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B'nai Mitzvah Preparation as a Portal of Jewish Learning and Connection for the Whole Family

Problem Statement

I have been tutoring *B'nai Mitzvah* students for almost twenty-five years. Before I started working with pre-teens, however, I went through my own education to become more comfortable with prayers and blessings, and eventually learned how to chant a *haftarah* and to *leyn Torah*. Growing up in a non-Orthodox, non-observant household, I was not exposed to very much in the way of Hebrew reading or ritual practice. Being a girl in a Conservative Jewish environment, with Orthodox relatives, it was not considered important that I be prepared for a *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony, or that I learn to read Hebrew prayers. I wanted to feel comfortable in the sanctuary, but I often felt the outsider, unable to follow along, unable to sing along, unable to recite *brachot*(blessings)..I loved the ritual of *Shabbat* services, with the *Torah* being paraded around the sanctuary, but everything was twice-removed from me. By the time I finished graduate school, met my husband, and started a family, much had changed in the culture of American Judaism. There were unaffiliated congregations, there was the start of some egalitarian Conservative congregations, and there were women rabbis and cantors. I was sure I had missed the boat, but this new breed of clergy convinced me that it was never too late to start learning more about Jewish practice. I have kept that as my Jewish educational, spiritual and cultural *mantra* ever since.

It is not easy to participate in Jewish prayer services and Jewish ritual practice if you do not know the “secret handshake”: services are, at least in part, in Hebrew; there are

special tunes for certain prayers and parts of the service; there are specific moments when one is supposed to stand, bow, bend over, cover one's eyes, sway from left to right, stand up on the balls of one's feet, and so on. There are moments of silence and there are moments of group response. Without education, this can all feel alienating and overwhelming. The complexity of necessary skills required to participate in Jewish prayer has helped to create a spiritual disconnect as well as a physical disconnect on the part of many people who culturally identify as Jewish, but who do not feel connected to Judaism as a religious practice. According to Chapter 4 of the PEW Research Center report on Jewish Americans, October 1, 2013, "Though many Jews say religion is not a very important part of their lives, participation in Jewish traditions remains quite common. Seven-in-ten Jews say that they participated in a Seder last Passover, for instance. And over half of Jews—including about one-in-five Jews of no religion—say they fasted for all or part of Yom Kippur in 2012 ("A Portrait of Jewish Americans").

America is a land of freedom of religion. We do not have to fight to be allowed to be Jewish. We are also free to *not* have a Jewish practice. In the October 2012 PEW study, when asked whether being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, ancestry, or culture, 62% cite either ancestry or culture (or a combination of the two). Fewer than one in five (15%) say being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, 23% say being Jewish is a matter of religion as well as ancestry and/or culture, and 83% of Jews of no religion say being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry or culture.

We now have a generation of parents who do not themselves know how to participate in services, and in many cases, do not know how to practice even basic Jewish ritual at home. Many of them were given recordings to learn their *haftarot* when preparing for

bar/bat mitzvah and as soon as they were finished with their rite of passage they stopped going to services or participating in Jewish ritual beyond attending a *seder*. This parental generation's children are now coming to the age of *B'nai Mitzvah* preparation. In some cases, the push to have the children tutored is driven by the grandparents. In some cases, the parents value the milestone, but are not well-versed enough to help their children in practicing *brachot*, chanting *haftarot*, or *leyning Torah*. As the tutor, I have heard many verses of the same basic song: "I went through it, so you have to go through it." "If you want that party, you have to learn this stuff." "It's important, it's what Jews do." "You'll make your grandparents so proud." But, I have also had parents express disappointment that their own education was so hollow. They memorized a Torah reading without learning how to really chant from the Torah. They memorized blessings without knowing their meaning, and there were no opportunities to learn more or use what they had learned in future settings. For parents who belong to a congregation and who are at the threshold of their child's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* preparation, there is a precious portal of inclusion and a unique opportunity to pragmatically empower both generations.

Thesis Question

How can Jewish educators, (Cantors, Rabbis, B'nai Mitzvah tutors, Religious School teachers), best use the period of interest in *B'nai Mitzvah* preparation as a portal of Jewish learning and connection for the whole family?

Hypotheses

The Bar/Bat *Mitzvah* ceremony is a window of opportunity when parental (family) motivation to learn increases.

Providing a "Ritual Toolkit" as an invitation for parents to learn along with, or in conjunction with, their child(ren) can help increase parental involvement in the learning which will, in turn, increase pupil motivation and make for a more meaningful experience for B'nai Mitzvah and parents. Because it is important to let people know that it is always the right time to learn one more thing in order to be more comfortable, and have a more meaningful connection to praying as a Jew, the "Ritual Toolkit" that I have developed over the past five years helps parents and children, using prayers, blessings, and other ritual skills, as points of entry into love of Torah and/or increased Jewish practice.

The Ritual Toolkit (See Attachment #1) is a checklist of prayers and blessings, which also includes learning *trope*, preparing a *Torah* reading, or a *haftarah*, and leaving some open space for anything else the child or parent would like to learn; perhaps a song or how to recite "*Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta*" along with the community, during a service. The most important component of the Ritual Toolkit is that it is a conversation-prompter giving both child and parent a voice in the development of their personal Jewish ritual

skills. It operates along the same lines as a grocery store shopping list under a magnet on your refrigerator door. 'We need some lettuce, apples, and toothpaste,' is a stress-free communication of what else we want to obtain for the household. The Ritual Toolkit creates a beginning list of "I know how to recite *Sh'ma/V'ahavta*, but I don't know how to recite *Vayomer*, and I'd like to". The student (adult or child) has a say in what happens next. The tutor provides the pre-printed list of some of the key "ingredients" a Jew might want to have in his/her "ritual pantry". For teens and for adults, having choices is important in their ability to learn comfortably.

Methodology

Over the last twenty-five years of tutoring, privately and for Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and unaffiliated congregations, as well as for the 92nd Street Y in New York City, I have been exposed to all different styles of preparing *B'nai Mitzvah*. I have learned just as much what *not* to do as what *to* do. Over the last five-and-a-half - years as a Cantorial student at The Academy for Jewish Religion, and as a Gratz College student, pursuing my Masters in Jewish Studies, I have been taught by exceptional teachers and, in my education classes, I learned about the importance of using different teaching methods for different individuals, because everyone learns differently. I have also learned that where someone is developmentally, or emotionally, can affect her ability to focus and to learn.

I began my research for this study by re-reading one of my textbooks from a class entitled "Understanding the Learner". In *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, the chapter on *Jewish Education in the Twenty-First Century*, Jonathan S. Woocher talks

about the potential of a “Jewish Renaissance” because of a reengagement with “Jewish learning and teaching that transcends the lines of age, setting, and religious ideology.”

(p.29) The twentieth century saw much modernization of Jewish education and a successful Americanization of some aspects of Jewish education with camps, youth movements, and Israel programs. There was also an increase in adult Jewish learning. But, this century still has its Jewish educational challenges. We cannot look at Jewish education as separate islands of concentration, although in many ways that has been the approach for some congregations. Woocher lists some challenges (pages 29-30) that affect Religious Schools, congregants, families, and by extension, affect congregations:

- Unclear (and often unrealistic) goals. Are we educating for identity, for cultural literacy, for specific knowledge and skills, for ideological commitment....?
- Despite our best efforts most Jewish education is still Jewish education for children.
- Fragmentation of education efforts....Our educational system is no system at all. It is an agglomeration of individual institutions whose relationships to one another are tenuous, and even competitive.
- Limited time allocations for Jewish learning, in terms of hours per week, weeks during the year, and years during the lifetime. Education must compete for “shelf space” in a highly competitive environment.
- Isolation of Jewish education from “real living”. Too much Jewish education still takes place in “bubbles” detached from the settings in which it is ostensibly located.

Woocher contends that, “We need to think less in terms of programs, and more in terms of pathways....The research is quite consistent....A clear educational vision, good personnel, attention to detail, involvement of the learners--these are what make a difference.” (p.31) Speaking directly to my work, Woocher describes the need for a much more flexible system of Jewish education. He says that Jewish education “needs to be ready whenever and wherever the learner is. This is especially true if our goal is to educate not just children, but adults as well.” (p.32) He advocates for thinking outside of the restricted teaching and learning environments and suggests that for some people having the equivalent of a “Jewish personal trainer” is part of the future, now present, vision. I might re-name that a “Personal Jewish Trainer”, but I see the *B’nai Mitzvah* tutor very much in that customized, personalized, one-on-one role, especially when one is working not only with the child but with the parent or parents as well.

In Roberta Louis Goodman’s chapter on Developmental Psychology, the theories of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Fowler are presented, with critiques on each and with implications of each theorist’s ideas for Jewish education.

Piaget’s theory of Cognitive Development concludes that most children’s thinking goes through four distinct stages. For children from 6 years to 12 years they are in the Concrete Operational stage where some of the behaviors are: Form ideas based on reasoning, limit thinking to objects and familiar events, can think systematically, but only about concrete objects. For 12 years and older, there is the Formal Operational stage where they: think abstractly, think systematically, and think hypothetically. (p.89) Piaget was also responsible for the idea that “children learn best when they can determine the meaning and significance of something rather than being told or led.” (p.90)

Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development identifies different phase names connected to a Developmental Task and Ego Strength that is developed and has various characteristics pertaining to each phase. For School Age (6-12 Years) the phase is Industry vs. Inferiority Leads to Competence with the following characteristics: Form relationships with others in neighborhood or school, make things, go to school. During Adolescence the phase name is Identity vs. Role Confusion which leads to Fidelity. The characteristics are: Listen to peers and peer groups, form ideologies, share oneself with others, formulate a sense of who one is and what one wants to be as an adult. For Middle Age the phase is Generativity vs. Stagnation which Leads to Care. The characteristics are: Mentor others, share labor with others, provide education to others, explore a variety of interests, continue to be productive, contributing member of society, family, and care for the next generation.

In this theory, a person's social environment is the context in which the developmental growth occurs. Having *B'nai Mitzvah* students practice and learn together with their peers can be part of the tutoring process. Having parents learn with each other or with other parents of *B'nai Mitzvah* or just other adults, provides a venue where support, growth, and helping others can be part of the learning process.

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development was an extension of Piaget's work. According to Kohlberg, there are six stages of development and accompanying characteristics. Focusing in on the earliest age of onset for Stage 3 being 13 years, we see Stage 3 - Conventional is The Stage of Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Conformity. The accompanying characteristics are: Act in response to the expectations of, and loyalties to, recognized others--family, peers, friends,

groups; take on the perspective of others, putting oneself in someone else's shoes; give priority to shared feelings, agreements, and expectations over that of individual interests. (p.95)

For Middle Age, Stage 5 is Postconventional and Principled: The Stage of Prior Rights and Social Contract or Utility. The accompanying characteristics are: Act out of a sense of justice that is prior to or higher than society's laws; criticize laws or practices of society that are unjust; act on principles, rights, and values that would benefit all if a society were fair; examines both the moral and legal points of view. (p.96)

For teaching both *B'nai Mitzvah* and their parents, Judaism provides many applicable touchpoints for learning, all wrapped up in the *mitzvot* and the Torah.

Incorporating the theories of his predecessors, Fowler developed his Faith Development theory which is about the whole person and what it means to be a human being. At 12 years, we are at Stage 3 - Synthetic Conventional Faith. Its characteristics are: Become attuned to ways others perceive self as part of abstract thinking; form own identity based on roles and relationships; seek and value approval and acceptance of others; look to non-parental role models in all aspects of life, including religion; (makes them susceptible to cult leaders); seek and grow in personal relationship to God; describe God primarily in interpersonal terms; seek groups to belong to; (make them susceptible to gangs and cults); see meaning of texts, opinions as being self-evident; can get stuck on one viewpoint; respond evocatively to symbols; interpret texts, people, and events in tacit, unexamined way. (p.100)

In Mid-Life, Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith's characteristics are: open up to and often explore and experiment with a variety of religious experiences and expressions;

appreciate paradox, ambiguity and inconsistencies in truth and life; tolerate differences; recognize the relativity of one's views, including one's religious group; renew sense of mystery found in ritual; focus on the transcendence of God and holiness. (p.100)

Taking Fowler's theory into consideration one can see that the implications for reaching out to parents for a customized approach to expanding their Jewish education fits in with where they are at this point in their development. It also helps to explain the importance to the parents regarding the ritual of Bar/Bat Mitzvah for their child. Looking at Fowler's developmental theory in regards to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah child, we can see how crucial the timing and how important the positive, uplifting nature of the teaching relationship needs to be, taking each individual's sensitivities and development into consideration.

Isa Aron, Ph.D., director of Hebrew Union College's Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), wrote in her book, *Becoming a Congregation of Learners*, that "A congregation of learners is a center for authentic Jewish learning--learning that is viewed as a lifelong endeavor, that grows out of the life of the community, and which, in turn, strengthens the community....It is an instrument for enculturating individual members into active participation in Jewish life, but it is also a model for Jewish community." (p.28) Dr. Aron describes a congregation-wide process of visioning from which all education, programming, and even ritual choices develop. Where one would need an entire congregation's "buy-in" to create organization-wide change in the manner he describes, there are individual aspects of Congregational Learning that pertain to my approach to *B'nai Mitzvah* training in a congregational setting.

Aron highlights the limitations inherent in afternoon and weekend religious school and explains that some congregations have responded by instituting family education. "They have found that teaching prayers and rituals in a family setting increases the chance that the rituals will be practiced at home, and that the entire family will attend prayer services together....When the entire family becomes involved in Jewish learning, a clear message is sent to the children that what they are doing is important." (p.41)

The Teaching Process

At one of the very large congregations where I served as one of more than a dozen tutors, there was a requirement that the tutor send an email to both parents, with a copy to the Cantor, summarizing what was covered in the 30-minute lesson that day, how the child did in his/her preparation and what the homework assignment was for the coming week. Many of the tutors were unhappy with this requirement because it took extra time to write the reports, and there was precious little time to work with each student. Some didn't want to take even 5-minutes to write the report at the end of the lesson, and others didn't want to take an extra hour at home writing report after report within the 24-hour deadline. But it was absolutely clear to me how important these reports were. I adopted this reporting as part of my tutoring regimen everywhere I worked.

For parents who hardly ever, (if ever), see the tutor, the email reports help to develop a relationship between parents and tutor. The reports also keep the Cantor informed as to how and what the tutor is doing, how the child is doing, and how informed the parents are. The reports can also serve as an insurance policy if there is ever a challenge to

how or what the student was being taught and whether the parents were informed of any challenges.

In a congregational tutoring environment where perhaps there is one tutor (the Cantor), or perhaps two or three tutors, developing a system of reporting, checks and balances, and a universal approach that allows for flexibility and independence within a guideline of base criteria creates a solid platform that lends itself to a feeling of security for the tutors, the students, the parents, and the congregation.

Listening to parents consistently express their lack of knowledge and inability to follow along in synagogue services, and understanding that *Ihavewalked in their shoes*, has brought me to reach out to these parents with offers of learning, “one more thing”.

Sometimes it is how to recite the blessing over lighting the *Shabbat* candles.

Sometimes it is how to recite *Shehechyanu*. Often it is how to properly sing the blessings before and after the reading of the Torah, for their *aliyah* the *Shabbat* morning service of their child’s becoming a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. Over the years, when circumstances permitted, I have offered to teach the interested parent(s) to learn *Torah trope* and to *leyn Torah*. When a parent accepts this offer, they become more connected to what their child is doing and their child often becomes their greatest support.

Parents study independently of their child or with their child, depending on the people involved. Some students are embarrassed either because they don’t want to show their lack of perfection and rawness in front of a parent who may be controlling or overprotective. On the other hand, there are students who want to show their parents

how well they are coming along. Sometimes parents don't want to appear vulnerable in front of their children, so they prefer to learn apart from their child. However, along the way, I often hear that the child has become the tutor at home, helping the parent review and practice.

For those who learn Torah cantillation, and haftarah chanting, imagery and metaphors are very helpful. It makes a lesson that much more engaging when the melody of a cantillation group is described as a duck getting a sense that a fish is in the water beneath him and dives into the water to come jumping out with a fish in its beak, and then shakes off the water and straightens its head once again! It sounds so silly, but they remember the tune!

Another technique is using the common toy *Legos* as the idea behind the structure of each verse of Torah, and by extension, each *aliyah* (portion of the Torah reading). The cantillation groups are called "*Leyning Legos*" and each group has its own distinctive *Lego*. I am currently working on developing a physical set of "leyning manipulatives" made out of real Legos, much like math teachers use math manipulatives to teach math concepts.

Another important piece of methodology is using the technology that is available to us and fun for our students! Just six years ago, I was recording sound files on my computer and burning CDs for my students to use in their home practice. That changed over to sound files sent via email and now, my student hands me her iPhone or Android, they open the "Voice Memo" application) and I announce, "Quiet on the set!" and start to record whatever we need at that moment. Some of the parents are a little behind in this technology, which only makes me, the tutor, that much cooler to my Bar/Bat Mitzvah

protege(e)! Along the same lines, just this year I've begun to incorporate smart phone photography as an exciting tool in Torah preparation. I use a copy from a page of a *tikkun* as the initial resource for preparing a Torah reading, but, as soon as we are comfortable chanting from the non voweled/unvocalized side of the *tikkun*, I have a photo of the Torah reading from the actual *sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) from which the child, (or parent), will be *leyning*. Being able to practice from a virtual image of the actual scroll provides another level of security and comfort. In "the old days", (last year!), one would have to wait to the week before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah before seeing what the reading one prepared looked like in the actual scroll. It's challenging enough to read from the Torah for the first time; it's even more challenging when you see that the words are falling in a different arrangement than that to which you had become accustomed.

Other changes I've made over the years include having the student, (adult or child), use the appropriate tools for the job. A Torah reader prepares by working out of a *tikkun*, a book that has the Torah readings in two columns: the column on the right has vowels and *ta'amim* (trope symbols), and the left column has the Hebrew words without vowels or trope symbols, as it would appear in Torah scroll. I give my students a copy of the page from the *tikkun*, and I usually have it enlarged to make it a bit easier to decipher. I find that the students are both surprised by the more exotic font often found in a *tikkun*, but they adapt quickly and appreciate the sophistication of their resource. We also work with a sterling silver *yad* (Torah pointer) that I use during our lessons. This makes the effort very real and heightens the sense of history and ritual importance. If I ever forget to take out the *yad*, my students always remind me! We also learn our prayers and

blessings from a *siddur* (prayer book), not copies of a few pages and not a pamphlet that no one in a real sanctuary setting would use. And, for learning *haftarot* we use a *chumash* (Book of the Five Books of Moses and haftarot).

Using the right tools allows one to learn in a real setting, and allows one to grow into their extended use. One goal is for the student to feel at home in the sanctuary by knowing how to find one's place in the Torah scroll, knowing how to find one's place during the prayer service, knowing how to lead some of the prayers, if needed. All of these are real scenarios for someone who knows her way in synagogue.

The best tool is real life exposure to Jewish practice. Easier said than done in many synagogues today. If there isn't a Bar/Bat Mitzvah that morning, many congregations have light attendance for *Shabbat* services. Schools list attendance minimums, and where some children are given "credit" for showing up, they are often dropped off, while the parents attend to some other task that morning. The message is "**You have to attend, I don't,**" and the other message is, "**Grown-ups don't go to synagogue. Get through this phase and you won't have to go either.**" How is that cycle broken? It's a tricky thing to change a culture anywhere, and very tricky to change a synagogue culture. It takes time. It takes a lot of listening and it takes courage to make mistakes and to learn from those mistakes. But, there is no substitute for learning in the real-life environment, so another methodological tool is the personal invitation. "I'd like Cindy to lead the *Birkot HaShachar* (the Morning Blessings) during our *Shabbat* morning service three weeks from now. It would be so special for all of you to be there, and I know it would be a perfect opportunity for you to practice the Torah blessings when you're called for an honor at the Torah.....We can practice the blessings together and I'll send

you a sound file as a backup resource.” It may not always be answered affirmatively, but, having shown respect for the scheduling of a morning three weeks away, instead of assuming they would be available the next *Shabbat*, and asking personally, and offering help, is much different than sending a blast email threatening that the Jewish people will become extinct if more families don’t show up for their “required” *Shabbat* service attendance.

In one relatively large congregation where I worked, seventh graders who were learning Torah trope in a group setting, during their religious school class, were given written tests that were graded. If they didn’t get a high enough grade on their written test, they couldn’t move on to the next trope group, and their parents had to sign the low grade paper. How would *you* feel if your introduction to preparing to become *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* was that demeaning ritual?

The Survey

I developed a follow-up survey that I distributed to 20 families, a tool to measure increased engagement with Jewish life, post-Ritual Toolkit. The people invited to participate in the survey are parents of children I tutored over the past six years. These were not the parents of children tutored under the auspices of some of the very large congregations, where the tutor almost never meets with the parents face-to-face. The parents who were invited to participate in the survey were either private clients who belonged to a congregation where I was serving as either a teacher or as Cantor, or clients who hired me to teach their child how to read Hebrew and eventually how to read and recite blessings and prayers connected to a Shabbat service. The common

denominators were that in each of these cases I had the autonomy to create the curriculum and to invite the parents to participate in the educational process, and in each of these cases, for whatever their reasons, there was an already existing deep interest in the children being prepared for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Shabbat service, where their child was expected to read from the Torah and lead at least some prayers and recite some blessings.

One or two parents had a solid base in reading Hebrew, reciting prayers, and participating in some home ritual. One parent already knew how to lead some services and *leyn Torah*. For these parents, the tutoring process was less about engaging them and much more about providing a positive *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* tutoring experience for their children, with the parents sometimes serving as helpers and guides.

Findings:

50% of respondents said that, as a parent, (before their child began Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring), they (the parent) attended Jewish prayer services only for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

33.33% said they attended once a month

8.33% said they attended twice a month

8.33% said they attended weekly

We also learned that 50% of the respondents had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah service when they were 12 or 13 years old, and 50% did not. 16.67% of the respondents had an adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

When asked how connected they felt to the services in the sanctuary during Shabbat services, (before their child began his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring:

8.33% said they did not feel connected at all at that point

16.67% said they felt mildly connected

41.67% said they felt more than mildly connected

16.67% said they felt quite connected

16.67% said they felt extremely connected

When asked how connected they felt to the services in the sanctuary during Shabbat services *after* their child completed his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring:

0% said they did not feel connected at all

27.7% said they felt mildly connected

36.36% said they felt more than mildly connected

18.18% said they felt quite connected

18.18% said they felt extremely connected

There is a shift in results here:

	BEFORE	AFTER
Not at all connected	8.33%	0%
Mildly connected	16.67%	27.70%
More than mildly connected	41.67%	36.36%
Quite connected	16.67%	18.18%
Extremely connected	16.67%	18.18%

33.33% of the respondents said they were barely able to follow along with reading from the prayer book, singing along during services, or reciting *brachot*(blessings), before

their child began his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring. Most comments centered on the fact that they could not read Hebrew. Some people could follow along but not pronounce anything out loud. 16.67% had no problem at all and could follow along and participate.

Again, there is a shift in results when parents are asked how much more confidently they were able to follow along with reading from the prayer book, sing along, or recite *brachot*(blessings) during services, after their child completed his/her tutoring:

	BEFORE	AFTER
Not able to recite any blessings	0.00%	0.00%
Barely able to recite a blessing	33.33%	16.67%
Somewhat able to recite some blessings	25.00%	41.67%
Able to recite some blessings	25.00%	25.00%
Very comfortable reciting some blessings	16.67%	16.67%

The most significant changes occurred where one would expect; that is, where people were barely able to recite a blessing or were somewhat able to recite some blessings, there was a marked improvement after their children's tutoring sessions. Most dramatically, the comments were that there was no change for those who had already been comfortable, but for others: "We felt more connected as a family participating together throughout services", and "Later, I learned to lead some portions of the Friday night service."

The following results show the connection that parents felt before their child began his/her training:

	BEFORE
Not at all connected	8.33%
Minimally connected	25.00%
Connected	50.00%
Very connected	16.67%
Extremely connected	0.00%

While 9.09% of parents said that their child's tutoring experience had no impact on their own connection to Torah, and 0.00% said that the tutoring had an extreme impact on their connection to Torah, 27.27% said that they felt it had a small impact on their connection to Torah, **36.36% said that it had a medium impact on their connection to Torah, and 27.27% said that it had a strong impact on their connection to Torah:**

"Well, I learned a Torah portion simultaneously with my son, I practiced chanting the trope. I felt that I had more of an insider's knowledge of the tradition and learning to chant gave me another level to interpret the text."

"I was never Bat Mitzvahed and going through this experience with my child and actually learning alongside each of them made me feel connected to Judaism and to my child."

We also learned that before their child began his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring all of our respondents felt some level of connection to Jewish practice. None of them said that they felt completely disconnected and none of them said that they felt extremely connected. 25% said they felt a small connection, 50% said they felt a moderate connection, and 25% said they felt a strong connection.

When asked, “How much of an impact on your connection to Jewish practice did your child’s tutoring sessions have on you?”, 16.67% said that they had no impact on their connection to Jewish practice. No one said that the tutoring sessions had a tremendous impact on their connection to Jewish practice, and no one said that they had a minimal impact on their connection to Jewish practice. However, 41.67% said that the tutoring sessions had a moderate impact on their connection to Jewish practice and 41.67% said the tutoring sessions had a strong impact on their connection to Jewish practice. *“Tried to participate more to encourage my child and to understand the rituals.” “Made me want to make sure I was doing things correctly.” “Made us more aware of the meaning behind the prayers and the rituals.” “We came to shul more often and I celebrated Shabbat more frequently.” “....Hearing them practice and practicing along with your child brings back a lot of the teachings you obtained throughout your Jewish life.”*

One-third of the respondents learned to *leyn*(chant from) the Torah as part of their child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring with Lois Kittner. For those who did not learn to *leyn* they could not say there was an impact on their relationship with Judaism. For those who did learn to *leyn Torah*, the impact on their relationship with Judaism was

moderate, strong, or a deep impact. ***“I felt more of a connection to being Jewish learning how to leyn Torah.” “At the time, I became more committed to ritual service.”***

When asked, “As a parent, after your child completed his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah training how connected did you feel to Torah?”, no one said that they felt completely disconnected, and no one said that they felt extremely connected, to Torah. 33.33% said they felt somewhat connected, 33.33% said they felt moderately connected to Torah, and 33.33% said they felt strongly connected to Torah: “I respect the complicated history and the process of wrestling with the questions.” “I felt that I could appreciate it on a deeper level by understanding the effects of the trope.” “I felt like a part of something bigger than myself.” “It reinforced or more to the point restrengthened an appreciation for the Torah.”

When asked to what extent they were inspired to learn more about Jewish ritual practice, after their child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, 16.67% said they were not inspired at all, 16.67% said they were somewhat inspired, 33.33% said they were moderately inspired to learn more, **25% said they were definitely inspired to learn more, and 8.33% said they were very inspired to learn more. “I participated in a lay leadership class.”**

Implications

The rationale for the list of prayers, blessings and synagogue skills on the Ritual Toolkit checklist is that some of these are iconic Jewish blessings, such as *Shehechyanu*, and they do not exist solely for reciting during the *Shabbat* morning service when a child is

called to the *Torah* for the first time. Using the desire to learn how to read or recite *Shehechyanu* for the *Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah* morning, as a stepping stone to helping these same Jewish parents discover how reciting *Shehechyanu* can become a part of their lives outside of the sanctuary, is just one example of how the simple list of the Ritual Toolkit can be used for numerous points of entry to leading a life that integrates Jewish values and expression on a daily basis. It helps to replace the notion that to be Jewish one must do “all or nothing”, and allows people to come to Judaism at their own pace.

Understanding the complicated world today’s pre-teens live in is key to working with them under any circumstances. Today’s sixth-grader is overwhelmed with an incessant flow of information coming at her from all technological and physical directions. She is also over-scheduled with school responsibilities and after-school responsibilities. This, besides the normal challenges of being an adolescent! What I have found works well for many students is a less didactic, open approach to tutoring. Giving the student choices in how much to work on and what to work on, (within certain predetermined, but flexible guidelines), gives her a voice in her own project.

The implications of helping adolescents and their parents to discover the underlying reason for Jewish prayers and blessings and seeing how ritual relates to their everyday lives can be far-reaching. Learning for connection, understanding and meaningful prayer in a Jewish context breaks the mold many of these parents come from. If the goal is to raise Jewish adults who understand that talking to God is also “Jewish” prayer, then we can help to open yet another portal to continued Jewish learning. Learning how to actually *leyn Torah* instead of memorizing a sound file and feeling that

you “faked it”, can bring one closer to *Torah*. Learning that even the basic home ritual of stopping to acknowledge the separation of the regular week from the holiness of *Shabbat*, by taking a few moments to recite a blessing and light *Shabbat* candles, is a beginning. The parents have opened the door by joining the congregation and bringing their children to classes at the religious school, but it is up to us, as clergy and professional Jewish educators, to let them know that it is okay for them to come in too.

As Seymour Rossel and Sara Lee write in the Introduction to *A Congregation of Learners :Transforming the Synagogue into a Learning Community*,(p.7): “....*The number of Jews who are candidates for Jewish education is, in truth, identical with the total number of Jews. Jewish literacy--knowledge of the tenets, life-style, history, customs, and ceremonies of the Jewish people--is the stuff of lifelong Jewish learning. If Jewish education is to be successful, it must not be confused with Jewish “schooling”....If we are serious about bringing Jewish learning to the Jews of North America, we must look to the one institution in which the vast majority of Jews take part, which is the congregation.....we must create a congregation of learners. By doing so, we will by definition create a congregation of Jews who live their lives Jewishly.*”

The methodology and resources I have developed over the last twenty-five years, rely on listening to the needs and desires of my B’nai Mitzvah students and their parents. This teaching approach could be used in a congregational environment, where a certain level of interest is established by default, in that the family belongs to the congregation. The second level of interest is that the family has made arrangements for their child(ren) to be tutored in preparation of becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah. However, since it is often the case that even students who had attended the congregational Religious School for a

number of years come to Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring with many items lacking from their personal Ritual Toolkit, we cannot and should not assume that fifth and sixth-grade Religious School attendance is enough to prepare the students for ritual and service participation at the level expected by the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Rena Fraade, the Director of Religious School at Larchmont Temple shared with “The Coalition of Innovating Congregations: an initiative of The Jewish Education Project”, the results of a survey of the seventh graders at her congregational school. **Here are some of the key pieces of information (she) heard from them:**

- They want to know why/how the learning they are doing “applies” to their lives
- They are busy, they want to feel like their time is being used well
- They aren’t really thinking about a Jewish future right now, they are living in the now
- The traditions of Judaism matter to them.
- They are listening to their parents AND their friends as influencers
- They want the opportunity to make choices about their time
- Technology is part of who they are, they find it annoying when they are asked to put the phone away
- Some of them are very compassionate and want to act on it
- They are both scared and excited for the future...they love learning but on their terms...they love their friends but want to meet new people...they yearn for the freedom to BE

Listening to our students and to their parents, to gain a better understanding of what is going on for our pre-B'nai Mitzvah and their families, are important tools in helping to educate and in helping to foster individual Jewish practice.

Inviting parents to be part of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* learning experience is one part of what could be a many-spoked wheel. Offering congregational education to enrich entire families of learners would ultimately allow people to go beyond learning by rote and begin to connect to their Jewish practice. The Ritual Toolkit is a conversation starter for people who are uncomfortable talking about how little they know of Jewish prayers, how alienated they feel during services, and how disconnected they feel to anything remotely spiritual in a Jewish context.

As the paradigm shifts, the list changes too. The future “shopping list” might have some of the following items:

- ❑ Engaging with the prayers and blessings for meaning and connection
- ❑ Learning how to *davven* with less emphasis on being able to lead the prayers and more emphasis on how to pray to God
- ❑ Torah study as normative behavior, with openness to new ideas and an introduction to learning from our Jewish sources
- ❑ Seeing the connection between our liturgy and Torah
- ❑ Making the connection between our daily life and Torah

Is it worth reinventing the Congregational Educational wheel? Paul Steinberg, on 12/23/13 in “*Educating for Jewish Identity Doesn’t Cut it Anymore*”, from *eJewishPhilanthropy.com*, in discussing Dr. Jonathan Woocher’s findings from 2012,

explains “Jews, just like most American, want to pick and choose their personal identity and proclaiming a static Jewish identity violates their conception of democracy.

Consequently, a Jew’s Judaism in America is not denied, it’s just positioned in the free marketplace to compete for priority amongst all of the other ideas, religions and cultures that each of us encounter--that’s the American way!...Therefore, we need a new response as to why Jewish education is important....We need to address the *apriori* question: Why is Judaism itself important? Why does Judaism exist and what about Judaism defines its core purpose?

Steinberg says: “...the underlying premise of Judaism is a spiritual one and filled with meaning, and that’s exactly what people need, no matter how or whether they choose to identify as a Jew. We must shift our educational attention and priority from the outward focus of Jewish identity to the inward focus of spiritual identity through Torah...”.

There are many ways to come to Torah. My job as Cantor, and as B’nai Mitzvah tutor is to help people feel that spiritual connection through song, through prayer, and I believe, through *leyning Torah*. People are visibly moved the first time they come to the Torah, and chanting Torah for the first time is an experience they never forget.

Steinberg says there is a need for a new breed of Jewish educator: “A Jewish educator must now have not only a vision for a school, but a vision for Judaism itself.

Programming, curriculum, and instruction are profoundly important, but are empty shells without spirit--without heart and soul. We need Jewish educators that know the “why of Judaism” just as well as the “how of Judaism”. If educators can’t speak to why we are teaching Judaism beyond the reason of Jewish identification, Judaism and Jewish practice will become progressively irrelevant.”

In “*Creating a Healthy Congregation*”, Ron Wolfson, Ph.D. Union for Reform Judaism, 2014, says that Synagogue transformation has a long way to go. He and his partner in Synagogue 3000/Next Dor, Professor Larry Hoffman, advocate moving from a transactional/programmatic model to Relational Judaism, which can take years.

Meanwhile, for the families who are joining synagogues and who are enrolling their children in congregational schools, and who are registering for *B’nai Mitzvah* tutoring, the paradigm shift can be put into effect by making immediate changes: Changes in attitude, changes in goals, changes in tools, changes in resources, and changes in methodology. With so many parents survivors of an empty formal Jewish education, and inheritors of a legacy of a life of “cultural” Judaism, with no spiritual connection and no ritual practice, today’s Jewish educators are never only teaching the child in front of them. Our job is not to teach families *about* Judaism, our job is to help establish Judaism’s relevance to their real lives.

APPENDICES

Ritual Toolkit

Torah Cantillation Guide Sheet

Haftarah Trope Guide Sheet

Sample Survey

LOIS KITTNER – RITUAL TOOLKIT

Student's Name _____ Today's Date: _____

Parashah: _____ Haftarah: _____

Parent(s): _____ Bar/Bat Mitzvah Date: _____

Email(s): _____ Phone(s): _____

- ☐ Shema/V'ahavta/Vayomer
- ☐ V'Shamru
- ☐ Hatzi Kaddish
- ☐ Blessing for Lighting
Shabbat Candles
- ☐ Friday Night Kiddush
- ☐ Al Netilat Yadayim
- ☐ Motzi
- ☐ Tallit Blessing
- ☐ Mi Chamokha
- ☐ Avot v'Imahot
- ☐ Gevurot
- ☐ Kedushah
- ☐ L'Dor Va Dor
- ☐ Torah Service
 - o Va Y'Hi Binsoa
 - o Sh'ma/Echad/Gadlu
 - o Processional (L'kha
AdoShem....)
- ☐ Hatzi Kaddish (Musaf)
- ☐ Avot/Gevurot (Musaf)
- ☐ Kedushah (Musaf)
- ☐ Morning Blessings (Ivrit
v'Anglit)
- ☐ Baruch She'amar
- ☐ Aleinu
- ☐ Mourners Kaddish
(Kaddish YaTom)

- ☐ Blessings Before Torah
reading
- ☐ Blessings After Torah
reading
- ☐ Torah Trope
- ☐ First Aliyah
- ☐ Second Aliyah
- ☐ Third Aliyah
- ☐ Fourth Aliyah
- ☐ Fifth Aliyah
- ☐ Sixth Aliyah
- ☐ Seventh Aliyah
- ☐ Maftir
- ☐ Blessings Before Haftarah
- ☐ Blessings After Haftarah
- ☐ Haftarah Trope
- ☐ Haftarah

- ☐ _____
- ☐ Ein Keloheinu
- ☐ Adon Olam
- ☐ Havdallah

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

- ☐ DATES for SERVICE
PARTICIPATION:

- o _____
- o _____
- o _____

NOTES:

TORAH CANTILLATION

mer-cha tip-cha mu-nach et-nach-ta

tip-cha mu-nach et-nach-ta

mer-cha tip-cha et-nach-ta

tip-cha et-nach-ta

mer-cha tip-cha mer-cha sof pa-sook

tip-cha mer-cha sof pa-sook

mer-cha tip-cha sof pa-sook

tip-cha sof pa-sook

kad-ma ma-pa-ach pash-ta mu-na-ach ka-ton

ma-pa-ach pash-ta mu-na-ach ka-ton

ma-pa-a-ach pash-ta ka-ton

pash-ta ma-na-a-ach ka-ton

pash-ta ka-ton

mu-na-a-ach ma-pa-a-ach pash-ta mu-na-a-ach ka-ton

kad-ma v az-la-a-a-a

- 1 מֶרְכָּא טִפְחָא מְנַח אֶתְנַחְתָּא
- 2 טִפְחָא מְנַח אֶתְנַחְתָּא
- 3 מֶרְכָּא טִפְחָא אֶתְנַחְתָּא
- 4 טִפְחָא אֶתְנַחְתָּא
- 5 מֶרְכָּא טִפְחָא מֶרְכָּא סוּף-פְּסוּק:
- 6 טִפְחָא מֶרְכָּא סוּף-פְּסוּק:
- 7 מֶרְכָּא טִפְחָא סוּף-פְּסוּק:
- 8 טִפְחָא סוּף-פְּסוּק:
- 9 קַדְמָא מִהַפֵּד פִּשְׁטָא מְנַח קֶטוֹן
- 10 מִהַפֵּד פִּשְׁטָא מְנַח קֶטוֹן
- 11 מִהַפֵּד פִּשְׁטָא קֶטוֹן
- 12 פִּשְׁטָא מְנַח קֶטוֹן
- 13 פִּשְׁטָא קֶטוֹן
- 14 מְנַח מִהַפֵּד פִּשְׁטָא מְנַח קֶטוֹן
- 15 קַדְמָא וְאַזְלָא

TORAH CANTILLATION

Handwritten musical notation for Torah Cantillation, featuring three staves with notes and lyrics in Hebrew and transliteration.

Staff 1: *geh - ei - ei - rech*

Staff 2: *mu - na - a - a - ach mu - na - ach r' vi - ee - ee - ee*

Staff 3: *mu - na - ach r' vi - ee - ee - ee*

Staff 4: *r' vi - ee - ee - ee*

Staff 5: *gor - sta - po - ee - ee - ee*

Staff 6: *dar - ga - ah - f' vi - ee - ee - ir*

Staff 7: *mer - cha - ah f' vi - ee - ee - ir*

Staff 8: *ka - ma dar - ga - a - a - ah f' vi - ee - ee - ir*

Staff 9: *ka - ma mer - cha - ah f' vi - ee - ee - ir*

Staff 10: *mu - na - a - ach dar - ga - a - a - ah f' vi - ee - ee - ir*

Staff 11: *mu - na - ach f' li - shaf - do - la - a - a - a - a - ah*

Staff 12: *mu - na - ach f' li - shaf - do - la - a - a - a - ah*

Staff 13: *mu - na - ach za - ze - ch - ch - ch - ch - ch - ch - er*

Staff 14: *za - ket ga - do - sh - oh - oh - ol*

Staff 15: *vi - mu - na - a - a - ach ka - ta - on*

Staff 16: *vi - ka - ta - on*

16 גֵּרָשׁ

17 מִנְחָה מִנְחָה רְבִיעִי

18 מִנְחָה רְבִיעִי

19 רְבִיעִי

20 גֵּרָשִׁים

21 דִּרְגָּא תְּבִיר

22 מִרְכָּא תְּבִיר

23 קִדְמָא דִּרְגָּא תְּבִיר

24 קִדְמָא מִרְכָּא תְּבִיר

25 מִנְחָה דִּרְגָּא תְּבִיר

26 מִנְחָה תְּלִישָׁא גְדוּלָּה

27 מִנְחָה תְּלִישָׁא קִטְפָּה

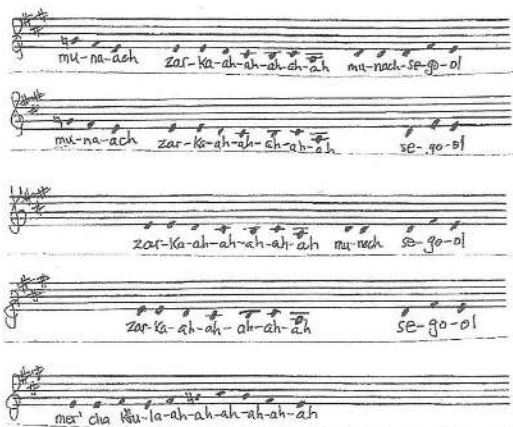
28 מִנְחָה פֶּזֶר

29 זָקָף גְּדוּל

30 יְתִיב מִנְחָה קִטּוֹן

31 יְתִיב קִטּוֹן

TORAH CANTILLATION



32 מִנַּח זָרְקָה מִנַּח סְגוּל

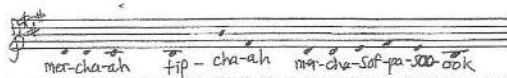
33 מִנַּח זָרְקָה סְגוּל

34 זָרְקָה מִנַּח סְגוּל

35 זָרְקָה סְגוּל

36 מִרְכָּא כְּפוּלָה

37 מִרְכָּא טַפְחָא מִרְכָּא סוּף-פְּסוּק: (end of *aliyah*)



ברכה לפני ההפטרה

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בְּנִבְיָאִים
טוֹבִים, וְרָצָה בְּדַבְרֵיהֶם הַנְּאֻמִּים בְּאַמֶּת, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי,
הַבוֹתֵר בַּתוֹרָה וּבַמִּשְׁנָה עֲבָדוֹ, וּבִישְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ, וּבְנִבְיָאִי
הָאֱמֶת וְצִדִּיק.

	1 מְרַכָּא טַפְחָא מִנַּח אֶתְנַחַת
	2 טַפְחָא מִנַּח אֶתְנַחַת
	3 מְרַכָּא טַפְחָא אֶתְנַחַת
	4 טַפְחָא אֶתְנַחַת
	5 מְרַכָּא טַפְחָא מְרַכָּא סוּף-פְּסוּק;
	6 טַפְחָא מְרַכָּא סוּף-פְּסוּק
	7 מְרַכָּא טַפְחָא סוּף-פְּסוּק
	8 טַפְחָא סוּף-פְּסוּק

Haftarah Trope - Lois Kittner

9 קדמא מהפך פשטא מנח קטן
Kad-ma ma-pach pash-ta mu-nach Ka-ton

10 מהפך פשטא מנח קטן
ma-pach pash-ta mu-nach Ka-ton

11 מהפך פשטא קטן
ma-pach pash-ta Ka-ton

12 פשטא מנח קטן
pash-ta mu-nach Ka-ton

13 פשטא קטן
pash-ta Ka-ton

14 מנח מהפך פשטא מנח קטן
mu-nach ma-pach pash-ta mu-nach Ka-ton

15 קדמא ואזלא
Kad-ma v-az-la

16 גרש
ge resh

17 מנח מנח רביעי
mu-nach mu-nach r'-vi-i

18 מנח רביעי
mu-nach r'-vi-i

19 רביעי
r'-vi-i

20 גרשלים
Ger-sha yim

Haftarah Trope - Lois Kittner



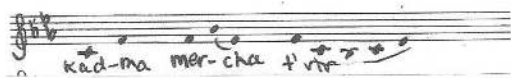
21 דָּרְגָא תְּבִיר



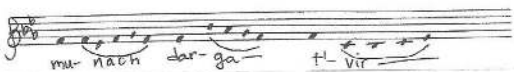
22 מֶרְכָּא תְּבִיר



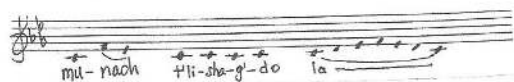
23 קִדְמָא דָּרְגָא תְּבִיר



24 קִדְמָא מֶרְכָּא תְּבִיר



25 מִנַּח דָּרְגָא תְּבִיר



26 מִנַּח תְּלִישָׁא גְדוּלָּה



27 מִנַּח תְּלִישָׁא קִטְנָה



28 מִנַּח פִּזֵּר



29 זָקַף גְּדוּל



30 יְתִיב מִנַּח קִטּוֹן



31 יְתִיב קִטּוֹן

Haftarah Trope - Lois Kittner



32 מִנַּח זִרְקָא מִנַּח סְגוּלָּה



33 מִנַּח זִרְקָא סְגוּלָּה



34 זִרְקָא מִנַּח סְגוּלָּה



35 זִרְקָא סְגוּלָּה



36 מִרְכָּא כְּפוּלָּה

37 מִרְכָּא טַפְחָא מִרְכָּא סוּף-פְּסוּק: (end of Haftarah)



Lois Kittner Thesis

These questions are connected to your experience during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutoring period with Lois Kittner tutoring your child(ren). If Lois Kittner tutored more than one of your children, please answer for each tutoring experience.

1. As a parent, before your child began his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* tutoring, how often did you attend Jewish prayer services?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Only for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur
- ☐ Only when invited to a Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Twice a month
- ☐ Weekly

2. Did you have a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* service when you were 12 or 13 years old?

3. Did you have an adult *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*?

4. As a parent, before your child began his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how connected did you feel to the services in the sanctuary during *Shabbat* services?

Not at all connected

Extremely connected

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

5. As a parent, before your child began his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how well were you able to follow along with reading from the prayer book, sing along, or recite *brachot* (blessings) during services?

Not at all

Extremely well

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Please specify.

6. As a parent, before your child began his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how connected did you feel to *Torah*?

Not at all connected

Extremely connected

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

7. As a parent, before your child began his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how connected did you feel to Jewish practice?

Not connected at all

Extremely connected

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

8. How much of an impact on *your* connection to Jewish practice did your child's tutoring sessions have on you?

No impact on me

Tremendous impact on me

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

In what way did the lessons impact your connection to Jewish practice?

9. How much of an impact on *your* connection to *Torah* did your child's tutoring sessions have on you?

No impact

Extreme impact

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

In what way did the lessons impact your connection to *Torah*?

10. Did you learn how to *leyn* (read from the *Torah*) as part of your child's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* tutoring with Lois Kittner?

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. After your child completed his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how connected did you feel to the services in the sanctuary during *Shabbat* services?

Not at all connected

Extremely connected

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

12. As a parent, after you child completed his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how connected did you feel to *Torah*?

Not at all connected

Extremely connected

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

In what way(s) did you feel connected?

13. After your child began his/her *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, how much more confidently were you able to follow along with reading from the prayer book, sing along, or recite *brachot* (blessings) during services?

I was not able to recite
any blessings

I was very comfortable
reciting some blessings

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Please specify.

14. After your child's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* training, to what extent were you inspired to learn more about Jewish ritual participation?

Not inspired at all

Very inspired

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Please explain.

15. If you also learned to *leyn* (chant from) *Torah* for your child's *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, to what extent did it impact on your relationship with Judaism?

No impact

Deep impact

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Please explain.

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