Contents

Marlene Krauss

I am honored to begin this ceremony and to introduce the prayer, Modah Ani. We say this prayer as soon as we wake up and it is a gift to thank God for restoring my soul and my life before any other thoughts enter my mind. It is amazing that we get do this each day; to begin anew, to forget our past, to be grateful for what is here at this moment and to forgive ourselves. It is so appropriate that this is my prayer because in this year my soul has been restored, I see things anew each day and I feel a new connection with the universe which makes me feel safe. In part, I owe these realizations to the people standing before you. We were nurtured and given a safe space to learn together and now I feel we nurture each other. When I look in each of your faces, I feel the connection and a shared consciousness that will sustain me for years to come. Thank you for joining me on this journey that hopefully will never end.

I am a person with a logical mind who believes in facts, data and things that are proven. I am not a person with a fanciful mind who is easily influenced by ancient stories that might not have happened (the Torah) or even by highly regarded clergy (Shayna and Ben). The experiences I relate were not expected and not just wishful thinking but they also can't be proven. They came from a very special place that is in me and where nothing has to be proven.

Last Sunday we all went to the *mikvah*. I was looking forward to it and had a sense that I was ready. The woman who guided me through the process was named Peninah, coincidently my mother's name, Pearl. My mother died 32 years ago but is with me and I miss her every day. I wasn't sure why she was at the Mikvah but after the third immersion, I knew. She was there to watch me being born again. I stayed under the water letting it sooth me and appreciating the peace. When I emerged, my father had joined my mother and they tenderly said: "She is all we ever wanted".

A few weeks ago, I was walking in Central Park on my way home from Rodeph Sholom. There was a pond I had never seen before. There was a pergola and still waters that reflected the sky. There was a big rock formation and I thought if I walked around it I would find the path across the park. Instead the path just went around the rock and I ended up where I started.

There were many people who seemed to know where they were going and I felt foolish and despondent and alone. Then, suddenly, I realized I wasn't alone. There was someone, something; in the trees, in the grass, holding me up and connecting me to everything and to others. I felt small but in a good way. I was just a part. In a big universe where all of us are important, not everything about me needs to be so crucial, so momentous. It was a comfort just to be a part, just to be. I was no longer alone.

My mind was fertile and prepared to receive these "experiences" because of my travels and my work in the last year. I guess it was my year of searching for spirituality. Last Spring, I went to Israel for a week for the 25th anniversary of Women of the Wall. This is an organization that fosters women's rights and pluralism and spurns some of the teachings of orthodoxy that enslaves women and men as well. But the trip was most important because there were hundreds of like-minded women from congregations all over the U.S. We thanked God every morning for waking up and I first learned Modah Ani. We prayed and sang as a group and we were in Jerusalem where spirituality is in every rock if you are open to seeing it. I then learned of the Adult B'nai Mitzvah class which, like many things was "*beshert*". The decision to join was spontaneous. It was just what I needed and at the right time. The people in the class and Rabbi Spratt and Cantor DeLowe were the highlights. I have come away with learning and nourishment for my mind and my soul; from spirituality to singing and from the *mikvah* to miracles. I also have a new understanding of the Reform movement and how Rodeph Sholom came from serving shrimp to serving the community. Ben and Shayna gave me a gift when they suggested that I go to a retreat sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. In the five day experience I had a month ago, meditation and yoga were combined with learning, silent times, lots of singing and more praying than many people do in a lifetime. There, with the help of what I learned at Rodeph Sholom in the last year, I realized that religious faith requires that I trust myself, trust others and trust a transcendent experience when I have it. That is a big deal for me; to trust myself and others. That trust enabled me to receive the experiences I had in the last month; to receive them without question and to receive them with joy. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Judy Landis

Reflections — otherwise a nice way of saying how did I get here?

Short answer — I went on the family congregational trip to Israel in December 2013, — because much to my increasing embarrassment I had never been to Israel — and my new friend, and little did I know it then, future adult B'nai mitzvah classmate) Monica Kaiser at school pick up one day said something like "Nancy (another new friend from the trip) and I are taking the class this year — why don't you come to the informational meeting". So I did. And before I could find the time to email Rabbi Ben a note about how I thought it was going to make too much of a demand of my time — well the emails and then a meeting with him came…and here I am.

I asked and was selected to introduce and lead the *t'filah* of Mah Tovu-how good it is.

When I hear those words— and don't laugh — I hear television pioneer Jackie Gleason, and his trademark slogan "how sweet it is". I think of him as part of Saturday nights spent as a preschooler dropped off at my grandparents' house and watching his variety show on a huge television set that sat in a cabinet that itself was a piece and a half of furniture in the living room, above the tree line of Central Park, but a humble black and white nonetheless. I think of my grandmother, for whom my daughter Rachel is named. Of course I also think of my grandfather who was, to be polite, an extremely difficult personality. I'm not slandering — he would probably be pleased by that remark— he probably viewed difficulty more or less as a badge of honor; it meant that after all, he did not compromise his standards and beliefs.

Of these standards and beliefs, included was a huge connection to Judaism and Israel. After he died, amongst his papers we found Palestine bonds from the 1920s. He had a library lined with Judaica books and artifacts. A visit would, if you were lucky, a not-so kid friendly (at least by today's standard) tour of the pictures of dignitaries on the walls and the volumes of books on the shelf. If you made it to the end — well behaved of course— there may be a chocolate or a box of Cracker Jack (prize included) at the end.

He was the first person I remember knowing who had travelled to Israel. Back in those days El Al gave out some kind of brochure with Hebrew words and translation on them and he'd give them to me; I would just pour over them. I remember a few days when it was just about to be summer one year and the same TV show— and not Jackie Gleason, was on for days and days. It was a lot of men sitting around a circular desk and I thought it had something to do with Israel. Sometime later I realized that it had been June 1967 and he was watching nonstop coverage of the UN. Difficult or not, his connectivity must have had an impact on me. Of eight grandchildren, I believe I am the only one who attends synagogue on a regular basis and has made Jewish learning an ongoing part in my life and the lives of my children.

As the New York City public schools were tanking during the 1970s New York City fiscal crisis, my grandfather saw the realization of one of his ongoing desires, namely to have me and my brother enrolled in Manhattan Day School, a modern orthodox Jewish day school, a school he had helped found and continued to serve as a board member.

My brother was six and got in on the "ground floor" of education— first grade. I was ten and as much as I counted down the time to the first day of school, I was in for a bit of shell shock when I took my seat at the beginning of the day which for us fifth grade girls was Jewish studies. Everything, and I mean everything, was in Hebrew. I thought being able to read Hebrew was going to be enough and then some for getting along with the curriculum. How wrong I was. Everything was in Hebrew; I mean everything. (I might have cried "help", but I didn't know the Hebrew word for it!) Torah was not even Torah — it was "Chumash." Prophets was "Navi." The first verses taught that morning were from Parshat Trumah — a weekly portion that deals with what tribute the Children of Israel had to bring for the making of the "Ohel Moed" (the tabernacle of meeting, or I as came to learn, a pre-cursor to Temple in Jerusalem. It also deals with the design of the structure and the objects in it. These were not user friendly verses to my ten year old brain. Lots of new words that did not exist in a broader context — not exactly like reading the story of Joseph or the Exodus as in a tale you're familiar with and have a fighting chance of figuring out in a brand new language.

By spring we were up to the book of Numbers, I mean “Bamidbar”. There were more narrative “stories” and with an increasing vocabulary I was able to piece more and more together. But I was far from fluency.

But let’s get back to “Mah Tovu". For our service we will be reading Parshat Sh’lach for our Torah reading, but in another portion from Numbers comes “Mah Tovu". It is found in Parshat Balak and will be part of the Torah reading in a few weeks.

As we studied this prayer last fall in class together, so many years after first encounter, I sheepishly confess that I never understood from way back the basic plot of the story, and the context in which it took place. In a quick summary, as Moses and our ancestors travel through the desert, the Moabite King Balak commands his prophet of sorts, Bilaam to visit the Israelite encampment, and espouse a curse to the people. I always had trouble understanding why the portion was named for the bad guy, and had trouble even keeping up with who was good and bad much less who was bad and turned into good.

But last fall the pieces finally came into place. I guess in the course of years I could have looked it up, but I did not. It took some forty years for me to really understand these few lines. (The same amount of time for me to get to Israel too - how funny is that?). I now know when Bilaam attempted to administer a curse, he saw the Israelite tents and, as his mouth opened to curse, as his king commanded him, he was moved by the beauty of the tents, the camp, the people he sees. The words that come out morph into a blessing:

> *How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!*
> *As for me, O God abounding in grace, I enter your house to worship with awe in Your sacred place. O Lord I love the House were you dwell, and the place where your glory tabernacles.*
> *I shall prostrate myself and bow; I shall kneel before the Lord my Maker.*
> *To You, Eternal One, goes my prayer: may this be a time of your favor. In Your great love, O God, answer me with Your saving truth.*

Whenever I hear that as one of the first prayers of a Shabbat morning service, I look around me and can’t help but think of fellow congregants as personifications of those tents. Ok, we may not be in the desert, but isn’t our collective presence at a hopefully peaceful moment of prayer and song an amazing feat after a millennium, or two? And that is what I reflect on when I hear

the melodies of “Mah Tovu"— it doesn’t matter which one. The constancy of history and culture, our history and our culture never cease to amaze me. My journey to understand the few words of the prayer, and how they happened in context is but a molecule of matter.

Another secret to share - I did go to that informational session because even though I was “allowed” a Bat Mitzvah service at my modern orthodox synagogue (a service pioneered by then future Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan in conjunction with our clergy— who knew?) I was not — I’m sure to no one’s surprise, called to, or allowed to bless, read, chant or anything from the Torah. That’s what I thought I was signing up for back in the fall. And it was, but as I’m sure my classmates will agree, lots and lots more. If ever there was a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts — this year and the experiences thereof is one to cite. Another constancy of our history and culture — no matter how allegedly advanced my education became over the years I attended Jewish schools , you never run out of content from which to learn something new, or a new way to reflect on something from the past. I didn’t know that would be how the class was going to roll. I thought I’d just be learning trope and getting to chant. Here we are after the equivalent of two semesters worth of Wednesday night classes- and it wasn’t the prospect of chanting, but the conversation, the sharing and the learning week after week, on rainy nights, on single digit degree nights that kept me coming back — no matter how messy it waste leave a third and an eighth grader at home with dinner barely thrown on the table and homework and musical practice needing to get done. A longer story, but another answer — reflection —of my journey here.

I also reflect the verses that I will be chanting during the service. As mentioned above, they are from Parshat Sh’lach as we encounter our no so merry band of forebears really just complaining and whining and hungry in the desert more than wondering out loud if all things being equal, it wouldn’t have been better to stay in Egypt, even as slaves. All jokes aside about another constant — that we as a people have been known to complain (although I’d prefer to think of it as not being afraid to air one’s mind).

So we complain, or see the bad part of a situation. Perhaps we even feel the need to curse, whether commanded by our own selves, or told to like Balak was before the words to

"Mah Tovu" come out. But therein lies another practical theme— when to stay the course or not. If I had complained about grandpa Abe's notion of fun and not listened through his orations (I always could have declined the chocolate) what good would I have missed? If I had complained during those fifth grade days that I was lost for half of every academic day and I wanted to change schools, what good would I have missed and where would I be now? To be fair, I would not have been allowed to changed schools, child's prerogative did not have a long shelf life in my parents' house. I may have stayed in the school, but I wouldn't be standing here.

What if I had balked at my friends' and my teachers, Rabbi Ben'sand Cantor Shayna's encouragement last summer? I would have missed what was the incredible of this year's journey— the learning, the bonding, the accomplishments, the chanting from the Torah and Haftarah (finally!)? All these tents of my life had their own versions of foreboding, but like Bilaam, though perhaps not as quickly, they turned into tents of beauty for me. Perhaps not an original thought, but this is what I think of when I reflect on "Mah Tovu".

Cecelia Cooper

Every morning, I pray that I may be drawn to learning and discernment; so in the spring of 2014 when I heard about the Adult B'nai Mitzvah program starting in the fall, to be led by Rabbi Spratt and Cantor De Lowe, I was elated. I wanted to study with them in order to gain sacred knowledge about Judaism, to develop my Torah-chanting skills, and to gain insight into myself as a Jewish woman. I wanted to become a Bat Mitzvah to confirm my commitment to my Jewish life. I felt the call to Torah.

I committed myself to the B'nai Mitzvah program after the orientation session on June 12, 2014. On that very night, I was injured in a bus collision. Consequently, during the course of the program, I was coping with traumatic injuries from that accident and also healing from cataract surgeries on both eyes. I felt anxious and overwhelmed at times, but I was determined do my personal best, to persevere, and honor my commitment to become a Bat Mitzvah. The call to Torah was so compelling, the journey so rewarding.

My journey to become a Bat Mitzvah actually began last summer, when I started reading one of the books on the Recommended Summer Reading List: "The Way into Jewish Prayer" by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. In that book, he cited a traditional morning prayer which moved me so deeply that I incorporated it into my daily morning prayers. It expresses an important principle of Judaism: that our soul, created and shaped and protected by God, is pure. That prayer is Elohai N'shama, which I introduced during the B'nai Mitzvah Ceremony.

My journey is focused on an awareness of God: knowing that God exists and having an understanding about God and the Universe. Through inspired reflection, I realized that my way to a relationship with God, to embrace God, and to keep myself in God's grace is through goodness and knowledge. The session on Theodicy was very meaningful for me. The reading and discussion led me to envision a spark of God's spirit dwelling within me guiding me towards good. I nurture that spark through goodness, knowledge, *mitzvot* and prayer.

From an anecdote shared by a classmate during the Theodicy discussion, I realized that my profound joy of being immersed in natural bodies of water—whether a lake, river, ocean or sea—is my feeling of being embraced by God. Her contribution provided a valuable insight for me.

One of my contributions to the class, although unintentional, was to cause them to laugh on two occasions—hearty, spontaneous laughter. Laughter is good; laughter is healing; laughter is precious. In one of the texts we studied, it was stated that "God laughed." Because God may be present when a group of people study together, I would like to think that God was present and also laughed along with us. Laughter is an area where I am uniquely qualified to appreciate due to my acting experience in musical comedy and comedy skits.

After studying Hebrew with Sara Rosen for five years and participating in a Cantillation class with Cantor De Lowe, I am delighted to have the honor of chanting a Torah portion during this B'nai Mitzvah Ceremony.

I am very grateful to have learned with and from the exceptional people on my journey down a road that never ends towards a spiritual life in the context of a Divine relationship.

Beth Greenwald

My Jewish journey is not very exotic. I was raised as a Jew in a family that observed the major holidays and always belonged to a synagogue. There were always latkes at Chanukah and traditional Passover Seders. However, I never attended Hebrew School, never learned to read Hebrew and did not become a Bat Mitzvah. Therefore, I have often felt disconnected from many parts of the synagogue service. After many years of synagogue attendance, I learned the tunes and with the help of transliteration I could sing along with some of the prayers. But somehow, I felt as if I was faking it.

When we became parents, I knew it was important to establish Jewish customs in our house. We enrolled the girls in the local New Jersey Temple preschool and subsequently religious school and thereafter became actively involved in the synagogue and the cycles of the Jewish calendar. I made Shabbat dinners and the family attended Shabbat services with frequency over the years. It was through this involvement as members of Barnert Temple that I began to become more educated about Jewish history, customs, traditions and rituals. Most importantly for me as part of this vibrant suburban Jewish community I had opportunities to perform acts of kindness through charitable works.

Over the years, I watched my friends become adult B'nai Mitzvah and had the joy of watching my daughters become Bat Mitzvah. After all these events my husband and daughters would say" You should become a Bat Mitzvah. " Yes Yes" I would reply not really knowing what it actually meant. Let me say now that after this experience I have even more pride and admiration for what my 13-year-old daughters did than I did on their special days.

I had all good intentions of trying once again to learn Hebrew with the goal of studying for my Bat Mitzvah. But, our 6-½ year detour to London slowed down my progress. Although we joined a synagogue in London, we were not actively involved and only attended on the High Holidays. I missed being connected to a synagogue that engaged me in ritual and learning. When I moved to New York City I decided it was time to Just Do It and take up beginning Hebrew yet again. Thanks to the incredible patience of Sara Rosen I can read at a very rudimentary level and slowly follow the services. I still rely on the transliteration in order to

keep pace with the congregation, but have pleasure in recognizing the words on the page. I soon realized that the ability to sound out the Hebrew alphabet did not increase my understanding of what was going on in services. Thus my decision to join Rabbi Spratt and Cantor DeLowe's Adult B'nai Mitzvah class.

Our class has explored a wide variety of challenging topics. Our study of the prayer service was especially interesting and helpful to me. A particular set of prayers that we explored that appealed to me is the Nisim B'chol Yom: Blessings of Gratitude. These prayers force us to count our blessings and be mindful of all that we have and can do. I have had a blessed life. I am healthy, my husband and children are healthy, and my parents are alive, well, and able to participate in fun events like today. I have a wide circle of friends, I get to travel, I live in a beautiful home and I am financially secure. However, all too often I take my blessings for granted. I often wake up in the middle of the night and start fretting about the list of things I have to take care of in the day ahead; usually, it is the mundane daily tasks: grocery shopping, car inspections, or bill payments and sometimes it is more complicated, like a transatlantic move or a house repair. But thankfully for me I am just worried about "how I will get it all done". I have not had to worry about how we can we pay the bills or whether or not we can afford groceries, or how to deal with debilitating illness. Too often I stress about what I will serve at a holiday dinner rather than focusing on the fact that I have a family with whom I can share the holiday. Too often I get outraged by the daily irritations of life, such as crowded supermarkets and sidewalks rather than marveling at the fact that I live in a vibrant city.

I am not minimizing the daily aggravations we all encounter or saying that I am especially prone to stressing about petty issues. Nor am I suggesting that we need to be perpetually perky or Pollyannaish; but I think remembering to take a deep breath and look at the good in the day is vitally important. This is why I believe that the writers who incorporated The Blessings of Gratitude into the morning prayer ritual recognized that people get caught up in the daily grind of life: the angst, the stress, the "to do" list. By forcing us to be thankful for even the small things like the ability to wake up and stretch, Nisim B'Chol Yom prayers renew our physical and spiritual energy. Learning about these prayers has made me more mindful of

the ease of my life as a Jew in America and thankful for the ability to get up each morning and live an independent productive life.

This year of study with Rabbi and Cantor has given meaning to the Hebrew words I have learned to read. I have a better understanding of the history of our religion and our prayers. The class has been challenging. The collaborative spirit of the class has made it an enjoyable learning experience. I have learned from my classmates as well as the teachers and the class has sparked my desire to pursue further Jewish learning. . Becoming a Bat Mitzvah is one more step in my desire to be an active participant in my Jewish community. It is an accomplishment that I am proud of. Thank you to Rabbi Spratt, Cantor DeLowe and Sara Rosen for getting me to this day. Thank you to David, Hilary and Emily for encouraging me to embark on this journey, for helping me with my Hebrew reading and supporting me throughout the entire process. Thank you to Rosie, my faithful companion, who has sat by my side as I practiced my Torah portion repeatedly and who gets me out in nature on a daily basis so I can literally stop and smell the roses. Thank you to my family and friends who gave up a summer Saturday to come celebrate with me.

Steve Toder

Yes, to answer the question, I became a Bar Mitzvah at age 13, at Progressive Synagogue on Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, on March 30, 1963, with friends and family in attendance, one of whom, my dear aunt Ruth, is here today. Yet I am standing at the *bimah* soon to read from the Torah as part of an adult B'nai Mitzvah group. Why? My having a Bar Mitzvah, and going to Hebrew school, was a concession my devoted and loving parents made to their tradition and to their parents. But my parents were in the breakaway generation that wanted to be American, distinct from their immigrant parents while not rejecting of them. My parents lived in a Jewish world – a Jewish neighborhood, with all Jewish friends, they wanted us to marry Jews, they strongly supported Israel... but the synagogue did not interest them. They felt it would generate a herd mentality that would blunt individuality and be as confining as their own upbringings. My father once asked me to reassure him that I enjoyed going to Hebrew school to be with my friends, not to *daven* – his word.

So why am I here? This is a question I have been asked - and have asked myself - many times this year. I have never rejected my background but for many years I lived 'without the benefit of clergy', to twist an old phrase. I was, as planned, Jewish culturally, not religiously, and living in New York City can make you feel that that is enough. I did listen to WQXR's broadcast from Temple Emanu-el on my drive home from work on Friday nights, as my mother had done decades earlier while she prepared dinner and I did my homework in the kitchen. Did that constitute attending services? Did that mean I was religious, or observant, or what? I have come to feel this year that community is an essential element, not present in that car. Is that why I am here today?

Being here today is less important than having been here all year. It has been an exceptional year of study. Led by our wise and wonderful teachers, we have been taught much, and have learned from each other. We have been a wonderful group, all willing to sit around a table and share our thoughts, week after week. Has our study been an inch deep and a desert wide? Too much material, I always say, certainly enough for a lifetime. There is a great spectrum of belief in Judaism, enough to encompass believers who are settled and those who

continue to question, grapple, wrestle. It is impressive that we ask the same questions and deal with the same issues that have been considered for millennia. Our answers may not be as important as our questions. I see that I am part of my generation, as my parents were part of theirs, which is now seeking more connection with our tradition. It is a return, or correction, but not away from the modern world. We need to understand and accept ourselves, and claim our place as Jews in this multicultural world, just as we respect others.

This year of study has not been centered on changing us, but on challenging us, unsettling our beliefs and thoughts, even if they may remain, in the end, substantially the same. It is essential that we know where we came from, as we move forward, spies or scouts into our own future. We must keep this going for our children and grandchildren, so they can see where they came from as they find themselves asking the same questions. It is always the next generation that will reach the Promised Land.

Who I was at thirteen bears little Jewish resemblance to who I am today. At that time, I was proud to fulfill my family's expectations. This year has supplied the knowledge, understanding and underlying meaning. I have been coming to the chapel service regularly for several years, at first following the transliteration, enjoying the readings and commentaries, gradually re-learning Hebrew, always enjoying the music and the still, small voice. I do not wear a *tallis*; if asked, I would say, somewhat irreverently, out of respect for my father. But I can wear one today. It symbolizes my joining this community with full intentionality, after a year of immersion –figuratively and literally – in our tradition. I am here today with my identity enhanced, not blunted, as I once again become a Bar Mitzvah.

I would like to thank everyone who has made this extraordinary year possible. First and foremost, my classmates – without their enthusiasm and attentiveness, none of this would have happened this wonderfully. None of us, I think, can express the admiration and appreciation we have for Rabbi Spratt, who with great knowledge and inspiration, and Cantor De Lowe, who with tremendous understanding and compassion, amazed us all at every session. I thank Sara Rosen, for her dedication to unlocking the secrets of Hebrew. I am thankful for the wonderful support given to me by my children and grandchildren, and by my great friends, Paul and Prudence. Most thanks go to Naomi, who has helped me every step of the way and has made these forty years in the wilderness quite an adventure.

Zubeidah Ullah

> **The Righteous bloom like a date-palm; they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon; planted in the house of Adonai, they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness, attesting that Adonai is upright, my Rock, in whom there is no wrong. --Psalm 92:1-7, 13-16**

Trees give me a sense of peace. I find them grounding, beautiful, and unique — they can stand the tests of time, flourishing and surviving long after the winds or the human hands that sow the seeds of life no longer exist. And like the trees themselves, my love for them has grown over the years, expanding ever upward and ever outward.

Much like a tiny seed dropping from its host, lying on the ground, full of unknown potential — the story begins:

The path that brought me here today has taken my entire lifetime to navigate. For close to forty years, I have looked inward and outward, through both the chaos and the calm of life -- always a seeker, ever a student, in search of what might be considered the unknowable, of what might be considered God. Along this journey I have found myself searching: for the questions that have not yet been asked; for my voice within the many; for my place among the stars; for the eternal.

The seed is planted, safely underground, still full of potential, with laughter like sunshine, this story finds its place in the soil:

This expansion, this growth, this life has taught me that profound transformation often occurs in the midst of chaos. In my most personal moments of doubt, sorrow, longing, and grief, I have learned that there is a light that shines to guide the way. I have not yet decided if this light is internal or external, nor have I decided if there is a difference between this dichotomy -- perhaps it is One. I am, however, certain that even on the darkest of days, this light remains -- warming our souls and encouraging growth in all of its many forms.

The soil is watered, the potential of the seed becomes possibility, and this story --my story -- begins to take root:

After my father died, this light of mine dimmed so low that I found myself completely and utterly lost. My best friend told me to write and to keep writing. “Just write.” Her message was to keep going. *Just keep going.* One hot July afternoon, as the year anniversary of his death approached, I began to think about trees. And I wrote. And I asked for help. And I wrote some more. I began to understand my own potential, my own beginning and rebirth as one-without-a-father. As the image of the seed and the tree became to take shape, I began to understand the courage and strength that is required to keep going, to keep seeking, to keep questioning, to keep living.

The seed that brought us here no longer exists, it is gone, transformed into something almost unrecognizable…from beneath the soil a tiny sapling appeared, moving closer to the sun, this story -- our story -- continues...

Over the years, I have found myself returning to this image of the tree that rescued me from despair. It was an image of one of Gods most beautiful creations-- an eternal reminder of strength, determination, and longevity. But, even more, it was an image of me as one of God’s beautiful creations and that gave me courage to understand that I am not, we are not, alone.

And so it goes. We have reached the part of this story where the trunk has taken shape and leaves are starting to appear — small and fragile, but visible for the first time. These roots have grown strong and this story has become something tangible.

It’s been about seven years since my dad passed away and I no longer feel as small nor as fragile as I did when this image of the seed first appeared. I have taken what I needed from that experience and used it as nourishment for the journey that has brought me here today.

In conclusion, I leave you with the following tidbit as we prepare to give thanks in song:

In 2008, National Geographic reported that the World's Oldest Tree was found in Sweden: 9,550 years old. Although the trunk portion, the part on the surface, isn't ancient, its root system is and has been growing since the last ice age.

Take a minute and absorb that — nine thousand, five hundred, and fifty years.

This makes me wonder: What determines how long things last? Can we ever know what will take root and for how long…and after something is gone, when the part that is visible and tangible moves on, is it possible that it continues to nourish the roots that gave it life in the first place? Is something ever really gone or does it simply change…could it be that if the roots are strong enough, something can actually last forever?

Maybe that's what accepting change is all about…acknowledging the often random nature of connection, nourishing that which endures, making space for unapologetic growth, and trusting that strong bonds survive the tests of time.

Maybe that is love.

Peter Ehrenberg

My relationship with God as of 1:30 a.m. on May 5, 2015

From my perspective, there are two significant aspects of the title of this personal reflection. The first is the word "My." A person's relationship with God is, in my view, an incredibly personal one. My relationship with God may be, and in all likelihood is, extremely different than the relationship that anyone else writing a personal reflection will have with God. The second important facet of the title is the time. My relationship with God has changed many times in the course of my life and no doubt will continue to change until I take my last breath. At times in my life, I found my inability to precisely define this relationship as extremely disconcerting. The Adult B'nai Mitzvah classes have helped me to realize that the dynamic of continuing to reexamine my relationship with God is exciting, daunting and immersive and goes to the core of how I perceive God. While I may never figure out my relationship with God, my attempts to do so help to sustain me. Of one thing, I am sure: I am sure that I will never fully understand this constantly changing and always challenging relationship.

In May 1955, when I was 8 years old and the Cold War was in its infancy, unbeknownst to me my father suffered a brain aneurism that nearly killed him. The doctors told my father that if he ever suffered another similar experience, he would likely die. As best I can tell and recall, this precarious situation was hidden from me. My life was unaffected until May 11, 1956. On May 11, 1956, again unbeknownst to me, my father was rushed to the hospital. This time he did not return. On May 12, 1956, while I played baseball at my cousin's home, my father died.

On the night my father died, while playing the games that eight year olds typically play with their cousins, I sensed that the grown-ups around me were troubled, but I did not know why. May 13, 1956 was a beautifully sunny day, in my memory much like the morning of September 11, 2001. In the late morning, my mother came to see me at my cousin's home and guided me to a porch, where she said one sentence that I will never, ever forget. She said: "**you will never see your father again**." She then explained to me that he had died the day before and had been buried that very morning. Acting purely out of love for me, my mother did not take me to the funeral. In short, I never had the opportunity to say "good-bye" to my father.

To this day, I search for my father's face in crowds. He was 39 years old when he died and I look for the face of the 39 year old that I see in the few pictures of him that I own (and of course treasure). He has not aged in my mind to what today would be the age of 98. I look for him wherever I am. No doubt, when I celebrate our class' B'nai Mitzvah, I will look for him in the audience, and again will not find him.

My mother has told me a few things about my father that reverberate in my psyche. She describes him as an extraordinary kind and gentle man. **I will always want to be my father**. At times in my life when I have not been kind or gentle, I have felt extraordinary guilt and dissatisfaction. At other times, when I have been complimented for an act of kindness, I have felt a sense of warmth and wholeness that envelopes me.

As I have come to discover, it is not unusual for people to pass through many stages when they have lost a loved one. I am sure that that happened to me as well. Over time, I felt hurt, alone and even abandoned. While I did not necessarily express it as a nine year old in terms of abandonment from God, I know now that what I felt was abandonment by God.

How could there be a God who would take the life of a young boy's kind, gentle father when that father was only 39 years old? In the mind of Peter Ehrenberg, the nine year old, there was no God.

That view of the absence of God was confirmed by what I perceived of the world around me. I grew up in the decade after the Holocaust. Newsreels would tell the stories of incredible atrocities that the Nazi's had perpetrated on six million Jews and on scores of other people who did not look like the Nazi's. I saw pictures of starving men, of emaciated women who were robbed first of their dignity and then of their lives, and the pictures were extremely dark ones for -3- me to comprehend. In those days after my father's death, although I was fortunate enough to be adopted by another kind and gentle man who always treated me as if I shared his blood, I knew that there could be no God, given the extraordinary atrocities visited on so many innocent human beings.

Over time, as I matured, became a husband and then the father of four beautiful children, my views about God mellowed a bit. **In my mind, I transitioned from denying God to**

not caring whether or not God existed. Of course, I kept up appearances, attending Services at my conservative temple on the High Holidays, attending Yizkor services ultimately for two fathers, making sure that my children knew the Passover rituals, celebrated their B'nai Mitzvahs and even serving for one year as the president of a small temple in New Jersey. Yet, I did that with no conviction one way or the other about God.

Slowly, however, my views changed. While I still doubted that there was a God, when with my third child I observed child birth first hand, I began to assume that perhaps there was a God, although just not a significant part of my life. For me, the notion of God was largely irrelevant. When I really thought about it, I just didn't see how God could be significant in my life if God took my father from me when I was so young, allowed the slaughter of millions, allowed children to suffer disabilities and death, acquiesced while minorities and women were enslaved and allowed our world to be a harsh and unforgiving place for so many people.

I know that it sounds trite to say that there was a single event or epiphany that changed my views, but surely the event that I recall most clearly occurred when, about seven years ago, at my wife Camille's suggestion, I read Rabbi Levine's third book, entitled What God Can Do For You Now. In that book, Rabbi Levine asks the question that I have been asking myself for decades. He asks: how could there be a God if there was a Holocaust? Rabbi Levine then provides an absolutely awesome answer. He explains that, in his view, God cannot do things alone. God cannot heal the world alone. God cannot stop Hitler alone. God cannot cure illness alone. God needs our help. In one very straightforward passage, Rabbi Levine explains to his readers what I had never before grasped: the existence of bad, and even evil, people and events does not disprove the existence of God. The existence of bad and evil people and events merely demonstrates that God cannot do things alone, but needs our help. This very simply stated but extraordinarily powerful lesson fueled the emergence of God into my life.

Rabbi Levine's message is accompanied by numerous supporting theories and stories that make reading his book nearly an annual ritual for me. Two stories stand out. The first, used to support a view that there are no coincidences in life, describes the funeral of the mother of one of our former rabbis, Rabbi Camille Angel. Rabbi Angel's mother apparently loved birds.

When she was buried, in a cemetery essentially bereft of birds, two doves appeared at Rabbi Angel's mother's grave site. If you want to believe that that is a coincidence, you may; I don't.

Rabbi Levine also tells the story of the death of a congregant, a story that I have also heard retold by that congregant's wife, who has become a dear friend of mine. This congregant was dying, but was struggling to stay alive to witness the B'nai Mitzvah of his daughter. Rabbi Levine and his wife Gina were constant visitors at his bedside. At one point, Rabbi Levine received a terrible telephone call: it appeared that the congregant's battle to stay alive for the B'nai Mitzvah would not come to pass. Our extraordinary Senior Rabbi grabbed a Torah from our synagogue, met the family in our congregant's hospital room and together they celebrated the B'nai Mitzvah that our congregant was hoping to observe. Our congregant reveled in that experience, participated in the full beauty of the Service, and then died later that evening. Although I had never met that congregant, I cried when I heard his wife retell that story and I cry every time that I repeat it, even as I write these words. I believe that my tears are tears of wonderment at the extraordinary power of pastoral care, particularly among the extraordinary members of the clergy that grace our Congregation with their service.

In the years after I first read Rabbi Levine's book, with incredible encouragement from my wife, I have become a regular at Friday night services, I have become a participant in chapel services on Saturday mornings and I have looked for opportunities to study, pray and to participate, as best I can, in our Synagogue's social action activities. I have learned what our clergy teaches, inspires and models by their own acts: our Synagogue enables us to perform three very important functions: to pray, to study and to help repair the world. I have also learned that these three separate activities are re-enforcing, so that as we do any one of those activities, the importance of the others are magnified. **I have also learned that the power of studying, praying and acting morally becomes far more powerful for me when I do these acts with others**.

For me, the opportunity to participate in the adult B'nai Mitzvah class has helped me to place my evolution as a Jew in context. Three concepts that we have studied and discussed this year have especially helped me to reframe my relationship with God. These three concepts,

focused upon our identify as Jews, our covenant with God to continue the path to redemption and our continuing focus on the future, have provided me with the following perspectives:

- Our identity. Rabbi Spratt and Cantor De Lowe have taught us that our identity as Jews is formed by our compassion for other people, by our shame at what happens to people who are wronged and by our continuing mission to help repair the world. *This identity requires us to be active in the world around us, to be horrified by horrors, to be gratified by grace and to be active participants in making the world a better place.*

- Our covenant and our redemption from Egypt. In our class, we have focused on the covenant and focused on redemption. *We are a chosen people not because we are special but because we are commanded to do special acts.* We have been redeemed from Egypt and have travelled to Mt. Sinai not because Mt. Sinai is a good place for us to rest, but because we are called upon to go from Mt. Sinai to help redeem others.

- The future. Each year, we re-read the Torah and read about the past. *Yet, to learn about the past is to enable future generations to go beyond where we have gone*. The image of Moses being able to see, but not ever able to step into, Canaan is an extraordinary image. *We strive for Canaan, we strive to meet the Messiah, and yet part of what is so very exciting about our lives is that we will never quite get there*. So, at some point, we must turn to future generations and ask them to continue the journey, to strive to reach a promised land.

Over the years, whether it be reading and re-reading Rabbi Levine's book, studying Talmud with Rabbi Laufer, learning the mitzvah of social action with Rabbi Meyer, learning to communicate with God through the extraordinary voices of Cantors Garfein and De Lowe or studying and traveling with our beloved teachers, Rabbi Spratt and Cantor De Lowe, I have transformed or been transformed from a liberal West Sider to a Jew who believes in the extraordinary reinforcing power of prayer, study and *tikkun olam* and who believes in the existence of a God whom I once rejected and for a long part of my life neglected. My view of God, which forms the basis of my current relationship with God, may be summarized in the following basic principles:

1. God cannot do things alone. We have a covenant with God. We are taught by our clergy that "we are what we do." With this view of God, God is a force for social justice and social action in this world.

2. God makes mistakes. To see a child with cancer is to know that God is imperfect. I am not the only child who lost a parent in childhood. Indeed, in our very own class, one of my classmates lost two parents early in life. Thank you Rabbi Levine for teaching us that this does not disprove the existence of God.

3. God is neither male nor female. Imperfections in our language sometimes lead us to choose gender-based terms that, at least for me, are not intended. If I have given God a gender in any of my remarks, that is an imperfection in my communication skills and not a reflection of who God is in my mind.

4. I have no picture of who God is. For some, God may be an old man with a beard or a beautiful women residing in the clouds. If that works for others, that is fine. For me, however, there is no picture of God.

5. I don't need a picture of God to believe that there is a God. There are things that exist that I cannot see. I know that there is energy, and yet I have never seen a piece of energy. I have seen a child born, and thus will always believe in the power of love, and yet I have never seen a piece of love.

As I have said on many occasions, I am blessed. I am blessed by my wonderful family and I am blessed by my awesome friends. I am blessed by my teachers, both those who sit at the front of the table and also those that sit around the sides of the table with me. I am indebted to Rabbi Spratt and Cantor De Lowe for an extraordinary year of teaching and friendship and I am indebted to each of my classmates for the many lessons that they repeatedly teach me about their humanity, for their inspiration and for their remarkable inner beauty. I am indebted to all who have participated with me in this journey. And so, I come back to where I began, with my father of blessed memory. I know, to the core of my existence, that you – my family, my old friends and my new friends - will help me to see my kind and gentle father again...perhaps in the mirror.

Nancy Crown

Many years ago, I read an account about a father who was in a Sbarro in Israel with his two young daughters when a suicide bomber ripped himself and the whole place to shreds. Like some modern day Akiva, this father cried out to his daughters hoping they could hear him through the smoke and tattered plasterboard, “Sing the Shema!” Reading this, I was deeply moved in ways both obvious and mysterious to me at the time.

One interpretation of the word “Shema” in Sign Language is; “Pay Attention.” As I have thought about the meaning of the opening words of this central prayer, I have begun to experience it in a new way. Perhaps it was the antiquated stiffness of the words “Hear O Israel” or the fact that I’d heard them so many times, but the notions, “Pay Attention,” “Understand,” “Know,” or even “Warning,” each of which could be an ASL construal of the Hebrew word “Shema,” stirred something in me. I began to notice, to pay attention, to wake up. For the first time I heard; “This is important;” and, “This is for you.” For the first time Judaism became personal—something I could climb inside of.

A commentary on the Shema describes it as an interactive prayer, with God calling out to the people of Israel, “Hear O Israel!” (or “Pay Attention!”), and the Israelites calling back; “The Lord is our God. The Lord is one.” (or, “Our God is one God of many people.”) Pondering the various possible ways the Shema can be understood invites me into interaction with the prayer. I never realized that prayer is open to interpretation, including my interpretation.

Pay attention because this is for you. Let it remind you of who you want to be, how you want to move through the world, with what purpose. Strive to be at one with your best self and with the chorus of voices that came before you.

I set out this year mostly to learn, which I have done, but along with gaining knowledge, I have experienced. I have experienced camaraderie grappling with Torah and with Hebrew, being a beginner, feeling lost, feeling inspired, humbled, and moved, and feeling “with.” Belonging has never been my strong suit--one foot in and the rest of me out in case I need to make a break for it. I’ve had those moments too, as well as moments where the ideas were like river stones so slippery with moss that I can’t hold them for long, if at all. But I would say it has

been *all* of this that unlocked the Shema for me and with it a new experience of Judaism. At the end of this year of study, I find myself at a beginning.

I have travelled from a place where the Tanakh felt alien and impenetrable, to a place where I dare to grapple with its contents. The sheer bigness of all there still is to learn, and the layers upon layers of meaning suffusing every aspect of Jewish study continue to both daunt and intrigue me. This complexity and multiplicity remind me of my psychoanalytic lens, lending a feeling of familiarity to the learning process, yet the content is new-- and at the same time, not so new. So many contradictions come up in the fabric that is Judaism, and in me in response.

The ideas of God as an experience, of prayer as a way of living, a path to a different state of mind, or as a way to set an intention, and the invitation to transform the meaning of the past for the present and the future are gifts this B'nai Mitzvah year has given me. Encountering the reality and the experience again and again through this process that there is room in Judaism for both tradition and a personal relationship with everything from prayer to theology both reassures and excites me. The music has always drawn me in. Singing with our group has been an especially sacred experience for me.

When my son was small, he arrived home from camp one day after having been punched. "I think I need a Jewish camp!" was his conclusion. I don't know whether what he was expressing was actually about something "Jewish" that this camp lacked, but at that moment, I knew what kind of Judaism *I* was interested in—the kind that a five year old boy reaches for when he needs safety and comfort, the kind a desperate father clings to as he cries out to his missing daughters in the panicked darkness -- the kind of Judaism that guides, sustains and comforts— The kind of Judaism that I am discovering.

I am grateful to my son Joe for suggesting I become Bat Mitzvah in the first place, to my daughter Sadie for her unwavering support and her wise suggestions, and to Sam who enriches my life immeasurably in every way (and still washes the big pots.) My heartfelt thanks to each of my cherished classmates who have been inspiring fellow travelers, and to Ben and Shayna for creating the sacred space to learn and grow and to grapple.

Elinor Goldsmith-Greenberg

I've had to unlearn a lot of ideas about God. Among the hardest to let go was the idea that God is a static entity, existing in a particular way at all times.

We are coming to *Mi Chamocha*, the prayer which describes and recounts our song at the sea. This is the event our liturgy calls us to remember every day; not the moment of revelation at Sinai, but the act of redemption, what God did for us when God brought us out of Egypt. We are to remember it joyously, with *shir chadash*, a new song, recalling the awe and wonder we experienced when we were delivered from slavery. And so we sing, *mi chamocha ba'eilim, Adonai?* Who is like you, Adonai, among the celestials?

Among the celestials.

This wording, reflective of a time in our history somewhere between idol worship and true monotheism, suggests that our God is one among a possible pantheon, and with that the possibility that we could've chosen another, if one or many had offered redemption from slavery in Egypt-- or been capable of such a feat. At the time of Moses, these were the kinds of God(s) we imagined, and possibly even experienced; particular God(s) with specific, supernatural powers.

Today, this wording is among my invitations from our tradition to see God in different ways at different times, to be open to ever newer ideas about how God exists and acts, and to be willing to rely on a flexible definition of who and what my God is. In this way, I can rely on God in any given moment, in any given state of mind, in any given circumstance. In this way, I can pray honestly through our liturgy, even when the words describe a God I don't recognize today.

The God of *Mi Chamocha* is the God I have the most trouble getting to; the God I don't really believe exists. This is the God that regularly communicates with human beings through conversation, who sends plagues and hardens hearts and literally parts seas. I have no experience of this God, and I don't believe in these events as historical facts. But I have no internal conflict over this prayer, as literal as it is about the miracles our God has performed for

us, because I have experienced through it what I believe I'm meant to learn from it; that there is a power greater than me, than any human being, which can redeem me, if only I have the courage to follow.

I am unlikely to be standing at the shore of the sea, Pharaoh's army behind me, needing safe passage to save my life and find freedom. I am unlikely ever to need that God. But I am very much in need of a God with the power to redeem. *Mi Chamocha* is the *shir chadash* we sang to our redeemer on the shores of the sea. And though I don't know a God who can create dry passage where there was deep water, I do know a God with the power to create empathy and love where there was guilt and shame. I know a God with the power to help me break patterns of behavior that no longer serve me, a God who can fill me with hope for what is still to come.

And to that God, for that redemption, I often want to sing. I am part of *Am Yisrael*, our people, so *Mi Chamocha* is my song.

Those moments in which I am moved to sing out to God my joy and gratitude for the redemptions I've been granted are precious for their scarcity. I go through long periods of yearning for the kind of joy I remember in this prayer. So what am I to learn from this moment being commemorated in every single service, every day? Certainly it's not that I should expect a sea to part for me every day. Surely it's to be reminded that such moments, singular and ongoing, are possible. Surely it's to encourage gratitude for the smaller redemptions I experience every day, and to give hope that what still needs to be redeemed in me will be taken by the only entity with that kind of power. It's not me, it's not you or any other human being; for me, it must be God.

And so in great joy, along with Moses, Miriam, and all Israel, I respond to my redemption with song to Adonai Elohainu, proclaiming these words: who is like You?

Christina Hurtado-Pierson

Seems like most of the time, I see people begin their D'var Torah speeches with a joke or an anecdote. And I did come up with a joke. Maybe I'll tell it some time, but I'd rather start with a song I learned as a little girl.

Twelve men went to the land of Caanan.
Ten were bad and two were good.
What did they see when they got to Canaan?
Ten were bad and two were good.
Some saw giants great and tall.
Some saw grapes in clusters fall.
Some saw God was in it all.
Ten were bad and two were good.

That, in a nutshell, is the story told in Sh'lach L'cha. Moses sends twelve men, one from each of the tribes of Israel, to check out the land promised to the Jewish people. Ten of the men return with the news that the land is prosperous, but then current inhabitants are strong and there is no way the Israelites can defeat them. Only the youngest two, Joshua and Caleb, believe that with God's help, victory is possible. The people of Israel side with the pessimists, so God condemns an entire generation, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, to wander around in the desert, never to enter the promised land.

So what does that have to do with me? It would be a bit of a stretch to call myself a young adult, but I am still early enough in my journey that a number of unknowns stretch out ahead of me. Parenthood, career, marriage, health- there are so many forces at work in the world that could easily derail my life. And I hear stories about all the bad things in the world. My best friend recently had a baby, and the complications in the delivery have her seriously reconsidering her plans to have a second child. Another friend passed away suddenly this winter from a disease she picked up from drinking tainted water overseas on what was supposed to be the "trip of a lifetime". A number of us have struggled financially after graduating into a difficult job market. I've watched several couples I thought would be together for decades spilt, and I've started to meet more people my own age who are already divorced.

It would be so easy to focus on the negative things I hear- the “giants in the land of Canaan”, if you will. According to the news, everything is terrible and getting worse and isn’t it too bad we can’t all live in self-sustaining bunkers.

But that’s the point of the story. The people who give up (all of Israel except for two guys) end up stuck in the desert. Maybe it’s better for those who would have died in battle, but an entire generation loses hope and goes nowhere. While there may not be the risk of extreme pain, there is no reference to any happiness either. In fact, they are told that the ultimate reward, the promised land, the land of their ancestors, is now out of their reach forever. They will never get to see their children thrive, nor will they ever experience the full blessings of God. As a community, they decide to focus on the worst, and so the community suffers.

I grew up in a very religious community, but once I moved away, I realized how unpopular it has become to admit you believe in God. A recent study by San Diego State University reported that my generation is 75% more likely to dismiss religion than our parents. I see this on a regular basis. Whenever I tell someone that I am a Jewish convert, the inevitable follow-up question is “Oh, is it because you got married?” Well, no. I attended my first Jewish holiday before I had even met my husband and I married a Jewish man because of my decision to convert, not the other way around.

I choose to live a Jewish life because I do not want to give up on the idea of goodness in the world and Judaism, at it’s very core, simply states “Be excellent to each other.” Faith is a ~~fact~~ facet (Matt & Elinor, that is for you) of existence I have chosen to focus on because it gives me hope in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. I see the armed giants on the borders of the promised land, but I also see fertile soil and the promise of peace and prosperity for generations to come. I can either stay where I am and live out my days without any real hope, or I can take risks and rely on God to help me make it through.

I decided to study for my Bat Mitzvah this year because it requires me to challenge myself. I cannot be complacent in my current life and actually fulfill my end of the covenant. There are a lot of rules and expectations for us- and I'm not talking about kashrut laws or keeping your house free of mildew. I'm talking about the really hard things- the things that cut into your leisure time or your prosperity. We are not supposed to live in a closed society and focus only on our own needs. It's easy not to be a bad person, but it takes significantly more effort to be a good person. Judaism expects you not only to look out for yourself, but for your family, your community, and even strangers. We are reminded time and again in Torah that the passive option is not the correct option- that the right choice is often harder and the results are rarely immediate. Think about it- even Joshua and Caleb, the two guys who believe God will help the Israelites to victory, still have to wait for an entire generation to die off before their faith is rewarded. And this generation includes parents, cousins, and friends.

By the end of this service, I will have become bat mitzvah, and I suspect very little in my life will appear to change . . . at first. The world will continue to seem harsh and uncaring, the news will not magically begin to cover the random acts of kindness that occur on a daily basis, and "manspreading" will both continue to happen on the subway, and we will keep using that word, both of which are things I hate. And yet I have faith that if I choose to embrace my Judaism and live each day in a way that honors the rules set forth in Torah, God will eventually bring me towards the promised land.

Andrea Katz

My Jewish journey started many decades ago. I was raised in a secular home typical of the 1960's suburbia, by parents who grew up in kosher homes but were non-observant as adults. My family celebrated Passover and attended High Holy Day services together and also occasional Friday night *yahrzheit* services but Shabbat was never more than perfunctorily observed with occasional lighting of candles. I had only one childhood friend who came from an observant home. He spent his weekends studying at a Talmudic high school which greatly impressed me.

I always enjoyed the spirituality of temple services conducted mostly in English with occasional transliterated Hebrew prayers; music was not a big element of services with our male cantor having a very raspy smoker's voice, though on Yom Kippur we were treated to a special performance of Yizkor melodies by a congregant who was an opera star. My Jewish education consisted of a year of rudimentary Hebrew in first grade when I was enrolled at the Lycee Francee. I was taught in French by a Parisian rabbi and then several years later began Sunday school eventually becoming confirmed in High School. We learned Jewish history but it was dry and didactic. I never developed a true connection to the religious aspects of Judaism. The only girl who I knew to become a Bat Mitzvah in those days was the daughter of the congregational president. Hebrew remained an alien and mysterious language.

My husband and I joined Rodeph Sholom shortly after our son was born. Services seemed unfamiliar with more Hebrew, prayers and music than we were accustomed to both growing up at The Westchester Reform Temple, though we immediately loved the beautiful sanctuary. After joining we would still always attend Yom Kippur afternoon services with our families in Scarsdale, but over time I came to love, feel more connected and eventually to prefer the new traditions, liturgy and music at Rodeph Sholom. However I still felt like an outsider peering in. I vaguely knew some of the prayer tunes but didn't know the words or their meaning. I first became aware of the adult B'nai Mitzvah program shortly after Alexander was born and immediately was inspired to deepen my own knowledge and connection to Judaism though this aspiration went unrealized for 20 years.

Jeff and I came to love Rodeph Sholom through our son who attended the day school through 8th grade. We made many close friendships with other school families and felt a true kinship with the Rodeph Sholom community at large. We enjoyed celebrating holidays, attending school functions and each other's children's B'nai Mitzvah. We are so appreciative of the wonderful education and foundation in Jewish history, language, culture and prayer our son received.

While I periodically toyed with pursuing Jewish study and classes myself I ever committed until this year, partly to fill a void with our son away in college and inspired that Rabbi Spratt, who I came to know and respect from his affiliation with the Rodeph Sholom School, was going to lead the Adult B'nai Mitzvah class for the first time. I jumped at this fortuitous opportunity to fulfill a dream. I had always nurtured a desire to read from the Torah and was committed to learning enough Hebrew to make this possible. I also wanted to learn more about Jewish rituals and prayers and their historical origins. While these goals have been more than realized, I also unexpectedly have come to enjoy and look forward to Shabbat, a new door opening!

I had never previously been a Sabbath observer and my experience with Shabbat was limited to occasional attendance at Friday night services, obligatory participation in Challah purchase when my son attended Rodeph Sholom nursery school and Saturday morning Bar Mitzvah services of friends and family. I felt no connection to Shabbat as a weekly ritual and associated Shabbat observance and attendance of regular Saturday morning services as something other, not part of my Reform Jewish life. My usual Saturday morning routine was unwinding and relaxing after a busy stressful work week, lingering over breakfast doing the Sunday NY Times crossword puzzle. This year I dutifully started attending chapel services as part of my B'nai Mitzvah preparation though initially somewhat reluctant to give up my precious free time. I felt out of place, a non-participant unfamiliar with the liturgy and the Hebrew and barely able to follow even with the available transliteration. Every else seemed to know all the words and the rituals and I felt very uncomfortable and lacking. However the music and the beautiful harmony of Cantor De Lowe and the congregants were magical. I also enjoyed listening to the cantillation of the Torah and Haftarah and looked forward to the

discussion of the weekly *parshah*. It astounds me the way the Rabbi can imbue modern day relevance to sections of the Torah which can seem totally archaic and anachronistic, "the Mount Sinai moment". But the prayers remained a large stumbling block.

I persisted and over time the liturgy started becoming more familiar and my Hebrew skills improved so that I could follow along without having to look at the transliteration for each and every word. Eventually I was able to somewhat follow along, but I also slowly became mesmerized with the beauty of the experience. I began to surprisingly to look forward to Saturday chapel mornings. The experience is very joyful. Reciting the blessings of daily miracles, looking upon each day as a new beginning and reciting the words of the Mi Shebeirach is very restorative and comforting. But what draws me most is still the beauty of the Cantor's soaring angelic voice singing and chanting ancient prayers.

Rabbi Heschel's essay on Shabbat as being the heart of Judaism really resonates with me. "Six days a week we are engaging in conquering the forces of nature, in the arts of civilization. By our acts of labor during six days we participate in the works of history; by sanctifying the seventh days we are reminded of the acts that surpass, ennoble and redeem history." To paraphrase, we are exhorted to live our lives fully and then on the seventh day reflect on the blessings and creation of life and divinity in all of us, remembering our collective Jewish history and journey out Egypt. Shabbat is also a time to look forward, "to kindle the lights of the soul, enhance our mercy, deepen our sensitivity".

The Yismichu prayer with its lilting tune, rejoicing in the weekly celebration of Shabbat, especially exemplifies the spirit of R. Heschel's eloquent words. Celebrating here today and every week in song and prayer has been a delight. To think of each day as a work of creation with new possibilities has been inspiring. I encourage those of you like myself who had not previously observed Shabbat to consider "opening a door" to experience the power and the beauty of the day and return here on future Saturday mornings to celebrate together.

Stefanie Gray

I first heard about Rodeph Sholom at a gas station somewhere in rural Romania.

I was standing on line to buy a bag of paprika flavored chips, when a woman standing next to me with an unexpected Barbra Streisand accent asked me if I was from New York. Oddly enough, it turned out that both myself and this stranger in a strange land lived on the Upper West Side.

I told her that I love the area, but I'd had a hard time looking for a neighborhood temple that felt like the right fit. This was a little over a year ago, and since then, I'm proud to have been a member of this outstanding congregation that has brought me here to the *bimah* today.

But wait -- why were Ronnie Stein and I at a gas station in rural Romania in the first place? It's kind of a long story, but the answer is: Family.

She and I had both been part of a trip to Sighet, Romania (formerly Hungary) to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Jewish community's deportations to Auschwitz. All far-flung descendants of the community were invited to return, including those who had never even stepped foot there.

The name Sighet may sound familiar because it is the same village that Elie Wiesel wrote of in his memoir, Night. My great-great-great-grandfather, Menachem Munish Schreter, is buried there in the Jewish cemetery. He was born in 1843, lived to be 94, and had ten kids, as outlined on my family tree.

Five of his children and their respective branches fled Sighet as the area underwent pogroms and World War I, mostly ending up in Canada and the U.S. The other five branches stayed behind and were largely wiped out in the Holocaust. On my family tree, each member who was murdered in the Shoah has a Star of David next to their name.

Amongst the sea of stars is a name that miraculously lacks one; my grandmother's cousin, Lanchu Schreter. After I'd flown by myself from New York to Budapest and spent seven hours in a bus over the border and through the Maramures Mountains to Sighet, I met Lanchu on the first official day of the gathering. A woman from Israel who was on a tour bus with the

two of us overheard that I was of the Schreters, and this 85 year old woman was of the Schreters, so perhaps we'd known each other? We didn't, but I'm immensely grateful that we do now.

Lanchu survived Auschwitz when she was only 15. Her entire childhood had been pleasant up until that point, and she'd spent it running around picking berries on the beautiful, green mountains and being a good Jewish schoolgirl. In 1944, the only place she'd ever known was immediately thrown into upheaval. When the Nazis invaded, her family was forced from their homes and made to sleep on the floor of the same synagogue described in Night - a synagogue that she and I attended together on Shabbat, as she described her memories to me with utmost dignity and detail.

Tears streamed down my face and onto my Siddur as she described the evacuations, the trains, the work camps. Absolute, unfathomable horror. She survived because she was young and clever - after all, she now speaks 8 languages. Her knowledge of the German language especially helped. Most of her immediate and extended family, with the exception of her mother, were murdered. She returned to Sighet after the camps had been liberated and was completely isolated in the village she'd known and loved so dearly.

I admire the fact that she traveled all the way from Israel with the help of her niece to attend the memorial services, and couldn't stop gushing to her about what an incredible inspiration she is. She took a liking to me too, and couldn't understand - but was very pleased about - the fact that this 26-year-old American would empty her savings to go by herself to the far-flung reaches of Eastern Europe just to shed tears about the Shoah.

It's true that I had the most questionably distant connection. Of the dozens of Sighet descendants who were also in attendance that week, I was the youngest, and the closest relative of mine from there wasn't my parents or grandparents, but my great-grandmother, Fanny Schreter. However, the importance of connecting with one's far-flung family, even if the blood you share comes down to a fraction of a droplet, was something Lanchu fully supported. Because she and I both know that when you lose your immediate family to tragedy, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and connect with those who remain.

My father passed away when I was 6, and my mother passed away when I was 12. I have no siblings. I have no immediate family. I'm an orphan. Most people don't associate "orphans" with someone like me - they think of them as a distant concept from Dickens novels, superhero origin stories or charity drives for third-world countries. Nope, they're real, and I'm one of them.

In turn, I've felt my own lifelong sense of isolation and inability to fit in. It did not help that I was born of an interfaith marriage. My mother's strictly conservative Catholic parents didn't attend her wedding to my father because he was a Jew.

They always treated the fact that I'm a "half-Jew" as a terrible ailment, with my grandmother making occasional passive-aggressive snipes about how I wouldn't have such a "stocky" figure if it weren't for my unfortunate Jewish genes. Not to mention such remarks as "You have blue eyes? I thought all of your people had brown eyes?" Sometimes she gives Archie Bunker a run for his money.

Moreover, I was baptized by an anti-Semitic televangelist and, in elementary school, attended born-again Christian services in a church the size of a stadium. Yes, that's three different religious influences. I don't blame my mother for seeking multiple pathways to hope after my father's death; she was a single mother left with a young child, and in Florida, there are very few means of social support outside of the church. This is the woman who worked hard to teach me how to read when I was only 2, and gave me the middle name "Faith."

Ultimately, after my father's death, I had little, if no, connection to Judaism and was encouraged to hide my supposedly tainted bloodline like a shameful secret. I kept it up and truly believed that my mother's family was doing what was in my best interests, and spent much of my childhood pledging allegiance to Christ and having nasty nightmares about hellfire and Satan.

When my father died, my mother's family encouraged her to cut his family out of my life, with the exceptions of spending Tuesdays with my Jewish grandma at the library. But when my mother died when I was 12, her family was nowhere to be seen. They were closest to me at the time, yet refused to take me in, when they easily could have.

I was thrown into a group shelter for about two weeks before Florida social services tracked down my Jewish grandma, who had only been living about 20 minutes away. She took me in, as did a quick succession of aunts and uncles who didn't know me very well, but loved and supported me as best they could.

Despite having been cut off from me for several years, my father's enormous family rushed back into my life, stepped up to the plate and did all that they could during my teen years to ensure that I would be cared for and never step foot into a shelter or foster home again. They didn't resent me for having been cut off for several years, nor did they shun me for grieving or acting out.

Reconnecting to my Jewish family was such a radical turn of events. My beautiful, wonderful Jewish grandmother, much like her phenomenal cousin Lanchu in Sighet, has shown me nothing but love and kindness. She doesn't care who you marry, what you do for a living or how you live your life, as long as you're helping others and you're happy.

It was around the time that I should've been having a Bat Mitzvah that I eventually realized that my Jewish family, as a whole, was my true family no matter what. Instead of connecting Judaism and Jewish blood to insecurities and shame, I recognized it as a source of kindness and community. I also enjoyed some of my first Seders and Rosh Hashanah feasts, and even developed a taste for chopped liver and *matzah brie* thanks to my Uncle Mark. And my aunt Vicki's brisket is incomparable.

Sometime during those tumultuous teen years, I received an email from a distant cousin in Israel who'd worked to reconstruct the entire Schreter family tree, leading back to Sighet. I became truly fascinated, if not somewhat obsessed with my genealogy's connection to Jewish history - tracing through these lines on my own and finding even more family with whom to connect. I can't help it; I was a geography major.

I've since gone on to meet even more Schreters I can count - in New York, in Sighet, and even in Montreal, where Lanchu had lived for 50 years. Just last month in Montreal, I visited a department store called "Schreter" that had been open since 1928, run by distant cousins.

Upon their first time meeting me, they said “You’re family!” and gave me a “Schreter” baseball cap.

After studying abroad in Eastern Europe and embarking on Birthright Israel, I’ve somehow managed to visit synagogues in six different countries: The U.S., Canada, Israel, Hungary, Romania and Russia. Aside from the Torah, the *bimah*, and other requisite features, they all have one thing in common: No matter how much the outside world may make you feel like a stranger in a strange land, they all feel like home.

That’s the beauty of Judaism. Instead of feeling as if I have no family and I have no home, I know that family is everywhere, and home is everywhere. I am a member of the Diaspora, and I will continue to uphold our history and traditions as best I can. That is why I am here today to become a Bat Mitzvah. Thank you.

Janice Gelfand

This is not something I planned to do. Become a Bat Mitzvah. Three years ago it had never crossed my mind; two years ago I decided to pursue it. Why? I discovered Shabbat.

My husband, Paul, and I, along with our son, Jacob, joined this congregation almost 13 years ago when Jacob began preschool at Rodeph Sholom School. We went to services on the High Holy Days, enjoyed a few Friday morning Kabbalah Shabbat at the school, took in a Purim spiel. These experiences were in fact quite meaningful, often very moving and thought provoking, but they were only occasional encounters.

In the summer of 2012, Jacob was preparing to become a Bar Mitzvah and we set out to fulfill the requirement of attending 10 Shabbat services. We attended a few Friday night services in the Schnurmacher which were beautiful and intimate. In the fall, the B'nai mitzvah season got underway and I was drawn to the Saturday morning prayer and Torah service. I found myself wanting to return to hear the music, to sing, to find out what happened next, to learn something new, to connect to the past. And probably most importantly, I was uplifted by these services, inspired by the words of our clergy. I wanted to return to renew the feelings of happiness, hope, optimism.

Somewhere along the way I found it: the Chapel Service. This may be the only true "hidden gem" I have ever found in NYC. Shabbat is a brief taste of peace. During chapel services, I feel a sense of peace. Peace that comes of accepting myself as I am while at the same time hoping and believing I can be more, become more. Lech Lecha. Peace that comes of being mindful and in the moment: singing, listening, praying and feeling an abundance of gratitude. Wallowing in gratitude. I am blessed to have another day. I am grateful Shabbat will return and restore me whenever I allow it. For, peace does not preserve itself.

Silent prayer is an opportunity for private thought and I look forward to it. It has become a time I connect with my father, during which I can really hear him. Why is that? Perhaps, in this prayer service, having connected with the past, having recalled creation and exodus, having "reached for [God] down the centuries", perhaps now I am in a moment when I

can connect with my father who like these things is out of reach but who compared to these things is also quite near.

I attended the Adult B'nai Mitzvah service two years ago and I was inspired. Inspired to do as they had done. To articulate and develop my Jewish identity. To ask and begin to answer, "What does being Jewish mean to me?" I wanted to answer for myself, for my family, for my son. But also and importantly, I wanted to answer publicly, out loud or in writing, in this community, that cares about how you are Jewish and why.

We care in part because we see ourselves in each other's stories. We see our own effort to find meaning and coherence and peace. In listening to each other we learn about each other and about ourselves. We feel connected to each other and to something bigger than ourselves.

The journey of becoming a Bat Mitzvah has been transformative. It surprises me the degree to which what I have learned and what I have experienced is on my mind, is with me, is part of me. It is with me on Shabbat and it is with me during the week. In it I find comfort, inspiration, renewed energy, meaning, hope. What a blessing.

Sarah Baker

I decided to become a bat mitzvah when I was in my twenties. At the time I had just finished an introduction to Judaism class taught by a friend of mine who was becoming a rabbi. After the class ended we continued to study together independently. He assigned books and we discussed them. It was fun and enriching and I thought the logical next step was to learn Hebrew and join a synagogue and become a real bat mitzvah. At the same time though I had decided to become a doctor and the amount of preparation required to just apply to medical school was staggering. A good Jew, I thought, would focus on becoming a doctor.

It was easy to focus; I had no ambivalence about wanting to be a doctor. I had more ambivalence about wanting to be a 'real' Jew. My mother is Jewish and my father is Christian, but neither of them was very observant and to further complicate things I spent my childhood in Switzerland. The Swiss include some lessons on Christianity in their public school classes. I was ashamed to stand out as the only Jewish person in class, so I sang with the class in church at Christmas and even played the angel Gabriel in a school play. There were a few instances of overt anti-Semitism in Switzerland that made me want to hide my Jewishness. I liked Christianity and loved churches because they were beautiful, smelled old, and were places for singing, which I loved to do. With Jesus on every corner I felt like I learned a lot about Christianity as a kid. At home we celebrated Passover which made me want to learn more about Judaism.

When we moved to America when I was twelve it was to a town that was mostly catholic. I liked the few Jewish kids in my class in high school but felt like they didn't see me as one of them. In college once I had settled on history as a major I decided to learn more about Judaism. I took a few classes on Jewish history and eventually wrote my thesis about Italian Jewish Anti-fascists. Learning more Jewish history was fascinating but I never felt more belonging because of the knowledge I had gained, so I decided to learn more about the practice of Judaism and that is where the introduction class with my friend came in. Having to abandon that study for medicine is just one of the sacrifices I made to get into medical school. I do not

regret becoming a doctor at all but wish the process hadn't been so expensive, money, time, and soul-wise.

In my trek to become a doctor there were many successes but it felt like there were many failures as well. I struggled with getting through the premed requirements with grades that were competitive. I had been told by many people that I should not do it: that I should marry a doctor instead, that I should do something easier, that I would never make it because I wasn't good at chemistry or biology. I persevered and got into medical school but then had trouble with classes and board exams. I came to doubt my brain's ability to do anything, but I kept going because I loved the work.

The worst collateral damage from my medical training was that it made me doubt my intelligence, it made me doubt that I could learn. Two years ago I took a class to learn how to read Hebrew. It took me under 5 weeks to get through the alphabet and start pronouncing words and be able to follow along with the prayers at Yom Kippur. I hadn't learned to read a new alphabet in 30 years but suddenly was back in first grade sounding out letters to make words. I felt a new wrinkle added to my brain that the old familiar path, the thoughts that "I couldn't learn," had kept me from seeing.

Becoming a bat mitzvah over the last year has been challenging, uncomfortable at times, joyful, and enriching. I wanted to become a bat mitzvah to honor my younger self, to honor my complicated relationship with Judaism, to honor the years spent feeling "outside of", and to reward myself for years of struggle and solitude, to prove that life is not all about work.

There are a million good intellectual reasons for appreciating Judaism, the one I'm introducing today is central: the Torah. I have spent many years of my life in books: hiding in them in adolescence, searching for meaning in them in young adult hood, looking to them for clinical skills in my professional life. The Torah is more than a book, it is a living link to our past and our future. A book is only as good as it makes you feel, only as good as the conversations and relationships it leads you to have. This book has raised a civilization.

To me the Torah is amazing because of the people who made it happen. There were people thousands of years ago before they had schools, before they knew what a cell was,

before they had a printing press who thought to write it down, carry it, protect it and think that we in future generations would want to know where we came from. That makes me proud to be Jewish. I am proud to be part of a culture that encourages learning, analysis, and thoroughness while still pushing it's people to be *menschlikh*.

Becoming a bat mitzvah is supposed to be like being Moses for the day. We are standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah, our truth, for the first time. On this mountain I get to see a little bit more of myself.

Steve Silverberg

The renewal of body. The renewal of spirit. Two complementary concepts in one prayer. Two pathways with very different sets personal and communal actions.

What does praying for the renewal of body entail? It entails praying for a positive outcome of a surgery or a rehabilitation of some kind. Other than the act of reciting the prayer, the supplicant does not have an active role in affecting the outcome.

Praying for the renewal of spirit, on the other hand, can be more readily paired with individual and communal actions that embody the truest characteristics of Jewish prayer. These actions may be taken on behalf of someone you know, or can be taken on behalf of complete strangers.

This past year I had a lot of time to think about the meaning of the *Mi Sheberach* prayer. Last April, after knee replacement surgery, I was suddenly and unexpectedly faced with life threatening complications. The power of actions by the Rodeph Sholom community cannot be overstated in my emotional well-being and recovery.

A few weeks post-surgery I developed intense chest pains and was rushed to the emergency room in the late afternoon. Doctors suspected pulmonary emboli or a ruptured aorta. We feared the worst. Marilyn had been in touch with clergy to inform them of the situation. As we were awaiting test results later that evening, I looked up and saw Rabbi Levine approaching us. He chatted with me and Marilyn for a few minutes, and then suggested that we all stand up and form a prayer circle while he offered a prayer of healing. What an emotional uplift that was to have the rabbi wrap his arms around both of us and offer up not just his own best wishes, but also a prayer for healing.

That night was followed by almost two weeks of surgery and convalescence in intensive care. Marilyn would stay with me each day, and each visit she would tell me that I was in the thoughts and prayers of many people at the synagogue. Just knowing this helped to keep me going. It was like spiritual gasoline refilling my depleted spiritual gas tank.

When I was finally released to go home, I was facing several weeks of being mostly confined to my bed in various degrees of discomfort and pain. It was during this period that several close friends from the Rodeph Sholom community went into renewal of spirit overdrive. Not one day went by without a call from at least two people and their spouses, who I am proud to say, stand on the *bimah* with me today. In addition to the calls, they would send over books and magazines that they knew I would enjoy and use to relieve the boredom of being home alone for extended periods of time. I received several deliveries of freshly baked desserts and other goodies to calm my sweet tooth. At several points we received deliveries of home cooked meals, from salad to main dish to dessert. As horrible as the recuperation experience was, these actions taken as a follow up to the prayers was incredibly emotionally supportive.

During that period I realized how fortunate I was to be a member of the Rodeph Sholom community, and how incredibly fortunate I was to have such incredible generous friends through the Rodeph Sholom community. The power of Rodeph Sholom acts on a macro scale to provide support and services to those in need, and also, through its clergy and members acts on a very personal level to provide "renewal support services."

It was also during this period that I fully realized one of the most powerful precepts in Judaism. Prayer without action does not have the same powerful meaning and result as prayer followed by action to back it up. We have a responsibility as part of the act of prayer to follow it up with meaningful action.

This applies not just in situations such as mine, but also in situations that directly or indirectly bring emotional and spiritual renewal and support to total strangers. Acts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim* help individuals to make it through another day, or keep their heads above water. Volunteering in a shelter, soup kitchen, or educational institution is an action that can change a life forever.

Justin Ferate

For me, the historic anchors of Judaism are powerful and reverberate with deep and forceful meanings. Over the past year, being surrounded by other students of B'nai Mitzvah – likewise engaged in a similar quest for those meanings – has proven to be exceptionally educational and inspirational. I have consciously immersed myself in the examination of many ideas, forces, debates, challenges, contradictions, and underlying centuries-old principles of Judaism. I've studied Torah texts, rabbinic commentaries, Ancient Near East texts, and comparative historical assessments. Each layer of study and each level of examination has helped create a near-symphonic resonance – not only aiding me in scrutinizing my own moral and spiritual obligations, but also providing a pathway by which to live my life. For me, Judaism is a necessity.

Spiritually, one of my primary personal goals has long been to work toward a greater sense of gratitude for the many blessings that are so very much part of my life. I often become impatient and want the world to change to my liking – failing to take seriously how many blessings I have been given and continue to receive.

Examination and interpretation of the various prayers that join to form the prayer services has been emphasized as an intrinsic aspect of the B'nai Mitzvah program. Each prayer plays a special role and I find that the prayers help me focus on aspects and attributes toward which to strive. I'm very human and I need to be regularly reminded of my duties and even of my own goals. Prayer is definitely one way toward that end.

The Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai wrote these lines, which underscore my beliefs:

> *I say with perfect faith*
> *that prayers precede God.*
> *Prayers created God.*
> *God created man,*
> *And man creates prayers*
> *that create God who creates man.*

One of the elemental and substantive prayers for me is the *Aleinu*. This pillar among the prayers declares God's sovereignty over all His creation. As an active participant in a culture that so

strongly advocates and reifies the importance and sanctity of the individual, I find that personal surrender can be a major and ongoing challenge for me. I don't surrender so easily. Through *kavanah* (heartfelt mental and spiritual concentration), our goal, as Jews, is to turn trustingly toward our loving and attentive Creator. Saying *Aleinu* and indeed all prayers with *kavanah* is precious to the Almighty. That being said, *kavanah* can, at least for me, prove to be a difficult state to achieve. It's a challenge for me to begrudgingly admit that I am really not as independent as I would sometimes like to believe. That's where gratitude comes in to play.

Perhaps more specific to my own life strivings, Yehudah Amichai also wrote:

> *God, like a tourist guide, describes our lives and explains to visitors and tourists and the children of God,* "This is the way we live."

How we live is defined in the prayer *Aleinu,* which has been described as a *"splendid declaration of the acceptance of the heavenly yoke."* In the year 1171, in the medieval French city of Blois, it was reported that 51 Jews – 34 men and 17 women – were burned at the stake for defending their Judaism. An eyewitness wrote to Rabbi Jacob of Orléans that, much to the astonishment of the executioners, these Jews died singing a mysterious and soul-stirring melody that spanned the stillness of the night. The prayer these courageous Jews were so soulfully singing was the *Aleinu.*

Who of us would be willing to make that sacrifice today? Frankly, the thought makes me panic-stricken. How many of us, when we recite or sing *Aleinu,* are consciously stating, *"I am willing to concede my life for my Judaism?"* What an almost unbelievable commitment! Is it for real? Is that what we are really promising?

עָלֵינוּ לְשַׁבֵּחַ לַאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל

Aleinu l'shabeach la'Adon hakol:
It is our duty to praise [God] – the Master of all.

It's a vow, an oath, a declaration, and a reconfirmation – made since time immemorial and regularly restated – even today, in 2015. It is a contract negotiated centuries ago in Sinai –

one that's restated and reconfirmed countless times throughout the yearly prayer cycle, yet do I take this oath seriously?

Aleinu is a challenging and often difficult contract by which to abide on a daily basis:

> *We bend our knees and bow and thank the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, who extends the heavens and establishes the earth. He is our God; there is no other.*

So what is required of me? Certainly, in this world of secular alternatives, there are active challenges and temptations, every day of the week, to sideline the constructs of *Aleinu* – temptations to put our Judaism on a shelf whenever inconvenient – only to be retrieved, when desired, at a later time. *"Take the kippah off; put the kippah on."* It's often tempting to try to blend in with the world at large, to not be "too Jewish" – to downplay Judaism to engender some semblance of a perceived public "harmony" – but at what cost? Doesn't being a Jew require that each of us stand up and act in ways that will often make us stand out? Some perceive the Jews as the "Chosen People." On the contrary, I believe that Jews are a "Self-Yoking People" – choosing to make a binding agreement with God to regularly acknowledge and commit to the very words of *Aleinu.*

In the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (the "abbreviated" Shulchan Aruch), Rav Shlomo Ganzfried states that since the *Aleinu* is a declaration of faith and an act of witnessing to God, the prayer should be recited in a standing position with great fear and awe.

To me, the concepts of fear and awe seem most appropriate. To declare such an extraordinary commitment, we should definitely stand at attention and stand in deference. *Aleinu* – as overwhelming as it may seem – is a powerful and intense acknowledgement and commitment to the sublime will and spirituality of God.

The Jewish nation thrives on spirituality and its spiritual substance is Torah. For centuries, the Jewish nation was sustained without a territory or a home. All other nations of the world have been defined by possession of a land. For centuries, *"Am Israel"* – the *"People of Israel"* – have not required a land to be perceived as a nation. Our Nationhood was indeed

thrust upon us: derived through the Torah and through God. These are great gifts, but gifts that come with great and often challenging responsibilities. Indeed, it is as Jews that we accept those responsibilities – with fear, with awe, and because these are heavenly gifts, with gratitude.

Perhaps the most important question is, *"Are we willing to actively LIVE our Judaism from day to day to day? Are we willing to fulfill the obligations of* Aleinu?"

Blessedly, most of us will never be presented with the challenge faced by those 51 Jews of 12th Century Blois. Hopefully, few of us will ever have to decide between Judaism and life. Yet, therein lies the real challenge – the real test.

In declaring *Aleinu*, we commit ourselves time and time again to the oneness of God and to a commitment to the spiritual heft of Torah. We willingly accept the weight and responsibility of sifting each of our daily acts through the words, ideas, and implications of Torah. This involves a lifetime of numerous assessments, continued reevaluations, and countless responsibilities.

I think often of those heroic martyrs at Blois. Yet, I would argue that we need a similar heroism to embrace Torah on a daily basis in our modern world – as a tool and a benchmark throughout the countless daily vicissitudes of life – throughout the millions of individual decisions and millions of individual acts that comprise the wholeness of any one person's life.

To a great extent, American Jews must strive to create their own Jewish universe while consciously retaining links to the world at large. In the modern secular world in which we live, there are many enticements, many attractions, many diversions, and many wooing alternatives that beckon. It takes constant reinforcement, constant study, constant prayer, and constant devotion to ensure that we live up to commitments we make to God and to Torah when we say the words of *Aleinu*. Stated in a different way, we must, as Jews, stand up and LIVE *Aleinu.*

In studying and standing here with other B'nai Mitzvah candidates, I have observed how others actively live their lives as Jews and have learned much through their examples. I've had the pleasure of working together with others and learning how to identify, acknowledge, and

resolve moral questions; to serve the needs of others; and to weigh and evaluate what behaviors might be most appropriate toward my own spiritual goals. In their own ways, these individuals have demonstrated their own heroism and have shown me how to be a better person and a better Jew.

I find that, for me, my own Judaism acts as a compass and as a gyroscope – both guiding the way and helping me to maintain psychic and spiritual balance. By processing my myriad daily decisions through my Judaism, I feel more whole, more integrated, more directly engaged with life. I find the daily mental exercises of weighing the justice of circumstances to be both challenging and invigorating. I also find it provides great a robust vitality to daily actions.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: *"The human side of religion, its creeds, rituals, and instructions, is a way rather than a goal. The goal is "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. When the human side of religion becomes the goal, injustice becomes the way."*

As we weigh our moral quandaries every day: how to act responsibly, how to behave, how to treat others, and how to be a good Jew, we often experience difficulties, contradictions, and challenges. That we, as Jews, are committed to addressing those difficulties, challenging those dilemmas, and balancing the contradictions with a goal of repairing the world is what ultimately what defines us as Jews. Our positive actions in life are the response to and acknowledgement of the commitments of *Aleinu:*

> *And it is said: "Adonai will be Ruler over the*
> *whole Earth, and on that day,*
> *Adonai will be One, and God's Name will be One.*
> *It is our duty to praise [God] – the Master of all.*

Monica Kaiser

This journey started when I was eleven years old. I wanted to have a Bat Mitzvah at the orthodox synagogue where I attended Hebrew school. I could not understand why my Bat Mitzvah would be on Sunday and why I would not be permitted to read from the Torah. It was so unfair that the boys in my class could have the honor of reading from the Torah and I could not. I felt that as a girl, Judaism viewed me as inferior and I wanted to do everything in my power to bring about change.

I naively thought that if I refused the Sunday Bat Mitzvah, the synagogue would realize that its policies were discriminatory and permit me to read from the Torah on Shabbat. The Rabbi, a wonderful, progressive educator, who has deeply impacted my life, explained that it was not his decision, it was up to the Board of Directors. Having only a vague notion of what a Board of Directors was, and having no knowledge of institutional politics, I told him to go back to the Board of Directors and explain again how I felt. I was sure that once the Board understood that I wasn't having a second class Bat Mitzvah they would change the policy. They did not change the policy. I did not have a Sunday Bat Mitzvah and my feeling of being a less than equal Jew continued. At my father's Shiva, fifteen years later, the Rabbi waited for one more man to arrive for the *minyan* because my sister and I did not count.

During this year of study to become an Adult Bat Mitzvah, the privilege of reading from Torah and the right to be an equal Jew became less important. This is not to say that when I stand in front of the Torah scroll, with a *yad* in my hand, I do not feel an incredible, deep and powerful connection to Judaism and to Jews worldwide, who today, and throughout history, have chanted from identical scrolls.

More important, during this B'nai Mitzvah process, I unexpectedly found myself struggling to find meaning in prayer and to reconcile the words we chant with my personal theology. When we started our studies, I did not understand why Rabbi Ben and Cantor Shayna designed the Adult B'nai Mitzvah process with the goal of unsettling us and what could be accomplished by pushing each one of us out of our Judaic comfort zones. It became apparent fairly early in the process that growth requires discomfort.

In Temple, the melodies, rhythm and familiarity of our prayer service have always connected me to my faith and comforted me. Our studies this year forced me to acknowledge that I was chanting by rote without the slightest thought as to the meaning of the prayers. The meaning of the prayers we studied made me uncomfortable. One prayer after another praised God and asked God for everything that one could ever want or need. We promise in our prayers to worship God and ask in return for God to answer our prayers and grant us health, peace and our material needs. Should we not obey God, then not only will our prayers not be answered but we will be punished. This is the foundation of our covenant.

Because I believe that each of us has free choice and I view that free choice as being incompatible with a deity that intervenes in our daily life to reward or punish, I began to feel uncomfortable and hypocritical chanting these words. I believe God is a powerful being that created a magnificent universe and created the scientific laws that together with our collective free choice propel us forward. It do not feel genuine asking God to actively intervene in my life, nor am I comfortable believing that one individual's good fortune is a reward for listening to God or another's bad fortune is a punishment for his or her disobedience. I have been struggling with this for many months. At times, I have thought I should have left all well and alone. If I did not take part in the Adult B'nai Mitzvah process, I would be happily chanting the prayers in Temple, blind to the meaning of what I was singing. The bliss of ignorance.

Since prayer is only one component of what it means to me to be a Jew, I considered abandoning prayer. I am a Jew because of the customs and the rituals I observe, my commitment to *tikkun olam* and how I think of the world and my role in it. Yet, it does not feel right to say I will be a Jew who does not pray. Prayer is the essence of Judaism and our covenant with God.

Once you go down a path, turning back is rarely and option. Through our studies, I have been introduced to the writings of Mordechai Kaplan, whose perspectives have helped me grapple with this dilemma. I am reassured that Judaism has a place for those who firmly believe in God's existence and power but do not believe that there is a direct casual connection between individual deeds and divine reward and punishment.

During services, I have decided to focus not on the literal meaning of each prayer, but on the essence of the prayer in the same manner as I interpret many narratives from the Torah. The story of creation in Genesis is not troubling to me because I do not interpret it literally. The concept is that an all-powerful God created the world, Creation probably did not happen in six days, as we measure time, but that is unimportant to me. In my view, the creation narrative was divinely inspired and articulated by our ancestors who did not have the scientific knowledge to tell the story any other way.

Because of the past year of study to become a Bat Mitzvah, coming into Temple and singing the prayers without thinking about the meaning of the words is no longer possible. My task is now to look at the essence of each prayer and find meaning in the prayer that is congruent with my theology. I now ask God for guidance, inspiration and strength to make good choices and perform *mitzvot*. Prayer immerses me in reflection and reflection leads to action. There is power in collective prayer. Our individual and collective prayer will lead to do *mitzvot* and make good choices, producing the very "rewards" we seek from God. Each of us, through praying, and acting upon the divine goodness that is part of each of us, will create peace, prosperity and good health. I do not pray for one individual to have prosperity or health but I believe that my prayer and actions can set in motion *tikkun olam*.

Over the course of our studies, I was fascinated to learn the historical context of our liturgy and its evolution. The prayer or the narrative is very much a product of the author and his or her context. I recognized, as I never had before, the extent to which Jewish prayer, ritual, custom, and observance have evolved and changed and the necessity for continued evolution for Judaism to survive. Since the universe and all of God's creations are constantly evolving, the institutions, tools, rituals and customs that connect us as Jews to our covenant with God must evolve too. I initially gravitated to Reform Judaism because I was welcome as an equal but felt it was Orthodox Judaism that would safeguard the survival of Judaism long term because of its aversion to change. My beliefs have been altered dramatically. It is the ability to change and the spirit of inclusiveness that will make Reform Judaism integral to the continuity of our people.

The Mourners Kaddish, a prayer to remember those who have passed, focuses on praising God rather than on our loss. It seems counter-intuitive to praise God when mourning a loss. Yet, by fostering a feeling of praise and gratitude, we affirm life, while recognizing that our physical presence on earth is finite. But our opportunity to impact the world is infinite. Each good deed or mitzvah is the foundation on which to build another. As we evolve individually, as families, communities and societies we continue to build on the foundation laid by those for whom we recite Kaddish.

When I recite Kaddish, I feel my father's spiritual presence near me and I recognize how much he lives on in the memories of his loved ones and that his good deeds transcend his physical presence. While I will never stop missing him, I am grateful, that he is part of who I am, in the values, morals, insights and love he imparted to me and that I hope to impart to my children.

A lesser, but yet important challenge for me of the Bat Mitzvah process has been to accept my inherent lack of ability to hear the difference between a high note and a low note, much less to sing one note. No matter how hard I have tried, I cannot carry a tune. As a result, I thought about abandoning this process as I listened to my classmates beautiful on tune voices. I envision the congregation thinking "really?" when I stand up to chant. I decided that I don't care. As a Jew, I want the experience, the privilege and the connection of chanting Torah at the Shabbat service even if I am not good at it musically.

I am grateful to the Board of Directors who did not allow me to read Torah as a child. If not for their choice, I would not have chosen to participate in this Adult B'nai Mitzvah Process. The experience at 12 years old could not have been nearly as rich and transformative as my current experience. I am even more grateful to Rabbi Ben and Cantor Shayna for their commitment of time and energy and for putting their hearts and souls into making this an extremely meaningful experience for all of us. I am thankful for all the members of my B'nai Mitzvah class for the learning that can only happen through the candid exchange of perspectives in a caring and supportive atmosphere.

Molly Gordy

I am grateful to have the honor of closing this very poignant ceremony, and by extension, the remarkable journey of study and fellowship that has led us here to become B'nai Mitzvah.

Our Shabbat service featured many eloquent prayers praising the Almighty, the Majestic, the Creator. There hasn't been a lot of talk about the All-Loving, the Comforting, the Nurturing God whose presence I feel in every moment of my daily life. Without that, this can all feel a bit distant to me; at times, even intimidating. For you see, I am somewhat of an anomaly. Statistically, the vast majority of Reform Jews are agnostics. I have an unshakeable belief and faith in God.

This is not an abstraction for me. Since the age of 16, when I had a religious awakening, I have felt the Holy Presence in my life at every moment – good, bad and indifferent, when I rise and when I go to sleep, with every step I take, in every molecule of my being.

Ironically, one of the places I feel least comfortable sharing that state of being is among my fellow congregants. I am proud that Reform Judaism is a big tent that does not demand blind faith as a condition for belonging to our community. I delight that we can bond as Jews over our shared cultural and intellectual heritage even if you are agnostic or atheist – a category that includes beloved members of my immediate family. It's just that, short of Yom Kippur, there don't seem to be many opportunities for people of my ilk to have a group conversation with Hashem. The very word is banned from our prayerbook, although it is a synonym for Adonai.

Conservative and Modern Orthodox Judaism have far higher numbers of believers among their ranks, as if personal faith needs to be expressed through a more vigorous adherence to ritual. That does not speak to me. I feel very much at home in the Reform movement, where I grew up, where I find a more progressive outlook on a wide range of social issues, and where there is far more room for diversity of opinions. Over all, I am happy.

It's just that at times it gets a little lonely. Over the past four decades, I have watched our prayer book become increasingly generic, so that no one feels uncomfortable. Adult education classes focus on the intellectual, or the political, or the historical. Everyone is very

mature and rational. How mortified would they be if I raised my hand and confessed, “Hey, did you know that, multiple times a day, I speak with my constant guide and best friend, God?” What if someone called the psych ward: “Doctor, she’s hallucinating!?!” I feel as if it’s socially acceptable in our circles to believe in God as a concept, but kind of creepy to realize you’re consorting with someone who actually feels a Holy presence, all the time.

Consequently I have kept my beliefs a closely held secret during most of my two decades at Rodeph Sholom, even as I sent children to Day School and Hebrew School and participated in an increasing number of committees, clubs, classes and activities. At the same time, I forged friendships with devout people in other religious sectors who felt comfortable talking about their deeply personal faith. There are people on my Facebook page who are Hasidic rabbis, Buddhist monks, Salvationist missionaries and Episcopal priests – as well as our own Rodeph Sholom clergy. All contribute to the discussion with candor and a degree of comfort. So why, I have come to ask myself, have I been so shy about expressing my spiritual beliefs in the context of my own congregation?

I do not know the answer. It has taken me 22 years of active membership to come to the point where I am even ready to ask the question. I have come this far thanks to the heartfelt discoveries I have shared with my 2015 Adult B’nai Mitzvah classmates studying with Rabbi Spratt and Cantor DeLowe. These insights – and the friendships born of them -- infuse my worship with a new significance and relevance. Yet even so, when it came time to reflect on the past year, I could not bring myself to “come out” as a believer. I was still too embarrassed. The initial essay I handed in for publication three weeks before our ceremony focused only on the prayer I was assigned to comment on, and barely touched on the personal. Only now, on the eve of being called to the Torah, do I feel sufficiently comfortable “coming clean” with my beliefs. I have come to realize that I need to publicly proclaim my faith in order for my Bat Mitzvah to be a true Coming of Age.

Let the record reflect that I live every moment grateful for the blessing of Spirit that suffuses everything, of the loving and protective Higher Power I believe is the Source of All. I feel it personally, intimately, and unconditionally. It is a Gift beyond measure, an unceasing comfort, without beginning or end. I came from It and I will return to It. This is what I believe.

Is there a place for that in our worship? I think there has been, if I look beyond the obvious.

Our Shabbat morning service opened with a simple prayer, Modah Ani, that thanks Adonai for trusting us enough to grant us another day of life. What a concept. What a covenant. You Lord, who have the power to do anything, not only give us life, you trust us to decide what to do with it. That is the ultimate act of unconditional love.

Our service also featured multiple prayers for peace: In our hearts, in our homes and for everyone on Earth. The name of our congregation, Rodeph Sholom, literally means Seekers of Peace. We come here on Shabbat to set aside our cares and calm our restless souls, as individuals and as a community. This is our safe place, our haven, where we replenish our spirits before returning to the outside world.

Today, we conclude not only our worship, but our shared experience as B'nai Mitzvah. And we do it by singing Adon Olam. This is a prayer that closes the circle by returning God's trust. Its final lines affirm that "The Lord is with me, I shall not fear." We are reentering a world of danger and uncertainty with renewed vigor, and we are not alone.

Adon Olam has an interesting history. It used to be sung at funerals, to comfort the mourners, in somber tones. Even today, some Jewish communities sing it seated, to symbolize congregants' reluctance to leave the holy place of worship for the secular world.

At Rodeph Sholom we rise to our feet to sing Adon Olam, in a rollicking tune. We are ready! We are eager! We meet the future with hope and joy, for we do not meet it alone.

This is especially true for us, the Adult B'nai Mitzvah Class of 5775. Under the guidance of our precious teachers, Ben and Shayna, we spent nine months sharing discoveries and exchanging confidences in an atmosphere of complete trust. We became more authentic, more compassionate and more vulnerable. We forged a special bond – a community within a community.

Now, gestation complete, we must leave the cocoon and apply what we have learned in a larger, more combative world.

Here is what I have learned:

Nobody escapes pain. Our lives can be driven by it, or shaped by it. We can use that pain as a vehicle to open our heart to others, or to close it. G-d has given us the Torah to guide us, and trusted us to make the right choice. And every day we awaken with breath in our lungs and our souls restored, we get another chance to choose.

That is an awesome gift, and a challenge to make us tremble. Adon Olam reminds us that we don't have to face it alone. As Adult B'nai Mitzvah, we are especially blessed. In the years to come, we will be able to turn to each other to give and receive love and help and inspiration – as we turn to you, our fellow congregants and peace seekers: our Rodeph Sholom.