



APPENDIX 1

What Non-Jews Should Know About the Bar and Bat Mitzvah Service

This appendix restates some of the material found in earlier chapters. It is a model for an explanation of the bar and bat mitzvah that you can send to non-Jewish guests with their invitations.

Jews and Christians look at many things differently. We have a different theology, a different liturgy, a different holiday cycle, and a different life cycle.

But Jews and Christians share certain things, and that sharing is no less profound than the differences. As philosopher Martin Buber once said, “Jews and Christians share a Book and a hope”—a Messianic hope. Jews and Christians “share” the first five books of the Bible. We both believe in a God that can be approached through prayer and worship. We believe in a God who loves and who is revealed through Scripture and holy interventions in history.

Jews and Christians also share a belief in the power of ritual. Rituals make a group distinctive and transmit identity from generation to generation. They dramatize a religious group’s beliefs about the world and about how God interacts with it.

Bar and bat mitzvah means that a thirteen-year-old Jewish child is old enough to perform *mitzvot* (the commandments of Jewish life). It is one of the most venerable and most potent of Jewish symbols and rituals. When a Jewish child becomes bar or bat mitzvah, he or she publicly reads a section from the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Each week, every congregation in the Jewish world reads the identical passage. In this way, the youth is linked to the entire Jewish people, regardless of where the thirteen-year-old happens to live. The youth also reads a *haftarah*, which is a selection from the weekly section of the prophetic writings—from Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, etc., or from historical books like Judges, Samuel, or Kings.

There is More to the Service than Meets the Ear

The bar and bat mitzvah ceremony occurs during the Sabbath worship service. The first part of the service ends with the congregation singing *Mi Chamocha* (“Who is like You among the gods that are worshipped?”). It echoes the song that Moses and the Israelites sang at the shores of the Red

Sea when the Israelites had been saved from the Egyptians. The second part of the service ends with a prayer for peace for the Jewish people and for the whole world. During the third section of the service, the Torah is read. The *haftarah*, by tradition, must end on a note of *nechemta* (comfort). This portion of the service ends with the implicit hope that all humanity will embrace God's words.

The entire service concludes with two prayers: *Aleinu*, a triumphant plea that the world will *ultimately* recognize that there is only one God, and *Kaddish*, a plaintive mourners' prayer which proclaims that God's Kingdom, the fulfillment of God's hopes for the world, will come someday. *Kaddish's* form and function are closely related to the Lord's Prayer.

The ultimate message of the service is *the triumph of hope*: hope for freedom, hope for peace, hope that all our words will end on joyful notes, hope for universal redemption.

There Is More to the Torah Scroll than Meets the Eye

The Torah symbolizes the moment when God met the Jewish people at Sinai and made a covenant with them. It reminds us of God's revelation and of God's intervention in human history.

The Torah also symbolizes all that the Jewish people hold sacred: stories, laws, histories, poetry. When a Jewish child reads from the Torah, he or she is enveloped in its heritage, in its power, in the majesty of Sinai. He or she says to the community: "I am now thirteen years old. I am now ready to fulfill the covenant with God by being responsible for performing *mitzvot*, the obligations of Jewish life."

All Ritual Moments of Becoming Are More or Less Alike

All religions—all cultures—have their moments of *becoming*. It is a moment when an individual goes from childhood to maturity, a moment of sacred initiation.

Bar and bat mitzvah have certain parallels in Christianity. In the Baptist tradition, *baptism* itself is that moment of becoming. Baptism occurs during young adulthood rather than infancy because only then, Baptists believe, can one freely assent to Christianity.

In most Christian denominations, the closest parallel to bar and bat mitzvah is *confirmation*. Confirmation acknowledges a mature entry into

the rights and the embrace of the church. It ratifies the baptismal vows that had been made for the child in infancy, just as bar and bat mitzvah acknowledge the pledge the parents made when their child was an infant that their child would study Torah.

Bar and bat mitzvah is a symbolic way to usher a child into the adult Jewish community, a way for the entire community to say to that no-longer-child, "All we cherish, all we hope to be, the sum total of our visions, we place them in your hands. May God make you ready. May God make you strong."



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