

Religious Education GCSE
Judaism Coursework (minimum of 1,500 words)
Question 12: Bar/Bat Mitzvah:

- a) – *Write a full description of how a Jew becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.*
- b) – *Explain the religious importance of this event for:*
- (i) the person who becomes the Bar or Bat Mitzvah*
 - (ii) his or her family*
- c) – *“It is unfair to expect a 13 year old to take on adult responsibilities”*
How far would you agree with this opinion? You must refer to Judaism in your answer.

- a) Bar and bat mitzvah literally means the son and daughter of the Commandment. Bar Mitzvah is for a boy and the bat mitzvah is for a girl. In all branches of Judaism, bar mitzvah is celebrated on the first Shabbat after the boy's thirteenth birthday. However, for a girl, the bat mitzvah celebration takes place on the first Shabbat, after her twelfth birthday. These birthdays are most likely meant to correspond to the age at which the boy and girl reach puberty, as girls tend to mature faster than boys. In both cases, friends and family are invited to the celebration which marks a symbolic entry to Jewish adulthood and responsibilities at the age of twelve or thirteen. The idea of a bat mitzvah dates back to the second and third century C.E when Jewish girls took all legal responsibility for their action and performance of the mitzvot. Preparation for the bar or bat mitzvah begins up to 4 years in advance. This is done in a religious/Hebrew school. It is recommended that the preparation should not simply be crammed into one hasty year, and time should be allowed to prepare as necessary. They will prepare by learning how to read Hebrew writing and to read and chant sections of the Torah. They may prepare for the chanting of the berachot by learning it by heart. The Hebrew schooling is expected to be continued with by the Jewish boy or girl until they have reached their late teens, mainly so they have a better idea of what and how the religion has been formed. At synagogue, many Jewish boys and girls are called up to the bimah to read aloud a section of the Torah called the berachot which may or may not have been pre rehearsed. They can also recite or chant the berachot. In Conservative congregations, the bar mitzvah usually takes place in the morning on Shabbat, whilst the bat mitzvah is often held during the evening. In Reform Judaism, the bar/bat mitzvahs may conduct all or part of the service. This depends on the congregation. They may recite the Haftarah berachot or chant the berachot over the Torah. This is known as an aliyah. Aliyah simply means going up. It is used as a description of being called up from the congregation to read from the Torah. After the reading of the Torah portion, the father of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah will come up from the congregation to thank God for raising his son or daughter to adulthood. He will say something similar to “Thank you for taking the burden of responsibility for my son/daughter’s sins from me and raising my son/daughter to adulthood.” This statement is called a

baruch sheprani. When this has been done, the rabbi will then give the boy or girl a few words of encouragement and congratulate them. Many families consider the synagogue to be the most appropriate and meaningful place to hold the bar/bat mitzvah, but this is not always the case. Some families may wish to travel to Israel to celebrate. This however is only available to boys and this way of celebrating the bar mitzvah is becoming increasingly popular. They may choose to go to Israel to celebrate the bat mitzvah because this is the central religious focal point for Jews. It is where the famous Wailing Wall is situated. The Wailing Wall (also called the Western Wall) is the remaining wall of the first temple built by Solomon. It is important to Jews because it helps them feel connected to God. The idea of Zionism, for Jews to have their own homeland where all Jews live is a popular one, and so Israel would seem the most meaningful place. Jews see themselves as the 'chosen ones' and they are set apart from other people in the world. They believe they have a special connection with God and going to Israel to celebrate their bar mitzvahs will strengthen their beliefs and religion. The family may write prayers to God and post them in the cracks of the wall in a hope that he will answer them. The bat mitzvah may also do this, praying for a good healthy future. The bar/bat mitzvah is popularly celebrated by a party where friends and family are invited. They used to involve feasts and grand dinners but many thought that they may be extravagant and wasteful displays of wealth and contradicting the ceremony's religious meaning and significance. There are other ways to make the celebration have a deeper Jewish religious importance, such as Israeli dancing and singing. The ways to celebrate bar and bat mitzvahs vary from family to family but in every case, it always a religious and joyous event.

- b) (i) This celebration is very important to a lot of people, especially the boy/girl who becomes a bar/bat mitzvah. By having an official declaration of the entry to adulthood it allows them to realise the importance of responsibility, self conduct and behaviour. It is a connection from adulthood and perhaps a way of letting them understand what kind of person they are expected to be and how they should act. The bat/bar mitzvah celebration may also help the boy/girl to feel closer and more connected to God, especially during the services and no doubt when they are called up to read a part of the Torah. They may feel compelled to show appreciation God for what they have and show they are grateful for his kindness and generosity and to the person concerned, the bar/bat mitzvah celebration seems the most meaningful and appropriate occasion to do so. The celebration may also be important to them because they want to show their loved ones that they are appreciative of the love and support that they have given over the years. The party afterwards and the synagogue service will be a good opportunity for them to let them know they are grateful and thankful for all that they have. Having a bar/bat mitzvah allows the person concerned to realise the importance of good citizenship and that they are no longer children, but young adults. With friends and family present, they also realise this, which allows them to move on from childhood and into adulthood. Because the person's family and friends made arrangements for

the party or presents, it can make the person see and appreciate the love that their family and friends have for them.

(ii) For the bar/bat mitzvah celebrations, it is important that family and friends are present. This is not only important for the boy/girl who is going to be a bar/bat mitzvah but also for the friends and family. They will realise that he or she is no longer a child but a young adult and consequently should treat him or her as such. With family in particular, it will mean a lot to see them growing up and maturing and also reaching a milestone during their life time. It can make the parents proud to see the child grow up and realise the importance of love of family. Seeing them reciting part of the Torah in the service at the synagogue may make them feel connected to God, as well as the boy/girl reading. It could possibly create a sense of belonging and community where they feel at home with one another. By arranging a party for close friends and family to attend it underlines the importance of love and community. They may also bring gifts and presents which show appreciation and affection but what they must know and will continue to do so is that love and devotion is and always will be far more important and valuable than material possessions.

c) I think that expecting a 13 year old to behave like an adult and take on the responsibilities is acceptable, but only to a certain extent. A bar/ bat mitzvah celebration confirms that the boy or girl is on his or her way to adulthood, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are adults, and as a result of this, they shouldn't be expected to take on the full adult responsibilities. For example, adults are responsible for baby and child care. It is illogical and unreasonable to expect a 13 year old to be able to know how to take care of a newborn baby and it also puts in danger the life of the baby. However, 13 years of age is usually when a boy or girl begins to or already has begun puberty. Consequently they will begin to think and act more maturely and conscientiously. Because the boy or girl will have attended Jewish schooling, they are expected to be aware of the rules and rituals of various festivals and celebrations such as Pesach, Shabbat and Yom Kippur, where it can be argued that the children have the largest active role out of all the Jewish festivals and celebrations, as they are encouraged to fast if they feel they are able to. Therefore they are responsible for their own learning and education which shows maturity as adulthood includes knowledge and understanding. It is acceptable for the 13 year old, and indeed a child of any age, to be expected to behave sensibly during synagogue services and also any other festivals and Jewish celebrations. They should also be prepared to take on active roles during festivals such as Shabbat which would reflect the respect their family would have for them as a result of being responsibly and acting sensibly. At 13 years of age, the child would be in senior school, where they are treated as young adults and taught to be a good judge of self conduct and behaviour and as a result of this; he or she should know how to behave as such. Consequently, a bar/bat mitzvah is a declaration on one's onset to adulthood and maturity and it is down to the person who becomes a bar/bat mitzvah to behave accordingly to show that their faith means a lot to them

and as a result, they are prepared to follow the teachings of the Torah and what the rabbi preaches about in the synagogue. However, at 13 years old, they have many other things to worry about, such as school work, and should not be expected to take on the full adult responsibilities. They should have a chance to enjoy their childhood. The whole point of childhood is that they should enjoy themselves and not have to worry about everything. Taking on full adult responsibility can be demanding especially all at once. When they are 13, the children should begin to understand what is expected of them, but should not be expected to become adults overnight. Just like puberty, entering adulthood is a gradual process and so they should take one step at a time with taking on full adult responsibilities. They should only be expected to take on the full adult responsibilities later in life, when they have seen more of the world and gained more general knowledge. Having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah doesn't mean that the person involved is officially an adult. However in society, there are laws to how old you have to be to do certain things, such as getting married at 16, or driving legally at 17, and drinking at pubs at 18. But in Judaism, by having the bar or bat mitzvah, it gives the boy or girl a mental realisation that he or she is growing up. It shows that ideally, there is no need to introduce age limit laws, as religious celebrations such as bar and bat mitzvah have a much stronger significance and are deeper and more meaningful than any legal document when it comes to confirming one's authority.