



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Family Values”
by Isaac Mann
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As part of my Bar Mitzvah process, I needed to interview and question family members, about their ancestry and values. From my interviews, I was able to compile a list of values that seem appropriate and meaningful to me.

As my grandma, Toby used to say, “if you don’t have your health, you don’t have anything”, so it makes sense to begin with Health; in Hebrew, Bree-oot. Health not only represents an individual’s physical wellbeing but also one’s psychological balance and clarity of thought. My family has very good health practices. My mom used to travel to a gym in Staten Island three times every week. My uncle, Gary studies alternative medicine. He is always advising us about how to identify and avoid toxins in our food and environment.

I now know why Dad does t’ai chi. It clears his mind and helps him relax. There was a time when we were driving home from Boston, lost our way, and my mom was having trouble interpreting the road map. Out of the blue we saw a sign on the road that read, “WELCOME TO PENNSYLVANIA” in big letters, and in case you don’t know geography very well, Pennsylvania is not on the way back from Boston. Despairingly, my dad looked down into his lap and said “this is horrible.” He got out of the car in the gas station parking lot and did t’ai chi for twenty minutes and Mom, Jake, and I watched. People saw us watching him and asked if he was okay, we said, “Yes he’s fine.... That’s just what he does. It helps him calm down”.

To maintain good health, you need determination, (Hech-leh-tee-yoot). But determination is necessary to meet any goal, such as the goal to be free. I come from a family of very determined individuals. Philip Silverstein is a relative of mine who escaped from Belgium with his family at the beginning of World War II. Bombs were actually dropping on his hometown. Philip thought he was going to die, but his father didn’t give up. He hailed a train conductor and Philip and his family got on the train just in time. Eventually they found a way to sail to America and escape the Nazi advance.

In the early nineteen hundreds, my great-grandfather, Joseph Mann, was about to be drafted into the Russian army, where he might have had to serve for twenty years. Instead, he went to a barber and asked the barber to chop off two of his toes. He underwent this procedure without anesthesia. All he did was drink a couple of shots of whiskey (talk about determined!). The loss of these toes got him out of serving in the army and eventually he was able to immigrate to England to become a tailor.

Years later, he opened his own tailor shop in Brooklyn, and my grandpa Milt, as a boy my age, worked for him. One time there was a kerosene leak. Joseph immediately filled a bucket with water and threw it on the tank. This spread the burning oil all over the shop and there was a fiery explosion. Joseph was determined to save his customers’ clothes, but my grandfather Milt had another goal in mind: to save their lives, so he dragged Joseph out of the store. By the time they both got to the street corner and turned around, the entire place was consumed in flames. Milt’s determination over-ruled his father’s determination in this case, and I am glad it did!

In my family there is a strong value placed on Independence, (atz-ma-oot) - the freedom to make your own choices. My great-grandfather Joe Katz did not have the freedom to make his own choices when living in the shtetl in Poland. He couldn't live anywhere besides the shtetl and there were very few job opportunities available to him as a Jew. He escaped from Europe, went to America, and became a delivery boy for a butcher in Brooklyn. He was free to make his own choices but he still didn't achieve his goal; he wanted to have his own business. So everyday after he finished his deliveries, he watched the butcher cut meat so he could become a butcher himself. My mom's father, Grandpa Saul, was the founder and director of his own private biological research laboratory. My mom and my uncle Gary also have independent businesses.

My grandpa Milt always told my dad when he was a kid; "You'll never be happy unless you work for yourself!" My dad, however, didn't follow this advice. He is a math teacher at Saint Ann's School and is very happy working there. So I guess another aspect of Independence is thinking for yourself, and not always following your parents' advice. My mom, as a kid, didn't have a lot of freedom. Her mother chose her friends for her. As soon as she could, she separated herself from her family to figure out what she wanted for herself.

Independence, when taken to an extreme, may seem stubborn or antisocial. But my family values communication too highly to be antisocial. Both of my parents have chosen lines of work in language and communication: (teek-shor-et) is the Hebrew for Communication. My mom is a psychotherapist and my dad is a teacher. When we have a conflict at home, we usually tell the rest of the family, and ask for help on how to work through the problem. Then we can express how we feel in words, listen to the other person's point of view, and resolve the conflict. Many people don't take the time to work through interpersonal problems but we do and I think it's worth it.

Artistic Expression, (bee-too-ee o-mah-noo-tee), is a form of communication that is both personal and universal. My Grandma Jane's art is in almost every room in the house. She was a well-known artist and illustrator. My cousin, Judy has her own radio show in British Columbia, and both her children are artists and performers. Mom and Dad like the radio so much because they met performing Shakespeare on the radio. Mom and Dad always read aloud to the family from stories they have written or from their journal entries. And, when my brother, Jake was still in school, I always went to see his plays and sketch comedy performances. It was the best sketch comedy I have ever seen. I enjoy all of the art forms mentioned, and I value Artistic Expression for myself. I know that I want to make Artistic Expression a major part of my life.

As a family, Humor (Hu-mor) is a very important value for all of us. When we are together, we often play family games that end up with all of us laughing. We also love to watch funny movies together and read funny stories.

Another value in my family is Repairing the World or (tee-koon-o-lam). My mom, as a teenager, worked in the CORE office. CORE is the Congress of Racial Equality. Her mother donated pictures that both CORE and UNICEF used as holiday greeting cards. My cousin, Barbara works tirelessly for the Democratic Party in Minnesota. Yet despite all of this, I feel that the value of social action does not get enough attention in my family. I would personally like to dedicate time and energy towards improving the environment and the health of our world.

My final value is the value of Family itself, (or in Hebrew- Meeshpahcha.) My family has not only brought me into the world and helped me fit into the world, but it is through my family that all of these values have been transmitted. My father's parents worked hard to organize events to bring all of the family together. These events included holiday dinners, birthday celebrations, and summer trips to the Nevele. Now that all of my grandparents are gone, my parents organize events to bring family and friends together like this Bar Mitzvah, for instance. I don't think I would have recorded all of these stories and information from family interviews if I hadn't had to write this paper. And now, by reading it aloud, the circle of community grows.