

How have Text and Tradition Shaped the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Experience?

discussion sheet compiled by Robyn Faintich, JewishGPS LLC

Prior to exploring these texts, which shape our modern bar/bat mitzvah experiences, consider the following:

- Did you have a bar/bat mitzvah? Reflecting on the experience, in what ways (if any) did that represent your commitment to Judaism at 12/13?
- What are 2-3 reasons it is important for our Jewish teens today to experience the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony?
- Why is the age of 12/13 an appropriate time for Jews to make a public commitment to Judaism?

THE AGE OF ADULTHOOD

According to Judah ben Tema in **Mishnah Avot 5:21**: *Mishnah – redacted oral tradition; 220 CE. The Mishnah plus the Gemara (commentaries on Mishnah) equals the Talmud; 3rd-5th Century. Rabbinic law not Torah/Biblical Law.*

“At five years the age is reached for studying the Bible, at ten for studying the Mishnah, at thirteen for fulfilling the mitzvot, at fifteen for studying the Talmud.”

Numbers 1:3 “from twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel”

Numbers 26:2 “Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel from twenty years old and above, by their fathers’ houses, all who are able to go to war in Israel.”

Exodus 30:14 “From twenty years old and above shall be included in the census and give this offering to God.”

- According to these texts, what age does a young Jew enter adulthood?
- Why do you think there is a discrepancy?
- If you were in charge of deciding the age of adulthood for today’s Jewish teens, what age would that be?

THE RITUAL MARKING OF ADULTHOOD

In **Talmudic times (3rd century)**, the **age of majority was moved to 13**, and in recognition of the son's change in status, the **father pronounced a blessing** in which he praised God for relieving him of responsibility for his son's conduct. But **no celebration marked the occasion**.

Sometime during the **4th century**, it became the custom to mark this stage of life by permitting the young man to be one of eight adult males privileged to make ascent (**aliyah**) to the reading desk on the Bimah on a given Shabbat soon after his thirteenth birthday. He would **read some verses of the Torah scroll**. **Blessings thanking God for the Torah were recited before and after the reading of those verses**.

As early as the **16th century**, bar mitzvah boys delivered **d'rashot**, discourses on the Torah portion that they had read. In the **17th and 18th century**, some synagogues permitted **accomplished students to lead part of the service as well**.

- Are parents today publicly “relieving [themselves] of responsibility for their [child’s] conduct” during the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony of their child?
- If this was the original intent of a public ceremony, is it still relevant today?
- Think about the religious education system that prepared these children for the public ceremony [consider the home, synagogue, school, and community]. How might it be similar/different from our modern Jewish education system?

THE CELEBRATION

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Orach Chayim 225:2, "the Tur" – a 14th century book of halakhic code written by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, died 1340

"It is a mitzvah for a person to make a meal [seudah] on the day his son becomes Bar Mitzvah as on the day he enters the wedding canopy."

By the **16th century**, it became custom to follow this first public ritual appearance with a **party sponsored by the Bar Mitzvah's family**. This was held in the synagogue or at the family home on the Shabbat during which the young person ascended to the Torah.

- What was the celebration like for the last bar/bat mitzvah that you attended? How is it similar/different to what is being described here?
- How/why do you think the celebration has evolved to what it is today?

THE BAT MITZVAH

In some **late 19th century** German communities, families would **hold a seudah, a festive meal, on the occasion of a daughter's 12th birthday**, and although a girl might deliver a speech and her father recited a blessing, this was **not a religious ceremony**.

First bat mitzvah 1922; It was celebrated by Judith Kaplan (Eisenstein), the eldest daughter of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement. **The bat mitzvah didn't become popular until the 50s.**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BECOME BAR/BAT MITZVAH?

Presently, the following constitutes the commitment of a bar/bat mitzvah:

- Obligation to mitzvot
 - Full fasting on Yom Kippur
 - Counting in a minyan
 - Tallit/Tefillin
- Do our teens make a commitment to these obligations at their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies?
 - What percentage of teens know that they are making a commitment to these obligations?
 - Is the modern bar/bat mitzvah a proclamation of a child's commitment to Judaism?

OPTING IN OR OPTING OUT?

Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 1:162 14th century, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's compilation of Halakha

Either a minor whose father converted him or he was converted by a bet din, he may reject the conversion when he matures and his legal status is not like a *yisrael mumar* (a Jew who converts out of Judaism). If the child convert decides on reaching maturity that he does not want to be Jewish, he invalidates his conversion and reverts to being a gentile. The age at which a child can make this decision is when he or she becomes obligated to observe mitzvos, twelve for a girl and thirteen for a boy.

- Are 12-13 year olds emotionally and intellectually capable of making a conscious choice?
- What would the Jewish education experience in synagogues/day schools have to be like to ensure they don't opt out?
- What would the Jewish education experience in the home have to be like?
- Should we allow our pre-b'nei mitzvah students to formally opt in or opt out? Why or why not?