

# Congregation Beth Israel

## *B'nei Mitzvah Handbook*

—Ne'arim Program, 2008-'09 —

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### A Time for Community and Family Celebration

Many parents describe the experience of seeing their child stand on the *bimah* as a bar or bat mitzvah as one of life's most moving events. It is a moment in which we imagine that we have passed our tradition and our values on to a new generation. It is a moment in which we remember past generations and feel connected to them. It is a moment in which the community feels that we have given a child a basic foundation for living a Jewish life.

Bar and bat mitzvah celebrations are neither a beginning nor an end. We know that our thirteen-year-olds are not yet the adults whom they will become. We hope that their paths of Jewish learning will continue for a lifetime. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah, though, is an important milestone through a turbulent time in the lives of young adolescents and their families. It is important to make it a meaningful and memorable experience.

This booklet is meant to help guide your family through the bar/bat mitzvah process. It attempts to answer questions about our community's policies and expectations. It is designed to provide you with some tools to help your family make the most of the experience.

## What are “*B’nei Mitzvah*”?

“*Bar mitzvah*” is not a verb. A person isn’t “*bar mitzvahed*.” Rather, a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is a Jew who has come of age and entered a special relationship with the Jewish community and with God.

A “*mitzvah*” is a commandment from God. More than “good deeds,” the *mitzvot* (plural of *mitzvah*) are things we do because doing them draws us closer to God. A *mitzvah* can be fulfilling an ethical obligation, like helping the poor. A *mitzvah* can be performing a ritual, like lighting Shabbat candles. Doing a *mitzvah* is not “following orders,” rather, it’s something we do to create order and meaning in our lives.

“*Bar mitzvah*” literally means, “son of commandment,” and can be understood to mean, “a man who is a part of the community of people who are bound by *mitzvot*.” “*Bat Mitzvah*” is the same in female form. In Hebrew, the plural of “*bar mitzvah*” and “*bat mitzvah*” is “*b’nei mitzvah*.” We talk about “*b’nei mitzvah*” when we talk about our children who are becoming members of the sacred community of people who respond to God with sacred action.

Traditionally, children become *b’nei mitzvah* when they turn thirteen (or, in some communities, twelve for girls). We celebrate the young person’s coming of age by inviting him or her to read from the Torah with the accompanying blessings. Even without the ceremony, though, every Jewish child becomes a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* with the coming of age.

Some adults who never celebrated becoming a *bar/bat mitzvah* as a child choose to have such a celebration as an adult. Often these “adult *b’nei mitzvah*” are people who converted to Judaism, or women who were not able to celebrate becoming a *bat mitzvah* as a girl because the ritual was not observed in their community. This can be a powerful experience for many Jewish adults and the CBI community encourages adults to consider it. This booklet, however, is intended for young people who choose to celebrate becoming *b’nei mitzvah* as thirteen-year-olds or soon after.

## Celebrating Our Values

Becoming a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is much more than an excuse for a party or for showing off Hebrew reading skills. Coming of age in Jewish tradition is an expression of our Jewish values as individuals and as a community.

**Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Means Accepting Responsibility.** It’s easy for parents to feel proud of their children when they see them reading from the Torah after months of difficult preparation. But becoming a *bar/bat mitzvah* is more than acquiring the skill of Torah reading. Jewish children who choose to celebrate becoming *b’nei mitzvah* in the synagogue are making a choice to identify with the Jewish people and with Jewish values. They announce their choice to assume responsibility for living a life of meaning with ethical and spiritual purpose.

**The Torah Is the Center of Judaism.** Everything we do as Jews, everything we believe, everything we value revolves around the Torah. The Torah is the testimony of our people’s encounter with God. However Torah is understood — as a divine revelation, a human text about striving for God, or a combination of the two — it is a text that has been embraced with the highest sanctity by the Jewish people. This is why the first *mitzvah* we expect our children to fulfill as *b’nei mitzvah* is to read publicly from the Torah.

**B'nei Mitzvah Celebrations are Communal.** It is no coincidence that we hold this ceremony in public. To be a Jew means to live in covenant — not only with God but with other Jews, too. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah marks the beginning of a child's entry into the community as a full-fledged member. The awarding of an *aliyah*, (“being called to the Torah”), is a gift of the Jewish people. For this reason, the marking of the child's coming of age takes place in the synagogue — our communal home — during our time of regular communal gathering.

**It's Not a Performance — It's a Celebration.** The synagogue is not a theater and the congregation is not an audience. The celebration of a child becoming a bar/bat mitzvah takes lots of hard preparation, but it is not a performance. This also means that the only “mistake” a bar or bat mitzvah can make at the celebration is to lose sight of this truth.

**Think of the Reception as a Continuation of the Celebration.** Judaism has a formal name for the meal after a bar/bat mitzvah celebration. It is a *se'udat mitzvah*, a meal to honor the performance of a mitzvah. It, too, is a sacred, joyful gathering. By reciting appropriate blessings at the *se'udat mitzvah* and by setting aside a portion of the plenty for the poor, we demonstrate that the words of Torah spoken at the synagogue were not an isolated or empty gesture, but a sincere declaration of our intentions in all that we do.

**Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Is Just the Beginning.** Being a bat or bar mitzvah is not the experience of a lifetime. It is the beginning of a lifetime of Jewish experience. A bar/bat mitzvah is not measured by what he or she does on the *bimah*, but in the days and years that follow the ritual. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah should begin a lifetime of spiritual growth and of Jewish learning.

## Making It Count

*Making It Count: A Covenant for Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah* is a ten-page study guide prepared by the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) that focuses on four Jewish values that are specific to becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. They are:

- ☆ *Talmud Torah*: Lifelong Learning
- ☆ *Avodah*: Service to God
- ☆ *Mitzvah*: Commandment
- ☆ *K'hilah*: Community

*Making It Count: A Covenant for Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah* is available to download from the URJ website. Simply log onto <http://www.urj.org> and enter “Making It Count” into the search field.

## The Ne'arim Program

Congregation Beth Israel's education program for pre-bar/bat mitzvah students is called *Ne'arim*, Hebrew for “Youths.” Students generally enter the Ne'arim program the year they begin fifth grade in secular school. The program meets on Thursdays from 4:30 to 6:00 PM and has two parts:

1) A course in Jewish values, thought and history taught by the rabbi. The course rotates through three basic topics over three years: “God,” “Torah” and “Israel (the Jewish people).” The topic in 2008 - '09 is “God.”

2) Hebrew instruction in our *Mitkadem* program taught by Rachel Barenblat. *Mitkadem* focuses on reading prayerbook Hebrew with special attention to basic vocabulary and understanding the ideas in the prayers. Students in *Mitkadem* are able to progress at their own pace.

During the months prior to a child's bar/bat mitzvah celebration, an additional tutorial time will be scheduled for preparing the Torah reading. The rabbi will arrange for this tutoring time with you. Students are expected to participate in the Ne'arim program until the end of the school year of their bar/bat mitzvah celebration.

## Requirements and Expectations

Congregation Beth Israel sets meaningful requirements for Ne'arim students and their families before they can celebrate their acceptance of Torah as a bar/bat mitzvah:

✧ In order to form a connection with the community and classmates, Ne'arim students should be enrolled in the Ne'arim program for a minimum of two years — preferably three — before celebrating becoming a bar/bat mitzvah at CBI. At the discretion of the rabbi and the congregation, a student who has had equivalent training at another congregation or school after the age of nine may celebrate becoming a bar/bat mitzvah at CBI after one year in the Ne'arim program.

✧ Students should attend all classes. Students can make up for a limited number of missed classes with additional written assignments.

✧ Each bar/bat mitzvah serves as the "Torah Reader" for his or her day of celebration, a role referred to as the *Ba'al Keriah* (male) or *Ba'alat Keriah* (female). This role requires the student to learn ten to twenty verses in Hebrew from the week's Torah portion and the appropriate blessings. The Torah scroll is unvocalized (without vowels or accent marks) and all b'nei mitzvah are expected to read directly from the scroll (or chant, if they prefer). This is a difficult task that requires a large investment of the student's time, especially in the six to eight months prior to the celebration. It is essential that students prepare Hebrew reading assignments regularly and master them to the standard and satisfaction of the rabbi before the bar/bat mitzvah celebration.

✧ Each Ne'arim student should attend and participate in one of CBI's Shabbat services (either Friday night or Saturday morning) with a parent or parents *at least once a month* during the school year. During the six months before his or her celebration, student should attend *one additional Shabbat morning service* each month. Students and parents should arrive on time and attend the entire service. Services on the first Saturday morning of each month include additional discussion of the meaning and structure of the service. There is a pot-luck dinner and a children's services on the first Friday evening of each month. Students are encouraged to lead a portion of the service as they feel ready. Ne'arim families are encouraged to consider hosting CBI Shabbat services.

✧ Ne'arim families are strongly encouraged to explore new and deeper Shabbat and holiday observances in their home on a regular basis. The rabbi is available to discuss ways for families to expand and strengthen meaningful Shabbat and holiday observance in their homes.

✧ Each student should complete a meaningful Tzedakah Project, selected and developed in conjunction with the rabbi, before celebrating becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. (Specific suggestions for Tzedakah Projects begin on page 10).

✧ Each student should prepare a d'var Torah — a short teaching based on their Torah reading — that he or she will deliver at the service celebrating his or her becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. Parents play an important role in helping their child identify meaningful themes in the text that apply to the student's life and experience. The rabbi also will work with the student in developing and writing the d'var Torah. The d'var Torah is not a “thank you” speech, but it may be appropriate for it to include brief expressions of thanks to parents and teachers. (Some helpful points on writing a d'var Torah begin on page 12).

✧ The family of each student in our Ne'arim program should be a member of CBI. Exceptions may be made for Jewish students who do not have a Jewish custodial parent.

✧ Students in CBI's education programs should not simultaneously be enrolled in the religious education program of any non-Jewish faith. Please speak to the rabbi if you have any questions about this.

✧ It is customary for the family of the bar/bat mitzvah to host the kiddush following the service. This does not need to be elaborate. The bar/bat mitzvah's family should provide refreshments similar to what we offer on a typical Shabbat morning — cheese and crackers, vegetables and dip, for example — in quantities suitable for members of the congregation and invited guests. See page 18 for our congregation's policies on food served in the synagogue.

## Special Needs Students

Our congregation takes great pride in making every bar/bat mitzvah celebration special. There are occasions when this requires us to acknowledge the special needs of some students. We will do everything possible to work with student with special needs — such as physical, mental or developmental disabilities — to maximize their sense of accomplishment and pride in Jewish identity. Please feel free to discuss your child's special needs and any concerns you might have with the rabbi.

## Study Materials

Text books and other materials used in the *Ne'arim* program are provided. The cost is included in program fees. Each student will be provided with a copy of his or her Torah portion months in advance of celebrating becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. If requested, the rabbi will make an audio recording (tape, CD or MP3) of the Torah portion, read or chanted. The actual verses to be chanted will be chosen by the student and his or her parents with the advice of the rabbi.

## The Nuts and Bolts of Bar/Bat Mitzvah Preparation

### Getting Help from a Consulting Member

As a small congregation, CBI depends on volunteers to make our services run smoothly. At most of our Shabbat services, volunteers host the service by greeting people as they arrive and by setting up the kiddush or other events following the service. However, on the occasion of a bar/bat mitzvah, we wish to free the hosting family from many of these duties. That is why we have set up a system of “Consulting Members” to help you manage some of these details and to give you guidance in the process of planning the logistics of your family's joyous occasion.

The bar/bat mitzvah family should choose a CBI Member to be the Consulting Member for the event. The synagogue office can help you identify an appropriate Consulting Member. This person can assist you with

questions of procedures and help the family with many of the tasks that otherwise would fall upon the service host, such as:

- ✧ Arranging for ushers to hand out prayerbooks, *kippot*, and programs, if a significant number of guests is expected.
- ✧ Talking with the Rabbi about the assigning of honors in the service.
- ✧ Providing a Kiddush for all who attend the service, including CBI congregants and guests. CBI provides only the quantities of wine, grape juice, and challah that are provided for a typical Shabbat morning Kiddush. Most b'nei mitzvah celebrations require larger quantities, for which the bar/bat mitzvah family is responsible. Additional foods must be dairy/vegetarian, in accordance with CBI's rules of kashrut. (See page 18).
- ✧ Arranging for people to set up the Kiddush, and afterwards to clean up the Kiddush, kitchen, and incidental messes.
- ✧ If the celebrating family wishes to host a meal in the synagogue following the service (beyond the Kiddush), they should begin planning well in advance, with the Consulting Member, regarding procedures, responsibilities, and applicable fees.

## Setting Dates

Because of the size of our congregation, we are fortunate to have great flexibility in scheduling b'nei mitzvah celebrations. Usually, the date chosen is soon after the child's thirteenth birthday on the secular calendar. Some families choose a date for their celebration by picking a date with a weekly Torah portion that is particularly meaningful to the child. It is also possible to select a date that meets the needs of family traveling from long distances. A date should be chosen approximately one year in advance. All dates must be approved by the rabbi.

B'nei mitzvah celebrations should be scheduled for a morning during which CBI has regularly scheduled services, excluding the High Holy Days. Generally, b'nei mitzvah celebrations are scheduled for Shabbat mornings. All b'nei mitzvah celebrations will be held at CBI's synagogue.

Requests for other days, times and locations for b'nei mitzvah celebrations will be considered but are discouraged. In keeping with our values, we insist that the celebration of a Jewish child's coming of age be a public celebration, held at a time and place of communal gathering.

## Invitations

Like all CBI services, the synagogue service at which a bar/bat mitzvah is celebrated is open to all and will be included in the congregation's announcements. In addition, you may wish to send personal invitations to your invited guests, near and far. The invitation should make clear that the service is our congregation's regular Shabbat service.

Here is one suggestion for the wording of the invitation: "We invite you to join us at Shabbat services at Congregation Beth Israel in North Adams on the morning of [date] at which our son/daughter, [name], will be called to the Torah as a bar/bat mitzvah. A reception will follow the service at ..."

Of course, you may ask the rabbi if you have any questions about invitations for your family's celebration.

## Decorations

It is not necessary for the family of the bar/bat mitzvah to provide decorations for the sanctuary. We are very pleased with the beauty of our sanctuary and we hope that your guests will enjoy the views of the Berkshire Mountains. Families may place a modest and limited display of flowers on the bimah if they wish. Please consult the rabbi in advance concerning any sanctuary decorations.

## Programs

Many families choose to create and hand out a service program to congregants and guests at the service. Programs can provide basic information about the meaning of bar/bat mitzvah and Jewish worship. They also can help in identifying the people who will be accepting honors at the service. If you wish, consult with the rabbi about ideas for a service program. There is a sample program on page 21.

## What Happens at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Celebration?

### What Do the Parents Do?

Besides *kvelling* (“taking beaming delight”), the parent or parents’ ritual involvement on the day of the bar/bat mitzvah celebration likely includes an *aliyah* (the honor of reciting the Torah blessings) and offering a brief blessing for the bar/bat mitzvah. A non-Jewish parent may accompany the Jewish parent to the bimah for an *aliyah* without reciting the blessings, in accordance with CBI’s policies on the role of the non-Jew in the synagogue. (A copy of these policies is available in the synagogue office).

### Honors for Other Participants in the Service

Honors are an important part of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. A variety of opportunities for family and friends exist within the Shabbat or Festival morning service. Below is a basic guide to honors. Included in this *B’nei Mitzvah* handbook is an honors work sheet. If you have any questions, please speak to the rabbi.

#### *Aliyah*

*Aliyah* means “going up” and refers to the person or people who recite the blessings before and after the Torah is read. In our congregation, we usually have three *aliyot* (plural of *aliyah*) during the Torah service that can be given to an individual or group of people. There can be as many as seven *aliyot* on Shabbat and five on a festival. Each *aliyah* must be at least three verses long, so additional *aliyot* require additional preparation by the bar/bat mitzvah. The last *aliyah* usually is given to the bar/bat mitzvah. Other *aliyot* may be assigned to adult Jewish friends and family.

*An Important Note:* The celebration of the bar/bat mitzvah is part of the congregation’s regular worship service. It is not a private ceremony. Under some circumstances, an *aliyah* will be given to a member of the congregation for a special occasion. For example, an *aliyah* is traditionally offered to a couple on the Shabbat before their wedding or following the birth of a child.

#### *Turgeman*

The *turgeman* is the person who translates the Torah reading into the vernacular (English). This may be assigned as an additional honor to an adult Jew or it may be done by the person called for the *aliyah*.

### *Petichah*

The *aron kodesh* (holy ark) is opened at the beginning of the Torah service and closed at the end. The honor of opening and closing the ark is called *petichah*. It may be assigned to up to two Jewish people (including a child or children) for each opening and closing.

### *Hagbahah and Gelilah*

After the Torah is read, the Torah is raised and shown to the congregation in the honor called *hagbahah*. This honor should be given to a Jewish adult who is able to lift our rather heavy Torah scrolls comfortably and confidently. (The rabbi can provide a brief lesson). The honor of rolling, tying and dressing the scroll is called *gelilah* and may be given to any adult Jew.

### The *Motzi*

A Jewish family member or friend may receive the honor of reciting the blessing over the bread at the kiddush or at the reception following the service. The blessing is called the *Motzi* for one of the words in it, "*HaMotzi lechem min ha'aretz*," "The One who brings out bread from the earth."

## The Participation of Non-Jews

We welcome the participation of non-Jewish family and friends. We want all of your guests to feel welcome. However, non-Jews may not be given Torah service honors because of the special meaning accorded to them by Jewish tradition. It *is* appropriate for non-Jews to be invited to recite special readings that are not part of the *matbei'a tefillah* (the traditional worship service). Such readings must be approved by the rabbi and may include a prayer for peace, a psalm or a meaningful modern poem. In the instance of a bar/bat mitzvah with married, interfaith parents, both parents typically come up for an *aliyah*, but only the Jewish parent recites the blessings.

## Blessing for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah's Family

The coming of age of a child is a rite of passage for the whole family, not just the bar/bat mitzvah. The rabbi usually will offer members of the bar/bat mitzvah's family an opportunity during the service to come up to the bimah together for a family blessing (including non-Jewish family members). This is also an appropriate way to include and recognize younger siblings in the celebration.

## Tossing Candy

Tossing candy is a common custom at B'nei Mitzvah celebrations as a way of wishing the bar/bat mitzvah a "sweet life." If you would like, you may provide small candies to give to members of the congregation. (We've had good luck with Life Savers and Starbursts that come in individual wax paper wrappers. Avoid candies with plastic wrappers that make a lot of noise when handled.) The family may ask a couple of children to hand the candy out at an appropriate time in the service, generally, at the end of the Torah reading service.

## Tallit

Jewish men and women are encouraged to wear a *tallit* (*tallis*, or prayer shawl) during morning services, but it is not required. As the *tallit* represents the acceptance of the mitzvot, it is not appropriate for non-Jews or children under the age of bar/bat mitzvah to wear one. *Tallitot* (plural of *tallit*) are available at the synagogue for members and guests.

Many families give their bar/bat mitzvah a *tallit* to wear at the service. The *tallitot* that children receive at their bar/bat mitzvah celebrations often become cherished possessions. There are resources for purchasing *tallitot* on the internet. *Concepts of Art* in Lenox (413-637-4845) has many styles in their store.

## Kippot (Yarmulkes)

Traditionally, all Jewish men and boys wear a *kippah* (*yarmulke*). The wearing of a *kippah*, however, is not mandated by Jewish law and it is not limited to men. There are no restrictions on non-Jews wearing a *kippah*. *Kippot* (plural of *kippah*) are available at the synagogue for members and guests.

Many families choose to provide *kippot* with the name of the bar/bat mitzvah printed or embroidered into them. This *kippah* becomes an appropriate keepsake of the occasion. There are numerous resources on the internet for ordering specially personalized *kippot*. If you order *kippot* for the occasion, make sure that you allow several weeks for printing and shipping.

## What to Wear

We respectfully request that clothing be appropriately modest. Inform your family and guests that they should dress for a religious service, not for the party that follows. Formal evening wear, low neck lines and bare shoulders are not appropriate for our Shabbat services. You can direct your guests to check the CBI website for information on appropriate attire for CBI worship services.

## Photography/Videography

The synagogue is sacred space and our services take place in sacred time. It is CBI's policy not to allow photography or videography during any part of the service, including the Torah reading. We suggest that you include notice of this policy in the service program. You can arrange for photos of the bar/bat mitzvah, the family and the rabbi before the service. Such arrangements must be made ahead of time and photography must be concluded at least one half hour before the beginning of the service.

## Additional Resources:

### Tzedakah Projects Ideas

*Tzedakah* is an obligation in Judaism: It involves giving our time, money, or raising money to further the cause of justice in the world. Here is a list of things to do and organizations that your family might consider helping. If you don't know about these organizations, check them out. It's good to learn about the ways in which people are doing *tikkun olam*, "repairing the world."

Obviously, this is not a complete list. You may find your own way to fulfill the obligation of *tzedakah*. The most important thing is not how much you give, but that you make a genuine commitment to help in a way that is meaningful to you. This is one of the ways in which a bar/bat mitzvah can show his or her desire to take on adult Jewish responsibilities.

#### 1. Give of Your Time:

- a. Volunteer to work in the synagogue or in our religious education programs (Hand in Hand and Aleph-Bet)
- b. Visit the elderly — family members, a neighbor, or a nursing home. There are a number of nursing homes in our area that are always looking for volunteers: Sweet Brook, Williamstown Commons, North Adams Commons, and more
- c. Work on a project to help the environment.
- d. Work at a soup kitchen, like the program run by the Berkshire Food Project at the First Congregational Church in North Adams.
- e. Collect old but usable clothes, toys, tapes, videos, etc., and give them to the needy and the homeless through an organization like Community Action in North Adams.
- f. Participate in a walk-a-thon for some cause.
- g. Work on a project for Habitat for Humanity.

#### 2. Raise Money for a good cause

- a. Help the hungry, the poor, and the homeless by helping to raise money for organizations like these:
  - ✧ Lewison House, the homeless shelter in Adams
  - ✧ Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger. Donate 3% of the cost of your celebration or a part of your bar/bat mitzvah gifts. [www.mazon.org](http://www.mazon.org)
  - ✧ The Berkshire Immigrant Center [www.berkshireic.com](http://www.berkshireic.com)
  - ✧ Jewish Federation of the Berkshires [www.jewishberkshires.org](http://www.jewishberkshires.org)
  - ✧ The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) [www.hias.org](http://www.hias.org)
  - ✧ The American Jewish World Service [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)
  - ✧ Habitat for Humanity [www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)
- b. Help support medical research and medical support groups
  - ✧ Local hospitals or nationally recognized specialty hospitals
  - ✧ Specific disease groups: Cancer Care, The Kidney Foundation, AIDS, MS, Heart Association, etc.
  - ✧ Hadassah [www.hadassah.org](http://www.hadassah.org)
- c. Help other support groups
  - ✧ Berkshire County Kids' Place [www.kidsplaceonline.org](http://www.kidsplaceonline.org)

- ✧ P-FLAG: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)
- ✧ JACS, AA, and other organizations dealing with substance abuse
- ✧ The Jewish Guild for the Blind. [www.jgb.org](http://www.jgb.org)

d. **Help Jewish Causes.**

- ✧ The Fund for Reform Judaism. [www.uahc.org/development/fund.shtml](http://www.uahc.org/development/fund.shtml)
- ✧ ARZA/WORLD UNION, North America. [www.rj.org/arzawuna/](http://www.rj.org/arzawuna/)
- ✧ WUPJ: World Union for Progressive Judaism. [www.wupj.org](http://www.wupj.org)
- ✧ WRJ: Women of Reform Judaism. [www.rj.org/wrj](http://www.rj.org/wrj)
- ✧ NFTB: North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods. [www.nftb.org](http://www.nftb.org)
- ✧ HUC-JIR: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. [www.huc.edu](http://www.huc.edu)
- ✧ Leo Baeck School in Haifa, Israel
- ✧ Rabbis for Human Rights (Israel)

# Guidance For Writing A D'var Torah

(From the *Bar and Bat Mitzvah Handbook: A Manual for Parent and Student*, Temple Ner Tamid, Bloomfield, NJ)

A *d'var Torah* (literally, a “word of Torah”) is no more than the identification of a question about the Torah followed by a straightforward and simple answer. It is not a sermon or a term paper. It is a single idea based on the text of the Torah.

**Part 1** The first step is to “identify” the question and/or the difficulty in the Torah portion.

There are two ways to look at the Torah portion:

- ☆ You may choose to address the larger theme that runs throughout the text (for example, talking about the concept of *law* for the portion that contains the Ten Commandments); or
- ☆ You may choose to examine a single verse or even just a word in the Torah portion (for example: What can we learn about the Binding of Isaac from the fact that at the end of the story Abraham returns “alone”?).

**Part 2** Once you have identified the question or problem, you need to consider how *you* would resolve it. What are your thoughts about it? What do *you* think is the way to read the Torah? The wonderful thing about Torah study is that there are no wrong answers. The process of midrash is the combination of the text *and* the reader. Torah is only complete when we put ourselves, through our ideas and questions, into the text. This makes the Torah not just an ancient document but a living and never-ending source of Truth. Think of the Torah as a *ma-ayan*, a “well,” or a *sha-ar*, a “gateway,” to important ideas. We want to hear the ideas *you* have to offer about the Torah.

**Part 3** The last part of the *d'var Torah* is applying the lesson you have taught us to our lives today. This part is especially powerful when you apply it to your life, particularly as a bat or bar mitzvah.

The three parts of the *d'var* then are:

- ☆ The introduction and identification of the question and/or the difficulty of the text;
- ☆ Your solution; and
- ☆ Applying the lesson (the solution) to our lives today.

The *d'var Torah* is not merely a thank-you speech. It is a teaching. On this day, you are a teacher. Use the form on the next page to get started.

## Here's How To Get Started on a D'var Torah

My Torah portion is \_\_\_\_\_ from the Book of \_\_\_\_\_.

The section from my Torah portion from which I will be reading is about:

Three questions I have about my Torah portion are: (e.g., What doesn't make sense?)

1)

2)

3)

Possible answers to *one* of the above questions are:

1)

2)

3)

Write about a situation in your own life that reminds you of your portion.

## Ideas for the Parents' Talk

(Adapted from the *Bar and Bat Mitzvah Handbook: A Manual for Parent and Student*, Temple Ner Tamid, Bloomfield, NJ)

*Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Shimon said: A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he must say, "Blessed is the One who has freed me from the responsibility of this boy!"*  
—Midrash Genesis Rabbah 63:10

The tradition of parents offering a blessing at a child's coming of age ceremony is ancient. The above quotation shows that it was performed thousands of years ago on the occasion of a child's first *aliyah*. Although it might seem inappropriate to recite a prayer freeing yourself from responsibility for your child, its underlying principle is instructive in thinking about what you might say to your son or daughter on the day he or she celebrates becoming a bar/bat mitzvah.

The intent of the parent's talk during our service is to give the mother and/or father the opportunity to publicly acknowledge — in a sacred setting — the joy and pride they feel at that moment. What is even more important, they also can share their hopes and dreams for their child. In other words, it is an opportunity to put the meaning of that special moment into words.

This is a unique opportunity — in the presence of community, friends and family — to tell your son or daughter about your hopes for him or her, and to ask God's blessings on your child's future. The talk should be addressed to your child, not to the congregation. Moreover, it should be directed toward the future. Where is it that you hope this moment will lead your child? What do you hope that he or she will take from it?

You may wish to include a blessing for your child like one of the examples below, or to write something of your own. In any event, it's best to prepare your remarks in advance. Also, shorter is better. Each parent's remarks should be no more than two minutes. (Remember, this is your child's moment, not yours). When you are done, please feel free to hug your child. Crying is permitted.

Below are some examples of blessings that parents can offer on the occasion of a child's bar/bat mitzvah:

\* \* \*

Praised is God who has granted new responsibility to \_\_\_\_\_ and to us. As you begin to enjoy your new status among the Jewish people, a status that redefines your role in life, may God grant us the wisdom to continue as guides and parents, allowing you to live in accordance with the teachings of our Torah as a responsible Jewish adult.

\* \* \*

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,*

(For a male) *shep'tarani mei-onsho shelazeh.*

(For a female) *shep'tarani mei-onshah shelazot.*

Praised are You, *Adonai* our God, Source of all being,  
who has freed us of some responsibilities and conferred new ones upon \_\_\_\_\_.

## Aliyah Primer

Below are the basic fundamentals of being called to the Torah for an *aliyah*. “*Aliyah*” Means to “go up” or “ascend.” The word, as applied to the Torah honor, also implies a spiritual ascent. An *aliyah* is considered one of the most sacred honors in Judaism. Consequently, you must be Jewish and “of age” (a bar/bat mitzvah) to qualify for an *aliyah*. The ceremony of bar/bat mitzvah is a celebration of a child’s first *aliyah*.

### Jewish Name

Proper form requires you to be called to the Torah by your Jewish name. This includes not only your given name but the name(s) of your father and/or mother. Here are examples of the forms of Jewish names:

For men	<i>Ya’akov ben Avraham v’Sarah</i>
For women	<i>Rachel bat Avraham v’Sarah</i>

Although Jewish names are often called “Hebrew names,” they may be either Hebrew or Yiddish.

### Going Up

When your name is called, go up to the *bimah*, and stand next to the reader. She or he will point to the place in the *sefer Torah* (the Torah scroll) where she or he is reading. Touch that spot with the *tzitzit* (fringes) of your *tallit* (prayer shawl) or the *avnet* (Torah binding cloth, called a “*wimpel*” in Yiddish) and then kiss the *tzitzit* or *avnet*. At this point the reader will close the scroll. Some people choose to grasp the two wooden posts of the scroll while reciting the *b’rachah* (the blessing).

### The First Blessing

Below is the blessing recited in Hebrew prior to the reading of the Torah. You should recite the first line, wait for the congregation to respond with the second line, then repeat that second line, and read the rest of the first blessing.

You: *Bar’chu et Adonai ham’vorach.*

The congregation: *Baruch Adonai ham’vorach l’olam va-ed!*

You: *Baruch Adonai ham’vorach l’olam va-ed!*

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam  
asher bachar banu mikol ha-amim v’natan lanu et Torato.  
Baruch Atah Adonai Notein ha-Torah.*

The congregation: *Amein!*

Bless *Adonai*, the blessed One.  
Blessed is *Adonai*, the blessed One forever and ever.  
Blessed are You, *Adonai*, our God, Source of all being,  
who has chosen us from among the peoples and given us the Torah.  
Blessed are You, *Adonai*, who gives the Torah. Amen.

## The Torah Reading

Following the conclusion of the first *berachah*, the reader will read the selection from the Torah. When she or he is finished, she or he will indicate that the English translation of the Torah selection is to be read.

## The English Translation

The *aliyah* is often asked to read the provided translation of the Torah reading after it has been read or chanted from the scroll. This honor may also be given to another individual.

## The Concluding Blessing

Following the Torah reading and translation, the concluding *berachah* is offered. Again, the person offering the blessing will touch the place in the *sefer Torah* with the *tzitzit* or the *avnet* and may choose to grasp the posts of the Torah scroll while reciting the blessing:

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam  
Asher natan lanu Torat emet  
V'chayei olam nata b'tocheinu.  
Baruch Atah Adonai notein ha Torah.*

Blessed are You, *Adonai*, our God, Source of all being,  
who has given us the Torah of truth  
and implanted within us eternal life.  
Blessed are You, *Adonai*, who gives the Torah.

The congregation responds, "Amen."

## After the Concluding Blessing

Following the concluding *b'rachah*, you should move aside to allow the person with the next *aliyah* to stand by the Torah reader. After the following *aliyah*, return to your seat.

## Honors Work Sheet

Use this form to assign honors to the people you wish to honor at the service. These are the *possible* honors. You do *not* need to assign them all. The rabbi will help you to complete this sheet.

*P'tichah* (Opening the ark) — 1 to 4 people \_\_\_\_\_

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*Hakafah* (Carrying the Torah in procession *before* the reading) \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: The bar/bat mitzvah usually carries the Torah in the procession *after* the reading.

*Aliyah* (Torah blessings) — 3 to 7 people or groups of people on Shabbat. 3 to 5 on Festivals.

The bar/bat mitzvah alone has the last aliyah. You may also assign reading the translation for each aliyah as a separate honor.

English Names

Jewish Names\*

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

*Hagbahah* (Lifting the Torah) \_\_\_\_\_

*G'lilah* (Dressing the Torah) \_\_\_\_\_

\* Jewish names are usually Hebrew or Yiddish. They include the name of the person's father or the names of the person's father and mother. Examples are: *Yonatan ben Shmuel v'Sara* (*Shmuel* and *Sara* are the Jewish names of the parents), *Rachel bat Moshe*, or *Oznat bat Avraham u'Ferl*. Ask the rabbi if you have questions.

## Kashrut at CBI

The synagogue's kitchen is not a kosher kitchen. However, the congregation has established standards for the foods that are appropriate to prepare in the kitchen and to serve in the synagogue. If you are hiring an outside caterer to serve food in the synagogue, please be sure that they are aware of these policies.

As a congregation, we have decided to keep the food served at all congregational functions "kosher style." We recognize that "kosher style" does not connote any level of observance of traditional Jewish law. Rather, it is a choice based on our response to Jewish custom and culture.

We have agreed to maintain these standards:

- No food will be served that includes pork (ham, bacon, etc.), shellfish (shrimp, lobster, etc.), or other categories of food that are specifically forbidden in Jewish law (octopus, squid, etc.).
- No food will be served that contains a mixture of meat and dairy products (cheeseburgers, meat on pizza, etc.)
- All meals are designated as either "meat" or "dairy."
- All Onegs and Kiddushes following Shabbat services are designated "dairy," unless it is announced otherwise in advance.
- At our "dairy meals" no food should be served that includes meat (except fish).
- At our "meat meals" no food should be served that includes any dairy products in its preparation (milk, butter, cheese, yogurt, etc.).
- We do not require the separation of "meat" and "milk" dishes, pots, utensils, etc.
- We do not require acceptable meats (beef, chicken, etc.) to be certified kosher according to traditional standards.
- We do not require processed foods to bear the symbol of a rabbinic authority (*heksher*).
- During the seven days of Passover, foods and products containing leaven will be removed from the kitchen and only foods free of leaven may be served at congregational events.

In addition, the rabbi makes these requests reflecting Jewish values of preserving life and preventing waste and cruelty:

- An effort should be made to serve healthy foods. We wish to limit foods prepared with refined sugar or that are high in fat. We encourage vegetarian choices. We encourage serving fresh fruits and vegetables whenever food is served.
- We encourage foods that reflect our environmental concerns. This includes making vegetarian choices and serving organic fruits and vegetables. We should especially avoid the meat of animals that are known to have been treated cruelly.

## Your *Se'udat Mitzvah*/Reception

(From the *Bar and Bat Mitzvah Handbook: A Manual for Parent and Student*, Temple Ner Tamid, Bloomfield, NJ)

The religious part of the *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremony occurs in the sanctuary. Choosing to focus on Jewish values during your later celebration will continue to sanctify the day and make it special and memorable. Remember, everything we do with our children teaches them something.

Decide as a family what you are celebrating and what this moment in your life means. This decision will help guide you through the rest of the planning stages. You may find the text *Putting God on the Guest List* by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin (Jewish Lights Publishing) to be quite helpful.

### Consider Jewish Values in Your Decision Making

- ✧ *G'milut Chasadim* — Acts of Loving Kindness
- ✧ *Tzedakah* — Righteousness/Justice/Sacred Giving
- ✧ *Talmud Torah* — Study of the Torah
- ✧ *Hiddur P'nei Zakein* — Honoring the Elderly
- ✧ *Zicharon* — Memory
- ✧ *Shabbat* — Honoring Shabbat
- ✧ *Tzar Ba'alei Chayim* — Non-Cruelty to Animals
- ✧ *Tikkun Hanefesh* — Repairing the Self
- ✧ *Tikkun Olam* — Repairing the World

### Some Tzedakah Suggestions:

- ✧ The invitation sets the tone for the celebration and can let your guests know what is important to you. In lieu of sending an expensive invitation, utilize your desktop publishing skills and make your own. Note on the back of the card that the simplicity of the invitation represents a donation to a *tzedakah* organization that you chose. The thank-you note can also be produced in this way.
- ✧ Donate 3% of the total cost of food to Mazon, an organization that helps feed hungry people nationwide. If you contact them ahead of time, they will send you cards to put on your tables, indicating that you have made a contribution.
- ✧ Give donations that can make a difference in the lives of others, not party favors that will cost you the same amount and end up in the trash. Give each guest a certificate indicating that a gift has been made in their honor to support Kibbutz Lotan or the Leo Baeck Education Center in Israel.
- ✧ Check to see if the leftover food can be donated to a soup kitchen. If you are somewhat insistent, many restaurants and caterers will help with this.
- ✧ Make either a financial donation to, or purchase something specific for CBI, our religious education program, or the synagogue library in honor of your becoming a bar/bat mitzvah.

### Keep it Jewish

Begin the meal with *Kiddush* and *Motzi* and end it with singing *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after meals. Consider ending the celebration with *Havdalah* if the party will end late Saturday afternoon. Begin with *Havdalah* before a Saturday evening event.

## Celebration Variations

It is common to have a celebration of some kind at a restaurant directly after services. Other models that deserve your consideration include:

- ✧ Using the synagogue for a luncheon for guests following the Kiddush;
- ✧ Having a luncheon at home;
- ✧ Providing a luncheon for adult guests immediately after services and then having a more informal party for the children later that evening or the next day;
- ✧ Inviting everyone to a mystery location and then involving them in a mitzvah project;
- ✧ Taking a family trip to Israel;
- ✧ Taking a family trip to the town in Europe (or any place in the world) from which your ancestors came and explore your Jewish roots together; and
- ✧ Any combination of the above.

## Closing Thoughts

Everything you do to make your bar/bat mitzvah celebration personal, filled with your values, and meaningful will enhance the experience for all. Every celebration need not look as if it's been shaped by the same cookie cutter. Have your celebration reflect who you are and what you believe as an individual and as a family. Make Jewish choices, and don't be afraid to be different. It's worth it! The memories of how you worked together and your incredibly meaningful celebration will last a lifetime. Put God on the guest list for your bar/bat mitzvah.

# Sample Program

Families often prepare a program for the bar/bat mitzvah service in booklet form as a guide to help people understand the service and also as a keepsake of the occasion. If you wish to create a program for the service, you may use this sample program as a model. (Ask the rabbi if you would like this sample as a Word or PDF file.) Feel free to adapt it as you wish.

*Ark openers/closers*  
[Name of people honored]  
*Aliyot (Torah Blessings)*  
[Name of First Aliyah]  
[Second Aliyah (usually parents)]  
[Name of Bar/Bat Mitzvah]

*Hagbah (Torah Lifter)*  
[Person Honored]

*G'ilah (Torah Dresser)*  
[Person Honored]

*Prayer for Peace*  
[Person Honored]

[Etcetera]

We celebrate the  
Bar/Bat Mitzvah of

*[Name of Bar/Bat Mitzvah]*

Secular Date / Hebrew Date

**Shabbat [Name of Torah  
Portion]**

Congregation Beth Israel  
North Adams, Massachusetts

## Welcome

We welcome you to this Shabbat service to celebrate with us as (Name) becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is with great joy that we share this milestone with our families and dearest friends who have traveled from near and far.

Today [Name] will be called for the first time to read from the Torah (the "Five Books of Moses"). In doing so, s/he will celebrate becoming a bar/bat mitzvah, literally translated as "daughter/son of commandment." Being a bar/bat mitzvah means that s/he is now considered a full member of the community of people who are responsible for living according to the commandments of the Torah. [Name] today also will give a *d'var Torah*, a teaching about this week's Torah portion that reflects on his/her own life experience.

We are so happy that you are joining us on this joyful occasion.

L'Shalom,  
[family of the bar/bat mitzvah]

## Synagogue Traditions

This morning we will celebrate *Shabbat*, the Jewish Sabbath. Reading from the Torah is part of the regular service on all Shabbat mornings. The honor of an *aliyah*, going up to the Torah to recite the blessings, is often given to people on special occasions. This morning, *aliyot* (plural of *aliyah*) will be given to people who are special in [name]'s life. [Name] himself/herself will have the final *aliyah*.

Here are some terms you may hear during the service:

**Siddur.** The Jewish prayerbook. Our *siddur* contains traditional prayers, modern translations, and transliterations to aid people unfamiliar with Hebrew. Because Hebrew is read from right to left the prayer book opens in the direction opposite books in English.

**Kippah (Yarmulke).** In Jewish tradition, men and boys cover their heads in the synagogue as a sign of piety and humility before God. In our congregation, a *kipah* is optional for everyone — men and women, Jews and non-Jews.

**Tallit (Tallis).** The fringed prayer shawl is worn by Jews who have reached the age of *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. Today, [name] is wearing a *tallit* for the first time. (It is not appropriate for non-Jews to wear a *tallit*.)

**Torah Scroll.** The Torah scroll is the holiest object in Jewish tradition. During the Torah reading service, the scroll will be removed from the ark and carried through the congregation. During the procession, many people will touch the scroll with a *siddur* or with the corner of their *tallit* and bring it to their lips as a symbol of the sweetness of the Torah's teachings.

# A Bar/Bat Mitzvah Checklist for Parents

## Six months Ahead

- ✧ The bar/bat mitzvah will begin to study his/her Torah reading
- ✧ Begin discussing the *d'var Torah* with the bar/bat mitzvah — ask, “What do you want to say?”
- ✧ Begin planning a tzeddakah project with the bar/bat mitzvah
- ✧ Arrange for a CBI “consulting member” to help you with preparations
- ✧ Make a guest list and order (or make) invitations
- ✧ Arrange accommodations for out-of-town guests (hotel rooms, etc.)
- ✧ Create a plan for the reception; hire a caterer, restaurant, music, etc., if you are using
- ✧ Create a plan for transporting guests, if necessary
- ✧ Hire a photographer, if you are using one

## Two months Ahead

- ✧ Work with bar/bat mitzvah on tzeddakah project
- ✧ Make decisions about giving service honors; ask for Hebrew names of people with aliyot
- ✧ Prepare service program
- ✧ Mail invitations
- ✧ Order kippot (yarmulkes)
- ✧ Select clothes for the occasion

## One month Ahead

- ✧ Work with bar/bat mitzvah on the *d'var Torah*
- ✧ Prepare parents’ blessings
- ✧ Finalize food, decorations and seating plans with caterers, restaurants, etc.
- ✧ Order kosher meals, if necessary, for guests requiring them
- ✧ Start writing “thank you” notes

## One week Ahead

- ✧ Prepare wrapped candies for the service (if using)
- ✧ Take photographs at the synagogue

## Bring to Synagogue on the day of the service!

- ✧ D'var Torah
- ✧ Parents’ blessing
- ✧ Programs
- ✧ Food for kiddush
- ✧ Tallit
- ✧ Kippot
- ✧ Candy

## Your Feedback

No process is perfect and we're always trying to improve ours. CBI's Education Director, Maude Rich, wants to hear your feedback about our education programs to convey it to the Education Committee, the rabbi and our teachers. If you have comments or suggestions about any aspect of the Ne'arim Program, about your bar/bat mitzvah experience, or about this handbook, please feel free to contact Maude about your concerns. The Education Director is committed to treating your comments with confidentiality and appropriate attention.

## So, You Still Have A Few Questions?

Please feel free to consult the rabbi if you have any questions about your child's bar/bat mitzvah celebration. The rabbi is happy to talk with you about meeting b'nei mitzvah requirements, additional tutoring, the *d'var Torah*, honors, *kippot (yarmulkes)*, the *kiddush* following the service, the parental blessing, photography in the sanctuary, scheduling of dates, Shabbat attendance, special needs, the Torah blessings, tutoring schedule, *Tzedakah* Projects and more.

Just ask!