

## BAR MITZVAH AND BAT MITZVAH

*Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah* (Hebr. Son/Daughter of the Commandment) is a ritual commemorating a boy's or a girl's adulthood. A young person is now under obligation, he or she assumes responsibility and is believed to have reached physical maturity. Boys take this obligation when they are 13 plus one day, and girls when they are 12 plus one day. It is held that henceforth they are able to control their desires. As stated in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, some Talmudic scholars, like, for instance, Rashi, claimed that *Bar Mitzvah* had a status of obligation and was in the category of Biblical laws. In *Midrash*, the thirteenth birthday is often mentioned as a turning point in the life of a young person. Until he turns thirteen, a son receives his father's merits (enjoys his father's privileges) but he is also liable to suffer for his father's sins. After *Bar Mitzvah*, a person is responsible for his own actions. That is also the time when a child leaves elementary school to enroll in upper grades. It is held that children of that age are already capable of fasting.

In the *Talmud* this custom is mentioned several times, while in the *Bible* the 13<sup>th</sup> birthday is seldom made reference of as a turning point in life. In fact, a quote from *Pirke Avot* (Hebr., *Fathers*, 5:24)) is the only section where it is mentioned: „He used to say, At five years of age the study of Scripture; at ten, the study of Mishna; at thirteen, subject to the Commandments; at fifteen, the study of Talmud; at eighteen, marriage; at twenty, pursuit (of livelihood); at thirty, the peak of strength; at forty, wisdom; at fifty, able to give counsel; at sixty, old age creeping on; at seventy, fullness of years; at eighty, the age of 'strength'; at ninety, body bent; at one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world.”

The *Bar Mitzvah* ritual is very solemnly marked in the synagogue and at the boy's home. The climax of the ceremony in the synagogue is when the boy is called up to read from the *Torah*, because it symbolizes his adulthood. This event takes place on any occasion following the 13<sup>th</sup> birthday according





to the Jewish calendar on which the *Torah* is read. It is the first public demonstration of his new role as an equal member of the congregation. Nowadays, this particular event is understood under the term *Bar Mitzvah*. When the boy's father is called up to read from the *Torah*, he pronounces the following benediction: „Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this one". Among the religious Jews in Eastern Europe, the boy would usually be called up to read from the *Torah* on the Monday or Thursday following his birthday. In western Europe this ritual is marked with much more solemnity and it is customary to call up the *Bar Mitzvah* boy to read the *Maftir* and *Haf-tara* on the first Saturday (*Sabbath*) after his birthday. The boys would perform this task after extensive preparations. According to an old custom from Lithuania, the boy reads the *Maftir* on the *Sabbath* preceding his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, and is accorded the usual *aliyah* immediately afterwards. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Worms, Germany, the custom was that those boys who were able and had pleasing voices conducted parts or the entire service for that day. In some communities it is customary to let the boy read the whole passage assigned for that week. On the *Sabbath* when *Bar Mitzvah* is celebrated the morning service at the synagogue is more solemn. The members of the boy's family are also called up to read from the *Torah*, and as a rule the rabbi gives a special sermon stressing the boy's new responsibility and privilege.

In many modern synagogues the *Bar Mitzvah* boy is given presents by the members of his congregation.

After the service or on the following day, the boy's family prepares a banquet for the members of the religious community. Some authorities ruled that the parents must arrange a banquet when their son became *Bar Mitzvah* just as they do on the day of his wedding.

The following is a recollection of *Bar Mitzvah* from a survey conducted among the Yugoslav Jews by the Jewish Museum:

„I remember *Bar Mitzvah* in full detail and shall give you a point-by-point account of it, although I believe not all of it will be of interest.

My father was a religious man and wanted his son's *Bar Mitzvah* to be special in every way and in all according to his design. Since I was born in August, it was my father's wish to read from the *Shofetim*, which he found to be among the most beautiful portions.

beginning I learned from the book, and ten days before the *Bar Mitzvah*, when I could already read, accentuate and sing fairly well, from the *Sefer Torah*.

For my *Bar Mitzvah* the temple was solemnly decorated like for the biggest holidays. Many non-Jewish friends of my father's were also present.





In our congregation, the *mitzvot* in the temple were subject to bidding and would go to the best bidder. That Saturday my father bought out all the *mitzvot* and then gave them up on behalf of the respectable members of our community.

When it was my turn to read from the *Torah*, the rabbi called me forward to stand at the *tiva*. The rabbi was standing on the left side, and those called up for the reading from the *Torah* on the right side. I was third in line, and then followed my father's brothers and as the last came my father, who read the *Aftar*. Everyone presented lavish gifts for the temple, the congregation and the rabbi, and their respect for my father and the *gabbai*. After the *Aftar* my father recited the *Kaddish*.

The rabbi was very pleased with my reading of the *Torah* and so was my father, and since they were pleased, so was I. After *Tefilla* was over, the rabbi, my father and I were congratulated. My father invited all the present to come to our house for Saturday lunch and many accepted the invitation.

Nothing was served in the temple. In our congregation eating or drinking in the temple was deemed inappropriate.

On the occasion of my *Bar Mitzvah* there was a three-day celebration in our house. It started with breakfast on Saturday, where brandy, hard-boiled eggs (*inhaminadus*), *burriqitas* and *zilena* were served, with coffee in the end. After the breakfast many stayed on and had long conversations.

In the afternoon on Saturday and Sunday my father's friends came to offer their congratulations, and my mother's friends on Monday. Individual visits and congratulating continued throughout the week.

The major ritual innovation obligatory on a boy who has reached the *Bar Mitzvah* is that henceforth he is required to put on the *tefillin*, ritual belts for the morning prayers. The boy is usually coached in wearing the belts some time before the *Bar Mitzvah*, and putting the belts on is a separate ceremony. The Sephardim and occasionally the Hasidim, interpreting the *Kaballa* very literally, insist that the *tefillin* must never be worn before the *Bar Mitzvah*.

Among the Sephardim donning the *tefillin* is a part of the solemn ceremony itself. Customarily, an elder or a scholar is honored with helping the boy in donning the *tefillin*.

This ritual is based upon the following verse from the *Bible*: *And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with the strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year (Exodus, 13:9, 10)*, and also: *It shall be as*





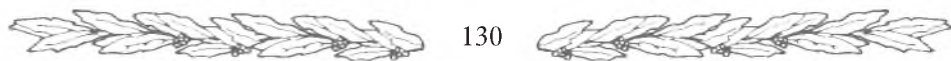
*a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes; for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt (Exodus, 13:16)*

The *Tefillin* consist of two parts: one for the arm, which is wrapped around the hand and the upper arm, and another for the head. Each of the two ritual belts has small cube-shaped cases in the middle, containing miniature scrolls with excerpts from the *Torah*. When wrapped around the upper arm, the case must be placed on the top of the muscle so that when the arm is resting next to the body the case faces the heart. It is wrapped around the naked left upper arm with the right hand, after the sleeve has been rolled up high. The ritual belt is wrapped around the arm towards the hand and around the middle finger. The other *tefillin* is put on the head so that the case is placed on the top and right in middle above the eyes ("between the eyes"), so that the rear part of the case touches the hairline. It is fastened behind the neck and the belts are left to hang freely next to the chin. The ritual of wrapping the belts is also based on the following biblical verses: „*And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes*” (Deuteronomy, 6:8), and: „*You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes*” (Deuteronomy 11:18).

As a part of the solemn ritual before the *tefillin* are put on, benedictions are pronounced. Serbian translation of these benedictions is found only in *The Book of*

*Prayers* by Dr. Shalom Fryberger: „Before putting on the arm-tefillin: Blessed are You, HASHEM, our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to put tefillin! Before putting on the head-tefillin: Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity. Before putting on the finger-tefillin: I will betroth you to Me forever; and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness, justice, kindness, and mercy. I will betroth you to Me with fidelity, and you shall know HASHEM.”

During the *Bar Mitzva* ceremony it was customary for a boy to wear the prayer shawl *tallith* for the first time. The obligation to wear the shawl during prayer is believed to derive from the following biblical verse: „*The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue, and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God’*” (Numbers, 15:37) and „*Bless the Lord, Oh my soul! O*





*Lord my God, thou art very great! Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment, who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent" (Psalm, 104:1-2).*

Before putting the *tallith* on the following benediction is pronounced: „Blessed are You, HASHEM, our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to wrap ourselves in *tzitzis*.”

After the ceremony in the synagogue it became customary among the Ashkenazim during the Middle Ages to let the boy deliver a solemn „talmudic discourse” – *derashah*, during the celebration at home. The content of the discourse is usually connected with the ritual itself. The discourse presents an occasion for the boy to thank his parents for their attention and care and for taking part in his ceremony. This custom is still observed today, with sons of traditional families giving a talmudic discourse, and others a more general talk. In Conservative, Reform and some Orthodox synagogues a prayer before the Ark of the Law is sometimes said by the *Bar Mitzvah* boy in place of the *derashah*.

Most congregational Hebrew schools have special classes for the preparation of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* students. In some congregations (for instance, in Great Britain) the boy is not allowed to celebrate his *Bar Mitzvah* until after he passes an examination in Hebrew and the basics of the Jewish religion.

Reform congregations have instituted the ceremony of Confirmation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany this was a substitution for *Bar Mitzvah*. The ceremony took place only after the 16<sup>th</sup> or the 17<sup>th</sup> birthday on the grounds that before that age a young person is not really able to understand all the implications of the rituals. In modern times, especially in the U.S., Confirmation has been adopted as an addition to *Bar Mitzvah*, which is celebrated in a more traditional manner.

A separate ceremony for the girls, *Bat Mitzvah*, is not found mentioned before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A formal „promotion” of the *Bar Mitzvah* boys appears not earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Still, it is obvious from various sources that the status of obligation for boys over 13 was assumed in early times. A *Bar Mitzva* boy acquired the right to vote, to become a member of *beth din*, to be reckoned as a member of a *minyán* and buy and sell property (although there have been records of the testimonies by 13-year olds being dismissed due to their lack of experience in the matters of trade).

Asked in a survey conducted by the Jewish Museum how the *Bar Mitzvah* was commemorated in our country, a respondent from Bački Petrovac said that „a boy would get his first pair of trousers”.





Nisim Navonović remembers customs typical of the Jewish community in Priština, Kosovo. „Wearing the belts around the arm and head and reading a prayer in the rabbi's presence. After the synagogue, lunch for friends and going to the Turkish bath together.”

„In the synagogue, the boy would be called forward to read from the *Torah* for the first time. In our congregation in Zagreb, the *Psalms* were not included in the reading, and that was applicable in my case too. It was customary on that day for the father to give charity (to *Hevra Qaddisha* and the like). This would be announced loudly and my father also made such donations. On the occasion of my *Bar Mitzvah* a large banquet was held at our house with many guests, and Dr. Gavro Schwartz, the chief rabbi of Zagreb, was also present.” (Andreja Preger)

„A more formal lunch and a present, a wrist watch.” (Emil Klajn)

The following is an account of *Bar Mitzvah* by Dragan Wollner: „When I turned 13 and celebrated my *Bar Mitzvah* and read the *Maftir* in the temple, according to our laws and religious rules I came of age and became responsible for my actions. Henceforth, I was regularly called up to the *Torah* and read from it myself.” (*Obitelj*, p. 95)

There are also recollections of how *Bat Mitzvah* was commemorated in our parts. This ritual was observed mainly in the Ashkenazi congregations. According to the section of the survey relating to holidays, it is clear that this ritual was associated with the festival of *Shavuot*.

„As a very young girl I belonged to the first generation to commemorate the *Bat Mitzvah* in Koprivnica. Dr. Hirschberber, the rabbi and our professor at high-school, coached us for the ceremony. He taught us Hebrew for a year, and an additional reason for this was a very strong and active Zionist organization in Koprivica, where many intended to leave for the then Palestine.

For *Bat Mitzvah* all the girls were given white dresses and white shoes. It was very beautiful when we were called up to the *Torah* and each had to say something. It was on that particular occasion that a grand parade was organized in Koprivica, which everybody talked about for a long time.” (*Obitelj*, memories of Lizzy Kollmann Nick, p. 124)

„In Subotica in 1941 my sister Ruža had her *Bat Mitzvah*, along with another fourteen girls, that was the last one. Then the war broke out. I never had one.

All fifteen girls wore white dresses and white gloves and held one white rose each. Three of them were speaking. The first recited by heart and in Hebrew, the second in Serbian, and the third in Hungarian. They held two huge wreaths, plenty of roses and other flowers, which they laid in front of





the *Torah*. After the benediction, they each received a book of prayers to remember the day.

That same afternoon at four o'clock they were invited to the rabbi's place for a snack.

My sister Ruža took that book of prayers with her to forced labor and managed to bring it back home. I hope she still has it, I should ask her, she lives in Subotica and I live in Israel. In Subotica, the *Bat Mitzvah* was commemorated on the day of the festival of *Shavuot*.<sup>1</sup> (Edita Dori/Deri from Subotica) „I do not know, I do not remember it all as it is mentioned in the Survey. All I know is that in June there was a celebration in the synagogue. Fourteen-year-old girls, myself among them, were dressed very solemnly (in brand new dresses) and held baskets full of flowers which we scattered at the entrance to the synagogue. We walked in pairs (two by two), then formed a line and walked inside and upstairs to the *Torah*, where rabbi Geršom was waiting. We all said a prayer, the synagogue was jam-packed because that was a very important ceremony. In the afternoon the rabbi invited us for a snack to which (unfortunately) I never went because a friend insulted me so gravely that I fainted. This sad event was covered by the daily press, too. Her words hurt me still today and I can still cry as I cried then whenever I think about it. My early childhood was very painful. Later on, there came a period of serenity. I would like to tell my life story to someone because it is already tormenting me.” (Jelisaveta Dinić from Subotica).

A.D.

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<sup>1</sup>Soiomon Ben Isak Rashi (1040-1105), the greatest Jewish commentator of Bible and Talmud.

<sup>2</sup>Here, some local phrases (formerly used in Derventa) are kept.

