



BY CAROL GUZY—THE WASHINGTON POST

Spencer Ross Levy, carried by his aunt Sheryl Kornfeld at the Levy home in Bethesda, is presented to Rabbi Raphael Malka, the mohel, for the baby's bris.

## THRESHOLDS

# The Cut That Binds

With Wine and Blood, a Baby Boy Is Welcomed Into the Jewish Faith

*One in an occasional series on rites of passage.*

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**T**hey're here today, just about everybody, crowding into this Bethesda split-level, aunts, uncles, cousins. All of them, every last one of them, every last one of them, is cued into what's about to happen.

Everyone, that is, except for the

one it's about to happen to.

Spencer.

Spencer, at the moment, is completely unaware. He lies on his back, kicking up his legs, wrinkling up his face, squinting just a bit, trying to adjust to life on the outside.

Spencer's got no clue.

His mom, however, does, and she's fussing over him, looking just a little anxious in that brand-new-mom way.

"You're going to be just fine,"

Leslie Levy coos, rubbing his tummy tenderly. "You're not going to feel a thing."

"Fat chance you won't feel anything," Spencer's maternal grandfather, Alan Kornfeld, tells him. "Fat chance. Spence, you cry for all the men in the audience. Good and loud."

It's Spencer's eighth day on the planet. This day is significant because, according to the faith of his parents and his grandparents, and those who came before them, this

is the day of his bris, the day in which he must be circumcised. By doing so, he enters into a covenant with God. Abraham did it when he was 99, as God commanded. And later Abraham did it to his son Isaac, who then did it to his sons, and so it has been for every Jewish male on his eighth day of life.

Spencer is no exception.

"It's affirming our heritage,"

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# The Bris, Creating a Covenant With God

THRESHOLDS, From D1

says Spencer's other grandfather, Richard Levy. "And it brings the whole family together to celebrate a new child."

While everyone else stands around celebrating, the mohel, Rabbi Raphael Malka, a jovial, joking sort, is laying out his tools on a card table covered with a paper tablecloth printed with blue Stars of David. Next to him is a list, titled "Rabbi Malka's Circumcision Kit," which he refers to as he sets up, checking to make sure everything is in place: "1 Towel, OR Blue . . . 1 Scissor, Sharp/Blunt 4.5-inch . . . 1 Forcep, Mosquito 5-inch Str Satin . . ."

The doctors at the hospitals, he says, they take forever. Half an hour. Not him. Mere minutes, seconds, and then it's done. Finished.

But . . .  
"If I tell you it's not painful," Malka says, "I'd be lying."

"We try to minimize the pain."  
A dab of numbing agent, strategically placed beforehand, helps considerably. And really, the babies stop crying almost immediately. But the parents, oh, they're almost always wrecks. Like the obstetrician who, when he asked her if she wanted to make the cut on her baby, said, "Over my dead body," and fled from the room. And then there was the plastic surgeon.

"As soon as I handed him the knife," Malka says, "he cried like a baby."

Watching the men watch the bris is always amusing, he says.

"People don't know what to expect. You see the men like this . . ."

His hands fly into place, forming an impromptu fig leaf.

Today, there are a few newcomers in the audience, like the friend who looks around, happy to



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After the circumcision is performed, Rabbi Raphael Malka presents young Spencer to family and friends.

be here, honored to be here, but just a little mystified by the process.

"I always heard about it," the friend says. "And I saw it on an episode on 'Seinfeld.'"

"You know the one. Where the guy misses and cuts his finger."

There will be none of that here. Malka's been at it for 31 years, ever since he learned so that he could perform the ritual on his own sons. The commandment, he says, is on the father to perform the duty. The first time, it was exciting, so exciting. Such an honor. (He has three sons and 11 grandsons, and he's taken care of all but the last two of his grandchildren.) Over the years he's lost count of the number of circumcisions he's performed. Let's just say that this year, since January, he's done 300 to 400. Spencer's will be his second today.

And the best part of the job?  
"Eating afterwards," he says, patting his belly. "That's why I'm so fat."

It's time.  
Malka drapes himself with a white prayer shawl, and his tone becomes serious, reverent.

"May we have the baby, please?"  
Spencer's maternal grandmother carries him into the room, slowly,

carefully, and hands him to his paternal grandmother.

"Give him a kiss and then all the blessings you can think of," Malka tells them.

From there, he is placed in the "Elijah chair" so that the biblical prophet will know that God's covenant has not been forsaken. But Spencer pays no mind to the spiritual significance of his temporary resting place. He rolls around in the chair, stretching his legs, eyes shut, in his own world, thinking 8-day-old baby thoughts.

Oblivious.  
His aunt picks him up, placing him on the pillow laid atop Malka's table, so that his head faces Malka.

Malka shakes his head.  
"What's your name?" he asks the aunt.

"Sheryl."  
"Sheryl . . . I need you to know . . ."

"I don't do nose jobs."  
The crowd laughs.  
"Turn him around."

Spencer's grandfather, Levy, is the *sandek*, who has the honored task of holding him during the surgery. He sits, head bowed, gazing at his grandson as Malka dabs a little wine on a bit of gauze, and offers it

to Spencer.  
"Now he's tasting it," Malka chuckles as Spencer starts sucking on the wine. "Now he's going to like it."

"He won't like this," he continues, as he picks up his scalpel. "But he has no choice."

This is the point where Spencer's mom, a 34-year-old accountant, grabs a Kleenex and dabs her eyes. Spencer's dad, Rustin, a 34-year-old periodontist, stands watching, holding onto a sheet of prayers. His eyes grow bigger and bigger as he watches.

But then, with a wail from Spencer, it's over as soon as it began.

Malka diapers Spencer, and then palms him in his big paw of a hand, lifting him up and up for all to see.

Spencer looks at the crowd, eyes blinking just a bit, his hands folded over each other as if he's about to expound on something, looking as wrinkled and quizzical as a wise old man, as Malka turns him around and around the room.

Murmurs fill the room.  
*Isn't he just the cutest thing you've ever seen . . .*

The wine is brought out. Glasses lift, saluting a new life.

*Mazel tov.*