

B. MITZVAH GUIDE



CONGREGATION OF
REFORM JUDAISM



Cantor Bryce Megdal
Rabbi Rachael Jackson



Jewish Identity Inventory

**Adapted from Bar/Bat Mitzvah Education:
A Sourcebook by Helen Leneman (p. 230)*

I am a Jew born in (city & country) _____.

I am a Jew whose ancestors originally came from _____.

How many generations has your family been in this country? _____

I am a Jew whose Hebrew name is _____.

My Hebrew name means _____.

I was named after _____.

When I think about being Jewish, I feel...

My best Jewish memory is...

My earliest CRJ memory is...

For me, belonging to CRJ means...

To me, the B. Mitzvah ceremony means...

My biggest worry about my B. Mitzvah is...

**After thinking about who has come before you and
what makes you the Jew you are today, how do you feel?**

Glossary

Aliyah: This word literally means “to go up.” It refers to when someone has accepted the honor of being called up to the *bima* (raised platform) to chant the Torah Blessings. Chanting the Torah Blessings is one of the highest honors one can have, and it is reserved specifically for Jewish adults. Sometimes, you will also hear each section of the Torah that you are chanting called an *Aliyah*.

Bar Mitzvah: The literal meaning is “Son of the commandment.”

Bat Mitzvah: The literal meaning is “Daughter of the commandment.”

B'nai Mitzvah: Plural form of the above.

B. Mitzvah: A gender neutral form, which will be what we use most frequently throughout this binder.

D'var Torah: The literal meaning is “a word of Torah.” This is what we refer to as your speech.

Mazel Tov: This phrase derives from the Hebrew words meaning “a good constellation of stars,” or good fortune/success. In Judaism, we use it as a congratulatory expression.

T'filah: The Hebrew word for prayer. It is derived from the root that refers to the concept of judging or judgment. To pray, or *l'hitpaleil*, can be translated as “to judge oneself.” This translation may be surprising, since we usually think of prayer as having to do with God rather than ourselves. However, there are many types of Jewish prayer. Some prayers offer praise or thanksgiving to God, while others are personal petitions and confessions. The translation of *l'hitpaleil* as “to judge oneself” provides us with an important insight into a key purpose of Jewish prayer: Prayers help us to look inward and to reflect on what is sacred to us.

Tallit: A prayer shawl. It can only be worn by Jewish adults.

Shabbat: The root of the word means “cease” or “strike.” Shabbat is a time for us to cease from our activities during the week. (More on this in the Prayers Section.)

Shalom: The root of the word means “wholeness” or “completion.” We translate it as “peace,” because when there is wholeness or something is complete, there is peace, or calm. We also refer to *shalom* as “Hello” and “Good-bye.”

Siddur: This word literally means “order.” Because our prayer book has the order of the Shabbat service in it, it has received *siddur* as its official Hebrew title.

Yad: This word literally means “hand.” It is the term that we employ for a Torah Pointer. We use a *Yad* because we cannot touch the ink of the Torah with our oily fingers.

Letter to B. Mitzvah Candidate

Dear B. Mitzvah Candidate,

Congratulations for having reached this very important point in your Jewish life! Your B. Mitzvah is a year or less away! This means that you are about to go through a process of transition, where you will ultimately become an adult member of the Jewish community. You will no longer be only a student, but now will also be a teacher; no longer a child, but a young adult in the eyes of the members of Congregation of Reform Judaism and the Jewish people.

Your B. Mitzvah is a religious milestone that marks the onset of adolescence. Your service will be the culmination of a period of study, which ideally would have started when you began attending JEEP at CRJ. The service will be your passage into Jewish adulthood. After your B. Mitzvah, you will be expected to assume responsibility for your actions, religious decisions, and to contribute to the welfare of CRJ's community and other communities. At CRJ, we will ask you to take on even greater responsibility within the congregation as a leader and role model for the younger children.

During the year prior and leading up to your B. Mitzvah, you will meet with Rabbi Jackson, Cantor Bryce, and your tutor to:

1. Discuss this new chapter of your life and explore *your* Judaism
2. Prepare the required prayers, your Torah portion, and *D'var Torah*, all of which you will present at your service.
3. Choose and complete a *Mitzvah* Project

We are here to help you in any way we can as you prepare for this special day in your life that you will remember forever. We are very proud of your choice to become B. Mitzvah and look forward to welcoming you into the congregation as our newest adult member.

Again, Mazel Tov!

B'NAI MITZVAH GOALS

1. **Understand what it means to become B. Mitzvah.**
 - a. Meet with Rabbi Jackson and Cantor Bryce to discuss the meaning of, and relevance to, becoming B. Mitzvah.
 - b. Read materials given to you related to becoming B. Mitzvah.
 - c. Participate in family activities related to your B. Mitzvah.
2. **Feel responsible for and comfortable with *your own* Judaism.**
 - a. Understand why you are Jewish and how you can make being Jewish meaningful to you.
 - b. Be able to practice and feel confident to pray Jewishly.
 - c. Study the meaning and significance of Jewish prayers.
 - d. Attend Shabbat Services on an ongoing basis.
3. **Form a sense of community with other B'nai Mitzvah candidates and teens.**
 - a. There is something very special about being a part of a B'nai Mitzvah cohort. You will get to know your fellow B'nai Mitzvah candidates through JEEP and YALA.
 - i. **JEEP:** Attending JEEP, our Religious School on Sundays and Hebrew tutoring during the week.
 - ii. **YALA:** YALA Is our Youth Program for 7th through 12th graders. Since JEEP goes through 6th grade, we highly encourage you to attend YALA on Wednesday nights from 5:30-8pm, with dinner at 5:30pm. At YALA, you are given the opportunity to socialize and explore Judaism with your B'nai Mitzvah cohort as well as other teens. It is a wonderful social and educational program that nurtures a peer-based group of individuals who come together as one in a uniquely Jewish format.
4. **Build relationships with Rabbi Jackson, Cantor Bryce, your tutor, and other CRJ staff.**
 - a. Rabbi Jackson, Cantor Bryce, and your tutor will be your mentors throughout the preparation process. They and other staff members at CRJ will treat you with love and care so that you can always be yourself and feel comfortable asking any question that arises.
5. **Nourish the desire to continue to be a part of CRJ's community—as well as the Jewish people—afterward.**
 - a. To be a member of a Jewish community such as CRJ is a blessing, and

something to cherish, especially when the world around us can be harsh. If you choose, CRJ can act as a foundation throughout your life, grounding you throughout your teen years and beyond.

- b. Becoming B. Mitzvah is not the end of Jewish learning. Rather, it is the beginning of a lifetime of adult Jewish experiences. A B. Mitzvah is not measured by what you do on the bimah, but in the days and years that follow. After your B. Mitzvah, it is our hope that you will be filled with pride for what you have accomplished, and to be a part of the CRJ community. We hope that you will be inspired to stay involved at CRJ. Most of all, we hope that you will feel proud to be a newly minted Jewish adult.

B'NAI MITZVAH REQUIREMENTS

1. Attend JEEP, our Religious School, through 6th grade.
2. Lead *Bar'chu*, *Sh'ma*, and *V'ahavta* on one Friday night service in addition to the Friday night service before you become B. Mitzvah.
3. Attend at least five other B. Mitzvah Services during your year of preparation.
4. Create a weekly practice schedule and prioritize practicing on your own often.
5. Plan and complete a *Mitzvah* Project.

MEETINGS AND REHEARSALS WITH CLERGY

* All meetings and rehearsals with clergy are scheduled by Clergy Assistant, Annie Hernandez (ahernandez@crjorlando.org).

You will meet with Rabbi Jackson and Cantor Bryce multiple times throughout your B'nai Mitzvah year. As the date approaches, you will have rehearsals in the sanctuary with them. At the first few rehearsals, you and the clergy will get a sense of where you are preparation wise. You will also stand on the *bima* and get comfortable using a microphone. When with Cantor Bryce, you will see what it's like to have guitar accompaniment while chanting many of the prayers.

Tutoring will begin shortly after your first meeting with Rabbi Jackson and Cantor Bryce. Tutoring occurs once per week for 30 minutes on Zoom. As the date approaches, if you would like to meet more than 30 minutes per week, this is something that you can discuss with your tutor. Compensation for extra sessions is *not* covered in the B'nai Mitzvah fee.

Hebrew Prayers To Learn (Listed in Priority)

1. Recite or chant the Candle Blessing and the first line of *Kiddush* (Friday night)
2. Recite the Tallit Blessing
3. Chant *Nisim B'chol Yom* (Blessings for Daily Miracles)
4. Recite the Blessing for Engaging in Words of Torah (BEWT)
5. Chant *Bar'chu*
6. Chant *Sh'ma*
7. Chant *V'ahavta* and *L'ma'an Tizk'ru*
8. Chant the beginning sections of the *Amidah*
9. Chant the Torah Blessings
10. Chant the second half of your Torah verses (Your 2nd Aliyah)
11. Chant the first half of your Torah verses (Your 1st Aliyah)
12. Recite *Eilu D'varim* in Hebrew
13. Chant at least the chorus of *Yism'chu*
14. Chant the congregational parts of *Chatzi Kaddish*
15. Read the first four lines of *Yotzeir*
16. Chant certain sections of *K'dusha*
17. Recite or chant *Hamotzi*

YOUR D'VAR TORAH (INTERPRETATIONAL SPEECH)

What you think and vocalize matters. As your B. Mitzvah approaches, you will start to work on your *D'var Torah* with Rabbi Jackson. Your *D'var Torah* is a very important component of becoming B. Mitzvah. It demonstrates that you have connected the words of your Torah portion to your life, and that you have substance to share besides what you have learned to chant or read. It will be such a treat for those in attendance to hear your opinions and perspectives. To read further, please refer to the *D'var Torah* section.

MITZVAH PROJECT

You are not only becoming B. Mitzvah, but you are also becoming a more mature and responsible person. Part of this is being able to look beyond yourself and grasp the bigger picture – to open your eyes and to see the reality surrounding you.

Two core beliefs of Judaism is *tikkun olam*, or "repairing the world," and "to be a light unto the nations." As a leader, you have the ability to make changes and improve the world, and to show other people that may not be Jewish how to do so. This is why we require you to complete a *Mitzvah Project*: We want *you* to be proactive and to take charge. To read further, please refer to the *Mitzvah Project* section.

YOUR B. MITZVAH YEAR CHECKLIST

*Below is a basic structured layout of the year; however, realistically, it may not match up perfectly due to changes in schedules, unforeseen circumstances, etc.

Check off the below boxes as they occur.

12 Months Out

- ☐ Parents and candidate meet with both clergy. (1 hour)
- ☐ Begin scheduling 30-minute lessons and working with Tutor.

11 Months Out

- ☐ Meet with Rabbi Jackson to go over selected Torah verses. (30 Minutes)

9 Months Out

- ☐ Meet with Cantor Bryce for a Check-In Session. (30 Minutes)

6 Months Out

- ☐ Meet with Rabbi Jackson to begin *D'var Torah*. (30 Minutes)
- ☐ Begin learning how to chant your Torah verses with Tutor.

4 Months Out

- ☐ Meet with Cantor Bryce for a Check-In Session. (30 Minutes)

2 Months Out

- ☐ Rehearse with Cantor Bryce in the Sanctuary. (Receive *Siddur*) (1 Hour)
- ☐ Meet with Rabbi Jackson to assess *D'var Torah* and make a *Yad*. (1 Hour)

1 Month Out

- ☐ Rehearse with Cantor Bryce in the Sanctuary. (Up to 1.5 Hours)
- ☐ Submit Honors Sheet to Annie Hernandez via email or in-person.

The Week Of

- ☐ Rehearse with Cantor Bryce in the Sanctuary. (Up to 1.5 Hours)
- ☐ Rehearse with Rabbi Jackson in the Sanctuary. *Parent(s) required to attend*. (Up to 1.5 Hours)
- ☐ I AM READY!☺

Hebrew Prayers To Learn (Listed in Priority)

****The order of items 13-17 does not reflect their location in the Siddur.***

1. Recite or chant the Candle Blessing (Friday night)
2. Recite or chant the first line of the *Kiddush* (Friday night)
3. Recite the Tallit Blessing
4. Chant *Nisim B'chol Yom* (Blessings for Daily Miracles)
5. Recite the Blessing for Engaging in Words of Torah (BEWT)
6. Chant *Bar'chu*
7. Chant *Sh'ma*
8. Chant *V'ahavta* and *L'ma'an Tizk'ru*
9. Chant the beginning sections of the *Amidah*
10. Chant the Torah Blessings
11. Chant the second half of your Torah verses (Your 2nd Aliyah)
12. Chant the first half of your Torah verses (Your 1st Aliyah)
13. Recite *Eilu D'varim* in Hebrew
14. Chant at least the chorus of *Yism'chu*
15. Chant the congregational parts of *Chatzi Kaddish*
16. Chant certain sections of *K'dusha*
17. Recite or chant *Hamotzi*

As you learn the prayers, please refer to the *About Prayer* section so that you understand the meaning of, and reasoning behind, each prayer that is done at your B. Mitzvah service.

Why do we pray?

Prayer is a way of expressing ourselves to God. Tradition teaches that God gave us the Torah, and we responded with words of prayer in praise of God. Prayer and deeds of kindness became a replacement for sacrificing animals when the ancient Temple was destroyed.

The Hebrew word for pray is derived from the root *pei-lamed-lamed*, which usually refers to the concept of judging or judgment. To pray, or *l'hitpaleil*, can be translated as "to judge oneself." This translation may be surprising, since we usually think of prayer as having to do with God rather than ourselves. However, there are many types of Jewish prayer. Some prayers offer praise or thanksgiving to God, while others are personal petitions and confessions.

The translation of *l'hitpaleil* as "to judge oneself" provides us with an important inside into a key purpose of Jewish prayer: Prayers help us to look inward and to reflect on what is sacred to us.

Why do we have Shabbat?

Every week, we are busy and often going from one thing to the next, without much time to rest. Well, as we all know, resting is important for a well-balanced life! This is why we have Shabbat – it is an opportunity for us to remove ourselves from the pressures of the week and to reconnect with God, our family, our friends, and our religion. As God took a break after creating the world, we too are to take a break from working hard. This special 24-hour period, designated for all Jews throughout the world, is Shabbat.

A few quotes on Shabbat:

"Shabbat represents those moments when we pause in our brushwork to renew our vision of the object." -Mordechai Kaplan

"Jewish tradition offers us an extraordinary gift. Every week, we receive a day, Shabbat, that is...filled with rituals that have the potential to become a deep and sustaining spiritual practice." -Rabbi Lisa Goldstein

"More than Israel has kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept Israel." -Achad Ha'Am

Description of Prayers

Candle Blessing (p. 2): The lighting of the candles officially begins the 24 hours of Shabbat. Usually, two candles are lit. Interestingly, the Torah says nothing about lighting candles to welcome Shabbat. The practice first appears in Rabbinic literature. It seems to have originated as an extension of the practice of lighting a flame before Shabbat precisely because flames may not be kindled on the Sabbath. This flame was a source of light after the sun went down. However, the Shabbat candles evolved into an important part of the ritual and it became forbidden to use them for any practical purpose.

The Talmud records that lighting Shabbat candles is a *mitzvah*, a commandment, but does not record a blessing attached to them. The first recorded instance of a blessing said for lighting the Shabbat candles is found in the Siddur of Rav Amram (9th c.), and it is the blessing we say today, apparently modeled on the blessing for lighting Chanukah candles.

For more info., go to www.myjewishlearning.com and search for the article called "Lighting Shabbat Candles."

Kiddush (p. 4): This prayer is recited on both Friday night and Saturday morning. The first part of the blessing, which you will be responsible to learn, thanks God for the fruit of the vine (the grape) that we use to make wine or grape juice. We are to drink something sweet and fruity to celebrate the joy and holiness (the root of the word *kiddush*) of the day. The second part of the blessing, which Cantor Bryce chants on Friday nights, blesses the holiness of the day, which recalls all that God did to enable us to be Jewish and celebrate Shabbat every week.

Modeh Ani (Chanted by Cantor) (p. 68): When we sleep, God watches over our souls. This prayer reflects our gratitude that God has returned our souls to us for another day of life. While most prayers are communal, *Modeh Ani* is in first person, because we are supposed to say it individually, upon waking up in the morning.

Tallit Blessing (Bottom of p. 72): The tallit is a prayer shawl with *tzitzit*—tassels or fringes—attached to each of its four corners. The tassels or fringes represent the 613 commandments—or mitzvot—that we are supposed to observe in the Torah. A mitzvah is a Jewish responsibility, good deed, or religious act. The specific commandment to wear tzitzit on the corners of one's clothes is found in the Book of Numbers in the Torah. Even though we have not become Bar or Bat Mitzvah yet, we will recite the Tallit Blessing together, as we will do at our Bar or Bat Mitzvah services.

Nisim B'chol Yom (p. 80-84): Also known as the Morning Blessings, it is comprised of blessings for our bodies working properly after waking up in the morning. Many of them are for the morning activities that we often take for granted. In reciting the blessings, we recognize that every moment of our lives is an opportunity to notice

the presence of divinity and the miracles that surround us. What an awesome and awe-inspiring way to start the day!

Blessing for Engaging with Words of Torah (Top of p. 86): This blessing is a reminder of our constant duty to learn and engage with our sacred texts and tradition. The verb used in this blessing is not “to study,” but rather “to busy oneself with.” We are commanded by God to engage with the Torah at all possible moments, or at least once every morning. In Jewish tradition, “Torah” is more than just the Five Books of Moses; it refers to all Jewish teachings or moments of study.

This blessing is different from the blessing before the ritual reading from the Torah during the Torah service. This is the blessing we use before studying the words of Torah to discuss and discover their meaning. In Jewish tradition, studying is not something we do just to become more knowledgeable or to know how to behave in the future. Judaism teaches that study is itself a spiritual act. By studying, we become closer to God and closer to our ideal vision for ourselves. We make a blessing before we study Torah to remind ourselves that we are not studying this ancient text just because it is historically significant (even though it is), just because it is literarily magnificent (even though it is), and not even just because it helps us understand Jewish law (even though it does). We study Torah because it sanctifies our lives and helps us discover meaning and purpose in life. Studying Torah draws us closer to God.

Eilu D'varim (p. 88): This list of ten *mitzvot* comes from the Mishna, a six-volume rabbinic compilation of the laws of the Torah that was created in approximately 200 C.E. Some scholars think of these as a kind of “Rabbinic Ten Commandments.” These mitzvot focus on the ways that each of us can improve the world, primarily by the concern we show for our fellow-human beings. By devoting ourselves to acts of love and kindness, showing hospitality to one another, visiting the sick, seeing to the needs of those who are deceased—who can no longer repay our kindness—and being peacemakers, we ourselves live more fulfilling lives and we leave the world a better place than we found it.

Psalm 150 (Chanted by Cantor) (p. 100): This prayer emphasizes the enthusiastic praise of God by living *all* creatures. Imagine if everything that has a soul were to praise God at the same time; we would probably feel vibrations and buzzing throughout Earth!

Chatzi Kaddish (p. 106): There are five forms of the Kaddish, the most common ones in *Mishkan T'filah* being the “Half Kaddish,” “Whole Kaddish,” “Mourner's Kaddish,” and “Rabbis' Kaddish.” All of them start off the same way, and are in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Aramaic was spoken by Jews from the time of the Babylonian Exile (586 BCE) until about the 5th century CE. It was especially used for legal documents. We are about to chant the Half Kaddish, or *Chatzi Kaddish*, which literally means “Half Kaddish.” It is called this because it is shorter than the other forms of the *Kaddish*. All of the

variations share many of the same words and themes, which proclaim God's eternal rulership over the world.

The *Chatzi Kaddish* always marks a moment of transition in the service. The *Chatzi Kaddish* before the *Bar'chu* serves to signal worshippers that we have concluded the "spiritual warmup" section of the service and we are about to move into the first major section of the service, called "The Shema and Its Blessings." We respond by standing in attention and setting a personal intention within our hearts for our prayers.

***Bar'chu* (p. 108):** *Bar'chu*—"Let us praise"—is the official call to worship by the prayer leader in the evening and the morning. After a few warm-up prayers, *Bar'chu* starts the formal beginning of the worship service. It is the first of several blessings in the section entitled *Sh'ma Uvirchotecha*, or "Shema and Its blessings." It is responsive so that the leader knows his or her congregation is ready to pray. *Bar'chu* recognizes that God is the source of all blessings and is an assertion of the worshiper's dedication to fulfill God's will by performing the divine commandments. The recitation of *Bar'chu* and the practice of standing during it may have originated at the time of Ezra, the prophet.

***Yotzeir* (p. 110):** This prayer praises God for restoring light to the earth and renewing the world every morning. *Yotzeir* parallels the *Ma'ariv Aravim* prayer that we recite after *Bar'chu* in the evening.

The first major section of the morning service is called "The *Sh'ma* and Its Blessings." *Yotzeir Or* (literally, "Creator of Light") is the first of the three blessings that surround the *Sh'ma* in this section. The blessing describes God as the creator of the world who is responsible for renewing creation in every moment. The other two blessings around the *Sh'ma* describe God as the giver of Torah and as the redeemer of the world.

Yotzeir includes the declaration, "How great are Your works, Adonai! You made them all with wisdom! The world is full of Your creations!" It is, in many ways, a challenging statement. When we look at the world, we do not always see that it is filled with great things. The world that contains beautiful sunsets and magnificent creatures also contains diseases, disasters and human suffering. Can this blessing mean to say that those things are great and made with wisdom, too?

Here is one way to understand the meaning of the blessing: Not everything in the world is wonderful, but we human beings are particularly prone to seeing bad things and ignoring good things. The blessing serves to remind us to notice the miracles that surround us – the gift of loving and being loved, the ability to learn and to understand the world around us, the miracle of each new day we get to be alive.

Here is another perspective: The blessing reminds us that things that seem terrible

also are part of God's plan. If we lived in a perfect world with no challenges or hardships, we would have no ambitions or striving to make the world better. If the world had to be good all the time, then human beings would not have the free will to make good choices. If there were no such thing as death, younger generations would never have a chance to take responsibility for the future with their own hopes and aspirations.

The *Yotzeir Or* blessing teaches us to appreciate the world as it is and it inspires us to see the blessings in each moment.

***Sh'ma* (p. 114-115):** Almost since the beginning of Jewish tradition, the *Sh'ma* has been considered the most important statement of the Jewish people, and therefore, one of the most important parts of our prayer service. It is a declaration of the belief in one God. The first line is taken from the Torah, while the second line—starting with *Baruch Sheim*—was written in its current form by Rabbis later on. When we say the *Sh'ma*, we affirm that just as God is one, so are all human beings united in one human family. It is customary in some congregations to cover one's eyes in order to be more focused on this very important prayer.

***V'ahavta and L'ma'an Tizk'ru* (p. 116):** The *V'ahavta* details the particular ways in which Judaism should be practiced: Love God with all of your being, teach it to your children and pass it down to the next generation, recite it when you wake and lie down, and bind it as a symbol on your body. It is actually the continuation of the *Sh'ma*. Traditionally, the *Sh'ma* consists of three biblical passages from the Torah. The first passage (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) states the obligation to love God and to live with the words of the *Sh'ma* close to you in everything you do. The second passage (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) is not included in the *siddur*, but describes God's reward for obeying the commandments and the punishment for disobeying. The third passage (Numbers 15:37-41) begins with the commandment to wear *tzitzit*, the fringes on the corner of the tallit (not included in our prayerbook) and ends with "*L'maan tizk'ru...*," the section that states the obligation to remember and do all of God's commandments.

Traditionally, the *Sh'ma* is recited twice each day, in the morning and evening worship services. This reflects the commandment within the passage to recite the words "when you lie down and when you rise up." The passage also includes the commandment to put a *mezuzah* on the doors of our homes ("...inscribe them on the doorposts of your house...").

It might occur to you that the commandment to love God in this passage is difficult to understand and to fulfill. How is it possible to order someone to have an emotion? How can love be commanded?

Here is one way to understand the commandment: We recognize that, when people love each other, they do things for each other that deepen the love between them.

For example, when I prepare a meal for the person I love, or when I wash the dishes after the meal, I do so, in part, because I know that it will make my partner happy. That makes me feel happy, too, because I enjoy meeting the needs of the person I love. Doing things like that makes me love my partner even more.

It is the same in our relationship with God. When we do what we know God wants from us—the *mitzvot*—it makes God feel good and it makes us feel good, too. Doing *mitzvot* deepens the love we share with God. You may experience this yourself when you do something to help a person in need. It feels good to do things that are good, in part, because it makes you feel closer to God.

The commandment to "love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" can be understood as a commandment to do the *mitzvot* with a feeling of joy and love. When you perform a *mitzvah* in this way, it deepens your love for God. The commandment to love God is not just an order to feel a particular emotion. Rather, it is a commandment about the attitude you have when you do things that draw you closer to God. Loving God and deepening your love for God is a choice you make every day through your actions.

Mi Chamocha (Chanted by Cantor) (p. 122): Partially taken from the Torah, the words of Mi Chamochah are part of the song of thanksgiving sung by the Israelites after they crossed the Reed Sea during the Exodus from Egypt. It praises God's strength and glory and celebrates this miraculous moment of freedom. The Exodus from Egypt is one of the most important events in all of Jewish history, and the Mi Chamocha recounts the sentiment of this event. In Jewish tradition, the first exodus from oppression became a symbol for freedom from all slaveries and hardships. The concept of God taking the Jewish people out of the land of Egypt recurs many times in the Torah and Jewish worship.

Amidah (p. 124-142): The word Amidah means "standing," and it describes the way in which this prayer is recited. There are two other names by which the Amidah is known. It is known as the *Sh'moneh Esrei*, "Eighteen," because it was originally composed of eighteen different blessings; now it consists of 19 blessings. It is also called *T'filah*, "Prayer," because it was considered the heart of Jewish worship. On Shabbat, we chant the first few sections of the *Amidah*, including the *Avot v'Imahot*, *Gevurot*, and *Kedusha*. If the *Amidah* is chanted during the week, all 19 blessings are chanted aloud.

Adonai S'fatai (p. 124): Before beginning the Amidah, one of the central prayers of the service, we recite this simple verse from Psalm 51: "Adonai, open up my lips that my mouth may declare Your praise." Before we begin praying, we ask God to use us as an instrument to speak the words that we need to say.

Have you ever had the experience of singing with other people and feeling like you got lost in the sound of all the voices around you? Have you ever been engaged in a sport so deeply that you felt like your body was moving without your mind telling it

what to do? There is a joy in giving yourself to an activity so deeply that it requires no effort and everything flows from a place beyond your conscious thinking.

That is one way of describing the experience of praying deeply. At some point, the prayer flows out of you effortlessly and all you need to do is let it out of your mouth. The verse from Psalm 51 that we recite before the *Amidah* helps us to set our intention for our prayer. We want to pray spontaneously and joyfully. We want to feel like we are placing ourselves into God's hands so that, instead of us speaking the prayer, it feels like the prayer is speaking us.

Avot v'Imahot (p. 126): The first blessing of the *Amidah* is called the *Avot v'Imahot*, "Fathers and Mothers," because its opening phrase refers to God as *Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu*, "God of our fathers and mothers." The ancestors mentioned here are the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs of Jewish tradition—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. When we say the formula "God of our fathers and mothers," we are immediately reminded that we are part of a people and heritage that reaches back thousands of years. The *Avot v'Imahot* continues on to describe different aspects of God, including great, mighty, loving, and redeeming.

In the words of the blessing, God is identified separately for each ancestor. We say, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob..." rather than just saying, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob..." A rabbinic teaching says that this is because God is understood differently by each of us, and God connects differently to each person. By saying, "The God of..." for each ancestor, we remember that there is no one correct way to think about God.

Gevurot (p. 128): While the first blessing of the *Amidah*, the *Avot v'Imahot*, speaks of God at work in history, the *Gevurot* praises God as the Power that sustains all nature. It expands on God's power to help the rains fall in the right season, to heal, and, ultimately, to sustain and give life.

In the contemporary world, we might think that the weather is not so important. We have clothing and homes that help us deal with almost any weather. However, in ancient times, the weather was a matter of life and death every day. If the rain did not fall at the right time of year, the crops would not grow and people would die. That is why the words of the blessing change over the course of the year; we pray for the right weather that is needed in each season.

The *Gevurot* also confronts the mystery of death in the face of God's power. We human beings are temporary and we realize that death is the common fate of everyone who lives. The blessing refers to God as the source of life and death. When we think of God's power in our lives, we also think about the fragility of our lives, about how life is a gift from God, and how death is part of the reality of the world.

When Reform Judaism came into existence in the early nineteenth century, it rejected the concept of bodily resurrection, or bringing someone back to life. The Reformers argued that once a person died, that person was dead and the body could not be revived. They did, however, agree with the traditional Jewish belief that each person is given a *nefesh*, a soul. This soul is not physical but spiritual. It is a spark of God, and it is eternal, just as God is eternal. Our Reform tradition emphasizes life, and God's power to direct it in any way.

The traditional version of this blessing made the theme of life and death even more clear. The older version of the blessing uses the words in parentheses that speak of God who "revives the dead." The Reform Movement originally changed those words to "gives life to all" in both the English and the Hebrew. The early Reformers rejected the traditional language because it refers to the idea that God will bring all those who have died back to life at the end of time – a literal belief that is rejected by Reform Judaism.

However, the idea of God "reviving the dead" does not have to be understood on a literal level. We can think of God as reviving us from death when we are healed from sickness or when we emerge from a life-threatening situation. Also, we can think of God "reviving the dead" when we keep people alive in our memories after they have died. To be respectful of the original words of the *Gevurot*, the Reform Movement left some of them as an option in parenthesis. *Mishkan T'filah* was the first prayerbook to offer both the traditional form of the blessing (in parentheses) and the revised language of the Reform Movement.

K'dusha (Top of p. 130): The word *k'dusha*, "holiness," is taken from the Hebrew *kadosh*, which means "different," "unique," "special," "sacred," "set apart," "unlike anything else." On Shabbat and on the holidays, when we make the blessing over the wine, we are setting that time apart from the everyday and "making the Kiddush." The word "holiness" in Hebrew means, then, something that is different—a moment in time that feels different from the regular flow of hours, days, months, and years. In the Book of Isaiah, we are told of a strange and wonderful vision that the prophet had one day in the Temple of Jerusalem. Isaiah tells us that he was praying, and in the midst of his prayers, he had a vision. In it he was surrounded by angels. They were moving their wings and singing some of the words of the *K'dusha*. In Isaiah's vision, the angels express feelings of *k'dusha*, "holiness," about God. The people who composed the *K'dusha* took the angels' words and used them as their own. We now continue with the *K'dusha* and will point out where the words are from Isaiah's dream when we recite them.

L'dor Vador (Bottom of p. 130): *L'dor Vador* literally means "to generation to generation," but we say it as "from generation to generation." Judaism emphasizes passing down its values and traditions from one generation to the next. This is one way that Judaism has survived for thousands of years.

***Yism'chu* (Top of page 132):** The root of the word *yism'chu* means happiness. The *Yism'chu* focuses on the idea that Shabbat is a day of not only rest and prayer, but also delight and celebration. Fun fact: This prayer contains twenty-four Hebrew words, said to correspond to the twenty-four hours of Shabbat.

Torah Blessings (Bottom of p. 250): We do not know who composed the blessings for before and after chanting the Torah, nor do we know when the practice of the blessings began. What we *do* know is that by the end of the first century C.E., the custom of saying the blessings became more common. The first blessing focuses on the idea that the Jewish people are unique, and that God chose the Jewish people to gift the Torah to. The Jewish people accepted this gift and will continue to accept it, eternally. The Torah is our most precious biblical text, filled with stories, instructions, and scenarios that help us be good people and live fulfilling lives.

Please remember: Though it is believed that we were chosen by God to receive the Torah, we are not superior to those who belong to other faiths. Rather, we believe ourselves to be "chosen" in the sense that we have a unique relationship with God that we call a *b'rit* (a covenant or agreement) and we live by doing God's *mitzvot* (commandments). We say that God chose us for the relationship we have with God; other people have their own relationship with God and their own ways of connecting with God. Each religion is special and valid.

In the blessing before the reading of the Torah, we say that God "chose us from all the peoples and gave us God's Torah." Do we, as Reform Jews, believe that literally? If not, why do we say so in the blessing?

Reform Jews, in general, do not believe in the literal transmission of the words of the Torah from God to the Jewish people at a single historical event at Mount Sinai. We see Sinai as a symbol of our ongoing relationship between God and the Jewish people. We believe that the Torah is a work written by human beings who were inspired by God and who wished to share the stories and laws that helped them understand God and God's will. According to this view, the Torah is the product of centuries of Jews who discussed and created laws and legends that drew them closer to God and what it means to live as God wishes us to live. That process has not ended. We are still creating new understandings and interpretations of Torah.

Torah is God's gift to the Jewish people and it is the foundation of our unique relationship with God. Everything we do as Jews, everything we believe, everything we value revolves around the Torah. The Torah is the testimony of our people's encounter with God. In whatever way we understand Torah—whether as a divine revelation, a human text about striving for God, or a combination of the two—it is a text that has been embraced with the highest sanctity by the Jewish people. In saying this, we are not accepting a supernatural view of the Torah and we are not saying that we are superior to others. Rather, we celebrate the text that is at the heart

of our ever developing and reforming relationship with God. That is how we understand the words of the Torah blessing.

Kaddish Yatom (Mourners Kaddish) (p. 294): It is customary to say this prayer in honor of our loved ones who have died. Interestingly, this prayer does not mention death at all. Instead, the focus is on God's eternal power over the world, and that this power will endure forever and ever. As with many of our prayers, we aren't sure who wrote the text or when it was written. Over time, *Kaddish Yatom* grew to its current length, and became the standard text for those in mourning to recite, while standing. After they rise, whoever is surrounding them also rises to show their support during this difficult time. Fun fact: This *Kaddish* and *Chatzi Kaddish* (above) are written in Aramaic, a form of Hebrew spoken and written by Jews from the time of the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.E) until about the fifth century C.E.

Hamotzi (Top of p.302): The prayer we say before eating Challah and most meals. It thanks God for providing grains that we can remove from the earth and consume in many forms.

YOUR B. MITZVAH PROJECT

WHY? Becoming B. Mitzvah is a “process” more than an “event.” It is a time in your life when you are to become more responsible. In Jewish tradition, at the time of becoming B. Mitzvah, one is expected to grow and mature, particularly when it comes to fulfilling *mitzvot* (plural for *mitzvah*). A *mitzvah* is a commandment, or a way of showing accountability as a Jewish adult. Part of this is being able to look beyond yourself and grasp the bigger picture – to open your eyes and to see how you can help others, whether within your small family circle, or within a global context. It is also about understanding what God requires of you as a budding Jewish adult.

Two core beliefs of Judaism is *tikkun olam*, or “repairing the world,” and “to be a light unto the nations.” You have the ability to make changes and improve the world, and to show other people that may not be Jewish how to do so. This is why we require you to complete a B. Mitzvah Project: We want *you* to be proactive and take charge.

Additionally, understanding *mitzvot* can raise daily acts of goodness and caring to acts of holiness. By fulfilling this journal, you will make *mitzvot* a more important part of your life and see how small, everyday acts can be seen as holy acts.

WHY THESE MITZVOT? For this journal we are focusing on “ethical *mitzvot*”, that is, *mitzvot* between people. The categories are based on a well-known and important passage from the Mishnah, a six-volume rabbinic compilation of the laws of the Torah that was created in approximately 200 C.E., that was adapted as part of our daily worship services and which you will lead in Hebrew at your service. The prayer is called *Eilu D'varim* and is on page 88 in your *siddur*:

אלו דברים שאין להם שעור, שאדם אוכל פרותיהם בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא. ואלו הן: כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והשכמת בית המדרש, שחרית וערבית, והכנסת אורחים, ובקור חולים, והכנסת כלה, ולוית המת, ועיון תפילה, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו. ותלמוד תורה כנגד כלם.

“These are the things that are limitless, of which a person enjoys the fruit of this world, while the principal remains in the world to come. They are: Honoring one's father and mother, engaging in deeds of compassion, arriving early for study (morning and evening), dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick, providing for the wedding couple, accompanying the dead for burial, being devoted in prayer, and making peace among people. But the study of Torah encompasses them all.”

HOW? With your parent(s), read through the below *mitzvah* categories. Try to choose to fulfill at least one from each category, and to have it be something you haven't done before, or don't do on a normal basis. It can also be something that involves your passions or special talents. As you perform each *mitzvah*, we ask that

you fill in the *mitzvah* journal sheet at the end of the listed categories. You will share your experience of your *Mitzvah* Project in your *D'var Torah*, so we encourage you to be thorough with your answers. After, please have a parent, Cantor Bryce, or Rabbi Jackson sign it.

WHEN? Start working now. Some of the *mitzvot* can be done right away; others will take some time and planning to accomplish. The goal is to complete all ten categories by your B. Mitzvah service.

CATEGORIES

1. *KIBUD AV VA'EM* - כְּבוֹד אָב וָאֵם HONORING ONE'S PARENTS (AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS, TOO)

1. Do something to be helpful to your parents.
2. Call, write, or visit a relative you do not normally see.
3. Create a family history or genealogy.
4. Do something that you would not ordinarily do to be helpful to another member of your family.
5. Find a way to let your parents know that they are appreciated and loved.
6. Come up with your own *mitzvah* for this category. Get clergy approval first.

2. *G'MILUT CHASADIM* - גְּמִילוּת חֶסֶדִים ENGAGING IN DEEDS OF COMPASSION

1. Contribute 3% of the cost of your B. Mitzvah weekend to MAZON, a Jewish organization which feeds the hungry.
2. Once a month, call, write, or visit a grandparent.
3. Visit a retirement or nursing home (Go several times to get to know some of the residents.). If you play an instrument, consider playing it for them.
4. Contribute money to the charity of your choice. In Judaism, this is known as *tzedakah*, or "doing the right thing." The Torah calls upon Jews to give a tenth of what they produce to what we would call "charity." This tenth is called a tithe. You and your family might consider a "simcha tithe," giving an amount to

charity equal to a tenth of what you will spend on the B. Mitzvah party. If you receive money as a B. Mitzvah gift, you may personally want to contribute a percentage to *tzedakah*. Another idea: A lot of the money you receive you'll probably invest; if you spend some now on yourself, give an equal amount to *tzedakah*.

5. Break one bad habit that has a negative effect on others.
6. Volunteer some time at a social service agency, (e.g., soup kitchen, nursery hospital, home for the aged...just to mention a few!).
7. Clean out your drawers and closets and donate old clothing to the needy.
8. Use books, baskets of food, or toys as centerpieces for the tables at your B. Mitzvah luncheon or party. Then, donate them to an appropriate organization of your choice. If you use flower centerpieces, donate them to a senior citizens' home or other worthwhile place.
9. Do something special for someone you know.
10. As invitations for your ceremony, use JNF certificates (those certificates you get when you buy trees to plant in Israel) or Uniongrams from the URJ.
11. Help friends with schoolwork in such a way as to ensure that they will be able to do it alone next time.
12. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

3. HASHKAMAT BEIT HAMIDRASH, SHACHARIT V'ARVIT

הַשְׁכָּמַת בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ, שַׁחֲרִית וְעֶרְבִית.

ARRIVING EARLY FOR STUDY, MORNING AND EVENING.

1. Attend Friday evening or Shabbat morning services *in addition* to what is already required.
2. Recite the *Sh'ma* (in Hebrew and English) before going to sleep each night for two weeks. Does praying in this routine effect your outlook on the day? Discuss your reactions with your parents, friends, or teachers.
3. Cook or bake two traditional dishes for a Jewish holiday or Shabbat meal.
4. Volunteer four hours of service at CRJ.
5. Fast for a full day on Yom Kippur.

6. Recite or chant the Friday night blessings (candles, wine, challah) at home for one month. You can request the blessings from clergy.
7. Keep Kosher for Passover for all seven days.
8. Take time to do the Havdalah Blessings, a ceremony that concludes Shabbat in the evening, on two Saturday nights in a row. You can request the blessings from clergy.
9. Affix a *mezuzah* to the doorpost of your house or your room. You can request the blessings from clergy.
10. Attend a service at another synagogue. Write down your reactions to the service and some of the differences from CRJ's services.
11. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

4. HACHNASAT ORCHIM - הַכְנָסַת אֹרְחִים DEALING GRACIOUSLY WITH GUESTS

1. Invite others to a Shabbat or holiday dinner in your home. Help prepare and serve the meal.
2. Welcome a new kid at school or camp by including them in an activity, or introducing them to other friends.
3. Contribute time and/or money to a refugee resettlement organization.
4. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

5. BIKUR CHOLIM - בִּיקוּר חוֹלִים VISITING THE SICK

1. Visit a children's ward in a hospital and bring balloons or small gifts.
2. Entertain at a hospital.
3. Create beautiful greeting cards or art for Rabbi Jackson or Cantor Bryce to use when visiting the sick.
4. Cook a meal or provide baked goods for someone who is ill.
5. Help clean the house of a less able-bodied person.
6. Help a classmate who is ill by bringing homework and delivering messages.
7. Visit a home-bound or hospital-bound relative or friend.

8. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

הַכְנָסַת כֶּלֶה - HACHNASAT KALLAH
PROVIDING FOR THE WEDDING COUPLE
(AND OTHER SIGNIFICANT JEWISH MILESTONES)

1. Participate in the planning of a *Brit Milah*, a baby-naming ceremony, a wedding, a conversion, or another significant Jewish milestone.
2. Attend one of the above and write up your reactions to it.
3. Help move chairs, serve food, etc., at a Jewish life cycle event.
4. Interview/video your parents and/or grandparents to find out about their wedding. What kind of ceremony did they have? Did they do anything special in it? What Jewish elements were a part of it?
5. Interview/video your parents and/or grandparents to find out about their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. How were things different then?
6. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

לְוֵיַת הַמֵּת - L'VAYAT HAMEIT
ACCOMPANYING THE DEAD FOR BURIAL

- A. Attend a funeral.
- B. Attend a *shiva* service. *Shiva* comes from the root meaning "seven." It refers to the seven-day period after a loved one is buried. Those who are in mourning mostly remain at home during these seven days. Typically, they are visited by their Jewish clergy, friends, and family, who provide support and food for them. A *shiva* service is a prayer service that is held at any point during *shiva*.
- C. Make a card for a family in mourning.
- D. Cook a meal or bake something and deliver it to a family in mourning.
- E. Visit the graveside of a relative. Learn and write about that person's life.
- F. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category.

8. IYUN T'FILAH - עיון תפילה
BEING DEVOTED IN PRAYER

1. Write a short essay on the meaning of your favorite prayer.
2. Practice communicating with God for five minutes each day for two weeks.
End your session with the *Sh'ma*.
3. Whisper the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta* to yourself before you go to bed at night. Do this daily for two weeks.
4. Say the *b'racha* (blessing) over bread in your home every time you eat for two weeks.
5. Create a special prayer or poem for your B. Mitzvah service. It could be a prayer of thanksgiving for becoming a B. Mitzvah, or a prayer for peace, about Shabbat, about worship, about being Jewish, etc.
6. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

9. HAVA'AT SHALOM BEIN ADAM LACHAVERO

הבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו
MAKING PEACE AMONG PEOPLE

1. Work on only speaking positively about others, and getting others to follow your example.
2. Help two enemies become friends.
3. Help someone who is in trouble.
4. Listen to a friend who is upset.
5. Become friendly with someone you didn't like before.
6. Restrain yourself from "answering back" in an argument.
7. Go out of your way to avoid a fight with your family.
8. Defend someone who is being teased or hurt.
9. Include someone in your "group" who is usually excluded.
10. Research, support, and/or join a peace-making organization, like Interns for Peace, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Jewish Peace Fellowship, Gesher, or Amnesty International.

11. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

10. TALMUD TORAH K'NEGED KULAM

תלמוד תורה כנגד כלם.

THE STUDY OF TORAH ENCOMPASSES THEM ALL.

1. Attend CRJ's Saturday morning Torah study group at least two times.
2. Study your entire Torah portion and choose one major issue that interests you. Find one traditional commentator (ask for help!) and learn what that commentator has to say about that issue.
3. Create a prayer, drawing, painting, collage, or song to illustrate your Torah portion.
4. Research a topic or current event relating to Judaism or Israel and write a report about it.
5. In order to begin developing your own Jewish library, add a Jewish book to your personal collection. Read it and write a paragraph explaining what you liked about it or learned from it. JEEP texts don't count!
6. Learn one new way to observe a Jewish holiday of your choice.
7. Visit or prepare to visit Israel. Write about your time there.
8. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

11. BONUS: PRACTICAL MITZVOT

You may substitute up to 2 of the 10 Mitzvot with "Practical Mitzvot". These are skills that you learn with a parent or another adult that will be useful to you as you become an adult. Follow through and use your new skill! For instance:

1. Learn to cook/prepare a full meal for your family. Learn to follow a recipe, grocery shop, and treat your family to a meal that you made.
2. Learn to bake a dessert or bread, or something else that's delicious.
3. Learn how to do laundry (including folding afterward!), and do it for two weeks.
4. Learn Sewing Basics: How to sew buttons, make a hem, simple repairs, etc.

5. Learn Car Basics: How to change a tire, to check tire pressure, check oil levels, etc.
6. Household Chores: Learn how to vacuum and dust. Learn the best way to clean a window.
7. Reorganize a closet.
8. Come up with your own mitzvah for this category. Get clergy approval first.

MY MITZVAH JOURNAL

Mitzvah Number _____

Mitzvah category _____

Activity (Please write exactly what you did.)

1. Describe **why you performed** this *mitzvah*.

2. Describe **your reactions** to doing this *mitzvah*.

3. Describe this *mitzvah's* **effect** on others.

Adult Signature: _____ Date: _____

Introduction

News flash: The most important thing about becoming B. Mitzvah isn't the party. Nor is it the presents. Nor even being able to celebrate with your family and friends, as wonderful as those things are. Nor is it even standing before the congregation and reading the prayers of the liturgy, as important as that is. No, the most important thing about becoming B. Mitzvah is sharing Torah with the congregation. And why is that? Because of all Jewish skills, that is the most important one.

Here is what is true about rites of passage: You can tell what a culture values by the tasks it asks its young people to perform on their way to maturity. In American culture, you become responsible for driving, responsible for voting, and yes, responsible for drinking responsibly. In some cultures, the rite of passage toward maturity includes some kind of trial, or a test of strength. Sometimes, it is a kind of "outward bound" camping adventure. Among the Ma'asai tribe in Africa, it is traditional for a young person to hunt and kill a lion. In some Hispanic cultures, fifteen year-old girls celebrate the quinceañera, which marks their entrance into maturity.

What is Judaism's way of marking maturity? It combines both of these rites of passage: Responsibility and test. You show that you are on your way to becoming a responsible Jewish adult through a public test of strength and knowledge, reading or chanting Torah, and then teaching it to the congregation. This is the most important Jewish ritual *mitzvah* (commandment), and that is how you demonstrate that you are, truly old enough to be responsible for the *mitzvot*.

What Is Torah?

So, what exactly is the Torah? You probably know this already, but let's review.

The Torah (teaching) consists of "the five books of Moses," sometimes also called the *chumash* (from the Hebrew word *chameish*, which means "five"), or, sometimes, the Greek word Pentateuch (which means "the five teachings"). Here are the five books of the Torah, with their common names and their Hebrew names:

1. Genesis (The beginning), which in Hebrew is *Bereishit* (from the first words, "When God began to create"). *Bereishit* spans the years from Creation to Joseph's death in Egypt. Many of the Bible's best stories are in Genesis: The creation story itself; Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; Cain and Abel; Noah and the Flood; and the tales of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. It also includes one of the greatest pieces of world literature, the story of Joseph, which is actually the oldest complete novel in history, comprising more than one quarter of all Genesis.

2. Exodus (Getting out), which in Hebrew is *Sh'mot* (These are the names). Exodus begins with the story of the Israelite slavery in Egypt. It then moves to the rise of Moses as a leader, and the

Israelites' liberation from slavery. After the Israelites leave Egypt, they experience the miracle of the parting of the Sea of Reeds (or "Red Sea"); the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai; the idolatry of the Golden Calf; and the design and construction of the Tabernacle and of the ark for the original tablets of the law, which our ancestors carried with them in the desert. Exodus also includes various ethical and civil laws, such as "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20)

3. Leviticus (about the Levites), or, in Hebrew, *Vayikra* (And God called). It goes into great detail about the kinds of sacrifices that the ancient Israelites brought as offerings; the laws of ritual purity; the animals that were permitted and forbidden for eating (the beginnings of the tradition of kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws); the diagnosis of various skin diseases; the ethical laws of holiness; the ritual calendar of the Jewish year; and various civil laws concerning the treatment of the Land of Israel, Leviticus is basically the manual of ancient Judaism.

4. Numbers (because the book begins with the census of the Israelites), or, in Hebrew, *Bamidbar* (In the wilderness). The book describes the forty years of wandering in the wilderness and the various rebellions against Moses. The constant theme: "Egypt wasn't so bad. Maybe we should go back." The greatest rebellion against Moses was the negative reports of the spies about the Land of Israel, which discouraged the Israelites from wanting to move forward into the land. For that reason, the "wilderness generation" must die off before a new generation can come into maturity and finish the journey.

5. Deuteronomy (The repetition of the laws of the Torah), or, in Hebrew, *Devarim* (The words). The final book of the Torah is, essentially, Moses's farewell address to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Land of Israel. Here we find various laws that had been previously taught, though sometimes with different wording. Much of Deuteronomy contains laws that will be important to the Israelites as they enter the Land of Israel laws concerning the establishment of a monarchy and the ethics of warfare. Perhaps the most famous passage from Deuteronomy contains the Shema, the declaration of God's unity and uniqueness, and the *V'ahavta*, which follows it. Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses on Mount Nebo as he looks across the Jordan Valley into the land that he will not enter. Jews read the Torah in sequence--starting with *Bereishit* right after Simchat Torah in the autumn, and then finishing *Devarim* on the following Simchat Torah. Each Torah portion is called a parashah (division; sometimes called a *sidrah*, a place in the order of the Torah reading). The stories go around in a full circle, reminding us that we can always gain more insights and more wisdom from the Torah. This means that if you don't "get" the meaning this year, don't worry-it will come around again.

And What Else? The *Haftarah*

We read or chant the Torah from the Torah scroll—the most sacred thing that a Jewish community has in its possession. The Torah is written without vowels, and the ability to read it and chant it is part of the challenge and the test.

But there is more to the synagogue reading. Every Torah reading has an accompanying haftarah reading. *Haftarah* means "conclusion," because there was once a time when the service actually ended with that reading. Some scholars believe that the reading of the *haftarah* originated at a time when non-Jewish authorities outlawed the reading of the Torah, and the Jews read the haftarah sections instead. In fact, in some synagogues, young people who become B. Mitzvah read very little Torah and instead read the entire haftarah portion. The haftarah portion comes from the Nevi'im, the prophetic books, which are the second part of the Jewish Bible. It is either read or chanted from a Hebrew Bible, or maybe from a booklet or a photocopy.

The ancient sages chose the haftarah passages because their themes reminded them of the words or stories in the Torah text. Sometimes, they chose *haftarot* with special themes in honor of a festival or an upcoming festival.

Not all books in the prophetic section of the Hebrew Bible consist of prophecy. Several are historical. For example: The book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest and settlement of Israel. The book of Judges speaks of the period of early tribal rulers who would rise to power, usually for the purpose of uniting the tribes in war against their enemies. Some of these leaders are famous: Deborah, the great prophetess and military leader, and Samson, the biblical strong man. The books of Samuel start with Samuel, the last judge, and then move to the creation of the Israelite monarchy under Saul and David (approximately 1000 BCE). The books of Kings tell of the death of King David, the rise of King Solomon, and how the Israelite kingdom split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (approximately 900 BCE). And then there are the books of the prophets, those spokesmen for God whose words fired the Jewish conscience. Their names are immortal: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, among others.

Someone once said: "There is no evidence of a biblical prophet ever being invited back a second time for dinner." Why? Because the prophets were tough. They had no patience for injustice, apathy, or hypocrisy. No one escaped their criticisms. Here's what they taught:

- God commands the Jews to behave decently toward one another. In fact, God cares more about basic ethics and decency than about ritual behavior.
- God chose the Jews *not* for special privileges, but for special duties to humanity.
- As bad as the Jews sometimes were, there was always the possibility that they would improve their behavior.
- As bad as things might be now, it will not always be that way. Someday, there will be universal justice and peace. Human history is moving forward toward an ultimate conclusion that some call the Messianic Age: a time of universal peace and prosperity for the Jewish people and for all the people of the world.

Note: You don't have to like everything that's in a particular Torah portion. Some aren't that lovable. Some are hard to understand; some are about religious practices that people today might find confusing, and even offensive; some contain ideas that we might find totally outmoded. But this doesn't have to get in the way. After all, most kids spend a lot of time thinking about stories that contain ideas that modern people would find totally bizarre. Any

good medieval fantasy story falls into that category. And we also believe that, if you spend just a little bit of time with those texts, you can begin to understand what the author was trying to say. Sometimes, the haftarah comes off as a second thought, and no one really thinks about it.

The Very Last Thing You Need to Know at This Point

The Torah scroll is written without vowels. Why? Don't *sofrim* (Torah scribes) know the vowels? Of course they do. So, why do they leave the vowels out? One reason is that the Torah came into existence at a time when sages were still arguing about the proper vowels, and the proper pronunciation. But here is another reason: The Torah text, as we have it today, and as it sits in the scroll, is actually an unfinished work. Think of it: The words are just sitting there. Because they have no vowels, it is as if they have no voice. When we read the Torah publicly, we give voice to the ancient words. And when we find meaning in those ancient words, and we talk about those meanings, those words jump to life. They enter our lives. They make our world deeper and better.

Mazel Tov to you, and your family. This is your journey toward Jewish maturity. Love it.

-Source: "Introduction" from The JPS B'nai Mitzvah Torah Commentary (Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin)