



## Celebrating the Age of Mitzvah: A Guide for all Genders

*Best practices to design and support affirming B'Mitzvah celebrations*

At its best, reaching the age of mitzvot (12 or 13 years) is an exciting, affirming, and connecting experience. It is a time for young members of Jewish communities to be called to the Torah for the first time, teach Torah to their communities, lead tzedakah or mitzvah projects highlighting their favorite causes, and take on new responsibilities and leadership roles in their communities. For many young people, this celebration represents months or years of work, planning, and study. A well-constructed ceremony offers a community—and parents or caregivers—the opportunity to tell a young person that they are recognized, honored, and celebrated.

Because this celebration holds so much weight, the ways in which it can recognize or erase the gender identities of young people can have an outsized impact. Gendered language, principles, and assumptions are often woven through the preparation and the ceremony: the title, language, and dress codes are all typically gendered throughout this process. Transgender, nonbinary, [gender-expansive](#), or gender-exploring youth may experience these moments as painful and alienating. Unaddressed, these can be negative formative experiences rather than the celebration of Jewish community and identity that they are meant to be.

This guide offers suggestions for language and practice. It is intended for youth of all genders, as well as for those who are in moments of transition and exploration. It pulls from and expands upon tremendous work created by Jewish communities. The purpose of this guide is not to erase gender from Jewish ritual, but to multiply the options to create intentional spaces of belonging for all.

When we are affirming and expansive in our approach, we create moments of possibility, connection, and celebration.



Please note that this guide is designed with egalitarian communities in mind, and does not address considerations such as how to negotiate a *mechitzah* or concerns about how different obligations or communal roles are understood as gender-specific in Orthodox spaces. Many Orthodox and non-egalitarian communities create affirming and loving communities in which transgender and nonbinary community members celebrate their milestone moments, and that process may look different than those outlined in this guide.

Keshet is happy to consult and work with you to develop rituals that are deeply affirming and authentically rooted in the Jewish approaches of each community. You can reach us at [education@keshetonline.org](mailto:education@keshetonline.org)

# So What Do We Call It?

*If you are communal leader, you may also want to consider whether you use this term only for youth who are themselves nonbinary or gender-expansive, or whether to revise your language across program names, handbooks, website, and other materials to reflect the gender diversity of the Jewish community. Options include: referring to the ceremony using multiple terms (i.e. Bar/Bat/B'Mitzvah) and specifying that youth will choose the option that best work for them, or referring to the ceremony using the gender-expansive title in all materials.*

One of the first questions we hear from youth, parents, rabbis, cantors, and communal leaders is, “what do we call it?” Is there a term for reaching the age of mitzvah that does not specify a gender? And if so, should we only use that term for the celebrations of nonbinary or gender-expansive youth, or should we use it for everyone? Historically, many communities have called this moment of transition a *Bar Mitzvah* (masculine) or *Bat Mitzvah* (feminine), literally meaning “subject to commandment.” For a person who does not identify with the gender assigned to them, having a name for the ceremony that is gendered incorrectly can feel uncomfortable and cause disengagement. For youth who identify as boys or girls, it is easy to use the gendered term that is reflective of that identity. But for youth who do not identify as either boys or girls, whose genders are fluid, or who are exploring or wondering about gender, more expansive terms are needed.

We recommend the following terms:

- ***Simchat Mitzvah*** (celebration of mitzvah)
- ***Kabbalat Mitzvah*** (receiving mitzvah)
- ***Bamitzvah or B'Mitzvah*** (in or subject to mitzvah)
- ***Brit Mitzvah*** (covenant of mitzvah)

All four of these terms remain close to the essential meaning of “*Bar/Bat Mitzvah*,” emphasize the celebratory nature of the event, and can be understood as gender-neutral or gender-expansive. We recommend using whichever of these terms most resonates.

*These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the rest of this guide.*

Whichever option you choose, the gender-expansive title should be easily accessible and made known to the community, both in materials as well as formal and informal conversation. This may mean that staff require additional education in order to feel comfortable.



# Ritual and Hebrew

Hebrew is historically a grammatically-gendered language, with nouns, adjectives, verbs, and most parts of speech taking gender markers. There are many Hebrew speakers working to create gender-expansive forms of Hebrew for daily and ritual use. We are still in a time of linguistic development, and there is not (yet) a single universally agreed-upon, gender-expansive grammatical form. However, there are several options for calling a celebrant to the Torah and offering blessings in ways that are gender-expansive.

## Calling to the Torah

The most commonly-used form for *aliyot* in synagogues in the United States and Canada is to use the gender-neutral phrase “*na la-amod*” (“please rise”) to invite an individual to the Torah. In some communities, this is used for all who approach the Torah to relieve the burden of “guessing” a person’s gender. In other communities, “*na la-amod*” is presented alongside “*ya-amod*” (masculine) and “*ta-amod*” (feminine). In those communities, a mechanism such as [aliyah cards](#) is used to invite each honoree to indicate how they should be called.

## Hebrew Names

Traditionally, Hebrew or Yiddish names include the name(s) of a person’s parent(s). An individual’s name is connected to their parent’s names by the term “*ben*” (son of) or “*bat*” (daughter of). Gender-expansive options include:

- ***Mibeit*** or ***l’veit*** (of the house of)
- ***Mimishpachat*** (from the family of)
- ***Bet*** (The Nonbinary Gender Project’s gender-expansive term meaning “child of”) ([nonbinaryhebrew.com](http://nonbinaryhebrew.com))

Some transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people might want to use their *kabbalat mitzvah* as a time to take on a new name. This is a wonderful opportunity to affirm their name and identity in community. A rabbi, cantor, or service leader can announce the new name and offer additional blessings, share information about what the name means, and invite the community to congratulate the young adult on their journey.

In addition, some transgender or nonbinary adults may request a *Simchat Mitzvah* ceremony to celebrate a new name/affirm an identity, revisit and re-engage a ceremony that felt painful or alienating as a young person, or celebrate a *Brit Mitzvah* for the first time. These are beautiful opportunities to deepen and honor a person’s connection with Judaism and *mitzvot*.

## Blessings and Other Hebrew

There are several other blessings throughout the ceremony. Many communities offer a *mi shebeirach* blessing to the celebrant and their parents.

Some options are:

- **Use nonbinary Hebrew:** The Nonbinary Hebrew Project ([nonbinaryhebrew.com](http://nonbinaryhebrew.com)) is a project to create a third, gender-expansive grammatical form in Hebrew. Their “grammar and systemics” and “applied uses” pages offer templates of how to offer words of blessing and engage in ritual moments in gender-expansive language.
- **Alternate masculine and feminine Hebrew forms:** Many nonbinary and gender-expansive Hebrew speakers find that alternating between gendered forms of Hebrew is an effective and meaningful way to express their genders.
- **Use the Hebrew third-person plural masculine:** Some nonbinary and gender-expansive Hebrew speakers use the masculine plural Hebrew forms (parallel to they/them in English) as a gender-neutral/expansive pronoun.

All of these options should be made available to celebrants to choose language that most resonates.

## Terms for the Divine

You might choose to also review the liturgical language that you use for the Divine:

- In English and Hebrew, one can alternate masculine, feminine, and non-gendered G-d language.
- Some communities alternate using He/Him and She/Her pronouns, as well as alternating between Mother, Father, King, Queen, etc. when using metaphors for G!d
- In English translations, we can use Ze/Zir or They/Them pronouns (after all, the Hebrew word “*Elohim*” is a grammatical plural used to describe a singular and expansive G-d!), other gender-expansive pronouns when referring to Gd, or eliminate pronouns altogether by just saying G-d/G-dself.
- Non-gendered words like Ruler, Sovereign, Parent, Creator, Source of life, Holy One, the Eternal, etc. can replace or expand on gendered terms like King and Father.
- Siddurim/prayer books and congregations make choices that feel the most authentic for them, and this can change from week to week or over time. Practicing moving between different metaphors and terms for the Divine can itself be a spiritual practice, reminding a community that any attempt to describe or categorize the Divine is imperfect.



# And in English?

Hebrew is not the only language that is gendered. While English does not incorporate gender deeply into its grammatical system, there are still many moments in a *B'nai Mitzvah* where gendered defaults might create a barrier for a nonbinary or gender-expansive participant.

- When speaking about the celebrant, leaders can use phrases like “young person”, “young adult”, “emerging adult”, or “today you are becoming an adult” rather than referring to “becoming a man/woman”.
- Parents can use terms like “my child” rather than “son” or “daughter”, or, if applicable, “my eldest”, “my youngest”, etc.
- Siblings can refer to their “sibling”.
- Leaders can greet the community as “friends,” “*chevre*” (Hebrew for friends), or other non-gendered terms rather than defaulting to the binary “ladies and gentlemen”. Many nonbinary and gender-expansive people feel erased by a communal greeting that does not include their presence.
- If you will be working with with catering staff, servers, venue staff, outside entertainers, etc., consider having a conversation with them in advance of the event about how to greet guests. Many servers and ushers are trained to greet people in a gendered manner (using “ma’am”, “sir,” “young lady,” “ladies and gentlemen,” etc.) which could be harmful to trans and nonbinary people in the space. Instead, ask them to say, “welcome”, “hi, everyone”, or “honored guests”.

# Gifts, Dress, and More

## Dress Codes and Expectations

- Many dress codes (whether expressed as formal guidelines, informal conversation while planning the ceremony, or even through unspoken expectations) are highly-gendered and place inappropriate burdens on the bodies of women and femmes. A best practice is to avoid gendered dress codes altogether. For example, instead of saying: “boys should wear dress shirts and slacks and girls should wear dresses”, you could say: “celebrants are encouraged to dress in semi-formal attire”.
- Because formalwear is highly-gendered, finding clothing that feels appropriate for synagogue and affirms nonbinary or expansive genders can be a significant challenge and contribute to dysphoria and discomfort. Building communities with less focus on formal dress and appearance can go a long way towards belonging and comfort for nonbinary and gender-expansive people (as well as for many other communities who are excluded financially or culturally by formal dress codes).

## Gifts

- In many communities, synagogues offer gifts to youth reaching the age of mitzvot. In some cases, these gifts are presented by a sisterhood, brotherhood, or other gendered group, and are differentiated based on gender (i.e. shabbat candle holders for girls, kiddush cups for boys). Instead, consider offering the same ritual items to all youth, or offering each youth the option to choose between a few ritual items.
- Among community members, many common gifts are gendered. For example, judaica-themed jewelry has become a very popular *bat mitzvah* gift for those perceived as girls. Families seeking to avoid uncomfortable encounters with gendered gifts might consider directing guests to instead offer their gift to a chosen tzedakah or charitable cause, scholarship fund, or bookstore. Some families may instead ask for no presents.
- Many cards marketed for *B'mitzvah* are gendered and use either “*bar*” or “*bat*.” Encourage guests to find cards that say “*mazal tov*” or “Congratulations” instead. Be prepared that there still might be some incorrectly-gendered gifts or cards. Many celebrants and their families find it helpful prepare how they will respond beforehand.

## Questions and Explanations

- Many celebrants and families do not want to spend the day explaining their gender or answering questions. Some families find it helpful to include a half-sheet or line in the Shabbat handout (if your community has one) explaining a *Kabbalat Mitzvah* and/or linking to Keshet's resources.
- Others may find it helpful to reach out directly to family/community members in advance to offer information, set expectations, and preempt any potentially-uncomfortable conversations.
- Others might choose to ask a few close friends or allies to “run interference” with any challenging moments or poorly-worded questions. Share with them in advance what you would like them to say, and trust them to let you enjoy your day.
- Finally, some transgender and nonbinary youth enjoy educating others about their identities and best practices for gender equity. If teaching and educating about gender is empowering, go for it and make teaching a core part of the celebration!



# Space and Plans

*Celebrating the age of mitzvot is only one (although formative!) moment in Jewish communal life. There are many other steps that you can take or advocate for to build a community in which youth and adults of all genders can thrive.*

## Your Space and Accessibility

- Ensure that people of all genders can access a restroom. This may mean having an all-gender restroom onsite, or it may mean placing [all-gender restroom signs](#) temporarily on a gendered restroom in a rental space.
- Pronoun etiquette: Many transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people consistently get referred to by incorrect pronouns (this can be called “being misgendered”). In some settings, there are few opportunities to proactively tell others which pronouns are correct, or no indication that others will respond positively. One way to counter this is for community leaders to share their own pronouns in email signatures, business cards, bios, and out loud when introducing themselves. You may even consider putting out pronoun pins for guests to take as a reminder to respect others’ pronouns and an invitation to share one’s own. Wearing a pronoun pin can even be seen as a holy act, when a basket of pins is placed alongside the communal *tallitot*.
- Signups, forms, and paperwork often ask questions about gender, and do so in ways that can be alienating. Symbols of welcome can often signal safety and respect to LGBTQ+ guests in your spaces. (For more information, visit [keshetonline.org/resources/forms](https://keshetonline.org/resources/forms)).
- If you have taken steps to ensure access and dignity to LGBTQ+ members and guests, consider putting up a [sign](#), flag, or [sticker](#) to indicate that your community is an affirming place.
- Decisions that you’ve made should be communicated to those involved. Think through who will be involved and what they will need to be equipped to participate. Consider rabbis, cantors, teachers, shul board members giving announcements at the end of the service, and others. Has everyone been looped in?

## And Finally – Celebrate!

We hope that these suggestions and tools can help you plan an affirming event! While gender-affirming practices are an important baseline for a meaningful and joyful celebration, don’t let your focus on building these practices take over the whole event. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people have so many interests, passions, talents, and ways of connecting with community, and all of these deserve to be celebrated and made a part of the *B’Mitzvah*!

Wishing you a joyful, meaningful, and perfect celebration!