

**Stepping Into the Sands of Time
as Teachers of Torah, and Leaders of Prayer**

**Guidelines for Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah
at the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas**

Shalom and welcome to a place where, literally, history and destiny meet. Where looking up, and looking down, and looking around all tell a tale unlike almost any other. We are delighted that you are considering observing this special rite of passage in your family's life in the setting of our historic congregation. The Torah has been passed on, from one generation to the next, in this fashion, in this place, since 1796 – and in our current building since 1833.

With all of the history here, and all of the ways in which this will be a unique experience for you and your family and friends, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah remains what it is anywhere else. We expect our young people to play a pivotal role in their Jewish development. On this occasion they take their place in our midst as, literally, “teachers of Torah, and leaders of prayer.”

Here they may be away, and far from home. Our goal is still to make this the most meaningful experience possible, once which will reflect the Jewish depth and sense of connection, commitment and accomplishment it would have anywhere else. How we do this, and how our process works, is outlined below.

In this packet you will find:

- Expectations of our B'nai Mitzvah
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- Blending Customs and Balancing Needs
- Outlines of our Services
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Expectations of our B'nai Mitzvah

Those who celebrate/observe the occasion of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah in our congregation should be prepared to lead, to read and to teach, at least that which is expected at their home congregations. We work closely with clergy and congregational tutors at synagogues around the country to ensure that we respect the *minhag* (tradition) of everyone involved.

Our own minimal expectations, even if these are not followed in your own congregation, include the following: that the student chants or recites (at the very least) the *Bar'chu*, *Sh'ma*, *V'ahavta*, *Avot V'imahot*, and *G'vurot*, in addition to participation in the Torah service. Baseline expectations of the Torah service include: a D'var Torah (summary and commentary about the Torah portion), blessings before and after the Torah, and chanting or reading from the Torah scroll itself. At Shabbat morning services, an introduction to the Haftarah, the blessings before and after that reading, and chanting or reading from the Haftarah itself are also usually expected. That being said, it is the Rabbi/Cantor at your home synagogue, working with us, who should decide which prayers your child should, or is able to, learn.

Prayerbooks

At most of our services, The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas uses *Mishkan T'filah*, the *siddur* (prayerbook) of the Reform movement. With consultation and with your assistance in providing them, the use of other *siddurim*, or even prayer pamphlets prepared just for your service, is also possible. In preparation for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, we encourage your child to master the common Hebrew prayers for a *Shacharit* (Shabbat or weekday morning) service. On some occasions we might be able to offer a *Mincha* (weekday afternoon) service as well.

Blending Customs and Balancing Needs

We are, have been, and will continue to be open to a wide spectrum of observance. We want all Jews to have a sense of connection with our story.

In some cases we may need to balance the expectations of your home congregation and the standards and customs of our own community, the congregation that calls this place its home. This is rarely a problem, but it helps to make some outer limits clear.

As one example: for families from Conservative or liberal Orthodox backgrounds we are prepared to facilitate a service which is much more traditional in orientation than we might otherwise offer. We will work with you. As a congregation which has been part of the progressive wing of world Jewry since the 1950's, however, there are some issues of gender-equality which are not negotiable for us. A physical separation of men and women, or vastly different expectations of girls than of boys are outside of the parameters of what we are able to offer.

Outlines of the Service

Our office will provide the outline for you and your child. Please look at this outline closely with your tutor or home clergy. This outline will be the most important tool for the congregation's preparation for your special day. **It is the responsibility of the family or tutor to properly fill out the outline, and deliver it to the congregation via e-mail at least two weeks before your service.**

For your convenience we have created an Excel spreadsheet that you can edit as you prepare for the service; this includes indicating whether the rabbi here or the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, or someone else will lead these sections of the service, whether these prayers will be led in Hebrew or English, and places to insert names of those you wish to honor (Ark openings, Aliyot, etc). There also may be a new service participation worksheet coming, which will help "pull together" all the different parts of the service.

About Services: Days, Times and Length

B'nai Mitzvah (the plural of Bar or Bat Mitzvah) are available in our Synagogue for *Shacharit* (morning services) on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Saturday (Shabbat) mornings. Morning services typically begin at 10:30am and last around an hour and a half. *Mincha* (afternoon) services on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday afternoons may occasionally be available, depending on your travel schedule and needs. The liturgy for an afternoon service is different from that of a morning one; other assumptions in these guidelines are based around the model of a morning service.

Rehearsals

Wherever possible, in either your schedule or ours, having a rehearsal a day or more before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is very helpful. Because your child will be doing his or her training with an outside Rabbi/Cantor/Tutor, we do not require this. Based on long experience, however, to make the service go smoothly we do expect the following:

For families flying in to the island, we ask that 45 minutes be set aside the day before the event for a short rehearsal, and that all those with roles in the service be present at that time. For those families arriving on a cruise boat the day of the service, we ask that 30 minutes be set aside that morning for a short rehearsal – again, with all those having roles in the service present.

The rehearsal involves the following:

- 1) A meeting with the Rabbi
- 2) A chance to go through the outline, review roles of participants and ask questions.
- 3) Last minute discussion about any changes or musical and liturgical decisions.
- 4) A chance for the B'nai Mitzvah to view the Torah and rehearse reading or chanting.
- 5) An opportunity to get used to the space, see where the B'nai Mitzvah will lead, and rehearse the "choreography" and "staging" of the service, for all participants.

We are unable to provide an advance photograph or other image of the portion of the Torah the Bar/Bat Mitzvah will be reading. Because scrolls differ from one another, and because the script in the scroll may seem different from that in the *Tikkun* (the printed version without vowels) used by most B'nai Mitzvah in their preparation, please do allow enough time to review the portion in person that morning.

Skype, Facetime or phone conversations with the rabbi are welcome beforehand, if and as it can be arranged -- again, based on either your schedule or ours. These are helpful but not always possible, and therefore this step is not absolutely necessary.

Torah and Haftarah Portions

Your Rabbi/Cantor/Tutor should assign a passage from the *parashah* (Torah portion) of the week of your child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah for your child to learn, using the standard reading cycle of your congregation. Because there are minor differences between movements and based on geography and timing (Diaspora Jews are occasionally one week behind Jews in Israel, and Reform Jews sometimes in the Diaspora sometimes follow the Israeli cycle), it is very important that you let us know, well in advance of the service, what portions you expect to be doing. Any part of the Torah portion can be read, but it is not our usual practice – and would be quite different for us – for the entire portion to be chanted on a Shabbat morning.

It is best that you and your child choose a section of the *parashah* that is meaningful or speaks to you in some way. The Torah reading must be contiguous. Each *Aliyah* (distinct section being read, surrounded by blessings) must be at least three verses long, and the division of the portion into *aliyot* (plural of *Aliyah*) must make sense according to the text and translation.

Please notify our Rabbi of the Torah and Haftarah passages your child will read, along with the prayers that your Rabbi/Cantor assigns your child by filling this information out on the outline attached. We, at The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, ask that B'nai Mitzvah know the blessings before and after the Torah and Haftarah Readings. (Haftarah – the readings selected from the Prophets, the second section of the Hebrew Bible -- is only read on Shabbat or the first or last day of a holiday. Therefore, we do not require, or expect, Haftarah to be read if your child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah is celebrated on a weekday.)

On Shabbat and weekdays, we allow three *aliyot* per Bar/Bat Mitzvah for the Torah service. An *Aliyah*, for us, is a minimum of three verses. The first *aliyah* is typically reserved for Grandparents; the second *aliyah* is typically reserved for Parents; the third *aliyah* is typically reserved for the child becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah. However, these are only recommendations; please choose whomever you would like for the *aliyah* and Torah blessings. (At a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the one becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah is, however, required to have one of the *aliyot* him/herself.)

Honors

In addition to the *aliyot* (blessings before and after the Torah reading), you are able to honor other friends or family members by assigning them to the following aspects of the service:

- 1) Opening and/or closing the Ark – The ark is opened three times, and an opener is needed for each of the two doors of the ark.
- 2) Serve as the *hagbah* to lift the Torah – We ask that this honor be given to a person who is strong enough to lift a Torah. (In fact the rabbi often lifts the scroll, and an honor is given to one who will hold it.)
- 3) Serve as the *galilah* to roll, wrap and dress the Torah. Multiple people, including small children, can have this honor.
- 4) Prayers – Often there are family members or friends who wish to contribute by sharing in the reading of a prayer, or reading of a prayer in Hebrew or English in place of the B'nai Mitzvah. We ask only that this does not substitute the basic requirements of B'nai Mitzvah.

Liberal Judaism invented – and some other denominations have now copied – a very special practice featuring the physical passing of the Torah from one generation to the next. Please discuss with our rabbi, in advance, which parents, grandparents and, in some cases, great grandparents will be with us at this service, and any limitations in mobility or ability to stand to participate in this powerful ritual any of them might have. Obviously, any other issues or family dynamics which might affect this, or any other part of the service, should be shared in advance as well. All such issues will be handled with confidentiality and sensitivity.

Music and Melodies

We at Hebrew Congregation wish to honor the musical *minhag* of your home synagogue. Therefore, please let the Rabbi know what melodies for prayers and blessings your child wishes to use. Without firm promises, we will do our best to accommodate these requests.

As a progressive congregation we sing a combination of traditional settings and the melodies most common in the North American Reform Movement, i.e. those sung at most Reform synagogues. These can include the works of Debbie Friedman, Craig Taubman, Dan Nichols, etc.

Special Needs

We at The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas are sensitive to the needs of our students. ***Please let us know if your child has special needs that we should be aware of, so that we can adapt the service requirements.*** Our goal is to make this a meaningful day for everyone, and we are always willing to make changes to fit the needs of your child.

Other Matters

While we do not require it, we encourage families to print programs for the day of your child's *simcha*. This program can include the Torah portion, the Haftarah, or any other personally significant readings or prayers. It can also provide translations, and names of honorees.

We provide plenty of *kippot* and tallit for guests, but we welcome personalized *kippot* for your service as well!

We have a wonderful list of photographers and videographers who can add to your service. All have worked with us before, and are trained in how to capture your child's special day while still respecting the sanctity of our sacred space.

Contact and Questions

Please contact us if you have any questions leading up to your child's special day! Communication is the best way that we can ensure a successful and meaningful event for you and your child!

For logistical and general questions, please contact Stella Minion at Stella@synagogue.vi
For questions about the service, please contact Rabbi Michael Feshbach at rabbifeshbach@synagogue.vi

We look forward to celebrating this wonderful *simcha* with you!

Rabbi Michael Feshbach and the staff, leadership and – your ultimate hosts -- the members of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas.

Links to more information (Coming Soon)

This material is under construction.

But you may find the following links to be helpful:

- [History of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah](#)
- [Glossary of Frequently Used Terms](#)
- [Additional Resources](#)
- [Guidelines/Sample Outlines for Speeches](#)
- [Information and Participant Worksheet for Services](#)
- [A Modern Challenge: Finding Meaning in the Experience](#)