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Software adds new dimension to b'nai mitzvah training

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"Mom, can I use the computer to practice my Torah portion?"

In homes across the country, this question is no longer as strange and futuristic as it once may have sounded. Bar and bat mitzvah students are spending hours at home honing their Hebrew skills with a software program called "Bar Mitzvah Personal Tutor."

The Bar Mitzvah Personal Tutor is designed to introduce Hebrew blessings, haftarah and Torah chanting to beginners of all ages. The makers of Personal Tutor believe that students need to learn to read the texts, not merely memorize them, in order to feel comfortable when chanting from the bimah. More importantly, the program's makers say, it will help students gain a skill they will use throughout a life of Jewish learning.

To meet this goal, this software program has a set of basic features that help students learn how the letters and words are pronounced. An interactive practice mode is designed for learning the trope, or cantillations, for each blessing or portion.

The opening menu provides easy navigation to a blessing or the text portion. Function keys allow the student to control the letters' font and size as well as the playback tempo and key of the music. Other function keys allow individual words or even syllables to be played back. The student selects a prayer or portion to work on, then reads the text from the screen.

In the practice mode, the music flows through the text as the student follows the yad (pointer) on the screen and chants the portion. Having a computerized Torah-haftarah tutor also allows for random access to any line in the prayer or portion to practice it over and over again. This feature is often handy when learning only a small section of the portion for the bar-bat mitzvah.

Special voice-synthesizing software on the disk provides the novice with a basic pronunciation of the text. This feature does not chant the entire text for you, however. It only "reads" one word or syllable at a time, giving the student an example of each sound individually. This option is particularly valuable for students who are just learning to recognize Hebrew letters and words.

One criticism of this drill and practice software is that it might somehow replace the cantors, rabbis and synagogues that are traditionally so important to students preparing for b'nai mitzvah. But that won't happen, say the people at Lev Software who designed the program. They say that it is designed to supplement those long hours of study, relying on the appeal of the computer to encourage students to spend even more time learning the text.

Others might be concerned about the sound of the trope. Some congregations have unique trope sounds, so Lev has created 36 different versions to account for this. It's also possible to order a customized trope.

The program was created for the simple interface of a DOS-based personal computer and operates effectively with or without a mouse. Windows and Windows 95 PCs can run the software, as can Macintosh computers running a "Windows emulation" program from SoftPC.

Lev says it is developing a straight Windows version of the program ,which should be out next spring. The new version will have full MIDI sound quality and allow for more advanced font manipulation, as well as new features for scrolling and printing the text. Current owners can upgrade at a minimal fee when it becomes available.

Each Bar Mitzvah Personal Tutor disk contains the prayers read before and after the haftarah and Torah portions, as well as the individual portions the student is learning. The program costs \$99.95 per disk, but schools can purchase the entire set of Torah and haftarah portions at a reduced rate.

"Bar Mitzvah Personal Tutor," \$99.95, is available for DOS and Windows from Lev Software: (800) 776-6528. Information on the World Wide Web: <http://www.levsoftware.com>
