



Bar/bat Mitzvah as a Rite of Passage Froma Fallik

Subject area: Jewish identity

Single lesson plan

Target group: 6th-7th grade

Objective: Students will understand that bar/bat mitzvah is both similar to and different from other adolescent rites of passage from around the world. Students will explore what bar/bat mitzvah implies about what is valued in Jewish culture.

Description:

1. Teacher discusses what a rite of passage is and elicits examples of rites of passage from students.

“A rite of passage is a ritual that marks a change in a person's social or sexual status. Rites of passage are often ceremonies surrounding events such as childbirth, menarche or other milestones within puberty, coming of age, weddings, menopause, and death.

..., rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. In the first phase, people withdraw from the group and begin moving from one place or status to another. In the third phase, they reenter society, having completed the rite. The liminal phase is the period between states, during which people have left one place or state but haven't yet entered or joined the next. It is a state of limbo.” (Wikipedia)

Elicit examples of American rites of passage:

- *first haircut*
- *graduation*
- *first time using makeup, nail polish, lipstick*
- *beginning to date*
- *prom*
- *wedding*

2. Each student is provided material about a rite of passage in a different culture that changes the status of a child to that of an adult. The student is given time



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to prepare and then teaches what he or she has learned to the other students. The class works together to identify what this rite says about that specific culture and what is valued in it. Rites of passage studied may include: scarification (Maori), kinaalda (Navajo), genpuku (Japan), Circumcision (Islam), Poy Sang Long (Burma), Dkimasia (Ancient Greece), Russ (Norway), debutante balls (England, United States), and Quinceanera (Mexico).

3. Students discuss bar/bat mitzvah as a rite of passage as well as discussing why he or she might want to have one, and what a bar/bat mitzvah implies about what is valued in Jewish culture.

How does bar/bat mitzvah fit the definition of a rite of a passage?

- *Change of social status*
- *Ritual*
- *Ceremony*
- *Stage one: Withdraw to study/prepare*
- *Stage two: Liminal period: period of preparation*
- *Stage three: Reincorporation into the community*

Why would you want to have a bar/bat mitzvah? What does it mean to you?

What does a bar/bat mitzvah imply about what is valued in Jewish culture?

- *Knowledge*
- *Learning*
- *Leadership*
- *Hard work*
- *Dedication*
- *Poise*
- *Community*

4. Conclusion:

Students write a brief reflection on what bar/bat mitzvah means to him/her. This can be used in a later class and/or can be used by the student when he or she comes to write his or her bar/bat mitzvah speech.

Sources: Unless otherwise noted, all material is from Wikipedia:



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Scarification:

http://www.randafricanart.com/Scarification_and_Cicatrisation_among_African_cultures.html

Adolescent circumcision:

<http://www.roxanefarabi.com/Culture/Circumcision%20in%20Islam.htm>
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/ethics/malecircumcision/religions_3.shtml

Kinaalda: <http://www.vibrani.com/Kinaalda.htm>

Bar Mitzvah: <http://www.jewfaq.org/barmitz.htm>

Rite of Passage

A rite of passage is a ritual that marks a change in a person's social or sexual status. Rites of passage are often ceremonies surrounding events such as childbirth, menarche or other milestones within puberty, coming of age, weddings, menopause, and death.

History of term

The term was popularized by the German ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957), in the early part of the twentieth century. Further theories were developed in the 1960s by Mary Douglas and Victor Turner. Joseph Campbell's 1949 text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and his theory of the journey of the hero were also influenced by van Gennep.

According to van Gennep, rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. In the first phase, people withdraw from the group and begin moving from one place or status to another. In the third phase, they reenter society, having completed the rite. The liminal phase is the period between states, during which people have left one place or state but haven't yet entered or joined the next. It is a state of limbo.



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Types and examples

Rites of passage are diverse, and are often not recognized as such in the culture in which they occur. According to Van Gennep a rite of passage would fulfill the tripartite structure he laid out. Many society rituals may look like rites of passage but miss some of the important structural and functional components. Typically the missing piece is the societal recognition and reincorporation phase. Adventure Education programs, such as Outward Bound, have often been described as potential rites of passage. Pamela Cushing researched the rites of passage impact upon adolescent youth at the Canadian Outward Bound School and found the rite of passage impact was lessened by the missing reincorporation phase (Cushing, 1998). Bell (2003) presented more evidence of this lacking third stage and described the "Contemporary Adventure Model of a Rites of Passage" as a modern and weaker version of the rites of passage typically used by outdoor adventure programs. Given these challenges, many examples of rites of passages are possible in contemporary society.

* A **debutante** (or **deb**) (from the French *débutante*, "female beginner") is a young lady from an aristocratic or upper class family who has reached the age of maturity, and as a new adult, is introduced to society at a formal presentation known as her "debut" or "coming out". Originally, it meant the young woman was eligible for marriage, and part of the purpose was to display her to eligible bachelors and their families with a view to marriage within a select upper class circle. This traditional event varies by region, but is typically referred to as a **debutante ball**.

* The **Quinceañera** or *Quince Años* (sometimes represented *XV Años*, meaning "fifteen years") is, in some Spanish-speaking regions of the Americas, a young woman's celebration of her fifteenth birthday, which is celebrated in a unique and different way from her other birthdays. In some countries, such as Puerto Rico or Peru, the word **Quinceañero** is used instead of *Quinceañera* when referring to the celebration.

The word is also used to refer to the young woman whose 15th birthday is being celebrated (analogous to the word *cumpleañera* for "birthday girl"). The closest equivalents to the *Quinceañera* in the English-speaking world are the sweet sixteen or, in more affluent communities, a debutante ball at the age of eighteen.



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Mexican Quinceañeras vary by region as well as by socio-economic status. If the quinceañera is Roman Catholic, the festivities begin with a Thanksgiving Mass (*Misa de Acción de Gracias*), at which the quinceañera arrives in formal dress (usually a color of her choosing) accompanied by her parents, and then they dance to a special song for a bit and party all night vow to be a virgin till the day of marriage and thanks for giving her the opportunity to get to that stage of age. In some traditions the court is omitted and it may just be the Quinceañera accompanied by her parents and godparents.

After the Mass, the Quinceañera and her accompaniment may select a special location for a photo shoot. In the evening, she arrives at the reception hall where she is greeted by friends and family. After an elaborate dinner, the quinceañera dances the traditional first waltz with her father (sometimes changing from flats to high-heeled shoes, symbolizing her transition from child to young adult) and male relatives. Sometimes there is also a surprise choreographed dance with the Quinceañera as the lead dancer. Toward the end she may also receive her "last doll" or "última muñeca" and a special crowning in which the Quinceañera's "madrina" (Godmother) changes her tiara to a crown. The parties last well into the night, sometimes ending the following morning.

* In classical Greece, Dokimasia was the name used at Athens to denote the process of ascertaining the capacity of the citizens for the exercise of public rights and duties.

If, for instance, a young citizen was to be admitted among the epheboi, he was examined in an assembly of his district to find out whether he was descended on both sides from Athenian citizens, and whether he possessed the physical capacity for military service. All officials, too--even the members of the Senate--had to submit to an examination before entering upon their office. The purpose of this was to ascertain, not their actual capacity for the post, which was presupposed in all candidates, but their descent from Athenian citizens, their life and character, and (in the case of some offices which involved the administration of large sums) even the amount of their property.

The examination was carried on in public by the archons in the presence of the Senate, and any one present had the right to raise objections. If such objections were held to be valid the candidate was rejected; but he had the right to appeal to the decision of a court, which would take cognizance of the matter in judicial form. On the other hand, if he were accepted, any one who thought his claims insufficient had the right of instituting judicial proceedings against him. If the decision was adverse he would lose



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his office, and was further liable to punishment varying according to the offence charged against him--which might be, for instance, that of unlawfully assuming the rights of a citizen.

A speaker in a public assembly might thus be brought before a court by any citizen, for no one not possessed of the full right of citizenship could legally address the people. The question might thus be raised whether the orator were not actually *atimos*, or guilty of an offence which involved *atimia*.

* **Genpuku** (元服[?]), also called **Kakan** (加冠[?]), was a historical Japanese coming-of-age ceremony. To mark the entry to adult life of boys between the ages of 12 and 16, they were taken to the shrines of their patron *kami*. There they were presented with their first adult clothes, and their boys' hairstyles (角髪 *mizurō*[?]) were changed to the adult style. They were also given new adult names (烏帽子名 *eboshi-na*[?]). In Heian times, the ceremony was restricted to the sons of noble and *samurai* families. During the *Muromachi* era, it gradually spread to include men of lower ranks. The equivalent ceremony for women was called *mogi* (裳着[?]); this was performed for girls aged between 12 and 14, and was similarly based around the presentation of adult clothing. In modern Japan, these ceremonies have been replaced by annual coming-of-age ceremonies for 20-year-olds of both sexes called *seijin shiki*.

Kami (神[?]) is the Japanese word for the spirits within objects in the *Shinto* faith. The **Heian Period** (平安時代 *Heian-jidai*[?]) is the last division of classical Japanese history, running from 794 to 1185. The **Muromachi period** (Japanese: 室町時代, *Muromachi-jidai*;) is a division of Japanese history running from approximately 1336 to 1573. **Seijin shiki** (成人式) is the Japanese coming-of-age ceremony. It is held annually on **Coming-of-Age Day** (成人の日 *seijin no hi*[?]), the second Monday in January. Festivities include ceremonies held at local and prefectural offices and parties amongst family and friends to celebrate passage into adulthood. The festival was created as a national holiday in 1948, when Coming-of-Age Day was set to January 15. In 1999, as a result of the **Happy Monday System** (ハッピーマンデー制度 *Happii Mandei Seido*[?]), Coming-of-Age Day – and thus the *seijin shiki* – was moved to its current date of the second Monday in January.



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*The age of majority in Japan is 20. The *seijin shiki* covers all those who will reach this age during the current school year, which runs between April and the following March. The ceremony is generally held in the morning at local city offices and all young adults who maintain residency in the area are invited to attend. Government officials give speeches, and small presents are handed out to the new adults. Many women celebrate this day by wearing *furisode* (振袖[?]), a special kind of *kimono*. Since most are unable to put on a kimono by themselves due to the intricacies involved in putting one on, many choose to visit a beauty salon to dress and to set their hair. A full set of formal clothing is expensive, so it is usually either inherited or rented rather than being bought specially for the occasion. While men sometimes also wear traditional dress (dark kimono or *hakama*), most men now wear business suits instead.*

*After the ceremony, the young adults often gather in groups and go to parties or go out drinking. Young women not used to wearing the *zori slippers* (草履 *zōri*[?]) can often be seen limping as the afternoon wears on and evening approaches. Later in the evening, it is not unusual to see wobbly young adults staggering in the trains, heading home after a day of celebration.*

** The **Poy Sang Long** (Shan: "Festival [of the] Crystal Sons") is a rite of passage ceremony among the Shan peoples, in Burma(Myanmar) and now in Northern Thailand, undergone by boys at some point between seven and fourteen years of age. It consists of taking novice monastic vows and participating in monastery life for a period of time that can vary from a week to many months or more. Usually, a large group of boys are ordained as novice monks at the same time.*

The Shan have brought their colorful Poy Sang Long ceremony to northern Thailand. The ceremony goes on for three days, as the boys (dressed up like princes in imitation of the Lord Buddha, who was himself a prince before setting out on the religious path) spend the entire time being carried around on the shoulders of their older male relatives. On the third day, they are ordained, and enter the monastery for a period of at least one week, and perhaps many years.

** **Scarification** is a term that is used to describe the act of **scarifying**. Scarifying involves scratching, etching, or some sort of superficial cutting or incision.*

Scarification has been used for many reasons in many different cultures:



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- *Scarification has been used as a rite of passage in adolescence, or to denote the emotional state of the wearer of the scars, such as times of sorrow or well-being. This is common among Australian Aboriginal and Sepik River tribes in New Guinea, amongst others.*
- *Scarification, by deliberately burning skin, is called branding and has historically been used to mark slaves and criminals, usually with the brand being visible and often letter-coded to reflect the crime.*
- *The Māori of New Zealand used a form of ink rubbing scarification to produce facial tattoos known as "moko." Moko were considered to make the body complete as Māori bodies were considered to be naked without these marks. Moko were unique to each person and served as a sort of signature. Some Māori chiefs even used the pattern of their moko as their signatures on land treaties with Europeans.*
- *In some cultures, the willingness of a woman to receive scarification shows her maturity and willingness to bear children.*
- *Scarification is fairly common in West Africa and New Guinea.*
- *Facial scarring resulting from academic fencing is regarded as a badge of honour among the European dueling fraternities, this tradition originating in the 19th century.*

** **Kinaalda:** A Navajo girl, upon reaching the age of 13 and experiencing her first menstrual period becomes initiated into womanhood by a beautiful 4-day ritual entitled the Kinaalda, which is part of the Navajo Blessing Way Ceremony. The Kinaalda literally translates "puberty ceremony," and this term is interchangeable with both the girl and the ceremony.*

The Kinaalda is based on a myth about the first Kinaalda Ceremony performed by and for Changing Woman, who is the female deity identified with the Earth and she is the source and sustenance of all life on the earth's surface, controlling particularly fertility. During the Kinaalda the legendary origin and its transmission to mankind is retold and enacted. The Kinaalda ceremony is clearly a bridge, a rite of passage (as defined by Arnold van Gennep, in his term "rites de passage", as rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.

To the Navajo, religion means ritual. Ritual is to extend the personality and make it harmonious. The world of the Navajo is characterized by movements in space and transformations in states of being through time.



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What concerns the Navajo most is controlling themselves and their environment. They stress activity, creativity, control, balance, harmony, order, and beauty. The Navajo time frame is different from Western thought. Navajos see the past, present and future as one and the same and interchangeable. Navajo rituals are rigidly and statically structured and must be performed perfectly and accurately in order to be effective.

Gary Witherspoon, in his book "Language and Art in the Navajo Universe", says that the primary purpose of Navajo ritual is to maintain or restore 'hozho' - everything that is good, harmonious, orderly, happy and beautiful. Navajo social and economic life is characterized by movement and change, activity and productivity; this area is dominated by the female.

Men are associated with the origin and culmination of things, and woman are associated with growth, process and change. This male/female polarity exists throughout the Kinaalda. One example is that the lead singer, who conducts the ceremony, is male. Another example is seen in the importance of the 4 directions and times of day and night during which the Kinaalda is performed, as these are also associated with male and female. The Kinaalda uses male and female energy and power in her actions and in its symbolism, in unison, to create balance. Male is east and north; female is south and west. Dawn and night are male, while the female rules the opposite. Kinaalda races at dawn towards the east - both time and direction are male and the runner is female.

The cycle of life is connected with the path of the sun. Daytime and the earth are associated with activity and productivity. The Navajo believe that life and movement are essential values. Daytime and light are good and beautiful, while night and darkness are not. Navajos are active in daytime and static at night as a rule, except in certain circumstances in which normal order is disrupted and rituals are required to restore the world to its normal and desired condition. The Kinaalda is performed during the day and night, with the heavy physical activity done during the daytime. During the ritual there is a strong emphasis on repetition of the actions.

During the ritual the Kinaalda learns that the universe must be kept in perfect order. She learns that she is to take care of the earth and everything (animal and plant) must be valued and conserved. The earth is the mother of all life - it provides shelter, nourishment, and produces life.



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During the 4 days the ritual demands many regulations and taboos. The girl will be on a restricted diet, must refrain from touching her own skin, combing and washing her hair, dressing or undressing herself. Her language and actions will be closely watched as it determines her future - all negativity must be avoided.

Throughout this celebration will be the Kinaalda, her family, and members of her society who are all considered participants and helpers. Kinaalda's duties in action include grinding corn, racing, preparing a cake called 'alkaan,' and these activities are repeated during the day, almost every day. She undergoes body moldings, hair washings and combings by a chosen female aid who will be a lifetime companion who can instruct the girl on proper behavior and procedures. The aide reflects the Kinaalda's intention that the ceremony be one of sharing and caring for others.

Special jewelry is placed on her and the way in which it is put on and removed must be performed precisely. Many Navajo girls are painted with a white clay mixture on different parts of her body and costume. The painting and costume of shells and other ornaments depicting Changing Woman are like a mask enabling her to stand out from the others, to aid in her walk through womanhood.

Corn grinding teaches the girl to understand and cater to her people. Corn is their basic subsistence. This motion of grinding is for her to memorize the act so she will never forget it and it makes her strong. She is sitting on her knees, leaning forward and backward while grinding in a particular rhythm.

Racing: the girl races several times each day and the running has its own choreography. It shows a different use of space than the other Kinaalda activities. The area the girl runs may vary from person to person as will the time allotted per race, but the area outdoors is not limiting - there is a sense of freedom. The race has a beginning and ending point which is the hogan, a circular lodge.

The circle is always emphasized in this ceremony. It symbolizes the sun, the cycles of the year and of life. She runs in a large circle. She runs towards the east and turns sunwise to return. Other children usually run with Kinaalda and they are blessed by their involvement. They yell out a Kinaalda shout to call attention to Changing Woman, the sun, and Talking God.



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The Kinaalda ceremony is an integral part of the culture, indispensable for both the girl and the Navajo community. The Kinaalda is a rite of passage and a dance - a dance into womanhood, which expresses the girl's spiritual and physical transformation and her society's acknowledgement and acceptance of her as a woman and beneficial part of society.

*** Circumcision in Islam:** *The first records of circumcision are from Ancient Egypt. Many wall murals depict circumcision being completed on men and women.*

Circumcision continued to be practiced at the time of the Mohammad. Mohammad encouraged circumcision for all Muslims.^{1[3]} There are multiple reasons why Muslims practice circumcision. They practice it for health/cleanliness reasons^{2[4]} or as a sacrifice to 'Allah'^{3[5]}. The primary reason is for the practice of Sunnah.

Sunnah is the way the Prophet lived. It is as important as the Q'uran in providing guiding principles to Muslims.^{4[6]} As Mohammad was circumcised, all Muslims are obligated to be circumcised as well. Dr. Bashir Quereshi explains Sunnah and circumcision:

"...every Muslim is expected to follow the way of life of Prophet Mohammad (be peace upon him). Therefore all Muslims – devout, liberals or seculars – observe this ritual [circumcision]. Muslims are obliged to follow not only Allah's message in the Holy Quaraan but also what the Prophet said or did as proof of their dedication to Islam."^{5[7]}

Circumcision was practiced throughout the middle ages in the Middle East, including Persia, Turkey, India and Islamic Egypt.^{6[8]}

The circumcision of a boy was an occasion to be celebrated, representing the boy's attainment of manhood.^{7[11]} Generally they were circumcised around the age of seven,



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however sometimes it was done later or earlier.^{8[12]} A circumcision for the son of a high-ranking official or for nobility was a festive occasion. According to Herbert, the boy was accompanied to the temple by a crowd of well-wishers.

“..for his kindred and friends in their best equipage assemble at the parents’ house, as a symbol of their joy presenting him with gifts of sundry prices; and, after small stay, mount the boy upon a trapped courser [horse with barding], richly bested, holding in his right hand a sword, in his left his bridle; a slave goes on either side, one holding a lance, the other a flambeau, neither of which are without their allegories. Music is not for wanting, for it goes first, the father next, and, according as they are in blood, the rest; others follow promiscuously.”^{9[13]}

Upon arrival at the temple, the ceremony is then performed by the priest and two other assistants:

“To work they straightway go: one holds his knee, a second disrobes, a third holds his hands, and others by some trivial conceit strive to win his thoughts to extenuate his ensuing torment. The priest (having muttered his orisons) dilates the prepuce, in a trice with his silver scissors circumcises him, and then applies a healing powder of salt, date-stones, and cotton-wool; the standers-by, to joy his initiation into Mahometry, throwing down their muner natalitia (gifts), salute him by the name of Mussulman.”

If the ceremony was at home, a feast was held during the circumcision. All the guests watched the initiation rite. The feast lasted for three days, which ended with

“...the child is led about in state, bathed and purged, a turban of white silk put upon his head, and all the way as he returns saluted with acclamations.”

BBC

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/>



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Circumcision of boys

By BBC Team

Islam and male circumcision

*Muslims are still the largest single religious group to circumcise boys. In Islam circumcision is also known as *tahara*, meaning purification.*

Circumcision is not mentioned in the Qur'an but it is highlighted in the Sunnah (the Prophet Muhammad's recorded words and actions). In the Sunnah, Muhammad stated that circumcision was a "law for men and a preservation of honor for women."

The main reason given for the ritual is cleanliness. It is essential that every Muslim washes before praying. It is important that no urine is left on the body.

Muslims believe the removal of the foreskin makes it easier to keep the penis clean because urine can't get trapped there.

Supporters of circumcision also argue that excrements may collect under the foreskin which may lead to fatal diseases such as cancer.

Some Muslims see circumcision as a preventive measure against infection and diseases.

Belonging

For the majority of Muslims, circumcision is seen as an introduction to the Islamic faith and a sign of belonging.

In Islam there is no fixed age for circumcision. The age at which it is performed varies depending on family, region and country.

The preferred age is often seven although some Muslims are circumcised as early as the seventh day after birth and as late as puberty.



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*There is no equivalent of a Jewish *mohe* in Islam. Circumcisions are usually carried out in a clinic or hospital. The circumciser is not required to be a Muslim but he must be medically trained.*

In some Islamic countries circumcision is performed after Muslim boys have recited the whole of the Qur'an from start to finish.

In Malaysia, for example, the operation is a puberty rite that separates the boy from childhood and introduces him to adulthood.

An essential practice

Circumcision is not compulsory in Islam but it is an important ritual aimed at improving cleanliness. It is strongly encouraged but not enforced.

The ritual dates back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. According to tradition Muhammad was born without a foreskin (aposthetic). Some Muslims who practice circumcision see it as a way of being like him.

Circumcision was also practiced by past prophets.

Dr Bashir Quereshi, author of Transcultural Medicine, explains: "Every Muslim is expected to follow the way and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, all Muslims - devout, liberals or seculars - observe this ritual. Muslim are obliged to follow not only Allah's message in the Holy Qur'an but also what the Prophet said or did, as proof of their dedication to Islam."

Traditionally, adult converts to Islam were encouraged to undergo the operation but this practice is not universally endorsed particularly if the procedure poses a health risk.

Bar / Bat Mitzvah

"Bar Mitzvah" literally means "son of the commandment." "Bar" is "son" in Aramaic, which used to be the vernacular of the Jewish people. "Mitzvah" is "commandment" in



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both Hebrew and Aramaic. "Bat" is daughter in Hebrew and Aramaic. (The Ashkenazic pronunciation is "bas"). Technically, the term refers to the child who is coming of age, and it is strictly correct to refer to someone as "becoming a bar (or bat) mitzvah." However, the term is more commonly used to refer to the coming of age ceremony itself, and you are more likely to hear that someone is "having a bar mitzvah."

Under Jewish Law, children are not obligated to observe the commandments, although they are encouraged to do so as much as possible to learn the obligations they will have as adults. At the age of 13 (12 for girls), children become obligated to observe the commandments. The bar mitzvah ceremony formally marks the assumption of that obligation, along with the corresponding right to take part in leading religious services, to count in a minyan (the minimum number of people needed to perform certain parts of religious services), to form binding contracts, to testify before religious courts and to marry.

A Jewish boy automatically becomes a bar mitzvah upon reaching the age of 13 years, and a girl upon reaching the age of 12 years. No ceremony is needed to confer these rights and obligations. The popular bar mitzvah ceremony is not required, and does not fulfill any commandment. It is certainly not, as one episode of the Simpson's would have you believe, necessary to have a bar mitzvah in order to be considered a Jew! The bar or bat mitzvah is a relatively modern innovation, not mentioned in the Talmud, and the elaborate ceremonies and receptions that are commonplace today were unheard of as recently as a century ago.

In its earliest and most basic form, a bar mitzvah is the celebrant's first aliyah. During Shabbat services on a Saturday shortly after the child's 13th birthday, the celebrant is called up to the Torah to recite a blessing over the weekly reading.

Today, it is common practice for the bar mitzvah celebrant to do much more than just say the blessing. It is most common for the celebrant to learn the entire haftarah portion, including its traditional chant, and recite that. In some congregations, the celebrant reads the entire weekly torah portion, or leads part of the service, or leads the congregation in certain important prayers. The celebrant is also generally required to make a speech, which traditionally begins with the phrase "today I am a man." The father traditionally recites a blessing thanking G-d for removing the burden of being responsible for the son's sins (because now the child is old enough to be held responsible for himself).



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In modern times, the religious service is followed by a reception that is often as elaborate as a wedding reception. In Orthodox and Chasidic practice, women are not permitted to participate in religious services in these ways, so a bat mitzvah, if celebrated at all, is usually little more than a party. In other movements of Judaism, the girls do exactly the same thing as the boys.

It is important to note that a bar mitzvah is not the goal of a Jewish education, nor is it a graduation ceremony marking the end of a person's Jewish education. We are obligated to study Torah throughout our lives. To emphasize this point, some rabbis require a bar mitzvah student to sign an agreement promising to continue Jewish education after the bar mitzvah.

Sadly, an alarming number of Jewish parents today view the bar or bat mitzvah as the sole purpose of Jewish education, and treat it almost as a Jewish hazing ritual: I had to go through it, so you have to go through it, but don't worry, it will all be over soon and you'll never have to think about this stuff again.

Is 13 an Adult?

Many people mock the idea that a 12 or 13 year old child is an adult, claiming that it is an outdated notion based on the needs of an agricultural society. This criticism comes from a misunderstanding of the significance of becoming a bar mitzvah.

Bar mitzvah is not about being a full adult in every sense of the word, ready to marry, go out on your own, earn a living and raise children. The Talmud makes this abundantly clear. In Pirkei Avot, it is said that while 13 is the proper age for fulfillment of the Commandments, 18 is the proper age for marriage and 20 is the proper age for earning a livelihood. Elsewhere in the Talmud, the proper age for marriage is said to be 16-24.

Bar mitzvah is simply the age when a person is held responsible for his actions and minimally qualified to marry. If you compare this to secular law, you will find that it is not so very far from our modern notions of a child's maturity. In Anglo-American common law, a child of the age of 14 is old enough to assume many of the responsibilities of an adult, including minimal criminal liability. Under United States law, 14 is the minimum age of employment for most occupations (though working hours are limited so as not to interfere with school). In many states, a fourteen year old can marry with parental consent. Children of any age are permitted to testify in court,



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Froma Fallik

and children over the age of 14 are permitted to have significant input into custody decisions in cases of divorce. Certainly, a 13-year-old child is capable of knowing the difference between right and wrong and of being held responsible for his actions, and that is all it really means to become a bar mitzvah.