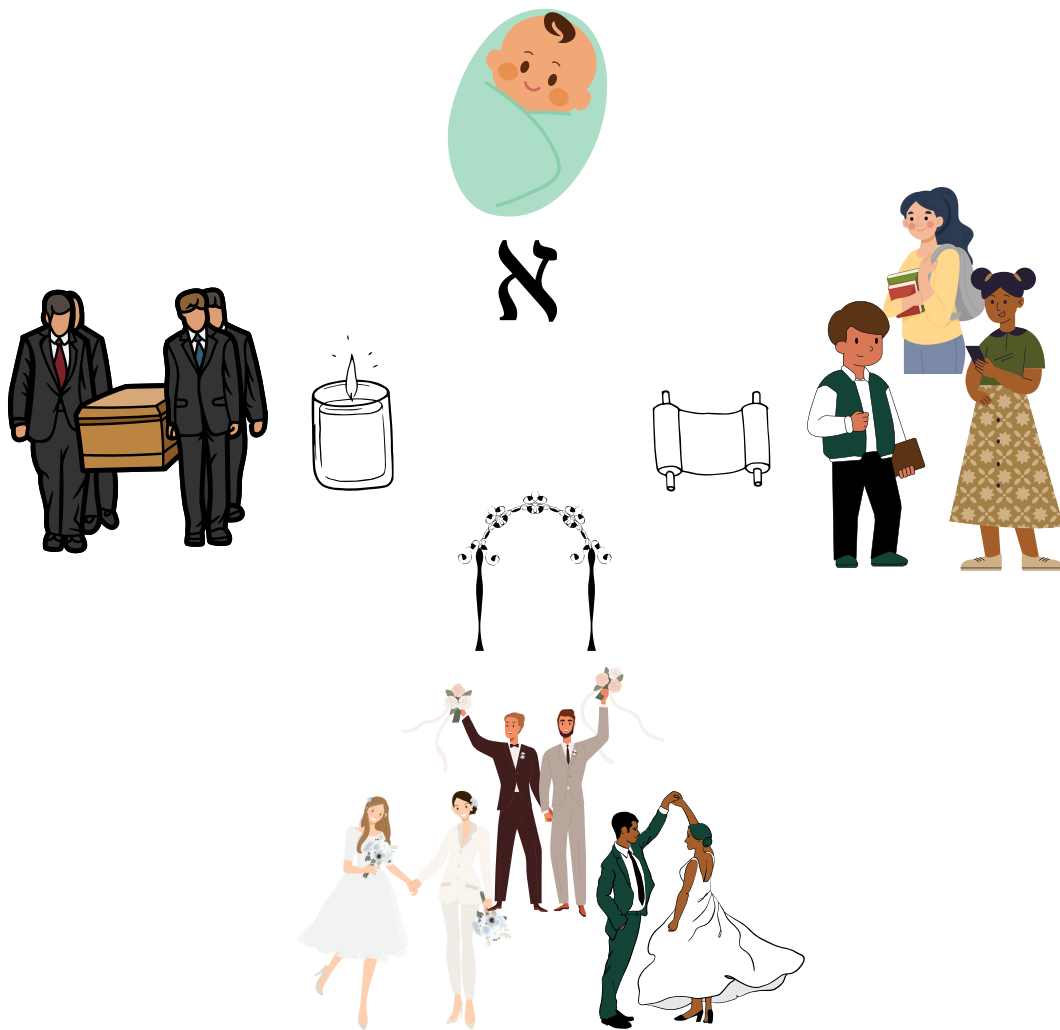


JEWISH LIFE CYCLES



*A collection of texts, rituals and activities for
learning about Jewish Life Cycles.*

Introduction for Educators

How to Use This Resource

This packet focuses on four major life cycle events: Welcoming Children, B'nai Mitzvah, Weddings, and Death & Mourning. Jewish tradition has many rituals and customs to honor these moments.



For each life cycle event, you will find ancient and modern Jewish texts; prayers, rituals and customs; outlines of the main elements of the ceremonies used to mark these moment; along with suggested activities for your students.



It is not uncommon for Reconstructionist Jews to create their own rituals to mark other major moments in their lives. There is a bonus section of Life Transitions with ideas for marking other life events.



Looking for more resources to teach about Jewish Life Cycles?

Ritualwell.org

An extensive online database that collects original Jewish rituals. Check out Ritualwell to find rituals, ceremonies, prayers, poems and thoughtful writing about life cycles, Jewish holidays and customs, Shabbat, healing, and more.

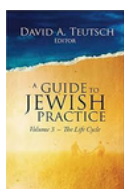


Siddur Kol Haneshamah

The Reconstructionist Siddur has collections of poetry and prayers for various holidays and life cycle moments.

Sefaria.org

This online database of classical Jewish texts can help you find primary sources (biblical, rabbinic, medieval and modern) on a variety of Jewish topics. The search function also locates ready-made source sheets with relevant sources.



Guide to Jewish Practice (edited by Rabbi David Teutsch)

This three volume series contains a wealth of information about all aspects of Jewish life. Volume 3 takes a detailed look at each stage of life and the Jewish customs and rituals associated with these moments.

Welcoming Children

Welcoming children is a common experience shared in all cultures, and there are many and varied ways in which cultural traditions create rituals to lend structure, order and meaning to this central moment and to the feelings it evokes. Religious traditions play a significant and often determinative role in how the arrival of a new life is understood within the community where the child's identity will be shaped and shared.

(Guide to Jewish Practice, Vol 3, p.13)

Hebrew Names

A person's Hebrew name is used for rituals: being called to the Torah, signing a legal document such as ketubah (wedding contract), in prayers for healing, and on gravestones. Traditionally, a Hebrew name includes the person's name and their parents' names. When one parent is not Jewish, some people will choose to use the English name of the non-Jewish parent in the formula, while others will choose to only use the Jewish parent's name. People who convert to Judaism usually name Abraham and Sarah as their parents, connecting them to millenia of Jewish history

“son of” (Hebrew Name) ben (parent 1) v'(parent 2)

“daughter of” (Hebrew Name) bat (parent 1) v'(parent 2)

“from the house of” (Hebrew Name) mibeit (parent 1) v'(parent 2)

“from the family of” (Hebrew Name) mimishpacha (parent 1) v'(parent 2)

for Jews by Choice (Hebrew Name) ben/bat/mibeit Avraham v'Sarah

The matter of names is rarely included in a discussion of Judaism [...] we cannot overlook the importance of names as a means of fostering Jewish consciousness [...] The name that a person bears carries with it cultural implications and associations and identifies [them] with a particular civilization.

(Judaism as a Civilization, p.453)

Symbols and Rituals

Judaism has many rituals and customs for welcoming new children. Some of these traditions are ancient (such as circumcision) and some are modern.

Chair of Elijah

An empty chair that reminds of us Elijah the Prophet, and can encourage us to be part of redeeming the world.



Festive Meal

It can't be a Jewish celebration unless there's food! Joyous occasions are a time to share a meal together.

Hebrew Name

The baby is often given a Hebrew (or Yiddish or Ladino) name to mark their entrance into the Jewish People.



Photographs or memories

A family may choose to have photographs of deceased family members, bringing their memories into the present celebration.

Tallit or Wimpel

Families often wrap the child in a tallit as a symbol of them being embraced by Jewish tradition. There is a German Jewish custom to embroider the baby's swaddle with their name and blessings to be used as a Torah tie at their b'nai mitzvah.



Wine or Grape Juice

Jewish celebrations include wine or juice as a symbol of joy. During a welcoming ceremony, the leader will bless a cup of wine.

Texts on Welcoming Children

Genesis 21:1-8

וַיְהִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר׃ וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזָקְנָיו לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים׃ וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שֵׁם־בְּנוֹ הַנּוֹלֵד־לוֹ אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָהּ־לוֹ שָׂרָה יִצְחָק׃ וַיִּמַּל אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בֶן־שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱלֹהִים׃ וְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן־מֵאָה שָׁנָה בְּהוֹלֵד לוֹ אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ׃ וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחֵק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כְּלִי־הַשְׂמֵעַ יִצְחָק־לִי׃ וַתֹּאמֶר מִי מָלַל לְאַבְרָהָם הַיְנִיקָה בְּנִים שָׂרָה כִּי־יָלְדָתִי בֶן לְזָקְנָיו׃ וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתָּה גָדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַגְּמִל אֶת־יִצְחָק׃

God took note of Sarah as promised, and God did for Sarah what had been announced. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac. And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him.

Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham, that Sarah would nurse children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age." The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

Genesis 25:19-26

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק׃ וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּקַחְתּוֹ אֶת־רֵבְקָה בַת־בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדוֹן אָרָם אַחֹת לָבֶן הָאֲרָמִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה׃ וַיַּעֲתֶר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לִנְכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הוּא וַיַּעֲתֶר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתַּהַר רֵבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ׃ וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה׃ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָּהּ שְׁנֵי (גִּיּוֹם) [גִּיּוֹם] בְּבֶטְנָהּ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֹאִם מִלֵּאִם יִאֻמָּץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר׃ וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ לֵלְדֹת וְהָיָה תוֹמָם בְּבֶטְנָהּ׃ וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲדָמוֹנִי בְּלוֹ בְּאֶדְרֵת שַׁעַר וַיִּקְרָאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו׃ וְאַחֲרָיָו יָצָא אַחִיו וַיְדוּ אַחֲזָת בַּעֲקֵב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּצְחָק בֶּן־שָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֵדֹת אֹתָם׃

This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

Isaac pleaded with God on behalf of his wife, because she had no children; and God responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of God, and God answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

From the Midrash

“And a fetus is taught the entire Torah while in utero,” (Niddah 30b). An angel teaches the child the entire Torah before they are born. The Holy Blessed One takes the soul of the child on a tour around the world, showing them when they will be born and when they will die. God shows the child the righteous and wicked of the world. When it is time for the child to be born, they resist, they do not want to leave the comfortable home inside their parent. The angel pushes them out and when the baby is born they forget everything they learned. As they grow, they must relearn it.

(Adapted from Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 3:9-11)

Jacob's 13 Children

Genesis tells the Torah about the birth of Jacob's 13 children. Most of the children are named by their mother (except Benjamin). Dinah and Benjamin's names are the only ones not explained.

Leah conceived and bore a son, and named him Reuben; for she declared, “It means: God has seen my affliction”; it also means: ‘Now my husband will love me.’”

She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This is because God heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also”; so she named him Simeon.

Again she conceived and bore a son and declared, “This time my husband will become attached to me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi.

She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This time I will praise God.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.
(Gen 29:32-35)

Bilhah (Rachel's maid) conceived and bore Jacob a son. And Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; God has heard my plea and given me a son.” Therefore she named him Dan.

Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. And Rachel said, “A fateful contest I waged with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed.” So she named him Naphtali.

And when Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son, Leah said, "What luck!" So she named him Gad.

When Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, Leah declared, "What fortune!" meaning, "Women will deem me fortunate." So she named him Asher.
(Gen 30:1-5-13)

God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore him a fifth son. And Leah said, "God has given me my reward for having given my maid to my husband." So she named him Issachar.

When Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son, Leah said, "God has given me a choice gift; this time my husband will exalt me, for I have borne him six sons." So she named him Zebulun.

Last, she bore him a daughter, and named her Dinah.
(Gen 30:17-21)

Now God remembered Rachel; God heard her and allowed her to conceive. She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." So she named him Joseph, which is to say, "May God add another son for me."
(Gen 30:22-24)

They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, "Have no fear, for it is another boy for you." But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni ("son of my affliction"); but his father called him Benjamin ("son of my right hand"). Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem.
(Gen 35:16-19)

Torah Names

Some of the names in the Torah are given an explanation. Here are some examples:

Isaac	God has brought me laughter	צַחֲקַת עֲשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים	יִצְחָק
Reuben	God has seen my affliction	כִּי־רָאָה יְהוָה בְּעַנְיִי	רְאוּבֵן
Simeon	God has heard me	כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה	שִׁמְעוֹן
Levi	My husband will love me	עַתָּה הַפְּעַם יִלְוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלַי	לֵוִי
Judah	I will praise God	הַפְּעַם אוֹדֶה אֶת־יְהוָה	יְהוּדָה
Dan	God has vindicated me	דָּנַנִּי אֱלֹהִים	דָּן
Naftali	A fateful contest I waged	נִפְתָּלוּ אֱלֹהִים נִפְתַּלְתִּי עִם־אָחִתִּי	נַפְתָּלִי
Gad	What luck!	בְּאֵגֶד	גָּד
Asher	Women will deem me fortunate	בְּאִשְׁרֵי כִי אֲשֻׁרוּנִי בְּנוֹת	אֲשֵׁר
Issachar	God has given me my reward	נָתַן אֱלֹהִים שְׂכָרִי	יִשָּׁשָׁכָר
Zebulun	This time my husband will exalt me	הַפְּעַם יִזְבְּלֵנִי אִישִׁי	זְבֻלוֹן
Dinah			דִּינָה
Joseph	May God add another son for me	יֹסֵף יְהוָה לִי בֶן אַחֵר	יוֹסֵף
Benjamin			בְּנֵימִין
Moses	I drew him from the water	מִרְהַמַּיִם מָשִׁיתָהוּ	מֹשֶׁה

Hebrew Name Examples

Many Hebrew names come from the Torah. Many modern Hebrew names, especially in Israel, can have biblical or liturgical origins, or come from nature. See below for some examples. Invite students to look up the meaning and origins of their own names on the internet or in a name dictionary.

Common Biblical & Liturgical Names

Adam	<i>Human</i>
Ariel/a	<i>Lion of God</i>
Asher	<i>Happiness</i>
Avigail	<i>Joyful father</i>
Avraham	<i>Father of many</i>
Binyamin	<i>Son of my right hand</i>
Gavriel/a	<i>God is my strength</i>
Daniel/a	<i>God is my judge</i>
Dinah	<i>Vindicated</i>
Leah	<i>Delicate</i>
Michael/a	<i>Who is like God</i>
Moshe	<i>Drawn from the water</i>
Naftali	<i>My struggle</i>
Noam	<i>Pleasantness</i>
Rakhel	<i>Ewe</i>
Rivka	<i>Connection</i>
Sarah	<i>Princess</i>
Tamar	<i>Date palm</i>
Uri	<i>My light</i>
Yaakov	<i>He will supplant</i>
Yael	<i>Mountain goat</i>
Yizchak	<i>Laughter</i>
Yosef	<i>God will increase</i>

Common Nature Names

Adva	<i>Ripple</i>
Alon	<i>Oak</i>
Aviv/a	<i>Spring (season)</i>
Dov	<i>Bear</i>
Dror	<i>Sparrow</i>
Hadas	<i>Myrtle</i>
Ilan	<i>Tree</i>
Gal	<i>Wave</i>
Maayan	<i>Spring (water)</i>
Meital	<i>Dew-water</i>
Nitzan	<i>Flower bud</i>
Noga	<i>Venus</i>
Ofek	<i>Horizon</i>
Oren	<i>Pine</i>
Shachar	<i>Dawn</i>
Tal	<i>Dew</i>
Yuval	<i>Stream</i>
Zev	<i>Wolf</i>
Zvi	<i>Deer</i>

What happens at a Welcoming Ceremony?

Every welcoming ceremony looks a little different depending on the family, the age of the child and the community. Here is an outline of the basic steps that many ceremonies include:

The baby is carried into the room and everyone says:

ברוך הבא

Barukh Habah, Welcome Little One!

The family may choose to sing a song, read a poem or prayer, or share briefly about why they are welcoming their child into the Jewish tradition.

We bless a cup of wine or juice

If the baby is being circumcised the mohel/mohelet and parent(s) say:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על המילה

Blessed are you, Source of Life, who has instructed us regarding circumcision.

The baby may be wrapped in a tallit, symbolizing them being embraced by the tradition.

The baby's name is shared and the family explains the meaning of the name. If the baby is named for a relative, the family may share stories about the qualities of that person they hope the baby emulates. If the baby is not named for a relative, the family may explain the reason they chose this specific name and the hopes they have for their child.

More songs, prayers or poems may be recited.

Guests might share blessings or hopes for the new child.

A Mi Shabeirach (a special blessing) is said for the new child.

The leader may give the Priestly Blessing to the whole family or the family may say it to the child:

יברכך יי וישמרך

יאר יי פניו אליך ויחנך

ישה יי פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

May the Holy One bless you and keep you.

May the Holy One shine light upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Holy One turn towards you and give you peace.

Often the ceremony closes singing Siman tov u'mazel tov!

Contemporary Prayers

Many families choose to write their own prayers or use contemporary prayers to supplement the traditional ceremony. Here are just a few examples.

For Newborn life

We have been blessed with this precious gift of a child. We are filled with wonder and with gratitude as we call you our child. We hold you close to our hearts and cradle you with love. We welcome you into the circle of our family and community and embrace you with the beauty of a rich tradition.

We pledge ourselves to the creation of a Jewish home and to a life of compassion for others, hoping that you will grow to cherish and emulate these ideals. May our child grow in health, strong in mind, and kind in heart, a lover of Torah, a seeker of peace. God of new beginnings, teach us to be parents worthy of this sacred trust of life.

(Siddur Shaar Zahav)

Blessing the New Parents (Rabbi Alissa Wise)

May your nachas and satisfaction as parents be wholly nourishing.

May you be able to distinguish between your child and yourself; this sacred being who has come through you.

May you give your child the space and support to be who they are and may each of you continue to develop and grow further into yourselves.

May you prioritize time to be in relationship with each other and with friends and family as yourselves, not just as parents.

May your love and bond be strengthened, may you help each other to grow into this role, partnering in the task to be a whole parent.

May you remain open to who each of you will become as you grow and change. This new life you two have brought into this world, feeding you and leading you down new paths.

May this joy and sacred work bring you into deeper relationships with your community as you participate in the education of your child.

May the resources and wisdom you bring into your child's life be a source of blessing also for those whom their schooling and activities bring into your home and lives.

May you be blessed with creativity and flexibility.

May you be bold and courageous as you help lead your child into this most uncertain world.

May the source of blessing bless you in this amazing challenge.

Sibling Blessing (Rabbi Amanda Schwartz)

Hinei ma tov umanaim

Shevet akhim gam yakhad

Behold how good it is, for these siblings to dwell together.

May you watch over each other, just as Miriam watched over Moses from the reeds of the Nile.

May you work together with your unique talents, just as Moses and Aaron together fought the injustices of slavery.

May you take care of each other when you are sick, just as Moses prayed for Miriam when she was sick.

Our tradition teaches, "it is not good for people to be alone." May you never feel alone for you will always have each other.

Hinei ma tov umanaim

Shevet akhim gam yakhad

For the Adoption of a Child

Not flesh of our flesh
nor bone of our bone,
but miraculously, our own.

Never forget for a minute, you didn't grow under our hearts,
but you grew in our hearts!

You are your parents' dreams realized, their hope fulfilled.

You are brand new -- a symbol of today and tomorrow.

You are a bridge over which we who welcome you can gaze from this day into future days, from our generation into your generation.

You are the newest link in the endless chain of our history.

Bruchah ha'ba'ah be'ahavah

We bless and welcome you with love.

God, bless us all together within Your shelter of peace.

(Siddur Shaar Zahav)



Ritualwell has a vast collection of contemporary ceremonies to welcome new children. Check out ritualwell.org for more examples!

Activities

- All families look a little different and children join families in many ways. Ask students to think about all the way a child might join a family (birth, adoption, fostering, etc.) and what the many beautiful types of family structures and caretaker roles can look like (parents, grandparents, foster parents, older siblings caring for younger siblings). Invite students to imagine how various types of rituals might be helpful in welcoming new children to different kinds of families.
- Watch videos on Jewish naming and welcoming traditions from BIMBAM
 - “Brit Milah: Jewish Traditions for Welcoming a Baby Boy” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOfkpHV4TxM>)
 - “Brit Bat: Jewish Traditions for Welcoming a Baby Girl” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFD4zrkWRB8>)
 - “Traditions of a Jewish Baby Naming” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PC24lbhixfM>)
- Read stories about welcoming new children into a family.
 - A Song for My Sister (by Lesley Simpson)
 - Terrible, Terrible (by Robin Bernstein)
 - The First Gift (by A.S. Gadot)
 - Room for the Baby (by Michelle Edwards)
 - Rebecca’s Journey Home (by Brynn Olenberg Sugarman)
 - My Name is Aviva (by Lesléa Newman)
- Create a welcome ceremony for a new child, sibling, cousin, friend.
- Share family stories. Invite students to share stories of their own families; invite adults to share the stories of welcoming the children in their family; ask the rabbi to share traditions in your own community.
- Look at stories from the Torah about welcoming new children. Explore the meanings of the names in the Torah and why those characters have those names.
- Explore family structures in the Torah to highlight different types of families. For example, Abraham and Sarah are older when they welcome Isaac; Jacob has two (or four) wives; Joseph marries an Egyptian woman and they give their children Hebrew names; Moses has an adopted mother (Pharaoh’s daughter) who names him; Ruth remarries and her mother-in-law Naomi helps her raise her son.

Activities (cont.)

- Create or decorate an Elijah's chair. Think about the chair as a symbol of inclusion: how do we make our spaces accessible to Elijah and to others? Who else might we "invite" to the ceremony and what symbols could you include to represent those people? (For example, other characters from Jewish tradition, deceased family members, heroes or figures from history, etc.)
- Have students explore their names
 - Ask students to find out if they are named for someone and/or why their family chose their name and write a story about what their means to them.
 - If students have Hebrew names, give them the opportunity to learn the meaning and any significant Jewish stories about that name. (For example, a student named Devorah could read about the Devorah the Prophet in the Book of Judges.)
 - Use their Hebrew name to inspire reflection on who they are. For example, draw a bubble letter version of their names (English or Hebrew) and have them decorate the inside with personal values, skills, hobbies, etc.
 - Have students write their name vertically on the side of a page and then choose words that start with each letter that reflect who they are. For example, Noah could write N - nice, O - organized, A - ambitious, H - hockey player.
 - Create a piece of visual art or photography that uses their name as a theme or focal point.
 - Invite students to write a song about their name (personal or family name), or a name or identity that want to explore.
 - Learn about the German Jewish tradition of wimpel (a decorative Torah belt used to swaddle the baby and then tie the Torah at their b'nai mitzvah) and have students create their own.
- Hebrew Name Verses. There is a tradition to pair one's Hebrew name with a verse from the Tanakh that starts with the same first letter and ends with the same last letter. The verses usually contain uplifting messages or illustrate a value the person hopes to cultivate in their life. For example, for names that begin with Alef and end in Yod (Ari, Avi, Orli, Uri, etc.) a person might choose, Psalm 17:6 אָנִי־קֹרְאֶתֶיךָ כִּי־תַעֲנֵנִי אֵל הַטִּי־אָזְנוֹךָ לִי שָׁמַע אֶמְרָתִי: (I call on You; You will answer me, God; turn Your ear to me, hear what I say.) There are multiple lists online, including on sefaria.org

B'nai Mitzvah

History of B'nai Mitzvah Ceremonies

The Talmud (Nidah 45a) says the age of maturity for boys is 13. In the 15th century, Jewish communities developed a ritual to mark this transition. The practice of bat mitzvah ceremonies for girls began in the 20th century, with Judith Kaplan in 1922 at SAJ, a Reconstructionist synagogue in New York City. Today, many communities have adopted gender inclusive language (b mitzvah, b'nai mitzvah, simchat mitzvah, kabbalat mitzvah, brit mitzvah).

This resource packet uses the term b'nai mitzvah.

A Jewish person automatically becomes a b'nai mitzvah at the age of 13, even if they do not have a ceremony. As a “Jewish adult” they can count in a minyan (quorum of 10 Jewish adults), be called up to the Torah for an aliyah, and participate in all Jewish rituals.

A Beginning, Not a Graduation

Understanding [b'nai] mitzvah as a process rather than an event encourages the creation of rituals that support the critical thinking and engagement appropriate for this stage of children's lives. It also helps to imbue their lives with important values for them to consider and question. Becoming a [b'nai] mitzvah, a rite of passage, is an unfolding experience, one beset with challenges and opportunities for growth. In most communities, the [b'nai] mitzvah process unfolds over a period extending as long as two years.

(Guide to Jewish Practice, Vol 3, p.70)

A Word about Adult B'nai Mitzvah Ceremonies

Many Jews did not have the opportunity to participate in a b'nai mitzvah ceremony at age 13. They may have converted to Judaism, their family may not have found it important, they may not have been interested at age 13 (among other reasons). Many synagogues will host an Adult b'nai Mitzvah cohort, a group of adults who learn and prepare together, marked by a ceremony and celebration where they have an opportunity to participate ritually, such as reading Torah, leading prayers, or sharing a Dvar Torah.

Symbols and Rituals

There are many rituals, some ancient, some modern, to celebrate the transition of becoming b'nai mitzvah.

Celebration

This custom varies widely by person and community. Some b'nai mitzvah families host a festive meal for the community, others may also host a party for the b'nai mitzvah's peers and friends. Some do both or neither.



D'var Torah



The b'nai mitzvah teaches the community through a D'var Torah. This could be a traditional speech, a facilitated discussion, a creative interpretation, or another innovative way of showing their understanding of Jewish values and traditions.

Going to the Mikveh

A more modern custom, some b'nai mitzvah immerse in the mikveh before their ceremony to mark the transition into Jewish adulthood.



Leading Prayers

Depending on the person, many b'nai mitzvah will learn to lead portions of the prayer service.

Mitzvah Project

Many b'nai mitzvah participate in a Mitzvah Project (or "Social Action Project", "Service Project", etc.) as part of their preparation. They often choose a cause they personally care about and teach about the importance of this project during their Dvar Torah.



Passing the Torah Scroll

In some communities, the family of the b'nai mitzvah will pass the Torah scroll from the oldest to the youngest to the b'nai mitzvah to signify passing on the tradition.

Reading Torah and/or Haftarah

The b'nai mitzvah often learns to chant from the Torah scroll. They may also read the Haftarah, an additional reading from the Prophets/Writings.



Receiving an Aliyah

The b'nai mitzvah is called to the Torah to say the blessing for their first aliyah.

Tallit

As a Jewish adult, the b'nai mitzvah wears a tallit to participate in the prayers and read from the Torah.



Texts on B'nai Mitzvah

Pirkei Avot 5:21

הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר, בֶּן חֲמֵשׁ שָׁנִים לְמִקְרָא, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִי לְמִשְׁנָה, בֶּן שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵי לְמִצְוֹת, בֶּן חֲמֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵי לְתַלְמוּד, בֶּן שְׁמֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵי לְחֻפָּה, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִים לְרֵדִף, בֶּן שְׁלֹשִׁים לְבַח, בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים לְבִינָה, בֶּן חֲמִשִּׁים לְעֵצָה, בֶּן שְׁשִׁים לְזִקְנָה, בֶּן שִׁבְעִים לְשִׁיבָה, בֶּן שְׁמֹנִים לְגְבוּרָה, בֶּן תְּשַׁעִים לְשׁוּמ, בֶּן מֵאָה בְּאֵלֵי מֵת וְעֵבֶר וּבָטֵל מִן הָעוֹלָם:

Rabbi Judah ben Tema used to say: At five years of age a child is ready to study Torah; at ten the study of Mishnah; at thirteen to observe the commandments; at fifteen the study of Talmud; at eighteen for marriage; at twenty for a career; at thirty the peak of strength; at forty wisdom; at fifty able to give advice; at sixty old age; at seventy fullness of years; at eighty the age of "strength"; at ninety a bent body; at one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world.

Bereshit Rabbah 63:10

ויגדלו הנערים - רבי לוי אמר: משל להדס ועצבונית, שהיו גדילים זה על גבי זה, וכיון שהגדילו והפריחו, זה נותן ריחו וזה חוחו. כך כל י"ג שנה, שניהם הולכים לבית הספר, ושניהם באים מבית הספר. לאחר י"ג שנה, זה היה הולך לבתי מדרשות, וזה היה הולך לבתי עבודת כוכבים. אמר רבי אלעזר: צריך אדם להטפל בבנו עד י"ג שנה, מיכן ואילך צריך שיאמר: "ברוך שפטרני מעונשו של זה"

Rabbi Levi offered a parable: Jacob and Esau were like a myrtle and a wild rosebush growing side by side; when they matured and blossomed, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. For thirteen years both went to school and came home from school, but after this age, one went to the house of study and the other to worship idols. Rabbi Eleazar said: A parent is responsible for their child until the age of thirteen, at which point the parent must say: Baruch sheptarani mei'ansho shel zeh, "Blessed is the One who has now freed me from the responsibility of this child."

Etz Yosef on Bereishit Rabbah 63:10

שפטרני מעונשו של זה כי עד י"ג עודנו כחותיו טמונים וצריך לעמול לגלותם וא"כ אין החטא על הילד כי אם על אביו שאינו מחנכו למוסר. וכשנעשה בן י"ג ואז יש לו בחירה בעצמו ואז נפטר האב מתובחתו ואינו נענש עליו:

Because until 13 years a child's powers are still hidden and they must work to reveal them. If so, the sin is not on the child, but on the parent who didn't educate them. When a child becomes 13 years old, they can choose their actions and their parents are exempt and not punished for their child's actions.

Why Thirteen? (Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin)

To the ancients, thirteen was the age of spiritual and moral choices. Some rabbinic sources say that only upon turning thirteen is a youth first able to make mature choices, because then the child becomes endowed with both the yester hatov (the good inclination) and the yester hara (the evil inclination), the dueling forces that Jewish theology perceives are within the human psyche.

A Recollection of the First U.S. Bat Mitzvah (by Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, z"l)

It was a sunny day early in May of 1922. My two grandmothers, rocking gently in chairs provided for their especial comfort in our house, communed in Yiddish. Their conversation was not intended for my ears, but since Grandma Rubin was slightly hard of hearing, and since both were moved by intense emotion, I could eavesdrop without any difficulty.

“In-law,” said my mother’s mother, “Talk to your son. Tell him not to do this thing!”

“Mahateineste (in-law),” said Grandmother Kaplan, “you know a son doesn’t listen to his mother. You talk to your daughter. Tell her to tell him not to do this thing!”

And what was this terrible deed which my father was about to perform, and which they both sought uselessly to prevent? He was planning to present me in a public ceremony in synagogue as a bat mitzvah.

The synagogue was the newly founded Society for the Advancement of Judaism. It had held services for only a few months when this new and dire occasion was contemplated. I was midway between my twelfth and thirteenth birthdays. At the time of my twelfth birthday, the age at which Jewish law recognizes a girl as a woman, subject to the mitzvot (commandments), there had been no synagogue where such a ceremony could be conducted. This was my father’s first opportunity to put into practice one of the basic tenets of his then yet unnamed philosophy of Reconstructionism, namely, the equality of women in all aspects of Jewish life.

It would be less than the whole truth to say that I was as full of ardor about the subject of this ceremony as my father was. Oh, to be sure, I passionately espoused the cause of women’s rights. Let us say that I was ambivalent (a word that had not entered the common vocabulary at that time), being perfectly willing to defy the standards of my grandmothers, pleased to have a somewhat flattering attention paid me, and yet perturbed about the possible effect this might have on the attitude of my own peers—the early teenagers (that word, too, was not yet in the vocabulary), who even then could be remarkably cruel to the “exception,” to the nonconformist.

A Recollection of the First U.S. Bat Mitzvah (cont.)

Everything else was in readiness. Invitations had been sent to family and friends for a party in our home on Motza-ei Shabbat (the evening following Sabbath). I had asked only one or two close friends in addition to my fellow members in the Yarmuk Club (a Hebrew-speaking club of girls who met in the Central Jewish Institute). The “club” could be depended on for sympathetic support, regardless of their precocious propensity for questioning all religious observance.

Everything was in readiness except the procedure itself. On Friday night, after Shabbat dinner, Father took me into his study and had me read aloud the blessings which precede and succeed the Torah readings. How severely he corrected my diction!...

The following morning we all went together, father, mother, disapproving grandmothers, my three little sisters and I, to the brownstone building on 86th Street where the Society carried on all its functions. Services were held in a long narrow room which led into a wider and more spacious one. In the wider room was the bimah (platform) with the Ark. The men of the congregation sat in that room and up one-half of the narrow room. Women’s rights or no women’s rights, the old habit of separating the sexes at worship died hard. The first part of my own ordeal was to sit in that front room with the men, away from the cozy protection of mother and sisters.

The service proceeded as usual, through shacharit (morning prayers), and through the Torah reading...I was signaled to step forward to a place below the bimah at a very respectable distance from the scroll of the Torah, which had already been rolled up and garbed in its mantle. I pronounced the first blessing, and from my own chumash (Five Books of Moses) read the selection which Father had chosen for me, continued with the reading of the English translation, and concluded with the closing brakha (blessing). That was it The scroll was returned to the ark with song and procession, and the service was resumed. No thunder sounded, no lightning struck. The institution of bat mitzvah had been born without incident, and the rest of the day was all rejoicing.

Judith Kaplan Eisenstein celebrated the first recorded Bat Mitzvah ceremony in 1922 at SAJ (Society for the Advancement of Judaism), a Reconstructionist synagogue in New York City. Her father, Rabbi, Mordechai Kaplan, founded the Reconstructionist Movement.

Blessing for a B”Mitzvah by Non-Jewish Family Members (Rabbi Sonja K. Pilz)

For generations, each member of our family has paved their own road.

Whenever we come together, we celebrate the vastness of our traditions, the depth of our stories, and the care that connects us.

On this day, you are taking upon yourself a heritage older than most others on this planet.

From this day on, you are a bearer of Torah, one of the sacred books of humanity.

We see that you are strong, wise, and ready to hold on to this book and make its teachings part of your own story.

We are proud of your pride in being Jewish.

We respect the respect you show for your heritage.

We love the love you feel for a people and a wisdom you chose for yourself.

Go, _____, find your own way. Take our blessings with you.

Blessing for Passing the Scroll L’dor vador (Rabbi Nina H. Mandel)

May the One who blessed our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and our foremothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless the generations of this family. Shine Your light upon _____ daughter/son/child of _____

(Grandaughter of, Nephew of...naming each person involved in the passing of the scroll)

who stands here today, ready to receive this legacy of her Jewish heritage, and make it her own. May she be strengthened by the bond of this holy wisdom being passed l’dor vador, from generation to generation. Hazak, hazak v’nithazek. May her family go from strength to strength. And we say, Amen.

(As each person passes the Torah they say to the next person in line: Hazak, hazak v’nithazek.)



Ritualwell has a vast collection of contemporary blessings for b'nai mitzvah celebrations. Check out ritualwell.org for more examples!

Torah Blessings בְּרָכוֹת הַתּוֹרָה

בְּרָכוּ אֶת יְהוָה הַמְּבָרֵךְ: Leader

בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה הַמְּבָרֵךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: Community

בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה הַמְּבָרֵךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: Leader

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ * הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִרְבָנוּ לְעִבּוּדְתוֹ
וְנָתַן לָנו אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָנו תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת
וְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם נָטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה:

Leader **Barkhu et Adonai hamvorakh.**

Community Barukh Adonai hamvorkh le'olam va'ed

Leader **Barukh Adonai hamvorakh le'olam va'ed**

**Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu ruakh* ha'olam, asher keirvanu la'avodato
venatan lanu et torato. Barukh atah Adonai notein hatorah.**

**Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu ruakh ha'olam asher natan lanu torat emet
vekhayei olam nata betokheinu. Barukh atah Adonai notein hatorah.**

Bless the Infinite, the blessed One!

Blessed is the Infinite, the blessed One, now and forever!

*Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, the Spirit of all worlds, who has drawn us to your service
and has given us your Torah. Blessed are you, Eternal One, who gives the Torah.*

*Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, the Spirit of all worlds, who has given us a Torah of truth,
and planted in our midst eternal life. Blessed are you, Eternal One, who gives the Torah.*

* Some people say: מֶלֶךְ melekh (king)

Want to learn the Torah Blessings in ASL? Ritualwell has videos to teach to you how:

<https://ritualwell.org/ritual/blessing-torah-reading-hebrew-and-asl-traditional-version/>

<https://ritualwell.org/ritual/blessing-after-torah-reading-hebrew-and-asl/>

Haftarah Blessings בְּרִכּוֹת הַפְּטָרָה

Blessing before the Haftarah:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בְּנְבִיאִים טוֹבִים, וְרָצָה
בְּדַבְרֵיהֶם הַנְּאֻמִּים בְּאֵמֶת. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה הַבוֹחֵר בַּתּוֹרָה וּבַמִּשְׁנָה
עֲבִדוּ וּבְנִבְיָאֵי הָאֵמֶת וְצִדְקָה:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu ruakh ha'olam asher bakhar binvi'im
tovim, veratza vedivreihem hane'emarim be'emet. Barukh atah Adonai
habokheir batorah uvmoshe avdo uvinvi'ei ha'emet vatzedek.

*Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, the Spirit of all worlds, who
has called upon the righteous prophets and desired their words,
spoken in truth. Blessed are you, Wise One, who takes pleasure in
the Torah, and in Moses, servant of God, and in the prophets of
truth and justice.*

A Note about Reconstructionist Liturgy

Reconstructionist liturgy reflects the ideology and theology of the Reconstructionist movement. Certain prayers were adapted from their traditional form to use more expansive language for God and to remove language of chosenness (a tenant rejected by Mordechai Kaplan), references to resurrection and to the reward & punishment. Since Reconstructionist Judaism believes in communal decision making, each community chooses to use the language and tradition that resonates most for them.

If you want to learn more about Reconstructionist liturgy, check out the Introduction (pages xviii-xx) of the Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim.

Haftarah Blessings בְּרִכּוֹת הַפְּטָרָה

Blessing after the Haftarah:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu ruakh
ha'olam tzur kol ha'olamim tzadik
bekhol hadorot, ha'El hane'eman
ha'omer ve'oseh, hamdabeir
umkayeim, shekol devarav emet
va'tzedek.

Ne'eman atah hu Adonai Eloheinu
vene'emanim devarecha, vedavar
ekhad midvareicha akhor lo yashuv
reikam. Ki El melekh ne'eman
verakhaman atah. Barukh atah Adonai
ha'El hane'eman bekhol devarav.

Rakheim al tziyon ki hi beit hayeinu
ulamkha Yisrael toshia bimheira
veyameinu. Barukh atah Adonai
mesamei'akh tziyon bevaneha.

Samkheinu Adonai Eloheinu
be'elياهو hanavi avdekha bimheira
yavo veyagel libeinu. Veheishiv leiv
avot al banim veleiv banim al avotam
uveitekha beit tefilah yikarei lekhol
ha'amim. Barukh atah Adonai meivi
shalom la'ad.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם צוּר
כָּל הָעוֹלָמִים צַדִּיק בְּכָל הַדּוֹרוֹת, הָאֵל
הַנֶּאֱמָן הָאוֹמֵר וְעוֹשֶׂה הַמְדַבֵּר וּמְקַיֵּם
שְׁכָל דְּבָרָיו אֱמֶת וְצֶדֶק:

נֶאֱמָן אַתָּה הוּא יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנֶאֱמָנִים
דְּבָרֶיךָ, וְדָבַר אֶחָד מִדְּבָרֶיךָ אַחֲזוֹר לֹא
יָשׁוּב רִיקָם. כִּי אֵל מֶלֶךְ נֶאֱמָן וְרַחֲמָן
אַתָּה: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה הָאֵל הַנֶּאֱמָן בְּכָל
דְּבָרָיו:

רַחֵם עַל צִיּוֹן כִּי הִיא בֵּית חַיֵּינוּ וְלַעֲמֶךָ
יִשְׂרָאֵל תּוֹשִׁיעַ בְּמַהֲרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ: בְּרוּךְ
אַתָּה יְהוָה מְשַׁמֵּחַ צִיּוֹן בְּבִנְיָהּ:

שִׁמְחֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאַלְיָהּ הַנְּבִיא
עֲבָדֶךָ בְּמַהֲרָה יָבוֹא וַיַּגֵּל לְבָנוּ. וְהָשִׁיב לָב
אֲבוֹת עַל בָּנִים וְלָב בָּנִים עַל אֲבוֹתָם
וּבֵיתָךְ בֵּית תְּפִילָה יִקְרָא לְכָל הָעַמִּים.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה מְבִיא שָׁלוֹם לְעַד.

(Continue on next page)

Haftarah Blessings בְּרוּכוֹת הַפְּטָרָה

Blessing after the Haftarah (continued):

On Shabbat

Al hatorah ve'al ha'avodah ve'al
hanvi'im ve'al yom hashabbat hazeh
shenatata lanu Adonai Eloheinu
likdusha velimnukha lekhavod
ultifaret. Al hakol Adonai Eloheinu
anakhnu modim lakh umvarkhim
otakh. Yitbarakh shimkha befi kol hai
tamid le'olam va'ed. Barukh atah
Adonai mekadeish hashabbat.

עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל הַנְּבִיאִים
וְעַל יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת הַזֶּה שֶׁנִּתְּתָ לָנוּ יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְקִדְשָׁהּ וּלְמִנוּחָהּ לְכָבוֹד
וּלְתַפְאֲרָתָהּ: עַל הַכֹּל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ
מוֹדִים לָךְ וּמְבָרְכִים אוֹתְךָ. יִתְבָּרַךְ שִׁמְךָ
בְּפִי כָּל חַי תָּמִיד לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְהוָה מְקַדֵּשׁ הַשַּׁבָּת:

On Festivals

If it is both a Festival and Shabbat, add the words in parentheses

Al hatorah ve'al ha'avodah ve'al
hanvi'im (ve'al yom hashabbat hazeh)
ve'al yom

עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל הַנְּבִיאִים
(וְעַל יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת הַזֶּה) וְעַל יוֹם:

hag hamatzot hazeh

חַג הַמִּצּוֹת הַזֶּה Pesach

hag hashavuot hazeh

חַג הַשָּׁבוּעוֹת הַזֶּה Shavuot

hag hasukot hazeh

חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת הַזֶּה Sukkot

hashemini hag ha'atzeret hazeh

חַג הַשְּׁמִינִי חַג הָעֲצֵרֶת הַזֶּה
Shemini Atzeret/
Simchat Torah

shenatata lanu Adonai Eloheinu
(likdusha velimnukha) lesason
ulesimkha, lekhavod ultifaret. Al hakol
Adonai Eloheinu anakhnu modim lakh
umvarkhim otakh. Yitbarakh shimkha
befi kol hai tamid le'olam va'ed.
Barukh atah Adonai mekadeish
(hashabbat ve') Yisrael vehazmanim.

שֶׁנִּתְּתָ לָנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ (לְקִדְשָׁהּ
וּלְמִנוּחָהּ) לְשִׁשׁוֹן וּלְשִׂמְחָהּ, לְכָבוֹד
וּלְתַפְאֲרָתָהּ. עַל הַכֹּל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ
מוֹדִים לָךְ וּמְבָרְכִים אוֹתְךָ. יִתְבָּרַךְ שִׁמְךָ
בְּפִי כָּל חַי תָּמִיד לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְהוָה מְקַדֵּשׁ (הַשַּׁבָּת וְ) יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַזְּמָנִים:

Haftarah Blessings בְּרָכוֹת הַפְּטָרָה

Blessing after the Haftarah (continued):

Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, the Spirit of all worlds, the rock of all worlds, the righteous one throughout all generations, the faithful God, whose word is deed, who speaks and fulfills, whose words are truth and justice.

Faithful are you, Eternal One, our God, and faithful are your words; not a single word of yours is unfulfilled, for you are a sovereign God, faithful and merciful. Blessed are you, Eternal One, the God faithful to your words.

Be merciful to Zion, which is the house of life to us, and be a help to Israel, your people, soon and in our days. Blessed are you, Eternal One, who gives joy to Zion through her children.

Give us joy, Eternal One, our God, in Elijah, your prophet and your servant. Soon may redemption come and give joy to our hearts. May God turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents. And may your house be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Blessed are you, Eternal One, who brings an everlasting peace.

On Shabbat

For the Torah, and for worship, and for the prophets, and for the day of Shabbat, which you have given us, Eternal One, our God, for holiness and rest, for honor and splendor, for everything. Wise One, our God, we offer thanks to you and bless you. May your name be blessed continually by every living being, forever and eternally. Blessed are you, Eternal One, sources of the holiness of Shabbat.

On Festivals

If it is both a Festival and Shabbat, add the words in parentheses

For the Torah, and for worship, and for the prophets, (for Shabbat), and for this day of
the festival of matza
the festival of Shavuot
the festival of Sukkot
the either day of festivity

which you have given us, Eternal One, our God, (for holiness and for rest) for happiness and joy, for honor and splendor, for everything, Wise One, our God, we offer thanks to you and bless you. May your name be blessed continually by every living being, forever and eternally. Blessed are you, Eternal One, source of the holiness (of Shabbat), of the people Israel, and their festive times.

What happens at a B'nai Mitzvah Ceremony?

Every ceremony looks a little different depending on the family, the age of the child and the community. Here some elements that many ceremonies include:

Presentation of a Tallit to the b'nai mitzvah

As a Jewish adult, the b'nai mitzvah is presented with a tallit which they will wear throughout this ceremony and future Jewish shabbatot and holidays.

Lighting Candles (Friday night)

Depending on the community practice, the family may all gather on the bimah to light candles to welcome in this special Shabbat.

Shabbat (or weekday or Festival) services

The b'nai mitzvah may lead some of the prayers as they take on ritual responsibility in the community.

Passing the Scroll

In some communities, the family passes the Torah scroll from eldest to youngest to the b'nai mitzvah, representing the passing on and continuation of tradition.

Torah & Haftarah Reading

- The b'nai mitzvah may chant from the Torah Scroll, be called up by their Hebrew name for an aliyah (saying the blessings over the Torah reading), and reading the Haftarah in Hebrew and/or English
- Family and friends are often given honors during the service (being called up to the Torah, lifting or dressing the Torah, carrying the Torah, etc)

Dvar Torah

The b'nai mitzvah will teach the community, often in the form of a formal speech. They may share their thoughts on the parsha, their mitzvah project, what Judaism means to them, and how they plan to participate in the community as a Jewish adult.

Rabbi (or officiant's comments and blessing)

The leader (often a rabbi) will reflect briefly on the b'nai mitzvah's journey and give them blessings, usually including the Priestly Blessing. A leader in the community may present the b'nai mitzvah with gifts from the synagogue, such as candlesticks, a kiddush cup, a Tanakh, or another Jewish ritual item.

Family Blessings

The family may share their own reflections or blessings for the b'nai mitzvah, celebrating this milestone for both the b'nai mitzvah and the whole family.

Other family traditions or blessings

If a family has a special ritual or tradition for this moment, they may include in the service.

Concluding prayers for the service

Kiddush

Sanctifying the day through the blessing on wine/juice

Hamotzi and a festive meal

Often there is a celebratory meal following the service.

Activities

- Explore the texts in this packet. Ask students to reflect on whether they feel 13 is an appropriate age to become a “Jewish adult”. What are they most excited and most nervous about in this process? What questions do they have?
- Invite students to reflect on what growing up has been like so far. What responsibilities do they have at home or school? How are they leaders in their communities already? What is most challenging about getting older and why? What other moments in their lives do they want to mark, beyond turning 13?
- As Jewish adults, we are responsible for living out our values. Ask students to brainstorm as many values as they can that are important to them, and then to think of concrete actions they can take as a Jewish adult to live out these values. They could illustrate these values using visual art, or they could do a charades game where they act out the scenario and the other students guess the value.
- Becoming a b’nai mitzvah is an ideal time to reflect on what does it mean to be Jewish? Ask students to create a collage, a song, dance, performance art, photography essay (or use another creative method) to tell their own stories. They could include ideas such as:
 - What does it mean (for you) to be Jewish?
 - Where do you feel most comfortable as a Jewish person?
 - Who is in your Jewish community? Who is in your wider community?
 - Do you feel Jewish in your body? In your mind? Your heart?
 - What big questions do you have or struggle with about being Jewish?
 - What do you wish more people knew about being Jewish?
 - How does Judaism intersect (or not) with other parts of your identity?
- Have students attend the next b’nai mitzvah ceremony at your synagogue. Ask them to pay attention to certain elements, such as,
 - How does the b’nai mitzvah participate in the service?
 - What happens when someone is called up for an aliyah?
 - When do people use their Hebrew names during the ceremony?
 - How many aliyot (Torah readings) does your synagogue do?
 - How are members of the b’nai mitzvah’s family honored?
 - What did the b’nai mitzvah talk about during their speech?
 - What questions do you have about there ceremony?

Activities (cont.)

- Scavenger hunt of ritual items: encourage students to explore the synagogue by finding various ritual items, such as:
 - How many Torah scrolls are in the Ark?
 - Can you find the yad (the pointer) for reading Torah? What does it look like?
 - Where is Torah placed when it's being read?
 - Where does the shaliach tzibur (service leader) stand or sit while leading?
 - Where are the siddurim (prayerbooks) kept?
 - What version of the Torah/Humash does your community use to follow the Torah readings in English?
 - Where are the tallitot kept?
- Read books about B'nai Mitzvah
 - Judy Led the Way (by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso)
 - Detour Ahead (by Pamela Ehrenberg and Tracy López)
 - My Basmati Bat Mitzvah (by Paula Freedman)
 - Echo Still (by Tim Tibbitts)
- Watch Bimbam's video on B'nai Mitzvah: https://youtu.be/GqTO9BID_Xs
- Explore the resources created by SAJ and Jewish Women's Archive to celebrate 100 years since the first bat mitzvah (<https://jwa.org/batmitzvah100>)
- Invite the rabbi to come talk to the class about your synagogue's preparation process. Have students prepare questions ahead of time too.
- Invite someone who had an Adult B'nai Mitzvah ceremony to come share their experience and why this ritual was important to them.
- Invite a 7th or 8th grader who recently celebrated their b'nai mitzvah to reflect on their journey and let your students ask them questions. Having a peer-to-peer conversation may allow students to ask more direct questions.

Life Transitions

There are many important moments in our lives that we want to celebrate beyond the traditional life cycles. While there are not traditional rituals for these moments, many people choose to create their own rituals or ceremonies to honor and/or celebrate these occasions.

Invite your students to think about transitional moments in their lives (something they have already experienced or something they are looking forward to) and see how many you can brainstorm together. Here are just some examples:

- Starting a new school or starting a new grade
- Graduation
- Moving (saying goodbye to one home and welcoming a new home)
- Coming out as LGBTQ+
- Gender transition
- Adopting a new pet
- Saying goodbye to a pet who has passed
- Planting or harvesting a garden
- Changing homes (for those whose parents may live in different homes)
- Leaving for or returning from summer camp
- Letting go of a friendship or other kind of relationship

Invite students to choose an transitional life moment that is meaningful to them and create a ritual to honor it. They could do this individually, in pairs or in groups.

Some elements that can help make the ritual “feel Jewish”:

- Use of Jewish text
 - Is there a story in Jewish tradition that fits this moment that they could incorporate into their ritual?
- Familiar blessing formulas, such as:
 - Blessed are You [attribute of God] who [irrelevant action] ...
 - May it be Your will ...
- Familiar rituals, such as:
 - lighting candles
 - blessings on wine/juice for joyous occasions
 - immersing in a mikvah (ritual pool)
 - songs and music
 - sensory experience (smells, sounds, touch, etc -- think about havdalah rituals)
- Poetry or prayers that reflect on the moment
- Wearing a kippah and/or tallit
- Choosing a meaningful place for the ritual (inside the synagogue, at your dining room table, in the forest or by a lake, etc)

Creating Our Own Rituals



What transitional life moment are you honoring and why?



Who is part of your ritual?

(Yourself, family, friends, the rabbi, teachers, etc)



Where will you do your ritual?

(At home, at the synagogue, in nature, etc)



What special items do you need for your ritual?

(Candles, juice, tallit, etc)



Outline your ritual in the space below or on the back of this page:

Weddings

The Jewish wedding blessings view with promise the potential within every newly married couple, comparing them to the first couple, Adam and Eve. Although Adam and Eve were a mythical pair, that represent the unique possibilities of every couple, whether heterosexual or same-sex, no matter what their background or upbringing. Including Adam and Eve in the wedding liturgy expresses hope for the future of a newlywed couple as having the potential to create a whole new world.
(*Guide to Jewish Practice, Vol 3, p.141*)

The nature of the Jewish wedding as a public ceremony embeds the covenant relationship within a community. Those witnesses can be called on for support as well as for friendships that enhance the loving bond. [...] Friendships and family ties can support each person individually and as part of a couple.
(*Guide to Jewish Practice, Vol 3, p.222*)

In 1983 the Reconstructionist Movement hosted a symposium on interfaith marriage, resulting in a resolution that supported rabbinic officiation of interfaith weddings.



In 1996 the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association approved rabbinic officiation at LGBTQ weddings (at the time, called same-sex weddings).

A Word About Divorce

Jewish tradition is hopeful that weddings lead to life-long marriages. However, it is also realistic that not all marriages last forever.

There are Jewish rituals for divorce as well, including a “get” (Jewish divorce document) which signifies this transition for the couple. Some people will visit the mikvah after a divorce to honor their new reality. Divorces can create a complicated combination of feelings for all involved.

**Note: it’s important that educators know that conversations about weddings, marriage and divorce may surface challenging feelings for some students. We can do our best to be aware of our students’ own stories and to give our students a heads-up about the content so they are able to process and participate.

Symbols and Rituals

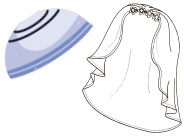
Jewish weddings have many symbols and rituals, some ancient and some modern.

Aufruf

A Yiddish word, the aufruf usually takes place the Shabbat before the wedding. The couple are called to the Torah for an aliyah to honor this moment in their lives.



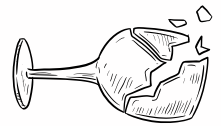
Bedeken



Bedeken was originally a moment for the groom to place the veil on the bride. Today, some couples may use it as a moment to put veils, kippot or kittels on each other in preparation for the ceremony; other couples may forego this ritual.

Breaking the Glass

The couple will break a glass (wrapped in a napkin!) to mark the end of the ceremony. There are many explanations for this custom including, honoring sorrow even in moments of joy, remembering the destruction of the Temple, calling to mind the brokenness in the world, or the fragility of relationships. After the glass is broken everyone shouts Mazel tov! (Congratulations!)



Festival Meal & Celebration



It's a Jewish wedding, there's going to be food! Usually the celebration includes a festive meal, dancing, blessings and toasts. Dancing sometimes includes lifting the couple on chairs, doing "schtick" (silly performances to make them laugh), and both Jewish and secular music.

Huppah

The wedding canopy, sometimes made from a tallit, with four open sides. This symbolizes the new home the couple will build together, surrounded by their family and friends.



Ketubah



Before the ceremony the couple will sign their ketubah (wedding contract), which outlines their responsibilities to each other and to the home they build together. There are many different ketubot that the couple may choose from, or they may choose to write their own. The ketubah should reflect their values and priorities for their marriage. The ketubah is signed by two witnesses and sometimes the officiant.

Symbols and Rituals

Mikveh

Some couples immerse in the mikveh before their wedding to mark the transition to a new stage of their relationship and life together.



Rings



The couple will exchange rings, a symbol of their unity and commitment to one another. In Jewish tradition, wedding rings are generally plain bands; the style of ring depends on the couple.

Sheva Brakhot

The Sheva Brakhot (Seven Blessings) are said under the huppah over a cup of wine or juice. The couple may choose to use traditional versions of these blessings, use a more modernized version, or even write their own. Family or friends may be given the honor of reading the blessings in Hebrew or English. These blessings also appear in the Grace After Meals for a wedding.



Tisch



Just before the wedding ceremony, the couple may choose to host a “tisch” (Yiddish for table) where their friends gather to sing songs, share blessings and toasts. Often the tisch ends with the two groups ushering the couple together to sign their ketubah.

Yichud

The couple enjoys the first few moments of their marriage alone together. This can be a time to both catch their breath (weddings are long and can be exhausting even as they joyous), to eat a meal, and to spend a few moments of sacred time together before they rejoin their guests for the celebration.



Genesis 2:18-24

In the Creation story God creates the first human, Adam from the soil (adamah=earth) but realizes that Adam needs a companion.

יֵאמֶר יי אֱלֹהִים לֹא־טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבִדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה־לוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: וַיִּצַּר יי אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאָדָמָה כָּל־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָאָדָם לְרֵאוֹת מֶה־יִקְרָא־לוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא־לוֹ הָאָדָם נִפְשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שָׁמוֹ: וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל־הַבְּהֵמָה וְלָעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלִכְל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְלָאָדָם לֹא־מָצָא עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: וַיִּפֹּל יי אֱלֹהִים תְּרִדְמָה עַל־הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת מִצְלָעֹתָיו וַיִּסְגֶּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתָּנָה: וַיִּבֶן יי אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר־לָקַח מִן־הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיָּבֵאָהּ אֶל־הָאָדָם: וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפְעַם עָצָם מֵעַצְמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לָקַחָהּ־זֹאת:

God said, "It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart for him." And God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the Human to see what he would call them; and whatever the Human called each living creature, that would be its name. And the Human gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but no fitting counterpart for a human being was found.

So God cast a deep sleep upon the Human; and, while he slept, [God] took one of his sides and closed up the flesh at that site. And God fashioned the side that had been taken from the Human into a woman, bringing her to the Human.

Then the Human said,
"This one at last
Is bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called Woman (isha),
For from a man (ish) was she taken."

Genesis 24:64-65

This text is one of the origins of the Bedeken ritual. Upon her meeting with her future husband, Rebekah covers her face, as a cultural sign of modesty.

וַתִּשָּׂא רֵבֶקָה אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְא אֶת־יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָעֶבֶד מִי־הָאִישׁ הַלֵּזָה הַהֵלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְקָרְאתָנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר הָעֶבֶד הוּא אֲדֹנָי וַתִּקַּח הַצָּעִיר וַתִּתְכַּס:

Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself.

Genesis 29:21-26

This text is one of the origins of the Bedeken ritual. Laban presents a veiled Leah to Jacob, causing him to believe he is marrying Rachel. In order to ensure the right people get married, the partners “check” under the veil (if they are veiled) to ensure they know how they are marrying.

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־לֵבֶן הָבָה אֶת־אִשְׁתִּי כִּי מָלְאוּ יָמַי וְאָבוֹאָהָ אֵלַיָּהּ: וַיֹּאסֹף לָבֵן אֶת־כָּל־אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתֶּה: וַיְהִי בְעֶרְבַּ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־לֵאָה בְּתוֹ וַיָּבֵא אֹתָהּ אֵלָיו וַיָּבֵא אֵלָיָהּ: וַיִּתֵּן לָבֵן לָהּ אֶת־זֶלְפָּה שֹׁפְחָתוֹ לְלֵאָה בְּתוֹ שֹׁפְחָהּ: וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וַהֲנִיָּהּ הוּא לֵאָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־לֵבֶן מִה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי הֲלֹא בְּרַחֵל עַבְדָּתִי עָמְדָה וְלָמָּה רָמִיתָנִי: וַיֹּאמֶר לָבֵן לֹא־יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן בַּמָּקוֹמִינוּ לְתַתּ הַצְעִירָה לְפָנַי הַבְּכִירָה:

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife, for my time is fulfilled, that I may be with her.” And Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast. When evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him; and he laid with her. Laban had given his maidservant Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.

When morning came, there was Leah! So he said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I was in your service for Rachel! Why did you deceive me?” Laban said, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older.”

Gittin 57a

This story recalls a community in Beitar that would plant trees when a child was born in anticipation of creating their chuppah later in life.

דְּהוּוּ נְהִיגִי כִּי הָיָה מִתְּלִיד יְבוּקָא – שְׁתְּלֵי אַרְזָא, יְבוּקָתָא – שְׁתְּלֵי תוֹרְנִיתָא; וְכִי הוּוּ מִיְנִסְבֵּי, קִיִּיצִי לָהּ וְעַבְדֵי גִנְנָא

As they were accustomed that when a boy was born they would plant a cedar; a girl, they would plant a pine. And when they would get married, they would cut them down and make a wedding canopy.

Berakhot 31a

One reason for breaking a glass at the end of a wedding is to remember that our joy is not complete while there is still brokenness in the world. This Talmudic story, Rav Ashi feels the Sages have forgotten this important message and wants to remind them.

רַב אָשִׁי עָבַד הִילולָא לְבָרִיָּהּ, תְּזַנְהוּ לְרַבְנָן דְּהוּוּ קָא בְּדַחֵי טוּבָא. אֵייתֵי כְּסָא דְדוּגִיתָא חִינְרָתָא, וְתִבְרַר קַמִּיהוּ, וְאֶעְצִיבוּ.

The Gemara also relates: Rav Ashi made a wedding feast for his son and he saw the Sages, who were excessively joyous. He brought a cup of extremely valuable white glass and broke it before them, and they became sad. (Tosafot: From here, it became customary to break a cup at a wedding. This custom remains with us till today)

Genesis Rabbah 68:4

In Jewish tradition it is no small task to find someone who is the right fit to share your life with. In this midrash, the rabbis imagine God as a matchmaker, ensuring that people marry someone they will be happy and prosperous with. It is a common rhetorical device in rabbinic literature for a Roman to question God or Jewish customs and a rabbi to provide wisdom in response.

מְטְרוֹנָה שְׁאַלָה אֶת רַבִּי יוֹסִי בַר חֲלַפְתָּא אֲמָרָה לּוֹ לְכַמָּה יָמִים בָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ, אָמַר לָהּ לְשֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים, בְּדִבְכֵיב (שמות ב, יא): כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה ה' אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ. אֲמָרָה לּוֹ מַה הוּא עוֹשֶׂה מֵאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה וְעַד עַכְשָׁו, אָמַר לָהּ, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יוֹשֵׁב וּמְזַוָּג זְוִיגִים, בְּתוֹ שֶׁל פְּלוֹנִי לְפְלוֹנִי, אֲשֵׁתוֹ שֶׁל פְּלוֹנִי לְפְלוֹנִי, מְמוֹנֵוֹ שֶׁל פְּלוֹנִי לְפְלוֹנִי. אֲמָרָה לִי, וְדָא הוּא אֲמָנוּתִיָּה, אַף אֲנִי יְכוּלָה לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן, כַּמָּה עַבְדִּים כַּמָּה שְׁפָחוֹת יֵשׁ לִי, לְשַׁעָה קָלָה אֲנִי יְכוּלָה לְזַוְּגָן. אָמַר לָהּ, אִם קָלָה הִיא בְּעֵינֶיךָ, קָשָׁה הִיא לְפָנַי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּקָרִיעַת יָם סוּף. הֲלֹךְ לּוֹ רַבִּי יוֹסִי בַר חֲלַפְתָּא, מַה עָשִׂתָּה נְטִלָה אֶלֶף עַבְדִּים וְאֶלֶף שְׁפָחוֹת וְהִעֲמִידָה אוֹתָן שׁוֹרוֹת שׁוֹרוֹת, אֲמָרָה פֶּלֶן יֵסֵב לְפְלוֹנִית וּפְלוֹנִית תִּסָּב לְפְלוֹנִי, וְזַוְּגָה אוֹתָן בְּלִילָה אַחַת. לְמַחֵר אֲתוֹן לְגַבְהָ דִּין מוֹחִיָּה פְּצִיעָא, דִּין עֵינוֹ שְׁמִיטָא, דִּין רַגְלִיָּה תְּבִירָא. אֲמָרָה לְהוֹן מַה לְכוֹן, דָּא אֲמָרָה לִית אֲנָא בְּעֵי לְדִין, וְדִין אָמַר לִית אֲנָא בְּעֵי לְדָא. מִיָּד שְׁלַחָה וְהִבִּיאָה אֶת רַבִּי יוֹסִי בַר חֲלַפְתָּא, אֲמָרָה לּוֹ לִית אֱלוֹהַּ כְּאַלְהֵכוֹן, אָמַת הִיא תוֹרְתְכוֹן נְאֻה וּמְשַׁבַּחַת יְפָה אֲמָרָתָּ

A Roman Matron asked Rabbi Yosi ben Halafta, "In how many days did God create the world?" He said, "In six, as it is said, 'Since six days God made...' (Exodus 20:11)

And since then," she asked, "what has God been doing?" "God sits on the Heavenly Throne and makes matches: this person for that person," responded R. Yosi.

"And for merely this you believe in Him!" she said. "Even I can do that. I have many slaves, both male and female. In no time at all, I can match them for marriage."

R. Yosi, "Though this may be an easy thing for you to do, for God it is as difficult as splitting the Sea of Reeds." Whereupon, Rabbi Yosi took his leave.

What did she do? The Matron lined up a thousand male and a thousand female slaves and paired them off before nightfall. The morning after, her estate resembled a battlefield. One slave had his head bashed in, another had lost an eye, while a third hobbled because of a broken leg.

She said to them: "What do we have here?" and they each said to her: "I don't want the person you matched me with."

Immediately, she summoned Rabbi Yosi and said: "Your God is not like our god, and your Torah is true, pleasing and praiseworthy. You spoke wisely."

New Ketubah

The New Jewish Wedding, by Anita Diamant, 2011.

On the _____ day of the week, the _____ day of _____ five thousand seven hundred _____ since the creation of the world as we reckon time here in _____.

The bride _____ daughter of _____ and _____ promised the groom, son of _____ and _____. "You are my husband according to the tradition of Moses and Israel I shall cherish you and honor you as is customary among the daughters of Israel who have cherished and honored their husbands in faithfulness and in integrity."

The groom _____ son of _____ and _____ promised the bride, daughter of _____ and _____. "You are my wife according to the tradition of Moses and Israel. I shall cherish you and honor you as is customary among the sons of Israel who have cherished and honored their wives in faithfulness and in integrity."

The groom and bride have also promised each other to strive throughout their lives together to achieve an openness which will enable them to share their thoughts, their feelings, and their experiences.

To be sensitive at all times to each others' needs, to attain mutual intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual fulfillment. To work for the perpetuation of Judaism and of the Jewish people in their home, in their family life, and in their communal endeavors.

This marriage has been authorized also by the civil authorities of _____.

It is valid and binding.

Brit Ahuvim

“Brit Ahuvim” (The Lovers’ Covenant) was written by Rachel Adler and published in her 1998 book “Engendering Judaism.” The brit took out the language of the partners acquiring each other and refocused the document on their mutual agreements of their responsibilities to each other.

On _____ (day of week) the _____ day of _____ (month), 57____, according to Jewish reckoning (_____month_____ day_____ year, according to secular reckoning), in the city of _____ (state or region), _____ (country), _____ (Hebrew name) and _____ (Hebrew name) confirm in the presence of witnesses a lovers’ covenant between them and declare a partnership to establish a household among the people of Israel.

The agreement into which _____ and _____ are entering is a holy covenant like the ancient covenants of our people, made in faithfulness and peace to stand forever.

It is a covenant of protection and hope like the covenant God swore to Noah and his descendants, saying, “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth. That,” God said to Noah, “shall be the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh” (Gen. 9:16-17).

It is a covenant of distinction, like the covenant God made with Israel, saying “You shall be My people, and I shall be your God (Jer. 30:22).

It is a covenant of devotion, joining hearts like the covenant David and Jonathan made, as it is said, “And Jonathan’s soul was bound up with the soul of David. Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself (1 Sam. 18:1-3).

It is a covenant of mutual lovingkindness like the wedding covenant between God and Zion, as it is said, “I will espouse you forever. I will espouse you with righteousness and justice and lovingkindness and compassion. I will espouse you in faithfulness and you shall know God” (Hos. 2:21-22).

The following are the provisions of the lovers’ covenant into which _____ (Hebrew name) and _____ (Hebrew name) now enter:

1. _____ and _____ declare that they have chosen each other as companions, as our rabbis teach:

“Get yourself a companion. This teaches that a person should get a companion, to eat with, to drink with, to study Bible with, to study Mishnah with, to sleep with, to confide all one’s secrets, secrets of Torah and secrets of worldly things. (Avot D’Rabbi Natan 8)

Brit Ahuvim (cont.)

2. _____ and _____ declare that they are setting themselves apart for each other and will take no other lover.

3. _____ and _____ hereby assume all the rights and obligations that apply to family members: to attend, care, and provide for one another [and for any children with which they may be blessed] [and for _____ child/children of _____]

4. _____ and _____ commit themselves to a life of kindness and righteousness as a Jewish family and to work together toward the communal task of mending the world.

5. _____ and _____ pledge that one will help the other at the time of dying, by carrying out the last rational requests of the dying partner, protecting him/her from indignity or abandonment and by tender, faithful presence with the beloved until the end, fulfilling what has been written: "Set me as a seal upon your arm, for love is stronger than death. (Song of Songs 8:6)

To this covenant we affix our signatures.

Queer Ketubah (by Rabbi Lily and Lanni Solochek)

On this day of great celebration and joy, on the _[Hebrew date]_ which corresponds to _[English date]_, in _[location]_, in the presence of family and friends, the brides _[name]_ and _[name]_ said to each other: “I dedicate myself to you, according to the ever evolving laws of Moses and Israel.”

We will cherish, cover, protect, financially sustain, work, nourish, and fulfill each other’s needs with honor according to the ways of Jewish tradition. We will create a home echoing with ancient and new melodies, a home which will be a link to the generations of the Jewish people. We will be devoted to justice, to acts of lovingkindness, and be partners in repairing the world. We will respect each other and the divine image within us. We will love each other always, the people we are and the people we will become. May our love be a blessing for all the world to share.

This is a covenant of love and companionship, as Ruth said to Naomi: wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

This is a covenant of protection and shelter, as the Jewish People bless one another: May God bless you and keep you; May God’s face shine upon you; May God lift God’s face to you and grant you wholeness and peace.

This is a covenant of devotion, like the covenant that David and Jonathan made: And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him like his own soul.

In the presence of witnesses, __[name]__ and _[name]_ accepted upon themselves responsibility for this ketubah contract.

All this is valid and binding.

Egalitarian Ketubah
(by Rabbi Gordon Tucker)

On the _____ day of the week, the _____ day of the month _____, in the year 57___, as we are accustomed to reckon it here, in _____ in the United States of America, we hereby testify that the groom _____ of the family _____ said to the bride _____ of family _____, "You are consecrated to me as my wife, with this ring, according to the laws of Moses and Israel and that the bride _____ said to the groom _____, "You are consecrated to me as my husband with this ring, according to the laws of Moses and Israel."

The groom _____ and the bride _____ accepted all the conditions of betrothal and marriage as set forth by biblical law and by the rulings of the Sages of blessed memory. The groom and bride further agreed willingly to work for one another, to honor, support and nurture one another, to live with one another, and to build together a household of integrity as befits members of the Jewish people.

The bride accepted a ring from the groom, and the groom accepted a ring from the bride, for the purposes of creating this marriage and to symbolize their love.

The groom and bride also accepted full legal responsibility for the obligations herein taken on, as well as for the various property entering the marriage from their respective homes and families, and agreed that the obligations in this Ketubah may be satisfied even from movable property.

We have had both the groom and the bride formally acquire these obligations to the other, with an instrument fit for such purposes. Thus all is in order and in force.

Traditional Sheva Brakhot

1. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגֶּפֶן.

2. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֵבִיל בְּרָא לְכַבּוּדוֹ.

3. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.

4. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצַלְמֵ דְמוּת תְּבַנִּיתוֹ, וְהִתְקִין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּנֵי עַדֵי עַד. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.

5. שׁוֹשׁ תְּשִׁישׁ וְתַגֵּל הָעֵקֶרָה בְּקִבוּץ בְּנֵיהָ לְתוֹכָהּ בְּשִׂמְחָה. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, מְשַׂמֵּחַ צִיּוֹן בְּבִנְיָהּ.

6. שִׂמְחַת תְּשַׂמַּח רַעוּת הָאֱהוּבִים/הָאֱהוּבוֹת בְּשִׂמְחָה יְצִירָהּ בְּגַן עֵדֶן מִקֵּדָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, מְשַׂמֵּחַ

אֱהוּב וַיְדִיד

פְּלָה וְכָלָה

חֶתָן וְחֶתָן

חֶתָן וְכָלָה

7. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בְּרָא שְׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה, פְּלָה וְכָלָה, גִּילָה, רִנָּה, דִּיצָה וְחֻדוּהָ, אֲהָבָה וְאַחֲוָה וְשָׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת. מְהֵרָה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׁמַע בְּעַרְי יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם קוֹל שְׂשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה,

קוֹל אֱהוּב וְקוֹל וַיְדִיד

קוֹל פְּלָה וְקוֹל פְּלָה

קוֹל חֶתָן וְקוֹל חֶתָן

קוֹל חֶתָן וְקוֹל פְּלָה

קוֹל מְצַהֲלוֹת פְּלוֹת מְחַפְּתָן וְנִעְרִים מִמִּשְׁתָּה נְגִינָתָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, מְשַׂמֵּחַ

אֱהוּב עִם וַיְדִיד

פְּלָה עִם הַפְּלָה.

פְּלָה עִם הַפְּלָה.

פְּלָה עִם הַפְּלָה.

Traditional Sheva Brakhot

1. Blessed are You Eternal our God Ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.
2. Blessed are You Eternal our God Ruler of the universe, Who created everything for God's glory.
3. Blessed are You Eternal our God Ruler of the universe, Creator of humans.
4. Blessed are You Eternal our God Ruler of the universe, Who created humans in God's image, in the image of the likeness You formed humans, and prepared for humans from Godself a building forever. Blessed are You God, Creator of humans.
5. Give great joy and rejoicing to the barren woman in the gathering of her children in her midst with joy. Blessed are You God, Who makes Zion happy through her children.
6. Make greatly happy loving friends like You made Your creation happy in the Garden of Eden previously. Blessed are You God, who makes happy
the beloveds
bride and bride
groom and groom
groom and bride
7. Blessed are You Eternal our God Ruler of the Universe, Who created joy and happiness, bride and bride, rejoicing, song, cheer and delight, love and peoplehood and peace and friendship. Speedily Eternal our God make heard in the cities of Judah and in the courtyards of Jerusalem a voice of joy and a voice of happiness, a
voice of beloveds
voice of bride and a voice of bride,
voice of groom and a voice of groom,
voice of groom and a voice of bride,
voice of exultation of brides from their wedding canopies and youths from their feasts of melody. Blessed are You God Who makes the
the beloveds happy together.
bride happy with the bride.
groom happy with the groom.
groom happy with the bride.

A New Seven Blessings (Rabbi Amber Powers)

1. We acknowledge the Unity of all, expressing our appreciation for life's sweetness.
2. We acknowledge the Unity of all, realizing that we are deeply interconnected. May you find comfort in your similarities and celebrate the qualities which make you different. May you be inspired each day by the abundance and diversity of the natural world.
3. We acknowledge the Unity of all, recognizing and appreciating the blessing of being human. All people have the capacity for love, generosity, kindness and compassion. May you express these qualities freely with each other and be blessed to receive them throughout your lives together.
4. May rejoicing resound throughout the world. May we envision a world in which persecution and oppression cease and all people and animals learn to live together in peace with each other and in harmony with their environment.
5. From the Source of all, we call forth an abundance of love to envelop this couple. May you be for each other true partners, companions and best friends.
6. We acknowledge the Unity of all, and we highlight today joy and gladness, bride and groom, delight and cheer, love and harmony. May we all witness the day when the dominant sounds through the world will be the sounds of happiness, laughter and celebration.
7. Blessed be this marriage. May the bride and groom rejoice together.

Sheva Brachot: An Interpretive Nondenominational Translation **(by Joshua E. Foster-Tucker)**

1 Blessed are You, The Sower, Our G-d, whose hand brings forth the fruit of the vine! May you two, [name] and [name], tend to your love as G-d does all of life.

2. Blessed is The One, our G-d, who created you two with an inconceivable love! And may the love that brought you two together be as vast and deep as the sea; may your shared cup overflow with it all.

3. Blessed is The Potter, our G-d, who created souls and the love that forever bonds two of them together today. And may it bind you two through joy and struggle, laughter, and sorrow alike.

4. Blessed are You, our G-d, Light of Lights, who placed within each of us a vision of eternal life, and who gives us the means to find it.

5. Blessed are You, our G-d, The Peacemaker, who brings families together and unites the divided. May the covenant you two enter into today bring together our families for generations to come!

6. Blessed are You, our G-d, The Source, for making for [name] and [name] companions as You did Adam and Eve in the Garden long ago. [Name] and [name], may your love be as old and as new as that first love, and may you also bring new life, in all its forms, into our world.

7. And, lastly, blessed is The One who makes joy and celebration; lover and beloved; gladness and jubilation; pleasure and delight; love and solidarity; friendship and peace. May you two be the best of friends: better together as one than either of you were apart. And may the home you build be a haven for wisdom, blessing, faith, laughter, trust, and, above all, love.

What happens at a Jewish Wedding?

Every Jewish wedding looks a little different, depending on the couple.

Here are some of the highlights often included:

Tisch

A chance for the couple to each spend time with their friends and family before the formal ceremony.

Bedeken and Ketubah Signing

The couple comes together to sign their ketubah and begin the journey to the huppah.

Procession

The couple, family, and wedding party, walk down the aisle to the huppah. The order and who is involved depends on the couple.

Circling

Originally a bride circled the groom seven times. Today, couples may each do seven circles, do three each and one together, or skip this ritual. Circling represents the couple's focus and commitment to one another; in kabbalah, it also represents knitting their souls together.

Opening words and Birkat Erusin

The officiant shares a welcome and opening words. They will likely explain the rituals so that all guests feel comfortable and included, even if it's their first Jewish wedding. The first blessing marks the couple's commitment to one another and is said over a cup of wine/juice.

Exchanging Rings

The couple will exchange rings and make a declaration of love and commitment to one another.

- The traditional version is: Harey at/atah mekudeshet/mekudash li betaba'at zo k'dat moshe ve'yisrael (Behold, with this ring you are consecrated to me according to the customs of Moses and Israel)
- A more modern version is: Ani ledodi ve'dodi li (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine)
- A couple may create their own declaration with their rabbi/officiant.

Reading the Ketubah

The officiant, a family member or friend will read the ketubah aloud to the community so they understand the couple's commitments to one another.

Sheva Brakhot

We say seven blessings under the huppah to mark this joyous moment over a cup of wine/juice. These blessings may be said by the officiant, family or friends, in Hebrew or English.

What happens at a Jewish Wedding? (cont.)

Officiant's Message and Blessing

The officiant will likely share a message, share stories about the couple (with the couple's permission), give wisdom and advice rooted in Jewish tradition for building their new life together, and offer them blessings to begin this journey.

Other Blessings or Rituals

Depending on the couple, they may choose to include additional blessings or rituals into the ceremony. These could include rituals from other religious traditions if they are an interfaith couple, family traditions, or prayers and poetry that they love.

Breaking the Glass

To close the ceremony one or both members of the couple smash a glass and everyone shouts Mazel tov (Congratulations!)

Yichud

The couple spends a few moments alone together before returning to their guests. They often eat a small meal as well, symbolizing their new home together as a married couple.

Reception and Dancing

The ceremony is often followed by a festive meal, along with dancing. When the couple rejoins their guests after Yichud they usually dance to Jewish music, are lifted on chairs (if they want), and dance with each other and their guests. After the meal there is often secular dance music as well. It's a party!

Schtick

One of the responsibilities of the guests is to make the couple laugh and smile on this joyous day. Often, during the dancing, the couple will be seated in the middle of the circle and the guests will perform funny dances, bring props or costumes, and do short skits to make the couple happy. This tradition is lovingly called "schtick".

Activities

- Explore the various versions of ketubot and Sheva Brakhot. Ask students to identify the values and priorities they see in each. What choices did the authors make? What, according to each document, are most important agreements in a marriage?
- Invite students to think about weddings as one form of family building (there are many ways to build a family). What does it take to create a happy and functional family? Should kids and grownups have their own “brit” (agreements) with each other too? If so, what would be included?
- Art project: students can design a chuppah, inspired by the Wedding Texts, key elements of the Sheva Brakhot, or other elements of a Jewish wedding.
- Invite the rabbi to talk to the class about how they help a couple prepare for a wedding and what it’s like to officiate a Jewish wedding. Ask them to share the most creative rituals they’ve seen or how they have changed the way they approach this ritual over the years. Ask students to prepare questions ahead of time as well.
- Invite adults from the students’ families to share stories about their own weddings -- pictures, funny stories, how they chose which rituals use, what they might do different now, etc.
- Have the students put together and host a Jewish wedding, inviting married adults from their families to play the couple (this helps avoid the awkwardness and ethical dilemmas of kids pretending to get married). Decorate a ketubah, create a chuppah, learn wedding dances and songs, throw a party!
- Read stories about Jewish Weddings
 - Uncle Eli’s Wedding (by Tracy Newman)
 - Dance the Hora, Isadora (by Gloria Koster)
 - The Mouse Who Danced the Hora (by Pamela Mayer)
- Watch these videos by Bimbam about Jewish weddings
 - Engaged? Jewish Traditions Before a Wedding (<https://youtu.be/zmyFeeJpQRE>)
 - What to Expect at a Jewish Wedding Ceremony (<https://youtu.be/MxQ87qN7E9o>)
 - Ketubah: The Jewish Wedding Contract (<https://youtu.be/clM1SEJfixo>)
 - Chuppah: The Jewish Wedding Canopy (<https://youtu.be/KYYinMgfn9k>)
 - Why We Break the Glass at Jewish Weddings (<https://youtu.be/be789D0B9J8>)

Death and Mourning

Few moments in human life carry as much meaning as those that touch on the boundaries of life. Jewish rituals and observances can help guide us through such moments. Traditions, values and customs can help create meaning and structure as well as provide comfort at times of transition. . . From a traditional as well as a contemporary perspective, many Jewish practices associated with mourning are subject to adaptation and to the customs of different communities. What may be standard in one locale would not necessarily be done elsewhere. . .

Explanations for rituals vary widely. Traditions surrounding death and mourning are in many cases centuries old, and the origins of customs are usually obscure, although some explanations are accepted as normative. Reconstructionism affirms the possibility of reading new meanings into old rituals while preserving those rituals out a sense of continuity and commitment. . .

(Guide to Jewish Practice, Vol 3, p.411-412)

Who is “A Mourner” in Jewish Tradition?

The traditional definition of a Mourner in Jewish tradition is one of the deceased closest relatives: parent, sibling or spouse. These individuals participate in the mourning rituals outlined below.

Other relatives and close friends may also feel a deep sense of loss as well. A grandchild or aunt may also choose to say Mourner’s Kaddish or light a yahrzeit candle, to honor their own grief.

What Do We Say?

It can be very difficult to know what to say when we hear that a loved one has died, when someone tells us their loved one has died, or when we want to offer comfort to mourners.

Judaism has a few short phrases that we say in order to show our love without asking us to think of “the right thing to say” in a moment of grief. These ancient words allow the mourner and community to held in the warm embrace of our tradition.

Upon hearing about a death:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם דִּין הָאֱמֶת

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha’olam dayan ha’emet

Blessed are You, Eternal One, the True Judge.

The community says to mourners:

הַמְקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שְׂאֵר אַבְלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם

Hamakom yinakhem etkhem betokh sha’ar aveley tziyon virushalayim.

May God comfort you, along with all mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.



Symbols and Rituals

There are many rituals and symbols during mourning to help give the mourners support as they grieve and process the loss of their loved one.

Aron (Casket)

In Jewish tradition the casket is traditionally is a plain wooden box, so that the casket will easily decompose, allowing the body to rejoin the earth.



Kaddish



The Mourner's Kaddish (Kaddish Yatom) emerged during the Middle Ages, although it is based on a longer prayer (Kaddish Derabanan from the Talmud). The Kaddish is usually said at all services. Depending on the community, the Kaddish may be said only by those in mourning or observing a yahrzeit or by the entire congregation.

Shiva

The first seven days following burial, during which the mourners often stay home, are brought food by the community, and have time to grieve without the expectation to be out in public. It is common to have a minyan gather at the mourners' house once a day to say prayers and recite Kaddish together.

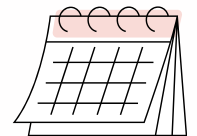


Shiva Candle

A tall candle that burns for the seven day period of Shiva.

Shloshim

The first thirty days after burial. For those mourning a relative who is not their parent, this concludes the formal mourning period. Many people mourning a parent continue doing so through the first 11 or 12 months, ending at the first yahrzeit.



Shomrim

After the body has been prepared for burial, a shomer/et sits with the casket until the funeral, ensuring the deceased is never left alone.

Taharah

The ritual preparation for burial. Traditionally done by the Hevra Kadisha (a group of trained community volunteers), the taharah involves washing the body and dressing the deceased in plain linen shrouds. Some people also include soil from the Land of Israel and/or pottery shards in the casket.



Yahrzeit

The yearly anniversary of the death of a loved one. The family members say Kaddish on this day to honor their loved one.

Yahrzeit Candle

A special candle that burns for a day, marking the anniversary of a death from sundown to dark the next day (one Jewish day).



Stages of Jewish Mourning

Aninut (between death and burial)

What happens:

Sharing the news of the death; making funeral arrangements

How the community can help:

Helping with funeral arrangements
Notifying the wider community
Arranging for food for the shiva house

Rituals for Aninut:

Baruch Dayan Ha'emet blessing
Kriah or wearing a shiva ribbon.



Preparation for Burial

What happens:

Taharah (if desired)

How the community can help:

Joining the Hevra Kedisha
Serving as shomrim

Rituals for Preparation:

Taharah
Shomrim (accompanying the deceased)

Funeral & Burial

What happens:

Family and community gather to honor their loved one. The casket is lowered into the grave and attendees each help with burial by adding a shovelfull of dirt into the grave. The mourners say Kaddish for the first time.

How the community can help:

Presence at the funeral
Assist with burial

Rituals for Burial:

Kriah (if not done already)
Kevod hamet (burial)
El Malei Rachamim
Mourner's Kaddish



Shiva (7 Days)

What happens:

Closest family gather to honor their loved one. Friends and community members bring food, offer emotional and practical support.

How the community can help:

Bring food to the mourners
Attend a shiva minyan

Rituals for Shiva:

Lighting a Shiva candle
Covering mirrors
Daily recitation of Kaddish
Sitting on low chairs
Staying at home and grieving



Shloshim (30 Days)

What happens:

A less intense mourning period. Family return to work, uncover their mirrors and begin transitioning back into “normal life”. They may continue to say Kaddish daily for the month.

For those grieving a parent, they continue saying Kaddish through the first 11 or 12 months. For all others, the end of shloshim concludes the formal mourning period.

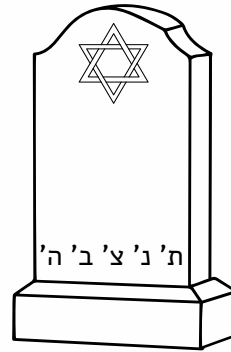
How the community can help:

Emotional and practical support

Rituals for Shloshim:

Mourner’s Kaddish

Avoiding big celebrations



Unveiling (1 Year)

What happens:

A headstone is placed on the grave and close family members and friends may gather for a short ceremony to honor the deceased.

How the community can help:

Emotional and practical support

Rituals for Unveiling:

Place the gravestone

Light a yahrzeit candle

Mourner’s Kaddish



Yahrzeit (Annually)

What happens:

Each year on the anniversary of the death, family members say Kaddish to remember their loved one.

How the community can help:

Emotional support for mourners

Rituals for Shiva:

Light a yahrzeit candle

Mourner’s Kaddish

These rituals are intended to help carry mourners through an incredibly difficult and painful time, helping them find comfort. However, grief is not linear, and even if someone has completed all of the above rituals, they may still need additional time and emotional support to process and heal from the loss of their loved one.

Biblical Sources for Mourning Customs

While the Torah does not list specific laws or customs how one should mourn, many of our traditions today are rooted in Biblical texts, such as the examples below.

Burial: Genesis 23:2-4

וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֵא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבִבְתָּהּ: וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי מֶתוֹ וַיֵּדְבֵר אֶל־בְּנֵי־חֵת לֵאמֹר: גֵּר־וְתוֹשָׁב אָנֹכִי עִמָּכֶם תָּנוּ לִי אַחֲזֹת־קֶבֶר עִמָּכֶם וְאֶקְבְּרָה מִתִּי מִלְּפָנָי:

Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (now Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial."

Kriah (Tearing Clothes): Genesis 37:34

וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלֶתוֹ וַיִּשֹׂם שָׂק בְּמַתְּנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל־בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים:

Jacob tore his robes, and placed sackcloth on himself. He mourned for his son for many days.

Shiva (7 Days of Mourning):

Genesis 50:10

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־גֹּרֶן הָאֵטָד אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן וַיִּסְפְּדוּ־שָׁם מִסֵּפֶד גָּדוֹל וְכָבֵד מְאֹד וַיַּעַשׂ לְאָבִיו אֶבֶל שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

When they came to Goren ha-Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and solemn lamentation; and Joseph observed a mourning period of seven days for his father.

Job 2:12

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אֹתוֹ לְאֶרֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְשִׁבְעַת לַיְלוֹת וַאֲיִן־דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו דָּבָר כִּי רָאוּ כִּי־גָדֹל הַכָּאָב מְאֹד:

They sat with Job on the ground seven days and seven nights. None spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering.

Shloshim (30 Days of Mourning)

Numbers 20:28-29

וַיִּפְּשֵׁט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אַהֲרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיִּלְבָּשׁ אֹתָם אֶת־אֱלֵעָזָר בְּנוֹ וַיָּמָת אַהֲרֹן שָׁם בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָר וַיֵּרַד מֹשֶׁה וְאֱלֵעָזָר מִן־הָהָר: וַיֵּרְאוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה כִּי גָע אַהֲרֹן וַיָּבֹבוּ אֶת־אַהֲרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם כֹּל בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.

Deuteronomy 34:7-8

וּמֹשֶׁה בְּן־מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בָּמָתוֹ לֹא־כָהֲתָה עֵינָו וְלֹא־נָס לַחֹה: וַיָּבֹבוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּעַרְבַת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יָמֵי בְּבִי אֶבֶל מֹשֶׁה:

Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his strength steady. And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days. The period of wailing and mourning for Moses came to an end.

Jewish Texts on Mourning

Mishnah Berakhot 3:1

This mishnah focuses on releasing the mourner from ritual responsibilities during the immediate time after death while their grief is sudden and strong.

מי שמתו מוטל לפניו – פטור מקריאת שמע ומן התפלה ומן התפילין, ומכל מצות האמורות בתורה.

One whose deceased relative is laid out unburied before him is exempt from the recitation of Shema, from the Amida prayer, and from the mitzva to don phylacteries, as well as all positive mitzvot mentioned in the Torah, until the deceased has been buried.

Tosefta Moed Katan 2

This text invites us to think about how the death of community leaders impacts everyone.

חכם שמת הכל קרוביו הכל קורעין הכל חולצין והכל סופדין והכל מברין עליו [ואפי'] ברחובה של עיר אין מוליכין חלילין לבית האבל [אלא] לבית המשתה ולבית השמחה במקום שנהגו

When a Sage dies everyone is considered their close relative. Everyone tears their garment, everyone bares their shoulder, everyone eulogizes, and everyone eats the mourner's meal (even in public). They may not bring flutes to the house of mourning, but may bring them to a wedding feast if it is the local custom.

Moed Katan 15a

This text considers the mourner's emotional state and their ability to socialize.

אבל אסור בשאילת שלום. דקאמר ליה רחמנא ליחזקאל: "האנק דום".

The Gemara continues: A mourner is prohibited from greeting others or being greeted. It is learned from when the Merciful One says to Ezekiel: "Sigh in silence" (Ezekiel 24:17) meaning that mourners need only speak when absolutely necessary.

Shabbat 151a

Sometimes when someone dies there is no one to mourn them. In that case, this text considers the responsibility of the community to mourn the deceased.

אמר רב יהודה: מת שאין לו מנחמין – הולכין עשרה בני אדם ויושבין במקומו. ההוא דשכיב בשבבתייה דרב יהודה, לא היו לו מנחמין, כל יומא הוה דבר רב יהודה בי עשרה, ויתבי בדוכתיה. לאחר שבועה ימים איתחזי ליה בחילמיה דרב יהודה, ואמר ליה: תנוח דעתך שהנחת את דעתי.

Rav Yehuda said: In the case of a deceased person who has no one to mourn them, ten people should go and sit in his house and accept condolences (as though they are mourners). A story: a person died in Rav Yehuda's neighborhood and who did not have anyone to mourn him. Each day of the shiva period Rav Yehuda would take ten people and they would sit in the house of the deceased. After seven days had passed, the deceased appeared to Rav Yehuda in his dream and said to him, "Put your mind to rest, for you have put my mind to rest."

Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De'ah 376

Mourners are in a difficult emotional state and may not wish to socialize in a normal way. Visitors may feel unsure what to say. This text addresses how to structure these interactions by prioritizing the needs of the mourner.

אין המנחמים רשאים לפתוח עד שיפתח האבל תחלה והאבל מיסב בראש וכיון שנענע האבל בראשו בענין שנראה שפוטר את המנחמים אינם רשאים לישוב אצלו: (אין אבל או חולה חייבים לעמוד אפילו מפני נשיא):

The comforters are not permitted to open conversation until the mourner opens first; and the mourner reclines at the head of the table in the Shiva house; and as soon as the mourner nods his head in a manner from which it is indicative that he dismisses the comforters, they are not permitted to remain seated by him. A mourner or a sick person are not required to rise even on account of a Nasi ("prince", a leader of the community).

אל מלא רחמים El Malei Rakhamim

אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים המצא מנוחה נכונה תחת כנפי השכינה במעלות קדושים וטהורים בזהר הרקיע מזהירים את נשמת _____ בן _____ .
אנא בעל הרחמים יסתירהו בסתר כנפיו לעולמים ויצרר בצרור החיים את נשמתו. יי הוא נחלתו וינוח על משכבו בשלום בשלום ונאמר אמן.

אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים המצא מנוחה נכונה תחת כנפי השכינה במעלות קדושים וטהורים בזהר הרקיע מזהירים את נשמת _____ בת _____ .
אנא בעל הרחמים יסתירה בסתר כנפיו לעולמים ויצרר בצרור החיים את נשמתה. יי הוא נחלתו וינוח על משכבה בשלום בשלום ונאמר אמן.

God full of mercy, who dwells in high places, grant full repose under Shekhinah's wings in the heights of the holy and pure, like a light glowing in the firmament, to the soul of _____ son/daughter of _____.

Merciful one, conceal them under your wings forever, and bind their soul to life. The Compassionate One is their portion. May they rest in peace in their place. And let us say: Amen.

(Source: Siddur Kol Haneshamah)

Mourner's Kaddish קְדִישׁ יְתוּם

Yitgadal v'yitkadash shmei rabah
be'alma di vera hirutei ve'yamlikh
malkhutei bekhayeikhon
uv'yomeikhon uvkhayei de'khol
beit Yisrael ba'agalah uvizman
kariv, ve'imru: amein.

יִתְגַּדֵּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא בְּעַלְמָא
דִּי-בְרָא כְרַעוּתָהּ וַיְמַלִּיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ
בְּחַיִּיכוֹן וּבְיוֹמֵיכוֹן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל-בֵּית
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעַגְלָא וּבְזַמַּן קָרִיב וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

**Yehei shmey raba mevarakh le'alam
ulalmei almaya.**

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעַלְמֵי
עַלְמַיָּא

Yitbarakh v'yishtabakh v'yitpa'ar
v'yitromam v'yitnaseh v'yit'hadar
v'yitaleh v'yithalal shmei dekudsha
brikh hu.

יִתְבָּרַךְ וַיִּשְׁתַּבַּח וַיִּתְפָּאֵר וַיִּתְרוֹמַם
וַיִּתְנַשֵּׂא וַיִּתְהַדָּר וַיִּתְעַלֶּה וַיִּתְהַלַּל שְׁמֵהּ
דְקוּדְשָׁא
בְּרִיךְ הוּא

Le'ela min kol birkhata veshirata
tushbakhata v'nekhemata
da'amiran be'alma ve'imru: amein.

לְעֵלָא מִן-כָּל-בִּרְכָתָא וְשִׁירָתָא וְתִשְׁבְּחָתָא
וְנַחֲמָתָא דְאָמִירָן בְּעַלְמָא וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

Yehei shlama rabah min shamaya
vekhaim aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael
ve'imru: amein.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן-שְׁמַיָּא וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ
וְעַל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh
shalom aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael ve'al
kol yoshvei teivel ve'imru amein.

עוֹשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם
עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי
תֵּבֵל. וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

Mourner's Kaddish קְדִישׁ יְתוּם

Let God's name be made great and holy in the world that was created as God willed. May God complete the holy realm in your own lifetime, in your days, and in the days of all the house of Israel, quickly and soon. And say: Amein.

May God's great name be blessed, forever and as long as worlds endure.

May it be blessed, and praised, and glorified and held in honor, viewed with awe, embellished, and revered; and may it be higher than all the blessings, songs, praises, and consolations that we utter in this world. And say: Amein.

May heaven grant a universal peace, and life for us, and for all Israel. And say: Amein.

May the one who creates peace above make peace for us and for all Israel, and for all who dwell on earth. And say: Amein.

Activities

Death can be a challenging topic for any age. It's recommended to be aware of your students' developmental stages and have some familiarity with their own stories in order to create a safe classroom to learn about death and mourning customs. Here are some suggested activities:

- Explore the texts on death and mourning.
- Explore Jewish mourning customs and invite students to think about what values they see in the customs. How do we honor the deceased? How do we comfort mourners? What is the role of community and why is community important when someone is in mourning?
- If your synagogue has Shiva booklets or prayerbooks, have students look through and reflect on what types of prayers and poetry are central.
- Synagogue Memorial Scavenger Hunt. Invite students to explore the various ways people are memorialized in their synagogue: memorial plaques, dedications (Torah covers, Tree of Life plaques, rooms, donations, artwork, etc). Ask students why we honor people in this way? How else have they seen someone honored after their death? Do they have family traditions for honoring deceased loved ones?
- Take a field trip to a cemetery and look at the symbols on Jewish graves (the Kohein hands, water pitchers, Star of David, pictures on Russian graves, etc). Do gravestones have English and/or Hebrew names, and why might someone choose either? What blessings, sayings, abbreviations are on the gravestones? Teach students that Jewish tradition has us leave a small pebble on the grave instead of flowers, as stones are more permanent.
- In a respectful manner, act out / walk through what happens at a Jewish funeral so that students learn the rituals and can understand what's happening when they go to a Jewish funeral. You could also set up a room as a shiva house and ask students to identify all the symbols and customs they see.
- Invite the rabbi or a funeral director to talk about what happens when someone dies
- Invite students to reflect on why the Kaddish is THE memorial prayer
- Ask an adult to share about a shiva house they visited and/or a mourning custom that is particularly meaningful for them.
- Make space for students to ask questions, they may have a lot, especially about death.