

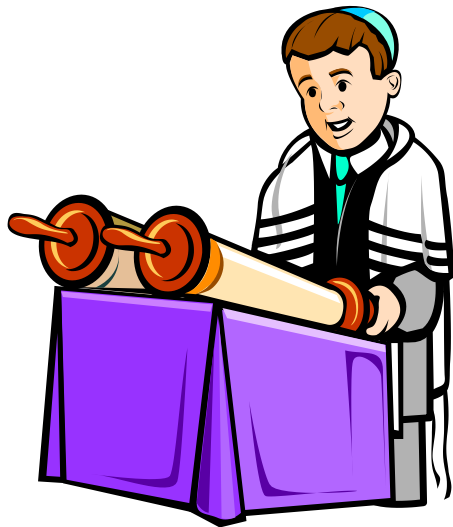
YOUR BARMITZVAH AT SYDENHAM SHUL

Dear Parents,

Mazel tov on your son's forthcoming Barmitzvah, which you have chosen to celebrate at Sydenham Shul. I am sure that you are eagerly looking forward to this important milestone in his life and in the life of your family. I hope and pray that you derive much Yiddishe nachas from your son.

On the Shabbat of his Barmitzvah, your son will be the centre of attention and that is how it should be! He represents the new generation of South African Jewry. Your hopes as parents, and ours as a community, are centered on your son.

In this booklet, we aim to answer the most frequently asked questions about a Barmitzvah. With all the effort and cost that goes into a Barmitzvah, I think it would be worthwhile to spend a few minutes considering these questions.



What is a Barmitzvah?

What is its origin in Jewish tradition? What is its significance? The Torah makes it clear that only an *ish* - an adult - is bound by the rules of the Torah. But what is an *ish* - at what age does a child become an adult? In the book of Genesis (34:25) we read that "the two sons of Yaakov, Shimon and Levi, ...took each man his sword..." According to Rabbinic tradition, Levi was 13

years old at that time and the Torah refers to him as an *ish* - a man, an adult.

For a boy, his thirteenth birthday is the time when his Divine soul, present from birth, becomes fully functional. The thirteenth birthday (twelve for a girl) obviously follows the Jewish (lunar) calendar. At this age, one reaches intellectual maturity. Therefore, on the day he turns 13, a boy becomes 'Barmitzvah' - 'a son of the commandment' - meaning that in the eyes of Jewish law he has now come of age. From now on he is subject to all the obligations as well as all the privileges of an adult. At most Shuls, including Sydenham, the formal Barmitzvah is scheduled for a Shabbat after the thirteenth birthday, occasionally some weeks after it.

The theme of Barmitzvah, is therefore, "assuming responsibility for one's Jewish and general conduct." If you feel the need for "a theme" for the party at all, this is it. There is no need to introduce any other themes into what is, essentially, a Jewish religious milestone.

What are the Barmitzvah requirements in Jewish law?

The Sages declare that it is the responsibility of the father to make a festive meal (a 'seudat mitzva') on the day his son becomes Barmitzvah, as it is on the day of his wedding. The welcoming of a new member to the Jewish community, to Torah observance, is indeed a cause for celebration. A minimum of ten adult men (to make up a minyan) should be invited, they wash and eat bread and the rest of the kosher meal. The festive meal can be a relatively low-key get-together for family and friends: there is no religious requirement to throw a costly party.

At Sydenham, you have the option of enjoying a Bracha for your family and friends after the Shabbat morning service or a full meal if you prefer it. Our resident caterer will cater either

of these for you. Please speak to the Shul Secretary to book one of our halls for your function and she will put you in touch with Shelley Geffen to discuss your precise needs.

Since he is now obligated to keep the mitzvot, your son's thirteenth birthday will also be the first time that he fulfills various mitzvot.

He will put on his Tefillin. Although he will have practiced for at least two months previously, this constitutes the first time he will have actually performed the mitzva. We advise that the Tefillin be bought here in South Africa at least 3-4 months before the Barmitzvah. Unfortunately, many Tefillin sets purchased in Israel are not kosher, particularly when the buyer does not know which are the reliable places to buy.

The following sources are recommended -

- House of Judaica (Norwood Mall)
- Kollel Bookshop (Norwood)
- Rabbi Klein (Cheltondale)
- Rabbi Herring (Glenhazel)

There you may purchase all religious articles that you need, including your son's Tallit. We strongly advise you to buy a large Tallit (usually made of wool) and avoid the smaller 'scarf'-style Tallit, as these are generally too small and not kosher for use. (This may be a good time for Dad to update, as well.)

On his thirteenth birthday, or as soon as possible after it, he is honoured with his first Aliyah, his first call-up to the Torah.

It is a wide-spread custom that on this birthday he should be encouraged to give some 'Tzedaka' (charity), from his own money, to any worthy charitable institution. If it falls on Shabbat, he should give Tzedaka on the Sunday after.

In regard to these mitzvot - the Festive Meal, Tefillin, his first Aliyah and Tzedaka - the significant day is his **Hebrew birthday, not the Shabbat of his formal Barmitzvah.**

What is the Barmitzvah programme at Sydenham Shul?

During his earlier years you carefully laid the groundwork for your son's moral, spiritual and intellectual life. That has been done. But the superstructure of his personality is still to be built on these foundations. At Barmitzvah, when he takes the step from childhood to adulthood, or at least, to becoming a young adult, this next stage in his development begins. As a teenager, he has reached a degree of intellectual and emotional maturity, he has new questions and problems a child does not face, he begins to understand concepts a child cannot. It is time for his Jewish education to address these issues, not to come to an end. Your son does not live in a vacuum. If you do not continue to help him build on this structure, someone else will. It is not wise to leave his religious, ethical and social guidance in the hands of others.

With this in mind, Sydenham Shul provides a stimulating and enjoyable Barmitzvah education programme, which begins about one year before the Barmitzvah. However, it is just as important that his Jewish education and observance continue in the years beyond Barmitzvah.

We run a Judaism Class every Monday afternoon, providing a broad knowledge of Jewish customs and beliefs. This class is compulsory for all boys. If he does not attend this class, you are asked to ensure that he revises the Exam-syllabus alone, or better still, with his parents. All boys sit a Barmitzvah Exam one to two weeks before the Barmitzvah. A boy who fails to pass this Exam may still have his Barmitzvah, but will not be presented with a Barmitzvah Certificate by the Rabbi from the pulpit.

There is a Breakfast Minyan attended by all boys on Sunday morning, which helps them become familiar with the most important prayers and their meaning, and teaches the customs of a meal. We will advise you by mail between 12 and 15 months before the Barmitzvah that your son is to commence Judaism Class and/or Breakfast Minyan.

Yes, it may be inconvenient to *shlep* your son to Shul at 8:30 on a Sunday morning; but, this forms a very important part of the preparations for a successful Barmitzvah.

You have booked your son to sing either the Maftir and Haftarah or a Portion on the day of his Barmitzvah. When we read from the Torah on Shabbat morning, we divide the Sedra (or Parsha) into at least 7 portions. After these 7 portions have been read, part of the last portion is read again - this is called the 'Maftir' (on special days the Maftir is from a different Sedra and deals with the special nature of that particular Shabbat). Then we read a selection from the Prophets, which usually follows the theme of the Sedra. This is read from a regular book, not from a Sefer Torah - it is called the 'Haftarah'. In addition, a Barmitzvah boy at Sydenham may sing either Kiddush on Friday night or 'Anim Zemirot' at the end of the Shabbat morning service, or both.

We provide tuition of the Maftir and Haftarah or the Portion to be read by your son on the Bima on the day of his Barmitzvah. Our teacher will phone you about 12 months before the Barmitzvah to set a time to test his Hebrew reading ability. It is vital that your son be able to read Hebrew before his tuition begins. If he cannot read Hebrew when tested by us, he may not be able to do all you would like on the day.

We strongly recommend that you utilize the services of our teacher, who is an acknowledged expert. He will also teach your son the Shul procedure for the day and be with him on the Bima to guide and support him. Our tuition fee is also much lower than those of private teachers. However, if for some reason you should decide to use a private teacher, please contact the Shul office for a list of recommended teachers. Unfortunately, we have had some embarrassing situations in the past with outside teachers and we would not like that to happen to you.

The Barmitzvah should be a spiritually meaningful event in your son's life and the life of your family. This should be your primary consideration in planning it. It is appropriate that your son should begin coming to Shul on Friday night and Shabbat morning some months before the Barmitzvah. This way, the Barmitzvah is a process of spiritual growth and awareness, rather than a 24-hour ceremony.

Moreover, he will feel comfortable in Shul on his special day and be familiar with the Shul service and customs, rather than looking like a fish out of water. The hours spent by a father and son sitting next to each other in Shul are surely amongst the most treasured and memorable of a stage in one's life that passes all too quickly. If your family is not currently Shabbat-observant, please encourage your son to be 'Shomer Shabbat' on the day of his Barmitzvah. It really is important that, at least on this day, he experience the beauty of a Shabbat. Also, as a Reader for the Congregation, he should be religiously suitable.



What should we know about the day of the Barmitzvah?

In the week before the Barmitzvah, you will meet as a family with the Rabbi of the Shul and with the Shul President. The meeting with the Rabbi is particularly important for families who are not members of our Shul or who do not regularly come to Shul; it gives you and the Rabbi a chance to get to know each other a little better. The meeting with the President is to discuss your requests for Shul honours on the day of the Barmitzvah. You will have been sent a form for these honours which you should fill out and hand to him. Also, the Shul fees for the Barmitzvah are really very modest and it is customary for the family to make a

more significant donation at this time. In this way, one also avoids any “schnodering” from your guests on the Bimah.

Decorum and Dress

Your cooperation in following these rules of Shul decorum on the day of the Barmitzvah is requested by the Rabbis and Gabboim (officials) of the Shul and will help make your celebration the sacred and dignified ceremony it was meant to be.

- **Our service begins at 6:00 p.m. on Friday night and your guests should be seated by then. On Shabbat morning, it begins at 8:15 a.m. and the Torah reading at about 9:00 a.m. The family should arrive as early as possible, but those receiving Shul honours should not arrive after 9:00. This service usually ends at about 11:30 a.m.**
- **Please ensure that your son, family and friends are appropriately dressed for Shul. The Barmitzvah boy should wear a jacket and tie and so, too, should any member of your party who will be given a Shul honour. The Barmitzvah boy should not wear an earring in Shul and his haircut should suit the importance of the occasion. Just as long hair looks out of place, so too is hair that is cut too short. In Jewish law a man may not cut his sideburns short (in the area in front of the ear, above the bone). The mother of the Barmitzvah boy should wear some type of head covering, preferably a hat, in Shul.**
- **Ask your guests not to enter Shul carrying gifts.**
- **There is no smoking or photograph taking in any part of the Shul premises, including the garden and outside entrances to the Shul.**

- **When arriving in Shul, join us in prayer. Few things ruin the Shul service more thoroughly than loud conversations conducted by visitors who act as if they are viewing some sporting event. The Shul has extra Talaisim for those Jews in your party who do not have their own. Siddurim and Chumashim should be taken when entering the Shul. A page indicator is in use to assist you in following the service. Both men and women are invited and urged to participate in the service to the maximum degree. This applies most of all to the Barmitzvah boy himself. Non-Jewish male guests require a Yarmulke but not a Talis.**

Do not think that your son is unaware of the true significance of his Barmitzvah. Otherwise, you may discover in later years that despite the gifts and the expensive party, he subconsciously considered that the occasion was little more than an elaborate show.

Mazeltov again on your son's future Barmitzvah. We pray that it will be a stepping-stone towards an even more meaningful Jewish life ahead for him and for your family and that he will give you many years of nachas in good health with much success and happiness.

Yours truly,

JONTY COHEN

(with much gratitude and thanks to Rabbi Goldman for his assistance and guidance)