

B'NEI MITZVAH

PARENT HANDBOOK

2026-2027



Congregation  
**Emanu El**



# **B'NEI MITZVAH PARENT HANDBOOK**

At Congregation Emanu El, our goal is to build B'nei Mitzvah experiences that serve as an important milestone in a journey of lifelong Jewish learning and growth for your child and your whole family. We believe that both your child's B'nei Mitzvah service, as well as the months spent preparing for it, will deepen your family's connection to Jewish prayer, Jewish living, and our Jewish community.

Specifically, our intended outcomes of the B'nei Mitzvah experience are:

- Student and family feel more connected to the Emanu El congregational community
  - Leading to a deepened engagement with the congregation
- Student and family find personal meaning in, and connection to, the ritual of B'nei Mitzvah
  - Leading to a continued investment in the development of their Jewish identities
- Student engages in meaningful acts of Jewish learning and teaching
  - Leading to the exciting discovery that Jewish learning can enrich their life
- Student feels pride at having accomplished something challenging (the B'nei Mitzvah should be, for each student, a task that was difficult but not impossible)
  - Leading to a sense of self confidence and pride in Judaism
- Student has a sense of familiarity and ownership with a core set of Jewish prayers
  - Leading to increased confidence in Jewish prayer settings

The terms *bar mitzvah* / *bat mitzvah* mean "son / daughter of the commandments." "*B'nei mitzvah*" is the plural form of these phrases, and "*b'not mitzvah*," the feminine plural, is used to refer to two (or more) girls. We encourage you to reach out to the clergy team if you wish to explore other terminology to better reflect your child's identity.

## **B'nei Mitzvah Program Eligibility**

To be eligible to celebrate becoming B'nei Mitzvah and lead services at Emanu El, students are required to:

- Be enrolled in Helfman Religious School and regularly attend 7th grade classes (or the grade level they are in during their B'nei Mitzvah year).
- Regularly attend Tuesday/Thursday (5:00-6:30 p.m.) B'nei Mitzvah preparation classes for approximately six months (48 sessions) prior to their ceremony.
- Have completed a minimum of 3 years of Hebrew classes. Students in public or private school must enroll in Hebrew classes at Helfman Religious School beginning in 4th grade. Students who attend a Jewish Day School must attend Helfman Religious School in the 6th grade.
- The family must be current in their financial commitments, including dues and all fees. The b'nei mitzvah fee (added to the student's account in fifth grade) must be paid prior to the initial meeting with clergy. See the end of this handbook for a list of all fees as per our Temple by-laws.

We strongly encourage all students to continue their Jewish studies at Helfman Religious School through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **B'nei Mitzvah Classes & Study Goals**

Please make sure your children come to class on time with all their B'nei Mitzvah materials. If you have any questions about the B'nei Mitzvah program at Emanu El, please contact the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator at 713.529.5771 ext.259. Your child's first visit is at the start of the 48 sessions. A parent should attend this meeting with your child.

Pre-Meeting — Clergy (30+ weeks) prior to B'nei Mitzvah weekend (In-Person, with parents)

- Overview of B'nei Mitzvah Process
- Overview of Torah portion
- Receive book containing Torah and Haftarah portions and commentaries

Welcome Meeting (with parent(s)) — Helfman Religious School staff (24 weeks prior to B'nei Mitzvah weekend) (Online OR In-Person)

- Discussion about the home/school partnership
- Receive information about the B'nei Mitzvah program and logistics
- Parent(s) share any special requests or issues of which we should be aware

Intro Session (with parent(s)) — Clergy (24 weeks prior to B'nei Mitzvah weekend) (Online OR In-Person)

- Discuss themes of Torah portion

Intro Sessions, Midpoint Check-In and Final Preparations Clergy (23–20, 13, and 6–1 weeks) (Online AND In-Person)

- Receive Torah portion assignment and practice materials
- Three initial Torah learning sessions
- Midpoint check-in and receive Haftarah portion assignment and practice materials
- Review chanting of all prayers and Torah and Haftarah portions
- Choose musical setting options for some prayers in the service

Teachers — Torah, Haftarah and Prayer (24-12 weeks) (Online AND In-Person)

- Learn all Hebrew Prayers
- Learn Torah/Haftarah blessings
- Learn Torah and Haftarah portions
- Practice English readings
- Note choreography of service

Progress Checks — Helfman Religious School staff (20, 16, 12, 8, 4 weeks) (Online AND In-Person)

Check progress of Torah and Haftarah portions, blessings, and general Hebrew

- 24 Weeks: Welcome to the program. Receive practice manual and other materials
- 20 Weeks: Check delivery of Torah portion. Discuss Mitzvah/Tzedakah Project ideas in preparation to start working on the D'var Torah
- 16 Weeks: Progress check
- 12 Weeks: Progress check
- 8 Weeks: Progress check
- 4 Weeks: Progress check

D'var Torah — Clergy (15–7 weeks) (Online AND In-Person)

- (In-Person, with parent(s)) Learn about the D'var Torah writing process
- Develop outline
- Write and compile elements of speech
- Email speech edits on time

D'var Torah rehearsals — Helfman Religious School Staff (6–1 weeks) (Online AND In-Person)

- Presentation of D'var Torah; possible changes
- Delivery of English portions of service (Friday and Saturday)

Clergy Meeting (4 weeks) (In-Person)

- Read from Torah; practice blessings, etc.

Sanctuary Rehearsal — Clergy (2-1 weeks) (In-Person)

- Practice choreography of the entire service

## **Practicing at Home**

The most important step in preparation is practicing. In addition to class time, students are expected to practice at home regularly. Students should plan to practice at home 5 days per week for approximately 10-15 minutes per session. Students should practice out loud, preferably with someone listening (even if parents don't know Hebrew). Using a pointer (a pen or pencil works fine!) helps significantly with learning and retention.

Listening to the prayers and other materials is a valuable and necessary learning tool for our students. Audio files are available as QR codes throughout your child's materials and can be accessed with a smartphone. In addition, all prayers are accessible on the Emanu El website at [www.emanuelhouston.org/BneiMitzvah](http://www.emanuelhouston.org/BneiMitzvah) and can also be downloaded to your computer or smartphone.

## **Attendance**

If your child is going to miss class for any reason, please contact the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator as soon as possible. Our expectation is that students attend 90% of scheduled classes (54 classes total). If a student misses more than 90% of scheduled classes, it may be necessary to receive supplemental tutoring. If a child requires private tutoring assistance, we will provide a list of approved tutors who are a part of our faculty. Parents will be responsible for all financial costs. Private tutoring must be approved by our B'nei Mitzvah team and is only meant to be a supplement to students when needed, not a substitute for our program.

Students are required to attend all classes, both in-person and virtually, in the four weeks prior to their b'nei mitzvah. The last four weeks contain important sessions with our clergy and specialists as well as giving the students time in the Barish Sanctuary. These final classes ensure that the students are fully prepared and comfortable in the space in which they will be leading services.

## **Summer Planning**

In December, you will receive a letter from the religious school office asking for information about your summer plans, especially camp, vacations and other times when your child may miss several sessions. Providing this information in advance enables us to enter your child into the program at the correct date.

## **Mitzvah Projects**

Acts of loving-kindness and deeds of compassion are at the very heart of Judaism. Becoming B'nei Mitzvah is part of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Performing mitzvot, fulfilling God's commandments, is also our responsibility as part of the covenant. In Judaism, mitzvot are believed to bring about Tikkun Olam (repairing the world).

Our tradition teaches that each of us can make a difference in our congregation, our community, and our world. Congregation Emanu El, since its founding, has been committed to responding to mitzvah opportunities. In order to fulfill this Jewish responsibility, each B'nei Mitzvah child is expected to undertake a mitzvah project of their own design. The project should have some significant impact and should be completed before the student finishes writing the D'var Torah, about ten weeks before the B'nei Mitzvah service.

## **Tzedakah**

We suggest that our students, upon becoming B'nei Mitzvah, observe the tradition of contributing a tithe (10%) of the monetary gifts they receive to Tzedakah. Students and their families may choose a cause or organization that is meaningful to them

## **Service Information**

### Service Times and Locations

Shabbat evening services will generally be in the Proler Chapel, as part of the congregation's main worship service. Shabbat morning services will usually be in the Barish Sanctuary. Your invitation should reflect that the Shabbat evening service begins at 6:00 p.m. and the Shabbat Morning Service begins at 10:30 a.m.

### Attending Services

The ceremony that celebrates becoming B'nei Mitzvah is an integral part of the worship services of our congregation. We strongly urge you to attend Shabbat services regularly with your child, either in person or via livestream, so you will become more familiar with the service and our ritual practices.

### Invitations

One of the benefits of our temple-based B'nei Mitzvah preparation process is that it helps create a strong and vibrant community among our students. We encourage you to include in your celebration all the B'nei Mitzvah teachers and the students in your child's cohort. Any invitations and/or programs are the responsibility of the family; Emanu El does not create invitations or programs.

### Dress at B'nei Mitzvah

B'nei Mitzvah and families are requested to dress in a manner which reflects the special religious nature of this ceremony. Ties and jackets, modest dresses/skirts or pantsuits are examples of appropriate attire for the bimah.

### Parent Rehearsal

You will receive an email with information and links to forms five weeks prior to the ceremony notifying you of the time and date of the parent rehearsal. The parent rehearsal is usually held the week of the B'nei Mitzvah service on Tuesday at 3:30 p.m. We realize this means your child may need to leave school early on the day of the rehearsal. This rehearsal is critical for parents as well as students. Please submit the completed forms online by the time of the parent rehearsal. This rehearsal takes place with a member of the clergy team in the Barish Sanctuary.

### Parent Participation

On the weekend of their child's B'nei Mitzvah, parents are invited to light candles during Shabbat evening services, pass the Torah to their children at the Saturday service, and offer a blessing to their child. In interfaith/Jewish+ families, non-Jewish members are invited to participate in the ceremony in all ways they feel comfortable. Our entire clergy team is available to help answer your questions and discuss any concerns you may have

### Parent Blessings

Before your child reads from the Torah scroll, you will have the opportunity to offer a special blessing to your child at this very important time in their life. Please see the “Suggestions for Writing a Parent Blessing” supplemental handout for more information.

### Passing of the Torah

Parents, grandparents, and great grandparents may participate in the passing of the Torah during the B’nei Mitzvah service.

### Ushering

Emanu El encourages each family to provide two ushers for Saturday morning before services. The ushers will greet congregants and guests. Ushers need to be at the entry doors at 10:15 a.m. Saturday morning.

### Aliyot

An aliyah is the honor of being called to the Torah. Each student is given an aliyah by being called up to read from the Torah during the Saturday morning Shabbat service. Each family will have two additional aliyot. An aliyah consists of being called up to the bima by the Cantor, chanting the Hebrew blessing before the Torah, staying on the bima while the Torah is read, then chanting the blessing after the reading of the Torah.

This can be a single person or a group of up to 8 people, but they must be at least 13 years old and comfortable chanting the Torah blessings in Hebrew.

### Other Opportunities for Family Participation

Family members may be invited to open/close the ark, and to participate in the Kiddush and Motzi blessings. Please see the “B’nei Mitzvah Family Involvement” online form for further information.

### Kippah and Tallit

Each student becoming a B’nei Mitzvah has the option of wearing a kippah Friday and Saturday and/or a tallit on Saturday. Students who choose to wear a tallit will put it on and recite the appropriate blessing in the robing room prior to the service. We teach the blessing to the B’nei Mitzvah students as part of their preparation.

### Clergy Requests

If you have any special requests regarding clergy participation or have any other special needs of which we should be aware, please discuss these issues at the Welcome Meeting. We will do our best to honor requests but cannot guarantee their fulfillment.

### Temple Arrangements

Arrangements for activities at the synagogue building, including scheduling photographers, room set-up, etc., should be made with the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator. Please speak to the Coordinator about catering arrangements.

### Livestreaming

Congregation Emanu El will livestream the Shabbat services of your B'nei Mitzvah weekend. For those who cannot attend your simcha, the livestream can be accessed on the front page of Emanu El's website, [www.emanuelhouston.org](http://www.emanuelhouston.org) and on the Emanu El Facebook page. Your child's B'nei Mitzvah will be recorded and available for playback on our website for a few months. The B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator will have the download of the livestream available the week following the b'nei mitzvah.

### Videography

A videographer of your choice may videotape the service from Feld Hall. The folding wall doors will be slightly opened. Only existing lighting may be used. Your videographer can connect with our sound system by speaking to our sound engineer. Since we have room for only one platform, we encourage partner families to share a videographer. Please notify the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator if you wish to do this.

### Photography

In order to preserve the sanctity of the ceremony, please pass these rules along to your photographer: Pictures may be taken during the ceremony without flash from the opening in the back wall of the Barish Sanctuary. Please call the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator to arrange for photography in the Barish Sanctuary on Friday afternoon or early Saturday morning before the service. Photography must be completed before 10:00 a.m. on Saturday morning.

### Flower Fund

The Sisterhood Flower Fund provides beautiful pulpit flowers for each worship service. Sisterhood requests a minimum donation of \$75.00 per family, to be collected no later than ten days before your simcha. We invite you to designate your contribution in honor of or in memory of loved ones. These designations should be submitted with complete details in writing, using the online form.

### Security

The Congregation provides two uniformed guards on Friday evening. The additional uniformed guard required for the Saturday morning B'nei Mitzvah service is subsidized by a fee. Fees are listed at the end of this handbook and will appear on your temple statement.

## **B'nei Mitzvah Fees**

All dues and fees must be paid in order to receive your B'nei Mitzvah date and must remain current through the time of the B'nei Mitzvah service. If you are not able to meet your financial obligation, please call the Accounting Manager, 713.529.5771 ext.223.

B'nei Mitzvah Fee                      \$1900

This education fee is to be paid in full prior to your first scheduled meeting with the Rabbi. The meeting will take place no less than 7 months prior to your child's B'nei Mitzvah date. Fees will be reviewed annually to reflect the actual cost associated with the program as closely as possible.

Security Personnel                      \$80/hour

For the safety of our families, we require a security officer at every worship service. We ask that B'nei Mitzvah parents contribute \$80 per hour per family to assist in helping us provide this very necessary element.

Wine and Challah                      \$60/family

We will provide wine & challah on Friday evening and Saturday morning worship services. The fee for wine & challah will be added to your statement.

## Building Use Fees

To use a room at Emanu El, you are required to pay a \$500 security deposit and sign our rental agreement. Please see the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator for further information.

### Kiddush Luncheon

Multi-Purpose Room (full capacity 120)	\$500
Feld Hall (full capacity 400)	\$750
Board Room (full capacity 50)	\$400

### Shabbat Dinners

Multi-Purpose Room	\$500
Board Room	\$400

Outside catering fee is \$250 when families choose to use a caterer other than our preferred caterer.

Families are asked to notify the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator regarding their intentions for hosting a luncheon, oneg, or dinner at temple associated with their simcha at least six months in advance. In addition to the \$500 security deposit, a deposit of 50% of the building use fee is due at the time the room is reserved. Final payment of all fees is due no later than four weeks before your simcha. Labor fees are based on the number of hours and individuals utilized specifically for your event. Optional beverage service is \$75, and includes water, coffee (decaf or regular), iced tea and lemonade.

## Notes

## Notes

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