

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

Coming of age in Sephardic and Mizrahi communities: first tefillin, the Torah read in a family's own melody, sweets, songs, and the newer celebrations for girls.

WHAT IT IS

A Jewish coming of age. In Jewish law, a boy takes on the commandments at 13 and a girl at 12.

THE HEART OF IT

In many Sephardic and Mizrahi families, the central moment for a boy was putting on *tefillin* for the first time.

IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Being called to the Torah, chanting from it in the community's own melody, and often giving a short speech, the *derasha*.

FOR GIRLS

Celebrations for girls grew in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and today take many forms across communities.

"Bar mitzvah" means "son of the commandment," and "bat mitzvah" means "daughter of the commandment." The words describe a change in status that happens automatically at the age of Jewish adulthood. The ceremony and party came much later. Historians trace the bar mitzvah as an event to medieval Ashkenazi communities in Europe, and many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities developed their own ways of marking the day, often centered on a boy's first tefillin. Families from Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Central Asia, and the Ottoman lands each brought their own customs, and many are still treasured today. JIMENA's companion explainers *Welcoming a Child* and *Synagogue* in this series describe the earlier milestones of a child's life and the setting of the Torah reading.

What happens at a bar mitzvah?

- **Tefillin.** Only adults wear *tefillin*, two small leather boxes holding verses from the Torah, during weekday morning prayer. In many Sephardic communities, putting them on for the first time was the heart of the celebration, and a respected rabbi or elder was honored with helping the boy.
- **Called to the Torah.** The boy receives an *aliyah*, an honor of being called to the Torah, on a Monday, Thursday, or Shabbat morning, when the Torah is read. Many boys chant a portion or the *haftarah*, a reading from the Prophets, using the musical signs, or cantillation, of their own community.
- **The derasha.** A short speech on a Torah topic, which Sephardic Jews have called the "tefillin derasha." It often ends by thanking parents and guests.
- **The festive meal.** A *seudat mitzvah*, a meal celebrating a commandment, brings family and community together.
- **Sweets.** In some communities guests toss candies at the boy, a wish for a sweet life. One source calls this an eastern Sephardic custom.

Tefillin first: a Sephardic emphasis

In medieval Europe, Ashkenazi communities came to bar children from Torah honors, so turning 13 became the moment those rights began. The historian Hayyim Schauss wrote that Sephardic communities never restricted children in this way. Instead, they celebrated a boy's first tefillin with a feast, sometimes about a year before age 13, along with a speech.

Customs on timing differ. The Encyclopaedia Judaica notes that many Sephardic authorities hold that tefillin should not be worn before the bar mitzvah day itself, while others describe a boy starting a month or so earlier. Families follow the practice of their own community and rabbi.

Community by community

Morocco

The Alliance Israélite Universelle describes the ceremony as traditionally held on the Thursday after a boy's twelfth birthday, often for several boys together. A party took place the evening before, and the next morning the rabbi gave the boy his tefillin. Other accounts describe the celebration at 13.

Families recall henna and a haircut the evening before, joyful ululation, a special *piyyut* (sacred poem) sung when he is called to the Torah, and a procession with decorated candlesticks, music, and sweets.

Sources: Alliance Israélite Universelle; My Jewish Learning (Hayyim Schauss); Encyclopaedia Judaica; Rabbi Ilan Acoca, Jewish Independent (2018); Moshe Gabai, Moreshet Morocco

Ottoman Sephardic (Salonica, Rhodes, Istanbul)

In Ladino the milestone was called *kumplir minyan*, "completing the minyan," since the boy now counts toward the prayer quorum of ten. In 1900, a Ladino newspaper in Salonica reported that the bar mitzvah ceremony was little known among local Sephardim; by the 1930s it was common there.

A 1957 religious guide by Behar, published in Istanbul, also addresses the bar mitzvah. In Seattle, Menache Israel gave his speech in Ladino in 1935.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies (Kara Schoonmaker, 2025)

Iraq (Baghdad)

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, known by the title of his book *Ben Ish Hai*, gave one of the earliest written instructions for marking a girl's coming of age: she should wear a new garment and say a blessing of thanks for reaching the day. He noted that Baghdad's custom was to hold a festive meal for boys, not girls. A 1963 photograph of a bar mitzvah in Baghdad appears in the U.S. National Archives' Iraqi Jewish Archive exhibit.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica; Jewish Women's Archive (Ariel Picard); U.S. National Archives

Iran

One Iranian Jewish family's memories describe early morning Torah readings, relatives cheering and calling out with joy, hard candies tossed at the bar mitzvah boy, and a party with dancing. The storyteller's family left Iran in July 1979, two days before his thirteenth birthday, and he celebrated simply in Los Angeles a month later.

Source: Ravdori Intergenerational Connection Program, Israel (2018)

Yemen

Yemenite Jewish boys traditionally learn to read from the Torah scroll at a young age, with their community's own cantillation, and in Yemenite synagogues each person called to the Torah traditionally reads his own portion. A Bar Ilan University historian notes that the bar mitzvah ceremony became standard in Yemen only in the twentieth century.

Sources: J. Weekly (Dan Pine, 2009); Ynetnews (Tali Farkash, 2023); Yeshivat Har Bracha

Bukhara (Central Asia)

Under Soviet rule, Bukharian Jewish boys often celebrated together in group ceremonies, sometimes after age 13, held early in the morning for privacy. Each boy was called to the Torah wearing tefillin. Manashe Khaimov's bar mitzvah in Samarkand in 2000 was described as the first public one there in eight years.

Source: Distinctions (Manashe Khaimov, 2024)

Egypt (Alexandria)

Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan, chief rabbi of Alexandria, introduced a communal synagogue celebration for girls in 1907. Rather than reading from the Torah, girls recited prayers and answered questions about Judaism after a course of study, making it one of the earliest bat mitzvah ceremonies in a Sephardic community.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica; Halakha of the Day (Rabbi Yosef Bitton)

Israel today

Bar mitzvah boys from Israel and around the world celebrate at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, a custom that began after 1967. In Israel, girls' twelfth birthdays are most often marked with a party, though some schools and synagogues offer ceremonies.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica; Ynetnews (2023)

The bat mitzvah

A modern milestone. Jewish law has long held that a girl becomes obligated in the commandments at 12, but for centuries there was no public ceremony. Celebrations for girls appeared in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: in Baghdad, the Ben Ish Hai recommended a new garment and a blessing of thanks; Italian Jews in Verona marked the day in 1844; and Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan held a girls' ceremony in Alexandria in 1907. In the United States, Judith Kaplan's bat mitzvah in New York in 1922 is often called the first American bat mitzvah.

Many approaches today. Families and communities mark a girl's coming of age in different ways, and each reflects sincere conviction. In many Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues, girls read from the Torah just as boys do. In many Orthodox and traditional Sephardic communities, girls celebrate with a festive meal, a speech on a Torah topic, a study project, or a school celebration. The late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a leading Sephardic authority in Israel, ruled that holding a festive meal for a bat mitzvah is proper. In Israel, girls often celebrate with a party, family trips, or school programs.

Common misconceptions

- **"The bar mitzvah is in the Bible."** The Bible does not mention it. The age of 13 comes from rabbinic tradition, and the ceremony developed in the Middle Ages.
- **"A bar mitzvah makes you an adult."** The change in status happens on its own at 13. The ceremony celebrates it.
- **"Every bar mitzvah centers on the Torah reading."** In many Sephardic and Mizrahi families, the first tefillin was the high point.
- **"Sephardic communities never celebrated girls."** Some of the earliest known guidance and ceremonies for girls came from Baghdad and Alexandria.

Words to know

Bar mitzvah / bat mitzvah *Hebrew and Aramaic*

"Son" or "daughter of the commandment." A Jewish coming of age.

Tefillin *Hebrew*

Small leather boxes holding Torah verses, worn by adults at weekday morning prayer.

Aliyah *Hebrew*

"Going up." The honor of being called to the Torah.

Haftarah *Hebrew*

A reading from the Prophets that follows the Torah reading.

Ta'amim *Hebrew*

The cantillation signs that guide the chanting of the Torah. Each community has its own melodies.

Derasha *Hebrew*

A speech on a Torah topic, given by the bar or bat mitzvah.

Seudat mitzvah *Hebrew*

A festive meal that celebrates a commandment.

Minyan *Hebrew*

A prayer quorum of ten. In Orthodox practice, it is ten men.

Kumplir minyan *Ladino*

"Completing the minyan," a Ladino name for the bar mitzvah.

Piyyut *Hebrew*

A sacred poem or hymn, often sung at celebrations.

Bringing the tradition to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach the bar and bat mitzvah as one of many coming of age traditions, and compare it with milestones in other faiths and cultures, such as confirmation or a quinceañera.
- Use a primary source: the University of Washington's exhibit shares a 1935 Seattle bar mitzvah speech in Ladino.
- Map the communities in this explainer and discuss how families adapted customs after migrating.
- Describe ceremonies; do not have students put on tefillin, chant from the Torah, or recite blessings or prayers.
- Students who are preparing for their own celebration may choose to share, but never ask a student to explain or perform their religion for the class.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Invite grandparents to describe their bar or bat mitzvah, and collect photos, speeches, and songs.
- Learn a few lines of Torah or haftarah in a Moroccan, Iraqi, Syrian, Yemenite, or Persian melody.
- Encourage students to write a derasha that honors a Sephardic or Mizrahi sage or ancestor.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for ideas across the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: How did our family mark this day? Who helped with the first tefillin? Were sweets thrown?
- Look for heirlooms, such as a tallit, tefillin bag, or speech, and record the stories behind them.
- Planning a celebration? Ask elders which customs, songs, and foods your community kept, and make them your own.
- Record an elder's memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think many cultures mark the move from childhood to adulthood with a ceremony, a speech, or a new responsibility?
- In many Sephardic and Mizrahi families, the first tefillin was a central moment. What does that tell you about what the community valued?
- How have celebrations for girls changed over the past 150 years, and why do communities approach them differently?

Learn more

Watch and listen

The Bukharian Jewish Community: History and Culture (JIMENA, 2021)

youtube.com/watch?v=DcH7_nKWxu0

Bat Mitzvah at 100: background videos (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/batmitzvah100/background-videos

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

Bar Mitzvah, a History, by Michael Hilton (Jewish Publication Society, 2014).

bookshare.org/browse/book/2022414

A Moving Feast: The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Across Jewish Cultures, by Hizky Shoham (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024). For teachers.

hartman.org.il/a-moving-feast-the-bar-and-bat-mitzvah-across-jewish-cultures

Today I Am a Woman: Stories of Bat Mitzvah around the World, edited by Barbara Vinick and Shulamit Reinharz (Indiana University Press, 2011).

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/today-i-am-a-woman-stories-of-bat-mitzvah-around-the-world

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"An Act of Good Will Softens the Hurt of an Exodus in Uzbekistan," by Manashe Khaimov His bar mitzvah in Samarkand in 2000, and Bukharian resilience.

distinctionsjournal.org/resilience-on-campus

Explore online

Kumplir Minyan: Bar Mitsva (University of Washington Stroum Center)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/bar-mitsva-ashkenazi-inspiration-sephardic-adaptation

Ceremonies and Celebrations (Alliance Israélite Universelle online exhibit, Morocco)

bibliotheque-numerique-aiu.org/en/exhibitions-us/exhibitions/82-ceremonies-and-celebrations

Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0003_0_02057.html

History of Bar Mitzvah (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/history-of-bar-mitzvah

History of Bat Mitzvah (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/history-of-bat-mitzvah

Ben Ish Hai (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ben-ish-hai

Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan: The First Sephardic Bat Mitzva (Halakha of the Day)

halakhaoftheday.org/2013/02/06/rabbi-eliyahu-hazan-the-first-sephardic-bat-mitzva

Importance of Rite of Passage (Rabbi Ilan Acoca, Jewish Independent)

jewishindependent.ca/importance-of-rite-of-passage

The bat mitzvah turns 100 (NPR)

npr.org/2022/03/17/1086733010/bat-mitzvah-turns-100-coming-of-age-jewish-girls

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)

sepharditoolkit.org

JIMENA Oral History

jimena.org/oral-history

Share your family's story

jimena.org/share-your-story



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; the Alliance Israélite Universelle; the Encyclopaedia Judaica; My Jewish Learning; the Jewish Women's Archive; the U.S. National Archives; NPR; Ynetnews; J. Weekly; the Jewish Independent; Moreshet Morocco; Halakha of the Day; Yeshivat Har Bracha; the Ravdori Intergenerational Connection Program; and Distinctions. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.