



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“What My Bar Mitzvah Means to Me”

by Sam Botwin

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When reflecting on what my Bar Mitzvah means to me, three words kept coming to mind: challenging, knowledge and accomplishment. The word Bar Mitzvah means “Son of the Commandments”, it also means that upon completing this process, I am now more responsible for my own actions. It is now up to me to decide how I will act and what values I find important in my life. Throughout this journey I have learned many interesting things about myself, my family, Jewish history and what it means to be a Humanistic Jew.

This journey has been very challenging because it required a lot of time and effort from many people. It required me to think carefully about myself and my values in a way I never thought of before. It pushed me to research subjects more thoroughly than most teachers had asked of me. Many times throughout this process I felt that I would not finish. The papers were long and difficult to write while doing my schoolwork and studying for high school entrance exams. My parents and my mentor Ira motivated me a lot, they encouraged me, and helped out by reading and editing my papers. Sometimes my parents nagged me about the due dates and completing the papers but I know they always wanted the best for me.

During this process I also gained a lot knowledge about myself, my family and what being Jewish means to me. I learned that if I put my mind to it I can accomplish anything. I discovered that both sides of my family and I share many of the same values and traditions. By going through this process I got to spend more time with many people in my family. It helped me to understand them better and has brought me closer to them. When researching Masada I learned two important things. One was about the history of the Roman siege on the Jewish fortress and the other was about the strength of the Jewish people. I learned that being a Humanistic Jew means to believe that Judaism teaches us through cultural and historical experiences to be good and caring individuals who are concerned with the well being of others, that we are responsible for shaping our own lives and that I am responsible for making the world a better place.

The first time I worked with Dave Hall reading my papers out loud it gave me a great sense of accomplishment and pride in the work that I had done. This process was difficult and time consuming but I feel a great deal of satisfaction in my accomplishments. Being part of this congregation has been a great growing experience and has given me many opportunities. First, working on all these papers and projects has given me a lot of writing experience which I know I will be able to use later on in school. Second, the congregation, along with Michael Witkin, gave me my first internship this summer. I learned a lot about the congregation, social networking and being responsible. The last opportunity was working with Dave Hall and Sam Freeman from the New York Times. Dave helped me prepare for today’s presentation and for someone who does not like to speak publicly it was a great help. An added bonus was a New York Times article written about this event.

There are many people I want to thank for helping me through this process. First, I would like to thank my mentor Ira Karlick for all his meetings and emails, you helped me a lot and gave me many good ideas for my papers and projects. I would also like to thank Isabel Kaplan for editing my papers and giving me such great advice. I would especially like to thank Rabbi Peter for meeting with me to discuss my Masada paper and for all the advice you gave me along the way, especially after the news reports Greg Mortenson. Your advice has been great throughout this process. I would also like to thank Aram and Rick for singing and playing these great songs. I feel privileged to be part of the congregation.

I would like to thank my parents for helping me through this Bar Mitzvah process. I know I wasn't always willing and agreeable but neither of you ever gave up on me. Thanks for finding this great place to have the service and party and putting it all together. I want to thank my grandparents for helping with the family history; it will be something I will have forever. I especially want to thank my great grandmother Angie who I interviewed before she passed last year. I know she would be proud of me today.

I am very proud of this entire process and hope all of you enjoyed it and found it interesting. I know that it was very different than most of you are used to. For my Christian family any Bar Mitzvah is unusual and for my Jewish family who are more traditional I know this was out of the ordinary. I would like to thank all of you for coming today and celebrating my Bar Mitzvah with me.

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