

Dear JRC Families,

Mazel tov! This is a very exciting time in your family's life, and we are thrilled to celebrate you and your child through the Bnai Mitzvah process at JRC. We know that this can be a time in your family full of activity – between middle school, homework, many activities and commitments, and a busy life, we are happy to work with you to make this experience as meaningful as it can be. Our Jewish education program celebrates Judaism that not only includes contemporary voices and interpretations, but encourages questions, looks for deeper meaning, and engages to make meaning out of our rich traditions. It is our hope that the Bnai Mitzvah process will not only engage and guide the child through this process, but the entire family.

#### What does it mean to become Bar/Bat Mitzvah?

Becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah will mean different things to different families and children, because Judaism means different things to different people. Just as there is no “one way” to be Jewish, there is no one way to make meaning out of claiming one's Jewish identity as one's own.

Some people connect through prayer. Some people connect through the study of Torah and other texts. Some people connect through food, flavors, and holiday celebrations. Some work to achieve social justice as their primary Jewish practice. Some connect through Hebrew, some through Yiddish, some through music and meditation, and some through silence. At JRC, we connect to Judaism in all of these ways and more. Part of what we hope to impart to our children is the diversity of practice and exposure to a wide variety of Jewish expressions, guiding them to find their own place and voice in the fabric of the Jewish people.

To become bar/bat mitzvah means to literally become a “child of the commandments.” More than being considered a “Jewish Adult” (a confusing and cliché phrase in a society in which parents are in charge and our 13 year olds are far from adulthood), becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah involves making a commitment to Jewish practice, the Jewish people, and to being part of Jewish traditions. We hope to nurture a sense of obligation in our Bnai Mitzvah, an awareness that their Jewish identity is connected to a family, and community, a congregation, and a larger Jewish world. It is our hope that by the time a child becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they will have begun to engage in the conversation of “what does being Jewish mean to me? And how will being Jewish be an important part of my life?”

#### Where did the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual come from?

Bar and Bat Mitzvah rituals evolved over time, from as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, through the Middle Ages. By the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century, the custom of calling a boy up to the Torah was established as the way of recognizing entry into manhood. The bar mitzvah boy would chant the blessings, all or part of the Torah portion of the week, and/or the haftarah section from the prophetic books. The bar mitzvah boy would often give a scholarly address on the Torah portion or some section of the Talmud. Then followed a gala feast, called *s'udat mitzvah* (“meal of celebrating the mitzvah”), to which family, friends, and the entire Jewish community would be invited.

The first girl to be called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah was Judith Kaplan in 1922. The daughter of an orthodox rabbi, her father (founder of Reconstructionist Judaism Mordecai Kaplan) called her to the Torah at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in New York. Since that time, the Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements call children of all genders to the Torah to celebrate becoming B'nai Mitzvah.

How does JRC celebrate Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals?

JRC celebrates Bnai Mitzvah rituals on Shabbat mornings in the context of our Shabbat Morning services. We believe that it is important that this life cycle ritual take place within the context of our synagogue community, both as a community that witnesses the Jewish life of the child, and that gathers to celebrate Shabbat and honor Jewish tradition together.

Our Bnai Mitzvah learn to chant from the Torah (5 Books of Moses/Hebrew Bible) and the Haftarah (prophetic texts), as well as lead portions of the *Shacharit* (morning) service. After learning their *Parshah* (Torah portion), they share a *Dvar Torah* (Torah teaching) with the congregation.

JRC's Bnai Mitzvah engage in learning about prayers, Torah text, Jewish rituals, and Social Justice. Each Bar or Bat Mitzvah contains some common rituals, while allowing for individual learning needs, goals, styles and creativities of each family. Families will work with the rabbi and cantor to make this ritual as meaningful as it can be for your family.