

Over 700 Join Mitzvah

For 26 Area Retarded

After months of preparation and longer months of study for 35 residents of four state schools, last Sunday finally arrived. The men and women, some of whom were middle-aged, were as excited as any boy or girl on the day of their bar-bat mitzvah.

Rabbi Leib Heber, chaplain to six state schools for the retarded, led the group to the bima with more than 700 looking on in Beth Shalom Synagogue. Secretary of Public Welfare, Helene Wohlgemuth, presented certificates to 26 of them, ranging in age from 13 to 72.

"I got the idea from Mr. Colomatto, Superintendent at Polk," Rabbi Heber explained. "We talked about it, and I started to work with the residents last summer. Most of them had never been in a synagogue, and I felt that they should be able to have the experience of a religious life. They have the right to participate in this part of their heritage."

The participants came from Polk State School, Western State School, Ebensburg State School and Cresson State School. Each was presented with a silver-plated Bible by Stanley Meyers, deputy secretary for mental retardation. They were gifts from interested citizens of Pittsburgh. A luncheon followed the ceremony, sponsored by a committee headed by Mrs. Sherwin Baseman of Pittsburgh

and Rabbi Moshe Goldblum of Beth Shalom.

Secretary Wohlgemuth had high praise for the efforts of Rabbi Heber. "Here is a man who said, 'Why not?'" she stated.

"He believed what we are talking about when we speak of normalization. He believed that these people could and should experience an important part of their religion--and that they would be accepted and welcomed by the community. That this ceremony took place in the middle of the second largest city in Pennsylvania--rather than on the grounds of a state institution--is of tremendous significance.

"The Rabbi overcame many obstacles, but he believed these residents could and should have the same opportunity as thousands of other members of the Jewish faith. The Rabbi's dedication is an inspiration of all of us."

"Twenty-two years ago," Rabbi Heber said, "I brought my learning to them. That's the way it was then. Now, our purpose is to bring these people to us--to our homes, to our churches, to our synagogues.

"There are many people here today who bring one or two of these residents home for a weekend. They are learning about retarded and handicapped people, and for many of these residents, this is the first time they have experienced a normal family life."