



**UNIVERSITY
SYNAGOGUE**
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Bar & Bat Mitzvah at University Synagogue



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Dear Bar/Bat Mitzvah Family,

You are about to experience one of the most meaningful and exciting moments in your family's life. Bar/Bat Mitzvah occurs as each child approaches adolescence and nears adulthood. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony marks and celebrates this remarkable transformation. The ceremony speaks of responsibility and recognition, of tradition, learning and growth. We share this moment with you and are here to guide and support you as you enter this stage of your life-long journey.

Like all of our Jewish life cycle rites, Bar/Bat Mitzvah brings a moment of personal and family change into the community. A community of adults, who have gathered for worship and learning, celebrate this unique moment of growth with family and friends. Traditionally, only adult Jews are permitted to lead the community in prayer and teach the community Torah. The best preparation for this special moment is to join that community. Come to the synagogue for worship and learning. Your participation says something very powerful about the importance of community, tradition, and of Judaism in your life.

Following the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony, it is important to connect and participate in Jewish life through a regular program of Jewish learning, through Tichon and Youth Group. University Synagogue offers a variety of learning options as well as a dynamic program of teen activities. Parents: encouraging your child's participation in these programs reinforces the important lessons of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony.

We look forward to traveling this journey and celebrating with you.

Mazal Tov!



Rabbi Morley T. Feinstein



Cantor Kerith Spencer-Shapiro



Jessica Shamout
Director of Jewish Education

Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation...Yesterday and Today

Listing the stages in a Jew's life, the *Mishnah* (around 200 CE) tells us that "thirteen years is for *Mitzvot*." That is, traditional Jewish law holds that it becomes incumbent upon a thirteen-year-old male to fulfill the 613 commandments thought to be revealed by God. From this time until the day of his death, the Jewish male is a *Bar Mitzvah*, a "son of the commandments." According to Jewish tradition, each Jewish adult is tied to the moral and ritual laws of Judaism as a son is tied to his parents.

Sometime during the 4th century, it became the custom to mark this stage of life by permitting the young man to be one of eight adult males privileged to ascend (*aliyah*) to the reading desk on the *Bimah* on a given *Shabbat* soon after his thirteenth birthday. At this stage, he would read some verses from the *Torah* scroll. Blessings thanking God as author of the *Torah* were recited before and after the reading of those verses. During this period of time, Jewish girls who reached the age of 12 had a responsibility to observe *mitzvot*.

By the 16th century, it became custom to follow this first public ritual appearance with a party sponsored by the *Bar Mitzvah*'s family. This was usually held in the synagogue or at the family home on the *Shabbat* during which the young person ascended to the *Torah*. The very next morning, the *Bar Mitzvah* resumed his seat in his *Talmud* class in the community religious school, where he continued to study for five or more additional years. By the 18th century, some families had begun to hold festive meals in celebration of a girl's twelfth birthday.

With the advent of Reform Judaism in the 1800's in Germany, the early reformers looked askance at the *bar mitzvah* ceremony. While meant to signal the religious maturation of the young adult, it had actually devolved into a merely "theatrical" experience and had become a "meaningless ceremonial". These reformers developed the service of Confirmation, which was conferred upon both girls and boys as early as 1846 in New York.

The first bat mitzvah ceremony in North America, which took place in May of 1922, was that of the late Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism.

Today in Reform Judaism, girls and boys are treated equally in the service and in their preparation. All children read from the *Torah* and all celebrate becoming *bar or bat mitzvah* on or after their thirteenth birthday. At University Synagogue, we continue this tradition of marking your child's passage into adult Jewish responsibility through the celebration of *Bar and Bat Mitzvah*.

Services at which students will be called to the *Torah* as *Bar and Bat Mitzvah* are held in the Kopelson Family Sanctuary or the Gray Family Chapel. It is our congregation's role to support and celebrate this rite of passage along with members' families and friends.

Contact Information for Key People

| | | |
|--|--|----------|
| Rabbi Morley Feinstein FAMILY INVOLVEMENT, PERSONAL PRAYER | rabbifeinstein@unisyn.org | ext. 125 |
| Cantor Kerith Spencer-Shapiro TUTORING | cantorshapiro@unisyn.org | ext. 127 |
| Joanne Loiben, Rabbinic Intern D'VAR TORAH | joanneloiben@gmail.com | ext. 123 |
| Jessica Shamout GOLDEN KIPPAH, DATES MITZVAH PROJECT | jshamout@unisyn.org | ext. 122 |
| Bonnie Kebre FACILITIES | bkebre@unisyn.org | ext. 104 |
| Marianne Wallace DATES, DATE CHANGES | mwallace@unisyn.org | ext. 121 |
| Sue Share, Assistant to the Clergy MEETINGS & COMMUNICATION | sshare@unisyn.org | ext. 125 |

Path to Becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah

Assignment of Dates

Students are generally assigned a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* date on the *Shabbat* that falls closest to their birthday. *Shabbat* dates in July are not assigned. Children born in July will be assigned a date in the fall. There are certain *Shabbatot* during the year that cannot be assigned, i.e. Passover and *Shabbatot* that fall on the High Holy Days. Children whose birthdays would fall on those *Shabbatot* are moved to an available *Shabbat*. Also taken into consideration are the students' Religious School progress, prayer mastery, and individual needs.

We hold our Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies during *Shabbat* morning worship (10:30 AM) and afternoon worship, which includes *Havdallah*, at the end of *Shabbat* (5:00 PM).

Where can I go for Bar/Bat Mitzvah Advice?

Attend the group meetings for *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* parents and their children offered through Religious School. Meet your fellow congregants who have already been through this special life cycle event and may be going through it again. Please feel free to call Jessie Shamout or a clergy member or any member of the office staff with questions about any part of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* process. We will steer you in the right direction. For questions about the facilities and celebrations at University Synagogue, call Bonnie Kebre.

Student Preparation

As a part of our Religious School curriculum, our students become familiar with the structure of the *Shabbat* service as well as the prayers of the Friday Evening and *Shabbat* Morning liturgy. Regular attendance at school, at-home practice, and attendance at *Shabbat* services are part of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* preparation experience. Students are required to attend at least 6 *Shabbat* evening and 3 *Shabbat* morning services with at least one parent.

Each Bar or Bat Mitzvah student will begin to meet with Rabbi Feinstein approximately six months before the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Once you have met with Rabbi Feinstein, Cantor Shapiro will contact you to begin weekly one-on-one tutoring with your child. During the training period, if the child is struggling with Hebrew, please reach out to the Cantor. Your child may benefit from extra outside tutoring at parental expense. It is the parent's responsibility to coordinate any weekly session rescheduling that may be required.

Study with our Cantor

Cantor Shapiro prepares each child to chant verses of his/her designated *Torah* portion from the *Torah* scroll. The student learns and writes about the content and meaning of the entire *parsha* for the Shabbat of his or her participation. It is the custom at University Synagogue to chant up to 8 *aliyot* during the service. The child may chant all of the *aliyot* or a portion of the *aliyot*. If the child opts to chant less than 8 *aliyot*, others including family members and the clergy may chant the other *aliyot*. We are sensitive to children's differing learning needs and styles. We are committed to making this a positive learning experience for your child.

The Cantor prepares each student to chant a selection from *Haftarah* in Hebrew. The students learn to understand the relationship of the assigned *Haftarah* and *Torah* Portions.

MP3 resources for learning prayers, *Torah* and *Haftarah* are available through the University Synagogue Dropbox.

All prayer and torah portion mp3s can be found here:

<https://unisyn.org/content/bnei-mitzvah>

Approximately two weeks previous to the ceremony, a run-through rehearsal will be held on the *Bimah* with a clergy member (usually Cantor Shapiro). During this session, the student will practice his/her part in leading the service, and *Torah* and *haftarah* readings from the pulpit. It is the purpose of this session to prepare the student for leading the service in the sanctuary. Attention will be paid to the choreography of the service and proper use of voice in the sanctuary. We require at least one parent or guardian to attend this rehearsal.

Study with our Rabbis

Rabbi Feinstein will guide your child in creating his or her own personal prayer. This prayer, recited in front of the open Ark, will include one or more of the themes of the biblical selections. Composing a prayer in this way gives your child the opportunity to express thoughts about becoming a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, to describe his/her feelings about the day, and to give thanks to God for this occasion.

Our student rabbi will discuss the *Torah* and *Haftarah* portions with each student to help prepare a *d'var torah* and *d'var haftarah* for the day of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony. The introduction to the *Torah* reading is called a *d'var torah* and for the *haftarah* reading, a *d'var haftarah*. Your child will meet with the student rabbi to study and discuss important concepts in the *Torah* and *Haftarah* portions. Working with the student rabbi, your child will create written introductions to both the *Torah* and *Haftarah* readings. Each introduction will consist of approximately 100-150 words.

Approximately one month prior to the date of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, the child should have all of his/her preparation completed and should be reviewing materials.

Cantor Emeritus

If you would like Jay Frailich, our Cantor Emeritus to attend and participate in the service, please inform Cantor Shapiro or Rabbi Feinstein well in advance of the bar/bat mitzvah date.

The Mitzvah Project

Each *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* student will be expected, as a part of his or her training, to participate in a *Mitzvah* project to be approved by Jessica Shamout and the student at the beginning of the training program. This program will give the student an opportunity to apply the concepts of *Tzedakah* and social responsibility. Students should plan on spending at least 6 hours of active *mitzvah* work for their *mitzvah* project, plus extra hours towards earning the Golden Kippah.

Check out these resources for *mitzvah* project ideas:

- Tablet article on doing *mitzvah* projects right: www.https://Mitzvah Projects-Tablet Magazine
- *The Mitzvah Project Book*, Liz Suneby
- An online resource for choosing mitzvah projects: www.jchoice.org



Participation in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Shabbat Services

Friday Night Erev Shabbat Participation for Parents and Child

During the *Shabbat* evening service prior to a child's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* ceremony, parents are normally honored with introducing both the blessing of the *Shabbat* lights on the *Bimah* and the *Kiddush*. The child participates in leading prayers with the congregation and community.

Family Participation in the Shabbat Morning or Afternoon Service/Havdallah

There are many opportunities for family members to participate in the morning or afternoon service. Typically, parents, siblings, grandparents, aunt & uncles, cousins and close friends participate. Participation that does not require any speaking includes opening and closing the *aron kodesh* (ark). Hebrew participation for Jewish family members includes the blessings before and after the *Torah* reading. There will be between three and eight *aliyot* during the service. Generally, the order of the *aliyot* is relatives, then parents, and finally the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. Non-Jewish family members are welcome on the *Bimah* of University Synagogue and may also participate. Speak with the clergy about finding ways to include your non-Jewish family.

Each family is unique...please talk to us!

Student / Parent Preparation

In order to be both familiar and comfortable with Shabbat services students are required to **attend at least 6 Shabbat evening and 3 Shabbat morning services with at least one parent** during the year prior to becoming a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. By attending services at our congregation you and your child will become familiar with our customs and connect with members of our synagogue community.

We want our *b'nei mitzvah* to appreciate the meaning and structure of the Jewish prayer service before they are leading the service. More familiarity leads to a better ability to worship and to lead a community in prayer.

As your contract states, all students are required to remain in Religious School through the entire year during which they become *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. Confirmation and Post Confirmation are the culmination of our formal religious educational program for youth at University Synagogue. Learning for people of all ages will foster positive Jewish identities, thereby building a foundation for lifelong Jewish learning.

We encourage our children to contribute 10% of their monetary gifts to *tzedakah* and to help others in need through a *mitzvah* project. The celebrants should designate the recipients of their generosity and their time and notify Rabbi Feinstein.

Parental Responsibilities

- In order for a child to participate as a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* at University Synagogue, the family must be a **member-in-good standing** at all times in order to maintain the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* date. All dues and fees must be current 12 months before the ceremony. The Synagogue reserves the right to cancel *the Bar/Bat Mitzvah* ceremony if it is determined that the membership obligations are not
- Parents **sponsor the Friday night Oneg Shabbat** preceding the child's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. This is included in the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* fee. Contact Bonnie Kebre, Facilities Coordinator, for details.
- It is the custom at University Synagogue for the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* family to honor your child and **express appreciation by making a contribution** to the clergy discretionary funds in honor of this joyous occasion.
- **Attire:** The bema is a holy space. We request that you honor this special occasion by wearing appropriate attire for both the Friday evening and the Saturday services. If you have questions about what is appropriate for the bema, please feel free to discuss with the clergy of your choice.
- **Support!** Helping your child reach this wonderful milestone will make the journey more meaningful for your family. Ask your child to share his/her assignments with you. Attend services with your child. If you find your child is having difficulty with any step of the process, please contact the Cantor or Rabbis, or Director of Jewish Education. Working as a team, with you leading the way, we can ensure a positive experience for your child.
- During the *Shabbat* service, the **parents offer a blessing to their child**. Your blessing should be no longer than two minutes (approximately one page, double-spaced). The blessing should relate to the child, the meaning of the religious and cultural experience and the spirituality of the occasion. The key themes of the blessing are the parent's hopes, dreams and aspirations, based on the child's character. **Use this time to think forward and share your hopes and dreams for your child, not to look back and catalog his or her accomplishments.**

Sample Parent Blessing

Dear (Child),

Judaism teaches that each person is born in the image of God and within each person there is a spark of Holiness. Not only is this an enabling power that guides us in our relationships with others, but to me, it is also a connecting channel between a person and God. I have seen this connection through you on many nights after you recited Shema. At first your prayer was an assurance that tomorrow will be a good day, but as you grew, so did the length of the time you took to pray with your eyes closed and your lips moving.

I hope that you didn't let the attractions or distractions of growing up pull you away from this link. Remain a child at heart and continue to wonder at the many ordinary, yet amazing goings-on around you. Add to your Jewish knowledge to gain further wisdom and insight into the adult life. As I always say...feed your soul. Know that faith gives you strength to overcome any challenge in life.

Let your deed, not words, tell you who you are and what you believe in. May you always be inspired to do good. And may we always see in you good health and happiness. We love you and *mazal tov!*

More Blessing, Less Bragging on Bimah by Jane Ulman, originally published in the Jewish Journal

One mother thanked every one of her daughter's teachers by name and grade, beginning with preschool. A father enumerated the scores of all his son's soccer games. And another mother, with tear-filled eyes and a choked-up voice, used the occasion to present her daughter with her first diamond.

Ever since parents began speaking at their children's bar and bat mitzvahs, they have raised the ante on length, competition and ostentation to the point where, according to University Synagogue's senior rabbi, Morley Feinstein, we find that every child is more compassionate than Mother Teresa, a faster swimmer than Mark Spitz and a better mathematician than Albert Einstein.

But increasingly, rabbis have taken steps to reclaim the bimah. They have reined in parents' freedom to present a laundry list of their child's achievements, awards and, occasionally, shortcomings. Instead, they are requiring or strongly encouraging parents to reshape their speeches as blessings and keep their focus on the child and the sanctity of one of Judaism's most significant rites of passage.

Donald Goor, senior rabbi at Temple Judea in Tarzana, instituted the practice of parent blessings eight years ago "out of an attempt to ensure the holiness of the service." He gives parents multiple examples and wording specific to blessings. He even provides a structured, fill-in-the-blank "create-a-blessing" guide that helps them express their love, pride and dreams for their child in the mandated 300 words.

For Kaye Bernstein, whose third child, Jeffrey, became a bar mitzvah at Temple Judea on Dec. 18, adhering to the guidelines was not a problem. "I tended to focus on what's distinguishing about his life, his personality and what he brings to the family mix," she said. For her husband, Fred, giving a blessing made him think about his words in a different way. "It's not a time to tell anecdotes or give a toast," he said.

Goor does not vet parent blessings. Neither does University Synagogue's Feinstein, who also provides parents with examples and who counsels them to keep their talks short and sweet and to recognize the holy nature of the day. "I still have to trust parents. I don't want to be a censor," he said. But at Congregation Or Ami in Calabasas, Rabbi Paul Kipnes insists that parents give him a copy of their remarks -- limited to one double-spaced typed page -- at least a week in advance. He is especially concerned that they not tease or embarrass the child, however subtly, humorously or unintentionally. He also wants parents to share words of praise with their child before coming on the bimah because he believes that it's easy to compliment publicly, but the compliments that really matter are the private ones.

Most rabbis estimate that parents, primarily in non-Orthodox congregations, began giving speeches 10 to 20 years ago. Many trace the custom to the traditional Baruch She-P'tarani blessing, dating back to the Middle Ages, that the father recited to mark his son's bar mitzvah. This blessing -- "Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this boy" -- has been omitted, reframed or replaced by both parents reciting the *Shehecheyanu* in most Reform and Conservative services. Some rabbis also believe speeches may be modeled on the blessings Jewish parents give their sons and daughters at the Shabbat table on Friday evenings.

Additionally, Jeffrey Salkin, senior rabbi at The Temple in Atlanta and author of "Putting God on the Guest List" (Jewish Lights, 2005) sees parent speeches as part of a trend in customs that used to occur at the celebration, such as a parent's toast, being moved into the service. "I'm tempted to say that it's because people want to own the experience, to have more of a personal investment," he said. For him, the practice isn't problematic as long as parents don't use the opportunity to competitively troop out their child's talents.

In Orthodox shuls, parent speeches are generally not an issue as the predominant model, according to Rabbi Elazar Muskin of Young Israel of Century City, since only the bar or bat mitzvah and the rabbi speak at the service. And at Muskin's synagogue, that occurs after the service. But it's quite accepted that parents speak during the celebration, and, even there, Muskin believes it's important that they incorporate some religious content, such as a d'var Torah or a spiritual charge to their child.

Sally Olins, rabbi of Temple B'nai Hayim in Sherman Oaks, asks parents to speak on two occasions -- on Friday night when they read the dedication that they have written in the siddur they give to their child and on Saturday mornings when they present the tallit. Olins offers guidelines both individually and in classes she holds for pre-bar and bat mitzvah parents. She asks them to keep their words short and to focus on the child, not the congregation. For her, the worst -- long-winded but not inappropriate -- was a parent who began her remarks with a description of the child's nine months in utero. "I try to say, could you start a little later in life?" she said. The process seemed overwhelming at first for Susan and Jeffrey Osser, whose daughter, Melissa, became a bat mitzvah at B'nai Hayim on Dec. 10. But it turned out to be very simple because they both, unintentionally and separately, wrote the siddur dedication and the tallit presentation and then melded them together. "We both sat down at a time that was perfect for us individually when the creative juices were flowing and wrote from our hearts," Susan Osser said. "It was so unplanned that it was authentic."

In general, most rabbis believe that parents are becoming more aware of the significance and sanctity of bar and bat mitzvah. And while their words may not always be exactly in the language in blessing, parents are speaking less and less in the language of competition and aggrandizement and more and more in the language of love and support. Said Salkin, "Every time I think of getting rid of this custom, I think of all the nice stuff I hear. I realize I would be punishing some very fine speeches if we decided not to allow this."

Tzedakah

1. Those who wish to express their **appreciation to the Rabbis and Cantor** for their spiritual leadership and participation contribute to their Discretionary Funds, which are utilized for support of Jewish and humanitarian causes and individual needs.

Every member of University Synagogue is eligible to receive all lifecycle services by virtue of his/her affiliation; your contribution will help our clergy fulfill essential Mitzvot.

2. University Synagogue's **Tree of Life** provides a way to acknowledge the happy events in the Temple family while supporting your Temple.
3. **Mazon**: Participate with your family in the MAZON program by contributing 3% of the cost of your Bar or Bat Mitzvah to MAZON, an organization which advocates for the hungry; www.mazon.org
4. Donate your flowers to a nursing home after the service is over. In lieu of table flowers- food items can be wrapped in large baskets and then the funds donated to **SOVA's** food bank.
5. Donate left-over food from your reception to the people with food insecurity (St. Joseph Center or O.P.C.C.in Santa Monica).
6. Select agencies which you find significant, both Jewish and secular, to which an appropriate contribution may be given in honor of your son/daughter.
7. Place a Tzedakah box in your home to contribute to a select agency on a weekly basis.

What do my clergy have to say about the party?

We are delighted that our congregants take the mitzvah of celebrating seriously! We hope that your celebration is meaningful, beautiful, and most of all – fun. With that in mind, we offer you the following article as a guide to helping create an appropriate atmosphere for celebrating bar and bat mitzvah after the ceremony.

A Plea to Lower the Bar on Bar Mitzvahs by [Gary Wexler](#), Originally published in the Jewish Journal

I'll never forget the first bat mitzvah invitation my oldest daughter, who is now 22, received. It didn't come in the mail. It was hand delivered after dark by a lady in a fairy godmother costume, carrying a crystal wand, who rang our doorbell, singing.

Her lyrics requested our daughter -- to whom she handed an oversized, pink envelope and then in a flourish, gave her the crystal wand and a kiss -- to attend the event. The envelope was addressed in professional calligraphy, with swishes and swirls. As we watched our daughter excitedly open the envelope, out popped a spray of glitter on the furniture, floor and our clothing. I think I still find evidence of it when we move the sofa. The invitation itself consisted of about 10 pieces of thick, colored paper, all glued together with the edges of each one exposed, rainbow style. They were adorned in more glitter and colored inks -- that was just the cover. It opened to a pop-up announcing that with love and joy, Alan and Alana (not their real names) request the honor of your presence, along with friends and family, to join them when Tiffany would be called to the Torah in the ancient tradition of the Jewish people to join her place among the community as a woman.

Behind it was another piece of paper titled, "Let's Party!" The event was to be at the Beverly Hills Hotel, where the fairy godmother would again reappear in a magical evening of food, fun and fabulousness. At the bottom of the invitation, the family proudly stated that the floral centerpieces would be donated to an old-age home.

I immediately took off for my bedroom, jumping on my bed and pulling the covers over my head. "God," I thought, "this is the first of three kids. Is this what we are in for over the next six years, as each of them reaches this age?" It was this -- and more.

There was a parade of invitations, some arriving conventionally in the mailbox, some by FedEx, a few more hand delivered, each trying to outdo the other. Some of them had to cost upwards of \$25-\$35 an invitation. There were events where the bar mitzvah kid arrived at the party upon a white horse, another driven onto the dance floor in a Maserati, one at the Santa Monica Airport where the kid arrived in a private plane, and many others where the kid made the grand entrance with her name up in lights, as everyone rose to their feet clapping and whistling. There was even one where the theme was shopping, and every table had a centerpiece of a bag from a fancy store. There was the circus, where the family brought in high-wire acts and roaming magicians. There was another where the parents flew in a 20-piece orchestra from Texas, because they were the only musicians who could do the event right.

At still another, each kid upon leaving was given a dozen bagels, lox, cream cheese and The New York Times. And at another, they rented out a public space in Santa Monica for a sumptuous feast and entertainment, while homeless people looked on from the sides and through the windows. At many of them, you had to watch the interminable video, which basically showed the kid on all the family vacations, from the Hilton Hawaiian Village to the Sheraton Beijing to the King David in Jerusalem. You ate at stations. There was the sushi station, the taco station, the pasta station, the hot dog station -- and those were just the hors d'oeuvres. There was the sweet table directly out of "Goodbye Columbus."

Now that our youngest is a freshman in college, and most of our friends' kids are well-beyond bar and bat mitzvah age, I feel liberated to speak out: our bar mitzvah culture is out of control. It is an unnecessary, extravagant, showy, inappropriate expenditure, which is done under peer expectation and pressure. It is an embarrassment to the Jewish people.

What does this bar mitzvah overkill say about us? What are our children learning from the bar and bat mitzvah experience? What are they ingesting about the values of Judaism and the Jewish people? I believe the responsibility for our bar mitzvah culture rests not only with the parents, but with the rabbis. A bar or bat mitzvah is a religious ceremony that takes place under their auspices, in their synagogues. They have the ability to shape it, speak about it and instill the values of what it should be.

The fact is that the kids and the community learn as much, if not more, about what they believe Judaism is from these celebrations. For most, this is the formative, big Jewish experience that shapes their attitude until they hopefully bump into some other Jewish moment, which has the power to undo this one.

The rabbis need to begin discussing the issues of bar and bat mitzvah celebrations with parents years before their children even near the age. There should be classes on bar and bat mitzvah values and planning when the kids are very young, not during the year preceding the event, when it is too late. The rabbis need to create a synagogue culture of what is and isn't an acceptable bar and bat mitzvah practice. They need to publish about it. They need to write guidebooks.

As for parents, why do we continue to go overboard on bar mitzvahs? Because we bow to peer pressure. We are at a vulnerable period in life where we want to prove that we have made it, so we use our children's rite of passage as the vehicle. We don't want our kids to be deprived of what everyone else's have. We believe we are showing our children how much we love them, with this kind of party and celebration. We are showing what our family can do, and who we are.

Why haven't the rabbis stopped this? They are afraid to speak out. They are afraid to step up to the plate of values and practice. The rabbis don't do it because they don't want to offend the family. They don't want to destroy a relationship with a potential major donor. They leave the values issues, which is their domain, solely up to the families, placing parents in a precarious position.

When our children were attending these events, at first, they would come home describing in wonderment what they had experienced. My wife and I had to often undo the expectations, as well as the embrace of the culture into which they had just been immersed.

They were just kids and could not discern what was appropriate Jewish practice. I eventually learned to tell my kids, "When it is your turn, we will make a celebration and a good time; we are not going to buy one from a bunch of other people." Can we as Jews not have a good time when celebrating a rite of passage for a 13-year-old without spending tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars? Have we lost the ability to celebrate from our soul and our culture in place of celebrating from our pocketbook?

Recently my friend, Louis Berliner, who can afford to make most any kind of bar or bat mitzvah celebration for his five kids, wrote a book titled "Celebrate! And Make the World a Better Place! : A Resource and Planning Guide to Socially Responsible Celebrations," on how to creatively celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah based on Jewish values and appropriate decorum. From the way the book is selling, it appears there are many Jewish families who are as disillusioned with the current practice as I am. More power to Louis.

Our rabbis would do well to follow Louis's example. And then, they need to do much more. After all, when it comes to Jewish values and practice, who is leading whom?

Ten Commandments for B'nai Mitzvah Parents by Jeff Bernhardt, originally published in the Jewish Journal

The bar/bat mitzvah is an important milestone for both child and family. It can be a sacred, spiritual experience for everyone. For many families, having a child become bar/bat mitzvah is as exciting as it is overwhelming and stressful. This is not just about one's child coming of age but also about the family entering a new developmental stage.

As with any journey, it is helpful to have a guide who has been there before. I have had the pleasure and honor of teaching b'nei mitzvah students for many years and have learned much along the way — from the teaching, from my colleagues, from the students and from the parents. My hope is that the following Ten Commandments for the parents of b'nei mitzvah students will help make the experience one that will be more meaningful for everyone (and perhaps a bit less stressful).

Thou Shalt Communicate

The parents, child, tutor and clergy are a team with a common goal: for the young person to be well prepared, have a meaningful and motivating experience, and, ultimately, to feel confident on the big day. The team should regularly communicate so that challenges can be resolved sooner, not later. Ask to sit in on a lesson; arrange to check in at the end of lessons. This time also presents a wonderful opportunity to build your relationship with the clergy. Getting to know the tutor and clergy sends a message about your investment in the process.

Thou Shalt Help Thy Child Create a Study Schedule

While some young people are self-directed, others need focus and support. Discuss the expectations (and how to achieve them) with the tutor and your child. You may have to remind your child to study for the first weeks, but with consistency he/she likely will become increasingly responsible. When that happens, acknowledge it. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah is about taking on responsibility (and not having your parent nag you to study). This is an opportunity to watch your child take ownership of his/her studies.

Thou Shalt Get Thy Child to B'nai Mitzvah Appointments

Be sure your child is at all tutoring and b'nai mitzvah-related appointments. When this is not possible, provide as much notice as you can. This communicates the value of the partnership and respect for everyone's time.

Thou Shalt Learn the Blessings

Your child is studying for an average of six to eight months. All those who will be chanting blessings should also prepare. This sends the message that the bar/bat mitzvah is being taken seriously, that learning is a lifelong process and that Jewish ritual life is relevant beyond age 13. If you don't know the blessings, ask your child to help you. This is good practice for your child as well as a great opportunity for you to learn from your child and demonstrate that this is important to you.

Thou Shalt Include Thy Child in Decisions

There are many decisions associated with the process of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. Some decisions must ultimately be made by adults, but give your child the opportunity to share in discussions when appropriate. Help your child understand why you made a particular decision. Having conversations about decisions exposes your child to considerations involved in decision-making. This is part of becoming an adult.

Thou Shalt Focus as Much Energy on the Service as on the Celebration

There are many details involved in the preparation for the bar/bat mitzvah. It is not uncommon for the parents to focus on the celebration, with the assumption that the student, tutor and clergy are "worrying" about the service details. Let your child see that you are as invested — if not more invested — in the service as you are in the celebration that follows. Get engaged in the lessons, the studying, the d'var Torah writing. Ask your child questions about what he/she is studying. Your engagement will send the message that the party is a celebration of something sacred, a developmental milestone — a religious moment.

Thou Shalt Use Positive, Encouraging Language

Becoming bar/bat mitzvah can be a sacred and wonderfully positive experience, due in large part to the spoken and unspoken messages the student gets from others, especially parents. Be aware of the potential impact of your words. Comments like “You just have to get through it” or “I had to do it, now you do” do not help your child approach this as a positive experience. In families of divorce when there is conflict between the ex-spouses, shield your child from the confrontation and seek support from clergy. Your child should not be anxious about a potential conflict as the big day approaches.

Thou Shalt Enjoy the Journey

There is much to appreciate in the journey and the preparation. Seek out resources (from the clergy, tutor, friends, etc.) to enhance the journey and the day.

Thou Shalt Continue Thy Child's Jewish Education

Your child may be an adult in the eyes of Judaism, but some decisions belong to the parents. Becoming bar/bat mitzvah marks the beginning of a new phase in Jewish life: a different connection to the Jewish community and commitment to Jewish education. There is much more for your child (and you) to learn.

Thou Shalt Remember That This Is About Thy Child

Of course it is about your whole family and your community, but when making decisions, keep in mind what this is really all about: a 13-year-old — your 13-year-old — becoming an adult in the Jewish community. Be sure that the choices you make reflect this.