

bar. mitzvah

A rite of passage

article and cakes by Deborah Bonelli

A thirteenth birthday brings both great joy and anticipation to a Jewish home. For at this age, a boy becomes a “Bar Mitzvah” a “son of the commandment.” Girls become “Bat Mitzvah” or “daughter of the commandment,” one year earlier at the age of twelve. However, today most girls decide to join their brothers and also celebrate their Bat Mitzvah upon turning thirteen.

Under Jewish law, the Bar and Bat Mitzvah marks entrance into adulthood, the time when a child is considered capable of making conscious, rational decisions. The adolescent is now responsible for his/her own religious and moral actions, and thus obligated to follow the commandments.

Prior to becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, children learn about the commandments, but are not obligated to adhere to them. For instance on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar, Jews are obligated to completely refrain from food and water for a twenty-four hour period.

Children, however, are not commanded to fast, and while parents spend the day in prayer atoning for their sins, most synagogues have a room with cookies, bread, or other snacks for the children. Upon becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, boys and girls can no longer dart into the room for a cookie or two, but must stand with the adult Jewish community and accept the obligation to complete the fast from sundown to sundown.

The elaborate Bar/Bat Mitzvah religious ceremony, so popular in contemporary American Jewish life, is a modern innovation, unheard of a century ago. Today's celebrant may sometimes wish for the basic origins of the Bar Mitzvah which simply involved the young man's first aliya, his first time reading a blessing over the portion of Torah (the Bible) to be read that sabbath.

In 2005, it is highly unlikely that a Bar Mitzvah will merely recite the short blessings for the Torah service. Rather, he will read the Maftir, the repetitive reading of the last section of the weekly Torah portion.

Next he will read the Haftorah, which is the reading from the Prophets that is usually related to the Torah reading for that sabbath. This requires a good deal of serious study, for one must not only read these passages in Hebrew, but also must commit to memory the proper chant. In effect, he must learn the music of the Haftorah, delivering each word with the proper inflection and cadence. And the difficulty of the task continues. The Haftorah is often chanted in front of a full synagogue during Shabbat services (Saturday morning).

After completing the Haftorah, there is yet one more hurdle. It has become common for the Bar Mitzvah to offer a talk on his interpretation of the prophetic portion of the reading. So, what began as simple ceremony where the adolescent comes up to the bimah (pulpit from which the Torah is unrolled for reading) and chants a short Hebrew blessing over the Torah, now has become a challenging but rewarding ceremony for even the most confident thirteen-year-old.

It is not merely the ceremony that has developed with time, but the scope of those eligible for a Bar Mitzvah ceremony has also broadened with time. Fifty years ago, it was uncommon for girls to participate in this important rite of passage. Now Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are the norm in both Conservative and Reform branches of Judaism. For traditional Orthodox Jews, this rite of passage is still limited to males.

In the past decade, adult women have begun to have Bat Mitzvahs too, making up for what was not available during their youth. Modern Orthodox Jews have created a Bat Mitzvah ceremony that is observed in the women's prayer group session, rather than the main sanctuary.

Receptions following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony were once no more than a home affair consisting of cake and coffee. Not so today. In many instances these celebrations have become as elaborate as a sweet sixteen party, or even a wedding.

As a sugar artist specializing in Jewish holidays and celebrations, my cake designs stress the core religious and



communal message of the ceremony. This may appear difficult, but a few creative solutions make it an easy process.

My first choice in designing a cake is to try to create a design around the theme of the Torah or Haftorah reading. On the other hand, a passage on death and destruction is hardly an inspiring theme for a cake-but there are solutions!

The Bat Mitzvah cake project that follows is such an example. In lieu of gifts the Bat Mitzvah celebrant for this cake asked her guests to make donations to selected Israeli charities/organizations, one of which was the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. This provided me with the perfect solution: desert flowers.

A desert in blossom is like a canvas of muted browns and grays splashed with the vibrant yellows, oranges, blues, and purples of the desert flowers. It is a spectacular scene.

Other religious items offer possibilities for equally impressive sugar decorations such as the following:

Bimah: The podium on which the Torah scroll is laid out for reading. Recreating the bimah of the celebrant's synagogue can make for a very special momento of the occasion.

Tallis: The prayer shawl worn during services. Most often, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony is the first time the tallis is worn. On each corner of the Tallis there are fringes, which fulfill the commandment to wear fringes at the corners of our garments as a reminder of the commandments we are to follow.

Traditionally, the tallis was white cloth bordered with bands of black or blue; however, today the tallis has become a work of art with embroidered Jewish symbols and silk screened designs. Visit www.israelcraft.com for modern design ideas.

Yad (or hand): A pointer used to guide the reader as he/she reads from the Torah. It is fashioned as a staff, tapered at one end, and usually made from silver or wood. They can be very elaborate.

Torah Scroll: A handwritten sacred text in Hebrew on sheets of parchment, which are sewn together and rolled onto wooden spindles. For the text of the Torah Scroll, I do one of three things:

- 1) With the rabbi's permission, I will write in Hebrew, or English, a line or two of text from the celebrant's reading. It is important that the rabbi approve of the phrase(s) being used.
- 2) I will write a standard inscription such as: "On your Bat Mitzvah, May the teachings of the Torah, Bring you peace and joy that last not only on this day, but for all days to come."
- 3) I use the space to write in Hebrew or English the celebrant's name and the Bar Mitzvah date.

