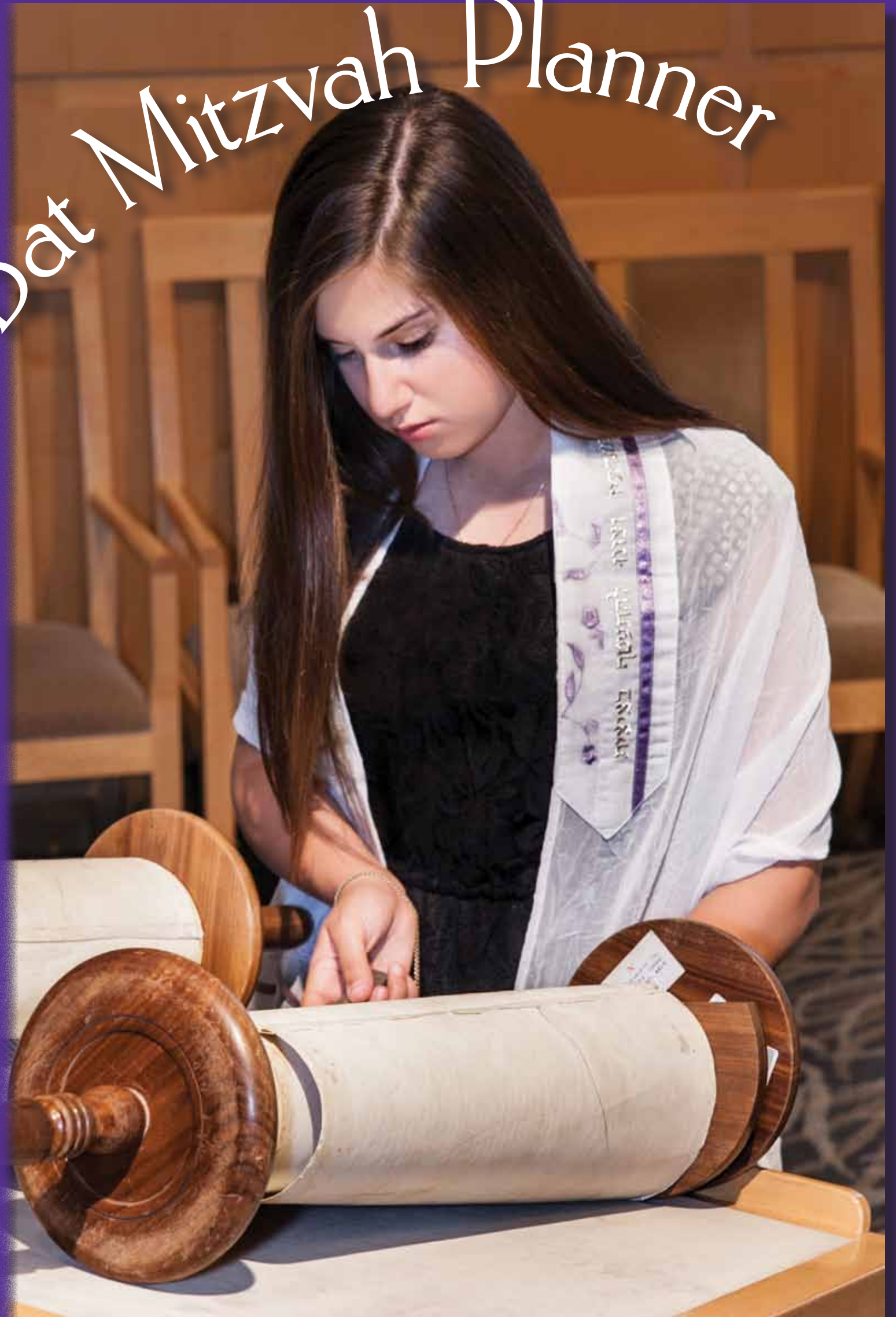


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# Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner



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Getting ready for a bar or bat mitzvah is a time of stress and study, planning and preparation. In this edition of the Jewish News Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner, you'll find great suggestions on where to hold an event, thoughts on how to include the congregation in the celebration, life advice from local rabbis, a column about becoming an adult bar mitzvah and more.

If you'll be planning a bar or bat mitzvah in the coming months, don't forget about the Mitzvahs & More Expo coming up on Aug. 25 at the DoubleTree Resort by Hilton. Visit [mitzvahsandmoreaz.com](http://mitzvahsandmoreaz.com).

Enjoy!

*Jennifer Goldberg*

Jennifer Goldberg

On the cover: Zoe Myers, daughter of Jami and Jay Myers of Scottsdale, became a bat mitzvah March 2, 2013, at Congregation Beth Israel. Photo by DW Photography. Call 602-909-1109 or visit [dwmitzvahs.com](http://dwmitzvahs.com).

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planner is a special section of Jewish News of Greater Phoenix. Edited by Jennifer Goldberg, designed by Becky Globokar. For additional copies and advertising information, contact Jaime Stern, 602-870-9470.

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# Scene of the simcha

## Venue choices abound for bar/bat mitzvahs

**JENNIFER GOLDBERG**  
Special Sections Editor

Planning a bar or bat mitzvah is a process that includes many components, from date, food and theme to clothes, decor and gifts.

One of the first decisions parents often make is the choice of venue, which can influence other decisions.

The Valley of the Sun has a wide variety of venue options, such as historic buildings, luxurious resorts, trendy spaces and fun locations.

### Arizona Biltmore

2400 E. Missouri Ave., Phoenix  
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The Arizona Biltmore has been a high-profile event venue for decades, and shows no signs of stopping. The historic resort offers spaces like the large Grand Ballroom and the luxurious Gold Room for indoor celebrations and several options for outdoor celebrations as well. The kosher kitchen is supervised by the Greater Phoenix Vaad Hakashruth.



Arizona Biltmore

*Photo courtesy of Arizona Biltmore*



Starfire Golf Club

*Photo courtesy of Starfire Golf Club*

### The Clayton on the Park

7343 Scottsdale Mall, Scottsdale  
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[theclaytononthepark.com](http://theclaytononthepark.com)

Celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah in high style at the trendy Scottsdale venue The Clayton on the Park (the “park” is the lush Scottsdale Mall). The Clayton offers three spaces — the Terrace, the Clayton Room and the Gallery — each with a glamorous and urban feel.

### Starfire Golf Club

11500 N. Hayden Road, Scottsdale  
480-948-6000

[starfiregolf.com](http://starfiregolf.com)

The Starfire Golf Club is a north Scottsdale event venue that overlooks the verdant, Arnold Palmer-designed public courses. Parties can be held indoors or outdoors, and the food and beverage staff will help design a menu to delight adults and teens alike.



Cutler Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center

*Photo courtesy of Cutler Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center*

### Cutler Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center

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[azjhs.org](http://azjhs.org)

The home of Arizona’s first synagogue is also a unique and meaningful central Phoenix location for a special event. The bar or bat mitzvah service can be held in the sanctuary of the original synagogue, while parties can be held indoors in the sanctuary or outdoors in the garden. Several packages are available.

### Chaparral Suites

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Chaparral Suites offers kosher events in a beautiful downtown Scottsdale resort. The property can accommodate small and large bar and bat mitzvahs. The kosher kitchen is supervised by the Greater Phoenix Vaad Hakashruth.

### Hilton Scottsdale Resort & Villas

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[hiltonvillas.com](http://hiltonvillas.com)

Host a celebration to remember at the Hilton Scottsdale Resort & Villas in central Scottsdale. The beautiful property has a number of event spaces to hold a fantastic bar or bat mitzvah party. The kosher kitchen is supervised by the Greater Phoenix Vaad Hakashruth.

### Stonecreek Golf Club

4435 E. Paradise Village Parkway, Phoenix  
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[stonecreekgc.com](http://stonecreekgc.com)

Tucked away in north central Phoenix, Stonecreek Golf Club is an intimate venue for any celebration. Events can be held indoors or outdoors, where guests can enjoy scenic views of the lovely golf course. Catering is in-house, but accommodations can be made for kosher food.

### The Phoenician

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[thephoenician.com](http://thephoenician.com)

A Phoenician bar or bat mitzvah will be an event to remember. The AAA Five Diamond resort offers indoor and outdoor celebrations in elegant settings just down the road from Old Town Scottsdale.

### Talking Stick Resort

9800 E. Indian Bend Road, Scottsdale  
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[talkingstickresort.com](http://talkingstickresort.com)

The adults may end up having even more fun

### The Phoenix Zoo

455 N. Galvin Parkway, Phoenix  
602-273-1341

[phoenixzoo.org](http://phoenixzoo.org)

Animal-loving teens will go wild over a Phoenix Zoo bar or bat mitzvah. The zoo offers 17 venues for any bar or bat mitzvah, from lush tropical locales outside to banquet halls inside, including several that allow views of Phoenix Zoo residents, such as Komodo dragons, orangutans and giraffes.



Phoenix Zoo

*Photo courtesy of the Phoenix Zoo*

than the teens at a Talking Stick Resort bar or bat mitzvah. The resort offers beautiful desert views and great events in its ballroom space. Out-of-town guests who stay at the resort will enjoy its location — right next to Casino Arizona.



# Words of wisdom

## Rabbis offer advice

*Jewish News asked local rabbis what advice they give to bar or bat mitzvah students as they prepare for the big day. Here are their tips.*

### ‘Seize this opportunity’

**Rabbi Robert L. Kravitz**  
Coordinator, JFCS Hospital  
Chaplaincy



My dear bar/bat mitzvah candidate,

You are growing up. Soon you will become an adult member of our Jewish People,

joining a list of Jews from Abraham and Sarah to today’s Israeli leaders and Jews in communities worldwide.

We Jews come in all sizes, colors, countries of origin, and speak many languages. Nevertheless, we are linked by our mutual history/herstory, a belief in God, Torah and the Hebrew language.

Once you accept the challenge to become a bar/bat mitzvah candidate,

you will learn more about our history, language and responsibilities of living an adult Jewish life.

Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah requires achievement, deeds. You are now on a pathway that will teach you Torah, mitzvot and Jewish opportunities for service — both in the synagogue and in the community.

Seize this opportunity to expand your knowledge, challenge your beliefs and increase good deeds. And as you study, know that 12 years (or 13 years) and a day are merely chronological milestones. The importance of celebrating your bar/bat mitzvah is to prove to yourself that you have grown into a new level of Jewish identity, and to proudly take your place among our Jewish People.

*Mazel Tov* to you and your parents!

### ‘Commit to becoming the person you want to be’

**Rabbi Janet Madden**  
Temple Havurat Emet

From birth to death, life is a process of growth. If we live our lives well, we never stop becoming. And the difficult

but vital question that every one of us is called to answer throughout our lives is: What am I becoming?

Choosing to become bar or bat mitzvah means accepting responsibility for the choices that we make. It means taking responsibility for our spiritual development. Looking at ourselves critically and honestly assessing ourselves in terms of our spiritual growth is a tremendous, ongoing and sacred responsibility — and an opportunity to grow consciously into our best selves.

My advice to all b’nai mitzvah — whether one makes this choice at the traditional age or as an adult — is simple: Really commit. Commit to becoming the person you want to be. Commit to tending to your inner life, to developing your spiritual self, to making your life a life of meaning. Staying committed to spiritual growth is not easy. But it means engaging, every day, in using the gift of life to



its fullest potential. And that is the most profound commitment that we can make.

### ‘Learn to try and try again’

**Rabbi Jeremy Schneider**  
Temple Kol Ami

In one of the most memorable baseball games in my lifetime, the sixth game of the 1986 World Series, the New York Mets were losing by two runs in the bottom of the 10th inning. A Mets player hit a grounder toward first base.



The ball went through Bill Buckner’s legs, and the Mets won the game. After the Red Sox squandered a three-run lead in Game 7, the team lost the series to the Mets and Buckner went down in history as the poster child of “the choke.” Nevertheless, Buckner continued to play ball and then coach for another 10 years, commenting,

# Give a gift that will last a lifetime

These forward thinking teens didn’t just donate once and call it a Tzedakah Project. These teens created their own charitable endowment funds using gifts they received from their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Every year, for the rest of their lives, they will be able to “recycle” their funds to support the organizations of their choice.



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To involve your teen with the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Phoenix, contact Andrea Cohen at [acohen@jcfphoenix.org](mailto:acohen@jcfphoenix.org) • 480-699-1717 • [www.jcfphoenix.org](http://www.jcfphoenix.org)

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“All I have to do is live with myself. I have to like myself. If I can do that, whatever they do or say, I can laugh it off ... I can honestly say that it doesn't bother me anymore.”

Let's face it. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah is an awkward time in life. You want to be perfect but are quickly learning that no one is perfect. I hope and pray that you not only learn to forgive others for mistakes, but you especially learn to forgive yourself. Let go of any pursuit of perfection. Learn to try and try again. Then you will truly have become a bar/bat mitzvah.

### 'Live a life worth living'

Rabbi Pinchas Allouche  
Congregation Beth Tefillah



“How can I pay you back?” Josh pleaded.

Josh had just been saved from a hurricane's wrath. An enormous wave was crashing toward him when a stranger appeared out of nowhere and transported Josh to safety.

Josh tried hard to repay the stranger's kindness. But as much as he tried, the man refused. “I was just doing the right thing,” he replied. “I don't need a reward.” Still, Josh insisted. After a long pause, the man conceded: “Alright, Josh, I'll accept just one reward: Pay me back by living a life that was worth saving.”

The tumultuous storm we face today is the tempest of distraction and the seduction of the banal. According to a recent survey, teenagers and young adults watch close to four reality shows a week. As if that weren't enough, we are increasingly YouTubing, Facebooking, Twittering and texting ourselves into oblivion.

In such a turbulent world, one crucial advice ought to be offered to our bar and bat mitzvah youngsters, 12- and 13-year-olds who are expected to become fully responsible human beings: “Live every moment fully. Live every experience meaningfully. Live every step of the way with utter loyalty to your Jewish identity, heritage and traditions. Live a life that is worth living.”

### 'Remain engaged as a Jew'

Rabbi Arthur Lavinsky  
Beth El Congregation



First and foremost, *mazel tov* to you as you are about to become a full-fledged member of the Jewish community. Don't worry about any mistakes you may make at the service. You've been well-trained and virtually everyone attending your bar/bat mitzvah is in your corner and rooting for you.

The success of your special day should not be measured solely by how many verses you read from the Torah, the quality of your voice or even the skills of your DJ at your Saturday night party. More important is whether your bar/bat mitzvah will mark the end of your attendance in synagogue (God forbid) or whether you are going to commit to continue to grow Jewishly, enroll at Hebrew High, travel to Israel and remain engaged as a Jew for the rest of your life.

In fact, we invite you to come back to shul on the Sabbath following your bar/bat mitzvah so that we can honor you with an encore aliyah to the Torah. That's because we're looking forward to your ongoing participation and presence in a congregation that loves you and your family.

Many youngsters ask me, “Rabbi, what theme do you think I should use for my bar/bat mitzvah?” I always suggest “Torah: It's an oldie but goodie!”

*This article was produced in partnership with the Greater Phoenix Board of Rabbis and the Orthodox Rabbinical Council.*



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# Putting the congregation on the guest list

More and more families planning bar and bat mitzvahs are taking the advice of Jeffrey Salkin, author of “Putting God on the Guest List,” by making sure to incorporate spiritual elements into their celebrations.

But are we re-examining who else we’re inviting to our b’nai mitzvah?

For many of us, the list is topped by family near and far, then co-workers, neighbors, teachers and those to whose *simchas* we have been invited.

But what about fellow congregants? Are you inviting them — I mean, all of them?

In a huge urban synagogue, this may be wildly impractical. But many of us belong to suburban synagogues with memberships of 200-300 families but regular Shabbat-morning attendance is just 30 to 50. Are those congregants who regularly make the minyan welcome not just to your bar mitzvah service but to your table, too?

“Many rabbis speak regretfully of the ‘privatization’ of bar/bat mitzvah,” writes Rabbi Janet Marder, a former president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in an essay on the website of the Union for Reform Judaism. “Almost all of those attending a Shabbat morning service when a bar or bat mitzvah takes place are guests invited by the family.”

She goes on: “When congregants not invited by the family do show up at such services, they often express discomfort, feeling that they are not welcome in the synagogue without an invitation.”

I’ve had this experience myself. After attending a bar mitzvah service to which I was not invited at an out-of-town synagogue, my wife and I had an intense post-service discussion about whether we should attend the luncheon.

“They didn’t say you had to be invited,” I remember saying as I looked wistfully at the buffet table. But as we stood in the doorway, neither of us felt comfortable enough to venture in.

Rabbi Steven Silver of Temple Menorah in

Redondo Beach, Calif., a suburban Reform synagogue near Los Angeles, insists that his congregants invite everyone who attends services to the lunch after the event.

“You want kids to have this rite of passage in front of their community, not as a private family event,” he said. “It’s not a birthday party, but a bonding event to the Jewish people.”

To gain acceptance for his policy, which he says he had to approach “gingerly,” Silver says he explained to parents that while their children were attending Saturday morning services to prepare for their b’nai mitzvah, “they had developed relationships with many of the older congregants” and therefore it had become important

“for their children to have them there.” “We tell them to expect an extra 30 to 35 congregants,” said Silver, who asks that when there is assigned seating, some tables be assigned for the “community.”

For my own children’s bar mitzvahs, held at the Movable Minyan, a small lay-led congregation in Los Angeles, we followed the organization’s policy of inviting everyone to both the service and lunch. Even though there were only 20 or so regulars, the community total came to 60 after adding the spouses, children and extended family of the regular attendees.

Those who have sprung for a kosher bar mitzvah luncheon, beginning at \$20 a head can understand easily why Silver had to broach the subject gingerly: It’s expensive!

To help keep down the costs, Silver said his temple hired a cook.

“Ninety-five percent of the parents now support the program. Their kids understand that they have been eating someone else’s bagel, and now it’s their turn to reciprocate,” Silver said.

Larger congregations with higher Shabbat attendance, like Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, a Conservative synagogue to which I also belong, take a different approach. According to the executive director, Sheryl Goldman, b’nai mitzvah families are required to host a kiddush after services for those not invited to the more formal luncheon.

**Edmon J. Rodman**



Milton Posner reads from the Torah during his October 2012 bar mitzvah at the Movable Minyan, a lay-led congregation in Los Angeles where all the worshipers are invited to lunch and an aliyah is reserved for a minyan member.

Photo by Jeremi Peck

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“It can be simple like challah, fruit and cholent, or very elaborate,” said Goldman, adding that the synagogue only in very special circumstances allows a bar or bat mitzvah in the late afternoon, when regulars are absent.

“We don’t want a private service,” she said. That would be “like a rental of space.”

**‘Many rabbis speak regretfully of the “privatization” of bar/bat mitzvah.’**

— Rabbi Janet Marder, Former president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis

But how to keep the service that takes place before lunch inclusive and communal?

At Temple Menorah, the fifth aliyah is reserved for the community. That way, Silver says, there is room to call up to the Torah a congregant who is getting married, has an anniversary or has some other compelling reason for an aliyah in addition to the family tree of b’nai mitzvah attendees who will be called up for the *simcha* that day.

Movable Minyan also reserves an aliyah for a minyan regular. I remember discussing with my wife who in our community we thought had welcomed and

included our kids and should get the aliyah. On the morning when that person was called up, we felt the communal circle of *l’dor v’dor*, generation to generation, had been completed.

As Silver said, “The community validates the bar mitzvah.”

*Edmon J. Rodman is a JTA columnist who writes on Jewish life from Los Angeles. Contact him at edmojace@gmail.com.*

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# Northern mitzvah

## Arctic community celebrates group lifecycle event

### JEWISH AGENCY FOR ISRAEL

With help from The Jewish Agency for Israel and the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, seven young Jewish adults in Murmansk, Russia celebrated their bar and bat mitzvah in late January.

Murmansk, the largest city inside the Arctic Circle, is one of the global Jewish family's northernmost communities. So harsh are the winters there that the bar and bat mitzvah celebrants had to shovel through several feet of snow to access the building.

The small Jewish community of Murmansk numbers only a



The seven participants in the Murmansk Bar/Bat Mitzvah, organized by The Jewish Agency, each recited a passage from the weekly Torah section of Bo in the book of Exodus.

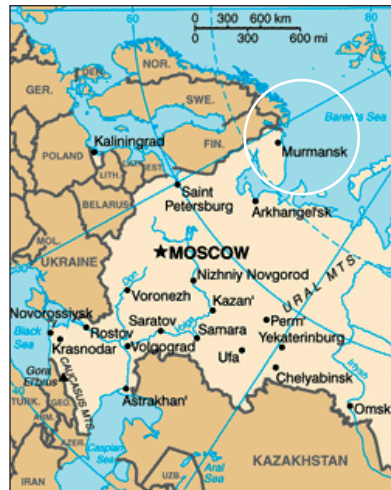
*Photo courtesy of Jewish Agency for Israel*

few hundred and does not even have a synagogue. Jewish teenagers in the city were unsure whether it was accepted practice to celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah since they had already passed the ages of 12 or 13. However, once they learned that the chairman of the Jewish Agency, Natan Sharansky, was celebrating his bar mitzvah at the ripe old age of 65, Murmansk community leaders reached out to The Jewish Agency to organize a bar mitzvah ceremony for their youngsters.

Jewish Agency Youth Shaliach (emissary) Sagi Rabovski traveled 870 miles from his home in St. Petersburg to run the group bar and bat mitzvah ceremony. The participants each recited a passage from the weekly Torah section of Bo in the book of Exodus and received a gift of the Chumash (Five books of Moses) for their bar or bat mitzvah.

"I feel that it is my mission to help even the smallest Jewish communities," Rabovski said. "By connecting Jews to Israel and the Jewish tradition, we can strengthen their Jewish identities."

The Jewish Agency runs Hebrew and Jewish history classes for the small Jewish population of the city. Cleveland's Beth Israel-The West Temple is twinned with the Jewish community of Murmansk. Members of the two communities regularly exchange personal updates and messages via email.



Left: Murmansk, which is located on the Barents Sea, has a population of about 300,000 people and is the largest city north of the Arctic Circle.

*Map courtesy of CIA World Factbook*

Below: Older teenagers also participated in the group bar/bat mitzvah.

*Photo courtesy of Jewish Agency for Israel*



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# Why do it?

## Behind adult bar mitzvah

I wrote an article titled “Spirits fulfilled” (Jewish News, Aug. 19, 2011) that looked at adult b’nai mitzvah celebrations, and two takeaway points soon became apparent.

First, a Jewish adult doesn’t need a b’nai mitzvah ceremony. If you reach the age of bar or bat mitzvah, you are — without the ceremony — a bar or bat mitzvah, a Jewish adult expected to carry out all the duties and entitled to all the rights and privileges that pertain. In other words, the ceremony is pretty much a custom that marks your status, like a graduation, rather than one that confers status, like a wedding.

Second, the reasons for having an adult b’nai mitzvah celebration are as numerous and individual as can be. This is a caution against the common thought that every person seeking an adult b’nai mitzvah ceremony simply didn’t have such a ceremony when they turned 13. In the Conservative movement, for instance, there were women who had bat mitzvah ceremonies in their youth who were not allowed to read from Torah then and thus decided to have an adult bat mitzvah



**Sal Caputo**

at which they were able to do so. Demographic changes likely mean that this will be a small and receding trend, but who knows for sure?

But there is another class of adult b’nai mitzvah ceremonies that has a long tradition and is actually likely to be boosted by the demographics of an aging nation, and that’s the adult bar mitzvah that’s marked at age 83 — a sort of renewal of vows that follows a particular tradition that views 70 years as a full lifetime and the subsequent 13 years as a coming of age period in a new lifetime.

In writing the story, I talked with rabbis representing the range of Jewish streams (although not every eddy, tributary or branch) and found that the appetite for the adult ceremonies among those who did not have a childhood ceremony (it’s hard talking about this in precise English terms because obviously the person having the childhood ceremony is an adult under Jewish law and tradition) is very low in the Orthodox world, possibly because such a ceremony does not change their status under Halacha (Jewish law), but in the more liberal streams it’s a flowing river that’s likely to ebb and flow over time because few affiliated Jewish boys and girls go without a b’nai mitzvah ceremony these days. Offsetting that ebb, however, is that rates of conversion into these streams, particularly Reform, will likely increase in coming years.

Learning the ins and outs of the adult b’nai mitzvah practices interested me because I came late to Judaism (and so did not have a childhood ceremony) and was wondering if I should take the adult b’nai mitzvah class the next time it was offered at my synagogue.

Each of the people who had undergone an adult b’nai mitzvah ceremony (which includes plenty of study and preparation leading up to it) expressed a sense of spiritual fulfillment. Those who had done so in a class and had a group ceremony expressed deep bonds they felt with their classmates that seemed to intensify their feeling of *klal Yisrael*.

I was also struck by Rabbi Nina Perlmutter’s description of adult b’nai mitzvahs as a “joyful, soulful Jewish experience for adults and, I believe, a model for the congregation.”

In other words, when an adult b’nai mitzvah is celebrated in a Shabbat service, the entire congregation is reminded of the Talmudic teaching that “the study of the Torah is equal” to all the good things that Jews are traditionally commanded to do, that the tradition (and the community that gathers around the tradition) rests on the thirst for study.

The idea that undertaking study for one’s own growth can give back to the community in a meaningful way made the decision very easy. Echoing in my mind was Hillel’s question, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

So I’m taking the course. The date hasn’t been set, but I’ll soon chant my portion.

*Salvatore Caputo is a member of Temple Emanuel of Tempe and is in the current adult b’nai mitzvah class there.*

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# Opulent or overboard?

## Marking a rite of passage in high style

**GIL SHEFLER**  
 JTA News & Features

Dressed in a black-and-white tuxedo and surrounded by a Secret Service detail, former President Bill Clinton greeted well-wishers at a bar mitzvah held at an upscale hotel in Los Angeles, shaking hands with guests and patiently posing for pictures. Once everyone had arrived, the ex-president turned to the audience to introduce the guest of honor.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is my distinct honor to introduce the next president — and the first Jewish president — of the United States of America!"

"Hail to the Chief" began playing from loudspeakers and a 10-foot model of the Washington Monument in the center of the room opened up to reveal an ebullient young Jewish teenager waiting inside.

The bar mitzvah had officially begun.

"The kid had been the class and school president, so he wanted a presidential theme," says Jay Shwartz, the Los Angeles party planner who organized the affair. "We put up balloons in red, white and blue all over and had models of the Lincoln Memorial, Mount Rushmore and the White House."

Themed bar mitzvah parties are nothing new. As long as American Jews have had a taste for the tacky, there have been parties inspired by cheesy Hollywood films and nearly forgotten pop stars. But the combination of growing Jewish affluence and the availability of new technological toys is driving the trend into the 21st century.

"Everybody's trying to be creative and do something different [from] the other person," says Joel Nelson, whose San Francisco Bay Area company has been producing bar mitzvahs for 31 years.

Some years ago, Nelson helped a family stage an "Alice in Wonderland" bat mitzvah in a rented warehouse on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. The party featured the Cheshire Cat, Mad Hatter and other characters walking around, as well as a section designed to look like the Mad Hatter tea party.

"There are very few who spend that kind of money, it's not the norm," Nelson says. "Sometimes, I wonder if it might be a business write-off. But if you have one kid and you own a company in the Silicon Valley, then I can understand why you might want to put up a party."

Increasingly, some of the money dropped on a lavish bar mitzvah isn't even spent on the event itself but on its promotion. Earlier this year, a YouTube video urging viewers to "save the date" for Daniel Blumen's bar mitzvah went viral. The video, shot at locations around

Atlanta and featuring a cameo by Mayor Kasim Reed, has the bar mitzvah dressed in an Atlanta Falcons jersey and draped in bling.

Blumen's spot was featured on the "Today" show, ABC News, CNN and even London's Daily Mail. More than 400,000 people have viewed it online.

One highlight of the over-the-top b'nai mitzvahs is the guest of honor's entrance, which can take on the form of a Vegas spectacle. Boys and girls celebrating the onset of adulthood make entrances accompanied by NFL cheerleaders, descending from the ceiling by a rope like Peter Pan or cruising into a room driving a miniature Ferrari.

"It's a big deal," says Alex Einhorn of Siegel Productions, a company in Boston specializing in planning bar mitzvahs. "Once they make the entrance, the stress is off. It's a statement saying, 'I'm here and I'm excited to celebrate with you.'"



Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed strikes a pose with Daniel Blumen for Blumen's viral "Save the Date" bar mitzvah video.

*Photo courtesy of YouTube*

In 2008, the excesses of contemporary bar mitzvahs became a national issue when the New York Post reported on a New York affair that reportedly had cost \$1 million. The bat mitzvah made her entrance by donning a Catwoman suit and descending by a rope to the floor of Cipriani, a swanky Manhattan restaurant. Upon landing, she was serenaded by rock

star Jon Bon Jovi for 45 minutes.

"My husband did well that year and he was proud of himself, and he wanted to throw a huge party," Liza Sandler, the girl's mother, was quoted as saying.

The lavishness and cost of some of the bigger bashes has been mercilessly mocked online and criticized from the pulpit, to little apparent effect. Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles said he has sought repeatedly to rein in over-the-top Jewish soirees. A few affairs he attended were so outlandish, he felt compelled to say something to the parents.

"I tell them they are giving the wrong message to the child, never mind to the community," Wolpe says. "Sometimes, they are under the impression that the religious value is commensurate with the value of the event. That is not true."

Lowell, the Florida party planner, admits some of the showier bar mitzvahs were narcissistic and had more to do with parental ambitions than a child's desires. Nonetheless, she said there was nothing inherently wrong about putting on a show, as long as it combined substance with style.

"At the end of the day, the message children need to learn is that this is a coming-of-age celebration," she says. "You look for depth and spiritual meaning, and if that is lacking, no matter how much money you spent, it's ice cold."







# Birth of a kveller

## How my brother's bar mitzvah taught me about sharing joy

In 3 1/2 all-too-brief years, I'll be sitting in a synagogue pew watching my oldest son become a bar mitzvah. This milestone event will mean several things.

It will mean that my children will have commenced our collective familial descent into the wondrous minefield of adolescence.

It will mean that I will, officially, be old. And most important, it will mean that I will experience some of the greatest joy of my life.

A cousin of my husband's once said that except for birthdays, a bar mitzvah is the only day that's all about you until your funeral. It's morbid and funny, but in fact it's only partially true. The day someone becomes a bar or bat mitzvah is implicitly, if not explicitly, about all the people who helped that bar or bat mitzvah get to the day as well.

I know this from personal experience. I am the oldest of three siblings. My brother, unlike his two sisters, was not a Hebrew school nerd. Chanting from the Torah came easily to us; my brother had a tin ear. And it wasn't just the tunefulness factor: Reading Hebrew aloud was a painful, time-consuming and excruciating endeavor both for him and his listeners. Throw in the preadolescent awkwardness and general lack of enthusiasm about being up on a bimah in front of lots of people and potentially, it was a perfect storm.

"Give him a hand with it," my mother told me.

I was a senior in high school and definitely had other things I'd rather be doing than helping my brother with his Torah portion. My brother and I rarely spent much time together other than during family meals and vacations — and certainly barely any time alone together. I had no idea that this time together would prove life-changing for me.

We sat on the floor of the den wedged between the couch and the stereo. We listened to the cantor's recording of his portion again and again. I tested him on cantillation signs and word pronunciations. I taught him as I had been taught

to read Torah: You aren't finished with a given practice until you can do the whole thing three times without any mistakes.

Don't misunderstand — this mother-enforced togetherness was far from idyllic. More accurately, I'd say it was grueling. At least one door was slammed in my face. Tears were shed, possibly by both of us. At different times, we each expressed the wish that I could do the portion instead of him.

I don't remember if we practiced every day, but we certainly did it fairly frequently — frequently enough that by the time his bar mitzvah date rolled around, I barely slept the night before out of nervousness.

As I watched my brother ascend the bimah in our suburban New Jersey synagogue the next day,

I felt like I was going to faint. My own palms were oddly clammy.

I looked at him in his little suit and tie, his geeky glasses, and thought, "I would give anything in the world to make this go OK for you." In short, I realized I wanted nothing more than for him to be happy.

As a teenager — someone whose wants and desires are mercurial and blow about like detritus tossed by a superstorm — this was a revelation.

Years later, I'm a parent, a writer and a parenting writer: a professional kveller, if you will (and a contributing editor for the parenting website *Kveller*, coincidentally enough). But I can trace the roots of my kvelling proclivities to that June day in 1991 when my brother became a bar mitzvah.

The day my brother did an amazing job at becoming a bar mitzvah — no mistakes! — was the day I first realized that there is no greater joy in the world than the joy you can take from schlepping nachas, or deriving pride, from someone else's achievement. It was the day I realized that life, if I lived it right, could be full of such moments, where love infuses hours with meaning and joy.

To accomplish that requires an investment of time and energy — an investment, I learned, that does pay off.

*Jordana Horn writes about Jewish life for the Forward and Kveller.com. This article was distributed by JTA.*

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