Dear Parents of Upcoming B’nei Mitzvah,

First of all, let me wish you Mazel Tov in advance for your child’s becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. I look forward to celebrating with you in the months ahead.

I am writing to review with you Beth El’s policy of inclusion with regard to celebrations. One of the goals of Torah class, our religious school, and our congregation is to teach our children values that are central to our spiritual community. We ask you to help support our teaching about inclusion by inviting all the students from your Torah class to your child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah. By doing so, we can work together to make our congregation as inviting and inclusive as possible.

What do we mean by “invitation” to the Bar or Bat mitzvah? Here we specifically refer to inviting the entire Torah Class to the Shabbat morning service and the Kiddush luncheon that follows. (Of course, the service is worship for the entire congregation, so everyone is always invited. In fact, the general public is welcome.)

At the same time, many families choose to have their party immediately following the Kiddush and that is a grey area of our policy. The children certainly think of the party as a part of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We do not believe we have the right to dictate your private celebrations. What happens outside the service and the Kiddush is up to you to decide. However, in the spirit of our policy and in keeping with the values of inclusion we are trying to teach our children, we urge you to be as inclusive as possible when considering who you will invite to your child’s party.

Many of the children in Torah class have known each other for years. They are comfortable with lots of familiar faces in class. Some are not as familiar because they do not attend our Hebrew school or because they are in a different grade. We know that young adolescents yearn to fit in and be included. At the same time, virtually all teens experience painful social experiences at one time or another in secular schools. We want Beth El to be a place where our teens feel safe, welcome and included.

For this reason, we urge you to invite all the kids from your Torah class to your child’s party. We hope you would invite all the students from their Hebrew school class as well. While we recognize that there are costs involved we also know that it is possible to make a party that fits a modest budget and reflects the deeply held values we are teaching our children.
Finally, our Bar and Bat Mitzvah coordinators, Janine Wolkon and Jill Porter, as well as our Administrator, Theresa Cohen, stand ready to help with advice and counsel about how to make your celebration fun, meaningful, and inclusive.

Thank you for helping us make Beth El a more welcoming community.

L’Shalom,

Rabbi David Thomas