B’NEI MITZVAH AT TEMPLE EMANU-EL

Welcome to the b’nei mitzvah journey at Temple Emanu-El! This is an important and joyful milestone for your family and for our community. We hope this handbook will help you understand the process, know what to expect, and prepare for a meaningful and memorable experience.

JOURNEY TOWARD B’NEI MITZVAH

Religious School

As soon as students gather as a community to explore the values, traditions, language, and stories of our people, they begin acquiring the skills and developing their identity to prepare them for b’nei mitzvah and Jewish adulthood. This is why, to become b’nei mitzvah at Temple Emanu-El, families must be members in good standing, and students must be enrolled in and attending Religious School or our Emanu-One program from the time they reserve a date through the end of the year of their ceremony.

In keeping with the egalitarian values of the Reform movement, we celebrate b’nei mitzvah when students turn 13, regardless of gender. Students are welcome to join our Religious School at any age, but they need two years of Jewish learning before their ceremony. Students who join us later, without previous formal Jewish or Hebrew education, may celebrate becoming b’nei mitzvah at age 14 or later and may need supplementary learning.

Students learn Hebrew letters, vowels, and basic decoding through Religious School’s one-on-one virtual Hebrew Home Page program. These skills are necessary before beginning work with a b’nei mitzvah tutor approximately one year before the ceremony. With their b’nei mitzvah tutor, students learn to chant prayers, their Torah portion, and, when applicable, their Haftarah portion.

Reserving a Date

Families may contact the B’nei Mitzvah Coordinator to begin arranging a date when their child is enrolled in Religious School and is in third grade or older. To reserve a date, the family must be a member in good standing and the student must be enrolled in and attending Religious School or Emanu-One.

After a tentative date has been selected, the B’nei Mitzvah Coordinator will send the family a contract. The contract must be signed and the deposit paid within 30 days to reserve the date. If the deposit is not received within that time, the date will be released.

Students must remain continuously enrolled in Religious School or Emanu-One from the time the date is reserved through the end of the year of their ceremony.

Choosing a Date and Time

Ideally, students will have turned 13 by the time they celebrate becoming b'nei mitzvah, but we offer flexibility if an optimal date falls shortly beforehand.

We offer three times for b'nei mitzvah ceremonies on Saturdays from September through mid-June: 10:30 am, 12:30 pm, and 5:00 pm. While the overall experience at these services is very similar, there are a few differences between them. B'nei mitzvah ceremonies are held individually; students do not share ceremonies unless specifically requested.

Setting

The 10:30 am service is a public, congregational service in the Main Sanctuary and runs about 90 minutes. The 12:30 pm and 5:00 pm services are private services for the family's invited guests and run about 60 minutes. Families may choose to hold these services in either the Main Sanctuary or the Beth El Chapel, which offers an equally beautiful, more intimate setting. The Beth El Chapel seats 250, compared with 2,400 in the Main Sanctuary.

Ritual

All b'nei mitzvah students lead prayers in Hebrew and English, chant from the Torah, and write a d'var Torah (a short sermon on their Torah portion). The prayers included in the service vary by time of day, in keeping with Jewish liturgical tradition.

Students at the 10:30 am service also chant from the Haftarah (the books of the Prophets). From late fall through early spring, the 5:00 pm service ends with a brief Havdalah ceremony, marking the close of Shabbat.

Torah Portion

A student's Torah portion is determined by the date and time of the b'nei mitzvah. The cantor assigns the verses the student will chant. Please note that the Torah portion is different for a morning service and an afternoon service (12:30 pm or 5:00 pm) on the same day because, according to Jewish tradition, we transition to the following week's portion on Shabbat afternoon. If a family changes either the date or time of the ceremony, the student would likely have a different Torah portion.

Music

The music at the 10:30 am service features organ and choir, which are included in the b'nei mitzvah fee. At the 12:30 pm and 5:00 pm services, there is a required music fee, and families can choose from a range of musical options, including a vocal quartet/octet, piano, violin, percussion, bass, guitar, and clarinet.

Livestreaming and Recordings

All 10:30 am services are livestreamed on the Temple website, Facebook, and YouTube. We also offer livestreaming of 12:30 pm and 5:00 pm services. Recordings of all b'nei mitzvah services are available to families.

PREPARING FOR B'NEI MITZVAH

Cantor Meetings

About a year before the ceremony, students meet with the cantor, who assesses their Hebrew skills and familiarity with the prayers, establishes expectations, and assigns the verses they will chant from their Torah portion and, when relevant, their Haftarah portion. In addition to weekly tutoring sessions with a b'nei mitzvah tutor, students have monthly check-ins with their officiating cantor.

Tutoring

Following the introductory cantor meeting, the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator works with parents to schedule a weekly 30-minute session with one of our tutors. Sessions take place at the synagogue and, in rare circumstances when necessary, over Zoom. While we strongly prefer that students work with our tutors, some situations may require a private tutor. In those cases, families should select a tutor from the list of vetted tutors available from the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator.

Rabbi Meetings

Approximately three months before the ceremony, the student and their parent(s) meet with the officiating rabbi. The rabbi walks the family through the service, discusses synagogue honors, introduces the d'var Torah (short sermon) writing process, and answers questions. The rabbi then meets twice with the student to guide them in writing their d'var Torah.

Rehearsals

In the month leading up to the ceremony, the student has two rehearsals with the cantor and two with the rabbi in the Sanctuary or Chapel.

Mitzvah Projects

Students work with mentors from Tzedek America to choose or create a mitzvah project, then prepare for a group program where they and their peers share their experiences with parents and the synagogue community.

SHABBAT OF B'NEI MITZVAH

Friday Night Shabbat Service

The b'nei mitzvah celebration begins at Friday night services. Families are invited to the bimah for the honor of lighting the Shabbat candles, and students receive gifts from the congregation. Families should arrive by 5:45 pm and the service begins at 6:00 pm.

Saturday Shabbat Service

Families should arrive at the synagogue 30 minutes before the service begins, unless they have scheduled a photography session.

The doors open 30 minutes before the service. Invitations should direct guests to enter through the Fifth Avenue and 65th Street entrance. Guests arriving more than 30 minutes early should enter the building at 1 East 65th Street.

Attire should be respectful of the sanctity of the space and the significance of the occasion.

Photography

Families who wish to take photographs inside the Sanctuary or Chapel should notify the Events Manager in advance.

- 10:30 am service: Photos may be taken from 9:30–10:00 am, before the doors open to the public.
- 12:30 pm service: Photos may be taken from 1:30–2:00 pm, after the service.
- 5:00 pm service: Photos may be taken from 4:15–4:45 pm, before the service.

During a Sanctuary service, photographers must remain on the balcony.

Room Rental

Families may explore renting space in the synagogue building for an oneg or other celebration, including a dinner or luncheon.

QUESTIONS?

We hope this handbook helps you and your family know what to expect as you prepare for this meaningful milestone. If you have questions along the way, please don't hesitate to reach out to the B'nei Mitzvah Coordinator or a member of the clergy.