

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## Bar and Bat Mitzvah – A History



### Context

Becoming bar/bat Mitzvah simply means to reach the age at which one is responsible for one's own Jewish life. This happens at the age of 13 (in the Orthodox tradition girls come of age at 12, in Reform all are treated equally). This legal transition happens regardless of whether or not it is marked in synagogue, however the celebration has come to have great resonance throughout the Jewish world as an adulthood transition and family/communal occasion. Since the twelfth/thirteenth century the primary ritual to mark becoming bar mitzvah has been reading from Torah.

Here **Rabbi Michael Hilton** of **Kol Chai Synagogue**, author of *Bar Mitzvah: A History* outlines the history of the British Reform approach to the ceremony and celebration of b'nei mitzvah, and some of the values that underpin our work in this area.

### Content

Before the days of Reform Judaism, b'nei mitzvah were for boys only. In fact, early Reformers found it a meaningless ceremony, observed without enthusiasm, and with no intellectual content. They invented a new ceremony for both boys and girls was invented, known as confirmation, in which a class of thirteen year olds who had been studying together, answered carefully prepared questions about their beliefs during the service. Bar mitzvah was no longer considered necessary: from now boys and girls would study together and be treated as equals. When the first British Reform synagogue was founded, bar and bat mitzvah were not on the agenda. Rabbi David Woolf Marks in the 1840s favoured this new ceremony, and group confirmation was also offered in the new Reform community in Manchester from 1860.

By the end of the nineteenth century bar mitzvah was in sharp decline in Western Europe and the USA: boys were learning little and therefore did not value the ceremony. This situation changed only because rabbis and congregations began to insist on much stricter educational requirements, normally two or three years' regular attendance at classes.

With the rise of the school leaving age in the early twentieth century, the age for group confirmations rose as well, enabling a boy to both celebrate a bar mitzvah at thirteen and a confirmation at fifteen or sixteen. At first Reform and then Liberal congregations in the UK slowly began to reintroduce bar mitzvah, and for the first time to offer bat mitzvah, in both cases because of demand from parents. After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, learning Hebrew was no longer seen as an irrelevance. It was, however, not until the 1970s that it became the norm across our congregations for both boys and girls to celebrate by reading from the Torah for the first time at the age of thirteen, followed by a family party. It was Reform who led the way in allowing girls to read from the Torah, and in equalising the age of bar and bat Mitzvah.

Within the Jewish community a wide range of views exists on whether it is the social or the religious aspects of bar and bat mitzvah which are more important. For all Reform synagogues, there is a clear answer: it is the educational aspect which has the greatest importance. This is emphasised in the ceremony itself, in which the boy or girl will not only read or chant from the Torah, but explain or translate the reading, and often lead part of the service as well. Reform has also promoted bar and bat mitzvah for children with special needs, so much so that even young people unable to speak more than a few words have been able to celebrate in synagogue. The use of special software and other IT aids in such instances is not only permitted by Reform, but actively encouraged.

Like any successful project, bar and bat mitzvah carries risks and dangers—the most obvious being an uncalled-for competition about levels of performance and the size of the party. It is the role of Reform rabbis and educators to make sure that each and every child is valued through the ritual. For many centuries, communities successfully limited the size of parties by regulation. That is no longer possible, but since the 1950s Reform rabbis have expressed their concern about the size of parties, suggesting that the event has become “more bar than mitzvah.” It is normal in many Reform communities to offer a standard Kiddush at a reasonable cost, to ensure that within the synagogue at least, everyone celebrates equally and the social aspects do not become competitive.

Another very important aspect of Reform bar and bat mitzvah is the support offered to today’s families, and the recognition of the difficulties of family life in our time. The importance of the family party as part of the tradition means that the occasion has become one which is a celebration not only for the child but for the parents, and indeed, one which emotionally and spiritually often means more to the parents than to the children—a milestone in the life of their child, and one that recalls their own childhood and the rites of passage they experienced. This can make the celebration difficult for some. After divorce, parents have to negotiate a share of the celebrations. Especially (but not only) in mixed faith households, the child may be confused about her or his Jewish identity and have doubts about the whole experience. Bereavement or illness, redundancy or just bad timing may make the celebration unusually stressful. In all such instances, it is the role of a Reform synagogue and the rabbi to put the needs of the child first, and to negotiate an approach to the ceremony which will satisfy the educational and spiritual needs of the child. Occasionally, this may mean postponing or cancelling a ceremony where it is not appropriate, even though the parents may have already made an emotional and financial investment in it. The interests of the child are paramount.

Fortunately, such difficulties remain exceptional, and most children and their families thoroughly enjoy the experience. All Reform communities have developed educational programmes which offer a positive approach, and which go far beyond the rote learning required for Torah reading. Synagogues today offer a range of class projects and, in many communities, children are encouraged to combine the ceremony with an individual Tzedakah (charity) project to raise money for a worthy cause. Communities offer opportunities for children to continue their involvement beyond bar mitzvah/bat mitzvah through continued education, clubs, community work, and opportunities to train as teachers and youth leaders. Communities also offer opportunities for adults to celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah, which is requested either because they did not have one as a child, or because they wish to celebrate again, often on the seventieth anniversary of the original occasion. In particular, adult bat mitzvah is a wonderful new life cycle occasion for women which has been pioneered and promoted by Reform Jews.

This article incorporates material from:

*Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah: A Reform Perspective Based on History*, pamphlet published by the Movement for Reform Judaism 2010.

*Bar Mitzvah: A History* by Michael Hilton (JPS/University of Nebraska Press 2014)

## Contemplation

A priest had mice in his church. He didn't know what to do. So he went to his friend the Rabbi who he knew had had mice problems which he had solved. The priest asked, "Rabbi how did you get rid of the mice and make sure that they wouldn't come back?" The Rabbi answered, "I gave them a bar mitzvah!"

We may consider bar and bat mitzvah to be an important expression of our values as Rabbi Hilton has indicated, but how do we ensure that it is a milestone in the journey rather than the final destination. What more can we do to the process of bar and bat mitzvah or were our predecessors correct in considering it an unhelpful institution?