



## About the B'nai Mitzvah Revolution (BMR)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaboration between the Union for Reform Judaism and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion School of Education, with funding from the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. From 2013-2019 BMR engaged professionals, lay leaders and educational thought leaders seeking to bring renewed depth and meaning to Jewish learning.

## About the BMR Innovations Guide

The purpose of the BMR Innovations Guide is to highlight b'nai mitzvah related innovations developed around North America that can spark innovation or be adapted in other congregations or communities.

The Guide is organized into six main Purposes that typically inform b'nai mitzvah Innovation:

- **Repairing the World:** Innovations that inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to *g'milut chasadim* (loving acts of kindness), *tikkun olam* (social justice).
- **Innovative Rituals:** Innovations that add new rituals into the b'nai mitzvah process or inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to Torah (learning) and *avodah* (prayer or ritual).
- **Mentoring:** Innovations that connect b'nai mitzvah students and/or families with others in the community, who will nurture, teach and guide them.
- **Becoming an Adolescent:** Innovations that support children and their families by focusing on the social, emotional and spiritual changes and milestones that accompany adolescence.
- **Participating in Community:** Innovations that infuse the b'nai mitzvah preparation with personal meaning, while maintaining the communal nature of the congregation and the worship service.
- **Family Engagement:** Innovations that work to engage whole families in Jewish learning and practice.

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## How to Use this Guide with a Congregational Team

Become familiar with the BMR's Innovations Guide by exploring and discussing it with members of your community. The Innovations Guide [User Protocol](#) is a discussion guide that will help you to:

- Become familiar with the [six categories of Purposes](#) that usually inform b'nai mitzvah innovation
- Learn about your own congregation's b'nai mitzvah program and discuss the overarching Purpose(s) that you would like to reinforce or introduce.
- Identify a [b'nai mitzvah related experiment](#) that your team could test out, either:
  - An innovation that your team would like to adapt, or
  - An issue you would like to consider when planning for experimentation

The [User Protocol](#) includes directions for facilitating two meetings with a team of b'nai mitzvah stakeholders. Sustainable change requires teamwork between congregants and professionals. We hope this resource will assist you in beginning that work together.

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# INNOVATIONS BY ORGANIZATION

Innovations described below were collected from 2014-2015. Information about specific programs and organizations is surely outdated. However, ideas and innovations may spark imagination for today's needs.

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# ANSHE CHESSED FAIRMOUNT TEMPLE

## Intensive Study and Creative D'verei Torah

Families and students are given the option to engage in mutual study of their Torah and haftarah portions with a member of the clergy, beginning as early as 14-16 months prior to their bar or bat mitzvah. This process fosters a stronger sense of engagement with the b'nai mitzvah preparation process and a deeper relationship between the clergy and the family. Through the process of study, the b'nai mitzvah student is able to identify a unique mode of expression for his or her *d'var* Torah, including creating videos and alternative haftarah teachings. Additionally, the clergy can work with families to create a service that meets the individual needs, limitations, and interests of each student.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Families have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Mentoring

## About Us

Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple

Cleveland, OH

1,100 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 55

## Links

[fairmounttemple.org](http://fairmounttemple.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## Bet Ha'am, Portland, ME

### Ask Me a Big Question

All b'nai mitzvah students begin their preparation for the service by first reading their Torah portion and coming up with 10 questions about what they read. The student brings the 10 questions to his or her first meeting with the rabbi, and together, they use these questions to select the verses that will guide the student's learning and be read at the service. Through the course of studying with the rabbi, students are encouraged to ask some "big questions" on any topic of interest to the student, whether related or unrelated to the Torah portion. The rabbi responds to one of these "big questions" during the b'nai mitzvah service, after the student's *d'var* Torah. By focusing on the child's question, the rabbi personalizes the teaching to the individual student while also offering learning with depth and meaning for the general congregation, including those who do not have a connection to the student.

### Lessons Learned

Shabbat morning "regulars" now feel there is something important for them in the b'nai mitzvah service, where they might otherwise feel disconnected. The "Ask Me a Big Question" sermon, builds a bridge between the b'nai mitzvah and the larger community.

### Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2011

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community

### About Us

Bet Ha'am, Portland, ME, 350 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 20

### Links

[bethaam.org](http://bethaam.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Central Synagogue, New York, NY

## B'nai Mitzvah Brit

In fourth grade, families attend a Shabbat morning service together, meet with the senior rabbi, and receive b'nai mitzvah and confirmation dates at this meeting, establishing a journey rather than an event. In the fifth grade, families receive the B'nai Mitzvah *Brit*, a document that specifies the values and responsibilities of all parties involved in the b'nai mitzvah process. During a b'nai mitzvah family meeting with clergy, families study the *brit* together and make additions that address unique family priorities. The bar/bat mitzvah student, the parents, and all members of the clergy sign the *brit*, signifying joint responsibility. At the sixth grade Masa Mitzvah Retreat, families and clergy come together to study, celebrate Shabbat, and discuss the values of the b'nai mitzvah experience.

## Lessons Learned

The key to this innovation is not the programming but the process. It took a few years for Central Synagogue to see the fruits of its labors, but today, post-b'nai mitzvah retention has tripled. The congregation has created an environment in which parents can openly and honestly share with one another their hopes and their anxieties.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 4, 5, 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2006

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Central Synagogue, New York, NY, 2000 members, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 110

## Links

[centralsynagogue.org](http://centralsynagogue.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation B'nai Israel, Fayetteville, GA

## Meet the B'nai Mitzvah

“Meet the B'nai Mitzvah” was designed to boost the communal aspects of the b'nai mitzvah experience. This close-knit community wanted to heighten the congregation's sense of responsibility for honoring young people's coming-of-age and facilitate the b'nai mitzvah families' connection to the greater congregational community. “Meet the B'nai Mitzvah,” which takes place on Saturday night, is open to the full congregation. Participants celebrate Havdalah together, play games, enjoy dessert, laugh, and have fun, all with the goal of beginning to build relationships and connections to each other. Everyone has developed a greater sense of obligation to the congregational community and to the celebration of b'nai mitzvah.

## Lessons Learned

Building relationships in the congregation requires baby steps, and “Meet the B'nai Mitzvah” is just the first step in that effort. Activities need to be light-hearted, pressure-free, and substantive in order to create the milieu for connections to begin to develop.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents, Community Members

Families have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings.

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community

## About Us

Congregation B'nai Israel, Fayetteville, GA

85 members, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 4

## Links

[bnai-israel.net](http://bnai-israel.net)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim #1

## My Israel

At the end of 4th grade, students and their families chose among three tracks (My Israel, My Personal Prayer Journey, and Team Tzedek) to becoming b'nai mitzvah. In the My Israel track students cultivate a meaningful personal relationship with Israel's history, culture, and people through traditional and experiential learning, both at the temple and on the ground in Israel. The temple partners with an Israeli educational tour company, creating a unique and personalized experience for each family. The tour culminates in a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service at a place which reflects the student's interests and passions. With guidance from the clergy, each student and family composes a personalized prayer book. A variety of itineraries have been created ranging in both duration and cost, so that each family can choose the option that is right for them. A family may arrange for an individual Bar/Bat Mitzvah or join the family trip for a group B'nai Mitzvah. A clergy member attends the group family trip; should a family choose to do a private trip the tour company would recommend a rabbi if one from the synagogue is not in Israel at that time.

## Lessons Learned

This track is designed for families who have made the conscious decision to travel to Israel for their child to mark becoming bar/bat mitzvah. The hope is that this option becomes more mainstream, as families see the life changing value of travel to Israel.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

**Year Implemented:** 2016

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement
- Innovative Ritual

## About Us

Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim, Deerfield, IL, 1100 family units

Reform Congregation, **B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 100+

## Links

[bjbe.org](http://bjbe.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.





# Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim #2

## My Personal Prayer Journey

At the end of 4th grade, students and their families chose among three tracks (My Israel, My Personal Prayer Journey, and Team Tzedek) to becoming b'nai mitzvah. In My Personal Prayer Journey, each student has the opportunity to create his/her own personal prayer experience, through the use of a variety of modalities, such as digital media, writing, art, music, etc. This expands upon a traditional course of study by adding the element of individual expression to both the learning process and the B'nai Mitzvah ceremony. This creates proficient prayer participants who read, connect, and interact with the prayer service in a way that resonates with their personal interests and passions.

## Lessons Learned

Change is challenging. In the inaugural year, a majority of families selected this track, as it is what was most familiar to them.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

**Year Implemented:** 2016

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement
- Innovative Ritual

## About Us

Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim

Deerfield, IL

1100 family units

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 100+

## Links

[bjbe.org](http://bjbe.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim #3

## Team Tzedek

At the end of 4th grade, students and their families chose among three tracks (My Israel, My Personal Prayer Journey, and Team Tzedek) to becoming b'nai mitzvah. In Team Tzedek, students and families create a community committed to improving the world through acts of loving kindness, community service, and advocacy for social change. Each student learns as part of a *chavurah* of 7-10 families. These *chaverot* will study together, participate in social action projects together, and create community together. The students celebrate their B'nai Mitzvah as part of a group ceremony, in which they read Torah, share what they learned about the Jewish value of giving, and explain how engaging in *gimilut chasadim* has impacted their lives.

## Lessons Learned

This track is the most “revolutionary” and it takes children and parents who are willing to buck the conventional B'nai Mitzvah model, in a community that places high value on the status quo. This track is the one which families have been hesitant to embrace. Children want B'nai Mitzvah similar to their older siblings and friends. Parents want their children to be the “stars” for the day.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

**Year Implemented:** 2016

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement
- Innovative Ritual
- Participating in Community
- Repairing the World

## About Us

Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim, Deerfield, IL

1100 family units, Reform Congregation, **B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 100+

## Links

[bjbe.org](http://bjbe.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation Beth Ahabah, Richmond, VA

## Pre-B'nai Mitzvah Ceremony

On a Sunday afternoon a year before the bar/bat mitzvah, the family and the rabbi meet on the *bimah* for a pre-b'nai mitzvah ritual that marks the beginning of the preparation process. The ritual adds framing to the preparation process by addressing the values of b'nai mitzvah and what it means to take on the obligations associated with preparing for it. The rabbi and the student engage in dialogue, families are given space to ask questions, parents bless their child, and the child blesses his or her parents.

## Lessons Learned

This ritual responds to families' need to feel valued by the congregation, moving the b'nai mitzvah preparation beyond the mundane tasks and instead into the realm of sacred ritual. It brings each family together as they begin this part of the b'nai mitzvah journey.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Every family is invited to incorporate this ritual into their b'nai mitzvah preparation process.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Innovative Ritual
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Congregation Beth Ahabah

Richmond, VA

650 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 25

## Links

[bethahabah.org](http://bethahabah.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA

## Ritualizing Moments on the Journey

To create a greater sense of comfort in the sanctuary space, to find opportunities to create holy moments, and to frame b'nai mitzvah as one holy moment in a lifelong journey, rather than an isolated one, ritual moments have been added to several steps in the b'nai mitzvah process. These moments include: (a) a cohort blessing on the bima on the Shabbat before bar/bat mitzvah dates are mailed out; (b) a cohort ritual for receiving one's Torah portion; (c) a personal blessing with the rabbi prior to beginning intensive Torah study with him/her; (d) a ritual before receiving one's siddur; (e) ritual for receiving one's tallit immediately prior to the bar/bat mitzvah service; (f) the bar/bat mitzvah service itself, and (g) a b'nai mitzvah-versary, the year after one's bar/bat mitzvah in which a special honor is given at services on the anniversary of the child's parsha. This constellation of rituals creates sacred moments for both the individual child and his/her family as well as for each cohort of families travelling on this journey together.

## Lessons Learned

Parents, and therefore their children, feel like they're not equipped to be comfortable on the bima. Families benefit from spending time in sacred moments in that space. These various rituals build a sense of appreciation for the experience of the b'nai mitzvah journey. They are surprised at how special these liminal moments make them feel.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

**Year Implemented:** 2016

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement
- Innovative Ritual

## About Us

Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA, 1600 families, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 60

## Links

<http://www.betham.org/>

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation Har HaShem, Boulder, CO, #1

## Ma'ameinim: Learning Mentors

There is no Hebrew School or b'nai mitzvah tutoring at Har HaShem. Research revealed that the tutor/student relationship was one of the most powerful experiences for b'nai mitzvah families, and so children are matched with a *m'amein* (tutor) based on their individual needs and interests. Building a powerful relationship with a family, the tutors mentor children to learn, increase their confidence, and foster a sense of Jewish faith and commitment. The tutors help children acquire the necessary skills, beliefs, and sense of belonging to become bar/bat mitzvah. They nurture each child's growing sense of responsibility, faith, and agency by helping to address the big questions of their emerging selves and encouraging them to find their own individual voices. Additionally, families commit to attending Shabbat services at least once a month. Tutors must have an established relationship with the congregation, know how to chant Torah, and agree to regular, ongoing professional development.

## Lessons Learned

The name *Ma'ameinim* comes from "amen," which also means, "to support, coach or guide." Amen also connects to the Hebrew words for "faith," "confidence," and "creativity."

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Community Members

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Mentoring

## About Us

Congregation Har HaShem, Boulder, CO

450 members, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 32

## Links

[harhashem.org](http://harhashem.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation Har HaShem, Boulder, CO, #2

## Project-Based Learning

Feeling that b'nai mitzvah students spent too much time on learning to decode and chant prayers, Congregation Har HaShem created a new curriculum for sixth and seventh graders to put more emphasis on Torah, text, "God-wrestling" and *tikkun olam* (social justice). Students are guided through a semester of project-based learning focused on *tikkun olam*, which begins with a parent/child retreat to explore what is broken in the world and to study Jewish texts about repairing the world. The students spend the semester in regular learning sessions to study texts, meet with "experts" in the congregation, choose a social justice topic, and create their own project around repairing the world.

## Lessons Learned

With other opportunities available for independent bar/bat mitzvah in the local community, this project-based learning model helps families find and build community.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents, Community Members

Families have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Repairing the World

## About Us

Congregation Har HaShem, Boulder, CO

450 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 32

## Links

[harhashem.org](http://harhashem.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation Har HaShem, Boulder, CO, #3

## Creative D'var Torah

In order to allow b'nai mitzvah students to individualize their services, each student has the option of doing a “creative” *d'var* Torah. In choosing this option, students are expected to delve more deeply into text study than other b'nai mitzvah students. Students and parents meet together with the rabbi and educator for two learning sessions that address studying text and how to locate one's self in the story. Through the process of studying the text, the student develops a project designed to teach the text. Examples of creative *d'verei* Torah to date include a piece of fan fiction, a play written by the student and performed by fellow students, and a game show played with the congregation.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Families have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings

**Year Implemented:** 2012

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Mentoring

## About Us

Congregation Har HaShem

Boulder, CO

450 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 32

## Links

[harhashem.org](http://harhashem.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Congregation Rodef Sholom, San Rafael, CA

## B'nai Mitzvah Family Retreat

In the fall, all pre-b'nai mitzvah children attend the B'nai Mitzvah Family Retreat with at least one parent. This gives families the opportunity to connect with one another, reflect on the process of b'nai mitzvah, and experience an immersive Jewish weekend. In addition to Shabbat services, parents and children spend time with their peers and with each other to explore issues surrounding b'nai mitzvah. Parents participate in activities designed to remind them what it was like to be 13 years old and to recognize that the process of becoming an adult is not easy. To gain better understanding of one another, parents and children share in an exercise exchanging perceptions and memories of being 13. Parents also write a blessing for their children on an adhesive that is then placed inside the child's copy of *Mishkan T'filah*.

## Lessons Learned

Being offsite is key to giving families time to take inventory and focus on this major lifecycle event.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2007

**Areas:**

- Becoming an Adolescent
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Congregation Rodef Sholom, San Rafael, CA  
1100 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 70

## Links

[rodefsholom.org](http://rodefsholom.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.





# Congregation Solel, Highland Park, IL

## B'nai Mitzvah Experience – Mitzvah Project

Congregation Solel, seeking to engage students in projects that reflect their interests and questions and to make the project a central part of the b'nai mitzvah, developed a three-pronged approach to their mitzvah project program. Sixth-grade families participate in several family programs in which they study their Torah portions, identify the values reflected in them, and delve into how they can live out those values in their home, within the congregational community, and in the broader world. Families explore *tikkun olam* experiences and build relationships with each other while doing hands-on projects, and students are given a Mitzvah Project coach who provides guidance throughout the process. The process ends with a reflection opportunity, as students create visual presentations about their projects, which are showcased outside of the sanctuary before their service. This allows others to learn about the meaningful work of the younger members of the congregation.

## Lessons Learned

Sixth grade is a perfect time for focusing on the mitzvah project because at this stage, students are able to understand and analyze the meaning of their Torah portions and are engaged in thinking about the b'nai mitzvah process.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Repairing The World
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Congregation Solel, Highland Park, IL

428 members, Reform Congregation, **B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 35

## Links

[solel.org](http://solel.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# JCC Manhattan, New York, NY

## Brit Atid

*Brit Atid* (Covenant of the Future), an aspect of the Jewish Journeys Project, is a yearlong learning experience designed to explore what coming of age means for a young person's relationship to self, family, and community. The program includes monthly one-on-one learning sessions with a Jewish educator, monthly family learning sessions, and participation in a class community service project; children are also expected to participate in courses offered at the JCC. The program culminates with a communal celebration with all families together, at which time children present projects they have created in response to a Torah portion.

## Lessons Learned

This communal celebration of coming of age has lifted some of the communal pressure off of families to throw large b'nai mitzvah parties. Families appreciate that the focus of the celebration is on the community of families, rather than on one child in particular.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Families may choose to participate in the *Brit Atid* program as a supplement or an alternative to a synagogue based Bar/Bat Mitzvah

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Repairing the World
- Participating in Community

## About Us

JCC Manhattan

New York, NY

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 8

## Links

[jewishjourneyproject.org](http://jewishjourneyproject.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Paula Brody & Family Education Center, Boston, MA

## Beneath the Surface, a Program for Bat Mitzvah Girls and Their Mothers

Beneath the Surface is a program for mothers and their pre-bat mitzvah daughters, designed to explore the power of ritual and how it can enhance the bat mitzvah experience. The goal of the program is to enable mothers and daughters to connect with each other through conversation, art, crafts, and texts. Moms and daughters learn about the power of ritual to mark moments of transition, and they have the opportunity to create their own personal ritual linked to the bat mitzvah. The curriculum is available for purchase and can be implemented in a variety of settings; it includes both intergenerational and parallel learning.

## Lessons Learned

Beneath the Surface has had unexpected positive impacts on mother/daughter relationships by giving them a meaningful access point to Judaism that has nothing to do with party planning, tutoring, or other stress factors during the bat mitzvah year. Mothers and daughters focus together on marking this time in a meaningful way.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Mothers/daughters have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings.

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Innovative Ritual
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Paula Brody & Family Education Center  
Boston, MA

## Links

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016  
between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



[mayyimhayyim.org](http://mayyimhayyim.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion, Oak Park, IL

## Sixth Grade Family Class

Students attend weekly with at least one parent for 15 weeks. The class is taught by an experienced family educator and teacher, along with the rabbi and cantor. The family class allows the parents to not only join their children in learning about Judaism, but also allows them to teach their children about Jewish life. In the sixth grade curriculum, participants learn about Shabbat worship as they prepare to lead the congregation through Shabbat services. The families in this program engage in meaningful Torah study, including having discussions of b'nai mitzvah Torah portions, helping families develop strong and meaningful b'nai mitzvah *tzedakah* projects, and exploring what b'nai mitzvah means to each family. A Hebrew pre-primer is used in this class. Through this program, stronger and longer-lasting relationships are built among the families and between families and staff of the congregation.

## Lessons Learned

Parents who learn alongside their children demonstrate long-term commitments to Jewish education. Oak Park Temple is trying to build a culture where it is understood and acceptable for parents to be very involved in their children's Jewish education.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Child and at least one parent are required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Repairing the World
- Mentoring
- Becoming An Adolescent
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion, Oak Park, IL  
500 members, Reform Congregation, **B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 40

## Links

[oakparktemple.com](http://oakparktemple.com)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## PeerCorps Detroit, Detroit MI

PeerCorps is a yearlong paid mentorship for Jewish teens and b'nai mitzvah students to build deep relationships with one another and a service site in Metro Detroit. Through mentor relationships, b'nai mitzvah students participate in mitzvah projects, and mentors (tenth- through twelfth-grade students) receive training during a week of living and working together in Detroit. All participants develop self-awareness, critical thinking skills, and a commitment to justice while connecting Jewish values to learning about self and society. Throughout the school year, mentors work with b'nai mitzvah students in grades five through eight who have made a minimum three-and-a-half-month commitment to volunteer every other week at designated service sites in the city. Each b'nai mitzvah student's experience begins with mentor-led orientation. During service days, mentors and local supervisors oversee the b'nai mitzvah students. Each day concludes with reflection on their experiences and learning.

## Lessons Learned

Some of the core ideas and structure of PeerCorps Detroit can be easily adapted to the congregational setting, especially pairing older teens with younger teens, providing older teens with meaningful and real leadership opportunities, and creating real and long-term relationships with service sites.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5 – 12

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Youth (post B'nai Mitzvah)

Families from participating congregations can enroll in the program as a way of completing their mitzvah project requirement for b'nai mitzvah.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Repairing The World
- Mentoring

## About Us

PeerCorps Detroit

Detroit, MI

In cooperation with Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, Joshua Venture Group, and participating synagogues

## Links

[peercorpsdetroit.tumblr.com](http://peercorpsdetroit.tumblr.com)

[eJewishPhilanthropy.com article](http://eJewishPhilanthropy.com/article)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## reBar, New York, NY

What aspect of your bar or bat mitzvah experience would you like to rewind and play again? The reBar project stands on this premise: “We were 13 when we made our bar/bat mitzvah commitments. Let’s see if they apply today and make commitments for the future.” Parents are invited to revisit their own adolescence or b’nai mitzvah from an adult perspective in order to understand the experience their child is going through. Parents affirm core Jewish values that are relevant to their life today and consider how they would like to engage Jewishly, both at home and in the community. Parents then dialogue with their child about the Jewish values they would like to affirm in his or her b’nai mitzvah. The free reBar DIY Toolkit includes all the materials necessary for engaging parents and families in these conversations, either during the course of a six-week curriculum or in a single evening.

## Lessons Learned

Because each community is different, adaptation of the reBar materials may be necessary. reBar staff is available to assist congregations interested in implementing a reBar program.

## Program Info

**Learners:** Children (pre-B’nai Mitzvah), Parents

Parents have the option of doing their own individual reBar, or the materials can be used in a group experience.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement

## About Us

Reboot

New York, NY

## Links

[rebarproject.org](http://rebarproject.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.





# Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA, #1

## Visual T'filah and Creative Writing Classes

Seventh grade students create “visual *t'filah*,” illustrations for prayers the congregation will recite at their bar or bat mitzvah. The students create a series of slides that include a welcome, shalom, Torah, haftarah, and holiness. They are guided through this creation process with a curriculum that helps them learn what feelings the prayers and Torah and haftarah portions are meant to evoke and how they can use imagery to enhance that experience. Some families have found new ways to use the slides to enhance the experience, such as displaying a picture of a relative who has passed away during the parents' prayer. Additionally, students work with the rabbi in a creative writing class to write their own *iyunnei t'filah*, comments or poems that relate to the themes of prayers they have studied. Guided by *iyunnei t'filah*, the cantor, and the rabbi, the students work to evoke similar feelings and expressions in their slides and writings.

## Lessons Learned

The success of the visual *t'filah* and creative writing courses is due in some part to the collaboration of the cantor (visual *t'filah* teacher), the rabbi (creative writing teacher), and the director of education, integrating the learning and process for the staff and learners.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah)

This is an elective for this age range.

**Year Implemented:** 2011

**Areas:**

- Innovative Ritual
- Mentoring

## About Us

Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA  
850 members, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 55

## Links

[kenesethisrael.org](http://kenesethisrael.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA #2

## Mitzvoteinu

Fifth grade students choose from seven social action activities available at the congregation, including working in the community garden, cooking meals for the caring community committee, and volunteering at a senior citizens' center. After an introductory session about what it means to volunteer, the students and their parents support the social action activities at least three times during the year and create a presentation (film, writing, speech, or any other medium they choose) to explain how they believe the activity relates to becoming a Jewish adult. After participating in *Mitzvoteinu*, students begin to plan their own mitzvah project to become a bar or bat mitzvah. Their educators guide them to think about what they learned in the *Mitzvoteinu* program and to apply it to their own mitzvah project.

## Lessons Learned

The introduction of this new program was initially met with resistance because some congregants felt that it was too much requirement without enough choice. Keneseth Israel has adapted some of its plans to incorporate this feedback.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents, Community Members

Families have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Repairing the World

## About Us

Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA

850 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 55

## Links

[kenesethisrael.org](http://kenesethisrael.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## Sherith Israel, San Francisco, CA

### Kvelling and Storytelling

Parents gather together every few months over brunch during Sunday school to *kvell* over their children and their own successes as parents as well as grapple with issues affecting parents of teenagers. A subject is chosen before the meeting; topics have included antisemitism and other biases, independence vs. protection, and *l'dor v'dor*—how to create connections with Jewish tradition that are authentic to each family. Parents share stories that illustrate their own challenges around topics they are often reluctant to raise in a group setting.

### Lessons Learned

The *Kvelling* and Storytelling gatherings help the group to grow as individuals *and* as a circle of parents, experiencing the congregation as a true community finding meaningful connections and supporting the sacred work of parenting.

### Program Info

**Learners:** Parents

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Becoming an Adolescent
- Family Engagement

### About Us

Sherith Israel, San Francisco, CA

550 family units

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 15

### Links

[www.sherithisrael.org](http://www.sherithisrael.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Shir Tikvah, Minneapolis, MN

## Beyond the Barchu

At Shir Tikvah, b'nai mitzvah is about being prepared to be a Jewish adult beyond the big day itself. Beginning in the fifth grade, families participate in a two-year series of learning sessions that incorporate family conversations, art, and worship services. The curriculum enables children and their parents to: articulate their motivations for becoming b'nai mitzvah; envision what they want the ceremony to look like based on their learning styles and family needs; and begin to craft their future Jewish engagement. Children are expected to take responsibility for their preparations, including Torah & haftarah exposition, a *d'var* Torah, service preparation, and designing a personal project about something they would like to learn or accomplish. A core goal is that each child will know, on the day of their b'nai mitzvah, that they charted this course and the work is theirs to be proud of.

## Lessons Learned

The experience of becoming b'nai mitzvah can be transformational for children and parents, and thus they all deserve to be nurtured and nourished.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5, 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2014

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Shir Tikvah, Minneapolis, MN

480 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 25

## Links

[shirtikvah.net](http://shirtikvah.net)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Adat Elohim, Thousand Oaks, CA

## Tzofim

In the *Tzofim* program, post-b'nai mitzvah teens become tutors and guide younger students through the process of becoming b'nai mitzvah. They experience tangible ways to make an impact on the lives of others, while pre-b'nai mitzvah students find mentors and role models with whom they can share concerns, ask questions, and gain guidance about the b'nai mitzvah experience, all while learning the prayers required of them to lead. Tutoring sessions take place year-round, so that seventh graders receive tutoring for seven to 18 months, depending on the date of their bar/bat mitzvah. The peer tutoring sessions focus on the liturgy, 25 prayers, and blessings that students are required to learn. Peer tutors keep track of material covered each week, and parents receive weekly email updates about their children's progress.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7, 8, 9, 10

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Youth (post B'nai Mitzvah)

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2008

**Areas:**

- Mentoring
- Becoming an Adolescent

## About Us

Temple Adat Elohim, Thousand Oaks, CA

550 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 50

## Links

[adatelohim.org](http://adatelohim.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## Temple Beth El, Charlotte, N.C.

### B'nai Mitzvah Madrichim

The B'nai Mitzvah *Madrichim* program is a peer-to-peer tutoring program in which eighth- to twelfth-grade teens are hired to tutor pre-b'nai mitzvah students. Post-b'nai mitzvah teens experience tangible ways to make an impact on the lives of others, serve as role models, and experience the responsibility of a “real job,” while pre-b'nai mitzvah teens find mentors and role models from whom they can gain guidance about the bar/bat mitzvah experience and learn the prayers required of them to lead. While eighth-grade *madrichim* volunteer their time as tutors, beginning in the ninth grade, *madrichim* are paid minimum wage for their time, with raises given to those who can do trope tutoring. A *madrich* works anywhere from two to 12 hours per month, depending on his or her skills and schedule. Tutoring sessions take place year-round. Each b'nai mitzvah student attends 20 weeks of tutoring, paired with one or two *madrichim* each week for 60-minute tutoring sessions.

### Lessons Learned

The cantor created a document that the *madrichim* and b'nai mitzvah students use to track progress made in tutoring sessions and assignments for home practice.

### Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Youth (post B'nai Mitzvah)

Students preparing for bar/bat mitzvah are required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2000

**Areas:**

- Mentoring
- Becoming an Adolescent

### About Us

Temple Beth El, Charlotte, N.C.

1100 members, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 70

### Links

[templebethel.org](http://templebethel.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.





# Temple Beth El of South Orange County, Aliso Viejo, CA

## Relationship-Building Retreats

Temple Beth El focuses on building relationships among its families and creating a sense of group identity among student peer groups. To further this effort, fifth- and sixth-graders participate in retreats to connect with peers and their families. In fifth grade, students participate in a “mini-retreat,” a one-night event at the synagogue. The event is intended to build relationships among fifth-graders in a familiar space for no more than one night, helping to reduce anxiety about being away from home. In sixth grade, all students attend a weekend-long retreat with at least one parent (all family members are invited to attend) at a retreat center.

## Lessons Learned

Parents and children alike have opportunities to build relationships with their respective peers.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5, 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B’nai Mitzvah), Parents, Siblings

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Becoming an Adolescent
- Family Engagement

## About Us

Temple Beth El of South Orange County, Aliso Viejo, CA

650 members, Reform Congregation

**B’nai Mitzvah each year:** 40

## Links

[templebethelsoc.org](http://templebethelsoc.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA #1

## Personalizing the B'nai Mitzvah Experience

Fifth- and six-grade students have the option of engaging in an additional project to personalize their b'nai mitzvah experiences. Each participating student works with his or her family and a synagogue staff member to identify a particular passion that can help explore what it means to him or her, personally, to be Jewish. Students create their own project for this exploration and partner with a mentor in the congregation to guide their work. For example, if a student is particularly interested in gender and LGBTQ issues, he or she might keep a blog to explore how Judaism addresses these topics, while working with a mentor who is interested in political activism.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5, 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents, Community Members

Families have the option of enrolling in this program in addition to the regular educational offerings.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Mentoring
- Repairing the World

## About Us

Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA

1200 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 80

## Links

[tbewellesley.org](http://tbewellesley.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA #2

## Milestones

In order to emphasize bar or bat mitzvah as one milestone along a Jewish journey, Temple Beth Elohim developed milestones for each year of learning, beginning with the consecration ceremony. In addition to consecration, other milestone ceremonies include receiving a *siddur* (prayer book) at the end of third grade, a *Tanach* (bible) at the end of fourth grade, and a *yad* at the end of fifth grade. Each milestone ceremony is created to be a “*Shehecheyanu* moment” with ritual and celebration.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** K – 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B’nai Mitzvah), Parents, Siblings, Community Members, Extended Family Members

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2008

**Areas:**

- Becoming an Adolescent

## About Us

Temple Beth Elohim

Wellesley, MA

1200 members

Reform Congregation

**B’nai Mitzvah each year:** 80

## Links

[tbewellesley.org](http://tbewellesley.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA #3

## Ma'asim Tovim

*Ma'asim Tovim* is the community service component of Temple Beth Elohim's b'nai mitzvah program. Beginning in fall of sixth grade and continuing through seventh grade, students continue their mid-week classes, but, in lieu of Sunday classes, they spend four to eight hours per month volunteering at one of approximately eight sites: the synagogue's caring community efforts, a food pantry and homeless shelter, a Head Start program, a senior citizen center, the Special Olympics, a poverty center, and a transitional housing program. To make the connection between Judaism and their volunteer work, each site visit begins with a 20-30 minute text study; to maximize the personal impact of the work, students keep journals.

## Lessons Learned

Beth Elohim addressed sixth and seventh grades separately because these students are at unique places developmentally. One of the reasons *Ma'asim Tovim* works well is because caring for others and making a difference in the world is an adult thing to do, which is an issue of interest to this age group.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 6, 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah)

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2008

**Areas:**

- Repairing the World
- Participating in Community

## About Us

Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA  
1200 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 80

## Links

[tbewellesley.org](http://tbewellesley.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, Beverly Hills, CA

## Journey to the Bima

Temple Emanuel created a series of 8 family education programs – 2 each year for 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> grades – with the desire to build a sense of community and provide occasions for families to get to know each other. What they soon learned from these programs is that parents very much want to infuse the b'nai mitzvah process with meaning, yet they don't necessarily have the tools to do so on their own. Temple Emanuel's family education programs provide opportunities and tools to meet both these goals. Topics of the programs include: in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, "What is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah" and "A Visual Tour of the Torah;" in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, "Judaism and Social Justice" and "Integrating Jewish Values into the Day"; in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, "Up Close with the Torah" and "Judaism in our Lives;" and in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, "Parenting Teens" and a community *Siyyum* (closing ritual).

## Lessons Learned

When given the opportunity to dig deeper into what b'nai mitzvah means to them as a family, they will appreciate it and engage in it. The key is to start early, in the 4th grade. By 6th grade families are already getting too stressed out about the details of the bar mitzvah celebration to begin these conversations. Emanuel also now encourages students to start their mitzvah projects in the 5th grade and to keep doing them through the bar/bat mitzvah.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th

**Learners:** Children, Parents

**Year Implemented:** 2016

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement
- Participating in Community

## About Us

Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, Beverly Hills, CA

720 family units, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 27

## Links

<http://tebh.org/>

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Isaiah, Lafayette, CA #1

## Hebrew Through Movement/Hebrew Side by Side

Temple Isaiah has changed its approach to teaching Hebrew, aiming for students to feel proud of their Hebrew skills and to connect to their Jewish heritage through Hebrew. Students mainly learn Hebrew prayers orally or through transliteration in twice-weekly *t'filah* services. The focus on learned Hebrew is "Jewish life vocabulary," as well as a rich vocabulary of modern Hebrew through the use of Hebrew through Movement ([www.hebrewthroughmovement.org](http://www.hebrewthroughmovement.org)). Students learn Hebrew vocabulary that helps them understand Jewish concepts, values, and experiences, as well as Hebrew related to Jewish holidays and rituals. In sixth grade, students participate in a 12-week "Hebrew boot camp," where they learn decoding to prepare for b'nai mitzvah using the curriculum [Let's Learn Hebrew Side by Side](#).

## Program Info

**Grade Levels:** 3-7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah)

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2012

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community

## About Us

Temple Isaiah, Lafayette, CA

900 members

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 55

Reform Congregation

## Links

[temple-isaiah.org](http://temple-isaiah.org)

[hebrewthroughmovement.org](http://hebrewthroughmovement.org)

[letslearnhebrew.org](http://letslearnhebrew.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## Temple Isaiah, Lafayette, CA #2

### B'nai Mitzvah University

The first four weeks of the seventh grade year is called B'nai Mitzvah University (BMU), during which time students and their parents learn about the history of and meaning behind b'nai mitzvah. The program is designed to build community by being fun and engaging, including events that the families participate in while wearing college alumni gear. Following BMU, seventh graders continue with programs such as Mitzvah Corps, in which they learn about and then engage in social action activities, and the Seventh Grade Fund, which teaches students about philanthropy by pooling financial contributions, researching causes, and deciding as a group how to distribute the funds.

### Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2007

**Areas:**

- Becoming Adolescent
- Family Engagement

### About Us

Temple Isaiah

Lafayette, CA

900 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 55

### Links

[temple-isaiah.org](http://temple-isaiah.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Israel, Columbus, OH

## Values Action Experience

Students embark on a six- to eight-month experience in preparation for becoming b'nai mitzvah, which includes three components: Torah, *avodah* (worship), and *g'milut chasadim* (action/value). Students begin their journeys by studying their given Torah portions, and, through the course of study, they pick one value in their portion that they wish to explore further. They then design projects to help them live out and explore that value, and they prepare a creative presentation about their experiences for the b'nai mitzvah services.

## Lessons Learned

Temple Israel began this project with b'nai mitzvah students, along with developing a values-based curriculum for first graders. Eventually, the congregation plans to have an entirely values-based curriculum from first grade through high school.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Families have the option of enrolling in the program instead of the regular educational offerings.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Repairing the World

## About Us

Temple Israel, Columbus, OH

575 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 20

## Links

[templeisrael.org](http://templeisrael.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.





# Temple Israel of Hollywood, Hollywood, CA

## Family Legacy Project

In helping to prepare young people to become b'nai mitzvah, Temple Israel of Hollywood initiated a family legacy project to help students and their parents record as much of their family's history as possible. Students are asked to search for historic family documents, photographs, family trees, recorded memories, memoirs, and ritual items, and they select an elderly family member to interview. Students are given a list of questions to draw upon, or they can ask their own questions. Each student then creates a presentation to share with peers and families during a Family Legacy Faire.

## Lessons Learned

In learning about these family members, children gain a sense of family identity and a greater sense of their family history. Older members of the families also find great satisfaction in relating their stories to future generations.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Extended Family Members

Everyone in the target audience is required to participate in the program.

**Year Implemented:** 2015

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement

## About Us

Temple Israel of Hollywood, Hollywood, CA

920 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 60

## Links

[tioh.org](http://tioh.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Kol Tikvah, Woodland Hills, CA

## Taking the Torah Home

On the Friday night before each student's bar or bat mitzvah, the rabbi, in a simple and private ritual, speaks to the b'nai mitzvah child about the importance of Torah in the Jewish community and how Jews have protected the Torah. The rabbi gives the child the Torah to take home and care for until the next morning, when he or she returns for their service of becoming a bar/bat mitzvah.

## Lessons Learned

The presence of the Torah at home creates a sense of calm and a sacred time for the family. The students create a unique connection to the Torah they bring home and talk about it afterward.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 7

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Every bar/bat mitzvah is given the opportunity to take the Torah home. No one has yet declined.

**Year Implemented:** 2014

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Innovative Ritual

## About Us

Temple Kol Tikvah, Woodland Hills, CA

230 members

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 40

## Links

[koltikvah.org](http://koltikvah.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



## Temple Sholom, Fanwood, N.J.

### Values-Based B'nai Mitzvah Process

At Temple Sholom, families may choose to create a uniquely personal b'nai mitzvah experience that is inspired by and grounded in an articulated set of values. Through a few learning sessions, families identify their values and explore how those values could inform the b'nai mitzvah process. Additionally, families participate in Shabbat morning learning services so they can develop greater understanding of the service structure. Families that choose to invest in the process work with the clergy to craft a b'nai mitzvah service experience that aligns with both the family's and the congregation's values. Temple Sholom aims to give children the option to express themselves personally, spiritually, and theologically throughout the b'nai mitzvah experience. Examples include writing songs as interpretations of the prayers, writing a creative service, or translating prayers into other languages for non-English speaking family members.

### Lessons Learned

Parents and children have to be invested in this unique process, especially the children. If they don't want to do it, they won't be excited and happy about the b'nai mitzvah experience. For this reason, Temple Sholom still offers the option for families to have "normal" b'nai mitzvah experience.

### Program Info

**Grade levels:** 5, 6

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents

Families have the option of enrolling in this program instead of regular b'nai mitzvah preparation process.

**Year Implemented:** 2013

**Areas:**

- Participating in Community
- Innovative Ritual

### About Us

Temple Sholom, Fanwood, N.J.  
240 members, Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year:** 15

### Links

[sholomnj.org](http://sholomnj.org)

The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution was a collaborative project from 2012-2016 between the URJ and HUC-JIR, in partnership with The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.



# Temple Sholom of Chicago, Chicago, IL

## 3rd & 4th Grade Family B'nai Mitzvah Retreat

Utilizing the facilities of URJ Camp OSRUI, Temple Sholom of Chicago provides families with a forum to explore how the *B'nai Mitzvah* experience is a step to Jewish living and becoming a mensch. At the same time, the program builds community by getting away to enjoy Shabbat time together at camp. Clergy and educators facilitate the adult and family programs, with the Youth Advisor leading children's programming. Time is provided for parents and children to connect, together and separately, with other families as well as clergy and staff, to enjoy relaxed meals, play games and learn together. Siblings are also welcome.

## Lessons Learned

Innovation doesn't have to mean creating from scratch, resist the urge to over-program, and empower participants to shape the program.

## Program Info

**Grade levels:** 3, 4

**Learners:** Children (pre-B'nai Mitzvah), Parents, Siblings

**Year Implemented:** 2016

**Areas:**

- Family Engagement

## About Us

Temple Sholom of Chicago, Chicago, IL

1000 member units

Reform Congregation

**B'nai Mitzvah each year: 55-70**

## Links

<http://www.sholomchicago.org/>

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# Innovations Guide

## User Protocol

### Goals

- Become familiar with the BMR's B'nai Mitzvah Innovations Guide
- Become familiar with the [six Purposes](#) that usually drive b'nai mitzvah innovation
- Determine a Purpose(s) for b'nai mitzvah innovation based on learnings about your congregation's b'nai mitzvah process and program
- Identify a b'nai mitzvah related experiment that your team is considering:
  - o an [innovation](#) that your team would like to adapt, **or**
  - o an issue you would like to consider when planning for experimentation

### What

Two meetings with a team of b'nai mitzvah stakeholders, with assignments for team members prior to and between the meetings.

#### 1. Meeting #1: B'nai Mitzvah Innovations Guide 1.5 hours

- Welcome - 5 minutes
- Review - 10 minutes
- Identify your possible Purposes - 60 minutes
- Assignment Distribution - 10 minutes
- Wrap Up - 5 minutes

#### 2. Homework Assignment Between Meetings

Innovations Guide Exploration (Up to one hour individually or with a partner)

#### 3. Meeting #2: Identifying your Main Purpose - 1.5 hours

- Welcome - 5 minutes
- Share Learnings from Innovations Guide - 30 minutes
- Identify innovations or issues that resonate - 15 minutes
- Determine Your Purpose - 15 minutes
- Preparing for Next Steps - 25 minutes
- Wrap up - 5 minutes

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This protocol includes directions for facilitating two meetings with a team of b'nai mitzvah stakeholders. Instructions for those meetings are described in greater detail below. Before holding those meetings, there is planning work that you will need to do that will enhance the efficacy of the work. Please read through the full protocol, including the details for each meeting in order to orient yourself to the types of conversations you will be having and the work you will need to do to prepare.

## Getting Ready for Experimentation

- **Gather a team**

Sustainable change requires a team (professional and lay) working together. Convene a team of thoughtful b'nai mitzvah stakeholders in your community. Inform those team members of the scope of the work you are asking them to do, the time commitment expected, and the dates of the two meetings.

- **Articulate a vision**

Visioning and planning are critical components of any change process. If you already have articulated a vision for b'nai mitzvah in your congregation, you are ready to delve into experimentation. You will have an opportunity to look at the Innovation Guide through the lens of your vision and goals.

It is likely that your congregation does not yet have a vision for b'nai mitzvah. This does not in any way prevent you from generating ideas and developing a possible experiment to test. Yet, although tempting, it would be a mistake to simply find an innovation your planning team likes and try to replicate it as the new program may not align with the goals and culture of your unique community. This exploration of the Innovations Guide could serve as a first step in your congregation's journey toward creating a vision for b'nai mitzvah.

If you choose to engage in some visioning work prior to delving into the Innovations Guide and developing an experiment, consider these resources which may help you:

- Read the BMR's [Theory of Change](#) to learn more about visioning and planning
- Bring [these Visioning Exercises](#) to your team to aid in creating a vision for b'nai mitzvah

Each [program profiled in the Innovations Guide](#) was created after considerable planning and in keeping with that institution's vision and culture. If one or more of these innovations appeals to you, begin by considering its rationale and purpose. Are these in keeping with the vision you have been articulating? If not, this might suggest that either:

- a) this might not be the best innovation to consider; or
- b) your vision needs to be broadened or altered in some way.

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# MEETING #1 - B'nai Mitzvah Innovations Guide

## Materials Needed:

- Copies of B'nai Mitzvah Innovation Purposes ([Handout 1](#))
- Copies of prepared Getting to Know our B'nai Mitzvah Process Chart ([Handout 2](#)) that lists the components of your congregation's b'nai mitzvah process and identifies which purposes each components serve.
- Copies of Homework ([Handout 3](#))
- The [B'nai Mitzvah Revolution Innovations Guide](#)

## Meeting Preparation:

1. Encourage all team members to spend time with the [Innovations Guide](#).
2. Customize and complete the Getting to Know our B'nai Mitzvah Process chart ([Handout 2](#)).
3. Add and/or delete components in the left-hand column to reflect your congregation's b'nai mitzvah process. For each component, put a mark in the appropriate Purpose column(s). Bring this chart to your team meeting for discussion.

Example:

	B'nai Mitzvah Innovation Purposes					
B'nai Mitzvah Component	Repairing the World	Innovative Ritual	Becoming an Adolescent	Participating in Community	Family Engagement	Mentoring
Mitzvah Project	X					
Meetings with Clergy			X			X
Orientation Meeting with Parents					X	

4. Assign homework of guided inquiry of 2-3 innovations within each selected Purpose. These assignments will be given to the team members during the meeting.

## Meeting Timeline: 1.5 hours

- Welcome - 5 minutes
- Review - 10 minutes
- Identify your possible Purposes - 60 minutes

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- Homework Assignment Distribution - 10 minutes
- Wrap Up - 5 minutes

### Meeting Activities:

#### Welcome: (5 minutes)

- Welcome and thank everyone for participating.
- Give an overview of this project, sharing why it is important and what you hope will come out of it.

#### Review: (10 minutes)

Invite individuals to share reactions to the BMR Innovations Guide. Possible questions you might ask to generate conversation:

- What stood out for you about this tool?
- What do you think is important for our group to keep in mind as we do this work?
- Are there experiments, ideas, or strategies here that our team might be able to learn from?

#### Identify Your Possible Purposes (60 minutes)

Distribute the B'nai Mitzvah Innovation Purposes ([Handout 1](#)).

Review the [six main Purposes](#) that typically drive b'nai mitzvah Innovation:

- **Repairing the World:** Innovations that inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to G'milut Hasadim (loving acts of kindness), Tikkun Olam (social justice).
- **Innovative Rituals:** Innovations that add new rituals into the b'nai mitzvah process or inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to Torah (learning) and Avodah (prayer or ritual).
- **Mentoring:** Innovations that connect b'nai mitzvah students and/or families with others in the community who will nurture, teach and guide them.
- **Becoming an Adolescent:** Innovations that support children and their families by focusing on social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and other changes and milestones that happen before, during and after adolescence.
- **Participating in Community:** Innovations that infuse the bar/bat mitzvah preparation with personal meaning, while maintaining the communal nature of the congregation and the service.
- **Family Engagement:** Innovations that work to engage whole families in Jewish learning and practice.

Discuss each of the Purposes:

1. Which of the Purposes make the most sense to you in connection with your vision for b'nai mitzvah? (See above, pg. 2)
2. Share the prepared Getting to Know our B'nai Mitzvah Process Chart ([Handout 2](#)) that lists the components of our congregation b'nai mitzvah process and the Purpose(s) that each component addresses.

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3. Notice which of the Purposes our congregation focuses on. How well are these Purposes being met? What's working and what's not working toward meeting each Purpose?
4. Which of the Purposes are not a focus in our current b'nai mitzvah process? Does this seem like a gap we want to address? Why or why not?
5. Which of the following do we want to explore?
  - a. Enhancing what we are already doing towards furthering one of the Purposes
  - b. Focusing on something that is not currently being addressed
6. Determine the 1-2 Purpose(s) we want to explore and discuss how they align with our vision. *Remember that these projects take the form of experiments. You are not expected to fix everything at once. Therefore, we suggest that you limit yourselves to **one or two Purposes** to investigate further.*

#### Homework Assignment Distribution - 10 minutes

Turn to the BMR Innovations Guide to see the [list of innovations](#) that seek to meet the Purpose(s) you have identified.

Distribute the Homework ([Handout 3](#)).

Assign each team member, or pair of team members, 2-3 innovations to explore that meet this (or these) Purpose(s). Review the assignment and the questions listed on the Homework handout. Decide together what and how you would like the material to be shared at the next meeting. Also decide how/who will remind everyone about their assignment.

Confirm together the date and time of the next team meeting.

#### Wrap Up - 5 minutes

Invite everyone to reflect on the meeting by sharing how a Purpose you have identified resonates with them. You may do it in a sentence whip, such as "I think (insert Purpose) is important for our congregation because \_\_\_\_\_."

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# MEETING #2: Identifying Your Main Purpose

## Materials Needed

- Paper and pens for team members
- The B'nai Mitzvah Revolution Innovations Guide

## Meeting Timeline: 1.5 hours

Welcome - 5 minutes

Share Learnings from Innovations Guide - 30 minutes

Identify innovations or issues that resonate - 15 minutes

Determine Your Purpose - 15 minutes

Preparing for Next Steps - 25 minutes

Wrap up - 5 minutes

## Meeting Activities:

### Welcome - 5 minutes

- Welcome and thank everyone for participating
- Give an overview of the meeting
- Access the BRM Innovations Guide so that team members can reference it when needed

### Share Learnings from Innovations Guide - 30 minutes

Everyone reports back on the 1-2 innovations they were most enthusiastic about, briefly describing the innovation and answer questions 1-3:

1. What do you think led this institution to introduce this particular innovation? What issues might they have been concerned with?
2. As best you can tell, what vision / values / goals underlie this innovation? List these values as you identify them.
3. What is appealing to you about this innovation? What concerns do you have about it? Address questions from the group.

### Identify innovations or issues that resonate - 15 minutes

Individual Free Write: Each participant spends five minutes collecting their thoughts, in writing, about the innovations introduced. Ideas will be shared with the group, not the writing.

Possible prompts for the writing:

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- What is it about any of the innovations that resonates with you and why?
- What concerns do you have about any of the innovations and why?
- Describe a tentative innovation idea that you are imagining. Which Purpose(s) would it address? What excites you about this idea? What concerns does it present?

Discuss what people are excited about, what concerns they are holding and any thoughts they have about experimentation ideas for your congregation.

### **Determine Your Purpose** - 15 minutes

Decide which of the [six main Purposes](#) driving b'nai mitzvah innovation is most compelling to your team.

If there is already a clearly shared Purpose, name it for the team and move on to the next activity.

If there are a few possibilities, poll the group to see which Purposes resonate most, then engage in a group discussion that will bring you to agreement on where to focus the next phase of your work. Some possible ways to structure the conversation include:

- Invite everyone to share their perspective on why a particular Purpose is most important.
- Ask the group how they would like to come to an agreement.
- If the group is struggling to come to consensus, you can “take the temperature” of those in the meeting using the following scale:
  1. I can say “YES” to the decision. I am satisfied that the decision is an expression of the wisdom of the group.
  2. I can live with the decision; I’m not especially enthusiastic about it.
  3. I do not agree with the decision and feel the need to stand in the way of this decision.
  4. I feel that we have no clear sense of unity in the group. We need to do more work before consensus is reached.

### **Preparing for Next Steps** - 25 minutes

- Briefly describe a tentative b'nai mitzvah related innovation idea that your team is considering. Which Purpose(s) are you hoping it will address? What excites you most about this idea? What concerns do you have with it?
- What would you need to consider and what would need to happen in order to continue this work?

### **Wrap-up** (5 minutes)

Invite everyone to reflect on the meeting by sharing either:

- something they learned during these sessions
- something they are looking forward to in the next phase of this work

Make plans to continue the work.

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# Taking the Next Step

Congratulations on making it to this point! You hopefully have an idea for an experiment that you would like develop further, or an agenda of items for further conversation with your team.

In order to get the most out of this process, and to keep moving forward with your work, here are some suggestions for continuing your work:

- Use the resources in this document:
  - [BMR Theory of Change](#) and [Visioning exercises](#): Articulate, or re-visit, your vision
  - Continue to learn what you can from the BMR Innovations Guide about innovations related to your Purpose(s).

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## Handout 1

## B'nai Mitzvah Innovation Purposes

These are the six main Purposes that typically drive b'nai mitzvah innovation:

- **Repairing the World:** Innovations that inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to G'milut Hasadim (loving acts of kindness) and Tikkun Olam (social justice).
- **Innovative Rituals:** Innovations that add new rituals into the b'nai mitzvah process or inspire practice of mitzvot typically relating to Torah (learning) and Avodah (prayer or ritual).
- **Mentoring:** Innovations that connect b'nai mitzvah students and/or families with others in the community who will nurture, teach and guide them.
- **Becoming an Adolescent:** Innovations that support children and their families by focusing on social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and other changes and milestones that happen before, during and after adolescence.
- **Participating in Community:** Innovations that infuse the b'nai mitzvah preparation with personal meaning, while maintaining the communal nature of the congregation and the service.
- **Family Engagement:** Innovations that work to engage whole families in Jewish learning and practice.

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## Handout 2

**Getting to Know Our B'nai Mitzvah Process**

Directions: Look at the chart below. Customize the components in the left hand column to reflect the elements of your congregation's b'nai mitzvah process. For each component, put a mark in the appropriate Purpose column(s) according to the definitions provided on [Handout 1](#).

	<b>B'nai Mitzvah Innovation Purposes</b>					
<b>B'nai Mitzvah Component</b>	<b>Repairing the World</b>	<b>Innovative Ritual</b>	<b>Becoming an Adolescent</b>	<b>Participating in Community</b>	<b>Family Engagement</b>	<b>Mentoring</b>
Mitzvah Project	X					
Meetings with Clergy			X			X
Orientation Meeting with Parents					X	

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## Handout 3

**Homework**

Spend about 1 hour learning about your assigned innovation(s), on your own or with a partner. Feel free to explore the institution's website to learn more about the institution and innovation.

Use the following questions to guide your inquiry:

1. What do you think led this institution to introduce this particular innovation? What issues might they have been concerned with?
2. As best you can tell, what vision / values / goals underlie this innovation?
3. What is appealing to you about this innovation? What concerns do you have about it?
4. What might you like to adapt for your congregation? In what way(s) might you adapt it?
5. If you did not find any ideas you want to adapt, did you generate ideas about issues you would like to consider when planning for an experiment at your congregation?

Gather information to share with the team at meeting #2 to describe the innovation and share answers to questions 1-3 above.

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# b'nai mitzvah revolution

## Theory of Change

### What is a Theory of Change and Why Do We Need One?

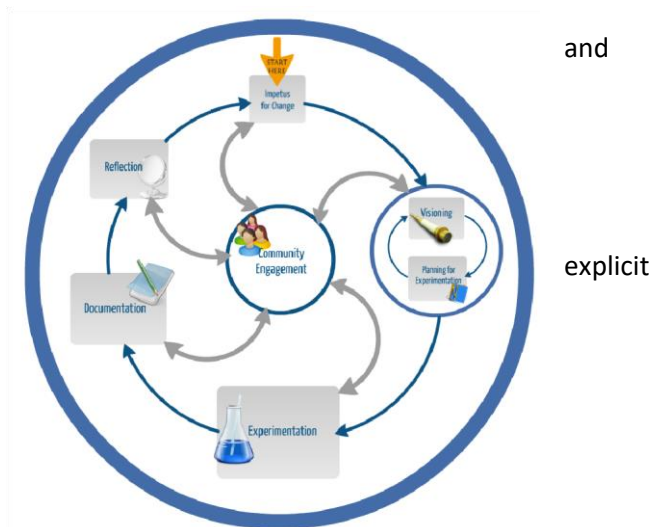
A “theory of change” is a model of — or a hypothesis about — the factors that will lead to a desired outcome. In the case of the BMR, our desired outcomes are:

- To generate new ideas and images of meaningful observance of b’nai mitzvah, observances that would tie b’nai mitzvah and their families more closely to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community.
- To create models of b’nai mitzvah preparation that are more engaging for both b’nai mitzvah students and their families

These outcomes are deliberately broad and general. We expect that every synagogue in this project will come up with its own definition of the terms “meaningful,” “engaging,” “more closely,” and even “the Jewish tradition” “the Jewish community.” And we expect that every synagogue will find different ways to reach its goals. That is what makes this project interesting and exciting.

The purpose of this document is to be as transparent and as possible about what we think it will take to achieve these outcomes. After months of discussion, the BMR staff identified 7 factors that form our theory of change.

- **Impetus for change:** This is what led a congregation to participate in the BMR.
- **Visioning:** Exploring (and possibly re-thinking) people’s beliefs about the role bar/bat mitzvah should play in the life of the child, the family, and the congregation.
- **Planning for experimentation:** The process a BMR team will go through to plan the innovations that will enable you to fulfill the vision.
- **Experimentation:** Implementation of these innovative programs and approaches.



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- **Documentation:** Collecting systematic data that will enable congregations to refine their experiments and evaluate their success.
- **Reflection:** Analyzing the data that has been collected, and considering what was learned from each round of experimentation.
- **Community Engagement:** Involving successive layers of the congregation in the BMR, so that a large part of the congregation comes to share the vision of the leadership team, and appreciate the changes that have been instituted.

## How These Factors Relate to One Another in the Context of the BMR

### Impetus for Change: What led a congregation to participate in BMR

- Project participants started thinking about the issues surrounding b'nai mitzvah long before BMR came along. The BMR application process brought their concerns “out of the closet” and created an opportunity for congregational leaders to have conversations about both their dissatisfactions and their dreams.
- Different members of the team may have come to this project for different reasons; it would be useful to learn (if you don't already know) what interested each of you in the project.

### Visioning

- Visioning is the process of articulating a desired future.
- A “vision statement” is a way station in this process, a document you can use to share one's values and assumptions about b'nai mitzvah. The vision statement is likely to change along the way as a larger group of stakeholders engages in this discussion, and as a congregation learns from continued experimentation.
- Examining one's assumptions is one step in the process of articulating a vision. BMR congregations have done this in both their applications and in assignment #1.

### Planning for Experimentation

- Why are we calling them experiments? Because they are trial balloons — first attempts at enacting the vision the team hopes to achieve. Thinking of these early programs as experiments frees people up to think creatively and boldly.
- Very few experiments succeed fully on the first round, and we expect that these trials will need to be revised and refined a number of times before they succeed in achieving their goals; and, of course, sometimes one needs to “pull the plug” on experiments. Calling them experiments gives one permission to try something that is, as yet, untested; it signals to participants and others that they are your partners and co-creators in these “works in progress.”

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- Which comes first: visioning or planning experiments? There is a *machloket* (a disputation) among change theorists about whether visioning or experimentation should come first. We believe that it doesn't matter where you start, since you should keep going back and forth to see if the experiments you plan are aligned with the vision and if the planning changes your vision. Our graphic tries to capture this visually by placing visioning and planning in the same bubble.
- Experiments are the concrete manifestation of the vision. It is through these innovations that most congregants will come to understand and share the vision, as it unfolds. Thus, it is critical to consider what kinds of experiments best suit the size and culture of one's congregation. Should early experiments include a select group of b'nai mitzvah students or the entire cohort? How many programs should one try to introduce at the same time? Alternately, can one stage them? These are just some of the questions that need to be asked as experiments are being planned.
- Even as the team plans ambitious, longer-range experiments, it should be thinking of smaller, short-term experiments that will test out some of the following factors:
  - How feasible are the plans? Does the congregation have the appropriate resources in terms of staff and money? How will staff be recruited and/or trained? How will the congregation find the funds?
  - What is the best way to recruit participants?
    - If they succeed, will these experiments get closer to the ideals expressed in the team's evolving vision? If not, what needs to change—the experiments or the vision?
    - How does one convince everyone (the team itself, the staff, the participants, and the congregation at large) that the early experiments are just a first step in achieving a larger change?
    - How can the team “claim success” for these smaller experiments while continuing to raise the bar—increasing the depth and scope of the experiments, and enticing larger numbers of children and families to participate?
  - What can the team do now to build ongoing support for experimentation on a larger scale?

## Experimentation

- Before implementing the experiments it has planned, the team will need to ask a number of important questions. The following are just a sample:
  - Does the congregation have enough staff with the necessary skills to facilitate the kinds of programs being imagined? If not, how can new staff be recruited and/or trained?
  - Who will explain to the staff the new direction the congregation is taking? How will the team support the staff as they enter the experiment?
  - Is there a group of potential participants who are especially well connected, who can be asked to recruit their friends to participate?
  - How will the team explain the experiments to those who are not (or not yet) involved?

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- What stakeholders need to be invited to learn about and/or observe your experiments, so that they can become supporters?

## Documentation

- Documentation is a critical component in the BMR for two reasons:
  - Most programs in Jewish life are evaluated anecdotally — they seem to work, or a number of participants give positive feedback. Documentation will enable pilot congregations to go beyond this kind of vague and subjective assessment to assessment that is based on evidence. (Note, assessment does not necessarily mean quantification!! More on this later.)
  - Over the past two decades, many innovations in congregational life have gone unnoticed, or at least under-appreciated. Through careful documentation, we hope to share the successes achieved, challenges faced, and insights gained in this project. In this way, the wisdom that accumulates in these congregations will have the best chance of being passed along to a wider network of synagogues.
- Rather than hiring outside evaluators, the BMR challenges and empowers the participants themselves to be their own documenters. The technical term for this kind of documentation is “action research.”
- In the context of the BMR, action research is the systematic gathering of evidence that will help pilot-cohort congregations understand what they are actually doing in their experiments (what is actually going on on the ground, as opposed to on paper); how the experiments are working; what effects they are having; and what changes the planners might want to make in the future.
- We have made action research a cornerstone of the project because we see it as the best way to challenge synagogue professionals to: do rigorous planning; take the time to reflect; hone their professional skills; and share what they’ve learned with others in a way that is evidence-based rather than anecdotal.
- Each of the pilot congregations has designated a documenter who works under the guidance of a mentor. The role of the mentor is to: help shape the research questions; identify appropriate methods and instruments for collecting data; collect the data most efficiently; analyze the data; and summarize their findings to be shared with others.

## Reflection

- As evidence is collected, a variety of stakeholders should be convened to reflect on it. In addition to the BMR leadership team, these include the professional and lay leadership and current, past and future b’nai mitzvah families. Even programs that appear to have achieved their goals have elements that can be refined; and even programs whose outcomes were not achieved have elements that can be built upon. Reflection and careful analysis is required to learn all that we can from experiments.
- Moreover, no change process, whether evolutionary, incremental, or transformational, runs smoothly. A myriad of potential issues can potentially complicate the journey, leading to unanticipated outcomes, some of them desirable and some undesirable. Reflection is critical to understanding how unexpected results came about.

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- Sometimes, even assiduous reflection leaves people feeling “stuck.” When that happens, the BMR staff, whose members have decades of experience guiding congregations through various change processes, are available to help.

### Community Engagement

- Since the ultimate goal is for the synagogue’s culture to be transformed, eventually everyone — from members with young children to board members who will be asked to budget funds for new efforts — should come to expect that the congregation’s b’nai mitzvah are, for example: more meaningful, more communally oriented: more tailored to the interests and abilities of the child: in other words, they are aligned with the evolving vision.
- For this to happen, members of the congregation need to be engaged in the change process from the start. While this cannot all happen at once, as many stakeholders as possible should do some of the following:
  - contribute to everyone’s understanding of why change is needed;
  - participate in shaping the vision;
  - understand the vision;
  - help shape the experiments;
  - participate in one or more of the experiments;
  - be touched in some way by the experiments;
  - reflect on and contribute to the experiments and the evolving vision.

Note that this kind of communication is multi-directional. It goes far beyond delivering sermons and writing articles in the bulletin, because it seeks to understand how various stakeholders perceive b’nai mitzvah and how they respond to the unfolding changes.

- It’s important to acknowledge that engaging the community continually takes a great deal of time and effort, both of which are in short supply in synagogue life. But research conducted on synagogue change efforts suggests that this kind of multi-directional communication is key. Failure to communicate the importance, urgency and value of the changes is probably the primary reason that synagogue change efforts fail.
- Malcom Gladwell’s book, *The Tipping Point*, is a useful resource for thinking about what innovators can do to help their innovations become deeply rooted and, ultimately, become part of a new set of expectations and a new reality.

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# VISIONING EXERCISES FOR B'NAI MITZVAH REVOLUTION CONGREGATIONS

Below are four exercises that can help various groups of stakeholders participate in the process of re-visioning the practice of b'nai mitzvah at their congregation.

## VISIONING EXERCISES:

Exercise 1: Reflecting on B'nai Mitzvah Experiences that Seem Special (page 2)

Exercise 2: Challenging our Limiting Assumptions (page 4)

Exercise 3: An Exploration of the Values Connected to B'nai Mitzvah (page 6)

Exercise 4: Drafting a Vision Statement and Writing a Series of Commentaries to Go with It (page 8)

## EXERCISE 1:

### REFLECTING ON B'NAI MITZVAH EXPERIENCES THAT SEEM SPECIAL

The easiest way to begin visioning is by recalling b'nai mitzvah ceremonies that seemed special.

This exercise will work best in small groups with about 5-6 participants each. The group does not need a facilitator, but it will need to designate a note taker, and someone who will report back to the others.

## HANDOUT:

- Start on your own by thinking about b'nai mitzvah that you have attended that seemed to “work” well in some way. They might include:
  - Your own bar/bat mitzvah
  - The bar/bat mitzvah of one of your children
  - Ceremonies in which the bar or bat mitzvah boy or girl seemed particularly “in sync” with the traditions of the service
  - Parts of the service that seemed moving and/or engaging

**What factors or conditions made these b'nai mitzvah observances particularly powerful or engaging for the child, the family and/or the congregation?**

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Of course, your own child's bar/bat mitzvah would be special to you no matter what else had happened, but, beyond that, what factors made it special? A particular ritual or custom? Something one of the clergy said?

The spirit in which the child participated? **INSTRUCTIONS**

*Give participants some time to think, and then share. As people share, take their answers and turn them into value statements, i.e., the importance of family, or making a connection to the Torah portion.*

*Note-taker: Keep track of the values on a board or flip chart.*

*After everyone has shared, look over the list and ask yourselves:*

### **Are any of these factors in tension with one another?**

Tension is most likely to arise when a practice that seems to some as particularly engaging seems to others to undermine traditions. This is an important issue to discuss. Your group need not arrive at consensus at this point, but it's worth noting that different people see both "engagement" and "tradition" differently.

### **Which of these values seem most important?**

Give everyone 5 stickers, and ask them to place the stickers on the factors that they think are most important for the congregation to introduce or stress. It's OK to divide the stickers in any way you like (e.g., anywhere from 1 sticker for your top 5 factors, to all 5 stickers on the factor you think most critical).

*Each group shares its top 5 values.*

*Whole group discussion:*

### **Take a look at some of the values that received the most votes.**

What might we do to increase the possibility that these values would be manifest at all of our congregation's b'nai mitzvah?

***Note-takers: Keep notes on the factors that received the most votes, and on the list of suggestions about increasing the prevalence of these factors.***

## **EXERCISE 2:**

### **CHALLENGING OUR LIMITING ASSUMPTIONS**

People make all sorts of assumptions about b'nai mitzvah, some of which are false (e.g., that b'nai mitzvah observances originated in the time of the Talmud; and that you don't become a bar mitzvah if you haven't had a aliyah to the Torah); others are true (e.g., one becomes a "bar mitzvah" automatically at the age of 13); still others reflect values that are debatable (e.g., the bar mitzvah child doesn't need to actually understand his/her

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Torah portion; s/he just needs to sound out the Hebrew correctly). Many of these assumptions are “limiting,” in that they keep us from thinking more deeply about what will make the ceremony both traditional and meaningful at the same time.

In this exercise members of the congregation share their own assumptions about bar/bat mitzvah, with a few goals in mind:

- To hear what assumptions people have, and see how much variation there is between different individuals and different groups.
- To challenge one another’s assumptions (respectfully, of course).
- To re-write some of the assumptions that seem most problematic, so that the congregation can arrive at a genuine consensus based on values that everyone can endorse.

The exercise requires a facilitator and two note-takers (to make things go more quickly), who take notes on flip charts, and post the results around the room.

This should be done with 10 - 30 participants.

*Opening question:*

**What assumptions do members of our congregation have about b’nai mitzvah observance?**

*This is a brainstorming exercise, so the note-takers take turns writing all the answers and posting their flip charts on the wall. If someone disagrees with a particular answer, s/he can offer an alternative assumption; both will appear on the list.*

*This can take 20=30 minutes. If the group seems temporarily stalled, some probes could include:*

- **Have we considered the assumptions that kids have? Parents? The b’nai mitzvah tutors? The clergy? Any other important group of stakeholders?**
- **Are we missing any assumptions about:**
  - **What the family needs to do?**
  - **The service?**
  - **The reason to have a bar/bat mitzvah?**
  - **What a bar/bat mitzvah represents?**

*After the assumptions have been listed, give participants 5 stickers each, and ask them to place one sticker on each assumption they would most like the congregation to modify.*

*Then, beginning with the assumption that received the most stickers:*

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# If you could wave a magic wand, how might you rewrite this assumption?

*It is likely that you will only get to discuss 4-6 assumptions; if there are other assumptions worth challenging, you can ask for a committee to do this work and report back.*

This exercise can be done with many different groups, yielding a rich list of assumptions people would like to challenge and rethink.

Think about how this list can be shared with the rest of the congregation:

- In the bulletin
- In a blog post
- In an exercise for the board

## EXERCISE 3:

### EXPLORING THE VALUES CONNECTED TO B'NAI MITZVAH

(WORKING DEDUCTIVELY FROM SOME EXAMPLES)

This exercise explores the values that inform b'nai mitzvah through examples of three very different kinds of b'nai mitzvah ceremony.

The ideal number of people in the group is 7-10, so if the group is larger, break into sub-groups. This does not require facilitation.

*Handout on the next page.*

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**HANDOUT:****Imagine two different ways to observe a bar/bat mitzvah:**

- Matt observes his bar mitzvah at the congregation's ongoing Shabbat service. He takes his turn chanting Torah with other congregants, chants the haftara, and gives a d'var torah.

Rebecca and her mother take a long bicycle trip together, with plenty of time to reflect on what turning 13 means to her, and what it means to become an older, more active member of her Jewish community.

**What values inform the way Matt's family chose to celebrate his bar mitzvah?**

**What values inform the way Rebecca's family chose to celebrate her bat mitzvah?**

**Compare the list of values underlying Matt's bar mitzvah, to the list of values underlying Rebecca's bat mitzvah:**

What tensions / conflicts do you see between these two lists?

How might you create a hybrid that would combine one or more values from each list?

**Now imagine a 3<sup>rd</sup> bar mitzvah:**

A year before his bar mitzvah, David and his parents create a list of 13 tasks that signify becoming a more responsible member of the Jewish community. Some of these are funny (like creating a costume for Purim), some relate to social action (like working in a soup kitchen), and some reflect his interests (like composing a song). In addition to reading Torah and haftara at his bar mitzvah, David's *d'var torah* relates the Torah portion to some of the tasks that made the deepest impression on him.

**What values inform the way David's family chose to celebrate his bar mitzvah?**

**What is your opinion of this hybrid bar mitzvah?**

**Can you imagine other hybrids of the two sets of values?**

## EXERCISE 4: DRAFTING A VISION STATEMENT AND WRITING A SERIES OF COMMENTARIES TO GO WITH IT

After doing visioning exercises with a variety of different groups, the leadership team should gather their notes, and create a first draft of a vision statement. Writing down the main points of consensus that bubbled up from the various visioning activities, and shaping them into an inspiring paragraph or page accomplishes two purposes: First, it creates a record of the conversation, keeping everyone "on the same page." Second, it enables you to communicate your ideas and values to others in the congregation.

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## WRITING THE VISION STATEMENT

There is no one right way to write a vision statement, and a great deal of disagreement over its ideal length; some experts argue that it should be only 8 words long; others insist that much more is needed. Bottom line: the statement must be short enough so that people will read it, and long enough to be substantive. The statement will undoubtedly go through many drafts, so the first draft need not be perfect.

It's important to keep in mind that the vision statement itself is only a pale representation of the wealth of insight and experience that led to its creation. In the absence of the conversations that animated them, the words of the vision statement can ring hollow, sounding like motherhood and apple pie.

So don't simply publicize the vision statement and leave it at that. In as many ways as possible, the vision statement should be used as a springboard for other members of the congregation to reflect on their own values and experiences, and to exercise their own imagination. **WRITING COMMENTARIES ON THE VISION STATEMENT**

This can be a short activity (15-20 minutes, as part of a meeting of the board, a committee, or a group of parents and /or children), or the main agenda item for an entire meeting.

If the group has not studied traditional Jewish commentaries before, this would be a good opportunity to offer a short introductory lesson about the tradition of Jewish commentary. The facilitator can choose a short selection from the weekly Torah portion (or any other passage in the Torah), and select a small number of commentaries that raise questions about the text, and offer a variety of answers.

### INTRODUCTION:

Explain the process by which the vision statement was written, stressing that, since this is to be a living document, it is now up to the rest of the congregation to write their own commentaries. They can do this in a variety of ways: by raising and answering questions, challenging assertions, elaborating particular points, or providing a personal perspective through anecdotes.

*Hand out a copy of the vision statement. It should be in the center of the page, framed by lots of white space all around, so it might appear to be several pages long.*

### FIRST:

**Take information questions only, such as:**

- What do you mean by "... " (a particular word or phrase)?
- Why did you say ....?

### SECOND:

**Everyone writes his or her own "commentaries" on the vision statement. These could be:**

- Challenges

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- Suggestions
- Revisions
- Examples of a particular point

*The exercise could end at this point. But if you wish to continue, take a brief break, while you look over the commentaries. Then open the floor to a discussion of the issues/questions/ suggestions that are: raised most often and /or are of great salience to you.*

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