

# INTRODUCTION

This guide:

- (1) Answers some of the most commonly asked questions about Bar/Bat Mitzvah.
- (2) Outlines synagogue guidelines relating to this year of study, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony itself, the celebration following it, and opportunities for continued involvement following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah.
- (3) Provides resources to get the most out of your Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience.

Please read this guide carefully. You may notice a number of changes from previous years. Much thought has gone into seeking ways to accommodate changes within Beth Shalom. The changes reflect a desire to meet the needs of our congregation while still providing each family with a personalized special experience.

## What Does It All Mean?

We often think of the word “mitzvah” as referring to a good deed. While many mitzvot require us to perform good deeds, the term “mitzvah” itself means commandment. When a child becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah, he or she has come of age to be personally responsible for fulfilling the commandments (the mitzvot) of Jewish observance and practice. These commandments are rooted in our understanding, as a Jewish community, of what we believe God commands us according to the Biblical text. Observing the Sabbath, making distinctions about what we eat (keeping kosher), being generous to the poor and kindly to the stranger, are all commandments which originate in our holy Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself is not a mitzvah per se. It is the ceremony marking the point at which our child becomes personally obligated to the mitzvot, the Commandments, the ethical and religious obligations that lie at the heart of our covenant as Jews with God. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is similar in some ways to middle school graduation ceremony, marking the completion of only one step in one’s Jewish education. Certain skills have been mastered and a certain amount of knowledge has been amassed. Yet much more remains to be learned.

If you desire your child to remain a proud Jew committed to his or her people and tradition, it is critical that following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, family attendance in services and synagogue involvement continue on a regular basis and that Jewish education (i.e. Hebrew High School, Jewish Summer Camping and Youth Group activities) continue as well. Our children learn the most important lessons by watching what we do, what we hold to be important, so it is important to model how to keep growing in one’s own Jewish knowledge and connection, as well.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah year can be a tremendously moving spiritual experience. It is with God that we have made our covenant to be Jews. It is God's message to us that your child will be reading in the Torah and Haftorah Shabbat morning. With this in mind, please make every effort to have your celebration be consistent with Jewish values and traditions. All celebratory events should be kosher, respectful of the Sabbath, and not conflict with Religious School hours. This should not be a weekend of conspicuous consumption but a personal testament to your commitment to Jewish observance, connection, and ethics.

One of the ways to make this experience more meaningful is to personalize it with a mitzvah project which is required of all students. In addition to the mitzvah project itself, a child can choose a worthy charity to which the student can donate a part of his or her gifts. (Some suggestions are included in this guide.)

Most important, don't let the details of party planning obscure the joy of seeing your child mature. The Rabbi, Cantor, Administrative Staff, Religious School, and the entire synagogue leadership are all your eager partners in helping to make this year joyful and fulfilling. Please don't hesitate to contact us.

May this year be filled with personal and spiritual growth for you and your child. Mazel Tov!