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# Bar & Bat Mitzvahs

*for the interfaith family*

interfaithfamily

Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life

# bar&bat mitzvah

## What Is A Bar Or Bat Mitzvah?

According to Jewish law, all children acquire the status of ritual adulthood when they are thirteen years old. Whether or not they participate in a ceremony, at that time they take responsibility for their own moral decisions and commitments to observing the commandments (*mitzvot*) that are the foundation of Jewish life. In Hebrew, *bar mitzvah* means “son of the commandments” and *bat mitzvah* means “daughter of the commandments.”

The central act of the bar or bat mitzvah is the honor of getting an invitation to bless and/or read from the Torah (Five Books of Moses) during a prayer service. This honor is known as an *aliyah* and can happen during any prayer service during which the Torah is read (Shabbat (Friday night, Saturday morning and/or Saturday afternoon, depending on the synagogue), festivals such as the marking of each new Hebrew month, and Monday and Thursday mornings). *Aliyah* means “going up” in Hebrew, as in “going up to the Torah.”

In addition to this honor, the youth often writes and presents a brief talk or sermon (known as a *drash* (interpretation) or *d'var Torah* (word of Torah)) on the meaning of these particular verses of the Torah. They may also lead parts of the worship service. In this coming of age ceremony, 13-year-olds make a public statement of their Jewish identity and a pledge for a Jewish future, demonstrating a readiness to take their place among the adults of the community. For the youth, this is a moment of triumph, bringing self-conscious 13-year-olds to face a room filled with family, friends and congregants who are predisposed to shower them with compliments for their achievement.

More important than a performance or a recital, more personal than a report card, it is an affirmation of a child's whole self, with every aspect of development on display, from a new physique to the emerging spiritual-moral-Jewish voice explaining the week's Torah portion.

For parents, bar/bat mitzvah is a crowning moment. To watch a son or daughter stand, Torah in arms, before family, friends, and congregation is a moment of great pride and joy – but one tinged with sadness as well. This young woman or man is not a baby, nor are you “young parents” anymore.

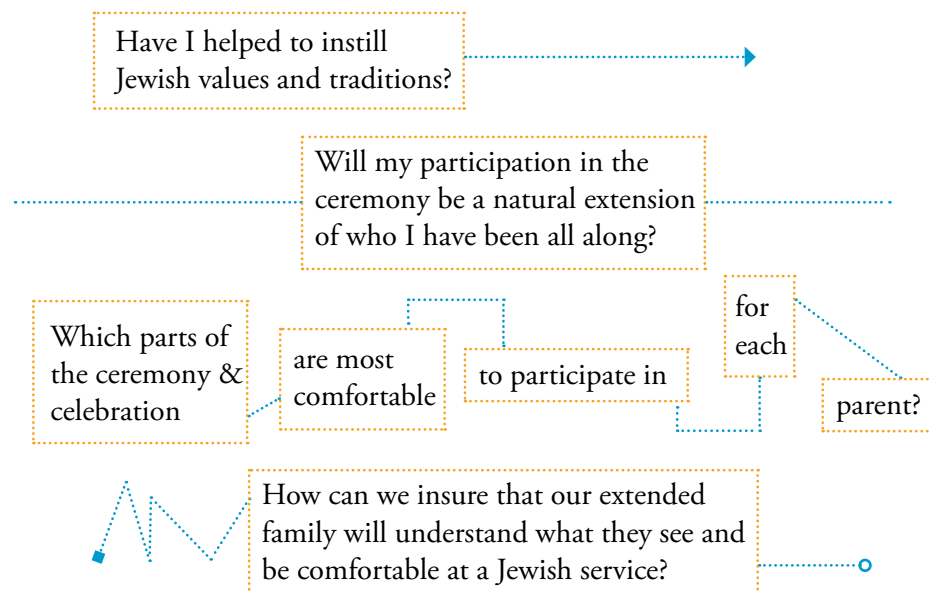
[How to Raise a Jewish Child, Anita Diamant with Karen Kushner]

The process of becoming a bat or bar mitzvah generally begins by attending religious or Hebrew school. Synagogues vary in the number of years required, but generally request children start their education by the third or fourth grade. Their education will include Torah study, learning about Jewish practice, history and values, and learning the Hebrew language. A year before the ceremony, students often begin working with a tutor or in smaller groups at their synagogues to focus on the Torah portion that is read during their bar or bat mitzvah service.

Students may also be asked to complete a study or volunteer project. Especially for a child of intermarried parents, these can provide an opportunity for the student to incorporate their dual heritage. Examples include a joint project with a church or mosque, or teaching a class on shared values from different religions or how their Torah portion compares to the equivalent story in the Quran.

While their child is preparing, parents can prepare themselves as well. Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff, in an article on InterfaithFamily.com (“Interfaith Families and Bar/Bat Mitzvah: Questions and Opportunities”), points out that emotional and religious dynamics often come to the surface for interfaith couples as this milestone event approaches. Based on his suggestions, here are some questions parents might ask themselves:

### What has been my commitment to my child's Jewish life?



Being present as a witness and supporter is as important as being an active participant.

## Family Participation

The various denominations of Judaism (Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, etc.) differ in their policies on participation of family members and friends who are not Jewish. Many congregations have a booklet explaining their policies on family participation. If there is no booklet, it is best to speak to the rabbi or educational director.

Again based on Rabbi Nemitoff's suggestions, here are some questions to guide your conversation:

*May relatives of other religions open the ark (an enclosed area where the Torah is kept) or dress the Torah (wrapping the Torah with a special cover and ornaments)*

*May a relative who is not Jewish read an English prayer or blessing*

*Has the synagogue designed rituals to involve family members who are not Jewish in the ceremony, such as the giving of the prayer shawl (known as a tallit or tallis)*

*If the Torah is passed through the generations – from grandparent to parent to the bat or bar mitzvah child – may the parent and grandparents who are not Jewish take part*

Relatives from all parts of the family can help with the preparations for the bar or bat mitzvah and serve as greeters at the synagogue. They can welcome guests; give out head coverings known as *kippot* or *yarmulkes*, programs or prayer shawls (*tallitot*, *talleisim*, the plural of tallit and tallis respectively).

Make sure that all family members know that their presence at the ceremony is important, and that their contribution to the child's upbringing has been essential to bringing the 13-year-old to this accomplishment, by honoring them at the celebration meal.

## Helping Guests Feel Comfortable

All guests at a bat or bar mitzvah ceremony are likely to feel more welcomed if they understand the ceremony and Jewish practices. Some synagogues will already have a pamphlet that you can use. If not, you can help put your guests at ease and explain your synagogue's customs and rules by creating an information sheet that can be mailed to them before the ceremony. Here is a sample:

You can also prepare a program, to be handed out at the synagogue, that will help guests understand more about the ceremony. Some synagogues will have these on hand. If yours does not, or if you would like to make your own, the program can be a simple summary prepared at home or a formal keepsake program with more in-depth explanations.

You may want to include:

An explanation of the tradition of the bar or bat mitzvah to help guests appreciate the holiness and significance of the ceremony.

An outline of the service, including page numbers.

Guests also enjoy knowing the relationship of the participants to the bar or bat mitzvah child.

An explanation of the items in the sanctuary.

A glossary of basic terms used during the service.

### A FEW CLUES FOR THOSE UNFAMILIAR WITH JEWISH WORSHIP AND BAR OR BAT MITZVAHS

WORSHIP SERVICES START AT 10 A.M. AND END AT 1 P.M.

THE TORAH SERVICE BEGINS AT 11 A.M. DURING THIS SECTION OF THE SERVICE, NO ONE CAN ENTER THE SANCTUARY.

ALL HEBREW PRAYERS ARE TRANSLITERATED IN OUR PRAYER BOOK SO YOU CAN FOLLOW ALONG. THE PRAYER BOOK OPENS FROM WHAT IS USUALLY THE BACK SIDE, AS HEBREW IS READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT INSTEAD OF LEFT TO RIGHT.

ATTIRE IS WHAT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE FOR CHURCH SERVICES OR BUSINESS CASUAL ATTIRE. PRAYER SHAWLS & HEAD COVERINGS ARE OPTIONAL.

THE CONGREGATION IS ASKED TO STAND, AS A SIGN OF RESPECT, WHENEVER THE TORAH (FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES) IS TAKEN OUT OF THE ARK.

PLEASE TURN OFF ALL CELL PHONES & PAGERS.

SMALL CHILDREN ARE WELCOME, BUT NEED TO BE QUIET DURING THE TORAH SERVICE & SERMON.

SMOKING IS NOT ALLOWED ON SYNAGOGUE PROPERTY.

A wide variety of sample guides can be found at:  
[www.interfaithfamily.com/barmitzvah](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/barmitzvah).

## Including Your Child's Interfaith Heritage At The Celebration

The festive meal and celebration following the bar or bat mitzvah is a perfect time to involve all the relatives who did not have a part in the religious ceremony.

Relatives can speak about the values that guide their lives and their desire to pass those values down through the generations. If there is a family memento that symbolizes these values, they can "ritually" hand it to the child.

Create a party that embraces the family's multicultural heritage. Traditional ethnic foods, music and entertainment can make the celebration memorable.

If they are reluctant to speak themselves, honor relatives who were not recognized at the ceremony by speaking about their importance to your family and how their values are reflected in the child's accomplishments.



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**InterfaithFamily**'s mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

**InterfaithFamily** offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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