



InterfaithFamily.com

Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

BAR/BAT MITZVAH IDEAS AND PRIMER FOR INTERFAITH FAMILIES

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Introduction

We at InterfaithFamily.com compiled ***Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ideas and Primer for Interfaith Families*** as a way to help interfaith families navigate the process of planning a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration. It includes detailed information about what takes place at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah as well as information on ways a child's interfaith family can participate in the celebrations, and possible limitations on participation in some synagogues.

The booklet is divided into sections addressing different aspects of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process, and ends with specific suggestions for rituals, excerpts to include in a Bar/Bat Mitzvah supplement and recommended books.

In March 2006 we asked our readers to share their ideas on ways to include a child's interfaith heritage and non-Jewish relatives at his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We want to thank everyone who took the time to offer their suggestions.

We would like to thank the following contributors (authors whose work originally appeared in another source include the name of the original publication):

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Introduction to Bar/Bat Mitzvahs

(Information from MyJewishLearning.com and [Judaism 101](#).)

In modern Jewish practice, Jewish children come of age at 13. When a child comes of age, he or she is officially a Bar Mitzvah (“son of the commandments”) or Bat Mitzvah (“daughter of the commandments”). The terms are commonly used as a short-hand for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s coming-of-age ceremony and/or celebration.

In its earliest form, the only ceremony associated with a child becoming Bar Mitzvah was a blessing by the child’s father thanking God for freeing him from responsibility for the deeds of his child, who is now accountable for his own actions. By the 17th century, boys celebrating their coming of age were also reading from the five books of Moses (the Torah), chanting the weekly Haftarah portion from The Prophets, leading services and delivering learned talks.

In 1922, the founder of the Reconstructionist Jewish movement, Mordecai Kaplan, held the first Bat Mitzvah ceremony, for his daughter Judith.

A typical Bar/Bat Mitzvah involves the child taking an active part in Friday night and Saturday morning services on a Shabbat close to his or her 13th birthday. Training for participating in the service typically begins at least a year before the ceremony. (See *Ways The Child May Participate in the Ceremony*, page 5.) Reserving a date for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony at a synagogue also may require advance notice of a year or more.

A child’s family typically participates in the celebration by participating in some way in the Shabbat services and by hosting and attending a celebration that Saturday afternoon or evening. (See *Ways The Family May Participate in the Ceremony*, page 7.)

There are numerous ways an interfaith family can be involved in the celebrations, but what is permitted varies widely from synagogue to synagogue. Different congregations offer different restrictions and opportunities for non-Jews to participate in the ceremony. (See *What’s Permitted and What’s Not*, page 4.)

One of the best ways to involve non-Jewish guests is by distributing a supplement explaining Jewish rituals on the day of the ceremony. (See *Educating Your Non-Jewish Audience*, page 13.)

*Portions excerpted and adapted from “Primer: Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation.”
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What's Permitted and What's Not

The first step in adapting the Bar Mitzvah ceremony to the needs of your interfaith family is talking to the rabbi or spiritual leader at the synagogue. Synagogues have varying requirements of prospective Bar/Bat Mitzvahs (e.g., enrolling in Hebrew school for a certain number of years, studying with the cantor, community service projects, etc.) prior to the actual ceremony. Generally, these requirements will begin at least a year before the date of the actual Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Be aware that synagogues have very different opportunities and limitations for families to adapt the service to their needs. Some synagogues seek to keep the Shabbat service a public, communal affair and therefore restrict the amount of control the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child and his/her family have over the service. Others allow families significant freedom in offering roles in the service to family members and friends.

As a general rule, the more liberal the movement to which the synagogue belongs, the more flexibility the congregation will allow in offering roles in the service to family members and friends. So Orthodox synagogues will offer the least flexibility, Conservative synagogues more and Reform and Reconstructionist even more.

Synagogues have different positions on what non-Jewish relatives (including parents) are allowed or not allowed to do during the service. It is important to discuss these issues with your rabbi or prospective rabbi before planning the ceremony. Unlike a wedding, you cannot mold a ceremony to your needs and then seek out a rabbi to perform it.

If, as in a typical Reform synagogue, you are offered the opportunity to make choices about the service, your child and you need to decide what's most important. Is this a day that's more about your extended family, and you therefore want to adapt services or readings to include them? Or is this a day more about your family's Jewish choices, and you therefore want to keep a more traditional service? Should your child's ceremony be one piece of a communal service, or the centerpiece of the service? No choice is right or wrong for everybody; it's important to figure out what is right for your child and you.

Also, be aware that in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, children born to non-Jewish mothers--or adopted children whose parentage can't be verified--may be required to go through a conversion process prior to their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. This process can involve circumcision (bris)--or, if a boy is already circumcised, a symbolic ritual circumcision (hatafat dam brit), a dipping in a ritual bath (the mikvah) and appearance before a ritual court of three rabbis (beit din). If you plan on having your Bar or Bat Mitzvah in a Conservative or Orthodox synagogue, it is essential you discuss this issue with the rabbi well before the child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Ways The Child May Participate in the Ceremony

There are a number of common ways in which the child may participate in the service, depending on the practice of the synagogue where the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is taking place:

1. He/she is called for an aliyah.

The Torah reading on Shabbat (Saturday) morning is divided into sections. Prior to each section, a person or persons is called to the front of the synagogue (the bima) to recite a short blessing over the reading. Only adults 13 and older are allowed to receive an aliyah, which is considered a great honor. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony is the opportunity for the child's first aliyah.

2. He/she reads from the Torah.

The child usually chants some or all of the weekly Torah reading in Hebrew.

This requires a significant amount of training and tutoring for the child to be able to read Hebrew without vowels and learn the unique music that goes with every Torah reading (the trope).

One way to include the non-Jewish parent in the child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah process is for the parent to study the Torah and Haftarah text with his/her child. It can be a great way for the non-Jewish parent to learn about Judaism, Hebrew, etc.

3. He/she chants the Haftarah.

Every Torah reading is thematically associated with a reading (the Haftarah) from The Prophets, sacred books that are not part of the Torah, which includes only the first five books of Moses. Almost always, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child is expected to chant this associated reading. As with the Torah reading, learning the Haftarah and its music takes time and training.

4. He/she delivers a commentary (drasha) on the Torah reading.

In many congregations, the rabbi gives a sermon about ideas and lessons from that week's Torah reading. In many congregations, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child is encouraged to give his or her own commentary on ideas and lessons from the week's Torah reading or his/her Haftarah portion. This is often an opportunity for the child to speak about his/her social action project, if he/she has done one.

It's also a great chance for the child--if he or she wishes--to recognize the contributions of his non-Jewish parent and/or relatives.

If you're interested in making the speech accessible to non-Jewish audiences, you can speak to universal values that Judaism and other religions share: social action, compassion, justice, etc. Another way to make the speech accessible to non-Jewish audiences is to speak about Jewish figures that are revered by other religions, such as Judith and the Maccabees, who are revered by Christians, or Abraham, who is revered by Muslims.

Also, if the rabbi is giving a speech or sermon, you can suggest that he or she recognize the non-Jewish parent or relatives in the child's family. This kind of encouragement straight from the pulpit can put non-Jewish relatives greatly at ease.

5. He/she leads parts of the service.

The Shabbat morning service includes psalms and readings that precede the service, the morning service (Shacharit), the Torah service and the additional service (Musaf). Each service is broken down into numerous prayers and readings, which vary from movement to movement.

In many congregations, the child is allowed to lead some or all of these services. In some congregations, however, Bar/Bat Mitzvah children are discouraged from taking over the service and turning a communal event into an individual one.

There are other ways that some congregations integrate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child into the service, such as having the child say a pledge to continue his or her Jewish education or having the child recite a unique prayer about his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

6. The child says the blessings over the post-service luncheon.

In some congregations, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child says the Hamotzi (blessing over the bread) and the Kiddush (blessing over wine) before a post-service Kiddush luncheon.

Ways The Family May Participate in the Ceremony

In many congregations, there are opportunities for involvement of parents, relatives and friends, although the number of opportunities varies from movement to movement and synagogue to synagogue.

In many cases, the congregation will not allow non-Jews to say particular prayers or perform particular rituals, but will allow non-Jews to stand on the bimah while other Jewish family members say the prayer or perform the ritual. It is important to discuss this with the rabbi.

Here are some main ways in which family members are allowed to participate:

1. The parent(s) are called for an aliyah.

The Jewish parent is typically called for an aliyah. Many congregations will allow the non-Jewish parent to come to the bimah for the aliyah but not say the prayer because it refers to the Jewish people as “us.”

In some Reform synagogues, the non-Jewish spouse reads the translation while the Jewish spouse recites the blessing.

A ruling of the Conservative movement’s authority on Jewish law does not allow non-Jews to receive an aliyah, but there may be exceptions in some synagogues.

In some congregations, non-Jewish parents are not allowed on the bimah.

2. Relatives are called for an aliyah.

Very few congregations allow non-Jewish relatives to be called for an aliyah. Also, every congregation has different rules about how many of the aliyahs the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family can assign. Some synagogues attempt to split the aliyahs fairly evenly between the Bar/Bat Mitzvah family and the congregation at large.

3. The parent(s) say a blessing over their child.

Often, after the child has read the Torah and Haftarah readings, the parents will recite the Shehecheyanu blessing, which thanks God for the opportunity to celebrate the occasion. Some congregations may not allow the non-Jewish parent to say the blessing, but will allow both parents to say an English blessing.

4. The parent(s) hand the Torah to the child.

This relatively new ritual is meant to symbolize how the Torah, the holiest book of the Jewish religion, is passed from generation to generation, and has been passed from generation to generation for thousands of years.

Some congregations allow the non-Jewish parent to participate in this ritual, although they may restrict the non-Jewish parent from touching the Torah. According to rulings from the Conservative movement's authority on Jewish law, non-Jews are not allowed to touch the Torah.

5. Relatives open and/or close the ark (the holy area that holds the Torah).

Before the Torah is read, the doors or curtains to the ark are opened and the Torah is removed from the ark. This is considered a very holy moment. After the Torah is read, it is returned to the ark.

The privilege of opening or closing the ark is often reserved for a revered older member of a family. Conservative congregations typically do not allow non-Jews to open or close the ark, while many Reform and Reconstructionist congregations do.

6. A relative carries the Torah around the congregation.

Before the Torah reading, the Torah is carried around the congregation and people are given an opportunity to “kiss” the Torah indirectly, either by touching their prayer shawl to the Torah and then kissing the prayer shawl or by touching their prayer book to the Torah and then kissing the prayer book.

Few congregations will allow non-Jewish relatives to carry the Torah because traditional Jewish law “prescribes that a gentile cannot touch the Torah,” according to Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn and Michael Boekstal.

7. The parent(s) give a talk to the child after he/she reads the Torah and Haftarah.

This is an opportunity for the parent to publicly express their love and pride for their child. In the congregations that offer this opportunity, it is very likely that the non-Jewish parent will be allowed to participate. This is a wonderful opportunity to speak about the choice you've made to raise a Jewish child. It's also a great opportunity to recognize non-Jewish relatives (e.g., grandparents) whether or not they have not had a chance to participate in the service.

8. The parent(s) present the child with a prayer shawl (tallit).

The Jewish prayer shawl (the tallit) is a four-cornered shawl with knotted fringes that men, and some women, often wear during the Shabbat service. Because wearing a tallit is a sign of reaching adulthood, many parents give their child a beautiful new tallit as part of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. In the congregations that include this ceremony, it is likely the non-Jewish parent will be allowed to participate.

9. Relatives read other prayers.

Depending on the movement and the synagogue, there may be other prayers that relatives can recite, such as the prayer for Israel, the prayer for the government, the prayer for peace or the prayer for the armed forces. Many congregations, including Conservative ones, will allow non-Jewish relatives to read these prayers in English.

Some temples allow the Bar Mitzvah family to choose favorite poems or songs that family members, including non-Jews, can read.

There are other ways that some congregations will allow relatives to participate. Ask your rabbi if you can include non-Jewish family members in these practices, which include:

- Relative(s) read the Torah portion in English to the congregation after it is read in Hebrew.
- Relative(s) read prayers in English after they are read in Hebrew.
- Family members distribute candy to participants to “throw” at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child after he/she has read from the Torah and Haftarah.
- Relative(s) hand out prayer books, yarmulkes and/or supplements to the service to guests and congregants attending the service.

There may be other rituals that non-Jewish relatives can participate in. Talk to your rabbi about the opportunities and who’s allowed to do what.

Ways The Child Participates Before the Ceremony: Community Service

Along with the study involved in preparing to read the Torah and Haftarah and preparing to lead sections of the service, many Bar/Bat Mitzvahs-to-be perform community service projects. Many congregations now require prospective Bar/Bat Mitzvahs to do a community service project.

Some ideas for projects that pay tribute to a child's interfaith heritage include:

- Raising money for the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous (www.jfr.org), which supports elderly non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust.
- Raising money for charities that address problems that unite religious communities, such as fighting the Darfur genocide or feeding the hungry.
- During the 13 months prior to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, doing 13 community service projects with (or dedicated to) 13 different relatives, Jewish and non-Jewish, and putting together a scrapbook of the activities.
- Inviting guests at the party to bring a book, old piece of clothing or non-perishable food item to donate to a worthy cause. Choose a secular charity, or perhaps even choose one Jewish charity and one non-Jewish charity.
- After the party, donating the leftover food or the flower arrangements to ecumenical charities, or one Jewish and one non-Jewish charity.

Naomi Eisenberger, the managing director of the Ziv Tzedakah Fund, recommends that children consider the following four questions when deciding what to do for their social action project:

- What am I good at?
- What do I like to do?
- What bothers me so much about what is wrong in the world that I get very angry and want to do whatever I can to change it?
- Who do I know?

Two good sources for social action/charity ideas are www.areyvut.org and www.socialaction.com.

Ways The Child Participates Before the Ceremony: Study

Some congregations ask the prospective Bar or Bat Mitzvah to do a Jewish study project in addition to his or her preparations for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. In the case of the Secular Humanistic Jewish movement, children often do significant Jewish study projects. Frequently in Secular Humanistic congregations, these projects are done under the direction of an adult mentor.

Study projects that can integrate the child's interfaith heritage include:

- A project that looks at the historical interaction between the cultures of his mother and father. For example, a child of a Jewish father and Danish mother could research how Danes protected the Jews during World War II, or a child of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish Mexican father could write about the Jews of Mexico.
- A project based around the values he or she has inherited from his or her parents, culminating with a paper or presentation where the child defines his or her values. You can connect this to the candle-lighting ceremony at the celebration by calling up a family member or friend that embodies each of these values. (See Sample Candlelighting Ceremony, page 30.)
- A comparative religion study project that looks at the similarities and differences between the child's parents' religions. This could be a great opportunity to define the differences between the two religions for the child, as well as for the parents. This is also a great opportunity to determine which rituals and holidays you and your family will observe.
- A study project on a Jewish hero in modern times. While this doesn't necessarily pay tribute to a child's interfaith heritage, a modern Jewish personality may be more accessible to non-Jewish audiences than a Biblical personality.

Ways to Include Your Child's Interfaith Heritage at the Celebration

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration, which is typically held either immediately after the ceremony or later that night, is not restricted by religious constraints, so you can involve all your relatives and family members in any way you see fit.

Whether or not the non-Jewish parent was restricted from participating in some rituals at the synagogue, the party is an opportunity to honor and thank that person.

A fairly recent tradition that is quite popular involves calling up relatives or friends to light the 13 candles on the Bar Mitzvah cake. This provides an opportunity to honor relatives or friends who were not honored at the ceremony, especially non-Jewish ones. (See Sample Candlelighting Ceremony Introduction, page 29, and Sample Candlelighting Ceremony, page 30.)

Often Bar/Bat Mitzvah parties are centered around themes. Your child's theme could recognize the multiethnic heritage of his or her parents, through decorations, food choice, entertainment or party favors.

Many families also do Bar/Bat Mitzvahs in Israel. Because Israel contains holy sites sacred to Judaism, Islam and Christianity, a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Israel could be a great opportunity for the family and guests to learn about different religious traditions.

Educating Your Non-Jewish Audience

One of the biggest barriers for non-Jewish guests at Jewish life cycle ceremonies is understanding what's going on. A great way to educate your non-Jewish relatives and friends is offering a simple supplement that explains the rituals and other aspects of the Bar Mitzvah.

Some essentials to include in the supplement include:

- An etiquette guide to attending synagogue (i.e. rules on wearing a yarmulke, how to treat a prayer book, when to stand, what to do about cellphones, etc.). Like Jews visiting a church, many non-Jews do not know the proper etiquette for visiting a synagogue. (See Sample Etiquette Guide for Guests, page 19.)
- A guide to the service, giving a chronology and explanation of prayers and rituals. Many congregations jump around in the prayer book and switch between English and Hebrew; a guide to the service can help guests follow along to whatever level they're comfortable. (See Sample Guide to Service, page 28.)
- An explanation of the tradition of Bar/Bat Mitzvah. This will help non-Jewish guests appreciate the holiness and importance of the event. (See Sample Guide to Sanctuary and Customs (1), page 22, and Sample Guide to Sanctuary and Customs (2), page 24.)
- A glossary of essential terms at the synagogue (e.g., bimah, Torah, ark, etc.). Rabbis and spiritual leaders will use these terms quite frequently during the service without defining them. This glossary gives non-Jewish guests a guide to follow. (See Sample Guide to Sanctuary and Customs (1), page 22, and Sample Guide to Sanctuary and Customs (2), page 24.)

Other items you can include in the supplement are:

- A history of the synagogue.
- An English summary of the Torah portion and/or Haftarah.
- A transcript of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child's Torah commentary.
- Any additional graphical guides to the child's Torah or Haftarah portion, like maps of Israel or photos of archaeological objects.
- A summary of the key pillars of the Jewish religion.
- A Frequently Asked Questions section about Judaism or etiquette at synagogue. (See Sample Frequently Asked Questions, page 27.)
- A program listing who will be honored with what ritual. (See Sample Program, page 21.)

You can also include a one-page sheet of Bar/Bat Mitzvah etiquette with the invitation. See (Sample Etiquette Guide for Guests, page 19.) Sample information to include:

- Expected dress code
- Appropriate behavior at synagogue

- Short explanation of service
- Information on length of service. This could also include times for parents to drop off and pick up their kids.
- Rules on cellphones
- Expectations for men, including whether to wear yarmulkes
- Other rules unique to your synagogue, such as whether you can take photographs or use a pen

Also, check out Jeffrey Salkin's *Putting God on the Guest List* (see Recommended Books, page 32), which contains an explanation of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service specifically for non-Jews.

Other Tips for Before the Ceremony *(by Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff)*

Teach non-Jewish family members about the upcoming ceremony of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Take the time to let non-Jewish relatives understand why your child is preparing so hard for his/her special Shabbat (Sabbath). Help them learn what Torah means, how Jews understand Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Show non-Jewish family members what being Jewish means to your family and to your community. Invite them to join you when you celebrate a holiday or Shabbat in your home. Allow them to experience another child becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, so they will be more comfortable when their relative stands on the bimah.

Such preparation can begin a few months before the ceremony or even before a baby is born. But there is another type of preparation. The challenge of an interfaith family raising Jewish children is balancing each parent's own religious tradition and the Jewish tradition in which the child is raised. Emotional and religious dynamics come to the forefront during this time. Questions parents should ask of themselves include:

- As the non-Jewish parent, 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?
- As the Jewish parent, will my spouse be comfortable participating in rituals that s/he may not believe in, or may not feel apply to her or him?
- Has our extended family been supportive and nurturing of our decision to raise our child as a Jew? Will they be comfortable participating in a Jewish service, when they themselves do not choose to be Jewish?

If the answer is no to any of these questions, this can be a wonderful teaching moment, where parents help their child understand that values and actions go hand-in-hand. Clearly, most children desire their parents and family all to celebrate. They want to be "like everyone else." This is an opportunity for parents to teach about the statement one makes when leading Jewish worship (by accepting an honor during services). And the statement is: "I support my child's Jewish choices, my child's Jewish identity."

The parent (or family) who has been uninvolved Jewishly can still celebrate authentically and participate fully in the "secular" aspects of the celebration (party, etc.) and in those aspects of the service which involve "presence" but not "participation." In this manner, the child is honored by both parents (and family) and the child understands the privilege of "being Jewish and behaving Jewishly."

Honest answers will help each family know what level of participation is appropriate for this "coming-of-Jewish-age" ceremony for the child.

It is an extraordinary opportunity for learning and growing when interfaith families approach the time when children become B'nai Mitzvah. Asking a few questions--both of self and of synagogue--and sharing one's Jewish heritage in advance can make the event one of true celebration for every member of the family who attends.

The entire text of this article can be seen at:

<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=ekLSK5MLIrG&b=297370&ct=323580>.

Sample Explanation of Bar/Bat Mitzvah (1) *(By Rabbi Daniel Kohn)*

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

At 13, a young Jewish man or woman becomes obligated to observe the commandments of Judaism. "Bar/Bat Mitzvah" literally means "son/daughter of the commandments." The celebration of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah signifies that the young man or woman is beginning and will continue to function as an active and responsible Jew in the synagogue and in the wider Jewish community.

Excerpted from "What a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guest Needs to Know," by Rabbi Daniel Kohn. Reprinted with permission from MyJewishLearning.com.

Sample Explanation of Bar/Bat Mitzvah (2) *(Courtesy Pam Saeks)*

Today, _____ will assume the religious, spiritual and ethical responsibilities that come with being a Jewish adult by becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Translated, word for word, Bar Mitzvah means “son of the commandments.” What the term means in Judaism is someone who is obligated to follow the commandments. This automatically occurs when a boy turns 13 and a girl turns 12, and while no special observance is needed, the practice of having a Bar Mitzvah ceremony became popular in the Middle Ages. Bat Mitzvah ceremonies began occurring more recently, the first one recorded in North America in 1922. Today the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony has become an important and significant life cycle event for many Jewish boys and girls.

Now, as a full member of the Jewish community, _____ will be able to be counted in a minyan, a quorum of ten, the minimum required for holding a prayer service or reading from the Torah.

The centerpiece of today’s celebration will be when _____ has his very first aliyah; the first time he will be permitted to ascend the bimah and recite the blessings over the Torah on behalf of the congregation. He will also chant part of this week’s Torah portion and the Haftarah portion, as well.

While _____’s Bar Mitzvah marks a significant turning point in his life, it is the beginning of what we hope will be a lifelong commitment to Jewish living and learning.

The Custom of Throwing Candy

In many congregations, it is customary to throw candy at the Bar Mitzvah boy when he has completed his Haftarah, to wish him a “sweet” life as he makes the transition to adulthood. Children are invited to come up to the bimah to retrieve and eat the candy once it has been thrown. Even though the candy will be distributed in advance, please save it so it can be thrown at the conclusion of _____’s Haftarah.

Sample Etiquette Guide for Guests (By Rabbi Daniel Kohn)

General expectations for synagogue behavior include:

Dress: Guests at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration generally wear dressy clothes--for men, either a suit or slacks, tie and jacket, and for women, a dress or formal pantsuit. In more traditional communities, clothing tends to be dressier.

Arrival time: The time listed on the invitation is usually the official starting time for the weekly Shabbat service. Family and invited guests try to arrive at the beginning, even though the Bar/Bat Mitzvah activities occur somewhat later in the service. However, both guests and regular congregants often arrive late, well after services have begun.

Wearing a prayer shawl: The tallit, or prayer shawl, is traditionally worn by Jewish males and, in liberal congregations, by Jewish women. Because the braided fringes at the four corners of the tallit remind its wearer to observe the commandments of Judaism, wearing a tallit is reserved for Jews. Although an usher may offer you a tallit at the door, you may decline it, if you are not Jewish or are simply uncomfortable wearing such a garment.

Wearing a head covering: A kippah, or head covering (called a yarmulke in Yiddish), is traditionally worn by males during the service and also by women in more liberal synagogues. Wearing a kippah is not a symbol of religious identification like the tallit, but is rather an act of respect to God and the sacredness of the worship space. Just as men and women may be asked to remove their hats in the church, or remove their shoes before entering a mosque, wearing a head covering is a non-denominational act of showing respect. In some synagogues, women may wear hats or a lace head covering.

Maintaining sanctity: All guests and participants are expected to respect the sanctity of the prayer service and Shabbat by setting your cell phone or beeper to vibrate or turning it off, not taking pictures, not smoking in the synagogue or on the grounds and not writing or recording tapes.

Sitting and standing: Jewish worship services can be very athletic, filled with frequent directions to stand for particular prayers and sit for others. Take your cue from the other worshipers or the rabbi's instructions. Unlike kneeling in a Catholic worship service--which is a unique prayer posture filled with religious significance--standing and sitting in a Jewish service does not constitute any affirmation of religious belief; it is merely a sign of respect. There may also be instructions to bow at certain parts of the service, and because a bow or prostration is a religiously significant act, feel free to remain standing or sitting as you wish at that point.

Following the service: Try to follow the service in the siddur, or prayer book, and the Humash, or Torah book, both of which are usually printed in Hebrew and English. Guests and congregants are encouraged to hum along during congregational melodies and to participate in the service to the extent that they feel comfortable. During the Torah service, the entire congregation is encouraged to follow the reading of the weekly Torah portion in English or Hebrew.

Excerpted from “What a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guest Needs to Know,” by Rabbi Daniel Kohn. Reprinted with permission from MyJewishLearning.com.

Sample Program

(Adapted from a submission by Pam Saeks)

Note: *This is an excerpt from a sample of how a program could look and is not a complete representation of a synagogue service.*

Bar Mitzvah of _____

Preliminary Service _____, Family Friend
Pages 1-336, Prayer Book.

Shaharit (Morning Service)..... _____
Pages 336-392, Prayer Book.

Lechi Lach..... Performed by _____

Presentation of Tallit..... _____

Shehecheyanu _____

Opening of the Ark _____, Uncle/Grandfather
Page 394, Prayer Book

Aliyah #1 _____
Torah Reader _____
Page 69-73, Humash, Bereshit (Genesis) 12:1- 12:13

Prayer for Our Country, English _____
Page 415, Prayer Book

Sample Guide to Sanctuary and Customs (1) *(By Rabbi Daniel Kohn)*

Unique Features in a Jewish Sanctuary

The following are architectural or symbolic objects that you may notice in a synagogue.

The Pews (Congregational Seating)

Everyone, Jew or gentile, is invited to enter and attend services. Sit wherever you like.

The Bimah (Pulpit)

Bimah literally means "high place." The bimah is the focus of most ritual activities in the synagogue.

The Ark (Aron Hakodesh)

The ark is the repository of the Torah scrolls and is the central object on the bimah. Many synagogue arks are dramatic works of art or craftsmanship in wood or metal, filled with symbolic elements representing parts of the Jewish tradition.

The Eternal Light (Ner Tamid)

Hanging from the top of the ark is an electric light that is never extinguished. This "eternal light" symbolizes the fire that burned on the altar in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

Candelabra

Many synagogues have a candelabra on the bimah to commemorate the seven-branched gold candelabra that stood in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and was lit each night to provide light for the priests during their evening duties.

Memorial Plaques and Lights

It is a Jewish custom to secure a memorial plaque for a departed family member, often on a wall in the sanctuary. The light next to the memorial plaque is illuminated each year during the week of the anniversary of a person's passing.

The Flags

Many American synagogues display two flags in the sanctuary, an American and an Israeli flag. The Israeli flag, adopted at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, represents the entire Jewish people. In the center is the six-sided star traditionally associated with the Jewish people, and the blue stripes above and below the star represent the stripes of the tallit. The Jewish tradition also requires Jews to be loyal to the country in which they live and to pray for its welfare, hence the American flag, representing the loyalty of the American Jewish community.

Participants in the Service

The Rabbi

"Rabbi" means teacher. The major function of a rabbi is to instruct and guide in the study and practice of Judaism. A rabbi's authority is based solely on learning.

The Cantor

A cantor has undergone years of study and training in liturgy and sacred music. The cantor leads the congregation in Hebrew prayer.

The "Emissary of the Congregation" (Shaliach Tzibbur)

The shaliach tzibbur is the leader of congregational prayers, be it the cantor or another congregant. Every Jewish prayer service, whether on a weekday, Shabbat, or festival, is chanted in a special musical mode and pattern. The shaliach tzibbur must be skilled in these traditional musical modes and familiar with the prayers. Any member of the congregation above the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah who is familiar with the prayers and melodies may serve as shaliach tzibbur.

The Gabbai

The gabbai, or sexton, attends to the details of organizing the worship service. The gabbai finds a shaliach tzibbur, assigns aliyot, and ensures that the Torah is read correctly.

The Laity

Members of the congregation may participate in all synagogue functions and leadership roles. Any knowledgeable Jew is permitted and encouraged to lead the prayers, receive an aliyah, read from the Torah, and chant the Haftarah.

Excerpted from "What a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guest Needs to Know," by Rabbi Daniel Kohn. Reprinted with permission from MyJewishLearning.com.

Sample Guide to Sanctuary and Customs (2) *(Adapted from a submission by Pam Saeks)*

Even if you've been going to synagogue your whole life, chances are there's a lot you don't not know about the special customs and traditions surrounding the architecture and ritual items found in the sanctuary, and the meaning behind many of the prayers we say during the Shabbat morning service. Whether you already have a broad understanding, or are visiting a synagogue for the very first time, we hope you will find something in the following explanation that will enhance the meaning of today's service for you.

The Sanctuary

The Bimah -- The bimah is the raised platform in the front of the sanctuary. It contains a reading table from which the Torah is read, and a podium from which the Rabbi typically leads the service and delivers his sermon. There is no altar in the synagogue, and no area of the sanctuary has any more sanctity than another.

The Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark) -- In the Great Temple in Jerusalem, the aron kodesh (holy ark) contained the original Ten Commandments. Today the synagogue is a representation of the Temple, and the aron kodesh, in which the Sifrei Torah (scrolls of the Torah) are kept, faces toward Jerusalem, in our case, East. To some, the design on the doors suggest a "tree of life," a metaphor often used by Jews to describe the Torah itself, and to others, it represents the burning bush, in which God appeared to Moses (Exodus 3). Like in the Great Temple in Jerusalem, above the ark is the ner tamid (eternal light) which is never turned off, and symbolizes the eternal presence of God. The Hebrew words found above the ner tamid, say: "The teaching of the Lord is perfect, renewing life."

The Torah Scrolls -- The Torah can be broadly defined as encompassing all the teachings of Judaism. Literally translated, the word Torah means "doctrine" or "instruction," the Torah is technically divided into two parts: the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah refers to the first five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. What we refer to today as the Oral Torah consists of Talmudic teachings and subsequent rabbinic literature. When Jewish people refer simply to the Torah, however, they are usually referring to the Written Torah.

The Torah has been divided into 54 weekly portions, or parashot (parashah, singular) and is read in annual cycles. Every synagogue in the world reads the same parashah on any given Shabbat.

The Torah scrolls are the most precious and holy objects in the synagogue and are inscribed by hand on parchment by specially trained scribes. For thousands of years the Hebrew calligraphy used to write the Torah has been the same. When a person

is reading from the Torah, he or she is forbidden to touch the parchment. Consequently, a pointer, or yad (Hebrew for “hand”) must be used.

Torah Cover and Decorations -- The Torah scrolls are dressed and decorated in a style reflecting the priestly dress of Temple times. A breastplate, robe and belt were all worn by the High Priest in Jerusalem, so the “robe, mantle and belt” of the Torah scroll are usually made of the finest materials, velvet or silk, with the breastplate made of ornate silver.

Special Blessings

Shehecheyanu -- “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe who has kept us alive and sustained us, and brought us to this moment.” The Shehecheyanu blessing is said to offer thanks for new and/or unique experiences such as seeing a baby’s first steps, beginning a new year at school, dedicating a new house, or picking the first produce from a garden. This blessing is also often recited at special occasions, such as a Bar Mitzvah!

Mishebeyrakh for those who are ill -- This blessing asks for the renewal of body and spirit for all those who may be in need of such healing. Near the end of the Torah reading, the Rabbi will recite the names of those in the congregation who are ill, or those who have friends or family members who are ill. Afterwards, he will ask for additional mishebeyrackhs. At that time, please feel free to offer the name of someone you know who is ill, by standing and simply saying that person’s name aloud when the Rabbi indicates the appropriate time.

Some Commonly Used Terms

Aliyah -- The first person to make aliyah was Abraham, when God commanded him to make an “aliyah” to the Land of Israel, “Lekh L’kha...” The word aliyah literally translates as a “going up” or “ascension.” During the Torah reading, various people are called to have an aliyah, which is a great honor. In fact, after completing an aliyah, or going up to the bimah for other honors such as opening the ark or leading a prayer, the individual is congratulated with the Hebrew words, Yeyasher Koh’kha (or Yasher Koach) meaning “more strength to you.”

Today, in addition to _____, who as a Bar Mitzvah is allowed to have an aliyah for the very first time, some of his relatives have been asked to come up for this very special honor as well. There are usually seven aliyot (plural of "aliyah") on Shabbat, plus the maftir, the final Torah passage, which Kevin will chant.

Tallit (prayer shawl) -- The purpose of this fringed garment, or tallit, is to remind us of the commandments, which are symbolized by the knots in the fringes, or tzitzit. It is worn by Jewish adults who have become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The numeric value of the Hebrew word "tzitzit" (fringes) is 600. Add to that the 8 strings and 5 knots on each corner, and you get the number 613, which is the number of mitzvot

(commandments) in the Torah (Rashi - Numbers 15:39). A tallit can be made of many different colors, but typically it is black, or blue, and white. In fact, the colors of the Israeli flag were taken from the traditional white and blue of the tallit. Today, _____ will share in an ancient tradition as he wraps himself in a tallit for the very first time.

Tekhelet (blue strings) – “Speak to the Children of Israel and bid them that they make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of each corner a thread of blue (tekhelet). And it shall be for you as a fringe, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of God, and do them.” (Numbers 15:38-39). Tekhelet are special blue colored strings that the Bible commands be made from the dye of a sea animal called a "hilazon." Over thousands of years, this practice was lost due to the inability to identify the creature referred to in the Talmud, so the common practice was to wear all white strings. Recently a discovery of the hilazon creature was made and authenticated by many authorities in Israel. Since then there has been a rebirth of this practice.

Rabbi -- Any Jewish adult may conduct a Jewish religious service or perform other religious functions if he or she is able to do so. The Rabbi (teacher) is a person recognized as a qualified teacher and interpreter of the Jewish religion.

Gabbai -- The gabbai is someone who helps to ensure the Torah is read correctly. _____ and others who will be reading Torah today will be joined by two gabbayim (plural), people who are highly skilled in reading Torah, who will stand by the sides of the reading table and call up those honored with aliyot, and who will assist the Torah reader if necessary.

Magbiah -- The person who lifts the Torah is called a magbiah. The purpose of lifting the Torah is to show that it is an open book and belongs to all the people. When the Torah is lifted, our congregation rises and chants: This is the Torah that Moses placed before the Children of Israel at the command of God.

Gollel (Gollelet) -- The person who helps to roll, tie and dress the Torah.

Sample Frequently Asked Questions

(Adapted from a submission by Pam Saeks)

Understanding Jewish practices and rituals can be difficult and confusing. We have prepared this section to answer some common questions you may have. We hope you enjoy today's service and learn a little something about our customs and traditions.

How do I use the prayer book?

The language of the Jewish prayer book, or siddur, is Hebrew, which is written from right to left. Therefore, our prayer books open from the left. The prayer book includes an English translation, so that everyone may follow the service. In addition to the prayer book, you will find copies of the Humash, the Five Books of Moses, in the compartment in front of your seat.

What should I do when the Torah is brought through the aisles of the congregation?

You may see many people move from their seats out to the aisles during the "Torah procession," one of two times during the service in which the Torah is brought out among the people. You will see some people kiss the corner of their tallit, or prayer book, and touch the Torah as it passes. This is a sign of respect and love for the Torah, and shows the happiness and joy that is felt in having received it. You may also participate in this custom if you wish, but it is not necessary. It is a matter of personal comfort.

Should I stand or can I stay seated when the congregation stands?

At many points in the service, the Rabbi or leader of the service will announce page numbers and times when the congregation should stand and sit down. If you are uncomfortable standing, or if you are unable to stay standing for any reason, please feel free to stay seated.

Should I wear a head covering or kippah?

In Jewish tradition, covering the head is a sign of respect of God. Therefore, Jewish men wear a yarmulke, in Yiddish, or, a kippah in Hebrew, when in the synagogue, and/or when engaged in prayer or religious study. A head covering announces the wearer's acknowledgement that there is a Holy Presence above him.

Sample Guide to Service (By Rabbi Daniel Kohn)

Major sections of the Shabbat morning worship service include:

The Shema ("Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One"). This passage from the Book of Deuteronomy and the three passages that follow constitute a central part of each morning and evening Jewish prayer service. Probably the most important single sentence in the liturgy, the Shema is not a prayer but rather an affirmation of the unity of God.

The Amidah ("Standing Prayer"). The Amidah, a series of prayers recited while standing in silent meditation, is the major liturgical piece of every synagogue service throughout the year. On a weekday, the Amidah contains prayers for the physical and spiritual well-being of the one praying as well as of the entire community of the people of Israel; on Shabbat we praise God for the joy of the Shabbat and the rest that we enjoy. It is perfectly acceptable and even desirable that people recite the Amidah in English, and worshipers are also encouraged to pray from their hearts if the printed words do not speak to them.

The Torah Service. Following the Shema and the Amidah is a transition from prayer to study. The primary study text is from the Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses. This text has been written on the parchment of the Torah scrolls by a specially trained scribe. The Torah is divided into--and read in--weekly portions, according to a prescribed calendar, so that the entire Torah is read in the span of one year. The cover and accoutrements of the Torah scrolls recall the priestly garb of ancient Temple times, i.e., breastplate, robe, crowns and belt. Usually the rabbi, and sometimes the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child or another congregant, delivers a d'var Torah, a word of Torah, that comments on the weekly Torah reading. Once the Torah reading is over, another person--usually the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child--chants a portion from the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. The Haftarah, which means concluding teaching, is usually chosen to reflect a theme or literary allusion in the Torah portion. The purpose of the Haftarah is not only to provide an opportunity to teach from a different section of the Bible, but also to assert that prophecy serves to reinforce the laws of the Torah.

Mourner's Kaddish. Although there is no mention of death in this prayer, the Kaddish is recited at the end of all worship services by family members who have lost a loved one in the past year or who are observing the anniversary of a death in years past. Despite sorrow and pain, the mourner rises to declare continuing commitment in praising God's name, to which we all respond, "Amen."

Excerpted from "What a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Guest Needs to Know," by Rabbi Daniel Kohn. Reprinted with permission from MyJewishLearning.com.

Sample Candlelighting Ceremony Introduction
(Adapted from a submission by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer)

We now mark our celebration with a candle-lighting ceremony. By assigning symbolic values to each candle, we recall the themes of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah service.

The modern ritual also reminds us that our ceremonies and observances are not fixed in stone, but that Judaism is evolving. Innovation is not only possible, it is welcome.

The student calls up his/her relatives and/or friends to light the candles on the cake (or in some synagogues, a candelabrum). (See Sample Candlelighting Ceremony, page 30.)

The candles are lit.

Guests:

Congratulations & Mazel Tov!

End with singing Hayvenu Shalom Aleichem

Lyrics to Hayvenu Shalom Aleichem:

Ha-venu sha-lom a-leichem
Ha-venu sha-lom a-leichem
Ha-venu sha-lom a-leichem
Ha-venu sha-lom sha-lom sha-lom-a-leichem. (*repeat*)

Sample Candlelighting Ceremony *(Courtesy Rabbi Peter Schweitzer)*

I'd like to call up _____, to light the first candle for Love – AHAVA.
May the light of love burn brightly within us all.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the second candle for Community – KEHILLA.
We light this candle to symbolize the light of this congregation which invites others to share its message and joy.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the third candle for Peace – SHALOM.
May the light of peace glow within our hearts, within our homes, and throughout the world.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the fourth candle for Friendship – CHAVERIM.
We light this candle to give thanks for friends, old and new, close and far, who give strength, caring and fellowship to one another.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the fifth candle for Making the World Better –
TIKKUN OLAM.
With this candle we honor heroes and role models who contribute to making the world a better place for everyone.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the sixth candle for Justice – TZEDEK.
This candle stands for fairness and equal opportunity and impartiality and equality for all.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the seventh candle for Reason – BEENAH.
This candle is about rational thinking and science; about asking questions, having doubts and not taking things for granted.

* * *

I'd like to call _____ to light the eighth candle for Charity – TZEDAKA.
This candle lights the way to helping others and causes that are in need of our assistance and support.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the ninth candle for Joy – SIMCHA.
We light this candle to celebrate laughter and humor and the joy that comes from being alive and kvelling at each other's simchas or times of happiness.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the tenth candle for Wisdom – CHACHMA.
With this candle we honor all the teachers who have shared knowledge and wisdom with us.

* * *

I'd like to call up _____ to light the eleventh candle for Memory -- ZIKARON.
This candle is lit in memory of deceased relatives and friends who influenced our lives and whose memory we honor with our own good deeds.

* * *

I'd like to call up my parents to light the twelfth candle for Family – MISHPACHA.
This candle is for everyone in our extended family, from coast to coast, who give us
joy by sharing this day of celebration in our lives.

* * *

We would now like to call up Bar/Bat Mitzvah _____ to light the thirteenth candle
for Hope – TIKVA.

This final candle symbolizes possibility. It stands for the future.

Of what she can become and who she will be.

Of how she can live a life of happiness and fulfillment.

Of how she can live out the values and teachings which she dedicates herself to
today.

Recommended Books

The following books include additional ideas for making the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration memorable and rewarding.

Salkin, Jeffrey. [Putting God on the Guest List: How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah](#). (188 pages, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005)

There is also a [kid's version](#) available.

Leneman, Cantor Helen, ed. [Bar/Bat Mitzvah Basics: A Practical Family Guide to Coming of Age Together](#). (197 pages, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001)

Cohen, Jayne, and Weinrott, Lori. [The Ultimate Bar/Bat Mitzvah Celebration Book: A Guide to Inspiring Ceremonies and Joyous Festivities](#). (288 pages, Clarkson Potter, 2004)