



The terms Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah mean 'son of the commandment' and 'daughter of the commandment' respectively, and were traditionally used to denote one who was 'subject to the commandments'. This was related to the age of physical maturity, and was deemed to be thirteen years and one day for a boy, and twelve years and one day for a girl. This reference to the significance of thirteen is based on a passage in rabbinic literature, by the second-century sage, Judah ben Teima: 'At five, one should study Scripture; at ten, one should study *Mishnah* (a collection of material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law, the first part of the *Talmud*); at thirteen, one is ready to do *mitzvot* ('commandments' - the plural of *mitzvah*, 'commandment'); at fifteen one is ready to study *Talmud* (the body of Jewish law and legend, made up of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*, an explanation of and commentary on the *Mishnah*); at eighteen, one is ready for the wedding canopy; at twenty, one is responsible for providing for a family' (*Mishnah Avot* 5:21)

In our eyes, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* is a stepping stone on the road to religious maturity - an important milestone on the journey of Jewish education and practice, rather than the conclusion of it. The hope is that all young people celebrating *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* will continue their Jewish studies and go on to celebrate *Kabbalat Torah* ('receiving the *Torah*') at around age 15 or 16.

There is no specific reference in Jewish sources to the actual ceremony of Bar Mitzvah until the 15th century, when the custom developed that a boy would be called to the *Torah* on the first possible *Shabbat* after his birthday, and read the last portion of the *Torah* (*Mafkir*), followed by the *Haftarah*. He would also give an exposition of the *Torah* portion. The *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony is much more recent, and dates to the 20th century. Liberal Jewish communities affirm the absolute equality of boys and girls, so all children become *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* once they are thirteen, and all are encouraged to read from the *Torah*, to give a *d'rashah* or *d'var Torah* (an explanation of the *Torah* portion), read the weekly *Haftarah* portion, and some may choose to mark the day by leading part of the synagogue service.

At SBJC, a young person must have attended *Cheder* (Religion School) for a minimum of two years before being prepared for *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. As well as regular attendance at *Cheder*, he or she will be expected to have attended services regularly and worked hard, with both their teachers and me, to prepare their reading from the *Torah* and the introduction to the *Torah* and *Haftarah* portions, to learn the *Torah* and *Haftarah* blessings and the leading of part of our *Shabbat* morning service.

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