

MAKING IT COUNT

A COVENANT FOR BECOMING
A BAR/BAT MITZVAH



UNION FOR
REFORM JUDAISM
האיחוד ליהדות רפורמית

SERVING REFORM CONGREGATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

Baruch she-amar v'haya ha-olam. בָּרוּךְ שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם.
Praised be the One through whose word all things came to be.

(From the Morning Service)

May our words find expression in holy actions.
May they raise us up to a life of meaning devoted to God's service
and to the redemption of our world.

(From "A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism," 1999)

Written by Rabbi Rachel Mikva

Dear Bar and Bat Mitzvah Students and Parents,

Mazal tov on your upcoming celebration! This guide is designed to help you make the most of your Jewish journey. Focusing on values that are important in our tradition, you will explore together what commitments you can make to bring these principles to life. Judaism has a lot of special wisdom to offer, but only you can make it real.

This guide is designed to be used in conjunction with family education programs, but it also offers other possibilities. If you do not have a rabbi, cantor or teacher to guide you through the exercise and offer group sessions with your class, you can simply sit down as a family and do the activities. Read one of the Jewish value pages aloud. Discuss the ideas and ask each other questions about them. Then fill out the *brit* page that follows. A *בְּרִית* *brit* is a covenant, and this is your chance to identify the commitments you will make that radiate Jewish values. We urge that you do only one session at a sitting so that each *brit* is made thoughtfully. Your rabbi or cantor would be happy to discuss any questions you may have.

Shalom uv'rachab. וְשָׁלוֹם וּבְרָכָה.
May peace and blessing surround you.

Joint Commission on Worship, Music and Religious Living

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו
וצונו לאסוק בדברי תורה.

Blessed are You, Adonai, Ruler of Time and Space, who gives us a path to holiness with mitzvot and commands us to engage in the study of *Torah*. (from the *siddur*, prayer book)

Study in Jewish tradition has always been a holy activity and a sacred obligation.

A driver's license, not a diploma. Jewish learning is a lifelong process. Just as you get a license in order to use it, you commit to a lifetime of learning and growing as a Jew when you become a bar/bat mitzvah. Continue your religious education and seek out opportunities to use what you have learned to live a rich Jewish life.

Getting there is half the fun (and more). The years of study required before becoming a bar/bat mitzvah are not simply preparation for the service. Regular attendance and serious commitment to learning are essential. The responsibility to make religious education a priority falls not only on the students but also on the parents. Our tradition teaches us to study Torah *lishma*, “Jewish learning for its own sake.” Much of the learning that goes on in today’s world is geared toward getting into a good college or acquiring a better job. The goal of Jewish learning is to make us better human beings whose lives are filled with purpose and holiness and meaning.

You are finally ready to begin. While there is much in Judaism that is wonderful for young children, the deeper substance of our tradition is too challenging for them. As a bar/bat mitzvah, you are finally mature enough to begin to understand the values, questions, texts, and ideas that shape our lives—to study Judaism “at full volume.”

Parents are teachers, too. Of course, parents teach not only by word but also by deed. Adults who model a lifelong learning commitment—reading Jewish books and participating in family and adult education programs, worship, Torah study, and/or classes and activities that deepen their Jewish knowledge—make the best teachers for their children.

Beyond technical skills. What is prayer to you? What do the individual prayers mean? What are the key words of the Torah portion you will recite, and what does the Torah teach? In tutorials and other preparations to lead the service, b’nei mitzvah (plural of bar/bat mitzvah) should make an effort not only to master the technical skills but also to discover the meaning of the sacred texts.

The world of Jewish learning and living keeps expanding. The synagogue is your spiritual home, but the Jewish community is larger than your own congregation. You can begin to explore the larger Jewish world through youth groups, tours to Israel, Reform Movement summer camps, and a wide variety of Jewish organizations that are out there trying to make a difference.

Students

I have tried to make real the value of *Talmud Torah* by...

I commit in the future to....

Parents

I have tried to make real the value of *Talmud Torah* by...

I commit in the future to...

וְתִהְיֶה לְרַצוֹן תָּמִיד עֲבוּדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ:

And may the service of Israel, Your people, always be acceptable to You. (from the *Avodah* prayer)

Prayer is more than a skill. It is a value, one of the ways in which we serve God throughout our life.

Service to God does not mean only attending services. Judaism teaches us to recognize all the spiritual moments of our life and to not be afraid to speak about the holiness within them. It offers an endless number of ways to serve God in daily life.

What is leadership? You celebrate becoming a bar/bat mitzvah by taking your place as a leader in the prayer community. Leaders are not people who show up once, tell others what to do, and disappear. Leaders are people who become involved with the community for the long haul. To this end, the following activities should be part of your “leadership training”:

- Attend services regularly, and participate to the full measure of your ability.
- Volunteer to lead worship or read the Torah again—even the same portion next year!
- Assist younger students in the religious school.
- Serve as an officer in the junior (and later, senior) youth group.
- Participate in a social action project sponsored by the synagogue and bring some friends.
- Serve on a committee that is preparing a special service or program.

Anavah—Humility. Moses isn’t praised for how great he was but rather for how humble he was. We serve God not by being concerned about showing off (either our Hebrew skills or our wealth) but by using our gifts to bring blessing to our world. Success is not measured by how many verses you read, or how beautifully you chant, or how many of your friends attend, or how original your party is. Success is measured by how much you can make the words and the music and the celebration count.

Worship is sacred drama. The service is not a performance, but it is dramatic. If an actor reads lines that mean nothing to him, then the play will not move people. Similarly, empty words of prayer cannot bring blessing to the world or move people’s spirit. Discuss with your family and your rabbi what prayer is to you and what the specific prayers mean to you. Whenever you read the words, try to make them come alive in your mind and heart.

Shabbat is sacred time. Most of you will celebrate becoming a bar/bat mitzvah on Shabbat. How can you fill the occasion with the spirit of the Sabbath, a day that celebrates what we already have and also envisions a world that is whole?

Know before Whom you stand. Above the ark in many synagogues are the following words: **דַע לְפָנַי מִי אֲתָה עֹמֵד**—“Know before Whom you stand.” The service you lead will be much more meaningful to (and much easier for) you if you remember that you are not performing in front of family and friends but rather that you are praying to God.

What do I wear? Make a thoughtful decision regarding whether you will wear a *tallit* and/or *kippah* at the service. The *kippah* is a sign of our humility before God. The *tallit* is a reminder of all the *mitzvot*. If you decide that these are meaningful religious items to you, wear them at every service you attend (the *tallit* at morning services only, plus *Kol Nidrei* and Simchat Torah). They will become part of your prayer uniform and help you enter holy time. The clothes you wear should also be appropriate for the worship service, not the party.

B'RIT AVODAH

בְּרִית עֲבוּדָה

Students

I have tried to make real the value of *avodah* by...

I commit in the future to...

Parents

I have tried to make real the value of *avodah* by...

I commit in the future to...

The fulfillment of one commandment leads us to fulfill another.
(*Pirkei Avot* 4:2)

מצוה גוררת מצוה:

While we tend to think of a mitzvah as a “good deed,” it is in fact a commandment. As Jews, our responsibilities to do good, to study and to teach, to keep the calendar of sacred time, to sanctify, and to support others are all sacred obligations.

Bar/bat mitzvah means “son/daughter of the commandment.” You may have been required to fulfill a number of mitzvot as part of your preparation. From now on, these Jewish privileges and responsibilities are assigned to you by God every year. What you accomplished in this year is not a climax: It is a standard that you now know you can meet.

Tzedakah—Righteousness. *Tzedakah* is very different from “charity,” which suggests that we give out of love. Judaism commands that we give of our resources (time, money, and concern) because that is the only way to create a just society. Even people who are hard to love deserve our help. Even when we do not feel loving, this obligation is ours.

N'divut—Generosity. Whenever Jews have a sacred moment (joyous or sad), we mark it by sharing what we have with those who are less fortunate. Within the celebration of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah, you have many opportunities to give. Here are a few ideas:

- Take the flowers on the *bimah* and the centerpieces to a hospital or nursing home, or create arrangements that use something you can give away, for example, fruit, canned food, pet supplies, or sporting equipment.
- Make a donation from the funds you receive as presents. Jewish tradition suggests 10 to 20 percent as a guideline.
- Give 3 percent of the cost of the celebration to *Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger*, to share your joy with those in need.
- Send invitations that are certificates of donations to a charitable organization.

G'milut Chasadim—Deeds of covenantal kindness. While most bar/bat mitzvah students do not have a great deal of money to give away, they can give of themselves. Soup kitchens, literacy programs, Habitat for Humanity, and other projects can use your help. So can your family and peers. How do you think you might be able to practice this value every day?

Hoda-ab—Thanksgiving. Jewish tradition teaches us not to take our blessings for granted. Every morning we thank God for waking up, for our bodies, our minds, our freedom, etc. When you become a bar/bat mitzvah, you will probably remember to thank the rabbi, the cantor, your teachers, your parents, your siblings, etc. You will also write thank-you cards. Try to make these opportunities for sincere thanksgiving, not empty forms of gratitude. If you stop to think about all the people who help you along the way, you may want to go into the synagogue office during the week before or after the service to thank the staff. Also find the custodian to personally thank him/her following the service.

Students

I have tried to make real the value of mitzvah by...

I commit in the future to...

Parents

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I commit in the future to...

הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד:

Behold, how good it is, and how pleasant, when we can be together and create unity.
(Psalms 133:1)

A synagogue is called a *k'hilah k'doshah*, “holy community.” The importance we place on coming together for significant moments in our lives and the ways in which we create a caring community mark the beginning of our path toward holiness.

The school community. Everyone in your religious school class is part of your community. Even the most modest of celebrations can be planned to not hurt people’s feelings. Try not to leave people out. You can also seek out ways to build community in the synagogue: Does the temple sponsor family retreats? Are there junior youth group activities? Why not invite the families of your classmates to your home to participate in *Havdalah* at the beginning of the school year?

Defining the moment. You celebrate becoming a bar/bat mitzvah at a congregational service. Every such service is beautiful and personal, but its uniqueness has to do with the way each child steps into the giant shoes of tradition and assumes the role of leadership. Neither the service nor the party has to be “new” or “different.” They should reflect your values, not your hobbies.

Participation is key. Family and friends should make every effort to participate fully in the reading and singing during the service, even if this means that they, too, must study in advance. “Being there” for your friends means helping to fill the services that they lead with a sacred spirit.

Kavod—Honor. There are ways to honor special friends and family. Find out from your synagogue what roles in the service your loved ones may have. Help your friends and family understand what to do and what the significance is of receiving an *aliyah* or another role so that they appreciate the honor you are giving them. Friends are also happy to help make your celebration beautiful in other ways. If many children will be present, ask some friends to chaperone during the service and others to do so at the celebratory meal.

How a meal becomes a *mitzvah*. The meal following a life-cycle celebration is called a *se-udat mitzvah*. It is commanded that we share our joy with the community by breaking bread together, which has always been the best means of drawing human beings together in true fellowship. The spirit of the meal should be simple and joyous. In Jewish tradition, moderation is always important. Leftovers can often be donated: Speak to your synagogue about food pantries and soup kitchens in your area.

Every home is a *mikdash m'at*, “sanctuary in miniature.” Our family relationships prepare

us for a lifetime of faithfulness. From our family members, we learn to extend ourselves to others and to love others even though they are not perfect. How can the process of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah deepen your family bonds?

B'RIT K'HILAH

בְּרִית קְהִלָּה

Students

I have tried to make real the value of *k'hilah* by...

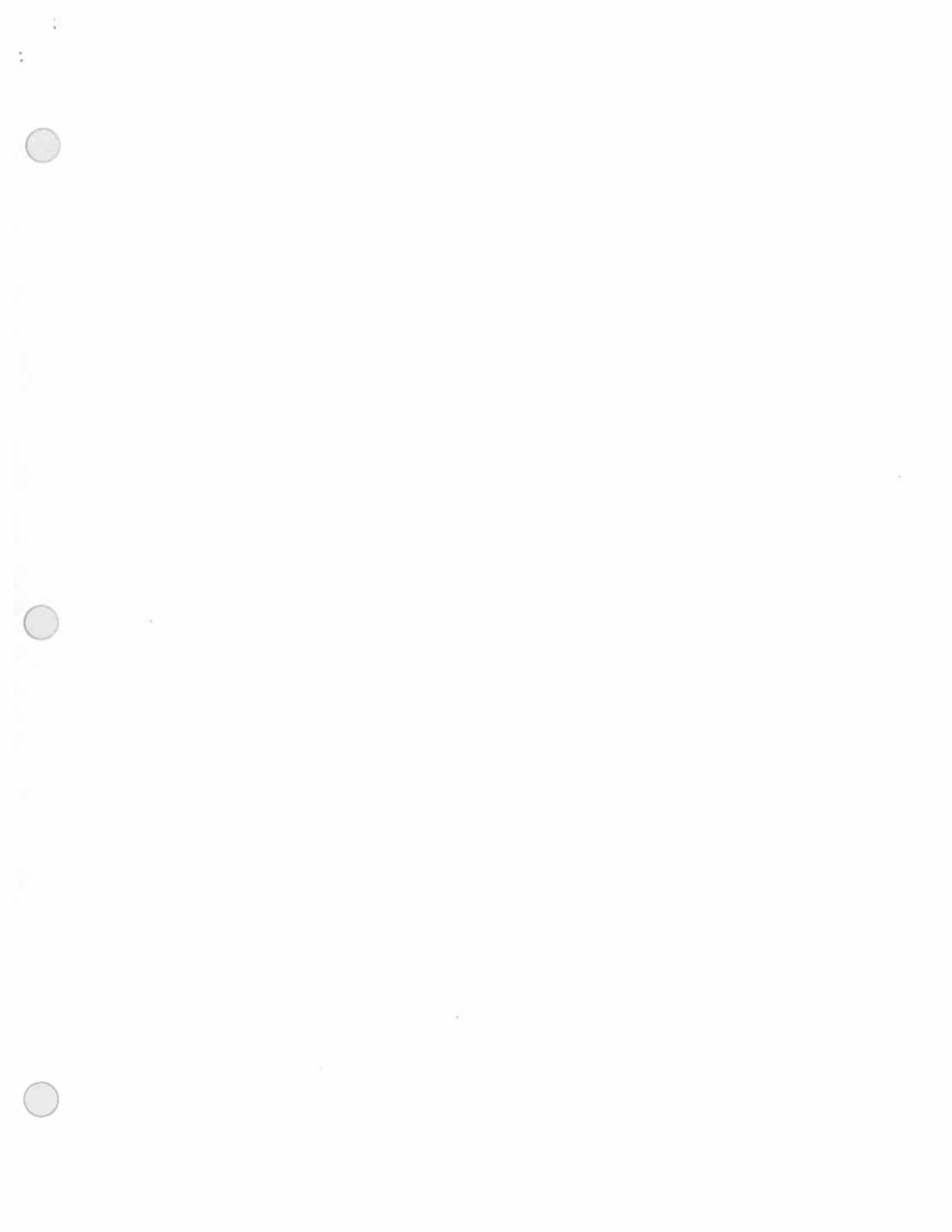
I commit in the future to...

Parents

I have tried to make real the value of *k'hilah* by...

I commit in the future to...

NOTES



THANK YOU.

Your membership in a Union congregation
has made the Reform Movement the largest
and most vibrant branch of Judaism.



UNION FOR
REFORM JUDAISM

האחדות ליחידות ויחידות
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