

Inclusive Bar/Bat Mitzvah  
Guide for a child with  
additional needs

# WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT

A Guide for  
Families, Communities  
and Religious Leaders

United Synagogue Inclusion Series



TheUS



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## INTRODUCTION

The United Synagogue is committed to inclusion in all aspects of community life. As we aim to ensure that our communities thrive, it is vital that we continue to make our spaces welcoming, inclusive and engaging to all.

This publication offers suggestions that to help create a meaningful and welcoming *simcha* for people with varying abilities and challenges. It opens the discussion around a family's additional or particular needs.

It is important to remember that around 20% of the population have a disability, whether it is visible or not. If someone feels that they are not able to participate in an aspect of community life, this could prevent them and their whole family from attending.

Some parents may be concerned that their child with additional needs will not feel welcome or able to participate, or that there is some template way in which this milestone is to be recognised. We hope that this guide will “break the ice” for early communication with your Rabbi, Rebbetzen and lay leaders.



**//** *Our tradition teaches that the Jewish people are just like a Sefer Torah - a complete and perfect whole. If one single letter is missing, then the entire scroll is not able to be used. Similarly with the Jewish people, every single person counts.*

***Our concept of community, within which every single person is valued, underpins our commitment to making everyone feel welcome and included in our synagogues. //***

Chief Rabbi  
Ephraim Mirvis

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## WHEN DOES A CHILD BECOME BAR/BAT MITZVAH?

The age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah is the moment at which a young person becomes religiously responsible for his or her actions and thus becomes a Jewish adult. According to our tradition, a girl becomes Bat Mitzvah, literally, a daughter of the commandments, upon reaching the Hebrew date of her twelfth birthday.

A boy will become Bar Mitzvah, a son of the commandments, upon reaching the Hebrew date of his thirteenth birthday. These ages are when a young adult can distinguish between right and wrong and make moral judgements, usually around the time of puberty. In Jewish law, they are then credited for all the *mitzvot* (commandments) they perform and, likewise, held religiously accountable for any errors.

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## DO WE HAVE TO HOLD A BAT OR BAR MITZVAH CEREMONY?

No. This is an important and significant milestone for the young adult, their family and community. It is an opportunity to create a meaningful *simcha* (celebration), enhance their Jewish journey and Jewish heritage as well as making them feel part of the community at this crucial time.

However, becoming Bat or Bar Mitzvah happens completely independently of any formal ceremony or celebration, as explained above. In fact, the idea of a celebration is only a few hundred years old and not universally popular; some communities still mark the day in a very low-key manner for all children. So, the 'when' of Bar or Bat Mitzvah is completely different to the 'how' it is marked.

Performing a *mitzvah* for the congregation is one way to highlight that they are Bat/Bar Mitzvah and now count as Jewish adults. A meaningful event, recognising the child's strengths and individuality, should be the focus. Flexibility will be essential in the planning, and it is important to remember that a child may perform a different *mitzvah* from the traditional service, instead of reading the Torah or delivering a *D'var Torah* (speech), and still have a meaningful ceremony (see below for examples).

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## WHO SHOULD WE CONTACT AND WHEN?

The advice for all parents and carers of all children, is to start planning as early as possible. Open a dialogue around your child's specific needs as soon as possible: each case is individual, and collaboration is the most likely way to achieve a meaningful occasion for your child, family and community. Collaboration between parents, the Rabbi, Rebbetzen, lay leaders, religious teacher, and whenever possible, the child with additional needs, is essential from the start.

It is important to consider the needs of all involved from the beginning. Everyone involved needs to set mutually agreed achievable objectives, goals and expectations. They should understand the possibilities and the child's strengths and weakness as well as allowing for specialist advice when needed.

Contact the synagogue administrator to enquire if the community has a key person leading on inclusion and ask to refer to the United Synagogue inclusion review.

When looking for a teacher who can help, the first step should be to speak to your Rabbi and Rebbetzen who should be able to advise you.

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## **MUST THE CEREMONY BE ON SHABBAT MORNING IN SHUL?**

Absolutely not. If you feel that a noisy and busy service is not the right environment, there are many other options open to you to explore with the Rabbinic team and lay leaders.

In considering the optimal forum for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the community should be open to using the most conducive rooms available for each element.

The particular needs of children taking medication or with attention conditions should be considered. They should consider how best to deliver whatever they are doing to mark their Bar/Bat Mitzvah at a time of peak focus. They should be seated at their ease and not required to stand awkwardly during a rabbinic address.



## BAT MITZVAH

Many synagogues hold Bat Mitzvah ceremonies on a Shabbat morning, where the girl gives a speech on the weekly Torah portion, her Hebrew name, the next festival or a significant *mitzvah* or value.

Alternatively, there are many options to hold an event either at home or in synagogue for the whole community or a private group. You could recite *Havdala* (ceremony marking the end of Shabbat with blessings over wine, candles and spices) on a Saturday night; have a Friday night service (Kabbalat Shabbat), or a personal ceremony in shul on a Sunday afternoon for family and friends. Another possibility would be a women-only service on Friday night or *Rosh Chodesh* (New Moon) which is traditionally considered a special time for women, with a blessing and presentation by the community Rabbi afterwards.

## BAR MITZVAH

If you feel that being called up to the reading of the Torah and saying the *berachot* (blessings) is right, but the Shabbat morning is too busy or intimidating, there are shorter Torah readings and often smaller services on Shabbat afternoon, Monday and Thursday mornings, as well as *Rosh Chodesh* (the New Moon), when the shul will be much quieter. Whilst some boys will also recite the corresponding *Haftarah* (section from the books of the Prophets) on Shabbat, a shorter *D'var Torah* or the boy just reciting the *berachot* with someone else reading from the Torah are also options.

Holding a midweek event will also allow driving to shul, photography, assistive technology, recording and live streaming of the ceremony. While it is optimal to celebrate among the community, a mid-week at home service can be an alternative if resources from the home are required and are not available in the shul, with the Rabbi and/or Rebbetzen in attendance (as often happens at a *Brit Milah*). Again, speak to your Rabbi and the lay leaders as soon as possible to explore all the options, including factors such as loaning a *Sefer Torah* and the requirements for a *minyan*.

If streaming is not appropriate, the child or parent could write a piece in the shul newsletter.

## ! PHYSICAL BARRIERS

Consider the layout of the shul in advance to check if access is restricted for children and guests with physical disabilities. There are many options open to resolve this challenge, from relocating the service to a hall or room with no steps, providing support so that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child could stand whilst performing the *mitzvah*, simply allowing the child to remain seated, or to bring the *Sefer Torah* to a table by the Bar Mitzvah boy. Once again, an early discussion with your Rabbinic team and lay leaders is essential.

## WHAT ABOUT PUTTING ON TEFILLIN?

An important *mitzvah* in becoming an adult male is the wearing of *tefillin* (phylacteries) which are worn for weekday morning prayers. Some boys with disabilities may need support with this. Together with the help of your Rabbi, creative solutions can be found and dealt with sympathetically.

■ *Hanachat tefillin* (a ceremony for first putting on *tefillin*) is an opportunity for a slightly different weekday gathering and as an alternative ceremony to how it is usually performed at a *Shacharit* morning service.

■ It might be necessary to build up to wearing *tefillin*. Sensitive children might particularly need to become used to the straps (which are often quite abrasive when new). The rabbi or teacher working with the family on adjusting the straps to size and becoming familiar with the technique of putting them on is a valuable experience and much better than rushed instruction during a service.

■ Boys should be encouraged to put on *tzitzit* every day.

## SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS

When reading from the Torah is not possible, talking about it may be another option and parents should discuss an appropriate length for the ceremony. As a rule of thumb, 700 words is 5 minutes.

Provide a copy of a speech for the audience if it is noisy, the space is not suitable for a large audience or the child has a speech impairment.

Where a child has a quiet voice, the family should be encouraged to provide transcripts of the *D'var Torah*, taking care that *Pesukim* (scriptural verses) are not reproduced in Hebrew or containing God's Name.

For a boy, the *mitzvah* could equally be experienced through reciting the *berachot* (blessings), or *leining* (reading from the Torah) but equally through *hagbaha* (raising the Torah) or *gelilah* (dressing the Torah), addressing the congregation or making *havdala*.

Reading in Hebrew from the Torah without vowels may be challenging for boys with additional needs. Saying the *berachot* while someone else reads could be an alternative.

Leading a part of the service, such as *Kabbalat Shabbat*, or weekday *Maariv*, or opening/closing the Ark.

The celebratory blessing on a girl or boy can be made by a family member, and the Rabbi can also give the priestly blessing.

For a nonverbal child, consider using sign language with someone else reading the *D'var Torah*, *parasha* or prayers.

Holding the *atzei chaim* (Torah rollers) for the Bar Mitzvah boy.

If the child is uncomfortable speaking, they could create a PowerPoint and show it during the week.

Write an article for the shul magazine, create a photo display or make a short video.

Many children now carry out a charity or social responsibility project in the year running up to their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. This is definitely a way to demonstrate that they are carrying out a *mitzvah* as part of the community.

A challah event, where the girl or boy makes a sufficient quantity of dough and says the blessing for separating the challah (originally the tithed portion for the Temple) before baking the loaf. This is creative, quite accessible and has a tasty completion!

Whatever the type of ceremony, consider planning for breaks if required by the child.

### FOR PARENTS

Bear in mind that the Rebbetzen or Rabbi may be unfamiliar with the nature of the additional needs of your child and will need guidance from you about your child's capabilities and aspirations. There are certain halachic considerations which are important to address early in the planning stages, so it is important to liaise with your Rabbi throughout the process.

### FOR RABBINIC TEAMS

Please listen carefully to the concerns and aspirations of the parents and child and consider how they can be addressed. With careful planning and consideration this can be an incredible and empowering milestone for the child, family and community.



## LIZZI'S BAT MITZVAH

BY HER MOTHER

// We never actually believed Lizzi would be able to have a Bat Mitzvah and not only did she prove us wrong, but she was outstanding and confident and taught the community not only about her *parasha* but how her disability affected her life.

We went into planning Lizzi's Bat Mitzvah by consulting with her every step of the way and all the decisions were based on her ideas and on her feeling comfortable, while all the time we knew that on the day or even a few minutes before she went on to the *bimah* either me or Elliot would have to take her place, which was the most nerve-wracking experience. We never took it for granted that she would get up on the *bimah* and just prayed we would not have to do her *D'var Torah* for her. Lizzi sat upstairs next to me and her grandma. I could see how nervous she was but everyone around made her feel comfortable and it was lovely how everyone came over to wish her well and put her at ease.

Lizzi loves princesses and Disney, so her Bat Mitzvah teacher used similarities from her favourite characters who had come of age, as linking ideas to work on her *parasha*. Lizzi talked about her journey in life and how she was diagnosed with Fragile X at the age of 5 and although it was challenging, it had made her the person she is. Lizzi then talked about her diagnosis of Autism and how she sees the world differently but how her Autism has not stopped her living her life. The community were so quiet when Lizzi spoke, and I believe Lizzi gave them a real insight into her life and what it's like to live with Autism. We centred the kiddush around food that Lizzi likes, and everyone was so proud of her on the day. When it came to Rabbi David's presentation and speech, well, I have to say that's where Lizzi came into her own, she heckled him and did so much ad-libbing it was hysterical.

Lizzi wanted a party and that was also planned with her in mind, the food, music and the wonderful DJ. She had input into it all and of course we did a Disney theme with every table being named after a different Princess. As Lizzi only had a few friends, her grandparents did the speeches which was really special. Lizzi felt so comfortable and really was the star of the show for the evening.

When planning something with a child with a disability all I can say is be prepared for the unexpected, centre it around your child's interest and know that anything can happen and just go with the flow and relax. We made Lizzi's *simcha* about her and made it as inclusive as possible, Lizzi had friends at the shul with various disabilities and the community made them very welcome and at ease. //

## HARRY'S BAR MITZVAH

### ST ALBANS UNITED SYNAGOGUE

The family thought that their son would never be able to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah as other boys did as he has autism. Rabbi Daniel Sturgess realised that the Bar Mitzvah boy would not be able to cope with any kind of Bar Mitzvah in the usual sense and so aimed for him to have a positive and enjoyable shul experience. He worked around the child's needs – “I want to make it special, not just for him but for you, his parents, as well”

Rabbi Daniel said, “The key was to really listen to the family about the boy's needs, abilities and favourite things, as they know him best, and to follow their lead”.

The first decision was that the ceremony should be held on a weekday when the shul was empty of other people so that it would not be too overwhelming for him.

The mother explained to the boy in advance what was going to happen, who was going to be there and what was going to happen afterwards. Rabbi Daniel devised a special format for the occasion, talking to him on the *bimah*, showing him around the shul and explaining who usually did what and asking the Bar Mitzvah boy to repeat the first line of the *Shema* word for word after him.

The ceremony concluded with the presentation of a Bar Mitzvah certificate together with a model car, in recognition of his passion of automobiles. This connected to the short, interactive address Rabbi Daniel gave to the Bar Mitzvah boy around his favourite topic – cars. To follow, the synagogue social committee chair organised a 'kiddush' that included all his favourite foods, including popcorn and ice lollies.

The mother said that “the occasion was joyous, incredibly joyous” and that she “was gobsmacked, it was something I thought would never ever come to pass and he did it so well”.





## NETANEL'S BAR MITZVAH

BY RABBI DAVID MASON - MUSWELL HILL UNITED SYNAGOGUE

// Netanel has Downs Syndrome, which made it difficult for him to read and remember Torah reading. Nevertheless, as he regularly *davens* at school he knew the blessings over the Torah. We often practised the blessings at synagogue while holding a Torah on the *Bimah* and he remembered them without the need for reading. At home on Friday nights, Netanel learned over time how to make kiddush and for his Bar Mitzvah, did so at a Friday night at the synagogue. Additionally, while I led the service in synagogue, I got Netanel to sing two bits of the service that he knows, when taking out the Torah and putting it back in the ark.

We also thought it would be nice for Netanel to give a very short, basic *D'var Torah*. We did this with the help of his school using pictures that would trigger what Netanel would say. We stood with him, as parents, and helped him through.

We also ran a special service on the Thursday night before where we asked members of the family to bless Netanel with words, as well as some music. He loved being with his family and being the centre of attention.

At the end of the service when there is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in Muswell Hill Shul, parents come up to the Ark and bless their Bar or Bat Mitzvah child. We did this with Netanel too, giving him the experience that others would also have.

The keys for our child were visual aids and regular practising in the synagogue. He enjoyed being part of things and was very excited when his Hebrew name was called!





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