

***Moving Toward
Bar and Bat Mitzvah
the
Mishkan Ha'am Way***

Bar and bat mitzvahs

in the Mishkan Ha'am community are often surprising events, each reflecting the strengths and growth of the young person at the *bima* that day. A boy who never spoke above a whisper faces the gathered congregation and poses questions that spark a lively discussion. A girl who wrestles with the meaning of God participates in a service she helped craft to reflect her conflicts on the subject. A boy begins his service by playing a favorite violin melody. A girl leads more than one hundred friends, family, and community members through the service from beginning to end, assisted gently and sparingly by the rabbi.

How did they all arrive at that day with such self-assurance? Through a combination of shared inquiry, a supportive community, and of course, Torah and haftarah study.

Taking the steps toward becoming bar or bat mitzvah can be daunting, a rush of excitement, anxiety, and uncertainty. In Mishkan Ha'am, children and families do not undertake the journey alone. They share the journey, a rich process of exploration and learning, with other families, the congregation's rabbinic leader, and with individual tutors.

B'nai Mitzvah Group

A core element of the year leading up to a child's bar/bat mitzvah is the B'nai Mitzvah group. All of the parents and their b'nai mitzvah-age children meet as a group approximately once per month, usually on a Sunday. Generally, these informal gatherings rotate among the homes of participating families. The group

is self-led, but may consult with the rabbi, who may occasionally attend meetings. Together, the families decide on topics to explore, drawing on the "curriculum" and materials developed by b'nai mitzvah group families in previous years.

Some topics typically encountered include:

- What *is* a bar/bat mitzvah?
- What does *mitzvah* mean?
- Do you want to be a bar/bat mitzvah? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to you to be Jewish?
- How do you feel about being Jewish?
- What do you know about your parents' and grandparents' bar or bat mitzvah experiences?
- What do *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* have to do with bar/bat mitzvah?
- Should we participate in a *tzedakah* or *tikkun olam* project together and what would it be? What are the issues that matter to us?

The meetings provide fertile ground for respectful dialogue between parents and their own children, youth and their peers, and between the adults and the children in the group. Almost invariably, the exchange leads kids and their parents toward a deeper personal connection to this complex rite of passage. It also affords an easy opportunity to swap information on practical issues such as recommended tutors, reliable photographers, good sources of imprinted yarmulkes, and which DJs and musicians are hot or too schmaltzy.

Torah and haftarah study

In addition to the B'nai Mitzvah group, each young person meets three or four times with the rabbi to study and discuss

the *parsha* or Torah portion, focus on its meaning, and decide on a *d'var Torah* (Torah study interpretation) topic. Parents also meet with the rabbi to review and plan the structure and components of the service.

She'arim/Gateways, Mishkan Ha'am's innovative approach to Hebrew school, provides basic Hebrew language instruction and education in Jewish rituals, holidays, ethics, history, and spirituality as well as the opportunity to get to know other kids of varied ages in the Mishkan Ha'am community. To develop fluent Torah and haftarah reading skills, families generally engage a tutor to work one-on-one on learning the Torah portion, blessings, and trope (chanting melody). This individual study often begins six months or so before the bar/bat mitzvah date.

Connected to Community

There is no standardized Mishkan Ha'am bar or bat mitzvah. However, there are many models to use as a starting point. In our sixteen-year history, some have been traditional, rabbi-led occasions in which the young person is called to the Torah to read and present a brief *d'var Torah* or interpretation. In others, the bar or bat mitzvah has taken on shaping and leading virtually the entire service and, together with his or her parents, compiling the prayer book. To gain context and a grasp of the basic structure, it is important that boys and girls become familiar with Mishkan Ha'am's Shabbat services and holiday celebrations and with the people who comprise the community and will share in the joy of the bar/bat mitzvah's accomplishment.

Bar and bat mitzvahs are among the proudest and most joyful occasions in our community. To perpetuate the tradition established within Mishkan Ha'am, families are expected to prepare for bar or bat mitzvah in a number of ways that include participation in community life in addition to individual Torah study:

- The family must be members for at least one year preceding the event, during which time the child should attend She'arim/Gateways, including the monthly She'arim Shabbat learning sessions in the year prior to and during the bar/bat mitzvah year. Of course, we hope that you'll choose to join, as well as to begin attending She'arim/Gateways, well before then!
- Families should attend numerous events throughout the year (and years) prior to bar/bat mitzvah, including Shabbat and holiday services, Havdalah programs, community celebrations, and/or tikkun olam efforts.
- The young person and at least one parent should commit to participating in the B'nai Mitzvah group for the six months to a year during which it convenes, remaining involved until the group concludes with the bar or bat mitzvah of the last child in that age cohort. Participation typically includes a tikkun olam project, as a group or individual.

Please contact us at
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