

Dearest family and friends,

It is with great pride and joy that we welcome you to share in a very special day in all of our lives. The words "B'nei Mitzvah" literally mean "children of the commandments" and are reserved for individuals willing to learn about Judaism and assume the responsibilities of a Jewish adult (observances, helping others, repairing our world, and fulfilling our own potential). In our Jewish tradition, a thirteen year old child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, but one can embrace this tradition at any age.

Our class is comprised of Jews by birth and Jews by choice; spouses and in-laws; new parents and grandparents; ones learning with their children and others learning from their children. We have, for the past two years, studied the language, history, culture, and values of the Jewish people. Today we read for the first time in public from the Torah, and this honor has a very special significance. We have each chosen to do this for ourselves, and for that reason, today is truly a momentous occasion. It means so much to us that you have taken the time to celebrate with us. Thank you for your love and your friendship.

We pause to give thanks to a truly remarkable teacher and mentor, Rabbi Jocee Hudson. From the Hebrew alphabet to the subtlest nuances of the great Torah commentators, she has guided our learning with patience, humor, knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration. Her spiritual guidance means more to us than she can ever know.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigianu lazeman hazeh. We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us and enabling us to reach this day.

Shabbat Shalom,

The 2009 Adult B'nei Mitzvah Class

Symbols and Traditions

Our Temple Sanctuary- Traditionally, there are few adornments in a Jewish sanctuary. However, there are three items that symbolically date back to the beginning of Judaism: the **Ark**, the **Torah** and the **Eternal Light**.

Ark- The original Ark of ancient times was built to hold the stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. Today, the sacred Torah scrolls are housed in the Ark, which is at the front of the sanctuary. Whenever the Ark is opened, the congregation stands in respect.

Torah- In a broad sense, Torah refers to all the laws and teachings of Judaism. Specifically, the Torah is a handwritten parchment scroll containing the first Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The five books tell the early history of the Jewish people and present the principles and rules by which we live. Each Sabbath morning a consecutive portion of the Torah is read and studied. Synagogues all over the world read the same passages and the entire Torah is read over the course of a year. We begin every Jewish New Year with the first book, and thus, the chain is never broken.

Eternal Light- This lantern, which hangs in front of the Ark, symbolizes the perpetual fire that burned on the altar of the original Temple in ancient times. It serves to remind us of the continuous presence of God and the permanence of the Torah.

Kippah-The Kippah, or Yarmulke, is the head covering worn as a sign of modesty and reverence while praying to God.

Tallit- In accordance with Biblical law, the *tallit*, or prayer shawl, is worn by Jews thirteen years of age or older. It is worn to remind us of God's *mitzvot*. The fringes, called *tzitzit*, on the *tallit* are knotted so that the number of fringes and knots totals 613, the exact number of *mitzvot*, or commandments, detailed in the Torah. Each B'nei Mitzvah will receive a *tallit* from a special person of their choosing today.

Morning Shabbat Service

The service is conducted from our prayer book, *T'feelat Shalom*. The "italicized" portions of the text in the prayer book are read aloud; your participation is optional and welcomed.

The Barkhu announces the beginning of the community worship by summoning the congregation to prayer.

The Shema is one of the oldest and most important Hebrew prayers. It is the Jewish people's commitment of faith, proclaiming the oneness of God: "Hear O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

The V'ahavta prayer emphasizes several basic religious duties: to love God, to teach Torah to our children, to talk of Torah at every possible occasion and to place Torah prayers (mezuzot) on the doorposts of our homes.

Torah procession After the Torah scrolls have been removed from the Ark, the Rabbis, Cantor and B'nei Mitzvah form a procession and carry the Torah around the sanctuary. Congregants may touch the Torah with their hand, prayer book or tallit as a sign of reverence and respect.

The Torah Service The purpose of the Torah service is to fulfill the biblical commandment to study the lessons of the Torah, and the public reading is considered to be both study and prayer. Each B'nei Mitzvah will read from the Torah today.

The Haftarah is a special passage read from the Book of Judges 13:2-5 to help explain the message of the Torah portion. The Haftarah is comprised of biblical selections from the books of the Prophets. The Haftarah was originally read at a time when we were not allowed to read the Torah. In modern times, we keep with the tradition of reading the Haftarah to remind us that there was a time when we did not have the freedom to worship in the way of our choosing.

The Mourner's Kaddish is recited toward the end of the service. The congregation will rise as one to recite this special prayer for those who have recently departed, as well as for those whose anniversary of death occurred during the week.

The Kiddush is held after the service for the entire congregation to thank God for our blessings, the sweetness of the Sabbath, and for bringing us together for this happy occasion. We do this with the Kiddush, the blessing of the wine, and with the Motzi, the blessing over the challah, our Sabbath bread.

Kathy Cohen

Naso, Numbers 6:1-7:89

In this week's Torah portion, the obligations of a nazirite vow are explained and God tells Moses to teach Aaron and his sons the Priestly Blessing, *Birkat Kohanim*.

A nazirite vow is taken to set oneself apart for the Lord. Devoting oneself entirely to God. The nazir described in Numbers 6 takes upon himself or herself a set of specific ritual observances that are beyond those required of other Israelites. Like the ritual observances of the nazir of old, ritual observances over the centuries serve as a reminder to us of who we are as Jews, and the values, ideals, and dreams for which we stand. They are the foundations of Jewish life that support Judaism— the ethical, moral, and spiritual truths of the Torah.

As with the vow of the nazir, we too must take a vow. A vow that requires both faith and action: faith in God, in ourselves, and in the vitality of the Jewish people. Action in that we must proactively continue efforts to integrate our Jewish values and Jewish identity into our daily lives.

The laws of the nazirite vow are followed by the threefold *b'rachah* called the *Birkat Kohanim*:

*May Adonai bless you and protect you!
May Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you!
May Adonai smile upon you and grant you peace!*

The *Birkat Kohanim* is recited by rabbis and cantors when they bless b'nei mitzvah and confirmands, couples under the chuppah, Jews-by-choice, and congregants at the conclusion of services. Parents recite it when blessing their children at the Shabbat dinner table (an observance with notable impact; children radiate a special glow that is certainly a reflection of God's presence).

In what we do and say, and in bestowing an ancient blessing at important times in our lives, all of us can help make God's presence felt within us and in the world around us.

By making a modern nazirite vow to commit ourselves to the study of Torah, to the defense of the State of Israel, and to the pursuit of social and economic justice for all, we will merit the right to both invoke and to receive the threefold *b'rachah* of the Torah.

Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them
Numbers 6:27

Although I have been a Jew-by-choice for more than fourteen years, the two year process of preparing and learning to become a bat mitzvah has opened my eyes and my heart to the importance of being close to God through the study of Torah, observance of ancient rituals and traditions, and celebration of holidays and honoring remembrance days. The past two years of learning with Rabbi Hudson and the students in our b'nei mitzvah class has shown me how significant and gratifying it is to get involved in our temple community, which collectively brings kindness and blessings to everyone, especially those participants whose faith is demonstrated by action and who do so much to help those in need in the greater community.

Thank you to Rabbi Hudson for sharing your special gift as an educator and for motivating me to become more learned in the teachings of Torah and Jewish history. As I begin a new stage of my Jewish life as a bat mitzvah, I only wish I could come to Torah study with Rabbi Hudson. Her insight and knowledge of Jewish text and Torah is truly awe inspiring. She will be greatly missed.

Julie Hecht Florman

I chose to partake in the process of becoming an adult bat mitzvah in large part so that I could understand my children's experience of this same journey. What flowed from that was an exploration into Judaism's teachings regarding the family and the relationship between parent and child.

The Jewish people are first and foremost a family. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachael, and Leah are still referred to as our forefathers and foremothers, rather than our founders or leaders. The Jewish people are still called the children of Israel. Not surprisingly, one of the Jewish words for home, "*mikdash me'at*," means "little holy place."

Jewish parents and their children are, in traditional Judaism, bound to each other by a series of commanded responsibilities and sacred practices. (In Judaism, the closer one is to you, the higher the level of obligation imposed upon you by the Torah.) Judaism places an exceptional emphasis on parents honoring and caring for their children and vice versa. Notably, "Honor thy father and thy mother" is the fifth commandment.

Judaism obliges parents to ensure that their children enjoy physical and spiritual health; a sense of worth and identity; and educational development and opportunity. There is an ancient Jewish saying that "with each child, the world begins anew." I think this encapsulates the sacredness of the child in the eyes of Judaism.

Jewish parents celebrate the birth of their children with an ancient promise called "*brit*"—covenant. Through this contract, renewed in every generation, parents pledge that their children will become part of the Jewish people. At virtually every "*brit milah*" (covenant of circumcision) or "*brit bat*" (covenant for a daughter), parents recite a wish that the baby may enter into Torah (teaching/learning), *huppa* (love) and *ma'asim tovim* (living righteously). Each of these principals is considered a mitzvah (good deed).

Likewise, the commandments to honor and revere one's parents are so valued in Judaism that they begin at the ages of 12 (for girls) and 13 (for boys) and continue even after the death of the parent. The surviving child is to use expressions of honor in referring to his or her parent, to name a child after the parent, to recite *kaddish* (mourner's prayer) and to light a memorial candle. The mitzvah of honoring parents does not depend on what a child's parents did for him or her or even whether they were good parents. Rather, we are to honor our parents simply because they gave us life.

I am hoping that, through my decision to become an adult bat mitzvah, I have bestowed a special honor upon my father who, at age 13, was unable to have his own bar mitzvah ceremony. (His father tragically passed away a few months prior to what would have been his bar mitzvah). Because neither my mother nor my sister had the opportunity to partake in a bat mitzvah ceremony, I am my family of origin's sole member to have this privilege. My bat mitzvah is especially meaningful for that reason.

My thanks go to my husband, Marty, who showed great enthusiasm for this milestone and who, with great joy, wished to present me with the *talit* he wore for his own bar mitzvah; my children, Becca, Adam, and Alex, who tolerated (with humor and even delight) the endless, off-key chanting of my Torah portion; and to all my other family members and friends who expressed great pride in my desire to study Hebrew and acquire a greater understanding of my heritage. No one showed this more than my life-long friend, Leigh Ann, who, unprompted, flew here from Utah to share in this day.

Finally, I wish to thank all the members of my b'nei mitzvah class for making this such an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Your dedication and conviction have been deeply touching. I wish to extend a special thanks to my friends in the class who added additional significance by agreeing to join me in this endeavor. Finally, my deepest thanks go to Rabbi Jocee who brought to this experience not only her kind and noble spirit but an unparalleled love of Judaism and a deep and abiding respect for each of us.

Joyce M. Keller

A Little Advice to Elena from her Mom

On the eve of my Bat Mitzvah, and the impending ceremony and celebration, I look to you, my beloved daughter Elena, and feel a sense of relief, and gladness that you will not have to wait as long as I have to take part in this wonderful experience. It is mostly for you that I have chosen to become a Bat Mitzvah at the ripe old age of 50. I want you to remember that while it is not easy to be called to the Torah, the ceremony can occur at any time in a person's life, if one believes that it is important to do so, and if one chooses to stick with it. The bottom line is that it is not when you do it, but the fact that you do it at all.

I hope you will remember that even if one is not born Jewish, one can become a Jew, and remain a Jew over a lifetime, even if it becomes hard to do so. And there are a few other things I would like to tell you about being Jewish, things which have come to my mind in light of my impending Bat Mitzvah.

There are many journeys one can take in order to become a Jew. Elena, your journey to Judaism has been far different from my own. You were not born to a Jewish birth mother, and I was. Yet, through your adoption; our coming together as a family and your Jewish naming ceremony in our synagogue; you today have become as Jewish as I am, and I hope that you will always continue to follow the traditions of our religion.

Adoption is a wonderful way to build Jewish families. In the Bible, for example, Abraham adopts his servant Eliezer, and Mordecai raises his orphaned cousin, Esther. But, the most beautiful statement about adoption comes from Michal, the wife of King David who according to the Book of Samuel never had children of her own. Yet, the Bible describes her as having five sons. The Talmud clarifies this discrepancy by saying: "Her sister Merabe gave birth to them and she raised them, therefore they are called by her name." Thus, Elena, this teaches us that whoever brings up a child in his home is regarded, according to Scripture, as though the child had been born to him or her.

In Jewish law, (Halakha), a person's Jewish status is determined by the status of the parent, or parents. Accordingly, if the mother is Jewish, so is her child. The Jewish Reform movement in America and the more liberal sects of Judaism accept a child as a Jew if the parent raises the child as a Jew, and the child then fosters a Jewish identity. Thus Elena my daughter, it is too late to turn back now. You are truly Jewish!

It is said by Ido Abram that there are five aspects to contemporary Jewish identity: (1) religion, culture, and tradition; (2) the tie with Israel and Zionism; (3) dealing with anti-Semitism, including the issues of persecution and survival; (4) personal history and life-experience; and; (5) relationship with non-Jewish culture and people. The importance of these factors will vary greatly from time to time, and from place to place. But, bidden or unbidden, they will always be present, each and every day in a Jewish person's life.

There are religious Jews, and there are "ethnic Jews," or "assimilated Jews;" terms that are used to describe a person of Jewish parentage and background who does not actively practice Judaism, but who identifies with other Jews both culturally and fraternally. I suppose that the way in which I have chosen to raise our family is a bit of both, or somewhere in the middle. I hope Elena, that someday you will follow my lead in raising your own family.

Being a Jew is a basic part of who I am. I have always lived as a Jew, worshipped as a Jew, and have never hid my "Jewishness," even when I have been in situations where I didn't exactly "blend" into the crowd. And even though I don't talk about my belief in God very much, I feel very lucky that God has always been there for me. Even when I have felt horribly lonely in this lifetime, I have never felt truly alone. Because I know deep down that wherever I am, God will always keep watch over me, and will not let me drop. The same way, after having brought you over 8,000 miles to America, he will not let you drop Elena.

The ultimate lesson I hope that you will take from this D'var Torah, is that for every day of your life you must remember that you are a Jew, and that is something you should never, ever, forget. Because one day, Elena, someone may not let you forget it.

Love Mom

Keira Malkus

Ritual, Presence and Gratitude

This has been a year of many blessings. My journey over the last two years to study to be a bat mitzvah has been enhanced by my first pregnancy and the birth of my son, Warren Gil. The intersection of these major milestones has inspired me to ponder how Judaism informs my parenting choices. The Talmud says that when dealing with a child, “be it ever your way to thrust him off with the left hand and draw him to you with the right hand.” I believe that this speaks to the precious balance parents must make between love and law. The love for my child comes easily; it is a wellspring of love that consistently replenishes and feels never ending. The law part of parenting is what is hard, and therefore the law requires guidance and boundaries. I believe that through studying Judaism and exploring my relationship with God, I can create a foundation for my family. This foundation is built upon ritual, presence and gratitude.

My background as a middle-school teacher has solidified my belief that children thrive when there is structure. Children grow best in an environment that is predictable and consistent. Judaism provides many opportunities for this consistency through ritual. The most important and sacred one is Shabbat. The weekly day of rest and reflection can act as an anchor for my family in an increasingly hurried world. The ritual of Shabbat is rooted in the management of time. Time must be managed as an investment in the future. The more efficient I am with my time, the more time I will have to renew. The story of creation goes that God worked hard for six days creating the world and rested on the seventh. We practice the daily ritual of family dinner, but elevating Shabbat as a special celebration to culminate a week of hard work is an idea that I love. In the same way that trips to Big Bear, the tending of our family garden, and nightly walks together solidify what it means to be in our family, Shabbat will be a ritual that will reinforce and define our togetherness.

Observance of ritual requires presence. Presence is a gift I give to the people I love. It requires observation, self-reflection and discipline. Wendy Mogel's parenting book, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, says “God gave us free will to choose our actions wisely, to make the most of our time on earth. We've been given the opportunity to leave this place better than we found it; to cherish the moment; to treasure time as well as manipulate it. The big paradox is that slowing down the clock takes as much effort and concentration as getting things done.” Presence requires the discipline of tuning out my insentient internal dialogue, but it also requires a reverence for time management. The more present I am the more I will notice all the blessings around me. I always feel the pull to be distracted: cell phones, television, internet, worrying about the future. Judaism roots me to focus on what is truly important.

When I slow down and focus on what is important – my health; the sound of Warren's laughter; my husband Neil's smile when he comes home to us after work; the love I share with our extended family – moms, dads, grandparents, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles; the support from my friends; the roof over my head; the fact that our bellies are full; kindness from strangers; our freedom – I feel immense gratitude. One benefit of being present is the space that is created for feeling blessed. I want to cultivate a family that recognizes its blessings and takes the feeling of gratitude as inspiration to give back. Mogel says, “The family is a little laboratory for what Judaism sees as the most mature stage of responsibility, where we treat our community as family, give charity, and provide service to others.” My “little laboratory” changes daily, and this thing called family and my role as parent does not come with a guide. However, I feel blessed that I can call upon ancient texts, modern interpretations of those texts, leaders, scholars and a whole community to help me find my way. Just as a sculptor chips away in daily practice to unveil hidden beauty, I too am dedicated to daily practice so that the beauty of my family is realized.

Lynn Matassarín

I grew up as a Jew in Kansas, right in the middle of the Bible belt, talk about your oxymoron! I often hear people ask, "There are Jews in Kansas"? Yes, there are a few, and let me tell you, it was a tough place to grow up religiously!

As I reflect back upon my childhood and adolescence, I recall what it was like to live a Jewish life when everyone around me was Christian. I remember feeling different, and sometimes picked on, outcast, and lonely. I still remember how angry my parents were the day I brought home a Gideon Bible that I had been given at school. When I was in junior high school, several of my teachers gave big tests on the days I was absent for the High Holidays and I wasn't allowed to make them up. I vividly recall my dad going to the City Council meeting to complain and they told him he was going to hell for being a Jew. Although there were indeed struggles, with the support of my parents, I lived through the tough times and learned enough to hopefully pave a smoother path for my children.

I guess at some point we all make a personal choice about our religious future, selecting from three options—we choose to stick with the religion in which we were raised, convert to a different religion, or believe in no religion at all. Yet, as tough as it was to grow up Jewish in Kansas, the good memories far outweigh the bad, and those memories are the ones that shaped my religious future bringing me today to my Bat Mitzvah.

My Jewish heritage runs deep as all four of my grandparents, may they rest in peace, were Jewish by birth. My paternal grandparents, Leon and Esther Matassarín, had 10 children, all of whom maintained their Jewish heritage throughout their lives. My maternal grandparents, William and Dorothy Cohen, had two children, both of whom maintained their Jewish heritage as well. Amazingly so, when you think about it, given that they also grew up in the Bible belt of the Midwest. As for my parents, well, if you've seen the movie "When Harry Met Sally", you may recall the scene where Harry and Sally try to fix up their best friends on a blind date, that's how my parents met. My dad was dating a woman who fixed up my mom with my dad's best friend, the best friend ended up being the best man at my parents' wedding.

The *V'ahavta* has always been my favorite prayer, even as a child. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children..." Ah, those important words, "You shall teach them diligently to your children..." And thankfully, my parents did just that!

My first school memories are from nursery school at the Temple. I remember riding in a great big car with my teacher (and our neighbor) Ruth Nathan. School was fun and the nursery classrooms had lots of great toys, dolls, books, etc. The best part was getting to go to the nursery school room during Shabbat services, as that is where we got to go for babysitting. I attended Sunday school from kindergarten through Confirmation, with the same 12 students, for all those years, no one in and no one out. We had a few different rabbis and I liked them all, but one, Rabbi Thomas Liebschutz, my Confirmation Rabbi, really made a positive difference in my life. He was (and is still today) kind, gentle, wise, and spiritual, all rolled into one.

The Jewish holidays were always family time. When I was really young I remember sitting in Temple during the High Holidays, in uncomfortable folding chairs, never saying a word, and wondering if the torture would ever end. When I was finally old enough to read, my mom would share her *siddur* with me, we would read the prayers together, and I wished that the services would last longer. When I was really little we would go to my Aunt Barbara and Uncle Walter's house for Passover. The house smelled of cigars, the *seder* lasted forever; I had to sit quietly in itchy/scratchy dresses, and try to smile while eating *matzoh* balls that could sink the Titanic. When I got a little older our traditions changed. If we spent Thanksgiving in St. Louis with the cousins, then they came to Wichita for Passover, or vice versa. We always had a house full and it was a blast, kids sleeping on cots all over the house. Bagels weren't available in Wichita so when we made our annual trip to St. Louis we would load the station wagon with dozens of bagels that we brought home and put in the freezer in the garage. The bagels would last us for 6 months until the cousins came to Wichita and brought us more. Oy, vey! My parents have always been my greatest cheering section and I, in return, couldn't be more proud of all of their accomplishments. They are outstanding role models of Jewish life. My father taught Sunday school forever (he was my sixth grade teacher, which I hated at the time), served the congregation as president, was president of the Federation, and sat on the UAHC national board. He became an adult Bar Mitzvah when I

was in college and it was a wonderful family event. My mother was the volunteer of volunteers when I was growing up. She organized and ran the temple fund raising project every year. She cooked corned beef, brisket, made homemade challah loaves, apple strudel, and noodle kugel, for months in preparation of the event. She served as the president of the Sisterhood and was the secretary on the Sisterhood National Board. Her first salaried job came when I was in high school when she became the Executive Director of the Mid-Kansas Jewish Federation. When my parents left Kansas and moved to Maui, Hawaii, there was no Jewish congregation there, so they started one. My parents lived *Tikkun Olam* long before it became "fashionable". I'm so proud of them and realize that I have big shoes to fill as I carry on their living legacy, to teach these words diligently to my children.

Living "Jewishly" in California is quite a bit different than growing up in Kansas. Both of my children have almost three times the number of peers in their religious school class as I had. They are not the only Jewish students in their public school classroom and there are many Jewish students in their schools. I chuckle inside when they complain about how long the services last or ask, "Do I have to go to Hebrew class today?", and I calmly reply, "Yes, you do". That's my job, "teach them diligently to your children." I'm proud of their accomplishments too. Ruthie has been an outstanding Hebrew tutor to Pam and me during the last two years of our B'nai Mitzvah studies and J.D. loves to sing Hebrew songs and play the guitar with Rabbi Cohen. He'll be an excellent song leader at Camp Sholom this summer.

As an adult, I am blessed to have found my spiritual home at Temple Beth Sholom. Since the moment that Cookie Stern became Ruthie's teacher in the pre-school, it became clear that this was the congregational family that welcomes you to "stay for a lifetime." My sincere thanks to Rabbi Jocee Hudson for teaching me to read Hebrew and for teaching me so much about the history of our faith; to Rabbi Cohen for her spiritual leadership, wisdom, and her warmth and caring; to Pam for taking this journey with me—yesterday, today, and tomorrow; to the Matassarini family for their love and support; and to my children, Ruth and J.D.—I love you!

Pam Matassarin

Participating as an adult bat mitzvah was not a journey to a destination, but rather an on-going exploration into a deeper understanding of the heritage I have chosen, to live as a Jew. This journey began for me with the first Seder that I was invited to attend twenty-five years ago, with the first Jewish person that I had ever met. Now, twenty-five years later, we are still celebrating Passover, and all of the Jewish holidays together, along with our two children.

For me, this has not been a quick journey, but a slow and sometimes confusing one. The confusion is not whether I want to be a Jew by choice, but rather trying to grasp what it means to "feel" Jewish. As I hear the stories of many of my friends who grew up going to religious school and Jewish summer camps I sense that they have a clearly defined sense of feeling Jewish, having known no other spirituality than that of a Jewish life. The community experiences of belonging to a synagogue and the discriminations that they went through in their youth and beyond begs the question, does this mean they are more Jewish than I am?

I never belonged to a congregation before moving to California, so joining Temple Beth Sholom has had a tremendous impact on my personal journey. Our family's association with TBS began with our daughter and the pre-school. Ruth began teaching me all that she was learning from Cookie, "the girl" rabbi and "the boy" rabbi, even at the early age of three. Even now, she continues teaching me by tutoring me with my Hebrew and reading the prayers together at services.

Just after our son J.D. was born, I began taking classes and studying with Rabbi Donnell on a continuation of my personal Jewish journey. Even after a year and half of studying and a trip to the mikveh, I told Rabbi Donnell I did not think I was ready to take my place as a Jewish woman. He assured me that I was, so I held the Torah and accepted a Hebrew name. The most beautiful part of the ceremony was the blessing I received from both rabbis, yet I still did not "feel" Jewish.

I have continued to take classes and I have participated in torah study trying to gain a deeper understanding of my Jewishness. I understand the academic side of it all but what about the spiritual? Sitting in services, with my family and friends, listening to the rabbi, singing along with the cantor, and finally, being able to read the Hebrew I begin to understand and to feel. When I stand in Friday night services with my eyes shut as I say the Shema, and feel the stress fall away and the warmth inside, then I realize that I do indeed know what it feels to be Jewish. I am proud to be a Bat Mitzvah. I am a Jew.

Caroline Paltin

The task of writing a meaningful *d'var Torah* is the task of contributing something in a small way to my Jewish community. My two-year study to become a bat mitzvah was a journey leading to this, and is only a stop along what I hope will be a long road of Jewish learning and contributions in a meaningful Jewish life.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of attending a talk given by Viktor Frankl, discussing his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he applies much of what he experienced in Nazi concentration camps to the endeavor to create a meaningful existence. Frankl noted that we find meaning in acts of service, through our connections to ourselves and others, and through our attitudes.

In service of doing *mitzvot*, I have found both meaning and connection. The very choice of which *mitzvot* to attend to makes me even more aware of all the suffering and injustice that exists in the world, and by choosing which to attend to, I am filled with awe and humility. I have supported programs to archive and preserve Jewish/Yiddish music, as well as programs to protect the right for all people to marry. I try to teach my sons Ben and Ari the importance of thoughtful decision in dealing with the injustices they encounter, and to remember that it is important to be involved and connected as Jews.

The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Eliazar, who, in the middle of a Talmudic dispute, calls for the voice of God to speak in support of his point, only to receive the response of "*Lo bashamayim hi*," or the "Torah is no longer in heaven." This passage taught me that we are actively connected to the Torah as interpreters of its meaning, not just passive recipients of the words. The Torah is read every year, but at each stage of my life, I change in response to what I hear in it. These changes in attitude bring meaning.

Many acts of service in my life have brought me to perform the work of changing someone else's attitude. In my work with disability awareness programs, I have the task of breaking down barriers which create exclusion and encouraging a shift in perspective to see all individuals as variations on humanity. In parenting my sons, I work to provide them with a strong sense of commitment to performing acts of social justice, to exercise tolerance in the most difficult circumstances, and to worry less about what has been described as a the selfish task of being a better person and more about what we are doing to make the world a better place. If we do this, the better person will genuinely evolve out of it.

Meaning flows from making the world a better place. Just as I am learning and developing an understanding of Torah teachings, it is important to me that I teach Ben and Ari to move from a developing knowledge of Torah, to action based on that knowledge. This involves developing a dialogue between Adonai and ourselves. When we enter into a connection with Torah, I feel that we create this meaningful dialogue. For my sons and me, music was the bridge to this connection, the language of the dialogue. The Torah makes several references to the act of singing and playing music as a service, and it is clear that it has created a meaningful connection between Ben and Ari and their Jewish community and spiritual experience. Singing my Torah portion each day in preparation for my reading has evolved into everything from a focused study time, to a sing-a-long in the car, to a lullaby at night. We each have experienced the power of music to create a voice for the joys, sorrows, celebrations and sufferings in our lives.

When I embarked on the two-year B'nei Mitzvah program, I had sheepishly asked each member of my family if they would mind me being out of the house a few more hours every month. My husband David gave full support and enthusiastic encouragement. When I explained to Ben what it was for, he immediately responded "Go for it mom." This enthusiasm and support, as well as the overflowing joy my younger son feels when he is able to teach me something new he learned at Religious School, fill me with meaning and a sense of hope that we are all on a journey together that will continue to grow and have lasting effects.

The Torah is given to us, and choice is also given to us. Frankl asserted that the human freedom to choose one's attitude cannot be taken away. It is an awesome task to struggle with deciding what is "right" and to model this for my sons. In Torah, I find a place to engage in this struggle. The task I set now for myself is to view this as a beginning of a continued commitment to study, to act, to connect and to create meaning.

Paula Pitluk

Poet Mary Oliver writes, "One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began..." Almost two years ago, I entered our B'nei Mitzvah class, looking forward to studying with Rabbi Hudson and eager to learn more about myself. It had taken time and thought for me to reach the decision, one that would mark a concrete and measurable step in my life.

While I had believed that becoming a Bat Mitzvah would be life changing, I have come to realize that it has been just one step in a journey. In this experience, I found the courage to take a risk, to do something I had thought about for many years because now it felt right. I knew that if I stumbled, friends would support me. I sensed that accomplishing this goal would lead me to setting and accomplishing others and felt sure that this adventure would be just one of many. I gained the strength and awareness to take a step away from who I had been and connect with who I was becoming.

Mary Oliver continues in "The Journey",

**...you felt the old tug
at your ankles...
But you didn't stop...
...and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper into the world.**

It has taken me a long time to begin, to be ready for a new life, and to design my own journey in the world. It has taken me a long time to listen to my own voice. To my family and to my friends who have become my family, thank you for traveling alongside me. To Michael and Sam, thank you for the joy you bring to every day of my journey. I will love you both forever.

Soni Sanberg

How many journeys bring us to the places we seek? How many goals are realized and then set aside because the unintended consequences are so much more profound? How many memories become the stuff of myth and ultimately metaphors at the expense of the production agenda initially designed?

I begin the Bat Mitzvah journey in a casual way, looking at it through the eyes of a close friend and an evening conversation about, "...wouldn't it be nice to..." So it doesn't begin at the beginning at all, although I really can't place the date or time when I decide to put my foot into the water. It is easy and fun, experiencing classes, discussing and examining beliefs, ideas and misconceptions. Each member of our class is an individual, many of them strangers to me. Gradually we develop a set of shared experiences that begin to give us a history; actually, a set of memories. Certainly no reflection can omit the enthusiasm of Robert spelling out his name card with Hebrew letters. Integrated learning is indeed alive and well. Gradually names and faces take on more dimensions as we continue that first year, although the "I" is still very much the pronoun of choice. *Chevruta* is a comfortable way to learn and mentor and *aleph* doesn't seem so tough after all; but perhaps I already am beginning to rewrite our history.

I want to consider the way we shape our memories to construct our history. I am in awe of the ability to experience, articulate and then reconfigure events in the attempt to develop a personal history. The magic of memory making intrigues me. The prior experiences, the view we have of ourselves and those around us, set up an agenda that helps us pick, sort and prioritize what happens and how we figure in the ongoing drama of our lives. I appreciate the memory-making that allows for the foolishness and foibles to remain a part of the ongoing narrative. Abram/Abraham, Jacob/Israel, patriarchs and matriarchs alike are presented in their entirety, the editing process relatively free from adjusting the stories to mere litany of praiseworthy behavior. I want my models to reflect the very human condition that generates mistakes, petty behaviors, mean-spiritedness as well as the heights of compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help repair the world. Sometimes the situation is very good and then it isn't anymore. Which is it then; which memory should prevail? I constantly struggle with this in the attempt to integrate an understanding of self in time.

And then we are at the half-way point. And *aleph* isn't enough anymore. Certainly Tony's generous *V'ahavta* transliteration, in large print, is a highlight of generosity and pragmatism. Keira is closing in on baby time and Darla is helping make it a rite of passage for us all. A party, the giving of books, holding a new baby once more - we meet again at Sinai. And these are the pieces that are crowding in as memories take shape. Politics and commitment, loss and gain, it is all right now; embrace with open arms, thank you Rabbi Steinberg. But memories, even those carefully cultivated, nurtured and guarded, eventually begin to morph into myths. The more we observe, reflect and retell, the more our memories become our mythology. It is very difficult to keep things contemporaneous, to behave as though the past, in the act of remembering, is brought forth unscathed, to be experienced in the present. I hear family memories shared and retold and at some point realize that the Passover photo in the dining room is filled with the figures of the Rice family mythology. I can sit around with my cousins, sharing stories and laughing at our memories and the memories that have been handed down through so many years but, try as hard as we can, we're still left with memories that are merging into family myths. So on a Sunday afternoon, in the midst of a congested freeway, I am asked to share some family stories. Memories or myths? Which ones does he want; which ones do I share? And we laugh and he asks more questions and the memories are passing along on this spring day on the 5 Freeway. "Someday you'll be a story to someone."

And memories become myths and I reach for them as metaphors. Let's shed some light on this Jewish journey. Torah passages and the new mantra - it's all about the Torah passage, that's what it's all about, and look, Nahshon, we're back to the first toe into the water! And then a brief glimpse into synchronicity, when everything is aligned and we're at the last class, and the last schematic and the last sharing and it is such perfection that it becomes the first moment of the journey. Metaphorically speaking of course, because it is too difficult to wrap in a memory and too intangible for a myth. So, I am a part of the Reform Jewish tradition, struggling with meaning and metaphors; a member of the Temple Beth Sholom Adult B'nei Mitzvah class of 2009/5769, reflecting on memories of the process that make the whole greater than the sum of the parts; and the individual who tries to read Numbers 6:17-19 while balancing images of the priest and the Nazirite and the "sacrifice of well-being." And what happens to the fascination with this metaphor, this myth, this memory? The

offering of the sacrifice of well-being, that desire for and appreciation of spiritual and community and personal homeostasis...well, it is a journey after all.

I begin this *D'var Torah* with a view of *Naso*. And *Naso* is still in view, just through the prism of two years of memories, two years of unintended consequences that come from a melding of sixteen people into a myth, two years of metaphors emerging en route. To teachers and friends, mentors and role models, family and family and family, I give thanks for your precious gifts.

Carolyn Sarnoff

About 3 years ago, some friends and I casually talked about taking the Adult B'nei Mitzvah class. I was just separated from my now-ex husband and trying to put some order into my life. It was just casual talk - we weren't sure what the class would consist of or how much time it would take or even if we could handle the studying and memorization at this time in our life.

I think we started with about 7 or 8 women. By the time the class began we were down to 4 and then to 3. But I'm getting ahead of myself. When I was first separated - my world was in disarray and I had no direction. I needed to figure out where I was going with my new and independent life and most of all - I wanted my daughter to be proud of me and what I could accomplish. This was an important step for me, but it was actually the second of many stepping stones to get me where I am today. The first stepping stone was to start a support group for divorced and separated women at our Temple - and this was for me as much as for others. It gave me a goal - something that was important to me and therefore it was easy to put every strength I had into it. Once I got that going - even though it didn't last past the first year - I was excited to accomplish a new goal. That is when I decided that I wanted to join my friends in becoming b'nei mitzvah. It was a two year program and it loomed ahead of me - but I looked at it as another stepping stone of accomplishment to get me to the next place. After all, that is what life is: A series of small and large accomplishments along with little back steps.

I guess I had a small advantage when I started the class. I had attended a Hebrew Academy High School in Miami Beach. So, way back in my memory, I had learned the alphabet. Some recollection returned - some did not. But, I studied and every week, I felt that I had gained more and more from the class and from Jocee. We learned more than the Hebrew letters - we learned history and discussed it. I found a new passion in my life. I expect much more of myself than of others. Studying became a ritual for me and I loved it. It took my mind off my "little problems" relating to my separation and subsequent divorce and gave me something to focus on.

Meanwhile, I was sharing all this with my daughter, even offering to teach her the Hebrew alphabet. I enjoyed the role of teacher as I had done when she was little. I think it gave me a feeling that I was in control of my life and aiming toward something very important. Most young people become bar/bat mitzvah because it is a natural progression in their lives. I decided to become a bat mitzvah because I guess I wanted to find out if I could. I also saw it as an accomplishment to be an adult woman making this decision solely on my own.

I think what this class taught me - besides the actual learning of reading Hebrew and learning of our history - is that I COULD do it. I could study and remember and discuss it! I could learn new things and put them to use in my daily life. I could be proud to say I'm becoming a Bat Mitzvah this year. Now all I have to do is decide on my next stepping stone of Life. And, that is getting easier all the time!

Finally, I needed to decide on what my Mitzvah Project would be. I had adopted a small, very sweet dog during this time. She gave me as much, if not more, love than I gave her. Seeing her react with all kinds of people, adults as well as children, made this decision easy. I would take her to classes to lead to her becoming a "therapy dog." Its a slow process as she needs to learn a few commands, but I can see her future as a "therapy dog" being very successful. She's six years old and I'm, well, older, but we still have a lot to give.

David Shapero

I was so excited to be getting close to the conclusion of the B'nei Mitzvah class, and then we learned our *parshat* was *Naso*. To be honest, it is not the most exciting portion, small bit players in the cast that went before us. There are the men who would be moving the Tabernacle, and the leaders of the twelve tribes bringing identical offerings. But then I thought about the bit parts we all play in life.

I felt strongly about writing about *Tikkun Olam* (repair of the world). Maybe it's a function of having kids, or maybe a function of my age and wanting to leave a positive legacy behind me. With all of the global environmental issues, I want to do my part. In my family we consciously recycle, have a home garden, try to buy and live locally, and generally consider our impact on the earth in most circumstances.

I am sure the general public views such a voluntary activity as repairing the earth as an enormous undertaking. In fact, so big, that they are stymied to pick where to start. "It's such a big earth, and I am just one person." In reality, we all get to play a bit part in the repair of the world. Whether it is being environmentally conscious, or working with less fortunate people, or any one of thousands of *mitzvot* we could do (and should do) everyday. The point is not to solve all the world's issues in a single day, but to participate in the constant, slow attainment of the goal over time. Just as this B'nei Mitzvah is simply a milestone, an important one, in the constant progression of my life, I have learned that *Tikkun Olam* is also a compounding of small events.

For my project I have been promoting and helping people start home gardens.

Darla Holland Shepard

MOM, MITZVAHS, MATS, and MORE

When I started class last year, I had a lot of preconceived notions about what I thought I would accomplish during our time together. There have been two things that have happened to change my thinking since then.....my mother died, and I started to practice yoga.

My Sunday morning yoga instructor (Sue from Disneyland) is one of the people who has changed my life. Sue is not svelte, and yet, after years of practice, she can put one leg behind her ear while standing on the other (it's amazing). Her constant reminders..... "there is no judgment.....this is *your* practice.....this is where you are *today*" have helped me worry much less about what the others in my class can do that I can't. She encourages and compliments and reminds us that maybe we can do more than we did yesterday or perhaps less, but we are here.....and that's something.

Each class ends with the closing, *Namaste* "The light within me honors the light within you". It's sort of a Sanskrit "shalom", and I love the term.

This shift in thinking has led me to worry much less about whether or not I will ever be able to read Hebrew like Rabbi Cohen. It's led me to worry less about whether or not I will measure up to my children's expectations (they think we will learn what they did), and it's led me to realize that I have no reason to feel embarrassed if I'm never able to memorize the *V'ahavta*. Maybe I will, but "this is where I am today" and I should celebrate that. I confess to always having felt like a second class citizen in the past for not being able to read Hebrew, and now I feel like I'm truly Jewish. My mother's death has made me realize that we may not always have as much time as one would think and that it's a waste to spend any of our minutes feeling inadequate or anxious.

My Mitzvah project, seeing patients on the mobile van at the National Guard Armory and homeless shelters, reaffirms for me that we have so much to be grateful for more and so much to give.

At my daughter's Bat Mitzvah, I wished for her a life blessed with learning, laughter, and love. At my mother's funeral, I recalled that during her lifetime, she had lived a life blessed with learning, laughter, and love. My Bat Mitzvah journey has been blessed with these things as well:

1. **LEARNING:** I give thanks for my classmates who have shared their experiences with me these past two years, helping me to remember, after so many years of being the one to teach, what a joy it is to be a student. I also give thanks for the opportunity to study with a special teacher, Rabbi Jocee Hudson. To borrow from the lyrics of *WICKED*, you have all left a "handprint on my heart".
2. **LAUGHTER:** I give thanks for my husband, Rick (frequently admitting "I'm a funny guy") who has kept me laughing for even longer than the 28 years that we have been married.
3. **LOVE:** I give very special thanks for the children, Jake and Maggie, with whom I have been blessed and who gave me the inspiration to become a Bat Mitzvah. The words of yet another musical, *LES MISERABLES*, best express my sentiments about them....."To love another person is to see the face of God."

My spiritual journey doesn't start or stop today. This is just a special landmark along the way. Shabbat Shalom! Namaste!

Doris Spector

I would never have thought that I would be a grandmother and a Bat Mitzvah at the same time. It caught me off guard.

I have always liked learning about Judaism and our people and have taken classes from time to time. The more I learn, the more it seems there is to know. It's never-ending, but it is good to know where I came from and why things are done the way they are.

I am so proud to see my children, Pam, Michael and Daryl and their spouses, Lenny, Stacey and Natasha instilling in their children, Evan, Jaclyn, Hannah, Sarah, Sydney, Jack and Chloe, a commitment to Jewish values. They are very aware of being Jewish.

As part of my Mitzvah project, I have been going once a week for the past few months to Bubbe and Zayde's assisted living house in Santa Ana. The residents I have met there are so proud to be Jewish and of their heritage. I just visit and talk with them and they seem to enjoy the company and the books of photos and pictures I bring to discuss. It makes me feel especially good when they ask me to come back!

This has been an enriching experience and I want to thank all those who helped me get through it.

I challenge grandparents to see what they can do to enrich their lives along with their grandchildren. I hope to continue to be a part of my children's and grandchildren's Jewish life. As new generations come up, older generations present a rich heritage to cherish and keep up.

Robert Waldstreicher

Hello my name is Robert Fisher Waldstreicher. I was bred, born, fed and raised in Montana. Big Sky Country. I love nature and hiking, backpacking, and bicycling. My religious life took a turn one day on the riverbank of the Missouri. I had been taught that the world started about six thousand years ago. As I turned over in my hand the smooth fossil of a seashell with its whorls and simple beauty I had an epiphany: I can question religion!

This took me on a journey in college of taking multiple world religion and philosophy classes that filled my head with all kinds of answers but even more questions. I was drawn to the idea that in Judaism one could question God, authority, the Torah (this was to come up years later in my Torah portion!). I thought of myself as a secular humanist. There were not a lot of Jews in Montana. A dorm mate that I got in some trouble with was Jewish (years later I would see him in the NY Times living in Israel). I knew there were MOT's in Montana when I was attending college. Some in Great Falls, Missoula, and Billings (tip of the *kippah* to Lisa & Dean).

An interesting event happened to me just prior to meeting my bride-to-be. During the 1988 elections, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a full-page questionnaire you could fill out and that would be returned to you. The questionnaire would profile what voting group you would most likely fall into. I had filled it out prior to meeting Lori and I opened the return profile a few months after I had met her. Hmmmm, it was interesting that this guy from Montana should be an educated, socially liberal, Jewish male! And in a few short years I would be sitting at a counter in New York having an egg-cream!

Lori and I fell madly in love. We met on a Monday and my Jewish education started that Friday with something called Shabbat. The phone call went like this:

Lori: "Do you want to come over for Shabbat dinner tonight?"

Robert: "What's that? Who's going to be there?"

Lori: "Oh, we just have a family meal, say some prayers over bread and wine. My brother and grandmother come over."

Robert: "Uhhhhh, sounds a bit formal after only knowing you five days, can I pass?"

Lori: "Oh, well sure maybe next time!"

Ruth taking the phone away from Lori: "Hi Robert this is Ruth, get your butt over here!"

Robert: "What time should I be there?"

I like food. I like growing it. I like preparing it. I like the nurturing aspect of it. I like the festivity of a meal with loved ones. This is probably why I was so struck by Shabbat with my wife's family. We celebrate every Shabbat. The taste of butter on challah with a few sips of sweet wine is very centering to me, and 21 years later I still have flashbacks to that first meal with her dad and brother grilling me about pre-nuptial contracts.

We decided to have a Jewish wedding: rabbi, cantor, *chuppah*, *ketubah*. I took a nine month course in Delaware that three rabbis from three different shuls taught. They "sold it" as a conversion class for getting married. Veeeery easy "conversion" class. Okay by me not to learn that ancient Hebrew language! Lori and I combined our names legally. Later on I thought it more complete with my Jewish identity to go by a Jewish last name: Waldstreicher. Wald means forest. Streicher has several meanings: paint stroke, vagabond or jester. I love the woods. I like to draw. I have been known to be a smart-tuchas. Pretty obvious to take it.

My Jewish life has been enriched and nurtured by my family I married into. My brother-in-law Dean has a similar background to myself. Dean and I refer to each other as Gers as salutation and saying goodbye. A Ger is someone that embraces a Jewish life both informally and formally. That's Dean and I. Dean is on the board at his Temple. He's my Ger Man!

Some wonderful memories of my Jewish education include: Howie reading to us on Shabbat. Having conversations with Howie and Ruth about their childhood. Lotte and Ruth talking about getting out of Germany just in time. When I wanted to learn about Golda Meir, Sephardic cooking, or Israel, I have pulled down a book from Howie's extensive library. Sitting under flowering trees celebrating Passover with Bill and Judy. Learning about Yard-Sale (yahrtzeit) candles with Tracy and Karen. I joked that I really felt Jewish when we had to pay our temple dues. Well, that is partly true, but hearing war stories from my Jewish patients at work has been awe-inspiring. As was Mr. Hecht sharing his life stories. I will not forget to share these stories with my children, too.

Hava Lotte, Eli Me'ir, and Noah Morris have really completed my Jewish life. Through my three witty, smart, fun, and insightful children I have taken this path that leads me here today. Through my children, I have the best friends one could ever have from TBS. Rabbis Heidi and Jocee. The *havurahs*. My Adult B'nai Mitzvah class. Now I am so glad I am starting my Hebrew journey.

Ruth and Julie were very inspirational in me pursuing a Bar Mitzvah. That leads me to my Torah portion from Numbers Chapter 6. Numbers discusses taking a census of the Nazirites and crossing from Sinai to Moab. I am reading Numbers 6:2-4. I had a difficult time comprehending the text because of its restrictive and harsh requests: "to consecrate oneself unto the Lord," one must abstain from wine and anything to do with grapes. What is one to put on your salad besides balsamic? Grapes and cheese go together. One must abstain from this? I would have to rip out the merlot grapes I have growing in the back yard! I am glad on Passover we reenact the passage out of Egypt by not eating leavened bread. That I can handle. Without wine! Without balsamic! Without grapes and raisins to accompany the curdled, aged milk of a goat! Mr. "cheese is more important as we get older" Florman couldn't comply with this!

From my research on Numbers regarding the above passage I found little that Jewish Scholars have addressed regarding the above specific passage. I think the metaphor in the writing is to show commitment. Commitment to Judaism. Commitment to one's Jewish Family. Commitment to the Jewish Community. Commitment to our Jewish Heritage.

I feel committed!

When called to the Torah, call me _____

Ruth Waldstreicher

I am unaccustomed to public speaking, my husband was the one who loved to pontificate, as those that knew Howie can attest to. I hid behind him. I guess now it's my turn, and I hope I don't go blank!!

I, being the oldest of all the b'nei mitzvah, at 76 years old, have had a very different story as to how I came to this day.

My life started in Germany. I was born to well-to-do parents, who were assimilated Jews, in an already ominous environment. We celebrated Jewish holidays and I went to the Temple pre-school through 2nd grade, brought there by the chauffer!! (We weren't allowed in a German school anyway.) My schooling ceased abruptly when big S.S. men came into class and told us to go home. It was about October of 1938.

Being six years old, I don't remember much of this time, but my dad was picked up and sent away to Dachau. He was amazingly returned home and my mom immediately sent him to relatives in Amsterdam. I do vividly remember Kristallnacht, being in a darkened room with my mom and grandma very scared, but not knowing why!! We rejoined my father in time to board the Stadendam for her last journey to America. It was February 1939, the seas were rough, I was sure we were sinking every morning, seasick all day, and terrified at our arrival in the dark docks of New York. I remember saying, "I want to go home."

I grew up in Washington, D.C., 2 blocks from our Orthodox Synagogue, which we attended for all the holidays, and where I was confirmed at 13 years old from Sunday School. I went to *cheder* with the boys for a short time, since I wanted to read Hebrew like my mom, but felt out of place and dropped out. I joined Habonim at 13 years old and became quite active. I always thought I would make *aliyah*, but not till the soil! A farmer, I am not.

I spent a year in San Francisco with some girlfriends and the least religious one instigated a kosher Pesach and we also attended a Seder at an Orthodox Rabbi's home. Wow—what an eye opener!!! I also realized, at this point, that my parents were growing older and being the only brat, *aliyah* on a kibbutz or a *moshav* would not be feasible.

I returned home to D.C. and met and married my husband. We had over forty years and four kids in a conservative Jewish home. We had Jewish holiday meals and almost all Shabbats with the kids.

Although I do not consider my family Holocaust survivors, we had it much too easy, I have always felt a deep conviction for bearing witness to the events. I always have reminded my kids where I came from and have always had a strong sense of Jewish identity. I have also been proud of my early picketing at the British Embassy for Israel and felt a deep commitment to the establishment of the State of Israel. I felt so deeply about our family's survival that when my mother said that she wanted to be cremated, I told her that is what "they" wanted to do to you. I could not do that out of spite. So my whole life has been spent with a deep sense of Jewishness because of my background.

I feel a great sense of accomplishment now that I have joined my whole family as a Bat Mitzvah.

Tony Zorrilla

The Light Shines Bright

If I were to give this brief essay a title, "The light Shines Bright" would be appropriate and fitting. My journey towards Judaism officially started 2 years ago on a fast track pace. The moment I decided to convert, it seemed to me that fast was just not fast enough. I'm not sure why I needed the urgency, I think I just needed to move forward in my life and I felt the need to get moving. Maybe I didn't want to miss anything.

My two-year conversation with Rabbi Cohen and Rabbi Hudson was an inspiring, insightful and a complete inner growth building experience. For some reason I had an expectation of conversion. As I explained to the Rabbi, I was looking for a flash of light; some sort of message delivered to me in a deep meaningful expression from God. I think that was just the Catholic upbringing in me. I just expected it to be dramatic. What I didn't notice was that the lights were shining bright the whole time of my journey and even before, I just didn't have the eyes to see it.

I have seen the light many times on this path; these are but a few of the most impressionable moments.

As a child in San Gabriel, our neighbors, Dr. and Mrs. Stepner, were my first introduction to Judaism. They opened their house to me as if it were mine. Through their friendship and love, I learned the tradition and rituals of every Jewish life without even knowing it. Years later I look back at this experience as a first step to understanding different religions, cultures and life attitudes. They opened a window and encouraged me to look out to a world that was much larger than my neighborhood.

Meeting Iris was an incredible bright light experience. Our friendship grew to become love and naturally led to marriage. Our early courtship and the possibility of a much more serious commitment made us both reflect on the importance of our independent religions. She was Jewish and was determined and obligated to continue her faith and belief into the next generation. To me, the important things of our life together meant that we would have a house with one faith, strong family values and that we would raise children believing in the same values and religion. I patiently waited for her to decide that I was qualified enough to spend my life with her. Our wedding remains one of the most emotional and memorable events in my life. We celebrated our wedding day in the full Jewish tradition, and to this day, I swear it was the best wedding we have ever been to. Iris encourages and challenges me; she continues to be the light on my path and my partner in life.

Hanna came to my life as tremendous joy. She, on a daily basis, brings me life, happiness and an appreciation to childhood that only your child can do. In the Jewish faith, the mother of the child declares the faith of the child. This declaration made me want to participate fully in Hanna's life and instill in her the traditions and knowledge of the Jewish faith. It has become my intention and goal to share her path and shine the light on the journey she is taking into Judaism. I am sometimes leading and I am sometimes following her steps.

The introduction to the TBS community has been one of the most important things for me. We attend Temple (as much as we can) and we have Hanna in Sunday school. We are involved with a wonderful group of people, where we started as friends and have now become a family. I have witnessed first hand the power of the community in happy occasions and in times of extreme grief. Together as a community, we have done mitzvot and I have been fortunate to have mitzvah done to me. I have reached out for help with an answer of, "sure what do you need," before my friend even knew the problem. I feel very blessed to be part of such a community. One of the most memorable conversations I have had was with a group of friends one morning. I was updating them on my progress, and how for some reason I was expecting some sort of big transformation, some flash of light or something. One of them turned to me and said, "Tony, we are your light". That to me showed such a level of love and connection, something that I have never felt before.

I know this conversion would have never been possible with any other Rabbi. Rabbi Cohen and Rabbi Hudson have both been so generous and patient with their time and knowledge. Through Rabbi Cohen, I have learned the basis of Jewish life, tradition and belief systems that just seem just so natural to me. Rabbi Hudson's lessons and Hebrew language study have made me continue to want to listen and absorb. I'm still not very good at Hebrew, but the passion she instilled in me to continue to learn has been put in place. Their

commitment and passion are an inspiration to me. They have shone the light on my path and have helped me navigate a better understanding of my own beliefs.

To become a bar mitzvah to me means the importance of: Mitzvah, forever learning, the strengthening of family values, the continuation of tradition, the importance of being part of a community and the importance of being at my best day to day. One lesson of Judaism that has always stuck with me is that you are not forgiven for past indiscretions, that you are judged day to day. That you are the person you are from the life you lead and exemplify to your family and community. Character is what you have when no one else is looking.

I don't know everything there is to know about Judaism, I'm sure I never will, but the Lights Shines Bright on my path.