, ineffectualities, violations, contagions, defeats, omissions, misframings and opacities all qualify as potential pitfalls for the ritual practitioner. In the category of abuses, he cites insincerities and flops as occasions when the ritualist fails to share appropriate thoughts and orientations from the tradition and thus fails to produce the appropriate mood and atmosphere.

**Presence of the Ritualist**

Whitehouse (2004) describes the ritual specialist as a recognized religious expert who has invested more energy and labor in mastering the complexities of religious knowledge than ordinary worshippers, novices or apprentices. Bell (1992) notes that relatively little attention has been paid to how the presence of specialists effects ritual practices, although their
presence or absence is usually taken simply as an index as to the importance of the ritual or the relative stratification of society in which the ritual is performed. Both Wach (1971) and Douglas (1973) note the presence of specialists in stratified or high-grid societies (societies which promote their own cultural expressions at risk of people choosing other alternatives) and correlate the status of such specialists with a pronounced social hierarchy and a social ethos of piety toward authority. Goody (1986) attributes such presence to the cultural effects of literacy on social organization and the subsequent rise of particular types of literary authority. He suggests that a textually constituted tradition which fixes the past in writing requires an authority structure with privileged access to the sources and wisdom of the past. It is they alone who can properly reconcile or re-contextualize the ancient past with the present. These experts maintain the past-ness of the past via an elaborate medium of interpretation promoted by recognized institutions and accepted credentials.

Dugan (1989) offers that religious life-cycle ceremonies including weddings and funerals have been used for centuries as a means to transmit familial and covenantal values, and that the participation of the clergy is central to sharing the perspectives of religious traditions regarding both social values and religious ideals during these ceremonial encounters. During the Reformation era, Lutheran funeral sermons took on a more pedagogical orientation such that these gatherings were viewed as an opportunity to praise God and edify the people through explication of Scripture. Messages of hope, comfort, faith, virtue and spiritual goals became central to ministers who embraced their role pedagogically as well as ritually. These sermons in fact presented the clergy's clear efforts to translate formal theology and church-approved values into terms that the ordinary layperson, whether educated or illiterate, could
easily understand. Similarly, my study will describe how *mohalim* may use *brit milah* ceremonies to share such messages from Jewish tradition by focusing on how each practitioner emphasizes different themes and religious ideas when interacting with celebrants.

Whitehouse (1995) notes an important connection between religiosity and memory which may have significant pedagogic implications. He suggests that for particular religions and rituals to take the form that they do, rituals must take a form that people can remember so that people can be motivated to pass on these explicit rituals and beliefs. He attempts to characterize a fundamental divergence in religious practice and experience through his theory of divergent modes of religiosity termed doctrinal and imagistic. In the case of the doctrinal mode of religiosity, ritual action tends to be frequently repeated and highly routinized, facilitating the storage of elaborate and conceptually complex religious teachings in semantic memory but also activating implicit memory in the performance of most ritual procedures. In these ritual performances, celebrated religious leaders cast doctrines in a highly persuasive fashion via a highly developed form of rhetoric and logically integrated theology. Through their skill as orators, ritual leaders provide the central tenets of the belief system through regular public rehearsal and reiteration. Such narrative is predicated upon an implicit principle of agreement as to the nature of these teachings and interpretations.

Bloom’s (1976) work on rabbi as symbolic exemplar is potentially of note here as well. He suggests that rabbis are considered to be a symbol of community, conscience, moral rectitude and divine calling. The adoption of this image in the eyes of the public impacts the rabbis behaviors as they strive to perform and be consistent with the functions of that image.
Role theory furthermore posits that, “a role consists of the system of expectations which exist in the social world surrounding the occupant of a position; expectations regarding his behavior towards occupants of some other position.” (Deutsch & Krauss, 1965, p. 12). Indeed clergymen and other symbolic exemplars must behave in a way that their constituency expects them to behave. The ritual specialist similarly may be impacted by such expectations which may directly affect their pedagogic and stylistic approach to their work.

In the imagistic mode of religiosity, the episodic distinctiveness of the ritual is its infrequent repetition combined with high levels of arousal or emotionality which together result in lasting autobiographical or even flashbulb memories. This high arousal fosters intense cohesion between participants present at the ritual. While exegetical knowledge can certainly be stored semantically in this context, it is often the personal unmediated inspiration that becomes most memorable to parishioners. I suggest that an educationally powerful brit milah ceremonial presentation can integrate the transmission of traditional teachings and innovative interpretations characteristic of the doctrinal mode within the context of high arousal and infrequent experiences typical of the imagistic mode.

Another description of the work of the ritual specialist is found in Driver’s perceptive analysis of the dichotomy inherent in Haitian ritual due to the integration and influence of both Roman Catholic and voodoo tradition. Driver (2006) delineates contrasting ritual pathways or ritual moves coordinated and led by the ritual practitioner, in this case, the high priest or the houngan or mambo. He suggests that despite the clear contrast in stylistic presentation, these two ideal-types of religious ritual represent a polarity which coexists in each religious
enactment, despite irreconcilable tension. At one end of the spectrum, the priestly tradition represents the emphasis of the high liturgical order, regularity and limit. Recurrent themes include obedience, promises and obligations and an emphasis on the mediating role of the priest himself. For the priest himself, charisma is subordinated by regularities imposed by the religious institution. In contrast, the shamanic tradition emphasizes creativity and the infusion of the Holy Spirit with invitation for transformation and limitless experimentation. The shaman is not obligated to any high church per se but rather finds his acceptance through popular means. He is charismatic and focuses his energies on creating affect and providing a transformative experience. A mohel, who in many senses is an independent contractor, provides an interesting case study, as a functionary who may have denominational leanings but may not be directly aligned with any governing church body. The mohel’s chosen presentation style as priestly or shamanistic and his use of doctrinal or imagistic mode has yet to be researched.

The Interface of Ritual and Pedagogy

Traditionally, Jewish writing regarding ritual has focused on teaching the how-to of ritual through thick description of specifics acts and texts related to every enactment. According to Marcus (2004), Jews wrote legal codes and collections of customs that usually included festival as well as life-cycle celebrations. Such collections include the Machzor Vitry of Northern France and Sefer Ha-Rokeach by Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah of Worms both compiled in the twelfth century. In Germany, Sefer Hatashbez was compiled in the thirteenth century followed by Minhagei Maharil by Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Ha-Levi Molin, a fifteenth century
collection. In Italy and Amsterdam, Christians (with conversionist inclinations) and Jews produced a series of illustrated custom books which contained artistic depictions of life cycle ceremonies. This pragmatic approach to portraying ritual is similarly embodied in a host of contemporary clerical manuals that outline the texts and order of their recitation for the novice practitioner.

Deitcher (2011) notes that until the last half of the twentieth century there were a limited number of books that addressed the Jewish life cycle in any comprehensive way. Since that time, hundreds of books and articles have examined life passages through a host of different lenses. These books tend to focus on re-readings or even “re-ritings” of ceremonies by previously disenfranchised social groups including anti-establishment autonomists (Siegel, Strassfeld & Strassfeld, 1965), feminists (Orenstein, 1994), innovators (Ochs, 2007), intermarried families or converts. None address the idea of considering the presentation of life-cycle ceremonies for the practitioner from a purely pedagogic perspective.

Furthermore, in secular writings, connections between education and ritual focus on how to construct courses that offer appropriate overviews of major theorists while introducing students to the many aspects of ritual inquiry. Serious inquiry into historical, cultural and theological sources is often combined with empathetic participation and ethnographic attentiveness. Wallace (2007) warns of the inherent difficulties of trying to construct mock classroom settings for a performance practice which properly resides within host cultures. He notes that such mock practices should be planned in a manner that is both culturally sensitive yet theologically vague and that rituals should be practiced as analogous to a laboratory, not as
a liturgical exercise in inculcating confessional beliefs. Pinault (2007) suggests that because rituals are not inert facts, but rather living traditions, neither videos nor in-class demonstrations properly convey the power of ritual. Rather, for students to fully appreciate ritual, it is incumbent upon educators to get students out of the classroom so as to witness, document and sometimes even actively participate in religious services. Field notes, interviews of congregants and personal reflections methodologically lead novices to a deeper understanding of ritual experience.

For my purposes, McGann’s (2007) approach is most appropriate as she writes from the unique position as engaged minister, attempting to train future ceremonial leaders. She differentiates three types of ritual knowledge. Foundational ritual knowledge exposes students to the complexities of contemporary liturgical practice, introduces them to the historical evolution of rites and their theological interpretation, and allows them to assess how rites become efficacious for particular ritualizing communities. Performative ritual knowledge focuses on the development of ritual competencies that students will need to enact rites in their professional ministries, specifically leading, orchestrating, inventing and participating in liturgical performance for particular communities. This knowledge requires both cognitive knowledge of particular rites and a holistic knowledge of ritual action itself, that is, an aesthetic awareness of how rites are effectively performed. Finally, scholarly ritual knowledge is intended to expand the hermeneutical, analytical and theoretical framework that students bring to their own scholarly pursuits of ritual practice. I propose that pedagogic reflection and consideration by the ritual leader while guiding families through rites of passage falls under McGann’s category of performative ritual knowledge.
The very notion of thinking about the interface between ritual and education is potentially problematic. Martin (2003) suggests an inherently reductionist mistake is typically made by both worship leaders and educators within the church. While worship leaders make the mistake of thinking of education as augmenting the worship experience, educators tend to think of worship from the sole perspective of educational goals in the classroom. Rather, as Martin points out, an ecclesiological point of view “takes into account the multidimensional and diverse nature of faith communities within an overall framework which unifies diversity.” He proposes constructing a holistic vision of ecclesial activities which would benefit worship leaders who often presuppose a discrete separation of education and worship. Harris (1989), borrowing from Acts, argues that the curriculum of the church be viewed as five dimensions of overlapping activities referred to as koinonia, leitourgia, didache, diaconia and kerygma which together form the educational curriculum of the church. It is only the process of seeing these events as either overlapping or, as Martin suggests, interpenetrating, that one truly acknowledges the mutually constitutive nature of community, worship, ritual, instruction, service and education. Within the context of brit milah, I argue that the practitioner mohel would benefit from avoiding a compartmentalist ethos (Nelson, 1989) but rather view ritual performance and interaction from an integrative perspective which acknowledges the interface between ritual and education.

It is with this in mind that we can now break from shallower understandings of the interface of ritual and education by moving beyond both simple descriptions provided by ritual manuals and simplistic considerations of education about the impetus and history of ritual. Rather, a deeper perspective leads us to a more profound appreciation of the confluence or
interpenetrating nature of ritual as educative, and therefore a consideration of how existing frameworks of education may be applicable to ritual performance is merited.

**Frameworks**

An attempt to see ritual as an educational opportunity is consistent with Wertheimer’s (2008) prescription of innovative thinking which can enliven and broaden the discourse of Jewish education. Thinking about the educational possibilities inherent in ritual performance aligns itself with his description of the contemporary proclivity to view non-traditional diverse settings such as summer camps, travel experiences, programming in Jewish community centers and social media engagement, all as potentially powerful Jewish educational encounters. Education is now viewed as a broad enterprise which not only enhances cognitive knowledge but also creates positive Jewish memories through powerful experiential encounters. Furthermore, given the possibility that mohalim view their work in an educational context, it is worth consideration how certain extant frameworks of education may be applicable as the mohel guides families through this rite of passage. I review here three frameworks of education which are directly linked to an understanding of the broader contexts of education in general. These frameworks all acknowledge that education takes place both within and removed from a traditional classroom context, need be aware of the audience to whom it is directed and may occur in formal as well as non-traditional venues, while engaged in alternate activities and nonconforming experiences.

Furthermore, these frameworks resonate with Schwab’s (1970) commonplaces of education and relate to the secondary research questions proposed in my study. The question
of curriculum is linked to the vision of education the ritualist adopts during his interactions surrounding the performance of *brit milah*; the identity of the learner is linked to a consideration of the *mohel*'s work as a family or adult educator and the analysis of the characteristics of formal or informal education leads us to appreciate the unique milieu in which the *mohel* performs his educative functions. I describe the applicability of each framework to the ritual work of the *mohel* participants in my study.

**Visions of Jewish education.** Fox, Scheffler & Marom (2003) in their seminal work of *Visions of Jewish Education* offer six basic ways of thinking about contemporary Jewish life and the types of educational philosophies required to sustain and enhance Jewish life while confronting the modern world in which we live. They argue that absent such philosophical underpinnings, Jewish education is likely to become a mere repetition of the past, an inert, uninspired and rudderless endeavor destined to lead to erosion of Jewish loyalties. Ritual, which is in embedded in large part on past practice, is likely to succumb to the same dreariness absent a strong philosophical understanding of the experience to be offered. While admittedly, each thinker in *Visions* is offering a view for an ongoing program of education, such frameworks can nonetheless be used to imply the orientation of the *mohel*/educator in this singular context. As the introductory chapter states, these visions are not meant to “represent an exhaustive list of promising approaches to Jewish education” but rather to “yield unforeseen responses to the issue in question (Fox, Scheffler & Marom, 2003, p.2).” Thus, assuming the intent of the *mohel* is to fashion an educational encounter, an understanding of his vision of the educational process is warranted. The nature of the ritual of *brit milah* as a legally commanded, public gathering, which affirms our identity by acknowledging our historical covenant with God,
suggests examining the mohel’s educative work through the following four specific visions of education, each of which resonate with one of these characteristics of the traditional brit milah ritual.

As a commanded action and as the performance of a mitzvah, which rabbinic teaching equates with the performance of all other commandments, approaching brit through a halachic vision of education is unavoidable. Twersky, adopting a Maimonedian halachicist perspective, suggests that proper education will result in a philosophical understanding of the mitzvoth (commandments) leading to a love of God. Habituation to religious life, firstly through mimesis leads to the ongoing practice of the commandments modeled by teachers and parents that will lead one to a rational and philosophical appreciation of the inherent richness of Jewish life. Each person is assumed to have a natural inclination to improve his understanding and that through exposure to traditional texts, an educator can foster such growth and subsequent fidelity. Continued practice of normative halachic behavior is the goal of education. A mohel who stresses the halachic aspect of brit and one who emphasizes this as the first mitzvah of many to be performed by the family follows Twersky’s orientation.

As a public gathering of Jewish community, the performance of brit milah resonates with Brinker’s sociological emphasis in his vision of education. Brinker, a secularist, accentuates the importance of the social self-definition of Jews, and stresses the centrality of peoplehood as opposed to the centrality of normative behaviors. In his view, historical awareness of the Jewish people leads each person to bring their own self-determined skills to the betterment of, and participation in, Jewish society. While fostering this sense of belonging, Brinker points out that
the educated Jew need be in constant interaction and communication with the world at large so as to bring particularistic idioms to discussions regarding universal values and concerns. The ultimate goal of education for Brinker is involvement in Jewish society. The \textit{mohel} who views the life-cycle passage as the first step of belonging echoes Brinker’s philosophy.

A performer of life-cycle ritual leads families through ceremonies during crucial life passages which inevitably may cause people to grapple with existential questions such as the meaning of life. Therefore, the \textit{mohel}’s work may resonate with an existentially oriented vision of education offered by Greenberg. He believes education should center on the existential universal quest for meaning and value in life. By fostering the love of learning Torah, accepting it is a moral guide, seeking community, building a strong relationship to the Jewish people, and contributing to the future redemption of the people, Greenberg believes that the student will find great meaning in life. The \textit{mohel} who presents \textit{brit} as an experience which adds meaning to life, sympathizes with Greenberg’s approach.

Under some circumstances, the contemporary liberal Jew who is exposed to other cultures and traditions may seek to rationalize the specifics of particularist religious behavior. The ritualist working with such clientele may consider the implications of a vision of education which primarily seeks to differentiate Judaism from other faith traditions. Meyer, a historian, believes that Jewish education is idealized in religious terms when the learner understands the similarities and differences between Jewish and non-Jewish values. As a religious as opposed to cultural tradition, Judaism is meant to guide the person through life’s challenges and
tribulations. The *mohel* who takes time to distinguish this initiation rite from other cultural rites of passage arguably models Meyer’s approach to education.

**Formal vs. informal education.** The educative interactions of the *mohel* with his clientele begin outside of a traditional classroom setting, often in a living room, a dining room, a house, a restaurant or a catering hall. At the same time, those interactions are highlighted by the execution of a prescribed religious rite and liturgy. As such, the question of classifying ritual interaction as formal or informal education is salient. In fact, essential to my investigation is a bias which suggests that, like other Jewish experiences, life-cycle performances can offer more than the opportunity for simple Jewish socialization. Reimer (2007) laments the missed opportunities when communal gatherings do not challenge the attendees to go deeper and experience Judaism in its fullest creative potential. While the socialization that takes place at gatherings for celebrations of life-cycle events is certainly impactful and meaningful for community and family members, there is no reason to be apologetic by assuming that the curricular agenda thereof need be absent, ambiguous or even ill-defined. Both Reimer and Chazan (1991) acknowledge that advanced preparation by seasoned professionals to structure almost any environment and group experience can pave the way for serious cognitive learning to take place. Therefore I suggest that *brit milah* viewed through this lens of informal Jewish education, can present an occasion for not only important socialization, but the presentation of a definitive pedagogic plan focused on transmitting Jewish content and religious beliefs.

Considered from a formal Jewish educational lens, participation in a life-cycle event such as a *brit milah*, either as a guest or as a *baal simcha* (celebrant), is the opportunity for people to
witness, analyze, describe and experience the power of ritual as noted above by Pinault. Since every formal Jewish educational setting is likely to cover elements of life-cycle at various points in the academic curriculum, participation in these ceremonies serves as potential reinforcement of previously acquired religious knowledge.

Life-cycle events also strongly resonate with Reimer & Bryfman’s (2008) sub-category of experiential education which promotes Jewish learning in any educational context and with any age learners. The ritual of brit milah fulfills all three of the distinct initiatives which the authors identify as inherent in experiential education. Recreationally, brit milah can aim to provide its participants with social comfort, fun and belonging in a Jewish context. At the socialization level, ceremonies can provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be an active member of the community and thirdly, the ritualist can intentionally aim to encourage participants to undertake the challenge of stretching themselves and growing towards even more complex participation in Jewish life.

Finally, Chazan (1991) notes that schools are not the only context in which Jewish literacy develops. Life-cycle ceremonies like brit milah, while attended voluntarily, can be set up to be interactive, participatory and intrinsically oriented; that is, aimed at helping attendees better understand the meaning of Judaism in an immediate context. In such a context, education and ritual performance meaningfully interface and enrich one another.

Orientation: Adult education or family education. Ascertaining the framework through which to consider brit milah is complicated due to the diverse nature of the interactions which take place. While there is always a celebrant family for whom the ritual is performed, a family for
whom this may be the first of subsequent Jewish rituals to be celebrated, there is also typically a congregation of guests that attend the ceremonial event. Additionally, britot take place according to tradition during the day-time hours when children are typically in school. Often the ceremony is performed primarily for an adult gathering. At the same time, it is not uncommon that older siblings, relatives or friends of celebrant families may bring children to attend. So, while the pre or post-bris interactions take place exclusively with the immediate celebrant family, there is also a predominantly adult congregation that may merit the practitioner’s educational attention. A consideration of the educative experience of brit milah through a review of literature distinguishing the features of adult versus family education is clearly relevant to our thinking regarding the mohel’s ritual work.

McKenzie (1975) defines adult education as a formally structured process in which an educational agent enables adults to actualize their potentialities to the end that they become more fully liberated as individuals and more fully prepared to participate in bettering the life of the communities to which they belong. The educational agent is a person responsible for fulfilling managerial roles in the educational process including assessing the adult learners’ needs, planning the educational process and evaluating the results of the process. Actualizing potentiality may reside in the domain of literacy education or religious education. The definition proposes that adults participate with one another to better community life precisely so that individuals may continue to grow and develop.

When the content of adult education concerns theology, liturgy, scripture and doctrine, adult religious education may be defined as follows: Adult religious education becomes a
formally structured process in which an educational agent enables adults to actualize their religious potentialities to the end that they become more fully liberated as individuals and more fully prepared to participate in bettering the life of the communities to which they belong (McKenzie, 1975). The process can thus be defined as religious education based either on the intent of the educational agent to share religious affirmations and convictions, or based on the content of the material.

Family education on the other hand is an emerging field which places the family unit at the center of religious and cultural transmission (Kay & Rotstein, 2008). An orientation towards consideration of the entire family instead of only children or parents is a fundamental feature of this approach. A family educator will acknowledge the role that the extended family and even community at large will play in determining the religious socialization of the children. At the same time, the primacy of the parents is recognized such that one of the goals of family education is to influence the values, beliefs and practices of the parents as a conduit to affecting the entire family unit. Research suggests that a program which supports positive growth and development of the family should include an awareness of the learners’ backgrounds and an opportunity for reflection and interaction amongst family members. In fact Sawin (1981) suggests that meanings of religious belief can be made overt through rituals like circumcision which promote family group activity including possible intergenerational interchange.

The family educator is devoted to presenting an authentic Jewish experience framed in a personally meaningful manner. Furthermore, the family educator recognizes the importance
of linking families to an ongoing supportive community, often an institution or school, which will strengthen the case for transformative Jewish living.

Gap in Literature

Historically, studies and writings regarding life-cycle fall into two general categories: compendiums that attempt to describe the specifics of the enactments and texts which are part of traditional ritual and writings that describe various approaches to teaching ritual. Neither of these lenses deal with the pedagogic considerations during the enactment of the ritual itself. To the best of my knowledge, no research examines what is taught at a brit milah, in what manner are traditions explained and what the mohel emphasizes and why? A deeper understanding of how the mohel conceptualizes his work with families and congregants before, during and after the bris, potentially leads to a reconsideration of how other life-cycle and innovative rituals may be approached.

In Jewish ethnographic research there is a preponderance of study devoted to the impact of bnei mitzvah (Salkin, 1991, Schoenfeld, 1997) but a definitive dearth of research regarding what takes place during the powerful and still widely observed practice of brit milah. Brit milah offers a unique opportunity to take an infrequently repeated emotionally charged religious moment led by an authorized religious leader, and analyze the ceremony with respect to its pedagogical characteristics. As Deitcher notes, “there is an urgent need to conduct research on topics of life-cycle education that will enhance our understanding of current educational practice and concurrently provide new vistas for introducing this topic in novel and
creative ways that crisscross educational frameworks and new target populations.” Within the context of this background, it is worthwhile to inquire as to how the ritualist conceptualizes the educational elements around the brit milah process.

Most importantly, my study suggests that the old model of the mohel quickly appearing at a home to act as functionalist is outdated and yields little in the educational life of a family. Any educational endeavor which is performed in isolation from Jewish family engagement and Jewish communal life yields lacking results. Rather, the attentive practitioner should view ritual as a transformative opportunity, part of a continuum of learning experiences, which can open doors to meaningful and joyous learning for all present, nurture relationships and build community, such that all can appreciate how Jewish learning lives.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Overview

My study investigates how the mohel conceptualizes the life-cycle rite of passage of brit milah as a potentially educative event in the liberal American Jewish community. I probe into this primary research question by considering all aspects of the interaction between the mohel and the family from its initial stages, often referred to as a pre-bris meeting or phone interview, through the ceremonial performance and concluding by inspecting as well any post-ceremonial exchanges. In the first section of the chapter, I describe the overall methodology used to answer my research question and explain the applicability and limitations of the method to my project. In the second section of the chapter, I discuss the research design as well as the selection of the participants and their respective backgrounds. The final section herein, details the data collection process and its subsequent analysis. I have used a mixed methods qualitative design including interviews, observations, artifacts and follow-up interviews to situate my study.

Research Design

Participants. Patton (2001) posits a fundamental rule of qualitative inquiry by suggesting that sample size is less important in this research approach than in quantitative inquiry. Assuming that participants can guide the researcher to discover what they want to know in a credible manner, even a single case study can be useful to reveal new realities. Due to the in-depth nature of qualitative research, it naturally lends itself, in fact, to limited sample
size. For the purposes of my research, which seeks to describe and analyze the current state of practice of *brit milah* while assessing it as a potentially educative experience, I selected three prominent *mohalim* who regularly serve their communities and have the reputation of providing a meaningful, content-laden experience for their clientele. By examining three *mohalim* as they practice *brit milah* in various settings my study qualifies as a multi-case, multi-site study and will rely on the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and grounded theory whereby data will be collected and emerging themes and theory-development frame ongoing data collection and interpretation.

In line with thinking regarding qualitative research in general (Maxwell 1998), participants were not randomly selected but rather purposefully and deliberately selected for the key information that they could provide. In identifying the three participants for the study I relied on snowballing, a system which identifies potential participants (Anderson, 1998). Utilizing the professional list-serves called RAVNET and HAZZANET, I solicited feedback from community religious leaders including rabbis, cantors and educational directors, to identify experienced ritualists who fulfilled the following criteria:

1) I am searching for busily practicing *mohalim* who regularly service families in your geographical area.

2) I am looking for *mohalim* who in your opinion as a congregational leader and based on the feedback that you receive from congregational constituents, seem to be intentionally teaching elements of the ritual during the process of *brit milah* by offering a content-laden ceremony replete with explanation and commentary.
Additionally, because I had this project in mind for over one year, I often asked other Jewish professionals and involved lay-people during this time for referrals of mohalim on an impromptu basis. Over the period of one month I compiled a list of mohalim whose names were offered in response to my electronic inquiry and combined it with the informal list that I created from the aforementioned casual conversations. Seven names were mentioned on multiple occasions and four other names were mentioned once.

**Recruitment: Issues and Process**

I began the process of recruitment with an introductory phone call explaining to the potential participants the general nature of my work as a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. I was careful to not mention the William Davidson School of Jewish Education, so as not to tip my hand in advance to the participants as to the nature of my inquiry, specifically, my focus regarding the interface between ritual and pedagogy.

Cantor Chayim Yankel (a pseudonym) was the mohel whose name was mentioned most often. Yankel has serviced a major metropolitan area for over thirty-five years and has performed over twenty-thousand britot. He services Jewish, intermarried, non-Jewish families and alternative families. He has been invited to perform britot in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong and has been the subject of numerous newspaper articles and television segments. I was excited to solicit his participation in my study not only because we had both learned the art of milah from the same expert in Israel, but more so, because of his stellar reputation. Cantor Yankel performs numerous britot each day in the tri-state area so it would have been easy to
observe him in a relatively short period of time. Nonetheless, he declined to participate not only due to his own hectic schedule, but more so, because of his ambivalent feelings towards JTS. He believed that the establishment of the Brit Kodesh program, which trains doctors to do milah, directly infringed upon the ability of mohalim to practice their craft and was therefore a clear example of masig g’vul (the prohibition of infringing on another person’s livelihood). Another mohel who I contacted declined to participate, not do to his unwillingness to interview, but rather because his practice has diminished exponentially over the last five years. He similarly attributed to this phenomenon to the influx of doctors into the field of brit milah. I choose to include the explanations of refusal in this section because it is related to my assumption that brit milah when performed by a physician may not include the same potential educative value and potential influence as a ceremony performed by an ordained cantor or rabbi.

One of the colleagues wrote me back after considering the project and stated, “at this point in my career, I have no interest in becoming a consultant for other mohalim. Perhaps after I retire, I would be willing to help you.” After this response and two additional refusals to have me observe their work, I wondered about the hesitancy of my colleagues to participate in my study. Another mohel also declined to participate because he felt there would be logistical geographical challenges, due to his distance from New York City. Finally, although my own name was offered by a number of respondents, I excluded myself as a potential participant in the study.
Given this initial difficulty in the recruitment process, it became clear to me that there was an issue here pertaining to collegiality and sharing of information and viewpoints. I identified three possible obstacles that may have needed to be addressed to potentially facilitate cooperation in the recruitment process. These included my colleagues’ concern that I would appropriate materials for use in my own practice, that the presence of a third party researcher would impact the intimacy of the interactions between the ritualist and the family and that thirdly, colleagues were concerned having another professional potentially evaluate the medical expertise of the circumcision itself. To address the first issue regarding pilfering of materials, I reiterated to participants that my research was for academic purposes only and that I had no intention of integrating their materials into my own work in the field. To address the issues of intimacy, I suggested to colleagues that they could choose appropriate ceremonies and interactions to which to invite me. I also decided to focus on celebrations that involved a larger extended family or larger number of guests, in which the presence of a third party researcher would be potentially more discrete than were I to attend a ceremony with just the immediate family. Finally, I added an important disclaimer in my phone calls, noting that while the specific focus of my project must remain confidential for the sake of academic integrity, I was not assessing or evaluating the surgical aspect of the ritual. I even went as far as to offer to absent myself from the room when the actual surgical procedure was to take place.

Eventually, I was able to recruit participants for my research project. After initial agreement to participate, each mohel was sent a formal letter of invitation (Appendix A) outlining the details of their participation, as well as a letter of consent (Appendix B) for their signature. Geographic proximity and accessibility to the mohalim for the purposes of interviews
and observation clearly influenced my sample creation. Additionally, *mohalim* who were particularly busy allowed me to group my observations close together. Due to the fact that some *mohalim* agreed to be interviewed but not observed formally, I consulted with the advisor and committee and determined that interviews alone, absent observation, could still provide data for purposes of analysis, certainly in understanding how *mohalim* conceptualize their role as Jewish educators. The following four *mohalim* agreed to participate in my study solely as interviewees.

Cantor AA is a Jerusalem trained *mohel* who studied with Rav Yosef Halperin and services a community in the Northeast. He is of Sephardic decent and is a gifted artist and singer. He is affable and pleasant and has been practicing *brit milah* since 2001. I interviewed him at his synagogue office on Tuesday Jan 31, 2011 and over the phone in July 29, 2012. Rabbi BB is a pulpit rabbi who has served communities in two United States cities and now lives and practices in a large traditional Jewish community in Canada. While he had an extensive practice in the United States, he is effectively retired now from his ritual work in *brit milah*. Nonetheless, he was able to offer a perspective from over thirty years of work as a *mohel*. I spoke with him by telephone for ninety minutes on Tuesday night, January 31, 2012 and again on July 26, 2012. Rabbi CC is similarly an older *mohel* whose practice is now winding down. He resides in the Northeast. His insights are of note in part because of the fact that throughout his career he serviced smaller Jewish communities and because he has expressed a clear understanding of the educational component of ritual work. Over the last fifteen years CC has devoted himself to improving the educational perspective of physicians as they practice *brit milah*. I visited with him for three hours on Wednesday February 8, 2012 and spoke with him on August 2, 2012.
Additionally, on March 7, 2012 I had the opportunity to interview DD, a semi-retired obstetrician-gynecologist, who now works exclusively as a *mohelet* in the tri-state area. Her perspective was unique as she was the only non-clergy participant in my research. She stands out in my study as both a physician who had completed the *brit kodesh* program at JTS and as the only female practitioner with whom I met. I conducted a follow-up interview with her on August 3, 2012.

The following *mohalim* agreed to fully participate in my study:

Cantor Green is a well-respected *hazzan* who learned *brit milah* from Rav Halperin in Israel. He has worked as a *mohel* in the tri-state area throughout his career and has performed three thousand *britot*. I interviewed him at the school at which he teaches Hazzanut on Wednesday Feb 1, 2012. Formal observations of his practice took place in New York City on February 9, 2012, March 4 and in New Jersey on April 19, 2012, which corresponded with *Yom Hashoah* (holocaust memorial day). During the first observation, both parents were Jewish. At the second *bris* the mother was Jewish and the father was not. This was the second *bris* Cantor Green was performing for the family. The third observation, also a second *bris* performed for the family, took place at a synagogue on Holocaust Memorial Day. Here both parents were Jewish. I conducted a follow-up interview on July 18, 2012, with Cantor Green.

The second participant has been a practicing *mohel* for twenty years and resides in the Northeast. I interviewed Cantor Brown, on Monday January 23 and observed him perform *britot* on Thursday January 26, Wednesday February 2, 2012 and Wednesday Feb 9, 2012. The families for whom he performed *britot* consisted of, in order, a single Jewish mother, an interfaith couple for whom he was performing a third *brit* and a couple, both Jewish, with the
mother’s family particularly involved in Jewish life and of Sephardic descent. The follow-up interview took place on August 1, 2012.

Rabbi White, my third participant, is a trained mohel whose main work is as a congregational rabbi. He has served his community in the tri-state area in both clerical capacities for twenty years. He studied brit milah through the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in Jerusalem, working directly with Rav Halperin. I interviewed Rabbi White on Tuesday January 17 and observed him conducting three britot. One took place on Friday March 23, 2012, for a family with two Jewish parents, one occurred on Friday April 27 for a very involved family in Jewish life with strong ties to Israel and Jewish academia, and the third took place on Sunday April 30th for a family with a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. Our follow-up interview took place on August 9, 2012.

All three participants invited me to these specific life-cycle ceremonies and interactions because they felt that these ceremonies and exchanges were representative samples of their work in the Jewish community. Furthermore, taken together, these nine observations afforded me the opportunity to analyze the brit milah process in a wide range of social, familial, religious and demographic settings.

In presenting the general discussion and findings of this study, the data from the observation-interview participants served as my primary reference point because it allowed for triangulation between the self-report, the observation in the natural setting and the collection of various artifacts. The additional data from the interviewees alone were included to help
augment the findings of the research and are included to buttress the representative nature of the findings from the primary research participants.

**Ethical Issues.** In order to protect the anonymity of the participants I drafted a letter of consent for the *mohalim* and was specific pertaining to the amount of time required for me to properly conduct the interviews. The letter stipulated that I would conduct a preliminary ninety-minute interview, then accompany the *mohel* to observe him perform three *britot* in order to create a representative sample of his performance of this life-cycle event. A one-hour follow-up interview was required as well. I assured the participants that they could refuse to answer any questions during the interviews and that they maintained the right to withdraw from the study at any time. An additional letter of consent was prepared for the families assuring them, similarly, that all identifying information would be removed from my study. There was discussion between me and the participant *mohalim* regarding the appropriateness of presenting the family with such a formal letter of consent on the day of the *bris* given the stresses that are inherent in becoming new parents and the accompanying tensions of the day. It was determined that in order to most likely gain access, the *mohel* himself would, during their initial conversation with the families, solicit permission for my presence at the ceremony.

Together both letters to the participants cover seven of the eight major parts of informed consent outlined by Seidman (2006) in his guide to interviewing for qualitative research (the issue of parental consent for minors was excluded in the letters). Due to the sensitive nature of the procedural aspect of circumcision it was decided, in consultation with
the dissertation advisor, that an audio recording was preferable to a video for purposes of collecting data.

**Dealing with Data**

*Data collection.* I employed the following methods to collect data for purposes of understanding how the *mohel* conceptualizes the *brit milah* process as an educative experience in the liberal Jewish community.

1) Semi-structured interview questions formed the basis for my initial meeting with the *mohalim*. These questions allowed me to understand the lived experience of the *mohalim* and appreciate the meaning that they make of their work as ritualists. I started my interview with these initial questions for each participant but, at the same time, I listened attentively to the participants and took advantage of the opportunity to ask follow up questions and encouraged them to elaborate on responses that I felt would provide additional rich data. In this sense, the interview could be termed semi-structured, in that it permitted flexibility on my part to delve deeper into the responses of each *mohel*.

2) I conducted a one-hour introductory interview with each of the *mohalim*. I met with one of the *mohalim* in his congregational office while I met the other two participants in their respective homes. The introductory interview (Appendix C) gathered information regarding their personal background and examined their overall approach to *brit milah*. I asked them additionally to describe the day of the ceremony and any follow-up interactions that were typical in their respective practices.
3) I accompanied the *mohalim* to three *britot*, thus creating a representative sample of their work in the community. These visits allowed me to observe the participants in the natural settings of their work, observing the subjects doing what they normally do (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I arrived at the homes of the celebrants a few minutes in advance of the *mohel* so as to be able to set up audio-recording equipment in an appropriate position and then situate myself as unobtrusively as possible. I comported myself as a participant observer.

4) I hand wrote descriptive field notes during each stage of my interactions. I began by recording my own preconceptions relating to the participants based on what I had heard of them in my professional workplace. I wrote reflective field notes before meeting the *mohel*, after the initial interview, and then for a third time, after attending each *brit milah*. I also wrote descriptive field notes during the formal observations so as to render a rich description of the participants, the people at the ceremony, objects, places, events, activities and conversations that took place, particularly noting the interaction between the *mohel* and the guests before, during and after the *bris*. These notes primarily recorded my reactions to each interaction but as well, encouraged me to jot down salient ideas and reflections which formed the basis of contextualizing the *mohel*’s thoughts in lieu of literature on ritual. Additionally, these notes helped me further develop the questions for the follow up interview.

5) I adopted Grimes’ (1995) methodology of ritual observation to allow me to accurately chart the *mohel*’s interactions with families and the ritual performance itself. In particular, I relied on his use of coordinates to strategize an applicable mapping of details possibly found during the *brit milah* process. In conjunction with the audio-recording, these ethnographic coordinates,
which are inherent in all ritual performances cross-culturally, provided fodder for me to compare each mohel’s performance to his peers, as well as to compare the initial, self-report of the ceremony, to the actual performance of the life-cycle ritual. These details allowed me to chart the choice points in ceremonial interpretation which I approached initially as the intended curriculum of the brit.

6) Artifacts were gathered during this stage of the research. The main source of data was gleaned by examining the website information provided by each mohel as well as reviewing any handouts distributed to the families and guests before, during and after the brit milah service. Here, access became a tricky issue, as one of the mohalim voiced his concern as to whether I intended to in fact use some of these handouts in my own work as a mohel. I additionally kept copies of follow up e-mail conversations with the mohalim.

7) I conducted a follow-up interview with each of the mohalim which lasted between thirty to forty-five minutes. During this second interview (Appendix D) the main focus was to allow the ritualists to react to issues that had emerged as a result of my observations and thinking regarding ritual and education as it relates to the brit milah process. Additionally, I asked them to reflect on any discrepancies between their self-reporting and my observations.

**Data analysis**

By employing the constant comparative method, I was able to find emergent themes in the work of each mohel. Studying transcribed interviews alongside observing current practice in diverse settings allowed me to describe, analyze and interpret the interface of education and ritual in the work of each mohel.
Generalizability and external validity. In qualitative research, generalizability is often used as a reference as to whether the findings of an investigation are transferable to other similar settings and subjects not presently involved in the research study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In some studies this may take the shape of checking findings against similarly situated research projects so as to suggest that the findings maintain an external validity. In my investigation, there are no such extant works examining the pedagogic orientation of the mohel, so there is no claim that each mohel in every geographical setting operates within the framework described in the study. Rather generalizability here may refer to how theoretical findings can be applied to other ritual settings or ritualist orientations to which they may be generalizable. While each mohel’s approach is idiosyncratic and therefore only representative of their particular approach, the findings regarding the global interface of ritual practice and education may resonate with other such studies. One of the key limitations is the subjective nature of this and in fact any other qualitative study. Only three mohalim are participants in this project so the universal generalizability of the study is questionable. Thus, the generalizations and implications derived from the study may not be applicable to the presentation of brit milah by other ritual practitioners either within the same community or elsewhere. However, as a result of studying these three mohalim, it is hoped that the generalizations herein contained will be useful to other ritual specialists, who will be encouraged to reflect upon the potential educational power of life-cycle rites of passage. The conclusions are therefore intended more for purposes of identification rather than comparison.

Reliability and internal validity. In certain contexts, reliability represents the idea that independent researchers analyzing the same phenomenon will arrive at identical conclusions.
Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggest that such a definition may not hold during qualitative inquiry wherein researchers, who function as both the main sources of and analysts of the study’s data, may interpret data through entirely different lenses. Rather, reliability should reflect the idea that there is internal validity, a dependable fit between what is recorded as data and what actually takes place in the research setting. Employing multiple sources for data-collection as described above insured the reliability of my study.

**Triangulation.** In qualitative research triangulation suggests that more than one source of data is used in establishing factual information and that utilizing multiple sources of information lead to a fuller and more complete understanding of phenomenon to be described. In my study, I triangulated the methods by conducting interviews before and after observing practitioners in their natural settings, participating in multiple observations of the *mohalim*, writing extensive field notes, tape recording details of each ritual enactment, reading and analyzing website information, and collecting artifacts in the form of service handouts.

**Member checks.** I engaged in an informal conversation with each *mohel* at the conclusion of each *bris* observation. During this conversation, I would reflect back to them my reactions to their ritual work, often sharing positive feedback and making sure that I was properly reporting the main characteristics of their ritual work. This allowed me gain their trust and begin to build a collegial and non-threatening relationship with each participant. Over several months I continued to speak almost weekly to two of the three participants and shared my ongoing findings as well as the developing direction of the project.
Audit trail. For purposes of verification, my audit trail includes files of initial impressions of the participants, copies of website information offered by each participant, lists of initial interview questions, notes of the interviews with the participants, reflections of meetings with the participants, field notes of the observations of each mohel in action, examples of service handouts from the mohalim, records of email correspondence with participants and notes of communications with the dissertation advisor during the research and writing process.

Researcher’s position. As a student of Jewish education and a practicing mohel for over fifteen years, I have a particular familiarity with the field of brit milah. My own practice in the field, my approach to the educative process of ritual enactment, coupled with the choices that I make, help me to see the confluence between pedagogy and ritual. While my background helped me formulate the literature review and the guiding questions of this research project, my main tension was to allow practitioners to fully explain and elaborate their approach without presupposing their attitudes regarding the learners, their teaching orientations or what I perceived to be intended educational choices.

In particular, I had to be careful not to assume the nature of the mohel’s work due to my own biases and familiarity with literature regarding possible preconceptions of the learner in a liberal Jewish setting.

The mohel fashions an educative experience for liberal Jews to guide them through a specific life-cycle rite of passage. In an attempt to think about the implications of educational theory and ritual performance, demographic research describes typical assumptions that the
practitioner may have regarding the people with whom he deals. Indeed, educational theory suggests that any pedagogic endeavor need account for the background of the learners present in a potential learning situation. It is therefore relevant to understand the implicit social and educational assumptions that the practitioner may hold regarding the liberal Jews with whom he interacts. Inaccurate assumptions about the nature of the audience may lead a practitioner to flawed thinking regarding the audience and directly impact pedagogic choices that the specialist makes during ceremonial interactions.

Cohen (1992) speaks of five current assumptions regarding the sub-group he labels, the marginally affiliated. Most professionals assume that Jews can be largely divided into two broad categories of the affiliated and unaffiliated. It is assumed furthermore that the unaffiliated is the faster growing segment of the community representing more than half of the population. Additionally, this unaffiliated group, it is assumed, may lack sufficient commitment to Jewish values and therefore educational efforts should focus on elevating their Jewish commitment and motivation. In fact however, statistics reveal that two-thirds of adult American Jews send their children for some type of formal Jewish education, celebrate seasonal holidays, contribute to philanthropic campaigns, and are passionate about Israel. Amongst parents age thirty-five to forty-nine, Jewish identity distribution is skewed even further in the direction of greater involvement. While direct ritual knowledge, including familiarity with synagogue skill sets is lacking amongst this group, most have a shared understanding of Jewish history, a belief in Jewish intellectual talent, an assertion of Jews’ moral sensitivity deriving from centuries of persecution and a sense of obligation to less fortunate or oppressed Jews. Cohen argues that from an educator’s perspective, these predispositions can be exploited as a useful starting-
point for educational enhancement. My study will consider whether the mohel’s presentation during brit milah reflects these potential starting points.

Phillips (2008) observes that the growing phenomenon of intermarriage impacts all aspects of Jewish life including Jewish education. The description of a typical Jewish family consisting of two Jewish parents living together with children is now the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, Cohen (2000) notes that intermarried adults maintain lower than average levels of Jewish activity and tend to come from weaker Jewish homes with less intensive Jewish education. On the bright side, Goldstein & Goldstein (2000) highlight emerging trends in the Conservative movement that are of interest. He finds that young adults selectively affiliated with Conservative synagogues today are more likely than even their parents’ generation to have been exposed to formal and ongoing Jewish education. In an educational field which emphasizes the importance of understanding our learners and meeting them where they are, what are the implications of these findings for ritual practitioners? How does the make-up of an intermarried or synagogue-affiliated family impact ritual presentation by the specialist?

Summary

In this chapter I described the qualitative research method chosen for examining my research question and argued why it is suitable for the study. I provided an overview of the research design, data sources and data collection process and commented on the subsequent analytical process. Chapter four is a descriptive account of each mohel’s work and represents my findings.
Chapter 4

Descriptive Accounts

Overview

All of the mohalim interviewed expressed that they assume educational responsibilities while guiding families through the process of brit milah. All mohalim interviewed and observed consider their role while interfacing with celebra nt families to be, in addition to functional, which is to say, fulfilling the specific ritual goal of performing circumcision in accordance with Jewish law, educational. All voiced the opinion that the work that they do has educational implications for both the guests as well as the new parents. In addition to performing a proper procedural circumcision which is at the forefront of everyone’s concern, here is a sampling of how participants describe the work which surrounds the functional aspect of circumcision. My study attempts to describe and analyze these initial statements.

“So I used the entire brit milah experience as a teaching tool.” BB (Jan. 31, 2012)

“The essential part is how to make brit milah a teaching experience.” CC (Feb. 8, 2012)

“That they have learned a lot by being here today.” Rabbi White (Jan. 17, 2012)

In order to appreciate the interactions that take place, my findings section details descriptive accounts of the work of three mohalim in their natural settings. These descriptions allow me to begin to delve deeper into the broad statements regarding the educational intent
of each practitioner. Alongside these descriptive accounts of the mohel’s work I share summary reactions to the work, offering commonalities and unique nuances of each mohel’s efforts.

Rabbi White

Continuity, God and the Clock

Rabbi White is an extremely busy cleric who prides himself on his successful pulpit career. He has serviced a major Conservative congregation in the northeastern metropolitan area for twenty plus years and is blessed with a large family. Balancing his familial obligations and his pulpit work, alongside his busy brit milah practice, is an ongoing responsibility which he takes seriously. On one Sunday during which I observe him interact with a celebrant family, White had come from teaching Sunday school and participating in a congregational meeting. He is now performing the bris prior to returning to the synagogue for yet another formal gathering. Afterwards, as he shares the rest of his day, White is picking up two of his children to take them and friends to dinner, with evening minyan, of course, to follow. Time is a critical commodity to Rabbi White.

Directly impacting his work in brit milah, this hectic schedule circumscribes the amount of time and attention that White devotes to the families before and after the brit ceremony. When I share with him that it is my practice, as well as that of other interviewees, to visit families both before and after the brit, he is shocked and responds “Oh, I could never do that. I’m just way too busy (April 27, 2012).” Rabbi White’s pre-bris interaction is a straightforward
phone call which consists of recording the venue, date and time of the *brit milah*. He feels little impulse to share many specifics of himself or his approach to *brit* before the day of the ceremony. “I’d say most people who call me at this stage in my career have heard of me, have seen me, have taken my card somewhere previously in prior encounters (Jan. 17, 2012).” He also notes that in this day of access to the internet, people can look up most of the answers to their questions and the specifics of the ceremony absent his guidance. When pushed further on his initial conversations with families, I inquire as to whether he traces origins of customs or traditions with the family. Justifying his simple approach to pre-*bris* interactions, White appropriately notes the following while being sensitive to the demands of this life stage for new parents:

> I want to make this as uncomplicated as possible for people. Getting into lengthy conversations about egalitarianism and the origins of the traditions doesn’t really serve the ultimate purpose. People want to have a *bris*. And they want to celebrate the *bris*. And if they have particular questions that they want to ask, I answer them. All I need to know from them is how, and when, is the ceremony going to take place. I’m not their synagogue Rabbi or their lifelong family Rabbi, I’m their *mohel*...they don’t need this right now in the first eight days of life...but my experience is that people who have just had a baby have their hands full with a lot of things, especially if they already have children (Jan. 17, 2012).
The demands on his time impact his ongoing participation in this study. White is slow to respond to e-mails, voice mails and texts, sometimes taking days or even over a week to respond. Additionally, during his initial interview with me, he consistently glances at his watch and, as the interview extends, his answers become brief, almost terse, or, even aggravated in tone. White shares, “I’m on a tight timeline. One of my kids is at home waiting for me (Jan. 17, 2012).”

Whereas other mohalim have expressed a desire to really get to know the families and a sense of both their educational backgrounds religiously and secularly, White is content to record basic information regarding the logistics of the brit, content to know where and when to show up. He shares in his initial interview;

I think the relationship of a family to a mohel is a short term relationship. It’s not meant to be an ongoing developing relationship. They say what needs to be said. They give me whatever relevant information there is. I don’t need to know everything about their personal lives in order to do their son’s bris (Jan. 17, 2012).

This can be contrasted by another interviewee, AA, who desires to integrate himself fully into the families with whom he interacts. “Every time I do a brit milah, I become part of the family, I force myself. That’s why it takes so much of me because it takes a huge amount of energy (Jan. 31, 2012).”

Although the constraints of an exhausting schedule preclude extensive interaction before the brit, White’s primary professional portfolio as a congregational Rabbi provided the
impetus for the beginning of his milah practice. He shares with me that he considers his milah work an outcome and natural extension of his rabbinate:

I wanted to enhance my rabbinic practice and develop an extension of my rabbinic practice. In a congregation, the pulpit Rabbi is asked to interpret Jewish tradition and teach text and try to make it relevant to people. So, that really is the essence of what I want to do as a mohel; make brit milah relevant to people (Jan. 17, 2012).

Since time is of the essence for White due to the delicate balancing of his responsibilities, I inquire as to how it is that the synagogue allows him to do this outside work. He offers that not only does he consider this an extension of his pulpit work, but that over the years, the synagogue has directly benefited as a result of his outside work in the community. Over one hundred family member units according to White have affiliated with the synagogue as a direct of his work in the field of brit milah.

White is highly sensitive to the anxiety provoking nature of circumcision. As a seasoned ritualist, he is aware that these rites of passage can create stresses and tensions. He insists that one of his main goals is to help families celebrate the birth of their child in an environment that is as reassuring and as calm as possible. He acknowledges that the parents and others are filled with anxiety. Throughout the ceremony he speaks in a gentle manner employing almost subdued tones. He notes that as a mohel, he wants to help people with this ritual of Jewish life by making the ceremony calm and affirming, a relevant and meaningful experience.
People want to be relieved of the anxiety surrounding all of this and I’m able to transform an otherwise anxious moment. They’re filled with anxiety with what this all means and the focus on minor surgery on the baby’s genitals (Jan. 17, 2012).

White is a physically imposing figure. He is well-dressed in suit and tie as he arrives at the bris but a few minutes before the scheduled starting time. Self-confident and secure in his leadership capacity, White neither knocks on the family’s door nor rings the doorbell, but rather strides into the front hallway announcing, “Rabbi White here!” As people come over to greet him, he exchanges pleasantries and wishes of Mazal Tov with the hosts before asking to sit immediately with the parents. From a visual perspective I note that whereas other mohalim arrive at a bris with a doctor’s bag, extensive supplies, circumcision boards and pillows, White presents a simple image, arriving at the bris carrying a small leather shoulder bag in which all his equipment is contained. As I observe White’s interaction with parents and grandparents in these few moments before the bris, he now becomes fully attentive and focused on the family. With guests arriving and noise from all around, White here will not be distracted. Metaphorically, he now reminds me of a shepherd guiding a flock, a devoted pastor directing a confused congregant, or an effective rabbi counseling a concerned parishioner. He is completely focused on the celebrants during these moments, sensitive to the families’ concerns, describing in detail the aftercare procedure and willingly helping the celebrants strategize the distribution of honors and the selection of the Hebrew names.

On one occasion, the parents begin by offering by self-admission their ignorance of Jewish tradition. Slowly and carefully, White helps them with Hebrew names sharing the
importance of the biblical figure, the Prophet Samuel. He offers that this is a strong Biblical name. The father of the baby is uncertain about whether to include a namesake after his great-grandfather by the Yiddish name of Yudel. Rather than dismissing this name as anachronistic and sure to be made fun of later in religious school, White shows the father how Yudel is a derivative of Yehuda and grants that such a selection would be appropriate and meaningful given the father’s connection to his grandfather. Patiently, White helps them finalize their choices, carefully explaining the meanings of the names and how to spell them in Hebrew. White does not suggest to the family a particular significance to each ritual role in the service. He checks his watch and suggests that it is time to start.

On another occasion I witness a beautiful interaction between White and a proud new grandfather with little religious knowledge. The conversation begins as the father of the baby asks his father to act as the sandek. White writes down on his checklist the grandfather’s name and then inquires of the new Zayde, “Do you have a tallis?” The Grandfather pauses and then after a few seconds reluctantly concedes that he does in fact own one. White asks if he is comfortable wearing a tallit. The grandfather says, “but I haven’t used it since my Bar Mitzvah.” White offers, “But you kept it. You must have kept it for some reason that maybe you didn’t even know about. Perhaps you kept it to celebrate as a Jew when you became a grandfather for the first time (April 30, 2012)?” The grandfather nods his head and says, “Yes, you’re probably right.” White helps him don the tallit and prompts him with the words of the blessing. Clearly emotionally affected, the grandfather wears the tallit during the service. I sense that here White has facilitated a Jewish connection for this man that he didn’t even think possible. I can’t help but think that perhaps the “pintele yid”, the spiritual spark that is part of
each Jewish soul, has here been reignited in some fashion and will now continue to burn in a new and unknown direction. When I later ask White about the interchange he offers, “These are the little things I can do to bring people closer to Jewish tradition (April 30, 2012).” Ever cognizant of the passage of time, White checks his watch and announces, “Let’s get started.”

During another bris ceremony, White encounters a family for whom he has performed britot for two older siblings. Although he doesn’t recognize them at first, he quickly takes a familiar tone as he says “Shalom!” to the older brothers. After compiling a list of honors White reviews the simplicity of aftercare. White is now interrupted by the congregation’s Rabbi who shares with him that he has compiled a ceremonial service to use in place of White conducting the rite of passage as the head official. Quick on his feet, White shares with the parents, “I pride myself on meeting the needs of the family and the Rabbi of the congregation (April 27, 2012).” He defers to his colleague who proceeds to conduct the service with a lengthy introduction, including the teaching of a niggun (melody without words) and a story about his own grandchildren. Although deferential, White does use the few minutes that he is allotted to share in a condensed fashion themes of brit milah which he expounds upon in greater length at the other services I observed. He defines each word of the ceremony’s name; brit, meaning covenant and milah meaning circumcision. He asks families attending the gathering, that when they return to their regular routine, they should share with others that they were not at a circumcision this morning, but rather at a sacred religious gathering to celebrate the continuity of Jewish life. At this time, I consider how flexible mohalim need to be each time that they go out to perform their ritual duties. Last minute changes come in a variety of ways for the
practicing mohel who oftentimes will need to adjust on the fly due to conditions beyond his control.

Internally consistent, as evidenced by congruence between his web site page, our interview, and the services observed, White has particular messages which he emphasizes on the day of the bris. As each service begins, his address reminds me of a rabbinic sermon as White prepares to embark on what best can be described as a detailed lecture on the history of circumcision. He then addresses the concept of continuity. Continuity is addressed not only from a ritual standpoint, but from a familial perspective as White focuses on the ceremony as a celebration of a particular family’s legacy. The theme of continuity is expanded as well from a Jewish perspective, as the bris is interpreted as a celebration of the continued existence of the Jewish people and a perpetuation of Jewish values in the world. Here, I recall White’s prideful evaluation of his elocutionary talents:

I think I have excellent communication skills and can articulate what we’re here for in a very meaningful way. I think I’m able to translate that into an experience that’s relevant and meaningful (Jan. 17, 2012).

On the days of the ceremonial presentations, these talents ring true as White’s services move quickly from an introductory perfunctory joke, presumably to put people at ease, to his introductory remarks intended to demarcate this assembly as a sacred religious moment. As an initial goal, White insists that this occasion be appreciated as a sacred religious gathering. He incorporates a candle lighting ceremony to serve this purpose.
The flame is a symbol that this is a time of sacred religious gathering, for which we are all here. It is not an ordinary moment in life. The candles have been lit and the bris has thus begun (April, 30, 2012).

During each bris that he performs, it is important to White that he differentiates his sacred task from that of a simple medical circumcision. The point is driven home not only on implicitly through recitation of prayers, candle lighting and the use of Hebrew, but more explicitly, through his immediate words.

So if someone asks you where you were on mid-day on Friday, please don’t tell them that you were at a circumcision. Please tell them that you were at a ceremony to celebrate the gift of life itself, and parenthood, and family and the continuity of the Jewish religion and people (March 23, 2012).

So I hope that everyone experiences today the idea that we are not here today to watch me perform a circumcision, and when someone asks you where you were today in the middle of a Friday, please don’t tell them that you went to a circumcision, please tell them that you went to a ceremony where we celebrated the gift of life itself and expressed gratitude (April 27, 2012).

When you go home today, please do not say that you were at a circumcision. Please tell people that you were at a religious ceremony to celebrate the life of a religious heritage (April 30, 2012).
White seeks to accentuate the importance of *brit milah* as the oldest continuous ritual practice of the Jewish people. White explains during each service a breakdown of the term *brit milah*. The word *brit* means covenant or partnership and reminds us that there is a covenant between God and the people Israel that goes back to the very beginnings of Jewish peoplehood, all the way back to Abraham our patriarch whom we regard as being the first Jew, the first to enter into a partnership with God. The word *milah*, is the physical act of circumcision and taken together the terminology denotes the physical sign of the spiritual covenant that continues in an unbroken chain of tradition throughout the generations. In describing the origins of this covenantal agreement and in order to highlight its continuity through the millennium, White paraphrases the early chapters of Genesis as follows:

“God promises to make him the father of a great nation that will one day become known as the people of Israel and to give him a way of life that, if he can follow it, will bring meaning and purpose to his life and just as important will inspire to make the world a better place. Abraham says back to God, “sure, I’ll do that. I’ll live my life according to a new set of values that you show me God. I’ll try to make my own life more meaningful and I’ll try to make the world a better place. But, give me a child. If you don’t give me a child, I will not be able to perpetuate this way of life beyond my own life. But if you do, then I can assure that this way of life will go on for eternity. I will share it with my child. I’ll ask the members of my family and my community to do the same thing. Then, this way of life that you show me will go on for an eternity. The miracle of what Abraham said back to God is that it worked. Because here we are 4000 years later in a very different part of the world from where this story first began and what
are we doing? We are doing the very same thing that Abraham and Sarah did many centuries ago in a very different part of the world (March, 23, 2012).”

His detailed account reminds me that he is a pulpit rabbi who has likely taught many courses on the book of Genesis. He continues by comparing this ritual act with the hundreds of ritual acts that we perform as Jews both individually and communally. He notes that nothing, not the Passover Seder, not the lighting of Hanukkah candles, is as ancient as the rite of brit milah. It is the continuity of this rite, White says, that we honor, by performing it yet again today.

In his remarks, White moves from the concept of the continuity of this ritual practice to the concept of the continuity of the Jewish people. He notes that we’re here today to celebrate our religious heritage and that our lives are surely given greater meaning when we connect ourselves to a people with whom we share a destiny. In the age of declining demographics of which people are surely aware, the mohel offers that we affirm today that this child is a Jew. The Jewish people are small in number and so we cherish every soul that is part of our people. The Jewish people are strengthened and enriched because through this rite of circumcision, this new baby is now counted amongst us. He challenges the new parents by suggesting that part of our celebration is predicated on the idea that we’re here today to witness that these parents want to continue the story of the Jewish people and that the story of the Jewish people will indeed continue in the next generation. White is adamant in noting that through the birth of this new baby, who joins in the peoplehood of the Jews through this rite of passage, we ensure the future vitality of the Jewish people.
The ceremony now seems to transition sharply from a macrocosmic to microcosmic context. Whereas White begins with a historical lesson on the continuity of ritual circumcision and the global consideration of the future existence of the Jewish people, he now shifts to a more personalized context focusing on the celebrant family. Now the brit milah ceremony is interpreted from a highly personalized consideration of the continuity of the generations of this particular family and the implications of the new status of parents and grandparents. White does everything here to highlight the liturgical phrase, “from generation to generation”. He notes that this event marks a new chapter in the chronicle of the family’s existence. In the interview he offers that ritual action in general is more greatly appreciated and deemed relevant and meaningful by families when contextualized personally. He therefore suggests that brit must be highlighted as a moment to celebrate family and the connection between generations. In the services he announces:

“We’re here today to celebrate family, the idea that our lives are made more meaningful when we connect our lives to generations that have come before us and the generations that will come after us. In our tradition we believe that physical life may end but that spiritual life never ends so it is possible to feel connected to and feel the love of those that we have shared a life, and to perpetuate their memory and their legacy for generations to come (March 23, 2012).”

Although many see the circumcision gathering as primarily an occasion to celebrate the arrival of the baby, White singularly highlights the importance of the obligations of Jewish parenthood. He interprets the recited parental blessing of the bris service in an enduring
context. He explains that while the recited blessing, to enter the baby into the covenant of Abraham our Father, is only recited today, it is in fact a commandment which is not consigned to a specific time and place (mitzvah aseh she’lo bizman). The command to bring a child into the covenant is rather a lifelong mitzvah of raising the baby to embrace his Judaism and these parental obligations last a lifetime. White asks parents to affirm this new commitment before reciting their blessing.

“I call upon you to affirm that you embrace the sacred role of being Jewish parents to this child, that you will build a home for him in which he will learn of his Jewish heritage. And he will remain motivated and enthusiastic about making his own life deeply meaningful in a place of harmony and unity within Judaism (March 23, 2012).”

From a theological perspective, White uses the bris service to present God as the one who constantly renews creation. He implicitly refers to God’s promise to the descendants of Noah to renew creation. To this day, tradition dictates the recitation of the blessings “zocher habrit” (blessing God for remembering his covenant with humankind) upon seeing a rainbow. White encourages the people to look at the baby and see within this infant God’s fulfillment to humanity of his promise to renew life throughout time.

“It is a promise that God made to all human kind that life would be renewed from generation after generation, season after season and family after family. All around us there are signs that God does renew life but the birth of a baby is the most profound, miraculous sign that anyone of us will ever behold that God does renew life (April 30, 2012).”
To emphasize the uniqueness of God as creator, White asks those present to pause and consider the miraculous nature of birth as a reflection of God’s power in the universe. He suggests that the bris gathering is an occasion to consider that even in the modern age of technology, there are some things for which human ingenuity cannot account.

“A bris is an affirmation that some things in the world happen not because of human cleverness and creativity; of course, a lot of things happen because of those things, including cell phones and computers; but some things in this world happen not because of us, but when we see them, we behold how awesome is God, the creator (March 23, 2012).”

Acknowledging this separation between the power of mankind and the uniqueness of God as creator, White introduces the concept of yirah or awe. He suggests that these ritual moments are our collective religious response when left in wonderment at the miracle of new life.

In addition to the universal God who in general renews creation, White offers an image of God in a highly particularistic context. Today’s bris acknowledges that God is a faithful God, who has kept his thousands of year old promise to Abraham and Sarah to make a great nation of their offspring. These references and allusions to other chapters in Genesis again remind me that White is a congregational rabbi, comfortable using each occasion to quote and teach Torah.

As part of White’s ceremonial presentation, the concept of the throne of Elijah is used to balance the emphasis of the service between viewing this occasion in simply parochial or Jewish terms versus considering the baby’s future relationships with all of humankind through a
wider universal lens. Elijah the prophet is introduced as a zealous biblical figure, a passionate man, committed to making the world a place of tolerance, peace and coexistence. Elijah’s inspirational legacy in the Jewish tradition is to make the world a place of harmony, togetherness, righteousness and non-violence. White offers a prayer that as he matures, this child’s conscience be rattled when he sees injustice and inequity in the world and that he himself must consider it a “sacred obligation” to inspire members of his generation to work with him to make the world a better place. Interestingly, there is no reference here to Elijah’s invoked presence at other Jewish occasions or his role in the announcement of the end of days.

At this point in the service the actual circumcision takes place. All mohalim I observed explain in advance the baby’s reaction to the procedure, minimizing the degree of discomfort from the circumcision itself.

“And I promise you that he is going to cry at his bris but not for the reasons that you think he’s going to cry. Babies cry because that’s what they do. They cry when they’re hungry, when the diaper is full when the diaper is empty. They cry for all kinds of reasons and that’s exactly how babies communicate with us at this stage of their life. The baby is going to cry or squeal just a little bit but not because of circumcision. It is only mildly uncomfortable and equivalent to what might happen to you or me at the doctor or dentist’s office- something that we don’t like but we don’t need anesthesia to bear. Circumcision is exactly in that category. It’s a pinch or sting- he’s not going to like it and he’s going to cry or squeal but the second it’s finished if not sooner he’ll be calm quiet and serene (March 23, 2012).”
Although tradition indicates that those gathered are there to witness the *bris*, White is the only *mohel* who actually averts their collective attention away during his fulfillment of the commandment. He announces to the guests, “I invite you to chat amongst yourselves for two or three minutes after which time we will continue our service with the naming. Go ahead, begin chatting (April 30, 2012).” He sits as he performs the surgery using an *izmal* in place of a surgical blade. The *izmal*, a silver knife sharpened on both sides is one of the only ritual objects particular to the *bris*. He discretely concludes the procedure employing a glass tube for the ritual drawing of the blood, called *metzizah*.

Naming is introduced as a symbol of Jewish identity for the baby. Here the *mohel* often acts as a resource to the plethora of Hebrew names that can be assigned. He suggests that the Hebrew name is a gift that the parents give the baby which lasts a lifetime. White offers that parents can say whatever they want at this time of the service regarding the baby’s namesake but that such participation should always be prearranged. Clearly the participation of the parents at this point highly personalizes this thousand year old ritual. White concludes the service by inviting all to share in the recitation of the *shechiyanu* blessing and then invites all to partake in the festive meal.

Despite his detailed presentation, White says that he does not consider his interaction with guests to be particularly significant. They are there he says to observe the service and be part of a community. On occasion he answers a follow-up question, typically related to *brit milah*, but he notes that such questions are atypical. Unburdened by many items to clean up, White packs up his instruments, hands the family a simple baby naming certificate, shakes
hands with the appropriate people and handles the business aspect of his work. White checks his watch and lets me know that he is tight on time for his next appointment. Outside of a quick phone call tomorrow to check on the well-being of the baby, there is no post-brit interaction.

Cantor Brown

Comedy and Humor: Hip and Clip

Hazzan Brown is an excellent musician who brings his vocal talents as well as his unique affable personality to each and every bris he performs. He has serviced major congregations in both the Midwest and the on the East Coast. He has produced a number of musical recordings and keeps busy with his large family and congregational responsibilities alongside his work in the field of circumcision. He orchestrated a flourishing brit milah practice in the Midwest, but is only now, after relocating six years ago, reestablishing himself as a prominent mohel in his new hometown. Hazzan Brown loves functioning as a mohel. His philosophy regarding the bris, what he offers to the families, how he executes the ceremony and his consideration of the relationships which he fosters with celebrant families is unique.

In reflecting on his introduction into the field of milah, Brown relates that while still a student, a senior member of faculty at the seminary where he was training to become a Hazzan, shared with the group that there were many parts of the United States and the world where people find it difficult to find a liberal mohel to service Reform, Conservative, interfaith and unaffiliated folks. It was proposed that many Jewish couples falling into these categories found themselves with few options outside of traditional mohalim. Additionally, there was an
obvious financial incentive to learn milah that would be beneficial for those who could stomach the idea of performing circumcision. While this outside income could nicely augment a Hazzan’s congregational income, Brown gravitated towards becoming a mohel for other more personal reasons.

Well, he threw in there as well that this could be a nice sideline for the cantor.

But more than the money, it was the autonomy that attracted me. This would be something that I could do, and while I would of course accommodate rabbis and what not, I figured I would be the one in charge. I had already been working with rabbis and knew what it was like to defer. The idea of the professional autonomy, quite frankly, attracted me (Jan. 23, 2012).

After having trailed a local mohel, Brown determined that he could in fact see himself performing britot, and he soon thereafter began studying at a local hospital under the tutelage of a well-respected urologist. After having learned the procedural aspect of circumcision, Brown recognized that he needed to acquire more knowledge in the area of ritual practice regarding brit milah. He enrolled in the Jewish Theological Seminary of America’s Brit Kodesh program, an educational program for practicing physicians which was initially designed to prepare doctors specifically located in sparsely populated Jewish towns to become mohalim. Invited to participate in that training, despite the fact that he was not a physician, Brown learned and reviewed in this context the various laws and customs related to performing brit milah. More importantly, he looks back at that experience as one of the few times that he was able to share with other professionals ideas pertaining to ceremonial presentation. He recognizes that other
styles exist and he laments not having ongoing access to adaptations regarding presentation style.

But there is no question that the people who had already been acting as mohels, in the Brit Kodesh program, together, we had several times that we discussed and that we shared with each other what we had planned to give out to families. So there was a sharing that was quite informing and it helped me come up with ideas as to what I was going to do. Today I don’t go to a lot of other brises...I wish people in my congregation would feel comfortable inviting me as their cantor...so, I don’t really see other mohel’s styles (Jan. 23, 2012).

Brown takes his cues from the families with whom he works as to whether or not to conduct a pre-bris visit by telephone or in person. Sensitive to meeting the family’s needs, he notes that:

Some families are so into their investigation that they really do want to have a meeting. I remember once meeting a family that lived about an hour away and we agreed to meet before the baby was born about halfway between us. They ultimately said that one of the reasons that they ended up using me was because they had that opportunity to meet me and get to know me personally (Jan. 23, 2012).
Most often however his interview is conducted by phone and he fills out a form that records pertinent details for the *bris* including the names of parents, grandparents, name of pediatrician, location, date and time. He is insistent that they can ask any question that they have and that “no question is a stupid question.” He reviews the honors and, in an attempt to create an inclusive service, Brown encourages the parents to include as many loved ones as possible in the ceremony. From the outset he informs his clientele that they can call as often as they like both before and after the *bris*. He is proud of the fact that he often uses this opportunity to talk to them about Shabbat and *Yuntif* (other Jewish holy days) and explain to them his personal religious practice regarding accepting phone calls on these Holy Days.

Many people have no clue so I see this as an opportunity to teach them about Jewish religious practice in general, not just the specifics of the *bris* (Jan. 23, 2012).

Like other *mohalim*, Brown is sensitive to the anxiety provoking nature of this rite of passage. His website and interview comments include phrases such as “minimize your anxiety” and “allay your fears.” Unapologetically he notes that his approach to reducing the stress is through the conscious and deliberate use of well-placed humor throughout the ceremony. He is the only *mohel* who I have met who actually devotes a special page on his website, citing humorous *bris* episodes from various television and movie segments.

I disarm people, especially if there are a great number of people in the room who are extremely nervous about the idea. I do this at the beginning; I have some humor that I add so that it will take the edge off. But I won’t make the
whole thing a joke. You can’t make the whole thing into a joke; it has to be a spiritual Jewish event (Jan. 23, 2012).

Brown presents anything but an old-world image of the mohel. In place of the stereotypical image of an elderly Rabbi with a white beard and shaky hands, Brown glides up to his client’s home in a slick convertible with hood down. He is neither conservative in dress nor grooming, but rather wears a closely cropped goatee and dresses sharply in dress pants and sports jacket. He carries himself with a sense of confidence knowing that he looks good, he is going to sound good and he is going to perform beautifully as well. As he exits his car, he grabs his myriad of supplies which include a circumcision board, a doctor’s bag, a supply of pens and nail files for the family and guests (embossed with his contact information) and a milk crate. A strange sight, he explains to me that the milk crate is used to support the circumcision board on the table so he can comfortably perform the procedure while standing up.

After a quick greeting to the parents, Brown sets up his instruments and puts on his white doctor’s smock making sure to show the hosts that his instruments are being removed from a sterilized pouch so “you have nothing to worry about.” He then sits down with the mother and father to review the honors of the ceremony. Before he allows the family to give him their list, Brown is clear that there is a hierarchy in the honors. The sandek, the person who sits across from Brown and gives the baby wine during the procedure, is the highest honor at the bris. He shares that the tradition is to give that honor to either a grandfather or even a person of great Torah learning. At each bris he explains to the parents that the people who usher the baby into the room at the beginning are often assigned that honor if they themselves
are trying to conceive. At one celebration, the mother of the baby became a single-mother by choice through in-vitro fertilization. She had chosen to become pregnant through the miracles of modern science. She was so touched by Brown’s explanation and the sensitivity of Jewish tradition that she became highly emotional.

In another scenario, Brown walks into the house of a family for whom he is performing what he refers to as “my first trifecta”, having conducted brises for the previous two boys. He is completely comfortable with the parents and high fives the older siblings before he is escorted to the sunroom where this bris will take place. Brown notes to his hosts that this room must be an add-on and that he didn’t remember it from last time. Recollection confirmed, Brown sets up his instruments before asking for the sweet kosher wine. Having forgotten to pick up the appropriate wine, the mother says that she only has a kosher cabernet. Instead of making the family uncomfortable due to their faux-pas Brown is quick on his feet, and says “no problem.” He next directs the family to add three teaspoons of sugar to the dry wine and place it for thirty seconds in the microwave. Impressed by this solution (no pun intended), Brown adds that “All Jewish celebrations are sweet celebrations.” This improvisation reminds me of Brown’s stated desire to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible.

While some mohalim voice that the most fulfilling part of their work in this ritual context is performing or even preserving the practice of ritual circumcision, Brown offers that the most fulfilling part of being a mohel is engaging with the families before or after in terms of their own “yiddishkeit.”
I have had a number of families who were unaffiliated who ended up joining my synagogue. But even if it’s not a matter of joining my synagogue, I am in the house and likely this is one of the first things that they’ve done in contacting a Jewish professional since their bar mitzvah. They may not even have a mezuzah or they ask me about kashrut and that might engage further discussion. And we will have further discussions and in many cases I have brought back a mezuzah to put in on (Jan. 23, 2012).

While other mohalim interviewed do not believe that their interactions with families will have any future impact, Brown suggests that his demeanor and conduct is crucial to the potential Jewish development of his clientele. Going the extra step to engage families in Jewish discussions, creating a positive experience, injecting appropriate humor is all part of what Brown calls his “duty as a yid.”

Look, one of the things that I have felt is that the bris can be milchik, fleishik or pareve. In other words, it can be a positive experience; it can be a real negative experience for a lot of people, in the way that you hear people talk about their mohel. And it can have nothing to do with the surgery; it has to do with how they conduct themselves. Or it can just be neither here nor there, it just took place and that’s that. I like to think that by me performing this bris for people, it’s more likely that they will have a positive experience and have a good perspective on what their Judaism can mean to them and they’ll be more likely to reach out to another Jewish professional for the next thing that they need (Jan. 23, 2012).
As a practitioner Brown is sensitive to the make-up of the crowd and the needs of the family. While he does have specific messages which he likes to share at a bris, he is often put in a position to reframe his remarks and his presentation. He has worked with families who have claimed in advance that they don’t want any ritual ceremony. If they’re Jewish, Brown says he just recites the prayers to himself and “let’s them think what they want to think.” If there is a co-officiant, Brown, like White, will edit his remarks based on the comments offered by the other professional. Brown recalls one instance of being accosted by a Humanist rabbi who was in attendance at a ceremony and challenged him directly on the barbaric nature of circumcision.

The family had obviously already decided to have a bris and so I was there for them, but I would say the stuff the rabbi said really made me feel rotten. Just the way she was bringing up stuff like female circumcision in Africa. And I said, that’s not what we do and let’s not confuse the issues. So, I was much more low-key and just tried to do the job and get out of there (Jan. 23, 2012).

As each bris begins Brown announces that there are head coverings for men who are inclined to wear them, and that women are welcome to wear them as well. He does not hand out a pamphlet for people to follow the service. His introductory remarks briefly cover the history of this Biblical commandment, the equal obligations of men and women regarding its fulfillment, and the concept of ritual agency. He shares all this briefly and with the interspersion of light humor.
“We are here today to bring this beautiful little boy into the covenant of Abraham. Abraham was the first Jew; he had to circumcise himself (high pitched inflection here to create humor). And did I tell you he was ninety-nine? So, I am not ninety-nine (again light laughter). So, Abraham also circumcised his own sons. And fathers did do their own sons circumcisions for many generations. But, don’t think women were left out. Moses wouldn’t do his own son so his wife Tzippora took the act into her own hands, so Bonnie, if you want, I can just leave you here with the rent a “bris-kit” here and I can take off (laughter). Do you want me to be your agent for this bris? Okay. So it’s pretty clear to all of you that she shook her head and would like me to be her agent (Jan. 26, 2012).”

Having placed the honorees in a straight line, Brown has the baby ushered into the room and then immediately places the baby on the Throne of Elijah before repositioning the baby on the circumcision board and performing the surgery. Here Brown transposes the liturgical words of welcome, “blessed is he who comes to enter the covenant on the eighth day” to the placement on Elijah’s chair. Instead of interpreting Elijah’s presence as a symbol of transforming change in the world at large, Brown introduces Elijah from the perspective of a guardian. He notes that Elijah is invited to other special Jewish events, especially when the Sabbath concludes. As the baby arrives on the Throne of Elijah, Brown shares that the words of welcome chanted today will hopefully be chanted at a future Jewish wedding. He thus places a hope for Jewish continuity within the individual life of this child.
“As the baby arrives on the Throne of Elijah we welcome him with the words that he will someday hear, please God, when he meets the woman of his dreams and he comes under the chuppah, where he will hear these very words again (Jan. 26, 2012).”

It is here at this point where Brown’s special consideration of the guests at the bris and their function most clearly stands out. He has already shared with the group that while there are designated honorees at a bris, in fact each person here is special because they are here to act as witnesses. They are to witness not only the assignment of agency but as well the circumcision itself. Every person here is special by virtue of the fact that they are here to witness a beautiful event. They are to be holy witnesses that the traditions of the Jewish people continue throughout the millennia. In addition to assuring the guests of their role, he solicits their assistance in a more active manner by having them sing with him and repeat liturgical phrases at various places in the service.

“Now ladies and gentlemen, babies under my care receive three types of anesthesia. He already received a topical anesthetic and now (while giving the baby some wine) he’s getting the vintage yesterday (laughter) and now you can provide him with the third type of anesthesia, what I call spiritual anesthesia. Now you can provide him with the third by singing, or humming if you prefer, or simply swaying if you don’t know the words and mostly by sending him prayers of good wishes that this should be the worst pain he feels in a good long time, although I warn you that he won’t be able to walk or talk for about a year after his bris (laughter)( Feb. 2, 2012).
He announces, “Now, sing with me.” He begins by chanting *Eliyahu Hanavi* as many join in; some singing and some with eyes closed, perhaps responding to Brown’s request to send prayers for the baby. Brown next continues with songs which he believes many guests will know including *oseh shalom*, *hinei ma tov* and *am yisrael chai*. He has created a beautiful and participatory moment and has engaged most of the onlookers and averted their attention as he performs the surgery. He recites the blessing for the circumcision. While he makes available on his website the traditional blessings for the parents in print, transliteration and with audio-files, should they choose to chant it, he most typically, as he does today, prompts the parents in the words of their Hebrew blessing. The congregation is then prompted in the words of the traditional response which is recited in both Hebrew and then English. The baby is wrapped up quickly and returned to the mother.

Before the actual naming, Brown congratulates the *sandeks* and informs them that had he as the *mohel* been for whatever unforeseen reason been unable to perform the *bris*, the obligation of the circumcision would have fallen to them. As light laughter ensues Brown segues into the naming. He is clear in noting to the people who are attentive that this is the second part of the ceremonial circumcision and that is not until the baby has fulfilled the commandment of circumcision that he can receive his Jewish name.

As the blessing for the naming is recited Brown reminds people of the importance of marking life’s milestones in a Jewish context. Having already referenced future potential participation in a Jewish wedding, he now chants in English so all will understand; “This is the little one known as *ploni ben ploni*, the name by which he will be called to the Torah as a Bar
Mitzvah and please God, I’d like to be there (laughter)” He adds that although it seems way off in the future, the idea of thinking about bar mitzvah and a Jewish wedding is something to always keep in mind because the passage of time will go by quickly. Completely sensitive to life cycle rites of passage, Brown speaks of bris in the same context as people reference the last act of loving kindness at a funeral:

When families have a bris, they give their baby a gift that can never be repaid.

In a very different sense, it’s sort of like how we talk about the shoveling at a funeral, but of course, not to be compared that way, but it is a favor that can never be repaid for. It’s a something that you do for your child... that you’re commanded to do, but for the family, there’s no reward, but you’ve done the right thing (Jan. 23, 2012).

In each instance Brown offers the opportunity for the family to personalize the ceremony by sharing words regarding the baby’s namesake. Brown next purposefully excludes the prayer for recovery of the baby as he determined that it undermines his presentation of the surgical procedure as very minor. He excludes the recitation of shechehiyanu which he notes is not traditionally done as part of the liturgy. Ever the humorist, Brown announces as he looks around the room, “Now that we’re done...who’s next?” He gets ready to conclude by recapping the stages of the ceremony;

“You see there are three parts to the ceremony; the first one nobody likes too much, the second one is when he is given his name and the third one everyone enjoys, is when we eat.
So in the meantime, *mazel tov* to everyone and may you only have happy occasions (Feb. 2, 2012).”

As he invites all present to put their hands together for singing *Siman Tov U’Mazal Tov*, he announces his web site contact information. Whereas two of the ceremonies I observed concluded at this point, a third came to a radically different culmination. At this gathering, two of the grandfather’s had shared a unique family lineage. One family was the descendant of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (a famous Chassidic rabbi) and another great-grandfather claimed to be a direct descendant of Maimonides. These families had a stronger connection with Jewish learning and prior to the beginning of the *bris*, one of the great-uncles of the baby had inquired about the laws of circumcision as it pertains to cesarean section and Shabbat. Another had inquired about the ceremonial drawing of blood called *metzizah*. As this ceremony concluded, Brown gathered the family in a circle and began a spirited *hora* dance which lasted for a couple of minutes. Brown told me afterwards that this was not something that he had planned or orchestrated but that rather, he was responding to the energy he felt in the room. Brown sits with the family for the festive meal following the ceremony.

Consistent with his desire to act as an ongoing Jewish resource to his clients, Brown takes his leave, wishing congratulations and saying to the parents, “You know this doesn’t have to be the last time that we’ll be in contact with one another, just because everything’s fine with your baby’s penis. I have lots of things going on in my synagogue and you know all the ways to reach me and I really want you to feel free to do so (Feb. 9, 2012).”
Cantor Green

Short and Sweet: Compassion and Closure

Cantor Green is the nicest man you could ever meet. He is a respected cleric having served a single Conservative congregation for his entire professional career. For over thirty years he has attended to the pastoral and musical needs of his community by sharing his vocal talents as well as his skills as a noted arranger and composer of synagogue music. Due to reasons beyond his control, he is unfortunately in the midst of concluding his pulpit career. Although he would like to continue working in his chosen profession, the economic downturn combined with his desire not to relocate his family, makes it unlikely that he will find a new full-time position. Whereas others in this predicament may allow such circumstances to affect their disposition, Green remains upbeat, pleasant and a pleasure to be around. He acknowledges that his personality remains an asset for him as he encounters families during the celebration of life-cycle events.

Green came to this field as a direct result of the passing of his father, of blessed memory. He shares with me that his father always wanted him to learn something to do outside of pulpit work and immediately after “getting up from shiva (the traditional seven day mourning period)” Green decided to honor his father’s memory by learning brit milah. Green made contact with the Chief Mohel of Jerusalem, Rav Yosef Halperin, who was one of the few people in Israel prepared to train liberal practitioners. Green booked tickets for a flight to the Holy Land, and set out to add a new dimension to his professional portfolio. In over twenty-five years as a mohel, Green has shared celebrations with over five thousand families in the tri-state
area. Like other mohalim, he notes a decline in business which he attributes to the proliferation of medical doctors performing ritual circumcision.

Similar to others in the field, Green is highly aware of the anxiety of the moments surrounding circumcision. He voices concerns in general but is particularly sensitive to the needs of the mother:

I try very hard to be a calming factor, especially for the baby’s mother who we know is fighting hormones and, who we know is very attached to the baby. And she is very concerned and very nervous. So I try very hard to calm her down, knowing that if I say ‘calm down,’ that won’t help. So just by how I talk to her and how I deal with the family, I try to keep everybody calm (Feb. 1, 2012).

Asked regarding the most fulfilling part of being a mohel, Green relates a beautiful ongoing interaction that he had with a particular family. He voices that he does not think that the relationship need be circumscribed by the performance of the actual ritual but rather he wants this to be a beautiful moment for all so that the relationship can begin to grown. His involvement with this particular family is indicative of the fact that he believes that sometimes one can have an ongoing impact in a family’s life, even after the bris ceremony. He shares that while people gather at a bris and proclaim in liturgical response that the baby should grow to Torah and the blessings of the wedding canopy, he, as the mohel, actually once had the chance to witness the fulfillment of that stated religious aspiration.

I love doing what I do. But if I had to pick one instance, it would be dealing with a family where I did britot for both boys. Then there was a girl born and I was
involved in the baby naming, and then I taught all three of them for bar mitzvah. And then just over a year ago, I flew out to Chicago to do one of the weddings. And the reason that I did it, because I wouldn’t normally fly out to Chicago to do this, is because one of the kids, as a young child, showed tremendous musical talent. And I went to his parents and said, you don’t know what you have with this kid. But trust me, he is tremendously musically talented and you need to foster this and you need to make sure that he’s educated properly in music. And they looked at me like I had six heads. Well the kid went on to take music lessons and he went on to be the pianist/musical director in the high school except when he was on stage as the principal, the lead role. And then he went on to Northwestern and he played every show there. And he’s now out in Los Angeles making a living as a professional musician and recording artist. So for him, I went out to Chicago to perform the wedding. I really got to see the fulfillment of what we said at his bris (Feb. 1, 2012).

Green shares that the families with whom he works generally have a very limited background in Judaism. In addition he services a number of intermarried couples. He notes that for the most part the families come to the occasion with a sense of willingness to participate and be educated.

Most of my clientele are, I would not describe them as being tremendously educated, but for whatever reason they opt to have a bris. Certainly they’re
willing to learn. They ask questions. They’re respectful for the most part to what’s happening. There are of course intermarried families where I find for the most part that the non-Jewish partner is extremely respectful and is, in most cases, willing to participate to a point (Feb. 1, 2012).

Green encourages his families to feel free to ask any questions and he finds that the nature of these questions most typically surround the timing of the event. In this context, Green feels he does specific teachings surrounding the laws of circumcision.

And they’ll ask questions about all the various aspects of the *bris* right down to timing of the *bris*. Can we do the *bris* on Saturday night because Sunday is the Super Bowl? No, you can’t do it on Saturday night because it has to be done before sundown. Does it have to be on the eighth day? Well, that is the biblical commandment. It has to be done on the eighth day unless the baby is not well. And if you have a healthy baby, you thank God that you have a healthy baby, and you do it when you’re supposed to (Feb. 1, 2012).

Green encourages families to take an active and responsible role in the service preparation. He has a standard service which he sends as an electronic file to the parents and asks them to review it and include any additional readings or poems that they may find meaningful. He then asks them to print as many copies as necessary for the guests who will be present. He feels that by reviewing and participating in this process the parents will feel included in the ritual and have an opportunity to review the blessings in Hebrew and in English.
Green arrives at the family’s home a full half-hour before the scheduled starting time. Diminutive in stature, he makes a calm and gentle entry into the house. He pleasantly greets the celebrants and then calls the parents over to review the honors assigned and asks if there are any last minute questions. At one bris I observed, a discussion ensued pertaining to the choice of sandek. He shares that it would be traditional to allow the grandfather, as opposed to a suggested uncle, to fill this role, although of course, the choice remains in the hands of the parents. He speaks in soft and soothing tones as he takes a moment to review aftercare with the family and, like other mohalim, he reminds the family that he is available around the clock should they have any follow up questions. Setting up his instruments and donning his white doctor’s coat, he announces that the bris is ready to begin.

Working off a pre-printed text, which he suggests keeps the guests focused on the proceedings, Green begins each bris the same way. An introductory reading proposes the potential of a new baby to fully participate in the task of repairing the world, or tikkun olam. This is of note because the chosen reading seems to frame the bris from the outset in universal as opposed to parochial contexts. While I note that the bris services can potentially embody and address both human as well as Jewish ideals and concerns, during Green’s services, universal themes are mentioned always before concerns related to the Jewish people. A later reading also seemingly prioritizes universal values by beginning with a hope that the baby “become a caring and loving person” and that he “accepts responsibilities to others” before acknowledging responsibilities to his Jewish heritage. I wonder whether such framing could be considered more palpable to less involved Jewish parents and intermarried families which he services.
Green, who suggests that he wants people to understand why we perform this bizarre ritual, continues by offering a brief history of the commandment:

“We are going to circumcise a baby boy this morning in accordance with Jewish law. This states that the Biblical patriarch Abraham was the first to accept the oneness of God, rejecting idolatry while entering into a covenant with God, promising to worship god, God promising in return to make a great nation of the seed of Abraham. As a sign of the covenant Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his sons throughout the generations. The act of circumcision today will include the baby in the 4000 year old covenant (Feb. 9, 2012).”

This is the only time during observation that any participant has reminded the assemblage that the covenant represents not only an acceptance of the oneness of God, but as well an active rejection of an alternative way of life. Denying idolatry, worship of the God of the Universe, is a response to this new relationship. There is a bookending of themes as Green’s chosen reading after the naming traces themes found in the declaration of faith, the shema yisrael (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Green is committed to keeping the service relatively brief due to the anxiety in the room. None of the three services that I observed lasted longer than ten minutes, rather they were, like Green, short and sweet. After the mother and then the father read a short selection from a pre-printed text, the baby is immediately placed on the pillow which represents the throne of Elijah in preparation for the procedure. Elijah, it is pointed out, is invited to each bris we perform because he is known in the tradition as the protector of small children. Green recites the Hebrew paragraph zeh hakiseh (this is the chair of Elijah) which is not translated.
Like each mohel observed, Green offers that the baby will experience little discomfort due to his use of topical anesthetic and ingestion of wine. The baby will be uncomfortable as the diaper is opened, the cold alcohol swab is applied and his legs are restrained. There is no formal designation of agency to perform this commandment on behalf of the father. Youngsters are asked to reposition themselves away from the table at this time. Quoting his teacher, Rav Halperin, Green says that there are many beautiful ways to introduce youngsters to the beauty of Judaism, but blood is not one of them.

The sandek sits across from Green and holds the baby’s legs as the surgery is performed using an izmal but absent metzizah. After Green recites the mohel’s blessing, he asks everyone to follow in the booklet as the father alone recites the blessing “to enter into the covenant” while the mother alone recites a special blessing of consideration, the birkat hagomeil, which thanks God for having delivered her from the danger of childbirth. He then asks the congregation to read with him the appropriate liturgical response. He tells me that he likes to include everyone here so as to minimize the talking and bring everyone’s attention back in focus after the procedure.

As Green segues into the next section of the service, he tells people that today we have entered this child into a many thousands-of-year old covenant and that he will now be given a Hebrew name. Here Green has a unique way of speaking about the concept of Jewish naming. He begins by focusing on the concept of future Jewish life cycle events, as if to remind the family that this is but the first of the baby’s rites of passage that will be marked in a Jewish fashion. Green announces that the name bestowed on the baby today will be the name that
will be used when he is called up to the Torah at his Bar Mitzvah and “hopefully, we all pray, that it will be the name that will affixed to a ketubah (a Jewish marriage contract) as he engages in yet another act of Jewish continuity (March 4, 2012).” He notes that when the family is intermarried, he himself is uncertain of the direction the family’s life will take, so he does not offer this as a future life path for the baby.

Green voices sensitivity to the concept of psychological closure which is often inherent in the naming of a new baby. He believes that for Ashkenazi families, who are often naming the baby after a deceased relative, the naming is certainly the most important part of the bris ceremony.

I obviously give the parents the opportunity to talk, to thank their family and friends for coming, to talk about the namesake, why they chose that name and who that person was. That’s also, especially if the person who they’re naming the baby after, passed recently. It also gives them a sense of closure. I know that in some families, obviously the more traditional families; let’s say, in my family, if somebody passes away, people are just waiting for a baby to be born so that they can give him that name. They don’t get complete closure unless that happens (Feb. 1, 2012).

When I ask Green if this personal focus on the naming overwhelms the greater religious aspects of his service, he shares his perception of the close ties in the contemporary community between religious expression and family gatherings.
Within the Jewish community that I’m familiar with in the United States, there seems to be a cohesive factor that binds together family and religious tradition. Probably the best example would be the pesach seder. Even a family that there is a Jew who is almost entirely removed from Jewish observance, he remembers going to the grandfather’s house for the seder. And they remember that they may not have understood anything at the seder but that the grandfather said every word in the hagaddah in Hebrew. That’s a memory, and seems to be a memory that is ingrained in so many Jewish souls and Jewish lives. And that brings together Jewish tradition and Jewish family (Feb. 1, 2012).

Skipping the prayer for recovery and the priestly benediction, Green concludes his service with a short reading for the grandparents and then a parental reading which, to the attentive listener, brings us full circle back to the concept of the acceptance of the oneness of God and themes for the baby to fulfill goals that would be embraced by people of any religious heritage. This selection, that alludes to the biblical paragraph found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, reads:

“With all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might, we are thankful for the gift of this wonderful child. We pray for the continued health of this child. We pray for him to be strong in mind, body and spirit, to grow steadily and sturdily in a home filled with joy. We pray for him to become a person who greets the world with joy, passion, compassion, courage, humility, humor and patience.
With all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might, we pray for the ability to love
and nurture this child, to provide for him, and to educate him, to understand him and to allow
him the freedom to grow.”

Looking for differences in performance practice, I note that I witnessed Green perform
three ceremonies in three highly different contexts. The first bris took place at a fancy
apartment where there were two Jewish parents and approximately fifty guests. The second
took place in a small house with just the immediate family. The father was not Jewish. The third
took place at a synagogue and coincided with the observance of Holocaust Memorial Day. Like
the other mohalim, Green has a specific way that he conducts his services and interacts with
the families. While this did not surprise me, I viewed it as a missed opportunity, when
addressing the concept of Jewish continuity, that the irony of celebrating the continuation of
Jewish life was not mentioned on Yom HaShoah.

On all occasions, Green checks the baby after the ceremony and exits quickly. He has
left a positive impression on the families who seem to be perfectly content with a brief
ceremony and procedure. As we leave the setting, each time I hear a guest mention about
Green, “He seems like such a nice guy.”

Summary Reactions: Themes in milah practice.

After having interviewed three seasoned professionals and observed them perform
representative britot in diverse settings, a number of findings can be reported and are worthy
of analysis through the lens of pedagogy as well as ritual theory. Data analysis involved creating
a ritual performance matrix which allowed me to begin by comparing detailed aspects of each
representative ritual performance. Additionally, I triangulated my data by reviewing interview transcripts, web sites information, and analyzing the distributed service materials from each bris performed where applicable. I will begin by noting some of the unique nuances that each mohel displays as well as some of the similarities in overall approach. I will in the next chapter suggest both pedagogical as well as practical issues pertaining to ritual that are worthy of consideration within the context of my investigation.

Brown’s interaction is at first glance easy to dismiss due to his liberal use of humor. Nonetheless, he shares that it is not humor for humor’s sake, but rather as an accommodation to the anxiety regarding circumcision. His services uniquely present circumcision as an egalitarian commandment to both the mother and father of the baby. His ceremony is highly focused on the individual child and the family. He concludes the service by focusing during the naming prayer, on the particular family’s lineage, by singing that the baby should grow to become a great Goldstein, or Greenberg, or Levine. There is little reference to the concept of Jewish peoplehood although the ancient nature of the commandment, and its fulfillment, is of note. Brown does remind people present at the bris of the next life cycle event to be celebrated in the Jewish life-cycle by referencing the future bar mitzvah of the baby. There is little focus on the obligations of Jewish parenthood beyond bris. Brown stands out in my study due to the serious consideration he gives to his interaction with the families after the ritual encounter as well as the serious role he assigns to the onlookers at the ceremony. The ritual audience he refers to as holy witnesses and throughout his service he engages them by having them repeat phrases in Hebrew and English, offer words of well-being to the baby and by soliciting them to offer spiritual anesthesia during the procedure. He happily spends extra time with the family
after the *bris*, not only by sharing in the meal, but also by offering to return as many times as necessary, to ensure the parents are pleased with his procedure and to guide them in future Jewish participation. His desire to function a Jewish resource not only in the context of the *bris*, but thereafter, allows him to regard himself a potential portal of entry into congregational Jewish life for the family. He has demonstrated his sincerity in this role by helping families affix *mezuzoth* after a *bris* and actively attempting to involve them in his synagogue’s functions. Although I observed him perform circumcisions for families of three completely different make-ups (one was a single Jewish mother by choice, one couple was intermarried and unaffiliated and the third couple were both Jewish and of considerable religious background) Brown’s interactions and presentation of the ritual in each setting was virtually identical.

White’s work stands out firstly due to the unique emphasis that he places on the parents concerning their ongoing responsibilities as Jewish parents. He is the only *mohel* observed or interviewed who explains the blessing of circumcision in an ongoing context, sharing with parents that while they recite this blessing on the eighth day of life, the obligations of entering their son into the covenant last a lifetime. He has them affirm that commitment before he allows them to recite the blessing. White’s services are further exceptional in the detail and depth of the presentation. His introductory remarks last upwards of ten minutes and reference various biblical texts and he presents to the assembled many Hebrew terms. Particular to White’s work is his argument that ritual is a collective reaction to the perception of the transcendent God the Creator in the world. His presentation is particularly eloquent and sounds like an *Introduction to Judaism* lecture. In his mind, and as evidenced by his limited interactions with the family before and after the *brit*, White regards himself as a ritual
functionalist for a particular time and place and is not looking to create an ongoing relationship with those with whom he interacts.

Green’s work stands out due to his use of a printed text to follow the pattern of the ritual. Ritual theorists will argue as to whether such an approach positively impacts the moment by allowing onlookers to follow the structure of the performance, thus encouraging active participation, or negatively impacts the ritual moment by drawing collective attention away from the experience itself. Green’s presentation is particularly brief yet employs a clever structure in the service, whereby he begins by connecting this commandment with a rejection of a polytheistic lifestyle, and then concludes his service with a parents’ prayer which is structured around a quotation from Deuteronomy related to the Jewish declaration of faith. His voiced sensitivity to the psychological state of the mother in particular and the added dimension of potential closure at a brit milah is also of note. His seeming prioritization of universal themes rather than particular Jewish themes suggests that ancient ritual is best presented to liberal Jews by accenting global versus parochial leitmotifs. His reference to the use of a Hebrew name on a ketubah (the Jewish marriage contract) is of note in a ritual context because it represents the ritual as demanding an intended future response from the participants.

Across the board, I observed the following commonalities amongst all participant mohalim which formed the basis for my discussion and further analysis:

1) Each mohel services a diverse population and encounters families from dissimilar religious backgrounds.
2) Each *mohel* sees his ritual role in an overarching educational context and believes that through his actions, words and interactions he is teaching the celebrant family not only about the particular of this ritual itself but also about the relevance, meaning and nature of Jewish life in general.

3) Pre-*bris* interactions are brief and during this time *mohalim* do not take the time to acquaint themselves with the Jewish educational backgrounds of the families with whom they work.

4) Despite addressing different audiences in diverse settings and at different calendric occasions, each *mohel* has developed a consistency in presentation style which rarely is altered despite varying circumstances.

5) Each *mohel* observed presents a life-cycle rite of passage consistent with Van Genep’s (1960) three-fold spatial metaphor for all such rituals including, separation, transition and incorporation or re-aggregation.

6) Each *mohel* is highly sensitive to the anxiety provoking nature of this ritual practice and attempts to reduce anxiety either through humor, tone of voice, or spending extra time with the celebrant family.

7) Each *mohel* models Turner’s (1969) idea that the liminal time of *communitas* is an opportunity for sharing powerful myths, symbols and wisdom from the repository-wealth of the tradition and use the time of the *bris* for sharing such ideas.

8) Each participant emulates Dugan’s (1989) idea that life-cycle ceremonies can be used to transmit familial and covenantal values, and that the participation of the
clergy is central to sharing the perspectives of religious traditions regarding both social values and religious ideals during these interactions.

9) Each mohel accentuates official (Hoffman, 1993) or canonical (Rappaport, 1999) ritual meanings during the beginning of the service before allowing for the emphasis of private and self-referential meanings during the naming ritual.

10) Stylistically, each mohel performs in the priestly as opposed to shamanistic tradition (Driver, 2006) emphasizing the fixed liturgical order and regularity. Recurrent themes include obedience, promises and obligations.

11) Through the adaptation of a priestly tradition, the mohalim strongly resonate with Jennings’ (1982) concept of the pedagogic mode of ritual by performing a bris ceremony that will be highly recognizable and repeatable in other settings. All britot are observed absent any significant ritual innovations.

12) Whereas each mohel uses ritual language (Wheelock, 1981) to present characteristics of the ritual, requests of the ritual, intent of ritual and attitudes tied to ritual, each performer interprets these ideas in an idiosyncratic manner. A discussion of ritual language will follow in the next chapter.

13) With one exception, post-bris interaction does not extend beyond expected medical aftercare.

Chapter Five offers an analysis and discussion pertaining to the features of the mohel’s ritual and educational work based on these observations.
Chapter 5
Analysis and Discussion

Overview

This chapter presents an analysis and discussion of the observations by considering the interface of educational and ritual theory and begins to answer the primary and secondary research questions presented at the beginning of the paper. I start by presenting a section describing how the mohalim function as ritualists. This includes a discussion regarding liminality, ritual noetics, ritual meaning, ritual absence and ritual language. I use these categories to identify educational goals and related pedagogic considerations of the mohel. Next, I examine the teaching practices of the mohalim during the brit milah process by discussing teacher-orientations, the frontal nature of teaching, teacher-centered education, teaching as a lonely profession and implications regarding collegiality and teaching materials.

Liminality

A central feature of life-cycle rites of passage is that they are intended to address the anxiety inherent in change of status (Van Genep, 1960). In the context of ritual circumcision, anxiety is further highlighted by the stress which accompanies the surgical procedure of taking a knife to an infant’s genitals. Each mohel is acutely aware of this stress and strives to reduce anxiety by reassuring parents while demystifying the pain experienced by the baby. All of the mohalim share comments related to reducing stress. Examples include; “I try very hard to be a
calming factor, especially for the mother,” and “I try to create an environment that is calm and reassuring for them.”

The initial focus of each ritual practitioner is an attempt to reduce anxiety, often by explaining the procedure, the degree of pain experienced by the infant or the medical aftercare required as a result of circumcision. Each mohel not only devotes sections of his website to explaining aftercare and medical aspects of the circumcision, but as well takes time to educate the parents regarding these issues and tries to reassure celebrant families that the baby will be fine. Ritually, within the context of the ceremony the omission of the prayer for recovery for the baby also helps to underscore the minor nature of the procedure.

It is only mildly uncomfortable and equivalent to what might happen to you or me at the doctor or dentist’s office...the second it’s finished, if not sooner, he’ll be calm, quiet and serene (Rabbi White, April 27, 2012).

I don’t ever want to belittle the amount of pain a baby has to the parents. So I tell them, there are things that we can do. We can use a spray. We can use a topical anesthetic. You can get emla from your doctor (Cantor Brown, Jan. 23, 2012).

I make the area cold and wet with alcohol. He is not going to appreciate that sensation. Babies tend to cry when they are wet and cold. He is going to want get fed and so he’s probably going to continue to cry ....so he will continue to cry. I am going to be using a topical anesthetic, it’s unlikely that he will feel
much if any pain so you may want to think about that when you hear him cry

(Cantor Green, Feb. 1, 2012).

*Communitas* experienced in liminality is a second feature of life-cycle rites of passage (Turner, 1969). During this transitory phase, cultures take the opportunity to share teachings of values and narratives deemed essential to the tradition. Each *mohel* accepts this responsibility and intentionally structures time during their work with families to share in some manner or interpretive schema the biblical account of the Abraham’s initial covenant with God. The liberal clientele of our participants, Cantor Brown suggests, are often not particularly well educated from a Jewish religious perspective and Brown verbatim repeats Anderson & Fowley (1998) who note that even practicing Jews are often biblically illiterate and may have no idea why circumcision is performed. This assumption regarding the learners provides the impetus for all of the observed practitioners to share the most general features of this fundamental biblical narrative. *Mohalim* accept as a second educational objective, whether during a pre-bris phone call or most typically during the ceremony, the teaching of the biblical account of God’s initial covenant with Abraham. Each *mohel* observed and interviewed offers an overview of this story accentuating different elements thereof.

Given that each *mohel* voices an intention to provide an educative experience during the ceremony, and given that each *mohel* fashions that experience by teaching and interpreting a biblical text, my study is directed to examine the work of the *mohel* in the same manner that one would analyze bible teaching in other educational settings. Specifically, as teachers of text,
I believe it is relevant to consider proposed orientations of teaching the bible as a framework for considering the educational nature of the mohel’s work.

Holtz (2003) suggests that teachers of text may adapt one of nine orientations when engaged in their work. Four of Holtz’s orientations are demonstrated by the mohalim who I observed and interviewed. In particular, the mohalim begin with the comprehension orientation which seeks to decode the text and allow the participants to understand the basics of the biblical text. This orientation reflects a tacit assumption by the practitioner concerning the general ignorance of the group regarding both Hebrew and the biblical narratives. Two examples of such an orientation are Rabbi White’s explanation of each Hebrew word brit, milah and brit milah and Cantor Brown’s humorously sharing part of the story outline that Abraham was ninety-years of age when he circumcised himself. An example of Holtz’s ideational orientation which shares the “big ideas” behind the biblical account is that shared by Cantor Green who proclaims that, “by circumcising this infant today we are entering him into a thousands of year old and ongoing covenant between God and the Jewish people (March, 4, 2012).” Many of the mohalim model a moralistic-didactic orientation as they focus on the moral lesson behind the text of the bible which Holtz notes teaches the lesson behind the text. An example of the moralistic-didactic orientation is shared by all mohalim who present that the lesson of the story is that our lives have meaning when lived in partnership with God and within a covenant of mutual obligation and commitment. Each mohel emphasizes the bible leads to action orientation which suggests that through understanding the biblical text, subsequent performance of commandments and performance of ethical behavior is inevitable. An example of this orientation is shared by Rabbi White when he arrives at the ceremonial placement of the
baby on the throne of Elijah. Here he suggests that in the future, the infant’s conscience should be shaken when he witnesses injustice and inequity in the world and that this baby should come to inspire members of his generation to work with him to make the world a better place, a place of co-existence and tolerance. As Holtz suggests, and as seen in the mohel’s work, teachers may feel more comfortable in one orientation than another but may choose to flow between orientations even in the context of a given, and here truncated, lesson. The mohel who carries a multiplicity of goals such as making each brit understandable, educational, meaningful and memorable, uses the text as a springboard, flowing between interpretive orientations.

The more academic orientations referred to by Holtz as contextual orientation, literary criticism and reader-response were not found in the work of the mohel. Only one mohel interviewed, adapts a parshanut orientation by sharing classical commentators’ understanding of weekly Torah texts each time a bris is performed. Another mohel shared that on occasion he would adopt this orientation by sharing a midrashic text related to the Genesis story, although such practice is uncommon. In reflecting on their work as teachers of a biblical text in a ritual setting it would be interesting for mohalim to consider if the orientation adapted during the brit milah ritual is the most effective orientation or, in fact the only orientation, suitable for accomplishing their educational work given the various backgrounds of celebrants with whom they work. Exposure to alternate orientations may provide mohalim with new ways to consider how they share teachings in their ritual work.
An additional insight was gathered in my observation of both Rabbi White and Cantor Green who indicated in the initial interview process, that they would be inclined to alter their educational approach when sharing the story while working with families with a more solid background in Jewish learning. In part, my assumption was that such an alteration would include moving beyond a rudimentary comprehension-orientation into a more sophisticated orientation of text teaching. At two particular britot I observed, the parents and immediate families came from strong Judaic backgrounds yet the explication of the text was virtually identical to that offered for less knowledgeable parents and even intermarried families. The fact that the interpretive orientation of the mohel did not change during the public ceremony seems to indicate that during this aspect of the mohel’s work, it is consideration of the guests as learners which takes precedence over what can be offered to the celebrant families as learners. AA and BB both elevate precedence of the guests as learners instead of the parents noting, says BB, “that the parents are in a fog by this point anyway (Jan. 31, 2012).” This prioritization of the larger group over the parents, in terms of educational focus, explains why even well intentioned mohalim may not in fact “do what they say” by sharing a more sophisticated orientation to bible teaching when working with parents of stronger Judaic backgrounds.

Furthermore, observations on the whole suggest that the mohel is remarkably consistent and almost repetitive in his interaction with diverse clientele. Indeed, the most troubling conclusion of my study, related to one of the secondary research questions, is that the diverse nature of parents, families and guests is not reflected in the educational work of the mohel. As observed, whether dealing with knowledgeable or less-educated parents,
intermarried or same-faith families, the mohel’s interactions with families and guests remains virtually identical. In almost any other progressive educational setting pedagogues are demanded to understand the learners’ backgrounds in order to fashion an appropriate educational encounter. In conducting my study I expected to find more extensive and probing pre-bris interaction on the part of the mohel. Such acknowledgement of the learners’ situation and Jewish educational background I assumed would theoretically allow the practitioner to shape his approach depending on the people with whom he was dealing. Aspects of ritual theory explain this strange phenomenon.

Rappaport (1996) notes that one of the obvious aspects of ritual is that the ritual participant, by making himself available for the ritual, in fact becomes fused with the message being transmitted and received. It is the classic lesson of “the medium is the message”. The individuality of the participant (read educationally the learner) is secondary to the message of the rite. By performing the rite of the liturgical order of brit, the participant accepts, and indicates to others, that he accepts whatever is encoded in the canon of the liturgical order in which he is now a participant. His indicated message of acceptance is the most essential feature of his participation in the ritual. In contrast, the participant’s belief, background, viewpoints and worldview are subsumed by his voluntary participation in the rite. As Rabbi White said when I asked him what he needs to know about the families before the bris, “All I need to know is that they want a bris.” When asked what he needs to know of the celebrant family, AA says, “The fact that they want to do a brit milah that says everything. So I don’t touch it.” It is as if the ritual dictates the most important relationship of the individual to the rite, namely, that he accepts its message. In conforming to that which his participation brings into reality, the
participant becomes indistinguishable from the ritual. Temporarily, in liminality, the participant and the message of the ritual become one.

Related to this pedagogical non-consideration of the learner is an aspect of ritual theory referred to as the limits of sincerity or the subjunctive dimension of ritual. Seligman, Weller, Puett & Simon (2008) posit that all ritual creates an “as if” world in contradistinction to an “as is” universe. This ritual dynamic is the underpinning of creating shared worlds and visions which allow us temporarily to imagine a particularly symbolic universe within which to construe our actions and speaking. As an example, the sharing of the ubiquitous inquiry, “How are you?” presents a worldview in which I, as a compassionate being, am genuinely concerned for your well-being regardless of the sincerity of the request. My intentions, personal feelings and attitudes are secondary to the action and words expressed themselves. Similarly, the response can be disingenuous because the import of the ritual exchange is not the content of the answer, but rather that we temporarily shared a joint representation. Similarly, in the performance of religious ritual, the participation of the individual and the community in enactment is intended temporarily for the purpose of sharing the “as-if” message of acceptance of the covenantal relationship with God, messianism or the primacy of Torah and the people Israel. The sincerity of the worshippers, their meanings and experience of lived reality is secondary to the creation of an imagined new world which ritual begets. Again, ritual herein is predicated upon participation rather than commitment, background or viewpoint of the participant.
Interestingly, it is precisely here that we find an inherent tension in my investigation. Rapapport (1996) and Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon’s (2008) prioritization of the rite over the participant is sound assuming the mohel is fulfilling his responsibilities solely as a functionalist. As a protector and perpetuator of the tradition, it is true that the message of the rite and the indicated acceptance of the doctrinal messages are literally the only lesson worth sharing. However, it is incumbent upon the mohel who prioritizes his role as an educator to assume more responsibility for understanding how the message can be nuanced or modified to resonate for different learners. It is here that a mohel need ask, “Am I strictly a ritual functionalist or am I a responsible Jewish educator as well?” These issues of self-identity will be further discussed in the section on implications for practice.

**Noetics**

Jennings’ (1982) concept of the noetic knowledge of ritual includes the importance of the performance in the now of the ritual, a type of knowing by showing, which ensures perpetuation of the ritual, by allowing the participants to become familiar with the appropriate physical actions taken during ritual performance. In the context of the brit milah service such examples may include the passing of the knife during the assignment of agency, the placing of the baby on the throne of Elijah, the recitation of the blessings for the parents or for the meal and even the laying of hands which is part of the priestly benediction which some mohalim employ during the service. By fashioning a ritual which includes preparing for and attending to these recitations and actions, each mohel observed teaches by showing, leading and demonstrating the physical performance aspects of ritual enactment.
The second of Jennings classifications, the pedagogic mode of ritual, suggests highly structured and familiar enactment of ritual teaches what each ritual should look like. While repeatable and recognizable gestures are the fundamental characteristic of ritual (Bell, 1992; Driver, 2006; Grimes, 2002; Rappaport, 1999) such a mode may function as a constraint for ritual creativity. In fact, none of the mohalim observed demonstrated either in practice or in theory, their desire to become ritual innovators. Green says, “Well, I think there’s enough there as it stands...and to be honest with you, I never thought about it (April, 19, 2012).” DD shares, “It’s just so ancient...I don’t think I would ever want to touch it (Aug. 3, 2012).”

While complying with Jennings’ (1982) classification of the pedagogic mode of ritual knowledge, it is here that the mohel’s identity as ritual functionalist as opposed to a Jewish educator is most clearly displayed. As evidenced by the lack of innovation, there exists a clear primacy in the mohel’s ritual work of reciting the prescribed traditional liturgy, performing the accepted and appropriate ritual actions and, of course, performing a proper medical circumcision. While each mohel acknowledges the potential for infusing an educational agenda during the brit milah process, during the ritual performance itself there is a clear goal to execute most aspects of the ceremony in a ritually consistent, halachically (legally) acceptable and recognizable manner.

Brown notes only one ritual innovation that he has incorporated in his work. Some families with whom he works belong to a large local Reform synagogue which has a painted chair which can best be classified as an artistic representation of the throne of Elijah. Each time a member family celebrates a bris, the synagogue provides the painted chair for the family to
use in the service. While not actually large enough to be used as a functional chair of Elijah, Brown claims, it has “really become a new custom for us to use the chair, and families have come to expect it (Aug. 1, 2012).”

Establishing a venture of entrepreneurial ritual imagination within the shared historical tradition of the Jewish people is a bold undertaking. For mohalim who are enacting literally the oldest of Jewish rituals, that risk is perhaps exacerbated. Ochs’ (2007) claim that innovation is inherent to the language of Judaism is salient. She posits a framework for the process of creating ritual embellishments and unique ritual rites by developing the metaphor of a Jewish ritual toolbox containing three compartments.

The first compartment upon which the development of an innovation must borrow is filled with texts including biblical passages, teachings of the sages, folktales, prayer liturgies and Hebrew poems and songs. The second compartment from which to draw contains a collection of resonant actions and objects. The actions include singing, candle-lighting, blessing, tearing, smashing, and bowing. These movements, borrowed from other recognizably distinct Jewish practices, invoke security through familiarity while performing pioneering ritual. Objects may include a scroll, an ark, a red ribbon, a palm branch or a picture of Jerusalem and imply connection to an imagined past, present or future community. The third drawer contains core understandings of Jewish tradition which could be incorporated into innovative practice. These concepts highlight the eternal presence of God, the bond of covenant, universal obligations to fellow Jews, integration of ethics in both the personal and private domain and the primacy of study. Hoffman (1996) would proffer that the last drawer of the ritual toolbox is intended to
convey official meaning while the rewording or transforming of ancient or familiar texts can access private and shared meanings so as to reflect contemporary sensibilities and situations.

Orenstein (1994), writing from a feminist perspective also offers a prescription for the creative ritualist. After ascertaining that there is a need to create a transformation of status which will be witnessed and honored in community, one should research existing rituals from Sephardic, Hasidic or mystical traditions which resemble the anticipated life-cycle passage. A mohel in our context could certainly further familiarize himself with customs in other traditions that might resonate with his congregational audience. Next, similar to Ochs, Orenstein posits that innovation may borrow from other Jewish symbols, objects, songs or heroes which could meaningfully be grafted onto the pre-liminal, liminal or post-liminal section of an existent ceremony. Additionally, Orenstein suggests grafting traditional liturgical themes of creation, revelation and redemption is paramount for authenticating and laying the groundwork for novel ritual practices.

Whereas ritual creativity is prevalent in other contemporary settings, the creative impulse in the mohel must still be concerned about overindulging any personal perspective. In fact, overemphasizing personal meaning through ritual innovation constructs a situation that is difficult to share and, in the extreme, impossible to perpetuate. The tension inherent in ritual creativity is maintaining a balance between traditional symbols and idiosyncratic autobiographical perspective (Orenstein, 1994). Can the mohel capitalize on such a sentiment and experiment with new customs while retaining an aura of authenticity? Furthermore, can a deeper understanding of the background of the ritual participants lead the mohel to create
particular ritual embellishments which may resonate for the celebrants themselves? Can a consideration of the physical settings of the ritual serve as the impetus for unique ritual additions?

The third mode of ritual knowledge, suggests that participation in ritual can serve as a paradigm for reactions in other settings not yet ritualized. Participants by virtue of their collective participation in the ritual come to understand how to respond in and to ritual. An extension of this idea could be shared by mohalim were they to concretize some of the concepts of which they speak so eloquently. Perhaps suggesting practical enactments of values highlighted during the service would fulfill this recommendation. At one bris over which I presided, a parent in his remarks encouraged guests to go out and “do a mitzvah today” in honor of the ceremony for his new son. Follow-up could include using social media websites to note the participation of guests or the family in ongoing Jewish learning or commitments.

Ritual Meaning

Hoffman (1993) and Rappaport (1999) reference different types of meanings potentially extant during ritual enactments. There is a strong preference by all mohalim to balance the personal meaning of bris alongside canonical messages of the tradition when working with liberal Jewish families. Michalowski & Dubisch (2001) suggest that the unique power of ritual is its ability to reflect and absorb a multiplicity of meanings, both religious and secular, and thus to offer to a variety of clients what each desires. Bris for example could highlight personal meanings when presented as a celebration of family or parenthood, the continuity of a specific family’s generations or as an acknowledgement of religious freedom rather than as a
celebration of God and the tradition. As observed, canonical messages are typically shared during the first segment of the service yet contain different educational messages depending on the language employed by the practitioner. A discussion of the categorization of such language appears in the next section of this chapter. It is worthwhile to note that the artistry of the mohel may be his ability to give expression to both types of meanings during the ceremony thus fulfilling the needs of both the tradition and the participant.

As I heard glowing feedback from guests to the mohel after each bris, I was struck by the idea that perhaps the ceremony works holistically because of the expression of both personal and canonical messages. Whereas there is a prevalence of doctrinal messages at the beginning of the service couched in introductory remarks followed by expression of personal meanings towards the end of the service during the naming, an alternate model of constructing a service may consider incorporating personal messages in other sections of the service. For example, reference to the throne of Elijah as representing final peace in the world may potentially resonate with celebrants. A practitioner could help a participant comment on, or write a reflective piece regarding their understanding of redemption from a personal perspective, thereby adding yet another layer of personal meaning to the ceremony. Similarly, personal meanings could be expressed and incorporated into the priestly benediction which focuses on the physical and spiritual blessings that our tradition offers for the infant. While this might sound farfetched, mohalim do encourage parents to write pieces and express personal meanings in the context of the naming ceremony. Finally, because parents often contact mohalim months before the baby’s arrival in an attempt to make preliminary contact with the
mohel, such thought-pieces could be something that are easily prepared prior to the celebration.

**Ritual Absences and Inclusions**

Although practitioners function primarily in a priestly tradition (Driver 2006) and demonstrate concern with the pedagogic mode of ritual which Jennings (1982) suggests highlights the recognizable nature of ritual enactment, each ritualist not only attends differentially to elements of the rite, but additionally edits particular sections of the fixed liturgy during brit milah. A ritual matrix allows the observer to note ritual inclusions and ritual absences.

Grimes (1995) builds on work of ritual theorists who suggest that such an interpretive framework or schematic map can be used to chart elements of ritual enactment. Predetermined ethnographic coordinates enable any researcher to follow the actions of a particular ritual and record or recall the specifics of ritual practice thus providing a basis for comparative discussion and criticism. In response to my observations and interviews I have created an adaptation of such a ritual matrix which has allowed me to note the elements to which the mohel attends and omits during the bris ceremonies. I chart the attention of the mohalim to the following coordinates offered by Grimes: ritual time (Is there an explanation of the timing of the bris during the daytime hours? Is there an explanation of the timing of the bris on the eighth day of life?), ritual objects (Does the mohel use or explain the use of an izmal?), ritual identity (Does the mohel differentiate the roles of the ceremony beyond simply identifying who will be carrying the baby?), ritual action (Does the mohel incorporate mention
of Pinchas, the land of Israel as the second part of God’s covenant with Abraham, *birkat hagomeil, birkat cohanim, metzizah or misheberach* in the service?). Due to my familiarity with elements of the service, its customs and variations, I note ritual absences, items deleted or not attended to by the *mohel*. The compiled observation chart, an adaptation of Grimes’ ritual matrix (Appendix E) reveals three missing components at the *bris* ceremony which relate to Grimes’ categories of ritual language, ritual identity and ritual action. These three omissions include references to the land of Israel as part of the covenantal agreement, exclusion of the liturgical introduction related to the biblical figure Pinchas and exclusion in action of *metzizah*.

While it is clear that a brief mention of *eretz yisrael* in a ceremony may not constitute a broad experience of Israel education, I am struck by the omission of reference to the land given its connection to the original covenant alongside the renewed contemporary interest in Israel education. I was further shocked that even when dealing with Israeli families, *mohalim* I observed, made no mention of the land as the second part of the covenant. It seemed to me that such an inclusion would have strongly resonated with these celebrant families and provided yet another layer of personal meaning to the ceremonial occasion.

*Mohalim* as active Jewish professionals are likely aware that Jewish institutions have come to realize that Israel education is a core issue in Jewish life. Indeed, educational foundations, federations and boards of Jewish education all continue to commission research and studies into this topic area. At the same time, the great success of the *Taglit* birthright program puts Israel on the agenda of many young people in North America such that it would
not seem inappropriate to mention a hope or aspiration that the infant who becomes part of Abraham’s covenant with God should merit himself to one day visit the land of Israel.

It is fair to suggest that such an omission could stem from three difficulties which face the implementation of Israel education in general. Firstly, as with formal educational settings, there simply may not be enough time to attend to the importance of the connection with Israel. Chazan (1988) mentions that there is a practical problem in all settings of teachers not knowing where to fit Israel into the school curriculum, or how to teach it in the classroom. Similarly, the mohel, constrained by time and anxiety related to the bris may not feel there is enough time to include mentioning the Holy Land and its implications for the strengthening of Jewish identity. Secondly, Troy (2006) offers that Israel is often caricatured in the media by intense patriotism, religious fundamentalism and militarism. He adds that any one of these three representations is liable to cause discomfort amongst politically liberal North American Jews. A mohel who is unfamiliar with the political and religious leanings of his clientele may worry that referencing Israel is potentially divisive for the family or guests, especially amongst liberal Jews who may be inclined to relate to Israel through a more critical lens than Orthodox Jews. Thirdly, Grant (2007) suggests that goals for teaching or speaking about Israel are expressed in broad and diffused terms such that many educators may find themselves unable to articulate a clear and concise vision for teaching about the connection between American Jews and Israel. Mohalim could experience the same discomfort. Given the prescriptive nature of a liturgy however, which maps out a future path for the initiate including further Torah study, Jewish marriage and the performance of good deeds, it would seem potentially relevant to include the idea of
encouraging or formalizing the thought of the eternal connection between the land of Israel and the Jewish people during this ritual enactment.

The omission of the character Pinchas, which is a central part of the fixed liturgy of the brit milah ceremony, may reflect the general ambivalence of the rabbinic tradition regarding the impulsive actions taken in the biblical account of the character as he slays those guilty of sin in the eyes of God (Num. 25:1-18) during the incident of Baal Peor. Milgrom (1990) posits that the rabbis were uncomfortable with Pinchas’ actions which were carried out without warning and set an uncomfortable precedent for the Israelites. Milgrom cites the Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 27b noting that although God creates an eternal briti shalom (covenant of peace) with Pinchas, Moses and the leaders of the people would have excommunicated Pinchas given the opportunity. This uncomfortable imagery of violence, coupled with actions absent warning or trial became a questionable model of behavior in Jewish tradition. When sharing this observed omission with noted seminary theologian Rabbi Neil Gillman, he exclaimed, “but you can’t have a bris without Pinchas (personal communication May 2011)!” Nonetheless, today no mohel I interviewed includes Pinchas as part of his ceremonial remarks.

Many mohalim do not practice metzizah by mouth, either directly or with a pipette although it is a legally prescribed part of the procedure. This drawing of the blood was considered at one time an essential aspect of preventing infection when performing the surgery. Recently, metzizah has received much negative press and has been directly linked to the passage of herpes as well as other infections to the infant, leading to illness and even death. Additionally, there is a sexual imagery inherent in the performance of metzizah which many
find disturbing. CC who never would do *metzizah*, adds, “It’s just gross (Aug. 2, 2012)!" Even for the one participant in my study who practices *metzizah* by mouth, he makes a point of not discussing it in advance with the parents, nor drawing attention to the act during the surgical act itself.

From an educational perspective the omission of the land of Israel, Pinchas and the sexual imagery of *metzizah* revealed by the matrix, represent the null curriculum (Eisner, 1994) within the *brit milah* ritual. Eisner posits the existence of three curricula referred to as the explicit, implicit and null curriculum. The explicit curriculum contains the goals and objectives of the educational endeavor. This is often a program that represents an agreement between the community (and here the tradition) and the educators regarding the exact nature of the materials to be shared and the skills to be learned. The implicit curriculum contains subtle messages related to socialization and behavior that are communicated by the structure of an educational setting. The null curriculum represents what is actively omitted or not taught in an educational setting. Such omissions similarly communicate messages as well. While the term curriculum is admittedly somewhat amorphous, Eisner’s (1994) framework combined with my adaptation of Grimes’ ritual matrix offers us a lens through which to answer the first of this study’s secondary research questions, namely, what comprises the *mohel’s* curriculum for *brit milah*?

When orienting my observations from the perspective of educational theory I identify specific aspects of the explicit curriculum of the *mohalim* within the context of *brit milah*. The primary explicit curricular feature of the *mohel’s* work is his sharing and explicating of the
Genesis 17 story, the original covenantal agreement between Abraham and God. This master story (Fowler, 1995) is used as a vehicle through which to disclose ultimate meaning in life. Faced with the transition to parenthood and the gift of new life, the *mohel* employs this story to respond to the miraculous event that has just occurred in the family and community’s life. In Gillman’s (1990) terms, the *mohel* is explicitly teaching a sacred myth of Jewish community transmitted through generations, intended to allow participants to make sense out of their experience in nature and history. Each *mohel* devotes time during the ceremony to summarize and review for the assembled guests the main features of the covenantal story. The *mohel* moves between different orientations of teaching bible during the service while primarily employing a comprehension orientation to share the meanings of the words and the actions of the characters in the story. The *mohel* then transitions from simple summation, to big ideas, and action-orientations. This teaching is strictly teacher-centered, delivered in a frontal-style and focuses on doctrinal or canonical messages in the text. Themes presented include commanded-ness, God as creator, God in partnership with mankind, God in sacred relationship with the Jewish people and God as redeemer. The artistry of the *mohel* and the *bris* ritual is that in just a few short minutes the *mohel’s* teachings cover four of the five basic key concepts of Judaism outlined by educational theorist Michael Rosenak (1987). Primacy of Torah, the notion of messianism during the Throne of Elijah section, the idea of the God of Israel and the concept of the people of Israel are all addressed in some fashion as the *mohel* is engaged in his explications. Rosenak’s fifth concept, *eretz yisrael* (the Land of Israel) is omitted.

The second aspect to the explicit curriculum relates to ritual theory, namely, the doing-by-showing of ritual practice (Driver, 2006) or the presentation of the ritual features of *brit*
milah. Each mohel utilizes the pedagogic mode of ritual (Jennings, 1982) by presenting a bris with recognizable and repeatable components. Each mohel describes the movement of the service through the three stages of the ritual, in effect showing by doing. Maintaining the authenticity of the tradition so that communities will continue the practice of brit is paramount. DD says, “I want them to know what a bris is.” White reflects that “I still see my role as making relevant a very ancient ceremony and to keep alive the oldest practicing tradition in today’s world.” Ritual innovation is avoided as it disturbs the boundaries inherent in the pedagogic mode of ritual knowledge.

The implicit curriculum of the mohel is more difficult to identify because it is inherently implied rather than explicitly stated. Nonetheless the actions of the mohel offer considerable latitude for hypothesizing hidden educational messages contained within their ritual work. The mohel’s implicit curriculum may include how one behaves in a ritual setting, as well as the proper attitudes, dress and dispositions that help create the conditions for fruitful interaction between the clergy and the laity. Such implicit messages may help create positive memories and associations for celebrant families encouraging them, later in life, to either reach out to Jewish professionals or consider affiliation with various Jewish institutions. The mohel who makes himself available for future interactions with celebrant communicates an implicit message regarding his concern for the ongoing connection of the family to Jewish life. Similarly, implicit messages such as dress and demeanor may create the conditions for the framing of a sacred experience. The mohalim I observed take time to implicitly present ritual as inclusive, participatory, flexible, egalitarian and celebratory.
Ritual is implicitly taught as inclusive as the mohalim I observed include both Jews and non-Jews in the ceremonial honors and take pains to work with families to find “parts in the service” for friends and families alike, sometimes adding “extra honors” for larger families who need to accommodate additional honorees in the ceremony. Ritual is implicitly presented as participatory as mohalim distribute readings which are not part of the traditional liturgy, make room for grandparents’ prayers and encourage guests to repeat words and phrases in the ceremony. Implicitly, ritual is presented as egalitarian by mohalim as they include the mothers in the recitation of what was traditionally the father’s blessing and also allow men and women to participate equally in ceremonial honors. Flexibility is inherent in ritual as mohalim quickly adapt to the conditions around them, whether through accommodating last-minute changes in ritual presentation or by shortening services due to requests from the family. Through general demeanor and approach, by sharing handshakes, smiles and good wishes of mazal tov, each mohel presents ritual as celebratory and joyous. One mohel goes as far as to say that he sees his role as the transmitter of the joy of the tradition (CC). Furthermore, mohalim implicitly present Judaism as morally enlightened and open to multiple meanings. In particular, when working with a liberal population, this demonstration of the non-particularistic moral grounding of Judaism is profound. Finally, the opportunity to include personal messages as a highlighted feature of the naming segment of the ceremony presents Judaism as open to meanings beyond doctrinal and canonical messages.

The null curriculum of the mohalim I observed acts to avoid uncomfortable ideas that were once part of the traditional circumcision ceremony. By not presenting the violent story of Pinchas, mohalim avoid addressing uncontested violence. By neglecting metzizah or the ritual
drawing of blood by mouth, practitioners present Judaism as a tradition aware of both accepted medical norms and uncomfortable sexual imagery. Both of these choices resonate with Eisen’s (1999) post-Enlightenment contention, based on Kant’s work on *Religion and the Limits of Reason Alone*, that rituals and interpretations which fail to demonstrably advance moral conduct or ethical purity are ultimately discarded or altered. Additionally, these omissions highlight the choice to exclude ritual elements lacking in personal meaning (Cohen & Eisen, 2000).

While the null curriculum can be identified, two aspects of ritual criticism also may impact a practitioner’s decision to omit a section of any proscribed rite of passage. These explanations come from the philosophies related to infelicitous performances and ritual disfavor. Grimes (2010) notes that flops are occasions when the ritualist fails to share appropriate thoughts and orientations from the tradition which create an appropriate mood and atmosphere. These flops may be directly related to Oukada’s (2000) notion of the epistemological or semiotic constraints inherent to any teaching endeavor. In the context of *brit milah*, the *mohel* may neglect to teach, show or explain ideas related to Pinchas and *metzizah* due to either a lack of full understanding of the material, or due to his difficulty in finding language to re-present these concepts in an educative and meaningful manner. CC says regarding the omission of Pinchas, “I don’t talk about it and I don’t explain it. There is not an easy translation.” White says, “Elijah, well that’s a compelling story. Pinchas is something that’s very obscure and irrelevant to people.” Furthermore any ritual component which fails to coincide with contemporary personal meaning or accepted social mores (Hoffman & Kahn, 1996, Cohen & Eisen, 2000 and Orenstein, 1994) becomes subject to omission by the ritualist.
One of the interviewees (BB) when asked to respond to the issue of the null curriculum notes that some rabbinic texts identify Pinchas as Elijah and therefore Pinchas is not really being ignored; *metzizah* is still being fulfilled by using gauze instead of a pipette and the Land of Israel is only a secondary, not primary aspect of God’s agreement with Abraham. Appreciating his explanation, I note that when adopting an educational orientation, *mohalim* should nonetheless consider the specifics of these three aspects of curricular structure.

**Ritual Language**

In beginning my study, I deliberately recruited *mohalim* who were known in the community as ritualists who presented content-laden services while seemingly intentionally educative in their approach to life-cycle ritual. As an added bonus, my observations allowed me to hear time and again carefully chosen narrative and explanation that left audiences feeling enriched, enthused and educated. Remarks included, “Rabbi, that was so beautiful”, “Cantor, I can’t believe how much I learned this morning,” and “Cantor, that was so uplifting!” Assuming that it was not the surgery itself to which people were responding, I was left with the impression that it was, at least in part, the language crafted during the ritual by the practitioner that resonated deeply and left such a positive impression on attendees. As a result of these comments, during my study I became focused on further classifying the use of the *mohel’s* ritual language.

Ritual language can be regarded as an ethnographic coordinate as postulated by Grimes (1995) in his work on mapping the ritual field. He suggests that an appreciation of the language used in ritual performance should chart the style of the language employed including use of
narratives, incantation, poetry, antiphony, formulaic sentences, and spontaneous expression. This classification is however lacking in that it primarily categorizes the form of speech as opposed to its placement, its content or the intent of its words.

While attention should be paid to how the language of the rite is connected to the ordinary language of the people, it is of note says Grimes (2002), whether the rite is guided by theologians or instructors who explain the rite to the participants. Mohalim performing britot in liberal settings function in exactly this manner during ritual enactment and the language that they use is deliberate, educational and worthy of further consideration.

Some ritual language can be categorized according to various speech theories. Austin’s (1962) concept of constative utterances, words used to present a situation or a dynamic, would apply to the recitation of the mohel’s benediction which blesses God for sanctifying the people through the commandment of circumcision. Performative utterances, the recitation of words which accomplish a deed, would apply to the naming prayer. When the mohel recites, “and his name shall be called in Israel, Binyamin the son of Isaac,” the situation has been affected by the mere fact of the words being announced. The utterance has accomplished the deed of bestowing a Hebrew name on the child which will follow him throughout his life. These two classifications of language however again only cover a small portion of what the mohel says during the ceremony. Observations show that most of the language employed by the mohel is intended to communicate the ideas, values and attitudes inherent in the performance of circumcision.
Indeed, *mohel* practitioners seem to use ritual language as Bell (1996) suggests: as a means to explain Geertz’s concept of ethos, the moral and aesthetic aspects of a culture while they expound upon the people’s underlying attitude towards themselves and their relationship to the world at large. Through sharing dispositions, moods and motivations, the *mohel* helps learners come to a covenantal worldview, a cognitive existential expression of the general order of existence.

Wheelock (1981) refers to ritual language as situating speech which sets the stage for participation in a known and repeatable situation. The language used in ritual in effect presents a situation, facilitates the recognition of the situation, expresses the recognition of a situation and helps create the situation itself. When Rabbi White says “the candles have been lit and the *bris* has thus begun,” his language in conjunction with a recognizable ritual act of lighting candles, orients the people to the sacred situation in which they are presently participating. When Cantor Brown announces that, “The *bris* has three parts; the first part nobody likes, that’s the circumcision. The second part, the naming, we have just completed and the third part everyone likes; participating in the meal. Let’s make *hamotzi* (the prayer over the bread).” The *mohel* has now, through word and action, situated the family and guests within the flow of the ritual rhythm.

Additionally, Wheelock says ritual language presents the characteristics of the ritual, requests inherent in the ritual, intentions of the ritual and presents attitudes intrinsically tied to the ritual action. I suggest that the use of ritual language by the *mohel* is particularly effective because of the last category suggested by Wheelock. The way that the ritualists present
attitudes intrinsically tied to the occasion is what makes the *bris* service not only educational but uplifting, resonant and meaningful.

Haidt’s (2012) work on moral foundations theory which builds upon Shweder, Much, Mahapatra & Park’s (1997) work on the big three of ethical discourse may be a useful tool in categorizing and understanding the power of language that is used so effectively by *mohalim* during a ceremony; language which consistently seems to leave a positive impression upon both families and guests. My suggestion is that the ritual language employed by the *mohalim* during the *brit milah* process is consistent with Shweder, Much, Mahapatra & Park’s (1997) moral clusters and Haidt’s (2012) moral foundations theory.

Shweder, Much, Mahapatra & Park’s (1997) analysis of the moral discourse of Brahmans in Orissa, India attempts to create a parsimonious categorization of breeches of ethical behaviors to arrive at an understanding of society and extant moral logic. He posits the existence of three overarching clusters which are the basis for understanding all moral reasoning within a community. These clusters are referred to as the ethics of autonomy, the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity. Ethics of autonomy promote the exercise of the individual-will in pursuit of personal preferences; ethics of community protect the various roles that constitute a society or community with an identity, standing and reputation and ethics of divinity aim to protect the soul and safeguard spiritual agents which are intrinsic to the tradition. As the *mohel* guides the family through the process and rite of *brit milah*, he speaks in the language of each of these clusters. The ethics of autonomy are implied as parents are encouraged to assign honors, add poetry and speak from a personal perspective about the
names chosen for the baby. The ethics of community are highlighted as the child is incorporated into the group of the People of Israel and presented as an integral component of the continuing story of the collective. The ethics of divinity are referenced as the mohel shares the story of God’s original and eternal covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

Moral foundations theory (Haidt, 2012) extends Shweder, Much, Mahapatra & Park (1997) work and posits the adaptive development in humanity of modules or innate receptors that function as taste buds of the righteous mind. In order for political or religious teachings to stand the test of time, messages of the medium need address as many of these modular sensitivities as possible. Haidt identifies care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity and liberty as the six spectrums of moral foundations that are innately organized in our brains prior to experience. Each of these foundations evolved as a response to adaptive challenges in human social history. The care foundation makes us sensitive to signs of suffering; the fairness foundation sensitizes us to collaboration, reciprocal altruism and the laws of karma; the loyalty foundation makes us sensitive to members of our group or team; the authority foundation makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status; the sanctity foundation senses us to hallowed relationships in our midst and the liberty/oppression foundation values self-determination and self-actualization. Ritual language of the mohel as observed taps into each of these moral foundations.

The care foundation is invoked as the mohel goes to great length to express his concern for the well-being of the baby and his intent to minimize the infant’s discomfort. In addition to reassuring the parents before the ceremony begins, which all mohalim do by offering that they
will take excellent care of the baby, the mohalim express care in the public setting of the ceremony by sharing statements of caring and concern. Green says, “I will be using a topical anesthetic and the baby is not going to be in any type of pain.” Brown says that to help the baby through the circumcision the audience has the responsibility to send prayers and good wishes and that, “You are going to help me with a special type of anesthesia, a spiritual anesthesia.” White notes, “It is only mildly uncomfortable.” AA says, “It’s a very important thing that they know that the baby will suffer as little as possible.”

The loyalty foundation is highlighted as mohalim stress the value of belonging to a group. Green relates that the baby has been granted membership in a group thousands of years old, a “club” that this child has now joined. Green’s ceremonial handout reads, “A new son of Israel has come and with him comes great promise.” White says, “We’re here today to affirm that this child has been born a Jew...We are a people small in number and so we cherish every soul that is part of our people” His website posts “Abraham pledged to live loyalty according to this new way of life.” In another ceremony he adds, “We’re here today to affirm that Jeremy and Chelsea want to continue the story of the Jewish people.” Brown offers to the single-parent mother, “We’re here today celebrating with you that he’s in the covenant. He’s part of the Jewish people in this very special way.”

The authority foundation is triggered by a number features in the ceremony which highlight hierarchal structure including the unique role of the mohel, the sacrosanct role of Jewish parents and the obligation of commandments. White shares, “A mitzvah is a commanded Jewish act of which there are hundreds to perform,” and that the obligations of
Jewish parenthood lasts throughout a lifetime. Green and others say, “Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his sons throughout the generations.” All *mohalim* highlight their own authoritative role as skilled practitioners by asking parents to appoint them to fulfill the commandment on their behalf.

The sanctity foundation is most eloquently triggered by White as he talks of *yirah* (awe) in the relationship between God and humankind, the miracle of new life and God’s ability to renew the world in each generation. “We are called upon to express a sense of awe, reverence, that which our tradition calls *yirah*. It is an affirmation that some things in this world happen not because of human cleverness and creativity, of course a lot of things happen because of that, cellphones and jumbo jets and laptops. Those things exist in our world because human beings are clever and ingenious and creative. But some things in this world happen not because of us but when we see them, we behold how awesome is God’s creation. And we have a sense of reverence, a sense of awe, when we see the birth of a baby, which is surely the most profoundly miraculous event in life that anyone of us will ever encounter and when it happens Jewish tradition asks us to respond with a sense of awe. And we are here to create a moment in which that can happen and that is, in large measure, why we have a *bris*.”

The liberty/oppression foundation is elicited as the *mohel* creates room in the ritual for expressing the infant’s social obligations to ameliorate injustice in the world. In sharing wishes for one infant’s future work in the world, White says, “May Noah grow-up in a world of co-existence and tolerance. May his conscience be dismayed when he sees injustice and inequity. May he inspire members of his generation to work with him to make the world a better place, a
world of blessing and peace for all of God’s people.” At another ceremony, a reading shared that the child should “be committed to a never-ending concern for family, synagogue, community and justice. While he cares for others, he will never be alone.”

When this language is employed, often in a large group situation such as a ritual gathering, it takes advantage of Durkheim’s (1963) concept of collective effervescence or the homo-duplex nature of man. Collective effervescence is a type of passion and ecstasy which redirects people to the realm of the sacred whereby the self disappears and collective interests predominate. Homo duplex is a referent to mankind’s natural social sentiment to exist at a level greater than the individual. These sentiments are those which bind each individual to a social entity and bind specific social societies with other societies. Haidt’s concept of the “ultra-social” is the moral evolutionary extension of Durkheim’s idea of homo duplex and implies that as individuals we evolve to seek ultra-kinship and ultra-cooperation by binding ourselves to a group and then binding our group to other groups for the greater good of all involved. The mohel’s ritual language emphasizes this concept of connectedness to others, whether the referent is family, community, the Jewish people or all mankind.

Ritual language and action which frame the interpretation and goals of brit thus attempt to coalesce with six of Haidt’s spectrums of moral foundation theory and directs those present to a greater appreciation of their place in the world. Taken together, the ritual language and actions of the mohel provide a glimpse suggesting an overall vision of Jewish education enacted at the bris for the liberal participant.
**Teacher orientation: Family education or adult religious education**

Evidence suggests that although the educational orientation of *mohalim* resonates more with descriptions of Jewish adult religious education than with models of Jewish family education, the *mohel’s* work *does* contain features found in both models.

Whereas Jewish family education is characterized by a process which places the family unit at the center of religious and cultural transmission (Kay & Rotstein, 2008), the work of the *mohel* seems to do little to promote the types of family group activity and intergenerational interchange suggested by Sawin (1981) as a key component to family education. There is furthermore, little evidence in the work of the *mohel* which suggests an intended consideration of the entire family unit, its make-up and background, or even an intention on the part of the ritualist to familiarize himself with learners’ (read here the family’s) backgrounds which are typically a fundamental feature of Jewish family education. *Mohalim* as observed do not take time to teach families how to explain circumcision to other siblings nor do they promote intergenerational interchange with grandparent celebrants. Evidence does however point to the fact that *mohalim* adopt some features of family education by encouraging in-part the expression of personal meaning related to the *bris* and acknowledging the importance of parents as conduits to future religious development of the child. While emphasizing the role of community during the ritual ceremony, *mohalim* typically do not behave consistently with descriptions of family educators. They do not actively support positive growth and development of the family unit during pre or post *bris* interactions by connecting celebrant families to local institutions such as synagogues, Jewish pre-schools, *havurot* (smaller groupings
of Jewish people who often gather to either pray, share holiday celebrations or participate in social action projects) and federations, all of which could provide an ongoing framework for nurturing for Jewish living.

The challenges of functioning more fully as a family educator may offer insight into how the mohel values or prioritizes his role as ritual functionalist rather than as an educational Jewish resource to the family. Ultimately, it is the performance of the medical procedure, attention to the baby and negotiation of the parents’ emotional state that seemingly preoccupies the mohel. As if this in and of itself were not a full enough workload, the mohel also carries the responsibility as perpetuator of the tradition. Mohalim, however well-intentioned, may have never reflected on their potential impact on the entire family unit and responsibilities to older siblings or grandparents present.

Mohalim typically address adult audiences, either when meeting with the parents or when presenting the ceremony to a group of guests. In fact, due to the fact that the brit is scheduled during daylight or midday hours, there was only one brit ceremony which I observed where there were more than a handful of children present. De facto, it is fair to say that mohalim function primarily as adult educators in that they intentionally organize a process and ritual service performance for adults. The process is aimed at bringing about changes in information and knowledge in the immediate, with the hope of affecting appreciation and attitudes in the future. As such, mohalim function as adult educators. The participants in our study have voiced the intention to use the ceremony as a means to explain the history of this ritual performance, present Judaism as a relevant and meaningful way of life and additionally,
to create a positive interaction with clergy that will result in future affiliation and participation in Jewish life. Given these parameters, the mohel’s stylistic approach as adult religious educator is worthy of discussion.

Analyzed from a style viewpoint, McKenzie (1975), borrowing from leadership literature, delineates five basic decision-making styles of the teacher of adults in religious educational settings. He proposes the existence of a persuasive style which involves sharing in advance with the learners the choices and materials to be covered. Such pedagogues are likely to share in advance with the students the rationalization for choices made during interactions. A mohel who sits with clients and shares different interpretations of each step of ceremonial presentation would be acting in accordance with this style. The consultative style indicates that the presenter actively elicits ideas from the learners and next considers that input before deciding on a planned course of action. A mohel who encourages clients to reflect on their own interpretations of this life-cycle rite of passage and who then actively considers such thoughts into his decisions before presenting a ceremony, may fit this style. In the consensual style an egalitarian plan of presentation is co-determined by the leader and the learners. A fourth style, the conformative approach, indicates that the course of study be solely determined by the learners and that it is simply the job of the leader to accommodate the learner’s decisions. A mohel who acquiesces to the client by completely reinterpreting the experience with no regard for canonical messages may fit this style. None of the mohalim interviewed or observed in my study fully adapt these styles. Finally, in the dominative style, it is the leader who makes the majority of the decisions pertaining to the presentation of materials. Herein, the leader is not inclined to gather learner support for his decisions, but rather the choices made during
presentation are predetermined by the instructor. Observations conclude that in the context of ritual performance, this dominative style is most prevalent.

Relevant to the volunteer or self-selecting nature of choosing to participate in this ritual, is Bergevin’s (1967) philosophy regarding adult education in general. He suggests principles for consideration of the practitioner during volunteer learning which occurs when adults participate in such a setting for no immediate palpable gain. Under such conditions, Bergevin highlights the necessity of the affirmation of the adult learner by the teacher, that is to say, the teacher must indeed believe that the adult is able to learn and acquire new knowledge, skill sets and convictions. Each mohel affirms that despite the emotional context of brit milah, such learning can take place. Secondly, Bergevin posits the acceptance of a personalist orientation implying that people deserve respect and consideration whereby the needs of the individuals are to be given priority over the needs of the teacher. This orientation is not prevalent in the work of the mohel. Thirdly, freedom implies that learners enter a situation freely and should exercise freedom in the context of the learning situation. Although collaboration is the natural consequence of freedom in education, it is the least observed phenomenon that takes place during ritual interactions. By contrast, non-collaboration assumes the teacher or institution may see some goals not recognized by the learners. Brit milah as observed is primarily founded on teacher goals rather than individual needs although practitioners voice a willingness to work with families who state specific needs.

Given the nature of the prescribed context of ritual and the lack of collaboration observed, it is worth noting that these educative opportunities often seem to fall into a
paradigm of adult pedagogy which assumes that the learner is dependent, has little life experience to offer and that the learning should be subject-centered rather than learner-centered. Teaching here tends to be transmissive. The teacher determines unilaterally what the adult learner needs educationally. In contrast, andragogy involves assumptions of an independent, self-directed, problem-centered learner who collaboratively participates in and directs their own learning choices.

In a ritual performance context, religious adult education as observed takes place non-collaboratively when handled exclusively by the clergy. The model observed is that of the mohel as preacher, an authority who speaks while passive learners listen. It is hypothesized that this model of teacher-dominated adult education is prevalent in oral cultures where the lore of the tribe was passed on intact by memorizing the great deeds and the past so as to be preserved for future generations. Furthermore, the ritualist may represent to the laity an intellectual aristocracy, likely more competent and well-versed in the area of religion, allowed to predetermine independently all ceremonial decisions. Deference supersedes independence. In the study of ritual performance, it is worthwhile to consider how a more fully-developed andrological approach would impact the educational potential within the brit milah process.

This discussion regarding the characteristics of the mohel as adult educator or family educator leads us to consider the larger question as to how the mohel exercises his role before during and after the brit ceremony. In order to best answer this question it is relevant to distinguish the mohel's educational work with the parents before and after the bris and contrast it with the educational features of the public ceremony with the gathered audience. In
recognizing the divergent nature of these interactions, we face yet again the bifurcated nature of the mohel’s dual identity. During the pre-bris interaction the mohel prioritizes his functional medical responsibilities while during the ceremony, his identity as a Jewish educator is more fully embraced. With one exception, there is almost no post-bris interaction which necessitates elaboration.

Various factors potentially impact the work of even the most well-intentioned mohel/ritualist. Pre-bris engagement may be lacking due to the obvious time and emotional constraints that accompany the arrival of a new infant. In particular, a mother who delivers by caesarian section is often hospitalized for five days such that the opportunity to sit with a family in a comfortable home setting before the eighth day when the circumcision takes place may be impossible to arrange. Additionally some mohalim note that when working with families who already have a close relationship with their congregational rabbi, the rabbi takes the lead in explaining the various aspects of the ritual to the parents. The lack of post-bris interaction as observed is as much a function of the circumscribed temporal nature of the circumcision ritual as opposed to negligence on the part of the ritual leader. Unlike a funeral in Jewish tradition where the period of liminality extends in a prolix fashion to the week of shiva (the seven day period after interment during which people formally come to comfort the bereaved) and potentially invites ongoing interaction between the ritualist and the family in mourning, the bris ritual formally concludes in all of its ritual elements and obligations once the circumcision has been performed. Once concluded, the participants in the bris ritual all return to their normal lives and routines.
In pre-bris interaction with the parents the mohel’s identity as medical caregiver is predominantly exhibited. It is here that his educational role is that of health professional, as he guides families through the details of circumcision and pain management options. The mohel here is still an educator although the goals of education are primarily to share knowledge regarding the procedure and aftercare itself. As BB points out, “So I always tried to tell people what was going to happen when they heard this, that the baby was going to cry and that was part of my teaching also.” For a few moments only the mohel transitions to his identity as Jewish educator by helping the family distribute ceremonial honors and finalize the determination of the infant’s Hebrew name.

As evidenced by my observations, during ceremonial presentation the mohel’s identity as Jewish educator is more fully revealed. Herein, the mohel embraces Knowles’ (1971) adult pedagogical orientation while teaching during the ceremony of brit milah. There is a voiced assumption by the mohel accepting one of Bergevin’s (1967) principles of adult education that adults in this setting are able to learn, acquire new knowledge and familiarize themselves with religious convictions shared through the ritual. The practitioner’s interactions are best described as dominative (McKenzie, 1975) whereby the leader is not inclined to gather learner support for decisions, but rather choices made are predetermined by the instructor. The ritualist presents his lesson in a frontal manner (Farrah, 1998) and consistent with Verner & Dickinson’s (1967) prescription for success, the mohel keeps the lesson brief, provides summaries and uses accessible language. As an example, most mohalim make a point of translating Hebrew into the vernacular so as to make the liturgical aspects of the service comprehensible to those not fluent in the original language of the text. One participant in the
study even amplifies the Hebrew text by singing the translations in English. During the ceremony mohalim flow between Holtz’s (2003) comprehension, big ideas, bible-to-action and moralistic-didactic orientations in an effort to make the text understandable and to outline desirable future behaviors implied by the ritual text itself.

The ritual structure provides guidelines and, in fact openings, for the mohel to highlight behaviors relevant to both particularistic concerns of continuity and universalistic concerns of all mankind. From a particularistic orientation the liturgy itself highlights the intention of the ritual that the infant should be dedicated to Torah study and marry a Jewish partner. From a universal perspective, the ritual implies partnering with others to make the world a better place through the performance of good deeds. Employing ritual language that resonates with Haidt’s moral foundations theory, the mohel presents the tradition to liberal Jews as morally, and therefore, spiritually desirable. The teacher-centered learning demonstrated through ritual performance of brit milah appears to be a natural outcome of a Turner’s (1969) structure of liminality which prioritizes the hierarchal transmission of cultural and canonical messages.

Post-bris educational work of the mohel is rare and, with one main exception, does not extend itself beyond medical follow-up. Nonetheless, two participants in my study show ongoing dedication to this aspect of an educator’s responsibilities. BB says that one of the highlights of his career as a mohel was the opportunity years later to assist non-Jewish spouses in their conversions to Judaism. Cantor Brown regularly works with by his clientele to familiarize them with other Jewish rituals such as mezuzah and dietary laws and actively functions to connect families to local Jewish institutions such as pre-schools and synagogues. His efforts in
these areas provide an excellent example of how a dedicated ritualist/educator can continue to be a resource to families after ritual enactment.

Frontal nature of teaching

While *mohalim* have the opportunity to work with parents before and after a *brit milah*, the nature of the *mohel’s* work shows that the prime interaction with guests occurs in a frontal context during the ceremonial presentation. All *mohalim* observed and interviewed intentionally take time during the service to share teachings from the Jewish tradition offered in what is best described as a lecture-type format. Evidence shows that teaching is at the forefront of the mind of the ritualist when engaged in ceremonial presentation. Farrah (1998) notes that lecture, intended for teaching, is a legitimate instructional method of discourse that results in learning on the part of the learner. All *mohalim* follow Verner & Dickinson’s (1967) findings on lecture-effectiveness by structuring a short (less than thirty minutes) presentation with summaries, simple language and appropriate speed of delivery. In fact, used appropriately, lecture intellectually stimulates and engages the audience without ignoring fundamental principles of general adult education such as encouraging reflection.

The *mohel’s* distinguished role as ritualist also resonates with Bergevin, Morris & Smith’s (1963) idea that a lecture by a highly qualified individual can be amongst the most effective means of sharing particular subject matter with a large group of people, especially when faced with the constraints of time. Well-organized oration and rhetoric can inspire and lead listeners to further inquiry and investigation regarding subject matter. All *mohalim* observed demonstrate both content knowledge and presentation skills which potentially allow the lecture to be an appropriate and effective instructional tool. All *mohalim* observed embody
other characteristics of effective lecturing by speaking clearly and with presence while establishing eye contact with audience members. Given the formal nature of ritual ceremony which does not generally invite verbal participation of the audience, lecture is an excellent choice by the mohel educators observed.

Teacher-centered education

At first glance the educational work of the mohel-educator seems to fall exclusively into the model of traditional or teacher-centered education. Dewey (1938), the father of progressive education, characterizes such a traditional approach by the transmission of subject-matter in which the bodies of information and skills have been worked out in the past while the learner is placed in a position of docility, receptivity and obedience. Teachers become the vehicle through which knowledge and skills are communicated to the recipient. Certainly, the work of the mohel in the noetic sense of showing the bris and introducing a comprehension-oriented account of Abraham’s initial covenant with God falls into this framework. Jackson (1986) employs novel nomenclature to describe this orientation of pedagogic instruction as mimetic rather than transformative.

The mimetic process is an essentially imitative method through which epistemic content is transacted via intended transmission from a substantive-methodological expert possessor (here the mohel) to an “empty vessel” recipient (here the congregant or celebrant family). A focus on direct mimesis insists that knowledge obtained and psychomotor skills mastered are both reproducible and objectively measurable.
While basic epistemological transference is clearly a staple of the mohel's work, the mohel shows that he similarly intends his work to resonate with elements of Jackson’s (1986) transformative tradition which aims to integrate societally-valued character traits, here as defined through a Jewish lens, by affecting an ingrained qualitative metamorphosis in the learner’s overall psychology. Through carefully chosen commentary, interpretation, the use of narrative and perhaps even personal modeling of a religious life-style, the mohel's approach follows the dominant metaphor in the transformative tradition that envisions a potter working with clay resulting in an altered finished product. Following the transformative tradition, all mohalim in the study emphasize multiple meanings and encourage families and congregations to grapple with ethics and value choices as members of a covenantal community. All mohalim have voiced the hope that their interactions with families will not only lead to "knowledgableness" (AA) but in fact begin a Jewish life open to such transformation. By framing the particularistic rite of bris in universal and ethical terms, mohalim seem to be translating Ellis’ (2004) philosophy of perennialism into Jewish language. Such a philosophy suggests that teaching and learning of enduring values are the essence of the good life. Mohalim seem to thus fall into the category of Jewish educators seeking to affect both the heart and mind of the celebrants and congregatants by blending the transformative and mimetic traditions into ritual performance.

The mohel’s teaching environment: Isolation and collegiality

Mohalim follow the pattern of teachers in other settings who tend to work in isolation. There is no observed ongoing dialogue between mohalim. Ritualists do not share with each
other nuances of their work and mohalim do not share their printed materials with others. Tauber (personal communication, October 2012) points out that isolated teachers can benefit from the opportunity to share thoughts, frustrations, challenges and successes with colleagues on an informal basis while passing each other in the halls of a school or conversing in a staff lounge. Participants in my study note that this is the first time anyone has asked them questions related to their practice of brit milah. One participant laments his isolation and goes as far as to suggest that he believes it would be beneficial for him as a mohel and as an educator to see his colleagues in action. He recalls but one instance in his professional life, some twenty years ago where he was afforded the opportunity to discuss his work and approach with colleagues. Cantor Brown says, “I wish my congregants would feel comfortable inviting me to their brises even if I’m not their mohel so I could see how others handle the bris.” Unfortunately, the practice of brit milah does not presently present any of the characteristics of collegiality seen in other teaching fields. One mohel (DD) notes that professionals in other Jewish educational settings, whether rabbis or teachers, regularly interact to share new concepts and applications appropriate to their work. She attributes the isolationism to perceptions of competition. Fullan (1982) proposes that breaking walls of isolationism creates conditions suitable for educational reflection, professional development and educational change and notes the benefits of providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on personal practice. Consideration of educational research regarding professional isolationism and collegiality may be pertinent for developing the work of the mohel as educator.
Clearly a culture of individualism exists in the field of *brit milah* work and any intervention to promote sharing or encourage reflection represents what may be best described as an awkward innovation. Nonetheless Schon (1987) concurs with Connelly & Clandinin (1988) maintaining that while teachers may privilege their experience above educational theory, reflection is possible as long as dignity is afforded to personal practical knowledge and personal pedagogic content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Resistance can be managed through empowerment. Furthermore unlike other settings, the circumscribed nature of ritual structure implies that pedagogic reflection and development in this context need not concern itself with issues such as transfer and scope, found in other teaching ventures.

Literature on collaboration distinguishes two alternate approaches or models of professional development (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). In an empowerment approach, expert colleagues are brought together to generate critical reflective thought based on personal experience leading to more skilled action in practice. This collaborative teacher culture creates an environment suitable to both curriculum development and pedagogical reform within a given educational setting. In an alternate second model referred to as contrived collegiality, professionals are assembled by administrators strictly as a means to allow uncritical adoption of imposed teaching styles, methodologies and goals generated from outside experts and institutions. Due to the fact that *mohalim* essentially function independently absent institutional oversight, it is unlikely that this second paradigm would apply to the work of the ritualist.
Peer coaching is a method often employed in collegial settings. Garmston (1987) differentiates technical coaching and collegial coaching as two types of peer work, one of which may be suitable in the field of brit milah. Technical coaching addresses the transfer of new skills and strategies into existing repertoires of teachers. It is a time-consuming process that may be intimidating as it is predicated upon objective feedback given in a non-threatening, although supportive, environment. It is unlikely that time-constrained mohalim would participate in such time-demanding coaching. On the other hand, collegial coaching is directed to specific contexts of teaching and the process of self-reflection. While dialogue between co-professionals leads to improved teaching, the ultimate goal of this model is self-coaching for continuous self-perpetuating improvements in teaching. Collegial coaching is often designed by partnering pairs of educators and is reminiscent of apprentice-type models in which mohalim originally trained. Mohalim may be more inclined to consider this model due to its familiarity. Mohalim dedicated to their educative work may additionally be receptive to this model if for no other reason than it increases professional dialogue and strengthens collegial bonds.

Teaching materials

Mohalim employ two basic types of teaching materials. These include personalized websites advertising their work in the community and pre-printed handouts for use during the ceremony.

The advent of technology clearly impacts the mohels’ work. Mohalim view websites as key teaching tools and resources for sharing aspects of brit milah. Each mohel utilizes his/her website to share component parts of the ceremonial service and to describe in detail the
medical aftercare required after circumcision. Some practitioners even offer accessible sound files to model the speaking and chanting of blessings to be recited by the parents. The availability of the web has come to function however as a justification for some mohalim to limit their interactions with families prior to the bris. As one professional shared, “everything they need to know is right there.” While the availability of this information is of course instructive, it is unfortunate that such accessibility has become an excuse to not sit down with families before the day of the celebration.

The second educational artifact that I came across in my study is the ceremonial outline distributed to guests attending the service. Mohalim who use this tool have voiced the idea that such a handout is educationally beneficial in that it allows people to understand and follow the flow of the service, while at the same time it allows for greater structured participation of the guests, who otherwise be relegated to a very limited and passive role. In fact, liturgically, there are only two places in a traditional brit milah service where the congregation is invited to offer a specific response. These handouts which include creative readings not only educate the audience to their appropriate invited additional responses but also enhance active participation in the service. Cantor Green sends an electronic document to celebrant families in advance and encourages them to bring their own additions to the service in terms of poetry or other selections. Here Green is following the suggestion expressed by Cohen & Eisen’s (2000) prescription that contemporary liberal Jews are autonomously motivated and want to participate in the creative aspects of ritual enactment. Green also suggests that the use of handouts, in his experience, limits extraneous conversations that may draw attention of guests away from the educational messages that he wishes to share.
In my study, one of the mohalim hesitated in allowing me to keep the ceremonial outline which he sometimes uses at services. Whereas my initial thought was that he was concerned that I would incorporate the materials into my own practice, I believe that his reaction also reflected a general lack of collegiality that one finds in the field of brit milah. White’s proprietary stance is similar to that of teachers in other settings who express reluctance to share materials with co-workers. In a time when educational organizations such as the American Federation of Teachers are forming partnerships with TSL Education, the British publisher of the weekly Times Educational Supplement in order to create websites where teachers can share curriculum materials with one another, (www.nytimes.com/.../teachers-union-to-open-lesson-sharing, June 18, 2012) this proprietary stance requires explanation.

Mohalim interviewed expressed concern over sharing knowledge and materials in a manner which resonates with the findings in other competitive fields where there exists financial incentives tied to the work. Soo (2006) notes that knowledge is regarded as the most valuable resource we have today because it is the only sustainable source of competitive advantage for firms in the economy. As White points out, “I don’t think mohalim are interested in sharing what they do or how they do it. It’s a competitive thing and they typically play their cards close to the vest.” Absent specific intrinsic and extrinsic rewards co-workers are unlikely to share their workplace knowledge. Soo differentiates intrinsic and extrinsic de-motivators which would lead professionals to reluctance in sharing. Extrinsic de-motivators relate to internal company dynamics and are not applicable to the work of the mohel. Intrinsic de-motivators include protecting one’s competitive edge, insecurity and personal animosity.
Working under the assumption that my colleagues lack personal animosity towards one another and are secure in their work product, it is likely that of these three de-motivators, competitiveness is the most likely reason for an observed unwillingness to share. This explanation is consistent with the self-reported reluctance of mohalim to work in a collaborative manner.

In a time of negative Jewish demographic growth, it is fair to ask why mohalim would share their hard-won knowledge and risk destroying their own competitive edge against potential competitors. I am left wondering if absent competition, either because all mohalim were extremely busy or because britot were not financially rewarding, would mohalim be more apt to share their general knowledge and distribute ceremonial handouts to colleagues in the field?

While Cantor Green believes handouts enhance the ritual experience, ritual theorists illuminate the inherent paradox of such materials. Specifically, “rites love not paper” (Driver, 2006, p. 215). The printed text Driver suggests rather distracts people from the performative words shared by the ritual leader and alienates the participant from the immediacy of the ritual moment. Instead of living in the moment, Driver believes the script encourages those present to count the steps to the end of the ritual drama taking away from the overall effectiveness in creating a sacred experience. Interestingly, both Green and White share that they sometimes use a script and sometimes do not, depending on their subjective feel for the audience.

**Summary**
In this chapter I examined the nature of the work of the mohel in his natural setting and analyzed his ritual performance from an educational and ritual perspective so as to answer three secondary research questions of the paper. I examined aspects of ritual theory including liminality, ritual meaning, ritual absence, noetics and ritual language and suggested how aspects of educational theory interface with the work of the mohel practitioner so as to determine and frame their observed curricular choices, consideration of the learner and their role as educators. Chapter six addresses the overall milieu in which the mohel works and offers conclusions, implications and areas for further research based on my study.
Chapter 6

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

Overview

Whereas chapter four of this dissertation shares the findings of my research by offering a detailed description of each mohel’s work and chapter five analyzes some of the questions related to both education and ritual performance, here I share conclusions based on contemplative synthesis of the mohel’s actual work, responses in relation to the literature review, my knowledge of ritual studies and my familiarity with aspects of pedagogic practice. I answer the last research question regarding milieu and suggest implications for practice before proposing areas for follow-up research.

The complex nature of interfacing ritual and pedagogy

Grimes (2002) offers that analysis of ritual inquiry is greatly complicated by the multitude of analytical lenses through which ritual may be interpreted. Sociologists, anthropologists, structuralists, functionalists, rationalists, phenomenologists, psychologists, lituriiologists, ecologists, cognitivists, and even political economists each offer distinctive theories attempting to define, classify, interpret and evaluate ritual performance. In my study, which analyzes the educational issues surrounding the practice of brit milah, I discovered one of the inherent problems of addressing the interface between ritual and education is that the process of guiding families, celebrants and guests through the process of brit milah similarly does not fit neatly into any predetermined categories.
For instance, *mohalim* offer an educative experience which can be primarily categorized as formal or informal education, adult or family-education, education concerned with celebrants or guests, education focused on functionality or biblical interpretation or education focused on modeling ritual and the perpetuation of tradition as implied by Jennings’ (1982) concept of ritual noetics. Furthermore, *mohalim* may choose to adopt numerous teaching styles, focus on multiple meanings, and act as functionalists in the moment as well as resources in the future. Through their interactions with clientele, *mohalim* seek to foster different types of relations with learners and as well seek to teach about *brit milah* as well as other issues of Jewish life and practice.

Further complicating matters, the work of the *mohel* resonates with Rosenak’s (1987) dialectical nomenclature used to address the ultimate goals of Jewish religious education in secular society. A normative-ideational education is based upon a conviction of what is right. It posits the existence of communally accepted eternal ideals which reflect the heights of human understanding and cultural achievement. This orientation demands transmission of specific bodies of knowledge and performance of particular actions. Given the complex realities of the communities in which we live, the *mohel* devises strategies and implements actions to accomplish this task through the performance of *brit milah*. At the same time, the *mohel* uses the *brit milah* ceremony, often during the throne of Elijah section, to share a deliberative-inductive orientation which senses unease in the world, identifies fundamental tensions of being and deliberates upon meaningful solutions. For *mohalim*, the message of the ceremony is not to transform their liberal clientele into observant Jews, but to create people who relate themselves meaningfully to the world through peoplehood and tradition. By reclaiming or
generating stronger connections to a meaningful, relevant Judaism it is hoped that Jewish life becomes a vehicle through which to consider relationships to the world at large.

It is abundantly clear that mohalim who I interviewed and observed are intending to fashion an educational experience for the liberal families with whom they work. They voice an affinity for many principles of experiential education (Dewey, 1938). Specifically, they are seeking to create a quality latitudinal experience in the immediate which is agreeable to families and they are attempting to promote longitudinally attitudes which will lead Jewish families to be open to a continuum of future Jewish experiences.

The mohel’s teaching milieu

The last secondary research question I have left for the concluding chapter of this dissertation deals with the milieu in which mohalim operate. In many ways it is the most pertinent of the findings in that it brings together many of the practical constraints that impact the overall educational environment. Consideration of such realities reflects the inherent balance of theory and practice in any educational work and brings to light the evidenced reality of the mohel’s educational predicament.

Oukada (2000) notes that there are four limiting factors in any teaching venture which include epistemological, semiotic, learning and environmental constraints. Epistemological constraints concern the full understanding of the material by the teacher. The mohalim, who are each ordained clergy from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America do not seem to struggle with this issue. Semiotic constraints concern the use of language to appropriately “represent” the intended knowledge to be shared. With the exception of voiced concerns
regarding the ceremonial character Pinchas, these seasoned professionals who have been leading rites of passage for decades are competent in translating the teachings of the tradition into palpable comprehensive language. As White shares, “I think I have excellent communication skills.” Learning constraints concern the motivation of the learner and are not the focus of this study. Finally, environmental constraints include regressive variables such as time. All of these constraints, suggests Oukada, can confine both the process and progress of any educational setting.

Attentive to similar issues, Schwab (1970) points out that all educational settings take place in a milieu that limits and circumscribes the nature of the educational endeavor. In his prominent article *The Practical*, he notes that educational designers must consider the socio-cultural conditions in which education occurs. Evidence suggests that four major environmental constraints of milieu directly impacting the educational work of the *mohel* include time, anxiety, isolation, and ritual structure. While not fully the focus of this study, there is an implicit undertone in some of the *mohel’s* comments which suggests that a fifth constraining variable is the financial aspect of *brit milah* work.

While time is a consideration in any teaching venture, it is the singularly most constraining factor, the most compelling regressive variable, impacting *mohalim* as they perform their educational work. As observed, each *mohel* conducts a content-laden ceremony with accompanying explication lasting anywhere from ten to twenty-three minutes. In the Midwest, I am aware of one *mohel* who conducts a service that lasts for over one hour. Attendees at those ceremonies, as personally witnessed, often complain that such a service
was simply not part of their expectation. Each practitioner in my study voices the belief that they only have a few minutes in which to share the educational message of *brit milah*. White says, “Well, I only have a little bit of time,” while Green adds, “I’m not looking to schlepp things out.” This perceived time-constraint, coupled with the expectations of the families and guests, suggests that *mohalim* need be concise and clear when sharing their teachings. This constraining feature of the educational environment is influential in the selection of the comprehension-orientation of bible teaching and the teacher-centered orientation preferred by many *mohalim*.

The second temporal consideration, which will be further addressed in the implications section of my study, is that *brit milah* work is a part-time activity for all *mohalim* I observed. Participants in my study have full-time work as clerics, functioning as both cantors and rabbis. They are neither full-time *mohalim* nor, more importantly, full-time educators. As such, participants have no formal professional preparation for their teaching in this context, nor do they participate in ongoing professional learning in the area of education or educational theory. Given the part-time nature of the work, it is perhaps even unlikely that *mohalim* would devote time to an enterprise aimed at developing their work as professional educators. BB looks back on decades of work and laments not collaborating with colleagues. He says, “I guess because each person is so engrossed with their other jobs, mostly clergy stuff. You know this is a part time job for most of us, so it never took on the importance to share.”

The second environmental constraint for the *mohel*-educator is anxiety. The *brit milah* ritual has characteristics of Whitehouse’s (2004) imagistic mode of religiosity. The episodic
distinctiveness of the ritual is its infrequent repetition combined with high levels of anxiety or emotionality. Observational evidence suggests that the procedure involved in circumcision creates tension and anxiety for all in the room, sometimes even including the mohel. This high arousal is communally advantageous from a ritual perspective in that it fosters intense cohesion between participants. However, from an educational perspective, heightened anxiety may impede transference of exegetical knowledge (Whitehouse, 2004). As one participant suggests when asked if their teaching efforts were directed to the parents or the guests, “hey, the parents aren’t listening anyway...they’re way too nervous.” This anxiety is part of the reason mohalim suggest for framing a concise and relatively brief ceremonial service intended primarily for the benefit of the assembled guests.

In many ways the isolated environment in which the mohel functions represents a third constraining factor in the mohel’s work. Absent collegial feedback and unlikely to share materials with others, each mohel singularly constructs his educational approach and each professional is rarely if ever exposed to other performance styles, best practices or alternative educational approaches. Each mohel reports finding a style in which they are comfortable and is unlikely to develop or change that initially developed approach. Rabbi White, when asked of the development of his approach in over twenty-years in the field offers, “Well, there may be small changes in language, in the phrases I use, but nothing substantive is different.” AA reflects on the changes in his practice over the last fifteen years as “only marginal.” The only significant interaction between colleagues, other than arranging to cover for each other in case of a scheduling conflict or illness, is an online discussion group which is open to physician-graduates of the Brit Kodesh and Koret HaBrit program. DD expresses that she believes it is crucial for
colleagues to share their work from an educational context because “that is the only way that we can continue to refine and improve our work as teachers.”

Ritual structure is the fourth and perhaps most obvious environmental constraint which directly impacts the educational work of the mohel. As Rappaport (1999) suggests, ritual is the performance of a more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers. This definition thereby circumscribes in many ways the curriculum of the educational encounter of brit milah. The texts to be introduced and recited, the mythological figures to be invited and the actions to take place are mostly predetermined by religio-cultural convention. Furthermore, juxtaposed against Jennings (1982) idea of the pedagogic mode of ritual knowledge, the practitioner is limited in scope to the possibility of ritual innovation. Educationally, these conventions, expectations and formalizations move us away from a learner-centered curriculum and circumscribe what is being taught and in fact, how it is being presented.

Financial remuneration is a fifth variable which directly impacts the ritual practitioner. All of the mohalim with whom I worked acknowledge that they are flexible in part when working with the demands of the family due to the financial remuneration which accompanies brit milah work. Ultimately, celebrant family represent a paying-customer whose own satisfaction with the services provided will potentially lead to future referral business. All mohalim are prepared to make adjustments regarding ceremonial structure based on the premise that they want to appease their clientele. Similarly, the demeanor of each mohel, his
approachability and accessibility is geared to providing a comfortable experience for each family.

**Accessibility and approachability**

All of the *mohalim* who I interviewed and observed stress that accessibility and approachability remains crucial to their professional work. While these two traits are in part a product of the business element of their work, given that they want to please the client, it is arguable that both characteristics reflect as well the duality of the *mohel*’s ritual identity. Access is a prime component to their functional medical work as *mohel*. Brown says, “I want them to know they can call me anytime they want. I will go back there as many times as needed until they feel comfortable with how things are going. I want them to know that the medical attention that they receive from me is even better than what they would get from a doctor.” Green’s website, his interview comments, as well as his statements to families indicate that he is “on call” twenty four hours a day. White, who seems to be faced with the greatest time constraints, offers simply, “please, do not hesitate to call me.” Ongoing accessibility as it relates to Jewish education is only voiced by Brown who aims to foster the family’s continued Jewish growth.

Approachability on the other hand is a characteristic manifested in relation to the *mohel*’s identity as an educator. All three *mohalim* are affable and pleasant. They are open to all questions, suggestions and comments related to their conducting of the service. They are sensitive to Schuster’s (2003) findings that adults express a sense of vulnerability due to their lack of Jewish knowledge. They remind parents when sitting with them immediately before the
bris, “…that there is no such thing as a silly question” (Cantor Brown to the mother, Jan. 26, 2012). Mohalim are patient when helping families determine Hebrew names and are always willing to answer questions related to brit milah after the ceremony concludes. Unlike other adult education settings where rabbis are inclined to wear the mantle of symbolic exemplar lightly (Tauber, 2010), here each mohel introduces himself by his title of Rabbi White or Cantor Green and does not invite people to address him on a first-name basis. BB says “When you walk in, it’s like the red carpet comes to the door. I mean people don’t know what to do for you.” One can conclude that this is a natural outgrowth of the formality and hierarchal structure of ritual wherein the ritual leader is ceded to be a recognized authority with privileged access to the sources and wisdom of the past (Goody, 1986).

Questions about questions

Questioning is one of the most utilized and effective tools of teaching. Instruction absent questioning is likely to simply expose learners to information without guaranteeing learning has taken place (Sanders, 1990). In fact, teachers are reported to ask between three to four hundred questions each day. Mohalim who are involved in an educational enterprise ask very few questions. Absent questioning, learning can still take place but cannot be verified. Outside of inquiries establishing the Jewish identity of the parents, a determinant of liturgical blessings to be recited, I did not hear the mohel ask any questions while guiding families through this educative event. Indeed, although the formal nature of ritual structure does not lend itself to two-way communication during the ceremony, perhaps it is worthy of the practitioner’s consideration to see if there are places even during the brit milah ceremony
where well-placed questions along the lines of an interactive lecture can encourage the families or guests to engage in active thinking and learning.

**Vision of Education**

I acknowledge that any attempt to extract the *mohel*’s vision for Jewish education in this context is complicated by three critical factors. Firstly, the vision implied is not exclusively the result of the *mohel* but is arguably intrinsic to the features of the ritual itself. Secondly, each *mohel* functions independently and thus emphasizes different ideas and concepts when working with clientele. Thirdly, vision statements of education are typically pronounced in response to a series of ongoing implemented educational activities, reflective of Dewey’s (1938) continuum of education, as opposed to a singular one-time ritual event such as *brit milah*.

The *mohalim* observed seem to gravitate to some elements of Twersky’s, Greenberg’s and Brinker’s vision of Jewish education. Similar to Twersky, *mohalim* do stress that this is a commanded obligation although they do not overly emphasize the importance of continual practice of commandments, nor is establishing such normative practice the ultimate stated goal of their work. Like Greenberg, they suggest that through a deeper understanding of the tradition one can in fact grapple with existential questions in life. Mostly, *mohalim* behave in a manner consistent with Brinker’s vision of Jewish education in that they highlight the importance of the social self-definition of Jews through family lineage and stress the centrality of peoplehood. None of these visions however fully encompasses the observed vision of the
mohel's work. However pretentious, I would offer the following reflective concise composite vision of education based on my observations and interviews with participants in this study:

The ultimate goal of Jewish education in the context of *brit milah* interaction is to suggest that Judaism is a morally sound way of life which, through fostering feelings of connectedness, whether that connectedness is to family, generations, spiritual ancestors, community, the people of Israel, or the heritage of Judaism, imbues our lives with greater meaning and significance.

**Implications for practice of *brit milah***

*Mohalim* are fine ritualists. They perform technically sound circumcisions and thus fulfill the functional aspect of their duties. *Mohalim*, while intentionally educative in their approach, have no formalized pedagogic training and work absent the benefits of collegial bonds and educational self-reflection as found in other professional settings. Evidence from my study suggests that *mohalim* rarely interact with colleagues and give little reflective consideration to their role as Jewish educators. DD inquires, “Doctors get together to discuss issues. Teachers get together to share ideas. Why don’t *mohalim*?” The next section of the dissertation discusses implications of this statement.

The creation of a professional learning community is used in many educational settings to encourage continuous learning and collaboration amongst professionals (Mendler, 2012). It allows individuals in educational settings to share best practices based on personal experience as well as knowledge gained outside of a formal teaching setting. Such dynamics encourage the sharing of innovative ideas and approaches. Often centered on the shared reading of relevant
texts, these interactions foster creative thinking and promote the creation of problem-solving strategies. Furthermore, the creation of a professional learning community strengthens social bonds of collegiality which as evidenced, are presently absent in the mohel’s ritual work.

For busy professionals such as mohalim, a symposium represents one possible method of building collegiality and creating conditions ripe for self-reflection. In such a setting, a series of presentations is given by a handful of experts noted for their authority and competence (Sisco, 1998). Such formal presentations could include descriptions by mohalim of their own educational approach to brit milah or, alternatively, presentation of theoretical constructs by experts in ritology or pedagogy. The advantage of the symposium is that the formal and concise nature of the gathering resonates with the type of presentation that mohalim typically offer themselves. By nature the symposium is non-threatening as only those who wish to participate in follow-up questions typically do so. In addition to discussing theories of education and ritual theory, symposia could address contemporary political issues relevant to each mohel’s work such as recent proclamations in Germany and California seeking to limit or ban the practice of ritual circumcision.

I imagine that the setting for such a gathering however would be best situated to occur outside the setting of a formal institution such as the Jewish Theological Seminary of America or Hebrew Union College, both in New York. Unfortunately in this age of denominationalism, and given expressed ambivalence towards JTS, colleagues may be reluctant to participate in a conference held at either a Conservative or Reform institution. Rather, a hypothetical gathering would best be organized in a non-denominational setting, perhaps a hotel or secular university.
Featured speakers might address issues which impact all mohalim regardless of their denominational leanings. Topics would include a discussion of political issues relating to circumcision, innovations in topical medical anesthesia and general educational theory, all three of which would likely be of interest and helpful to all mohalim, regardless of personal practice.

While the field of mohalim is relatively small, it is possible to imagine a type of mentorship model to facilitate the development of the new professional. In a mentorship model, a mohel who has training in educational theory or is devoted to the educational aspect of his work, may partner with a newcomer to help the novice understand his own pedagogical philosophy and approach while guiding families through life-cycle passages. The mentor’s responsibilities (Daloz, 1998) would include providing positive feedback, suggesting alternate ceremonial language and encouraging new thinking on the part of the neophyte practitioner. An experienced mohel may have the familiarity with some of the semiotic constraints of presenting brit milah that would help a novice beginning his career as a ritualist. Ongoing mentorship is familiar and unintimidating to many mohalim, who originally trained in this manner.

Teachers in all settings are encouraged to practice self-reflection. Findings in my study suggest that mohalim who are attempting to provide an educative experience while guiding families through the brit milah process may want to reflect on, perhaps for the very first time in their careers, numerous characteristics of their work including teaching style, teaching curriculum and ritual language employed during their teaching. One implication of my study is
that the reflective practitioner would be well-served to chart and consider stylistic aspects of their ritual work. In developing a template for considering ritual work in an educational context, I borrow from Orenstien (1994) and Ochs (2007) who suggest that the process of identifying characteristics of ritual performance is central to ritual innovation. The following nine questions represent my *educational principles for ritual engagement* as a potential practitioner’s tool for guiding families through both traditional and innovative ritual.

1) Does my presentation parallel Van Genep’s structural outline for ritual enactment?

2) What are my explicit and implicit curricular goals during the suggestive moments of *communitas*?

3) Is there a null curriculum and if so, what is the rationale behind curricular exclusions?

4) How do I successfully translate particularistic Jewish ritual language into universal terms and universal terms into particular Jewish language?

5) What is my overall vision for educating people through this specific ritual?

6) How can this ritual enactment accommodate the learners’ educational backgrounds?

7) How can I accommodate multiple meanings possibly present in the room?

8) How are my chosen teaching styles best suited to this ritual?

9) How can I negotiate the effects of regressive variables which impact the educational goals of the ritual?

My study suggests three other areas which merit the *mohel’s* reflection, consideration and evaluation:
Firstly, the brit milah ritual is by definition a life-cycle rite of passage that is performed for families. Infant(s) and parents may be joined by other siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents who come to celebrate the arrival of the baby into the world. It is therefore surprising that mohalim display more characteristics of adult educators than family educators. As implied by studies regarding early childhood education, attention to developmentally appropriate practice could allow mohalim to further include siblings in an authentic Jewish experience of brit milah (Defining Excellence, 2004). Scheindlin (1998) is amongst a number of researchers who suggest that it is possible to build on the innate curiosity and natural sense of spirituality and wonder that children generally exhibit. No doubt, this curiosity is heightened given the experience of childbirth and excitement of welcoming a new sibling into the home. Furthermore, Ben-Arie (2008) borrows from Erikson, noting that at each developmental level the child addresses the idea of identity anew leading to a sense of who-ness and wholeness which affirms his/her place in the world as a unique individual. In my study there was not a single occasion when the mohel offered the families strategies for explaining the brit to a young sibling or even engaged a sibling in a conversation which would allow him/her to grow from, or react to, the experience of brit milah.

The mohel who fully embraces the model of family-educator is actively concerned with the continued spiritual and Jewish development of the entire family. While interfacing with older siblings, the mohel could consult literature written to explain other life-cycle events to children. Much has been written and is available, for example, at Jewish funeral homes, to explain death and dying to children. While not directly applicable, such an approach would offer a framework for a practical and creative approach to teaching a difficult topic to a baby's
older siblings. While each *mohel* accepts Rav Halperin’s sentiments that observing the actual procedure is no way to sensitively inculcate a greater appreciation of Judaism for older siblings, it is nonetheless worthwhile to consider aspects of covenant, history, peoplehood and *simcha shel mitzvah* (the happiness of performing God’s commandments) that could readily become part of a family-based curriculum while guiding families through this life-cycle rite of passage. In consultation with colleagues, age-appropriate literature could be authored as a starting point for *mohalim* to include siblings more fully in educational initiatives surrounding *brit milah*.

Adapting some of Beck’s (2002) recommendations for families with pre-school aged children, a *mohel*, similar to other Jewish educators, could work to strengthen links between families and local Jewish pre-schools, synagogues and clergy. Presently, outside of performing in the moment *brit milah*, *mohalim* provide little information or resources to help parents create an extended Jewish community for the family.

Secondly, *Mohalim* possess a dual identity as functional ritualists and as Jewish educators. BB says, “I was a *mohel* but I was also a teacher, a *hazzan*. I wear a number of hats.” Even though they function in part as teachers, the lack of formal educational training may imply a narrow repertoire of teaching skills. Rowell (2000) suggests that through self-reflection, a minister can develop empowering metaphors to enhance his/her self-image as teacher. He lists seven subsets to the meta-metaphor of interpreter which include gardener, liberator, nurturer of hope, co-learner, preparer of trials to come, midwife and teller of stories of faith. While the teaching-is-telling image lends itself to formal ritual performance, the nature of pre and post-*bris* interactions may be impacted by reflecting on other creative metaphors. While Cantor
Brown sees himself as redecorator, AA describes himself as a memory-maker; CC calls himself a transmitter of the joy of the tradition offering dor l’dor (generation to generation) service and White refers to himself as a meaning-maker. Other mohalim struggled to invent a new metaphor for their work.

Related to the idea of the dual-identity of mohalim, a third point merits reflection. There has been much research conducted regarding the changing role of the rabbi and cantor, two other prominent Jewish professional who serve the liberal community at large (Wertheimer, 2005). Studies have shown that roles continue to develop, expand and reframe over time given the changing needs of the Jewish community. Given the proliferation of physician conducted brit milah as a voiced concern of many of this study’s participants, it is arguable that the mohel should further prioritize the inherent value of his work as the provider of a distinctive Jewish educational experience in this ritual context.

**Implications for ritual practice in general**

The findings of this study, while particular to the practice of brit milah, can be expanded to ritual in other contexts. While by definition, life-cycle ceremonies are rare, ritual leaders should be encouraged to adapt ideas generated by this investigation as they guide families through more regularly practiced ritual performances, either traditional or innovative in nature. In particular, the ritualist needs to be attentive to pedagogic considerations regarding educational commonplaces outlined, as well as aspects of ritual theory.

Regarding the learners, it is important to note that modern Jews by definition are not traditional even when they retrieve from the tradition and choose to act traditionally.
Nonetheless their very participation in ritual performance, regardless of their ritual sincerity or disposition regarding theology, underscores a desire to learn, to be accepted into the fold and to identify as part of the Jewish community. Through participation in ritual they express a desire to be part of a people which perpetuates some aspect of a shared historical tradition. The social bonds that ritual interaction creates during liminality are seemingly powerful and, in marking boundaries between the sacred and the mundane, ritual practice which strengthens links between group participants and effectively educates, has direct implications for Jewish families, Jewish communities and ultimately, Jewish continuity.

Regarding the content of the message to be shared during the execution of the curriculum, it is important to note that while Judaism has a set of core principles, it is not a fixed body of beliefs or observances but rather an entity that has changed over time and undoubtedly will continue to do so. Judaism to the modern mind is indeed a complex and pluralistic tradition subject to a continual process of adaptation and change. The incorporation of identifiable doctrinal or canonical messages must continue to be accompanied by personal and public messages couched in thoughtful moral language and action all within an educative context. Such an approach will ensure the ongoing performance of meaningful and relevant Jewish ritual practices in our contemporary society.

Regarding the instructor, this study notes that the ritualist must confront a dual identity as functionalist and educator. It is imperative for any ritual leader to fully consider the functional aspects of ritual performance and how the educative process of ritual interaction represents but a limited engagement with families at a specific time, place and occasion. As
powerful as the message in the moment may be, it is only through accepting responsibilities for making connections to other Jewish sources, traditions and institutions that the greater goals of communal Jewish education and Jewish community can be achieved. Additionally, isolationism does not benefit practitioners or clients in the modern world in which we live. Ideas and knowledge will inevitably need to be shared. It is only through exchanging ideas and best practices with others that a leader can hope to do his/her best educational work in a given ritual setting, whether innovative or traditional.

Regarding the macrocosmic milieu, it is significant to note that the Jewish demographic in America is rapidly shrinking. Furthermore, large segments of the population classified as liberal Jews come from weak educational backgrounds, are intermarried, and tend to compartmentalize their religious identity as perhaps one of many personal and professional identities that they assume. Accompanied by the stresses and obligations of daily life, it is likely that time will continue to be a regressive variable in any ritual structure. For the mohel’s efforts to be fully appreciated and embraced, ritualists will be well-served to consider the framing of any educational message in a condensed fashion, sensitive to the learner’s backgrounds, in deference to the implication of these ongoing restraints.

Finally, for any ritual endeavor to be successful, ritual practice must continue to build reliable bridges carrying people across unknown territories to new stages and opportunities in both spiritual and physical life. Jewish ritual in particular, must however continue to be recognizable and replicable balancing the familiar, with its attachment to the past, alongside the innovative and creative. In rabbinic parlance this is reflected in the inherent tension of
kevah, the fixed and handed-down aspect of the tradition, co-existing alongside kavannah, the personal intention and creative impulse for the modern participant. Ritual’s rhythmic structure must be compelling enough to lead to an intuitive sense of urgency for potential participants and for ritual to indeed achieve acceptance in contemporary society, it must be perceived as an educative, dynamic performative system, generating new materials while recombining traditional actions in new ways. Only by embracing anti-structure, can ritual continue to open up our ideas of time, space and mind, so as to transform participants via meaningful and relevant connections to some ultimate redemptive process.

Recommendations for future research

Outside of this initial foray, there exists no research regarding the mohel as educator. Therefore, recommendations for future research are almost limitless. Nonetheless, as a result of this study and its findings, I propose the following six ideas for future educational research:

1) The unit of analysis which I chose to conduct my study was the mohel as teacher. While I have been able to identify many characteristics of the mohel’s pedagogic practice, I have not addressed what is actually learned by the participants at the bris as a result of those efforts. A study to ascertain the level of knowledge of participants before and after an interchange would therefore be fruitful in comparing educational intention versus educational outcome (Ellis, 2004).
2) *Mohalim* voice the opinion that a positive interaction during this life-cycle event is a determinant of future outreach to Jewish professionals and synagogues. Intake interviews at synagogues and pre-schools could chart the impact of previous such exchanges and the resultant attitudes of affiliating Jews in other communally-based Jewish organizations.

3) This study raises questions regarding the efficacy and consequences of self-reflection and collegiality in teaching via ritual interaction. In particular, through the process of reflecting on educational issues raised by the proposed *pedagogic principles for ritual enactment*, does the *mohel*, either by himself or through interchange with colleagues, come to a deeper understanding of his educational practice? How does such a shift or clarification of such understanding affect his educational approach to ritual performance and does it alter the characteristics of pre and post *brit* work?

4) My study focused on three *mohalim* who are ordained clergymen from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. How is the educative experience offered by *mohalim* of other denominations or even physician-*mohalim* different than that offered by participants in my study?

5) How do the findings in the traditional context of *brit milah* compare to the findings in innovative ritual?
6) How can schools training rabbis and cantors craft a program to raise the educational awareness of clergy in their role as teachers in various ritual contexts which they will encounter such as weddings, divorce and funerals?

Limitations of the study

My study included interviewing seven mohalim, and working extensively with three of them over a period of seven months from February 2012 through August of 2012. I met with each participant for an introductory interview and then observed each mohel perform three britot which they considered to be representative samples of their work in the liberal Jewish community. I engaged in casual conversation with the mohalim before and after each observation and shared phone calls and emails with them before conducting follow-up interviews.

This study is not intended to be a synopsis of all extant theories pertaining to the development of ritual in religious-life. Many scholars have offered such overviews. Rather herein, I am accentuating the gap in academic literature which fails to consider interface of ritual performance and educational theory. This study is rather aimed at addressing the pedagogic perspective of practitioners as evidenced by choices they make and styles they adapt while presenting a specific life-cycle rite of passage. It is important to note that a separate study would need to be organized to ascertain the learning that takes place while participating in a ceremony and interaction led by a ritual leader who gives ample consideration to his educational work in this context.
Clearly, as a mohel who embraces a pedagogic orientation, I have been careful not to position my own presentation style, choices and practice as an ideal template against which to compare other ritual performances. While my experience offers me an insider’s knowledge of pedagogic choices, I have tried to carefully explore my colleagues’ perspectives fully and non-judgmentally. Their perspectives and orientations alongside my study have opened new insights for me in my own practice of brit milah.

Each of the three full participants in my study is an ordained clergyman from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and has served Conservative congregations in the Northeast for the majority of their professional career. Only one interviewed mohel spent his professional career primarily in cities with smaller Jewish communities and only one interview participant is non-clergy.

Therefore, an additional limitation of my study is that this small sample size is not intended to present generalizable findings with regards to the work of all mohalim in all contexts. Arguably, mohalim who are not ordained ministers or who function in other geographic settings may not exhibit the same characteristics found in this investigation.

Summary statement: The final cut

This study has provided an insight into the interface between educational and ritual theory as witnessed in the work of the ritual circumciser, the mohel. By examining the work of three prominent mohalim in their natural setting, I have been able to describe how they conceptualize the brit milah process as an educative experience. In particular, I have taken elements of ritual theory to understand how it affects various aspects of the mohel's
educational work. Employing the framework of Schwab’s educational commonplaces, I have summarized the nature of the mohel’s curriculum, the impact of the learner’s background on the mohel’s ritual work and the styles or orientations of teaching the ritualist typically employs. Furthermore, my research with Cantor Brown, Cantor Green and Rabbi White has allowed me to identify some constraints the mohel faces when providing an educational experience in this specific milieu. By considering the totality of the mohel’s interactions with celebrant families and guests, a composite vision of education that the mohel offers has been developed. In reflecting upon the unique role of the ritual practitioner as he guides families through this life-cycle rite of passage, I have proposed nine questions called educational principles for ritual engagement which may represent a useful practical tool for ritualists in settings other than brit milah.

A significant conclusion of the research shows that the mohel maintains a dual identity of functionalist and Jewish educator which directly determines his major educational goals at various points in the process of working with families. Regardless of his commitment to an educational orientation, the mohel is first and foremost a ritual leader who performs “in the moment” a sacred covenantal act of circumcision and is responsible for the recitation of the prescribed liturgy. Each mohel is committed to the primacy of perpetuation of the tradition within a predetermined framework. At the same time, as with other Jewish professionals who interact with families in diverse settings, there is an opportunity to function as an effective educator during this process. While each mohel acts in an idiosyncratic manner, all participants in my study demonstrate their commitment to the additional role of Jewish educator during this life-cycle ritual. During the ceremony, the mohel adapts a teacher-centered, dominative
approach while he flows between various bible-teaching orientations in an attempt to review the particular master story of the Jewish covenant. The mohel shares the messages of Jewish tradition by employing ritual language which resonates with Rosenak’s (1987) key concepts of Judaism and Haidt’s moral foundations theory (2012) which together present Judaism in a favorable light to a liberal audience.

Finally, my research implies that by building a sense of collegiality and encouraging the process of self-reflection, mohalim can deepen their educational thought and potentially enhance the quality of the educational experience they provide.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

Dear Colleague,

My name is Eric L. Wasser and I am a Hazzan and Mohel in your area. I am also a doctoral candidate at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

I am writing you today to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting in reference to my doctoral work. Moreover, I am contacting you because of your reputation in providing high quality brit milah work for the members of your community.

Attached is a letter of consent that describes the nature of our work together and will give you a sense of the time frame required as well as some aspects of our future interaction together.

I am thrilled to extend this invitation to you and hope that my discussions and observations of your work will provide the larger community with an interesting perspective on the current state of practice of brit milah in the area.

I appreciate your consideration in accepting this invitation and I look forward to our time together.

B'Shalom,

Cantor Eric L Wasser

7-19 Fairhaven Place, Fair Lawn NJ 07410       elw613@optonline.net       201-562-5277
Appendix B: Letter of Consent

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my field research towards my doctoral studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. My interaction with you will explore various aspects of your work as a mohel in the Jewish community. I will require your participation in two separate interviews, the first of which will take approximately ninety minutes while the second interview should be about an hour-long. In between those interviews, I will attend and observe three representative britot services which you conduct in your community.

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and all identifying information will be removed about both you and the families/communities who you service. Your participation is of course voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any questions or to discontinue our dialogue and work at any point in the process.

It is my hope that our collective endeavors will increase our understanding of the present state of practice in one area of life-cycle ceremonial enactment.

Should you have further questions about the project please contact either me at 201-562-5277 or via e-mail at elw613@optonline.net, or Dr. Jeff Kress, my dissertation advisor at jekress@jtsa.edu.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information shared above. Please keep a copy for your records, and, in advance, thank you for your participation.
Appendix C: Initial Interview Protocol: Developed with Dr. Jeff Kress

Interviewer: Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule to meet with me. As I explained on the phone, I am doing doctoral research with the Davidson School at JTS and I am working on specific aspects of life-cycle ceremonies. I want to begin by getting a little bit of an overview of your own personal background and a sense of your overall approach to brit milah. So I am going to start very generally and then ask you more specific questions as we move through our interview, ok?

Can you tell me how you became involved in your brit milah work?

I understand that each mohel may employ their own style when approaching this important community work. Can you describe to me your overall approach to doing brises?

Can you describe for me how you developed this approach or style?

Are there times or circumstances when you have to alter your general style or approach? If yes:

Can you recall any of those specific examples or circumstances? How/why did you feel these circumstances affected what you did within this context? If no: Were there any circumstances that in retrospect you might have altered your approach and done things differently?

I know that you have been in the business for many years now. Looking back at your own history, would you say your approach to brit milah has developed or changed over the years? If yes: What factors led to some of these changes in approach and style? Why do you think they impacted what you do? If no: That’s interesting. Can you speak about that consistency of approach commenting on why you think your approach has remained the same?
What is the most fulfilling part of being a mohel for you?

Interviewer: Thanks! These are helpful responses. I am going to shift gears now and take us more directly into various aspects of the specific work itself. So, I am going to ask some general questions about the families whom you service when doing britot. Also I want to discuss the nature of some of your initial interaction with them, ok?

Can you tell me a little about the families with whom you work?

When you first engage with families, what is important for you to know about them?

Why do you think these things are important to know?

Once you have gotten to know some of these things, how might a family’s circumstances impact your approach and practice?

Are there any circumstances that you find particularly challenging?

Is there anything else about the families that you like to know before the ceremony?

Interviewer: I want to shift gears yet again and now start getting into some real depth now regarding the first contact that you have with families and then examine the day of the bris itself, ok?

Can you walk me through a pre-bris phone call or meeting?

What are some issues that generally come up in these calls or meeting?
What do you feel is essential for you to communicate here? Why?

Interviewer: Great. If you don’t mind, I want to ask some questions regarding the day of the ceremony itself.

I am curious if you have a preferred venue for doing britot? Why? Does the choice of venue impact your practice?

Now, I want to investigate some your work on the day itself. Can you walk me through the bris from when you first arrive until you leave the house? (this will allow me to use Grimes matrix for ceremonial presentation and also get a sense of some of the questions that we asked regarding milieu: where do you stand, what is the set-up, how do you interact with parents, other family members and congregation at large: with each description I will ask follow up questions such as .... That’s interesting, why do you do that, what are you thinking when you do that, etc. I will use my familiarity to focus on some of their choice points and emphases).

What do you want people to take away from their experience with you? (If the mohel talks about the family, ask him to discuss the congregation: if the mohel focuses on the guests, ask him the same regarding the family. Say: I notice you are talking a fair bit about the guests; what do you want the others to take away from their experience with you?)

Can you describe the nature of contact you have with families after a bris? If there is follow up: Can you describe it? Why do you think this is important? If none: can you imagine a circumstance where you would have to follow-up?
Interviewer: You have described in great detail for me the nature of your work as a mohel. What do you think makes your approach distinctive? Why would you recommend yourself to families?

Interviewer: I really appreciate your time today and I am eager to see you actually perform a bris!
Appendix D: Follow-up Interview Questions

1. Can you describe the nature of any ongoing interactions that you have had in the past or present with other mohalim?

2. All of the mohalim who I interviewed expressed that they see part of their responsibilities in an educational context. Were a context to be designed to share approaches to the educative aspects of brit milah, how might that be helpful to you in your own work?

3. The throne of Elijah is actually a recent addition to the brit milah service first appearing around the 16th century. Of course today we would never think of doing a ceremony without including this embellishment. Have you ever thought about adding something “new” to the ceremony? What factors would enable you or prevent you from being so creative?

4. Ritual absence is a term which refers to the exclusion of certain elements of a liturgical service. In my survey, absences typically include references to the brit shalom of Pinchas, references to Eretz Yisrael as the second part of God’s covenant with Abraham and an explanation of metziza. From your own perspective, can you suggest why these elements are often not included by some mohalim?

5. Assuming that brit milah can be an educational encounter, can you comment on your prioritization of teaching the parents, the immediate family and the congregation who show up at a bris?

6. As a bible teacher, how does your teaching during a brit milah experience compare to your teaching in other settings?
7. Teachers often find metaphors to describe their best work in a classroom. When you are doing your best educational work with families and audiences at a *bris*, what metaphor might you choose to describe your work? (you might want to think of this along the lines of: when I am at my best, I am like a ______________ because__________________)
Appendix E: The Grimes Ritual Matrix Adaptation for Brit Milah

Observation Chart A

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Observation Chart B

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