

Bar/Bat Mitzvah Family Education

Overview: This three-part family education series addresses issues related to bar/bat mitzvah. It is designed for a large group of parents and students and uses active learning exercises. It covers issues around Jewish identity, the meaning of bar/bat mitzvah, and common concerns that parents and students have about the process.

Session 1 – What does it mean to be Jewish?

Objectives:

- Help parents and students to think critically about what they see from an informed place.
- Encourage parents and students to have honest conversations about what it means to be Jewish – the bar/bat mitzvah process can deepen this.
- Assist parents and students come up with good questions to help them in the process. Goal is maximal involvement and engagement.

Key points:

- There are many ways to be Jewish; there is huge diversity in Jewish religious practice, political beliefs, historical experience, and culture.
- It's our responsibility to create our own unique Jewish identity.
- We should root our own ideas and practices in Jewish tradition and contemporary Jewish practice.
- The point of being Jewish is to help us lead meaningful lives, ethical, spiritual lives

Outline of the morning:

- 1) Welcome and explanation of graffiti exercise (9:55-10:00)
Around the room are large pieces of paper with photographs in the center. Parents and students walk around and write "graffiti" on the paper in response to the photograph. Some of the photographs are intentionally provocative and all speak to issues of Jewish identity.
- 2) Walk around the room and write comments (10:00-10:15)
Write whatever comes to your mind first in response to the photograph. You can also comment on other comments (please be respectful).
- 3) Read graffiti and explain any confusing images (10:15-10:25)
- 4) Break into small groups to discuss questions (see below) (10:25-10:40)
- 5) Report back from small groups (10:40-10:55)
- 6) Break up into kids' groups and parents' groups (10:55-11:30)
 - Parents – how do you or how do you want to convey your Jewishness to your kids? How might your child's bar/bat mitzvah (if they are having one) be an opportunity to do this?
 - Students – how do you relate to your parents' Jewishness? How might having a bar/bat mitzvah strengthen your own Jewish identity?
- 7) If time bring everyone back together.

Questions for Small Group Discussion

- 1) Did any of the photos surprise you? Disturb you? Make you laugh? Make you angry? What do you think about the comments that other people wrote?
- 2) Are there generational differences between how the students understood the images and how the adults understood the images? Discuss.
- 3) Imagine how the people in these images would answer this question: What's the point of being Jewish or becoming active in Jewish life? How would you answer this question?

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Session 2 – Becoming a Jewish Adult

9:50-10:00 – Getting Started

Set up chairs in two concentric circles, introduce first activity:

Two circles of people sit facing one another, outside circle facing in, inside circle facing out. Each person faces a partner from the opposite circle.

10:00-10:30 – Activity

Ask a question – the first is an easy one. Questions are discussed only between the partners. Partners take three minutes to discuss. Then ask the next question. Before people answer the next question, those on the outside circle move to the right and sit in front of a new partner. Take another three minutes to discuss. Then ask the next question, and people on the outside will again move to the right.

Partners should briefly introduce themselves first if they don't know each other before each round.

Parents and students should be randomly mixed up; sometimes two parents will talk, sometimes two students, and sometimes a parent and a student.

It's important that the number of people on the inside and outside circles are the same. Use a teacher's assistant as needed to equal the numbers.

Adjust the three minute time as needed.

Questions:

- 1) How long have you been a member of Shaarei Shamayim? What do you like about this congregation? (this is an intentionally simple question to introduce the process.)
- 2) What do you like about being Jewish/being part of a Jewish family?
- 3) What is one thing you are excited about your or your child's bar/bat mitzvah?
- 4) What is one thing you are concerned about regarding your or your child's bar/bat mitzvah?
- 5) What is one hope for the bar/bat mitzvah process and ceremony?

(Adapted from *Jewish Identity Games*, Richard J. Israel)

10:30-10:45 – Small group discussions: “Hillel Says”

Before parents and students move, explain the next activity. Break into groups of two to three families. (No more than six to eight people in a group.)

Explain the famous story of Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai:

A Story: A man who is interested in converting to Judaism came to Rabbi Shammai and said that he would convert if Rabbi Shammai could teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot. Offended, Rabbi Shammai drove him away with a stick. The man then came before Rabbi Hillel and asked him the same question. Hillel responded: “Do not do to others what is hateful to you. The rest is commentary. Go and study.”

One of the challenges of this story is to figure out what is the most important thing to say, because we can't stand on our foot for too long. So, have each person share one interesting thing that they heard in the last exercise – while standing on one foot.

(Adapted from *Jewish Identity Games*, Richard J. Israel)

10:45-11:20 – Students go to class with teachers. Parents stay for discussion with Rabbi.

Students:

Students break into groups of three. The trios form a circle. Teachers give each trio scenarios that they have to discuss. (Distribute scenarios one at a time.)

Each student in the trio should discuss it. Teachers should make sure that everyone participates. After five minutes, ask each member of the trio to be a 0, 1, or 2. The member who is a 1 should move one trio to the left. The member who is a 2 should move two trios to the right. The member who is a 0 should stay seated. The 0's should raise their hands high so that others can find them. There will now be entirely new trios.

Distribute a different scenario to discuss, then use the same rotation procedure. Do this a third time with the third scenario.

Come back together for a group discussion. Ask for a volunteer who is comfortable reporting back to the parents about what the group discussed.

(Adapted from *Active Jewish Learning*, Shoshana Silberman and Mel Silberman)

Discussion questions for Students

Sam loved learning Hebrew, and he loved to sing, so he was excited about having a long Torah and Haftarah portion. He had a great time with his tutor, and he quickly learned all the prayers in his service. But there was one problem. He was terrified of speaking in front of people, and he thought all of his ideas were stupid. He was so anxious about writing his dvar Torah that he put it off week after week. The rabbi was expecting a draft, but he just couldn't write it. The thought of standing in front of all those people made him sick.

- 1) What advice would you give to Sam?
- 2) Do you relate to him?

Jane wasn't really interested in being Jewish, and she didn't understand why her parents were making her have a bat mitzvah. It wasn't like they ever went to Shabbat services, so why did they care so much? They said that the ceremony would link her to all the Jews who came before her. It was an important ceremony for a teenager to have. And it was really important to her grandparents. But Jane hated studying every night, and her tutor was often frustrated that she rarely did her homework. She got mad at her parents, and they often fought. It wasn't making anyone happy, but the date was already set, and the invitations had been sent.

- 1) What advice would you give to Jane?
- 2) Do you relate to her?

One of the students in Beth's bnei mitzvah class had just celebrated her bat mitzvah. All the kids in her class had been invited to the party. It was held in a fancy club, and everyone was talking about how cool it was. Beth's parents told her that they couldn't afford to have an expensive party. They were just going to rent a room in a community center. She felt really bad about it, and hers was coming up next. Everyone was going to compare the two and think hers was boring.

- 1) What advice would you give to Beth?
- 2) Do you relate to her?

Parent Discussion:

- Last week I heard a lot of diversity among the parents as far as their thoughts and priorities regarding bar/bat mitzvah.
- We will continue this discussion today but in a more concrete way. There are many different kinds of priorities, and they are overlapping, but for today's purposes I have chosen three different components of bar/bat mitzvah that seem to excite parents.
- I would like parents to go to three different corners of the room that represent these different components. Again, they are overlapping, and you may want to go to more than one, but there will be plenty of time to talk about all of them.
- I have created a fictitious congregation – Congregation Oseh Shalom – and written up their bar/bat mitzvah program (see next page). These aren't proposals for Shaarei Shamayim, though we could certainly discuss whether any of them would work for us at another time. I wanted to present three different models to help us clarify what's really important to us and to examine what's uncomfortable.
- Move to a particular area of the room and ask one person in the group to read the scenario out loud.
- Designate one person to take notes and be responsible for sharing the conversation with the other groups.
- After 5-10 minutes of discussion, the group representatives move to other groups and explain to the others what they discussed. They then engage in a new conversation. After another 5 minutes, they then move again.

11:20-11:30 – Come back together and wrap up

Members of Congregation Oseh Shalom recognized that parents and students related to bar/bat mitzvah very differently, and their perspectives were an outgrowth of their Jewish identities. They understood the need for creating a standardized program for all the students, and they wanted to stretch the parents and students in terms of acquiring Jewish skills, knowledge, and familiarity with the tradition. But they also wanted to affirm their members' unique Jewish identities and allow them to concentrate on what was most meaningful to them. Therefore, they created three different tracks beyond the basic requirements for bar/bat mitzvah. The kids specialized in an area that excited them.

The members also saw bar/bat mitzvah as one step along the way in the development of a child's Jewish identity, not as an end in and of itself. Therefore, students were asked to make commitments to the community beyond the bar/bat mitzvah.

The tracks were:

1) Jewish Ritual and Tradition

Students in this track delved deeper into Jewish tradition in any number of ways. 1) They could focus on Torah and Haftarah reading, taking on bigger portions and mastering the skill of leyning (chanting). 2) They could learn additional liturgy and become familiar with the structure of the service. 3) They could learn how to read traditional Jewish commentaries on their Torah portion and become familiar with how Jewish texts work together. There would also be an option of developing a creative Jewish ritual as part of the bar/bat mitzvah that would combine Jewish traditions with contemporary approaches to Judaism.

Commitment post-bar/bat mitzvah:

Students would commit to reading Torah or Haftarah at Shabbat services three times over the next year; leading Shabbat services three times over the next year; writing a dvar Torah once over the next year; or helping to integrate their ritual into the life of the community.

Questions:

- What is exciting to you about this track?
- Does this support your vision of your child's bar/bat mitzvah?
- Is your area of interest the same as your child's? If not, how will you handle this?

2) Intergenerational Experiences: Jewish Peoplehood and Culture

Students in this track really focus on broadening their perspective on what it means to be Jewish. They do this in different ways: 1) They are matched with an older Jew who can share stories with them about being Jewish when they were young and open their eyes to different Jewish historical or cultural experiences. They can create a report or project that goes into depth on one aspect of what they learn. 2) They find a mentor to teach them about Jewish music, art, or literature and they create a report or project that goes into depth in any particular area. 3) They spend time with their own grandparents learning about Jewish genealogy and creating a family tree.

Commitment post-bar/bat mitzvah:

They continue the relationship they made, do a program at Shaarei Shamayim on a topic of interest, or teach about what they have learned to the students at Bet Sefer.

Questions:

- What is exciting to you about this track?
- Does this support your vision of your child's bar/bat mitzvah?
- Is your area of interest the same as your child's? If not, how will you handle this?

3) Social Justice from a Jewish Perspective

Students in this track are asked to donate a meaningful amount of money that they receive as bar/bat mitzvah gifts to the Oseh Shalom Social Justice Youth Board. Students pool this money and become a granting organization. They narrow down the organizations they want to fund and ask representatives to make presentations to them and their parents. They also discuss Jewish perspectives on tzedakah and social justice and figure out together how to distribute the money each year.

Commitment post-bar/bat mitzvah:

Students remain on the board and participate each year in the granting process. They become responsible for leading the meetings and teaching younger students how the process works. They also become involved in publicity for the fund, as well as additional fundraising efforts.

Questions:

- What is exciting to you about this track?
- Does this support your vision of your child's bar/bat mitzvah?
- Is your area of interest the same as your child's? If not, how will you handle this?

Session 3 – Making Judaism Your Own

9:50-10:00 Getting Started – Reflections from last week

Encourage parents and students to share any conversations or thoughts they've had in the past week with the group. What is one thing that you've learned from the past two sessions?

While this is happening, teachers' assistants pass out different colors of paper which will be how the next groups are formed. Parents and kids should be together for this next exercise.

10:00-10:10 Set up for the next exercise: Fishbowl/Samoan Circle

Explain the next exercise, break families into groups and send them to various rooms.

We will break into three groups of 15 people each and go to separate rooms. Four people will make up the inner circle – it should be diverse: someone who is retired, a teacher's assistant, one or two parents, and one or two students (preferably of different ages/stages in the bar/bat mitzvah process).

Each person will get a text. One person reads it out loud. The four people in the middle then talk about it. After 4-5 minutes, someone from the outside can tap someone on the inside circle and they take their place in the inner circle and the group continues to talk.

10:10-10:40 Fishbowl/Samoan Circle

The facilitator should use judgment as far as how long to let the conversation go. Leave at least 5 minutes at the end for wrap-up.

Facilitator questions during the exercise – use as necessary to prompt discussion or to change the direction of the conversation so that it continually engages parents and students.

Touch on these issues if others are not addressing them:

- Is David justified in being angry at his parents?
- Can someone defend David's parents?
- Is Sarah being too hard on herself? What responsibilities do parents have in raising Jewish kids?
- Is believing in God a necessary part of becoming a Jewish adult? In having a bar/bat mitzvah?

Facilitator questions for wrap-up:

- What was one interesting thing you heard?
- Was there anything you disagreed with?
- Are there any issues that you want to explore more?

10:40-10:50 Come back together; any reflections to share with the large group?

10:50-11:20 Hopes, Wants, and Needs – Break into parent groups and student groups

Parents: Moving forward, what do you hope for, want, and need regarding your child's bar/bat mitzvah from 1) the congregation, 2) the rabbi, 3) other parents, and 4) your children?

Randomly break into three groups. Brainstorm these hopes, wants, and needs and come up with a statement. Where there's consensus, it should read, "We." Where there's not, it should read "Some of us" or "One of us."

Don't be concerned about making sure that each category is adequately attended to or figuring out whether something is a hope, want, or need. Go with the flow of the conversation and concentrate on the substance.

One person should be the notetaker and should write out the statement for each group. It will be collected and distributed.

Students: Moving forward, what do you need from 1) the congregation, 2) rabbi, 3) your classmates, 4) your parents?

Randomly break into three groups. Brainstorm these hopes, wants, and needs and come up with a statement. Where there's consensus, it should read, "We." Where there's not, it should read "Some of us" or "One of us."

Don't be concerned about making sure that each category is adequately attended to or figuring out whether something is a hope, want, or need. Go with the flow of the conversation and concentrate on the substance.

One person should be the notetaker and should write out the statement for each group. It will be collected and distributed.

11:20-11:30 Report back – Each group reads their statement

Ask if there are any parents who want to work with me on fun, community-building activities for this group.

Text 1 for Fishbowl/Samoan Circle:

David was furious. He had been going to Hebrew school for years and he always knew that he would have a bar mitzvah. But last night his parents told him that he could only take karate one night a week because now that he was in sixth grade he had to leave time for his bar mitzvah studies. One night a week?! He had been going four nights a week! Karate was his life. He felt so at ease with it, and he had great friends in his group. Now they would be progressing and he would fall behind.

It wasn't like he hated Hebrew school and he was fine with having a bar mitzvah, but he didn't feel at ease with it. They learned about Jewish customs and traditions but they rarely ever did them at home. Hebrew school was this thing that was just stuck onto his busy schedule. The classes were sometimes interesting, but he never understood why he went. It wasn't like his parents were that religious. They barely ever went to services. Okay, they celebrated Chanukkah and Passover, and they went on the High Holidays, but that was it. Now he had to go to Shabbat services every month and work with a Hebrew tutor every week and practice reading his Torah portion every night? Why were they making him do it when they didn't do it themselves?

When he shouted at them that he wasn't going to have a bar mitzvah, they said that he had to. They said it was important to them and to David's grandparents.

Text 2 for Fishbowl/Samoan Circle:

The bat mitzvah was so beautiful. Sarah could barely believe it. Her daughter, Jessica, was standing before the congregation leading the prayers. This was everything she had hoped for. She thought about how her grandfather had a bar mitzvah, her father had a bar mitzvah, and even her mother, later in life, had a bat mitzvah. Judaism was so important to all of them. Then she thought about her bat mitzvah thirty years ago. It had been okay, but it never really meant a whole lot to her. The service and the whole experience, really, were so empty. It was just what you did, but it wasn't meaningful.

The rabbi called her and her husband and all of their parents up to the bimah. They were about to pass the Torah from their parents, to them, and then down to Jessica. The rabbi talked about how they were passing Jewish tradition, customs, and rituals down generation to generation – in Hebrew, *l'dor vador*. Sarah felt guilty. Was she really passing Judaism down from generation to generation? Jessica was well-prepared for her bat mitzvah, but there was so much that she had never taught her. Life was busy, and to be honest, she was ambivalent about Judaism.

Sarah held the Torah in her hands. No, it wasn't that she was ambivalent about Judaism. Really, the problem was God. She just didn't believe in God. Or maybe she didn't

understand what to believe about God. As she held the Torah in her arms, ready to pass it to Jessica, she worried that she hadn't fulfilled her responsibilities as a Jewish parent.