

What do B'nai Mitzvah Children Need to Know?  
What Do Jewish Adults Need To Know?

Over the past few months I've been rethinking our Bar/Bat Mitzvah curriculum. On one hand, we "have" these students as captive learners in Religious School or B'nai Shalom, and in B'nai Mitzvah classes, where they learn, together with their parents, what they need to know to prepare for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We teach them in Kadimah, and USY, and in Ramah and at CJ. We teach them in family education programs at the synagogue and they all get a full year with Phil Sil. And most important, they learn from their parents, in their own homes.

We hope, we expect, but there is no guarantee, that their Jewish knowledge will grow in the years following their B'nai Mitzvah. So, perhaps it makes some sense to stuff them full of Jewish learning when we can, to prepare them for life as Jewish adults.

On the other hand, much of Jewish life is sophisticated, and children are simply not equipped, emotionally or intellectually, to learn much of what Jewish adults ought to know or understand - after all, at Bar/Bat Mitzvah, our children are still, well, children.

I began to gather a list of Jewish skills that I think we can teach in the years leading up to Bar/Bat Mitzvah, so that with the acquisition of those skills, our students can feel comfortable in Jewish settings in which they will find themselves (trips to Israel, visiting other synagogues, college Hillel life, as young adults in Atlanta or DC or NY, etc.), and if they feel comfortable and competent, then hopefully they will be inspired to learn and grow further.

Below are Jewish skills that I think we can successfully teach our children by the time they are Bar/Bat Mitzvah. These are skills that, with practice, they will be able to use to transition into competent and practicing Jewish adults. Of course, the "why" of these skills, and the personal meaning derived from these acts, will change for each of them as they practice and as they mature.

I welcome your thoughts and comments. Here's the list:

- How to light Friday night candles
- How to make kiddush and motzi on Friday night
- How to make Havdala
- How to have an Aliya
- How to lead weekday mincha and ma'ariv minyan
- How to say the mourners' kaddish (Lord save us from such a need!)
- How to lead/participate in the Torah service (and other services) on Shabbat
- How to wear a talit and tefillin
- How to light Chanuka candles
- How Torah trope works
- How to put up a mezuzah
- How to lead or participate in Birkat HaMazon
- How to sing Hatikva
- How to read a Jewish calendar
- The cycle of Jewish holidays
- The cycle of Jewish life
- What is my Hebrew name and my parents' Hebrew names

- What is the context of my Bar/Bat Mitzvah parsha
- What is the general story of the Chumash and the Tanach/Jewish Bible

*What else needs to be on this list?*

And while I was musing, I looked ahead a few years, and asked myself.... What are the teen/young adult experiences we expect them to have in the years ahead, that we ought to articulate, and at least put on the table as desirable?

- Go to Israel
- Tikkun Olam - Community/World Service
- Jewish youth group
- Jewish camp
- Find a college with Jewish activity and take Jewish studies courses
- Be able to articulate why being Jewish is important to them
- Hillel
- Marrying someone Jewish
- Creating a Jewish home

Whew! As parents and as a synagogue and schools and a community, we have quite a job to do! It seems that, as in the words of Pirkey Avot, "The day is short, and the task is great!"

I welcome your thoughts and comments.

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