



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“What My Bat Mitzvah Means to Me”

by Alanna Olken

November 5, 2004

“Alanna, what’s your haftorah portion going to be?” has been the recurrent question asked ever since I began this bat mitzvah process. I answer with the unchanged words of “I’m actually not doing a haftorah. It’s really confusing, I’ll tell you about it some other time.” Well, I figure, what better time to answer that persistent question than during my actual bat mitzvah. We moved to The City Congregation about three years ago when I decided I didn’t believe in God and that my previous temple wasn’t right for my family and I. We found The City Congregation, a congregation that accepted our views and opinions with open arms. Whether the case be that my brother and dad believed in God, my mom was unsure, and I definitely didn’t, we were all able to come to The City Congregation and learn about Judaism as a whole, and not only focus on God. Jewish culture, food, holidays, stories, the difficulties of the past, music, and much more were topics of discussion during Kidschool.

Now, another frequent question asked is “What does it mean to be a humanistic Jew?” To me, a large part about being a humanistic Jew is believing that humans, have the power to do anything, and that we don’t have to rely on a higher power or deity to make miracles happen. It’s a lot about being a proactive people and not waiting for God to talk to me and give me an A on a test I wasn’t prepared for. It means that humans will cure cancer one day, not God.

Anyways, I started a bat mitzvah process two years ago, and to tell you the truth, it has been a long two years. Now that I am 14, it’s quite obvious that I am having my bat mitzvah a year late. That is just one aspect of this bat mitzvah that would be considered different. The individuality and uniqueness that this bat mitzvah demonstrates really expresses my personality. The uniqueness is the best part about it, and is one of the fundamental reasons why I liked the process so much. Of course there were a lot of additional fights than normal, and lots more screaming. There was a lot of delay and a lot of “I’ll do it later.” There was a lot of attention given to me by my parents and I thank them so much for their immense contributions and amount of hours and weekends spent on this. But most of all, I’d like to acknowledge my brother for being such a great sport during this whole process for never complaining, helping me out, lifting my spirits after a hard day of Judaism, and just being the best brother possible. So thanks, Hank.

I also have this congregation to thank. I feel that this process played a huge, if not entire, role in helping me discover my Jewish identity. It made me discover my values, it allowed me to hear stories about my family history that I would have never heard. It’s really great to be apart of this family.

I would really like to thank Peter Schweitzer for being such a wonderful rabbi and for always providing me with a record to listen to, a book to read, an old picture to look at, and a great question for me to answer. You always help me out during meetings with Myrna, and thanks for being there.

Throughout this process, I have learned so many things. I found out that I enjoyed Woody Allen movies, that my grandfather, Aaron, was very generous to his community, that Arthur Ashe struggled with AIDS, that one of my most important values was trust, and that I have very little patience.

To conclude, although the complaints about the vast amounts of work don't show it, I thoroughly enjoyed this whole process right down to the fights. All of my hard work really paid off and I couldn't be more pleased with my bat mitzvah. The most important person in this process, who I would have never been able to do this without is Myrna Baron, my mentor. You could say I completely lucked out in getting the best of the best. I feel that we really got very close because of my bat mitzvah and that our relationship has grown to be really special to me. She couldn't have been more helpful and supportive and I really admire her lack of complaint, when I didn't necessarily follow my due dates, along with her kindness, her enormous intelligence and her never ending aid during these past two years. I can't thank her enough. They say life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get. Well, whoever gets Myrna next is a very fortunate person. Thank you so much, Myrna and to everyone who came today.