



◀ Rabbi Avrohom Rubin performing a bris with the Bluzhever Rebbe serving as sandak.

# Eliyahu Hanavi

## At His Side

### Conversation With Mohel Rabbi Avrohom Rubin

He has attended *brisos* across the United States, Canada, Eretz Yisrael and even in far-flung locations such as the Caribbean, but one of Rabbi Avrohom Rubin's most memorable *brisos* took place in Yerushalayim. As his dexterous hands performed the *bris milah* and his mind was focused on the proper *kavanos*, the eyes of the *sandak*, Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, *zt"l*, observed his every move. Upon completion of his sacred task, Rabbi Rubin looked up at the *Gadol Hador*, who uttered two words: "*Mohel mumcheh.*"

#### Mission of a Mohel

Avrohom Rubin was raised in Staten Island, where his family shared close ties with Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, and with his sons, *shlita*, Harav Dovid and Harav Reuven Feinstein. It was during his high school and *beis medrash* years learning in the Mirrer Yeshiva in Flatbush that he developed a close relationship with Harav Shmuel Berenbaum, *zt"l*, even learning with him *b'chavrusa*. It was Harav Berenbaum who would ultimately encourage and arrange for the young Avrohom

Rubin to study to become a *mohel*. Avrohom later learned at Yeshivas Mir in Eretz Yisrael and, after marrying, returned there to live.

“When my second child, a son, was born I approached my son’s *mohel* to please teach me *milah*,” says Rabbi Rubin. “He told me not to waste my time; that it’s a hard business and I won’t be *matzliach*. I told him I wasn’t doing this for business. It’s *klei kodesh*, and if I could give something to the *klal*, it’s something I would like to do.”

Rabbi Rubin called his Rav, Harav Berenbaum, and recounted the conversation. “Reb Shmuel told me to ask someone else,” Rabbi Rubin relates.

Soon after, the Rubins relocated from Eretz Yisrael to Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he learned in *kollel*. He received guidance from Harav Moishe Epstein, the Rabbi of Bridgeport, a noted *mohel*. But since Rabbi Epstein was no longer practicing *milah*, Avraham opted to serve the *klal* by joining the local *chevrah kaddisha* instead.

It was a few years later, when Rabbi Rubin relocated to his hometown of Staten Island, that he began to actualize his dream of bringing children into the covenant of Avraham Avinu. He first apprenticed with Rabbi Shimon Hess, the well-known *mohel* of Bais HaTalmud in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

After a conversation with his *talmid*, Harav Berenbaum, called Rabbi Romi Cohen, a world-renowned *mohel*, to ask him to undertake teaching Rabbi Rubin. “I followed Rabbi Cohen across America for a year and a half,” says Rabbi Rubin. “I assisted him in *brisos* in homes, shuls, Columbia Hospital, Methodist Hospital, and even on adults.”

Rabbi Rubin also spent many hours observing Harav Yisroel Belsky, *shlita*. Harav Dovid Feinstein guided and coached him and Harav Reuven Feinstein refers people — particularly Staten Islanders — to him all the time. He has performed *brisos* with numerous noted personalities serving as *sandak*, including Harav Elyashiv, *zt”l*, and, *ybl”c*, Harav Chaim Kanievsky, *shlita*.

Even after performing a few hundred *brisos*, Rabbi Rubin still

views each one as a special event. “It’s a Yom Tov for me,” he enthuses. “There’s no greater feeling I [can] have. It’s hard to describe the unbelievable, elated feeling of knowing that you were *machnis* a child into his first *mitzvah*. I go to the *mikveh* any day I perform a *bris*. Sanctity and *kedushah* are important, and the entire day is more *chashuv* to me — especially Shabbos and Yom Kippur *brisos*.”

“I feel that we must understand what we’re doing — the *kedushah* you put in is what the child ultimately receives. ... [No matter who the baby is, or who his parents are,] every *bris* has its own unique moment, even if I do a few [*brisos*] in a day.”

### Working With Eliyahu Hanavi

“When I first began doing *brisos*,” says Rabbi Rubin, “I asked Harav Shmuel Berenbaum what I should have in mind when performing a *bris*. He told me that because Eliyahu Hanavi attends each *bris*, as the *mohel*, I have a strong *koach hatefillah* and I should use that power of prayer to *daven* for people who have not yet been blessed with children. I have a list of names I *daven* for at every *bris*, and because of Reb Shmuel’s words, I put a lot of effort into that *tefillah*.”

An acquaintance of Rabbi Rubin’s, who had been married for four years and had not yet had a child, requested that he be added to his list. A few months later, he was asked to do a Yom Kippur *bris* in Flatbush. Rabbi Rubin left his family and stayed in Flatbush. He would have to trek two miles on that sweltering Yom Kippur.

Twenty minutes before the fast, he drove to the home of the newborn to deposit his *mohel* bag there. The grandmother of the baby offhandedly made a comment that startled him. He realized that the mother had misunderstood one of his routine questions when checking the baby, but now he realized that due to the nature of the baby’s birth, it was not permitted for the *bris* to take place on Yom Kippur as planned; it would have to be postponed.

The day after Yom Kippur, the *bris* took place in the afternoon. Still feeling the holiness of Yom Kippur, and in particular because he felt he had been protected from transgressing this holiest of days, Rabbi Rubin felt a tremendous *hisorerus*.

As he launched into his *Mi shebeirach* for the many childless couples on his list, he realized his acquaintance’s name was missing. Thinking perhaps he had the wrong list, he pulled out the list he kept in his backup *mohel* bag. The name was missing from this list as well.

“I went to *daven Minchah* at the shul where this individual *davens*. I approached him and told him, ‘You’re off my list. You don’t need my *tefillos*.’ He gave me an odd look but stayed quiet. Later on, he called me and told me, ‘Aside from our doctor, my wife, and me, you are the only one to know that my wife is expecting.’”

### A Priceless Mitzvah

The *mitzvah* of *milah* is so dear to

▼ L-R: Rabbi Avrohom Rubin with Harav Reuven Feinstein, who often refers Staten Islanders with newborn sons to him.



Rabbi Rubin that he doesn't charge a fee. One day, he received a call from a woman in Staten Island asking him to perform a *bris* on her grandson.

"I arrived at this home," recounts Rabbi Rubin. "The father of the baby wasn't even Jewish, and the *bris* was being done largely at the grandmother's urging. The grandmother came in and asked, 'Rabbi, how much do you charge?' 'This is such a holy thing,' I told her, 'I don't charge. If you want to give something, you can, but I don't put a price on it.'

"A few minutes later she returned to the room and said, 'Rabbi, I realize how important the *mitzvah* is. I really went all out,' and she handed me an envelope. When I got home and opened the envelope, there was a \$50 bill inside. Imagine if I had told her even a relatively low price for a *bris*, like \$200. It would have been a *chillul Hashem*."

Three years later, Rabbi Rubin received a call from a non-religious woman asking him to come do a *bris* on her grandson at her home in New Jersey. It was to take place the day after Hurricane Irene, and he had to travel in from the Catskills. Most of the roads were flooded and impassable.

Not one to allow anything to deter him from his holy mission, Rabbi Rubin, driving his beat-up minivan, proceeded through a roadblock into a deluge of water in the roadway. "In the worst case, I knew that I'd get a well-deserved ticket," recalls Rabbi Rubin wryly. "The sanctity of *bris milah* was more important to me than that.

"I pulled up to a sprawling mansion, and when I walked inside, I recognized the woman, who had apparently moved from Staten Island. I was now invited to do the *bris* on the second child of her daughter and non-Jewish son-in-law. When I got home, I opened the envelope she had handed me. It contained one thousand dollars, along with a note thanking me for doing the *bris*, and an apology. She explained that after I had performed the *bris* on her first grandson, she had told a friend that she had generously paid the *mohel* fifty dollars. Her friend reprimanded her for paying so little, so she wanted to make it up to me now."

### A Bris Fit for a Prince

The most elaborate *bris* Rabbi Rubin attended served as a personal lesson in *dan l'chaf zechus*. He received a call from a fellow who inquired about his prices. "When he heard that I don't charge," relates Rabbi Rubin, "he told me, 'I will give what I can, because I know you're coming in from the mountains.' I walked in to a non-kosher restaurant that had been *kashered*. It was an extremely ostentatious affair, where every type of food imaginable was displayed and every piece of cake cost a minimum of five dollars. On my way out the baby's father handed me an envelope stuffed with bills.

"I got home and opened the envelope. It was filled with small bills totaling \$144, which I realized was eight times *chai*. A few weeks later the father of this baby phoned me. 'You're probably thinking that I am cheap for making such a lavish affair and paying you such a measly sum,' this man stated. 'But I grew



▲ Prior to performing a *bris* in Columbia Hospital.

up in foster homes and I work as a driver. I have no money to my name. The night before the *bris*, a long-lost uncle contacted me to wish me *mazel tov* and offered to pay for the *bris*. He made the *bris* by his standards, but I was embarrassed to ask him for money for the *mohel* too, so I gave you what I scraped together."

### Following the First Avraham

Sitting in the pediatrician's waiting room with his young daughters, an apparently non-Jewish woman sitting with her own daughter and grandchild struck up a conversation with Rabbi Rubin and his children. Devorah, his daughter, then seven years old, turned to the woman and commented, "You know, you look Jewish." The woman appeared shocked and said, "In all my years, no one has ever commented on my religion, let alone a seven-year-old." She went on to admit that her mother had been a Holocaust survivor, but that she had never had any connection with Jews.

As the Rubins made small talk, they learned that the woman's daughter was her only child, and that she had a grandson, in addition to the young granddaughter who was waiting to see the doctor. Rabbi Rubin inquired whether he had had a *bris*. They explained that the boy had had a hospital circumcision performed on the second day of his life. Rabbi Rubin, with his unpretentious, magnetic personality, gained the confidence of the mother and grandmother and explained to them the importance of a proper *milah*. By the time the Rubins saw the doctor, he had them convinced. A few days later, this young boy whose family had no connection or affiliation with religion underwent an authentic *bris*.



Being a *mohel* is a mission that Rabbi Avrohom Rubin undertakes with the same mixture of sanctity, awe, pride, and significance, whether with the *Gadol Hador* or in the home of a non-religious Jewish family, because he knows that Eliyahu Hanavi is standing at his side as he brings yet another Jewish *neshamah* into the holy covenant of Avraham Avinu. 🌀