



Standards & Guidelines
for
Bat/Bar Mitzvah
A Manual for Candidates

Report
of the
Bat/Bar Mitzvah Task Force
June 1994 / Tammuz 5754

Preface

Reconstructionism teaches that it is up to each congregation to decide what bat/bar mitzvah means *to us*—and then to devise standards that strive to realize our vision.¹

In the Fall of 5754 (1993), the Religious Committee and Rabbi David felt the need for standards that could be handed out in advance and applied across the board. To focus the thinking of the congregation on this matter, our board of directors then called for the creation of a Task Force on Bat/Bar Mitzvah, charged with assessing our past practice, reviewing options, and drafting guidelines that would best further the goals of our congregation.

Nina Storch, our vice president, assembled and convened the task force. Our group included members of key stakeholder groups: a candidate for bat mitzvah, persons who had become bat/bar mitzvah at Beit Tikvah, parents whose children became bat/bar mitzvah at Beit Tikvah, parents whose children will be candidates next year, our religious school director, the religious committee, and our rabbi. The task force met for 7 evenings over a 7-month period. Each member found the task force's mission and process to be engaging, stimulating, and rewarding.

In accord with Reconstructionism, we took note of each other's personal experience. We also studied Jewish texts on a given topic with interest and respect, and we engaged in thoughtful discussion. Only then did we recommend policy for the present. Finally, we carefully explained our decisions in writing, knowing that this effort would prompt us to be clear about what we think.

We hope that we succeeded in thinking clearly and that our work will assist you (the candidate for bat/bar mitzvah), your family, and congregational leaders. The process of defining standards for bat/bar mitzvah turns out to be the same as spelling out what it means to be a Jew in the United States today. A vital but big question! We are grateful for the opportunity to have joined together in search of answers.

Task Force on Bat/Bar Mitzvah

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¹By implication, practices will vary from one congregation to another. Our attempt to live fully in both Jewish and American civilizations means that congregations take into account the norms of both cultures when applying Jewish tradition to our situation—and that may lead to creative deviations from traditional ritual. Reconstructionism also recognizes the need for *pluralism* in ritual observance, due to differences in environment, upbringing, talents, and individual tastes. Experimentation is fine so long as it does not desecrate what Jews traditionally hold to be sacred.

Recent Experience

Here is what becoming bat/bar mitzvah has been like at Beit Tikvah, as described from the perspectives of two people: Heather, who came of age in our congregation, and Andy, a parent whose daughter came of age here.

Heather Ovcharek

I shared the big day with my mom; she also celebrated her bat mitzvah—during the same services. Although I had been worried that her celebration would take attention away from me (I felt that I had worked hard and deserved lots of attention), it turned out to be great.

I actually started religious schooling late—at age 11—and so I was much older than my classmates with whom I learned Hebrew. But that was okay; now we are all good friends. I celebrated my bat mitzvah before any of them did because I am older than they are. I was actually 14 when the ceremony took place.

I was also part of a group of four young people who prepared together for bat/bar mitzvah. We made our way through a wonderful workbook called *Crossing the River*.² We got together once a month as a group, with our parents, to discuss what we had covered on our own. Each of us young people took responsibility for leading the discussion on one chapter of the book, including coming up with questions for the group. We young people insisted that we answer first, before any of the grown-ups could say anything.

Rabbi Steve expected us to attend services at least once a month, to become familiar with them.

To learn to read from the Torah (3 “paragraphs” for 3 *aliyot*), I met with a private tutor — once a month at first, weekly later, and twice a week during the last month. At first I did not understand why I needed to learn to read Hebrew without vowels. It was hard. But then later it felt good.

I analyzed the Torah portion myself. I wrote down what it meant to me and read that during the ceremony.

Working with Rabbi Steve, my parents and I assembled a custom *siddur* for the services.

I did not chant Haftarah.

During the services, my parents presented me with a *tallit*.

It’s a lot to just go through with this process. It’s emotional. We studied so hard. I’d like to do it again now.

²*Crossing the River: Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the Journey Toward Jewish Adulthood*, by Rabbi Burt Jacobson, who explains in the introduction, “*Crossing the River* was written to help young people like you become aware of how you are growing and changing, and how Bar/Bat Mitzvah can help you build the raft that will take you from childhood to adulthood.” *Crossing the River* is divided into “journeys” toward six goals: 1) Adulthood, 2) Jewishness, 3) God, 4) Jewish Tradition, 5) Becoming a Good Person, and 6) Becoming a Religious Jew. This book is available from the rabbi.

Andy Cherlin

We followed a similar approach to what Heather described. My daughter Claire and I met in a group with 2 other families; parents were responsible on a rotating basis for teaching the young people. From the activities, study, and discussion, she gained in understanding of spiritual and moral issues.

Claire had two tutors: one for learning to chant from the Torah and one for discussing its meaning.

In addition, Claire read the Haftarah in translation, reciting some of the Haftarah blessings in Hebrew.

As a parent, I gained from this experience in several ways:

- I watched Claire go through the process; it brought our family closer together even as it helped “launch” her as an adult;
- I gained a sense of community together with the other parents—and with the congregation as a whole; and
- It was gratifying to bring friends and family together to celebrate.

Historical Background³

Our ancient sacred texts appear to view “coming of age” as just one status change among many in a person’s life.⁴ They saw that the emerging adult was acquiring certain *natural* endowments—intellectual, physical, and reproductive—which then prompted the rabbis to assign new *cultural* responsibilities and privileges.

Coming of age occurred when two natural conditions were met: (*a*) minimum age, and (*b*) steps toward puberty. Age served as proxy for two more meaningful—but less easily measured—qualities in emerging adults: *understanding of God*⁵ (including a sense of moral accountability)⁶ and *strength / stamina*.⁷ Finally, *puberty* played a key role in that one did not come of age until certain tokens of reproductive maturity were also apparent.⁸

The concept of a status of being “of age” is ancient among Jews, although scholars find little evidence of a specific coming-of-age ceremony or celebration until about six hundred years ago. The earliest evidence of recognition for emerging adults appears to be related to fasting on Yom Kippur.⁹

Despite the relative lack of pomp and circumstance, we infer that even in ancient times, a period of preparation preceded one’s coming of age. Rabbi David infers from the texts that preparation aimed at three goals, which correspond to the above-mentioned natural changes in the maturing young person: (*1*) awareness that Jewish spirituality has something to offer,¹⁰

³You will find sacred and historical documents collected in the Appendix to this report.

⁴Mishnah *Avot* 5.21; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Evidence §9.8.

⁵Mishnah *Niddah* 5.6.

⁶According to Rabbi David, the terms *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah* are best translated as “one who is responsible.”

⁷Mishnah *Yoma* 8.4.

⁸Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Evidence §9.7.

⁹*Soferim* ch. 18 §5. In context the text appears to refer to both males and females.

¹⁰Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* §63.10.

(2) mastery of facts and skills,¹¹ and (3) a sense of integrity and self-possession.¹²

Eventually, males who came of age began to *confirm in public* their reaching this stage of communal membership, by playing an active role in public discussion of Torah and in communal prayers.¹³ The father also had a public role at this time.¹⁴ The public nature of this rite seems to have changed the definition of “coming of age,” for over time, age became the sole deciding factor—at the expense of a more awkward insistence upon the more private tokens of reproductive maturity.¹⁵

At the same time, reaching this stage in life became an occasion for celebration among Jews—not solely within families but also *in community*. It is no modern innovation for the family in question to host a feast—this is a centuries-old tradition. Sometimes the feast was a “party” and at other times it was treated as a religious obligation (*mitzvah*); there, the young adult, his father, or a guest would publicly address what the community considered sacred (Torah); and the elders present would offer blessings, congratulations, and prayers.^{16,17}

Meanwhile, women traditionally took on a more private religious role than men, so females’ public acknowledgement of new status does not appear to have been marked until the turn of the century.¹⁸ The practice of young women publicly celebrating their becoming bat mitzvah got a boost from Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, starting in 1922.

The exact method of demonstrating one’s new status has varied by locale and over time. (We acknowledge this variability in order to discourage any impulse to be dogmatic about the “one right way” to do this.) Typically, young Jews have marked this stage in life in three basic ways:

- By playing a prominent role in communal worship services;
- By giving a *derashah* (presentation on the meaning of a piece of our sacred texts); and
- By being the focus of a joyous family celebration.

¹¹Mishnah *Yoma* 8.4; responsum of R. Jacob Fraji.

¹²*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* A 16; *Pirké de-Rabbi Eliezer* 26.

¹³Responsum of Rabbi Jacob Fraji; *Love Letters* by Rabbi Isaac Walzer of Celle (early 18th c.).

¹⁴Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* §63.10; *Ben Ish Hai*, First Year, *Reéh* §17.

¹⁵Rabbi Solomon Luria, *Yam shel Shlomo* on BT *Baba Kamma* 7.37.

¹⁶*Ben Ish Hai*, First Year, *Reéh* §17.

¹⁷In at least one community (1770, Aschaffenburg—a town of about 35 families in Bavaria), it was the rule that parents of boys who became bar mitzvah would make a contribution to the religious school.

¹⁸*Ben Ish Hai*, First Year, *Reéh* §17.

What Bat/Bar Mitzvah Means at Beit Tikvah

In accord with our heritage, we at Beit Tikvah also view “coming of age” as a change in status, one among many in a person’s life. Like our forebears, we take note of the acquisition of certain intellectual, physical, and reproductive powers in our emerging adults; and we too wish to provide an ethnic and religious framework for these changes.

Thus, Beit Tikvah celebrates its children’s becoming bat/bar mitzvah so as to meet real individual and communal needs. We find the preparation period and ceremony to be a commendable beginning of new periods in the life of an emerging adult as well as in the life of her/his parents. We are grateful that our heritage offers us the model for a sacred, transformative path.

True, times have changed. Post-modern America is not like pre-modern Europe or the Middle East. One significant difference is that Jewish identity is now much more a function of personal decision than before; a Jew repeatedly makes a conscious choice to be called a Jew. This fact greatly sharpens one ancient meaning of what happens around age 13: the *choosing of one’s group identity*.¹⁹ Similarly we view the meaning of bat/bar mitzvah today as foremost affirming a decision to “opt into” the Jewish community.

If that conscious decision is to be an *informed* choice, then a young Jew must be educated in advance. Thus, we concur with the ancient tradition of a period of preparation—involving development of an awareness that Jewish spirituality has something to offer, of mastery of facts and skills, and of a sense of integrity and self-possession.²⁰

What we (Congregation Beit Tikvah) mean by bat/bar mitzvah is a *community* development as much as a *family* one. That is, the congregation’s interest in providing a venue for bat/bar mitzvah is both to cheer on and strengthen family ties and to increase the emerging adult’s engagement with community. We therefore expect our congregational leadership to vigorously represent both interests in making future decisions regarding the application of our guidelines.

Finally, let us say a bit about what becoming bat/bar mitzvah is *not*. It is not an “initiation”—because in practice we do not treat adult Jews who became bat/bar mitzvah differently from those who didn’t. This is due to practical considerations; a difference between members of the two groups may well exist,²¹ yet we cannot workably *measure* it. To do so, for example, there

¹⁹Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* §63.10.

²⁰We suggest that in a world of optional Judaism, the first and last goals of preparation are the most important; however, because knowledge of facts and skills is the least provocative and the easiest to measure, it may tend to be overly emphasized in Jewish education.

²¹Perhaps congregants who have celebrated becoming bat/bar mitzvah (or an adult equivalent) are like neighbors who have joined their local neighborhood association; they take responsibility for maintaining and improving the neighborhood. Other members of Beit Tikvah are like neighbors who have *not* joined the neighborhood association; they might nevertheless be good neighbors and they might still participate in working for the good of the neighborhood. The difference is that they have not made an “up front” commitment to the community and what it stands for — and this might to some extent color how other neighbors view them.

would need to be some sort of community-wide registration of initiation, which is currently lacking in our fractured Jewish world.

In sum, at Beit Tikvah, the act of preparing for—and becoming—a bat/bar mitzvah means:

- affirming a decision to “opt into” the Jewish community
- riding a booster rocket into a steady Jewish orbit
- growing in stature, nurtured by a personal enrichment program
- celebrating the choice and the achievement, in community

Standards for Preparation and Participation

We have adopted *general* standards that also presume some built-in *flexibility*. That is, it’s generally fair if all young people face the same standards; each candidate is asked to do what everyone else is doing. On the other hand, given different backgrounds and abilities, it seems most fair that sometimes what we will ask of you may differ from what we expect of others:

- In the case of a special-needs child, the rabbi, together with the family, will modify our standards to suit the needs and abilities of the candidate. We are willing to be flexible when the family shows good intentions and makes a good-faith effort.
- If you are capable of taking on more than the typical preparation described below, then you should do more. The amount of effort each person invests should be equivalent—even if the results differ.

Another occasion for flexibility arises if circumstances beyond your control arise to prevent the agreed-upon preparations. Again, we will be willing to work with you if you showed good intentions and made a good-faith effort.

As stated above, a period of preparation for coming of age is an ancient tradition among our people. Rabbi David perceives three goals within that tradition. For the sake of continuity with our heritage, we categorize our guidelines at Beit Tikvah according to the same three goals:

- a. Awareness that Jewish spirituality has something to offer,
- b. Mastery of facts and skills, and
- c. A sense of integrity and self-possession.

A. Awareness of Jewish Spirituality

During the preparation process, we expect you (our candidate) to pay attention to those aspects of our heritage that nurture, renew, and inspire people. By the time you come of age, we want you to have developed your own understanding of what our people considers sacred.

This is not to say that you must (for example) observe the Sabbath every week; rather, we want you to grasp how this holiday functions—that is, what it means to those Jews in whose eyes such a device has power. Similarly, you do not have to “believe in God,” but you should be able to explain (with fairness, and in a way that makes sense to you) what Jews who say they *do* “believe in God” mean by it.

By the time you come of age, we also expect that you will be able to show that you can:

STANDARD	REASON
A-1. Lead certain Jewish home rituals (e.g., Lighting candles, Kiddush for Shabbat evening, Breaking bread, Grace after meals, Havdalah, Cleaning for Pesach, Preparing a seder plate, Putting up a mezuzah) as specified by the rabbi	You will know how Jewish religion makes time and space holy. These rituals will be available to you, either now or later in life— whenever you want to draw upon them.
A-2. Recognize and understand key Hebrew words and phrases in the worship services and in your Torah and Haftarah portions (see below).	The best way to “tame” Hebrew is to relate it to what you already know something about.
A-3. Put on a Jewish prayer uniform (<i>tallit</i> and <i>tefillin</i>)	You can gain a better understanding of the need for <i>focus</i> in prayer.
A-4. State “what comes next” at any given point in the Sabbath morning services.	This encourages you to gain a sense of how communal worship is constructed and what it’s all for.

WHAT LEVEL OF HEBREW KNOWLEDGE IS EXPECTED?

The study of Hebrew is vital because it is our people’s language of the spirit. Of course candidates like you are expected to be able to decode the alphabet—that is, to sound out words on a page—before you even begin to prepare for becoming bat/bar mitzvah. You also know how to recite and recognize key prayers in the siddur.

Now, as an integral part of your preparation, you will gain some sense of what the words mean—and how the language works. Learning to lead a section of the service will involve recognizing and understanding key words and phrases. And analysis of the Torah and Haftarah portions, as well as preparation to read from the scroll, will involve some consideration of the Hebrew language. (To cover these items, we strongly suggest additional weekly Hebrew tutoring during your year of candidacy.)

B. Mastery of Key Facts and Skills

One cannot truly understand something except by getting close to it, developing a relationship, taming it and making it one’s own. So too with Judaism. In the ancient world, 12-year-olds proved to themselves and others that they could fast for all of Yom Kippur;²² this conveyed a gut-level grasp of our heritage that no mere study about Judaism—or memorization of facts—could achieve. This is what prepared them to come of age. The same approach leads us to these guidelines for you:

²²*Soferim* ch. 18 §5.

STANDARD	REASON
B-1. You will fast on the Yom Kippur prior to when you celebrate becoming bat/bar mitzvah. ^{23, 24}	You will place yourself in the chain of tradition, along with the young Jews of long ago.
B-2. Contribute money or time to תְּדָקָה <i>tzedakah</i> —helping to meet needs of people who at the time lack the resources to meet their own <i>basic needs</i> , simply because it is part of being human to help.	By applying this classic Jewish value you will place yourself into a relationship with other people, including those whom you might not otherwise think of as part of your community.
B-3. Contribute money or time to a Jewish <i>communal institution</i> of your choice (synagogue, school, community relations agency, or advocacy group)	The best way to develop your own relationship to the Jewish community is for you to help make the community work.
B-4. Commit beforehand to undertake a service project for some part of the Jewish community <i>after</i> the bat/bar mitzvah ceremony occurs	If bat/bar mitzvah means that you “opt into” the Jewish community, then the ceremony is only the <i>beginning</i> of your service to the Jewish people and to the world.
B-5. Attend worship services at least once a month for 12 months, or the equivalent. ²⁵	Your ability to lead services confidently depends upon consistent attendance. Also, familiarity with the prayers can add to their meaning for you. And you will gain a better sense of the community that you are choosing to affiliate with.
B-6. Design (with the rabbi) a supplement booklet for your bat/bar mitzvah ceremony.	It will help you to “own” the worship services if you give thought to how they should be presented on this particular day.
B-7. Lead one of our 3 Sabbath morning worship services (warm-up service, morning service, or Torah service) as שְׁלִיחַ זְבוּרָה <i>she·li·ah tzi·boor</i>	Leading worship services is an ideal way for you to publicly become bat/ bar mitzvah, because worship is the public act during which we all symbolically declare ownership of our cultural tradition. By meeting in prayer, we claim the doctrines and sacred forms of the past as our own.

²³Do not make the common mistake of thinking that this is because Judaism is about suffering. The fast of Yom Kippur is not about suffering; rather, it is about making a clean start.

²⁴Of course, if fasting makes you ill, then you should break your fast.

²⁵To some extent, Friday night services can substitute for Shabbat mornings. Also, attendance at other congregations may substitute for attendance at Beit Tikvah, after the rabbi is satisfied that you have a basic understanding of Shabbat morning services as conducted at Beit Tikvah. The rabbi will work out the exact regimen with each family.

- B-8.** Deliver a ten-minute-long talk that presents something of personal interest and meaning that you have found in your study of the weekly Torah portion (דֵּרָשָׁה de-ra-shah);

This is how you make Torah your own. And generally people learn best when they are asked to teach others.
- B-9.** Be called up to serve as communal witness for a portion of the public Torah reading, reciting the blessings for the privilege of doing so (אֲלֵיָּהּ a-li-yah);

When we ask you to represent the congregation, we are giving you an adult responsibility. Because of the trust and confidence we place in you, you are likely to grow in your sense of presence when in public.
- B-10.** Read aloud or chant a paragraph of 3–4 verses from the Torah scroll (קְרִיאַת הַתּוֹרָה kri-at ha-to-rah).²⁶

This is a token to symbolize your personal relationship to Torah. The length is equivalent to what is commonly read by a bat/bar mitzvah elsewhere.
- B-11.** Present our public reading of an excerpt from the weekly selection from the Prophets (הַפְּטוּרָה haf-ta-rah, “completion”)²⁷

This ties you to a third portion of our sacred literature—in addition to the Torah and the siddur.

C. Sense of Integrity and Self-Possession

We expect that your preparation and celebration of bat/bar mitzvah will help you to increase the sense of meaning and purpose in your life. You will be better able to face challenges when you join together with others to make the world right.

STANDARD	REASON
<p>C-1. Prepare for, and attend, the full series of monthly discussion groups based upon <i>Crossing the River</i> or its equivalent.</p>	<p>Through this you can explore: Jewish thinking about what is a life well lived, how being a Jew matters, and how to apply Judaism to your daily concerns.</p>
<p>C-2. Make it a priority to attend other opportunities that congregation occasionally provides for you to explore what it means to be a Jew.</p>	<p>Same as above.</p>
<p>C-3. Write and sign a covenant in which you commit to taking responsibility for selected aspects of your life in the foreseeable future.</p>	<p>You will clarify what it means to be a Jewish adult. “What new privileges am I going to claim now? What new responsibilities am I going to undertake?”</p>

²⁶You may choose which paragraph of the overall weekly portion to prepare, and you may choose whether to chant or to expressively read from the scroll. Accurate, fluent pronunciation is paramount.

²⁷We ask you to follow our congregation’s general practice, which is to read at least a cohesive excerpt from the Haftarah aloud in translation, with a token amount chanted or read in Hebrew. As for the benedictions before and after: read or chant the body of each blessing in translation, reciting the last key sentence of each paragraph in Hebrew.

Guidelines for Meeting the Standards

A. Typical Procedure

	<i>Countdown</i> (T = Blast-off date)
1. Enroll in religious school	T – 4 yr
2. Contact our rabbi for a preliminary conversation	T – 2 yr
3. Sign a covenant with our rabbi; select a date	T – 1½ yr
4. Begin attending services regularly	T – 1 yr
5. Begin <i>Crossing the River</i> discussion groups	T – 1 yr
6. Begin intensive tutoring	T – 1 yr
7. Tribunal (<i>beit din</i>) meets to evaluate progress	T – ¼ ₁₂ yr

By 120 days in advance of the tentative date of the ceremony, we will hold a review of your progress and make a final commitment as to the pace and content of the preparation. (Prior to this review, you should have already specified—through agreement with our rabbi—how you intend to meet standards B-2, B-3, and B-4.) This review will adopt the format of a tribunal (*beit din*) involving one rabbi and two lay members of sound judgment whom the rabbi selects.

B. Community engagement

The Rabbi's Roles. Our rabbi plays three roles in your becoming bat/bar mitzvah: (1) As a *consultant* to help congregants reach their religious and spiritual goals, the rabbi will meet periodically with bat/bar mitzvah candidates and their parents, individually and as a group. (2) As head of the congregation's court (בית דין *beit deen*), the rabbi is a *judge* who needs to be satisfied that you are meeting the terms of this covenant. (3) The rabbi will be *officiant* at the worship services during which the coming of age takes place.

Religious School Attendance. A Jewish family without ties to a Jewish religious community is like a root-bound potted plant. It can only grow so far. In order to thrive, Jews need a broader base in the communal soil of the type found in a religious garden. While it really takes a lifetime to grow a Jew, we view 4 years of study as the least amount of time needed to prepare a child to become bat/bar mitzvah.

Generally, 4 years is what it takes for a young person to get a basic grasp of Sabbath and holiday observances, Torah, history, prayer, God, and the Land of Israel. (Of course, more study tends to be better than less.) Our minimum requires a real commitment, and that is what it takes for the ceremony—and being a Jew—to mean something. At Beit Tikvah, we do not literally interpret the Jewish tradition to celebrate coming of age at 12 or 13. Rather, our approach is this: *Better that you wait until you are fully prepared and ready, rather than rush to celebrate at the tradition upon reaching a given birthday.*

At least three years of the total study must be undertaken at a recognized religious school; the last year has historically been tutor-based so as to be tailored to the educational needs of each child. While in some cases parents themselves are qualified to instruct their children at the same level of knowl-

edge as does a school, we insist on schooling because of the community relationships that a school engenders and the placing a value on community that it symbolizes.

Occasionally, parents do not enroll their children in religious school until age 11 or 12; this can be a consequence of divorce or other family trauma. In such a case, it may be awkward for an older child to be in a class with much younger children. So if we sense that the family is now sincere in its commitment to properly prepare the child, the congregation is open to the family's undertaking its own "make-up" program (via attending classes and workshops held in the larger community, summer camp, directed reading, and the like) concurrent with attendance at our school. We will make available a *beit din* (tribunal) to assess that the candidate has received an education equivalent to what a child would receive in 3 years of attendance at our school.

Another key part of membership is doing one's share to support our religious community financially. Therefore, at least one parent in the household must be a *member of the congregation* in good standing for at least 2 years.

HOW THE CONGREGATION WILL SUPPORT YOU

During the period of preparation:

- Taking part in the *Crossing the River* discussions²⁸
- Lending books
- Sharing knowledge / special talents as needed for you to meet the standards
- Assisting your parents (especially: parents who have already gone through the process with a child of their own)

At the ceremony or feast

- Rituals that welcome you into the community: Torah chain, *tallit* canopy
- Making speeches of welcome (especially: teenagers who themselves went through the process at Beit Tikvah)

LOCATION OF BAT/BAR MITZVAH CEREMONY

May the ceremony take place in a location other than the regular meeting place of the congregation? —This issue is currently under discussion by the Board of Directors.

²⁸At the *Crossing the River* discussions, we recommend that at least one person (not the parent of a current candidate) officially represent the congregation—as a community, apart from the familial interests also represented by members. We suggest that the board appoint an official representative (who will also be expected to encourage other members to attend what are sure to be interesting discussions), to ensure that the presence of a larger community—beyond the bounds of immediate family—is palpable during the preparations.

Conceivably, this representative could also serve as convener, seeing to it that these meetings take place regularly and that all participants remain engaged in the process.

2. Parent Involvement

DURING THE CANDIDACY YEAR

Parental involvement is required in several ways:

- Inner preparation for the personal transition that they—as the parents of a child who becomes bat/bar mitzvah—are going to be making
- Sitting with you as a companion, while you engage with preparatory materials
- Parents will likely need to meet to discuss practical “how-to” matters related to ensuring that you are properly prepared (although parents are urged to avoid making significant decisions until they have consulted the children)
- Attend monthly meetings of you and your peers, based upon *Crossing the River* or an approved equivalent
- Attend worship services as your companion
- Seeing to it that you have transportation to meetings with the rabbi, etc.

CELEBRATION OUTSIDE OF SYNAGOGUE

- Hosting a feast²⁹—an uplifting religious event if handled properly.³⁰ For the sake of a healthy tone in our Jewish community, we recommend that you give serious consideration to striving for that goal. It helps to involve community officials (elders) in the event, to speak some words of Torah on the occasion, to sing some songs, to express gratitude and appreciation, and to recite benedictions before and after the meal.³¹
- We recommend that parents consider making a donation to the religious school in honor of the child’s aliyah to the Torah

FOCUS ON THE PARENT

When children become bat/bar mitzvah, parents also reach a turning point. Today, the traditional parental benediction—recited in public at the end of worship services or at the feast—might be understood to mean, “Yes! I have made it this far—from now on, I am looking after a teenager, not a child!” or “Yes! I no longer have to choose Judaism for my child, because s/he has made that choice for her/himself!” or “I hereby begin the process of letting go.”³²

During the candidacy year, we expect that the parents will meet (with congregational facilitation if need be) specifically to discuss their own transition, in both its spiritual and practical aspects, at least twice. Such meetings might usefully be held concurrently with meetings of the candidates. ■

²⁹At the place of worship, after services, we suggest that your family to provide at least grape juice/wine and challah for all attendees.

³⁰*Ben Ish Hai* (1898) explains that the bar mitzvah feast is a religious obligation because it shows your eagerness to take on the identity of an adult Jew.

³¹Traditionally, a special table is set aside for the poor and homeless to eat and share in the festivities. (A modern approximation of that custom is to donate money to Mazon.)

³²Midrash Genesis Rabbah §63.10.

Appendix: Sacred and Historical Texts

Mishnah *Yoma* 8:4

Land of Israel, c. 200

התינוקות	As for children,
אין מענין אותן ביום כ	they do not impose a fast on them on the Day of Atonement.
אבל מחנכין אותן	But they do train them
לפני שנה ולפני שנתיים	a year or two in advance,
בשביל שיהיו רגילים במצוות:	so that they will be used to doing the religious duties.

Lesson: Coming of age requires a period of preparation. Here, children were expected to work up to fasting for a full day on Yom Kippur, so that when they come of age they would know what it's like.

Mishnah *Avot* 5:21

Land of Israel, c. 200

Judah ben Tema used to say, “At age 5 to Bible, 10 to Mishnah, 13 to religious and ethical duties, 15 to Talmud, 18 to the wedding canopy, 20 to responsibility for providing for a family, 30 to fullness of strength, 40 to understanding, 50 to counsel, 60 to old age, 70 to ripe old age, 80 to remarkable strength, 90 to a bowed back, and at 100—one is like a corpse who has already passed and gone from this world!”

Lesson: Coming of age is just one status change among many in a person's life.

Mishnah *Niddah* 5:6

Land of Israel, c. 200

A girl 11 years and 1 day old—her vows (promises sworn in God's name) are examined [by the court, to see if she actually grasped the import of her words, or whether she was just playing]. A girl 12 years and 1 day old—her vows are binding [automatically, just like an adult's]. And they examine [in such cases] throughout the 12th year.

A boy 12 years and 1 day old—his vows are examined. A boy 13 years and 1 day old—his vows are binding. And they examine through the 13th year.

Before this age, even though they said, “We know before whom we have vowed,” “for whose sake we have donated our property”—their vows are not vows, and that which they have donated to the Temple is deemed not donated.

After this age, even though they said, “We do not know before whom we have vowed,” “for whose sake we have donated our property”—their vow is a vow, and that which they have donated to the Temple is deemed to have been donated.

Lesson: Part of coming of age is that people take your words more seriously. Adults are held accountable for their promises in a way that children are not.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan, version A, ch. 16

Land of Israel, c. 300

Rabbi Joshua says: “A grudging eye, the impulse for evil, and rejection of people remove a person from the real world.”

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....*the impulse for evil*—What did he mean? The sages explained: At age 13, the impulse for evil is greater than the impulse for good. In the mother's womb it had begun to develop and it entered the world with the child. If the child began to profane the Sabbath, it offered no restraint. If the child murdered, it offered no restraint. If the child embarked on a major transgression, it offered no restraint.

But at age 13 the impulse for good is born. If the adult profanes the Sabbath, it says, “Numbskull! The Torah clearly says, *One who profanes the Sabbath shall be put to death*

(Exodus 31:11)!” If the adult murders, it says, “Numbskull! The Torah clearly says, *Whoever sheds a person’s blood, persons shall shed that one’s blood* (Genesis 9:6)!” If the adult embarks on a major transgression, it says, “Numbskull! The Torah clearly says, *the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death* (Leviticus 20:10)!”

Lesson: If parents can provide their children with firm limits until age 13, then the emerging adults will be able to call to mind and respect the limits that society places on its adult members. That is, one goal in preparation for bat/bar mitzvah is to make it clear what other people expect of them.

Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* § 63.10

Land of Israel, c. 400

When her [Rebekah’s] time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.... When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. (Genesis 25:24–27)

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When the boys grew up. Rabbi Pinḥas said in Rabbi Levi’s name: “...For 13 years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines.”

Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Simon said: “A father is responsible for his son until age 13; at that point, he must say, ‘Blessed is the One who has now freed me from liability for this young person!’”

Lesson: This text implies that age 13 is when a (male) Jew chooses his religious and spiritual community; also, the (male) parent celebrates release from moral responsibility to guide the child—and possibly also for release from civil and criminal liability for the child’s actions. This text reinforces our assertion that becoming bat/bar mitzvah represents making a choice to “opt into” the Jewish community. It also recognizes that the parent has reached a turning point as a parent.

Pirké de-Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 26

Land of Israel, c. 730

Our father Abraham was tried with ten trials, and he stood firm in them all. The first trial was when our father Abraham was born; all the magnates of the kingdom and the magicians sought to kill him, so he was hidden in a cave for 13 years without seeing sun or moon. After 13 years he went forth from beneath the earth, speaking the Holy Language, and he despised idols and was appalled by the graven images; he trusted in the protecting shadow of his Creator, saying, *Blessed is the one who trusts in you!* (Psalms 84:12).

Lesson: This text implies that if parents can protect their children from bad societal influences until age 13, then their children will emerge as steadfast Jewish teenagers. That is, one goal in preparation for bat/bar mitzvah is to nurture a sense of integrity and self-possession.

Sofêrim, ch. 18, § 5

Land of Israel, c. 800 CE

<p>וכן היה מנהג טוב בירושלים להתענות בניהם ובנותיהם הקטנים ביום צום בן י"א שנה עד עצם היום בן שתים עשרה להשלים ואחר כך סבלו ומקרבו לפני כל זקן וזקן כדי לברכו לחזקו ולהתפלל עליו שיזכה בתורה ובמעשים טובים.... ללמד שהן נאין ומעשיהם נאים ולבן לשמים. ולא היו מניחין בניהן קטנים אחריהם</p>	<p>And there was likewise a fine custom of the people of Jerusalem [to train] their young sons and daughters in self-denial on the fast of Yom Kippur— at age 11, up to the middle of the day; at age 12, the full day; the next year, the son [or daughter?] would be taken around and presented to each and every elder who would bless and congratulate the young adult, praying that this one should come to attain Torah and do good deeds.... This shows how splendid the people of that city were; their deeds were fine and their minds on godly things. And they would not leave their young children behind at home;</p>
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אלא היו מוליכין אותן לבתי כנסיות rather, they would take them to synagogue
 כדי לזרים במצות: in order to encourage them in the performance of the precepts.

Lesson: The actions of the people of ancient Jerusalem were held up as a model of proper behavior, including preparation for coming of age, as well as a coming-of-age rite on Yom Kippur, when the elders would congratulate and bless the emerging adults.

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Judges, Evidence Laws § 9.7–8

Egypt, 1178

Minors are disqualified as witnesses by biblical law, as it is said, *Then both men...shall stand before Yhwh—before the priests or magistrates in authority at the time, and the magistrates shall make a thorough investigation* (Deuteronomy 19:17)—it says *men*, not minors. Even if the minor is discreet and intelligent, a boy is ineligible until he has grown two pubic hairs after the completion of 13 years....

In the case of a male who has reached the general age of maturity, if the upper tokens of adolescence appeared, no further investigation is required; otherwise his evidence is inadmissible until further investigation.

If a male who is 13 years and 1 day old has grown 2 hairs but does not know anything about business, his evidence pertaining to *real estate* is not accepted, since he is unable to exercise due care in regard to matters with which he is unfamiliar. But his evidence with regard to *movable property* is accepted, because he is mature.

Lesson: Traditionally, one did not come of age until certain tokens of reproductive maturity were also apparent. But even a biologically mature 13-year-old was not considered a full adult in the eyes of the law. Again, coming of age was just one status change among many in a person's life.

R. Solomon Luria, *Yam shel Shlomo* on B.T. *Baba Kamma* 7.37

Poland, c. 1560

Rulings on feasting—which is permitted for ritual circumcisions, Hanukkah, etc....but not for the sake of socializing.

...It appears that any feast may be called a “feast of religious obligation” if it is not for the sake of socializing and merrymaking but rather in order to express gratitude for one's circumstances [literally, “to render praise to God”] or to call attention to fulfillment of a religious precept or to call attention to a marvelous event....By all appearances, you can find nothing that excels the feasts that we Ashkenazim make for bar mitzvahs....They make merry and render praise and offer thanks to God that the boy reached the point of becoming bar mitzvah, for the sake both of the boy and of the parent....Indeed the whole idea of bar mitzvah is not valid in my eyes, for most of the youths who celebrate bar mitzvah do not yet have the tokens of reproductive maturity. So how can they be considered to have come of age—as able to lead the congregation in prayer and in saying Grace after Meals?...And how can the feast be considered a “feast of religious obligation”?...The person who is trying to live an upright life should avoid going to many bar mitzvah feasts.

Lesson: Complaints about lavish bar mitzvah parties are nothing new! Actually, in this commentary on the Talmud, the author's real concern was that his fellow Jews had disregarded that portion of the earlier definition of “coming of age” that first required the start of puberty. In other words, the definition of “coming of age” appears to have evolved over time—to the author's dismay.

Responsum of R. Jacob Fraji (“Maharif”)

Alexandria, Egypt, late 1600s

...I used to be a teacher of boys, and when a boy would arrive at the age of being bar mitzvah, if he was not capable of giving a *derashah*, I would prepare him to fluently recite the portion in public in lieu of a *derashah*. But my enemies would see this young man and take him for being a mere boy who was not yet bar mitzvah, and they would slander me [claiming that I was violating Jewish law]. So I adopted another approach;

I would educate young men when they were about 15–16 years old to read the Torah portion...¹

Lesson: By the late Middle Ages in Europe, coming of age involved giving a talk explaining the Torah portion, or else reading aloud from the Torah scroll. (We also see incidentally that Jews were sometimes mean to each other.)

Love Letters (Yiddish social critique) by R. Isaac Walzer of Celle

Germany, early 1700s

I have encountered a number of people, in both towns and villages, who for the purest of motives truly want their sons to be learned. They spend a great deal for lessons, bringing expensive tutors into their homes. The boy quickly learns the *alef-bet* and the prayers, and he begins to learn Torah before he even knows how to pray well. The teacher, noting that the boy is picking up the Torah quickly, asserts that it's a great sin to fritter away more time with him on Torah. The boy will most certainly be learned—even able to teach a verse by himself when he gets older. Thus the teacher begins with the Mishnah; and after the child learns a few units, the rabbi and fellow students say, "It's too bad that this boy who is such a great master should waste his time studying Mishnah!" So they start him on Talmud. The child learns Talmud so well, studying even the resulting legal rulings and the classic commentary, that he begins to study by himself, thus attaining the most important level of all: *chutzpah*. And everyone says that the boy will be a renowned sage. Eventually he is made a bar mitzvah and delivers a fine *derashah* [explanatory elaboration of the Torah portion]. And in the same fashion he continues his studies two or three more years until "everyone" says that really, his father ought to send the young man away to study in yeshiva...²

Lesson: Critiques of the state of Jewish education are not new. What this Mark Twain–like description confirms in passing is that in Europe, becoming bar mitzvah involved giving a talk explaining the Torah portion.

Minutes of the School Committee for Aschaffenburg and Vicinity

Bavaria, Germany, 1770

Decision: In our communities, whenever one's son is made a bar mitzvah, the parent shall (during the following week) give a set donation to the school, in honor of the son's having been called up to the Torah on the Sabbath.³

Lesson: In these communities, support for a key communal institution was part of the celebration of becoming bar mitzvah.

R. Joseph Hayyim ben Elijah, *Ben Ish Hai*, Year 1, *Parshat Re'eh* § 17

Baghdad, 1898

A male arrives at legal majority at the age of 13 years and one day; thus on the first day of his 14th year, his father takes his hand and says, "Blessed is the One who has released me from liability for this young person!"...

The father should strive to host a feast for close friends and family (inviting those learned in Torah as well). The feast should be as lavish as God's hand has been good to him; for from this feast will arise a potent defense on behalf of Israel—that is, advocates will say before the blessed Holy One: "Master of the Cosmos, how your dear ones rejoice when one of them takes upon himself the discipline of the commandments!" Such a feast is considered a religious obligation.

¹*Sources for the History of Jewish Education: From the Start of the Middle Ages to the Age of Enlightenment* (Hebrew), Vol. 4, ed. S. Assaf (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947), p. 108.

²Transl. into Hebrew by S. Assaf and into English by R. D. S. Stein; from *Sources for the History of Jewish Education*, p. 114.

³*Sources for the History of Jewish Education*, p. 127.

The aforementioned benediction...is said by the father during the feast. Those adults present bless the son, affirming the hope that he should acquire knowledge of Torah, reverence, and the ability to abide by the commandments; and the elders among the guests should lay their hands on his head and bless him with the Priestly Blessing.

If the son is able to deliver a discourse on the Torah, it is commendable if he then does so. If he cannot, then his father should give such a discourse; and if he cannot, then one of the guests who is learned in Torah should do so.

It is recommended that the son wear new clothes and recite the *she-heḥeyanu* benediction both for the clothes and for his entrance that day into the discipline of the precepts. If he cannot afford new clothes, he should recite the benediction over a fruit that is new for the season.

Similarly for a daughter on the day that she enters the discipline of the precepts—even though it is not customary to host a feast for her, nevertheless she ought to rejoice on that day, wearing Shabbat clothes. And if she can afford to, she should wear new clothes and recite the *she-heḥeyanu* benediction both for the clothes and for her entrance that day into the discipline of the commandments.

Lesson: In that community, it seems that the bar mitzvah speechifying was done outside of synagogue. The text suggests that if properly conducted, a bat/bar mitzvah feast can be a meaningful religious occasion. (We also see here the first known mention of something special for girls who came of age.)