Congregation Beth Israel
B’nei Mitzvah Handbook
COVID-19 EDITION
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Accommodations for Celebrating during the pandemic

Everyone on the temple staff is dedicated to providing a meaningful and memorable celebration for our families during these months. We look forward to communicating with you often throughout the process and want you to know that our ears and hearts are open to you as we continue to move through uncharted waters. At this time, we know we can celebrate one of two ways: 1) in our sanctuary with immediate family (parents and siblings) in attendance or 2) in your home over the online platform Zoom. Sarah Avner looks forward to communicating directly with each of you to determine which choice makes the most sense for your date.

Supporting your Child in Preparation

Here are some helpful things you can do to be supportive:

- Regular participation in our education programs on Sundays.

- Attend Shabbat services as a family on a regular basis. *The more your child hears and sings along with the prayers, the easier it will be for them to prepare for the big day. We cannot emphasize enough how important this is to your child’s success!*

- Practice with your child at home. Even the best teacher cannot prepare a child well unless the student puts in time outside of his/her lessons at the Synagogue. Check your student's study folder for the weekly assignment. You don’t need to be able read Hebrew to listen to your child practice.

- Encourage your child along the way letting her/him know their hard work has not gone unnoticed.

- Stay on top of the timelines and schedules.

- Consider lightening your child’s extracurricular activities, at least for the six months prior to your child’s celebration.

- Be members in good standing of Congregation Beth Israel. All Temple financial obligations must be current, or with appropriate arrangements made, at least three months prior to the service.
Timeline of Preparation Process

**Grades 7 through 10** – Enroll in Sunday School. It is an expectation of our community that your child be registered and attending our Sunday Religious School program throughout the bar/bat mitzvah process and through Confirmation in 10th Grade. We see the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony as a significant marker in our student’s life-long journey of Jewish experience and community, but not as the end point. We expect that all of our students will continue with their involvement in our Religious School, so that they can continue to develop and nurture their Jewish identity and their connection to the synagogue community and Jewish tradition. We believe that incredible gifts await them as they continue to bring their developing questions, doubts, and insights to their rabbis and teachers here at CBI following their bar/bat mitzvah. If you have any questions about your family’s ability to fulfill this expectation, please speak with Cantorial Soloist Sarah Avner or Rabbi Folberg as soon as possible.

**Eighteen Months Out: Service Attendance.** All students are expected to attend Shabbat worship services 18 times (14 mornings and 4 evenings) during the months leading up to their celebration. There is a binder* at the reception desk where students record their attendance. Attending services enables students and families to connect more deeply with our community and provides a familiarity with the expectations of the day. *During the time of the pandemic we ask that you attend services online and keep track of your attendance at home.

**Eighteen Months Out: Mitzvah Hours.** Rabbi Tarfon said, “You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it.” This quote expresses the Jewish value of working to help those who are in need. We expect b’nei mitzvah students to have completed at least 18 hours* of volunteer work before their bar/bat mitzvah date. We encourage students to choose “hands-on” projects involving meaningful and personal service. Please refer to the appendix for some ideas or reach out to Carly Cera for suggestions. *During the time of the pandemic families will do the best they can acquiring service hours. Be sure to check out the weekly emails from our Education office for opportunities.

**Twelve Months Out: Hebrew Assessment.** Approximately twelve months out, Sarah Avner will meet* with students to assess their Hebrew and prayer skills. After the assessment, she will make a recommendation regarding the start date for prayer class and b’nei mitzvah tutoring. If necessary, she will suggest additional tutoring (at the family’s expense) to bring up the Hebrew reading skills to the necessary level for prayer class and b’nei mitzvah tutoring. A parent(s) must be present at this meeting as timelines and expectations will also be discussed. *During the time of the pandemic these meetings will take place over Zoom.

**Eight to Twelve Months Out: Individual Tutoring for Torah/Haftarah.** Approximately eight to twelve months before the bar/bat mitzvah date (depending on the results of the Hebrew
assessment), all students will attend* individual, weekly, 30-minute study sessions with our tutor, Ellen Sable. The purpose of the tutoring is to learn the Torah and Haftarah portions and refine prayers. Ellen is a wonderful teacher who is experienced in teaching all styles of learning. After the Hebrew Assessment with Sarah Avner, please contact Ellen Sable to schedule a mutually workable meeting time. **At least one parent is required to attend the first meeting with their child.** Study materials will be provided to the student at the first lesson. Tutoring with Ellen is included in the bar/bat mitzvah fee. Lessons with Ellen do not follow the Religious School calendar and continue over the summer and through holiday breaks. **Please note that 24-hours’ notice is required for cancellation of lessons or change of lesson time with Ellen. If a cancellation or change is made less than 24 hours in advance, a $36 fee will be assessed.** For sudden illness or emergency, please contact Ellen via text, phone or email, as soon as you know your child will not be able to attend the session. **During the time of the pandemic these meetings will take place over Zoom.**

**Eight Months Out: Prayer Class.** Approximately eight months before the bar/bat mitzvah date, students will begin to attend* our prayer class, which meets on Sundays from 10:00-11:00 am. Prayer class is led by Jacob Jew, a gifted teacher who grew up in our community, and Ellen Sable, our talented b’nei mitzvah tutor. Prayer class is a wonderful way for our students to master the main prayers of the worship service. While the class participants are all at different stages in their studies, by working together they build community, as they support and encourage one another. Prayer class tuition is included in the bar/bat mitzvah fee. Generally, prayer class follows the Religious School calendar with the exception that it may meet a few times throughout the summer. **Consistent attendance is expected.** *Sarah Avner will email families an invitation and class schedule. Unless otherwise informed, this class is on a break. When in session, this class will meet over Zoom.*

**Seven to Four Months Out: Meetings with our Senior and Associate Rabbis.** Our Senior Rabbi will meet* with students in small groups two times before the ceremony in order to get to know them better and to discuss the meaning of the day. In addition, our Executive Assistant to the Clergy will reach out to your family to schedule 4 meetings with your student and one of the Rabbis in order to study their Torah portion and help prepare their d’var Torah (short speech that includes a lesson from the Torah portion). **At least one parent is required to attend the first d’var Torah meeting with their child and the Rabbi.** *During the time of the pandemic these meetings will take place over Zoom.*

**Six to Five Months Out: Event and Facility Information Form completed.** *During the time of the pandemic CBI is not open for social gatherings. You will be reached out to DIRECTLY when this policy changes.*
Two to Three Months Out: Invitations. It is our policy that you invite your child’s entire Religious School Grade to the service and luncheon (or kiddush refreshments, whichever your family chooses to provide) following the service. By supporting this policy, your family will ensure every child feels included and help us to create kehila kedosha, sacred community. You may either mail or hand out a paper invitation or email an invitation to each of your child’s classmates. Before sending out the invitations, please reach out to Carly Cera (ccera@bethisrael.org) to get an updated class list as Sarah Jew is out of the office on family leave. During the time of the pandemic this is a lovely note to send to your child’s classmates. They can attend the service online and celebrate with your family.

Six Weeks Out: Mentor Rehearsals. Students will be paired with an adult mentor from our community. They will meet 3-4 times in the Sanctuary* for 1 hour, during the final four to six weeks leading up to the ceremony. Our mentors are caring volunteers who transition our students from learning their materials to training them to become the service leader for their Shabbat. With their mentor they will review the cues in their prayer books, rehearse the Hebrew and English readings, practice reading from the Torah as well as reciting their d’var Torah. Our mentors devote significant time to this process. Ellen Sable, with Sarah Avner’s assistance, will match each student to a mentor and will send out a note of introduction about eight weeks out.

*During the time of the pandemic these meetings will take place online. We encourage your family to set up a space in your home that replicates the feeling of standing at the podium on our bimah. Your child will practice standing at the ‘podium’ leading our community in prayer, reading Torah, and sharing their d’var Torah.

Three Weeks Out: Forms. Please email your Honors Form, to our Executive Assistant to the Clergy and email our Associate Rabbi a copy of your Parent’s Blessing for review. Both documents are available on our website here. During the time of the pandemic we will speak directly with your family about the honors form.

One Week Out: Final Rehearsal. 10 days prior to the service itself, on Thursday afternoon, the student and their parent(s) will meet with Sarah Avner in the Sanctuary* to go over the key points of the service. This rehearsal lasts 1 ½ to 2 hours giving students (and parents) the opportunity to ask any last-minute questions and work out any nervousness they may have. Parents do not actually say their parent blessing during this time but they do get to practice their parts too including lighting Shabbat candles if their child is participating in our Friday night service as well as their role during the Torah service. Our Executive Assistant to the Clergy will be in touch to solidify the date and time of the rehearsal. *Should a family choose to celebrate in our sanctuary with immediate family (parents and siblings) in attendance we will rehearse in the sanctuary. Should a family choose to celebrate from their home over the online platform Zoom we will rehearse over Zoom. If your family chooses the sanctuary it is critical that the parent(s) and siblings attend the Final Rehearsal. We will be in touch to confirm the date and time.
**The Big Day.** Please have all family members arrive by 9:50 am on the morning of the ceremony to meet the Rabbi in the Sanctuary for a final practice. Have a great day! You have earned it!

Parent and Family Roles During the Service – Please keep reading for updates during the time of the pandemic.

Honors Form

During the time of the pandemic we will speak directly with your family about the honors form. Unfortunately, we will not be inviting loved ones beyond immediate family (parents and siblings) to join us in the sanctuary.

Passing of the Torah Through the Generations

At the beginning of the Torah Service, a member of the Clergy Team will invite family in attendance up to the bimah to pass the Torah from the ark to the bar/bat mitzvah. The parent(s) will remove the lighter Torah(s) from the ark and will pass it directly to their child(ren).

Parent’s Blessing

Once the Torah has been passed to the bar/bat/b’nei mitzvah, parent(s) are invited to say a blessing for their child. The blessing is said after they pass the Torah to their child. Feel free to speak to your child(ren) from the heart in a way that is prayerful, reverent, and gives members of the congregation an opportunity to say “amen” at the end. This is not a time for a ‘speech’. Your private celebration is your opportunity to speak at length about your child(ren)’s personal history and accomplishments. For the sake of time and the flow of the service we ask that this blessing be brief. If you would like to see some examples of Parent blessings, please go to our website [here](#).

Please send a copy of your blessing to Rabbi Levy (klevy@bethisrael.org) no later than two weeks prior to the service.

Opening and Closing the Ark

At the beginning of the Torah service, along with the parents, the Rabbi will call up sibling(s) in attendance to open the ark before the parents remove the Torah from the ark itself. These participants stay on the bimah as the Torah is passed to the bar/bat/b’nei mitzvah, the parent(s) deliver their blessing, and a few prayers are said before returning the Torah back to the ark. The same sibling(s) will then close the ark when cued by the Rabbi.

Torah Carrier – We will NOT be having a Torah Carrier during the time of the pandemic.
Placement of the Torah on the Podium

The clergy team will explain the role the parent(s) will play in this on a case by case basis. The circumstances are different when we are celebrating one student, two students from the same family, two students from two different families.

Aliyot – blessings before and after the reading of the Torah

When we celebrate our b’nei mitzvah our students typically read 3 aliyot (3 sets of 3-4 verses of Torah/set). Families give the honor of an Aliyah (reciting the blessings before and after the Torah reading) to loved ones. On the honors form, specify your honorees for these aliyot and, when possible, include their Hebrew names. The first aliyah is typically aunts, uncles, cousins and/or close family friends. The second ALWAYS includes parents and may extend to grandparents. The third is ALWAYS your child. The fourth aliyah on the morning will be read ONLY when a sibling or parents has learned the maftir for the week. The clergy team looks forward to working out the details of honorees for your aliyot during this challenging time.

[The above paragraph is a guideline. Adjustments are made on a case by case basis.]

Torah Lifter – We will NOT have a Torah lifter during the time of the pandemic

Torah Dresser(s) – We will NOT have Torah Dresser(s) during the time of the pandemic
Event and Facility Information

Bimah Decorations

Some options:

- Based on your child’s mitzvah project, you may create baskets filled with donations highlighting what they have done. It is YOUR responsibility to get these baskets to their destination. Please do not leave them at the temple.
- CBI has silk plants that may be used at no charge.
- Purchased cut, unscented, flowers from a florist to create 2 bouquets – one for each side of the bimah.
- No decorations are also completely acceptable.

Photography and Videography

Videography options:

- Hand-held camera devices (including cell phones) are NOT permitted at any time during the worship service itself.
- The worship service may be recorded one of two ways:
  1) You may make arrangements with Sarah Avner at the final rehearsal and supply an SD card that will be placed in the Temple’s video recorder which is permanently placed in the balcony OR
  2) You may hire a videography to setup up a camera on a tripod in the balcony that is ready to go no later than 10:15 am.

You may schedule still photography at the following times:

- The Friday morning or afternoon prior to your family’s celebration. Contact Harold Wilensky (harold@bethisrael.org) to schedule this.
- The morning of the service (finished by 9:50 am when service participants will meet with a member of the Clergy team)
- After the service.

Your clergy team is happy to participate in socially-distanced photos at this time. If you would like members of our clergy team to be a part of your pictures, please contact Trish Ivey to help with scheduling. (clergyoffice@bethisrael.org).
Staff: We are here to help!

Administrative Staff
Harold Wilensky, Director of Community Engagement: harold@bethisrael.org; (512) – 454-6806
- Your contact for reservation of spaces and general questions.

Pam Hanna, Director of Membership Services: phanna@bethisrael.org; (512) 454-6806 x203
- Your contact for Temple membership and finances. All b’nei mitzvah associated fees will be handled through her office.

Dawn Forman, Facilities Manager: dawn@bethisrael.org; (512) 454-6806 x208
- Your contact for room setup, meeting with the caterer to go over the rules, will let the caterer and or volunteers in on Saturday to set up. Will be on-site for questions or concerns.

Clergy Suite
Trish Ivey, Executive Assistant to the Clergy: clergyoffice@bethisrael.org; (512) 454-6806 x214
- Handles the appointment scheduling for bar/bat mitzvah tutorial lessons with members of the Clergy Team. Gathers information about honors and prepares the Shabbat morning program.

Rabbi Steven Folberg, Senior Rabbi: sfolberg@bethisrael.org
- Meets in a small group setting with all our students to explore the meaning of the bat mitzvah and bar mitzvah rite of passage. You will receive an email from the Executive Assistant to the Clergy with dates and times for your child to attend.

Rabbi Kelly Levy, Associate Rabbi: klevy@bethisrael.org
- Through group meetings with study partners and private meetings, Rabbi Levy helps students’ study and understand their Torah portions. While looking at various commentaries, Rabbi Levy helps the students craft a d’var Torah based on what they have learned.

Sarah Avner, Cantorial Soloist: savner@bethisrael.org
- Beginning with date selection, to the twelve-month Hebrew check-in, to the dress rehearsal, to the Shabbat service, Sarah is involved every step of the way.

Ellen Sable, B’nei Mitzvah Tutor: ellenrose.sable@gmail.com; (512) 913-8245
- Ellen meets with all students on a one-on-one basis teaching the Torah and Haftarah portions as well as refining and reviewing the prayers. She is also one of the teachers of our b’nei mitzvah prayer class. Ellen and Sarah Avner communicate regularly regarding
student progress and Ellen is an integral part of the b’nei mitzvah process. She will also be your contact person when it is time for your student to begin working with a volunteer mentor to practice their d’var Torah.

Education Office

Carly Cera, Director of Youth Education and Engagement: ccerabethisrael.org; (512) 454-1589

- Carly guides the educational journey leading up to and after your child becomes bar/bat mitzvah. She oversees the completion of mitzvah hours and will check in with you throughout the year. If needed, she will help your student create a passion project or explore organizations who benefit from volunteers.

Sarah Jew, Education Coordinator: sjew@bethisrael.org; 512-454-1589

- Sarah is your point person for all questions regarding: registration for religious school, Midrasha and Hebrew side-by-side learning. She is also your direct contact for the most up-to-date class list when it comes time to prepare invitations.
Appendix 1: Mitzvah Hours

Rabbi Tarfon said, “You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it.” This quote expresses the Jewish value of working to help those who are in need. We expect b’nei mitzvah students to have completed at least 18 hours of volunteer work before the date of his/her bar/bat mitzvah service. We encourage students to choose “hands-on” projects that involve personal service. Many of these organizations require parents to accompany youth volunteers. *Carly Cera, our Director of Education and Youth Engagement can help with ideas during the time of the pandemic. DO check the weekly emails being sent out from Carly to all students/families registered for Religious school.*

*Community Service Ideas:*

**Austin Animal Center** is the largest municipal animal shelter in Central Texas, provides shelter to 23,000 animals annually and services to Austin/Travis County. [http://www.austintexas.gov/page/individual-aac-volunteer](http://www.austintexas.gov/page/individual-aac-volunteer)

**Austin Yellow Bike Project** is an all-volunteer non-profit initiative to put bicycles on the streets of Austin and Central Texas by operating community bike shops, teaching bike mechanics and maintenance, and acting as a local bike advocacy group. [http://austinyellowbike.org](http://austinyellowbike.org)

**Austin Habitat for Humanity** offers many ways for youth to volunteer—landscaping, planting trees, raising awareness or providing lunch for volunteers who are building. [www.austinhabitat.org/youth](http://www.austinhabitat.org/youth)

**Austin Parks Foundation** connects people to resources and partners to develop and improve parks. Volunteers participate in activities including erosion control, mulching, tree-planting, eradicating invasive species and trash pick-up. [www.austinparks.org](http://www.austinparks.org)

**Austin Pets Alive!** is a volunteer run non-profit animal rescue group committed to promoting and providing the resources, education and programs needed to eliminate the killing of homeless companion animals. Must be 12 to volunteer. [www.austinpetsalive.org](http://www.austinpetsalive.org)

**Bake A Wish** is a volunteer run non-profit organization who provide free, homemade birthday cakes to neglected, abused and/or abandoned children and the elderly and disables who would not otherwise receive a birthday cake. Volunteers bake and deliver cakes. [www.bakeawishaustin.org](http://www.bakeawishaustin.org)

**Central Texas Food Bank** is the largest hunger-relief charity in Central Texas, serving more than 46,000 people each week. There are family volunteer times when youth can participate. [www.centraltexasfoodbank.org](http://www.centraltexasfoodbank.org)

**Circle of Friends** is an Alzheimer’s respite group that meets at CBI every Thursday morning from 9am-2pm. This is a great summertime, or school break idea. For information, contact Theressa Lyons at tlyons@mac.com.
**Jewish Family Services** is the division of the JCAA that provides mental health and social services to the Austin Jewish and general community. JFS offers meaningful service projects that fit your schedule. Food pantry drives, shabbat and holiday programs, tech helper, education talks, games or musical entertainment, phone-pal or friendly visits are just a few examples of how you could be a mensch in our Jewish community. For more information, contact JFS Outreach & Volunteer Coordinator at jfs@shalomaustin.org or call 512-250-1043.

**Keep Austin Beautiful** provides resources and education to engage citizens in building a more beautiful community. Volunteers work on service projects, including creek and road cleanups. [http://keepaustinbeautiful.org/volunteer](http://keepaustinbeautiful.org/volunteer)

**Little Helping Hands** facilitates family volunteering by organizing and leading volunteer activities with various organizations. Opportunities are suitable for ages 3-17. For older kids and teens, they offer educational and leadership programs to enhance the learning that comes out of service experiences. [www.littlehelpinghands.org](http://www.littlehelpinghands.org)

**Meals on Wheels Central Texas-Greater Austin Area** makes and delivers meals to homebound members of the community, including those age 60 and older. Volunteers deliver meals by car. [www.mealsonwheelscentraltx.org](http://www.mealsonwheelscentraltx.org)

**Mobile Loaves & Fishes** is a social outreach ministry for the homeless and working poor. Volunteers can help prepare and deliver meals through the St. John Neumann Commissary or work on the Community First Village homes and gardens. [www.mlf.org/volunteer](http://www.mlf.org/volunteer)

**Refugee Services of Texas** a social service agency dedicated to providing resettlement services to refugees and other displaced persons. Youth appropriate opportunities include donation collection, apartment set-up, helping families explore Austin and child-care. Volunteers must attend an hour-long training session offered the first Tuesday of each month. [http://www.rstx.org/volunteer](http://www.rstx.org/volunteer)

**Sustainable Food Center** oversees the SFC Farmers Market and creates opportunities for individuals to makes healthy food choices and participate in a local food system. Youth participation in volunteer opportunities will depend on the job. Volunteers must attend an hour-long orientation session. [www.sustainablefoodcenter.org](http://www.sustainablefoodcenter.org)