

# 3 Bar and Bat Mitzvah: Creating Diamonds

## Core Concept

A bar or bat mitzvah ceremony marks and celebrates an adolescent's passage into Jewish adulthood. Becoming bar or bat mitzvah links a young person to tradition, to family, and to community, as well as creates opportunities for self-exploration and accomplishment.

## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and history of bar and bat mitzvah.
- Articulate the new roles and responsibilities inherent in becoming a bar or bat mitzvah.
- Discuss ideas and reasons for creating bar or bat mitzvah experiences that are both personal and connected to Jewish tradition.

## Chapter Overview

The chapter compares a bar or bat mitzvah to a diamond: a precious gem that is created under pressure. Upon becoming a bar or bat mitzvah, a young person assumes new privileges, including reading from Torah and being counted in a *minyan*, as well as new responsibilities, including fasting on Yom Kippur.

The chapter outlines the practices and rituals of a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, as

well as the variety of customs associated with the bar or bat mitzvah celebration. The chapter also provides practical advice for discussing and attending bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies.

The “Moving Along” section encourages students to envision themselves as young Jewish adults and to consider their own maturation, identity, and goals.

## Vocabulary

**bar** “son,” Aramaic (a language similar to Hebrew, spoken by Jews between approximately the fifth century BCE and fifth century CE)

**bat** “daughter”

**b'nai** “sons” or “children”

**b'not** “daughters”

**d'var Torah** “word of Torah”; a speech delivered by the bar or bat mitzvah, usually including an interpretation of the Torah or *haftarah* portion and reflections on becoming a bar or bat mitzvah

**haftarah** selection from the Prophets; read or chanted by the bar or bat mitzvah

**minyan** a group of ten adult worshippers required for a prayer service

**tallit** prayer shawl worn by adult Jews as a reminder of God's commandments



## Sound Advice

### Some Suggestions for Talking about Bar and Bat Mitzvah

Studies have shown that preparing for the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is one of the most stressful times in a young person's life. Given that your students either will be preparing for becoming or will have recently become b'nai mitzvah, this chapter may cause anxieties to surface. Plan on making time while teaching this chapter to address your students' concerns.

A few thoughts to keep in mind:

- If your students are preparing for their b'nai mitzvah ceremonies, they may express anxiety about workload, parental expectations, or fear of the ceremony itself. Create a comfortable environment for them to express their emotions—and assure them that these feelings are a natural part of the experience!
- For post-b'nai mitzvah students, emphasize reflection on the experience. Provide students with the opportunity to talk about the process and what they learned.
- If some students have become b'nai mitzvah and others are still preparing, try to find opportunities for the students to share their experiences and to learn from one another.

## Getting Started

Create diamond-shaped sheets of paper by cutting the corners off 8 1/2" x 11" sheets. Distribute one sheet to each student. Instruct your students to write their greatest expectation—or favorite memory—of their bar and bat mitzvah experiences on the paper. Have a volunteer read the paragraph on page 31 aloud. Ask the students to share their “diamonds” with the class.

### Introductory Paragraphs (page 32)

Ask: What is or was *your* greatest fear or concern about your bar or bat mitzvah ceremony? (*Answers may include: messing up my haftarah reading; not being prepared; freezing on the bimah.*)



## Expand the Conversation

Ask:

- What causes the pressure and anxiety over your preparing for the ceremony? (*Answers may include: parental expectations; older siblings' achievements at their ceremonies; not having enough time to prepare.*) Remind your students that anxiety is a natural part of this nerve-racking rite of passage!
- What is or was the best part of preparing for your bar or bat mitzvah cere-

mony? (*Answers may include: a feeling of accomplishment; learning more about Judaism; working with a great tutor.*)

## Reb Monye's Diamonds (page 32)

Ask for two “theatrical” volunteers. Assign them the parts of Reb Monye and the rabbi. Ask them to present a skit based on this story.

Note: You may wish to explain that “Reb” does not always mean rabbi; it is often used as a general term of respect for a man, like “mister.”



### Expand the Conversation

Ask:

- What is the lesson of “Reb Monye’s Diamonds”? (*Answers may include: every person is unique; every person adds beauty to the world; it is not good to judge people without knowing them.*)
- What skills do we need to be a “maven in the value of every person”? (*Answers may include: being a good listener; not stereotyping; respecting others.*)
- What advice might the rabbi in this story give a student preparing for bar or bat mitzvah? (*Answers may include: do not worry about other people’s expectations; work hard to make yourself proud.*)

## First Things First: Your Bar and Bat Mitzvah FAQ (pages 33–34)

“Your Bar and Bat Mitzvah FAQ” contains three sets of questions and answers. Divide your class into three groups, and instruct each group to read and discuss one of the sections. Have each group present its section creatively—through a skit, mock debate, or quick illustration.

**Note:** Your students may ask why girls were traditionally considered adults before boys. The Talmud legislates the ages as twelve for girls and thirteen for boys. The age difference was based on the fact that girls reached puberty sooner and were married at a younger age.



### Expand the Conversation

Ask:

- What recent changes in your life indicate that you are growing up and approaching adulthood? (*Answers will vary according to the age of your students, but may include: a later curfew; more responsibilities; more freedom to go places without parental supervision.*)
- What new Jewish privileges, roles, or responsibilities have you fulfilled (or do you plan to fulfill) after your bar or bat mitzvah ceremony? (*Answers may*

*include: wearing a tallit; being counted in a minyan; joining a junior high or high school Jewish youth group; studying for confirmation.)*

## So Many Reasons to Celebrate (page 33)

Have your students work in small groups to complete this section, then bring the class back together to discuss their answers.



### Q & A

- **List two ceremonies in your life—perhaps a recital or graduation—that have marked an accomplishment or choice that you’ve made.** (*Answers may include: an award ceremony; a cast party; a sports trophy.*)
- **List two milestones that just happen.** (*Answers may include: getting one’s first tooth; moving on to the next grade in school; being tall enough to ride on a favorite amusement park ride.*)
- **Even though we would become a bar or bat mitzvah without a ceremony—it would just happen—why do you think we mark the occasion with rituals?** (*Answers may include: rituals create opportunities for reflection; rituals create opportunities for families to be together; they create opportunity for us to speak the same words that our ancestors did.*)



### Bring It to Life

If your students are preparing for their b’nai mitzvah, have them write a letter to themselves about their hopes for their ceremony. Have them seal their letters in self-addressed envelopes and submit them to you. After each student’s ceremony, mail his or her letter.

## Bat Mitzvah (page 35)

Go around the classroom and practice “bar and bat mitzvah-ese”: Have each student say “I will be called to the Torah for the first time as a bar/bat mitzvah on . . .”



### Expand the Conversation

“Mitzvah” may be literally translated as “commandment.” Today, it is often understood as “good deed.” Ask your students: What is the difference between a commandment and a good deed? (*A commandment is something that we must do; a good deed is something that we should do but is optional.*)

## The History of the Celebration (pages 36–38)

Break your class into small groups. Instruct your students to imagine what it must have been like for young women in

the late 1800s who were petitioning to have coming-of-age ceremonies. Have each group write a letter to the rabbis and elders of the community, including reasons for such a ceremony.

### **Back to the Sources** (page 37)

Your students are likely familiar with the Torah blessings. As a class, review this blessing together.

Explain that during a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, it is traditional to invite family members and close friends to the Torah for their own *aliyot* (plural of *aliyah*). If your students have already become b'nai mitzvah, ask them to list people who received *aliyot* during their ceremonies, and why those people were chosen. If your students are still preparing to become b'nai mitzvah, ask them to compose a list of those they might wish to honor with *aliyot*.



### **Q & A**

#### **Can You Imagine? (page 38)**

**How do you think you would have felt if you were Judith?** (*Answers may include: nervous, fearful, excited, proud.*)

You may wish to explain to your class that the photo of Judith Kaplan on page 38 is not from the day of her bat mitzvah ceremony; certainly no one at that time would have dressed so casually in a synagogue.

### **Fast Forward (page 39)**

Have students complete this activity individually. You may wish to have students read their “biographies” aloud.

Just for Fun I: Ask volunteers to hand their book to you. Read their “biographies” aloud and have the class match each with the correct student.

Just for Fun II: Have students complete this exercise again—this time in pairs. Instruct one partner to request the parts of speech or descriptions (adjective, verb, club or organization, etc.) of his or her partner, then write the answers *below* the blank spaces. Allow students to be a little silly (but not inappropriate). Have students read their partners’ new “biographies” aloud.

### **The Bar or Bat Mitzvah Ceremony—Step by Step** (pages 40–41)

Introduce this section by asking the students: What was the most memorable part of your own bar or bat mitzvah ceremony (or those you recently attended)? As students mention parts of the ceremony, write them on the board.

Have volunteers read pages 40–41 aloud. After they have finished reading, challenge the class to list parts of the ceremony missing from the list on the board. Then have students number the parts in the order that they occur.



## Expand the Conversation

Ask: How do this congregation's bar and bat mitzvah customs compare to those listed here? Do we lead all or part of the service? Do we chant or read Torah and *haftarah* portions? Do we breathe sighs of relief? (These questions will allow you to help those planning for their b'nai mitzvah to feel more prepared, and will make post-b'nai mitzvah students feel like old pros!)

## But They Sound Alike! (page 42)

Review the structure of the Hebrew Bible, also called the Tanach or TaNaK. Explain that "Tanach" is an acronym for the three parts of the Bible: Torah, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). (Because of the placement of the *kaf* in the word "Tanach," it becomes a *chet*; hence the pronunciation.) A *haftarah* comes from the second section of the Bible—the *Nevi'im* or Prophets.

## Be a Give-Your-Best Guest (page 43)

On the board, write the five ways to make someone else's bar or bat mitzvah celebration great: Choose a Meaningful Gift, Make Your Friend Feel Special, Help Out, Show Respect, and Be Friendly.

Break your class into five groups. Instruct each group to write two or three *more*

suggestions for each topic. Have each group share their suggestions and write them on the board. See if the class as a whole can add yet another suggestion or topic for each!

## Party Time (page 44)

Introduce this section by reviewing the "tough parts" of the bar and bat mitzvah process. Ask your students to envision each part as you say it: choosing the date, studying, writing the *d'var Torah*. Now review the ceremony itself: leading prayers, reading from the Torah, delivering the *d'var Torah*. Conclude by saying: "Now it is time for the *simhab*—the joyous celebration!"

If students have not yet had their b'nai mitzvah, ask: How do you think it will feel to come to that point? If they have already become b'nai mitzvah, ask: How *did* it feel?



## Using the Photograph

## Parent and Baby Guanaco (page 44)

Use this photo and caption as an opportunity to talk about the role of parents in the bar and bat mitzvah process. Ask:

- How are/were your parents involved with your bar or bat mitzvah process? (*Answers may include: driving to tutoring; studying together; planning the party.*)

- What expectations do/did you think your parents have/had for your bar or bat mitzvah experience? (*Answers may include: an opportunity to show pride in their child; a great family get-together.*)



## Sound Advice

### A Note on Talking about Bar and Bat Mitzvah Receptions

In Jewish tradition, the party after a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is a *se'udat mitzvah*—a meal of celebration. Students should be encouraged to celebrate their achievements and their new roles. Yet bar and bat mitzvah receptions often overshadow the sanctity of the rite of passage. This section encourages students to think about ways bar and bat mitzvah celebrations may be infused with meaning and mitzvah.

### What Do You Think? (page 45)

Have students work in pairs or small groups to answer this question. Encourage them to focus on party ideas and themes that fit with the spirit of becoming bar or bat mitzvah. Bring the class back together and compare answers.

### Beyond Coke-and-Pepsi (page 45)

Note: You may wish to explain to your students that “Coke-and-Pepsi” is a game

often played at bar and bat mitzvah receptions.

After having volunteers read through the suggestions on page 45, break the class into groups of three or four. Ask each group to list additional ways to bring mitzvot into the reception. Write their ideas on the board.

Once you have collected ideas, write the following categories on the board: Most Meaningful, Most Fun, and Most Creative. Have each group nominate one idea for each of these categories. As a class, vote for the winner in each category.

### Spark of a New Tradition (page 46)

Invite your students to share plans or memories of parties that have included *gemilut hasadim*.



## Expand the Conversation

Ask:

- Why do you think that a reception that focuses on a *gemilut hasadim* project—such as repairing an old synagogue or making toys for homeless children—might be fun or meaningful? (*Answers may include: because it would make a difference in the world; because it can be active or creative.*)
- Would you consider having such a celebration? Why or why not?



## Bring It to Life

Ask the synagogue's Director of Education or rabbi for the name of a family that incorporated *gemilut hasadim* into their celebration. Invite the family to speak to your class.

### **Profile of Michael Berlin** (page 46)

Have the students imagine that they are establishing their very own philanthropic fund. They have received donations totaling \$1,000 to the fund in honor of their combined b'nai mitzvah ceremonies. Divide the class into small groups and have each group choose a recipient of the money. Have each group present their idea to the class, then vote on how to allocate money from the fund.

If your class does not already collect tzedakah, you may wish to begin a *real* fund to benefit the organization of your students' choice.

### **From Generation to Generation** (page 47)

Instruct students to bring home their books and interview their parents or grandparents using the questions on page 47.

During the next class session, discuss the answers as a class. Ask your students if they learned anything new—either about their parents or about themselves.

## Moving Along:

### Finding Ourselves

Textbook pages 48–49

## Getting Started

Introduce this section with some serious reflection: Talk to the students about the challenges of becoming an adult and accepting more personal responsibility. Ask: What are you looking forward to most about becoming an adult? What are you looking forward to the least?

Have a volunteer read the first paragraph and three “Will I?” questions aloud. Instruct the students to work independently to write five ways that they might fulfill each of these life goals. Explain that you will not ask them to share their answers; they are personal and private promises to themselves.

### Forks in the Road (page 48)

Instruct the students to work independently to complete this exercise. Ask each student to share the entry that is most meaningful to him or her.



### Expand the Conversation

Ask:

- Have you ever made a choice that you later regretted? If so, explain. Is it possible to “undo” a choice that you’ve made?
- Have you ever made what seemed like a small decision that had dramatic results? If so, explain.

- How much do your friends influence your choices? What are some ways to cope with peer pressure? (*Answers may include: having self-confidence; respecting yourself or your own decisions; surrounding yourself with friends whom you trust.*)

### Respect Yourself (page 49)

Divide the class into small groups. Instruct the groups to write a “Top Ten” list of ways to fulfill the mitzvah of *sh’mirat habriyut*. Encourage them to include physical as well as emotional concerns.



### Bring It to Life

You may wish to extend this activity by having each group create a *sh’mirat habriyut* “commercial,” based on one item on their “Top Ten” lists. Have the groups perform their “commercials” for the class, or for a younger grade!

### Confirmation (page 49)

If your synagogue offers a confirmation program, talk to your students about this program and requirements.



### Bring It to Life

Invite past confirmation students to speak to your class. Ask them to discuss what they learned from the experience. Encourage your students to ask questions.