

BECOMING B'nai Mitzvah

A Sixth Grade Curriculum for Congregational Schools

Unit 2: *Mitzvah*–Commanded-ness

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Introduction

The BECOMING B'nai Mitzvah curriculum is designed to guide and support sixth grade religious school students in formulating a personally meaningful understanding of the upcoming lifecycle milestone of b. mitzvah. It outlines a group learning component of a congregational b. mitzvah preparation program, intended to complement and deepen individual training focused on the successful performance of the b. mitzvah ritual. This iteration of the curriculum is conceived for a congregational religious school setting in which the sixth grade class meets twice weekly; however, it could be adapted to fit other settings and circumstances.

Unlike many curricula for the sixth grade year of religious school which emphasize the practical skills needed to lead a service and read from the Torah and Haftarah, this program is devoted to exploration of the meaning of Jewish adulthood. In order to form a personal understanding of the lifecycle transition marked by b. mitzvah, students will investigate the meaning of the ritual through the lenses of identity, commanded-ness and peoplehood. Using the knowledge and skills that they have accumulated throughout their time in religious school, students will study and interpret Jewish texts from a wide variety of sources, traditional and modern, in light of their own personal experience. Each unit culminates in an individual or group project that challenges students to apply their learning and provides an opportunity to share their Torah with the larger synagogue community. Examples of the work that students complete throughout the year will be collected in a portfolio, which they will be able to

draw from as they prepare to lead services and teach the congregation at their b. mitzvah ceremonies.

I conceived the BECOMING B'nai Mitzvah curriculum as consisting of three units, devoted to the topics of identity, *mitzvah*, and peoplehood, respectively. This curriculum guide concentrates on the second unit, in which the class probes the relevance of *mitvah*—commanded-ness—to teens in a progressive Jewish setting. Because the context of the larger year-long curriculum that I envisioned strongly informed my process of formulating the desired outcomes and learning activities for this unit, I will also briefly outline the goals and activities of the other two units in this guide.

In the first unit, “*Anochi*—Identity”, student will explore the roles and connections that make up their identities, and examine how their Jewishness fits into that web. Throughout the trimester, students will complete research and interview assignments culminating in the creation of a family history presentation. In the second unit, which is the focus of this curriculum guide, students will grapple with the meaning of “*Mitzvah*—Commanded-ness” in a progressive Jewish context, and formulate a personal theology of *mitzvah*. At the end of the unit, the class will share their ideas and reflections through the creation of a multimedia mural commentary on Exodus 19-20. The third unit, “*Am*—Peoplehood”, explores the complex topic of Jewish peoplehood and the implications of collective responsibility for students’ individual choices. Students will apply their learning to the development of a class service or justice project to benefit their synagogue or local community. Work on this project will continue over the summer and the following school year.

Literature Review and Rationale

The b. mitzvah ritual is a treasured lifecycle milestone for American Jewish families, and has thus played a decisive role in shaping the character of the American Jewish community. 73% of Jewish-identified teens surveyed as part of the 2005 National Study of Youth and Religion reported having a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony.¹ In his 1987 article, “Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America,” Stuart Schoenfeld outlines how twentieth century American Jewish institutional leaders leveraged popular enthusiasm for b. mitzvah to incentivize synagogue membership and enforce minimum educational requirements.² The broad acceptance of these measures and their enormous impact on patterns of affiliation demonstrates the powerful position held by b. mitzvah in American Jewish life.

One reason for b. mitzvah’s massive appeal is the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by the ritual. Rabbi Jack Spiro identifies b. mitzvah as a “rite of passage,” defined by classical anthropologists as a ritual which initiates its subject into a new stage of life.³ In her interviews with clergy, educators and b. mitzvah families in Bay Area congregations, Patricia Keer Munroe identified four main understandings of b. mitzvah: (1) a status change that occurs at the age of 13, (2) a public affirmation of Jewish identity,

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47.

² Stuart Schoenfeld, "Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America." *Contemporary Jewry* 9, no. 1 (1987): 72.

³ Spiro, Jack D., "The Educational Significance of the Bar Mitzvah Initiation." *Religious Education* 72, no. 4 (1977): 385, 395.

(3) the successful accomplishment of a challenging Jewish task, and (4) an opportunity for friends and family (and maybe community) to celebrate the student's accomplishments.⁴ These are only some of the myriad of possible interpretations of b. mitzvah. Due to this multivalence, the b. mitzvah ritual addresses a wide variety of spiritual and cultural needs.

However, the multiple meanings of b. mitzvah can also obfuscate the main goals and purpose of the experience. Though the exact makeup of a b. mitzvah service varies from community to community, successful enactment of the ritual always requires a lengthy period of preparation. Thus, the process of each student becoming b. mitzvah involves a large number of stakeholders, including the student, family, clergy, teachers, tutors, synagogue community and guests. Each of these groups approaches the ritual with its own set of values and assumptions.

Munro found that these differences in perspective were particularly pronounced between synagogue leadership and families. She writes, "...as these leaders, parents, and children talked to me, they seemed to be talking about two entirely different events."⁵ While families were focused on the individual meaning of b. mitzvah in the life of their child and family, leaders stressed the importance of ongoing commitment to Jewish community and continuity.⁶ These diverging and sometimes conflicting agendas for b. mitzvah are generally unnamed and implicit. The resulting tension has a significant

⁴ Patricia Keer Munro, *Coming of Age in Jewish America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 60.

⁵ Munro, *Coming of Age*, 38.

⁶ Munro, 51.

impact on the structure of b. mitzvah preparation, leading to a lack of clearly articulated goals and leaving students with mixed messages. This curriculum seeks to address this tension by providing students with opportunities to explicitly examine and discuss different possible interpretations of b. mitzvah. Because I approach this subject from a progressive orientation, the program is designed to promote critical thinking and scaffold students in forming their own understanding rather than prescribe a “correct” interpretation of b. mitzvah.

In b. mitzvah preparation programs at most congregations, the vast majority of time and energy is devoted to strengthening the practical skills necessary to successfully enact the ritual, including leading the service and chanting from the Torah and Haftarah. In their interviews with b. mitzvah students, both Munro and Schwartz noted that without exception, students from across the denominational spectrum highlighted the importance of mastering this material and performing it competently.⁷ Both concluded that students infer the relative importance of the various elements of b. mitzvah from the amount of preparation time they consume.⁸ While the mastery of the liturgy, Torah and Haftarah is a meaningful and powerful aspect of b. mitzvah, these labor-intensive tasks have a tendency to eclipse all other purposes of the ritual in the minds of students. To me, this indicates a missed educational opportunity, because b. mitzvah has the potential to be a profoundly transformative experience in so many other ways.

⁷ Munro, 60; Katherine Schwartz “I Worked Hard to Come of Age, Everyone is Proud of Me, and I Really Do Feel Different: Adolescent Narratives of Bar Mitzvah.” (DEd diss., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2018),

⁸ Munro, 6; Schwartz “I Worked Hard,” 2.

This emphasis on competent performance of the b. mitzvah ritual becomes even more problematic when a student struggles with or lacks interest in the narrow and specific set of skills required; namely decoding the Hebrew alef-bet, singing, rote memorization and public speaking. In my personal experience preparing students for b. mitzvah, I have found only a small minority enjoy and excel at all of these tasks. For those who don't, the typical practice regimen can easily become a joyless exercise that ironically becomes even more time consuming. When a student's struggles stem from a learning difference or emotional challenge, there is a particular danger that b. mitzvah preparation of this kind will be a negative experience that causes long-lasting damage to the child's self esteem.

It is my firm conviction that a positive b. mitzvah experience is possible and should be available to every student. Gila Vogel and Shunit Reitner observed the profound spiritual experience that a non-traditional b. mitzvah program facilitated for Israeli students with moderate to severe developmental disabilities and their families.⁹ This curriculum seeks to balance the emphasis on practical skills typical of congregational b. mitzvah preparation programs by expanding the amount of time and energy devoted to exploring the meaning of the ritual. This shift in focus provides opportunities for greater differentiation in the modalities of learning involved in the preparation process. By drawing on a more diverse set of skills, this curriculum increases

⁹ Gila Vogel and Shunit Reiter. "Spiritual Dimensions of Bar/bat Mitzvah Ceremonies for Jewish Children with Developmental Disabilities." *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities* 38, no. 3 (2013): 314.

the likelihood that students will find opportunities not only to compensate for weaknesses and develop discipline, but also to build on strengths and pursue interests.

While the expectations regarding leading the service and chanting from the Torah and Haftarah are clearly articulated, successful accomplishment of other goals tends to be less well defined. In her interviews with families and congregational leaders, Munro found general agreement that Jewish identity was a central part of the b. mitzvah process. However, "...there was little agreement on how to define it, express it, or infuse it into the ritual."¹⁰ Often, it seems that the only clear expectation regarding students' Jewish identity and commitment is that they continue on to the congregation's confirmation class or other post-b. mitzvah program.

This haziness surrounding desired outcomes of b. mitzvah is reflected in students' understanding of the goals of b. mitzvah. Students receive and appreciate the message from clergy and teachers that b. mitzvah represents a transition or change of status. Of the 15 students interviewed by Katherine Schwartz, 13 identified b. mitzvah as a rite of passage or coming of age ritual.¹¹ However, as these quotations from b. mitzvah students interviews by Schwartz and Munro exemplify, they struggle to articulate what this change in status actually looks like:

I would say it's the coming of age for...any, like Jewish girl or boy, kind of like, like the step into adulthood...it kind of means like stepping from your childhood. You're kind of, like, leaving it all behind. It's a like a fresh start. You're like a new person...mature now. This is like your life now. Like you have to move from the bat mitzvah into this life.¹²

¹⁰ Munro, *Coming of Age*, 63.

¹¹ Schwartz, "I Worked Hard," 67.

¹² Schwartz, 67.

[I]t's going to symbolize you *being an adult in your synagogue*. The rabbi said that I'm going to have to start *taking on more responsibilities*, help my family out more, help my friends out more. When other kids turn thirteen, they don't realize how much they're growing up and that you take on more responsibilities. But a bat mitzvah shows you that.¹³

While students embrace the concept of taking on greater responsibility, the status change marked by b. mitzvah has few practical implications in their daily lives. As Munro notes, the main reason for this is that the transition takes place only in the Jewish sphere, and most students have few regular experiences in which this status change is enacted.¹⁴ A major goal of the BECOMING B'nai Mitzvah curriculum is to make this transition real and relevant to students. One way this is accomplished in the curriculum is through the articulation of clear goals for b. mitzvah students in the areas of personal and religious development as well as communal responsibility. I strove to make these learning outcomes as precise as possible without being overly prescriptive, as it is important to me that students have agency over their own interpretation and experience of b. mitzvah.

The learning activities in this curriculum also seek to provide students with the religious language to describe the transition to b. mitzvah and opportunities to enact this change in status. Jewish educational theorist Michael Rosenak defines the concept of “language” as, “the canons, the ways of thinking and imagining, the basic assumptions and procedures of a culture...that give it a specific identity.”¹⁵ Many students do not

¹³ Munro, *Coming of Age*, 61.

¹⁴ Munro, 61.

¹⁵ Michael Rosenak, "Educated Jew: Common Elements." *Visions of Jewish Education*, ed. Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler, and Daniel Marom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 180.

receive this knowledge and experience at home. This is not unique to Jewish students; from their study of the religious lives of American teenagers, Smith and Denton concluded,

Religious language is like any other language: to learn how to speak it, one needs first to listen to native speakers using it a lot, and then one needs plenty of practice at speaking it oneself. Many U.S. teenagers, it appears, are not getting a significant amount of such exposure and practice and so are simply not learning the religious language of their faith traditions.¹⁶

Through engagement with Jewish texts, concepts and traditions related to identity, theology and collective responsibility, this curriculum seeks to give students the Jewish language they need to better understand and express the transition to b. mitzvah. Wherever possible, it incorporates opportunities for students to engage with and be recognized by the larger synagogue community as they experience this process.

Target Learners

The content of this curriculum is developmentally appropriate and important for sixth grade religious school students in a number of ways. Firstly, an exploration of personal and religious identity is well suited to the developmental milestones of this age group. In his stage theory of psychosocial development, Erik Erikson identifies the age of b. mitzvah as the beginning of a developmental stage in which where focus shifts from acquiring competence to forming an identity and developing social relationships.¹⁷

According to Selman's theory of cognitive development, children in this age group are

¹⁶ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 130.

¹⁷ Erik H. Erikson and Joan M. Erikson, *The Lifecycle Completed* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1997), 72.

able to engage in tasks that require multiple perspective taking.¹⁸ James Fowler classifies b. mitzvah age as the stage of faith development where adolescents begin to develop a personal religious identity.¹⁹ Thus, this curriculum addresses several core developmental imperatives of this age group. The curriculum is structured according to the developmental challenge presented by each unit. Therefore, it moves from the personal in unit 1, which is the most accessible to adolescents, to the collective in unit 3, which represents the most challenging material for this developmental stage.

Another reason that this subject is vital for sixth graders is that religious engagement strongly correlates with an array of positive life outcomes for teens. Smith and Denton found that teenagers with a rich religious life are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, have better relationships with family and adults and stronger community ties, are better at moral reasoning, and report greater emotional wellbeing.²⁰ However, they observed these benefits only in teens whose religious engagement was fairly regular and consistent. Teens who participated in religious experiences only sporadically showed no difference in outcomes from teens who were completely disengaged from religion.²¹ The BECOMING B'nai Mitzvah curriculum seeks to offer students a wide variety of avenues to engage with Judaism, incorporating text, story, art, music, science, history and social justice. This increases the likelihood that students will connect with Judaism in a way that speaks to their unique interests and needs, fostering ongoing engagement in Jewish life.

¹⁸ Robert S. Siegler, Judy S. DeLoache and Nancy Eisenberg, *How Children Develop* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2006), 350-51.

¹⁹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 151-73.

²⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 218-19.

²¹ Smith and Denton, 232-33.

Finally, among all of the different stakeholders' goals and agendas for b. mitzvah, it is the voice of the student that most often gets lost. "Though it is likely that every Jew—and a fair number of non-Jews—will attribute meaning to the ritual," writes Munro, "in congregations these meanings are primarily negotiated between parents and rabbis, while students are given and interpret the meanings."²² Schwartz found that students looked for opportunities to exercise choice and agency within the process, even when few were provided to them.²³ This curriculum is targeted specifically at students in order to give them more of a voice in their b. mitzvah experience. They are, after all, the subjects of this rite of passage, and it is essential that the b. mitzvah process addresses their spiritual and developmental needs. I also believe strongly that every individual has a valuable piece of Torah that only they can teach, and that includes our tweens and teens. The project element of each unit is intended to provide a creative outlet for students to share their Torah with the community.

²² Munro, *Coming of Age*, 56.

²³ Schwartz, "I Worked Hard," 79.

Desired Outcomes

Enduring Understandings

BECOMING B'nai Mitzvah Curriculum:

1. Becoming b. mitzvah marks a transition to a status of greater autonomy and responsibility in the eyes of the Jewish community.
2. B. mitzvah is a time to begin exploring who I am and who I want to be.
3. B. mitzvah is an opportunity to experiment with how I express my Jewish identity.

Unit 2: *Mitzvah*—Commanded-ness:

1. The b. mitzvah ritual signifies that I am taking on the responsibility of fulfilling *mitzvot*—commandments.
2. For progressive Jews, there is no single definition of what it means to be commanded. It is up to me to form my own understanding of what commandment means to me.

Essential Questions

Unit 1: *Anochi*—Identity:

- What does it mean to be considered an adult in the Jewish community?
- What will be different after I become b. mitzvah?

Unit 2: *Mitzvah*—Commanded-ness:

- What does it mean to be commanded?
- How do commandments factor in to my decisions and actions?

Unit 3: *Am*—Peoplehood:

- What are my responsibilities to the Jewish community?
- What are my responsibilities to my local communities?
- How will I fulfill those responsibilities?

Evidence of Understanding

Unit 1: *Anochi*—Identity:

- Students will tell the story of their family and articulate the impact that it has on who they are now.

Unit 2: *Mitzvah*—Commanded-ness:

- Students will grapple with a variety of theologies of commandment, and explain which ideas they most identify with.
- Students will envision, describe and experiment with a Jewish practice that is plausible, personally meaningful & consistent with their theology.
- Students will apply their personal theology in a novel context.

Unit 3: *Am*—Peoplehood:

- Students will weigh their own needs and beliefs against those of their community in order to arrive at a decision.

Curriculum Overview

Unit 1: <i>Anochi</i>—Identity		
Unit 2: <i>Mitvah</i>—Commanded-ness		
Lesson	Core Concept	Learning Activities
1. Standing at Sinai	The Torah and midrash contain multiple understandings of how Torah was given to Israel.	Take out Torah scroll, comparison of Ex. 19 & 20, midrash and art gallery walk
2. Theological Passport	Jewish theologians understand what it means to be commanded in different ways.	Living museum activity
3. <i>Na'aseh V'nishma</i>	Observing mitzvot requires both action and reflection.	Text study, guest from JOIN for Justice, choose your own adventure
4. Yavne	In Yavne, Jewish law was adapted to fit new circumstances.	Story of Yavne skit, study takanot
5. Questions & Answers	Responsa are one way to address challenging questions about mitzvot.	Study progressive responsa, scenarios
6. Shabbat in Space	We need to innovate to adapt Jewish tradition to our changing world.	Create and present a shabbat ritual for the ISS
7. <i>Pirkei Noar</i> 1	Our voices and ideas are an important link the chain of Jewish tradition.	Personal theology journaling, prep and begin mural
8. <i>Pirkei Noar</i> 2	Our voices and ideas are an important link the chain of Jewish tradition.	Mixed media mural
Unit 3: <i>Am</i>—Peoplehood		

Lesson 2: Theological Passport

Core Concept: Jewish theologians understand what it means to be commanded in different ways.

Evidence of Understanding:

- Students will be able to summarize the main ideas of 7 Jewish theologians—Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn, Eugene Borowitz, Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, Benjamin Sommer, and Alyssa Gray—views on the meaning of commandment.
- Students will identify the ideas from these theologians that they most identify with.
- Students will identify the ideas from these theologians that they disagree with.

Time: 1.5 hours

Materials:

- Board or chart paper and markers
- Costumes for volunteer actors
- Theological passport booklets, 1 per student
- Theologian “stamp” stickers, enough for every student to receive 1 of each
- Pencils

Space: 7 classrooms, or two large spaces (e.g. social hall) with plenty of room to spread out

Prep:

- Recruit 7 volunteers to play the 7 theologians. Ideally, as least some should be post b. mitzvah students. Clergy, teachers and parents can also play a role.
- Review all of the recommended reading.
- Give each “actor” the recommended reading for their theologian. Actors should also familiarize themselves with the biographical details of their theologian.
- Before the lesson, meet briefly (15-20 minutes) with each actor to make sure they have a clear understanding of the theologian they are playing and address any questions.

Recommended Reading:

1. Maimonides

Kreisel, Howard. “Reasons for the Commandments in Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed and in Provençal Jewish Philosophy.” Chap. 10 in *Judaism as Philosophy*, 361-396. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2015.

2. Moses Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn, Moses. Ed. Michah Gottlieb. "From *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*." Chap. 9 in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible*, 72-123. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011.

3. Eugene Borowitz

Borowitz, Eugene B. "The Jewish Self." Chap. 20 in *Renewing the Covenant*, 284-299. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996.

4. Judith Plaskow

Plaskow, Judith. "Torah as Law in Feminist Judaism." In *Standing Again at Sinai*, 60-74. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990.

5. Rachel Adler

Adler, Rachel. "Here Comes Skotsl: Renewing Halakha." Chap. 2 in *Engendering Judaism*, 21-59. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1998.

6. Benjamin Sommer

Sommer, Benjamin D. "Conclusion." In *Revelation and Authority*, 241-251. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

7. Alyssa Gray

Gray, Alyssa. "Ancient Law Made Modern and Spiritual," College Commons Podcast. Dec. 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/collegecommons/dr-alyssa-gray-ancient-law-made-modern-and-spiritual>

Procedure:

0:00-0:15 Introduction

- *We all know that next year you will become b. mitzvah. But what does "mitzvah" actually mean?*
 - Write students answers in a word web with "mitzvah" in the center on board or chart paper
- *The most literal definition of "mitzvah" is "commandment." What do you think of when you hear the word "commandment?"*
 - Write students answers in a word web with "commandment" in the center on another section of the board or piece of chart paper
- *What do you notice about the words that we came up with as a group?*
- *What do the 2 word webs have in common? How are they different?*
- As you might have already guessed, all of these different answers are right! The idea of mitzvah or commandment is really complicated. Many very smart Jewish thinkers have spent their whole lives writing and talking about what exactly "mitzvah" means.
 - Explain the terms "theologian" and "theology"

0:15-0:25 Directions for Theological Passport Activity

- Often, theologians use their own “language”, which can make their writing dense and difficult to understand. But theology is something everyone can do.
- We at “Holy Planet” Travel Guides are here to help! We have arranged a special travel package just for you. Tonight, you will have the chance to meet 7 of our favorite theologians and ask them what they think about *mitzvah* and commandment.
- In order to travel with us, you will need your theological passport.
 - Show theological passport booklet
- Try your best to get your passport stamped by all 7 theologians.
- On the left side page, write the theologian’s name, dates, and location.
- In order to get your passport stamped, you must fill out the right side page with the following:
 - *One of their ideas that you like, or that resonates with you.*
 - *One of their ideas that you don’t like, or that makes you uncomfortable.*
 - *One thing that you are still thinking about, or a question you still have*
- When you have finished your conversation and filled out the right side page for that theologian, show it to them and they will stamp your passport.
 - Hand out a theological passport booklet to each student.

0:25-1:10 Theological Passport Activity

- Each “theologian” should be set up in their own classroom or space in the room with their “stamp” stickers.
- Students rotate freely between the theologians, asking them questions and filling out their passports.
- Teachers should help monitor and encourage students to come back to a station later if it seems crowded.
- Give a 15 and 5 minute warning.

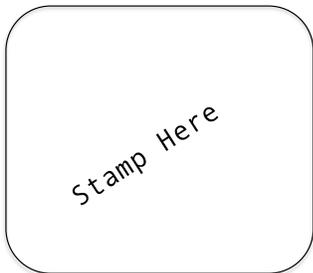
1:10-1:30 Closing Discussion

- Gather students and actors together back in the space where you started.
- Call on students to summarize the main ideas of each of the 7 theologians.
- As a group, discuss the following questions:
 - *Which of the theologians did you most agree with? Why?*
 - *Which of the theologians did you least agree with? Why?*
 - *What was one new idea you heard?*
 - *What is one idea that you are still thinking about?*
 - *What questions do you still have?*

Extension: Each student’s theological passport will go into their sixth grade portfolio. This will also allow the teacher the opportunity to review what students have written in the passports.

Appendix A

Theological Passport Sample Page

<div data-bbox="388 531 701 804" data-label="Image"></div> <p data-bbox="331 934 748 968">NAME: _____</p> <p data-bbox="331 1003 748 1037">DATES: _____</p> <p data-bbox="331 1073 748 1106">LOCATION: _____</p>	<div data-bbox="857 522 1299 569"> _____</div> <div data-bbox="857 611 1299 621">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 663 1299 674">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 716 1299 726">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 768 1299 814"> _____</div> <div data-bbox="857 856 1299 867">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 909 1299 919">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 961 1299 972">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 1014 1299 1060"> _____</div> <div data-bbox="857 1102 1299 1113">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 1155 1299 1165">_____</div> <div data-bbox="857 1207 1299 1218">_____</div>
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Appendix A

Passport Stamp Stickers

Maimonides



Moses Mendelssohn



Eugene Borowitz



Judith Plaskow



Rachel Adler



Bejamin Sommer



Alyssa Gray



Lesson 4: Yavne

Core Concept: In Yavne, Jewish law was adapted to fit new circumstances.

Evidence of Understanding:

- Students will be able to summarize the story of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai's escape to Yavneh.
- Students will be able to explain the concept of a *takanah*.
- Students will devise *takanot* for situations from everyday life.

Time: 1.5 hr (90 min)

Materials:

- Long piece of rope
- Gym mat
- Copies of *takanot* handout (Appendix D), 1 per student
- Chart paper, 1 sheet per 4 students
- Assorted markers

For the skit:

- 13 copies (more as needed) of "Escape to Yavne" script
- Toy swords, or something funny that can be used to act out sword fights (e.g. pool noodles)
- Cardboard box large enough for a person to fit inside
- Large arch, representing the city gate, made out of cardboard or posterboards
- Large map of Israel
- Large sign, reading, "A Short Time Later...in YAVNE"
- Pair of sunglasses
- Have fun with costumes! The more ridiculous, the better.

Space:

1. Outdoor or open space with a mat or soft floor surface
2. Large classroom, social hall or sanctuary set up for a performance and audience

Prep:

- Cover the floor with a gym mat (or other soft surface)
- Recruit performers for the Yavne skit, ideally students in the upper grades who have recently become b. mitzvah. The skit requires 13 actors, plus as many non speaking roles as you would like to add. You may want to set aside some time to rehearse the skit ahead of time.

Procedure:

0:00-0:15 Set Induction-Rising Water Game

- Using the rope, create a boundary on the floor that the entire group can easily fit within
- Explain to the group that they are on an island. The area outside of the boundary is water that is slowly rising.
- The water is filled with sharks, so everyone must work together to stay within the boundary.
- Adjust the rope to shrink the island. Each time that students adjust to the smaller space, shrink the island again.
 - Modification: Set limitations on how students may adjust to the smaller space according to safety and instructor comfort level.
 - Modification: For larger classes, it may be better to divide the class into two or more “islands”

0:15-0:25 Rising Water Game Discussion

- As a group, discuss the following questions:
 - *What solutions did the group devise to keep everyone on the island?*
 - *What strategies were the most successful? Why?*
 - *What challenges arose during the activity?*
- Turn and talk to a partner
 - *Can you think of a time in your life where you had to adapt to a change? What did you do?*

0:30-0:50 Escape to Yavne Skit

- If possible, transition to another space for this part of the lesson.
- Performance of Yavne skit (See **Appendix C** for script)
 - Performers check for understanding with the following questions:
 - *Why did Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai move the Jewish community to Yavne?*
 - *How was Yavneh different from Jerusalem?*
 - *What problems might Jews have had observing Judaism in a new place?*
 - *Do you agree with what R. Yochanan ben Zakkai did? Why or why not?*

0:50-1:05 Takanot

- Explain the concept of a *takanah*
 - A rabbinic ordinance or law within the system of Jewish law- *halakhah*
 - תקנה = *to repair*
 - Ask: Why do you think the term was created using the Hebrew root that means “to repair” or “fix”?
 - A *takanah* was tool used by the rabbis who created the system of *halachah* to create a new law when necessary or to adjust a law that no longer made sense due to changing circumstances
- “Rabbi Yochanan” passes out copies of handout listing some of his *takanot* (See **Appendix D**)

- Performer should remain in character: “check these out! I’m very proud of them... etc”
- Students study the handout with a partner and discuss:
 - *Name the problem each takanah “repairs”*
 - *What is another possible solution?*
 - *What do you think would have happened if Rabbi Yochanan did not institute these takanot?*
- Assess understanding by checking in with each group

1:05-1:20 New Rules

- Combine pairs into groups of 4
- Have one performer join each group with markers and sheet of chart paper
- Assign each group a different setting
 - Home
 - School
 - Synagogue
 - Sports team
 - Library
 - Swimming pool
 - Gym
- Add additional settings or repeat from the list above as necessary for your group size
- Instructions for group:
 - *Write your assigned setting on the chart paper*
 - *As a group, think of a rule in your setting that you think is outdated or doesn’t make sense*
 - *Once you’ve agreed on a rule, come up with some ideas for takanot that would “fix” this rule*
 - *Be careful! Try to anticipate problems that your takanah might create.*

1:20-1:30 Share Takanot

- Have each group share their problem and favorite *takanah* idea with the whole group
- After each group shares, allow students in other groups the opportunity to give feedback about the group’s *takanah*.

Appendix C

Escape to Yavne

Characters (13):

Shlomi the Jerusalemite
 General Vespasian
 4+ Jerusalemites
 4+ Romans
 Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai
 Rabbi Eliezar
 Rabbi Yehoshua

Props:

- Toy swords, or something funny that can be used to act out sword fights (e.g. pool noodles)
- Cardboard box large enough for a person to fit inside
- Large arch, representing the city gate, made out of cardboard or posterboards
- Large map of Israel
- Large sign, reading, “A Short Time Later...in YAVNE”
- Pair of sunglasses
- Have fun with costumes! The more ridiculous, the better.

Script

SHLOMI

Runs into the room where students are finishing up discussion of opening activity.

Come quick! Jerusalem is under siege!

SHLOMI leads students to space where skit will be performed. As students enter the room, JERUSALEMITES and ROMANS are swordfighting. YOCHANAN stands off to the side, watching.

VESPASIAN enters.

VESPASIAN

Listen you foolish people of Jerusalem! You are the ones who started this Great Revolt! All I am asking is that you hand over our weapons, and we will leave you in peace!

JERUSALEMITES

Shouting and brandishing their swords

(Ad lib) No! Never! We will never surrender! You're going down Romans! Don't mess with the Jews! (etc.)

SHLOMI

Guys, guys! Maybe that's not such a bad idea! *(sings and waves hands in the air)* All we are saying is give peace a chance!

JERUSALEMITES

Shouting

(Ad lib) No way! Not a chance! Traitor! Get him!

Crowd of JERUSALEMITES chase SHLOMI off to the side. Some of them start to fight with each other. ROMANS stand around looking confused.

VESPASIAN

Jeez. It's like they want me to burn down their Temple.

VESPASIAN exits, followed by ROMANS. JERUSALEMITES run after them, leaving SHLOMI laying on the ground, groaning. YOCHANAN walks to the center.

YOCHANAN

Burn down the temple?! God forbid! *(spits three times)* I can't let that happen! I have to find a way to convince them to make peace with the Romans.

As YOCHANAN speaks, SHLOMI slowly stands up and limps toward him.

Shlomi! What happened? You look like you've been run over by an 18-wheeler chariot.

SHLOMI

Sarcastically

Oh, you know, just a Talmudic debate that got kind of heated.

YOCHANAN

Shlomi, the general is planning to burn down the Temple, maybe even destroy the whole city, if the rebels don't surrender! We must convince them to lay down their arms!

SHLOMI

(Groans) Yeah...I don't think that's gonna happen.

The JERUSALEMITES wander back on stage, wiping sweat from their brows, leaning on their swords and looking exhausted.

YOCHANAN

Calling to them

My bothers! Please listen, I beg you, for the sake of our holy city! If you do not want to see your homes, your shops and your holy Temple burned to the ground, you must surrender to General Vespasian!

JERUSALEMITE 1

Shouting and brandishing sword

Get him!

*Other JERUSALEMITES look at him wearily and don't move.
JERUSALEMITE 1 drops his sword arm and sits down.*

...tomorrow. *(sighs wearily)* We'll get him tomorrow.

JERUSALEMITES *exit.*

SHLOMI

I told you so.

YOCHANAN

Conspiratorially

You're right Shlomi. These people cannot be reasoned with.

SHLOMI

Yes. Thank you!

YOCHANAN

I must go talk to General Vespasian.

SHLOMI

What?!

YOCHANAN

Perhaps, I will be able to reason with him. It is the only way that I can save my students and our sacred Torah.

SHLOMI

Uh huh, got it, I'm chopped liver. Nice. At any rate, the Romans are camped outside the city walls. The rebels have guards at every gate, there's no way they'll let you past.

YOCHANAN

Thinks. Suddenly, he is struck by an idea.

Shlomi, I have an idea. Go get Rabbi Eliezar and Rabbi Yehoshua, and tell them to bring a coffin.

SHLOMI

What the heck are you gonna do with a coffin?!

YOCHANAN

I'm going to play possum.

SHLOMI

What's a possum?

YOCHANAN

I have no idea.

SHLOMI *looks at him for a moment, then runs off and exits.*

I really hope this works.

SHLOMI *returns, followed by* ELIEZAR *and* YEHOSHUA. YEHOSHUA *carries a large cardboard “coffin.”*

That was quick! And you brought the coffin! How did you manage it?

YEHOSHUA

Oh, you know, I just happened to have one lying around.

SHLOMI, ELIEZAR *and* YOCHANAN *look uncomfortable.*

YOCHANAN

...Okay...whatever. I'm going to get inside, and you two will carry me to the city gates. When the guards ask, just tell them you're bringing a dead body out of the city! It's genius, isn't it?

ELIEZAR

Looking doubtful

So...you want the two of us...to carry you there?

YOCHANAN

Exactly!

Climbs into box.

Alright disciples. Let's go save the Torah.

ELIEZAR *and* YEHOSHUA *look at each other, hesitating.*

YOCHANAN

From inside box

Come on! What's the hold up?

ELIEZAR *and* YEHOSHUA *mime dragging the box with great strain.*

SHLOMI

Waves.

Have fun guys! See ya later.

SHLOMI *exits.* 2 JERUSALEMITES, *carrying a cardboard arch, move toward the box, as if it is being dragged toward them. When the arch reaches the box, JERUSALEMITE 2 calls out to YEHOSHUA and ELIEZAR.*

JERUSALEMITE 2

Where do you two think you're going?

ELIEZAR

Just bringing this dead guy here out of the city, sir.

YEHOSHUA

Makes face

Please let us through, he's already starting to smell!

JERUSALEMITE 2

Okay, okay, you can spare me the details. Go ahead.

The JERUSALEMITES move the cardboard arch off stage, as ELIEZAR and YEHOSHUA mime dragging the box away. VESPASIAN and ROMANS enter. YOCHANAN leaps out of the box.

YOCHANAN

Surprise! It is I, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai!

VESPASIAN

Yochanan who? Oh, right! The great Rabbi, Yochanan Ben Zakkai, of course. You know, I've always wondered...why do you guys all have "Ben" as your middle name? Like, what's the point if you all have the same one?

YOCHANAN

Looks confused

It's not...a middle name...

VESPASIAN

Never mind. What can I do for you Rabbi?

YOCHANAN

General, look. I know my people. I get that they can be a lot. But do you really have to destroy the whole city and burn down the Temple.

VESPASIAN

Gee...I'm really sorry, Rabbi, but I think I do. You know what they say...when in Rome! But if there is anything else I can do for you, let me know.

YOCHANAN

What about Yavne?

VESPASIAN

Gezundheit!

YOCHANAN

No, you know, Yavne, this town over here.

YOCHANAN takes a large map of Israel out of the box and points to Yavne.

VESPASIAN

Oh, sure! Yavne! Great spot, close to the beach.

YOCHANAN

Right. I'm getting old, thinking of retiring there with, say, 100, 500 of my closest disciples. Would you consider...giving me Yavne?

VESPASIAN

I think I might be able to make that happen...

YOCHANAN

General...there's one other thing I'd like to tell you.

YOCHANAN gestures to VESPASIAN to come closer. VESPASIAN comes closer. YOCHANAN gestures again. VESPASIAN comes closer. YOCHANAN gestures again. VESPASIAN comes close enough that YOCHANAN can whisper in his ear.

YOCHANAN

In a very loud stage whisper

Some day, not so long from now, you are going to be the Emperor of all Rome!

VESPASIAN

No way! How do you know?

YOCHANAN

Oh, you know, I was just chatting with God the other day, and she happened to mention it.

VESPASIAN

Well, Rabbi, that's just great! I'm so glad we got a chance to catch up.

YOCHANAN

Me too. Oh, and General...about Yavne?

VESPASIAN

Sure, sure, take it, no problem! Anything for you, old pal!

YOCHANAN

...and if we happened to, you know, study some Torah, say a couple blessings, reconstitute Jewish law there...that'll be okay with you?

VESPASIAN

Absolutely! What happens in Yavne stays in Yavne! Now, go build your beach house and relax, Rabbi. You deserve it!

VESPASIAN and ROMANS exit.

ELIEZAR

Master, how do you know that General Vespasian will become the Emperor? Did you truly receive a divine prophecy?

YOCHANAN

Nah, I was just trying to butter him up. Wouldn't it be so crazy if he did though? He'd probably think that I can like, see the future with my super rabbi powers! That would be hilarious!

JERUSALEMITES enter, and gather center stage with YOCHANAN, YEHOSHUA and ELIEZAR. SHLOMI walks across in front of them, carrying a large sign that reads, "A short time later...in Yavne" SHLOMI exits, reenters without the sign, and joins the group.

YEHOSHUA

Man, I can't believe Vespasian just became the emperor. That's so crazy!

ELIEZAR

I know, right?! He probably thinks you have, like, super rabbi powers or something, Yochanan. He'll definitely leave us alone now! We can do whatever we want!

YOCHANAN

Exactly. Now, my friends, let's get to work on mourning the destruction of our holy Temple. You're not going to believe this, but I totally thought ahead and I've got sackcloth and ashes for everyone! There's plenty to go round, so...go crazy! Then, after

we're done with that, we can restructure the entire Jewish legal system to function without the Temple.

YEHOSHUA, ELIEZER, *and the* JERUSALEMITES *look disappointed.*

I know guys, I'm so pumped too! It's gonna be so lit, I think the messiah might even drop by!

SHLOMI

Puts on sunglasses

Well, have fun nerds! I'm going to the beach

YEHOSHUA, ELIEZAR, *and the* JERUSALEMITES *look even more disappointed.*

THE END

Appendix D

The *Takanot* of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai

These are some of the *takanot* put into place by Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Before, many Jewish laws required Jews to go to Jerusalem or make sacrifices at the Temple.

For each of the *takanot* below, please write:

1. The problem the *takanah* "repairs"
2. Another possible solution, or *takanah*

When you finish, discuss: "What do you think would have happened if Rabbi Yochanan *didn't* institute these *takanot*?"

1. When Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the shofar is not blown
(Before the destruction of the Temple, the shofar was blown only in Jerusalem when Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat)

Problem: _____

Another solution: _____

2. The four species (lulav and etrog) are waved on all the days of Sukkot
(Before the destruction of the Temple, the lulav and etrog were waved on all the day of Sukkot only in Jerusalem. Elsewhere, they were waved only on the first day of the holiday)

Problem: _____

Another solution: _____

3. Ritual sacrifice that would have taken place at the Temple are substituted with prayer.

Problem: _____

Another solution: _____

4. Witnesses of a new moon (the sign of the beginning of a new month in the Jewish calendar) report to their local leaders, rather than to the central authority in Jerusalem.

Problem: _____

Another solution: _____

5. Converts are no longer required to offer a sacrifice at the Temple as part of the conversion process.

Problem: _____

Another solution: _____

Lesson 6: Shabbat in Space

Core Concept: We need to innovate in order to adapt Jewish tradition to our changing world.

Evidence of Understanding:

- Students will identify problems that might arise in observing familiar Shabbat rituals in space.
- Students will create innovative rituals that take into account the conditions of life aboard the ISS.
- Students will create a presentation of a Shabbat ritual in space.

Time: 1.5 hr (90 min)

Materials:

- A/V set-up that everyone can see and hear
- Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkvsWBfmgw>, downloaded in advance or a reliable Internet connection.
- Printouts of information on Shabbat rituals: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/shabbat-customs> OR internet enabled device for each group
- Poster
- Markers
- Construction paper
- Scissors
- Shabbat ritual items: candles, challah cover, kippot, siddurim

Space:

Classroom with chalkboard and separate tables, spaced out to allow group work

Procedure:

0:00-0:15 Set Induction

- Brainstorm Shabbat rituals that students do at home, camp, or know about from other sources.
- Create list of examples on the board or chart paper

0:15-0:20 Review of Previous Session

- Ask students summarize the Yavneh story and explain the concept of a *takanah*

0:20-0:25 Video: What is Life Like on the International Space Station?

- Briefly introduce and show video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkvsWBfmgw>

0:25-0:40 Discussion of Space Station video

- *What is different about life on the International Space Station than life on earth?*
- *Imagine that a group of reform Jewish Scientists were going to live on the ISS. They would like to plan to observe Shabbat together. What problems might they encounter? (e.g. How do we know/decide when Shabbat starts?)*
 - Refer students to list of Shabbat rituals on board. Write answers on a separate section of board from Shabbat rituals.

0:40-1:05 Groups Create a Shabbat Ritual for ISS

- Students will break into groups of 3-4 to create an innovative solution for observing a particular Shabbat ritual on the ISS.
- Choose an appropriate number of rituals that were brainstormed earlier for the class size, and break students into groups based on interest.
 - Encourage students to begin by reviewing the procedure for observing their ritual (using info handouts provided or the internet to research)
 - Ask students to consider the following questions:
 - *What problems might you encounter with observing this ritual on the ISS?*
 - *What does this ritual signify? What is most important about it?*
 - *What adaptations could you make to this ritual so it could be observed on the ISS?*
- Groups will create a poster or model presenting their solution
- Give 5 minute warning for clean-up

1:05-1:30 Present Shabbat in Space Rituals to Class

- Each group briefly presents their new Shabbat ritual to the class.

Extension:

The sixth grade will hold a Shabbat science fair. Students will arrive early enough to put finishing touches on their projects, and then set up tables around the social hall/ community space as stations for each group. Before and after services, guests will have the opportunity to peruse the fair and hear students explain their projects.

Resources

Annotated Bibliography

Munroe, Patricia Keer. *Coming of Age in Jewish America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

In this book, Munro presents the findings of her ethnographic observation of the b. mitzvah process at five Bay Area congregations representing the denominational spectrum. She supplements this research with interviews with Bay Area congregational leaders. Through these accounts and observations, she illustrates the often conflicting perspectives that different stakeholders bring to b. mitzvah. Her analysis provides vital insight into the ways that these underlying tensions shape the b. mitzvah experience, particularly how they impact the understandings that students take away from the process. This book played an important role in helping me clarify my goals for this curriculum, and is essential reading for any educator working with b. mitzvah students.

Schoenfeld, Stuart. "Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America." *Contemporary Jewry* 9, no. 1 (1987): 67-85.

Schoenfeld's classic article outlines the way that negotiations over b. mitzvah have shaped the American Jewish institutional landscape. He traces the history of clergy and leadership leveraged the popularity of b. mitzvah to institute virtually universal minimum educational requirements and incentivize congregational membership. This article provides important insight into how the typical congregational b. mitzvah program came to look like it does today, and why certain curricular elements seem to be near universal in Jewish supplementary schools. Understanding this history is essential to reimagining b. mitzvah education. Schoenfeld demonstrates the enormous power that b. mitzvah holds in American Jewish culture, a compelling argument for approaching b. mitzvah education with particular care and intentionality.

Schwartz, Katherine. "I Worked Hard to Come of Age, Everyone is Proud of Me, and I Really Do Feel Different: Adolescent Narratives of Bar Mitzvah." DEd diss., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2018.

Schwartz's dissertation zeros in on the on the perspectives and experiences of b. mitzvah students. For her research, she conducted extensive interviews with students participating in two reform congregations and two alternative b. mitzvah programs. Because there is so little scholarship that centers the voices of students themselves, her work represents a vital contribution to the literature on b. mitzvah. Her analysis of the students' narratives provides a valuable and objective picture of what these students are taking away from

their b. mitzvah experience. It is an important model for determining if the messages we are hoping to transmit to b. mitzvah students are being successfully received.

Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

This book summarizes the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion conducted by the University of North Carolina. Through surveys and interviews with teens across the country, the project aimed at a better understanding of the religious lives of adolescents. The book provides interesting information on how the experience of Jewish teens compares to that of teens of other faith traditions. It is also a source of vital insight into how American teenagers relate to religion in general, and the ways that sociological and developmental influences shape their understanding of their faith.

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