

Zoom-Mitzvah 101

A Moving Traditions Guide to Thinking Creatively About Pandemic B'nai Mitzvahs



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Why We Wrote This Guide

During the pandemic, many families are wrestling with the question *“How do we celebrate a b’nai mitzvah¹ online and still make it joyous, authentic, and meaningful?”*

While some are postponing celebrations while they wait for COVID rates to subside, thousands of Jewish families are letting go of long-held expectations, pioneering socially distanced celebrations and demonstrating wonderful creativity, resilience, and resourcefulness.

Many rabbis, cantors, and communal leaders are extending themselves to families, offering guidance around the service and ceremony as well as ongoing emotional support.

If you are planning a b’nai mitzvah for the first part of 2021, this guide is for you! In the pages that follow you will find a reflections, creative ideas, and best practices gathered by us through the Moving Traditions B’nai Mitzvah Family Education Program (learn more about it on pages 8-9) from parents who have celebrated their child’s b’nai mitzvah during the pandemic, and from Jewish educators and clergy who work with b’nai mitzvah families across North America.

We highlight b’nai mitzvah celebrations that are broadcast from a synagogue or are held in-home or outdoors. We take you on the journey through the celebration—pre-planning, day-of, and post, with a variety of creative possibilities. We hope to share useful innovations and alternative approaches, and to spark your creative ideas.

One meta-note: as the pandemic evolves, synagogue leaders are making real-time policy decisions about gathering safely and about Jewish ritual practice. Decisions are likely to be revisited multiple times over the next few months as the pandemic plays out. If you are celebrating your child’s coming-of-age within a Jewish institution, we recommend ongoing consultation with clergy and other leaders to understand communal guidelines.

¹ There is a vast array of names that have emerged for this coming of age ceremony. So many creative names are now used: “b mitzvah”, “b’nai mitzvah”, and, of course, bat and bar mitzvah. We are using “b’nai mitzvah” throughout this document.

Traditions In and Out of the Home

Jewish rituals, even the oldest and most significant, have undergone many transformations over generations. Passover began as a holy day when extended families would gather around a roasted lamb and tell of the exodus from Egypt. Yet, as we read in Deuteronomy 16:5-6, the festival later became a communal pilgrimage to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the Temple. This communal celebration was then radically disrupted when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. In the aftermath, the rabbis decided that each family should celebrate by holding a Passover seder, without ritual sacrifice, in their own homes. The lamb became a symbol: the shank-bone on the seder plate. The seder has gone through transformations more recently, including the addition of symbols like Miriam's Cup and the orange on the seder plate.

In the pandemic, the b'nai mitzvah has in many communities also become a "home-based" Jewish ritual. It has also changed in other ways. In these many months of life under COVID restrictions, grandparents who were going to come forward for an *aliyah* (blessing before the Torah reading), instead extended their *tzitzit* (fringes of the prayer shawl) to the lens of a webcam and virtually kissed the Torah. People who never before had Torah scrolls in their homes created temporary sanctuaries. Preteens who did not feel comfortable giving speeches in front of cameras created voice-overs for animated video commentaries on the Torah portion. And people from across the globe have gathered together to share a celebratory meal in breakout rooms. These new traditions transform and enrich our traditional rituals.

Letting Go Before Moving On/Talking to Your Preteen

Jewish people have a long history of survival. But while it may be tempting to tell yourself and others who are planning a b'nai mitzvah to just "move on" and "get over it," we do not recommend remaining silent about the hurt and pain that the pandemic has caused. If you are planning a b'nai mitzvah, for your own psychological well-being as well as for the preteen in your life, it is a good idea to at least make note of what it is each of you are giving up in celebrating a b'nai mitzvah during the pandemic.

There are likely many aspects of the celebration—large and small—that cannot take place now, and it will help you and your preteen to take time to reflect on those things that you may have been picturing for many years. This can involve discussing all that will not be able to happen, writing down a few items, and then literally and symbolically letting them go, similar to the letting go we enact each year on Rosh Hashanah in the *tashlich* ritual.

By letting go of what we had pictured, we can make room for what is present. Sometimes we have to consciously let go of what could have been in order to make room for what could be. Indeed, that is how many of the creative ideas in this guide were born.

As you begin to think about what could be, you will want to include your preteen in the conversation. We have provided a worksheet at the end of this guide to help get you started.

You may want to print and fill out the worksheet separately from your preteen, and then compare answers, or you might prefer to fill it out together.

Organizing Your Event

Once you have let go of what you expected to happen, the sky is the limit! While there are a lot of “no’s” right now, there can also be a ton of “yes’s.” Below are some of the best ideas from clergy, educators, and parents like you. We have organized the ideas based on time order. As *The Art of Gathering* author Priya Parker says, an event begins the minute your guests receive an invitation, and so that is where we will begin.

1. Inviting: Use the invite to set up expectations about participation.

Here are questions that you might want to consider before you invite people to the event:

- a. Are you asking guests to have their cameras on the entire time? If not, what times, specifically, do you want to be able to see guests?
- b. Is there a dress code?
- c. Do you want guests to wear a *tallit* (prayer shawl) if they have one in their home?
- d. Should guests bring anything to the screen, such as a kiddush cup, challah, or picture?
- e. Do you want to send a background or a sign for guests to use at a particular moment?
- f. Do you want to send a box to guests with the program, a *kippah* (head covering), a poster to write a personal message to hold up, or some candies to throw at the screen at the end?

2. Set up: Create the sacred space you want

- a. Create a handmade banner or printed sign to put in the background of your home screen, with meaningful symbols, such as a *chai* (an amulet with the Hebrew letters meaning life), a pomegranate, a Star of David, a *hamsa*, etc.
- b. Create a *bimah* (pulpit/sacred stage) with a table where you are going to be standing as a family. Use a special tablecloth and place family heirlooms, flowers, or have each family member place one object that is sacred to them on the table.
- c. Use several screens/monitors, each with its own 25-person Zoom page so your child can be talking to 100 people or more at once.
- d. If you are bringing a Torah into your home, use a *tallit* (prayer shawl), your child’s baby blanket, or another meaningful cloth as the Torah covering.
- e. If there are family and friends who cannot be there in person, put their photos on the table as if they are watching.
- f. If you are having the ceremony outdoors, create a branded “stand here” sign to be placed on the ground (six feet apart). You could do this in a circle around the b’nai mitzvah child and/or in rows, so people can watch and still stay six feet apart.

- g. Create a congregation of treasured stuffed animals in the living room so your child can feel like they are talking to an audience instead of the camera.

3. Welcoming: Create a community online

- a. Assign someone as a “greeter” to welcome people or families by name as they enter the Zoom room.
- b. Create a “naming protocol,” such as first names only, like “Nate and Dylan” or it could be by family, like the “The Cohen-Cruz family”, or it could be something more creative.
- c. Create a few questions for you or the greeter to put in the chat while you are waiting to begin, for example: “Everyone please write in the chat where you are located...how you know the b’nai mitzvah family...how many years you have known the b’nai mitzvah child...”
- d. Ask your guests to take selfie screen shots during the b’nai mitzvah and send them to you afterwards or create a Dropbox or album into which people can upload their pictures.

4. The Prayer Service

- a. Assign specific family members or friends to read selected prayers or poems.
- b. Have two participants in different locations read a responsive prayer together.
- c. Invite everyone to unmute and say the *Shema* or another specific prayer together, enjoying the cacophony of sounds.
- d. Add simple elements of movement or dance to musical prayers to encourage participation.
- e. Allow for a minute of silent meditation.

5. The Torah Service

- a. Reach out to family and friends ahead of time asking them to email or snail mail their blessings for the b'nai mitzvah child. Print and put them in a container and present it to your child at the service when the Torah passing would usually occur.
- b. Assign *aliyot* (coming up to bless the Torah before a reading) to family members who cannot attend in person. Have them symbolically kiss the camera with their *tzitzit* (fringes of the prayer shawl).
- c. Torah Pass:
 - Virtually “Pass” the Torah from Zoom box, to Zoom box (with a mini Torah that everyone has been sent ahead of time).
 - Ask each person or generation in the line to say, “I pass you this Torah and from it I hope you learn...” (The idea is that even if they can’t pass the scroll, they are able to share their family Torah (wisdom) with the next generation.)
 - Have generational representatives recite a short blessing for the child.

- d. Ask clergy or others use their hands to create the *kohanic* (priestly) sign for group or family blessings.
- e. Set up one camera so that it shows the reading of the Torah from behind to give guests the experience of being called up for an *aliyah*.
- f. Create a question for you, your child, or an assigned person to put in the chat at a specific moment with a question related to the Torah portion, i.e. “Have you ever had to stand up for something you believed in like Abraham?” “When have you challenged authority like Miriam?” “What is your unique talent like Bezalel, who was chosen by God for his skills to make a portable ark?” “What is the ‘golden calf’ or false idol in modern times?”
- g. Do a *hakafah* (dance around the room) with whomever is in your space. Have one person hold the camera or laptop that is recording the video follow the family around their living room, backyard or sanctuary, so everyone gets to join in.
- h. Candy
 - Even if it’s only your family alone, throw candy!
 - Have friends gathered outside the synagogue or outside your home to throw candy from a distance.
 - Deliver candy bags to members of your child’s b’nai mitzvah class so everyone has candy to throw at the camera in their own homes.
 - Send a candy filter to all guests and invite them to use it in their Zoom box as the *d’var*Torah (discussion of the Torah portion) is finished.

6. The Kiddush/Celebration

- a. Create a schedule to meet with specific smaller groups throughout the day so you say a *kiddush* (blessing/celebratory toast) in shifts.
- b. Send individual packages of the *oneg* (celebratory Shabbat meal), such as bagels and lox, to family members so they can all enjoy the same food.
- c. Ask everyone to have a challah and when the time comes, ask everyone to show it on their screens so you can break bread together.
- d. Create a virtual sign-in board with blessings and messages from loved ones near and far (<https://padlet.com/> is great for this).
- e. Play *horah* (traditional Jewish circle dance) music and have your family raise your child on a chair in your space.
- f. Schedule a food truck or dessert truck to ride around to local guests’ homes.
- g. Create breakout rooms in place of “tables.” Give each “table” a discussion question or prompt. The b’nai mitzvah family can then visit each “table.”
- h. Make a tribute video and play it for everyone after the ceremony.
- i. Using a simple tech tool like <https://answergarden.ch/create>, invite guests to anonymously create a word cloud of wishes for the b’nai mitzvah child. Share the word

cloud on your screen. (Ask, “What is one word that encompasses what you wish for this child?”)

There are countless ways you can expand on the ideas on these pages.

Conclusion

It would be wonderful to peer into a crystal ball and know what life under the pandemic will be like in six months. But that is not a possibility. In six months or nine months or more, we are likely going to see different realities in different places, and synagogues and other communal institutions will have to make decisions based on local factors and risks. It may be a long time before it is safe to bring a multi-generational group of hundreds of people together to celebrate. Adapting to the current circumstance has been a Jewish art form for generations—and we wish you the best in making the most of this moment.

“People are always searching for the city of happiness, but they don’t realize that it is a state of mind.” — Rabbi Yaakov Pam

“The moment when we can step back and marvel at the twists and turns, the synchronicities and blessings that have brought us to the here and now—that is the moment of realization that every step matters.” — Rabbi Shefa Gold

Zoom-Mitzvah 101: Family Worksheet

There are so many things your family may be considering for your b'nai mitzvah. Pick at least three items from the following list and write them in the appropriate spot on the table below:

- Give family members online *aliyot* to the Torah
- Have family members be part of the service (through a reading, song, or speech)
- Have friends be part of the service (through a reading, song, or speech)
- Make a speech
- Chant Torah/Haftarah
- Sing a prayer by myself
- Sing a prayer with family members who are in the room with me
- Read a prayer in Hebrew
- Read a prayer in English
- Ask everyone online to unmute and sing a prayer
- Carry a Torah around the room
- Ask participants to respond to a question I ask via chat
- Dress up in special clothing for the occasion
- Have a “kiddush” online
- Be lifted on a chair
- Do a hora/dance party online

Definitely want to do	Definitely don't want to do	Don't want to do but will if important to family members

More About Moving Traditions B'nai Mitzvah Family Education Program

Thousands of families like yours in over a hundred Jewish communities have partnered with Moving Traditions to enrich their b'nai mitzvah preparations with our series of informal, family-based educational experiences that focus on:

- Speaking honestly about the challenges of “becoming a teen” and “parenting a teen.”
- Encouraging healthy dialogue between parent and preteen.
- Making meaning out of the Jewish rituals connected to b'nai mitzvah.
- Helping teens find a place in the Jewish community where they receive support from peers, question the social pressures that they face in school and online, and take on new responsibilities.

What does Moving Traditions do?

Moving Traditions conducts research and works with a team of rabbis, social workers, and psychologists to design exceptional informal educational experiences for families of preteens and teens that are infused with the latest in social-emotional learning and Jewish wisdom (both ancient and modern). Rabbis, cantors, and educators from communities across North America train with Moving Traditions and learn how to facilitate conversations based on the Moving Traditions curriculum.

In each session of the curriculum, preteens and their parents (or other guardians) learn together, listen to one another's perspectives, and participate in a communal conversation that enriches the meaning of the b'nai mitzvah as a lifecycle ritual. Sessions run from 60-90 minutes and include:

- Today You Are an Adult: What does it mean to become a teen?
- B'nai Mitzvah: Why am I doing this?
- Repairing the World: What's a mitzvah?
- Beyond Thank You: What does it mean to be a host? a guest?
- Fitting In and Standing Out: How will I navigate the teen years?
- “You Just Don't Understand.” How do parents and teens talk to each other?
- Now What? Deepening Friendships and Finding Community
- How to Connect When You're Never Apart (COVID-19 curriculum)

Each session—whether online or in-person—includes interactive parent-child dialogue, wisdom from Jewish sources, and informal group games that keep the program engaging and fun.

In addition to the family education experiences, Moving Traditions has designed a series of informal educational sessions specifically for 6th and 7th graders, and a [blessing for preteens having a b'nai mitzvah in the time of COVID](#).

What is @13?

Moving Traditions produced a [six-episode podcast, “@13,”](#) specifically for parents and preteens preparing to celebrate a b'nai mitzvah. Producer Michelle Siegel (Slate, WNYC) brings host Sara Ivry (Tablet) together with Peggy Orenstein, Mark Oppenheimer, Rachel Simmons, Rabbi Sharon Brous, and many others to explore the meaning of the Jewish coming of age rituals.

What do parents say about the Moving Traditions B'nai Mitzvah Family Education Program?

“It was great to help (my son) understand why he will be doing this milestone event, what the significance is, and that at different points throughout his life it will have different meaning and relevance to him.”

“It was nice to be reminded that other families share some of the same conflicts, and even better to learn some concrete guidelines for disagreeing more lovingly. And that they're rooted in our tradition.”

“I enjoyed getting feedback from other parents about how they were handling gender expectations— especially the parents of girls.”

“It was a good chance to have discussions with our kids that we don't typically have.”

“We got to hear about the challenges our kids are having as they become teenagers.”

How do I encourage my synagogue or community to partner with Moving Traditions?

Please contact Sarah Fox (sfox@movingtraditions.org) if you'd like to bring the program to your community.

Where can I learn more?

- Read these [articles](#) about the impact of our program
- [Sign up for our parent emails](#)
- Learn more about [our programs](#)



About Moving Traditions

Moving Traditions believes it is critically important for the Jewish community to help Jewish youth navigate the world so they will thrive as healthy, ethical, and Jewishly connected people. Moving Traditions emboldens youth by fostering self-discovery, challenging sexism, and inspiring a commitment to Jewish life and learning.

However, while a majority of Jewish teens will become b'nai mitzvah, most drop out of Jewish life soon after, leaving the Jewish community at a critical stage, just when they are figuring out who they are and how to behave in a society that often dictates narrow and unhealthy gender roles and ways of dealing with differences.

Moving Traditions connects the issues preteens and teens care about most—such as body image, social and academic pressure, friendship, romance, and sexuality—to enduring Jewish values, fosters positive peer-to-peer relationships through our trained educators and mentors, and inspires participants to develop an ongoing connection to Jewish community. By promoting a more inclusive and expansive view of gender for Jewish girls, boys, and transgender and nonbinary teens, we create a more vibrant, engaging Judaism that helps all teens to flourish.

Impact

Established in 2005, Moving Traditions launched with our program for teen girls, Rosh Hodesh, and has since created Shevet for teen boys and Tzelem for LGBTQ+ teens. (Tzelem is offered in partnership with Keshet.) In 2018-19, Moving Traditions launched our innovative B'nai Mitzvah Family Education Program, preparing Jewish clergy and educators to help 6th and 7th graders and their parents develop strong communication and empathy as they prepare to become and parent a teen. That year we also launched Kol Koleinu, our national feminist teen fellowship, now offered in partnership with URJ and USY, which is inspiring 50 fellows in three regional cohorts to deepen knowledge, amplify their voices, exert leadership, and create tangible change through social activism projects. Since 2017, through the CultureShift initiative, Moving Traditions prepares camp leaders to train counselors—both in person and online—to prevent sexual harassment and assault and to promote a culture of safety, respect and equity at Jewish camp.

To date, Moving Traditions has emboldened more than 27,000 preteens and teens, trained more than 2,300 adults as Moving Traditions B'nai Mitzvah Family Education program leaders and Teen Group mentors, prepared more than 140 senior camp leaders to promote safety, respect and equity through CultureShift, and partnered with more than 500 congregations, JCCs, camps, day schools and other Jewish entities across North America, including in our staffed regions in Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia.