

Bar and Bat Mitzvah at Temple Israel:
Some thoughts and advice from Rabbi Kaplan

1. What is Bar or Bat Mitzvah?

Bar and Bat Mitzvah are the Hebrew terms that indicate that a Jewish boy or girl has become obligated to observe Jewish Law. The closest secular correlation is when American law recognizes a person's majority status as an adult, and no longer as a minor. Thus, a Jew becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah automatically, at the age of reaching puberty, and we celebrate that time just after a child's 13th birthday.

It is the celebration of reaching the age of obligation to Jewish Law, to the Mitzvot, that Bar and Bat Mitzvah is all about. And so it is ironic that often parents and children use Bar and Bat Mitzvah as the ending point of formal Jewish education and participation. It is really quite the opposite. It is the beginning of a child's life as a fully obligated Jew; he or she becomes a full citizen of the Jewish People.

The obligations also come with privileges, including the honor to be called to the Torah. So at the celebration of Bar and Bat Mitzvah, the newly obligated Jewish child is called to read from the Torah and chants the Haftarah, a portion from the Prophets.

Family gathers together with the synagogue community to participate in this ceremony which marks the child's coming of age, and the ritual continues in typical Jewish fashion, with a SE'UDAT MITZVAH, the meal of celebration.

This is where things tend to get a bit out of hand. After all, we are celebrating with a 13-year-old who must now observe Jewish law. This is not a college graduate, nor is it a young adult getting married, nor has he or she just written a first book or won a Nobel prize. It is a 13-year-old child. We have an obligation to keep the celebration in line with the ritual. An elaborate affair with the Bar or Bat Mitzvah child's name in lights seems out of context.

A nice Kiddush following the service is all that is necessary to compliment the ritual celebration of Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Since our families and friends are spread apart these days, and people will be coming from far away to celebrate with us, we often provide an event that far exceeds the nature of the celebration. Let's try to keep the party commensurate with the meaning of Bar and Bat Mitzvah. I honestly suggest that if money is not an issue, you consider taking the family to Israel for a truly meaningful Bar/Bat Mitzvah trip that emphasizes the Mitzvah. It will also be much more memorable than a lavish party. I have nothing against parties- I believe we should celebrate in a big way major milestones like weddings and anniversaries. But the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a Jewish child's entrance into taking Judaism seriously. It's the celebration of a beginning of a committed Jewish life, not the culmination of 25 years of marriage, and it's not worthy of tuxedos and gowns. It's more suited for paper plates- even the really fancy ones. Imagine the impact you will have on your child's future if you have a very modest celebration and make a substantial financial donation instead in your child's honor. You'll be teaching him/her about Tzedakah in a way that overshadows the party. That would be a wonderful Bar/Bat Mitzvah lesson. If you need ideas, please let me know!

2. What are the requirements for students?

A. Enrollment in Hebrew school, Day school, or similar formal education.

Since Bar and Bat Mitzvah marks the culmination of a period of study before a child moves on to the next step in his or her Jewish education, completion of at least four years of Hebrew school at Temple Israel, or another accredited Conservative synagogue school is required. Children must fulfill the standards set for each religious school grade level. If the child had not been enrolled in such a program, the decision about a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony will be made by the Rabbi, Cantor, and Executive Committee.

We expect our post Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to continue with Hebrew school after their ceremony and to continue with our 8th grade and beyond classes and Shabbat services.

B. Attendance at services.

Since Bar and Bat Mitzvah is celebrated at the synagogue service when the child is called to the Torah on a Sabbath or Festival morning, our children must become familiar with the worship service. Some of their training will take place during Hebrew school, but most of the practical experience will be learned by participating in services throughout their elementary years. By sixth grade students should participate annually in at least eight services. Seventh grade children should be in Temple for at least thirteen services a year, including some Friday afternoon and Shabbat afternoon services. Students will track their service participation, and will be rewarded for fulfilling the service attendance requirement.

Families should encourage their children to join them at least once a month at the daily morning or evening services known as “Minyan.” *We would like each Bar and Bat Mitzvah child to be called to the Torah and to read his or her part on the Saturday evening, Monday or Thursday prior to his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and also recite the Kiddush at the Friday evening service of their B’nai Mitzvah weekend.* The actual date and time will be set in consultation with the Rabbi or Cantor.

Please keep in mind that our congregation is comprised of individuals and families that all have their own unique circumstances. While we as a congregation have an obligation to help families adjust their lifestyles to one that approaches the Jewish ideal, we know that some of the above will not be possible for every family to accomplish. Please speak with the Rabbi if you have any concerns.

DRESS CODE: Dress should be modest and appropriate for a house of worship. Modest dress includes the covering of shoulders and midriff. Boys are expected to wear a suit and tie and girls must have their dresses cover their shoulders. No spaghetti strap or strapless dresses. After the Bar/Bat Mitzvah these young people are expected to wear their Tallit at all Shabbat and holiday services.

C. Mitzvah project.

Each Bar or Bat Mitzvah child will have to spend time each month during the year prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah performing two Mitzvot that he/she will choose together with the Rabbi or Cantor. One of the Mitzvot will be of the category “Bein Adam L’Chaveiro” (an ethical Mitzvah, literally, “Between a person and his neighbor”), and the other Mitzvah will be “Bein Adam LaMakom” (a Ritual Mitzvah, literally “Between a person and God”). For example, a child may choose to keep some degree of Kashrut outside the home as his “Bein Adam LaMakom” Mitzvah, and volunteer at a nursing home every other week as his “Bein Adam L’Chaveiro” Mitzvah.

D. Tutoring

Each child will study a portion to read from the Torah (called the Maftir) and from the Prophets (called Haftarah) with the Cantor. The lessons, to be coordinated between the Cantor and the family, will begin approximately one year prior to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah date. Lessons will be once or twice a week for 30-45 minutes week outside of the Hebrew school time schedule. It is imperative that students attend all scheduled lessons! Rescheduling options may not always be available..

The Cantor will be in touch with parents to advise them of the progress their child is making. Studying for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah requires daily practice. Children learn at different speeds, and you need to make sure your child is spending enough time preparing for the lessons. It is a common misconception that the amount of time spent with the tutor is the best way to gauge how well a child will chant his or her portion. The truth is that after the initial sessions for learning the mechanics, the weekly meetings with the Cantor should only be for the purpose of checking the accuracy of what the child has been studying at home and presenting new material to learn. If your child will not be taking ample time to review his portion and prayers at home, please do not expect him or her to participate fully at his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Please make an appointment for your child to meet with the Rabbi six months before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, again at three months, and again at six weeks in order to work on the meaning of the Torah portion and a short lesson that your child will teach the congregation on the morning of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

E. Tallit, Kippah and Tefillin

The Bar or Bat Mitzvah child has a Tallit (sometimes called “Tallis”) placed on his or her shoulders before the Torah service on Shabbat morning. Its fringes are a reminder of the commandments (the Mitzvot) that the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony commemorates. The Tallit can be purchased online or at any Judaica store, or woven at the JCC. If it is possible to actually participate in producing the Tallit by hand, it makes the Mitzvah extremely special.

The Bar and Bat Mitzvah child must wear a head covering, as should all participants in the service. To enhance the beauty of this Mitzvah, a special Kippah can be purchased for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah child.

Tefillin are the black boxes and straps that contain the words of the Shema and other paragraphs from the Torah. They are worn on the head and arm from the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah every morning during prayer. Since they are a sign of God’s commandments, they are not used on days which themselves serve as such a sign, including the Sabbath and holidays. Tefillin are worn on weekday and Sunday mornings, and while they are mandatory according to Jewish Law for boys who reach the age of Bar Mitzvah, they are suggested also for girls who are to become Bat Mitzvah. Your child should have a set of Tefillin about six months prior to his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and should begin to attend a morning service on a weekday (7:15 am Monday and Thursday) or Sunday (8am) where they will be taught how to wear them. Tefillin can be purchased through the synagogue.

F. Family Obligations: Adult Education, Services, Havdalah Services

Bar and Bat Mitzvah is a family matter. Thirteen year olds do not join synagogues, families do. We pretty much see to the education and Jewish experience for our children, especially in the years prior to Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But many families ignore the parents and older siblings in the family that ought to participate in the preparation for this special time. All adults in our congregation should avail themselves of ongoing Jewish education either in our Adult Education series or through some other

institution in the area. It is crucial that our children see that they are not studying as hard as they are for a momentary, one-day event, but rather are setting the stage for their Jewish life as an adult. When they see that their parents have made the commitment to some type of Jewish study, once a week or once a month, for example, our child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah becomes something meaningful. Please consider availing yourself of one of our Adult Education courses.

Jewish professionals of late have been concerned with the decline of family participation in their child's Jewish education and experience. When it comes to attending services, we have come to be upset not with the "Drop-Out Rate", but rather with the "Drop-Off Rate". Parents need to try and adjust their schedules so that they can attend services when their children do. Please remember that a child's parents are the real Bar and Bat Mitzvah tutors.

We will have, periodically during the school year, a Havdalah Family Service. Families are always welcome to join our brief and enjoyable Shabbat afternoon service every Saturday at 5:15. In addition, several family religious school Havdalah services will be scheduled throughout the year.

3. The Services

A. Service Schedule

Friday afternoon services are from 5:15 to 6:00, except for scheduled Family Shabbat dinners and services. We expect Bar/Bat Mitzvah families to join us for this service the evening before the actual ceremony at which the Bar/Bat Mitzvah will lead the Kiddush and concluding prayers.

Shabbat morning services begin at 9:30 am and we hope to conclude by 11:40 am. We always try to enhance our service at Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies with a bit more English and music.

Afternoon services all week long, including Saturday afternoon, begin at 5:15 pm.

B. Aliyot (Honors to the Torah)

Each family invites family members and friends to participate in the service. Some of the honors are spoken, such as the blessings before and after the reading of the Torah, while others are not, such as opening and closing the Ark. Please contact the Rabbi two to three months prior to the date to discuss which Honors you will be giving, how the rest of the family will participate, and to set a time for photographs and a "run through" if the family wishes. If reading Torah, Cantor must hear the Torah portion three weeks prior to the ceremony. If your family member will be reading Hebrew, the Honor should also be reviewed by the Cantor 2-3 weeks prior to the ceremony, either by phone or in person. Since ritual honors during the synagogue service, both spoken and not spoken, are performed by Jews, please speak with the Rabbi if you would like to involve a non-Jewish guest or relative in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony with additional readings.

4. Kashrut

The Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony commemorates the point in a Jew's life at which he or she becomes obligated to observe the commandments. When one thinks of Jewish Law, now binding upon the post-Bar or Bat Mitzvah child, one of the first Mitzvot, or commandments that come to mind are the Kashrut laws. When we celebrate the fact that our child has reached the age of obligation to keep kosher, we must endeavor not to contradict the reason for the celebration by having a non-kosher meal

to mark the occasion. Since an elaborate Kosher affair will inevitably cost more than a similarly elaborate non-Kosher affair, the logical suggestion is to have a modest celebration, as discussed above, more in line with the nature of the occasion. The reason to serve a Kosher meal in honor of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is not so that Uncle Sid who is Orthodox will be able to eat. The reason is that your child has just become obligated to observe Kashrut even though she is not Orthodox, and even though you may not at this time keep Kosher at home.

If you have made a decision to go ahead with a non-Kosher meal, please try to keep it as “Kosher” as possible. Avoid serving foods that are inherently not Kosher such as pork or shellfish. If the meat will not be Kosher, try to avoid serving anything dairy with the meal. Perhaps you might consider a dairy or vegetarian meal. We need to try to approach the ideal when celebrating Bar and Bat Mitzvah even if our normal lifestyle isn’t attuned to strict Jewish observance.

Please contact the Rabbi if you have any concerns about a Kosher celebration. Both the Rabbi and Cantor will work with families to find a way to provide as Kosher a celebration as possible.

5. Financial Information

Prerequisite: Parents of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child must be members in good standing of Temple Israel prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. That is, all Temple obligations must be fulfilled or arrangements made with the Administrator to fulfill them.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Fee: A fee of \$700 is to be paid during the year of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. This Bar/Bat Mitzvah fee is a financial assessment to those families celebrating the Bar/Bat Mitzvah at Temple Israel, reflecting the extra attention given to each family during the months leading up to the *simcha* as well as the rental fee for the vestry room for the Kiddush following the service. It is also a reminder of the importance of keeping Temple Israel financially secure, so that there will continue to be a synagogue service at which to celebrate Bar/Bat Mitzvahs and future life-cycle events.

If you have any questions about the financial information presented above, please contact the Administrator.