

JEWISH GRANDPARENTS NETWORK

# Reimagining

## The Role of Grandparents in Their Grandchildren's B-Mitzvah Experience

BY RAHEL MUSLEAH



We all recognize this B-Mitzvah scene: A 13-year-old stands on the bimah, chants from the Torah and/or haftarah, and delivers a *d'var Torah* prepared with the help of the rabbi or educator. The extended family sits in the front row, emotional and deeply in the moment. The event ends with a joyful party with dancing to a DJ or band.

# imagine.

- 1.** Before the B-Mitzvah, the grandparent and teen sit down together to create a family statement of values. They discuss what's important to each of them and their family, including ways of ethical living and the Jewish principles that guide their lives. They talk about their stories, share photos, and even reveal some of their secrets. From that meeting, the grandchild plans a social justice or mitzvah project, involving the grandparent and the larger community.
- 2.** At the ceremony—whether in the synagogue, outdoors, in the home, or at any other venue—the grandparent joins the grandchild and passes down a treasured object or family heirloom to the grandchild, perhaps a Kiddush cup, tallit, photograph, piece of jewelry, or tzedakah box.
- 3.** Following the Torah or other reading from our sacred sources, elders of the community join the family in encircling the B-Mitzvah with singing and dancing.

If you are a rabbi, educator, spiritual leader, philanthropist, grandparent, or parent, you too might be reimagining the B-Mitzvah experience today—each from your own perspective. What does the teen want? What is meaningful for my family? What is right for my community?



COVER & PAGE 2 PHOTO BY STEPHANIE FINK

The Jewish Grandparents Network (JGN) is pioneering a reimagined intergenerational B-Mitzvah experience as part of a Covenant Foundation Signature Grant they were awarded to re-envision the role of grandparents at significant family life stages. The work began at a two-afternoon virtual symposium in May 2022 to which JGN invited Jewish leaders, educators, ritualists, grandparents, and teens from across the country to think expansively about how to transform grandparents' roles in a grandchild's B-Mitzvah celebration.



PHOTO BY UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM

The scenarios on page 2 are just a few of the ideas that emerged from the symposium, which tackled the unique relationship between grandparents and grandchildren; the challenges of adolescence; the significance of rites of passage; the importance of family and community; how to negotiate the desire to honor tradition yet incorporate creativity and change; and ideas for significantly elevating the roles grandparents play in the B-Mitzvah experience than most currently do.

# consider.

## 1. The importance of grandparents

The unique relationship between grandparent and grandchild is the basis for JGN's reassessment—and indeed for all their work. On a basic and visceral level, grandparents offer unconditional love to their grandchildren. One teen who participated in a JGN focus group said, "My grandparents represent a place in which I can experiment with who I

am.” In turn, grandchildren respond in a way they may not to their parents—their response is often “yes” to Zayde, Grandma, or Saba.

That two-way street forged of love and respect creates the opening for guiding a grandchild toward what is perhaps the ultimate goal of Jewish adulthood: becoming a moral and ethical human being. The personal relationship is further powered by grandparents’ roles as the keepers of wisdom, experience, Jewish tradition, and community connections—a potent combination that can help propel the B-Mitzvah into the broader context of community.

***How can our Jewish communities acknowledge grandparents and elevate their roles at the liminal B-Mitzvah moment?***

## **2. Adolescent challenges and choices**

Teen development issues often surface during the B-Mitzvah process. Psychologists tell us that the physical and developmental changes of adolescence don’t necessarily coincide with how the adolescent’s brain works; in other words, physical and emotional maturity often don’t go hand in hand.

Teens feel vulnerable and prone to shame and embarrassment. Just existing can be embarrassing! They struggle to find a place to belong, both in public and social spaces, compounded by their worry about appearance and body image that is battered by social media messages. And biologically, they need more sleep.



PHOTO BY ALEX PAUL PHOTOGRAPHY

At the same time, many adolescents need a much higher level of stimulation to get the same level of emotional impact. They increase their risk-taking behaviors and rebelliousness. They—and their parents—may not fully understand that becoming more independent and being independent are different.

Grandparents can help their grandchildren develop “struggle muscles”—enduring difficult experiences, even failure, so they can survive and grow. By providing the crucial message that they love their grandchildren as they are, no matter what, grandparents become a safe haven and can be critical for the teen’s healthy maturity.



At the same time, teens in a pre-symposium focus group who had recently become B-Mitzvah expressed their gratitude—and relief—when their rabbis or other spiritual leaders were flexible in what they expected the teens to prepare, for example, reading only a few verses of Torah.

Often it was the parents who took the lead to meet the needs of their children at different emotional and developmental levels. Two teens with dyslexia credited their parents—in particular their mothers—with creating unique experiences that catered to their strengths, for example, a family-led course of study on topics that interested the teen.

***How can we be sensitive to the impact of emotional and developmental issues on B-Mitzvah?***

***How can giving teens choices enhance their roles in owning their B-Mitzvah?***

### 3. B-Mitzvah as a rite of passage

We all know the famous line associated with B-Mitzvah: “Today I am a man” (though we don’t often hear girls say, “Today I am a woman”). Regardless of gender, coming of age is an important teachable moment, and B-Mitzvah is the ritual that marks that moment.

B-Mitzvah is an example of a rite of passage that occurs when an individual leaves one group to enter another—think marriage or conversion. Anthropologists identify three phases: separation (leaving the familiar), transition (a time of testing, learning, and growth), and return (incorporation and reintegration). For more, visit [Open Sky Wilderness Therapy](#). At the conclusion of this process, new roles and responsibilities for the participant and/or the community ensue.



In ancient times, and to this day in other cultures, adolescents were already preparing for work and marriage eligibility and, witnessed by the community with the involvement of its elders and leaders, rituals marked their change of status from childhood to adulthood.

The change in status is not as clear for B-Mitzvah today. The teen usually has to read or chant in an unfamiliar language (Hebrew) and setting (the sanctuary), without real clarity about how they can contribute to the community where they are now considered an adult. Yet, we can still clearly apply the three phases. The B-Mitzvah stands alone on the bimah (separation); reads from the Torah and leads the service after much preparation (challenge); and reintegrates

with an activity that celebrates the B-Mitzvah's new role—a social action project in the community and/or a joyous party.

Any kind of change has multiple layers. Both fear and celebration inhabit transformational rites of passage. In a B-Mitzvah, fear, pain, or stress can make the adolescent stronger and can result in a sense of accomplishment. Music, chanting, movement, and elements of drama enhance the celebratory aspect. Recognizing the transition to maturity is the crux of the blessing *Baruch She'p'tarani*, which articulates that the parent is released from responsibility for the child. The blessing can be updated and recited to reflect that the B-Mitzvah is now at a different life stage.

***What does it mean to come of age in Jewish life?  
How can we make B-Mitzvah a valued experience with new  
roles and responsibilities that are truly meaningful to the  
young person?***

#### **4. Rethinking the B-Mitzvah ritual, incorporating both tradition and change**

A good ritual helps us zoom in—to be present in the moment—as well as zoom out—to feel connected to something larger than ourselves. Some families will want to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors, maintaining the sense of tradition, Jewish ritual, and prayer. Others may find the traditional performance-oriented aspect of a B-Mitzvah not personally meaningful and will want to focus on creating new Jewish rituals and experiences. Still, new practices often have the most meaning when they are connected to the treasure chest of time-honored Jewish rituals.

The Jewish Grandparents Network National Study (2019) revealed that 71% of grandparents say it is important to transmit Jewish

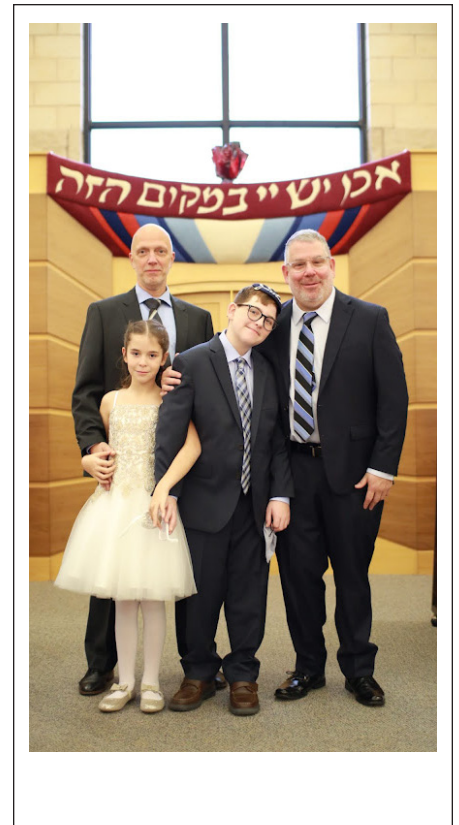


PHOTO BY MARTY FASTAG

values to their grandchildren; 70% believe it important to teach their grandchildren about Jewish heritage; and 64% want their grandchildren to have a strong connection to Judaism.

Grandparents embody both the real and symbolic connection to ancestry. Sharing the Jewish values that shaped their lives can encourage their grandchildren to add Jewish values to the toolkit of their lives. Like a secret handshake, rituals can bond grandparents and grandchildren as they explore their family in the context of Jewish tradition.

***How do we reinforce the sense among elders that they are our people's sages and keepers of wisdom and traditions?***



## **5. The role of community in the B-Mitzvah experience**

Covid has further changed the landscape of B-Mitzvah and reshuffled the primacy of community and family. As the pandemic disconnected families from synagogues and communities, it highlighted the intimacy, essential meaning, joy, and purpose of celebrations devoid of extraneous trappings. Both these extremes require further exploration and rebalancing.

One major question facing us is this: What exactly is community? Zooming out from our synagogue or geographic communities, we can broaden our perspectives to include the Jewish people as well as our country and global communities. The B-Mitzvah can choose with which community or communities to engage. They can further integrate into community through an actual or symbolic change or action that best exemplifies the transition into becoming part of the community.



For example, a B-Mitzvah and family members can participate in a community-wide social justice project such as building a playground in an underserved area. Young teens can connect with Jewish community by joining a youth group or participating in a Jewish summer or travel program. In other cultures, coming-of-age rituals organically weave in the community, who often take a key role; for example, elders lead the chanting, singing, and dancing, or lead the initiate in physical challenges. Integrating community elders into the B-Mitzvah could take many forms. One example: Invite elders to rise from their seats, or encircle the B-Mitzvah, to bestow *Birkat Kohanim* onto the B-Mitzvah.

***How can the community regain and reimagine its role and importance in the B-Mitzvah experience?***

***What role can the B-Mitzvah teen play in the community?***

***How can integrating into community result in a broader connection to Judaism, benefiting all parties?***

## **6. The role of the family in the B-Mitzvah experience**

Our changing contemporary society also requires a rethinking of family, today spanning faiths, genders, races, and abilities. How Jewish is the family? How Jewish does the family want to be? How do we welcome adolescents who have not been educated in Jewish culture, traditions, and rituals?

To achieve meaning or lasting impact, we will ideally tailor B-Mitzvah celebrations to the interests, values, and circumstances of individual families. Perhaps our grandchildren live outside of congregational and Jewish communities but feel genuinely connected to Jewish identity.



PHOTO BY EVAN WEISS

How can our communities connect with them? What role might grandparents play in this? Some children grow up without grandparents or their grandparents have passed away. Perhaps there are other important adult figures in a child's life other than grandparents who can take on the grandparents' role.

***What new and better avenues can make the family central to the B-Mitzvah experience?***

## **7. Innovative and practical grandparent involvement in the B-Mitzvah experience**

The Jewish Grandparents Network believes that grandparents are a hidden treasure in plain sight. Their potential value and influence are immeasurable.

Imagine if we trained lay elders instead of professionals to lead our B-Mitzvah ceremonies so we would have a cadre of learned elders from whom to draw. Other elders in the community could serve as resources to guide the teen in areas that spark their interest—anything from Jewish cooking and Jewish humor to photography.

The relationship between elders and teens would be a two-way street: the teen would also have the potential to give back to family and community, for example, with social justice work, volunteering, or just sharing their time and their personal selves.

How exciting it would be if grandparent and grandchild engage in something momentous that they have never done before. They plan a year of preparation that could include the elements below or create their own. If they are separated by distance, they prepare together on Zoom, FaceTime, or WhatsApp.



PHOTO BY ALEX PAUL PHOTOGRAPHY

# explore.

JGN has identified four key areas in which grandparents (or other close elders) can play a significant role with the grandchild in the B-Mitzvah experience. These are derived from real-life examples offered by Covenant Foundation Signature Grant symposium participants. In all cases, it is best to involve the parents at the outset, since their go-ahead is essential.

## 1. Family Legacy

Grandparents create a legacy for their grandchildren by sharing family stories, passing down heirlooms, and doing genealogy projects together. Teens experience a deeper connection with their grandparents as they gain insights into their family's history.

### EXAMPLES

- The grandparent visits a childhood home with their grandchild—physically or through photos—and relays stories that may recount struggles and difficulties, thus also modeling resilience.

- The grandparent gives the grandchild a treasured object such as a piece of family heirloom jewelry or an old photo as a symbol of trust and continuity. Or the teen wears a beloved grandfather's tefillin or the earrings a grandmother wore at her wedding. The grandchild says, "You are giving me a taste of the world you came from." The grandparent responds, "You are giving me a taste of the world to come."
- The grandparent wears a legacy tallit at the B-Mitzvah service, takes it off, and places it around the grandchild's shoulders, giving the teen a personal blessing.
- The grandparent and grandchild design and create a new sacred object, for example, a tzedakah box, mezuzah, or other personal object of meaning to them.

## 2. Family Values

The grandparent and grandchild explore the values that ground and guide their family. They plan projects, trips, and celebrations that translate those values into action.

### EXAMPLES

- The family discusses, then creates, a list of family values, for example, helping one another, kindness to others, honesty, and conserving natural resources. Grandparents add their top Grandparent-isms or rules of living, guiding values, and principles.
- The grandparent and teen explore related Jewish values and build a joint mitzvah or social action project or trip around one of them. For example, if conserving resources and not wasting are important to the teen, they might go thrifting at shops that support not-for-profit causes.

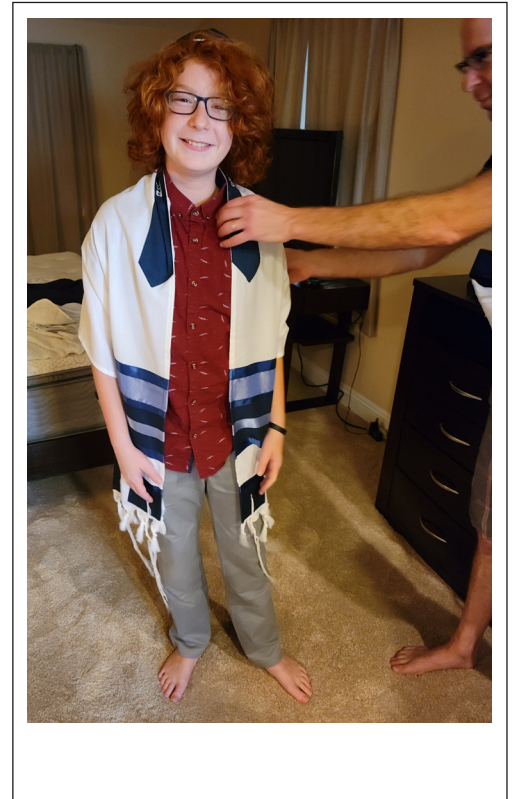


PHOTO BY HARRIET WOLPOFF

### 3. Study and Jewish Text

Studying is both an end in itself and also deepens and sharpens values and responsibilities. There are ways the grandparent can share in, and contribute to, the grandchild's learning as they approach B-Mitzvah.



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE FINK

#### EXAMPLES

- The teen's parent plans a course of study beginning about six months before the B-Mitzvah ceremony based on topics of interest to the teen such as poetry, the arts, Jewish history, social justice, and the environment. Family members (immediate or extended) each prepare one or two sessions (in person or virtual) and teach the teen about the topic.
- Grandparent and grandchild each choose a *middah* (a moral and ethical trait) and take on the responsibility to cultivate the *middah* in themselves. These traits in the Jewish practice of Mussar include humility, patience, gratitude, compassion, order, equanimity, honor, simplicity, enthusiasm, silence, generosity, truth, moderation. The pair creates a journal (shared or individual) and follows the *middot* they choose, recording challenges and triumphs.
- The grandparent plays a significant role in the B-Mitzvah ceremony, side by side with the teen. For example, the grandparent and teen write a *d'var Torah* or responsive reading and they present it together at the ceremony, taking turns to speak. They might relate aspects of the Torah portion to their individual journeys.

### 4. Travel and Outings

Through travel, grandparents and grandchildren can grow together. They delight in new places and experiences that help them learn more about themselves, each other, and the world around them.



## EXAMPLES

- The grandparent and grandchild set up a once-a-month outing several months before the B-Mitzvah ceremony, exploring places of interest to the teen. For example, if the teen expresses interest in understanding the Holocaust, the grandparent and teen visit a Holocaust or heritage museum and the grandparent recommends websites, movies, or videos on the subject. They follow up with a discussion, together or virtually.
- The teen draws events or themes from the Torah portion and, with the grandparent, plans one or more trips or outings around it. For instance, if the portion is *B'reishit*, they visit a botanical garden, planetarium, aquarium, or other places that reflect the creation story. Or perhaps, on a trip to Israel, they visit Neot Kedumim biblical garden. In this way, ideas from the teen's Torah portion infuse everyday grandparent-grandchild experiences with holiness.

We hope these findings can serve as a guide and road map for you as spiritual leaders and elders to craft amazing B-Mitzvah opportunities.

We are here to support you.

For more information, please contact  
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***B'hatzlachah!***

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