

Jewish Press of Pinellas County
20th Annual Bar & Bat Mitzvah Planning Guide
 & Jewish Press of Tampa

YOU

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This bonding time with the folks will also help everyone keep things in perspective.

And if things get really tense, there is always a great book called *Who's Bar/Bat Mitzvah Is This Anyway?* by Judith Davis (St. Martin's Griffin, 1998). Quickly throw it toward the parental units and make a hasty retreat.

The best time / worst possible time

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah comes at exactly the wrong time for a young adult to stand up in front of a crowd and proclaim their adulthood. This practice is from the olden days when a 13-year-old was ready to have his or her own spouse and kids — so be happy your biggest responsibility is picking the color for the suede kippot.

Depending whether you're a boy or girl, your voice will crack up there — your face will be full of braces, your arms longer than they should be, and a pimple will be in the center of your nose — or all of the above. (Sorry guys, it's a fact girls mature faster so they may have an edge.)

In the movie, *Keeping the Faith*, Ben Stiller's rabbi character explains to his vocally challenged Bar Mitzvah student that he should embrace his "suckiness." So don't stress. The truth is it's not a performance; it's a time to be with your community and celebrate the process of gaining knowledge and questioning — so enjoy it.

While it may be the most awkward time in life, your Bar/Bat Mitzvah can be one of the best memories in the making, a true accomplishment — this can only happen by taking an active role in your preparation for that day.

For the right reasons

Make sure you are having a Bar/Bat Mitzvah for the right reasons. What they don't tell you is that according to Jewish law, simply turning 13 for boys and 12 for girls makes you a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony has served to motivate Jews to obtain the first level of learning in Jewish life, but the goal of it really is the process before and the exploration that happens as you head into adulthood.

With that spirit in mind, your Bar/Bat Mitzvah can be one of the great milestones of life. You are making a public commitment to your family, your friends and yourself that you will continue to seek out knowledge and to wrestle with what tradition and culture have

to offer.

All of this said, there is no reason to do something only for the sake of tradition or because everyone is doing it — or because your parents promised you a new iPod.

Practice well and often

Your parents are going to be harping on you night and day to go over your Torah, Haftarah and prayers. Here is how best to handle that situation: Practice several times a week rather than forcing yourself to sit down for one extended practice session. It's painful to sit there for an hour at a time; 15-25 minute sessions are much more doable and, actually, practicing more often will help you to better retain the text. You may want to practice in earshot of the parents, just to get them off your back. It is helpful to get into a routine. Find an appointed time of the day — before a favorite TV show, before dinner or after dinner, in the car or on the bus on the way to school. Before bed is always a mistake — you end up falling asleep on your chumash and having nightmares that your father is about to sacrificially slit your throat!

Rabbi for the day

Write a drash (speech) for the service — one that relates the weekly Torah portion to your own life. You are thinking: How could I possibly do this? True, this is no simple task. But rest assured many less intelligent and able than you have done it before. Yours will not simply be OK, but memorable. The best of speeches are those that culminate from an in-depth process of wrestling with the text, reading commentaries by other thinkers on the subject and talking it out with teachers, friends and parents. It is your chance to teach the community. You are the rabbi for the day. So make sure it's your own words — too often we let others revise our work, so much that it is almost unrecognizable by the end of the editing process. The best speeches are those that were written by the students themselves and are from the heart. Definitely practice the speech several times and in front of others, but not so much so that it feels overly rehearsed — make sure to look up, smile and talk to us in attendance.

The big day

So, you've reached the day in which you proclaim to the world that you are an adult ... sort of. A word of caution: Your parents are going to cry. Let them. Also, a lot of people are going to want to kiss you and hug you and want to shake

your hand — so be sure to pack hand sanitizer.

So many details will have gone into that day. It's OK if a couple things go awry. By now you've mastered some impressive skills. It's important to note that even the most accomplished Torah readers have someone next to them or close to them, following along, in case they need assistance. So go easy on yourself — it's OK to make a mistake. Take a deep breath. A good rule of thumb while up in front of everyone — take a moment before each prayer, blessing and reading that you do. Of course, you want to do well and feel accomplished, but remember everyone sitting out there is pulling for you.

Just keep going, keep trying. You can do it. Count on it. Your parents, rabbi, cantor, tutor — whomever — would never let you get up there if you couldn't!

Todd Shotz is the founder of *Hebrew Helpers* (www.hebrewhelpers.com), a bar/bat mitzvah tutoring service. Although based in Los Angeles, *Hebrew Helpers* has placed tutors/facilitators and licensed its unique curriculum in many other cities nationwide. This story originally appeared in the *Jewish Journal of Los Angeles*.

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