



The license plate of Rabbi Michael Rovinsky says it all. When training other mohels Rovinsky says he looks for 'steady hands and integrity.' Photos: Kristi Foster

# 'Steady hands and integrity'

*Mohel Rabbi Michael Rovinsky provides brit milah service to community*

BY PAM DROOG JONES  
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT

## Matchmaker, Matchmaker

If you get the feeling Rabbi Michael Rovinsky is just being polite when he laughs at your circumcision joke, you may be right. There's not one he hasn't heard at least a hundred or more times. A certified *mohel*, recognized by the State of Israel, Rovinsky has performed nearly 6,000 circumcisions since 1988.

To Rovinsky, *brit milah* is not a career choice; it's a mission. "While a child without a *brit* is Jewish, he's missing the spiritual component of the covenant between God and the Jewish people," Rovinsky says. "But even if a child never does anything Jewish the rest of his life, if he had a kosher *bris* with a kosher technique by a kosher *mohel*, he's connected to the eternity of Judaism." He adds, "Literally, I'll go to the four corners of the world to do this, and I have."

Rovinsky, 44, was born and raised in Dallas. "My family was right-wing Reform, left-wing Conservative, or right in the middle," he says. He attended Jewish day school. "Around the time of my *bar mitzvah* I started to become more interested in Orthodoxy, and more observant," he says. "On Saturday mornings I would walk to synagogue, about three miles from my home, and my parents would follow me in the car to make sure I was safe."

After graduating from public high school, Rovinsky studied in Israel for two years. His plan was to come back and become an engineer like his father or a criminal lawyer. "But I truly felt I wanted to have a direct impact and serve at a grassroots level," he says. That led to Rovinsky's lifelong dedication to Jewish educa-

**MOHEL, PAGE 53**

## MOHEL, FROM PAGE 9

tion. "I wanted to work with kids and adults to give them an education that was fun and exciting and vibrant," he says, "not to make them religious, but to help them see what Judaism was all about."

Rovinsky ended up in rabbinic studies at Kol Yaakov Torah Center in Monsey, New York, while working on a bachelor's degree in education at Adelphi University. During this time he met his wife, Selina, through a matchmaker.

"A Hasidic gentleman in Monsey owned a hat store and a shirt store. They were not the most cutting edge, fashion-wise but I liked the man and always bought my hats and shirts from him," Rovinsky recalls. "He knew I bought things I didn't need and sent my friends to him to help him. So he said, 'You know, Reb Mike, I'm going to pay you back one day. I'm going to find you a wife.' I said, 'No thanks! It's okay!' But he said, 'No, you're really doing a *mitzvah* and I appreciate it.'"

About a year and a half later, Rovinsky says, he was visiting the store and the owner said he had found a wife for him. "He said, 'I was in synagogue this morning and overheard another Hasidic man talking about his secretary who was 21, still single and from Arizona. So I went over to him and told him I know a boy from Texas. Texas! That's near Arizona!' he said. 'It's got to be a perfect match!'"

Apparently it was. Michael and Selina Rovinsky married that October after going on their first date in May and announcing their engagement in July. They have four children, age 22, 20, 11 and 9.

### The Making of a Mohel

After two years in New York, Rovinsky attended the Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore. His first son was born there in 1987. "At his *bris* it dawned on me that through *bris milah* one has a great opportunity to reach unaffiliated Jews," Rovinsky says. "With most Jewish kids, after their *bar* or *bat*

*mitzvah* it's sayonara. Some continue their Jewish education but most have had enough. Then they grow up and get married and have a kid, and say, 'Oh my God! What type of Jewish home am I going to create for my child? I haven't been to synagogue in ages and all I really know about Judaism is what I learned back in Hebrew school.' Often," he notes, "the *mohel* is the first rabbi the couple has met since they got married."

Rovinsky asked the *mohel* who circumcised his son to train him. "He said he only could train me with the

permission of his teacher who was the chief *mohel* of Israel, because there are certain tricks of the trade that enable us to do the *bris* extremely quickly with minimal pain. The baby barely cries and stops crying right afterwards. You have to take an oath not to reveal these techniques," Rovinsky says.

The *mohel* flew to Israel and got permission to train Rovinsky. His internship took about a year. During that period Rovinsky also received additional training at Johns Hopkins

MOHEL, PAGE 54



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## MOHEL, FROM PAGE 53

Childrens Hospital and Mount Sinai Hospital.

“When I did my first *bris* alone, I wasn’t too nervous because of the way we are trained,” Rovinsky says. “The key part is setting up the instruments properly. By the time I got to my first *bris* I had done that hundreds of times. So my first *bris* was really just a matter of putting all the pieces together.”

Results are important, Rovinsky agrees, but “so much depends on

your bedside manner and your personality.” He explains, “So often, what makes people think someone’s a good *mohel* or a lousy *mohel* is, did he tell a good story, did he make us feel comfortable, did he tell a couple of corny jokes, did he call afterwards.”

In 1990, Rovinsky moved back to Dallas, to teach and lead Judaic studies at the day school he had attended. His mentor and former teacher, Rabbi David Leibtag, was the principal there. But soon after Rovinsky arrived, Leibtag left to become head-

master at Epstein Hebrew Academy. “I stayed three years and built up a very nice *bris* practice,” Rovinsky says. In fact, in 1990, he notes, about 20 percent of the Dallas Jewish community used a *mohel*; in 1993, it was up to 80 percent.

“Then, like now, I worked with Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis,” Rovinsky says. “A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. We’re all part of the same family. It pains me so much when Jews view one another as less or more Jewish based on their level of observance.”

Rovinsky recalls particular *brises* he performed under extreme circumstances. “I did one in South Carolina where it was me, the mother and the baby. The father had run out on them,” he says. “It has to be done so I did that *bris* at my own expense.”

Later he performed a *bris* in Eureka, Montana. “There was a mother, father and eight kids. They were so poor they lived in teepees while they were building their house by chopping down trees,” Rovinsky says. “As a result of that *bris*, the whole family except the father took a train to attend my son’s *bar mitzvah*! They were the hit of the weekend!”

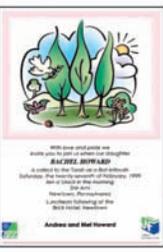
At the other end of the spectrum, wealthy families from across the country have sent their private jets for Rovinsky. “I don’t charge for a *bris* but I do suggest an honorarium,” he says. “Sometimes I challenge a wealthier family to double whatever they were planning to pay me and make the check to charity. But I can only do that when I can make the mortgage payment that month,” he says with a chuckle. Shrugging his shoulders, he adds, “God makes it work.”

### St. Louis's Mohel

Rovinsky stayed in Dallas three years, then joined Rabbi Leibtag in St. Louis at Epstein Hebrew Academy as executive director. He left in 2001 to help start a software company. Soon after, Rovinsky says, the lay leadership of the community asked him to manage the St. Louis chapter of the National Congress of Synagogue Youth. He also founded

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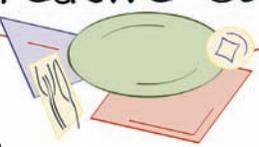
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the Jewish Student Union program, which involves 300 teenagers at four area public high schools. "I bring in pizza during lunchtime or after school and whatever issues they're facing, we'll discuss from a Jewish perspective," Rovinsky says. "Teens are so wonderful and honest. You might not like what they say, but if you listen and remove your own ego, what you can accomplish with them is just amazing."

Rovinsky's *bris* practice also has flourished in St. Louis. He was nervous about possibly intruding on the territory of the established *mohel*, the legendary Rabbi Avraham Magence. "When I met Rabbi Magence he was already up in years. He gave me a big kiss and said, 'You're here now so I can retire.' I said, 'First you have to show me around and introduce me!' And he did," Rovinsky recalls.

Today Rovinsky's practice is primarily Jewish infants, although he also will circumcise Jewish adults and non-Jewish adults and babies. Rabbi Randy Fleisher of Central Reform Congregation says, "It is a true blessing for the entire St. Louis Jewish community that Rabbi Rovinsky is in our midst. As a *mohel*, he has been incredibly open to the diversity of households involved with our congregation."

Adds Monte Sandler, "Rabbi Rovinsky is fantastic." Rovinsky recently performed the *bris* on Sandler's newborn, Ian Zachary, and previously, his son Nathan. "At the *bris* we had two people who are converting to Judaism, an ultra-Orthodox cousin who lives in Israel, plus Reform and Conservative Jews from St. Louis. Rabbi Rovinsky made the occasion so special. He explained the symbolism and history of the *bris* and was so informative, even my cousin from Israel was very impressed." Sandler adds, Rovinsky called that night and checked on Ian two days later.

Rovinsky's primary market is St. Louis but he still travels to Dallas once a week, where he may circumcise a dozen or more babies in a day. "Jewish babies have to have their *bris* on the eighth day, so I schedule the non-Jewish babies around that," he



**Rabbi Michael Rovinsky, head of Jewish Student Union works on a project with Daniel Iken of Clayton High School, Samantha Sabol of Parkway North, Joe Weil of Ladue High School and Andrew Israel of Parkway North High School.**

says. "I keep a list in my computer of everyone who needs to be scheduled and as soon as I get a Jewish baby I put it all together. Or if I don't, I just pick a day and say I'm coming." Rovinsky also has a *bris* practice in Wichita, Kan.

Rovinsky also has trained three other *mohels*, all out of town. He looks for "steady hands and integrity," he says.

### **Busy Schedule**

Rovinsky holds an MBA from Johns Hopkins University, a Master's degree in Talmudic law and two rabbinic degrees, and currently he's working on a master's degree in counseling at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. "I don't have a lot of down time but when I do I spend it with my family," he says. "My rule is I try to never sleep away from home unless there's no other alternative. Sometimes I have a very long day but I want to be there to kiss my kids good night."

He gets a lot of help from Selina, a private chef and party planner. "I couldn't do everything I do without her," Rovinsky says. "She's multi-talented and doesn't mind at all when we have 15 or more at our Shabbos table. She is truly an *aishes chayil*, a woman of valor!"

The family belongs to Young

Israel but Rovinsky frequently attends services at other nearby synagogues. "It depends on what kind of mood I'm in," he says. "Do I want to hear a sermon? What kind of *kid-dush* do I want?"

Recently over the High Holy Days Rovinsky had a chance to indulge in one of his favorite activities: blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. He started at The Gatesworth and then made several stops along the way home.

Rovinsky dedicates time to reading and studying Jewish topics. "I block out six hours a week and turn off the cell phone," Rovinsky says. "I have a study partner and we immerse ourselves in Torah."

His biggest dream, however, is to make sure every Jewish child has a kosher *bris*. "Even in Jewish circles, some people are against circumcision. My response is, there are certain fundamentals and circumcision is one of them," he says. He spends a lot of time meeting with expecting parents to educate them about the importance of *bris* and how the Jewish technique is both faster and safer than the standard medical procedure.

"Here's the bottom line," he says. "A kosher *bris* is the hallmark and badge of the Jewish people. It's the most critical spiritual decision parents will make for their child."