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“What My Bar Mitzvah Means to Me”

by Yoela Koplow

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I have many Jewish friends. However, I'm the only Humanistic Jew out of all of them. The past few months have been what my mom and I call “The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Season”. Since everybody's Bar/Bat Mitzvah happened in the past months, I could hear kids compare their Torah portions, whine about how long and hard their part is, or brag about how easy theirs is. Since most of them know that I'm Jewish, they would ask me about mine. I would say that I don't have a Torah portion. They thought that I didn't get mine yet, but when I explained that it's a different kind of bat mitzvah, they told me that it wasn't a real bat mitzvah then because you have to read from the Torah for it to be real. This argument went on for a while, but now I think it's safe to say that this is a real bat mitzvah, but in a different way. But this paper isn't about proving them wrong - it's about letting you know what my bat mitzvah means to me.

The first bar mitzvah I ever went to was my cousin Shaun's. I was 10 years old. He was really good, and his bar mitzvah got me thinking about having a bat mitzvah of my own. I went to a few more traditional bar and bat mitzvahs before we joined The City Congregation. When I went to my first humanistic bar mitzvah, I realized that this kind of bat mitzvah would be perfect for me! It's creative, you can choose your own research project and turn it into a power point, movie, or any other thing you want it to be! Now, many of you know that I'm a VERY hands on kind of girl, and don't have a big attention span, so as you can imagine, I would have had a hard time trying to concentrate on a large Torah portion and learning a whole new language just for that.

So many different things happen in different kinds of bar or bat mitzvahs, it's easy to forget that they're all part of the same religion, and all leading up to the same purpose: to be seen as a man or a woman through the eyes of the Jewish community. Some people who aren't Jewish think that having a bar or bat mitzvah means that you are actually becoming a man or a woman, physically and mentally, not symbolically through the eyes of a person or a community. To me, having a bat mitzvah means gaining respect from my peers and from my family, and finding out more about my family, my background, and more about me. I've learned more about my family's history and background, which makes me understand who I really am, even though I am adopted. Even though it might not be where I biologically came from, I still feel like it is. I feel more knowledgeable, more informed, and more aware of how my family came to America and why. My bat mitzvah, to me, is not about being seen as a woman through the eyes of my community, but understanding who I really am. And I'm proud to have been able to share it with all of you.

I would like to thank Rabbi Peter and Isabel Kaplan, the leader of the bar/bat mitzvah program, for playing a big part in making this event possible. I also want to thank my mentor Sandy for coaching me, and my mom, Lesley, for all your love, support, and your endless amount of patience. Rosetta and Jon, Jane and Rhonda, thank you for making this day possible. I would also like to thank Aram and Rick for the music, my Uncle Bruce for helping me out with the slides, and all of my family and friends for your love and support. Thank you all so much!