

On

Bar Mitzvahs

What started as support of Jack's interest in his Jewish roots has become a learning experience for our entire family. Connecting with ancient traditions through the lens of a modern, reform community has been very meaningful for all of us. We're hoping that sharing some of the "hows and whys" we've learned can help you – our community of family and friends – connect to this day, too.

What is a *Bar Mitzvah*?

Bar is Hebrew for "son" and *Mitzvah* means "divine commandment." It's often defined as becoming an adult member of the Jewish community. But let's be honest – he's still 13! Put in a more meaningful way - to paraphrase a certain rabbi - "As a kid, you were taught to choose between right and wrong because of consequences. As a *Bar Mitzvah*, you know right and wrong because of your moral values and you understand how those choices affect your community."

He'll show this readiness and commitment by helping lead services on September 9th @ 10:30 AM by chanting prayers, reading from Torah, and sharing his interpretation of that reading. (More on all of that further down.)

I'm (choose one): not Jewish / half Jewish / not observant / not religious. How awkward is this going to be?

FIRST, you need to know that ALL families can be considered "mixed families;" Jew and non-Jew, Jew by birth and Jew by choice, observant and non-observant, Reform and Conservative or Orthodox. All families.

Our clergy is experienced in serving a mixed group of attendees and will guide you throughout the service. Your only role is to connect with us as a community in our support of Jack growing into a good human being and making smart and ethical choices in his life. That doesn't require any specific faith or prayer – just love from you, part of our Towbin community.

Is this whole thing in Hebrew? I don't read Hebrew!

I'll let you in on a secret I've learned after attending services for a while: even folks raised in the Jewish faith don't always read/speak Hebrew or know all the songs and traditions.

When you enter the sanctuary, you'll be handed a *siddur*, or prayer book, that serves as a guide for the service. The trickiest part is that it opens from right to left. (Hebrew is also written and read from right to left – “backwards” for us new-to-Hebrew folks.).

Most of the prayers in the book are printed in both Hebrew and what we lovingly call “Heblish” – a phonetic spelling of how the Hebrew is pronounced. Most prayers are also SUNG – in remarkably catchy and repeatable melodies. There's no disrespect in trying – only love and support – so give it a try!

Throughout the worship service, the clergy will direct the congregation about when to sit and when to stand (as people are able). There are also several places where congregants bow. If you are not familiar with the service, it is practical to follow what others are doing if you're able. Of course, if you are not able to rise or remain standing comfortably, you are not obligated to do so.

What should I wear?

While you'll see Jack and family dressed up for this special occasion, our congregation is generally neat but casual. “Business Casual” is a pretty good guide. (No jeans or t-shirts, choose respectful cuts of clothing with shoulders covered, etc.) There's no reason to avoid any specific colors.

You may see congregation members (men and women) wearing a round head covering called a *Kippah* (Hebrew) or *Yarmulke* (Yiddish) inside the sanctuary. It's traditionally worn as a sign of respect, and a literal reminder of the concept that “God is above us.” You are welcome to wear one – there's even a basket of loaners – but it's not required.

Adult community members may also wear a *Tallit*, or prayer shawl. It's a symbol of God's love and blessing, “embracing” those who wear it. As directed in the Torah, it has four corners, to symbolize that God's presence extends to the four corners of the Earth. The fringes are a reminder to keep the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) in the Torah. Again, there are loaners in the foyer.

Jack will be wearing a *kippah* that Kristen has sewn from scraps of fabric from his father and grandfathers, to honor them. (You'll also notice that Jack needs about 90 bobby pins to hold it on that head of hair.). The *tallit* he's wearing belonged to his grandfather, David Towbin, and is a gift from his dad, Patrick.

What is Shabbat?

In the Jewish faith, the day of rest - *Shabbat* – falls on Saturday. It begins at sundown on Friday evening and ends when three stars can be seen in the sky on Saturday night. “Keeping” (observing) Shabbat is a central part of faith - commanded by God.

NVHC offers Friday evening services (*Erev Shabbat*) to “kick off” *Shabbat*. Saturday morning's service continues *Shabbat* and includes the week's reading from the Torah (like Jack will do).

While the format can take many paths – especially in a creative, Reform congregation! – services typically follow the same flow, horribly abbreviated by me here:

- *Kabbalat Shabbat* (“Welcoming Shabbat”) opens with lighting candles and singing songs that evoke a warm and joyful welcome.
- *Sh’ma* & Its Blessings includes all of the prayers that reaffirm Jewish beliefs - God created the Earth, taught us right from wrong, serves as the one true God, and offers redemption and protection for his people.
- *Amidah* (“The Standing Prayer”) is what I’ve heard beautifully described as a “sacrifice of words” - created by rabbis after the destruction of the second temple, when there was no longer a physical place to make offerings to God. This is the portion of the service that invites participants to speak directly with God - to offer thanks, ask for healing, celebrate blessings, and take a moment for quiet reflection.
- Torah is read every Saturday - the same portion is read or chanted in every synagogue around the world, moving through the cycle of the scroll each week over the course of a year (More on Torah in a moment). The *Haftarah* (a reading selected from The Prophets that for our students is connected to the *mitzvah* work they are doing) is also chanted aloud. Any one of our clergy (rabbis or cantor) will also share a *D’var Torah* - thoughts on the week’s Torah portion - at most Friday and Saturday’s services.
- The Conclusion of the service wraps up the service. Clergy recites the names of those who are being remembered because they have died within the last month (*sh’loshim*) or because it is the yearly anniversary of their death (*yahrzeit*), and we mourn together by reciting the *Kaddish* (“The Mourner’s Prayer”). The congregation also recites the *Kiddush* (“Blessing of Shabbat with wine”) and *HaMotzi* (“Blessing the Challah”) as acts of sanctification and remembrance.
- *Oneg* (“Joy & Delight”) - a favorite part of kids young and old! We share sweet treats and time to socialize after services are complete. (Think of it like coffee and donuts after a Sunday church service.)

Want to know more about Shabbat? There’s also a [Towbin Erev Shabbat Cliff Notes](#). A highly recommended read if you’re thinking about attending Friday’s evening service!

So, what exactly is Jack doing as a Bar Mitzvah?

As part of the usual Saturday Shabbat service, Jack will be called to the *bimah* (the raised platform at the front) to help demonstrate his readiness to participate in the Jewish faith, by offering blessings, reading from holy texts, and sharing his interpretation of the week’s message.

Before he reads each portion of text, Jack’s loved ones will be called up for an *Aliyah*, to chant the blessings before and after reading from the Torah. (Promise you won’t laugh - we haven’t practiced as long as Jack!)

Jack will read his portions of the Torah between blessings, using a *yad* – a fancy silver pointer tool – to keep his place in the text. He'll also read from the *Haftarah* (a collection of writings of the prophets of Israel, that are meant to complement the Torah).

He'll also offer his own *D'var Torah* - an interpretation of what the week's Torah portion means to him. (Something Jews are all challenged to do for themselves - reflect on how stories from Torah can be interpreted and applied to life today.)

You know who knows how to make an impressive entrance? The Torah. What do I do when the Torah circles the room?

First, you'll notice the impressive storage. Behind the *bimah*, there is a set of large silver doors – the ark where NVHC's three *Sifrei Torah* are stored. A *Sefer* (singular) *Torah* is a parchment scroll containing a handwritten copy of the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy. (You can read more about the interesting history of the three scrolls NVHC has in its ark by clicking [THIS LINK](#).)

You'll then get to witness a beautiful ritual known as the *Hakafah* ("circle or process, as in a processional"). The Torah is brought out of the ark and symbolically "passed down generations" in Jack's family. It's then circled through the congregation, for everyone to see. You might notice congregants touch their prayer book or the end of their *tallit* to the Torah scroll and then kiss it in a gesture of love and respect. It is customary never to turn one's back to the Torah scroll as it circles.

When the Torah is returned to the *bimah*, it's uncovered, opened, and rolled to the text to be read. After the readings, the congregation will rise as the Torah is dressed and returned to the ark.

Why is candy being furtively passed out?

Tradition is to throw candy and sweets from the congregation onto the *bimah*, showering the *Bar Mitzvah* with "sweetness." So, when we start passing out the candy, take a few and focus your aim...

What's with the "Sabbath Mode" button on my fridge?

We had to include this - it was always the question we wanted to ask! As a member of a reform congregation, it means it's a button we ignore. For more conservative, Observant Jews, following *Halakha* (Jewish religious law) forbids them from doing "work that creates" on Shabbat. This is interpreted to include activities like making a fire, preparing food, using a light switch, or pressing an electronic button. "Sabbath Mode" was created by appliance manufacturers to address these specific needs. In a fridge, this usually means disabling the door light and preventing the automatic engaging of the compressor when the door is opened. Ovens get much trickier - I'll just refer you to [this Wikipedia entry](#) if you're really dying to know.

Sources:

Course Materials, "Introduction to Judaism," Rabbi Susan Warshaw

Course Materials, "Parent B'nai Mitzvah Course," Judith Naiman

NVHC Website

Union for Reform Judaism Website

My Jewish Learning Website

Chabad Website