

# Jews just the tip of mohel's practice

St. Louis rabbi uses scalpel, jokes to cut across cultural differences

By Eric Berger | Staff Writer

**R**abbi Mike Rovinsky, a mohel, tells a couple after a circumcision in January to use antibiotic ointment and a gauze pad on the site at every diaper change for the next two days. He then offers a warning: The 11-day-old baby, Hezekiyah, likely won't be able to walk for a year after the procedure.

Tiffany Norris, the mom, looks concerned and then starts to crack up. It's one of a handful of jokes the Orthodox rabbi from University City tells to help the parents relax.

In about an hour, he performs four circumcisions in Russellville, Mo., outside of Jefferson City. This was a relatively light day of work for Rovinsky. About a week earlier, he flew to Dallas on a Sunday, performed 23 circumcisions and returned home that night. (The Jewish Telegraphic Agency ranked Rovinsky in 2014 as one of "America's Top Mohels.")

After the four circumcisions, Rovinsky catches up with the midwife who owns the clinic in Russellville, and then he's off, winding down a gravel road at night in rural mid-Missouri to drive more than two and a half hours back to St. Louis.

Meanwhile, Tiffany and her husband Rodd Norris, who describe themselves as

not Jewish or Christian but say they keep the sabbath, had driven more than four hours from Fredonia, Kan., to meet Rovinsky, 55. A Mennonite couple came from nearby. Another Christian couple drove 10 miles. The fourth drove for about an hour from Camdenton, Mo.

The same way an increasing number of people are hiring midwives to deliver babies rather than pay for what they see as an impersonal experience at a hospital, some people hire the rabbi instead of a doctor to perform circumcisions. (In 1989, 3 percent of births in the United States were done by midwives, according to the Centers for Disease Control. In 2013, the number was 9 percent.)

Over that time period, Rovinsky has done more than 14,000 circumcisions — about half of them for non-Jews.

In short, Rovinsky offers an experience that appeals to Christians and Jews.

"It was relaxed," said Tiffany Norris, who plans to homeschool her five boys while her husband farms. "It was like we had known him forever, and we really have just been talking on the phone with him for a couple weeks."

For her first child, Norris went in the room with the baby as a doctor did the circumcision. She was so "traumatized" that she stayed away from the next three.



She had been unhappy with her last delivery at the hospital — "they tugged and pulled" the placenta and "were very impatient," she said— so for her recent pregnancy, she went to a midwife in Wichita. That midwife connected her with "Rabbi Mike," as Norris and others call him.

After an explanation of the procedure, Tiffany Norris held Hezekiyah's legs down while Rovinsky snipped the foreskin.

"I teared up but the difference of it and how quick it was," compared to the hospital "was amazing," said Norris.

They discussed pay, which varies on a number of factors, including how far Rovinsky has to travel and how many cir-

cumcisions he is doing at one location. Here Rovinsky originally quoted one price but then realized they had discussed something lower.

When Rodd Norris asked if he was sure, Rovinsky assured him it was fine and then added, "Besides, I have the tip anyway."

Another few laughs and they are off.

## 1-800-85-MOHEL

When explaining why he became a mohel, Rovinsky starts at the beginning — as in God and Abraham, who was commanded

at age 99 to circumcise himself to establish a covenant between him — and his offspring, the Jewish people — and God. As such, on the eighth day of their lives, Jewish boys traditionally are circumcised.

"I'm participating in adding a link to the chain of our people that goes back to Avraham," said the rabbi.

Rovinsky grew up in Dallas in what he describes as a "right-wing Reform, left-wing Conservative" Jewish household. After a disagreement with their Conservative synagogue, Rovinsky's family moved to a traditional congregation, and he

joined the National Congregation of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), the Orthodox youth group, and became more observant.

He decided he wanted to become a Jewish educator rather than an engineer, like his father. He went to rabbinical school at Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore and then apprenticed with Rabbi Moshe Rappaport, a leading mohel who trained under the former Chief Mohel of Israel, the late Rabbi Yosef Weisberg.

Alongside his work as a mohel, Rovinsky has held a number of different Jewish educational and

Tiffany and Rodd Norris drove more than four hours from a farm in Kansas to have Rabbi Mike Rovinsky perform a circumcision on their newborn son. Photo: Eric Berger



Above: Rabbi and mohel Mike Rovinsky (second from left) leads a bris at Young Israel of St. Louis in January for the son of Max and Jerilyn Oppenheimer. Grandfather Howard Oppenheimer is holding the child. Photo: Bill Motchan

youth groups jobs — in addition to a stint with a human resources software company. He moved to St. Louis in 1993 and in 2003 started Jewish Student Union, a youth group with hundreds of students at chapters at non-Jewish high schools throughout the St. Louis area.

In his first years as a mohel, he was only doing circumcisions in the Jewish community. Then a friend in Dallas had a non-Jewish employee who had a baby and didn't want to go to a hospital for a circumcision. Rovinsky said he wasn't interested but was guilted into it by the friend — "Remember I did x, y and z for you?" — and so it began.

Rovinsky started attending and speaking at midwifery conferences around the country and connecting with their clients.

"As more and more people start-

ed leaving the formal medical environment, midwifery started to grow," said Rovinsky, who has four children with his wife, Selina. He said he now works with 300 midwives around the country and has built his practice primarily through word of mouth. He travels to Dallas weekly and can be reached at 1-800-85-MOHEL.

Despite his initial reluctance to perform circumcisions outside of the Jewish community, Rovinsky said it is now something he enjoys.

With circumcisions for "non-Jews, I can be more me, meaning I can carry on conversation — I can joke around. I can talk to them during the procedure. It's not constrained by the solemnity, the seriousness of the religious procedure — I do tone it down if they are Mennonite," he said of the Christian sect that to varying degrees avoids modern technology.

### Kinder, gentler procedure

A day before the trip to Russellville, Rovinsky heads to Young Israel of St. Louis, a modern Orthodox congregation, for a bris. By 7 a.m. at the University City synagogue, there are already more than 50 people praying.

Rabbi Moshe Shulman of Young Israel, who is also a mohel, offers a few words about how before the bris, the baby is placed on the chair of Eliyahu (Elijah), the prophet who God anointed "the angel of the covenant, the one who will come to every *brit milah* to testify before God of the commitment of the Jewish people to the ceremony."

From the chair, the baby — who has not yet been officially named — is placed in the lap of his grandfather, Howard Oppenheimer, the *sandek*. The

baby rests on a pillow in his lap and he holds his legs as Rovinsky places the shield on top of the penis to protect it and then cuts around it to remove the foreskin.

A little bit of blood. No anesthetic. A couple drops of wine.

"It's all over in less than 15 seconds," Rovinsky said.

At the conclusion of the bris, Max Oppenheimer reveals his son's name: Owen Braden (Hebrew name: Eitan Binyamin).

Afterwards, Oppenheimer told the *Jewish Light* that "it was such an incredible occasion and I am overwhelmed with joy and family — and I was glad that we were able to have the bris on time."

### The Rappaport method

For most Jews, going to a mohel for a circumcision is the obvious choice. But why exactly does a Christian couple drive four hours to see Rovinsky?

Rabbi Avraham Rappaport, whose father is one of the leading instructors for mohels, said Rovinsky consistently delivers "the perfect experience" in performing brises.

"Lots of mohels can do the procedure, but perfect means that there is no quicker, there is no painless or more precise way to do it than the way we do it as Rappaport trainees," said Rappaport, who does circumcisions in the Washington, D.C. and Virginia area and is known as the "national and confederate mohel."

In a hospital, the doctor typically uses some form of anesthesia — local or general — and puts the baby in a circumstraint, a board that immobilizes all four limbs. It's typically done 24 to 48 hours after the delivery. Different hospitals provide a range of time estimates — from 10 to 30 minutes — for the surgery. The baby then remains in the recovery room until he is fully awake, and then the family usually can take him home.

"I enjoy non-Jewish circumcisions because I have the satisfaction of knowing that I'm saving these babies from going through a 30-minute procedure, being strapped down to a restraining board — very painful, lot of cutting, pulling, stretching," Rovinsky said. "A very invasive procedure."

Susan Wilson, the owner of the Garden



Rabbi Mike Rovinsky and his custom license plate. Photo: Bill Motchan

of Health clinic in Russellville, met the rabbi about 15 years ago through a friend that went to him to have her baby circumcised. At that time, Wilson was working as a nurse in labor and delivery at hospitals and had helped with "lots of circumcisions."

"I thought the baby was far less traumatized, there was less blood loss," said Wilson, who later became a midwife. "It just seemed like a kinder, gentler procedure."

She has since connected hundreds of people to Rovinsky for circumcisions. She sees it as a logical partnership for mothers who don't deliver in the hospital. Why would they then want to go to a doctor for the circumcision?

### For religious reasons

Still, there are people who say it doesn't matter how well the circumcision is done; it's genital mutilation and should not be done at all.

Rovinsky has faced protesters at midwifery conferences. (He said conference organizers once alerted him of a death threat and then provided him with a bodyguard.)

A legislator in Iceland recently introduced legislation to outlaw circumcision in the country. Jewish and Muslim leaders describe it as an attack on their freedom of religion.

"We are talking about children's rights not about freedom of belief," the lawmaker said in early February. "Everyone has the right to believe in what they want, but the rights of children come above the right to believe."

In 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared that the "health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks, but the benefits are not great enough to recommend universal newborn circumcision."

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## ROVINSKY

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When Rovinsky receives telephone calls from potential non-Jewish customers, he said, "I don't tell them you should or should not circumcise; that's not my business."

Instead he lists the reasons why a person of a particular religion may wish to do so for religious reasons. If the person is an atheist, he said, he would not take the customer because he is only legally allowed to provide circumcisions for religious reasons. Otherwise, he could be accused of practicing medicine without a license.

"Every non-Jew that comes to me has to have — if they were asked — a religious reason why they want me," he explained. Such as, "They want a rabbi. They want someone they perceive as a holy man, a man of the cloth. They want the Jewish technique. They want it on the eighth day or later as God commanded. They want me to bless the baby. They want a spiritual environment. As long as that is the reason, it's not a problem."

Still, he carries forms that people can use for health insurance reimbursement.

### The jokes don't cost extra

Delton and Ashley Rissler, members of the Dunkard Brethren Christian denomination, drove about 10 miles to

Russellville, down the gravel road, where they live and run Diesel Power Plus, an online retailer that sells apparel and equipment for truckers and drivers.

The fact that they aren't Mennonites also means that Rovinsky doesn't have to hold back.

He asks Delton Rissler to keep three fingers on each of his son Deyton's legs and then instructs him, "You don't have to look; I keep my eyes closed."

Then he tells him, "Don't let go unless you want a daughter."

And then afterwards, "I'm going to have to charge you double based on size."

"Oh, whatever," Ashley Rissler, 35, says, cracking up. She had a miscarriage seven years ago and then met Wilson, the midwife, who started helping her deliver babies.

"Our experience at a hospital versus having a baby here — there's just no comparison," said Delton Rissler, 36. "It's like us comparing Christianity and Judaism."

Afterwards, for medical billing forms, Rovinsky asked them for Deyton's birthday. When Delton Rissler can't come up with the answer, Rovinsky asks him if he knows his wife's birthday. When he again can't find the answer, the rabbi asks whether he "permanently lives in the doghouse."



Selina and Rabbi Mike Rovinsky were honored at Traditional Congregation's 2017 Israel Bonds Brunch.

"You have four kids — and you don't know your wife's birthday?" Rovinsky questions. "Can you imagine how many you would have if you knew your wife's birthday?"

"Is that the problem?" Delton Rissler asks, laughing.

Rovinsky, who is also a licensed clinical therapist, says, "We have to talk, my friend." ■

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