

Coming of Age

What does it mean to become an adult? To answer this question, sociologists have examined cultures throughout the world. They have found that most cultures mark an adolescent's entry into adulthood with a rite of passage, a ritual that signals a transition from one major life stage to another. A rite of passage associated with becoming an adult is often called a coming-of-age ceremony.

Think about your own life. What events or ceremonies have marked different stages in your maturity? When do you expect society to say to you, "Now you have entered adulthood, and you can have the rights and responsibilities of an adult"? Some of our rites of passage into adulthood are informal events. For example, obtaining a driver's license has great significance to many teenagers. Likewise, voting at age 18 indicates that you are adult enough to participate in the political process. Rites of passage may also be marked by more formal and elaborate ceremonies, such as a high school prom or a debutante presentation.

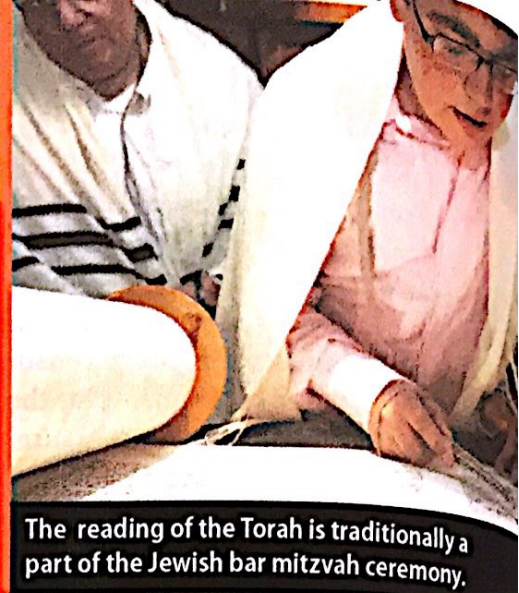
All over the world, young people just like you engage in rites of passage to become adults. Although some of these rites and ceremonies may seem unusual, each has the same significance and function—to recognize that a young person has entered adulthood.

Mexico When a girl reaches 15 years old in Mexico, many people mark that milestone with a rite of passage called a *quinceañera*. A girl of 15 arrives at a thanksgiving mass in a traditional white or pastel dress full of frills. Her friends, who act as attendants, may accompany the girl. After mass, there may be a birthday party, at which a dance with the girl's favorite boy highlights the day's festivities.

Navajo Nation When a Navajo girl comes of age, she participates in a ceremony called *Kinaalda*. This ceremony lasts for four days. It is based on a cycle of songs called the *Blessing Way*. The ritual ends on the fourth day with a traditional meal in which the girl serves a special corn cake to symbolize her acceptance of the hard work that comes with adulthood.

Maasai As part of elaborate coming-of-age ceremonies, Maasai boys from the East African nations of Kenya and Tanzania go to live in *manyattas*, camps built by adult women of the society. There, the boys practice ancient rituals, including using spears and shields, to become warriors.

Judaism Many coming-of-age rituals are religious in nature. When a young boy of the Jewish faith makes a transition into manhood, he participates in a ceremony called a *bar mitzvah*. Girls participate in a similar ceremony called a *bat mitzvah*. Each ceremony



The reading of the Torah is traditionally a part of the Jewish bar mitzvah ceremony.

is held on a single day soon after the youth's 13th birthday. However, the ritual requires months of preparation and learning about the Jewish faith, and completion of the ritual signifies that one has become an adult in the Jewish faith.

One thing that characterizes all of these rituals is the society's emphasis on the importance of publicly acknowledging a youth's entry into adulthood. Although the message that one is becoming an adult is serious, the rites and rituals themselves can be exciting and show that the adults accept the young person as one of their own.

Thinking Critically

1. **Contrast** How do these coming-of-age ceremonies differ?
2. **Discuss** What impact do you think coming-of-age ceremonies have on society?



In Mexican culture, the *quinceañera* is a celebration that marks the entry of teen girls into adulthood.