1. Introduction. In this week’s parsha we read about Avraham undergoing a bris milah, which for a man his age was an extremely painful and dangerous procedure. Many of the concepts and halachos of bris milah are derived from the original bris of Avraham Avinu. This week, we will discuss the concept of the “sandek” at a bris. The sandek is the person who holds the baby on his lap during the actual bris milah procedure and is considered the highest honor that can be accorded to somebody at a bris. One of the distinguishing characteristics of a Jewish milah is that the child is held in the warm embrace of a loved one rather than on a cold operating table. Indeed, Chazal identify the very first Sandek in history as none other than God Himself, who played a comforting role in the bris that Avraham administered on himself.
2. Source for the Advantage. There are several sources that indicate that the role of sandek is both a great source of merit as well as something that was traditionally done by great people.

First, the מדרש תהלים סימן לה states, as noted above, that God was the first sandek because Avraham was afraid to do the bris on himself and Hashem held him in place and became his sandek.[[1]](#footnote-1) Second, the תרגום יונתן בן עוזיאל בראשית נ:כג writes that when the torah states "גם בני מכיר בן מנשה יולדו על ברכי יוסף" it means to say that Yosef was the sandek for Menashe’s children, perhaps the earliest source for having a grandfather serve as a sandek. Finally, ילקוט שמעוני פרק לה writes כל עצמותי תאמרנה, אמר הקב"ה לדוד מה אתה עושה? אמר לו אני משבחך בכל אברי בראש אני מניח תפילין בשערי לא תקיפו בירכי אני עושה סנדיקוס לילדים בשעת מילה ופריעה. God asked Dovid what he was doing. Dovid responded “I am praising you with all of my limbs – I place tefillin on my head, I do not round off my haircut, with my lap I serve as a sandek for children while they undergo their bris milah”.

1. Source for it being like קטרת. One of the central concepts related to the sandek that is discussed by the leading torah authorities is that the sandek on some level is considered like a person who has burned the קטרת in the מקדש. The source of this concept is a Medrash on פרשת לך לך. In בראשית רבה פרשה מז אות ז' the Medrash states that when Avraham circumcised the members of his household (this probably refers to Avraham’s thousands of followers – see רמב"ם הלכות עבו"ז א:ג) he piled up the foreskins into a small mountain. When the sun shone on them, the seemingly putrid aroma was as pleasant to God as the קטרת. There are several halachic ramifications to this equation between serving as sandek and burning the incense in the בית המקדש. The following is a list of issues that may relate to the connection between a sandek and קטרת:
2. The דרכי משה יו"ד סימן רסה ס"ק יא בשם מהריל ריש הלכות מילה writes that a sandek is considered to have a greater obligation to receive an עליה לתורה than even the mohel, because the sandek is considered to have brought the קטרת.
3. The רמ"א יו"ד סימן רסה סעיף יא writes in the name of the Maharil that one should not serve as a sandek on two different children. This is based on a comment of the גמרא יומא כו. in relation to the קטרת. The gemara says that the same kohein wouldn’t do the ketores twice because the performance of the קטרת service has the power to make somebody wealthy. Similarly, the Maharil argues, one should not honor the same person to serve as a sandek twice because we would prefer to spread the wealth.

It should be noted that the גר"א רסה:מו challenges the Maharil on the grounds that "שלא ראינו סנדק מתעשר" – anecdotal evidence suggests that those who serve as sandek do not experience any newfound wealth. Several answers have been suggested to address this comment of the Vilna Gaon. First, the חתם סופר (שו"ת או"ח סימן קנח) writes that it is possible that the sins of a sandek prevent the blessing of wealth from taking effect. Second, the Mekor Chessed cites the Meor Einayim who explains that the guarantee Chazal have עשר בשביל שתתעשר (give tzedaka in order that you should become wealthy) is fulfilled by a person being blessed with the character trait of contentment with what he has, which is the true definition of wealth. Third, Rav Moshe Shternbuch תשובות והנהגות א:תקפד explains that wealth is not only with money, but with God nullifying any negative decrees and with blessings being conferred on his family.[[2]](#footnote-2) Finally, the חיד"א (פתח עינים יומא דף כו) writes that the level of wealth one experiences may have a direct correlation with the level of love expressed in doing the mitzvah.

1. The Rama cites further from the Maharil that he would go to the mikvah prior to serving as a sandek. This custom may be based in the connection to קטרת, as the kohein who brings the קטרת must certainly dip in a מקוה prior to doing the עבודה. However, in his דרכי משה, the Rama writes חומרא בעלמא הוא ואין נוהגין כן – this is an unnecessary stringency and is not our practice. However the Chida, in ברכי יוסף אות יח encourages the practice of immersing prior to serving as a sandek. R’ Yehuda Hachasid relates a very odd story that may serve as a source for this minhag to immerse prior to serving as a sandek. ספר חסידים סימן תז relates:מעשה באשה אחת שרחצה שני בניה והטביע האחד את חבירו ונדרה אמו שלא לרחוץ ביום ההוא פעם אחת היתה בעלת ברית ורחצה ומתה – There was a story with a woman who was bathing her two sons and one of them drowned the other, whereupon the woman committed never to bathe on the anniversary of the death. One year she was honored with an active role in a bris milah so she bathed and died as a result of violating her commitment. Apparently it was the common practice to bathe on the day that one would participate in a bris milah.[[3]](#footnote-3)
2. מגן אברהם או"צ קלא:יא records that in many places they have the practice to eat the festive meal on the night after the milah. This practice seems erroneous because the source for holding a festive meal in honor of the bris is the following derasha: "ויעש אברהם משתה גדול ביום הגמל את יצחק" ואמרו במדרש ביום ה' ג' מל את יצחק דהיינו ביום השמיני – “And Avraham made a great party on the day he weaned Yitzchak. Our rabbis understand that it was the day of five plus three when Yitzchak was circumcised, which is the eight day”. Apparently the practice to celebrate a bris with a festive meal should be limited to the calendar day of the bris itself, and not the following night. However, given our understanding of the relationship between a bris and קטרת perhaps we can explain this practice. Although the Jewish calendar day typically starts at night, in the בית המקדש the day is reversed, beginning with morning and ending with night. Since by קדשים הלילה הולך אחר היום having the meal on the following night actually fulfills the requirement of having the meal on the right day.
3. We may also suggest that the widespread practice to perform a bris milah in a shul relates to its status as a korban. The shul is defined as a “miniature beis hamikdash” (Gemara Megila 29a), an ideal place to bring a korban.
4. The ספר ברית אבות סימן ה' אות יז cites a dispute whether a minor may serve as a sandek. On the one hand, if we view bestowing the honor of sandek in a similar manner to choosing which kohein to give terumah to (as suggested by the נודע ביהודה see later in this essay), a child would be a suitable sandek just as one can give him terumah(see תוס' פסחים דף פט). On the other hand, if the honor of sandek is related to burning קטרת it stands to reason that just as a child is not suitable to burn the קטרת in theבית המקדש he is equally ill suited to serve as sandek.
5. The רמ"א (יו"ד סימן שצג סעיף ג') writes that a mourner during shiva is permitted to serve as a sandek. The שדי חמד (מער' אבלות אות מח) explains that a mourner may not attend the festive meal celebrating the bris but may actively participate in the mitzvah itself even though it is a mitzvah that is done with great joy. Since the joy is not a physical joy and does not involve any lightheaded behavior, a mourner is not precluded from participating. The הגהות יד שאול (יו"ד סימן שצג), however, suggests that a mourner should not serve as a sandek because a kohein who is a mourner may not offer קטרת.
6. The אות שלום להרבי ממונקאטש סימן רסה אות כז points out that a mourner should be discouraged from serving as a sandek because he is not permitted to sit on a regular chair. The Munkatcher Rebbe concludes that although it is difficult to argue with earlier and more authoritative sources who permit a mourner to be a sandek, we have never heard of anybody allowing it and should maintain our custom to be stringent on this issue.
7. The ספר זכר דוד writes that the sandek should not do work the day of the bris because it is a minor holiday for him. He provides support for this from the תלמוד ירושלמי that states that a person should not do work on the day he brings his korbanos.
8. There is a widespread practice in Sefardic communities for the sandek to bless people. Many of the attendees line up after the bris to receive a blessing from the sandek. This may be related to the role of sandek as a kohen who brought the ketores. Just as a kohen has the unique obligation to bless the Jewish people, the custom developed that the sandek too should bless people.
9. Serving as sandek more than once. Rama, as previously noted in this essay, says not to give the same person twice.
10. There are several reasons offered for this limitation:
11. The Maharil cited by the Rama explains that this relates to the parallel to קטרת mentioned earlier in this essay.
12. The נודע ביהודה מהדו"ק סימן פו rejects the suggestion of the Maharil. The entire source for the milah relating to קטרת may only relate to Hashem’s joy in the performance of the mitzvah, and not to the segulah or wealth that comes from the mitzvah. In fact a careful reading of the gemara in Yoma indicates that the ability of the קטרת to confer wealth is a result of the rarity of the privilege. It would therefore seem that a bris milah which the Jewish people do hundreds of times each day would carry no such segulah. Instead, the Noda B’yehuda suggests that the custom not to repeat relates to the suggestion of Chazal not to give all teruma to a single kohein. Similarly, one may not give the opportunity of being sandek to the same person repeatedly.
13. The באור הגר"א רסה:מוand ערוך השולחן רסה:לד suggest that the real reason is more mystical in nature and based on comments of ר' יהודה החסיד. In fact, the ערוך השולחן suggests that the Rama only quoted the reason of the Maharil in order to avoid openly writing kabbalistic customs in theשולחן ערוך , but even the Rama believed the kabbalistic reasons to be the true driving force behind this custom.
14. Finally, the ברכי יוסף suggests that the practice is an attempt to show extra love and affection for this mitzvah by trying to involve as many people as possible.
15. The exact parameters of the limitation may depend on which reason one chooses to explain why the same person cannot serve as sandek twice.
16. The Beis Hillel (commentary to Shulchan Aruch) writes that a sandek can serve several times for different families. The minhag is just that within each family the same sandek should not be used twice. This conforms to the נודע ביהודה’s understanding of the custom as the prohibition to give all of your terumah to a single kohein is only on each individual. There is no halacha that discourages a kohein from receiving terumah from many different people. However, according to Maharil it should not matter whether it is from one or many families due to the parallel to קטרת.
17. The ערוך השולחן רסה:לד and שו"ת חת"ס או"ח א:קנח point to the fact that there are many communities where the Rav is always the sandek. This would certainly work with the explanation of the Maharil because just as a כהן גדול may take the job of burning the קטרת as often as he would like, so too the rabbi of the community is in a position that allows him to be sandek as often as he wants. However, if the custom is modeled after the distribution of terumah, there should be no exceptions made for people of high stature.
18. Conversely, the יד שאול writes that a family member may be honored as sandek multiple times. This exception is based on the teruma disbursement model, which allows for a person to give all of his teruma to a kohein who he is very close with (see שו"ת חכם צבי סימן עד). If, however, the custom is based on the relationship to קטרת it wouldn’t seem to matter whether the potential repeat sandek is a family member or not.
19. שו"ת בית דוד סימן קכב writes that certain cities don’t allow a single person to be sandek twice in one year but after a year allow for a second sandek opportunity. This would seem to work with neither the Maharil nor the Noda B’Yehuda. However, perhaps if the basis for the custom is kabbalistic or as a show of love for the mitzvah a statute of limitations would be a possibility.
20. How strong is the source for this custom? The נודע ביהודה מהדו"ק סימן פו writes that this entire practice is not halachic in nature as there is no source in the Talmud for any such limitation. Therefore, he concludes this custom should not be viewed as a firmly established principal and many great Jews do not concern themselves with this limitation.
21. Who should be chosen? As we have mentioned earlier, Chazal have identified God as the first sandek, and such great Jewish leaders as Yosef and Dovid as people who served in the capacity of sandek. It is therefore no surprise that the רמ"א רסד:א writes "ויש לאדם לחזר ולהדר אחר מוהל ובעל ברית היותר טוב וצדיק" – “one should look for and prefer a mohel and bris participant who is exceptionally good and righteous”. Some explain that "טוב" is the mohel whose proficiency at the performing the procedure is critical, and "צדיק" is a reference to the sandek whose righteousness qualify him for the job. The אור זרוע הלכות מילה explains that we want Eliyahu to be comfortable sitting next to the sandek so we choose somebody who is particularly righteous.
22. Family Members. The obligation to give a child a bris milah is one that falls on the shoulders of the father of the baby. When a father is incapable of performing the bris by himself, שו"ת דברי מלכיאל ח"ד סימן פו suggests that at the very least he should serve as the sandek so that he can be of help during the actual milah and gain a partial fulfillment of the mitzvah of performing the bris. In the event that the father does not want to take the honor for himself and would like to choose a family member as sandek, there is considerable discussion amongst the poskim which family member should be chosen. לקט יושר writes that the grandfather of the baby should be given precedence over the great grandfather, but he notes that the custom is to have the great grandfather serve as sandek because “people say” that one who serves as a sandek for his great grandson will be spared from גהינם. The ברית אבות records varying customs as to whether the maternal or paternal grandfather should be given preference for the first bris in the family. He concludes that in the event of a dispute, the relative with the greatest sense of יראת שמים should be chosen. (Of course, this too may be a matter of dispute!)
23. The Rama writes that a woman should not be chosen to serve as sandek out of concern for פריצות. Furthermore, שו"ת דברי מלכיאל ח"ד סימן פו points out that if we view the sandek as a participant in the milah a woman should not serve as sandek since she cannot perform the milah under normal circumstances. If we preclude anybody who is not permitted to perform the milah from being sandek, we may assume that a gentile should also not be chosen to serve as sandek.
24. The פרי מגדים או"ח סימן תקפה משב"ז אות י' writes that the mohel should not also serve as the sandek. Several reasons are offered for this ruling. First, the Beis Yosef (8) writes that one should recite berachos on mitzvos while standing, and the sandek has to sit. Second,שו"ת מהר"ם שיק או"ח סימן סד cites others who say it is a violation of the prohibition of doing mitzvos “in bundles”. (The Maharam Shick himself rejects this reason because it is all one mitzvah). Finally, ספר אוצר הברית פרק ג' הערה כד quotes fromספר זכר דוד מאמר א' פט"ו that the mohel is said to have the mazel of blood and killing (see גמרא שבת קנו.), whereas the sandek is in place of the מזבח which lengthens a person’s life. The contradiction in character is not a healthy mix for the bris milah procedure.
25. Conclusion. As with most Jewish life cycle events, the celebration of a bris milah is laden with meaningful customs and laws. It is my hope that this essay will help us appreciate the depth and meaning of a single custom, thereby enhancing our appreciation of all Jewish customs.
1. The מגדל עוז נחל ט' records a practice that the sandek should give a gift to the child as a way of emulating Hashem who gave Eretz Yisrael to Avraham Avinu after the bris milah. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Steipler Gaon, Rav Yakov Yisrael Kanievsky, was once asked why he had never become wealthy considering the astonishing number of times he had served as a sandek. The Steipler responded that “having a son like Rav Chaim is the greatest wealth one can have”! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See מנחת אשר פרשת וירא for a brief discussion of how many preparations are appropriate before a bris, particularly when the preparations may delay the performance of the מצוה. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)