Nadia’s Bat Mitzvah:

A Survival Guide to Jewish Services

Dear Friends and Family:

We’re moved and delighted that you’ve come all this way to take part in Nadia’s Bat Mitzvah. We know that many of you have questions about what to expect during the Saturday morning service. If you’ve never been at a traditional Jewish service before, a lot of it may seem strange and intimidating, so we’ve compiled this guide to help you plan and make sense of the experience.

**KEY THINGS TO KNOW:**

1. **Arrival and seating:**
2. **Jewish services are *LONG****:* For many people, the most startling thing about Jewish services is their length (they’re also, for the most part, in Hebrew). A standard Saturday morning service lasts about **2.5 - 3 hours**, but don’t panic. Not everyone comes for the whole thing (it’s not uncommon for people to get there an hour in). This is **NOT** seen as disrespectful as it might in church; it’s totally normal. The central component of Nadia’s role, reading the Torah, will likely begin around **10:15**.
3. Seating: There are no reserved seats/pews etc. Sit anywhere that you see an open seat. Some congregants lay their books or prayer shawl bags on empty seats, but they’ll move them into their own seat as soon as they see a person in need of a place to sit (you are **not** putting them out or inconveniencing them).
4. It’s perfectly OK to step out of services for a while.
5. **Don’t use electronic devices at services:** Observant Jews traditionally refrain from using all electronic devices, including phones, cameras, and computers, for the duration of the Sabbath and other holidays and festivals. Please silence your cell phone and refrain from using any electronic devices during services and the luncheon that follows.
6. **Dress Code:** Many people express the special nature of the Sabbath and festivals by dressing in festive and/or “nicer” clothing. This might be described as “business,” “business casual,” or “dressy.” However, in this congregation you’ll see a fair range of dress levels. Everyone is welcome to attend services no matter how they happen to be dressed.
7. **Head coverings:** Jewish men and sometimes women traditionally cover their heads during services, but **there is no expectation that you do so.**
8. **Standing and Sitting:** You may notice that people alternate between standing and sitting at different points in the service. You should not feel uncomfortable about “doing it right” but should generally follow the cues of the congregation to see when it is appropriate to stand or sit. No one will be offended if you miss a cue and you should not be self-conscious if you lag. Also, it’s totally fine to stay seated if for whatever reason standing is not comfortable for you.
9. **Where’s the Rabbi?** In Judaism, you don’t need a rabbi to have services. In fact, our congregation doesn’t have one at all. All the components of the services are led by congregants, visiting members of Nadia’s family, or Nadia herself.

**Structure of the Service**

Our Shabbat morning services contain a few distinct parts (detailed below). We begin with a series of prayers and then move to a portion of the service in which we remove the Torah scroll from the *aron* (ark) to read the weekly portion. After the *Torah* reading there is an additional reading called the *haftarah* which is followed by returning the *Torah* to the *ark* and a short sermon from the rabbi or member of the community in which they share some learning or a reflection on the portion of the *Torah* that was read that week. Following this, we re-commence with prayers and then conclude the service.

You will see that congregants switch between two books during services. For the prayer portions at the beginning and end, we use a book called a *siddur* (prayer book) which contains all the prayers recited in our congregation in original Hebrew and in English translation. This is the smaller of the two books.

During the *Torah* reading portion of the service, we use the larger book, the *chumash* (Pentateuch), which contains the full text of the *Torah* (Five Books of Moses).

**Shabbat Morning Schedule (Approximate)**

**9:30** - 9:40 Preliminary blessings and Psalms.

**9:40 - 10:10**  Nadia will lead *Shacharit*, the morning service. This segment includes the *amidah*, a silent devotional prayer recited while standing. The *amidah* is then repeated aloud on behalf of the congregation by Nadia.

**10:15 - 11:15** The Torah scroll is removed from the ark and brought to the center of the synagogue to be read. The *Torah* is divided into sections. Each Shabbat morning, a section is read in an annual cycle through which the entire *Torah* (Five Books of Moses) is recited over the course of the year. The *Torah* scroll is written without any punctuation, vowels, or vocalization, or any indicators of the musical pattern. The reader must study and memorize those components in order to read the Torah for the congregation. Most weeks, the Torah reading is divided into seven smaller sections and a different member of the congregation is called to say a blessing over each section of the Torah reading. Nadia will read six of the seven sections, with her cousin Maya Verskin reading the remaining portion. After the Torah is read, it is briefly lifted up and displayed before being wrapped and covered. Nadia will then read a selection from the prophetic writings, called the *Haftarah*. While Nadia is reading it, some of her young family members will pass out candy. Feel free to eat one at this point, but save one wrapped! After Nadia completes the Haftarah reading and blessings, Eli and Laura will say a special blessing for the occasion of Nadia’s bat mitzvah, marking her entry into Jewish adulthood. Then, all present will bombard her with candy as an expression of joy. Young children will then make a beeline to gather the candy.

In light of the events in Israel and Gaza since October 7, we will then say a traditional blessing for those held captive.

After additional specific prayers for the sick, the Torah is paraded through the congregation to song, and people may touch their tallit, prayer shawls, or a book to the scroll. Then, the Torah is returned to its storage place in *aron* (ark) at the front of the sanctuary.

Nadia will then deliver a short homily about the Torah portion she has just read. She is preparing a glossary of terms to make it easier to follow.

**11:15 - 11:30** *Mussaf*, an additional prayer segment recited only on Shabbat and festivals, will be led by Nadia’s cousin, Hannah Verskin. It also contains an extended silent devotional segment which is then repeated aloud.

**11:30 - 11:40** Our services end with concluding prayers, congregational announcements, and the singing of *Adon Olam*, a culminating hymn that is led by the young children of our community.