



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Heroes and Role Models:
Why Albert Einstein Did Not Become a Bar Mitzvah”
by Irene Grosso
March 19, 1999**

Becoming a bat mitzvah is a time to think about who my role models and heroes are. To me, a role model is someone who influences you to do good. The person I chose as my role model is Albert Einstein who was born on March 14, 1879 and died on April 18, 1955.

The first reason I chose Albert Einstein is because he is the most famous Jew of the 20th century. He became famous for being smart. He is most known for the theory of relativity, that $e = mc^2$. This formula tells us that measurements of time, space and motion are relative. Albert Einstein started thinking about relativity when he was 16 years old. He tried to imagine what would happen if he could run after a light wave at the same speed as the wave. He thought the light would look like it wasn't moving.

After he won the Nobel Prize in physics in 1921, he said “I have no special talents. I am merely intensely curious.” Because of his curiosity, he changed the way people looked at and thought about the world and everything in it.

The second reason I picked Einstein was because he hated school, something most kids can relate to. He was always in trouble with his teachers because his mind wandered and he had a bad memory. What do you expect? He had his mind on more important things. Like Einstein said, “imagination is more important than knowledge.”

When he was young, teaching in Germany was all done by drill. Questions and discussion in class were discouraged. Einstein realized that real learning for him would have to take place outside school through independent study. He studied geometry by himself and became skeptical of anything that couldn't be proven with logic – including much of what he had been taught at school, by the German government, and in the Bible.

The third reason I picked Albert Einstein was because he used his fame to do good for the world. He always gave generously of his time and energy to causes he supported. He lectured on world peace and on the dangers of nuclear weapons. Einstein also worked to establish a Jewish state. He helped start the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He even played his violin in public to raise money for Israel. When the first president of Israel died in 1952, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion asked Einstein to become Israel's second president. He was flattered, but he declined.

The last reason I picked Albert Einstein is because he was a secular Jew. His family was not observant, but when Einstein was 12 years old he began preparing to become a bar mitzvah since that was what boys generally did. At the same time Einstein started studying physics. His science studies convinced him that many of the Bible stories could not possibly be true. As Einstein put it, “young people were being deliberately lied to by the state.” For him, this was a shattering discovery. When he decided on his own not to pursue his religious studies, his parents had no real objection.

However, even though Albert Einstein did not become a bar mitzvah, he was always proud to be a Jew. He said that, “I was fully aware of my Jewish origin, even though the full significance of belonging to Jewry was not realized by me until later.”

As I prepared for my own bat mitzvah, I kept thinking about Einstein. Einstein liked to do everything his own way. He taught himself what he wanted to know about physics and geometry. What if he had been able to choose what he wanted to research and study about religion also? Instead of following assignments, what if he could have taken responsibility for his own education and studied Judaism in his own way, in a secular way? In other words, what would have happened if the City Congregation had existed when Einstein was my age? Maybe he would have wanted to become a bar mitzvah after all.

Albert Einstein said many wise things but my favorite is: “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence – these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it.”