

Age of B'nai Mitzvah

April 6, 2000

"At five years old one is ready for the scripture, at ten years for the Mishnah, at thirteen for the commandments..." Pirke Avot, V.24

Question: At what age does a youth become a Bat or Bar Mitzvah?

Answer:

Bar or Bat Mitzvah literally means "son or daughter of the commandment." A Bat or Bar Mitzvah is a person who is now responsible to follow the commandments and is viewed as capable of understanding and fulfilling both the obligations and honors accorded to adults in our community. Judaism marks the occasion of becoming a Bat or Bar Mitzvah with a ceremony. The Reform movement explains the ceremony as follows:

"It is a mitzvah to be called to the reading of the Torah and to recite the appropriate blessings. This is called an ahYah (lit. "going up") and takes place for the first time when the child reaches the age of thirteen and thus becomes a Bar Mitzvah or a Bat Mitzvah.¹

Although the Bar Mitzvah observance dates to the middle ages, the Bat Mitzvah ceremony is a creation of the twentieth century. In prior centuries girls were obligated to the mitzvot, but there was no ceremony to mark the occasion. The time for Bar Mitzvah has always been thirteen, but in some communities Bat Mitzvah age has been twelve or twelve and a half. The rationales for adopting different ages for Bar and Bat Mitzvah are varied. Girls and boys were thought to reach the age of possible marriage at different times. Great emphasis was placed on physical maturity. An early Reform responsum that recommended against recognizing Bat Mitzvah relied in part on the fact that, at that time, after Bar Mitzvah a boy would be eligible at age fourteen to attend the Hebrew Union College, while girls could not.²

Today, the Bat or Bar Mitzvah marks an "initial step toward maturity," which "must lead to continued Jewish education." Reform Judaism regards Bat and Bar Mitzvah observance as part of the continuum of Jewish education and as a step on the way to full membership in the Jewish community. "The ceremony bespeaks a willingness on the part of children to accept and live by the commandments of Judaism."⁸ In keeping with Reform principles, the age for both Bar and Bat Mitzvah at Congregation B'nai Israel is thirteen.

In a movement, such as Reform Judaism, that recognizes full equality between the sexes, the age when a young individual may be counted as part of the minyan⁴ should not differ depending on one's sex unless some strong reason exists to treat the sexes differently. The old reasons, based on physical maturity, simply have no place in modern Reform practice. The age for being called to the commandments has nothing to do with the age of marriage. Rather the question should be at what age should we mark the beginning of the transition from a Jewish child to a Jewish adult.

¹Simeon J. Maslin [ed.], *Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*, 21 (Central Conference of American Rabbis 1979).

²Bat Mitzvah (1913), in Benjamin, *supra*, at 83.

Young adults of both sexes mature at different ages, so the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah today is based on the youth's place in our system of Jewish education. That place is the same for girls as for boys. Children begin their education at the same age, regardless of sex. The youngsters who become Bar or Bat Mitzvah have thus had their first six or seven years of Jewish education together. They will continue in that education and will become confirmands at Shavuot roughly at the age of sixteen, regardless of sex.

By the age of thirteen most adolescents have advanced sufficiently in their understanding of Hebrew and in intellectual maturity to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Some girls and boys may reach physical or emotional maturity earlier or later, but thirteen as the age for being called to the commandment finds support both in the Talmud and in our educational system.

For these reasons, among others, the Central Conference of American Rabbis unequivocally stated in 1979: "We recommend that the age for both [Bar and Bat Mitzvah] be held at age thirteen."⁵ And, for the same reasons, our congregation has adopted the age of thirteen for both Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The age may be calculated using either the Jewish calendar or the secular calendar, at the option of the family.

Approved by the Temple Board on
April 6, 2000, based on
recommendations from the
Religious Practices Committee and the Rabbis

³Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Adultery (1989), in Walter Jacob [ed.] Questions and Reform Jewish Answers, 46 (1992).

⁴See Havdalah Bar/Bat Mitzvah (1982), in Jacob, *supra*, at 93.

⁵Reform Attitude Toward Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah (1979), in Walter Jacob [ed.], American Reform Responsa, 88 (1983). This responsum is signed by Walter Jacob, Chairman, and Leonard S. Kravitz, Eugene Lipman, W. Gunther Plaut, Harry A. Roth, Rav A. Soloff, and Bernard Zlotowitz.