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Please return with payment to: Stuart Berger  
**Jewish Federation of Pinellas/Pasco Counties**  
 13191 Starkey Road, Suite 8,  
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stuartberger@jewishpinellas.org



## We Make a difference YOU can make a difference too!

By starting a B'nai Tzedek account, you will be starting the experience of a lifelong habit of philanthropy, and exposure to a diverse group of people and Jewish organizations that are working hard to change the world.

By giving kids the opportunity to be philanthropists, we place into their hands the most valuable Bar or Bat Mitzvah gift we can give them: we teach them how to give.

*Empowering kids to make a difference.*



B'nai Tzedek Program -Pinellas/Pasco  
 TOP Jewish Foundation  
 c/o Jewish Federation of Pinellas/Pasco Counties  
 13191 Starkey Rd., Suite 8;  
 Largo, FL 33773

727 - 530-3223 stuartberger@jewishpinellas.org

## The history and meaning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah

By **RABBI MICHAEL TOROP**  
 Special to the Jewish Press

Bar/Bat Mitzvah is not mentioned in the Bible. But as far back as the 2nd Century CE, the Talmud implied 13 as the age of a boy's maturity. Pirkei Avot states categorically that, "At age 13 one becomes subject to the commandments" (Avot 5:21). A vow made by a 13-year-old boy was regarded as valid (Mishnah Niddah 5:6). In addition, a boy of 13 or a girl of 12 was expected to fast on Yom Kippur (Ketubot 50a).

A well-known "mi-drash" by Rabbi Eleazar contains these words: "A man is bound to occupy himself with his son until the age of 13, thereafter he should say: Blessed be He who has released me from the responsibility for my son's

conduct." This commentary led to a ceremony still observed in some traditional congregations in which a father pronounces a prayer called *Baruch She-p'tarani* — "Blessed is He who has released me".

It is unclear when these early pronouncements were transformed into actual ceremonies. In general, historians believe that it became the practice in the Middle Ages in Germany for a boy of 13 to help lead the service and to give a learned interpretation of the weekly Torah reading. Thus, it has been for about eight centuries — not a long time in the span of Jewish history — that young men prepared to participate in worship and assume adult responsibilities in the Jewish community — fasting on Yom Kippur, counting for a quorum or minyan, and being a witness in a Jewish court or bet din.

Shabbat participation to mark the growth of a young woman has roots that go back more than a century in France and Italy. In Europe, such celebrations were often important

family and social events, but were not generally intended to be the religious equivalent of the more comprehensive Bar Mitzvah.

That occurred on May 6, 1922, when the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (founder of the Reconstruction Movement of modern Judaism) took part in such a ceremony in New York. Rabbi Kaplan was a great visionary who



**Rabbi Michael Torop**  
 Temple Beth-El,  
 St. Petersburg

inspired many features now taken for granted as part of modern American Jewish life. He said that his four daughters represented four excellent reasons for the institution of yet another revolutionary ceremony, and Judith Kaplan is thus generally credited with being the first modern

Bat Mitzvah.

More important than the history of the ceremony is its significance for our future. Becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah is an expression of the joy of accepting Jewish values and the promise to pass them on to succeeding generations. Accordingly, it is most important that everything we do in connection with the event is in keeping with the Jewish ideals that give it meaning.

So, the primary aspect of Bar and Bat Mitzvah is its role, not as the culmination of one's Jewish education, but as one of the important beginnings of one's life as a Jew. As such, the idea of celebrating the event and then dropping Jewish involvement is antithetical to the very nature and purpose of Bar Mitzvah, and it is the community's expectation that every child who celebrates a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is really celebrating the first step towards continuing education and other more adult Jewish events, including travel to Israel, involvement in Jewish campus life, and the establishment of a Jewish home.

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