

Bar Mitzvahs

Bar Mitzvah (for boys) and Bat Mitzvah (for girls) are Jewish coming of age rituals (i.e., puberty ceremonies).

According to Jewish law, when Jewish boys become 13 years old, they become accountable for their actions and become a bar mitzvah. A girl becomes a bat mizvah at the age of 12. Most non-Orthodox Jews celebrate a girl's bat mitzvah in the same way as a boy's bar mitzvah. Prior to reaching bar or bat mitzvah, the child's parents hold the responsibility for the child's actions. After this age, the girls and boys bear their own responsibility for Jewish ritual law, tradition, and ethics, and are able to participate in all areas of Jewish community life. Traditionally, the father of the bar mitzvah gives thanks to God that he is no longer punished for the child's sins. In addition to being considered accountable for their actions from a religious perspective, these rites may be counted towards a “minyan” (prayer quorum) and may lead prayer and other religious services in the family and the community.

Bar mitzvah is mentioned in the *Mishnah* and in the *Talmud*. In some classic sources, the age of thirteen appears for instance as the age from which males must fast on the Day of Atonement, while females fast from the age of twelve. In the late Middle Ages this was systematized in Europe into a general rule as to when a young person was obligated to observe the mitzvot. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_and_Bat_Mitzvah]

As a teacher, I've had the opportunity and pleasure to attend several bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs for students over the years. Having been raised a Catholic, I couldn't help but make comparisons between services and the like, and I found I much preferred the Jewish format, which was much more personal, casual, and friendly. The congregation was also part of the services, rather than simply an audience.

