

New Policies for B'nai Mitzvah at CBH – And a Hope for New Customs, Too

As Congregation Beth Hatikvah has grown, one of the blessings has been the expansion in the number of B'nai Mitzvah who come of age in our community. The surge in Bar and Bat Mitzvah-age young people has challenged us to think creatively on a number of fronts – how to schedule Friday nights, how to juggle the use of various rooms in our building, how to extend the involvement of our CBH Singers into B'nai Mitzvah celebrations without overtaxing our remarkable musical volunteers.

For the last few months, our B'nai Mitzvah, Facilities, Religious School and Spiritual Life Committees have been meeting – separately and together – with Rabbi Amy to develop some principles to govern these varied circumstances. I'm pleased to report that the Board of Trustees adopted the committees' policy recommendations at the November board meeting. The policies have been posted on the CBH Website, and they will be communicated in various ways to B'nai Mitzvah families in the coming weeks.

At the heart of the policies is a desire to change CBH's thinking about B'nai Mitzvah in a very fundamental way. For many years – not on purpose, but just by the way we've come to do things – B'nai Mitzvah in our congregation have been regarded as family affairs, not as community celebrations. The family was encouraged to “own” the service – on Saturday morning, and to a lesser degree on Friday night. The unintended side effect has been that most of the congregation assumes that a Shabbat with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah isn't their affair. On the Friday night of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah weekend, attendance often is sparse. And on Saturday, the general rule is that if you don't get an invitation, you don't come to synagogue.

We'd like these norms to begin changing. We want Shabbat – whether or not a child is celebrating a Bar or Bat Mitzvah – to be a community celebration. We want to nurture an understanding that Shabbat services are the congregation's services. So while families will always be given ample opportunity, working with Rabbi Amy, to creatively tailor a Saturday service that reflects their children's personalities and preferences, the service likewise will always meet the whole congregation's needs – and be, we hope, a service that the whole congregation feels welcome to attend.

As always, we strived to base our new principles on CBH's core values, and not simply on pragmatics. The logic is that one person's obvious, practical solution may not take the next person's needs into account. By basing principles on values, we have a framework for balancing individual and communal needs. Fortunately, we think that these principles, agreed on by our four committees working with Rabbi Amy, will also be eminently practical.

In adopting these principles, we acknowledge that they represent a shift in emphasis, putting a higher priority – when scheduling requires a choice – on

meeting the needs of larger groups (the congregation in general, or the Religious School) than on meeting the needs of an individual B'nai Mitzvah family. We also acknowledge a responsibility to inform and educate families about the implications of these principles for their plans. Finally, we accept the responsibility to do the sort of thoughtful advance planning that will avoid scheduling conflicts.

Please read the policies on the Website and address any questions to Katia or Rabbi Amy.

Jim Schachter
Outgoing Spiritual Life Chair