

Congregation Beth Am  
Bar/Bat Mitzvah Task Force Recommendation  
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Task Force Members:

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Goals:

- Increase the sense of community among the bar/bat mitzvah students, parents and as a class of families and create stronger ties to the greater Beth Am community.
- Strengthen the sense of Jewish identity that is enhanced from the bar/bat mitzvah process.
- Strengthen the bar/bat mitzvah student and families' commitment to Jewish values, in particular tikkun-olam and torah learning.
- Increase bar/bat mitzvah student and families' familiarity with Shabbat worship at Beth Am.
- Decrease distractions from the above goals by reducing stress/focus on logistical issues.

Background:

At the beginning of the year 2000 the Board approved the formation of the bar/bat mitzvah task force. The task force began meeting in the spring of 2000. The activities of the task force have included the following:

- Studying the history and meaning of bar-mitzvah in a broad context as well as within the Beth Am community.
- Identifying problems/issues, setting goals.
- Researching best practices from leading Reform and Conservative congregations in other communities.
- Gathering input from our Beth Am community (internal research) as to student and parent experiences during the bar/bat mitzvah process both positive and negative. This research included adult focus groups, student interviews and written surveys.
- Synthesizing input from research and prepare recommendations based on goals.

Research Findings - Other Congregations:

- The vast majority of congregations studied had a bar/bat mitzvah family education program (similar idea to our Morasha). Many of these programs were greater in scope and duration than ours. Enhancements to highlight include:
  - Earlier initiation of the program, in some cases as early as spring of 5<sup>th</sup> grade.
  - Important tikkun-olam emphasis in the programs. This was often a requirement.
  - Many opportunities for class-wide family bonding - retreats/conclaves etc.
- Most congregations required students to attend some set number of Shabbat services (various permutations of numbers, specific requirements and tracking systems).
- Many congregations had a fairly detailed handbook for families as well as a clear staff focal point for planning issues

Research Findings - Beth Am:

- Overall, our bar/bat mitzvah families are extremely pleased with our bar/bat mitzvah program. For most, it is an important part of their Beth Am experience. They enjoy

Morasha, the intensive interaction with clergy and professional team and, of course, the experience of the actual day.

- Common issues and concerns included the need for earlier information, particularly logistical, stress around scheduling and the sheer volume of driving, meetings, tutoring sessions etc. at Beth Am during the last several months of the preparation process.

Additional details regarding the research results are available from task force members.

### Recommendations:

1. Modify and expand current family bar/bat mitzvah education program as follows:
  - Begin entire process earlier - either 2 years or grades in advance of bar/bat mitzvah date.
  - Increase number of retreats/shabbaton etc.
  - Initiate a focused, organized tikkun olam project as part of the program. This can be done as a large group or with smaller group or individual family options. Tikkun olam project to start in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. If possible, the project should be of an ongoing nature though this is flexible.
  - Encourage students to keep a diary (perhaps provide a structured workbook) to track the education, tikkun olam and service attendance (see below) experience.
  - Incorporate more information sharing on logistics/details/process earlier in program.
  - Schedule group experiences early during program, possibly to include structured activities that encourage families getting to know one another.
  - Program to include hands-on preparation for parents - i.e. optional sessions to work on torah chanting.
  - Most of the group program should wind down several months before bar/bat mitzvah date to reduce the schedule crunch
  - Families will be expected to support other families of their bar/bat mitzvah class as well as the year ahead. We suggest requiring each 6<sup>th</sup> grade family to usher for one Shabbat/bar/bat mitzvah service. Additionally we suggest requiring each 7<sup>th</sup> grade family to assist with 2 onegs.
2. Institute an expectation that Religious School and Hebrew School students attend both Friday evening and Saturday morning services and encourage their participation in those services.
  - Expectation would begin at an early grade and increase with each year. For instance, 2<sup>nd</sup> graders attend 2 Friday evening and 2 Shabbat morning services, 3<sup>rd</sup> graders attend 3 and 3 etc. As students move through the grades there could be flexibility in terms of "counting" other festival services or services attended at other synagogues.
  - A non-onerous tracking program would be instituted. There would not be punitive actions for failure to meet the numbers; however, incentives would be implemented for exceeding recommended attendance both as an individual and as a class.
  - To support this program, study of prayers occurring in these services should begin during early years of Judaica/Hebrew study.
  - Similarly, to support this program we would encourage the Judaica program to begin some Hebrew education in earlier years. Sunday morning tefillah should be continued.
  - All Beth Am students attending Shabbat services would be invited onto the bimah to help lead a prayer such as Adon Olam or Ein Kelohainu as well as lead prayers during Kiddush.
  - Possibly implement a fun children's activity after services.

- Investigate a way to have oneg or lunch after Shabbat morning services without adding any additional burden for bar/bat mitzvah family.
  - Create program of Hebrew/Judaica School mentor - an older student to be a resource for younger student over the years through bar/bat mitzvah.
3. Identify dedicated resource to work with families through preparation process
    - Single point of scheduling
    - Single point of contact for bar/bat mitzvah issues
    - Coordinator of tikkun-olam projects, ushering, oneg support etc.
  4. Work to identify other ways to reduce logistical overhead and/or simplify process for families. Initial ideas include:
    - Creation of a bar/bat mitzvah handbook covering all of the preparation requirements as well as logistical issues. This needs to be user-friendly and include both the "what's" as well as the "why's". Maintain and update a list of "FAQ's".
    - Creation of a resource book (in library) of post-bar/bat mitzvah notes/questionnaires from families as well as sources such as vendors and comments.
    - Offer handbook and resource book type of information online on the Beth Am web site.
    - Identify experienced community members who would be willing to be resources (advice) for bar/bat mitzvah families.
    - Offer optional increase in bar/bat mitzvah fee to cover regular required expenses (bimah flowers, challah, kosher wine etc.)
  5. While it is not within the scope of this task force to recommend a specific solution to the bar/bat mitzvah scheduling issues, our research has found that this is a significant source of stress within the Beth Am community (both parents and staff) and recommend that a solution, whatever it is, be implemented soon.
  6. Post bar/bat mitzvah program - the task force touched on this issue recognizing the benefit of further encouraging post bar/bat mitzvah participation in educational, spiritual and social activities at Beth Am, however, did not have time to identify specific recommendations.