



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“What My Bat Mitzvah Means to Me”

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When I began to prepare for my bat mitzvah at The City Congregation, it was mostly because my parents wanted me to. There was KidSchool about twice a month, almost always with homework, and then there were the essays. I had no problem with it, though, at times, I envied my friends, who didn't have to do extra homework on the weekends, and could just enjoy holidays as an excuse to get presents. However, at other times I enjoyed the process, and felt that although it was challenging it was a very enriching experience. Having to look inside myself and articulate my beliefs and views now is something I believe will help me when it comes time to determine my goals in life and how I'll achieve them.

One of the more practical things I have gained from my bat mitzvah preparation is greater ease with writing. And through the writing I've also become a clearer thinker.

Beyond that, I've gotten to know people like my mentor, Nancy Cohen, and Genevieve Faulkner, at Grace Church in Jersey City, where I volunteer. Nancy was the person with whom I worked most closely and helped me refine my ideas. In Genevieve, I got to see a leader in action. Myrna Baron and all the kids in my bat mitzvah class were more sources of discussion and ideas and challenge. Through talking and working with them, I've discovered what matters most to me and what I think about things. Our talks last year about *tzedakah* really helped when I was writing my main paper.

I've also learned a lot about both my Jewish heritage and my Christian heritage, and the historical experience of both, which makes me feel closer to my dad's and my mom's families.

My parents wanted me to have a bat mitzvah because they liked The City Congregation's program. They felt that the way one prepared for a humanistic bat mitzvah would be more meaningful and special than the traditional kind that my dad had. They felt that this kind of preparation would pave the way to participation in the Jewish community and in the larger world. They feel that participating in life is thinking through one's positions on issues of all kinds – political, moral, economic, social - and then taking action.

The City Congregation's bat mitzvah program has marked the beginning of that process for me. I've begun to think more about the world around me, the Jewish community and my place in both.

My father's family belonged to a Conservative congregation in Phoenix, Arizona, and he had a traditional Jewish bar mitzvah. He read from the Torah and participated in the service and then there was a big party at a nice hotel with a band and a professional photographer. To prepare for his bar mitzvah he met once a week with his rabbi to recite his Torah portion.

He remembers reciting at home along with the tape, repeatedly. He didn't really know what the words meant and feels today that his bar mitzvah was not a very meaningful event. Something about his bar mitzvah that did resonate with him was the youth group he participated in before, during and after his bar mitzvah preparation. It was a community of young Jewish people with whom he discussed ideas and who helped forge his values. He is proud of all the work that I am doing and doesn't think that he would have been able to put in all the effort that I am putting into my bat mitzvah training when he was my age.

My mother was raised Episcopalian and she had Jewish friends, but remembers going to only one bar mitzvah, the son of a friend of her mother's. It was of the traditional sort but remarkable to my mother for the outpouring of love and pride for the bar mitzvah boy. My mother was confirmed in her church at age 13. The confirmation process is similar to a bat mitzvah in that the ceremony marks a young adult's coming of age in the church community and there are written passages to memorize. There was discussion in the preparation classes about ideas and beliefs and church history. The class was confirmed in a group ceremony and without fanfare.

My bat mitzvah is different from their experiences because while they had to read established writings in their services, sources outside of themselves, I get to read my thoughts and opinions, what I think. They had to read what they were assigned, I've had many choices. I've chosen the music I find most meaningful, I've chosen who reads which passage from the ceremony, and I chose the topics of my papers. Their services were identical or little varied from everyone else's in substance and arrangement but my service is unique.

Coming from those experiences, my parents found in The City Congregation Bat and Bar Mitzvah program people and a way of thinking that would prepare me for adulthood. They could see that my study of family stories and related topics would give me a way to form opinions about how I fit into my communities and the world. My father has said he hopes my becoming bat mitzvah will help me make the best decisions possible when I am an adult. My mother has expressed the hope that everything that I now know about myself will be projected into everything I do.

I see this course of study and ceremony as part of a long line of events that will help make me a mature and responsible adult. It has helped me discover who I really am, and has helped me find out more about my community. Not just my family, but my school, my congregation and the world in general.

There are several groups of people who really have helped me during my preparation for this day.

I want to thank my mom and dad for all their help with my essays and especially I want to thank the Lewit-Shapiro family for introducing us to the congregation.

While my brother Jack hasn't always been what one would call helpful during my bat mitzvah preparation, I have to thank him for making me laugh when I needed it most. That goes double for my friends.

Thanks to my mentor Nancy Cohen and Myrna Baron and Peter Schweitzer for posing hard questions, never settling for the first answer and for helping me every step of the way through this learning process.

Thanks to Peter and Myrna, again, for all their help in preparing this ceremony, and to Ivan Rubenstein-Gillis for providing the music.

I'd like to thank those members of my family who generously shared their stories with me and answered my questions: all four of my grandparents, my parents, Great Grandma Sophie, Great Uncle Chuck, Great Aunt Joyce and Aunt Marcia.

And finally, a big thanks to all of you who've come to celebrate this day with me and my family. Some of you have come from as far away as Florida, California, Arizona and Pennsylvania and I thank you for your special efforts to be here today.