

## Traditional Ways of Welcoming Jewish Daughters:

Long before the creation of contemporary welcoming ceremonies for girls, Jewish communities around the world have had special ways of welcoming their new baby daughters.

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### Sephardic Customs

In Sephardic communities (where Jews are of Spanish, Middle Eastern, or North African heritage) and Italian communities, there is a tradition of welcoming girls with a celebration called *zeved habat*, or "gift of the daughter." The name for the ceremony derives from the book of Genesis, in which the matriarch Leah states, following the birth of Zevulun, "Zevedani Elohim oti zeved tov," or "God has granted me a gift."

The *zeved habat* goes back many generations, and is still celebrated today. In the Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn, New York, on the first Shabbat after a girl is born, her father, along with his father and father-in-law, are called to the Torah. The baby and her mother are usually in attendance, but since this is a primarily Orthodox community, only the men are called up for *aliyot*, the honor of saying the blessings before and after the public reading of a section of the Torah. The father says the blessings over the Torah reading twice--once on his own merit and once in honor of his daughter --and the grandfathers each have an *aliyah* as well.

The rabbi offers the family congratulations on their new arrival and offers a *misheberach*, a prayer for the girl's well-being. Then the words "avi habat," or "father of the daughter," are called out. That is the congregation's cue to start singing traditional songs for welcoming girls. The songs, based on poems dating back to 14th and 15th century Spain, are known as *pizmonim*. Women and men join in together.

Afterward there is a lavish *kiddush*. In the synagogue social hall, tables groan under platters of *helweht*, Arabic for "sweets," many of them dripping with honey and loaded with almonds and pistachios. The reception usually lasts two or three hours and typically attracts 250 or 300 people.

Another practice for welcoming girls--*Las Fadas*--dates back to medieval Spain, before the expulsion in 1492, but is rarely practiced today in America, though when celebrated it is generally by families of Turkish and Balkan heritage. It is a ceremony that was held the night before a baby boy's circumcision as well as after the birth of baby girls.

In the case of a girl, about two weeks after the baby's birth, when her mother felt up to having company, the family would invite family and friends to their home for *Las Fadas*. The rabbi would make a speech and then the guests would each take a turn holding the baby, offering blessings and speaking about their hopes for this new life. This was based on a medieval folk custom among Spaniards in general, not just Jews, though the Jews

turned it into a community and family celebration. The ritual is rooted in a popular folk tale about bad fairies from the underworld ("*las fadas*") feeling upset they weren't invited to celebrate the new child, and doing harm. Passing the baby from person to person was designed to fool the bad fairies into thinking that good fairies were protecting the baby by blessing him or her.

In Turkey it was customary at the *Las Fadas* for the mother and daughter to have an embroidered silk veil placed over their heads. It was lifted after the naming and the mother would continue to wear it until she gave it to her daughter to wear at her wedding ceremony. In more recent years, some Sephardic Jews in Italy, Holland, the Balkans, Turkey, and parts of Morocco would invite family and friends for a similar ceremony on the 30th day of the girl's life.

Traditional Yemenite Jews officially welcome the new babies into the congregation on the first *Simchat Torah* after their birth, on the autumn holiday that celebrates the conclusion of the year-long cycle of reading the entire Torah and beginning it anew. The father or grandfather usually *õbuysö* (with a donation to the synagogue) a *hakafah*, one of seven processions with the Torah, in the baby's honor, and with the infant in his arms leads the procession around the block or the neighborhood.

One woman--an American who moved to Israel and married into a traditional Yemenite family in Israel--relates this story of the way her children's births were celebrated by their father's parents. His mother cracked a raw egg on the doorstep of their house the first time either of her new grandchildren, first a boy and then a girl, were brought in. An aunt of her husband's put salt in the baby carriage--to keep away the evil eye--the first time they took the baby to synagogue. Her daughter and son were both honored with dances celebrating the Torah on the first *Simchat Torah* after their births. And while the arrival of a baby of either gender is celebrated, this mother says, "I am pretty certain that my father-in-law paid more for my son's honor!"

The Jews of India have what may be one of the simplest and loveliest customs: They welcome their daughters by decorating their homes with flower blossoms floating in water.

### **Ashkenazi Practices**

Until the Holocaust decimated the Jewish populations there, a cradle ceremony greeted the births of girls and boys in Southern Germany, Bavaria, the Rhineland, and Alsace. Children would surround the baby's specially-decorated cradle and raise it three times while shouting *õHollekreisch, Hollekreisch!* What shall be this child's name? (*Hollekreisch* is a word of uncertain origin.) Several passages would be read from the Torah and the baby's name would be announced, and then the ritual concluded with cakes and drinks. By the 1650s, urban Jews had ceased the cradle ceremony and it was practiced only in small towns and rural areas, but the custom spread to Alsace and the Rhineland, to southern Holland and to the Jewish communities in what is now Switzerland, and continued until modern times for the naming of girls.

There is also a longstanding practice among Ashkenazic Jews (those descended from Jews of Germany and eastern Europe) of the father having an *aliyah* on the Shabbat following the birth of his daughter, followed by a prayer in which his daughter's name is announced and a blessing of healing for the mother who has just given birth. This is still practiced today in most Orthodox communities, as well as in many non-Orthodox communities (in the latter, often with the participation of the mother as well), and may take place before, rather than instead of, a larger ceremony at home or in the synagogue. In Reform synagogues, it is often common for parents to bring their new daughter to synagogue services on Friday night or Shabbat morning for a very brief baby naming ceremony.