
What a Bat Mitzvah Guest Needs to Know

This guide explains appropriate synagogue behavior, major sections of the service, the synagogue environment, and service participants.

You have been invited to Brooke's Bat Mitzvah. Now what? What are you supposed to do there? How do you act? Whether you are Jewish or not, the following is a brief guide to help you feel more comfortable at the prayer service and enjoy the events as they unfold.

General Expectations for Synagogue Behavior

1. Wearing a head covering: A *kippah*, or head covering (called a *yarmulke* in Yiddish), is traditionally worn by males during the service and also by women in more liberal synagogues. Wearing a *kippah* is not a symbol of religious identification like the tallit, but is rather an act of respect to God and the sacredness of the worship space. Just as men and women may be asked to remove their hats in the church, or remove their shoes before entering a mosque, wearing a head covering is a non-denominational act of showing respect. In some synagogues, women may wear hats or a lace head covering.
2. Only Jewish adults (all men and many women) are required to wear a *tallit*, commonly referred to as a prayer shawl. The main feature of the *tallit* are the fringes located at its four corners, which are meant to remind us of God's 613 Commandments, as enumerated in the *Torah* (Five Books of Moses). The commandment for the fringes on garments is found in the 3rd paragraph of the *Shema* (see below).
3. Maintaining sanctity: All guests and participants are expected to respect the sanctity of the prayer service and Shabbat (the Sabbath) by:
 - a) Setting your cell phone or beeper to vibrate or turning it off.
 - b) Not taking pictures: At Congregation Geshet Shalom, photography is strictly forbidden on Shabbat.
 - c) Not smoking in the Sanctuary, inside the building, or even on the synagogue grounds.
 - d) Not writing or recording tapes.
 - e) Not speaking during services. While you may see others around you chatting

quietly--or even loudly--be aware that some synagogues consider this a breach of decorum.

4. **Sitting and standing:** Jewish worship services can be very athletic, filled with frequent directions to stand for particular prayers and sit for others. Take your cue from the other worshippers or the rabbi's instructions. Unlike kneeling in a Catholic worship service--which is a unique prayer posture, filled with religious significance--standing and sitting in a Jewish service does not constitute any affirmation of religious belief; it is merely a sign of respect. There may also be instructions to bow at certain parts of the service, and because a bow or prostration *is* a religiously significant act, feel free to remain standing or sitting as you wish at that point.

5. **Following the service:** Try to follow the service in the *siddur*, or prayer book, and the *Chumash*, or Torah book, both of which are printed in Hebrew and English. Guests and congregants are encouraged to hum along during congregational melodies and to participate in the service to the extent that they feel comfortable. If you lose the page, you may quietly ask a neighbor for help (although it is better not to interrupt someone in the middle of a prayer). During the Torah service (described below), the entire congregation is encouraged to follow the reading of the weekly Torah portion in English or Hebrew.

Major Sections of the Shabbat Morning Worship Service

The Shema ("Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One")

This passage from the Book of Deuteronomy and the three passages that follow constitute a central part of each morning and evening prayer service. Probably the most important single sentence in the liturgy, the *Shema* is not a prayer but rather an affirmation of the unity of God.

The Amidah ("Standing Prayer")

The *Amidah*, a series of prayers recited while standing in silent meditation, is the major liturgical piece of every synagogue service throughout the year. On a weekday, the *Amidah* contains prayers for the physical and spiritual well-being of the one praying as well as of the entire community of the People of Israel. On Shabbat, when such petitions are considered inimical to the concept of Shabbat, we praise God for the joy of the Shabbat and the rest that we enjoy.

The Torah Service

Following the *Shema* and the *Amidah* comes a transition from prayer to study. The primary study text is from the Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses. This text has been handwritten on the parchment of the Torah scrolls by a specially trained scribe.

The *Torah* is divided into--and read in--weekly portions, according to a prescribed

calendar, so that the entire *Torah* is read in the span of one year. The cover and accoutrements of the Torah scrolls recall the priestly garb of ancient Temple times, i.e., breastplate, robe, crowns, and belt.

When the Torah scroll is removed from or returned to the Ark, it is carried in a procession around the synagogue, accompanied by song, to show the love and reverence in which Jews hold its teachings. In more traditional synagogues, congregants kiss the Torah as it is carried around.

The Torah reader must learn the Torah portion so well that he or she can chant it accurately without relying on punctuation (which is absent from the Torah scroll). The melodies in the prescribed cantillation system facilitate the learning process by providing proper parsing. All guests and participants are encouraged to follow the reading in the English translation in the printed Torah books.

Usually the rabbi, and sometimes the bar/bat mitzvah child or another congregant, delivers a *d'var Torah*--a word of Torah--that comments on the weekly Torah reading. Brooke will be delivering the *d'var Torah* today.

The Torah Blessings (Aliyot to the Torah)

On Shabbat, the weekly Torah portion is read in seven divisions (*aliyot*). Each division of the reading provides an opportunity to honor a member of the congregation or a guest by calling him or her (just him in traditionalist communities) up to the *bimah* (pulpit) to recite the blessings over the Torah reading. This is known as "receiving an *aliyah*," or "being called up" to the Torah. The day of the bar/bat mitzvah celebration is when the child is called to the Torah for the first time to recite these blessings. Members of our family as well as congregants will be honored today.

At the conclusion of the Torah reading, two people are called to lift up and wrap the Torah scroll. The lifting displays the open Torah scroll to the congregation, showing symbolically that the Torah is an open book and belongs to everyone.

The Haftarah

Once the Torah scroll has been removed from the reading table, another person—today it will be Brooke--chants a portion from the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. The *haftarah* is usually chosen to reflect a theme or literary allusion in the Torah portion. The purpose of the haftarah is not only to provide an opportunity to teach from a different section of the Bible, but also to assert that prophecy serves to reinforce the laws of the Torah.

Mourner's Kaddish

Although there is no mention of death in this prayer, the *Kaddish* is recited at the end of

all worship services by family members who have lost a loved one in the past year or by those who are observing the anniversary of a death in years past. Despite sorrow and pain, the mourner rises to declare continuing commitment in praising God's name, to which we all respond, "Amen."

Kiddush (Sanctification of the Wine)

At the conclusion of the service, everyone is invited to the social hall for *kiddush*, the blessing over the wine and *ha-motzi*, the blessing over the bread. Then everyone is invited to enjoy a festive luncheon.

Unique Features in a Jewish Sanctuary

The following are architectural or symbolic objects that you may notice in a synagogue.

The Pews (Congregational Seating)

Everyone, Jew or gentile, is invited to enter and attend services. Sit wherever you like.

The Bimah (Pulpit)

Bimah literally means "high place." The *bimah* is the focus of most ritual activities in the synagogue.

The Ark (Aron Hakodesh)

The Ark is the repository of the Torah scrolls and is the central object on the *bimah*. Many synagogue arks are dramatic works of art or craftsmanship in wood or metal, filled with symbolic elements representing parts of the Jewish tradition.

The Eternal Light (Ner Tamid)

Hanging from the top of the Ark is an electric light that is never extinguished. This "Eternal Light" symbolizes the fire that burned on the altar in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

The Flags

Many American synagogues display two flags in the sanctuary, an American and an Israeli flag. The Israeli flag, adopted at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, represents the entire Jewish People. In the center is the six-sided star traditionally associated with the Jewish people, and the blue stripes above and below the star represent the stripes of the *tallit*. The Jewish tradition also requires Jews to be loyal to the country in which they live and to pray for its welfare, hence the American flag, representing the loyalty of the

American Jewish community.

Participants in the Service

The Rabbi

"Rabbi" means teacher. The major function of a rabbi is to instruct and guide in the study and practice of Judaism. A rabbi's authority is based solely on learning.

The Cantor

A cantor has undergone years of study and training in liturgy and sacred music. The cantor leads the congregation in Hebrew prayer.

The "Emissary of the Congregation" (Shaliach Tzibbur)

The *shaliach tzibbur* is the leader of congregational prayers, be it the cantor or another congregant. Every Jewish prayer service, whether on a weekday, Shabbat, or festival, is chanted in a special musical mode and pattern. The *shaliach tzibbur* must be skilled in these traditional musical modes and familiar with the prayers. Any member of the congregation above the age of bar/bat mitzvah who is familiar with the prayers and melodies may serve as *shaliach tzibbur*.

The Gabbai

The *gabbai*, or sexton, attends to the details of organizing the worship service. The *gabbai* finds a *shaliach tzibbur*, assigns *aliyot*, and ensures that the Torah is read correctly.

The Laity

Members of the congregation may participate in all synagogue functions and leadership roles. Any knowledgeable Jew is permitted and encouraged to lead the prayers, receive an *aliyah*, read from the Torah, and chant the *haftarah*.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

At 13, a young Jewish man or woman becomes obligated to observe the commandments of Judaism. "Bar/bat Mitzvah" literally means "Age of Commandment." The celebration of a bar/bat mitzvah signifies that the young man or woman is beginning and will continue to function as an active and responsible Jew in the synagogue and in the wider Jewish community.

