



**Beth El**  
SYNAGOGUE

## **Goals and Program Overview: Fiterman B'nai Mitzvah Training Program**

### **Introduction**

To Abraham, God said, “and you shall be a blessing.” This short phrase (only two words in Hebrew!) encapsulates God’s charge to the very first bar mitzvah, indeed, the very first Jew! For over 3000 years, this has been the mandate to us, Abraham and Sarah’s descendants. We are to be blessings.

To “be a blessing” is more than to be a good person. It is to build a life of holiness, to live a life that matters to ourselves, others and to God. This is no small charge! But for centuries, the Jewish people have diligently and successfully accumulated a treasury of wisdom to show us how.

“Be a blessing.” This remains the ultimate charge to today’s b’nai mitzvah. And thus, it is the guiding principle behind our bar/bat mitzvah program.

At Beth El, we know that each of our students has the potential to be a great blessing to his/her family, community, society, even to our entire world! We believe and the Torah teaches that they can achieve this by “walking in the ways of God.” To that end, we teach and encourage our b’nai mitzvah to walk a path that Jews call, “halakha,” “the way” of living.

### **Putting the “Mitzvah” back in Bar/Mitzvah**

Students often know to say that being a bar/bat mitzvah happens when they turn 13 years old. They may know it is has something to do with becoming a Jewish adult. But what does that mean? “Becoming” a bar/mitzvah is different than “having” a bar/bat mitzvah. Becoming a bar/bat mitzvah means committing to living a Jewish life of mitzvot. Mitzvot define for us the path of holiness. We say as much when we look at our tzitzit and pray, “look at them, remember the mitzvot, do them, and be holy before God.” (Appropriately, students begin wearing a tallit with tzitzit when they become bar/bat mitzvah.)

Secular society tends to focus on the rights of each rite of passage- the right to drive, right to vote, right to drink, etc. Judaism’s overwhelming emphasis is not on rights but on responsibility. So while we hope to instill in our students a sense of pride and privilege of being a Jewish adult, we emphasize mitzvot first and foremost. They are sacred duties that we are called upon to observe- with joy and understanding.

## **Sacred Partnerships**

Jewish tradition teaches that there are three partners involved in the birth of every child: mother, father and God. To help that child enter Jewish adulthood, another partner must be added- community.

Our b'nai mitzvah program relies on the partnership of parent-child-teacher and on the ties between home-shul-school. To best achieve our goals, we must work together and support each other. We do so when what is taught, emphasized and modeled in one place is reinforced in the other. Jewish summer programs and youth group activities lay additional support for fashioning an engaged Jewish life.

As important and involved as Beth El will be in your child's bar/bat mitzvah training, truly, Jewish learning begins at home. Hebrew reminds us that parents (*horim*) are teachers (*morim*). We teach best by example. By living an engaged Jewish life ourselves, our children will be conditioned and inspired to follow suit. The opposite is also true. If we "drop off" our kids and outsource their Jewish education to others, we send the message that Judaism is for kids, that bar/bat mitzvah are end points. This inadvertently undermines the very message we want to convey.

Our program is designed to work in close coordination with the HMJDS and the Talmud Torah which provide the essential foundation of Jewish education (knowledge of Jewish tradition, values, beliefs, thought, ability with Hebrew, etc.). A strong Jewish education places the learning we offer within a larger context. In this way, the Jewish lessons we teach are understood to be more than a random collection of antiquated skills but rather the building blocks of a life of blessing.

If it takes a community to raise a child, it is within community that that child's accomplishments are celebrated. The most famous Jewish song of celebration says as much: "*siman tov u'mazal tov y'hey lanu ul'kol yisrael*, it is a celebration for all of us (plural) and for the entire Jewish people." More than a family *simḥa* for invited guests, at its core, bar/bat mitzvah is a communal celebration. Through it, a child is eagerly and lovingly welcomed into the adult Jewish community.

## **Nachas- Pure Joy**

Parents see in this rite of passage their child growing from a dependent child to a more independent teenager. It is a sacred moment full of emotion, steeped in memories, rich in meaning. Week after week, the congregation eagerly looks forward to bar and bat mitzvah celebrations for it sees in each child the future, another link in the chain of Jewish tradition.

We look forward to taking this journey with you, to celebrating with you and your families, to deepening our relationship and to seeing your child be the blessing God first bestowed upon Abraham and Sarah.

Rabbi Alexander Davis

Rabbi Avi Olitzky

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