Bar mitzvahs and Bat mitzvahs

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Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs

A bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, meaning “son/daughter of the commandment” in Aramaic, refers to a Jewish series of rituals performed by adolescent males at age 13 and females at age 12. The ceremony of becoming bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah is not required by Jewish law but is held sacred. The ceremony consists of, among other things, leading part of a worship service and reading the sacred text in front of the assembly. This paramount event in the life of a Jewish youth has evolved over the centuries, but the origins of the ritual date back as early as the 1st century C.E. Many Jewish parents of past and present view this rite of passage as an important step in the life of their adolescent progeny.

A male, per Jewish law, is not required to observe mitzvoth (“commandments”) until he has reached the age of maturity. In rabbinic literature of late antiquity, maturity may not have been determined by age, but rather by the first sign of physical maturity, namely, the appearance of pubic hair. Eventually, 13 was designated as the age when each boy was initiated into adulthood, and was required to observe mitzvoh. A 2nd century C.E. authoritative text states that “at five, one should study Scripture; at ten, one should study Mishnah [rabbinic text]; at thirteen, one is ready to observe mitzvoth” (Mishnah Avot, 5:24).

Another early rabbinic text explains that at age 13, the boy’s father would “bring him in front of each elder to be blessed, strengthened, and to pray that he might be privileged to study Torah and perform good deeds” (Talmud, Sofrim 18:5). Near the age of 13, the well-known 1st century historian Josephus was recognized in Jerusalem by the elders for his accurate understanding of Jewish law.

Process

The process of becoming bar mitzvah, including the ceremony and festivities, has evolved through the centuries. As it is performed today, this rite of passage is imbued with both symbolic meaning and sentimentality, particularly because it is an amalgamation of authoritative rabbinic precepts and centuries-old traditions. By the 20th century, the process of becoming bar mitzvah had grown to include many procedures that vary across Jewish subgroups. These procedures include (1) wearing tefillin (“phylacteries”) for the first time (tefillin are small boxes containing scriptural passages that are bound to the head and arm during worship); (2) receiving an aliyah during a synagogue service (i.e., “ascending” to the podium to make blessings over the weekly Torah portion); (3) the father publicly declaring that the bar mitzvah is thereafter responsible for his actions (i.e., “Blessed be He Who has exempted me from the punishment of the child”); and (4) reading all or part of the Torah portion and/or reading an additional portion (haftarah) from one of the books of the prophets.

Jewish females 12 years of age are also initiated into adulthood with a ceremony that, among most Jewish groups today, resembles the process of becoming bar mitzvah, although this was not always the case. In fact, not until 1922 was a ceremony of becoming bat mitzvah performed in the United States. On this occasion, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, permitted his daughter to recite a blessing and read a selected text from the Torah in front of the assembly.

Today, nearly every Reconstructionist and Reform congregation, and a majority of Conservative congregations, celebrate the process of becoming bat mitzvah in a similar manner as the bar mitzvah. The Orthodox community celebrates a bat mitzvah in a variety of ways that may or may not mimic the process of becoming bar mitzvah; nevertheless, high value is placed on both rites of passage.

A candidate for becoming bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah begins preparations a few months to a year prior to the ceremony date. The rabbi often assigns a teacher to the candidate and regular sessions commence, usually once per week. In the early stages of instruction, the candidate obtains greater knowledge of several key rituals. As the special day approaches, classes intensify, and the candidate begins to learn how to read from the Torah, which also includes lessons by the synagogue cantor on Torah cantillations. Rehearsals may also commence a week or two prior to the ceremony.

Perhaps most important, the candidate, if a male, receives instruction on tefillin. As mentioned previously, tefillin are black boxes containing four biblical passages that are donned daily during prayer. The candidate is instructed on how to wear, remove, and store tefillin properly. The wearing of
efillin is of sufficient significance that the family often celebrates this aspect of becoming bar mitzvah on par with a major graduation. For example, parents often hire a photographer to take pictures of the candidate wearing tefillin. The parents may also buy fine leather tefillin and present it to the candidate as a gift.

The actual day of the ceremony is a special event for the entire family and the Jewish community. Several people are involved in the process, including the rabbi, instructors, photographers, family members who are invited to read portions of the Torah during the service, those involved in physical preparation of food and facilities, and individuals who give monetary contributions and gifts to the synagogue or the family.

The experience of becoming bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah need not be the pinnacle of Jewish learning and observance. However, a growing number of Jewish families view this day as a pinnacle. In fact, the American Jewish community has seen a dramatic increase in Jewish school dropout rates after the age of 13. On the other hand, to certain segments of the Jewish community, the process of becoming bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah will always retain momentous meaning and joy.

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See Also: Judaism and Orthodox Judaism; Passover; Rituals.

Further Readings
