

Disclaimer: This document was compiled in anticipation of a traditional bar mitzvah ceremony at Temple Beth Shalom. Due to the pivot to a distanced ceremony, some of these elements may be omitted or altered to work in this new format.

## What is Bar Mitzvah?

Let's start by explaining what Bar Mitzvah is not...

- It is not something to be owned: *"My son had his bar mitzvah last week."*
- It is not something to be acquired: *"I got my bar mitzvah last month."*
- It is not an event: *"Holden's bar mitzvah was so fun."*
- It is not a verb: *"The rabbi bar mitzvahed my friend."*
- It is not a past participle: *"My cousin was bar mitzvahed last year."*

Bar mitzvah is what a young man (bat mitzvah for a young woman) becomes, simply by turning thirteen. The words literally mean "son of the commandment." What it really means is "old enough to be responsible for *mitzvot*." Mitzvot are the commandments that a Jew does not only to live a Jewish life, but also to sanctify life.

## Why at the age of thirteen?

There are many different reasons for this. To the ancients, thirteen was the age of spiritual and moral choices. Some rabbinic sources say that only upon turning thirteen is a youth first able to make mature choices. Thirteen was also the age of religious achievement. The thirteen-year-old child could help constitute a *minyan* (traditional quorum of ten adult men needed for a communal prayer). Thirteen also becomes the age of a kind of legal maturity. The Mishnah, the code of Jewish law compiled around 200 C.E., traditionally considers the vows of a boy aged thirteen plus one day as legally binding. Therefore, the age of thirteen was considered the crossroads of spiritual, moral, and religious maturity.

## What does it all mean?

Bar mitzvah is about ritual maturity. It is about growing up as a Jew. It is about becoming a fuller member of the Jewish community. It is also about moral responsibility, about connecting to Torah, to community, to G-d. Today, Holden will show his maturity and recognition of this responsibility by leading the congregation in prayer and song.

## Why do we come together to celebrate?

Bar mitzvah is a symbolic way to usher a child into the adult Jewish community. This is a way for the entire community to say to the no-longer-child, "All we cherish, all we hope to be, the sum total of our visions, we place them in your hands. May G-d make you ready. May G-d make you strong." This may seem like a heavy burden, so having a loving community to support and celebrate this transition is so important and means so much to our family.

## Elements of the Jewish Worship Service

The Shabbat (Sabbath) worship service is a joyous celebration. Jewish worship in a Reform synagogue is expressed through songs and prayers, some ancient and some contemporary, in both Hebrew and English. Holden will lead most of the service from the **bimah** (the raised platform) along with the **rabbi** (religious leader) and **cantor** (musically trained clergy).

### Morning Blessings & Blessing for the Tallit

Holden will begin the service with the blessing for putting on a Tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl. The tallit has special twined and knotted fringes known as **tzitzit** attached to its four corners representing the commandments that Holden is now responsible to fulfill as he understands them.

Then, Holden will say a number of blessings for daily miracles that are customarily recited at sunrise, as well as a blessing for the study of Torah. Prior to the call to worship, Holden will say the **Reader's Kaddish** or **Chatzi Kaddish** - a prayer that serves as a transition to the next part of the service.

### The Sh'ma and Its Blessings

Next is the chanting of **Bar'chu** (Let us Praise). This prayer is the call to worship. It is a "call and response" prayer. Holden invites the congregation to praise G-d, and the congregation responds. During this prayer, the congregation will bow then stand straight to express humility in the presence of G-d.

The Bar'chu is followed by the **Yotzeir Or**. Its theme is the creation of light and darkness. The prayer affirms that G-d creates and re-creates the world every day.

These blessings lead into the **Sh'ma**, a brief but incredibly important statement of the central tenet of Judaism –that G-d is singular and unique: "Hear, O Israel, the Eternal is our G-d; the Eternal is one." (Deut. 6:4) Some people close or cover their eyes while reciting the **Sh'ma** to shut out external distractions and focus on the words.

Holden will then recite the **V'ahavta**, telling us that it's not enough to know that there is a G-d. Knowledge must be manifest in specific actions.

Towards the end of this part of the service, we will sing **Mi Chamocha**, "Who is like you, oh G-d?" with the Cantor. Holden will then recite **Shira Hadasha** and the **Tzur Y'israel**.

### The Amidah or T'filah

The Standing Prayer is said facing East, towards Jerusalem. It is a central section of our liturgy. The **Amidah** consists of several blessings. The prayers remind us of our connection to G-d

throughout history from the time of Abraham and Sarah; speak of G-d's power; help us to feel part of G-d's holiness; help us to open our heart with sincerity to G-d; to give thanks; to find fulfillment, peace and shalom (wholeness). We recite most of the blessings together, with Holden leading us. We will sing **Sim Shalom** with the cantor, asking for peace. We will then continue individually in silence for personal prayer or meditation.

### The Torah Service

The centerpiece of the Shabbat service is reading the **Torah** and the **Haftarah** (the Prophets). Inside the **Aron Hakodesh** (holy ark) located on the Eastern wall of the bimah, is the **Torah** (the body of Jewish law, teaching, and divine knowledge). The Torah contains the first five books of the **Tanach** (Hebrew Bible): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This scroll is made of specially prepared parchment and is written by hand, using Hebrew calligraphy. The text is divided into a year's worth of portions. Each Sabbath, congregations around the world read from the same Torah portion, linking Jewish people in ritual, regardless of where they live. Opening the Ark during the Torah service is a great honor, often given to family of the Bar Mitzvah. (We will say the **Sh'ma** again during this part of the service.)

### The Passing of the Torah

A Bar Mitzvah ceremony involves the transmission of Judaism to a new generation. This is represented symbolically when the Torah is passed through from grandparents to parents and into the arms of the Bat Mitzvah.

### Carrying of the Torah (Hakafah)

It is customary to carry the Torah through the Temple for everyone to see and touch. The **Hakafah** (circling) recalls the Israelites' journey through the wilderness; it demonstrates that the Torah belongs to all of us. We sing as the Torah is carried through our midst. Many touch the Torah with the fringes of their **Tallit** or the corner of a prayer book, and then kiss the fringes or the book. This shows love for G-d's gift of holy teaching. We honor the Torah by never turning our back on it, so it is proper to turn and follow the journey of the Torah as it is carried.

### The Reading of the Torah

The weekly Torah portion is divided into sections; each preceded and followed by a blessing. The Bar Mitzvah honors friends and family by inviting them to participate in an **Aliyah** "going up" to the bimah to say the blessings over the Torah. Holden will then read the designated verses from the Torah. Holden is celebrating a special occasion in the life cycle of a Jewish person -- the first time she is invited to read from the Torah. To read from the scroll (and chant) is the most difficult part of the service.

The Torah is read in Hebrew from right to left, and there are no vowels or punctuation in the Torah scroll. Holden trained to read Hebrew, studied the prayers to lead today's service, and mastered this week's portion. Holden also learned trope (a special chant that determines the 'tune') for reading the Torah. Recognizing this milestone, he is also called for his first Aliyah (the

honor of reciting the blessing before and after the reading). It is Holden's first Aliyah that marks his official entry into Jewish adulthood. Once the Torah reading is complete, the Torah is lifted into the air (**Hagbahah**) and dressed (**G'lilah**). Lifting and dressing the Torah are also considered to be great honors.

Before Holden's Torah reading, we will pray a **Mi Shebeirach** for those in need of healing in our congregation and in the community. The Rabbi will ask for names of people to be included in this prayer, please feel free to name someone you know in need of healing.

### Haftarah

Following the reading of the Torah, Holden will read the **Haftarah** (a weekly reading from the Prophets linked thematically to the Torah portion for the week) in Hebrew, along with the blessings that precede and follow the reading. The **Haftarah** reading is selected from the second part of the Hebrew Bible, which contains prophetic writings from Isaiah, Amos, etc. or writings from historical books like Joshua, Judge, Samuel or Kings.

### D'var Torah

After the **Haftarah** reading, Holden will deliver a **D'var Torah** -- his commentary on the weekly Torah portion. The ability to study and teach **Torah** and **Haftarah** is a mark of maturity. At the conclusion of the *D'var Torah*, the *Torah* will be returned to the Ark, and the Rabbis will invoke G-d's blessing upon Holden in front of the Ark.

### Tossing Marshmallows

After Holden is blessed and on a cue from the rabbi, it is customary to throw sweet soft candies at the feet of the Bar Mitzvah as a wish that his life will be sweet and full of blessings.

### Concluding Prayers: Aleinu and Mourner's Kaddish

There will be some special presentations to Holden honoring the occasion of his Bar Mitzvah. Concluding prayers begin with the **Aleinu**, which acknowledges that G-d has given the Jewish people a unique destiny: to strive for the repair and healing of our broken world. After the *Aleinu*, we recite the **Mourner's Kaddish**, in memory of those who have died. (This prayer may sound similar to the *Reader's Kaddish* which you heard at the start of the service.)

Finally, we express our joy for the Sabbath lunch we are about to enjoy through shared singing of **Kiddush** (the blessing over wine) starting with **V'shamru** and followed by **Motzi** (the blessing for food thanking G-d for bringing forth bread from the earth). We conclude the service with a closing song.

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