



The Bar/BatMitzvah Guide

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons, Aish.com

Caterer? Photographer? What is the essence of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah? Here are the seven key points you need to know.

1. Bar Mitzvah Basics

Let's first understand what the words "Bar (or Bat) Mitzvah" actually mean. The phrase translates as "son (daughter) of commandment" – i.e. the young person becomes responsible to observe the commandments (mitzvot) of the Torah.

The purpose of the commandments are to keep our lives focused on what's truly important: family, community, and a relationship with God.

Although we commonly refer to "having" a Bar Mitzvah, technically speaking, this is impossible. The term "Bar Mitzvah" refers to a status, in the same way that being a student or parent is a status.

A Jewish boy automatically becomes Bar Mitzvah when he turns 13 years old, and a girl at age 12. (In general, girls tend to mature earlier than boys.)

On a deeper level, just as their bodies are growing and changing, so too their souls are growing and changing. Kabbalistic tradition says that a person's spiritual being has several levels of soul. A new level of soul (called *neshama*) comes into awareness at Bar/Bat Mitzvah time. This is the time when moral awareness and sensitivity fully develops, enabling young people to take responsibility for their actions.

One's actions after reaching this stage of life are considered more significant for another reason: The Talmud explains that a mitzvah performed because one is commanded, is considered greater than a mitzvah performed voluntarily. This is because a person has a natural aversion to fulfilling an obligation. Overcoming this aversion is a sign of maturity, and this is what the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrates – reaching the stage of obligation.



2. Synagogue Event

On Shabbat (and various other days), the Torah – a scroll containing the Five Books of Moses – is read publicly. The Torah is divided into 54 portions, following an annual cycle, with one portion read each week in the synagogue.

The weekly portion is further sub-divided into seven sections. At Shabbat morning services, people are called up and honored with saying the special blessings before and after the reading of each section.

The Torah is removed from the ark and then carried to the *bima*, the raised platform from where the Torah is read. While the Torah is being carried, everyone stands out of respect.

Colloquially speaking, when people say, "I had a Bar Mitzvah," it means that they had an aliyah to the Torah in synagogue. "Aliyah" means to "go up" to the *bima*.

The Torah scroll is meticulously written by hand by a God-fearing scribe. A number of rules ensure that the Torah is written with perfect accuracy, thus maintaining the unbroken chain of tradition back to Mount Sinai.

On the Shabbat following his 13th birthday, the young man is called up to the Torah. This calculation follows the Jewish calendar. At the conclusion of his final blessing, some synagogues have the custom to good-naturedly pelt the young man with candies.

At this point it is customary for the father to recite the following blessing:

*The father says the following blessing.
Custom varies whether to say the words in parentheses.*

בָּרוּךְ (אַתָּה יְהוָה) Bâruch (Atâ Adonoy
(אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,) Eloheinu Melech hâ'olâm,)
שִׁפְטָרָנִי מֵעֲנֹשׁוֹ שְׁלֹזָה sheh'pi'târani may'ânsho sheh'lâ'zeh

Blessed is the One (are You, Lord our God, King of the universe,
Who has freed me from the punishment due this boy.

Following this, the bar mitzvah boy reads a portion from the biblical prophets, called the Haftorah. During a period of persecution 2,000 years ago, Jews were forbidden from reading the Torah, so they instituted a reading from the prophets that corresponds to the theme of that week's Torah portion. The Haftorah is read with a unique traditional melody.

Following services, the congregation usually joins in a Kiddush, a small lunch that begins with a blessing over wine.

3. The Reception

One popular feature of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration is a reception. This should ideally be held on the day which the young man/woman becomes 13/12 years old. If necessary, the celebration may be postponed somewhat.

There are different practices regarding what is done at a Bar Mitzvah celebration. It is proper for the young person to relate some Torah thoughts at the celebration – i.e. the famous Bar Mitzvah speech. The speech usually contains ideas from the weekly Torah portion, and emphasizes the young person's commitment to Jewish values.

And what about that Titanic-themed party with Hollywood-style special effects? It's important that the festivities should not become so ostentatious that the spiritual significance becomes secondary. The new adult should appreciate that this is a celebration of maturity and responsibility, a message which will carry through for the rest of their life.

4. The Gift

Now what about the ubiquitous Bar Mitzvah gift? In the old days, the gift of choice was a fountain pen, then a Walkman, and today an iPod.

Those are just fine but there are much more meaningful gifts for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Since this event celebrates the young person becoming obligated in the commandments, the most appropriate gift is, naturally, one that gives a deeper understanding of the Jewish heritage and enables one to better perform the mitzvot! (An iPod, s/he can get anytime.)

With that in mind, my favorite gift idea is a **tzedakah (charity) box**. Every Jew should have a tzedakah box in his home, so he can drop in change on a regular basis. The money can then be given to support a Jewish school or institution -- in your home town or in Israel (every Jew's "home town"). There are beautiful tzedakah boxes made of wood and silver, and you can see a selection at judaicawebstore.com.



The next obvious gift is a **Jewish book**. There are many hundreds of titles to choose from, so I've narrowed it down to the **Bar/Bat Mitzvah Top 10**. To order, just click on the title or go to amazon.com.

Stone Chumash (published by ArtScroll), an excellent translation of the Five Books of Moses with running commentary on every page

Book of our Heritage by Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov (Feldheim), a beautiful overview of the Jewish holidays

The Bar Mitzvah Treasury, an illustrated collection of customs and inspiring stories (by Rabbi Yonah Weinrib and Rabbi Yaakov Salomon; ArtScroll)

The Thinking Teenagers Guide to Life by Rabbi Akiva Tatz (Targum), gripping essays on forging a path through life

Sand and Stars by Yaffa Ganz (ArtScroll), a two-volume book about Jewish history, written especially for teenagers

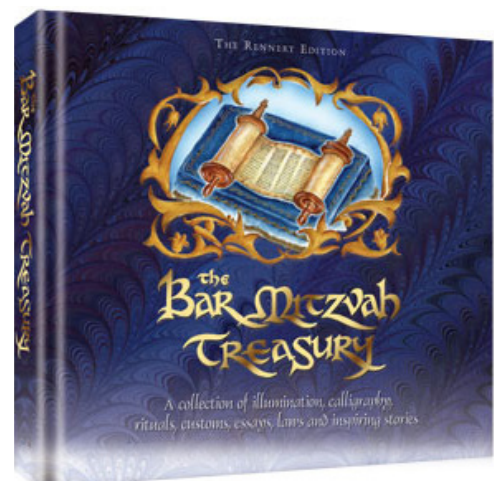
Shmooze by Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith, a fun book that provokes thoughtful discussions on essential Jewish issues

The Long Road to Freedom, by Avner Gold, an exciting historical novel filled with intrigue and insight into Jewish life.

Bible for the Clueless But Curious by Rabbi Nachum Braverman (Leviathan), packed with wisdom on relationships, spirituality and more

Candles in my Window by Beth Firestone, a delightful fiction book about a young girl discovering her Judaism

Triumph – Aish.com's popular book of inspiring true stories of challenge and spiritual growth.



If all else fails, you can always give money. It is a nice idea to give \$18 (or some multiple thereof), since the numerical value of 18 in Hebrew is "Chai," which means "Life."

5. Tefillin

Upon reaching age 13, a boy begins the obligation to put on tefillin every day (except Shabbat and holidays).

Tefillin are two square, black leather boxes, which contain parchments of Torah verses. Attached to each box are black leather straps. One of the boxes is worn on the bicep, and the other is worn on the front of the head.

The two boxes represent the two ways that we serve God in this world: thought (the head) and action (the arm). The arm-tefillin contains one parchment in one compartment, whereas the head-tefillin is four parchments, each in its own separate compartment. This is to signify that in service of God, the two powers must work congruently: We use the totality of our mind to gain the full perspective, and then we act with a singular clarity of purpose.

Inside each tefillin box are parchments containing four Torah sections, which speak about God's unity, the obligation to observe the commandments, and the responsibility to transmit Judaism to our descendants.

If you're really feeling generous, tefillin is a wonderful gift for a Bar Mitzvah boy. Owning a pair of tefillin (and wearing them!) is an important part of Jewish identity. But since they are expensive (about \$400), not every Bar Mitzvah boy has a pair. To make sure you get kosher tefillin, go to judaicawebstore.com.



6. The First Bar Mitzvah

Now here's a Jewish trivia question: Who was the first person to have a Bar Mitzvah?

We could actually suggest three answers:

- 1) Abraham – The first person to begin observing some of the mitzvot was “the first Jew,” Abraham. However, he was older than age 13 when he started, so...
- 2) Isaac was the first person who was “Jewish” upon reaching age 13. The Torah writes, “And Abraham made a great party on the day” (Genesis 21:8), which the Midrash explains was a celebration for Isaac becoming Bar Mitzvah.
- 3) Mount Sinai – Only when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai did Jews become truly obligated to observe the mitzvot. Therefore, the Sinai experience was actually a mass Bar/Bat Mitzvah of the entire Jewish people.

7. The Journey Continues

Some have the misconception that Jewish practice is confined to the synagogue, or to an occasional holiday celebration at home. The truth is that Torah and mitzvot punctuate every moment of our lives: setting standards for business ethics, proper speech, honoring parents, what we eat, and even how to care for pets!

We refer to these laws as *Torat Chaim*, literally “instructions for living.” Torah is the ultimate “owner’s manual” for maximizing our pleasure and potential in life.

Torah is a basis for life’s most important questions: How can I live a meaningful life? How can I build successful relationships,

deal honestly in business, and fulfill my personal potential? How can I really make a difference in the world?

Torah study emphasizes building a rational basis of belief, to engage one's mind, stimulate the intellect through questioning and debate, and thereby nourish the soul. It does not endorse a leap of faith, all-or-nothing decisions, or disengagement from the world.

The goal of any Jew is not only to study the Torah, but to become a "living Torah," who embodies the lofty ideals of "love your neighbor," "peace on earth," "justice for all," "universal education," "all men are created equal," "dignity of the individual," and "the preciousness of life." These concepts all originate from the Torah, and these have defined the moral makeup of humanity.



In Jewish life, a Bar/Bat Mitzvah does not represent the culmination of one's Jewish education, but rather a stepping-stone to a more mature and profound relationship with Jewish learning.

This is illustrated by the following idea: If even one letter is missing from a Torah scroll, it is rendered invalid. According to tradition, each Jew corresponds to one letter in the Torah. This teaches that each and every one of us has an integral role to play in the future of the Jewish people.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah means to become educated, and to strengthen one's Jewish pride through knowledge and understanding. It means to grow Jewishly, one step at a time. It means standing up for Israel and respecting every Jew. It means taking responsibility for the world, using the Torah as our guide, because that is the mission of the Jewish people. And most of all, it means to love being Jewish.

Success in achieving these goals is what we wish for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the beginning of that journey is what we celebrate on this joyous occasion.

Mazel tov!

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