

B'nai Mitzvah Family Guide

Congregation Beth Israel of Media, PA

2019

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
Introduction & Goals.....	2
Tools for Living a Jewish Life	3
Student and Family Expectations.....	6
Preparation and Tutoring.....	8
Planning the Service.....	10
To Do List for Planning the Service.....	14
To Do List for Planning the Celebration.....	17
Acknowledgements	19
Glossary	20
Resource Materials for the Family Planning a Bar or Bat Mitzvah	21
Appendices	23

Introduction & Goals

At Congregation Beth Israel of Media (BI), we hope that your Bar or Bat Mitzvah experience will be a fulfilling part of your Jewish journey, whether you are the child or the parent. This guide is intended to help everyone prepare for this important rite of passage. We start with the big picture and go all the way down to the nitty gritty details.

Upon reaching the age of thirteen, a Jewish child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah - literally, “son or daughter of the *mitzvot* (commandments).” This means that the young person is now responsible for their own Jewish practice. It is traditional to celebrate this coming of age in the context of Shabbat morning services. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah leads the congregation in prayer, is called up for their first *aliyah*, chants from the Torah, and delivers a *D’var Torah* (word of Torah or teaching).

Preparation to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah extends far beyond developing the skills to be exercised on this momentous occasion. A young person will truly be ready to assume the responsibilities of a Jewish adulthood only if they understand the practices and values of Judaism. This broader goal is reflected in the expectations for preparation outlined in this guide. It is our hope that going through this process will strengthen a family’s ties to the Jewish community and foster a desire to continue a lifelong relationship with Judaism.

BI has also developed these goals and expectations for B’nai Mitzvah families in order to strengthen the BI community and the individual’s understanding of God and Torah. Just as each ancient Israelite contributed in their own way to the building of the *Mishkan* (tabernacle), we recognize that each of us today contributes to our community in different ways. Consider these preparation years a time to learn more about how to nurture a relationship with Jewish tradition, religion, and community.

Our goals, all of equal importance, are for the student and their family to:

- Foster a lasting relationship with the BI community and the Jewish community as a whole
- Understand the meaning and importance of mitzvot (commandments, Jewish practice)
- Celebrate Shabbat
- Appreciate the importance of Jewish education and study
- Deepen understanding of Torah, liturgy, and God
- Embrace the values of *tzedakah* (charitable giving), *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and *gemilut chasidim* (acts of loving kindness)

Words from our Teens

“Becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah completes you.”

“It makes you feel special and brings *nachas* (parental pride).”

“To be connected to Judaism, one needs to learn about it, and the process of preparing for your Bar or Bat Mitzvah helps you to do that.”

“It’s important to learn about Jewish culture and connection to community.”

“Learning the language is important because it connects you to the culture, Israel, the Torah, and the Bible.”

“Being in Hebrew School links you to the culture and knowledge. [Studying for Bar Mitzvah] is a lot of work and you have to be committed to it and want to do it. The preparation gives you a sense of accomplishment and makes you learn your own strengths. It is also rewarding to learn the language and words and to read from the Torah.”

Tools for Living a Jewish Life

Reconstructionist Judaism has its origin in the teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Rabbi Kaplan believed that Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. As we immerse ourselves in the many aspects of Jewish life (see Tools below), we draw from our rich history of text and traditions to guide us. We also use our communal creativity when we need to develop a meaningful contemporary Judaism. To learn more about Reconstructionist Judaism go to <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/learn/reconstructionism>.

Community

Judaism has always been a religion of community. Jewish culture has developed within the community and has added richness to Jewish life. The support of the community helps to make the joyous moments of life sweeter and the difficult ones easier to bear. Your BI community is here to provide support as you prepare for this wonderful, but sometimes stressful, *simcha*. We hope that your experience with the Jewish community in preparation for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah will help deepen your commitment to our BI community and to the Jewish community as a whole.

Mitzvot

When your child reaches the age of thirteen and becomes responsible for their own Jewish practice, it is important that they have knowledge of *mitzvot*, or Jewish practices, in order to assume this responsibility conscientiously. *Mitzvot* include ritual practices, as well as guidance for interpersonal behaviors. It is the parents' job to support their child in acquiring and applying this knowledge. Hebrew school education, adult education, family education, and individual or *chavurah* (small group) study are important ways for parents and children to learn about *mitzvot* and incorporating them in your lives. This learning can be transformative and can start or continue a lifetime of Jewish practice.

Shabbat

As it has been said: more than the Jewish people have preserved Shabbat, Shabbat has preserved the Jewish people. In the early days of the Jewish people, Shabbat or a weekly day for rest (*menucha*) was a foreign concept. The importance of Shabbat is made clear in Genesis; God finished creating the world and called the seventh day a holy day, and rested. The observance of Shabbat is sanctified within the Ten Commandments (fourth commandment). How wonderful a gift to be commanded to take a day of rest, even more so in our present hectic lives. A family's observance of Shabbat can take many forms, but it is essential to "remember and keep Shabbat." To learn more about Shabbat there are many educational opportunities offered at BI, and a starting-point bibliography is included with this guide. The rabbis are available to offer suggestions, as well.

Torah and Jewish Study

The rule book for Jewish living is the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses. Within it are the family stories of the first Jewish people, along with Moses and the Exodus story. In it, one can also find the basis for each mitzvah and guidelines for modern Jewish practice. Sometimes the word Torah is used to mean Jewish teaching in general and includes its many extensions and interpretations. These include the *Tanach* (Torah, Prophets and Writings), the Rabbinic texts including the *Mishnah* and *Gemarah*, and more modern interpretations that continue today.

Learning and study have always been valued within the Jewish community. The Torah and other Jewish texts can take a lifetime to study. Within a Reconstructionist community, examining the texts is often the starting point for policy discussions and decisions, so developing an appreciation for them is very important. It is our hope that the preparation for Bar or Bat Mitzvah, beginning with tutoring, meetings with the Rabbi, and Hebrew school and Family Education during the years leading up to the *simcha*, will support your continuing a lifelong practice of Jewish study.

Liturgy

Our liturgy is a script that can help us to pray, and is a reminder of how our ancestors related to God. Some of it is very old (*Sh'ma, Mi Chamocha*) and some of it is quite contemporary. At times, the combination of words and music can hit us in a deeply visceral way that transports us to another realm or to a godly place. It can be a source of comfort or inspiration. Families can cultivate familiarity with the liturgy by spending time in services and/or on

their own. The liturgy takes on more meaning when it is experienced often, as that familiarity allows each person to find its deeper meaning.

Tzedakah

In Jewish thought and tradition, material support for those in need is not a matter of “charity,” but a requirement. In the Bible, tzedakah means “righteous behavior” and is often paired with “justice.” Biblical prophets insisted that God has particular concern for those in need and the Bible is full of laws calling on farmers to leave aside some of their crops during the harvest for the poor and landless. Rabbinic Judaism used these laws as the basis for an extensive social welfare system built on individual initiative and shared responsibility with voluntary societies forming to care for the ill, provide for newlywed couples, house travelers, bury the dead, and offer interest-free loans to those in need. Judaism gives guidance on how much to give, how to minimize embarrassment to the recipient, and how to set priorities among competing demands for assistance¹. Now, while your family is preparing for this simcha, might be a good time to consider discussing a donation in honor of your good fortune and for an annual tzedakah plan (how much, what you value, what are your concerns, where to donate, etc.).

Tikkun Olam

The practice of repairing the world, or *tikkun olam*, and making it a better place has been an important part of Judaism for centuries. The phrase *tikkun olam* may have first appeared in the Mishnah, and also in the *Aleinu* prayer, where it expresses a hope of repairing the world through the establishment of the kingdom of God. Judaism believes that, not only do we have the ability to initiate change, we have the obligation to do so. Acts of *tikkun olam* provide us with a way to get involved and apply a Jewish response to contemporary issues. The focus may change with the times and changing problems of the world. This might include sheltering the homeless, helping the environment, looking out for the stranger, protecting those who are most vulnerable such as endangered communities and animals, supporting the state of Israel, and encouraging world peace. The ways to help are limited only by your imagination. *Tikkun olam* is about taking action, and not just our own action, but the instigation of others’ action, as well. Action so that some day, tzedakah is no longer necessary because society provides enough for everyone’s well being². In addition, working on a *tikkun olam* project as a family allows you to know the benefits of actively working together to repair our world. We encourage you to choose a project in which you work with a worthy organization that will, in turn, give you the opportunity to learn through that service. Your child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a great time to instill the knowledge that *tikkun olam* is a lifelong practice.

Gemilut Chasidim

Acts of lovingkindness can help make us conscious of our responsibility to take care of one another. The acts of lovingkindness attributed to God in the Torah are: providing clothes for the needy, visiting the sick, comforting mourners, accompanying the dead to the grave, providing the dowry for indigent brides, and offering hospitality to strangers. As you prepare for Bar or Bat Mitzvah, find ways to make *gemilut chasidim* a regular part of your life.

Celebrating in a Jewish Fashion

Celebrating life cycle events is quintessentially Jewish. Having a *seudat mitzvah*, or festive meal, is traditional, and many people enjoy a large celebration. However, an equally important value is that of *tzniut* (modesty) which can be a reminder that one does not need to have an expensive catering hall or fancy clothing to honor this occasion. Additionally, planning a celebration that respects the environment (e.g. minimizing waste) aligns well with our congregation’s commitment to the environment and Greenfaith initiative (more details on *page 13*). Contributing to *tzedakah* can also help to make the celebration especially Jewish. This hearkens back to biblical stories, such as that of Ruth, when the Israelites obeyed the commandment to leave the corners of the field for the hungry and poor. For this reason, some people choose to donate a portion of their gifts to a charitable organization and/or contribute three percent of the cost of your celebration to feeding the hungry. One suggested choice is Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger. (For details about Mazon, see the Resource list.)

¹ Adapted from Tzedakah 101 on the website “My Jewish Learning.”

² Adapted from “Judaism’s Call for Social Change” by Julie Chizewer Weill

God

Judaism allows for many different conceptions of God. A person's understanding of and relationship with God is an individual matter. We hope that your family will take some time to identify its current beliefs about God, and any moments of experiencing God, while recognizing that individual family members may have different understandings which can change and develop over time.

Family Thoughts and Questions

Consider writing down any thoughts about how your family might want to engage with or enact any of these Tools for Living a Jewish Life. Please also jot down any questions you may have for the rabbi, Education Director, tutor or teachers or other lay leaders.

Student and Family Expectations

The following expectations should be viewed through the prism of the goals and tools provided in the previous section. Fulfilling them reflects your family's commitment. We, in turn, are committed to each child's success and we recognize that there is a need for some flexibility. If you have questions about a particular expectation, feel free to discuss it with the [Rabbis](#), the [Education Director](#), or chair of the applicable committee (RPC, Education, Social Action, Facilities, Financial). A To Do List of tasks, with some guidance on when they could be done, starts on *page 14*.

Hebrew School Education and Family Education

At BI, formal education begins in preschool and kindergarten and we encourage families to start their Hebrew education as early as possible, with a suggested minimum of four years of Hebrew School. Those who start Hebrew school later may need additional private tutoring in order to catch up with their peers. [Please consult the school Education Director for assistance in that case.](#) Students should be in good academic standing as they approach the year prior to their *simcha* and continue in good academic standing until graduation from the *Zayin* class (7th grade).

Family Education sessions, and other inter-generational learning, attended by you and your child, are offered for each grade or for the school as a whole. They cover topics that are important for B'nai Mitzvah preparation, including: introduction to Torah study, appreciating the significance of becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah and other life cycle events, and Reconstructionist Judaism. These sessions will help reinforce the groundwork of earlier education and help the family to expand their base of Jewish knowledge. Each year, there are also many adult education opportunities available and you are warmly encouraged to partake.

Service Attendance and Liturgy

Families are encouraged to attend at least ten Shabbat services per year for at least the two years preceding the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It is important to attend a mixture of Friday night (*Kabbalat Shabbat*) and Saturday morning (*Shacharit*) services, in order to ensure familiarity with the liturgy and customs of Beth Israel. Many families have remarked how helpful it is to attend Shabbat services, including Bar/Bat Mitzvah services, in advance.

Shabbat and Mitzvot

Families are encouraged to develop and/or maintain a Shabbat ritual or practice. There are many rewarding ways to bring Shabbat into your family life. Your family can share Shabbat dinner most Friday nights, attend services on weekends, and dedicate time to family relaxation and connecting with each other. We also encourage you to explore adding other *mitzvot* into your daily life: eco-kashrut, tzedakah, visiting the sick, celebrating the holidays, taking care of the needy, the list goes on.

Community

We encourage each family to become fully involved with the BI community. Just as your child is involved in the community through school activities and a *tikkun olam* project, we encourage parents to join a committee of interest or help out with particular projects. Your family is expected to host the *kiddush* after services on the Saturday of your child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. You are also invited to host the *oneg* on the Friday night your child is leading prayers, especially if you have family attending and/or want to have something special for the *oneg*. For details see *page 11* and also the [online guidelines for hosting an oneg or kiddush](#). It is important to remember that members of the BI community will be present at services along with your invited guests, and that the *oneg* and *kiddush* are for all those present. To be inclusive, we recommend that you invite your child's entire Hebrew School class to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and *seudat mitzvah* celebration. Please sign up to usher (hand out prayer books) for one or two B'nai Mitzvah during the year to help build class community.

Tuition and Dues

Our community depends on the financial support of its members. **Please ensure that your financial obligations to BI are up to date by the time of your *simcha* (or other arrangements are made as described in the annual dues information).** If you have any questions, please contact the administrator or one of the [rabbis](#).

Preparation and Tutoring

Meeting with the Rabbi

Approximately two years before a child's 13th birthday, parents are invited to attend a group meeting with the Rabbi for an overview of the B'nai Mitzvah experience. At this meeting, or soon after, the date for your child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah will be scheduled. See the timeline in this guide for some considerations in choosing a date (*page 14*).

Individual students and families will meet with the Rabbi to discuss the meaning of becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah, their Torah portion, family participation, and other concerns. About six months before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the synagogue secretary will contact your family to set up the first meeting; feel free to contact the [office](#) if you would like to meet sooner. Generally, there is at least one meeting with the family and two with the child, but the Rabbi is happy to meet more often, if you are interested, and these sessions can include family Torah study.

Choosing a Tutor & General Preparation Suggestions

Choosing a tutor is an important decision to make in planning this event. Our [rabbis](#) and [Education Director](#) have the names of qualified tutors and can assist parents in finding an appropriate tutor for your child. Consider issues such as geography (you will be seeing this person once a week for many weeks) and temperament. Meet with the tutor to find out when she or he would want to start working with your child. The average length of time to prepare is a year. Some students appreciate more time. A longer study time allows for further learning. Tutors are paid for their time working with your child (and other members of your family, if desired). Subsidies for tutoring are available from the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund.

Tutors have guidelines for charting progress during the course of the preparation, and we encourage parents to be involved in helping their child to stay on track. We have received feedback from teens that it is more helpful to practice a little bit each day (10-30 min, for example), than to have to cram later. Parents should realize how much work is involved and be careful not to overcommit their children during the year leading up to their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. If desired, some tutors can work with other family members to teach them how to read Hebrew and to chant Torah for this special day.

Torah & Haftarah

Being called to the Torah for an *aliyah* (chanting the blessings before and after the Torah reading) is when a child marks becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. With a tutor's help, Bar and Bat Mitzvah students typically learn Torah trope and prepare to chant a Torah reading for their date. They will also prepare a *d'var Torah* to offer to the congregation on Saturday morning. Some students may also learn to chant a Haftarah portion with its blessings.

D'var Torah

When your child prepares and presents a *d'var Torah*, they are sharing with the community the knowledge gained from understanding the Torah and/or Haftarah portion. Students need support to write a *d'var Torah*. That support can come from the tutors, rabbis, Hebrew school Education Director, teachers, and/or other members of the congregation – it varies from student to student. It is a plus as well for parents to work with their children to research and discuss topics for the *d'var Torah*, creating another opportunity to strengthen your connection to Judaism. Parents and children should attend any family education sessions in 6th or 7th grade that provides an introduction to Torah study. Begin early, to allow enough time for research, reflection, writing and editing.

Liturgy

Students will become more familiar with the Shabbat service and learn the blessings for the *aliyah* and *tallit*. They will be given the opportunity to learn how to colead parts of the service. Family members will also have a role in both Friday night and Saturday morning services. We have gotten feedback from teens that they wanted their families to attend services more in the time before their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, so that they would become more familiar with the services. More details on family member participation can be found beginning on *page 10*.

Service-Leading Readiness

Leading prayers is not a performance, but there is anxiety for every child who has to get up in front of his or her friends, family, and congregation. To help ease this anxiety, it is useful to take advantage of opportunities for your child to lead prayers in front of the congregation before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah service. Often, Hebrew School classes will help lead parts of the service at Sunday morning prayers, or on the Saturday Shabbat services when Hebrew school is attending. Tutors can also schedule a time for your child to co-lead part of a service. Encourage and support your children when they have these opportunities.

Most tutors also schedule time in the month or so prior to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah to rehearse in the sanctuary, with reading from the Torah, holding and carrying the Torah, and leading prayers from the *bimah*. This rehearsal includes the whole family.

Tikkun Olam Project

Students are encouraged to research and choose a *tikkun olam* project that they will work on. They can discuss their project ideas with the [Rabbi](#), [members of the Social Action Committee](#), tutors, the [Hebrew School Education Director](#) and/or teachers. A *tikkun olam* project is primarily directed by the student, and includes direct contact with, and clearly benefits, another community, organization or person-in-need outside the student's home or regular circle. It's best to avoid direct solicitation for money. The project may be done as part of a group, or can build on projects that other students have started. We encourage each student to be creative and develop their project, based on their own interests or concerns. If you are looking for ideas, see the index for a [list of many projects](#) that have been done over the past decade or so, compiled by Carol Briselli, SAC chair 2016 - 2019. Also, the Social Action Committee can provide "seed money" funding through its Matt Coburn memorial program. Details and information on how to apply for funding can be found in the Resources on *page 22*. After completing your project, please submit a form ([included with this guide and also on the website](#)) to the Social Action Committee. You can also discuss the project and its significance in your *d'var Torah*.

Family Thoughts and Questions

Consider writing down any thoughts or questions you have about the expectations and preparation.

Planning the Service

Participation of Family and Friends

Friday Night

- Family members may take or assign the honors of lighting Shabbat candles and/or chanting *kiddush* (often this is done by the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, but could be an option for others as well). Some families participate in the service the night before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, while others choose another Friday night, in consultation with the [rabbi](#). The time of the Friday night service may vary, so plan to confirm the time of the Friday night service with the rabbi and BI calendar.

Saturday Morning

- *Torah Readers*: If you have family, friends, or fellow BI members who wish to chant Torah, please notify the [Torah reading coordinator](#), ideally six months in advance. This way, readings can be assigned to family and friends; the remainder will be assigned to our regular readers by the Torah reading coordinator. All Torah readers wear a *tallit* and *kipah*.
- *Aliyot*: Parents of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah are given the honor of assigning *aliyot* to Jewish family members or friends. The family may choose up to 4 *aliyot* (not including the child's *aliyah*). We are happy to offer group *aliyot* for family members, as well. Please review the [aliyah blessings](#) with your loved ones, as the Reconstructionist blessings vary slightly from the Conservative blessings. (Copies of the blessings are enclosed, they will be on the bimah, and are on the recording listed in the resources.) Please provide the Rabbi with a [list of names \(English and Hebrew\) of all those receiving an aliyah](#). Two *aliyot* are reserved for the congregation, one of which is usually for healing. All Jewish adults who receive an *aliyah* are invited to wear a *tallit* and *kipah*.
- *Other Opportunities*: Parents, grandparents and other close family may want to consider the following:
 - Placing the tallit on the Bar or Bat Mitzvah as he or she recites the blessing.
 - Handing the Torah from grandparents to parents to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah during the Torah service, signifying the concept of *dor v'dor* (generation to generation). (For additional opportunities for non-Jewish relatives, please see below.)
 - Offering words of blessing or congratulations to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah after they give the *d'var*. We suggest you speak for up to five minutes. It can be helpful to write this out in advance.
- These additional honors may be assigned to Jewish family members or friends ([instructions for some of these can be found in the appendix](#)):
 - Offering an English reading (you may include up to three total). There are many choices in the prayerbook and the Rabbi keeps a binder of multicultural English readings to choose from.
 - Opening and closing the ark at the beginning of the Torah service.
 - Passing out candy while the Torah is parading around the sanctuary (usually done by children).
 - Opening and closing the ark at the end of the Torah service.
 - *Hagbah* (lifting the Torah scroll).
 - *Gelilah* (dressing the Torah scroll).
 - Offering the student the gift from the congregation (a personalized *kiddush* cup), followed by brief remarks.

Participation of Family Members and Friends who are not Jewish

We are committed to being as inclusive as possible while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the Jewish service and respecting the beliefs of non-Jewish relatives. Non-Jews are encouraged to wear *kipot* (head coverings)

but not wear a *tallit* (prayer shawl). Non-Jewish relatives and friends are invited to participate in any of the following ways:

- Reading an English prayer (we include up to three).
- Accompanying a Jewish relative to the *bimah* for his or her *aliyah* or other Torah honor (they should not wear a *tallit* or recite the blessing).
- Assisting in placing the *tallit* on the shoulders of the child.
- Passing out candy while the Torah is parading around the sanctuary (usually done by children).
- Joining the rest of the family for the recitation of *kiddush* and *motzi*.

A non-Jewish parent may offer his or her child a personal blessing (see above) and/or read a prayer during the *aliyah* (Torah blessing) for parents.

Family Members with Special Needs

There is a wheelchair-accessible ramp that allows for anyone to ascend to our *bimah*. For those with diminished hearing, we offer a convenient headphone listening system, which provides additional amplification. This audio loop system is worn Walkman-style, with comfortable headsets. Further, for cochlear implants and for those wearing hearing aids with a built-in and enabled “telephone” feature (also known as a telecoil), the audio system is piped directly into the hearing aid. For those who need larger print, we have Vivitar illuminated magnifiers to borrow when reading from the prayerbook. The audio headsets and magnifiers can be found in the drawers on top of the book case in the foyer. For any of your guests who cannot be there in person, we have a system that live streams the audio of our services over the internet. More information and the link to streaming are on our website under [“Sanctuary Accessibility.”](#) Remind anyone listening from home to adjust for time differences - and that it will be dead air until the mics are turned on.

Changes in Honorees

Please communicate any last-minute changes in honorees directly to the rabbi to minimize any confusion.

Oneg and Kiddush

Your family is the host for the Saturday morning *kiddush* on the day of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. You are invited to host the Friday night *oneg* on the evening that your family has arranged to lead prayers, especially if you will have extra family attending or would like to provide something special. An *oneg* or *kiddush* typically includes wine and juice, challah, pastries and/or cookies and/or fruit. (If the Friday night service is at 6:30pm, the *oneg* is simpler - just wine and challah.) If you choose to do something more elaborate, please remember that the BI kitchen is dairy/vegetarian. You are responsible for pouring the wine and juice toward the end of the service (or having someone else do so). You are also responsible for cleaning up afterward. Some families pair up to exchange their assistance in setting up and cleaning up the *oneg* and *kiddush*; this can be a great help. You are welcome to use the coffee pots and paper goods that are already in the synagogue. If you want to have specific paper goods, please plan on purchasing and bringing them yourself. For additional details, please see [“How to Host an Oneg or Kiddush”](#) in the appendix or online.

Photography

We encourage you to [schedule non-Shabbat time](#) in our sanctuary to take pictures with your family. If you take pictures that day, it can either be done before services and completed no later than 9:30 am that morning, or after services are finished. No photography or videography, by professionals or family members, is permitted during services.

Candy

There is a long-standing tradition of showering a Bar or Bat Mitzvah with candy. This dates back to an association of Torah and honey (sweetness) from when *yeshiva* school children were learning their first lessons. If you choose to follow this tradition, please make sure that the candy you use is wrapped, soft, and kosher. No hard candy may

be used, since it can hurt people when thrown. (Sunkist Fruit Gems are a popular choice.) ***Absolutely no chocolate (including Tootsie Rolls) may be used, because it melts and cannot be cleaned up.*** The candy is usually passed out by family members' children who follow the Torah as it is carried around the sanctuary at the beginning of the Torah service.

Facilities Use

The sanctuary is usually set up with chairs for 150 people with four tables in the back for the *oneg* and *kiddush*. If you need additional chairs or tables, a facilities use form ([included with this guide and online](#)) should be filled out at least two weeks in advance. Any special instructions can be included on the form. You could also email this information to the [office secretary](#).

Beth Israel is also available to host all or part of your *simcha*. Tables can be set up downstairs to host a *kiddush* luncheon for about eighty people. The sanctuary can be set up for events after services on Saturday and can fit about 140 people. Tables and chairs may need to be rented. If you are planning to have dancing, a dance floor must be rented. If you are considering using the building for your *simcha*, notify the office as soon as possible to make sure that there are no scheduling conflicts with other events. The BI kitchen is kosher dairy. If a meat meal is to be served it must be kosher and the caterer needs to bring in all cookware, utensils and serving ware. For any questions, contact the office.

BIMAS

The Beth Israel Music Appreciation Society, the “house” Klezmer band, would be pleased and honored to play at your son or daughter’s Saturday morning service. Their presence adds to the festive atmosphere of the occasion, especially drawing in those guests unfamiliar with Jewish tradition and Shabbat services. Please email your request to the [BIMAS Coordinator](#) at least two months before the date, so your *simcha* will be on their schedule. BIMAS typically plays a few numbers before and after the service, plus “Simen Tov” after the Rabbi’s blessing of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. They are happy to play other appropriate music on request if there is enough time to prepare it (preferably at least two months). If they are unable to obtain the sheet music, you may be asked to provide it for them. A contribution to the [BIMAS fund](#) is always welcome (choose BIMAS in the drop down menu). This helps to pay for musical coaching and arranging, equipment, and additional sheet music to help increase their repertoire.

Tips For Guests and Creating a Booklet

To increase the comfort of guests attending your *simcha* at Beth Israel, we encourage you to share some information with them. Everyone is invited to wear a *kipah*, or other head covering, during services. In addition to being a part of Jewish tradition, wearing a *kipah* is also a sign of respect for our holy spaces and activities. Jewish adults are encouraged to wear a *tallit* to morning services. There is no applause during services. To show appreciation for a job well done, wish a person “*Yasher koach*” which means “May you go from strength to strength.” It is also customary to wish family members “*Mazal Tov*.” Please also remind your guests to silence all cell phones, pagers and alarms to respect our Shabbat space and to minimize distraction. Some families will include some brief notes about the service with their invitations.

The above information, along with explanations of the service, honors, *d’var Torah*, etc., can be included in a booklet that you create for your guests. These would be handed out in the lobby on the morning of the service. There are many samples in the office that you can use for guidance in creating a booklet. [A formatted template is also available.](#)

Catering and other Service Providers

In the Beth Israel office, there is a binder called B’nai Mitzvah Resource Guide. It has a list of service providers that have been recommended by members of the congregation. Please use this to help guide you to reliable photographers, florists, caterers, transportation providers, printers, musicians, tallit suppliers or crafters, kipot suppliers, Bimah food baskets, etc. There is also a [blank feedback form](#) in this guide, for you to fill and let us know about your experiences with providers (make as many copies as you need). We would like to keep this information as current and complete as possible so that it will be available to future celebrants. Return filled out forms to the [office](#).

Leftover Food

Please make sure to have a plan for how to handle any leftover food from your *oneg* and/or *kiddush*. Bringing it home is a great way to feed any family and friends who are spending time with you during the weekend and beyond. If you wish to donate leftovers to the synagogue for events that may be happening over the following few days, please make sure to pack them up, label them with the date and place them in the kitchen, refrigerated if necessary. **Notify the Hebrew School Education Director, Education, Religious Practice Committee and/or Adult Education chair(s) so that someone knows when food is left at the synagogue and is available to use for additional events.** This will ensure that it gets used before it spoils, and will minimize waste. Another place to consider for food donations is the Life Center of Eastern Delaware County Shelter in Upper Darby, where we host the food service a few times a year (610-734-5770). This is especially useful for large amounts of leftovers that you or BI might not be able to use before the food spoils. You would be responsible for transporting the food to the Life Center.

Greenfaith Certification

Beth Israel is a certified Greenfaith congregation; as such, congregational events are planned so that the environment is respected and waste is minimized. As you plan your *simcha*, please keep these values in mind in the choices you make for tableware, beverages and other potentially wasteful elements. Some items you might consider avoiding: plastic balloons or favors, disposable water bottles, plastic straws, excess plastic.

Contributions and Grateful Guests

Families often wish to make charitable donations (*tzedakah*) in gratitude for the experience of any *simcha*. There are many different Beth Israel funds accepting donations, should you wish, in addition to many other charitable organizations (see Other Tikkun Olam resources for some suggestions). Jane Laffend, who is a member of the Beth Israel endowment fund and a proud grandparent, was really moved when her grandchildren had their B'nai Mitzvah and wanted to support their synagogues with a donation in gratitude, but there was no information on how to do so. Should any of your family feel so moved, consider suggesting they make a [donation to our endowment fund](#) as a way to continue *l'dor vador* (from generation to generation).

To Do List for Planning the Service

There are many details to remember when planning for this event. This timeline provides some guidance on how far in advance things can be completed or considered, based on the input of some parents who have recently celebrated their child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It is always possible to get everything done in a shorter time, if needed.

Earliest:

- Get a Date: This is done as part of a meeting with the rabbi and other families whose children share the same birth year. At this meeting, the rabbi will also discuss the significance of and preparation for becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Some issues to consider in selecting a date include the following:
 - your child's birthday, often using the Hebrew birthday as a guide
 - the Torah portion for the particular date
 - religious and other holidays, including school holidays
 - school vacations (you don't want to pick a date when all of your child's friends will be out of town)
 - weather (some people avoid winter dates because of concern over travel for out-of-town guests)

It may be good to think about what is optimal for your family before you meet with the rabbi and the rest of the Hebrew school class parents.

- Decide whether you would like to participate in the Friday night service on the night before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, when possible, or on another Friday. Let [oneg coordinator](#) know if you will be hosting the oneg that night.
- Attend Shabbat services as often as possible. Examine your family Shabbat rituals and decide if there are any additions you would like to make.
- Attend Family Education and intergenerational programs for your child's class.
- Have your child continue in good academic standing in Hebrew school.
- Look for ways to become involved in synagogue activities.
- Get a tutor and review expectations. (See prior section on "Preparation and Tutoring.")
- Begin to work with your child to research and choose a *tikkun olam* project. The [rabbi](#) and/or [Social Action Committee](#) can be resources to help decide on a project. (See prior section on "Tikkun Olam Project" and/or this list of previous [Tikkun Olam projects](#))
- Start thinking about a *tallit*. Some families use an heirloom; others purchase a new *tallit*. Sources include Jewish gift shops, synagogue shops, museum shops, and custom designs. If you are going to have it custom made, figure out by whom, and start thinking about how you would like it to look.
- Sign up to usher for another Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Midway:

- Think about who will read from the Torah at the service. Ask tutor and/or [Torah reading coordinator](#) to assign open readings.
- [Ask friends or relatives to participate in the service](#); send them any materials they might need. Review *aliyah* blessings with any family members who are receiving *aliyot*. See enclosures for [blessings](#) and [honor instructions](#).
- Consider if anyone will make remarks at the service, e.g., one or both parents, and who you would like to present the gift from the congregation to your child.
- Review your child's progress with tutor.

- Schedule when your child co-leads portions of a Shabbat service (Friday and/or Saturday) with tutor and/or Hebrew School class.
- Check with your child and/or tutor about starting the *d'var Torah*.
- Schedule time to work on the *tikkun olam* project.
- Make sure financial obligations to Beth Israel are current.
- Make appointments for your family to meet with the [rabbi](#), and for your child to meet with the rabbi to discuss the Torah portion and *d'var Torah*. Finalize plans for participation in Friday night services.
- Consider what arrangements you would like for the *kiddush* following the service on Saturday morning, as well as whether you will host the *oneg* following services on the Friday night your family leads prayers. Find help or swap setup duties with another Bar or Bat Mitzvah family.
- [Contact BIMAS](#), the Beth Israel Music Appreciation Society, if you would like them to play music on Saturday at the service. This is a wonderful way to add more joy to your *simcha*. The musicians need at least two months notice to get onto their calendar. The [suggested minimum donation is \\$72](#) (a multiple of *chai*). The current coordinator is listed under “Committees and Coordinators” in the BI directory.
- If you plan to buy new clothes for the occasion, start shopping now. Choose shoes that are comfortable and wear new shoes a few times before that day. Bringing a clip to secure one’s kippah is helpful.
- Decide if you want to order personalized kipot. The synagogue has plenty of kipot, so you can probably order less than you think you need. Plan to take home the extras.
- Decide if you want any decorations (mitzvah basket for the bimah, flowers, etc.) for the sanctuary. Coordinate any deliveries with the [office staff](#).
- Review child’s progress with tutor and schedule rehearsal (s).

Coming Down to the Wire:

- Prepare [list of honorees](#) and give to the rabbi.
- Have your arrangements in place for the *oneg* and *kiddush*, including setting up wine at the end of the service and cleaning up afterward.
- Some families prepare a program to be distributed at the service. This can be helpful for family or friends who are not familiar with the service. There are many sample copies of programs available in the office, and a template (Word document), created by Alison Manaker, is available to use. ([Contact the office if you want a computer template.](#)) If you will be having a program, prepare it and decide where to have it printed. Consider printing one per family, plus 15-20 additional for BI members.
- Continue working on *tikkun olam* project. [Review forms for the Social Action committee.](#)
- Consider whether your child will donate a portion of the gift money to a charitable organization. Some people estimate the cost of a *simcha* and donate three percent to a charity.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Day

- Bring student’s tutoring folder, including any notes on leading the service and the *d'var Torah* (clearly written or printed in large print).
- Bring parents’ written materials, including blessing(s)/congratulations to be offered.
- Bring Bar or Bat Mitzvah’s *tallit*, *kippah* and any *tallit* and/or *kippah* clips. Bring family members’ *tallit*.
- Bring programs, candy for throwing, and/or personalized *kippot* for guests.
- Inform rabbi (in writing) of any last minute changes in honorees.
- Remind whoever is helping with the *kiddush* to set up, pour wine and juice, and clean up afterwards.
- Enjoy the special day with family, friends and the BI community!!

Afterwards (Parents and/or child)

- Fill out [Service Provider Evaluation forms](#) and return them to the [office](#).
- Send thank you notes. You and your child might want to agree upon a regular time and amount to work on each day/week. It might be smart to discuss this before your *simcha* so that they are aware that there will still be things to work on when it is over.
- Send in [donation for BIMAS](#), if they played music at your *simcha*.
- Complete *tikkun olam* project. Submit final forms to [Social Action committee](#).
- Discuss with your child the possibility of working as an aide in the Hebrew School.
- Discuss your family's continuing role in the synagogue, including participation on committees and/or the Board of Directors.
- Help out with other synagogue projects.
- Participate in services. Look for opportunities to chant Torah or lead prayers. Keep up the Torah chanting skill by chanting a line from your portion at Simchat Torah or on the Bar/Bat Mitzvah anniversary.
- We encourage students to continue their Jewish education after they have finished their Hebrew School studies at Beth Israel. The options vary year by year and might include study sessions with the rabbis or in community Jewish teen programs (Mekom Torah, B'nai Brith).

To Do List for Planning the Celebration

There are many details to remember when planning your event. This timeline provides some guidance on how far in advance things can be completed or considered, based on the input of some parents who have recently celebrated their child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Please remember that these are just general guidelines. It is always possible to get everything done in less time, if needed.

Your child will likely want to help plan the celebration. Based on feedback from other teens, this is especially important in regard to the invitation list. They also recommended that everyone in the family discuss what they want at the party. Having a checklist that identifies who is in charge of each task can be helpful.

Earliest:

- Start to plan your *seudat mitzvah* (festive meal). It may take some time and thought to determine what kind of *simcha* your family wants to have. Before you start looking for a venue, you need to decide whether the event is a luncheon or a dinner, buffet or sit-down, and, roughly, how many people you intend to invite. You also need to consider whether you are having one event for everyone, or separate events for the adults and the kids. If you are doing separate events, you need to decide whether they will be on the same day. The [rabbi](#) and RPC chairperson are available to advise you regarding the dietary laws of *kashrut*.
- Prepare preliminary guest list. Start investigating whether you have current addresses for everyone on the list. Your child may only want to invite guests with whom they have a relationship.
- Book a place for your celebration. This involves many obvious issues, such as cost and type, as well as less obvious ones, such as proximity to the hotel that you intend to recommend to out-of-town guests. If the place does not include a caterer, you will need to start thinking about selecting a caterer. BI is available to rent for your luncheon and/or dinner. A list of kosher caterers is available in the B'nai Mitzvah Resource Guide (which is located in the synagogue office). It's best to check earlier rather than later to ensure availability.
- If music is desired at your celebration, research different bands or DJs. For best selection, it's best to check earlier rather than later.
- Some people choose to send out "Save the Date" cards or e-mails to family and friends who will be attending.

Midway:

- Contact photographers. Decide if you want pictures or video of the party. Note that video or photography is not permitted during service.
- Begin to finalize the guest list. Get your child's input on the guest list, and discuss some possible compromises. BI teens also felt that the polite thing is to invite their entire Hebrew school class. You can get current class lists from the Hebrew School Education Director. Because there are multi-grade classes, you may want to review the class lists for older and younger grades as well.
- Order invitations and thank-you notes. Before ordering, confirm service times with the rabbi and/or office for both Friday night and Saturday morning. Decide whether you will address them, or have them addressed by the invitation provider. If you will be providing transportation to the party for children who are invited without their parents, state that on the invitation. Discuss a plan with your child to write thank you notes afterwards.
- Order decorations, etc.
- If you are planning to rent a tent, dance floor, or other party furniture, make those arrangements.
- Reserve a block of rooms for out-of-town guests. Obtain or create an invitation insert regarding room arrangements. Prepare any other necessary inserts regarding directions, etc. Consider whether you will have a brunch on Sunday. If so, make a reservation, consider catering arrangements, or host it at your home.

2 months in advance

- Mail invitations. Be sure to check postage on a complete invitation at the post office before buying your stamps.
- Make arrangements for transporting your child's friends from the synagogue to the party (e.g., bus, carpool).
- Start organizing family pictures if you plan to do a picture board, video, or slide show.
- Purchase a guest book or make a sign-in board (if you want one).
- Plan seating arrangements. Prepare place cards (if a sit-down meal). Contact caterer with final count (some caterers will allow you to make adjustments closer to the date as well).

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Week and Day

- Deliver anything for guests to the hotel.
- Drop items off at celebration venue (seating cards, candlelighting and/or other remarks, decorations, bathroom basket, etc.)
- Enjoy the party!

Acknowledgements

Revision 1

As we worked to ensure that this guide reflects our current goals and practices, a number of members took time to review and provide wonderful suggestions for improvement. Thank you to Rabbi Linda Potemken, Rabbi Nathan Martin, Reisa Mukamal, Marion Hamermesh, John Greenstine, Carol Briselli, Louis Friedler, and Diane Longenecker.

Original Guide

A document like this cannot be written (or even compiled) alone. Thank you to everyone who contributed: Rabbi Linda Potemken, the Education committee (co-chaired in 2002 by Sharon Kleban, Selene Platt, Susan Sauvé Meyer), Principal Helene Cohen, the RPC committee editors (Marilyn Verbits, Randy Tiffany), the Social Action committee 2003 (chaired by Lynn Cashell), tutors/editors (Rich Block, Meira Pitkapaasi, Reisa Mukamal, Helen Plotkin, Steve Smith), parent editors/contributors (Jeff Golan, Jennifer Lenway, Emily Levine, Marge McAboy), Facilities VP 2003 Lauri Mansky, the original B'nai Mitzvah guide committee (chaired by Penny Bernick), Roy Brandow for his vision that shaped this document, the Chavurat Noar class of 2003 (Murphy Bug, Sam Datlof, Sophia D'Ignazio, Claire Fishkow, David Gilbert, Tony Golan-Vilella, Jessica Jenkins, Sophie Kaufman, Emma Lowe, Mara Maxman Hilmy, Alexis Perrine, Brooke Petersen, Victoria Ruby, Miriam Schuldenfrei, Greg Smith, Dana Walters), Chris Pragman (editor/formatter extraordinaire), Rachel Pragman (who sometimes allowed mommy to work on the computer), Maris Blechner (mom and editor) and all of the parents who made suggestions on how to make this guide useful.

This guide is intended to be a living document. As you use this guide to plan your family's Bar or Bat Mitzvah, you may have suggestions that can improve the guide or process for future celebrants. Congregation Beth Israel is interested in your feedback. Please forward comments and suggestions to me so that they may be incorporated into future revisions of this guide.

Y'asher Koach - May we go from strength to strength.

Laura Lee Blechner

RPC Chair / Co-Chair 2002-2017

Glossary

aliyah (plural *aliyot*) – literally “going up,” an honor during the Torah service given to participants to say a blessing over the Torah

bar – son of (Bar Mitzvah – son of the commandments)

bat – daughter of (Bat Mitzvah – daughter of the commandments)

chavurah – friends; in this case, a study group

d’var Torah (plural *divrei Torah*) – literally “a word of Torah”, an explanation of or information related to the weekly Torah reading

gemilut chasidim – deeds of loving kindness (see text for details)

haftorah – a companion reading to the Torah portion with a related theme, usually from the prophets

havdalah – Saturday evening ceremony done at the end of Shabbat, including wine, spices and a special candle

kashrut – Jewish dietary laws

kippah (Yiddish – *yarmulke*) – head covering

kiddush - blessings over wine; also used for the food and drinks served after Shabbat morning services

mazal tov – often used to mean congratulations, literally “good fortune”

mazon – food, sustenance, also a charity

mitzvah (plural *mitzvot*) – commandment (s), Jewish practices

oneg – a gathering after Friday night services at which food is served in celebration

seudat mitzvah – festive meal, usually associated with life cycle events

shacharit – morning service

simcha – celebration, literally “happiness”

Sh'ma – a pivotal prayer in our liturgy declaring the universality of God

tallit – prayer shawl that Jewish adults wear during morning services, usually worn for the first time at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service

tikkun olam – repair of the world (see text for details)

trope – the specific musical notes used for chanting the Torah or haftorah

tzedakah – often used to mean charitable donations, literally “righteousness/justice”

yasher koach – often used to mean good job, literally “may you be strengthened”

V’ahavta – prayer segment immediately following the Sh’ma, commanding us to love God with all our being.

Resource Materials for the Family Planning a Bar or Bat Mitzvah

Publications

Shabbat Vehagim

Our Shabbat Prayer Book can be ordered directly from the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation by calling (215) 782-8500. It may also be borrowed from and returned to our sanctuary.

Celebrate Shabbat CD: Prayers and Songs for Home and Synagogue Melodies for Congregation Beth Israel

Sung by Juliet Spitzer, our previous High Holy Day Cantor.

This is a great resource for the whole family and can be purchased from BI for \$5. It has recordings of all of the songs and prayers used in the BI service. It is an excellent tool for preparing to lead portions of the service or to help family members with their Aliyah blessings.

The Beth Israel B'nai Mitzvah Resource Guide

This looseleaf binder, which is located in the synagogue office, includes member provided information on many local providers of services, e.g. catering halls, florists, photographers, etc.

For further information, the following books are available through retail or online booksellers, and some may be available in the BI library.

Whose Bar/Bat Mitzvah Is This, Anyway?

A Guide for Parents Through a Family Rite of Passage

Judith Davis, Ed. D., St. Martin's Griffin, NY, 1998.
www.barbatmitzvah.com

Putting God on the Guest List:

How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, Jewish Lights Publishing, Vermont, 1996.

For Kids, Putting God on the Guest List

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, Jewish Lights Publishing, Vermont 1998.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Memory Book

(A diary or album type of book that corresponds with the other Salkin books)
Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, Jewish Lights Publishing, Vermont, 2001.

Bat Mitzvah, A Jewish Girl's Coming of Age

Barbara Diamond Goldin, Viking: A Division of Penguin Books, NY, 1995.

Bar Mitzvah, A Jewish Boy's Coming of Age

Eric A. Kimmel, Viking, NY, 1995.

Reaching for Sinai:

A Practical Handbook for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Family

Rabbi Ronald H. Isaacs, KTAV Publishers, NJ, 1999.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Basics

Edited by Cantor Helen Leneman, Jewish Lights Publishing, Vermont, 1996.

A Spiritual Journey:

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Handbook

Seymour Rossel, Behrman House, 1993.

The Complete Bar/Bat Mitzvah Book:

Everything You Need to Plan a Meaningful Celebration

Patty Moskovitz, 2000.

Living a Jewish Life: Jewish Traditions, Customs and Values for Today's Families

Anita Diamant with Howard Cooper, Harper Perennial, NY 1991.

How to Be a Jewish Parent: A Practical Handbook for Family Life

Anita Diamant with Karen Kushner, Schocken Books, NY 2000.

The Sabbath

Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Noonday Press, NY 1994.

Other Tikkun Olam Resources

[Tikkun Olam Project Ideas list: compiled by Carol Briselli, former Social Action Committee chair. See link/appendix.](#)

Matt Coburn Scholarship: Matt Coburn was a Beth Israel member who was active in the Social Action Committee. Matt had a passion for learning and an interest in making the world a better place for our children. In his name, the committee can provide funding to assist B'nai Mitzvah and other students (under 21 years old) in the Beth Israel community with *tikkun olam* projects. This fund is a result of contributions donated to the Social Action Committee in memory of Matt Coburn.

Procedure: Applicants should choose a project following the *tikkun olam* guidelines, which are distributed with the B'nai Mitzvah Family Guide. The applicant may request "seed money" funding support by writing to the chair of the Social Action Committee and describing the project and how he or she plans to spend the money. The amount of money for each project will typically be \$50 or less, but the committee will consider larger requests. The committee will evaluate each proposal, and may offer suggestions. Approved project funds will be disbursed by the committee. Upon completing the project, the recipient should provide a written report to the committee describing how the funds were used and what was accomplished. If the funds are used as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah project, the student should also describe the experience in their *d'var Torah* speech and/or in the program.

Some Jewish charities you may wish to consider for tzedakah:

Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger

American Jewish World Service

Jewish National Fund

HIAS: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

Jewish Federation

Reconstructing Judaism

Appendices

[Important BI contacts](#)

[Tikkun Olam project idea list](#)

[How to Host an Oneg or Kiddush, including Kashrut Policy](#)

Forms to return to BI or give to family

[Family Honors List & Family Torah readers](#)

[Honor Instructions for family members \(copy and cut as needed\)](#)

[Reconstructionist Torah Aliyah Blessings for family members](#)

[Facilities Rental Information & Form](#)

[Tutor Evaluation Form](#)

[Tikkun Olam project form](#)

[Provider Services Evaluation Form \(caterer, DJ, favors, party rental, *kippot*, *bimah* baskets, photographers, florists, etc.\), also called "Bar/Bat Mitzvah User Guide"](#)