

BNEI MITZVAH HANDBOOK

עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד
עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוֹדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים:

*The world stands on three things: on Torah,
on worship, and on deeds of loving kindness.*

—Pirkei Avot 1:2 (Ethics of the Fathers)



PARK AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

מזל טוב! | *Mazal Tov!*

We here at Park Avenue Synagogue want to wish you *mazal tov* on your first step in the exciting journey toward your child(ren) becoming Bnei Mitzvah. (Recognizing that all children do not fit precisely into predefined categories, we will use the Hebrew plural form “Bnei Mitzvah” to refer both to individual young people preparing for this life cycle event and to all of the young people approaching this milestone.)

Preparing to become Bnei Mitzvah is a learning and growth experience for children and their families. Over the next two years, there will be many educational opportunities, informative meetings, and memorable moments that will lead you through this uniquely Jewish experience.

As much as children learn in Congregational School, day school, and synagogue services, parents are ultimately their children’s primary teachers. By committing to your children’s Jewish learning, you teach your children to make the synagogue a part of their lives for the rest of their lives.

Our Sages teach that an invisible angel stands beside each blade of grass and whispers, “Grow!” (*Genesis Rabbah* 10:6) How much more so each human soul! The Bnei Mitzvah ceremony celebrates a young person’s growth and transition from one stage of life to another. As our ancestors did, we recognize the importance of marking our life cycles with meaningful ceremonies. We see the ceremony both as a milestone – acknowledging hard work and dedication as your children enter Jewish adulthood – and as a gateway to lifelong learning and involvement within the Jewish community.

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Rabbi Neil Zuckerman
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THE SYNAGOGUE PERSPECTIVE

Becoming Bnei Mitzvah at Park Avenue Synagogue

- Bnei Mitzvah ceremonies at Park Avenue Synagogue can take place on:
- Shabbat morning at 9:45 am
- Shabbat afternoon (Minha) at 4:45 pm or 5:00 pm, depending on sundown
- Sunday Rosh Hodesh (first day of a new Hebrew month) or holiday Monday (e.g. Memorial Day) morning at 10:00 am
- Yom Tov (holiday) as part of our community holiday worship on Sukkot, Hanukkah, or Pesach at 9:45 am

In addition, Bnei Mitzvah participate in the Friday evening service of the same Shabbat, coming up for candle lighting and leading Kiddush from the bimah. The family also attends morning minyan on the Monday or Thursday morning before the Shabbat, when the Bnei Mitzvah have an opportunity to wear a tallit, lay *tefillin*, and be welcomed into our Jewish community as adults.

What Our Students Learn as They Prepare to Become Bnei Mitzvah

Students prepare to chant the maftir *aliyah* from the Torah, chant the Haftarah (weekly reading from the Prophets), lead prayers, and give a short Dvar Torah (a teaching and reflection related to the weekly Torah or haftarah reading).

We support students who wish to read additional *aliyot* from the Torah, provided that they learn all required materials with enough time to take additional readings. This will be coordinated with the student, parents, Bnei Mitzvah tutor, Bnei Mitzvah Coordinator, and the clergy. In addition, if other members of the family would like to read Torah, please let us know as early as possible so that we can reserve the Torah reading for your family member.

Please note: For a shared Bnei Mitzvah ceremony, each family is able to take up to three additional Torah readings, if desired. This includes extra readings for a family member, as well as extra readings for the Bnei Mitzvah.

Attending Services Prior to the Bnei Mitzvah Ceremony

We encourage all families to come to Friday night, holiday, and Shabbat morning services. Attending services regularly will make your children more comfortable with them and ensure that they are fully prepared for their own ceremonies. To see the current schedule of services, visit [the synagogue's calendar \(https://pasyn.org/calendar\)](https://pasyn.org/calendar).

Families in the Congregational School attend many PAS Shabbat services and programs as part of the weekly Shabbat Experience Program in the learners' Vav (Grade 6) year.

Approximately one year before your child(ren)'s Bnei Mitzvah, your family will be invited to a Shabbat morning service in the Sanctuary, where you and your child will be

invited up to the bimah to lead the community in the *Aleinu* prayer and give your family the honor of an ark opening. We call this “myParashah Shabbat.”

Sharing a Service

On most Shabbat mornings at Park Avenue Synagogue, we have the joy of celebrating two children becoming Bnei Mitzvah. This is a wonderful milestone to celebrate together. We encourage families to meet in the months leading up to the day to help foster this sense of community. We are happy to make those family introductions.

Logistics and Scheduling

Approximately five months before a child's ceremony, parents meet with our Bnei Mitzvah Program Manager to discuss the logistics of the day, including timing of services, family participation, sponsorship, and biographical information. We also discuss honors available to your family, including *aliyot*, raising and/or dressing of the Torah, and ark openings. Those assigned to *aliyot* and raising or dressing the Torah can familiarize themselves with the ritual by watching the instructional videos on the [PAS Bnei Mitzvah page \(https://pasyn.org/program/bnei-mitzvah\)](https://pasyn.org/program/bnei-mitzvah).

After the five-month meeting, we will call you to schedule rabbi, dvar Torah, and cantor meetings/rehearsals, including the final dress rehearsal (one hour) on the bimah during the week before the ceremony. Please keep in mind that during this last week your family will also attend morning minyan on either Monday or Thursday at 7:15 am (9:00 am if it's a bank holiday) and Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat services at 6:15 pm.

At the final dress rehearsal, we will confirm arrangements and logistics, and students will run through their service on the bimah. Before or after the dress rehearsal is also an excellent time to take photos in our sanctuary.

Respect for Shabbat

The synagogue is a sacred place and as such commands respect. If we are on a cell phone, and we are not paying attention, we are not showing respect. It is distracting to others. We want to be present and dedicated to the service, clergy, and congregants, as well as the Bnei Mitzvah on the bimah. The use of electronic devices is prohibited in the Sanctuary. In addition, please encourage your family and friends to open the siddur and follow the service, sing with the cantors and be a part of the service. We also encourage families to share with their guests that wearing a kippah and (for Jews) *tallitot* are also signs of respect for the service.

Please also note that cameras may only be used in your private reception.

Shabbat Bnei Mitzvah Reception

We hope that you will hold your child(ren)'s Bnei Mitzvah reception at Park Avenue Synagogue. Our catering vendors are strictly kosher and offer a wide variety of menu options. To reserve one of the banquet halls for a private luncheon or to reserve the lower level, you will make arrangements directly with our Event Manager, [Jayde Grossman](#). We encourage you to make contact as soon as possible to ensure that your needs are met.

If you host your reception offsite, we encourage you to offer kosher or dairy/*pareve* meals. We are happy to give you recommendations for top-notch kosher catering services.

In addition to food considerations, there are other important policies regarding receptions in the synagogue: Although some music is permitted at an afternoon reception, DJs, sign-in boards, writing, candle lighting, and the use of money or electronic devices by attendees or entertainers are not allowed for Shabbat afternoon, but are suitable for an evening reception after Shabbat.

If you hold your reception at another location, please note that buses must wait on Madison Avenue between 87th and 88th Streets.

THE EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Enrollment Requirement

To ensure that children are properly prepared to become Bnei Mitzvah, they must be enrolled in and regularly attend either our Congregational School or a full-time Jewish day school.

Becoming Bnei Mitzvah is an important milestone on a lifelong journey of Jewish learning. In addition to continuing to learn at Congregational School or in day school, and attending services regularly, we provide a variety of educational experiences to make the most of the Bnei Mitzvah year.

Bnei Mitzvah Preparation – Congregational School Students

Vav Year – 6th Grade

- Congregational School classes, Shabbat services, and programs
- Bnei Mitzvah Family Education Programs – four during the year
- Book Club with Rabbi Cosgrove – two during the year

Hebrew Tutoring

- Hebrew tutoring continues to take place in 6th grade
 - As students will read many new Hebrew texts for their Bnei Mitzvah, commitment to Hebrew tutoring is critical for success.

Trope Instruction as Part of CS Curriculum

- 5th graders will attend a series of four Torah trope sessions taught by trope specialists during regular class time.
- 6th graders will attend a series of four haftarah trope sessions taught by trope specialists during regular class time.

Zayin Year – 7th Grade

The Zayin curriculum is a four-part seminar style classroom experience, divided into four main sections in 4-5 week sessions. Each section includes connections to relevant organizations, project based learning and opportunities for parents to join the students for learning.

- Anti-Semitism
- Holocaust
- World Jewry & Israel
- Human Rights

Bnei Mitzvah Preparation – Day School Students

6th Grade

- Bnei Mitzvah Family Education Programs – four during the year
- Book Club with Rabbi Cosgrove – two during the year

7th Grade

- Family education trips and programs, including one to the Museum of Jewish Heritage

Bnei Mitzvah Preparation – Individual

The Learning Process – Trope Class

Official preparation for your child's Bnei Mitzvah begins with trope (cantillation) class approximately one year in advance, during Congregational School hours. At this multi-session class, students learn fundamental skills for reading from the Torah and chanting haftarah.

One-on-One Tutoring

When it is time to begin one-on-one Bnei Mitzvah tutoring, our Bnei Mitzvah Program Manager will contact you to schedule sessions. The tutor will meet with your child for half an hour once a week at the synagogue, outside of Congregational School hours. The Bnei Mitzvah fee covers these weekly half-hour lessons for up to 40 lessons. Students may also request additional lessons at their family's expense. We ask that if you need to reschedule a lesson, you alert the tutor more than 24 hours in advance.

Meeting with Our Rabbis and Dvar Torah

Families will also meet with our rabbis several months before the ceremony to discuss what it means to reach this milestone, learn about the particulars of the ceremony, and get answers to questions. After the initial family meeting, students meet individually with our rabbis for three sessions to work on their dvar Torah, and families meet with the rabbis again in the weeks leading up to the ceremony.

Bimah Rehearsals

Our cantors will meet with students in the sanctuary or chapel during the two months leading up to the ceremony, culminating with a dress rehearsal the week before the ceremony. Some meetings take place on Zoom.

The first bimah lesson is a family meeting, and we ask that one or both parents be present. Subsequent rehearsals are one-on-one with student and cantor. The meetings with the cantors culminate in a dress rehearsal during the week before the Bnei Mitzvah ceremony. If the morning service is shared, the two families attend the dress rehearsal together.

Mitzvah Project

Each student is encouraged to do a mitzvah project. This can take many forms – volunteering for an organization, collecting money for a cause, or creating a program to help a need in our community or the greater community. Whatever the project, it should be close to each student’s heart, engage them, and provide the priceless feeling of making a difference. If you have questions, please reach out to our Bnei Mitzvah Program Manager for guidance and support.

We encourage you to look over [this list](#) of mitzvah projects completed by past Bnei Mitzvah, as well as those that both our Tikkun Olam Committee and Mitzvah Day organizers are involved with. As an example of a project found on the list, see the Give Mitzvah, Do a Mitzvah below.

Give a Mitzvah, Do a Mitzvah

This UJA-Federation program is a popular resource for creating a mitzvah project. This program enables Bnei Mitzvah students to create customized mitzvah projects that connect their interests and hobbies to UJA-Federation of New York’s work around the world. Alongside a UJA-Federation mitzvah coordinator, participants brainstorm individual projects and contribute time, energy, and a portion (or all) of their monetary gifts to their project. For more information, enter Give a Mitzvah in the search box on ujafedny.org.

Commitment to Jewish Learning

Park Avenue Synagogue offers teens varied opportunities to stay involved after their Bnei Mitzvah year. We have trips that balance education and fun. We offer Jewish learning on Wednesday evenings at the Rabbi Judah Nadich High School and monthly teen parent learning sessions with Rabbi Cosgrove. Teens are able to participate in community building programs like Broadway shows and other outings, as well as various tikkun olam opportunities such as: biweekly food pantry, the Teens Combatting Antisemitism Task Force, intergenerational programming, and more! Teens are also invited to apply for positions on our leadership boards. As teens grow and mature, they're able to tackle Jewish issues at a deeper level, and form and maintain friendships that will carry them into college and beyond. Mackenzie Haun, Assistant Director of Youth Programming, will be in touch with you after your child's simcha to help you navigate this next step.

Educational Opportunities for Parents

The period of a child's Bnei Mitzvah training allows parents to increase their own Jewish education. We urge you to take advantage of the wealth of educational offerings at the synagogue, including daytime and evening classes, offerings, and conversations in Bible, theology, Hebrew, and synagogue skills, as well as our Shabbat Speaker Series, Study Circles, and numerous other programs. As always, we encourage you to join us in services on Friday night and Shabbat morning. Please consult our website and emails to learn more.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Bnei Mitzvah Fee

Our Bnei Mitzvah fee covers the cost of trope class, 40 one-on-one tutoring sessions, family programs, administration of the Bnei Mitzvah program, materials for your child's simcha, and a high-resolution video of your child's service. Additional tutoring sessions beyond the 40 will be considered private, and you can coordinate those sessions with your Bnei Mitzvah tutor. Please note that the balance of the Bnei Mitzvah fee is due before the start of one-on-one tutoring, with the \$1,000 deposit (paid when you confirm the Bnei Mitzvah date) deducted from the total fee.

Photography and Video

Sessions with your professional photographer will be coordinated with our staff. Suggested times include after you attend weekday morning minyan, the week before your child's ceremony, or before or after the dress rehearsal in the Sanctuary. A Torah scroll will be provided for you to use during your photo session. We ask that you not move reading tables, microphones, or other equipment in the Sanctuary.

During Shabbat, photography is prohibited in the Sanctuary and public spaces, including hallways. At the Monday or Thursday morning minyan service, professional photography is not permitted, but unobtrusive photo taking with no flash is allowed.

Bnei Mitzvah services are recorded in high-quality HD. Within a week of your ceremony, you will be sent a link with the video of the service, which you may download and share.

Park Avenue Synagogue also provides livestreaming of Shabbat morning services. Family and friends may watch in HD from afar on our [Livestream \(pasyn.org/worship/livestream\)](https://pasyn.org/worship/livestream). For Minha services, we will provide a private Livestream link.

Invitations

When designing your invitation, please feel free to consult Cantor Azi Schwartz or Allen Paisner, our Ritual Coordinator, about the correct spelling of Hebrew names and phrases. Shabbat morning services begin at 9:45 am. Shabbat afternoon (Minha) services may begin at 4:45 pm or 5:00 pm, depending on the season and when Shabbat ends that day. Sunday Rosh Hodesh services begin at 10:00 am, as do Monday morning services on bank holidays. Please ask the Bnei Mitzvah Program Manager about the times.

Bnei Mitzvah Sponsorship Opportunities

Shabbat Morning Kiddush

We encourage Bnei Mitzvah parents to sponsor the Congregational Kiddush following services. Everyone who attends services is invited to this Kiddush, and it is a mitzvah to extend hospitality in this way. Beyond sponsoring the basic Congregational Kiddush, the following Kiddush options also are available:

1. Embellish the Congregational Kiddush by supplementing the Kiddush menu, allowing for additional foods.
2. Expand the Congregational Kiddush by ordering additional quantities of food.
3. Hold a private Kiddush luncheon.
4. Have a private event consisting of a cocktail hour followed by a formal sit-down meal. This type of event uses both of our banquet halls.

Friday Night Oneg

Park Avenue Synagogue offers a sweet snack after Kabbalat Shabbat services on Friday night to welcome Shabbat. The Oneg sponsorship offers the opportunity for families celebrating a simcha to help cover the cost to these sweet treats.

Flower Arrangements on the Bimah

Park Avenue Synagogue has fresh flower arrangements on the bimah for Shabbat services. Families celebrating a simcha may sponsor these flowers to help cover the cost.

Monday or Thursday Morning Minyan Breakfast

There is typically no food served after Monday and Thursday minyan. If a Bnei Mitzvah family wishes to sponsor breakfast, Park Avenue Synagogue provides bagels and cream cheese (Minyan Breakfast) or bagels, cream cheese, and lox (Embellished Minyan Breakfast).

Music Sponsorship

Park Avenue Synagogue provides a musical experience at Shabbat services. The music sponsorship offers the opportunity for families celebrating a simcha to help underwrite these musical enhancements.

Minha services will have piano accompaniment. For the full ensemble, music must be sponsored.

Note: Each sponsorship fee underwrites only a portion of the cost, so we do not split sponsorships among families sharing their simcha date. Each family pays the full sponsorship fee listed.

For Sponsorship Opportunity prices, please visit our [Bnei Mitzvah page \(https://pasyn.org/program/bnei-mitzvah\)](https://pasyn.org/program/bnei-mitzvah), click on Contacts for Bnei Mitzvah Program Manager, and then on the sponsorship form or go directly to the [Bnei Mitzvah Sponsorship Form \(https://www.tfaforms.com/4744168\)](https://www.tfaforms.com/4744168).

TIMELINE

2 years before	Bnei Mitzvah Family Meeting
1 year before	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trope study begins in Congregational School • myParashah Shabbat (leading <i>Aleinu</i> with a cantor and other students who share Torah portion) • One-on-one Bnei Mitzvah tutoring begins • Bnei Mitzvah fee paid in full
5 months before	Logistics meeting: parents only with Bnei Mitzvah Coordinator
3–4 months before	Meetings with rabbis begin for dvar Torah prep
2 months before	Meetings with cantors begin for bimah rehearsals
Week of ceremony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning minyan either Monday or Thursday (7:15 am or 9:00 am if it is a bank holiday) • Dress rehearsal • Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat service: candle lighting and Kiddush
Shabbat of ceremony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat service: candle lighting and Kiddush • Bnei Mitzvah ceremony: morning at 9:45 am or afternoon (Minha) at 4:45 pm or 5:00 pm
Week after ceremony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing Congregational School through end of 7th grade • Register for Rabbi Judah Nadich High School

Contact Information

Synagogue office: 212-369-2600

Bnei Mitzvah Program Manager

Rhonda Sexer-Levy: x196, rsexer-levy@pasyn.org

Clergy

Rabbi Cosgrove: x120

Rabbi Zuckerman: x124, nzuckerman@pasyn.org

Rabbi Shayna Zauzmer: x123 sgolkow@pasyn.org

Cantor Schwartz: x125, aschwartz@pasyn.org

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Cantors' Executive Assistant, Lindsay Ramsammy: x115, lramsammy@pasyn.org

Ritual Coordinator, Allen Paisner: x102, apaisner@pasyn.org

Congregational School & Youth Programming

Director of Congregational Education, Rabbi Bradley Solmson: x136, bsolmson@pasyn.org

Director of Congregational School, Melissa Silverman Cohavi: x132, mscohavi@pasyn.org

Administration

Executive Director, Valerie Russo: x106, vrusso@pasyn.org

Events Manager, Jayde Grossman: x141, jgrossman@pasyn.org

Bnei Mitzvah Terminology¹

Aliyah (plural, *aliyot*): literally, “going up.” The ascent to the bimah to be honored with a reading from the Torah scroll and to say the blessings over the Torah scroll.

Amidah: literally, the “standing” prayer. The *amidah* constitutes the main body of Jewish liturgy. It is also known as *ha-tefillah* or the *shemoneh esrei*. The weekday *amidah* includes 19 blessings, while the Shabbat *amidah* includes nine blessings.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony: a religious service during which a child celebrates attaining the age of commandments (*mitzvot*)

Bikur holim: visiting the sick

Bimah: refers either to the raised pulpit or to the desk from which prayers are led

Birkat ha-mazon: the Hebrew blessings that are recited after the meal

Brakhah (plural, *brakhot*): blessing

Hesed: loving kindness

Humash: (from *hamesh*, five): the Torah or Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses), or a book containing the text of the Torah

Dvar Torah: literally, “a word or item of Torah.” Characterizes a short comment or interpretation of any text or religious topic.

Gelilah: rolling and tying of the Torah scroll

Haftarah: literally, “completion.” A selection from the Prophets for a particular Shabbat or holiday that complements a theme or topic in the Torah reading.

Hagbah: lifting the Torah

Halakhah: literally, “the going” or “the way.” Traditional Jewish law.

Havdalah: literally, “separation, distinction.” The ceremony that ends Shabbat.

Kavannah: sacred intention, concentration, the goal of Jewish prayer and worship.

Ketuvim: the third section of the Hebrew bible (*TaNakh*). Includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and the five *megillot*, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

Kiddush: literally, “sanctification of the day over a cup of wine.” It also refers to the reception held following a service, at which time *kiddush* is recited.

Ma’ariv: the evening prayer service

Maftir: the last *aliyah* on a Shabbat or holiday morning. The person honored with the *maftir aliyah* also chants the *haftarah*.

¹ Adapted from Salkin, Jeffrey K., *Putting God on the Guest List*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996).

Midrash: literally, “the searching out.” A post-biblical, rabbinic interpretation of a biblical verse.

Minha: the afternoon prayer service

Mishnah: the classic post-biblical code of Jewish law, compiled in Israel circa 200 CE by Rabbi Judah Ha-nasi

Mitzvah (plural, *mitzvot*): literally, “commandment.” An obligation of Jewish life. The word has also come to mean “a good deed.”

Musaf: the “additional” prayer service on Shabbat and holiday mornings. Recalls the ancient sacrificial rites of the Temple and repeats some themes covered earlier in the liturgy.

Parashah: the Torah portion of the week. Also sometimes referred to as the *sidra*.

Pirkei Avot: literally, “the chapters of the fathers.” The ethical maxims of the Mishnah, quoted in the names of the early Rabbis.

Shaharit: the morning prayer service

Talmud: literally, “learning.” Commentaries and discussions of the Mishnah, compiled circa 450–500 CE.

TaNakh: acronym for *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the later writings) that compose the Hebrew Bible

Tefillin: black leather boxes containing excerpts from the Torah, attached with straps to the arm and head. *Tefillin* are worn at weekday morning services.

Tikkun: a book to aid the reader in preparing to read from the Torah. Each page has parallel columns with the punctuated Torah text next to the unpunctuated text as it appears in the Torah scroll.

Tikkun Olam: repairing the world

Torah: literally, “teaching” or “direction.” Narrowly, the first section of the Hebrew Bible, the Five Books of Moses that is read from a scroll. Broadly, all Jewish sacred literature.

Trope (cantillation, *ta'amei ha-mikra*): symbols that represent a configuration of notes that indicate how each word in the Torah or haftarah is to be chanted

Tzedakah: the mitzvah of sacred giving