

The Journey to Adulthood

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Rites of passage in life come in many forms, whether it's graduating from high school, getting a driver's license or finally being allowed to vote in national elections. In Judaism, one of the most significant rites of passage happens at age 13, when a child becomes an adult in the eyes of the Jewish community. They become a bar or bat mitzvah.

Most people think of bar mitzvah as a ceremony, which it is. But "bar mitzvah" translates to "son of the commandment," and "bat mitzvah" means "daughter of the commandment." Therefore, Jewish teenagers not only have a bar or bat mitzvah, they become one, too.

"My bat mitzvah was really important to me," said Kailee Jordan, a Morgan Hill resident who had her ceremony two weeks ago. "It showed that I was committed to Judaism, and it symbolized the start of my journey as an adult in our community."

Once a child becomes a bar or bat mitzvah, he or she must begin practicing religious obligations that are observed by the adults in the Jewish community, explained Joelle Jenkins, 17, who has taught religious school and continues to teach Hebrew school to children preparing for their ceremonies.

"For example, Yom Kippur is coming up in October, and adults are obligated to fast," Joelle said. "So, anyone who is 13 or older is technically required to fast. There are a few exceptions, like if you're sick or elderly, but for the most part, all the adults fast. Before you turn 13, you don't have to."

At this age, the teens are also counted as part of a minyan, which is the minimum number of congregants required to have a religious service.

Boys celebrate bar mitzvah at age 13, but girls can celebrate bat mitzvah at 12 or 13 because they typically mature faster.

Bat mitzvahs are a custom mostly practiced by Reform Jews and hardly, if ever, practiced by Orthodox or Chasidic Jews because women play a different role in the religious services.

The bar and bat mitzvah ceremony, according to the educational Jewish Web site www.jewfaq.org, has only been around for the last century or so. Before that, teens transitioned into their roles as spiritual adults with minimal fanfare.

Today, the ceremonies are part of Saturday morning services and last about two hours.

"A lot of kids start Hebrew school in third or fourth grade, and they keep taking lessons right up to their ceremony, so they've been getting ready for about seven years," Joelle said. "You have to learn how the prayer service works, you have to learn how to read all the prayers and learn how to chant the readings from the Torah. It's really hard reading from the Torah because the passages are written with no vowels, so you almost have to memorize the passages. You need to know the word as soon as you see it because you're reading as many as seven different portions of text."

In anticipation of reading the many different portions from the Torah, Kailee said she was a little nervous, but she felt ready after all the schooling she'd had in preparation. After reading the passages, Kailee gave a speech, as all bar and bat mitzvahs do, explaining the passages and telling the congregation what messages she got from them.

"I talked about how the preparation for my bat mitzvah and reading the Torah can help me every day," Kailee said. "You learn from the things that happened in the past, and you can think about the Torah when you have decisions to make and it can help you make wiser decisions."

Children preparing for their bar and bat mitzvahs must also do a project similar to a community service project. Kailee did a project to honor the soldiers who have died in Iraq in the last year or so.

"You're up in front of a lot of people, so it can be intimidating in some ways, but you know almost everyone there, so it's not as bad as if it were all strangers," Joelle said. "It's family and friends and other members of the congregation, and they're all there for you."