Chapter 2
Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah
Introduction

Becoming a bar mitzvah (for a boy) or a bat mitzvah (for a girl) is a milestone occasion in the Jewish life cycle. Bar/bat mitzvah recognizes and celebrates Jewish children becoming more responsible for their Jewish lives and their ethical choices. In traditional Jewish practice, upon turning 13 (for boys) and 12 (for girls), individuals become accountable for the decisions guiding their behavior and for their actions in regard to observing mitzvot (commandments; singular, mitzvah). Since the medieval era, the bar mitzvah ceremony has marked this occasion for boys; an equivalent bat mitzvah ceremony for girls was
created in the 20th century. Today, *b’ney* (plural of bar) or *b’not* (plural of bat) mitzvah ceremonies are commonly observed as part of a Shabbat morning service, with a celebration following. Liberal Jews recognize that the process of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah is as crucial as the moment itself. *B’ney mitzvah* ceremonies are rites of passage that prepare children to lead engaging and thoughtful Jewish lives with a sense of commitment to their Jewish identity.

Understanding bar/bat mitzvah as a process rather than an event encourages the creation of rituals that support the critical thinking and engagement appropriate for this stage of children’s lives. It also helps to imbue their lives with important values for them to consider and question. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah, a rite of passage, is an unfold-

“*B’ney mitzvah*” is plural for “bar mitzvah” and refers to more than one boy becoming bar mitzvah. It is also used to refer to a group of bar and bat mitzvah students. “*B’not mitzvah*” is the plural for “bat mitzvah” and refers to more than one girl becoming a bat mitzvah. Hebrew is a gendered language, and the masculine plural is often used as the default form, even if the group is primarily made up of female-identified people. —R.T.H.

As a life-cycle event, the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony marks a moment of Jewish maturation that doesn’t exactly line up with the accepted age of maturity in secular society. Hence it brings to consciousness Jewish difference and distinctiveness. —D.D.M.

Saying “becoming a bar/bat mitzvah” unintentionally supports the idea that the service itself confers the status of bar/bat mitzvah. Instead, I try to say: “*celebrating becoming a bar/bat mitzvah,*” to underscore the idea that it is a status change that comes with age, not with the affirming ritual. —N.H.M.

Bar/bat mitzvah students usually work long and hard preparing for the bar/bat mitzvah service. It is important for students to understand that one goal of preparing for and celebrating the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is to challenge each student. This may take different forms, according to the learning needs and abilities of each child. There-
ing experience, one beset with challenges and opportunities for growth. In most communities, the bar/bat mitzvah process unfolds over a period extending as long as two years.

This rite of passage is undergirded by many values that can be instilled in children and can also shape adults’ understanding of b’ney mitzvah. Some of the most important and foundational concepts of Jewish life should be woven into the preparation process: respect for and connection to Shabbat, community (kehila), justice (tzedek), prayer (t’fila), learning (talmud Torah), family (mishpaha), godliness (elohut) and holiness (kedusha). Adults who support and guide children during this rite of passage would do well to model these values and to cultivate others as well.

Therefore, students should not judge themselves against how much they see another bar/bat mitzvah student doing in another service. Furthermore, students should be reminded that leading services and reading from the Torah are not performances, and perfection is not expected. —R.T.H.

At my synagogue, the b’ney mitzvah program officially begins with picking a date for the service at the end of the fourth grade (three years in advance). During fifth grade, students, together with their parents, begin the formal process of preparation. —S.C.R.

The increased length of study required by congregations prior to bar/bat mitzvah resulted from the realization on the part of American Jewish religious leaders that bar mitzvah ceremonies appealed to a growing number of American Jews. Religious leaders saw that they could take advantage of that situation to insist on several years of study preceding bar mitzvah in order to enroll students in Hebrew school. —D.D.M.

Families or communities may wish to develop their own lists of values or foundational concepts. These values can play a role throughout the b’ney mitzvah process. They could become the basis of a covenant between the child and the family, or between families and their community. For a more extensive list of values to consider, see A Guide to Jewish Practice, Volume 1, pages 565–578. —R.T.H.
Effective shepherding of children through this process requires compassion, active listening, flexibility, patience, faith and enthusiasm. These are crucial because, similar to other rites of passage, the *b’ney mitzvah* process creates challenges for children, who may be unsure of how to overcome such challenges. Adults should respond to this anxiety with care and compassion, assuring children that they will be supported throughout the process and that they will succeed.

Balancing inherited practice with responsiveness to the individuality of each child is important. If the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony takes place in an established community, the community is likely to have guidelines. Many communities have a range within these guidelines to allow for a nuanced exploration of Jewish living and expression. Designing a process and a ritual that reflect an awareness of the fact that children have different strengths, challenges, interests and learning styles makes it more likely that the child will experience personal connection and meaning. Extending this recognition to families can engage adults in powerful ways, and it can make the bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage a meaningful experience for the entire family that honors the family’s relationships and participation. A meaningful experience can create an enduring Jewish touchstone for everyone involved.

Adults can reduce their children’s anxiety by participating as co-learners with the bar or bat mitzvah, creating opportunities to have conversations about important Jewish values leading up to the ceremony. —N.C.M.
Many communities organize their *b’ney mitzvah* programs on a teaching from *Pirkey Avot* 1.2: “The whole world is built on three pillars: Torah, *avoda* (worship) and *g’milut hasadim* (acts of lovingkindness).” These overarching pillars shape much of the rite of passage. We combine *ahavat Torah* (love of Torah) with *talmud Torah* (Torah study) as children prepare to carry the Torah, chant from the Torah and study Torah. The children engage intensively with Jewish text, usually culminating with a bar/bat mitzvah offering a teaching based on those studies—often, a *d’var Torah* delivered at the ceremony. In many communities, children lead part of the worship service (*avoda*). At best, their learning process is not solely about how to execute the prayers. It involves delving into their spiritual beliefs (*emuna*), their connection to God and godliness (*elohut* and *kedusha*), and their understanding of prayer—both generally and in the context of

We tend to focus on actions an adolescent may take in order to live Judaism in terms of Torah, *avoda* and *g’milut hasadim*. But adult *b’ney mitzvah* are at a different stage, one of inner spiritual growth. I wonder what would happen if we built adult *b’ney mitzvah* programs around the parallel statement in *Pirkey Avot* 1.18: “Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel would say, ‘By three things is the world sustained: *din*, *emet* and *shalom*—judgment, truth and peace.’” A year spent in reflection on character growth within these three domains—a type of *musar* or Jewish self-discipline—might serve as the primary practice. —J.M.S.

One of the most powerful aspects of the *b’ney mitzvah* preparation at Kehillath Israel has been helping our students to appreciate what it means that the Torah is more than 3,000 years old. They realize how astounding it is to be reading a 3,000-year-old book, not as one would look at an object in a museum (which is where most 3,000-year-old documents would be found), but as a living, inspiring text that can teach them about their own lives today. —S.C.R.
Shabbat morning. Related to the pillar of *g’milut hasadim*, children usually design a bar/bat mitzvah project in which they plan some act of *hesed* (care) or *tzedek* (social justice); these are often referred to as *tikun olam* or *tzedaka* projects. Such projects inspire children to contribute in some meaningful way to the larger community around them.

**Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Process**

“Parents who teach their child teach not only their child, but also their child’s child—and so on to the end of generations.” (Babylonian Talmud, Kidushin 30a) The ritual of marking a child’s coming of age through bar/bat mitzvah is one that reaches back to ancient traditions and forward to building the next generation’s reconstructed Jewish life. When discussing bar/bat mitzvah, many people point to a moment in time (erroneously turning the noun into a verb: “My daughter was bat mitzvahed this past Shabbat”). In our time, bar/bat mitzvah is a process that culminates in a ritual denoting change in the status of the child. In the

Our congregation takes a broad view of projects. The congregational school curriculum ensures that the students learn and do Torah, *avoda*, and *g’milut hasadim*. Then each student preparing for bat/bar mitzvah selects and develops a project that does something extra in any area of Jewish life. While most projects have been geared toward *tikun olam*, others have involved engaging in Jewish learning not covered in the curriculum or taking on additional training as synagogue service leaders or Torah/haftarah chanters.  —J.A.S.
most traditional sense, “bar/bat mitzvah” means “son or daughter of commandment.” While the age of bar/bat mitzvah (that is, religious majority) is 12 for girls and 13 for boys, the ritual is celebrated at age 13 for both in many communities. In a progressive, nonhalakhic understanding, the bar/bat mitzvah process is the beginning of children’s responsibility for making moral choices, understanding their religious and spiritual legacy, and starting to forge their own spiritual lives. A way to encourage such awareness and growth successfully is through a thoughtfully designed process and a ritual that marks this important rite of passage.

Understanding the bar/bat mitzvah experience as a rite of passage requires that we have some insight into the rea-

In rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic, to be a “daughter” or “son” of something means to be subject to it or fit for it. Thus, while taking the phrase “son of commandment” literally raises interesting interpretive questions about our filial responsibility toward our heritage, or about the generative power of mitzvah, the plain meaning of the phrase is “subject to the mitzvot” or “fit for doing mitzvot.” —J.A.S.

In considering the meaning of becoming bar/bat mitzvah, it is helpful to ponder the possible meanings of “mitzvah.” Is it a good deed? It is certainly not only that in any well-developed understanding of Judaism. Is a mitzvah a command from God? Is it a folkway, as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan categorized the ritual, as opposed to an ethical practice? Is a mitzvah a cultural or civilizational norm? Is it an opportunity for bringing holiness and beauty into our lives? Is it an obligation that arises from our encounter with other people, with our community and heritage, with our planet and/or with our God? —J.A.S.

Most kids are used to saying that becoming bar or bat mitzvah means, “becoming an adult Jew,” even though they know that they aren’t becoming adults in the way that their parents are adults. We teach them that what it means for them to be adults is to take responsibility for the choices they make in their lives and for the consequences of those choices in developing their character as human beings. —S.C.R.
son why such rites of passage are necessary. In many cultures, rites of passage help with major life transitions that are psychological, biological and social in nature. These changes often spark emotional and spiritual challenges that are eased by a ritualized way of marking life transitions. Rites of passage not only enable the individuals involved to see themselves with a new perspective, but also help their friends, family and community members. Many such rituals are designed to reinforce values that are part of the culture or religion of the community.

For liberal Jews, the bar/bar mitzvah is a rite of passage that facilitates a transition in the way adults see and understand children, interact with them and set expectations for them. The rite also helps to build a path for children to take ownership of their Jewish spiritual and ethical lives. In communities where the ceremony and process are rote, pressure to conform to communal beliefs and practices interferes with this personal growth. The best

While a 13 year old may be excited about the celebration, parents have a bigger context for this transition from childhood to adolescence. Preparation for parents can be a significant aspect of the year prior to the ceremony, in that it helps parents to recognize the changing nature of their role. The planning, financial commitment and family dynamics (nuclear and extended) play into the process in a way that can have a larger impact on the parents than on the student. My congregation’s family programming in the b’ney mitzvah year is intended to help parents and children to recognize these changing roles and to support parents undergoing their own emotional and logistical challenges. —B.P.

The process of growing up involves individuation, but it also requires a growing sense of one’s obligations to others. A healthy Jewish civilization needs its members to seriously engage with communal beliefs and practices and to be shaped by those beliefs and practices, while also questioning them when necessary. Thus, bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies should reflect both how the community does things and how the individual young person does things. —J.A.S.
approaches allow for the child’s individuality to shine through the process, for self-expression to emerge, and for personal engagement with Jewish traditions to take place.

History

By any measure, the bat mitzvah, a coming-of-age ceremony for Jewish girls, is a very new ritual. We can trace the origins of its modern, North American form to the 1920s, shortly after the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted American women the right to vote. But in the Jewish way of counting time, too, the bar mitzvah is a relatively new ritual. The practices of circumcision, marriage and some death rituals have their roots in the Bible, and ancient rabbinic texts contain instructions and commentary on marriage,

In many communities, the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony itself is an opportunity for creative self-expression. We have had students sing, dance and create works of art and poetry, offering a wide variety of personal expressions of what the day, the ceremony or the Torah message means to them. The more personal the experience becomes, the more meaningful and lasting it will be. —S.C.R.

My family’s experience for all three of our children was that the bar/bat mitzvah service has surprising and extraordinary power. In each case, our child was transformed by the events of the bar/bat mitzvah weekend. Standing in front of hundreds of adults as well as their own friends, leading the service, chanting from the Torah scroll, and composing and delivering their d’var Torah changed the way the community saw our children, and thus changed their own self-image. Standing in the sight of one’s community is not only symbolic; it is a significant and palpable experience. —J.J.S.
divorce, burial and other major life-cycle rituals. By contrast, the bar mitzvah ceremony is a medieval upstart, with its first explicit mention in Jewish texts in the 15th century.

The term “bar mitzvah” itself refers to a status, not a ritual. Moses Maimonides, the great twelfth-century rabbinic scholar, confirmed earlier rabbinic sources that a male becomes obligated to observe the commandments at age 13. (Mishneh Torah, Ishut 2.9–10) From then on, a

According to the research of Jewish historian Ivan Marcus, in 13th-century Europe, Roman Catholics celebrated their first Communion at age 7, and the Jewish initiation ritual for boys occurred at age 6 or 7. It involved introducing them to the study of Torah. In the 15th century, when the age of first Communion moved to between 12 and 14, the earlier Jewish initiation ritual disappeared, and bar mitzvah ceremonies were introduced. Jewish civilization evolves partly in response to the surrounding culture. —J.J.S.

The Talmud puts the precise minimum age for bar mitzvah at 13 years and one day old. (B. Talmud Nida 45b) Some texts suggest that signs of the development of secondary sex characteristics are also necessary. According to one view, a male becomes obligated to follow the commandments after the appearance of at least two pubic hairs. (B. Talmud Nida 52a) The halakha views both conditions as necessary for an adolescent to be fully obligated to follow the commandments. The emphasis on physical maturity has not transferred explicitly to contemporary liberal practice, but it is still present rhetorically in such phrases as “from childhood to youth” and “Today I am an adult.” If we value the conscious taking on of adult gender identity, we may choose to play up this emphasis and incorporate single-sex group maturation rituals—for example, participation in a sweat lodge, or immersion in a mikvah—into the bar/bat mitzvah experience. Some may choose to downplay the physical maturation aspect out of concern for klal Yisrael (inclusive community) and k’vod habriyot (human dignity). We should think about how to proceed sensitively with children who physically develop much earlier or later. We also need to think of what aspects the bar/bat mitzvah ritual takes on for transgender people or for those considering gender transition. In this case, the ritual should be able to serve as a structure in which to express a chosen identity if the celebrant so desires. —J.M.S.
male is eligible to be counted as a full adult in the eyes of the community, including being counted for a minyan (prayer quorum) and serving on a bet din (legal court). Maimonides also noted that 12 is the age when a girl is considered mature and fully responsible for her own conduct, though her obligations and opportunities under halakha (Jewish law) are very different from those of a boy. In the middle ages, bar mitzvah was a legal coming-of-age ceremony in the Jewish community, akin to the passage of a young adult male turning 18 and being able to vote, or turning 21 and being able to drink alcohol. In the premodern Jewish world, a boy turning 13 became bar mitzvah, a son of commandment, regardless of whether there was a ceremony or any other special ritual. Since most Jewish communities were self-contained and individuals were well known to each other, there was no formal need to mark the change in status.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that some marking of the event began early on. The earliest and most significant ritual involved the boy being called to the Torah to receive the honor of an aliyah, thereby publicly acknowledging the change in his status. In some communities, the boy’s father would recite a blessing acknowledging that he was no longer responsible for his son’s behavior (“Blessed is the Holy One who has now freed me from the responsibility for this [child]”). In both Sephardic and Ashkenazic

Maseh et Sofrim, a compilation from perhaps the eighth century, records the tradition of bringing a new bar mitzvah to elders to receive a blessing after completing his first full fast. (Maseh et Sofrim 18: 5 or 7 [depending on the edition]) —J.A.S.
communities, sources suggest that, in addition to the Torah blessing, the boy also chanted from the Torah, most often the maftir or final portion. He also recited the haftarah (an excerpt from the prophetic writings assigned to each Torah portion) and delivered some form of teaching. The event also included a se’uda, a festive meal marking a communal celebration. Yet, until the modern era, the bar mitzvah celebration was a minor one in the Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Mizrahi (Eastern Jewish) traditions. In Converso communities—communities of Jews originally from the Iberian Peninsula who were forced to convert to Christianity during the Spanish Inquisition—there was no celebration, but parents explained the family’s true identity when their son became 13. Some 19th- and 20th-century adherents of classical Reform Judaism set the ceremony aside as being a painfully outdated example of Jewish “Orientalism” and adopted instead a group confirmation on Shavuot for boys and girls at age 16, reasoning that a person at that later age is closer to a mature under-

The confirmation ceremony still often serves as a ceremony at the end of tenth grade marking the end of formal Jewish studies. Since Shavuot is the celebration of receiving Torah, the ceremony often takes place on or within close proximity to Shavuot. The ceremony and associated preparations have evolved over time, and they may vary by community. Options may include: leading a Shavuot or Shabbat service, delivering divrey Torah (individually or as a class), engaging in a service learning or social action project, framing the celebration around a particular theme, or sharing a creative presentation (such as a musical or art project). While some communities approach confirmation with a formalized set of rituals and expectations, others tailor the celebration to each class, resulting in a slightly different celebration each year. —R.T.H.
standing of obligations. (Kaufmann Kohler, CCAR Yearbook, Vol. XXIII, 1913, pages 170–173)

Reform Judaism is itself a product of the modern era, and the classical Reform understanding of age 16 as an age of maturity reflects another modern development—the emergence of adolescence as a category. In the medieval Jewish community, an individual moved directly from childhood to adulthood, when he was morally responsible for his own actions. That transition happened at age 12 or 13. The modern era introduced the concept of adolescence, a period when teenagers (a word that didn’t appear until 1911) are seen as more than children, but as not yet fully adult. Marking the transition from childhood became more important. Furthermore, in the modern era, the autonomous Jewish communities that had long existed began to disperse, and Jews began to live among non-Jews and to become more like them. A bar mitzvah ceremony became an opportunity to educate the child about how to relate to the Jewish community, a process that had previously been enacted unconsciously.

The abundance of America has resulted in a shift in bar mitzvah from a change of status not needing any action or ritual, to primarily a life-cycle ritual. Jenna Weissman Joselit, an American Jewish historian, traces the development of the ritual to the children of immigrants from Eastern Europe. She notes that the bar mitzvah ceremony is one of the few rituals that were more widely and expansively celebrated in America than in Eastern Europe because in America it was strengthened by ample material comfort, a child-centered culture, and creative new ways
to express Jewish identity. (The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950, page 90) In the years following World War II, when many Jews moved into the suburbs, the synagogue became the primary site of Jewish education. Away from ethnic neighborhoods where they lived side by side, most Jews joined synagogues with the stated goal of educating their children Jewishly, at least through seventh grade. The bar mitzvah ritual became the culmination of this trajectory of childhood education, with a de-emphasis on the change of status or halakhic obligations and increased attention on the party. Many children received no further Jewish education following bar mitzvah (rather than beginning a lifetime of learning, a traditional Jewish ideal), and some families dropped their synagogue membership following the bar/bat mitzvah of their youngest child. The bar mitzvah ritual became so popular, and it came to be seen as so normative for Jewish boys, that most Reform congregations had reincorporated it by the 1960s.

The bat mitzvah emerged both as a part of these trends and as a response. Though premodern women’s history is often hard to document, there is some evidence of girls’ coming-of-age ceremonies in various communities around the world in the 18th and 19th centuries. One reason for the classical Reform preference for confirmation over bar mitzvah was that the group confirmation ceremony could include both boys and girls. The first bat mitzvah ceremony, celebrated in 1922 at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), a Reconstructionist synagogue established by the followers of Mordecai M. Kaplan, had its roots in
American democratic practices. It took hold because of girls’ desire for religious equality, and because of the desire of some men in leadership positions to facilitate this equality.

Prior to the 1950s, many girls were given neither a Jewish education nor the opportunity to become bat mitzvah, and the Reconstructionist innovation was slow to catch on. In many instances, girls lobbied significantly for the right to learn and to lead, seeking the education, the expression of empowerment and, often, the celebration as

Mordecai M. Kaplan, a rabbi, educator and public intellectual, was deeply influenced by American democracy. Kaplan sought to integrate democratic principles and practices into Jewish living because he believed that integration was the necessary, next stage of Jewish development that would help to create a meaningful future for modern Jews. The father of four daughters, he was strongly affected by the passage of the 19th Amendment, which granted American women the right to vote. One of his first acts after he and his followers established the SAJ in early 1922 after breaking away from his previous Orthodox pulpit was to celebrate the bat mitzvah of his eldest daughter, Judith. Just as his own father had schooled his sister in Jewish learning, Kaplan provided his daughters with intensive Jewish education and, on March 18, 1922, Judith Kaplan stepped forward to become the first bat mitzvah. Her father took the mafṣir aliyah and chanted the haftarah; after the Torah service, Judith stood in front of the bima to recite the Torah blessings and to read—from a ʾhumash, not from the Torah itself—an excerpt from the Book of Leviticus. Reflecting on the experience later, Judith Kaplan described herself as a typical adolescent, excited but also anxious that the unprecedented ceremony might somehow open her up to teasing from her peers. —D.W.

In fact, Judith Kaplan’s grandmother was scandalized about the bat mitzvah and wrote to her son expressing her distress. —D.D.M.

My mother’s mother was literate and extraordinarily knowledgeable when she came over from Navardok as a teenager at the turn of the 20th century. She explained that her father was a melamed (teacher of Torah), but that she was not allowed into his classroom. Her job was to serve his students tea. After she served them, however, she stood surreptitiously by the door outside the room and transgressed by listening and learning Torah. —J.J.S.
The form of bat mitzvah has been different in different times and places. As liberal synagogues negotiated the issue of women’s religious equality in the years following World War II, bat mitzvah ceremonies were often held on Friday evening or Saturday morning—but with the girl leading fewer elements of the service. At the SAJ, the bat mitzvah soon came to look identical to the bar mitzvah, and such parity is usually the case now in synagogues that practice religious equality for women. The institution of bat mitzvah has become so mainstream that many Orthodox synagogues create opportunities for girls to demonstrate their learning, such as a teaching session and meal on Shabbat afternoon. In addition, many communities offer adult bat mitzvah classes and ceremonies—individually or in groups—for women who didn’t have an opportunity to become bat mitzvah in adolescence.

Even as the ritual of bar mitzvah has evolved and expanded to include bat mitzvah, there are strong continuities with its earliest expressions. A progressive understanding of bar/bat mitzvah situates the ritual in the midst of a community rather than as a stand-alone celebration. The ritual is understood as a milestone in a lifelong engagement with Jewish learning and as the beginning of

I always remind my students that it would not be sufficient for me simply to hand them a Torah to take home and have them open it in their bedrooms, chant from the Torah, declare, “I’m done,” and call it a bar or bat mitzvah. The ceremony must take place in a service so that it represents the importance of Jewish identity as a reflection of belonging to the Jewish community and entering the community as a Jewish adult. —S.C.R.
responsibility for moral and spiritual choices. Though the
day itself is full of accomplishment and celebration, the
ritual is the culmination of an extended rite of passage
that helps to shape an emerging Jewish and adolescent
identity.

**Settings**

Frequently, bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies are held in syna-
gogues. This setting lends itself to the celebration for rea-
sons both principled and pragmatic. The bar/bat mitzvah,
as it is currently understood, is about an intersection of
the child, the community and religious practice. In Amer-
ica, the synagogue is a major location of religious expres-
sion for the Jewish community, so the synagogue is one
obvious place for a religious ceremony that ordinarily
requires a minyan (prayer quorum), includes a Torah and
involves extensive educational preparation. Many Jews,
leaders and laypeople alike, want to emphasize the reli-
gious component of becoming bar/bat mitzvah. Involve-
ment in a synagogue makes it more likely (without offer-
ing a guarantee) that key elements—Jewish learning, a
connection to community and readiness for responsibili-
ty—will be part of the process. As a result, many syna-
gogues require membership and Hebrew school atten-

Ideally, the bar/bat ceremony is not the culmination of Jewish learning. It is one step
along the personal path of developing one’s relationship with Judaism and the Jew-
ish community. —R.T.H.
dance in order to serve as the setting for bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. It is important to note, however, that alternative models have always existed for Jewish communal gatherings—*havurot*, Hillel houses on campus, folk shuls, Jewish camps—and that these and other gatherings may be appropriate places for celebrating a bar/bat mitzvah.

For many reasons, some families celebrate the bar/bat mitzvah rite outside of a synagogue. Families may belong to a congregation but prefer a different location, at the initiative of either the parent or the child. In these instances, families that are members of synagogues usually have the support of the synagogue community, including the provision of ritual items, such as prayer books and a Torah scroll that may otherwise be difficult to procure. The

Synagogue membership and associated obligations are problematic for some individuals. Some families may have a hard time finding a synagogue that is a good fit for the entire family or just for their child. The lack of a comfortable fit may be for religious or cultural reasons, or because a family member has special needs that are not met, or because of status matters, such as a single parent, a parent who is not Jewish, or both parents being the same gender or sex. Some families find synagogue membership prohibitively expensive; others are unable or uninterested in becoming involved in the community in the way that a synagogue community expects. —D.W.
change in location may be preferred because a different setting is most appropriate for the child, either because of special needs or because of an attachment to a particular location (such as a summer camp, a geriatric facility where a beloved elder lives or where the child has volunteered or a Hillel house on a campus where a parent teaches). Some families choose to travel to Israel to celebrate this event, and they usually work with a liberal Israeli rabbi to arrange the ritual, though the preparation for it may be carried out at their local synagogue.

Some families prepare the child and celebrate the ritual entirely independently of a synagogue. In most instances, the parents hire a tutor for their child and organize their own service in a private setting, which may be lay-led or led by a rabbi, a rabbinical student, a cantor or the tutor.

While I am sympathetic to the idea that both bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies and synagogues are due for major overhauls, the two of them belong together. If the ceremony marks the beginning of entrance to the adult community through an aliyah to the Torah, it should take place in an ongoing community that the child is eligible to enter and where adults regularly take aliyaot to the Torah. Otherwise, the ceremony is a show, not an actual rite of passage. A Hillel house, for example, is not a community that the child is eligible to enter, being a community neither for young teenagers nor for post-college adults, and so is not an appropriate site for bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. —J.A.S.

This chapter uses the term “parents” for adults responsible for a child. Sometimes this refers to the general category of parents, and other times it might assume that a family is made up of two parents. Families obviously take many forms, and they could have one, two or more parents taking a primary role in the raising of a child. The primary guardian for a child may also be a grandparent, an aunt, an uncle, or another guardian. Though the term “parents” appears throughout the chapter, clearly not all families include two parents. —R.T.H.
If the ceremony is set within a Shabbat morning service, the arrangements may be demanding, since the family will need to obtain prayer books, a Torah scroll and other elements essential to the celebration (tables, tablecloths, chairs). The relationship with the tutor may be especially important, since she or he will serve as the primary guide and interpreter in such a situation. Other families create a coming-of-age ritual that is more tailored and personalized to the child and that may not be focused on Jewish learning, religious observance or community involvement. In this instance, a setting other than a synagogue may be most appropriate.

There are many reasons why the synagogue makes the most sense for a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, especially if it is understood by the family to be predominantly a religious service. Most synagogues have significant resources to support the child and the family in the bar/bat mitzvah

Reconstructionism understands Judaism to be the civilization of the Jewish people and civilizations to be inherently communal constructs. A private bar/bat mitzvah ceremony outside of an ongoing Jewish community, though perhaps occasionally necessitated by unusual circumstances, generally seems to reflect a rather different understanding of what Judaism is. Traditional Judaism considers separating from the community to be a very problematic act. —J.A.S.

Having officiated at bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies in restaurants, I have found one of the biggest challenges to be connecting the family to a larger sense of Jewish community, rather than just having the ceremony remain solely a family ritual. For families choosing to hold the ceremony somewhere besides a Jewish communal setting, this issue deserves extra thought and attention. —N.C.M.
experience. These resources include people (rabbis, cantors, educators, tutors); religious items (prayer books, arks, Torah scrolls); programming (bar/bat mitzvah education for students and, frequently, parents); catering supplies (tables, chairs, tablecloths); and experience (knowledge of reliable caterers, recommendations on musicians). While the child and the parents will spend significant time, energy and money preparing for the ceremony, the expertise of synagogue staff members should facilitate this process and make it less demanding and, often, less expensive than a privately organized event. A thriving synagogue will offer all this support and far more: It will be a community of engagement within which the bar/bat mitzvah will begin to shape an adolescent identity through questioning, service, accomplishment and celebration. In deciding on a setting, the most critical question to consider is how the child will be connected to the community or communities.

Parents of other children in the b’ney mitzvah class and parents of older children who have gone through the b’ney mitzvah process are a great resource. Opportunities to interact—such as family education programs, café-style schmoozing while children are in religious school, or connecting on social media (such as a closed Internet group)—are a great way to discuss the plethora of decisions and details surrounding the bar/bat mitzvah process, and the best way to support one’s child through it. —R.T.H.

While the size and availability of synagogue staff may vary depending on the size of the synagogue, many congregations maintain lists of caterers and other vendors who are familiar with the physical space and the kashrut and halakhic practices of the synagogue. This includes how they are permitted to use the kitchen, if and how pictures or video are permitted during the service, and what kind of music (if any) is permitted in different parts of the building. —R.T.H.
While synagogues are the most common location for bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, they are far more: They are centers of learning, spirituality and connection. Ideally, the child and the family are part of the life of the community. They may attend services in seasons other than the bar/bat mitzvah; they may celebrate other people’s joyous occasions there; they can learn and grow as Jews and as humans; they can receive and give support to people in need. The bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is one moment in the child’s and the family’s life cycle, and one moment in the yearly cycle of the synagogue. A synagogue’s leadership and membership should take steps to make certain that the individuality of the occasion for the child and family is celebrated, and that the process does not feel automated or impersonal. Family members, too, should make an effort to ensure that the child’s celebration takes place as part of the life of the community, rather than overwhelming it or taking place outside of it.

Becoming a Jewish adult takes on a deeper meaning when celebrated within a community that extends beyond the family. The Reconstructionist approach to Judaism as an evolving religious civilization is built on the principle of peoplehood. All children who enter Jewish adulthood take their places among the Jewish people. In the process, bar/bat mitzvah children come to understand that they are not alone. They also come to realize the deeply religious and moral challenge of recognizing that the world does not revolve around them. A ceremony that takes place in a synagogue will balance the individualistic and family component with the demands—and benefits—of taking part in the broad embrace of the Jewish people. —B.P.
Covenants

A planning meeting with the rabbi, tutor, parents and child a year before the bar/bat mitzvah celebration has many purposes. It can provide an opportunity for working out the timeline for the year’s preparation; for exploring hopes, fears and dreams; for setting the parameters for the celebration; and for reaching a formal agreement among all those present.

Today, Jewish identity is a personal experience and a choice. Adults often reflect back on their bar/bat mitzvah experiences, which can either strengthen or weaken their Jewish connection. Ensuring that the experience is positive and affirming requires a process that allows for ownership and individual expression. Forcing children to become bar/bat mitzvah or creating a rote and impersonal experience works against the vision laid out here. This vision calls for room for individual expression and practices that are designed to elicit the best of a child’s spiritual and ethical self, so that children are encouraged to step into greater responsibility and privilege.

While in some communities families may be asked to pick a bar/bat mitzvah date two or three years prior to the time when their child will become bar/bat mitzvah, preparations for the ceremony itself typically don’t start until about a year prior to the ceremony. —R.T.H.

One should be conscious of the creative tension that exists between expressing individuality and taking greater communal responsibility. —J.A.S.
One way to start cultivating a sense of personal investment is through a covenant among the child, the parents or family and the religious leaders involved in creating the process and, ultimately, leading the ritual. Creating a bar/bat mitzvah covenant is a meaningful way to secure children’s commitment to the process and to help them to start envisioning the power of the experience and understanding its significance. A covenant empowers them to take the role of b’ney mitzvah as their own, and it makes entering Jewish maturity a central, personal and spiritual process. A covenant also binds the community, the family and the child together.

The Jewish values of community or family can be at the center of the framework of a covenant. The covenant should identify multiple parties so that the responsibilities are shared and mutual accountability is part of the process. Children and their parent(s) can read the covenant aloud with the rabbi, tutor or members of the community before signing it.

Helping a child to take ownership of Jewish ritual can begin well before the bar/bat mitzvah year. Each year starting from third grade, students in the Hebrew school of my synagogue receive Jewish practice tools such as a siddur and a Tanakh/Hebrew Bible to honor their increasing learning and commitment to Jewish life. —N.C.M.

The covenant can be transformed into a piece of artwork and framed, providing an opportunity to show how the value of hidur mitzvah (beautifying a commandment—though creating a covenant is not technically a commandment) can elevate the importance and value of the bar/bat mitzvah process. When a child signs and then receives a covenant that is clear, well-articulated and beautiful, it can create excitement and communicate importance. Many children take great pride in signing such a covenant. —J.L.
If the ceremony is taking place in a synagogue, the covenant should reflect the values, goals and practices articulated by the congregation’s education committee. (The discussion in this chapter may help to formulate or revise such guidelines.) Covenantal language ideally should be more inspirational than the congregation’s guidelines and policies, but it should work in harmony with them.

**Choosing Not to Have a Ceremony**

There are times when a child expresses a strong, sustained preference not to go through the bar/bat mitzvah process. This must be distinguished from such factors as a lack of enthusiasm or discipline around preparing for the ceremony, intense performance anxiety, or a dislike of a particular teacher or the child’s peer group. Most parents need to cajole children into practicing for the ceremony, or they may want to insist on participation in group activities. Parents also need to be aware of particular anxieties or concerns expressed by their children. However, in some instances, a child may be convincing in rejecting the ritual and all its preparations as being devoid of meaning, either

In *Putting God on Your Guest List*, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin tells a moving story about a girl who chose not to have a bat mitzvah ceremony because of her principled objections to the ostentation that she saw at *b’ney mitzvah* celebrations in her congregation. Salkin considered that girl the most exemplary bat mitzvah (in the traditional sense) in her class. —J.A.S.
through persistent assertions or through ongoing arguments. Or it may be that developmental or emotional issues provide a reason to delay the ceremony. While these things are being considered, it is important that the parents’ anxiety about the child’s preparation and performance not affect the decision. The child’s willingness to give up the party and the gifts is an important indicator of serious resistance to the process. Both the ritual and the process leading up to it should be oriented toward and infused by the values listed above, especially community, learning and family. If the child is uninterested and unwilling and, especially, if all of the elements of preparation, which can extend over years, become ongoing battles, then the most constructive option may be not to have the child become bar/bat mitzvah, at least at age 12 or 13.

Such a decision is a family decision, not a unilateral one by either parents or child. If the family is active in a congregation, then the rabbi and other leaders should be involved in the ultimate decision. This decision should never be made for punitive reasons, and it should be made with an awareness of the impact that the decision not to

Over the years, I have witnessed a number of young men and women who rejected having a bar or bat mitzvah at age 13, but who at a later age, sometimes in their late teens, chose to study, prepare for, and celebrate their Jewish coming of age and formal entry into the Jewish community. —S.C.R.

In a traditional understanding, children and families cannot choose whether the children will become bat/bar mitzvah, since the young people’s age makes them responsible for their actions and accepted as community members. The children and families can choose only whether or not to mark the transition with a ceremony. —J.A.S.
participate in such a coming-of-age process could have on a child’s life and development. (Adult women who were never offered the opportunity to become bat mitzvah because it was not yet the custom often speak with pain about watching their brothers become bar mitzvah and being excluded from the process.)

In keeping with an understanding of bar/bat mitzvah as a rite of passage infused with values, the decision to proceed or not to proceed should be thoughtful and intentional. The decision needs to be child-centered, even though the child should not be the primary decider. Ritual is transformative, and the approach to bar/bat mitzvah expressed in this chapter presumes that the child, the family and even the community will be transformed by this process. However, given the effort and expense involved, the process should not go forward if there is substantial evidence that it will be devoid of meaning or, worse,
destructive. While parents’ expectations are major shapers of children’s behaviors, the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony should not happen exclusively because parents impose it on a child.

A decision not to become a bar or bat mitzvah does not disqualify a Jewish adolescent from participation in Jewish ritual life. Jewish teens and adults are still entitled to be called up to the Torah and receive other honors (though they may lack the skills for some roles). Such a decision does, however, deprive them of participating in a rite of passage at a critical moment in adolescent development. Attention should be paid to facilitating other opportunities for development, such as participating in a major service project or an outdoor leadership program, not as a reward for forgoing the Jewish ritual, but in order to foster the teen’s maturity and development. Care should also be taken to find ways to highlight Jewish values in the decision-making process. These include reflecting on one’s place in the universe (godliness, learning) and responsibilities that emerge from understanding one’s place (justice, community) in the world.

Occasionally, adolescents who have opted out of the bar/bat mitzvah process express a desire when they are older to undertake the preparation and create the ceremo-

Sometimes there is no way to really know what impact the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony will ultimately have on children. I have known children who passionately resisted having a bar or bat mitzvah, but who, after the fact, expressed profound gratitude and satisfaction in having had the experience to carry with them for life. —S.C.R.
ny. (See below for a discussion of adult bar/bat mitzvah.) Though standards should not be lowered, all efforts should be made to accommodate this desire. After all, that is the point of becoming bar/bat mitzvah—that an individual chooses to take on adult responsibility within the Jewish community. Parents and leaders seek to instill this desire in children as they approach bar/bat mitzvah age, and this desire should be welcome when it is manifested by anyone of any age. Unless there is an existing program for becoming an adult bar/bat mitzvah, the preparations for the ceremony will ordinarily take place through intensive tutoring.

### Putting the Child First

This chapter frames the bar/bat mitzvah experience as a process and sets it in the context of family and community. It encourages family and community to orient the process and the celebration toward Jewish and general values. The explanations and recommendations presume a high level of intentionality, toward the ends of growth and well-being.
There are instances, however, when such intentionality is absent. This can be especially true when the child’s parents are divorced or otherwise estranged. If there is ill will between divorced parents, it frequently plays out during the bar/bat mitzvah process. Ill will may be expressed through arguing over arrangements or honors, threatening to withhold money, refusing to be in the same space together, or other painful situations. When this type of dynamic is present, two additional values are critical—*anava* (humility) and *sh’lom bayit* (peace in the household). No matter how angry or wounded, no matter how justified they are in their feelings, parents must understand—or be pushed to understand—that the bar/bat mitzvah event is about their child, not about their relationship. If the point of bar/bat mitzvah is to help the child to make the transition into responsible adulthood, then feuding parents have the opportunity and

While divorced parents may bring their own drama to planning a family celebration, a lack of intentionality can be found in any family configuration. As with any ritual, the more preparation and intentionality that one brings to the ceremony, the more transformative the experience will be. Parents and teachers should be mindful throughout the process to engage the bar/bat mitzvah student on many levels. This should go beyond the details of leading the service and extend to conversations about becoming an adult in the Jewish community—both broadly and specifically related to their community. —R.T.H.

Honesty is important. If there is ongoing conflict between divorced parents, it can be useful for them to have a conversation with the bar/bat mitzvah child acknowledging this and pledging to try their best not to have the conflict detract from the ritual. Both parents should say how much they love and support their child, regardless of the disagreements they are having between them. —N.C.M.
the obligation to model maturity, self-discipline and even self-sacrifice (within limits).

In a synagogue setting, the rabbi can lay out clear expectations for estranged parents. The rabbi may need to clarify issues, to coach the parents and even to set limits on behavior. Without undermining parental authority or the parent-child relationship, the rabbi or other adults may provide important support to the bar/bat mitzvah, who is usually deeply affected by such negative interactions.

Remaining Engaged with the Community Immediately After the Ritual

Both historically and in current times, the bar/bat mitzvah process is about a child moving into adulthood and becoming a responsible member of the Jewish community. This is true in regard to individuals’ relationships both with other members of the community and with the divine, however they understand God and their relationship with God. When the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is celebrated in an established community, such as a synagogue or havura, this transformation is embodied: The bar/bat mitzvah has real relationships with actual members of that community.

Of course, self-sacrifice on the part of parents should not extend to the point of jeopardizing anyone’s safety. —J.A.S.

In modern society, synagogues are one of the places where individuals across generations regularly come together. While we frequently prefer more homogenous settings, there is tremendous value to such a heterogeneous space. —D.W.
Ideally, the child-turned-adolescent has time to develop and deepen these relationships. If a family exits the synagogue immediately after the celebration of the bar/bat mitzvah, no such development can occur. Instead, the message sent undermines the lesson that responsible Jewish adulthood is experienced in the context of community. Becoming a bat/bar mitzvah is a door into adult Jewish engagement.

Parents should consider seriously what it means to walk the path of the bar/bat mitzvah process with their children in order to bring them into adult Jewish society and into the continued communal engagement that implies. We are at a time when Jewish communal institutions, including synagogues, need to become the sort of communities that more people will be drawn to. And I believe that bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies ought to evolve to reflect the nature of the communities in which children live and to raise their aspirations about what their communities could become. —J.A.S.

Perhaps expectations of what the bar/bat mitzvah child will do in the months following the ceremony, if articulated as part of the covenant or even as part of the process, would help a Jewish child to enter the realm of adult Jewish engagement. For example, a bar/bat mitzvah could be expected to read Torah at least twice in the following year. —D.D.M.

Whether or not families remain connected to a synagogue community after b’ney mitzvah ceremonies, there are many ways b’ney mitzvah students can engage with Jewish community and express their Jewish values beyond their synagogue communities. Teens can connect to Jewish community through Jewish camp, Jewish youth groups, and Jewish sports activities (such as the World Maccabiah Games and Maccabi USA). They may also choose to continue their mitzvah projects well beyond their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, thereby deepening their sense of Jewish values and tikun olam. —R.T.H.
Timing

For many people, a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah ceremony can mean many things, including, sometimes, an occasion for a party and the gifts it brings. The approach outlined in this chapter encourages families to view bar/bat mitzvah as an ongoing process of education and engagement in community and with Jewish history and practice. The classical religious focal point of becoming bar mitzvah and, more recently, bat mitzvah is the Torah service: An adolescent signals to the community that he or she is prepared to accept adult responsibility by receiving the honor of being called to the Torah and, at a minimum, chanting the Torah blessings. Most times, the bar/bat mitzvah chants a section of that week’s Torah portion, and sometimes also chants at least an excerpt from the prophetic portion, known as the haftarah.

Since being called to the Torah is at the heart of the religious ceremony, that occasion suggests when a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony may be held. Below are times when the Torah is ordinarily read and some reflections on scheduling.

**Weekday Morning.** A short excerpt from the weekly Torah portion is read on Monday and Thursday mornings during the *shaḥarit* (morning) service, which is ordinarily held early, before work or school. The service has three aliya (Torah honors), and no reading of the haftarah. On *Rosh Ḥodesh* (the new month according to the lunar calendar), which may fall on any day of the week, four aliya are chanted. The Torah is also read on every day of
Hanuka. In premodern times, the weekday service was when many boys marked becoming bar mitzvah, with the family sponsoring a light breakfast, often with schnapps for a toast in the boy’s honor. Some congregations that have a regular weekday service require the bar/bat mitzvah to participate in one of these services as well as a Shabbat morning service. Bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies held in Israel at locations such as the Western Wall or Masada are frequently held on weekday mornings. In the United States, the Thursday of Thanksgiving or Mondays that are federal holidays may be options for a more expansive service, especially when the family has relatives who do not travel on Shabbat. (See the weekday service in Volume 1.)

**Shabbat Morning.** There is a full Torah service on Shabbat mornings. Traditionally, seven aliyot (Torah honors) plus a *maftir* (the aliyah reserved for the person reciting the haftarah) are chanted, though more can always be added. Some congregations have reduced the number of aliyot. Shabbat mornings are the primary time for holding bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, in part because a minyan is guaranteed and in part because the longer service allows

Another weekday option might be a celebration on Hanuka, when the Torah is read on each of the eight days. On days of Hanuka that are not Shabbat or *Rosh Hodesh*, there are three aliyot with no haftarah reading. When Hanuka coincides with Shabbat or *Rosh Hodesh*, an additional reading from a second scroll is added. When Hanuka, Shabbat and *Rosh Hodesh* all fall on the same day, there are three scrolls. Our congregation avoids scheduling *b’iney mitzvah* ceremonies on special days, so that the service remains accessible and retains the structure of the regular Shabbat practice of the congregation. —B.P.
for a more expansive celebration. The bar/bat mitzvah may participate only around the Torah service or may lead some or all of the other parts of the service. Many 20th-century congregations emphasized the chanting of the haftarah. More recently, the emphasis has shifted to leading the service and chanting from the Torah. In large congregations, sometimes two children celebrate becoming bar/bat mitzvah on the same Shabbat morning, and they divide responsibilities. (See the Shabbat service in Volume 2.)

**Yom Tov (Festival) Morning.** Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot all have Torah services as part of their observance. The Torah service has a few added prayers and usually fewer prescribed aliyyot (five on the non-Shabbat

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At our congregation, most b’ney mitzvah lead the congregational singing for the whole service, in keeping with the notion that a bat/bar mitzvah ceremony is an introduction into the adult community. We generally don’t expect most of our adults to lead services, but we hope that they will participate in congregational singing, and the b’ney mitzvah demonstrate their readiness to do so. —J.A.S.

The shift toward having b’ney mitzvah lead the service and leyn (chant) from the Torah reflects the community’s desire to provide skills that will allow the student to play adult liturgical leadership roles. This was necessitated by changes over several generations away from a time when people gained mastery of basic liturgical skills by osmosis as a result of weekly, and sometimes daily, worship experiences. —D.A.T.

Chanting the haftarah on Friday evening or Shabbat afternoon, when it is not a required part of the service, is often the only option for girls who are becoming bat mitzvah in non-egalitarian communities in which girls are not permitted to read from the Torah or lead the service. —R.T.H.
days of the festival, four on the intermediate days, and the regular seven plus a maftir on Shabbat). A bar/bat mitzvah ceremony may be scheduled on any of these days. Such scheduling may allow for elements in the ceremony that may not be allowed on Shabbat, such as the use of electrified musical instruments during services.

**Shabbat Afternoon.** On Shabbat afternoon, the first verses of the following week’s portion are chanted in a short Torah service, with no accompanying haftarah. The mincha (afternoon) service is shorter than the morning service. In many synagogues, mincha is either lightly attended or not held on a regular basis. In large congregations with many children, adding this service enables each child to have his or her own ceremony.

Families should be aware that festival services can take longer than regular Shabbat services because of the additional psalms of the Hallel service and because of the use of a second Torah scroll for the maftir reading. (See A Guide to Jewish Practice, Volume 2 for descriptions of the various holiday services.) —J.A.S./B.P.

Reconstructionist and Reform congregations generally allow electrified instruments on both Shabbat and festivals, as do many Conservative congregations. —J.A.S.

At Kehillath Israel, even though we have some 1,000 families and 80 to 90 b’ney mitzvah ceremonies each year, we have made a commitment that all children will have their own service rather than doubling up with another child. That means we have both a morning service and an afternoon Havdala service virtually every Shabbat of the year except during the month of July. At the afternoon service, we read the same Torah portion as the service in the morning, and we have four aliyot. —S.C.R.

Except in special circumstances, I would hesitate to conduct a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony at a service the congregation doesn’t normally hold, as it undermines the sense that the ceremony should lead to further engagement. —J.A.S.
Some congregations that meet for Shabbat only on Friday evenings choose to incorporate a Torah service into the *ma’ariv* (evening) service rather than forgo it completely. In these congregations, Friday evening may be a scheduling option as well.

If the focus of the bar/bat mitzvah experience is other than religious—say, in a *folkshul* setting—then tying the ceremony to the Torah service is not relevant. Sometimes, bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies with a religious focus are celebrated at a time when the Torah is not ordinarily read. From the 1940s through the 1980s, many Reform and Conservative congregations held bat mitzvah ceremonies on Friday evenings, omitting the Torah service entirely, but allowing the girl to chant a haftarah and deliver a *d’var Torah*. This timing avoided any halakhic conflict about women being called to the Torah. Congregations that have embraced full religious equality have dropped this practice; newer congregations founded on egalitarian principles never instituted it.

Some ceremonies are held at the close of Shabbat, with a focus on *Havdala* (the service marking the end of Shabbat and the beginning of the next week). These services may be tied to the Shabbat *mincha* service (see above) and sometimes to a brief *ma’ariv* (evening) service as well. The *Havdala* ceremony itself is very short, and other creative elements are usually added around it.

An explanation of *Havdala* can be found in *A Guide to Jewish Practice, Volume 2*, pages 177–181. —D.A.T.
The timing of a ceremony held in a synagogue will depend on the intersection of synagogue policies and the needs of the child or the family. Most congregations have a strong preference, if not an outright requirement, that bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies take place on Shabbat morning so that the entire community can participate and the bar/bat mitzvah can undergo the experience in community. Some congregations may welcome bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies during holiday celebrations in order to bolster synagogue attendance if the child has the willingness and capacity to take on some additional learning, such as leading Hallel, a selection of psalms that is chanted on holidays. A child with serious learning differences or severe performance anxiety may do best in a shorter, more lightly attended service, though care should be taken not to frame such a ceremony as a “special needs” ceremony or as something that is “less than” a regular ceremony. When a ceremony is to take place on a Shabbat or holiday, the family should inquire in advance about the congregation’s policies on taking videos and photos and on playing music in the building.

Ideally, the Shabbat morning experience is an experience of coming of age in community, with the adolescent and the family experiencing themselves as part of an

Congregational policies on Shabbat and holiday observances are generally arrived at with considerable care. For greater insight into these considerations, see A Guide to Jewish Practice Volume 2, pages 182–188. —D.A.T.
extended community, and with the members of the community feeling a connection to them and happiness for them. There are practices and policies that can foster this type of experience rather than turning Shabbat morning services into bar/bat mitzvah factories with no room for regular synagogue-goers. Congregations may recommend or require that bar/bat mitzvah families regularly attend Shabbat morning services in the period leading up to their own celebrations so that they are familiar with the service as well as the community of regular synagogue-goers. Congregations may require families to reserve at least one aliyah in the Torah service for members of the community outside of the family and invitees of the bar/bat mitzvah. They may urge that the entire community be invited through a newsletter or listserv announcement and that a generous communal Kiddush or luncheon be provided. Congregations may also communicate expectations to members beyond bar/bat mitzvah families, urging them to attend and to warmly welcome visitors, and even to sponsor a Sunday morning brunch for out-of-town guests who have stayed over. In the determination about timing, as in all other matters, attention should be paid to making decisions that foster community and the bar/bat mitzvah’s sense of participating in that community.

Some synagogues may request that families help to usher at bar/bat mitzvah services during the year preceding their celebration. This is a great way for parents and children to help welcome guests into their synagogue while also becoming familiar with the role of b’ney mitzvah in the service. Becoming more familiar with what will be expected of them can help to allay fears that students may have. —R.T.H.
Tutoring

Tutoring can be a powerful part of the bar/bat mitzvah experience. Some congregations require one-on-one or small-group tutoring as part of the training for the religious ceremony, while others recommend or make available tutors for children with learning differences or special interests. In these instances, the tutor is an additional educational and emotional resource for the child and the family, beyond the rabbi, cantor and education director.

The relationship with a tutor may be short term and project based. That is, the tutor may help the child to learn particular skills, such as the *trop* (cantillation/chant) for the Torah and the haftarah. Or the relationship may begin at the earliest stages of planning and preparing for the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. In addition to skills coaching, the tutor may work with the child to study the meaning of the Torah portion and the haftarah, prepare a *d’var Torah* (teaching on the portion), and even plan and implement a

Tutors may also help to review prayers in the service that the student will be responsible for leading, and they may help the student to gain confidence when leading or addressing a large group. —R.T.H.

Though I tutored my own children to lead the service and to chant their Torah and haftarah portions, each of them worked on their own *d’var Torah* with a tutor, giving them the freedom and independence (under adult supervision) to say what they wanted, independent of their parents’ influence. —J.J.S.
mitzvah project. In this scenario, the tutor can play an important role in the life of an adolescent as a non-parental, non-rabbinic authority figure. The tutor may be able to discern and perhaps also to help to address significant concerns around such matters as changes in school, performance anxiety, family dynamics and so on. The tutor may be able to offer parents and rabbis important information that, while preserving the relationship with the child, will help to ensure that the child has a maximally positive and rewarding experience in becoming bar/bat mitzvah.

Some synagogues have a roster of tutors from which families must choose. These may be mature adults, teens

For many people, their relationship with a bar/bat mitzvah tutor will be their most meaningful relationship with a Jewish role model. Tutors don’t often realize it, but they can do great good or great harm within that relationship. —J.M.S.

In many smaller congregations, the rabbi serves as the tutor for b’ney mitzvah. —J.A.S.

Tutors should take time during each session to build a relationship with the bar/bat mitzvah. This relationship can make it easier for the bar/bat mitzvah to share any anxieties that arise during the preparation process. —N.C.M.

Tutoring will typically begin six to twelve months prior to a child’s bar/bat mitzvah. The timing often depends on how much material has been covered in Hebrew school—and thus, how much will be new and how much will need to be reviewed—and also on each child’s learning style. If a child is away over the summer (traveling, at camp or staying with another family member) and tutoring is not an option, then extra time may be needed during the year to allow for this break in preparation. —R.T.H.
with excellent synagogue skills and a good track record of working with bar/bat mitzvah students, or college students. If the family has the opportunity to choose a tutor, the most important consideration is a good fit between the child and the tutor. The connection need not be magical at the outset, but it should not be combative. If a child has learning differences, it is important to select a tutor with the capacity to accommodate the child’s learning style and, ideally, to bolster it. Occasionally, learning differences not obviously present in secular settings are identified in the bar/bat mitzvah preparation process, especially around Hebrew or the learning of *trop*. If a child who otherwise succeeds in academic settings is struggling with learning skills in preparation for the ceremony, the involvement of a professional educator for assessment purposes may be a good idea so that learning strategies can be identified. Similarly, if a child is extremely shy, a tutor who can make space for the shyness and help to pre-

Some communities draw tutors from former religious school teachers, synagogue members who *leyn* on a regular basis, and clergy. Sometimes, the synagogue’s cantor tutors *b’ney mitzvah* students. —R.T.H.

As a rabbinical student, I tutored a bright young man who had significant hyperkinetic and attention-deficit issues that were only exacerbated as the hour grew later on school days. For example, he often chanted his Torah portion in my presence while standing on his head! As a 22 year old, I had the patience, sense of humor and stamina for this that I would not have possessed in subsequent years. —J.J.S.

I have often discovered that using a large-print text helps students who struggle with Hebrew but who have not been identified as needing glasses. In at least one of those cases, a follow-up showed that we had discovered such a need. —J.A.S.
pare the child for the public nature of the service is important. While the relationship between the child and the tutor is most important, parents should be certain that they feel comfortable with the tutor since they will be interacting with the tutor extensively in the period leading up to the ceremony.

**Torah and Haftarah Readings**

Most bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies involve chanting either from the Torah or a haftarah or both. While children often memorize their portion, teaching them instead how to chant *trop* comfortably can be a powerful tool that gives them access to participate in important ways in Jewish life in the future.

Most Reconstructionist congregations utilize the triennial cycle for Torah readings (a breakdown for this cycle can be found in *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Veḥagim*, pages 710–724). A third of each *parasha* (weekly Torah portion) is read rather than the complete Torah portion. This results in shorter aliyot, and it can enable the bar/bat mitzvah to read more than one of the aliyot. In some Reconstructionist communities, the bar/bat mitzvah reads all seven aliyot, although it has become more common for

While I encourage chanting and learning to decipher the *trop*, I also try to be aware that the musical aspect can be a stumbling block for some kids. In those cases, I stress reading accurately and comfortably rather than singing, and I teach the *trop* as punctuation to help these kids to read in a more expressive way. —N.H.M.
family members to learn and chant aliyot as well. Where this occurs, the familial investment can make an incredible difference, and the child may be inspired by parents, siblings and grandparents, some of whom are reading for the first time ever, or the first time since their own b’ney mitzvah.

Only a third of the portion will be chanted, but the child should study the entire *parasha* in English for context and understanding and in order to prepare for writing a *d’var Torah* on the *parasha*.

In many congregations, the haftarah is read. This additional reading introduces another text, which gives bar/bat mitzvah students another entry point for connecting with Jewish tradition. Some congregations chant the haftarah traditionally, using the cantillation reserved for the haftarah. It is not uncommon for some communities

I challenged myself to learn the entire Torah portion for my bar mitzvah. It took a year of study, but I got there and, in the process, gave myself the tools to learn Torah in order to read it and understand it. This aptitude has given me a powerful key to personally connect with Torah in a lifelong conversation. —J.M.S.

If asked, most congregations will happily provide resources for those who wish to learn a Torah reading for a bat/bar mitzvah service. These might include digital recordings and references or online resources. If a family member or friend will be chanting a Torah reading, the celebrating family should let the rabbi or cantor know. Some congregations require that, before the big day, the rabbi or cantor listen to all those who plan to read. And they will want to make sure that no one else goes to the effort of preparing the same section. —J.A.S.
to shorten the text for ease or to provide for a more focused message. Other communities chant only the blessings and then read the haftarah in English, which allows for a fuller understanding of the text.

D’var Torah

One of the rich opportunities for children in the bar/bat mitzvah process is that of writing a response to a teaching that emerges from the child’s Torah portion. Ideally, children come to feel a sense of ownership, engagement and investment in the Torah and its commentaries. This emerges from an educational process that gives them a

If the haftarah portion is especially long or difficult for the child to learn, I sometimes find a natural stopping point in the story in order to transition from Hebrew into English. The child is then encouraged to read the English expressively. —N.H.M.

Some Reconstructionist congregations chant the haftarah in English on the grounds that it should be understood by all of the congregants without the need to consult a translation. The process of translating the text into English—studying different translations and then making decisions about what to chant—adds another dimension to reading the haftarah. —D.D.M.

My Orthodox parents hired a “tutor” to write my two divrey Torah, which I then read exactly as they were provided to me because I could not be trusted to express ideas that would be acceptable in our Orthodox Young Israel synagogue. This is not a practice I recommend. —J.J.S.

Bar/bat mitzvah children are often expected to create an insightful d’var Torah without having first listened to a few themselves. We should pay considerable attention to building the context for the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony through regular engagement leading up to the bar/bat mitzvah. That will encourage teens to apply the skills they have learned after the bar/bat mitzvah. —J.M.S.
meaningful understanding of their portions. Teachers, tutors and parents must be comfortable discussing difficult topics, allowing children to challenge parts of the Torah, and addressing their concerns unabashedly. Adults do well to listen to their children’s interests and to help them build bridges between their portions and their lives.

A common approach to writing a d’var Torah involves children finding a point of departure from their portions and, after study with a parent, tutor, teacher and/or rabbi, elaborating on a relevant teaching that speaks to them.

Our son, who at age 12 had no interest in becoming a bar mitzvah or even in being Jewish, worked on his d’var Torah with a tutor (Elyse Wechterman, who is now a rabbi) who guided him to an irreverent but thoughtful reflection, in which he expressed his views in the format and idiom of a traditional d’var Torah. At the time, it was one of the most positive Jewish experiences of his life! —J.J.S.

The process of creating a d’var Torah, through words or another creative expression, can include the entire family, not just the bar/bat mitzvah student. By including parents and siblings in conversations with the rabbi/tutor/teachers, the preparation of the d’var Torah becomes a powerful impetus for discussing topics such as spirituality, theology, and our connection to Judaism and the Jewish people. Some communities even include the family in the preparation and delivery of the d’var Torah. At the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore, divrey Torah during a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony are presented by the whole family, and they can take the form of anything from a game show to a counseling session! —R.T.H.

I enjoy mulling over the Torah reading with students and their parents. As we delve closely into the portion and the commentaries, I invite the student to join “the Jewish conversation.” The connection between the Torah and contemporary life is one that commentators have developed over some 2,000 years. Now, we offer this 13 year old the privilege of adding his or her voice to that conversation. In many ways, giving a d’var Torah can be the most personal and inspirational part of becoming a bar or bat mitzvah, anchoring the student within the Jewish historical, literary and philosophical traditions. —B.P.
With support, a child writes a *d’var Torah* that may incorporate other Jewish responses or contemporary sources, such as current literature, science and news. The *d’var Torah* may also include a personal narrative that expands on an idea from the *parsha*. On the day of the service, the bar/bat mitzvah delivers the *d’var Torah* before the congregation.

It is important, however, to expand the model to allow for more creative outcomes and to meet the needs of children who may relate to the Torah portion differently. Thinking about alternative approaches can foster a higher level of investment. The *d’var Torah* coach should consider not just children’s interests, but also their learning styles, their strengths and their challenges. The coach may introduce the art of writing midrash to a child who has an interest in creative writing. Children pursuing alternative paths have written plays, built models, curated art shows, staged debates and written music as ways to relate to their

The voice of the bar/bat mitzvah should be apparent in the *d’var Torah*. Allowing the bar/bat mitzvah to argue with God or criticize characters in the biblical narrative can help the adolescent to claim a place in Jewish tradition. —N.C.M.

In our congregation, in addition to the Shabbat morning *d’var Torah*, the kids do an oral history project in which they interview at least two Jewish adults—often family members, and sometimes members of the congregation. They may focus on specific issues of Jewish identity or ask more generally about what life was like for the elder at age 13. This becomes the basis of a *d’var Torah* presented during the Kabbalat Shabbat service the night before. In addition to helping to underscore continuity between generations, this approach gives the student an opportunity to give a speech before the main event, which eases some performance anxieties. —N.H.M.
Torah portions. Such paths address the needs both of children with unusual talent and of children for whom a particular kind of writing or public speaking feels formidable. Children who are presented with options and supported in taking a different approach form a powerful relationship to their portions, often beyond their families’ and their own expectations.

**Social Action Projects**

The expectation of most communities that the bar/bat mitzvah process will incorporate a project fostering the child’s ability to contribute to the larger community is rooted in the rabbinic pillar of *g’milut ḥasadim*, deeds of lovingkindness. This project is often referred to by different names, such as a mitzvah, *tzedaka* or *tikun olam* project. Such projects reflect both the centrality of “giving back” as a Jewish value and the diversity of ways to describe the Jewish roots of such activities. Undertaking such a project creates an opportunity to explore the distinct but interrelated ideas of *tzedaka* and *tikun olam* (discussed in detail in *Volume 1*).

Helping children to distinguish the connections among personal kindness, healing the world, charity, responsibil-

In addition to children undertaking their own mitzvah projects as part of the *b’ney mitzvah* experience and then sharing their projects as part of their speeches, most of our families forgo floral arrangements on the *bima* in favor of a display of fresh fruit in baskets. The baskets are then donated to the Westside Food Bank each week at the end of Shabbat as a further expression of the mitzvah of bar/bat mitzvah that the entire family undertakes. —S.C.R.
ity and justice can lead to powerful conversations and insights. Making a difference can come in different forms. Projects can be educational, direct service or political. They can raise funds or promote advocacy or other forms of activism. Finding an area of interest and a project that is meaningful can produce powerful results and can teach a child that when people become engaged and volunteer to make a difference, we all benefit. When we give of our time wholeheartedly, we can better ourselves, strengthen our character and attain a higher level of holiness.

For maximum impact, a project – whether volunteering in a nursing home or soup kitchen, doing community organizing around a justice issue, or taking on any other activity—should entail a long-term commitment, including repeated visits to gain familiarity and insight. I encourage families to keep a journal of the visits, noting what they did, any interesting or unusual stories from a visit, and most important, the students’ reflections on what their projects have taught them. —B.P.

A mitzvah project should relate to the child’s own interests, skills and capacities. Some projects may be synagogue-related, such as making a commitment to attend a minyan on a regular basis, or volunteering to plant and care for a synagogue garden. The project can also involve study and a presentation of one’s learning, whether an oral history project or a topic in Jewish life. —B.P.

Some students choose to initiate a project that extends beyond themselves into their family or synagogue communities. This may take the form of volunteering as a family on a regular basis or organizing a project for the whole community, such as a book drive, a food drive or a benefit walk-a-thon. Some students may even wish to approach a particular topic or cause from multiple angles and possibly to continue their project well after their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. —R.T.H.

Along with individual mitzvah projects, families often utilize the bar/bat mitzvah party to incorporate or convey the mitzvah values that their child has embraced. Sometimes a value is reflected in the centerpieces chosen for the tables; sometimes it is part of the activities that children engage in at the party, and sometimes people are asked to bring books, clothing or other items to be donated to various causes as the cost of admission to the party itself. —S.C.R.
For families holding a ceremony outside of a synagogue, where the focus may be more on coming of age than on religion, the project can provide an important opportunity for challenge, learning and mastery, where a Jewish child can learn about what it means to be a Jewish adult. The tutor or educator can provide importance guidance for achieving these goals.

**Rituals**

This chapter presents becoming bar/bat mitzvah as a rite of passage that helps to mark the beginning of children’s responsibility for making moral choices, understanding the inheritance of their religious and spiritual legacy, and starting on a path to engage in their own spiritual lives. The rituals traditionally associated with this rite of passage focus on religious competence (leading parts of a service, chanting Torah and haftarah) and entering into the community as an adult, both by being eligible for new honors (such as being called to the Torah) and by taking

The ritual core of a bat/bar mitzvah ceremony held outside of a synagogue service could be the two *b'rakhot* over the mitzvot “*la'asok b'divrey Torah*” —“to engage with words of Torah” —and “*la'asok b'tzorhey tzibur*” —“to engage with communal needs.” These blessings, with which my congregation begins all of our board meetings and many other meetings, represent two core components of the Jewish life for which *b'ney mitzvah* become responsible. —J.A.S.

The aliyah to the Torah, as the core ritual of bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, symbolizes not only the new status of the bat/bar mitzvah in the community and the resultant eligibility for honors. It also symbolizes the acceptance of a relationship with Torah and the totality of Jewish life represented by Torah. —J.A.S.
on new roles (such as being counted in a minyan). Preparing to fulfill these roles is, for most adolescents, an extended process that involves challenges, significant learning and, if not mastery, then a level of competence. Ideally, this process will be structured so that the children involved will gain an understanding of the rituals themselves and the community in which they are celebrated, as well as a changed understanding of themselves.

Care should be taken that the acquisition of skills is not simply form without content, undertaken simply to meet someone’s (a parent, rabbi, a God concept) expectations or just for the goal of having a party and receiving a lot of presents. At their best, rituals, together with the preparations leading up to them, are transformative. Individuals who participate in rituals, especially ones requiring significant preparation, can be altered by the process. All the elements leading up to the bar/bat mitzvah celebration can

The bar/bat mitzvah ceremony fosters a change in how both the child’s family and the synagogue community view and relate to the child. The ceremony and the associated preparation offer the child an opportunity to demonstrate confidence and maturity in navigating this exciting rite of passage. —R.T.H.

I tell parents that the process of preparing for becoming bar/bat mitzvah is a kind of Jewish Outward Bound experience. The more students face (manageable) challenges as they look toward this event, the more accomplished they will feel. Some students work hard to master the Hebrew or chanting; others overcome their fear of standing before a group; still others grapple with connecting their Torah text to their own lives as they craft a d’var Torah. The pride that students feel on their special day can be an ongoing source of strength and give them confidence to face future challenges. —B.P.
contribute to the transformative experience of that ritual, and decisions leading up to the day should be approached with this in mind.

**Leading up to the Day**

The invitation can be an important connection to the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony itself, and it is sometimes the first concrete piece of evidence that the ceremony is approaching. An artistic child may want to design some or all of the invitation, or may want to work with an adult who can create a personalized design. The child may want to select a particularly meaningful verse from the Torah portion or a passage from the Shabbat service to include on the invitation. Sometimes the invitation includes information about how guests can participate in the bar/bat mitzvah’s *tzedaka* project. The invitations themselves may reflect values that are important to the child or the family (such as printing with soy ink or using a union shop or co-op). Families often use electronic invitations. These may

Some bar/bat mitzvah students have questionable Jewish status in the eyes of some Jews because they are of patrilineal descent or because they were adopted and their birth parents were not Jewish. Such students may choose to use immersion in a mikvah, not only as a part of their bar/bat mitzvah preparations, but also as a fitting moment to affirm and confirm their Jewish status. —R.T.H.

An invitation to a Jewish rite of passage should reflect Jewish values through the language as well as the symbols used. Using the name of the Torah portion, the Hebrew date and the Hebrew name of the student all convey the possibility of deeper connections to Jewish culture and religion. —B.P.
be scanned versions of personally designed invitations, or they may be formatted through free software platforms.

In most synagogues, both boys and girls now wear a tallit. Purchasing or receiving the tallit can have deep significance. Sometimes the bar/bat mitzvah uses a tallit of a beloved elder, such as a grandfather who has died. On occasion, the tallit is made expressly for the child by a parent, relative or friend. This could be the entire tallit with all its elements, or just the *ara* (yoke) and *arba kanfot* (four corners), or simply a bag in which to carry the tallit. Depending on relationships, the child may be involved in the design or may receive the finished tallit as a gift. When a tallit is handmade, the tying of the *tzitzit* can be a powerful experience that can involve the bar/bat mitzvah. A

The tallit is a ritual object, not part of the “outfit” for the day. When selecting a tallit, consideration should go to the fact that it will be used after the ceremony as a sign of Jewish adulthood at each subsequent synagogue service the student attends. Selecting a color that matches the outfit may be nice, but will that tallit match every outfit in the future? A special *kipa* with a favorite color or cherished symbols can meet the student’s immediate desire to make a fashion statement, while the tallit is a garment that the student may use for many years to come. As the student grows into adulthood, it’s easier and less expensive to buy new *kipot* than a new tallit. —B.P.

Bar/bat mitzvah students may also wish to make their own tallitot—from picking out and purchasing the fabric to tying the *tzitzit*. At Congregation Or Hadash, sixth graders learn about why we wear a tallit and where this instruction appears in our text and liturgy. Then, together with a parent, they each make their own tallitot. Their teachers give students instructions for purchasing the fabric and making buttonholes in the corners for tying the *tzitzit*. As a class, students learn how to tie *tzitzit* onto the corners of their very own tallitot. Even if a bar/bat mitzvah is being given a new tallit or a family heirloom is being passed down, the student may still choose to make a tallit. The handmade tallit can be fun to wear as a teen, especially for those who attend Jewish summer camp, and it provides an opportunity to deeply engage with this mitzvah. —R.T.H.
tallit can be purchased at a synagogue or museum gift shop or through an online vendor; many people purchase tallitot on trips to Israel. Thought should be given to arranging for a tallit well in advance of the ceremony.

Selecting in advance who will be honored during the service and at the party can also deepen the web of connection and community and help the child to understand his or her place in it. As much as possible, the bar/bat

Selecting clothing for the ceremony and related events can also be understood as a part of the ritual. Most bar/bat mitzvah children get new clothes for the ceremony, and, for some, the occasion is a “first”—first suit, first set of high heels, first pierced ears, first cell phone. Noting the significance of this newness and the changed status of the child can heighten the meaning of the preparation for the ceremony. In some families, the bar/bat mitzvah event is the moment to pass on a cherished family heirloom. —D.W./J.L.

Some parents track the bar/bat mitzvah as a coming-of-age ceremony for other responsibilities and opportunities, and they ritualize these other transitions as part of the bar/bat mitzvah process. —D.W./J.L.

To mark the change in status from being a child to becoming an adult in the Jewish community, bar/bat mitzvah students may also want to consider immersion in a mikvah or performing a ritual hand-washing ceremony. Students may wish to be accompanied to the mikvah (though not into the mikvah) by a parent, an older sibling, or a close group of friends. Parents may also choose immersion in a mikvah to mark the transition in their lives and the change in their relationship with their maturing child. In 2008, Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters (a community mikvah and education center in the Boston area) launched a program entitled “Beneath the Surface” for bat mitzvah girls and their mothers. As a part of the program, girls and their mothers learn about mikvah, coming-of-age rituals around the world, and creating new rituals. See www.mayyimhayyim.org. —R.T.H.

Our congregation takes the rehearsal for the ceremony very seriously, both to give students the opportunity to practice their parts in order, and to give parents an opportunity for taking photographs. Since we do not allow photography at a Shabbat ceremony because it disrupts the spirit of Shabbat, the rehearsal allows families to document key ritual moments. —B.P.
mitzvah should be involved in selecting the individuals and even in extending the invitations. (See more below about potential honors.)

**Rituals During the Service**

Depending on the practices of the synagogue and on the skills of the bar/bat mitzvah, the child will lead either selected prayers within the service (such as *Bar’khu* and the Shema), major parts of the service (such as *shaḥarit* or the Torah service) or the entire service. If the bar/bat mitzvah is not leading the entire service, then there may be room to select skilled individuals who are particularly meaningful to the child or the family to lead other parts. Usually there are readings within the prayer book or select prayers that family members or guests may be assigned. These may include the prayer for the State of Israel, Psalm 145 before returning the Torah to the ark and *Adon Olam*. Special attention should be paid to finding a way to include younger siblings in the service.

Fifteen minutes prior to the ceremony, the immediate family gathers in my office. With each family member asked to speak about their hopes and dreams for this day, we create an intention and focus that quiets the mind, reduces the stress, and reminds us what this day is all about. Just before we enter the sanctuary, we put on our tallitot together. Family members who are not yet of bar/bat mitzvah age are included in this ritual by responding, “Amen” to our blessing. —B.P.
The Torah service is the focus of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony in a synagogue. (For a full explanation of the Torah service, see Volume 2, pages 151–169.) The bar/bat mitzvah usually has many responsibilities during the service. Here is a full list of potential ritual elements for the child during the Torah service, though different communities have varying practices, and different children have different capacities:

- Taking the Torah out and putting it away (chanting from the siddur and, in some communities, carrying the Torah around the room);
- Reciting the Torah blessings (the bar/bat mitzvah is usually called up to the Torah by the gabay with a special flourish);
- Chanting or reading one or more aliyot (portions of the Torah);
- Reciting the blessings before and after the haftarah;
- Chanting or reciting the haftarah; and
- Delivering a d’var Torah that explains the Torah portion or a mitzvah project, and usually thanking family and friends as well.

The Torah service is managed by gaba’im. The literal translation of this Aramaic word is “sextons” or “wardens,” but the function is more meaningful: The gabay makes certain that the Torah service runs smoothly. The rabbi and tutor often serve as gaba’im in order to offer reassurance and coaching to the bar/bat mitzvah; if they are not formally fulfilling these roles, they are usually nearby. The gaba’im can help other people participating
in the Torah service navigate their honors with minimal anxiety and, ideally, great pleasure.

Many honors for the Torah service can be distributed. Guests can be asked to read the Torah, to open and close the ark, to carry the Torah around the community, and to lift (hagba) and wrap (g’lila) the Torah after the Torah reading. Some coaching in advance about the practices associated with each of these honors may be advisable, and the gaba’im or the rabbi usually pays close attention in order to help if there is any confusion. Aliyot, or Torah honors, are a significant way to honor groups of most cherished guests. Different synagogues have different numbers of aliyot. The last aliyah (usually the maftir, the aliyah reserved for the person chanting the haftarah) is reserved for the bar/bat mitzvah. The second-to-last aliyah is commonly reserved for the parent(s) of the bar/bat mitzvah. Remaining aliyot may be distributed among grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and dear friends. These are often collective honors.

People are customarily called up for an aliyah by their Hebrew names. If the aliyah is for a large group of people, then the group can be called up without naming individuals. But if it is just a few people, individuals are usually

Our congregation reserves two aliyot for members of the community as a demonstration that the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is part of the regular Shabbat morning service for the entire congregation. It is also a way to remind the family that they are supported by and obligated to the larger community. —B.P.

It is also a lovely practice to honor teachers with an aliyah or another honor. —J.A.S.
identified by name. Names should be collected in advance so that no one is put on the spot. Distributing copies of the Hebrew blessings in advance so that the individuals being honored can practice may also be advisable.

There are other moments in the service that focus on the coming-of-age ritual that is taking place. Rabbis or tutors often give a special Mi Shebeyrakh blessing at the Torah to the bar/bat mitzvah child, or they may give a more free-form blessing embedded into a short d’var Torah or preceding the recitation of the priestly benediction. In many congregations, families are invited up to the bima before the Torah is read. The Torah is physically passed from the oldest family members down to the bar/bat mitzvah. (Younger siblings usually join the family on the bima but do not pass the scroll.) This ritual enacts the rabbinic teaching that Torah should be passed l’dor vador, from one generation to the next.

Parents usually have the opportunity to speak about and bless their child as part of the service, and rabbis or educators sometimes meet with parents to discuss the

The Reconstructionist version of the blessing before reading the Torah differs from the traditional blessing. (For an explanation, see A Guide to Jewish Practice, Volume 2, pages 160–162.) Some synagogues allow guests to recite whichever blessing is most comfortable for them, and they may make printouts with more than one option available on the bima, while other communities may not. The options and procedures should be shared in advance with bar/bat mitzvah guests who will be honored with an aliyah to the Torah. —R.T.H.
blessing. Sometimes one parent speaks during the ceremony, and the other during the party. The parents, of course, know their child most intimately. The blessing is an opportunity to highlight for bar/bat mitzvah children—in the presence of family and community—the nature of the coming-of-age ceremony, the strengths and gifts they bring to the community, and the responsibilities they have as they mature.

Many families have non-Jewish members. When considering who will have what honors, it is important to be familiar with the policies of the congregation regarding

The parents’ blessing can be one of the most personal and powerful moments of the ritual; a short, focused, written blessing has more impact, and it will be easier for participants and the bar/bat mitzvah to recall it later. —N.C.M.

Bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies usually include non-Jewish guests. It is important to give thought to welcoming them, providing sufficient explanation during the service, and instructing them on how to participate in the ritual. Often, a bar/bat mitzvah family creates and distributes a program that describes the various elements of the ritual. —N.C.M.

As in every relationship, communication between the synagogue and the family is crucial to the b’ney mitzvah experience. Families should be encouraged to ask questions about synagogue policies, particularly around the role of non-Jews in the ceremony. Congregations should spend time in advance thinking through these policies and they should then communicate them in a way that makes roles, boundaries and obligations clear, and that also invites questions and communication. Such policies help to maintain the delicate balance in the dynamic between the child and family and the congregational community. —B.P.
the role of non-Jews in services. Aliyot, family blessings, English readings and ark opening are handled differently in different places.

Rituals Highlighting the Relationship to the Synagogue

When the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony takes place in a synagogue, participation in the life of the synagogue community is often expressly ritualized. Often, a representative of the synagogue—the president or another officer, or a member with whom the child has a relationship—presents the bar/bat mitzvah with one or more gifts. The presentation usually includes a certificate and a tangible ritual object that will enable the bar/bat mitzvah to participate personally in Jewish life. This may be a yad (a Torah pointer) to celebrate the reading of Torah and to express the hope that the child will continue learning after the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, a Kiddush cup (often engraved), a tzedaka box or candlesticks. Many synagogues give prayer books, copies of the Hebrew Bible or books on Jewish themes, usually with an inscribed bookplate commemorating the occasion. Some congregations

The service provides an opportunity to educate non-Jewish family members about Judaism, including what will happen during the service and how the service is structured. Some congregations invite all those who have never seen a Torah scroll to come up to the bima to look at the opened scroll before the formal reading of Torah begins. —D.D.M.
also give the child a membership in their teen organizations or pledges of discounts if they participate in Jewish camping or Israel trips in the future.

The Party

In America, most bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies are accompanied by—and sometimes consist solely of—a party held separately from the synagogue service. This may take the form of a luncheon immediately following the ceremony, held either at the synagogue or at another location. If the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is at a location other than a synagogue, the party usually takes place in the same setting. It may be celebrated in the evening or on the next day. Several rituals are associated with the party, distinct from the Torah-focused ceremony discussed above.

Jewish communal meals that have a religious orientation usually begin with the recitation of the motzi, the blessing over the bread. On Shabbat, Kiddush, the prayer over the wine, is also recited if it was not incorporated into the synagogue service. The bar/bat mitzvah may recite the motzi, or younger siblings or a beloved elder can do so.

Many people find the candle-lighting ceremony to be one of the most powerful moments of the bar/bat mitzvah

I often enjoy the candle-lighting ceremony, but for me, the passing of the Torah scroll is a much more powerful moment, though just as recently invented. —J.A.S.
celebration. The bar/bat mitzvah invites up 13 individuals or groups of individuals, one for each year of his or her life, to light candles on a sheet cake. The child sometimes composes a rhyme or brief comments that highlight the relationship for each candle. This extremely popular folk ritual, which was invented by American caterers, has come to be seen as essential to the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. It is a child-driven, English-language ritual that focuses on relationships and usually lays out the child’s experience and understanding of the community. It easily enables non-Jews to participate in the day. If a parent speaks at the party, it is often immediately following the candle-lighting ceremony.

Parties frequently have music, either through DJs or with live musicians. Just as caterers invented the popular

The candle-lighting ceremony fuses birthday rituals (candles) with Jewish sentiments expressed toward each person or group of persons who light a candle. —D.D.M.

Rabbi Anchelle Perl created the “Cup of Life Ceremony” as an alternative to the candle-lighting ceremony. This ceremony involves taking 14 small cups (assuming the child is 13 years old, plus one for good luck) and filling them each with grape juice. Each cup is then assigned an ingredient/wish that is important for a good life. Cups may be assigned wishes for such ingredients as good health, wisdom, kindness, compassion, good humor, dedication, curiosity, prosperity, generosity, friendship, happiness and love. (These ingredients may be altered according to the wishes of the family or child.) Special groupings of guests are invited to come up and share a few words while pouring the juice from their cup into a larger goblet. After all 14 cups have been poured, the bar/bat mitzvah concludes the ceremony by drinking from the goblet. —R.T.H.
candle-lighting ritual, DJs have a set of activities that many people associate with bar/bat mitzvah parties. This can involve traditional Jewish dancing, sometimes including lifting the child (and occasionally the parents) in a chair, a practice borrowed from traditional Jewish wedding celebrations.

Thought should be given to the values being passed from generation to generation when planning the party. If the religious ceremony is to be central, it should not be overshadowed by the elaborateness of what follows. Values should also dictate the party’s level of expense. Some families contribute a percentage of the costs of the party to tzedaka and let guests know about the contribution through an announcement or printed cards on the table. The donation may be tied to the child’s mitzvah project, or it may be made to an organization like Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger. Centerpieces on guests’ tables may also be related to the child’s mitzvah project, or they may be comprised of food baskets to be delivered to food

I understand that some DJ traditions are sacred and not to be changed, but I wonder if others couldn’t be given a Jewish flavor with no harm done to the tradition. Why not make “Coke and Pepsi” into “Yerushalayim and Tel Aviv” or something similar? —J.A.S.

Many synagogues adorn the bima with flowers. While flowers are pretty and festive, they can also be expensive and if they are not locally sourced, using them may also not be environmentally friendly. In order to create an additional mitzvah opportunity, one that may or may not connect with their mitzvah project, bar/bat mitzvah families may choose to create mitzvah baskets to adorn the bima. These may include baskets of food to donate to a local food pantry, books to donate to a school or library, sports equipment for an afterschool program or dog toys for a local animal shelter. —R.T.H.
pantries. Incorporating a tzedaka sensibility into the party helps to keep the focus on the meaning of the day and to curb excessive celebration.

**Further Thoughts on the Party**

The party itself can be as complicated as the religious ceremony, though the parents tend to bear the brunt of the planning responsibility. Venues, caterers and DJs or bands may need to be chosen, especially if the party is to take place at a location other than the synagogue. There are sometimes multiple events: an adult party, a child-centered party (which may happen simultaneously or at a separate time) and additional meals for out-of-town guests. Parents should allow adequate time to plan for events, and they should take care that any stress arising from the planning not be transferred to the child.

In some corners of American Jewish culture, only a few guests are invited to the ritual, or the ritual itself is dispensed with entirely, and the party becomes the point,

Doing tzedaka in conjunction with the party is a good statement of values, and it may help to make people feel better, but I doubt that it curbs excess. That can be accomplished only by addressing the issue of excess directly. —D.D.M.

To help reduce costs, share resources, and support moderation, a group of families can create a joint party to celebrate a bar/bat mitzvah cohort, with individual b’ney mitzvah having smaller family celebrations on their own particular weekends. —N.C.M.
even the entirety, of the bar/bat mitzvah. Events like these frequently cost as much as a modest wedding celebration. However, they are divorced from the coming-of-age-and-into-the-community rite of passage (and in some instances, from Judaism itself).

The approach outlined here eschews excess. It suggests that the child be celebrated for the intersection of accomplishment and potential and that this celebration be the culmination of a process that is meaningful to the child and to the family and reflective of the bar/bat mitzvah’s interests and strengths. It suggests that the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony take place in the context of an intergenerational community, offers a range of suggestions for how to accomplish all of these goals, and provides some alternatives if the parents or children have different goals in mind. Within this approach, there is ample room for singing and dancing and celebrating a child’s coming of age, together with friends and family and community. Some synagogues adopt policies that promote celebrations that are not overly lavish, both to keep the focus on the religious and communal values undergirding bar/bat mitzvah, and to mitigate the financial pressures on families trying to “keep up with the Goldbergs.”

Given the delay among American Jews in marrying and having children, one sometimes senses that parents fear that they will not live long enough to celebrate a wedding (or that their child may never marry), and therefore the bar/bat mitzvah event is the last occasion for a simḥa for the foreseeable future. —D.D.M.
Adult Ceremonies

Adults who did not have a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony as adolescents often decide to undergo preparation and celebrate an equivalent ritual as adults. These may include women who grew up before the bat mitzvah ceremony was common, Jews by birth who were not involved in religious expressions of Judaism, and Jews by choice. Many of these adults already actively participate in the life of their communities. Yet they discern that the process of preparation and the performance of the ritual will be transformative. Most of the time, the focus is on the Torah service: Adult celebrants master the Torah blessings if they don’t already know them, chant from the Torah or the haftarah, and deliver a d’var Torah. There may be a communal celebration—a Kiddush or a luncheon for the community—that is sponsored either by the congregation or by the celebrant. The celebration rarely approaches the extensiveness or complexity of most adolescent celebrations.

Adult ceremonies are frequently group ceremonies. A cohort of adults goes through the preparation together and then celebrates the ritual together. For many adults, this camaraderie is deeply reassuring. They may be mature adults, effective parents and competent professionals, and yet they experience much of the same performance anxiety that many adolescents feel. The anxiety may be intensified by the challenges of learning to decode Hebrew or to master trop. While many English speakers struggle with Hebrew, it can be especially difficult for adult learners to
learn a second language. The encouragement and support of others who are going through the same process can reinforce the message that adult bar/bat mitzvah is truly about process and community, and not primarily about performance.

Sometimes individuals initiate the adult bar/bat mitzvah ceremony themselves. They recognize their desire to learn and to lead, and they create a process of preparation and celebration in collaboration with a rabbi, a cantor or a tutor. Other times, a synagogue offers classes on an occasional or semiregular basis. In those instances, the community establishes the curriculum of study and the date of the celebration.

Often, the experience of watching an individual or a class celebrate adult b’ney mitzvah inspires other adults to take up new learning challenges or, if they never celebrated a bar/bat mitzvah, to prepare for their own. The perseverance, courage and strength in the face of anxiety manifested by these adult learners are often reassuring to children who are working through their own emotions and experiences as they prepare to become bar/bat mitzvah.

Most adults who celebrate a bar/bat mitzvah rite experience a tremendous sense of accomplishment. They often continue to study and to deepen their knowledge and their

Adult b’ney mitzvah classes usually last somewhere between one and two years. Learning and preparing as a cohort can help the members of the class to create deep and lasting bonds with each other, while also gaining the skills to be able to take on new roles in the life of the community. —R.T.H.
skills, and sometimes they step into more prominent leadership roles in the life of the community. If they celebrated a group ceremony, they may have gained new friends within the community.

Hillel centers on campus often become the sites of bar/bat mitzvah celebrations for young adults. An undergraduate or graduate student who was not active as a child in a synagogue (or, possibly, who was not Jewish as a child but who has converted) catches up on skills and learning and celebrates the entry into Jewish adulthood at a moment roughly equivalent to the entry into secular adulthood.

Some synagogues have established a ben/bat Torah ritual. This is a ritual of Jewish adulthood that is timed, like the college-based ritual described above, at the moment of adulthood rather than at adolescence. The ben/bat Torah ritual acknowledges that adolescence does not equal adulthood, and it seeks to create a process that proactively engages emerging adults in Jewish issues. The ritual is not necessarily focused on the acquisition of skills. Rather,

For thousands of young adult participants, a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip is an opportune and ideal setting for an adult bar/bat mitzvah celebration. Almost every trip has staff members who can facilitate a group bar/bat mitzvah ceremony during the trip. Typically, a group bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is held on a Shabbat afternoon during the trip when the group is at a hotel and not traveling. The celebrants say the Torah blessing. During the trip, celebrants prepare a short insight statement and a concrete statement of commitment to the Jewish people that they read during the ritual. Though the preparation for a group ceremony is much less intensive than the preparation for a typical bar/bat mitzvah, the feeling during this transformative Jewish moment in people’s lives is often quite powerful, and it can contribute to the formation of the participants’ Jewish identity. —J.M.S./N.C.M./R.T.H.
it focuses primarily on study and engagement with moral issues at a deeper and more complex level than is possible with most 12 and 13 year olds. Preparation for the *ben/bat Torah* ritual is most powerfully experienced as part of a cohort, so that conversations about community are grounded in real relationships. The culmination of the *ben/bat Torah* ritual is not necessarily to lead part or all of a synagogue service, though such a service may be an appropriate venue in which to acknowledge the completion of such a program.

**Conclusion**

Becoming a full adult member of the Jewish community involves a process of learning, of more fully joining the weave of Jewish relationships that constitutes the fabric of community, and of making a commitment to ethical living and to the Jewish people. That complex agenda requires a thoughtfully designed process so that the bar/bat mitzvah celebration marks not an ending, but rather a firm new beginning toward maturity, responsibility and Jewish engagement.

**For Further Reading …**

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin’s *Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah* (third edition) was one of the first
books to challenge the largely unsuccessful, formulaic approach to *b’ney mitzvah* that has been common in America, and it still remains an important guide to bringing meaning and holiness into the ceremony. Salkin has also written a separate edition of the book designed especially for kids that invites their ideas and participation. Much of his approach here seems less revolutionary to those accustomed to a Reconstructionist approach, but it underscores the importance of engagement.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram brings an innovative, resourceful, expansive and creative approach to imbuing the *b’ney mitzvah* process with familial engagement and meaning. *Reclaiming Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a Spiritual Rite of Passage* (second edition) brings spirituality into the center of the process and moves the child and family toward lifelong Jewish engagement. Milgram proactively creates a pathway for building an enduring Jewish life. Her website, www.bmitzvah.org, has many tools, including her deck of *Mitzvah Cards: One Mitzvah Leads to Another* and her inspiring mitzvah stories gathered from some of the many families who have used her cards and other resources.

*Whose Bar/Bat Mitzvah Is This, Anyway?* by family therapist Judith Davis recognizes that the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is a familial rite of passage. This book draws upon the best of family therapy, seeking to have the ceremony maintain the value of *sh’lom bayit* (peace in the family) and extend it to create opportunities to heal family systems.

In *Surviving Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah: The Ultimate Insider’s Guide*, Cantor Matt Axelrod offers insights into
the stress that children and families endure during the bar/bat mitzvah process and offers tips for making the process a smooth one. His practical guide seeks to decrease the tension and increase the sense of accomplishment throughout this rigorous spiritual process.

Ritualwell.org is a rich resource for a myriad of concrete suggestions for beautifying and enhancing the bar/bat mitzvah process and the ceremony itself. It is a great resource for the adult bar or bat mitzvah as well.

*The Book of Jewish Sacred Practices: CLAL’s Guide to Everyday & Holiday Rituals & Blessings*, edited by Rabbi Irwin Kula and Vanessa L. Ochs, Ph.D., includes a small chapter on *b’ney mitzvah* that offers families a blessing and a ritual for beginning the process.

Both Danny Siegel’s *The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah Book: A Practical Guide for Changing the World Through Your Simcha* and Liz Suneby and Diane Heiman’s *The Mitzvah Project Book: Making Mitzvah Part of Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah … and Your Life* are great hands-on guides for prompting children to think about undertaking significant mitzvah projects that will be opportunities for growth.