

**Bat Mitzvah D'var Torah (Parsha Naso)  
Congregation Rodeph Sholom**

*Shabbat Shalom.* Thank you so much for coming. It means a lot to me that all of you are here. A special "thank you" to everyone who helped get me here and become a *bat mitzvah*. Thanks to all of the Rodeph Sholom clergy- every single one of you- and Allie Fox. Thanks also to the whole staff here - from the building staff and security guards to the office staff; I have literally grown up here since the week I was born, and you have done so much for me. I would also like to thank my siblings, Sam and Ana, for always being there for me and being so supportive during this process. I want to thank my parents for always helping me to go onwards and upwards in my schooling and religious education. I love you very much. Finally, "*mazel! tov*" to Nicole and Jake, as well as their family and friends.

I would like to talk for a moment about what it means to me to become a *bat mitzvah*, and then I will talk about my *parsha* and my service project, and what this all means to me for the future.

To me, being Jewish means being part of a community where each one of us is accepted and respected. As a Jew, I take on a responsibility to help others - not just the people in my synagogue - it is my job to care for people no matter who they are, where they come from, what color their skin is, what religion they practice, whether they're young or old and most relevant to me in today's *parsha*, whether you're a boy or girl.

I think that for each person God speaks to them in a different way. For me, God speaks through internal motivation, the voice inside me that's always pushing me onwards and upwards.

It means you have to be kind to those even if they are not kind to you-you have to give that second chance to those who were not given it. You are to help those who need it now, in the present, no matter their background; if they are in need of help, I as a Jew have an obligation to help.

As I become a *bat mitzvah*, it's almost like I am signing a contract - not only with God but with the world, that says: "I will help, I accept you, I respect you." I am committing myself to making sure that I help people - all people - in the world get what they need to live better and fairer lives.

That is kind of what Judaism is. We are in a contract called a "covenant." Each one of us signs a contract that has the same basic parts but is also personal to who we are. To me, for example, this "contract" is an internal one that I am signing with myself as well as with God and the world, because it is about my own internal motivation and connection to doing good.

I've always been proud about how we as Jews value others, and cherish this respect for everyone in the community. But I have to tell you: as I read my *parsha*, I became more and more confused. There's a part of it that seems to go against everything that I've learned about gender equality- the idea that we are all created in the image of God - that all of us are worthy, both men and women.

Let me explain. Today's *parsha*, *Naso*, starts by talking about the census of the Levites and the duties in the Tabernacle. But then it talks about a very different issue: women who were accused of adultery by their husband, and the process to judge them - which is called *sota*. What would happen is that, if a husband suspects a wife of committing adultery, he could accuse her before a Jewish court. The wife is given a choice: either accept a divorce or drink "bitter waters" which was liquid soaked in parchment that had this section of the Torah written in ink. If the woman's stomach bloated and she died when she drank it, then she was judged guilty. If not, then she was innocent.

Mind you, these consequences could only be taken out by a husband upon a woman - and the husband didn't even need to have real evidence that the wife committed adultery. This ritual was awful and humiliating for the woman.

And it's not just that a husband can poison a wife. If he can do that, it changes the whole relationship between the husband and the wife and forces the woman to live in a state of fear. It puts the man in a position of power and leaves the wife much more vulnerable.

Ironically, *Naso* means to "lift up" in Hebrew, but this chapter of the Torah seemed to be bringing women down. This is completely opposite to what I had been taught my whole life.

Is this the kind of contract I would want to sign? No! But *Sota* is actually not in my contract. Because we, as modern and progressive Jews, don't believe that the written Torah is the spoken word of God. There is an oral tradition in Judaism that came first. I believe that the written Torah is men in the old days trying to interpret the word of God. But I don't have the same interpretation as them. Also, I believe that the Torah is something that must be interpreted as time goes on.

Today, even though we have come far, there are still places where women are being held back and in vulnerable positions as the women were in *Naso*. Though no woman is being poisoned, women are being threatened and hurt for simply wanting equality.

I started thinking about this when I went to Israel with our synagogue group, when I was seven years old, and we visited the Western Wall. I was very excited- a little annoyed that I had to wear a long skirt and tights - but excited nonetheless. Yet, when we got there, I got very angry. My dad and brother went onto the men's side and had lots of room and could take their sweet time-praying-and putting their notes in the Wall, while the women's side was so tiny and uncomfortable that my mother, sister, Rabbi Laufer and I literally had to shove our way to the front of the pack and my mom and sister gave me their notes so that I could crawl through legs and put our notes in the Wall. My mom and sister never actually even got to the front of the Wall. When we rejoined the rest of our family, I was furious. Why was the women's side so much smaller than the men's? Why did I have to crawl through legs just so that I could come up to the Wall? It was absurd. This is an example about how we still have very far to come for women's rights. This is also why I am wearing a "Women of the Wall" *tallit* as I stand here before you becoming a *bat mitzvah*. They are a great group in Israel fighting for women's rights at the Wall. I encourage you to visit their website and support them!

I started thinking about this again when I read "I Am Malala." It made me think about girls around the world and through time. Girls my age - what did we have in common - the hardship girls face as they go to school. I was thinking about girls in small villages in Africa, what did they do when they had their periods? I knew they didn't have access to any of the products you find at the drugstore.

When I heard they had to miss a week of school when they had their period, I was shocked. Something so simple, something that all women have to deal with. I thought it was crazy that something that was an absolutely healthy part of growing up was seen as an obstacle to girls trying to go to school and trying to stay in school.

This is why I decided to volunteer at "Days for Girls" as my service project. Days for Girls is an organization that creates sustainable and reusable "period kits" for girls and women who do not have access to feminine hygiene products when they are on their periods, which is considered shameful and so they are forced to stay home from their school until their period ends. It's called Day for Girls because its main objective is to give girls back all those days of school they are forced to miss.

The problem is that if you have to miss all that school, then you can't get a full education and that keeps girls vulnerable and not equal to boys. If women can get an education, they become much less vulnerable.

As I worked on making these kits I realized how lucky I was to live in a place where women were accepted as equals and weren't being held down but being encouraged to be our best selves. You have to make sure women get proper education or they cannot achieve their full potential. And if a woman cannot live up to her full potential, not only does she lose... not only does her family lose... but we all lose - employers lose, society loses. That could affect everyone in this Sanctuary and beyond. For all we know, some girl is out there who can cure cancer... if girls have more chance at education, we'll have double the brainpower working on all these things.

As I grow into my womanhood I am going to be a much more aware person and will take on my duty as a modern Jew and will make sure that no woman is forced into the position that the wives were in *Naso*.

I will take on my role to seek justice against unjustified acts that determine if someone is denied a good quality of life. I will take a couple hours out of my week to help make sure girls can stay in school because I know what school does - it empowers girls to be informed so they can make informed decisions and don't have to rely on anyone to do it for them. It gives them tools to raise their voices, to share their opinions and to share their ideas. And all these tools will help these girls make change and that is not only important for women but it is important for the entire world.

I have so many role models. My grandmas and my Mom and my aunts and my cousins and teachers and babysitters and my friends and teammates and fellow dancers and classmates, there are so many strong girls and women. Congregation Rodeph Sholom and Judaism today gives me hope for the future of women. Women here aren't only equals but they are in top positions, like executive director and teachers and many more. I will make sure that as I go into high school and college, I stick to the contract that I am signing today and participate not only in the Jewish faith but also in helping Days for Girls by promoting it and helping out personally.

As a woman, I need to make sure that girls not only receive an education but they can also use it to accomplish great things. And I need to make sure that not only am I helping these girls and women but I need to make sure that I become educated and that I go on to do great things myself.

Last, I want to say one thing to "powerful people" who think it is okay to sexually harass women just because they are wealthy or powerful. This goes back to the intentions of *Sota* that leaves women in this vulnerable and sometimes dangerous position.

Women are not just Barbie dolls that are to be used. We are living, breathing people with our own opinions and brilliant all in our own ways. And if you can't see this, then someone like me is going to have to step up one day and become President of the United States of America. ©

Thank you and "*Shabbat shalom*."

## **D'var Torah Congregation Rodeph Sholom**

Shabbat Shalom,

Thank you for coming here today to celebrate my special day. After many hours of horrible singing, speech writing, and most tedious of all, procrastination, I am finally here. But, I didn't go on this journey alone. I would like to thank all of the people who helped me get to the place I am today.

First, I would like to thank Rabbi Levine, Cantor Garfein, and a special thanks to Elona my tutor. They have been patient, kind, and forgiving, especially when I didn't do my homework. They made the process less of a process, and I definitely wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them.

Mom, over the years you have helped me become intellectually curious and supported me in my every endeavor. You have been my cheerleader when I felt discouraged, *my* rock when I felt weak, and my support when I've felt like I was on shaky ground. I owe so much *to* you and words cannot begin to describe my gratitude.

Dad, when I felt distracted, you kept me on track. When I felt discouraged, your words inspired me. Now that I am a Bar Mitzvah myself, I find it all the more amazing that you invested your Bar Mitzvah money in your idea to save your father's business. That is the same money that I will likely use to buy headphones or sushi, and you used it to *save* your house and pay for college. Dad, you have taught me what it means to be self-made and are a great role model.

And lastly, and in my opinion the most important (no offense mom), are all my relatives that survived the worst imaginable to make my reality the one they dreamed of having - my ancestors. My dad's family came mostly from Russia with a little Poland, Germany, and France in the mix. Many of these relatives came to America in the late 1800's as part of the mass Jewish exodus from Russia during the pogroms, settling mostly in NY, NJ and Pennsylvania.

Fifty years later in the 1930's, my mom's family came to America from Germany. Her mom's side fled the Nazis before the war broke out. Separated from her parents, my Mom's great aunt Erna brought her baby sister Trude (Jen's grandmother) to Chicago via London.

Then in the late 1950's, my grandfather Baba came to America from Iran as part of a new student visa program. When Pierre got off the boat in New York, he could hardly speak English and was confused why there were no gold coins on the side of the road like he heard about in Iran. Working too many odd jobs to recount and getting help from very kind neighbors, he made it through college in Omaha, Nebraska. After graduating from medical school, he settled in Chicago, became a successful radiologist, and eventually got his whole family out of Iran.

These journeys, while all different, share common themes. All my relatives fled religious persecution. In Russia, the Cossacks burned Jewish villages and told them to leave. In Germany, an evil dictator tried to wipe the entire Jewish people off the face of the earth. In Iran, Jews were forced to practice their religion in secrecy. My grandfather remembers one horrible Passover when Mashadi men raided his home, destroyed the Seder table, and beat his father in front of the entire family. All my relatives also left behind everything they had. None returned to their childhood homes. All came to America, the promised land, in search of a better life.

And so here I am today talking about how I achieved this milestone when really my ancestors put in the blood, effort, and often life, just so I could become a Bar Mitzvah in a Jewish community with no persecution. If how I and Judaism got here today is a mountain, then all I had to do was put a flag on top. My ancestors' stories help put things into perspective for me. Their stories make me appreciate all that I have. Their stories motivate me to make the most of my life.

This is because on a relative scale, I had it easy, but this ease did come at a price. Everyone in this room has a tragic story caused by faith. All of this combined pain and loss should have ended our religion, but it didn't. That is the reason we are such a strong people. It is because we have endured the worst imaginable but stayed true to the thing that binds us as one, our religion. After much grit and determination, we now have a holy land, religious freedom, and our fear has turned to pride.

In my Torah portion, God unleashes the ten plagues on Egypt to pressure Pharaoh to let our people go. The Jews are finally able to flee Egypt, much like my ancestors followed in their footsteps 3,000 years later in Russia, Germany, and Iran. In one section of my parsha, it says that God "hardened Pharaoh's heart." But by hardening Pharaoh's heart, God prevented Pharaoh from giving in earlier. It's as if God wanted the plagues to go all the way to #10, the worst of all, the killing of all first-born sons. I kept wrestling with a single question, why did God harden Pharaoh's heart?

Wouldn't it have been more humane to let Pharaoh see the light sooner, free the future Israelites earlier, spare the Egyptians from ever worsening plagues? Could it have been to punish Pharaoh and the fellow Egyptians for all the bad things they did to the Jewish slaves? Could it have been to make sure the Egyptians remember the pain so they never mess with the Jews again? But then I thought, maybe the message was not for the Egyptians at all. Maybe God was really talking to the Jews? Perhaps he was showing his people, follow me or else. Look what I have the power to do. Do as I say and you will enjoy the carrot, but always fear the stick.

I also want to point out something else I noticed from my parsha. Back in biblical times, God did so much for the Jews, yet we didn't even know who he was. God created the plagues, killed thousands, parted the Red Sea, all so we could be free from slavery. These actions earned our faith, but now that he has our faith, where has he been in more recent times? Where was he in Russia, Germany or Iran to help out my relatives? I have to be honest, this caused me to question God's existence. In earlier versions of this speech, I went back and forth whether or not I even believe in God. Finally, I came up with an analogy that helped me sort through my beliefs.

Computer programmers strive to create code that is self-reliant and efficient so that the code can solve its own kinks. I see God more as an expert programmer. He made our people self-sufficient so we didn't have to wait around for God to bail us out. God didn't part the Red Sea to get my ancestors out of Russia, Germany or Iran. It was individual family members who took the initiative, made the sacrifice, and put forth the effort. God has made us a stronger people. He gave us the values and intelligence to deal with our problems. I also see a related analogy with parenting. Parents should never solve all their kids' problems. Good parents let kids figure it out on their own. In the long run, this makes them stronger, and certainly more self-reliant.

In conclusion, I am overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude today. I am grateful for the 13 years I have spent on this earth. I am grateful for my family who support me and sacrifice everything for me. None of this would have been possible if it weren't for my ancestors risking their lives, all of our ancestors, who made our reality the one they dreamed of. So don't waste this oasis. Make them proud, make what they sacrificed worth the sacrifice, and make sure you appreciate it.

Thank you, Shabbat Shalom, and have a wonderful rest of the day.

**D'var Torah**  
**Congregation Rodeph Sholom**

Shabbat Shalom. Before I start, I would like to thank Rabbi Levine, who keeps it deep on the inside and hilarious on the outside, and Cantor Garfein, who has been preparing me for this day since Junior Choir in 2nd grade. I would like to thank Papa Stu, for being my partner-in-crime; Grandma Berta, for brisket, homemade applesauce, Pisha Paysha, and Casino; Grandpa Danny for constantly making me think; and Grandma Rozzy for teaching me how to feel. I would also like to thank Ben, for teaching me about all the baseball players, and for being the most caring person I know. I want to thank Susie, whose big personality fills up my world. And finally, Mommy and Daddy, I'm thanking you because I love you. All of you, and the rest of my family and friends, were in my mind when I thought about my Torah portion.

My Torah portion is largely about Abraham trying to find a suitable place to bury Sarah. However, the portion is named Chayei Sarah, Hebrew for The Life of Sarah, which leads me to believe that the portion is less about the fact that Sarah is dead and more that it is important to honor someone after they die. That led me to think: why is it important to honor someone after they die? Why did we B'nei Mitzvah, just last night, light a Peace Candle in commemoration of Kristallnacht? Why do we say Kaddish? Earlier this year, I had an opportunity to delve into these questions.

This spring, I visited the ancestral hometown of my mother's maternal side, Wroclaw, Poland, which was Breslau, Germany before WWII. I also spent a week in Berlin, Germany. I went with my mother, my Grandma Rozzy, Grandpa Danny, and 9 second and third cousins. The trip was a bridge to the people who are part of my DNA and the reason that I exist. I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the graves of my ancestors going as far back as 1799. We said Kaddish for each of our relatives and it felt to me as if I was speaking directly to them. I felt total and raw emotion and an undeniable connection to my family. It hit me that during the prior 200 years, my family likely stood in this very same space and said the very same prayer. It tied me to my family and my Judaism.

I was so fortunate that I was able to make that pilgrimage. I hope that I can one day make the same pilgrimage to the homelands of the rest of my family. In Berlin, I felt a connection to the Jews and many others that were persecuted during the Holocaust. Berlin is a city populated by memorials. At the Berlin Jewish Museum, the Memory Void is a designed void in the middle of the museum

with a floor covered with 10,000 metal faces. When walking in the void, each step knocked a face against other faces and created loud clanks. Even the smallest of faces still made a large noise that filled the room. You can't help but remember each and every face, the person it represents, and honor them. Memorializing ensures that we do not forget what happened and that we don't let it happen again.

So, what did my Torah portion and this experience teach me? I learned that a fantastic way to honor someone is to make sure they are never forgotten. Abraham tries to find a suitable place for Sarah to be buried so that she is not laid down somewhere where she will not be found again. Perhaps Abraham buried Sarah in a cave so that she would be protected against the elements and the test of time. Furthermore, he did not buy a small plot of land, he bought a field, a place where more of his descendants could be buried and never forgotten.

My Torah portion also taught me that while you should not forget the dead it is also important to be able to move on. After Sarah's death and burial, Isaac found love with Rebekah, married her and as the Torah says, "took comfort after the death of his mother." Possibly even more importantly, Abraham remarried a woman named Keturah and had 6 more children. Yet he was buried in the same plot of land as Sarah.

When I was in my European hometown, not only did I get to visit the graves of my ancestors, I got to visit their homes, their university, their town square and the location of their stores, what made them them. I truly learned who they were.

While my experiences this spring were a dramatic way to memorialize and honor the dead, there are many other ways to do so. I think the best way to honor someone is to take who they were and channel them into who you are. For instance, I never got to meet my Grandpa Harry, my Hebrew namesake, but I do know he was an amazing father. I know he never missed a baseball or soccer game or performance of any of his children. I know my dad strives to and does channel those ideals into his everyday life with me. I intend to do the same. Today I am wearing his watch from his bar mitzvah. My father's brother, Uncle Paul, who passed when I was five, was incredibly brave. Just weeks before his death, I had a very deep conversation about death, love, and family. I intend to honor his memory by being brave in the face of adversity. Today I am using his Tallis bag from his bar mitzvah. My Aunt Jina, who died when I was nine, meant so much to me. Aunt Jina was always the happiest person in the room and threw the best pool

parties which I looked forward to every summer. She taught me how to go at life in the happiest way possible. I intend to try to always do that.

While I grieved for Paul and Jina, I've been able to move on, much as Abraham and Isaac did. I still remember them and everything that made them special and have tried to use the lessons learned from them to be a better person.

I could talk about all of my ancestors such as Great-grandpa Hymie, whose ring I am wearing, Great-grandpa Adi whose Tallis I am wearing, and my other great-grandparents, but I only have 5 minutes today. Suffice it to say, I am listening and learning so that I can try and be like them too.

From my trip this Spring, I learned how much Judaism, its traditions, and its history really mean to me. I understand the power of Kaddish, the power of traditional honoring throughout centuries. The prayer calls back the memories of the departed not by mourning death but by honoring life. I understand why we lit the peace candle, so that their memories can be represented by something powerful, a fire. I understand deeply the need to "Never Forget" and the need to resist Neo-Naziism. The process of becoming a Bar Mitzvah helped me think about my experiences, go deep into myself and learn about the person I want to become.