

The Peretz Centre's B'nai Mitzvah Credo

I am I.

I am a citizen of the world.
All life on this planet nurtures me.
Therefore, I must assure its future.

I am a human being.

Nothing that touches other human beings is strange or foreign to me.
All people are my sisters and brothers.

I am a Canadian.

The dreams of all the millions who came here,
who sweated, struggled and died for a better life,
all this is my heritage. The dreams are not yet fulfilled.
Therefore, my heritage is my responsibility
to carry on the struggle for the dream.

I am a Jew.

My roots are deep in the millennia that formed my people's culture.
My people are not chosen; they are unique, as are all peoples.
The freedom-dream of Moses is my heritage,
and the picket-lines of the sweat shops.
I am a descendant of the Prophets,
and the uprisings in Europe's ghettos and death camps.
My inheritance is in the songs of Hirsh Glick and Solomon, in the wisdom of Maimonides, Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz,
in the heroism of Masada and Hannah Senesh.
The beauty of my people's dreams finds voice in Yiddish, in Hebrew,
in Ladino and in all the languages of the world.

I am a Jew.

Every person must have roots and these are mine.

I am I.

My eyes and hopes are on the future.
My identity and my strength come from the past and from the present.
From the heritage of all our yesterdays I will help build
a humane tomorrow.

— Adapted from Hershl Hartman's text, *Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations*

Culturally Jewish? Not religious? Mixed marriage?

Peretz Centre's Secular Humanist

B'nai Mitzvah Program

Opens the *dor** to Jewish identity

B'nai Mitzvah handbook for students and their families

Peretz Centre for
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**dor* (דור): generation



We welcome your entire family to our B'nai Mitzvah Program.

Based on what we know from previous graduates and their families, we are sure your son or daughter and indeed all members of your family are about to embark on an amazing journey.

The growth and maturity that takes place in our young people in these two years is always awe-inspiring for the teachers and parents. The hard work and close bonds between students—with the help of a few good jokes—are clearly evident once the graduation ceremony approaches. Everyone in the family and the Peretz community *klaybn nakhes* (feel a sense of pride) at the tremendous accomplishments of our young people.

We hope this guide will help explain and answer your questions about the B'nai Mitzvah program at the Peretz Centre.

History of the Peretz Centre

The centre was founded in 1945 in response to the threat to Jewish culture and the Yiddish language posed by the Holocaust and WW II.

The founding families felt an urgent need to establish a school to ensure the continuity of Jewish culture and secular humanist thought. And they opened the doors to all—Jews and non-Jews—who felt a connection to Jewish culture, history and experience.

We continue to provide a wide variety of programs for all ages to families in the Greater Vancouver area. Our community is diverse, inclusive and intercultural, and welcomes everyone with Jewish family ties.

Philosophy of the Peretz Centre

Jewish secular humanism provides the basis for the Vancouver Peretz Centre's philosophy. In other words, we are "cultural Jews."

The word secular comes from the Latin, "of this world." Secular philosophy developed as an alternative to the sacred interpretation of life.

Secular humanism teaches that we have a kinship with all living things on this planet and only people working together creatively, adhering to ethical and democratic principles, can solve the world's problems.

community and importance of the occasion through its performance of several selections appropriate to the occasion.

A dress rehearsal, with the choir if possible, will be held, to which the Peretz community is invited. It is especially valuable for the parents and students of the following year's class to attend.

On the day of graduation, students may want to display their research reports. Some groups have also hung posters featuring photo collages chronicling each student's life and allowing space for guests to write their good wishes.

In the past, a program or booklet has been developed and handed out to other family members and guests. It can feature information about the program and the celebration about to unfold, student biographies, photos of the students and class activities and the B'nai Mitzvah Credo. Programs from previous years, outlining the various components, are available.

There are also experts in our community to provide advice on sound and lighting for the production. And parents from former years can provide a hand and answer questions.

However, all arrangements, set-up and negotiations for the presentation and celebration are done by the families, with all costs borne by them.

The entire ceremony and surrounding celebrations should be secular and humanistic in content (focusing on people working together creatively, rather than worshipping or making a commitment to a supernatural authority or god).

The celebration

The celebration following the community presentation can be as simple as dessert (with all families bringing something to share) and coffee and juice. The arrangements will depend on the resources of the families involved but should be in keeping with the Peretz Centre's philosophy of inclusivity, simplicity and moderation.

If you have any questions, the program coordinator at the Peretz Centre would be happy to talk to you and other members of your family.

We are sure all the members of your family, and especially the B'nai Mitzvah student, will find this an enlightening and enriching experience.

Supporting other youth—Students are also expected to donate 10% of the cash gifts they receive upon graduation to the Peretz Centre Youth Fund. This fund is used for a variety of purposes, for example, activities of the Peretz Youth Group or sending youth delegates from the Peretz community to the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations' annual youth conference. In addition, families donate 3% of their share of the cost of the celebration to this fund.

Opportunities for the whole family at the Peretz Centre

The B'nai Mitzvah program also opens up learning opportunities and a sense of community for all members of the family. There are programs for younger siblings, adults, seniors, and the entire family, including Sunday School, Jewish Young People's Theatre, Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir, Yiddish classes, Sholem Aleichem Seniors, *Fraytik Tsu Nakht* (Friday night shabbes dinner) and holiday celebrations. The more involved you become, the more everyone in the family will gain from this experience.

Some long-time friendships between families and students have also resulted from this program. Often, B'nai Mitzvah families meet once a month in each other's homes, on a Friday night. They hold a simple secular Friday celebration, sharing challah, wine and a potluck supper, singing songs and getting to know one another better.

The community presentation in June

The parents provide students with guidance in developing the final ceremony in June. The community presentation is based on the research projects students have done. In the past, students have presented their research findings in speeches or dramatic interpretations—either as a series of vignettes or a format using a game such as Trivial Pursuit.

The graduation ceremony usually takes two hours; with one hour for the students' group presentation to family and friends. The other hour is devoted to remarks from the executive, teachers and the families' representative and the presentation of gifts and certificates. Our Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir adds tremendously to the sense of

But as we move toward a global community it is also vitally important to sustain our Jewish culture. The Jewish experience, including the numerous attempts by groups and individuals over thousands of years to destroy this culture, serves as a reminder to all humanists of the importance of mutual dignity and respect, justice, freedom and peace for all. Jewish identity is the way to keep this message alive. It is important to our community that the class' community presentation be consistent with this philosophy.

Jewish culture, including stories, music, art, dance and theatre, also stresses wisdom, ethics, humour and an ability to live by one's wits.

Secularism began well over 200 years ago in Europe as scientists developed theories to explain the laws of the universe and scientific discoveries began to have a greater influence on people's lives. The secular Jewish movement began in Germany with the *Haskala* (Enlightenment Movement) and Moses Mendelsohn is considered the founder.

In general, the secular movement appealed to the working class and Yiddish-speaking people.

Yiddish culture, *yidishkayt*, not only includes a rich and expressive language, it stresses a secular philosophy and supports improving the life of the common people.

Those who subscribe to secular thought are not anti-religious; they simply place their focus on human endeavour.

History of the B'nai Mitzvah program

The Peretz Centre offers a group coming of age ceremony for boys and girls, hence the name B'nai Mitzvah. *B'nai* is the plural of *Bar* and *Bas*, meaning sons and daughters, and *Mitzvah* means a good deed.

The program began over 15 years ago with two students and has since graduated over 125 students.

We welcome all students and families looking for a bar/bas mitsvah program that focuses on Jewish cultural traditions and ethical values.

Goal and philosophy of the B'nai Mitzvah program

The goal of the program is to imbue participants with a love of Jewish culture, wisdom and ethics. In keeping with tradition, it is open to girls who will be 12 or older at the time of graduation and boys who will be 13 or older. And, in keeping with secular humanist philosophy, this program is about people working together. The program is most successful when families get to know each other and pull together to share the responsibility and the work.

Priority at all times, of course, is given to the students to ensure this experience is meaningful and valuable to them.

This program also has an intergenerational focus: all family members have a role to play and there are built-in connections to other programs and groups affiliated with the Peretz Centre.

Program outline and expectations

A family membership is required, in addition to the cost of the program. We encourage you and your family to attend Community Sundays and special holiday events.

This is a two-year program, with students meeting every second week for approximately 20 weeks a year—about 80 hours in total. Regular attendance is very important. Just one class missed means a student is out of touch for a month. During the second year, alternating weekends will be needed for rehearsals and planning the community presentation.

If your child is expected to be absent, please notify the teacher in advance.

Themes covered in the program include:

- ◆ Why are we doing this program at the Peretz Centre?
- ◆ The meaning of a Bar/Bas Mitzvah to secular Jews
- ◆ Other cultural rites of passage
- ◆ Who is a Jew?
- ◆ The Ten Commandments
- ◆ *Tsedokah*
- ◆ Ethics and justice
- ◆ Jewish geography and history
- ◆ People we should know about
- ◆ The Holocaust and Ghetto uprisings
- ◆ Pogroms and the Inquisition

- ◆ Immigration
- ◆ Humour
- ◆ Holidays and traditional foods
- ◆ Music and art
- ◆ Literature
- ◆ Introduction to Yiddish/Hebrew
- ◆ Current issues

Some additional elements:

Bring a joke—To help make learning fun and introduce students to the nuances of Jewish wit, wisdom and humour, they are asked to bring a joke to each class to share with other participants.

Family presentation—Students see history come to life and numerous issues are raised when they learn about the past experiences of each other's families. Family members (parents, grandparents and siblings) are invited to talk to the class for a half hour about their roots and how their family came to Greater Vancouver. Presentations can include artifacts, maps and photos. Parents of the other students are welcome to sit in on these presentations.

Research project—Students in the second year of the program are required to research and prepare a paper on a topic of their choice by the first class meeting in December. This information provides a basis for the community presentation. (Topics in the past have included: Jewish literature, a biography of a well known Jewish person, humour, tales our grandparents told us, Jews in sports, the Holocaust and Inquisition, Righteous Gentiles, immigration, Jewish music, etc.) Teachers can provide suggestions for resource material.

Media scrapbook—Over the two-year period, students will collect newspaper and magazine clippings and make notes of TV, movie, radio or internet stories that deal with Jewish issues or themes of this program.

Community service (*Tsedokah*)—Students are asked to perform some service to the community, usually 40 hours, before graduation. (In the past, students have volunteered at a community centre, helped take care of the yard of an elderly person, volunteered at their regular school, helped clean up a stream, etc.)

Social activism—Students and their families are expected to participate in some endeavour such as the Walk for Peace or Walk for Israel or do something as a group to help make a better world. This is group *Tsedokah* or *Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World).