

News & Events

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Local nurse-midwife becomes certified mohel Mother of four performs *brit mila* with 'warmth'

When Lara Allen-Brett and her husband, Matthew Brett, of Short Hills were awaiting the birth of their third child, a son, in February and began planning the bris, they knew they wanted a *mohel* who was more than simply competent in the technical aspects of the ritual circumcision (though that, of course, was also essential). "We wanted someone warm, someone we could relate to," said Allen-Brett.

The *mohel* who performed their first son's bris, she said, was somewhat cold and difficult to relate to.

So this time, they chose Lucy Waldman, who, they said, was just what they were looking for.

Waldman, a Short Hills resident and practicing certified nurse-midwife for 15 years, received *mohel* certification in February. (While technically she is a "*mohelot*," she prefers the more familiar "*mohel*.") With four sons of her own, ranging in age from four to eight, she herself had had less than satisfactory experiences with three different *mohalim*. With the first two — the second and third boys are twins — there were competency issues, she said. The last one "was competent but he had no kindness. He was rude, brusque, not really compassionate. This is a very rough time for a mom, and to acknowledge that is very important. If we are going to keep this sacred tradition going, we need better options."

As a *mohel*, Waldman said, "I have compassion as a woman and as a mother."

She also has plenty of professional experience performing medical circumcisions. She's been on the staff at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital in New York since 1995. "I've been doing circumcisions all these years. Every Monday all the babies that need circumcisions are done by me."

Waldman went through the intensive training program offered by the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles and followed up with several weeks of learning with her own rabbi, Steven Bayar, at Congregation B'nai Israel in Millburn.

'Serene experience'

Waldman, Allen-Brett said, helped make Max's bris "a serene experience — she had a calming presence.... As a mommy, she knows what a bris is like. She knew what to say to make me feel calm. I felt really connected spiritually."

Allen-Brett felt her choice was *bershet*, meant to be — the two had met years earlier in Manhattan, when she took Waldman's childbirth class in preparation for delivering her first child, a daughter now seven years old.

The Item of Millburn and Short Hills Thursday, August 19, 2010

Resident becomes a rarity in religious field

BY KATIE PANICALI

Township resident Lucy Waldman has been a practicing nurse-midwife since 1995. This past February, she added another credential to her name: Certified Mohel.

In the Jewish religion, a mohel performs circumcision. Traditionally, mohelim are men. Waldman explained that although they do exist, mohelot (the plural of the female "mohelot") are rare.

Waldman's experiences with her four young sons prompted her to take the path to becoming a mohel and providing the support that a family should have.

"I saw a need in the community," said Waldman. Having performed newborn circumcision as part of her medical practice, she felt that she could provide a good bedside manner and calming presence for families whose religion dictates that the procedure be performed at home.

The idea first occurred to Waldman 15 years ago when she met a fellow certified midwife in California, who was also a mohel. Waldman ran her thoughts past Orthodox family members.

"They were dismissive and downright negative," said Waldman. "They said 'no one would use you.'" She forgot about it.

When Waldman recently picked up the path she laid aside all those years ago, she found support in what she thought was a surprising place. "I had strong encouragement from a male rabbi," she said. Rabbi Stephen Bayar of Temple B'nai Israel made himself available to Waldman during her journey, offering help and clarification.

"It's very rare," said Bayar. "I don't know of any other woman practitioner in the area."

Waldman was certified in the Reform Movement, and Bayar was able to answer her questions about the Conservative Movement. "It's like any woman trying to break into a male-dominated profession," he added. "She's a very strong and directed woman — and it takes a very

Raised in a Conservative congregation in Lawrence, NY, Waldman, who attended day school, views becoming a *mohel* as a "fusion" of her faith and her professional experience. "Being Jewish is a cornerstone of who I am as a person. Becoming a *mohel* is obvious; it makes such good sense. It's a perfect match for me given that I'm also a midwife."

There are surprisingly few women among *mohalim* serving throughout the United States. There is nothing halachically impermissible about it, but many Orthodox communities retain the custom of using men. Among liberal movements, the 2010 directory of the National Organization of American Mohalim of the Reform movement lists only 26 women out of 121 affiliated *mohalim*. (These include a handful of nurse-midwives, as well as Dr. Susan Roth Pitman, who has an OB/GYN practice in West Orange.) The Conservative movement, through its Brit Kodesh program, has trained approximately 90 *mohalim*, including 10 women, according to the Rabbinical Assembly's Rabbi Jan Caryl Kaufman.

So far, Waldman has performed just the one *brit mila*, an experience that, she said, "was marvelous. It was a really special first bris."

The only thing she would change? "I'd wear a bobby pin in my *kippa* next time." When she was wrapping up the baby after the circumcision, her purple suede *kippa* flipped off her head. "I said, 'Whoops!' It's not something people want to hear at a bris."

strong and directed woman to do it."

Waldman said Bayar was there for her during her final report exam at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles.

"I got word of passing the exam in February," she said, which was good news, since someone was already hoping to use her at the end of the month.

She's found herself doing more secular work than religious so far, noting that her certification as a mohel seems to make people more comfortable. Medical professionals are also apt to refer people to her.

As for her family members, Waldman had tentatively revealed her plans to become a mohel to them again, before she left for California. "Their attitudes had changed over the years" she said. "They were supportive!" When asked what she attributed the change of heart to, she suggested emphatically, "Women are closer than ever to being accepted in the Orthodox community."

Waldman learned that she "had to let go of the hurt" over the wasted time, believing that "everything happens for a reason."

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