

## **THE BAR/BAT MITZVAH YEAR – A GUIDEBOOK**

### **MAY, 2007**

This is a guidebook to help families know the goals and expectations of the Bar/Bat mitzvah year. This booklet will address many of the common questions families have and will help families in their planning throughout the year. Your feedback and help in broadening the scope of this guidebook are welcome.

A glossary of terms is on page 6.

#### **1) SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND TUTORING**

The Bat/Bar Mitzvah class meets on Wednesday afternoons from 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. The class normally ends with the end of the Hebrew School year. B. Mitzvah students are expected to participate in the education program, which meets from 6:30 until 8 p.m. on Wednesdays, and are invited to join the Youth Group. The Etz Hayim youth group is affiliated with NFTY, a program of the Union of Reform Judaism.

Attendance at class is required. If a student is absent five times between the beginning of the year and March 15 their B. Mitzvah date may be in jeopardy. If they are absent three times in that period a member of the Education Committee will call to discuss the situation with the parents. We will have a sign in sheet at class to record attendance for both the B. Mitzvah class and the education program that follows.

Attendance at Shabbat services is an integral part of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Students must attend a minimum of 12 services during the year leading up to the ceremony. Students must sign in when they attend services. If they have not attended at least 6 services between the High Holy Days and the beginning of February, the family will need to meet with the Rabbi and/or the Education Chair. Please note that attendance at High Holy Day Services does not count toward this total. If you attend services at another synagogue, please inform the rabbi so he can include this in number of total services attended. If this requirement is not met, it may be necessary to reschedule the B. Mitzvah.

Services are held every Shabbat evening and 2 Shabbat mornings per month. Services may vary in style and may include a speaker, a meal or study time. When parents join their children at services it helps model behavior for the children. It helps assure a minyan so that the children regularly experience a service that is comparable to the service they will lead for their Bat/Bar Mitzvah. It helps parents know how their children are progressing.

Individual tutoring begins approximately 4 months before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and is in addition to the class time. The tutoring, 45 minutes per week, is focused primarily on the chanting of the Haftara and the Torah readings. If you wish your child to have more tutoring, the rabbi can help you locate qualified tutors. Also, parents who know the service and/or the chant of the Haftara may choose to tutor their own child in consultation with the rabbi.

The rabbi will make CDs for the service. Students will learn the trope for the haftara. The rabbi will make tapes or CDs of the Haftara and Maftir late in the process. The recommendation is that they not be used for learning the material, but held until late in the year as an aid for polishing the student's reading and performance skills. The goal is that our students work on reading the text, not memorization. Commercial tapes and computer programs are available; please consult the rabbi before investing in one.

#### **2) GOALS**

The over-riding goal for the year is to give the student the positive and successful experience of being accepted into the Jewish community as an adult. They will lead a part of the service and will be accepted to the community with a presentation from a member of the board.

I have three major educational goals for the Bat/Bar Mitzvah year. First is the development and polishing of synagogue skills, including the ability to lead services, chant Haftara and Torah, know how to use a Tallit and how to perform various skills around the Torah. Second is to know the broad outlines of the service, be familiar with the choreography of the service and what types of activity and prayer are associated with the different sections of the service. Third is to experience Torah discussions and to develop a D'var Torah as preparation for writing their own speech.

One other goal that has been suggested in past years is a Tzedakah project for the class. Based on past experience, this goal will only be met if there is parental leadership to help organize and carry through such a project.

### 3) **BAR/BAT MITZVAH RESOURCES:**

There are a variety of good resources available on the web and for purchase.

A site known as the School House has pages for learning Hebrew at <http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Dell/7736/school.html>

At NJOP you can see the Alef-Bet and hear each letter sounded out: <http://www.njop.org/choicealeph.htm>

A fuller introduction to whole language can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/3034/ivridx2.htm>

The Hebrew text for Haftarah portions can be found on-line at <http://www.exc.com/CL/index.html> and then click on "Tanach on Demand," to chose your particular text. An English text can be found on-line at <http://www.jtsa.edu/community/parashah/jpstext/>, and then pick your particular haftarah from the index list. The site, Virtual Cantor, <http://www.virtualcantor.com/index.htm>, has many of the prayers chanted, often using the tunes we use at Etz Hayim.

ORT maintains an excellent site, Navigating the Bible, which includes a Bar Mitzvah tutor section. The one reservation I have is that the trope taught at that site is different from what I teach. So I do not recommend it unless you are working with someone who will follow that trope program. But the other resources on the site are quite good. The site is <http://bible.ort.org/intro1.asp?lang=1>

There are several software programs available, though I have no experience with them. Folks at the Jewish bookstores in Brookline may be able to help – either Israel Bookstore or KolBo – both on Harvard Street.

### 4) **MATERIAL COVERED AND EXPECTATIONS**

I hope to prepare our students to lead various sections of the service including the morning blessings, the shema, the Torah service and the Aleynu. The students will learn the trope (chanting) for the Haftara and will learn to chant their particular portion. They will not learn the trope for the Torah reading (approximately 3 verses), but will learn that by memorization during the last weeks of the their training. My reasoning is that the two sets of music are very similar and I want to avoid confusion.

The students will write a speech to present during their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The rabbi will remind the student of the need to write this speech as the service nears. It is the rabbi's recommendation that this speech be written by the student with the support of the parent. A possible generic outline for the speech is: a) This day is important to **me** because .....; b) During this process **I** learned ..... – This is a place to talk about the Haftara or Torah portion, the experience of going through this training, or some other aspect of the Hebrew School experience; c) Thanks to those special people who have been important in the course of coming to this day.

This is not a contest and it is understood from the outset that not every student will have the ability to do all of these parts. That is fine. Each student will conduct that part of the service that the Rabbi determines they are competent and comfortable leading. The goal is that each student will feel successful at what they do, not that they measure themselves against any other student.

## 5) FAMILY PARTICIPATION

Throughout the year parents are encouraged to ask about their children's progress. They are encouraged to participate in services and to listen to their child practice the reading and chanting. There is a lot of material covered and our children learn it more easily if they work steadily through the year.

If families have a particular trope, chant or music that they have as their own, we would like to encourage them to teach their own child. It helps preserve and teach about Jewish diversity. It truly makes this rite of passage a passing on of the tradition from one generation to the next.

Parents should recognize that as the date of the Bat/Bat Mitzvah nears school grades may fall. It may be that other extra-curricular activities need to be curtailed. The student is appropriately investing a great deal of effort preparing for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the time has to come from somewhere. Please encourage your child and let them know that this is a family priority. Let them know you recognize the choices and the cost this may have for grades or other activities. If you can encourage the school to help ease the burden, please do so.

At the service there are a variety of ways in which the family may take part, and that will be quite individual. Some givens exist. There are traditionally 7 aliyot before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah comes to the Torah, and these usually come from the family. Anyone who comes to the Bima for an honor should wear a tallit and kippa. Other honors may include a person to open the ark at the beginning of the Torah service, two gabbais (though one should be from within the congregation), a person to lift the Torah and to wrap the Torah, and someone to open the ark as the Torah is returned. A sample sheet of honors that can be used for planning is attached.

There are a number of other places in the service that can be read by members of the family. Some families have honored non-Jewish members of their family with readings of Psalms or with other English readings that come at various parts of the service. Specifics can be discussed with the Rabbi as the date of the B. Mitzvah nears.

Some families choose to have the Torah – as it is taken from the ark – passed from generation to generation. Some parents choose to address their child during the service. Some families have songs they want sung or other members of the family they want to take part (for example, siblings). These questions can be discussed individually.

**No photography of any kind is allowed during any part of services.** Photos may be taken after the event.

## 5) PROGRAMS AND OTHER PRINTED MATERIAL FOR THE SERVICE

We currently own a dozen Humashim and about 150 prayerbooks. There will be sufficient prayerbooks, but not Humashim. Some families have photocopied the Torah and Haftara selection for distribution at the service. We urge families that choose to do this to create a neutral cover that can be used in the future so that we do not have to recycle the copies every time they are made.

Some families have created programs designed to explain parts of the service. Some of these programs have included prayers, page numbers for the service or selections from the Torah/Haftara reading. The rabbi can help develop a program or the photocopied portions for the Torah service.

## 6) MAZON, A JEWISH RESPONSE TO HUNGER AND OTHER TZEDAKAH

Mazon is a Jewish organization which is actively combating hunger in the world. Their primary focus is on providing food for hungry people in America. They also have an international component to their program and work on preventative and educational programs. Mazon gets the bulk of its donation from families across the nation who donate 3% of the cost of a simcha – an affair like a Bat/Bar Mitzvah or other life-cycle event. You may wish to consider supporting MAZON as a part of your family's celebration.

In the winter of 2001 the board of Etz Hayim voted to become a MAZON partner. That means we will provide you with information about MAZON and how you can support their program, should you choose to do so.

Similarly, many simchas these days include the obligation of Tzedaka as a part of the celebration. Some students have chosen to ask that presents be in the form of donations to selected charities. Others have pledged their personal support to a certain cause. In the past we have had a number of students make a pledge to a given charity and announce their gift as a part of their B. Mitzvah speech. I urge this possibility as a full family discussion.

#### **7) SHABBAT SERVICES, ONEG SHABBAT & KIDDUSH**

It is the obligation of the community to welcome the Bar/Bat Mitzvah into the adult Jewish community. Therefore it is a given that the entire Etz Hayim community is encouraged to attend and to welcome our young people as they mark their B. Mitzvah. We extend that invitation through the newsletter and other announcements. The family is invited to light candles on Friday night; the student will lead three prayers on Friday night and take a more active role in the Saturday service. We regularly schedule programs for Friday night, including speakers. Friday evening programs may coincide with Bat/Bar Mitzvah weekends. Speakers will not change the family's participation in the services. We also have a monthly Family service that begins at 6:30. That schedule also will continue through the B. Mitzvah season. Occasionally we do have baby-namings that would fall on a Shabbat morning. If so, one aliyah would be reserved for that family.

Most families provide the snack for both the Friday evening Oneg Shabbat and for the Saturday morning Kiddush following services. We require that the family provide at least a simple Kiddush on Saturday morning regardless of whether there is a formal reception following or not. All services are public and not all attendees will be invited to a family's private reception. We do, however, wish to assure that everyone who attends the service has the opportunity to partake of the Mitzvah of kiddush.

Should a family not wish to provide the Oneg Shabbat for Friday evening we will assign families to that week's service as we do for the remainder of the year.

#### **8) RECEPTIONS**

Receptions can be planned which are either very simple or very elaborate. Some receptions have been held in backyards, others in various of the restaurants in the area. The main consideration is that this is a celebration for a 13 year-old child.

Some families offer a lunch at the synagogue. This has been very successful and encourages the community to participate in welcoming your child into the adult Jewish community of Etz Hayim Synagogue. Arrangements for the use of the social hall must be made directly with the Church office. They can be reached at 432-2120.

#### **9) AVAILABLE FROM THE SYNAGOGUE GIFT SHOP**

Many of the items you may wish to purchase in preparation for your Bar/Bat mitzvah can be ordered through the synagogue. These include Tallisim, kippot, invitations, and specialized paper goods, Benchers, tallis clips, books and music. Using the gift shop is a convenient way to consolidate your shopping for these items and directly benefits the synagogue.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

A Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a celebration held simultaneously within the community, within the extended family and within the nuclear family. Each of those groupings offers a special opportunity for joy and a particular challenge. Life cycle events are political and you may find that too many people are willing to tell you of their expectations and needs. It helps if you can be clear about what elements are important to you and your child, and which elements are open for negotiation.

The Bat/Bat Mitzvah is a spiritual event, and that can sometimes get lost among the details of planning for this day. I recommend the book, **Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah**, by Jeffrey Salkin, as a useful guide in creating a celebration that is spiritual and joyful. He has also published a companion volume, **For Kids – Putting God on Your Guest List**. A second recommended book is by Judith Davis, **Whose Bar/Bat Mitzvah is this Anyway? A Guide For Parents Through a Family Rite of Passage**.

The spiritual dimension is often expressed by what gives meaning to your event. You might consider that even the guest list is a place for considering the spiritual import of the day. For example, it represents who we count as family and friends. It also offers the opportunity to reach out in a healing way to individuals within your family. Similarly the invitation can express the value you place on this religious milestone as symbolized by the text and graphics you choose. The key element is that you take the time to discuss the meaning of how you design your event, and the values imbedded within it.

The Bat/Bar Mitzvah is a rite of passage, an initiation into the adult Jewish community. In reality the child often has a difficult time seeing the passage. From their point of view there may be little change in their life pre- and post-ceremony. It is worth considering ways in which you can help make that transition real and concrete for your child. If we can affirm our children's passage into adulthood, perhaps they will not feel compelled to act out dangerous adult behavior to prove their adulthood to others.

With all of the preparations – for the child and the parents – it sometimes seems hard to remember that this is a time to enjoy. But it is. Set aside time and place within this year to mark the changes and to have your own time to enjoy this momentous celebration in the life of your family.

**GLOSSARY:**

**TORAH** – The Five Books of Moses, the first of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible. Each week during the course of the year a parasha (section) of the Torah is read according to a pre-set schedule. At Etz Hayim Synagogue we do not regularly read the entire portion, but a selection of between 25-40 verses.

**HAFTARAH** – The completion of the Torah reading with a selection from the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. The selections are set by tradition and have a thematic relation either to a topic within the Torah reading or to the particular time of the year.

**MAFTIR** – The very last reading from the Torah portion which serves as a bridge between the reading of the Torah and the Haftara.

**TALLIT** – The prayer shawl which is worn at morning services by Jews over the age of 13. Traditionally it was limited to men, but the rabbi encourages both men and women to wear a Tallit. The rabbi requires that those who come on the Bima wear a head covering and Tallit.

**D'VAR TORAH** – A “word” of Torah, really a discussion or exploration of a lesson from the Torah.

**TZEDAKAH** – While commonly translated charity, its core meaning is justice. It covers any act which service to help others, whether that be a gift of money or a gift of effort.

**SHACHARIT** – The morning service. In this context it refers particularly to the section of the service from the Borechu (call to prayer) until the beginning of the Torah service.

**AMIDAH**—The standing silent prayer which is a part of all services. The traditional Shabbat morning service includes a Shacharit amidah which precedes the Torah service and a Musaf (additional – in honor of the occasion of Shabbat) amidah which follows the Torah service.

**ALEYNU** – One of the closing prayers of the service. It speaks of one’s obligation to praise the Creator of the universe and anticipates a time when all the world will come to acknowledge the Creator and live in peace.

**TROPE** – The signs which indicate the chanting of the Torah or the Haftara.

**ALIYAH** – The honor of being called up to the Torah. On a Shabbat morning there are 7 aliyot, plus the maftir. Each person called to the Torah recites a blessing before and after the reading. We have a card on the Bima with the blessings in transliteration.

**BIMA** – The raised platform from which the service is led.

**KIPPA** – The head covering, also known as a yarmulke. We encourage both men and women to wear a kippa during services.

**GABBAI** – The individuals who help arrange and conduct the Torah service. The main tasks of the Gabbais are to assure that the Torah scroll does not roll off the reading table, to follow the reading and see that no mistakes are made, and to help each person as they come up for their aliyah. Traditionally there are two gabbais.

**HUMASH(IM)** – The book which contains the readings of the Torah and the Haftara. The book usually includes various commentaries on the text. This book is different from the prayerbook.

**SIMCHA** – A joyous event.

**ONEG SHABBAT** – Literally, the joy of Shabbat. It refers to the reception that follows the evening service.

**KIDDUSH** – Specifically the prayer that sanctifies the occasion. A kiddush prayer is recited over wine (or grape juice) at both the evening and the morning service. It also refers to the snacks or reception which follows the morning service.

**MITZVAH** – While in Yiddish the term refers generically to a good deed, in Hebrew the word means specifically a Divine command. A Bar/Bat Mitzvah is one who accepts their own responsibility for the performance of the Mitzvot.

## BAR/BAT MITZVAH HONORS

The Rabbi needs a list of the aliyot and other honors on the week preceding your Bat/Bar Mitzvah service.

**ALIYOT:** In some communities the first two aliyot are reserved for a Cohen or a Levi. Some also maintain a custom of not calling a parent and a child in sequential order. While neither of these considerations are enforced at Etz Hayim Synagogue, you may choose to do so if you wish. It is helpful if you provide both the English and Hebrew names for those being honored.

Aliyah 1 (Cohen) \_\_\_\_\_

Aliyah 2 (Levi) \_\_\_\_\_

Aliyah 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Aliyah 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Aliyah 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Aliyah 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Aliyah 7 \_\_\_\_\_

Maftir (reserved for the B. Mitzvah student) Hebrew name \_\_\_\_\_

**Gabbais (optional):** Two Gabbais are traditional. They both need to be able to follow the Hebrew reading. At least one should be from within our community.

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**Hagbah & Galilah:** These are the people who lift and wrap the Torah. Whoever lifts the Torah should be able to lift a heavy weight.

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**If you have requests** fore readings, music or other specifics, you should make individual arrangements with the rabbi.

### **From Rabbi Jack Bloom**

I wrote this piece a couple of years ago. It has served in some places as an intro into Haazinu. You're welcome to use it with proper attribution.

Jack H. Bloom

He was 13 and pudgy, standing in a suit that itched, bought from Bobby's Clothing Store on Canal Street. Bobby's specialized in outfitting husky boys. He was thinking more about the kiddush that was to follow than what he was doing. It was his Bar Mitzvah day and he was reading (or more accurately, reciting from memory) the Torah portion – Haazinu. Thank G-d and his birthdate – it was really short. The aliyot were just a few verses long. He was doubly lucky, because Mr. Rappaport had insisted in his antiquated way, that the entire seventh grade, each and every one, learn Haazinu by heart. As classmate after classmate struggled to recite the right words, he could, with just the inkling of a smirk, rattle it off. To be fair to him, he had to learn a special trope for Haazinu. That was burden enough. But it had become part of him. And every year thereafter, when he could, he would chant the poem in any synagogue that would have him.

He was chanting Moses' great ode, Haazinu. "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!" A visionary's poem! Breathtaking scope! Peoples destinies decided! The fate of nations hanging in the balance! The Bar Mitzvah boy understood little of it. Everyone said it was too tough to understand anyway. Even Mr. Rappaport said so. Maybe Mr. Rappaport had assigned it by heart because of the verse at the end of Haazinu, "Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children, that they may observe Faithfully all the terms of this Teaching." For this is not a trifling thing for you; it is your very life.

Mr. Rappaport took such things seriously. This was no trifling matter. He would have it be a part of us. Memorized. When Moses delivered Haazinu he didn't have to learn it by heart. He knew it by heart. The words came from his heart. They were his. Moses just spoke the poem, teaching as he went. Moshe Rabaynu, our peerless teacher, who against all odds had brought the people Israel to the very edge of The Promised Land. Moses, who maneuvered between an ingrate people and their explosive ally who had more than once threatened to destroy them all. Moses, master mover of men and yes, let it be said, of God. God's friend and intimate; awesome leader of God's People. Yet at the end of the ode, in full view of the promise about to be realized, Moses hears the fateful words the Bar Mitzvah boy dares in his ignorance recite: "You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend. . . . . for you broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people. You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it.

He didn't understand it when he stood in his Bobby's suit and he doesn't understand it now. How could Moses who envisioned the whole thing, who led the trek through the desert for forty years, be turned away on account of such trivia. OK, so he hit the rock (probably hurt his hand) instead of talking to it, to get water for his people. Big Deal!!! A small thing!!! Too great a punishment for a trivial offence, not forgotten by the God of justice, nor forgiven by the God of compassion. He is denied the prize for not having sanctified God's name in the midst of the people Israel!

He didn't know if he would understand it if he lived to Moses' 120. Nor did he care. It was enough to just get to the end of the Torah portion without any mistakes. And to get downstairs for the herring in sour cream.

Fifty years later he understands a bit more, though not very much. There have been glimpses of meanings. Learning it by heart did something. It comes in his dreams and enters his musing from time to time. He knows that though the big vision is crucial, little things matter. They count big time. Kind words he said to others, words others offered him, made a difference. A smile, a note, a bit of praise and appreciation all lingered. He knows that he liked them when he got them, but though it was so easy, he often failed in giving them.

He's learned that though he needs to keep his eye on the goal, he needs to attend to the little things at the same time. And that's a tough balancing act. He's learned that we fail when success is in our grasp and succeed when failure is at the door. And that we are magnificent in both. He's seen that we're both holy

and mundane, saint and sinner, generous and stingy, incredibly vicious and supremely kind, each of us and all of us. He's recognized that though we get lost in the little things, we dare not ignore them, For it's in the little things that we sanctify God's name in the midst of our people.

He understands a bit more and then only sometimes; like Moses we're destined to die without the prize, and that the prizes we do get are often not worth the pursuing. He has seen big prizes lost by small acts. He's noticed that for brief shining moments we succeed, and that we make promises to our selves that we intend to keep and don't. That things we can't help impede us. And that that's just the way it is. We're more human than not. Over fifty years he had learned something – sometimes.

He had learned Haazinu by heart. Mr. Rappaport's pedantic vision and the luck of his birthdate had seen to that. Long after his Bar Mitzvah he was reading Haazinu with the confidence of having done it fifty times. Pretty soon it would be kiddush time and he could have some herring in sour cream. But now his wife's caring concern about animal fat would deny him that prize too. Still, he could taste the herring as the words, planted in him long ago, came out of his mouth. He had never guessed and didn't know now, how they would bloom.

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Jack H. Bloom, Ph.D.