

# REFORM AMERICAN BAR AND BAT MITZVAH IN ISRAEL

By

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## Abstract

This paper is focused on compiling literature and experiences about B'nai Mitzvah, Jewish rites of passage, and Israel travel in order to create recommendations for a meaningful and holistic Israel B'nai Mitzvah experience. It creates a model of what the purpose of B'nai Mitzvah has become and what it could, and perhaps should, be. The paper pushes back against the idea that B'nai Mitzvah, as it exists today, is truly indicative of a rite of passage that it is so often called. It also makes use of a survey designed to collect information about families who have traveled to Israel for B'nai Mitzvah as well as an interview with Rabbi Stacey Blank, a rabbi in Israel, who leads a number of these B'nai Mitzvah services each year. The results of this research and interview led to some recommendations for families looking to plan a B'nai Mitzvah trip to Israel. The B'nai Mitzvah in Israel experience has the opportunity to be one of the most positive, formative experiences in a young Jew's life. The results and recommendations of this paper are mostly geared towards a Reform Jewish audience, but they can be applied to all denominations. In general, the respondents who rated the highest level of satisfaction in their Israel experiences were those who were already connected to a synagogue or other Jewish institution in their home community and who traveled on a family trip with a tour guide, not a group tour. There are also additional suggestions from Rabbi Blank for families thinking about planning their trips in the future.

## Introduction

The purpose of this project is to examine American families who travel to Israel to celebrate B'nai Mitzvah. I chose this topic because a significant number of American families are choosing this option for B'nai Mitzvah and there is very little academic research about them. The main questions I used to start my research were: What inspires a family to travel to Israel to celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah? What do the families do during their trip? What does the service look like? And what is the family's relationship with Israel? Throughout my research, the process has evolved into a guide for families when planning their trips. The research and recommendations lean towards Reform practice because that is my main connection to the Jewish community. As a result, most of my original research comes from a Reform perspective.

## Literature Review

There are three main categories of literature that are relevant to this topic: literature about B'nai Mitzvah, literature about rites of passage, and literature about Israel travel.

As a result of the large drop off of students after they become B'nai Mitzvah, some have called for a new revolution of the B'nai Mitzvah. One rabbinical student argues for a new system in which "the entire family learns the curricula for the bar/bat

mitzvah ceremony, and passes it on to the child through in-home learning, as opposed to outside religious school" (Aleph, 2013). He wants the synagogue to only be part of the education and encourage and enable the parents to bring the education home. This includes teaching the parents as well as the students. Rabbi Bradley Solmsen, the Director of Youth Engagement for the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), responded by pointing out the numerous successes of the Reform movement to revolutionize the B'nai Mitzvah (Solmsen, 2013). He references a joint venture between the URJ and Hebrew Union College (HUC) to revolutionize the way B'nai Mitzvah are seen within synagogues called the B'nai Mitzvah Revolution. Their main goal is "to generate new ideas and images of meaningful celebrations of b'nai mitzvah, celebrations that would tie b'nai mitzvah and their families more closely to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community" (<http://www.bnaimitzvahrevolution.org/about-us>).

One way to fulfill the main goal of the B'nai Mitzvah Revolution would be for students to celebrate their B'nai Mitzvah in Israel. Israel trips that include B'nai Mitzvah are amazing ways to enhance the B'nai Mitzvah as a rite of passage as well as bring the family close together with Jewish tradition. One challenge with this approach is connecting the families to their Jewish communities at home. This is something I will return to in the conclusions.

While most of the writings about B'nai Mitzvah focus on what it can be today because of the very little historical evidence of the ritual, a few books do help trace its

history. The Bar Mitzvah was first established as an idea in Mishnaic times. Two quotes from Mishnah and Talmud lead us to believe the Bar Mitzvah was already happening in those times: Pirkei Avot 5:24 says "thirteen [is the age] for [the fulfillment of] the commandments" (Efron and Rubin, 1977, p. 6), and, "Rabbi Eleazar remarks in the Talmud: Until the thirteenth year, it was the father's duty to train his boy. After that he must say: 'Blessed be He who has taken from me the responsibility of this boy!'" (Horowitz, 1973, pp. 18-19). This sentiment is still heard in contemporary, Orthodox ceremonies when the father of the Bar Mitzvah child says "Blessed is He who has freed me from the [religious] responsibility for this child" (Efron and Rubin, 1977, p. 6). The Bar Mitzvah, at the age of thirteen, was seen as the time when a Jewish boy took Jewish responsibility for himself. He was obligated to fulfill the commandments and liable for punishment if he failed to do so. This age was selected because it loosely corresponded to the age of puberty. The ceremony was also tied to a celebration of the Bar Mitzvah boy with a festive meal (ibid., p. 7).

In the Reform movement in America, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony was temporarily discontinued in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century partly due to a lack of inclusivity and partly due to assimilation; the leaders and members of the Reform movement wanted women to also be allowed to become Bat Mitzvah (Kaplan, 2003, p. 84). As a result, this rite of passage was temporarily replaced with Confirmation, based on the Christian rite of the same name. This was held as a communal celebration for all the students of the class to

celebrate together instead of the individual celebration of the Bar Mitzvah. It wasn't until the mid-1900s that some Rabbis began allowing girls to become Bat Mitzvah (Efron and Rubin, 1977, p. 12). The Bar Mitzvah came back into fashion in conjunction with the Bat Mitzvah. It took a fair amount of time for the notion of the Bat Mitzvah to gain steam, but "by the time that the CCAR produced a new rabbis' manual in 1988, W. Gunther Plaut could write that 'bar and bat mitzvahs have become commonplace in our congregations'" (Kaplan, 2003, p. 85). Today, both Bar and Bat Mitzvah are carried out throughout progressive Jewish communities while the more traditional still only perform Bar Mitzvah services.

The idea of individual versus communal celebration is also evident in the history of the B'nai Mitzvah. The Reform movement is very focused on the B'nai Mitzvah student celebrating his or her individual accomplishment (Ellman, 2004, p. 42). This is often done by tailoring the service to fit the abilities of the student and celebrating the accomplishment with a lavish party. The students are generally asked to do Torah Blessings, chant Torah, give a D'var Torah, and do a Mitzvah project in the months leading up to the service. The student remains on the Bimah for the duration of the service and the whole morning is devoted to the student. In some congregations, there is no Shabbat morning service unless a student is becoming B'nai Mitzvah. This is different than the Conservative movement which affirms the student is becoming a member of the community. The student participates in the regular Shabbat morning

service rather than having an entire service dedicated to the B'nai Mitzvah student (ibid). He still leads the same parts of the service, but it is within the context of an established service that would look the same with or without the Bar Mitzvah.

Current literature about B'nai Mitzvah usually refers to it as a 'rite of passage' (Oppenheimer, 2005, p. 3; Jeiven, 1983, p. vii; Kaplan, 2003, p. 84), but these books use this term incorrectly. A rite of passage is not something that can happen in one day; it takes time. It is possible that the books refer to the entire process of preparing for B'nai Mitzvah. These could be considered initiation rites which "best exemplify transition, since they have well-marked and protracted marginal or liminal phases" (Turner, 1967, p. 5). However, it is clear to me that these books are referring specifically to the day of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, not the whole process.

According to Victor Turner, one of the preeminent thinkers about rites of passage, these rites are meant to be group based. He argues that people follow a basic pattern (Turner, 1967, p.5). First, they leave the comfort of the stage they were in. Next, they find themselves in a state of liminality, which is when transformations occur. People in the liminal stage often struggle to find a sense of belonging and branch out to look for anywhere they can be accepted. They also tend to group together with others in the same liminal stage. This is how some groups form tight friendships that last a lifetime even after they spend plenty of time apart. Finally, the people come out the



other side of the rite of passage as members of a new social stage having gone through some form of transformation during their liminality.

Both B'nai Mitzvah and Confirmation follow parts of Turner's framework but fall short of matching up fully. B'nai Mitzvah students are in the liminal stage of puberty and are trying to find their sense of belonging. Unfortunately, after they become B'nai Mitzvah, they do not join a new social stage. There is the large drop off in attendance after B'nai Mitzvah that results in teenaged Jews lacking a social structure. For those Jews that do continue to attend religious school after becoming B'nai Mitzvah, they usually continue through Confirmation. Here, they form tighter friendships with their peers, but there is not necessarily a liminal stage they are traversing; they have already gone through puberty. The whole process from B'nai Mitzvah through Confirmation could be seen as a rite of passage, according to Turner's definition. Unfortunately, these rituals are generally seen as separate entities, rather than two parts of the same process. Therefore, neither fully lives up to the definition of a rite of passage suggested by Turner.

The Israel experience is viewed by some as becoming a rite of passage almost on the level of B'nai Mitzvah (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002, p. 275). As more and more young Jewish adults are traveling on Israel trips, especially Birthright, it is expected that their peers will also take part in this experience. Many Jews see Israel trips as an expected part of their development as a Jew. Either through Birthright or another Israel

program, Jews are looking for opportunities to travel to Israel. One of the main books written about Israel travel experiences is *Tours that Bind* by Shaul Kelner (2010). Kelner explains that when people travel on educational trips they often create meaningful experiences for themselves. The participants assume the places they are going to visit will be extremely meaningful and force themselves to have that experience. The group leaders help re-enforce these expectations by creating opportunities for these moments to occur and emphasizing that they should be happening at specific times (Kelner, 2010, p. 128). I have a friend who upon arriving in Israel for the first time, exclaimed, "Look, they drive on the right side of the road here!" We had to remind him that we also drive on the right side in America. He was so excited for a meaningful moment that he created one for himself.

I believe that when B'nai Mitzvah and Israel travel are combined, those two rites make for an extremely powerful and memorable experience. B'nai Mitzvah can be a major milestone for Jewish adolescents and has the opportunity to be leveraged into a formative moment for the student's Jewish identity when combined with an Israel trip. When the focus of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is the party after the service, that becomes the main event that is remembered. However, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah built into an Israel trip will be much more meaningful and memorable over time and will be more likely to have a positive impact on the B'nai Mitzvah student's Jewish identity.

Unfortunately, there is very little literature guiding families who are looking to travel to Israel to celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. I found only two sources that offer advice. In Checklist for a Perfect Bar Mitzvah (and a Bat Mitzvah), Jeiven (1983) offers three options for the trip: family trip, synagogue trip, or travel agency; and four places the service could take place: the Western Wall, Masada, Hebrew Union College, or a private synagogue in Israel. Her advice strongly suggests that it is very difficult to have a non-Orthodox service in Israel (Jeiven, 1983, pp. 143-148). Her book, however, is now 30 years old and it is much easier for a non-Orthodox Jew to become B'nai Mitzvah in Israel. Lewit and Epstein (1991), in The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Planbook suggest the same locations for a Bar Mitzvah and later point out that a Bat Mitzvah is not an option in some places in Israel. They give the contact information for the Government of the Israeli Tourist Office in New York as a starting place for planning the trip (Lewit and Epstein, 1991, pp. 134-136).

Finally, I researched what Israel travel websites have to offer about the B'nai Mitzvah in Israel experiences they offer. There is very little material related to the service itself; instead, the website focuses on the touring that takes place while on the trip. When reading through testimonials from the ITAS (Israel Travel Advisory Service) Tours website, they have a section of quotes from Bar Mitzvah tour participants (ITAS Tours, 2010). Out of twelve testimonials from a July 6, 2009, tour, only one mentioned the Bar Mitzvah service. The rest were focused on the tour, the guide, and the

experience. A YouTube video for Keshet Bar and Bat Mitzvah tours started by mentioning the B'nai Mitzvah service and then speaking in length about the tour itself throughout Israel ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9tPlsqY0bQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9tPlsqY0bQ), 2011). The video also devoted nearly two minutes to one student and the service project he did as part of the trip. It seemed that the focus was on the service project and not on the religious service.

After surveying the literature in the field related to rites of passage, B'nai Mitzvah, and Israel travel, I found a lack of discussion about how all three come together. While B'nai Mitzvah in Israel is not a revolution, it could be one of the ways B'nai Mitzvah evolves to enhance students' and families' connection to their Jewish identities.

### Methodology

My research was designed to learn about the families who travel on B'nai Mitzvah trips to Israel. The research included a survey for families who went on a B'nai Mitzvah trip and an interview with a rabbi in Israel who facilitates 15-20 of these services per year. In the survey, I asked where families got the idea for going on the trip, who attended, where the service was, and of what it consisted. The survey was designed and distributed over the internet via a list serve, direct email to known participants, social media, and word of mouth. I also sent the survey to a few travel

companies that lead B'nai Mitzvah trips to Israel, though they did not respond. The survey represents a Reform leaning constituency from across America. Approximately 50% of the 64 respondents self-identify as Reform Jews. There were also 11 Conservative respondents and 4 Modern Orthodox. While these numbers are very small, there are some clear differences between Modern Orthodox and Reform customs when travelling to Israel for B'nai Mitzvah. I will focus on some of these in the following section.

I also interviewed Rabbi Stacey Blank about her experience with families traveling to Israel for B'nai Mitzvah. I found her after disseminating my survey and looking at responses. A number of responses included notes about their experience with Rabbi Blank and how much they enjoyed working with her. I asked how she connects with and how much she interacts with the families, how she does her services, what similarities she notices between families, and what advice she would give for a family ready to plan a trip.

### Survey Findings

Even though there is a small sample size, I feel comfortable making a few conclusions that were clear from the data. I believe these results would be corroborated if the sample sized was increased to a statistically significant number.

### *Comparing Progressive and Traditional Families*

First, there are clear differences between where progressive and traditional families celebrate the B'nai Mitzvah. More progressive families are much more likely to celebrate at a non-traditional location, including the Southern Wall, Masada, or a hotel. Only 4 out of 35 Reform families held their service at the Western Wall while 3 of the 4 Modern Orthodox families held their service there. There was also a big difference in who led the service. In the Modern Orthodox families, 3 of the 4 Bar Mitzvah students led their own service while the fourth was led by a Rabbi from home. In contrast, two-thirds of Reform families had their service led by a Rabbi in Israel. Another six families came with a Rabbi from home and three more had their service led by a tour guide.

It was also clear that Modern Orthodox families were better connected in Israel. All of them had either friends or family and they had all been to Israel before. This is probably what led them to traveling without a tour guide. If they needed any advice about where to travel or what to do, they could ask their family and friends. On the other hand, Reform families had very few connections with people in Israel. Just over half of the families had ever been to Israel before the trip. As a result, nearly 90% of Reform families traveled with a group or a guide. However, most of those families traveled with a guide, rather than going on a group tour. This may be a consequence of them wanting a fully individualized experience for their child, instead of being a part of a group experience.

### *Satisfaction*

There seemed to be some overall patterns that led to a high satisfaction rate among participants. Satisfaction was based on how likely it would be for the family to take another child on a similar trip. Service location had a clear impact on satisfaction. Only 6 of 12 families who celebrated at Masada and just 5 of 9 who celebrated at the Western Wall were very satisfied with the trip compared to 15 of 17 who celebrated at the Southern Wall. Of those who celebrated at Masada, 3 were not likely to take a child on a similar trip. This may be a result of not enjoying the group experience. Families who traveled with a group reported lower levels of satisfaction compared to those who went alone or with tour guides. Interestingly, there was no real difference in satisfaction among the different denominations. In both Conservative and Reform, the likelihood that a family would or would not take another child on a similar trip was equivalent. Both were 82% in favor, 9% against, and 9% indifferent. Those who were already connected to a synagogue or other Jewish organization were also more likely to be satisfied with their trip compared to those who were less affiliated.

Overall, people spoke very highly of their experiences and wanting to return to Israel. For example, one respondent wrote, "It was a wonderful experience. It helped shape the life of my daughter. It was an emotional experience for our family." Another wrote, "It was an amazing experience. My kids can[t] wait to come back. My older son

is hoping to do birthright this summer.” One respondent explained, “We felt that we didn’t want to spend a lot of money on a meaningless party. We wanted to take that money and celebrate in Israel.” There were just two negative comments from survey respondents. One shared her frustration with the overall experience: “It is hard to plan a BM from so far away. I was disappointed to find an industry that preys on ‘rich’ Americans, who truly want to do a nice thing by having a BM in Israel, and tries to overcharge for help planning and organizing the party and trips.” The other had more of a challenge during the service: “We had a very unpleasant experience during our service with the ‘keeper’ of the synagogue building heckling us in order to get us to leave.” Despite these comments, both families still rated a high likelihood of taking another child on a similar trip.

### *Reform Specific Findings*

As stated above, Reform families were much more likely to have their service at a non-traditional location. Reform families held their services, in order of popularity, at the Southern Wall of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, Masada, a synagogue in Jerusalem, a hotel, the Western Wall, HUC, the Golan Heights, a beach in Tel Aviv, and Tzfat. The first two comprised more than 50% of the total responses while the final three had one response each. Interestingly, those who held their service at Masada were least likely to want to



take another child on a similar trip. This may be a result of so many of those who had their service at Masada being part of a group trip.

When looking at the content of the service itself, every Reform B'nai Mitzvah student led the Torah Blessings and all but one read Torah. However, when it came to Haftarah, those numbers dropped to almost fifty percent. It seems that a connection to the Torah is far and away the most important element of the B'nai Mitzvah service for these Reform families. It may also reflect a minimization of the service in exchange for a focus on the trip to Israel itself. Students and families may not spend as much time studying for their B'nai Mitzvah service because they are planning the rest of their trip to Israel. It may also reflect the common proportion of Reform B'nai Mitzvah students' participation in their services. To determine that would require a comparison of these students who traveled to Israel with their non-traveling counterparts.

I suspected that the families who traveled to Israel to celebrate a B'nai Mitzvah would do so because they did not have a strong connection with their community at home. The data did not support this assumption. Nearly 85% of Reform respondents claimed to be somewhat to very involved in their home synagogue and over 70% also claim the same level of involvement in a non-synagogue organization. I believe these families chose to come to Israel for the B'nai Mitzvah to strengthen their connection to Judaism and/or Israel. Out of the 20 Reform families that responded to the question "did you also celebrate the B'nai Mitzvah in your home community?" only five

answered no. It seems that these families are connected to their home communities and wanted to enhance the B'nai Mitzvah by including an Israel trip in addition to the home B'nai Mitzvah.

#### Interview with Rabbi Stacey Blank

Looking through the survey results, I found numerous comments from families who worked with Rabbi Stacey Blank and spoke very highly of their experience. I reached out to Rabbi Blank, and she was able to share with me more of what she does and her experiences with families. Her experience is predominantly with Reform families, although she has also worked with Conservative and unaffiliated families.

Rabbi Blank typically officiates between fifteen and twenty B'nai Mitzvah each year. When she works with the families, she typically connects with them between 6 months and a year before the trip. She asks the students to prepare whatever they are comfortable doing with a bare minimum of leading the Torah Blessings. Some will also read or chant Torah if they are able, lead some of the other prayers, and they are always encouraged to give a D'var Torah relating not only to the portion, but the significance of coming to Israel to celebrate the B'nai Mitzvah. Rabbi Blank connects with the home rabbi and/or Hebrew tutor for each student to discuss what the B'nai Mitzvah student will prepare for the service. When the families come to Israel, she meets with them a

few days before the service, if possible, to review the service and the parts the student is leading.

Rabbi Blank often suggests holding the service at Robinson's Arch near the intersection of the Southern and Western Walls of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in order for the service to be open to all attendees. She has a short service booklet that she uses for her service. It includes the most common prayers in Hebrew and some others in English translation. There are also a number of readings related to Israel, and HaTikvah is the closing song. It is a service booklet designed specifically for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Israel. It looks to be well balanced between the basics of the service and an appreciation for the fact that it is happening in Israel. Her services generally last about 1 hour.

Finally, I asked Rabbi Blank what advice she could give to families who are thinking about making a trip to Israel for a B'nai Mitzvah. Some of these suggestions relate to the differences in Israeli culture and climate versus American: the dress is more casual and the weather can get unbearable in the middle of summer days. She also offered other pieces of advice to families in their planning process. One of the main things was to really enjoy the whole trip. While the trip may be designed around the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, that does not mean they shouldn't do other things. If a family is coming for 10 days to two weeks, there is time to see a large portion of the country. She also recommends doing the Bar or Bat Mitzvah at either the beginning or end of the trip. If the student is a nervous person, it is best to do the service early so s/he can

relieve the stress and enjoy the rest of the trip. If not, the service at the end can wrap up the trip on a high note and be the moment everyone remembers as they leave.

While she usually works with groups of 10-20 family members, she also recognizes that not everyone can make the trip to Israel. If families want to include those who can't travel, she suggests buying a Wi-Fi stick for the day of the service and using Skype to connect with them. This way, grandparents in Chicago can still see their grandchild read Torah without having to leave their living room.

### Conclusions

After reading the literature and conducting my research, I feel comfortable making recommendations to families thinking about celebrating a B'nai Mitzvah in Israel. First and foremost, including an Israel experience with the B'nai Mitzvah is good thing. No matter how the trip is done, it will be a formative and positive experience for the B'nai Mitzvah student and his/her whole family. However, I do have some suggestions for how the trip should be done. First, they should try not to go on a large, group tour. These tours are impersonal and formulaic. They do not give the students the specialized celebration that most Reform families have come to expect. This may be why some families were not very satisfied with their experiences.

I would recommend families start at least one year in advance of their trip by speaking with their rabbi or educator in their synagogue who have most likely been to

Israel and are familiar with Israel travel companies, or individuals like Rabbi Blank, who specialize in B'nai Mitzvah travel to Israel. The families should plan to have the B'nai Mitzvah as just one part of the trip and make sure they do a lot of traveling throughout Israel. They might go to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the Dead Sea and Masada, Eilat (if they love snorkeling), Haifa, Tzfat, the Kinneret, and the Golan Heights. It is difficult to visit them all in one trip, but seeing a handful of them will really fill the Israel experience. A tour guide can be very useful, especially to find some of the more 'off the beaten path' experiences. At the very least, they should have a well planned itinerary that balances fun activities with experiencing the uniqueness of Israel.

As for the service itself, I agree with Rabbi Blank that students should do whatever they are comfortable doing, with the Torah Blessings as a minimum. B'nai Mitzvah is meant to mark Jews' beginning their transition from child to Jewish adult so it is important that they take on the responsibility of doing something Jewish adults do during a service. I would highly recommend reading a few verses of Torah, giving a D'var Torah about the Torah portion and the experience of coming to Israel, and completing a Mitzvah project, preferably related to Israel. As the video referenced above showed, a service project could be bringing soccer jerseys to underprivileged children in Israel. Other possibilities could include volunteering through *Yad Lakashish* (Lifeline for the Elderly) in Jerusalem, working on a *kibbutz* for a few days, or picking fruit with *Leket* (Israel's largest food bank). This enhances the child's connection to

Israel and gives him/her a very positive association with whatever people or organization s/he helps. It also increases the chances the student will remain connected with that group, and in turn with the Jewish community.

I also recommend that, if possible, this experience be in addition to a service in the home congregation. Becoming B'nai Mitzvah in the home congregation allows the student to be part of a ritual that all his/her friends and classmates will be celebrating and allows those friends to celebrate with him/her. If a family is not involved in a synagogue, they should look for opportunities to become involved in a Jewish community. That will allow the family to continue engaging with their Jewish identities after the trip. They could even look for other families who went on similar trips so they have a common language when speaking about their Jewish identities. The Israel experience is a wonderful addition to any B'nai Mitzvah because it will strengthen the whole family's connection with Israel and their Jewish identity. It would be great for synagogues and rabbis to give as many students as possible the opportunity to enhance their B'nai Mitzvah by including an Israel experience.

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