# Congregation Beth El B'nei Mitzvah Guidelines

**Mazel Tov!**
The time is fast approaching when your son or daughter will celebrate becoming bar or bat mitzvah at Congregation Beth El. This handout is meant to answer many of the questions families have in preparing for that special occasion. As always, we recognize that individuals and families vary so these are just guidelines. Details for your particular celebration will be planned in consultation with the Rabbi.

## Introduction

When a Jewish child comes of age, they become a *bar* (son) or *bat* (daughter) *mitzvah* (of the commandment). The expression "Bar or Bat Mitzvah" refers to both the celebration of this milestone and to the young person. There are currently communities developing non-gendered language as well. When a child becomes Bar/Bat Mitzvah, they are now able to fulfill communal responsibilities in the Jewish community and are old enough to be obligated to the *mitzvot* – the deeds and commandments of Jewish tradition and teaching. The ceremony does not "make" someone a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, it only acknowledges the status publicly.

In our community, the young person steps into the role of religious adulthood for the first time during the bar/bat mitzvah celebration in several different ways: by calling the community together in prayer; receiving an *aliyah* – a call to the Torah – and reading or chanting from the Torah and an excerpt from a prophetic writing, called the *haftarah*; and by acting as a teacher and sharing a short talk, called a *d'var torah*, on the weekly Torah portion.

Our students work very hard to prepare for this milestone. They attend Hebrew School classes for as many as six years. They learn to decode Hebrew and study the central prayers and beliefs of Judaism. They also take on projects of special interest before their ceremony, often research into a particular aspect of Jewish civilization or history. Students might also conduct oral history interviews with friends or family members. Much of this work is incorporated into their ceremony.

## Philosophy

Congregation Beth El celebrates all of its students and hopes that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony will instill a love of Judaism and learning into our youngsters. This is not a graduation, it is just the first stop on what we hope will be a lifetime of Jewish learning. To that end, the Bat/Bar Mitzvah ceremony is a family and community affair. Your whole family is marking this important milestone!

Students are taking on a huge responsibility in preparing for the ceremony. They are learning new ways of thinking and studying and preparing to take on a very public role, at least for one day to start. The support, encouragement and participation of the entire family and community will be critical in the days ahead. We must all work together to ensure that Torah and haftarah readings are practiced regularly, services are attended, and assignments are completed in a timely fashion.

**Congregation Beth El Policies**

The following are policies of Congregation Beth El. If you have concerns or issues about any of these policies, please discuss them with the Rabbi. Exemptions or exceptions will only be made with the guidance of the Ritual Committee and the approval of the Board of Directors.

1. Bar/Bat Mitzvah students must be enrolled in the Beth El Hebrew School.
2. Prior to the celebration day, the family must be current with Beth El dues and a member in good-standing in the community.
3. In accordance with Jewish tradition, video cameras, still cameras, and recording devices are not to be used during any Shabbat services (Friday evening or Saturday morning) or on synagogue premises on Shabbat.
4. Non-Jewish parents and family members are permitted on the bimah during the service and can participate with non-liturgical readings or blessings. Traditional Jewish liturgy is not read or facilitated by non-Jewish participants during the service.

**Requirements and Expectations**

*Shabbat Morning*: Each month in the year prior to b'nei mitzvah celebration
*Friday Evening:* At least once a month in the year prior to the b'nei mitzvah celebration (as described below)

**Attending Services**

*Because the celebration of the Bat/Bar Mitzvah is incorporated into a regular Shabbat service, the importance of attending services prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah cannot be overstated!!* This is where the student practices and grows comfortable leading prayers and also reinforces their learning through practice. It is also where students are able to make connections with members of the congregation who regularly attend services but may not be involved in Hebrew School activities. Combined, these factors lead to a more meaningful celebration on the Shabbat on which the student will take on the B'nei Mitzvah leadership responsibilities.

We have services every Friday evening throughout the year and a traditional Shabbat morning Torah service on the first Saturday of each month during the academic calendar year.

Students who attend a minimum of 12 Friday evening services in the year prior to their celebration will have the opportunity to lead parts of that service on the Shabbat evening of their b'nei mitzvah and can share their oral history report as the sermon that evening.

Students are expected to attend Shabbat morning services when they are offered, especially in the year prior to their b'nei mitzvah celebration. They should also plan to attend as many of the holy day observances throughout the year.

After the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration, many students continue service-leadership and Torah reading roles in the congregation, especially during the High Holy Days.

**Curriculum**

Bar/Bat Mitzvah students should be proficient in basic Hebrew reading skills, be able to lead the congregation in the standard prayers, read from the Torah and the Haftarah, and give a sermon on the day of their celebration. We also realize that students have different strengths, comfort levels, and personal issues which might need to be taken into consideration when planning for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Students with special developmental or learning needs will always be accommodated.

Students prepare for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah by coming to Hebrew School classes which, in the year prior to their celebration, will focus on this preparation. Individual meetings are also scheduled with the Rabbi for tutorials on the Torah readings, blessings, and speeches. In the case of a large Bar/Bat Mitzvah class, these may be group tutorials.

***Liturgy:*** The following is the basic prayer-set expected to be learned prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration, there is always the option to learn and do more than is on this list:

*Friday evening:*
-Shalom Aleychem
-Shema/v'ahavta
-Mi Camokha
-Veshameru
-Hatzi Kaddish
-Vaykhulu
-Aleynu
-Kiddush (full)
-Motzi

*Saturday morning:*
-Tallit blessing
-Hatzi Kaddish
-Psalm 150 (Halleluyah)
-Barehu
-Torah blessings
-Haftarah blessings

Depending on readiness, (see Attendance requirements above) students will have the opportunity to lead some or all of these prayers at their b'nei mitzvah celebration.

In addition to prayers and blessings, students will be expected to learn at least one aliyah, the maftir, of their Torah portion as well as the associated Haftarah portion. These portions will be read by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah during the service. Chanting these biblical readings will be taught and encouraged, though not required. Prayerbooks will be available through the synagogue.

***Written Projects:*** Students are expected to present one teaching or sermon at the Saturday morning service. The speeches are prepared with the guidance of the parents and the Rabbi. Special help with writing is also available. The student will have the opportunity to practice giving their speeches many times before the big day. If they lead a Friday night service (see requirements above) they will have the opportunity to do two, based on their project work.

***Project Work:*** For the teaching sermon, the student will complete at least one of these choices, or an approved alternative: For an Oral History project, each student interviews at least two Jewish people, their parent's age or older. The interview focuses on what it was like for each of the people when they were Bar/Bat Mitzvah age, the role Judaism plays in their lives, and how this compares to the experience of the student. This project is written up in report form and may be presented to the congregation.

A *d'var Torah* or sermon may be based on their Torah or Haftarah portion. Students choose a theme that is of interest and study traditional and modern commentary in order to apply it to their life.

A teaching can also be research into a topic relevant to Jewish life, an artistic or musical project, or any other creative endeavor with Jewish content. This is worked on over the year prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration and often is incorporated into the *d'var Torah* given at the Saturday morning service.

***"Mitzvah" Project:*** Because communal responsibility is an important component of being Jewish, students are encouraged to choose a project that will benefit either the synagogue community, the broader Jewish world, or any cause to which they are committed (whether Jewishly focused or not.) Projects range from tzedakah fundraising drives, collection of goods, volunteer service, or incorporating tzedakah into their b'nei mitzvah plans. These projects should be started, if not completed, before the b'nei mitzvah date.

**Materials Needed**

Every student should have a binder to keep all of her or his materials in. You will also need a supply of Post-it flags. The binder, prayerbooks, a writing utensil, and extra paper should come with the student to every meeting and every class!!!

**CHECKLIST**

___ Shabbat Morning Services (6-8 in the year prior)
___ Friday Night Services (12 in the year prior)
___ Required Prayers
___ Teaching/Sermon
___ Mitzvah Project
___ Hebrew School
___ Member in good standing

**Bibliography**


Davis, Judith — Whose Bar or Bat Mitzvah is it Anyway? A Guide for Parents Through a Family Rite of Passage

Lewit, Jane & Ellen Epstein — Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planbook

Salkin, Jeffrey — Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah

**Frequently Asked Questions**

***Do we have to pay the synagogue or rabbi extra for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah?*** No, but it would be in keeping with Jewish tradition to make a gift to the synagogue in honor of your simcha.

***When do we incur a cleaning fee, building use fee, or security fee?***
As part of your membership, families may use the social hall for celebrations for celebrations directly connected with a service. This would include a family dinner on Friday night before services, an Oneg, or a Kiddush lunch on Saturday immediately after services. We ask that you arrange for set-up and clean-up of food and dishes, and that you provide any paper goods you will be using.

There is a cleaning fee of $185 to cover the additional cleaning costs that come with having a larger number than usual in our space. Arrangements will be made by a synagogue representative for our cleaning service to come in following the final event (usually Saturday evening), based on our usual cleaning schedule. This cleaning does not include washing dishes, putting away food, resetting the social hall, or cleaning of linens. *If you have a larger than usual oneg or dinner on Friday evening that requires additional cleaning, an additional charge will be incurred.*

Again, please ensure that you have made arrangements for leftover food to be stored or thrown away, that dishes are washed, and that all trash is in a bag or in recycling. It is helpful if you have extra bags of trash to take them outside rather than leaving them on the floor.

Should you wish to host an event at the synagogue that is not directly connected to the B'nei mitzvah, such as a party Saturday night, the building use rental fee of $250 applies.

Please note that for events beyond normal services (for example, a B'nei mitzvah celebration after the ceremony itself or a special celebration at the synagogue on the previous evening), a security fee of $25/hour will be charged, with a minimum of three hours of coverage required.

***How many aliyahs do we "get"?*** An aliyah is when someone is called to the Torah to say the blessing before the Torah reading. There are seven on a Shabbat morning, plus an additional one called the maftir. The maftir is reserved for the bar/bat mitzvah. One is reserved for the parents and siblings of the student. You may choose to ask people from your family to come up for the remaining aliyot, but are not required to do so. Sometimes the family chooses someone from the community who is special to them. The person saying the blessing must be Jewish, though a non-Jew can stand with the person saying the blessing.

***Do we have to invite everyone in the congregation and/or Hebrew School?*** No. This is your simcha, but keep in mind a few things: All of our services are open, there is never an invitation required. Your invitations are for meals or parties. It is customary to invite everyone in your class to your simcha, if not the whole Hebrew School.

***What about the Oneg?*** It is customary that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family hosts the Oneg on the Friday evening of the simcha if their child is participating in the service. It need not be elaborate. The family should also plan on supplying at least Challah and wine/juice for the Oneg on Saturday morning. Some people choose to do something more elaborate. This is not required, though it is appreciated. Food served should be in keeping with the Kashrut guidelines of the synagogue. These will be distributed separately.

***What if my kid can't sing?*** Singing or chanting of the prayers and Torah/haftarah readings is traditional. However, it is more important that the words get spoken clearly and to the best of the student's ability. If that means not singing, it is perfectly acceptable and "kosher."