



UNION OF AMERICAN
HEBREW CONGREGATIONS
איחוד ליהדות מתקדמת באמריקה

EXPERIMENTAL EDITION

MAKING IT COUNT

GUIDELINES FOR
BECOMING A
BAR/BAT MITZVAH

Baruch she-amar ve-haya ha-olam - בְּרוּךְ שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם -
Praised be the One through whose word all things came to be.
(from the Morning service)

May our words find expression in holy actions.
May they raise us up to a life of meaning devoted to God's service
And to the redemption of our world.
(from *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, 1999)



RABBI ERIC H. YOFFIE, PRESIDENT

Dear Bar and Bat Mitzvah Students and Parents,

Mazal tov on your upcoming celebration! This guide is designed to help you make the most of your Jewish journey. Focusing on the values that are most important in our tradition, you will explore together what commitments you can make to bring these principles to life. Judaism has a lot of special wisdom to offer, but only you can make it real.

This guide is designed to be used in conjunction with family education programs, but it also offers other possibilities. If you do not have a rabbi, cantor or teacher to guide you through the exercise and offer group activities with your class, you can simply sit down as a family and do it. Read through one of the Jewish value pages (aloud). Discuss the ideas and ask each other questions about them. Then fill out the *b'rit* page that follows. A *b'rit*, בְּרִית, is a covenant, and this is your chance to identify the commitments you will make that radiate Jewish values. We urge that you do only one unit at a sitting, so each *b'rit* will be thoughtfully made. Your rabbi or cantor would be happy to discuss any questions you may have.

Shalom uv'rachah - שלום וברכה

May peace and blessing surround you,

UAHC-CCAR Commission on Religious Living

If, after going through this exercise, you have suggestions for families who will do it in the future—or for the text of the exercise itself—you can send them to: Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, Department of Religious Living, Union of American Congregations, 633 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6778.

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בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה

BLESSED ARE YOU, *ADONAI*, RULER OF TIME AND SPACE,
WHO GIVES US A PATH TO HOLINESS WITH MITZVOT, AND COMMANDS
US TO ENGAGE IN THE STUDY OF TORAH.
(FROM THE *SIDDUR* - PRAYER BOOK)

Within Jewish tradition, study has always been a holy activity and a sacred obligation.

A driver’s license, not a diploma: Jewish learning is a lifelong process. Just as you get a license in order to use it, you commit to continue learning and growing as a Jew when you become a bar or bat mitzvah. Continue your religious education and seek out opportunities to use what you have learned to live a rich Jewish life.

Getting there is half the fun (and more): The years of study required before becoming bar/bat mitzvah are not simply preparation for the service. Regular attendance and serious commitment to learning are required. This responsibility falls not only on the students, but also on the parents to make religious education a priority. Our tradition teaches us to study Torah *lishmah*, Jewish learning for its own sake. Much of the learning that goes on in today’s world is so that we can get into a good college or get a better job. The goal of Jewish learning is to become better human beings, with lives full of purpose and holiness and meaning.

You are finally ready to begin: While there is a lot within Judaism that is wonderful for young children, the deeper substance of our tradition is too challenging for them. As a bar/bat mitzvah, you are finally mature enough to begin to understand the values, the questions, the texts and the ideas that shape our lives—to study Judaism “at full volume.”

Parents are teachers, too: Of course, parents teach not only by word, but also by deed. Adults who model a lifelong learning commitment—reading Jewish books, participating in family and adult education programs, worship, Torah study and/or other classes and activities that deepen their Jewish knowledge—make the best teachers for themselves and their children.

Beyond technical skills: What is prayer to you? What do the individual prayers mean? What are the key words of the Torah portion, and what does the Torah come to teach? In tutorials and other preparations to lead the service, b’nei mitzvah (plural of bar/bat mitzvah) should make an effort not only to master the technical skills, but also to discover the meaning of the sacred texts.

The world of Jewish learning and living just keeps getting bigger. The synagogue is your spiritual home, but the Jewish community is larger than our own congregation. You can begin to explore the larger Jewish world through youth group, tours to Israel, Reform movement summer camps and a whole alphabet soup of Jewish organizations out there trying to make a difference.

B'rit Torah - ברית תורה

Students:

I have tried to make real the value of *Talmud Torah* by...

I commit in the future to...

Parents:

I have tried to make real the value of *Talmud Torah* by...

I commit in the future to...

וְתֵהִי לְרִצּוֹן תָּמִיד עֲבוּדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ

...AND MAY THE SERVICE OF ISRAEL, YOUR PEOPLE, ALWAYS BE ACCEPTABLE TO YOU.
(FROM THE AVODAH PRAYER)

Prayer is more than a skill; it is a value—one of the ways we serve God throughout our life.

Service to God does not mean only going to services. Judaism teaches us to recognize all the spiritual moments of our lives and not to be afraid to speak of the holiness within them. It offers an endless number of ways to serve God in daily life.

What is leadership? Becoming bar/bat mitzvah is celebrated by taking your place as a leader in the prayer community. Leaders are not people who show up once, tell others what to do, and disappear. Leaders are people who become involved with the community for the long haul. To this end, the following activities are part of your “leadership training:”

- Attend services regularly, and participate to the full measure of your ability.
- Volunteer to lead worship or read Torah again—even the same portion next year!
- Assist in younger grades in the religious school.
- Serve as an officer in junior (and later, senior) youth group.
- Participate in a social action project with the synagogue and bring some friends.
- Serve on a committee that is preparing a special service or program.

Anavah - Humility: Moses is praised not for how great he was, but how humble. True service to God requires that we not be concerned about showing off (either our Hebrew skills or our wealth), but about how we can use our gifts to bring blessing to our world. Success is not measured by how many verses you read or how beautifully you chant, or how many friends attend, or how original your party is. Success is measured by how much you can make the words and the music and the celebration count for something.

Worship is sacred drama: The service is not a performance, but it is dramatic. If an actor reads lines that mean nothing to him, then the play will not move people. Similarly, empty words of prayer cannot bring blessing to the world or move people’s spirit. Discuss with your family and your rabbi what prayer is to you and what the specific prayers mean to you. Whenever you read the words, try to make them come alive in your mind and heart.

Shabbat is sacred time: Most of you will celebrate being bar/bat mitzvah on Shabbat. How can you fill the occasion with the spirit of the Sabbath, a day that celebrates what we already have and imagines a world already whole?

Know before Whom you stand: It says above the ark in many synagogues:

דַּע לְפָנַי מִי אַתָּה עוֹמֵד - know before Whom you stand. The service you lead will be much more meaningful (and much easier for you) if you remember that you are not performing in front of family and friends, but rather praying to God.

But what do I wear? Make a thoughtful decision regarding whether you will wear *tallit* and/or *kippah* at the service. The *kippah* is a sign of our humility before God. The *tallit* is a reminder of all the mitzvot. If you decide these are meaningful religious objects to you, wear them at every service you attend (*tallit* at morning services only, plus *Kol Nidrei* and Simchat Torah). They become part of your prayer uniform and prepare you to enter holy time. The clothes you wear, too, should be appropriate for the worship service, not the party.

B'rit Avodah - בְּרִית עֲבוּדָה

Students:

I have tried to make real the value of *Avodah* by...

I commit in the future to...

Parents:

I have tried to make real the value of *Avodah* by...

I commit in the future to...

מצוה גוררת מצוה

THE FULFILLMENT OF ONE COMMANDMENT
LEADS US TO FULFILL ANOTHER.
(PIRKEI AVOT 4:2)

While we tend to think of a mitzvah as a “good deed,” it is in fact a commandment. As Jews, our responsibilities to do good, to study and to teach, to keep the calendar of sacred time, to sanctify, and to support others are all sacred obligations.

Bar or bat mitzvah means “son or daughter of the commandment.” You may have been required to fulfill a number of mitzvot as part of your preparation. From now on, these Jewish privileges and responsibilities are assigned by God — every year. What you accomplished in this year is not a climax; it is a standard you now know you can meet.

Tzedakah - Righteousness: *Tzedakah* is very different from “charity,” which suggests we give out of love. Judaism commands that we give of our resources (time, money, and concern) because it is the only way to create a just society. Even people who are hard to love are deserving of our help. Even when we do not feel loving, the obligation is ours.

N'divut - Generosity: Whenever Jews have a sacred moment (joyous or sad), we mark it by sharing what we have with those who are less fortunate. Within the celebration of becoming bar/bat mitzvah, you have many opportunities to give. Here are just a few ideas:

- Take the flowers on the *bimah* and centerpieces to a hospital or nursing home. Or create arrangements that use something else you can give away: fruit, canned food, pet supplies, sporting equipment.
- Make a donation from the funds you receive as presents. Jewish tradition suggests 10-20% as a guideline.
- Give 3% of the cost of the celebration to Mazon, to share your joy with those in need.
- Send invitations that are certificates of donations to a charitable organization.

G'milut Chasadim - Deeds of covenantal kindness: While most Bar/Bat Mitzvah students do not have a great deal of money to give away, but they can give of themselves.... Soup kitchens, literacy programs, Habitat for Humanity and other projects can use your help. So can your family and peers: How do you think you might be able to practice this value every day?

Hoda'ah - Thanksgiving: Jewish tradition teaches us not to take our blessings for granted. Every morning we thank God for waking up, for our bodies, our minds, our freedom, etc. When you become bar/bat mitzvah, you will probably remember to thank the rabbi, cantor and other teachers, parents, siblings, etc. You will also write thank-you cards. Try to make these opportunities for sincere thanksgiving, not empty forms of gratitude. If you really stop to think about all the people who help you along the way, you may also go into the synagogue office during the week before or after the service to thank the staff; find the janitor to personally thank him/her after the service.

Hiddur Mitzvah - We try to make that which is commanded, beautiful: Like all beauty, the inside counts more than the outside.

Which mitzvot are really commanded? What do you think about this quote from the 1976 statement: Reform Judaism — A Centenary Perspective:

“The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including: creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; life-long study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogue and community; and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence.”

B'rit Mitzvah - בְּרִית מִצְוָה

Students:

I have tried to make real the value of *Mitzvah* by...

I commit in the future to...

Parents:

I have tried to make real the value of *Mitzvah* by...

I commit in the future to...

הנה מה-טוב ומה-נעים שבת אחים גם יחד

PROVERBS 29:18 BEHOLD, HOW GOOD IT IS, AND HOW PLEASANT,
WHEN WE CAN BE TOGETHER AND CREATE UNITY.
(PSALM 133:1)

A synagogue is called a *kehilah kedoshah*, a holy community. The importance we place on coming together for significant moments in our lives, and the ways in which we create a caring community are the beginning of our path toward holiness.

The school community: Everyone in your religious school class is part of your community. Even the most modest of celebrations can be planned to not hurt people's feelings; try not to leave people out. You can also seek out ways to build community in the class. Does the synagogue sponsor family retreats? Are there junior youth group activities? Why not invite the families of the class over for *havdalah* together at the beginning of the "cycle"?

Defining the moment: You become bar/bat mitzvah at a congregational service. It is beautiful and personal, but the uniqueness has to do with the way each child steps into the giant shoes of tradition, and takes on the role of leadership. Neither the service nor the party need to be "new" or "different." They should tell of your values, not your hobbies.

Participation is key: Family and friends should make every effort to participate fully in the reading and singing of the service, even if they too must study. "Being there" for your friends means helping to fill the services they lead with sacred spirit.

Kavod - Honor: There are ways to honor special friends and family. Find out from your synagogue what roles your loved ones may have in the service. Help your friends and family understand what to do and what the significance is of receiving an *aliyah* or other role, so they appreciate how you wish to honor them. Friends are also happy to help make your celebration beautiful in other ways. If you are having many children present, ask some friends to chaperone at the service, and others to do so at the celebratory meal.

How a meal becomes a mitzvah: The meal following a life-cycle celebration is called a *se'udat mitzvah*. It is commanded that we share our joy with the community by sharing food with them because food has always been the best means of drawing human beings together in real fellowship. The spirit of the meal should be simple and joyous. In Jewish tradition moderation is always important. Leftovers can often be donated; speak to your synagogue about food pantries and soup kitchens in your area.

Every home is a *mikdash m'at* - sanctuary in miniature: Our family relationships give us our best practice for a lifetime of faithfulness. From them, we learn to extend ourselves to others, and to love them even though they are not perfect. How can the process of becoming bar/bat mitzvah deepen your family bonds?

B'rit Kehilah - ברית קהילה

Students:

I have tried to make real the value of *Kehilah* by...

I commit in the future to...

Parents:

I have tried to make real the value of *Kehilah* by...

I commit in the future to...

THANK YOU.

Your membership in a UAHC congregation
has made the Reform Movement the largest and
most vibrant branch of Judaism.

REFORM JUDAISM:
WE ARE THE FUTURE.



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