

# An observation of a bar mitzvah

Society



\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [The Ceremony](#) \n \t
2. [Discussion](#) \n \t
3. [Conclusion](#) \n \t
4. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

The bar mitzvah is not actually a ceremony or rite of passage as many people believe. It is actually a boy of the Jewish religion who has attained the age of 13. It is thus a legal status that is automatically ascribed with no need for ceremony or any other religious rite. A parallelism would be attaining adult age, typically 18 in most societies. The bar mitzvah pertains to males while a bat mitzvah is to females, and females become bat mitzvot (plural of mitzvah) at the age of 12. Bar or bat mitzvah translates to a “coming of age” and signifies the transition of the child to that of beginning adulthood insofar as religious practice was concerned, and be counted as part of the minyan or quorum for public prayer. While it is widely practiced, there is actually no direct mention of it in the Talmud.

Because women are traditionally not allowed to read from the Torah, it was a momentous occasion when in 1922 the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan was the first bat mitzvah to read from the Torah in celebration of her 12th birthday. (“The first American bat mitzvah”) Today, many young girls celebrate becoming a bat mitzvah with a grandiosity that rivals that of a Sweet 16 birthday party.

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## **The Ceremony**

The synagogue was a study of the diversity in the US. On one side was the families of the two girls who were to become bat mitzvot and since one of the girls was an adoptee of Chinese descent and the adoptive mother was not Jewish, there were quite a few who were not. Among the congregation, many were not Jewish as well, guests of the girls and their families who were to join in the celebration. (Schapiro)

A box of commemorative yarmulke or distinctive skullcap enabled male guests to help themselves to one because it is expected that they cover their heads when participating in the service. However, only Jewish males over 13 wore the ritual fringes called the talit. Aside from this, there did not seem to be a distinction in dress for Jews and non-Jews.

Some small children were present, and were quite surprisingly free to get up and roam as they pleased as long as they behaved. The unruly ones were quietly led away to what can only be supposed is a playroom.

On the eastern wall of the synagogue, the Ark is evident. This is the repository of the Torah, and above the Ark is a light called the Ner Tamid or eternal light. There is also a representation of the Tablets of the Covenant.

On the bima, the raised platform on which the service was to be conducted. The two girls were seated on the right side of the altar. The girls' fathers laid the prayer shawl on their respective daughter's shoulders, signifying a transfer of power, or responsibility, whichever perspective works, and the choir raised their voice in a welcoming song in Hebrew.

The rabbi commenced with the reading, and at each part the congregation was told when to sit or stand. This was especially helpful for non-Jewish participants of the service. The girls then were directed to approach the Ark where the Torah scrolls were kept. Each took their scroll and carried it around the sanctuary, as each Jewish guest touch their prayer books to it to signify love and devotion to its teachings.

The girls then took their place at the bima in front of the congregation to read out the scrolls in Hebrew. This is referred to as the aliyah. The girls each read part of Chapter 21 of Exodus which was the reading for the Shabbat for that week. Afterwards, each girl gave a speech in English, a d'rash about how the experience preparing for becoming bat mitzvot had meant to them. Each girl then touched the fringe of their prayer shawl to the Torah before kissing it and returning to their seat. The parents (excepting the non-Jewish mother) spoke before the congregation thanking God for the blessing of freeing them from the responsibility for their child's sins. This part was spoken in English.

The rabbi then said a few words directed at the new bat mitzvot and the girls then proceeded with the concluding prayers, the Haftorah and then the ceremony was over. The next part of the celebration was the fun part, the Kiddush and seudat mitzvah that translates today to a party held outside the synagogue, where speeches and advice are liberally given for the elucidation of the new bat mitzvah. Traditional gifts with associations with the number 18 (considered a "lucky" number in Jewish tradition, means also "life") and more generic gifts were given at the reception. ("Bar and Bat Mitzvah"; Rich "Gifts")

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## Discussion

Mitzvah is the word for “commandment,” and bat is “daughter” so a bat mitzvah is a daughter of the commandment. The whole point of this rite is to commemorate the child’s coming of age but the way it is practiced tends to be highly adaptable to the particular societal context. The ceremony itself has no mention in the Talmud so the rituals have evolved over time and application. (“Bar & bat mitzvah”)

Preparation for the bar or bat mitzvah typically begins a year or more prior to the projected date, especially for modern Jews or those who are newly converted. This is to allow the child to become familiar with the Jewish commandments, prayer, history and the Hebrew language. A large portion of this education is overseen by the cantor, or scholar.

The responsibilities of the bat mitzvah includes the keeping of the mitzvot or commandments as embodied in the Torah, all 613 of them. She is also expected to observe rituals such as fasting days. Interestingly enough, this is also considered the point in which the bat mitzvah can decide to remain or not within the faith. Because of this, a confirmation ceremony is slated for the 16th or 18th year of the bat mitzvah in some communities. (“Bar/bat mitzvah”)

More orthodox Jewish families prepare their male children for eventual emancipation by starting their preparations at kindergarten age and beyond the age of bar mitzvah. Orthodox Jews do not allow women to participate in religious services, so becoming a bat mitzvah in these communities does not

include the service and is usually celebrated at home with a small party that merely commemorates the child's 12th birthday.

Reformist sects take the cue from their spiritual leader, the rabbi. This was what happened to Judith Kaplan the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, who believed women should be given equal consideration and importance in the community. However, for the longest time bat mitzvot usually celebrated on a Friday rather than on the Shabbat, or did not read directly from the Torah, so deeply ingrained was the bias against women in the Jewish orthodoxy. (" The first American bat mitzvah")

With the influence of American society and growing diversity in religion, however practice has been inevitably affected. The number of religious intermarriages is rising and many religious groups have seen the wisdom of adapting to the changing society.

This is especially apparent in the ceremony described above. The bar mitzvot are now allowed to read from the Torah, and are instructed in this by the cantor with the benevolent overseeing of the rabbi himself. They participate fully in the ceremony, and the fact that one of the parents is non-Jewish is no longer a big issue as long as they play a passive role in the service itself. Outsiders are welcome to participate in a passive manner as well, and religious scholars are more than willing to explain the intricacies of the service to the clueless.

There is even a growing trend among newly converted Jews who become bar or bat mitzvah in ceremonies held at any point in their life, some as old as 80. Because these people came into the faith late in life, they are considered

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to have attained a “ coming of age” when they have mastered the basics of the Jewish religion.

## **Conclusion**

For all children, rites of passage are important highlights in their lives. For Jewish children in particular, the concept of becoming a bar or bat mitzvah and the formal celebration of the event focuses on the importance of having a good knowledge of Judaism. At the same time, it serves as inducting a sense of belonging for children, which at this particular point in their lives is crucial for optimal development.

Because survival of the congregation that is yearly becoming diverse, even the most stringent religious traditions have been compelled to unbend and accommodate the evolving population. The practice of commemorating the becoming of a bat mitzvah is a particularly good example of this accommodation.

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