

Judaism Your Way's

Open Tent B'nai Mitzvah and Beyond

Little can match a bar/bat mitzvah in terms of meaning, effort and energy for a young person and his/her family. And for good reason: bar/bat mitzvah is a Jewish celebration of a young person's coming of age – emotionally, intellectually, physically and spiritually. It is a time when a young person gets support to ask him/herself: Who am I? What's important to me? Where do I come from? What are my gifts? To whom am I accountable?

For parents, it is a time of great pride and poignancy. Their child is no longer just a child. Their relationship is evolving, and matters of authority, autonomy, responsibility and privilege will be negotiated over and over again. It's a time when parents get support to ask themselves: Of the legacies from my past, what do I want to pass on to my child? What does he need to know about where he comes from to know who he is? How do I want her to take her place in the world? What kind of adult do I want to guide my child to grow into?

And for extended family and community, bar/t mitzvah is a celebration of continuity, when a young person claims for themselves the Jewish identity that, to this point, they have received from their parents and their community.

Many people authorize their synagogue to guide them through the bar/t mitzvah process culminating in a rite that occurs in the context of the community's worship service: the young person reciting blessings over the Torah, reading the Torah, giving a talk based on the Torah passage, and leading parts of the service. This is a powerful model. It brings the young person to the heart of a central narrative of Jewish spirituality – the giving of Torah through Moses to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.

But for families not affiliated with a congregation, for interfaith families, and for any family whose relationship with Judaism is not religiously defined, the nature and meaning of the ceremony can be more complex.

As the diversity of life situations and spiritual temperaments among Jews and their loved ones continues to grow, the synagogue model may not best reflect the family culture within which a young person is coming of age as a Jew. A ceremony that assumes that everyone in the room is Jewish, or that everyone believes in God, or that Torah is this family's primary way of finding meaning within Judaism, can, ironically, reinforce people's distance from Judaism and keep them from affirming the non-religious Jewish connections they do have.

For example, what are the implications of a bar/t mitzvah celebration for the child of an interfaith family? For the child's identity? For the non-Jewish parent? What might it mean for a child who sees themselves as Jewish plus... to celebrate a bar/t mitzvah?

In the same vein, what are the most authentic ways for a young person whose family's Jewish orientation is humanist or secular, to celebrate their coming of age?

Judaism Your Way was created almost 5 years ago to meet unaffiliated Jews and their loved ones in the particularity and uniqueness of where they are. Thus the name, Judaism Your Way. In many ways, this is nothing new. The mission of meeting people where they are is reflected in the classical image of the tent of Abraham and Sarah, the Jewish people's first family. It is told that they had openings on all 4 sides, so travelers could enter in the direction that they were coming from.

That's the intention behind Judaism Your Way's Open Tent Bnai Mitzvah and Beyond program, a two year program that first prepares students for their individualized bar/t mitzvah and then supports them to explore next Jewish steps.

Here's how it work: In the first year, students take a weekly class led by Rabbi Brian. The class introduces the three axes of Jewish living – study (mind), spirituality (soul) and acts of loving kindness (heart). Students also choose from multiple tracks that reflect widely diverse ways of experiencing and exploring one's Jewishness:

- Traditional service--the student develops skills to be a participant/leader of a service and to read from the Torah.
- Four Worlds service: the young person explores aspects of their physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual selves. A service or ceremony is developed that builds upon the themes that get identified in this exploration. In this way the service grows out of the individuality of the young person, not something external that is imposed..
- Research project: The student explores in depth a topic or theme within Jewish peoplehood and makes a presentation based on it. This option may fit for families that have a more secular or cultural orientation to Judaism.
- Activity model: The student completes 13 accomplishments from a variety of life and skill areas that demonstrate their mastery and commitment to their community, their family and themselves.

In the year following their bar/t mitzvah, students participate in a peer-group such as Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing. Students will also be encouraged to participate in community programs such as Bnai Tzedek and Hebrew High School. In addition, students and parents will act as peer mentors to the pre-bar/t mitzvah groups.

Open Tent Bnai Mitzvah and Beyond is based on the belief that young people will be most permanently affected by a bar/t mitzvah process that is congruent to the Jewish style and values of their family. When young people experience the bar/t mitzvah process as an extension and expansion of who they are, it will be more natural for them to continue to explore their Judaism after the bar/t mitzvah celebration is over.