

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

Summary: The major rite of passage for Jewish boys and girls is the bar mitzvah (son of the commandment) and bat mitzvah (daughter of the commandment) service. The term refers both to the person and the ritual, in which Jewish children, at ages twelve or thirteen, and adult Jewish converts, lead their congregation for the first time in the recitation of a weekly Torah portion. They thereby begin full participation in Jewish congregational life, and the service is often followed by a large celebration.

One of the most precious moments in every religious community is the moment when a young person appropriates for themselves the central symbols of the tradition. In the Jewish tradition, that central symbol is Torah, the revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai and all that has issued from it over some 3,000 years. When Jewish children come of age—around twelve for girls and thirteen for boys—they become *bat mitzvah*, daughter of the commandment, or *bar mitzvah*, son of the commandment. The term refers both to the persons and to the ritual, in which the Jewish child is called forward to the Torah scroll and for the first time reads from it publicly. This rite of passage not only bestows a new privilege upon the next generation, it also requires the younger generation to take on a larger set of *mitzvot*, including full participation in congregational life. The ceremony takes place as soon as possible following the twelfth or thirteenth birthday, although adult converts to Judaism also celebrate their *bar* or *bat mitzvah* as the culmination of their conversion process. While the tradition has historically been reserved for males, most contemporary Jewish movements and synagogues, including Orthodox, have extended this ritual to females as well. The first *bat mitzvah* ceremony took place in the early 1920s in New York City.

Whether in childhood or in conversion, preparation for the *bar* or *bat mitzvah* may take several years and is especially intense during the year preceding the rite, when the Jewish person must acquire a basic understanding of the Hebrew language and be able to read the Torah portion for the day. In the Orthodox and Conservative traditions, the *bar mitzvah* male now can put on *tefillin*, the small black boxes containing four portions from the Torah that he will bind to his head and arms during weekday prayers. At a *bat mitzvah* the female will likewise read the passage from the Torah as well as the weekly

portion from the *haftarah* (“Prophets”). As part of the *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, the new Jewish adult will also give a short public talk to commemorate their entry into Jewish adulthood. Students may also perform some community service, in keeping with the Jewish values of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*.

After the ceremony there is a simple *kiddush*, in which wine and sweet bread are blessed and passed around for the congregation to partake. After the services are over, the gathered friends and family adjourn from the sanctuary of the synagogue to the social hall, a private home, or a gala hotel space for a festive reception complete with food, music, dancing, and gift-giving. In the United States and for twelve- and thirteen-year-old *bar* or *bat mitzvahs*, these celebrations have become increasingly festive, elaborate, and costly. In other parts of the Jewish community and for adult converts, these celebrations are typically quieter and less expensive, attended mostly by close friends and family.

The *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is much more than the recognition and celebration of a single day; it is the entry into a new phase of one’s life and responsibility as a Jew. Traditionally, the parents of a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* also recite blessings marking the passage from childhood to adulthood (in Jewish terms) and expressing their thanks that the child now has taken full responsibility for their Jewish life. The particular portion of Torah a person has struggled to learn and read with confidence will forever have a special place in his or her memory. Sometimes he or she will be called up to the Torah to read that portion every year. It is not only a private milestone, but the beginning of a new participation in the life of the community.