

## Circumcision

*continued from page 25*

by-choice is no exception to this rule. According to our tradition, one who has converted to Judaism gives birth to or begets Jewish children, just as if she or he were a Jew by birth. One who chooses Judaism, in other words, has chosen to become a member of the tribe.) To say that we are a “tribe” is simply another way of saying that we are the *people* of Israel, a community that asserts its ongoing historical existence. This may be what the author of the *Sefer Hachinukh*, a late 13th-century Spanish presentation of the 613 *mitzvot*, had in mind when he offered this rationale for *berit milah*: “The Holy One desired to distinguish His people by means of a sign fixed upon their bodies, to set them apart in a physical sense from the other nations, just as they are distinct from those nations in a spiritual sense.” Translation: circumcision serves as an indelible physical mark of Jewish peoplehood. Tribal rite.

Of course, we don’t customarily explain our ritual observances as “tribal

rites.” This is partly because the word “tribal” sounds so, well, *tribal*, jarring to our modern, sophisticated ears. It’s also because we Jews have a long history of seeking *ta’amei hamitzvot*, “explanations for the *mitzvot*” that reflect the higher intellectual and cultural temper of the present age rather than the original (“tribal”) background of those practices.

*Berit milah* is our classic ceremonial acknowledgment that we, descendants of Abraham, consider ourselves a community set apart from all others and set aside in covenant with God. That is the story we have always told, and continue to tell, about ourselves. To assert our sense of particular Jewish identity as Jews is therefore in and of itself a *mitzvah* of the first rank. And of all the ritual practices by which we have historically made that declaration, none is more physical, more visceral, or more tangible than *berit milah*.

In an era when the forces of cultural assimilation pose such a daunting challenge to our continued existence as a distinct people, this admittedly ancient tribal custom bears a message that we do well to hear. □

## Peter Weidhorn Interview

*continued from page 68*

them to liberal colleges: what can we expect? Many are going to be marry non-Jews. Let’s figure out how to move forward: to respect the intermarrieds within our congregations and bring up our grandchildren as Jews while honoring non-Jewish spouses who play active roles in our congregations.

So you see a high rate of intermarriage both as inevitable and as an opportunity. It’s more opportunity than anything else. As the non-Jewish spouse begins to enjoy Jewish holidays and rituals, it opens up many possibilities, including conversion to Judaism.

You’ve also pointed to Jewish camping as our Movement’s great opportunity, calling it “the best insurance for the continuance of Judaism in North America.” Yes. Joan and I have spearheaded the funding of a scholarship program to enable Reform families to give their children a great time with their peers while the Jewish learning happens naturally. It’s my dream that there will come a time when no Jewish child who wants to go to a Reform summer camp will be left behind. Why not initiate a “Taste of Camping” program to give every child in our religious schools an opportunity to experience two weeks at one of our camps at no charge, just as the URJ College Taglit: birthright Israel program is sending hundreds of our young people to Israel?

You and Joan also take a strong interest in social action.

Yes. Joan and I never miss the opportunity to learn at the Religious Action Center’s Consultation on Conscience in Washington, D.C. Studying the issues and Jewish values on the death penalty, for example, I’ve changed my position from pro- to anti-death penalty. I’m proud of the Union’s resolution against the war in Iraq—we’re a religious organization with social values, and we need to represent those values and speak up. On the issue of church-state separation, do you realize how fragile that wall is, how easily it can be pierced by the forces working to do just that? On women’s



**Making the journey yours.**

**Ayelet Tours, Ltd.**  
outstanding tours since 1986

**www.ayelet.com**  
**800-237-1517**

**EL MALIN**  
IT'S NOT JUST AN AIRLINE. IT'S ISRAEL.