

A Bar or Bat Mitzvah at Beth Jacob Synagogue

Introduction

A *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* is a person who has reached the traditional age of Jewish maturity, with all the ritual rights and responsibilities that entails. A Bar/Bat Mitzvah *celebration* is about a child being recognized as a full member of the Jewish community. Since the Middle Ages, it has been customary to celebrate reaching the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah with a Shabbat celebration in the synagogue, where the celebrant is called to the Torah for the first time in front of their community, friends and family.

At Beth Jacob, we delight in celebrating every child becoming a full citizen of our Jewish community. This pamphlet outlines the steps for celebrating a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at Beth Jacob, with the goal of making this process easy and straightforward. It should be noted that most of the items mentioned in this pamphlet are general guidelines. What exactly will or won't happen at your (or your child's) Bar/Bat Mitzvah will be decided upon in private consultation with the rabbi, based on the uniqueness, interests and needs of the specific celebrant. Should you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to ask us!

Mazal tov!

Eligibility

- Each Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate must have completed one year of Hebrew school, as certified by our Education Director or be enrolled in Hebrew School at the time of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and registered and paid for a year.
 - If new to the community, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate must have completed one year of Hebrew school at another synagogue or school.
- The family must be members in good standing of Beth Jacob Synagogue for at least one year or become members in good standing with dues paid for at least one year.
- The date of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is set after a discussion with the rabbi.
- In the year before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the candidate is expected to attend at least 12 Shabbat morning services, as well as major holiday services, to the best of the family's ability.
 - During this year, with coordination with the tutor, the student will frequently be invited to help lead certain prayers such as *Ashrei*, *Ein K'Eloheinu*, *Aleinu* and *Adon Olam*, to get used to singing in front of the congregation.

Bar or Bat Mitzvah Date

Traditionally, a child reaches the age of Jewish majority on her 12th Hebrew birthday if she is a girl, and on his 13th Hebrew birthday if he is a boy¹ (see next page, **The Age of Bat Mitzvah**).

The Bar or Bat Mitzvah *celebration* usually happens at a Shabbat morning service on or after the child's Hebrew birthday – ideally the first Shabbat after their Hebrew birthday. If not on the first available Shabbat, we try to set it as close to their birthday as possible, but some flexibility is allowed.

- The celebration cannot happen before their Hebrew birthday.
- It is usual for the immediate family to gather at the synagogue at a weekday service a month before the Hebrew birthday, to celebrate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah's first opportunity to put on *Tefillin* – the rabbi can help you with this.
- It is common for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah to receive an *aliyah* to the Torah at the first Torah-reading following their Hebrew birthday even if the big celebration will occur later. Torah is

1. The Hebrew calendar is a lunar calendar which functions independently from the commonly-used Gregorian one, such that a boy born on the 1st of January 2000 did not become Bar Mitzvah on the 1st of January 2013. We look at his Hebrew birthday. The 1st of January 2000 corresponded with the 23rd of Tevet 5760; that child became a Bar Mitzvah on the 23rd of Tevet 5773, which corresponded with the 5th of January 2013! The rabbi will determine your child's Hebrew birthday based on their date of birth. It will be important to tell the rabbi if your child was born in the evening after sunset, since from a Jewish perspective, that will mean they were born on the following day.

read during morning services on Shabbat, Mondays and Thursdays, *Rosh Hodesh*, Biblical holidays, as well as at the afternoon service on Shabbat. The rabbi can help you plan this as well.

Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrations are occasionally held at a service other than Shabbat morning. These need approval and are considered on a case by case basis. Please speak with the rabbi about these options.

Egalitarianism

Beth Jacob is a fully egalitarian, Conservative/Masorti congregation. We treat boys and girls equally in terms of religious rights and responsibilities. We strongly encourage both boys and girls, as well as men and women, to wear a *Tallit* during Shabbat services and certainly when being called to the Torah.

Beth Jacob custom mandates a head covering for both men and women when receiving an honour during a service. (Non-Jewish participants and guests do not wear a *Tallit* but do cover their head.)

We strongly encourage parents to buy *Tefillin* for both their bar and bat mitzvah children. *Tefillin* are worn during weekday morning prayers. As part of the preparation for Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the rabbi teaches both boys and girls how *Tefillin* are used and why.

The Age of Bat Mitzvah

For various reasons, Jewish tradition sets the age of majority at 12 years for girls and 13 years for boys.

At some point in the last century, most Reform congregations, and later some Conservative congregations decided to move the age of celebrating Bat Mitzvah from 12 to 13. Officially attributing this change to equality, they mostly used this move as an easy way to keep the girls in Hebrew school for an additional year, as in those days, typically, students would quit Hebrew school after their Bar/Bat Mitzvah year.

The trend today among many liberal Jews is to return the Bat Mitzvah celebration to the original age of 12. Some feel that insisting on celebrating a year later than necessary is misleading, and shows a lack of respect and trust of the girl and her family. Our modern sense of egalitarianism does not promote holding someone back for the benefit of another. And traditionalists emphasize that choosing to celebrate later will not alter the fact that Judaism already sees the girl as an adult at age 12, regardless.

At Beth Jacob, this choice is left up to the family. That said, the girl counts towards the *Minyan* from the day of her 12th Hebrew birthday regardless of when her celebration will occur; at least a small celebration at age 12 to mark her change in status is encouraged.

Tutor

Although Beth Jacob provides an excellent supplementary Jewish education, it is necessary to hire a tutor to prepare your child for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah as most of the elements they need to learn are not covered during Hebrew School. The office will provide you with a list of approved Beth Jacob Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutors from which you are welcome to choose, subject to their availability.

Community Service / *Tikkun Olam* Mitzvah Project

As part of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process, we encourage children to choose a *Mitzvah* Project to do in the community. The goal is to fulfill the Jewish tradition of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). The recipient can be a Jewish or secular organization or cause. Students are encouraged to choose their own project that is meaningful to them and includes tangible service to the community. Your child will meet with the rabbi at the beginning of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparations, and together they will brainstorm and finalize an appropriate idea that your child can be proud of.

Service Times and Invitations

At Beth Jacob, Shabbat morning services on a standard Shabbat begin promptly at 9:15 am, but on certain special Shabbatot with longer services they start at 9:00 am. Services begin promptly regardless of who is in attendance at that time. Please consult with the office or rabbi to determine what time your child's service will begin.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrant and their immediate family should plan to arrive at least 15 minutes before the start of the service so that the rabbi can greet them, advise them, and answer any last minute questions they might have.

Our services generally end by 11:30 am, but at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, due to the family's desire to honour extra family members and guests, services can sometimes last until closer to noon.

A draft of the invitation text you will be sending out should be shown to the office before going to print. This helps avoid unfortunate mistakes both with service times, dates, as well as the spelling of the Hebrew name and other Hebrew words you may wish to include. The rabbi can also advise you and help you with appropriate Hebrew texts to use in the invitation.

Shabbat Observance

Beth Jacob is a fully Shabbat-observant Conservative congregation, and all guests are expected to respect the Shabbat while at our facility, whether during the service, reception, and before and after. Use of cellphones, cameras, and any other electronic devices is absolutely forbidden.

Since no photographs may be taken on Shabbat, arrangements may be made with the office to come into the sanctuary during the week before at a designated time to take photos. Photos may be taken earlier as well; some like their invitation to include a photograph of their child holding a Torah scroll. Any photos taken with a Torah scroll must be done with the rabbi or a *gabbai* present; the office will happily help you set up this appointment.

Participation in the Shabbat Service

As mentioned, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student is expected to attend Shabbat services at least once a month during the year leading up to their Bar/Bat Mitzvah, as well as all Jewish holiday services that fall during that year. Please advise the rabbi which services you will be attending in advance, so that we can help make you feel welcome, guide you through the service, as well as provide parts of the service which your child can already lead to help them feel comfortable on the *bimah*.

At the Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself, while some will choose to minimally only read the Torah blessings and perhaps deliver a speech, we encourage the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child to learn as much of the Shabbat morning services as possible. They will be permitted to lead those parts of the service if able to do so adequately.

Parts of the service which the Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrant often leads are:

1. *Shema Yisrael* (**Siddur Lev Shalem**, p. 155)
2. The Torah Service, as the Ark is opened and the Torah removed from the Ark (pp. 168-171)
3. Carries the Torah scroll in a circuit around the sanctuary to the reading desk
4. Recites the blessings before and after a Torah portion (an "*aliyah*") (p. 172)
5. Chants a Torah portion from the Torah scroll
6. Recites a *Haftarah*, including the blessings before and after (blessings, p. 175)
7. *Ashrei* (often together with young siblings, relatives or friends – p. 181)
8. *Yehalelu* and *Etz Hayyim Hee* as the Torah is returned to the Ark (pp. 183-184)
9. Carries the Torah in a circuit around the sanctuary back to the Ark
10. The final songs: *Ein K'Eloheinu*, *Aleinu*, *Adon Olam* (often together with other youngsters – pp. 204-206, 211)

Additionally, most Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrants deliver a speech about their Torah portion, after the Torah is returned to the Ark. Some also introduce the Torah portion before it is read. The rabbi is available to help the celebrant write their speech, and should see the final draft a few weeks before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Special Needs

Beth Jacob is a welcoming and inclusive, positive space. Individuals' special needs are always accommodated in a dignified way. Please speak to us about any and all concerns.

Candy Tossing

It is customary for attendees to shower the Bat or Bar Mitzvah celebrant with candies at the conclusion of their *Haftarah* reading. Individually wrapped soft candies **bearing a kosher symbol** must be used. The candies must be purchased in advance and brought to the synagogue before Shabbat begins. The synagogue office can advise you on where you can buy appropriate candies.

Honours

In addition to your child being called to the Torah, other family members and close friends receive various honours during the service. Some of these may require some reading or singing in Hebrew (transliterations are often available), some may just be performative such as opening the Ark, while some require muscle and previous instruction, such as lifting the open Torah scroll. Many of these honours are reserved for Jewish people, while others can be given to any of your guests. A month or two before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah the rabbi will go through the available honours with you and help you decide who should get what honour.

Reception and Catering

After the prayer service, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration continues with a *kiddush* luncheon. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah family sponsors this *kiddush* and, generally speaking, invites the entire congregation, including the synagogue regulars who haven't specifically been invited to your event. At this luncheon the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and/or other family members or friends will be invited to recite the blessings before/after the meal. Even if the family has decided to have a celebration at another location at a different time, the *kiddush* luncheon is an inseparable part of the synagogue celebration.

If you are worried that this may be financially difficult for you, speak to us and solutions can be found.

For catering, you have the option of choosing our in-house chef or one of our approved kosher caterers who are familiar with the rules of our kitchen. The office will provide you with your options.

Please note that we follow kosher laws and as such, no outside food whatsoever may be brought into the synagogue without explicit prior approval of the rabbi.