



Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planning Guideline

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Approved By: Board of the Shaar Shalom Congregation

Initial preparations:

1) Affirming Your Jewish Identity:

The bar/bat mitzvah offers an incredible opportunity to reflect on what it means to be Jewish and publicly affirm that age-old bond to our people and to our Torah. We all come from different backgrounds, and in order to become a bar or bat mitzvah, one must be Jewish in accordance with *halakhah* (Jewish law).

Rabbinic Judaism regards anyone with a Jewish mother as legally Jewish. Even if one does not have a Jewish mother, there are rabbinically-recognized legal and ritual measures a child can take to affirm her/his Judaism and be considered legally Jewish. For a young woman, this involves ritual immersion in the *mikveh* (which one can also do in the ocean); for a young man, this also involves ritual immersion in the *mikveh* along with *hatafat dam brit* if the young man is already circumcised, or circumcision, if the young man is uncircumcised.

If you have any questions or concerns, the Rabbi is happy to speak personally and work with you to create a meaningful ritual to affirm your child's Jewish identity as s/he prepares for becoming an adult in the community.

For more context on what exactly it means rabbinically to become a bar or bat mitzvah, please ask the Rabbi to share with you her presentation on this topic.

2) Confirming a Date:

- According to rabbinic law, a female child reaches the age of majority upon turning 12 years of age; a male 13 years of age or older is considered a "bar mitzvah," a Jewish adult. One may have a bar/bat mitzvah celebration at *any* age following reaching the Jewish age of majority (outlined above). Many more senior adults, especially women who were denied the opportunity to have a bat mitzvah service in their youth, opt to have what is commonly referred to as "Adult B'nei Mitzvah." Please consult with the Rabbi if you are interested in having such a service (for yourself) at a more mature age--it can be a deeply moving experience (plus, your voice is less likely to crack!).

- Check in with friends and family, especially ones from out of town, to see which dates work for them best to **travel** and participate in your *simcha* (happy celebration) here in Halifax.
- Consider what the **Torah portion of the week** might be and how much relevance and “meaning” mileage that portion will have for your child, especially if s/he/they will be delivering a sermon.
- If possible, try to steer clear of **Jewish holidays** and/or **new months**, as these are longer services with other components which may be unfamiliar both to your guests and even to your child (in addition to longer service lengths). You can find out what a given (secular) calendar date’s corresponding Torah portion is and when the Jewish holidays are in a particular year by consulting websites such as hebcad (<https://www.hebcad.com/>) or consulting a printed Jewish wall calendar (such as those offered by the JNF).
- Narrow it down to two or three preferred dates, in case your first choice cannot be accommodated.
- Finally, **contact the AJC (Atlantic Jewish Council)** at (902) 422-7491 to make sure your preferred date clears the **communal schedule**. Also book the date with the Shaar Shalom (902-423-5848) and Beth Israel (902-422-1301) Synagogues.

3) Identifying Ritual Goals and Setting up a Tutoring Schedule:

- Start by considering your child/ren’s learning needs: do they do best preparing over long stretches of time, or do they do lock in new material best closer to when they will be using it? Are your children faster or slower learners? How comfortable are they with Hebrew reading?
- Is your child a visual learner? A self-learner? **What method(s) of learning works best?**
- What does your child/ren’s academic schedule look like? How involved are they in extra-curricular activities? What are your long-term goals for your child—do you want your child to be able to be able to apply the skills (such as leading services and/or Torah reading) they gain during this experience to future ritual participation in services?
- Determine what you would like your child to do ritually. Remember that the ritual climax of the bar/bat mitzvah is the young honoree reciting publicly for the first time **the blessing before and after the Torah** when they are called up for their very first *Aliyah* to the Torah. Everything else is “extra,” in a sense, and you can mix and match what your child/ren does. Here are some options:
 - a) deliver a *D’var Torah* (sermon, ideally a pop song’s length: 3-7 minutes, but more on that later)
 - b) chant from the Torah
 - c) lead Pesukei d’zimra (the opening prayers of the Shabbat morning service)
 - d) lead the Shacharit (morning) service
 - e) lead the Torah service
 - f) lead the Musaf (short end part of the service)
 - g) lead Kabbalat Shabbat (the very musical prelude to Friday Night services)
 - h) lead Friday Night Ma’ariv
 - i) recite Kiddush at Friday Night services

Don’t fret if this is unfamiliar you to you-- the Rabbi is happy to walk you through each part in person and explain more at length.

- Consider that (generally speaking) students are more likely to remember how to lead services (some of which will already sound familiar to them and involves relatively easy singing) long-term than chanting *haftarah* trope or even chanting Torah. This may tip the scales in your deliberations. Set **realistic goals** for your child and for anyone else who might be participating in your service. You want to enable your child to shine on her/his/their big day!
- Once you have assessed the above items, talk to the Rabbi about setting up a regular **tutoring schedule**. Your child's primary tutor will be the Rabbi. Depending on your child's individual needs and experience, they might require additional support from other tutors – and if so, their primary tutor will provide recommendations. The schedule you create with your child's tutor will depend ultimately on **how much** your child is going to learn and **at what pace** your child learns best.
- Closer to the bar/bat/bnei mitzvah, you will meet with the Rabbi for an in-sanctuary run-through of any service-related parts the honoree(s) will lead. The Rabbi will also assist in the final stages of your child/ren's D'var Torah writing.
- Also, it is never too early to brainstorm your child's **Mitzvah Project**. The Mitzvah Project can be anything from a fundraiser campaign for a charity your child deems worthy to an active, ongoing community-building project. While such a project is not a mandatory policy of the synagogue, it is a truly beautiful way for your children to embark upon their journey as a Jewish adult. If you are in search of project ideas or inspiration, please feel free to consult the Rabbi and/or recent b'nei mitzvah families.

4) Involving friends and family in the ceremony

- If you plan to ask friends and/or family to actively lead any part of the service, it is never too early to begin that conversation. Like your child/ren, others close to you will need to time to prepare for their role in the service, especially if you are asking them to read Torah or prepare some original words for the occasion (such as a speech or toast).
- Consider how you will distribute ritual honours on Shabbat. Please contact the Shaar Shalom office for our Honours Form which will help acquaint you with the various honours you can give to special friends and family. Please leave at least two Torah *Aliyot* honors open in case other members of our community are observing a *Yahrzeit* for a loved one that same day.
- Everyone is warmly welcome to attend services, but some honors are appropriate only for those who are halakhically recognized as Jewish adults (see opening paragraph of this document)—the Honours Form will walk you through the different honours and who is eligible. As per synagogue policy, only rabbinically-recognized Jews should be on the *bima* during Torah services. (Ritually, the Torah Service is a reenactment of the Revelation of Sinai.)
- If you have non-Jewish friends and/or family whom you would like to have lead part of the service, please consult with the Rabbi to brainstorm an appropriate ecumenical reading for them to recite as part of the service.
- If you are inviting friends and/or family who are uncomfortable reading Hebrew to help lead a part of services, please know that we have fully-transliterated prayer books available at the Shaar for both Friday night and Shabbat morning services. The (bigger) spiral-bound transliterated booklets for Friday night can be found in the Small Chapel and the spiral-bound transliterated booklets for Shabbat morning services can be found in the main hallway, near the *tallitot* and prayer book shelves.

Practical Considerations:

- If you will require additional seating in the sanctuary please complete a work order as detailed in the *Renting Synagogue* Policy.
- Especially for out-of-town guests, consider mailing out a "Save the Date" note or email at least a year in advance. Formal invitations may be mailed out later. The Rabbi and/or recent b'nei mitzvah families can recommend local printers who make custom-designed invitations for your occasion.
- The bar/bat/b'nei mitzvah service is a joyful, public occasion. At the Shaar, we celebrate this major milestone communally by offering a *Kiddush* following services open to the entire community. Please refer to the *Kiddush Sponsorship* and the *Renting Synagogue* Policies.
- Some families opt to make special *kippot* for the occasion, often including the name and date of the bar/bat/bnei mitzvah printed inside, serving as a keepsake for guests. If you have a friend or family who is especially crafts-inclined, hand-made kippot can be an especially meaningful *simcha* keepsake.
- Some families opt to create personalized bar/bat/bnei mitzvah programs. The Rabbi is happy to share samples she's collected over the years for 'inspiration'.
- If you are expecting out-of-town guests, consider calling local hotels to see if you can arrange for a block of rooms at a discounted price for your weekend.

In the Weeks Leading Up to the Big Day:

- Meet with the Rabbi to review, apply final edits, and rehearse the *D'var Torah* (if applicable)
- Meet with the Rabbi, other tutor(s), and anyone else you wish to do a preparatory in-sanctuary run-through of whatever parts you plan on leading
- Make sure your guests have good directions to the Shaar, know how to enter, and where to park
- Consult with the gabbai team and/or the Rabbi to ensure the Torah scroll is already rolled to the correct place before the weekend
- A family celebration is often a good time for professional photos. Consult with other recent bar/bat mitzvah families in the community for recommended photography studios.
- Any outside food brought into and/or on the synagogue premises, including any and all food brought in by a caterer, must first be approved as kosher by either the Rabbi or the mashgiach and comply with the *Kashrut and Kitchen Use* Policy.
- If you are bringing in outside catering, all food must be prepared in the Shaar kitchen, and all the food must be either dairy or *pareve*. Any outside food preparation/presentation utensils and/or equipment to be used in our building must be approved (and in most cases, also *koshered*) by the Rabbi or another Rabbi in our community. The Rabbi can perform the *koshering* with at least two week's advance notice. Please refer to the *Kashrut and Kitchen Use* Policy.
- Please ensure any candy to be 'thrown' at your honoree(s) is kosher and are also approved well in advance of your ceremony. For the safety of the honoree(s) as well as anyone else in the room, only jellied candies are permitted – no hard candies.

- For the service itself, the Rabbi will generate an “Order of Services” chart which includes every prayer, page number, and projected time for each part of the service. She is happy to share this document with you, if you would like.
- If your child/ren will be delivering a *D’var Torah*, make sure to print at least two copies (just in case!)—one to leave in the *bima* storage at the Shaar, and one to bring with you on the big day.
- Submit in writing to the gabbai team and/or the Rabbi all of the Hebrew names of anyone whom you will be ritually honoring before the weekend of the ceremony. (This can also be done on the Honors Form you can obtain from Shaar Shalom office.)
- Especially if your child will be leading any other part of the service, please make every effort to come to as many (and at minimum, three) Shabbat services together as you can in the weeks leading up to the bar/bat/bnei mitzvah. If your child will be leading the Torah service, the Rabbi will invite her/him/them to lead the Torah service at regular Shabbat morning services, one or two weeks before the big day. Not only will this help your child better understand the flow of services, it will help ease the possibly “foreign” sensation of services and make the experience less psychologically daunting for them.
- Remember that your child is likely very stressed—not only with the bar/bat mitzvah, but with their lives as a pre-adolescent. Respect their space and psychological needs, especially in the weeks and days leading up to this occasion.
- Most importantly, make sure to take some time to RELAX! Amidst so much planning, it is very easy to lose sight of the bigger picture—which is the beauty and holiness of this fleeting but major moment in your child’s life as a Jew. Make time to celebrate together as a family, doing what your child loves most.

Some Commonly Asked Questions Not Addressed Above:

- “We’ve been to so few services as a family. How do we know what my child should do for the service?”

If you’re feeling overwhelmed by the options listed under Item 3 in this document, fear not. As mentioned earlier, your child can still have had an entirely valid bar/ bat mitzvah by turning 12 (if a girl) or 13 (if a boy) and reciting the Torah blessings for an *Aliyah*. For example, s/he/they could simply recite the (very short) Torah blessings, receive an Aliyah, and deliver a *D’var Torah*.

- “What should my child talk about in the D’var Torah?”

The focus of your child’s D’var Torah is largely up to your child. The D’var Torah is an opportunity for your child’s true self to shine through highlighting her/his interests, values, and questions within a Jewish frame. Writing a D’var Torah offers a rich journey of personal introspection and puts your child at the center of a centuries-old ongoing conversation about ethics, history, and destiny. The Rabbi and/or tutor(s) can be of ongoing assistance throughout the writing process.

While many bar/bat mitzvah honorees tend to focus on the Torah portion of that particular week, they can also focus instead on the content of their Haftarah, or even something seasonal (such as a theme based on an upcoming Jewish holiday), or even something from current events with a Jewish framing. The Rabbi’s biggest piece of advice to bar/bat mitzvah students

for writing a meaningful D'var Torah is to write a D'var Torah that only *you* can write. Both the content and the language of the D'var Torah should be identifiably *theirs*.

- “If I address my child as part of the ceremony, what should I say?”

It is common for parents to bless or somehow formally address their children as part of the bar/bat mitzvah service. This is often one of the emotional highlights of the service, representing years of hard work, deep love, and tremendous growth as a family. The address need not be long, but it should of course be heartfelt. This is your child's big day, so keep the focus on her/him/them and celebrate who s/he/they are.