

Using Music Therapy To Help Jewish Children With Different Abilities Complete Their  
Bar/Bat Mitzvah

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Creative Arts Therapies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Creative Arts Therapies, Music Therapy Option)

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 12, 2016

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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The purpose of this theoretical inquiry was to propose how particular music therapy interventions may be used and/or modified to address specific needs of young persons with different abilities as they prepare for and participate in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. The author reviewed relevant literature to identify needs of young persons with different abilities who were completing their bar/bat mitzvah. She then examined interventions used in traditional music therapy contexts that address similar needs and re-conceptualized four interventions for use within bar/bat mitzvah preparation and/or ceremony contexts. Limitations of the research, potential implications for practice and future research, and concluding thoughts are presented.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wow! It is hard to believe that the journey is over. Although it may not have been the easiest trip I have ever taken, I am lucky to have walked away with some spectacular friends, experiences and the coveted title of music therapist. I feel that I could spend four times the number of pages in this paper expressing my gratitude to each individual who has helped me along the way, but, since there is no APA protocol for the number of times I can say ‘thank you’ and ‘I love you’, I will attempt to keep it brief!

First, to my professors, thank you for taking the time to share your skills and knowledge. As soon as I found the field of music therapy, I knew this was what I should be doing. It was only through you that I learned how to be an effective, empathetic and practicing member of our community. If there would be one of my professors to spend twenty pages saying ‘thank you, thank you’, it would be my thesis supervisor Laurel Young. As a teacher, you have one of the hardest jobs there is, and I can’t thank you enough for the time and energy you have put into helping me finish this paper and the understanding you have every time I asked for just one more day to turn it in. I am incredibly grateful for having the opportunity to work with you on this project. The first drink is on me!

I would also like to thank two remarkable women, who simply inspire me. Marcia Greene and Nancy Levin have both worked tirelessly with students with different abilities who want to have a bar or bat mitzvah. You both have shaped who I am, given me support at different times in my life, as well as have made and are making a tremendous difference in so many students and families lives. We should all strive to do as much good as you in our lifetimes.

To my friends: thank you so much for listening to my endless prattling about my thesis topic, my droning on about how cool music therapy is, for always being there with coffee, chocolate or a much needed hug of encouragement, and finally being okay with my constant “I can’t... I have to work on my thesis”, this year! I could not have done this without you and I love you so much! I would also like to mention the women I worked with in the graduate certificate and Master’s program at Concordia. In my life I don’t think I have ever or will ever again find a group of women who are more loving, supportive, inspiring, musical and grounding as you are. We have gone through the feat

of education and a life altering time together. I feel so lucky every day to have been able to make the trip with you. You are the future of music therapy and are a constant inspiration for me. Thank you for being you!

I would also like to thank my family, which not only includes my immediate family but also our extended family and family friends. I feel so lucky to have grown up with the support and love of such unique and strong role models and I am grateful everyday for you. To my immediate family, thank you for your ever-constant love and support. Throughout the past few years, in the process of my being a music therapist and pursuing my Master's, you have encouraged me when I didn't think I could, believed in me when I didn't, and just simply loved me. And, all that I gave you in return were bad jokes and puns! I love you.

Finally, I would like to thank my father. You and Mom instilled a love of music in me at such an early age and encouraged me to follow my dreams of being a musician in every way you could. Even when that dream included getting a degree in classical saxophone, even though I'm sure you were secretly wishing it was something more practical. But, who knows why, you let me do it anyway, and the path led me to where I belong. Dad, the world isn't whole without you, but the memory of your love and goodness will keep me going. I love you and miss you every day.

I would like to finish by sharing a quote from one of my favourite songs from the musical "Carousel" by Rodgers and Hammerstein (in true music therapy style) that is particularly meaningful to me.

*"When you walk through a storm hold your head up high  
And don't be afraid of the dark.  
At the end of the storm there's a golden sky,  
And the sweet silver song of a lark.  
Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain  
Though your dreams be tossed and blown.  
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart, and you'll never walk alone.  
You'll never walk alone."*

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

A bar (male) or bat (female) mitzvah is a Jewish coming of age ritual and rite of passage that occurs at the age of 12 or 13 and confirms an individual's entrance into adulthood (Davis, 2000; The Jewish Federations of North America, n.d.; Syme, n.d.). Although a formal ceremony is technically not required in order to confer the rights and religious obligations of becoming an adult, many consider it to be an extremely important part of a practicing Jewish pre-adolescent's life. It is the time where a young person approaches their congregation and after years of learning and anticipation, and months of preparation and practicing, declares that he or she is a son or daughter of the commandment and a practicing adult member of the Jewish faith (Syme, n.d.).

In addition to this rite of passage into adulthood, there are many other reasons as to why having a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony may be important. For the individual, it can promote feelings of self-esteem and accomplishment by recognizing the accomplishment of a huge feat on a day when one is in the spotlight. It is a journey that young persons make with their peers as they study together, which "creates a strong sense of community [and camaraderie] among the participants" (The Jewish Federations of North America, n.d.). For parents and other family members, it is a public forum in which they can display pride in their loved one's accomplishments and celebrate together (Davis, 2000). For the faith community, it is a way to welcome the individual into this phase of his/her life and it can help to promote and maintain the traditions of Judaism in the younger generation (Syme, n.d.).

Given that having a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is an important milestone for many young people, there is no reason to assume that this would be any different in this regard for Jewish persons with different abilities (i.e., those who have special or complex needs). Many studies have shown that religion and spirituality overall, can be an important aspect in the lives of these individuals (Artson, 2007; Ault, Collins, & Carter, 2013; Hersov, 2007; O'Hanlon, 2013; Vogel & Reiter, 2003). Some literature indicates that Jewish individuals with different abilities and/or their parents have expressed a desire to have a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony or expressed appreciation at having had one (Hersov, 2007; Hyman 2009; Jones, 2004; Lifshitz & Merrick, 2001; Merrick, Gabbay, & Lifshitz, 2001; Shogren & Rye, 2005; Vogel & Reiter, 2003). However, the literature and the

current author's experiences indicate that the process of preparing for and participating in a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony may contain unique challenges for persons with different abilities.

Under typical circumstances, the inherent stresses of preparing for and participating in a bar/bat mitzvah are many. In his book "*Surviving Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah: The Ultimate Insider's Guide*" Axelrod (2012) summarizes the stressful circumstances in a somewhat humorous manner. He imagines a meeting between G-d<sup>1</sup> and the angels, where an angel makes a suggestion:

"Let's take young people when they're about thirteen years old. It's perfect. They're just starting to go through puberty, their voices are changing, and they're socially awkward and self-conscious. We'll make them stand up in front of all their friends and family and sing for hours. Plus, they'll have to do it in another language" (p. 2).

For individuals with different abilities, these typical stressors may be exacerbated by various developmental, communication, and/or physical challenges that may result in feelings of frustration, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, increased anxiety, etc. Although some additional supports may be available for those who attend Hebrew school (periodically or daily), these schools are not necessarily consistent in the supports that they provide (if any) for this purpose. Furthermore, the current author's experience has revealed that not all Jewish individuals with different abilities are able to attend Hebrew school because of the severity of their diagnosis or for financial, logistical (i.e., location or accessibility to the site), and/or other reasons. In other words, it appears that the support that individuals with different abilities might need to successfully complete their bar/bat mitzvah may be limited and inconsistent.

As will be explored further in Chapter Two, the literature contains some case examples that illustrate how some individuals with different abilities were able to complete their bar/bat mitzvah ceremony (Hersov, 2007; Hyman, 2009; Jones, 2004; Hornstein, 2007). However, these examples were somewhat limited in scope, in that they were very specific to individual contexts and did not examine issues at large nor how they might be addressed on a broader scale. This suggests a need for more investigation

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the abbreviated spelling for this word is due to personal religious reasons.



into how young persons with different abilities can be best supported throughout the process of preparing for and participating in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies.

There are four main denominations of Judaism practiced in North America today: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist (The Jewish Outreach Institute, n.d.). As a practicing member of the Jewish faith, my current beliefs lie somewhere between Conservative and Reform, and my perspectives on this topic are heavily influenced by several factors. As a child, I attended Sunday school and then bi-weekly Hebrew school as I approached the age of 12 (within Conservative and Orthodox contexts). I remember all of the hard work, stress, anxiety and constant preparation I had to go through as I prepared for my own bat mitzvah. I also remember how much I enjoyed the day of the ceremony. My family and I were proud, extended family members came to visit, and I was treated like an adult. As a musician, I particularly enjoyed the performance and singing components. Finally, it is also important to note that I spent about 5 years working as a Hebrew schoolteacher and teacher's aide after my bat mitzvah. Here, I was able to watch children develop and grow as young members of the Jewish faith within a Reform context. My supervisor (also director of the school) was a strong advocate for children with different abilities. She believed that they had a right to complete their Jewish education and be part of the community like everyone else. Her values continue to have a strong impact on me. To a certain extent, all of these experiences influenced my decision to choose the helping profession of music therapy as a career and sparked my interest in the current research topic.

In my journey as a music therapist thus far, I have had the privilege of working with children and young adolescents who have different abilities and watch them achieve goals that others did not think they were capable of. The music therapy literature contains numerous examples of interventions that may be used with young persons who have different abilities to help them achieve a wide variety of goals (see Chapter Two for a general overview on this literature). This, along with the fact that music is an integral component of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, lead me to wonder how music therapy interventions might be used to help individuals with different abilities as they prepare for and participate in this important rite of passage. I found no literature on this specific topic. Therefore, the purpose of this theoretical inquiry was to propose how particular

music therapy interventions may be used and/or modified to address specific needs of young persons with different abilities as they prepare for and participate in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies.

For this paper, I chose to use the term *different abilities* to refer to persons with intellectual disabilities (also known as intellectual developmental disorder) as defined by the DSM-5 (2013). Intellectual disability falls under the category of Neurodevelopmental Disorders and is characterized by:

“...deficits in general mental abilities, such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience. These deficits result in impairments of adaptive functioning, such as the individual fails to meet standards of personal independence and social responsibility in one or more aspects of daily life, including communication, social participation, academic or occupational functioning, and personal independence at home or in community settings” (p. 31).

I wanted to use the term *different abilities* because in my work as a music therapist, I prefer to focus on strengths based approaches rather than deficit based approaches. Teacher and researcher Judith Leblanc coined this term in 1998, as a way to change society’s expectations of these individuals and to change these individuals’ expectations toward themselves. (Leblanc, n.d.). Dr. Leblanc’s beliefs on this matter deeply resonated with my own.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question that guided this inquiry was: How might music therapy interventions be used to address the needs of young Jewish persons with different abilities who are completing their bar or bat mitzvah?

The subsidiary questions were: (a) What are the needs of young Jewish persons with different abilities who are completing their bar or bat mitzvah?; (b) How are similar needs addressed in various music therapy contexts with young persons who have different abilities?; and (c) How might interventions used in music therapy contexts with young persons who have different abilities be used or modified to support Jewish persons who are completing their bar/bat mitzvah?

### **Chapter Outline**

I have organized this inquiry into five chapters. Chapter One describes the significance and purpose of the inquiry as well as my personal relationship to the topic. The primary and subsidiary research questions are also presented. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature and summarizes topic areas related to the research questions. Chapter Three describes how the theoretical methodology was conceptualized in this research. Chapter Four includes the results that emerged from a directed content analysis of the literature. Chapter Five presents limitations of the research, implications for clinical practice and future research, and concluding thoughts.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

As proposed in Chapter One, music therapy interventions may potentially be used to help young Jewish persons with different abilities to prepare for and participate in their bar/bat mitzvahs. The purpose of the present chapter is to summarize topic areas related to the research questions. These include: the role of religion/spirituality for persons with different abilities, how the bar/bat mitzvah is conceptualized within the Conservative and Reform Jewish traditions, identified needs of young persons with different abilities when preparing for and participating in their bar/bat mitzvahs, the role of music in the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, and an overview on how music therapy has been used to address the needs of young persons with different abilities.

### **The Role of Religion/Spirituality for Persons with Different Abilities**

In 2013, O'Hanlon published a study about the experiences of families of children with special needs and their perceptions of the support they received through their religious and spiritual institutions/communities. Parents of children with disabilities (between the ages of 6 months to 21 years) were interviewed via an online survey (n = 58). Results indicated that religious education was either important or very important to 93.1% of these parents, with only 6.9% stating religious education for their child was not important. This highlights the importance that many families place on religious and spiritual education for their children with different abilities.

A study conducted by Shogren and Rye (2008) sought to understand individuals with intellectual disabilities' self-reported perspectives of their own spirituality. Forty one individuals with mild (n = 22) or moderate (n = 19) intellectual disabilities living in either group homes or supported living residences ranging from ages of 25 to 76 participated in semi-structured interviews. Individuals did not have to identify themselves as being religious in order to participate. A majority of participants indicated that religion was either somewhat important (34%) or very important (56%) to them. Similarly, Hersov (2007) examined the importance of spiritual, religious, and cultural life for Jewish people with learning disabilities. He conducted group and individual interviews with adults with learning disabilities who were living in Jewish group homes, participating in day/leisure services provided within a Jewish cultural framework, or living in the community (i.e., not participating in programs) and who identified as being Jewish (n =

17). Through these interviews, several themes emerged. For example, being Jewish was important to the research participants; it provided a sense of strength, social belonging and inclusion, and was a part of their personal identity. Participation in the celebration of festivals was highly valued. Singing, dancing, music, and parties were perceived as being important, as was attending bar and bat mitzvahs and weddings. Many of the participants expressed a desire for more opportunities for religious and spiritual education and development. The findings of both of these studies are particularly poignant because they show first hand, the desire of persons with different abilities to be active participants in and learn more about their religions.

“If we are to understand Jewish spirituality as the search for, or fulfillment of, Jewish identity, a person with a disability is as likely, or unlikely, as any other to engage in the process of resolving what it means for them to be Jewish” (Jones, 2004).

Overall, this literature indicates that religion and or spirituality is important to both caregivers of individuals with different abilities and as well as important to the individuals themselves. It also indicates a desire for more opportunities for participation in religious and spiritual venues, which is directly related to the purpose of the present study.

### **The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Within Conservative and Reform Traditions**

As noted in Chapter One, the current research is delimited to bar/bat mitzvahs that take place within the Conservative or Reform Traditions. In these traditions, a large emphasis is placed on education and knowledge, which is displayed in the teachings of the Torah. In the Torah, there are 613 commandments that are organized into two separate categories. The first, which contains 248 commandments, are positive (things a person should do) and the other 365 commandments are negative (things a person should avoid doing; Lifshitz & Merrick, 2001). Within these teachings, parents are required to teach their children the Torah as well as ensure that their children obtain formal instruction in Jewish religious studies: “And you shall teach the (these words of the Torah) to your children...” (Deut. 11:19; Merrick, Gabbay & Lifshitz, 2001, p. 57). This has obvious implications for the present study.

The term bar/bat mitzvah literally translates to son/daughter of the commandment, which would happen officially within the Jewish community at the age of 13 for boys and 12 for girls, and would be obtained even without public recognition or celebration. (Syme, 2005; The Jewish Federations of North America, n.d.). In the historical use of the word bar/bat, a person would simply become a bar/bat mitzvah. In modern society, the word bar/bat can refer to the person or it can refer to the event. Another way to describe it is "...when the boy reaches thirteen and the girl twelve, they are not initiated into secret rituals but attain a new status whereby they can participate as adults in the synagogue, in commercial contracts and in all religious ceremonies requiring adulthood (Seidman, 1973). In the Jewish religion, once an adolescent reaches 12 or 13, as an adult in the community, they are permitted to be counted as part of the *minyan*, or group of ten adults that constitutes a public quorum (Cardin, 2000).

The celebration that many people associate with a bar or bat mitzvah is in fact, not a religious obligation. As noted earlier, an adolescent automatically becomes a bar or bat mitzvah at a specific age, and nothing in the Torah refers to having a celebration or even that the adolescent is required to recite from the Torah in order to become a practicing member of a Jewish community (Syme, 2005; The Jewish Federations of North America, n.d.). It was sometime during the Middle Ages (by the 13th or 14th century) that the ritual of calling the bar/bat mitzvah to the Torah emerged (Cardin, 2000; Syme, 2005; The Jewish Federations of North America, n.d.) In current Jewish culture, there are two main elements that are found in almost every bar or bat mitzvah celebration. First, the bar or bat mitzvah joins the community prayer service, typically held on Shabbat, and recites the blessings of his or her *aliya* (blessings over the Torah) as well as recites some or all of the weekly Torah portion. The second element involves chanting the *haftarah*, which is the weekly reading from the Prophets (Cardin, 2000). It is also interesting to note, that although the bat mitzvah ritual did not come about until the late 1800's, almost every sect of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist) has found ways to include girls in this coming of age celebration (Cardin, 2000).

Because of the vast differences in ritual from community to community, bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies can look very different depending on where they take place and in what denomination they take place in.

“Because Judaism is a complex mixture of culture and religion, the manner of celebration of the bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah varies in place and time, from community to community... The process is sufficiently flexible to allow synagogue communities to regularly make accommodations where they are needed in order for *any* child, independent of cultural background, social or economic status, or disability, to become bar or bat mitzvah”. (Jones, 2004, p. 60)

Ultimately, the differences between a Reform and Conservative bar/bat mitzvah service is dependent on the rituals and culture of the specific synagogue. However, in every bar/bat mitzvah, the ceremony is “...a public demonstration of learning, accomplishment and commitment” (Davis, 2000). No matter which branch of Judaism the ceremony takes place in,

“...a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is the highlight of years of elementary Jewish education and the culmination of a yearlong course of study in which the children hone their Hebrew skills, are initiated into the ancient ways of chanting the Torah and *haftarot*, and explore the spiritual message of these texts. (Cardin, 2000)

Seeing as the bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies are flexible by nature, it is logical to take the next step in ensuring that every adolescent with different abilities has the option to tailor a service to their particular needs and giving the opportunity for every child to complete their bar or bat mitzvah.

### **Needs of Young Persons with Different Abilities in Relation to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ceremony**

In an article entitled *Judaism, Spirituality, and Disability*, Jones (2004) described the bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies of persons with different abilities and the types of support needed in order to facilitate their successful participation. Natan (pseudonym) was an individual who had significant psychosocial and behavioral problems associated with autism. He had been born into a practicing Jewish Orthodox family. He had difficulty learning and being accepted in a typical Jewish education environment so Natan’s parents worked with him in their home for 13 years to ensure he was prepared for his bar mitzvah when the time came. On his bar mitzvah day, Natan had trouble staying

in one place, and wandered around during the beginning part of the service. However, with the dedicated help of his parents, Natan was able to pronounce the Hebrew blessings, read his Torah portion, and deliver a speech mostly written himself about his Torah reading. In another case presented by Jones, Tova (pseudonym) had severe multiple disabilities which resulted in her being unable to speak, read or write. She required one-on-one care and became distressed in crowds. Her bat mitzvah ceremony, which took place in a reform temple, was led by the Rabbi and Tova's family (i.e., her brother, aunts and uncles). The service was kept very short to accommodate Tova's needs. To further include Tova, her parents placed a *Tallis* (prayer shawl) around her shoulders during the service and gave her a blessing, like any other family would during a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony. In both of these ceremonies Jones witnessed the considerable amount of effort put into either adapting the bar and bat mitzvah services to best fit the adolescent or adequately prepare the adolescent to ensure success on their bar or bat mitzvah day.

In the story of Leon, a 13-year old boy with autism, Hyman (2009) described in great detail the effort that went into helping him successfully complete his bar mitzvah. Leon had three main behavior issues: the first was noncompliance, where he would loudly yell 'no' and become aggravated in certain situations, sometimes in public. The second was that, on occasion, Leon had been known to place his hands inside his pants in public. And the third issue centered on Leon's difficulty in sitting for long periods of time. Because religion was important Leon's family, they wanted to do everything they could to ensure he had a bar mitzvah. Leon's parents enrolled him in an elementary Jewish day school where he received both general education and Hebrew and Jewish curricula since kindergarten as well as intensive behavioral therapy since age 3. As the time of his bar mitzvah approached, Leon's parents and his team of educators decided that a positive behavior support plan (PBS) specifically for his bar mitzvah was the best choice for success. Leon began preparing for his bar mitzvah 8 months before the day. Paraphrased from the Carr et al. (2002) article "Positive Behavior Support: Evolution of an Applied Science", Hyman described a PBS plan as "a strategic and systematic approach that relies primarily on teaching new behaviors and on environmental management to achieve both reductions in problem behavior and improved quality of



life” (Hyman, p.187). By the end of the process of preparing Leon for his bar mitzvah, Leon and his family were left with a successful day in Leon’s life and life milestone Leon would always be able to keep. “Positive outcomes were realized in all three domains because of his support team’s commitment to systematic, person-centered instruction within a PBS framework” (Hyman, 2009, p. 191).

In an article entitled “What Makes a ‘Special Needs Bar Mitzvah’ Truly Special”, Hornstein (2007) outlined areas to consider when helping a child with different abilities prepare for his/her bar or bat mitzvah. She noted that the people helping the individual should understand the learning challenges they possess, meet with the parents and discover what they have in mind for their child’s Jewish education, and determine with them what educational setting is best for the child depending on the child’s abilities. When the date of the bar or bat mitzvah approaches, all who are involved in the preparation for the bar or bat mitzvah should convene in order to set realistic expectations for the ceremony and decide how best to accommodate the adolescent. Hornstein noted that all decisions made for the bar or bat mitzvah day should remain flexible as the adolescent might change their mind or factors may appear up until the final day.

Hornstein (2007) also suggested practical modifications, which would be conceptualized according to the diagnosis/abilities of the adolescent. For example, for adolescents who do not speak, it might be helpful to prerecord another person’s voice reciting the blessings or a speech, and the bar or bat mitzvah could select the correct picture on a screen in order to play the recorded message. Alternatively, family members and/or friends could recite blessings and speak for the bar or bat mitzvah. If the family members and synagogue are comfortable with the adaptations to the service and use of technology, these modifications could help the adolescent to achieve a positive experience of his/her bar or bat mitzvah and give him/her every possibility to ensure success.

The needs and modifications identified in the above examples were taken into consideration when designing music therapy interventions within the context of the present study. While the approaches described above appeared to be successful, they were quite behavioral in terms of their approach. Furthermore, the implied resources, needs, and desires of the individuals with different abilities were not always explicitly

addressed in these publications. It was the current researcher's position that music therapy interventions could build upon the approaches used in the above examples while being conceptualized within a more resource oriented, strengths-based philosophical framework. The current author hopes that this paper will make an important addition to the literature by expanding intervention options available (practically and philosophically) for adolescents with different abilities who want to participate in a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony.

### **The Role of Music in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Ceremony**

It is important to note, that in Jewish religious customs, “music is rarely separate... whether from fundamental texts (e.g., in biblical cantillation) or from the many contexts of ritual” (Bohlman, 2008). In the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony alone, the ceremony is saturated with music that is as imbedded in the Jewish culture as the ceremony itself.

As noted earlier, a typical bar/bat mitzvah ceremony can include the person being bar/bat mitzvahed to recite of the *aliya*, recite the Torah portion of that week, and chant the *haftarah* (Cardin, 2000). In the Judaic culture of reciting prayers, different musical motifs are associated with different prayers and, interestingly, much of the prayer motifs are congregation specific. For example, the prayer melodies (also called the *nusah*) vary depending on the congregational population, if the congregation is made up of Ashkenazi (of Eastern descent) or Sephardic (of Spanish or Mediterranean descent) Jews (Edelman, n.d.)

As for reading from the Torah, there is a non-pitch-specific notational system for reciting the Torah called *te'amim* (also known as cantillation marks or tropes; Bohlman, 2008). The *te'amim* indicates to the reader which syllable is stressed and when to connect words and when to separate them, as well as a system of musical notation (Jacobson, 2005). The *te'amim* is a set of graphic signs that are present either underneath and or on top of the text. These signs are not used in a kosher Torah used for prayer, but are on learning texts. Each sign represents a melismatic phrase to which the word it is attached to is sung (Teamim - Origins, n.d.).

Given the importance and use of music in many aspects of the Jewish religious ceremony of the bar/bat mitzvah, there may be ways in which adapted approaches to

music learning that are used in music therapy may be relevant for persons with different needs who are preparing for this ceremony.

### **Select Overview of Music Therapy Practice with Young Persons with Different Abilities**

The literature indicates that music therapy has been used in multiple ways to address the needs of young persons with different abilities (Keith, 2013; McLaughlin & Figlure Adler, 2015; Polen, 2013). As the methodology component of this paper involves applying and modifying traditional (i.e., established) music therapy interventions for use with young persons with different abilities who are completing their bar/bat mitzvah, goals of specific interventions used in music therapy with this population will not be addressed here. However, a brief overview of music therapy practice with children/young adults who have different abilities will now be provided.

According to the American Music Therapy Association (n.d.), music therapy is used to help children and young adults with different abilities to address issues that fall under the following domains of functioning: motor, physical, social/emotional, sensory, communicative, or cognitive. When working in classroom settings, music therapists often work collaboratively with other professionals to identify challenges and resources and establish learning goals (McLaughlin & Figlure, 2015). Outside of classroom settings, music therapists often work with families to develop interventions that may be used to better the young person's life in general (both within and outside of the music therapy context). Goal areas with this population typically include communication and conceptual skill development, social skills, acquisition of daily living or functional skills, adaptive functioning skills to aid in normalization for appropriate behaviour social skills in individual practice and group, and a range of emotional skills (Keith, 2013; McLaughlin & Figlure Adler, 2015; Polen, 2013). Music therapy may also be used with these individuals to improve their overall quality of life through enabling their participation in a variety of enjoyable music experiences, while giving the support to help acquire the functional skills described above (McLaughlin & Figlure Adler, 2015).

In order to identify the most appropriate goal areas for an individual with different abilities, the music therapist conducts an assessment. Although assessment procedures vary widely, the music therapist essentially engages the client in a wide range of music

experiences to assess the person's strengths, needs, interests, and potentials, and then makes recommendations based on the findings (Polen, 2013). A treatment plan is established and progress is evaluated and recorded.

Music therapy for young persons with different abilities has evolved over the years, as have the general public's attitudes around recognizing these individuals' ability and need to be contributing members of society (McLaughlin & Figlure Adler, 2015). There is still more work to be done in this area. Music therapy can play an integral role in the lives of these individuals as they strive toward realization of their potentials. This has direct implications for the present study.

### **Summary**

For many young persons with different abilities and their families, having a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony is a significant life event. However, there may be barriers that need to be overcome to ensure that the event itself and the preparation process leading up to the event are as positive and constructive as possible. Given the role of music in the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony, and humanistic approaches used in music therapy that address the needs of persons with different abilities, it is the current author's opinion that established music therapy interventions may be used or modified to help these individuals prepare for and participate in this important life event. This study examined how this proposed idea might be conceptualized.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **Design**

The design of this paper is theoretical in that proposed links are being made between identified needs of persons with different abilities who are completing their bar/bat mitzvah and the use of music therapy interventions that are used to address similar needs in other clinical contexts.

In order to focus the scope of study, some delimitations were established. All references made to Judaism throughout the paper were delimited to Conservative or Reform perspectives. This is because the author is personally more familiar with these perspectives and this also helped to make the information more directly applicable to particular faith contexts. All literature reviewed or analyzed was delimited to English language publications with a cut-off date of December 2015. Finally, although the phrase “young persons with different abilities” can refer to a variety of people with a wide spectrum of needs, the literature utilized in the analysis was delimited to publications that applied to young persons with intellectual disabilities as defined by the DSM-5 (see definition in Chapter One).

### **Participants**

No participants were included in this inquiry.

### **Materials**

Publications in the form of books, book chapters, relevant popular literature, and academic journals were the main sources of data for this research. Relevant websites were also reviewed.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection occurred as follows:

1. A keyword search was conducted using electronic databases such as Concordia Library Search, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and Spectrum. Keywords included: special needs, bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, mitzvah, education, Jewish, music, music therapy, autism, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual delay, developmental delay, learning disability.

2. All relevant sources were organized into topic areas that aligned with the subsidiary research questions.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis occurred as follows:

1. The author searched relevant sources and identified needs of young persons with different abilities who were completing their bar/bat mitzvah.
2. The author searched relevant sources and identified needs of young persons with different abilities that are typically addressed in various music therapy contexts.
3. The author identified commonalities with regard to needs indicated in the above two areas.
4. The author examined interventions typically used in music therapy to address these needs and re-conceptualized them for use within a bar/bat mitzvah preparation/ceremony context.

## Chapter 4. Results

The following four interventions are modified versions of traditional (i.e., commonly used) music therapy interventions contained in the literature that in their new form are meant to address identified needs of young persons with different abilities who are working toward completing their bar or bat mitzvah. In order to make these interventions as practical and user friendly as possible, I (the current researcher) also made modifications to the steps (when needed) based on my own knowledge and experience as a music therapist and as an individual who has had past and current personal involvement in Jewish culture and traditions. The interventions are not presented in any particular order of importance.

### **Intervention One: Community Choir**

**Identified need of person with different abilities when completing his/her bar/bat mitzvah.** In her article *Judaism, Spirituality, and Disability*, Jones (2004) indicated that persons with different abilities need social skills in order to prepare for and participate in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. Because there is a tremendous amount of education involved with becoming a bar/bat mitzvah student, attending a Hebrew school on a full time or part time basis is often an important part of the process. However, some students with different abilities have behavioural issues (e.g. inability to stay in a classroom setting for an extended period of time, aggressive tendencies towards self or others, inability to control volume of voice, etc.) that may inhibit or limit their abilities to attend Hebrew school and/or participate in bar/bat mitzvah preparation programs in socially constructive ways. Creating a social milieu where students with different abilities can practice their prayers, sing in front of/with others, and alter the ways in which they interact with their Hebrew school community members could help students with different abilities to develop the social skills that they need to prepare for and participate in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies.

**Music therapy intervention used to address a similar need in another context.** *Music Ensembles* as described by Keith (2013) addresses the development of social skills for clients with different abilities. Here, the clients are active participants in groups that learn and perform musical pieces that may involve singing and/or instrument playing. A

primary goal of this type of group is to improve clients' social skills within a supportive music-making context that targets a performance outcome.

**Description of re-conceptualized intervention.** The community choir will be inclusive in that students with different abilities will have the opportunity to participate. Members of the community can also participate as this could offer a more inclusive and supportive community atmosphere. The choir may also include extended family members who wish to participate in the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. Depending upon contextual circumstances, the choir can be led, co-led, or supported by the music therapist to ensure the needs of the student(s) with different abilities are being specially attended to. Sessions are conducted within a rehearsal format rather than a traditional music therapy session format. However, the music therapist and the choir leader (if applicable) plan and work together to create a supportive musical space where all of the bar/bat mitzvah students can work on their material for their ceremony as well as interact in socially constructive ways. Even if the music therapist is not the choir leader, he/she attends all rehearsals to provide emotional and/or musical support to individuals with different abilities. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. For example a professional music therapist knows how to constructively prompt the student when/if they have difficulty maintaining attention in the rehearsal, he/she can provide emotional support or musical prompts when the student needs help or guidance, and/or a music therapist has knowledge on how to constructively handle challenging behaviors the student may exhibit. The rehearsals may also be structured to address individual students' and the group's social needs. For example, the choir can focus on only prayers said throughout the ceremony, the Torah portion, the Haftarah, or even choose nonreligious songs to include in the ceremony, as warm ups, or for other events. The ensemble will sing and best support each student on the day of their bar/bat mitzvah by singing the prayers or other songs learned during rehearsals.

**Other considerations.** Members of the choir who do not have different abilities need to be flexible and perhaps be taught that things might need to change or be conducted in non-traditional ways in order to accommodate choir members with different abilities. For example, the service may need to be shortened or re-designed for those individuals who are sensitive to loud music. Non-verbal individuals who have



difficulty singing may still participate in the choir to feel supported by the prayers and music, and are encouraged to participate as much as they can, for example playing a supporting instrument like the drum or other percussive instrument. Some individuals may be assigned a “buddy” from the choir who can attend to particular needs, including escorting them out of the room if a short break is needed. This would also be to strengthen the bond between the choir members and the student with different abilities, working on the student’s social skills with his or her peers. It might be beneficial for the conductor and the music therapist to create a list of considerations for the choir to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of what is expected.

### **Intervention Two: Bar/Bat Mitzvah Preparation**

**Identified need of person with different abilities when completing his/her bar/bat mitzvah.** Some literature indicated that persons with different abilities had difficulties with maintaining attention to task, experienced feelings of restlessness/lack of impulse control, and also lacked confidence in their abilities (Hornstein, 2007, Hyman, 2009; Jones, 2004). The bar/bat mitzvah service can vary in duration and adaptations can be made, but even sitting in one place or focusing on one task for 10 minutes might be too much for some bar/bat mitzvah students with different abilities. By working with the student to increase the amount of time he/she can sit and/or focus on a task and by having successful practice sessions before the ceremony, the more confidence the student will feel when the day of the ceremony arrives. Successful participation in the ceremony can be a source of pride for the student, which in turn may also increase his/her self esteem.

**Music therapy intervention used to address a similar need in another context.** Performance re-creation as outlined by Polen (2013) can be used to address attention, lack of impulse control, and self-esteem. In this intervention, the client learns pre-composed vocal or instrumental music (e.g., the prayers for the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony) through a process of repetition and practice and then performs in front of an audience (the congregation and their family and friends). This intervention occurs in a one-on-one session format between the music therapist and the bar/bat mitzvah student.

**Description of re-conceptualized intervention.** The practice sessions need to occur in the location where the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony will take place, or a place of similar size/structure that best embodies the original space. The music therapist helps to

facilitate the learning of the prayers included in the student's bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. This can be achieved by using the traditional songs of that congregation, adapting the songs to be shorter to better fit the student, or even composing music with the student to make it a more personal experience for him/her. Repetition is an important factor in learning prayer(s). Depending on the capabilities and willingness of the student, multiple songs can be learned. It is important to have the student decide upon the instrumentation he/she would like to have in their ceremony in order to create as close as possible what the performance will actually sound like on the day of the ceremony. Once the performance event has started, it is the music therapist's responsibility to ensure an atmosphere of respect for the performer(s). This can be achieved by making an opening remark to the attendees of the bar/bat mitzvah on behalf of the student or writing a flyer to be handed out to the congregation before the ceremony (written and reviewed by the student in session with music therapist beforehand). The music therapist is there in a supportive position and "accompanist" to ensure the student's success and reinforce the student's sense of pride in his/her achievement.

### **Intervention Three: Picture Options**

**Identified need of person with different abilities when completing his/her bar/bat mitzvah.** Some literature emphasized that the more aspects of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony that the student is able to participate in, the more authentic the experience can be for them, and that developing an individual's resources/strengths may help them to overcome barriers (Hornstein, 2007; Jones, 2004). For example, individuals who are unable to express themselves verbally or vocally can have alternative ways of participating in the musical components of the ceremony by utilizing their motor capabilities. Through addressing the behavioural issues a student has (such as impulse control, appropriate group behaviour, and concept development), the music therapist can ensure the student has a variety of ways they can be involved in the ceremony.

**Music therapy intervention used to address a similar need in another context.** Picture songs as described by Keith, (2013) can be used to address the behaviour issues outlined above. Clients sing pre-composed songs while using pictures to support concept development (e.g., brushing one's teeth). This intervention also focuses on behaviour

goals such as impulse control (waiting to point/press the button until the appropriate time) and appropriate group behaviour (such as interacting appropriately with others).

**Description of re-conceptualized intervention.** Picture songs are used to represent the process of the student's bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. The order of the ceremony should be decided before the music therapist starts to work on the picture songs concept with the student. In the first session, the music therapist comes prepared with visual and musical materials relevant to the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony and leads the student in songs using the visual aids. For example, a picture of a Torah may be used to represent the prayer recited before each Torah portion. A Velcro board or iPad may be used to emphasize the order of events (e.g., order of the prayers). The order is to be practiced in extending time periods. For example, in the first month, sessions might be only be 10 minutes in total duration to familiarize the student with the different prayers that will be included in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. As the sessions progress, the times can be eventually increased to the estimated length of the ceremony. Repetition and consistency in the order of the prayers is important. When the student becomes more familiar with the materials, they may become more independent. By encouraging the student to work on the goals identified above through picture songs, he/she can be included in more parts of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony.

**Other considerations.** While leading picture songs, the music therapist may use an accompanying instrument (e.g., guitar) but the primary focus should be on helping the student to participate. If the congregation is open to using technology on the Sabbath and an iPad or tablet is being used, pictures can be pre-recorded with a response, such as the student's vocalizations to indicate the beginning of a prayer or end of a prayer. This could also be pre-recorded by a family member. For example, because many of the prayers included in the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony finish with the word amen either sung or spoken, the student can have the opportunity to finish the prayer by touching a picture on the tablet.

#### **Intervention Four: Sermon Song**

**Identified need of person with different abilities when completing his/her bar/bat mitzvah.** Hornstein (2007) identified communication barriers and self-confidence as areas of need and emphasized the importance of flexibility, adaptation, and

creativity to best help each student complete their bar/bat mitzvah. By working with students in creative ways, barriers can be overcome or lessened and strengths/resources can be maximized.

**Music therapy intervention used to address a similar need in another context.**

Composition experiences with a client as described by Polen (2013) can be used to increase expressive communication skills, which can also have a positive impact on a client's self-confidence. In this intervention, the therapist helps the client to create original songs, lyrics, or instrumental pieces and enhances communication by providing the client with structured opportunities to make choices and express his/her feelings.

**Description of re-conceptualized intervention.** In this case, the focus is on helping the bar/bat mitzvah student to create a song (with all of the necessary adaptations) that represents their Torah portion in order to facilitate their ability to deliver a speech to the community. Taking the student's receptive and expressive language skills into account, the therapist provides instructions to the student about what is expected of them, which will help to focus the topic of the composition (i.e., the topic of their Torah portion). The conversation can take place in either a very structured way, by asking specific questions about the topic using only conversation, adding instruments and voice after the topic is explored verbally including yes or no questions or questions with prompts about the Torah portion. Instruments and voice may be added in the same sessions after the topic is explored verbally or in subsequent sessions depending on how the process unfolds. The therapist can also engage the student in a more open discussion about the subject to see what comments are offered spontaneously, which can be done with or without musical assistance. For example, reading the Torah portion in English using either an adapted text or the original translation. In many cases, because the direct translation might be difficult to understand, an adapted version of the original text is preferable.

Determining the style of music for a composition experience is as important as formulating the words. The therapist must draw upon his/her knowledge of the student's relationship with music, particular styles of music that are especially motivating or stimulating for the student, and tonal centers that will encourage and support the student's natural intonation and vocal range, as well as give consideration to elements such as

meter, phrase length, instrumentation, etc. It is also important to keep in mind this specific Jewish communities relationship to music. For example, would the community be open to having an electric guitar on the bimah and rock music on Shabbat if that is the preferred instrumentation of the student? If the community would not be open to having an electrical aspect included in the performance, then an acceptable alternative must be found.

Depending upon the abilities of the bar/bat mitzvah student, the sermon song can be performed on the day of the ceremony and there are several options as to how this can be presented: (a) the sermon song can be pre-recorded and played at the ceremony, (b) the student's family can perform the sermon song with/for the student, (c) with permission from the student and/or his/her family, the music therapist, can perform the sermon song for/with the student, and (d ) if the client would like to be included in a non-vocal/non-verbal way, they can use an instrument to accompany the music therapist and/or family members when they present the sermon song. This intervention allows the student to participate in a traditional part of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony in a non-traditional way and give the student the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about their Torah portion and their journey to becoming a bar or bat mitzvah.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

Preparing for and participating in a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony at the age 12 for girls and 13 for boys is inherently stressful under the best of circumstances. On the other hand it is a time when the family of an adolescent comes together to celebrate the fact that, after years of hard work, dedication and practice, this adolescent is ready to take responsibility for their involvement in their Jewish culture and religion. Although persons with different abilities may have added stressors due to their unique needs, this does not mean that they should be denied the opportunity to participate in this significant life event should they wish to do so. The purpose of this theoretical research was to examine how music therapy interventions might be modified and used to address the needs of young Jewish persons with different abilities who are completing their bar or bat mitzvah. I reviewed relevant literature to identify music therapy interventions being used to address needs of persons with different abilities in traditional music therapy contexts. I then adapted four interventions to address these same needs but for use in music therapy contexts aimed at helping these individuals to prepare for and participate in their bar or bat mitzvah ceremonies.

Limitations of the research are outlined next. The research process and results also revealed implications for practice and research that will be presented. Finally, I will present some concluding thoughts on what I learned from this research process.

### **Limitations**

This study contained limitations, which may have influenced how I designed and conducted the research. I have personal knowledge and experience of Conservative and Reform Judaism, but not as much knowledge of Orthodox Judaism. The results may have less applicability in Orthodox or other Jewish faith contexts. As literature was the main source of data used to inform the design of the interventions, only interventions contained in publications were considered. There may be unpublished music therapy interventions used by clinicians that have relevance for this study. Although I used my personal knowledge and practical experience to inform the formulation of the interventions, they were not tested in practice. Therefore, further adaptations may be needed when they are applied in real world contexts.

Based on my personal and professional experiences, I also had assumptions that may have resulted in additional limitations. I assumed that music therapy interventions from the literature could be re-contextualized and tailored to address the needs of persons with different abilities and help them to complete their bar or bat mitzvahs. I assumed that the people involved in the process leading up to the ceremony (e.g., parents, rabbi, children, educators, special educators etc.) would be open to using music therapy interventions for this purpose. Finally, I assumed that the music therapist facilitating the interventions designed in this study would have or be able to accrue enough knowledge about Judaism to be able to execute these interventions in a culturally competent manner.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As noted earlier, only published interventions were considered in this study. A future study could involve surveying music therapists on the interventions that they use with persons who have different abilities. Furthermore, it is likely that music therapists are working with Jewish children who have different abilities for various reasons and in various treatment milieus. Qualitative interviews with these individuals to better understand how music therapy interventions are conceptualized within Jewish cultural contexts could help to build upon the findings of the present study. In addition to music therapists, there are others such as educators, Rabbis, and various specialists who work with children with different abilities. Qualitative interviews to discover what techniques they currently use could yield important information that could be applied to music therapy contexts. As well, interviewing Rabbis and other members of the Jewish community to gauge the willingness to utilize technology such as the iPad or tablets on the Sabbath in the case of nonverbal students would help to develop more interventions. The music therapy interventions conceptualized from these proposed studies and in the present study need to be tested in “real life” contexts and modified accordingly for use in day-to-day practice.

Finally, this paper pertains only to the bar or bat mitzvah, a Jewish rite of passage experienced by adolescents aged 12 to 13. Other investigations that examine how music therapy interventions may be adapted for young persons with different abilities in order to facilitate their participation in rituals or ceremonies from other religions are most certainly warranted.

## **Implications for Clinical Practice**

The process of conducting this research as well as the results has yielded several potential implications music therapy clinical practice. If the proposed interventions can be tested in practice, this would expose music therapy to a variety of stakeholders—the adolescents with different abilities, family members, and various individuals in the Jewish faith community. If perceived positively, there is potential to expand the scope of traditional music therapy practice and create more jobs for music therapists, as well as ensure that more individuals have access to music therapy services. It could also reveal possibilities for collaborations between the music therapist and various professionals such as special educators, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and other individuals who may be helping the bar/bat mitzvah student. These collaborations could result in the formulation of interprofessional models of intervention.

I also believe that this research could inspire both Jewish and non Jewish music therapists to explore the idea of supporting young Jewish clients with whom they may be working in preparing for and participating in their bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies (in consultation with their clients' families). Presenting the potential adaptations to the ceremony and supporting realistic expectations for the student could promote feelings of inclusion for the entire family in their religious community. Music therapists might also consider working more actively and directly with the family members, to facilitate constructive inclusion of the family in the student's bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. This could bring families closer together, change their perceptions of their child's abilities, and allow the child with different abilities to more fully experience the social aspects of this religious ritual.

In all of these scenarios, it would be important for non Jewish music therapists to familiarize themselves with the cultural and community traditions. It would be equally as important for Jewish music therapists to ensure that they do not impose their own personal beliefs onto the families/clients who may have slightly different or even very different beliefs from their own. As noted in the previous chapters, different Jewish communities have different traditions, song styles, accepted adaptations to religious rules, etc. Even if the music therapist is Jewish, he/she needs to remember that every individual has a unique relationship with his/her culture and/or religion.



I also hope that this research will inspire clinicians to expand their scope of practice to the importance of spirituality for persons with different abilities and/or the importance of these individuals' participation in a wide range of culturally-relevant rituals. When approached in a knowledgeable, respectful, and culturally competent manner, there may be many creative and innovative ways in which they can address these issues in their practice with their clients and their interactions with clients' families.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As indicated in the literature and in my personal experiences, there is a desire and need for children with different abilities who practice the Jewish faith to not only have a bar or bat mitzvah, but to have a successful and positive experience in preparing for the day and participating in the ceremony itself. It is important to note that there are many individuals who are currently making strides to find ways to make the processes of completing a bar/bat mitzvah for an adolescent with different abilities a successful experience, such as parents, Rabbis, educators, special educators, etc. The main purpose of this paper was not to point out any flaws in what is not currently being done to help prepare children and adolescents for their bar/bat mitzvah, but to ask the question: what more can be done and more specifically, how might music therapy contribute?

Unfortunately, I found it difficult to find a large number of relevant academic publications that I could use in this research, which contributed to my desire to put forth this paper—so there are more people talking about this issue in academic realms, inspiring more academics to think about and hopefully act upon this topic, working on more solutions so every child, adolescent and family may feel like they have a place in the greater Jewish community. The individuals working presently on this issue are pioneers and dedicated individuals. My intentions are to purely, through my love and knowledge of music therapy, ask how we can better aid more children and adolescents with different abilities to achieve success.

The reason I stress this point is because I know there are many individuals who work hard with this population and I do not want to diminish their work simply because it is 'unpublished.' Throughout the process of writing this paper I found this to be something I constantly thought about and wanted to be aware of, which was sometimes helpful and sometimes hindered my process. I wanted to be sensitive to the individuals

currently working in this field but I also wanted to bring a new approach to work with this population, which I found incredibly hard to do.

Conducting this research has helped me to realize how important it is to not only be flexible in my approach to music therapy when working with this population (and others), but also to see how important it is to have an open line of communication between all members involved in the client's care and well being. The interventions that I have proposed in this research all involve time, dedication, and participation by a team of people: the music therapist, the student, the family, and their congregation.

I believe more strongly than ever, that every practicing Jewish adolescent who wants to participate in a bar/bat mitzvah rite of passage, for whatever personal reasons, should have that opportunity. I believe that the bar/bat mitzvah process and ceremony is far more than a religious ritual. I believe that music therapy has a great deal to contribute to this process because like persons on the autism spectrum, caring and working with an individual with different abilities is also a spectrum endeavor. What might work for certain clients may not be as successful for others, which is why I believe that music therapy could potentially be the next step to helping adolescents with different abilities working towards their bar/bat mitzvah to be successful and have a positive experience with their family and their community in the process. Through the bar/bat mitzvah, the community can see the student as an individual, rather than as a person with 'special needs'. It gives parents the opportunity to be proud and celebrate their child like every other family. After all, Jewish parents everywhere should be given the chance to k'vell over their child.

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