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InterfaithFamily.com offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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# Bar/Bat Mitzvah for the Interfaith Family



## What is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah?

According to Jewish law, all children acquire the status of ritual adulthood when they are thirteen years old. Whether or not they participate in a ceremony, they now take responsibility for their own moral decisions and commitments to observing the *mitzvot* (commandments) that are the foundation of Jewish life.

The central act of the bar mitzvah is the honor of getting an *aliyah*, an invitation to bless and/or read from the *Torah* (Jewish Bible) at a regular congregational service. The student often writes and presents a *drash* or brief talk on the meaning of these particular verses of the *Torah* and may lead parts of the worship service. In this coming of age ceremony, thirteen-year-olds make a public statement of their Jewish identity and a pledge for a Jewish future, and demonstrate readiness to take their place among the adults of the community. For the child, this is a moment of triumph, bringing a self-conscious thirteen-year-old to face a room filled with family, friends and congregants who are predisposed to shower him with compliments for his achievement.

“More important than a performance or a recital, more personal than a report card, it is an affirmation of a child’s whole self, with every aspect of development on display from a new physique to the emerging spiritual-moral-Jewish voice explaining the week’s Torah portion. For parents bar/bat mitzvah is a crowning moment. To watch a son or daughter stand Torah in arms, before family, friends and congregation is a moment of great pride and joy—but one tinged with sadness as well. This young woman or man is not a baby, nor are you ‘young parents’ anymore.” (Diamant, *How to Raise a Jewish Child*)



## Sources

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You can also prepare a program to be handed out at the synagogue that will help guests understand more about the ceremony. The program can be a simple summary prepared at home or a formal keepsake program with more in-depth explanations.

You may want to include:

*An explanation of the tradition of the bar mitzvah to help guests appreciate the holiness and significance of the ceremony.*

*An outline of the service, including page numbers. Guests also enjoy knowing the relationship of the participants to the bar mitzvah student.*

*An explanation of the items in the sanctuary.*

*A glossary of basic terms used during the service.*

A wide variety of sample guides can be found at :  
InterfaithFamily.com, and MyJewishLearning.com.

## Including Your Child's Interfaith Heritage at the Celebration

The festive meal and celebration following the bar mitzvah is a perfect time to involve all the relatives who did not have a part in the religious ceremony.

*Relatives can speak about the values that guide their lives and their desire to pass those values down through the generations. If there is a family memento that symbolizes the values, they can "ritually" hand it to the child.*

*If they are reluctant to speak themselves, honor relatives who were not recognized at the ceremony by speaking about their importance to your family and how their values are reflected in the bar mitzvah's accomplishments.*

*Create a party that embraces the family's multicultural heritage. Traditional ethnic foods, music and entertainment can make the celebration memorable.*

The process of becoming a *bat mitzvah* generally begins in the fourth or fifth grade and includes study of the Torah (Jewish Bible), the Hebrew language and Jewish values. A year before the ceremony, students often begin working with a tutor to focus on the Torah portion that is read on the Shabbat of their bar or bat mitzvah.

Students may also be asked to complete a study or volunteer project. Either of these provides an opportunity for a student to incorporate his dual heritage by arranging a joint project with a church or mosque.

While their child is preparing, parents can prepare themselves as well. Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff points out that emotional and religious dynamics often come to the surface as this milestone event approaches. He suggests parents ask themselves:

*What has been my commitment to my child's Jewish life? Have I helped to instill Jewish values and traditions? Will my participation in the ceremony be a natural extension of who I have been all along?*

*Which parts of the ceremony and celebration are most comfortable to participate in for each parent? Being present as a witness and supporter is as important as being an active participant.*

*How can we insure that our extended family will understand what they see and be comfortable at a Jewish service?*

## Family Participation

The various denominations of Judaism (Reform, Orthodox, Conservative and Reconstructionist) differ in their policies on participation of family members and friends. It is helpful to attend as many Shabbat services as you can to become familiar with the worship service at your synagogue. Many congregations have a booklet explaining their policies on family participation. If there is no booklet, it is best to speak to the rabbi or educational director.

Here are some questions to guide your conversation:

*May relatives of other religions open the ark (an enclosed area where the Torah is kept) or dress the Torah? (wrapping the Torah with a special cover and ornaments)*

*May a relative who is not Jewish read an English prayer or blessing?*

*If the Torah is passed through the generations - from grandparent to parent to the child - may the parent and grandparents who are not Jewish take part?*

*Are there rituals designed by the synagogue specifically for family that is not Jewish to involve them in the ceremony, such as the giving of the tallit (prayer shawl)?*

Just as a person who is not Christian would not take communion, there are parts of the service that can only be led by Jews. Rabbi Elliot M. Strom describes the situation as a balancing act. "You try to involve and invite the partner who is not Jewish," says Strom. "And, at the same time, you need to have enough respect for Jewish life, rituals and blessings to make sure that those parts of Jewish life that are to be done by Jews are done by Jews."

Relatives from all parts of the family can help with the preparations for the bar mitzvah and serve as greeters at the synagogue. They can welcome guests, give out *kippot* (head coverings), programs or *tallitot* (prayer shawls).

Make sure that all family know that their presence at the ceremony is important to the bar mitzvah, and that their contribution to the child's upbringing has been essential to bringing the thirteen-year-old to this accomplishment, by honoring them at the celebration meal.

## Helping Guests Feel Comfortable at the Ceremony

All guests at a bar mitzvah ceremony are likely to feel more welcomed if they understand the ceremony and Jewish practices. You can help put them at ease and explain your synagogue's customs and rules by creating an information sheet that can be mailed to them before the ceremony.

### **A Few Clues for Those Unfamiliar with Jewish Worship and Bar Mitzvahs**

Worship services start at 10:00AM and end at 1:00PM.

The Torah service begins at 11:00AM and no one can enter the sanctuary once this starts.

All Hebrew prayers are transliterated in our prayer book so you can follow along. The prayer book opens from what is usually the back side, as Hebrew is read from right to left instead of left to right.

Attire is what would be appropriate for church services or business casual attire. Prayer shawls and head coverings are optional.

The congregation is asked to stand whenever the Torah (Five Books of Moses) is taken out of the ark as a sign of respect.

Please turn off all cell phones and pagers.

Small children are welcome, but need to be quiet during the Torah service and the sermon.

Smoking is not allowed on synagogue property.