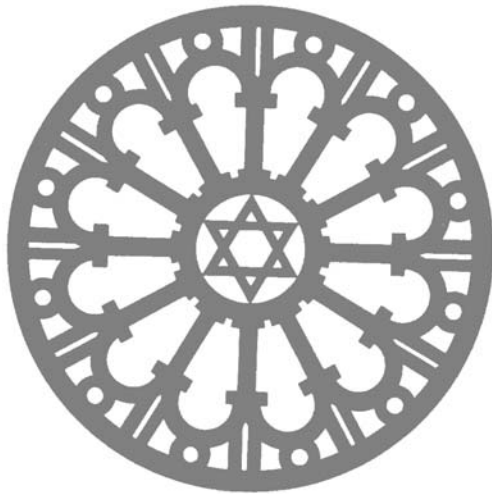


*Congregation Emanu-El
of the City of New York*



Bar and Bat Mitzvah

מועדים לשמחה וזמנים לששון

Times of Joy and Seasons of Gladness

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

The occasion when a young person becomes a bar or a bat mitzvah ought to be a meaningful and beautifully dignified life-cycle celebration for family, friends and community. We at Temple Emanu-El take seriously our congregation's orientation to this *rite-de-passage*, which—while addressing the historic and essential meaning of the ceremony—is equally concerned with the total well-being of the young people involved, as well as with the reverence that envelops the services of worship conducted within our sanctuaries.

The Aramaic-Hebrew term “bar mitzvah” is used in the Talmud with reference to any adult Jewish male who is obligated to observe Jewish law in its totality.

This obligation, according to our tradition, commences at age 13. Once a boy reaches that age, he becomes, as defined in Jewish law, a bar mitzvah, and he retains that status for the rest of his life. Having reached the age of 13, he has attained his legal majority and thus becomes a bar mitzvah—a responsible adult. These traditions were formulated centuries ago in historical settings significantly different from the times in which we live.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in our country, which we at Temple Emanu-El seek to avoid, that has transformed the meaning of bar mitzvah from that of a legal term to the position of a religious sacrament, as one might find in other faith communities. Under this newer

and fundamentally erroneous concept, a 13-year-old boy no longer becomes a bar mitzvah. He is rather “bar mitzvahed,” or “has a bar mitzvah” (both phrases have no meaning), and the fear is that without such a ceremony a Jew loses his status as a member of the community.

But, if we realize that according to Jewish tradition a male automatically becomes a bar mitzvah at age 13, then these corruptions will cease to distort our Jewish lives. We hope that our congregants at Temple Emanu-El will be among those who realize that they will never “go to a bar mitzvah,” “have a bar mitzvah,” or expect their rabbis to “bar mitzvah” anyone. It simply cannot be done!

The History of Bar and Bat Mitzvah

Temple Emanu-El, founded in 1845, is the largest Jewish house of worship in the world. From its inception, Congregation Emanu-El has been guided by the philosophy and theology of Reform Judaism. As the third oldest Reform congregation in the United States, our involvement with life-cycle ceremonies for young people is of particular interest and importance within the history of the American Jewish experience.

The custom of calling a young boy who had reached the age of 13 to the Torah for his first *aliyah* began in Europe, probably in the late 16th century. Its purpose was

to be a public statement of the fact that the youngster had just become a bar mitzvah. This custom had its origin in Europe and spread through most of the Jewish world.

As in most other congregations, the ceremony of calling a bar mitzvah to the Torah was part of our congregation's ritual when it was founded. It continued to play a part in the life of the Temple until the early 1870s, when the practice was discontinued, a consequence of the fact that our members at that time ceased requesting the ceremony. Of course, with or without their consent (or, perhaps, knowledge), all boys in the congregation continued to become, according to authentic tradition, b'nei mitzvah (the appropriate plural form).

The recognition of a young girl as a bat mitzvah occurred for the first time in 1922, here in the United States. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement in Judaism, was called to the Torah in her father's synagogue. This custom has spread to all branches of Judaism, with the exception of ultra-orthodoxy.

Planning in Advance

Any child of a family belonging to our congregation who wishes to participate in a service marking the

occasion of his or her becoming a bar or bat mitzvah at Temple Emanu-El must be a student in the Religious School. It is strongly urged that three years' prior notice be given to the rabbis and the administration by the family in order to designate the day on which a celebration will take place. In order to maintain the decorum and the spirit of one of the most renowned of Jewish worship services the world over, only one celebration may take place on a given Sabbath morning, unless twins are involved.

It is for this reason that an option for a private family ceremony also is offered to members of our Temple. Such a celebration may be held on the Sabbath afternoon, Saturday evening, Sunday or any other weekday. To schedule a service, call Sherry Nehmer at (212)744-1400, ext. 312.

Preparation for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Under the direction and supervision of the rabbis of the congregation, preparation for the ceremony may assume one of two forms. If your child elects to read from the Torah (reading from the Torah is not mandatory for every bar or bat mitzvah), then at least eight to 10 months prior to the ceremony, please call one of the rabbis, who will designate a tutor, generally a member of our Religious School faculty. The cost of this private tutoring is borne by the family of the bar/bat mitzvah. If your child elects not to read from the Torah,

then the preparation is done with one of the rabbis or with the cantor.

Students reading the Torah read no more than 12 verses, as is customary here at Emanu-El. This is our practice because we believe that the ceremony should fall comfortably within the uniquely beautiful and dignified mode of our worship. Most important, we strive for the benefit of our students to be certain that the ceremony never becomes for them a competitive talent show or a trial by ordeal. Such a view of the occasion is not in harmony with the best interests of our children nor in keeping with the purposes of the ceremony.

Sensitive to the welfare of our students and respecting the traditions of worship in our sanctuaries, we ask that no special requests be made to alter the conduct of our services.

At the public service on Sabbath morning, both parents may ascend the *bimah*. Prior to the reading of the Torah, the parents offer a prayer that has been prepared by the rabbis. At the private service in the Beth-El Chapel, participation by siblings or other family members is also possible.

The Service of Worship

Our worship begins promptly at 10:30 on Sabbath morning. For this reason, it is best to invite your guests

for 10:15 a.m. and to be seated by that time. Particularly because you will be seated in the front pews, we ask you to assist us in maintaining the long-established traditions of decorum appropriate for our service.

It is not the custom at Temple Emanu-El to wear a *kippah* or a *tallit* at our public Sabbath morning service. If any of your guests are more traditionally oriented, please remind them that Temple Emanu-El is a Reform Congregation. We want no person to feel uncomfortable at a worship service because of a misunderstanding of our temple's traditions and norms. We also remind you of the Talmudic dictum that "one follows the customs of the place to which he comes." However, should any worshipers request a *kippah*, our ushers will be more than happy to provide one.

The festivities that follow a celebration are called in our tradition a *simchah shel mitzvah*—a rejoicing of the mitzvah. Following this tradition, we urge that your reception following the service reflect the Jewish values of graciousness, hospitality, modesty and good taste.

May your children—our b'nei mitzvah—go from blessing to blessing.

Notes

Administrative Office

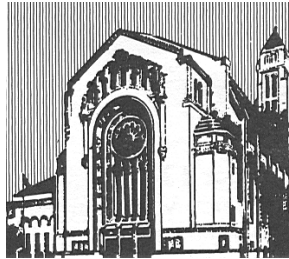
Dr. Mark W. Weisstuch
Administrative Vice President

Mark H. Heutlinger
Administrator

Sherry Nehmer
Assistant Director of Administration



Please call the Temple Office at
(212) 744-1400, ext. 210
for information concerning:
Wording of invitations...Pulpit flowers...
Photography policies and procedures...
Parking and transportation...
Handicapped accessibility...Temple security...
Possible Fifth Avenue parade conflicts...
And any other details about which you are uncertain.
We will be pleased to assist you.



Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
One East 65th Street • New York, NY 10065