

ADULT BAT MITZVAH PLAINVIEW JEWISH CENTER



**Rabbi Steven Conn
Cantor Morris Wolk**

**June, 1, 2013
23 Sivan 5773**

Carol Breshin

D'var Torah

God commands Moses to send twelve spies into Canaan - one representing each tribe. They are to report back as to what kind of country it is as well as what the people inhabiting it are like. Are they strong or weak, few or many?

They return forty days later with samples of the land's produce and with negative reports about the inhabitants. They say that the people are like giants and we are like grasshoppers compared to them. "We cannot attack that people for it is stronger than we!" they exclaim. Only Caleb and Joshua deliver a positive report but the Israelites believe the ten others. Their reaction was that they wanted to return to Egypt.

Moses and Aaron are totally dismayed by this reaction and "fall on their faces." Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes as a sign of mourning (a custom that is still practiced at funerals). Joshua and Caleb emphatically tell the nation that the land is an "exceedingly good land. The Lord is with us. Have no fear of the people of the country!" The Israelites threaten to stone Joshua and Caleb.

God then appears in the Israelite camp and is very angry. He speaks to Moses, threatening to disown and destroy the nation and to begin anew with Moses. Moses pleads with God not to destroy the Israelites by saying "If you slay this people... the nations who have heard your fame will say - it must be because the Lord is powerless to bring that people into the land." Moses appeases God on the Israelites' behalf. God's verdict, however, isn't absolute forgiveness. The current generation is condemned to die in the wilderness in which they will wander for forty years. The spies die in a plague except for Joshua and Caleb.

When Moses repeats God's words to the people, they are overcome by grief. They attempt to enter Canaan against Moses' instructions and in violation of God's command. They meet with disaster and defeat in battle at Hormah at the hands of the Amalekites and the Canaanites.

How could this entire episode of the spies report have had a better outcome? Rabbi Marc Angel, when commenting on this parshah in "Torah Sparks"*1 suggests that the spies should have reported their findings to Moses in a closed meeting. Moses could have combined the reports of both the pessimists and the optimists so that the final disclosure would be a balanced one. It would reflect the confidence of the optimists and the

concerns of the pessimists. It would convey honesty about the dangers ahead but faith and confidence that God would bring them victory.

The lack of faith in God to help them was the major causative factor in the negative report of all the spies except Caleb and Joshua. Would the Jewish people have survived and the State of Israel be 65 years old this year if this lack of faith had been a dominant factor throughout our history?

I think not.

#1. www.vscj.org/Jewish Living and Learning/Weekly Parshah/Torah Sparks

Personal Statement

Becoming a Bat Mitzvah has earned me the privilege of reading from the Torah. As, a child, I grew up in an Orthodox home; the consideration of this privilege never even crossed my mind. Now as I become a Bat Mitzvah I feel a sense of importance and equality as a congregant of the Plainview Jewish Center reading from the Torah.

Mitzvah Project

For my mitzvah project I have chosen to be a sponsor in the program M'Yad L'Yad- (Long Island's Helping Hands). Anonymously, volunteer sponsors send the family-in-need that they are paired with a package of things that will help them materially as well as a note providing friendly support.

The family I am sponsoring consists of two older parents and an adult son. The package I sent so far contained various household items, two pairs of almost new womens shoes, and a Kohl's \$50 gift certificate. I hope that I get a response from the family and that we can develop a continuing relationship.

Elise Epstein

D'var Torah

"For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land" (Moses)

Last summer my family and I visited Israel for my daughter's Bat Mitzvah. We enjoyed bountiful meals, especially the delicious fresh food we ate and wine we drank, all Israeli grown. We also stayed at Hagoshrim Kibbutz, one of the many self supporting agricultural communities located in the Upper Galilee. While there, I was impressed by the abundance of the land and its resources and learned that Israeli agricultural efforts have been very successful. Israel produces 70% of its food requirements and exports about \$800 million annually, including produce such as flowers and exotic fruits and vegetables. As in biblical times, Israel is still famous for their dates and exports 12,000 tons of dates each year.

In our Torah portion, Parasha Sh'lach L'cha ("go for yourself"), Moses sent twelve scouts, one from each tribe, to the land of Canaan to determine if there were forests and if it was fertile and productive. He also asked that they bring back some fruit from the land. It was critical for Moses and the people to know how fertile the land was so they could produce enough food to feed the nation and all the livestock. When the scouts came to the Valley of Eshcol, they cut down a large branch with clusters of grapes which was so heavy it required two men to carry it back supported by a pole. They also returned with pomegranates and figs. They reported to Moses that the land was "flowing with milk and honey" and showed him the fruit they collected. The honey referred to the sweet fruit of the date palms and the milk referred to the goats they saw laden with milk thus alluding to a fertile land. Moses told the people "For the Lord your G-d is bringing you into a good land". G-d also promised its goodness would provide sustenance for future generations.

Unlike Egypt, Israel did not have the Nile as a reliable water source. Instead, it was a land of hills and valleys and depended mostly upon rain which is unpredictable. The very existence of Israel as a sovereign nation was dependent upon the spirit of its people who were lifted to high ideals, courage and belief in G-d, by their sense of mission and dedication to the land. So the land not only provided sustenance but also nurtured the human spirit and allowed people to believe in something beyond themselves. No other nation successfully settled the land until the Jewish people returned 2000 years later from exile. When Jews began resettling the land, their first efforts were toward reclaiming the arid land which was rendered untillable from deforestation, soil erosion and neglect. To overcome these obstacles, the early settlers terraced the hilly regions, drained swampland,

removed salt from the land, and started the process of reforestation. Today, trees are continually planted with the help of the JNF organization, which also develops Israeli land and infrastructure.

Our Torah portion, Sh'lach L'Cha, reinforces the parallel of the original scouts who went forth to start the process of claiming their land and then 2000 years later, when the first pioneers established kibbutzim and occupied their homeland to become self sustaining and to achieve their destiny. The Jewish people inherited a desolate land and fought to reclaim its productivity using new agricultural innovations, modern irrigation and water management, and reclamation methods. Over the centuries the Jewish people felt a special connection and nostalgia toward Israel, as a source of strength and belonging, and a touch stone of spirituality. Their ingenuity, spirit, determination and beliefs transformed Israel into an abundant oasis and the land of promise once again. Theodor Herzl led the movement to recognize Israel as a Jewish state when he said "If you will it, it is no dream". This concept helped to encourage a new self-image as pioneers and helped to transform Israel from a desert into a rich bountiful farmland.

The lesson I learned from studying this Torah portion was that dedication to achieving a goal and overcoming obstacles requires faith, tenacity, hard work and belief in your own abilities. Israeli leadership in farm management is a great example of self determination, resourcefulness and spiritual connection to the land.

I would like to thank Rabbi Conn for his spiritual guidance and educational insight throughout, and Cantor Wolk for his patience and guidance in preparing me to recite my Torah and Haftarah prayers.

Personal Statement

Becoming an adult Bat Mitzvah has been a fulfillment of a long-held dream. While studying over the last two years with my class, I have expanded my knowledge of Jewish prayers, holidays and customs, historical and contemporary Jewish philosophy, reading and translating Hebrew passages and understanding our relationship with Israel, with an emphasis on women's roles both old and new.

Personally claiming my right to become a full adult within Judaism has provided me with a sense of empowerment and commitment that I have never felt before. Also, I was inspired by my daughter's becoming a Bat Mitzvah over the last few years. I will always value and cherish this opportunity and the friends that I have made, while allowing me to grow personally and spiritually.

Mitzvah Project

I was inspired to sponsor the Lev LaLev (heart to heart) organization, in order to raise awareness and provide funding for disadvantaged and orphan girls in the Rubin-Zeffren Children's home in Netanya, Israel. They provide a safe and warm haven for girls who have no fail of their own to nurture and care for them due to war or illness. The funds contribute to the girl's education, mental and physical health, recreation and other therapeutic programs. Also, the sponsorship serves to provide for each of the girls Bat Mitzvah ceremony preparation and celebration at 100% of the donated amount. I have set up a website through Lev LaLev in order to give back to others less fortunate but who are in desperate need of care and support. If anyone wishes to donate and help the orphan girls through my website, please let me know and I will send you the link to the site.

Stacey Goldsmith

D'var Torah

Each week at services a torah portion is read. My part of the torah portion talks about the Jewish tradition of the blessing over the Challah.

The Challah is a very important part of our torah portion. At the end of our torah reading the Israelites give offerings to g-d. To this day we are still given the same offerings. Challah refers to a small portion that was set aside for Jewish priests. On Shabbat the blessing is said over two loaves. Each has six braids that together represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Before baking the challah, the tradition is to break off a small piece of dough a size of an olive and burn it while making a blessing. The Challah is usually broken apart and not cut with a knife. This is thought to extend our hand to g-d the one who gave us this offering in the new land. The Israelites were very grateful for the bread. To this day when you see the challah you feel the presence of Jewish heritage. The challah is not only a representation of a piece of bread. It is a special reminder that the Israelites should listen to g-d to guide for their future. The Challah is a symbol of the end of the week and the good fortune for the next week.

Challah is always present in our Jewish festive occasions, weddings, and bas/bar mitzvah's and of course on Shabbat. I think challah brings us closer to g-d. It also brings us closer as a community or family. I believe when we say the blessings, we are always thankful for what we have and for what we are given. We are hopeful for things to come in the future. I believe that when we share a piece of challah, we are trying to spread good fortune. It also, helps us to start over and gives us a clean slate.

After studying my torah portion, I have learned that Challah is not just yeast risen egg bread. It has a symbolic meaning. Challah brings people closer together and closer to g-d.

Personal Statement

I remember when I was a little girl going to Plainview Jewish center for services with my family. I would sit there not understanding what was being said and wondering why was I there. Thirty years later and after completing two years of Hebrew school sitting in the same sanctuary at the same temple, I now understand what it feels like to have a connection with Judaism. They say as you get older your experiences have much more meaning. Now I feel that when I am sitting in a service at PJC it is not foreign and I understand the significance of what is going on around me.

Now that I have a daughter in Hebrew school, it sparked my interest in learning more about Judaism. How can I tell my daughter she had to go to Hebrew school if I was not willing to do the same? It means a lot to me that my daughter and I are going through Hebrew school together. Now I feel when I go to temple with my family it is a bonding experience for us all. Becoming a bat mitzvah has taught me so many things. Most importantly, it has brought me full circle back to a place where I grew up and now where my daughter is growing up too.

Mitzvah Project

My Mitzvah project is with a family from M'Yad L'Yad. It is an organization that helps families in need. They not only provide necessities but encourage an ongoing relationship with the family you are chosen to help. It gives me great pleasure to be paired with a family that could use our assistance. I look forward to an ongoing relationship.

Dorene Greenberg

D'var Torah

In this week's Parsha, Shelach Lechah, G-d allows Moses to send out 12 scouts, one from each tribe, to survey the land of Israel. Ten scouts return with a negative account and two provide positive feedback. The majority of the Jewish people are fearful and discouraged by the reports and think about returning to Egypt. G-d is displeased by the lack of faith shown by the people and decrees that the Jewish people will continue to live in the wilderness for 40 more years until this generation of people is gone. Only then will the Jewish people be able to go to claim their homeland. Some people reconsider and attempt to fight the current inhabitants of the Holy Land only to be met with swift defeat. The Parsha continues to discuss how the scouts who returned with negative reports meet with an ill fate. G-d gives the people different opportunities to repent including animal sacrifices, reserving crops, and keeping a portion of bread aside when making challah. One man is sentenced to death by stoning after he gathers wood on Shabbat. Finally, G-d helps create a reminder of the mitzvot for the people by having Moses tell them to wear tzitzit under their garments.

I found this week's torah portion to be challenging. Although I read many different Dvar Torahs I was still perplexed with the harshness of some of the decrees. The Jewish people had only recently been freed from 400 years of oppression and slavery. The idea that they had doubts even with all of the miracles that they had just witnessed is understandable. One interpretation that I found clarified things for me was that Moses was having trouble convincing all the people of G-d's plan. Moses feels that if he can win the support of these scouts who are the leaders of the various tribes he will have more influence over the people. Moses, however, understands that this mission may not go according to his plan. He therefore requests that the scouts bring back crops to prove the land is fruitful. This was one way to ensure that the people would want to go to the Promised Land. There is another interpretation that suggests the taking of crops is also one way to claim possession of the land.

Moses was having difficulty leading the Jewish people. He could not afford to have dissension in the people, which may explain the harsh sentence for the man gathering the wood on Shabbat. Some scholars said that this man was given many warnings and opportunities to change his actions, but his blatant disregard for G-d's command could not

be ignored. These people living in the desert needed a strong bond to G-d and to one another.

I believe this week's Parsha highlights some of the challenges of making decisions. We often are faced with choosing a correct path for ourselves and our families. We try to seek the advice of others, but in the end we need to choose what we believe to be right. It is easy to be influenced by people's negativity. We must try to disregard those who try to discourage us. When I was a young girl, I had an opportunity to be in an advanced class. My teacher at the time did not know if I could handle the work because of some of my work habits. My father said that she should give me the chance to succeed. It turned out to be the best choice, because I really did well. We need to be able to have courage to face different challenges that arise in our lives. Hopefully, G-d will help to guide us all on a good path.

Personal Statement

I feel a great sense of accomplishment being able to achieve my Bat Mitzvah. I started out on this course of study to learn more about Judaism and to be able to better follow the service. I wanted to be able to read and understand Hebrew better. In addition, I was happy to set an example for my children that Jewish study is a lifelong pursuit.

I was very fortunate to have been able to share this experience with a wonderful group of women. Over the course of our studies, we have been able to share many personal experiences with each other. I feel that this experience has created a special bond between us.

I am very thankful to both Rabbi Conn and Cantor Wolk for teaching me and helping to make this day possible. I had a tremendous sense of pride to be able to read from the Torah for the first time.

Mitzvah Project

For my mitzvah project I am going to raise money for a charity called Sharsheret. This is an organization which helps young Jewish women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer. My family has been active in supporting this organization over the years. I hope to be able to walk with them this fall to support this good cause.

Melissa Hafkin

D'var Torah

This week's torah portion is Shelach Lecha and the part I chose to discuss is about the stranger who refers to someone who wants to become part of the Jewish people. In this section the stranger does become part of the Jewish people and is accepted as an Israelite.

This has reminded me of a part of my families past history and the feeling of thankfulness that I have always felt toward the Jewish people, and the reason is as follows. When my great-grandmother Jenny was a child, she lost her mother at a very young age. Her family lived in Lopie, Poland (a small town on the outside of Warsaw). This area was extremely poor. Her father wanted to give Jenny a better life so he left her in the care of a Jewish family that were family friends so he could go to the States make enough money to bring his daughter back to the States with him. During Jenny's time with this family when she wasn't in school she was taught to prepare foods, cook, Jewish laws and Jewish holidays. Yes she was catholic but this family WAS Jewish and this was the environment she was being raised in. This family took great care of Jenny until she was 18. At that time Jenny got a letter stating that her dad had started making a good living and felt that Jenny was now old enough to travel by herself to the States so this family prepared Jenny for her travel and Jenny said that was last time she ever saw or heard from the family ever. Jenny believed her first letter to them informing them that she arrived safely was received - all other letters were returned. Jenny found out years later that the family was lost in the Holocaust. This is how the stranger reminded me of Jenny being a stranger among the Jewish people.

I also have a great connection to the stranger being a convert in a sanctuary when many of its congregation are born Jewish. As a convert, I chose to be Jewish to honor the family that raised my great-grandmother Jenny, and to fit into the Jewish community. I follow the traditional laws and try to add some of the modern conservative traditions. With that said many people in our Jewish community aren't fully accepting to any changes, therefore with all my studying for my conversion and my Bat Mitzvah I still feel as though I am a stranger amongst my own people.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Rabbi Conn for all the time that he took and the commitment he had taken on by teaching the first Bat Mitzvah class at the PJC. I would also like to thank Canter Wolk for teaching me to hold somewhat of a note, therefore I haven't broken any windows in the temple today. All joking aside Cantor Wolk your help has been so gratefully appreciated beyond words can say.

I would like to thank this Bat Mitzvah class for the encouragement we have given one another during these two years. We have made old friendships stronger and created new ones. We will always be bonded by this time together and by this challah cover we now donate to the PJC.

I would also like to thank my children Austin, Harrison, Sam and Brooke for telling me on Sunday mornings that "MOMMY YOU HAVE TO GO TO HEBREW SCHOOL"! I would like thank my husband Allan who has tolerated my frustration even when I thought I just couldn't do this.

Personal Statement

Becoming an adult Bat Mitzvah brings me great pleasure. It is the final portion of my conversion. I converted as an adult so I didn't have the chance to be a Bat Mitzvah and as I have grown to find out now, that years ago many women were not Bat Mitzvah. This was very surprising for me to learn. Not only did I learn that but I also learned that if women want to wear tallit there is a great deal of controversy regarding this. I feel that as a Bat Mitzvahed Jewish woman I have made the decision to wear tallit because I feel that the fringes remind me of the Jewish laws. Although untraditional for women to wear tallit I feel it is right for me. There are many women who even as we are here today need to be guarded at the western wall by police because they will be humiliated and or attacked for praying wearing tallit. This is a shame. I am happy that on this special day and when I come to pray in the future I have the freedom here to wear my tallit. This is just one topic we touched on during our Bat Mitzvah class and I would like to thank Illyse Conn for conducting that class, I really enjoyed her teaching and the way she enlightened us about this topic. We also were taught to read Hebrew, Hebrew vocabulary and Jewish history and kashrut laws. Now that I have completed my Adult Bat Mitzvah class I would like to continue learning modern day conservative Judaism and Jewish history so I could pass it down to my children and future generations.

Mitzvah Project

My Bat Mitzvah project was created for a special young man, Spencer Reis. Spencer has not only been a special person to our family, he has also been a superstar in the PJC for many years whether it was being a mentor to younger children, or narrating a "man vs. Jew" video or playing in the klezmer band. Spencer found great solace in his religion and in the PJC. When he was not studying or at the PJC he played soccer which he also loved.

Unfortunately although Spencer was a strong young man, G-d needed an angel like Spencer in heaven. My mitzvah project is called "Stand Up For Spencer Cares," a scholarship fund for high school seniors. The monies collected are through fundraisers initiated by his older brothers, Ryan and Josh. This scholarship will be presented at the senior awards night. Spencer had always been a very studious child and helped all of his friends with their homework and studying and helped them prepare for their upcoming state testings. This scholarship is a way that Spencer will always be remembered and will be able to continue what he loved doing helping other kids.

Lee Hauptman

D'var Torah

This week's portion of the Torah is Parshat Shelach Lecha. It deals with Moses sending out 12 scouts to check on the land of Canaan. Only 2 scouts of the 12 come back optimistic. I try to live my life optimistic.

They had to make many sacrifices and offerings when they left Egypt to show G-d that they could fulfill what was expected of them before they entered the land G-d had given them. Before Passover, I feel that I personally make sacrifices. It is a very trying time for me in cleaning and shopping and changing over the kitchen. When I get done with all there is to do and we have our Seder I have a good feeling. I do this in order to show my commitment to Judaism.

I keep a traditional and kosher home. When my children lived at home we always had Shabbat dinner together on Friday night. They knew it was the one meal at which they were always expected to be. However, they also knew they could have a friend join us. I still make that dinner now for my daughter and her family. We go to the family friendly Shabbat services which is just a continuation of that dinner. The holidays are another way we celebrate together and always have guests at our table.

Personal Statement

I am a shy, serious and sensitive person. Perhaps that has to do with my name. Very few people pronounce it properly. So I decided when I had children to give them easy, simple names. Steven (who became Stephen because that was more popular then), Gary (who became Garry because it seemed to go with Barry) and Joyce (who became Joy).

I learned how to write and read the Hebrew alphabet and vowels as a young girl. I never learned how to use it with prayer. I had to relearn some vowels and letters when my children went to Hebrew school. This was when it was adopted as a national language rather than just for prayer. I marveled and kvelled at my children when they became bar and bat mitzvah and seemed to be so comfortable upon the bema. I am proud of my Judaism.

I have met and been inspired by many women who read from the Torah and Haftorah including some who are here on my behalf. I was so glad to have this class come about at this time. When I signed up for the class I thought I would feel out of place. Instead I found myself in very

good company. I am looking forward to being on the bema (not without some trepidation) and carrying on this tradition.

Mitzvah Project

When we embarked on becoming B'nai Mitzvah we discussed doing a mitzvah project. I have done several things which could have been considered my project, but I chose to start a new project.

M'Yad L'Yad means helping hands. I started working with them last summer. They suggested that you mail out 4 packages a year. The first one was for summer. The next is for the start of school. The third is for Xmas/Chanukah and one for Easter/Passover. I have a woman who has a son who will be 11 this year. Since my oldest grandson will be 10, I have an idea of what he would like. He expressed an interest in Legos. Since my grandson is also interested in Legos we went shopping together to send him something for his birthday. I put in little notes and try to say pleasant things about the seasons we are going into. I try to send treats and cleaning supplies and gift cards when I can.

I also contacted them as I have many toys that my grandchildren have outgrown. I am working with them to try and give bigger toys and other baby things to someone who works with a shelter to make other people benefit from what we no longer need rather than just throw it out.

They gave me the name of a woman who has a little boy aged 2. My daughter put together a box full of clothes that my younger grandson has outgrown together with some smaller toys and books.

Lisa Hindi

D'var Torah

Moses, why was he such an effective leader? When Moses told the people to take possession of the Land of Israel, and they wanted to send scouts first, Moses agreed, while knowing it was not necessary. Moses sent the 12 scouts, one from each of the tribes, and they were all leaders of their respective clans, and gave them very specific instructions on their tasks, which was to report on the quality of the land, the water supply, the soil, and the strength of the cities. Of these 12 men, only 2 followed Moses' directions. The other 10 decided to become spies, doubting Moses. The spies tried to give a negative report to Moses by showing the extraordinary fruit to Moses, and saying that the inhabitants were mighty and the cities were well fortified, and that it was impossible for them to conquer the land on their own. They did not believe that G-d would assist them, fight for them and protect them. Caleb tried to bolster their courage by pointing out that G-d has been miraculously providing manna and worked alongside with Moses to split the sea when they escaped Egypt.

What does it take to be a strong effective leader? What traits are needed? Are they inherent or developed? Did G-d choose Moses to lead because He saw those traits or did He know that Moses could become a leader when challenged? Leaders need to have a vision, or as in the case of Moses, believe in G-d's vision. They also need to have courage in the face of adversity, and the ability to motivate others to follow that vision. and they also need to have followers. Moses believed in G-d's words and most importantly, had the leadership abilities.

I believe that some people are born to lead, and some develop their leadership abilities along life's pathways.

Moses fervently believed in equality and freedom to practice religion. He rose to the challenge when his people were oppressed. In modern day society we have leaders whose abilities may not be inherent, but rise to the challenge when needed. As a new Police Officer, I never had to be a role model or lead people while growing up and found myself having to handle many different crises, sometimes surrounded by innocent civilians. I took the oath to serve and protect, and always had faith in the greater good, and now must rise to the challenge. There were many times that I did not feel like a leader at that exact moment, but my belief system pushed me to lead. When I have believed in a vision or the task at hand, I somehow found the courage to lead, and the ability to motivate others to do what was needed.

Personal Statement

Recently, I was told that my husband's grandfather believed that learning doesn't stop until you pass away. At a very early age, I wanted to learn about Judaism, but for various reasons, I was never given the opportunity to learn in a formal setting. Growing up, I spent much of my time with my maternal grandmother who passed on her love for holiday baking to me, but I didn't get to learn about why we do the things we do. I knew how to light candles, how to make the most amazing mandelbrodt, and how to make a nice seder. As a teenager, I always felt special, being Jewish, but didn't know why. When I became a Police Officer, I was usually the only Jew in a police precinct, and became the "go to" person for the WHY questions? Why do you people do this, and why do you people do that? I still felt special, but was frustrated that I didn't usually have the answers. When my father passed away and I was sitting shiva, there was a night that just a few friends were over, some Jewish, some Catholic. One of them noticed the Jewish Book of Why sitting on my bookshelf and that night we invented a Game Show! We would pick out some interesting facts from the book, and quiz each other. Maybe, doing this while sitting shiva was not the proper thing to do, but we LEARNED that night. It refueled my desire to learn more about Judaism.

When I asked Rabbi Conn about an adult Bat Mitzvah class and the "feeler" email went out, the response was more than amazing! How wonderful that this many women felt the same pull to learn, and achieve this milestone in their lives. The widespread ages in our group clearly demonstrate what my grandfather-in-law felt. We keep on learning until we pass away. Just as a Tallit surrounds us and sometimes even provides warmth and comfort, so does my Jewish education. I hope to continue the learning process for as long as I can, and inspire my daughters to do the same.

Keep on learning!

Mitzvah Project

For the past 16 years, I have been privileged to be a volunteer in an organization called POPPA (Police Officers Providing Peer Assistance) that is staffed wholly by NYPD cops of all different ranks, helping cops. We started out in 1996 with a confidential Helpline open 24/7. We have since expanded to Outreach programs, Resiliency Training, Suicide Prevention Trainings, and a Trauma Response Team.

This past fall, I was asked to become the Coordinator of the Trauma Team, consisting of over 100 cops who respond on their off duty time to help their fellow “brothers and sisters” when they have experienced certain traumatic situations while at work. My responsibilities include the scheduling of the 100 volunteers, training, dispatching the teams to the cops in need, and organizing the trauma debriefings that the affected cops need. We also send teams to other Police Departments around the country as needed, such as New Orleans and most recently, Boston. Since the NYPD is “open” 24/7, POPPA’s doors are as well, and I am honored to be a part of this amazing effort to help heal our cops

Zita Jospa

D'var Torah

The next generation of Jewish people has finally reached the promised land after 40 years. They grew up never knowing humiliation and bondage.

I am like the next generation, believing in my own ability to be victorious in achieving my goal to become a Bat Mitzvah. Through this difficult journey, the camaraderie that we share as a determined group of learned women has given me the courage to persevere and attain this lifelong goal.

In the past two and a half years, "I have made it to the Promised land" our special group of women had faith in each other to realize our goal. Thank you Rabbi Conn and Cantor Wolk for your confidence and support in helping me on my journey.

Personal Statement

Being in Synagogue has become a very big part of my daily life. Since my dad passed away, I have made a commitment to attend the daily morning Minyan. I have now come to realize that this ritual has given me the strength to cope with daily pressures of life.

Additionally, I began learning the art of Tai Chi three years ago, which has contributed in shaping my spiritual self.

Because of these life-changing events, I feel I was able to make the decision to become a Bat Mitzvah.

Mitzvah Project

ACLD

Adults and Children with Learning and Developmental Disabilities, Inc.

Fonda Leibowitz

D'var Torah

This week's Torah portion, Shelach Lecha, tells the biblical account of the 12 spies sent out to scout the land of Canaan. The spies' bleak report teaches us about our outlook on life and our understanding of our surroundings. Returning from scouting the land, the spies used their opinion to manipulate the people and destroy their vision of continuing to the Promised Land.

The people should have focused on faith in God and his promise. Only Joshua and Caleb brought back an optimistic report saying: "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it" (Numbers 13:30).

God had promised a land flowing with milk and honey. The people did not have trust and faith in God to accept his promise. Maybe it was easier to return to Egypt where their lives as slaves would be more desirable than possibly be overpowered by the unknown land. The spies were fearful to enter the Promised Land because they saw themselves as "grasshoppers" and would be overcome by the Canaanites and Amalekites. No one stopped to think and listen to Joshua and Caleb's account of the new land. Instead, they expressed their fears and were afraid to proceed to the Promised Land.

Many times our fears and perception of ourselves are filled with challenges and obstacles that can prevent us from moving forward towards our own individual Promised Lands. We all face an uncertain future as individuals. I have personally faced obstacles in my journey to spirituality. Acceptance of reality has been difficult for me at times. I sometimes ask myself, "how can this happen" or why did this happen? Understanding my Torah Portion has restored my faith and belief to see beyond these barriers in life.

Personal Statement

Today I finally become a Bat Mitzvah. But why now? Why 20 years late? (wink) As an adult woman, I feel that it's time to develop a better understanding of Judaism.

Growing up, I was never offered a Hebrew School education. My Jewish life consisted only of having a kosher home and celebrating some of the Jewish holidays. I knew that we ate brisket on Rosh Hashanah, latkes on Chanukah and matzah on Passover. But I didn't know exactly what we were celebrating. What does the shofar have to do with Rosh Hashanah? Why do I have to eat greasy, fried foods on Chanukah (not that I minded)? And let me get this straight, Charlton Heston took us out of Egypt and now I can't eat bread for a week? What's that all about?

I always enjoyed the holidays, and still do. But now I have learned and developed a desire to study and learn more. Rabbi Conn and Cantor Wolk have been an inspiration to me. Learning with Rabbi Conn and all the great women in my Sunday morning class has been a wonderful experience that I hope continues. Studying my Torah and Haftarah portions with Cantor Wolk for months has enabled me to stand on the Bimah with confidence and pride as a Bat Mitzvah.

Marilyn Leibowitz

D'var Torah

I am honored to have the opportunity to write about parsha shelach-lecha. It resonated very personally for me. During my middle years, and through my working years and in my current years, my philosophy has been that no one should ever feel, and therefore appear, as a grasshopper. When I was a young child, all the way into my early 20's, I was very shy and felt somewhat like a grasshopper— small and not too visible.

In this parsha, g-d told Moses to send twelve spies to seek out the land of Canaan in order to come back and tell the Israelites about the land, is it fruitful, do the people live in fortresses, is there an abundance of food to eat? The twelve spies, who went into the land of Canaan, came back showing evidence of the fruitfulness of the land of Canaan. Nevertheless ten of the spies told Moses and g-d that the people there were giants. They reported that **"all the people that we saw in it were giants ..in our eyes we were like grasshoppers so we must have seemed in their eyes too."** G-d was very angry that the ten spies came back with that attitude. G-d felt they showed no faith in their own ability and in g-d's power to keep them safe and provide for them. After all that He did for the tribes in the past, taking them out of Egypt, how could they not trust in g-d's ability to take care of them now? Where was their faith in g-d?

When I read this passage it really surprised me. How could the spies react this way? They showed no attempt at trying to overcome the challenges. In so many ways it appeared that they did not want to attempt to meet the challenges and trust g-d. I could really see why g-d became angry at them. G-d gave them a chance to come back enthusiastic, feeling strong, and powerful and accepting the challenge that g-d was presenting, keeping faith that g-d would help and guide them to a new land. The spies were feeling unable to move forward.

As I grew into an adult, I studied and learned that how one appears or presents oneself is how others will perceive you. For my part, I consciously did what I needed to do to change my perception of myself. Subsequently, as I grew into my middle years and later, I was perceived differently. With this modified philosophy I was able to meet many challenges for myself and my family.

In my professional life, as a woman, I had to be sure to never appear as a grasshopper. I had to be taken seriously or others would have perceived me as weak and insignificant. Moreover, my ideas would never have been taken seriously.

The parsha lesson for me confirms my belief...how we perceive ourselves affects our self image. Most of the time, how we project ourselves is how people will perceive us. In addition, at times we have to do all that we need to do to make things happen, after which we need to put our hands in g-d and hold our faith in g-d to help us do the right thing. This parsha is relevant in today's world, encouraging us to look at ourselves in a positive light so that others will perceive us positively as well.

Personal Statement

Growing up as an only child and a girl, my parents never even thought about giving me a traditional Hebrew education. My parents grew up Orthodox and after their marriage became Conservative. As a young child I was given piano lessons not Hebrew lessons. However, around my 10th year, a Workman's Circle shuller opened in my neighborhood. Since I spoke to my grandparents in Yiddish and my parents were Workman's Circle members, they decided to send me to learn Yiddish. I learned how to read and write Yiddish only. I attended this school for about two years. I really enjoyed it. However, when I went to Temple in Brooklyn with my parents I was still not able to follow along from the books that were used to pray. I thought everything was so high level that I could never achieve that standard.

Fast forward to having children, joining Plainview Jewish Center, and my children became a B'not Mitzvah, who are now fluent readers of Hebrew. In addition, my husband and I became more and more involved in PJC. I would read the English, as I learned the prayers in Hebrew by rote, but I was never able to follow along. I felt left out; I felt very uncomfortable.

After I retired, I made the ability to learn Hebrew something I really wanted to accomplish. I was attending Shabbat services more frequently and wanted to really be able to follow all the prayers and be able to "keep the place" and not look over to see where they are up to in the service. I wanted to feel very much a part of the service.

When the Adult Bat Mitzvah class became available in 2011, I signed up immediately. It has given me so much satisfaction, that I could start at the very beginning of the course knowing very little and accomplish the learning required to read prayers and Torah. I feel pleased about meeting my immediate goal and who knows how much further I will take this new skill of reading Hebrew.

Mitzvah Project

The organization, M'yad L'yad, has been my Mitzvah project for the past 12 years. While I was working full time I wanted to give back in a way that would not involve too much personal time.

I became an anonymous "sponsor" of an elderly woman. I helped her by sending her, from time to time, a box full of items, through the local UPS store. I purchased things she requested, that were not perishable, and that were too costly for her to buy. I purchased and sent, per her request, over the counter drugstore and supermarket items. My recipient's name is Shirley. She and I correspond and got to know each other via letters I place in the boxes I send, without ever knowing her last name or address. Shirley continues to be my "recipient".

I became more involved in M'yad L'yad when I retired seven years ago. I was asked to join the Board of Directors and subsequently became Vice-President, which is the position I hold now. I also encouraged Marty to join the Board of Directors.

For my Bat Mitzvah project, I decided that I might interest my Adult Bat Mitzvah fellow classmates to also become sponsors of needy recipients. As I appreciate what this organization does to help so many people on LI, on a personal level, I wanted to encourage others to get involved. It thereby became my mitzvah project.

Since the process is very unique, I made a presentation to my class explaining the process of filling and getting the boxes to the recipients. Although it seems simple to us, this direct donation of supplies to a needy family is very meaningful and feels good, since it is a direct mitzvah. In most cases, one can develop a personal relationship with a recipient even if it is only on a first name basis.

As a result of my presentation, I created interest in the organization with my fellow Bat Mitzvah classmates. Ultimately, five of my classmates became sponsors of M'yad L'yad recipients. They are all helping families with children or single people.

It is a tremendous feeling of Mitzvah for me to have a more sponsors helping at least five or more needy individuals.

I hope my classmates get the same feeling of doing a Mitzvah as I do, while helping needy individuals. I hope they continue to be sponsors beyond our class experience.

Rhoda Meshover

D'var Torah

G-d spoke to Moses and told him to send twelve Israelite men to scout the land of Canaan. Moses then told the scouts to check it out, and when they returned after forty days, two different reports were made. Ten scouts felt it would be too dangerous for the tribes to settle there. When they gave their reasons, it frightened the people and panic set in. The scouts did not realize that speaking their minds would provoke alarm among the people. They had no faith in themselves or G-d. The other two scouts felt it would be a challenge that G-d was on their side, and would present many opportunities for them. G-d said that those who spoke against him would not be allowed to enter the new land, and they would die in the wilderness. However, their children would be a part of the land they rejected. The children would roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for their fathers' unfaithfulness to G-d.

I feel the most important theme of the Torah portion is Faith. I have faith that G-d surrounds me daily and gives me the stamina to solve my problems. In my life, I have had many wonderful happenings, but have also encountered adversity. I do not always understand the reasoning for the misfortune, but I look on the affirmative side. I can be stressed and fall to pieces, or I can try and take a positive attitude to carry on. I turn a negative into a positive, make lemonade out of lemons, and look at my glass as being "half full" rather than "half empty".

These scouts who were sent as leaders, did not put their trust in G-d and lost the support of their tribes. Perhaps if they had more faith, the ending would have been different. Certainly for me, faith has made a big difference in my life. It has allowed me to move forward, and see things in a positive light.

Personal Statement

I remember hearing that a Hebrew class may be forming leading to a Bat Mitzvah, and I decided to be part of this experience. Very often, my mother would remind me to try and learn something new each day.

When my husband, Saul, and I moved to Plainview, a new community, it was very important to join a synagogue for religious and social purposes. I involved myself in many activities at PJC, and enjoyed volunteering wherever help was needed. My daughter was educated and later married at PJC, and Jewish traditions were carried on to my grandsons, who had their Bar Mitzvahs in NJ. My daughter said I did wonderfully with all the customs, but I felt something was missing. Each holiday, when I sat with the family at services, I would read the texts in English. All the letters and symbols looked "Greek" to me, and I felt awkward. This is the reason I took advantage of the Bat Mitzvah class so I could participate in Judaism in another way.

At this time of my life, studying each day has been stimulating, and also very frustrating. I have had the opportunity to meet lovely women in my situation. I do not know if I will master the art of reading quickly or understanding many of the interpretations, but I do comprehend much more than ever before.

This is a significant milestone for me, and I am grateful to all the helping hands who reached out to share in this event. Todah Rabah to Rabbi Conn for his dedication to my class in introducing the Hebrew alphabet, history, customs and discussions each week; to Cantor Wolk for his patience and magnificent voice; and to my daughter, Aileen, and her family, for their support, encouragement, love and persistence in helping me attain my goal.

Mitzvah Project

I have been involved in many mitzvah projects. Each morning, in the small chapel, I am part of a minyan to make up the required ten (10) people for congregants who are saying kaddish. This has been an ongoing way of life for me, and I hope I can continue to be of service for many more years.

Through Sisterhood, I send letters to the parents of Bar/Bat Mitzvah children congratulating them, and asking if they wish to have their children's names inscribed in the BOOK OF LIFE. It is a lovely memory for all. This beautiful display is housed in the showcase of PJC's lobby.

I enjoy being part of an Advisory Committee (PACE), from the Mid-Island "Y". Programs are reviewed, and ideas are contributed, which helps guide the professionals in their work to enable seniors to remain in their homes. Through telephone conversations with two senior people, outside of this community, we socialize. There are times they may need some help, and I am able to accommodate them.

Although I no longer handle tree certificate orders for the Jewish National Fund (something I enjoyed doing for fifteen years), I still have a warm feeling for the organization. Each day I put coins into my JNF Blue Box, which makes me feel close to Israel. Whenever the coins can no longer fit, I send a tree certificate honoring or memorializing someone I care about. Tsedukah has been part of my upbringing. I always try to extend a helping hand to others.

Arlene Pickus

D'var Torah

While studying and preparing for my Bat Mitzvah, my portion of parasha Sh'lach L'kha seemed insignificant compared to the more well known, or common subject matter, i.e. making challah and wearing tzitzit. My portion, the first aliyah, is about G-d's instructions to Moses to send 12 spies, representatives of each tribe, into Canaan to report on the prospects of being able to take over the land. The spies were listed by name....

While talking with Rabbi Conn, I jokingly said "I can't write a D'var Torah about a list of names". When he suggested that I certainly could, it intrigued me.... ***What is in a name?***

In my research on the parsha, there were suggestions that the names may have been changed to reflect the character traits or actions of the spies. Two examples are Nachbi and Satur, whose names can be translated to mean "hide" and "confront", respectively. Imagine the power in defining who someone is by their name?

When Abby and Hope were born, Ronnie and I had the pleasure and responsibility of giving them names. How could we name them appropriately, not knowing the kind of people they would be? In English, each is named after one of their grandparents while, in Hebrew, Abby was named after a dear friend of mine and Hope's name matches her English one. Their English names were names that we liked. Their Hebrew names, however, required deeper thought about their meaning and somehow, we managed to choose correctly because their names accurately reflect who they are. Abby's name, Chaya, means Life, and Hope's name, Tikvah, means Hope. To this day they both reflect both life and hope in all that they do.

Anyone who knows Ronnie knows that he is a true "helper". His Hebrew name, Ozer, means helper, something he prides himself in being. His name fits properly as well.

During my research, I even looked into what my own name, Chana, means. One of the four translations I found is ... "passion". On many occasions I have found myself doing things "passionately", whether taking care of a loved one or arguing a cause. My name even fits me!

So what is in a name? I would "passionately" argue ... A LOT!

Personal Statement

When I started a Hebrew class Sunday mornings with Rabbi Conn approximately 2 years ago, my intention was to learn how to read Hebrew and be able to follow along during services. I had always enjoyed services but found them slow and boring – most of the time, I just found myself lost; unable to follow.

After the first year, Rabbi Conn inquired as to how many of our class might like to continue and become Bat Mitzvahs. Feeling that I was very much a part of the group and enjoying the learning aspect, I found myself agreeing to proceed. Two years have passed by very quickly.

I am in awe at how much Abby and Hope did for their Bat Mitzvahs and how beautifully they did. By comparison, I am doing much less than they did however, they remind me that there is really nothing to compare. They started earlier in life and studied for a longer period of time than I have. They often comment on how far I've come in a relatively short time. Instead of saying I can't (at times I truly thought I couldn't), I've found that, with excellent teachers, supportive family and friends, and a very patient husband, I have finally become a Bat Mitzvah, just shy of my 53rd Birthday. It was my decision to accomplish it, and it has been worth the wait.

So – here I stand as a Bat Mitzvah, very nervous to do well.

Mitzvah Project

When deciding on a mitzvah project, I chose M'Yad L'Yad (Hand helping hand) because it was a cause I had never been involved with before and I thought I would find some level of fulfillment in participating in it.

The idea of helping an anonymous person by sending them packages filled with items, several times a year, may seem easy. In many ways, it actually is but, at the same time, it requires some level of thought. I typically sent packages consisting of products that are useful on a daily basis, necessary items that many people don't think twice about buying on a regular basis. In addition, I always try to add a special, wrapped gift, or another "luxury" item that reflected either the holiday closest to the time of year the package was being sent, or the person's birthday, or anniversary. I also tried to include a gift card so the person could simply buy something for themselves if they needed to.

It isn't too difficult to think that some items I sent may have been perceived as luxury items by the recipient, while being taken for granted as a basic necessity by me.

Thinking of someone else and trying to purchase items that could help them on a basic level, and trying to include an occasional decadence has been rewarding and has helped ground me. I have a fresher appreciation of the daily items I use than I did previously, and I hope that I won't take them for granted anymore.

Now that I am a Bat Mitzvah, I intend to continue to be a part of this fulfilling organization.

Anita Reis

D'var Torah

Good morning, my Torah portion is *Shelach Lecha*, and the part that I chose to write about is: *The Stranger*. The parsha states: *Someone who comes to live among the Israelites from somewhere else or someone who wants to become part of the Jewish People. There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord;* My family is Jewish, my husband and I raised our children to be *Modern Conservative Jews* and to believe that G-d is good, and he will always protect and watch over all of us, he has no differentiation. I was raised to believe that Hasidic Jews don't associate with women who wear pants, Orthodox Jews live amongst themselves, and Conservative Jews are the most accepting of women and are part of the Modern Jewish movement, and Reformed Judaism is *ultra* modern.

During the summer of 2011, my youngest son was diagnosed with Lymphoma, prior to this in his *D'var Torah*, Spencer stated that he was going to travel the world and discover the *Cure for Cancer, through Venum*. He loved going to *Family Friendly Friday Night Shabbat Services*, and he kvelled when he helped others. Spencer also helped me to instill Judaism in his older brothers. I always told my boys when choosing a college, check out the Hillel because you should always be around people with similar backgrounds to yours because they will have a better understanding of your feelings. Both boys pledged Jewish Fraternities and during our journey, while they were far from home they received the comfort and support very similar to what they were accustomed to. At home, my husband attended Minyan every night and said a *Mischaberach*, the prayer for the sick. My boys questioned all of this because Spencer was not getting better. Ryan and Josh did not understand how they are surrounded by Jews, Daddy attends Synagogue and prays for Spencer every night along with the Jewish Community and yet G-d is not listening. *He's treating us as if we are not part of our own people!* My family cried.

Further into our journey, Spencer was hospitalized with Jews from all over the world, including Israel: *Orthodox, Ultra Orthodox, Hasidic Jews from New York and Israel*. Spencer's primary Nurse, Daniel, was an orthodox Jew from Mill Basin, Brooklyn. We never felt out of place. The Israeli Hasidics invited us to light the Shabbat Candles and join them in Shabbat dinner. We watched movies on the Sabbath and they slept, we questioned the *tzitzit*, and the *white and black satin robes and the big fur*

hats; These Jews always answered us, our questions were never ignored. We were never ignored, even though our Jewish beliefs were so different from each others: my family was treated as if we were one big family. After all we were all in the same boat, fighting this horrific disease. My interpretation of *The Stranger* is that deep down inside we are much more alike than we realized, we are all the same Jewish person with different beliefs and we can all learn to live together. This experience is helping me get through my awful life changing experience.

The Parsha also taught me that the *Tzitzit* keep us grounded to obey the laws of the Torah. As an Adult Bat Mitzvah, it is our job to teach our children to follow the rules even when we lose faith in them. My older boys and I have lost our faith in the Jewish laws; we feel that we followed the rules, especially Spencer; he was a *rule follower*, who held onto his faith until the end. This was a very difficult decision for me to follow through with the Adult Bat Mitzvah, Spencer wanted this for me, it is difficult for my boys to understand why/how I can stay grounded with the laws on this special day, that has lost its true meaning for me.

At this time I would like to thank the Rabbi and the Cantor, it was a female dominated adventure to take on the task of teaching fourteen adults, language, traditions, culture and concluding with a Bat Mitzvah. These two men have been part of my family's journey since day one, they have been cursed at by me and when I asked why, they shrugged their shoulders and cried because they had no answers. Cantor, Spencer told you in his D'Var Torah that you must be happy that he was the last Reiss you had to teach Bar Mitzvah lessons to. I remember the smile on your face when I told you that I signed up for the Adult bat Mitzvah class, and you replied that you would be honored to have B'nai Mitzvah four fifths of my family. Rabbi, Spencer had a lot of admiration for you. We all learned a lot from both of you and developed a very special bond. Next, I would like to thank this wonderful group of woman, we completed part one of our journey; we have built new and old friendships and learned from each other. You were all there for me over the last two years and you always kept me abreast even during my darkest hours. Lastly, I want to thank my family, and extended family, this began as an exciting adventure, with the most encouragement from Spencer. Our beliefs have changed, your support has helped me to grow and look at life differently and mostly become a B'nai Mitzvah like all of you and I love you all. To my friends, I love you and you are my family.

Shabbat Shalom!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Personal Statement

As a child growing up I watched many of my friends go to Hebrew School and become a Bat/Bar Mitzvah. I was new in the neighborhood the year that my friends were celebrating their Jewish woman/manhood. On Friday and Saturdays, they would all be at Synagogue or a party and I was home doing homework. Due to health issues I was unable to attend Hebrew School, therefore I was not included in the celebrations. Growing up, I always felt that I would like to become a Bat Mitzvah someday, maybe it would help give me better insight to my Jewish history and background.

As a mother of three wonderful young men, I sent them to Hebrew School so that they would have a Jewish Education and have an understanding of their inner selves and who they are. They often asked questions about their Bris, why we ate certain foods on various holidays and why they couldn't have cheeseburgers or chicken parmigiana. My answer to them was always that's how grandma and grandpa raised me. When they entered Nursery School at the Y, the children learned the holidays and also about the different foods and the whys. Through the years of Nursery and Hebrew School I learned about the holidays and traditions at a higher intensity. By the third Bar Mitzvah I felt that I knew everything about the traditions and Jewish Ancestry, but I did not know the language or how to modernize it. After all I am a Woman and I learned through three "men".

Plainview Jewish Center offered a Chai Mitzvah class one year and I attended. Here I learned modern female Conservative Judaism. For Passover I brought a modern Haggadah to the table, which included all explanations about the holiday in English. I learned that there are more than four questions, and in turn I taught my family that there are hundreds. We sat around the table asking and answering questions all night. Spencer and I put frogs and skeletons and bugs, and a Miriam's cup and an orange on the seder plate to make a long night fun and a learning adventure. After this an Adult Bat Mitzvah class was being offered at PJC, Spencer said "mommy you do so much for us, so that we learn our ancestry and our religion, now it's your turn. I looked at him and said; I always wanted to be a Bat Mitzvah and never had the time, and now because of my "Angel" I made the time for me. This was his wish and mine.

I am very proud to be standing up on the same Beamer that my three boys shared for their Bar Mitzvahs and I am elated to be wearing the Talit that Spencer custom ordered from Israel for his Special day and for mine.

Mitzvah Project

Stand Up for Spencer Cares is a scholarship fund that was created by Ryan and Josh Reis to honor the memory of their little brother, Spencer. Spencer had a passion for learning, the environment and for animals. He shared his enthusiasm for learning with his friends and his family. He would walk into a room and it would sparkle.

Even during Spencer's illness his friends would visit him in the hospital to watch movies or play games. They would also bring their homework with them. Spencer always said *first we do your homework then we can watch the movie*. His friends and their educational success were as important to Spencer as his own.

The *Stand Up for Spencer Cares Scholarship Fund* is awarded to one or more high school seniors in the Plainview-Old Bethpage school district who write an essay appropriate for the criteria chosen. This year, the first year, we are proud to be awarding three high school seniors checks in the sum of \$1000 each.

I am very proud of all three of my boys because they are loving, passionate, enthusiastic and educationally oriented. Ryan and Josh are keeping Spencer's aspirations alive through *Stand Up for Spencer Cares*. I appreciate if all of you will also.

Elise Smith

D'var Torah

In this story of the spies exploring Canaan, there were several issues that came up for both G-d and for the Israelites, all relating to the bond and level of trust between both parties.

When Moses chose twelve spies to spend forty days exploring the land of Israel, he did so with the belief that they would come back with an accurate and hopeful report of what they found there. Instead, ten of the spies returned with a distorted view of what the rest of the Israelites would find. They claimed that although the land was plentiful in resources, its people were far too big and strong for the Israelites to conquer in order to take over the land. I think that the Israelites retreated, because they were frightened by this report. It seemed to create for them a huge doubt in G-d's ability to help and protect them, should they choose to move forward into the new land. It did not seem unusual to me that they feared death by these "giants" and began to think it would be better for them to return to Egypt instead. In Egypt, they felt safer, because they knew what to expect there.

The other two spies, however, seemed more positive. They insisted that not only was the new land perfectly habitable, they did not believe that the Israelites could not overcome its people. The two spies maintained their confidence in G-d's ability and intent to help the Israelites take over the land and keep them safe and prosperous.

I sensed the lack of faith in these spies, because the majority of them did not provide a positive picture of what they believed life would be like in Israel. The Israelites then fell victim to the distorted reports, and G-d

became angry. After having demonstrated His love and powers to the Israelites on many occasions, G-d apparently felt betrayed and angered by their lack of faith in Him. He expressed his disappointment to Moses, claiming that He would punish the people by creating a plague to destroy them. As with other such reactions, I did find this to be in contrast to what I believed G-d to be. There were segments of this story and other bible stories that I needed to research and review in order to have a better perspective on G-d's more extreme reactions.

Moses tried to reason with G-d, explaining that a plan to destroy the non-believers with a plague would only serve to reinforce the peoples' lack of faith in Him; believers and non-believers alike. Moses claimed that destroying the Israelites would create the notion that G-d was doing so because He lacked the ability to protect them in the new land, and that He was not the loving and forgiving G-d He claimed to be. Ultimately, it seems G-d chose to make concessions. As punishment for their words and deeds against Him, the spies would not immediately be destroyed, but they would not be granted entry into the Promised Land. Instead, they would perish with others of their generation, as they and their children would be forced to wander the desert for forty years. This forty years represented one year for each of the forty days the original spies spent exploring the new land, and was possibly meant to serve as a teaching opportunity of sorts for the next generation. Because Caleb and Joshua had remained loyal, they and their descendants would be allowed into the Promised Land after wandering the desert, and they would prosper.

Once Caleb, Joshua, and this next generation entered the Promised Land, each was required to make an offering to G-d to show their faith and loyalty. They were also expected to accept all others who chose

to enter their land from then on, as equals, in order that a standard of people be maintained and perpetuated. These new entrants would also be expected to make offerings to G-d. G-d also directed Moses to have the people make fringes on the corners of their clothing to represent G-d's Commandments and to remind the people to live by these Commandments in the new land. I found the story of the spies to be very interesting, and I was not familiar with most of it prior to our Torah study assignments. Again, I did struggle with the part of the story when G-d becomes angry and intends to kill the Israelites. After trying to envision myself living as an Israelite in a time when experiencing G-d's miracles was commonplace, I understood His frustration that the Israelites still lacked faith. However, I continued to feel that a lesser punishment would have been more reasonable and more like the loving and forgiving G-d I believe in. It made me wonder why G-d didn't consider how his ability to reason was supposedly far superior to mere humans, thus allowing Him to be more merciful. Although the Israelites had experienced G-d's miracles, they as humans apparently were still more inclined to react to the words of ten "of their own" rather than a mysterious, unseen being. Like Moses, I would have intervened for that lesser punishment, although an entire generation was still made to suffer and perish. It is also unclear to me why Caleb and Joshua were made to wander the desert as well, since they were loyal; was it to set an example for the next generation and help Moses ensure that faith was maintained?

Personal Statement

When I was a little girl, and also during early adulthood, I would go to temple on high holidays with my maternal grandmother. I knew it made her happy, and it gave me special time with her. I was not sent to Hebrew school. None of my girlfriends growing up were sent. Although my mother made it clear that there was no bread or "real" cake during Passover, we ate on different dishes, and we were not to go in a car on Rosh Hashanah, there was little provided in the way of Jewish education during those early years. Yet, I followed these few rules, never really understanding why or the history that created them.

While in temple with my grandmother, and often my mother and uncle, I would look for my friends, and I would watch them. The boys seemed to have an idea about what was going on, but the girls seemed as lost as I was. I would try to understand what the rabbi and cantor were saying (and singing), but I just didn't get it. All I knew was that although I didn't speak the language or understand much about Judaism, somehow I still felt I should be there. It felt right, it felt good, it made Grandma happy.

Then came my (older) brother's Bar Mitzvah. For the most part, I didn't really feel left out for not having that in my future, because none of my girlfriends were having Bat Mitzvahs either. It seemed that was not the norm where I grew up, so I was ok with it. I did enjoy it, however. After my brother's special day, my own male friends began having their Bar Mitzvahs. It still seemed a "boy thing".

It wasn't until I was much older that I started to realize that other girls/women did in fact have Bat Mitzvahs. They did go to Hebrew school. They did get that education, and they did have a connection to and

understanding of their own heritage. That's when it began to register. That's what had been missing for me -- that connection, that knowledge, that acceptance to a group of "my own" people, that history. That's also when it began to bother me. Why had I not been offered that opportunity? Why were my girlfriends and I seemingly lost in the Hebrew shuffle? What didn't occur to me for many years, was that I could do something about it.

Later on, I began to explore a little about the bible, G-d's word, and Jewish history. It was unfortunate that situations in my life presented the need to run for Jewish cover, but for whatever reason, I got the push I needed. I would read, compare, object, and try to decipher whatever I could. At times, I had to force myself to move forward rather than feel sorry for myself for not having done this sooner. On I went, until I realized I was in a bit over my head. I needed guidance. I began to develop a sense of what happened starting at the dawn of Jewish history, but I had no idea how to translate this information to my own life or to modern times. There was something missing. Something big. My journey hit a wall, and it was put aside for later use.

Many years later, once I was married to a Jewish man and had a Jewish child, a boy, my feelings of below-par Jewishness began to recur. My husband came from a fairly religious background, had been bar mitzvah'd, and certainly seemed to have something resembling that mysterious connection I so longed for. We joined his family temple and decided our son would one day go there for Hebrew school.

A mom friend who was also a member of our temple approached me a couple of years later and asked if I had been bat mitzvah'd. I shyly responded that no, I had not, and those feelings of lack began to stir once more. The same feelings as earlier on, when another

local mom friend convinced me to join Hadassah, and the women at my very first (adult) event looked at me as though I had jumped out of a dumpster when it was revealed I had never been to Israel. When the temple mom immediately responded that she had not had the experience of her own Bat Mitzvah either, those feelings faded, and I suddenly felt a kinship with this woman. She explained that she had approached our rabbi and asked if he would consider conducting an adult (women's) Hebrew class that would lead to each of us becoming a Bat Mitzvah. He told her that if she could generate enough interest, he would gladly oblige. When she returned to me with the good news that a class had actually been created, I was all at once nervous and excited to be a part of it.

When our class began, I discovered several comforting facts. There are many women across the country who have been in my shoes never having had a Bat Mitzvah. Many who also went to temple as children and maybe young adults, yet still had no clue what was going on. Many who were actually fluent in Hebrew due to the environment in which they were raised, but had no more tradition in their current lives than I. Many of these women had been raised in a traditional or orthodox home, but there was no Bat Mitzvah, and many did not even keep kosher (something else I thought I ought to be ashamed of, especially now that I had a child, a boy, who was being raised Jewish). During the course of our studies, and whatever extra-curricular reading I had chosen to do, I discovered something else. I did not have to feel left out, different, or any less Jewish than my peers. Over time, we would have many discussions on levels of tradition and personal choice. Those discussions alone made a world of difference for me. I realized that I am me, and I am just as Jewish as anyone else, simply because I value and respect my relationship with G-d.

I always have. Traditions such as keeping kosher, going to services every Friday night and/or Saturday morning, changing those dishes on Passover, were simply that -- traditions. Whereas they are intended to serve as visual and physical acts of devotion and respect, and of course education, they did not make one person more Jewish than another. I did, however, learn that these customs would be a way to set an example for my child and maybe even show G-d the intentions of my heart, but I learned to believe that G-d already knows the intentions of my heart, and he certainly knows those of my child.

I have enjoyed learning to read Hebrew, something I've always wanted to do. Studying many different subjects within Judaism has truly been eye-opening and fulfilling. Thoughts and concepts that have arisen during class and within myself have been wonderful opportunities to bond with the other women in my group as well as solidify a more substantial connection with my heritage and my G-d. Becoming a Bat Mitzvah will be the culmination of all of this effort toward that connection and special relationship that I had longed for my entire life. It means to me that I no longer need to question my Jewishness, nor will I ever again need to feel that disconnect from my own people or anyone else. Becoming a Bat Mitzvah has given me something that can only be vaguely described in words, but that something is already filling a longstanding void that never needed to exist.

I truly appreciate every effort made by our rabbi and cantor to help us along this wonderful journey, and should I encounter an individual who has lived with that void or lack that I knew so well for so many years, I would urge that person to consider this same journey.

Mitzvah Project

Helping hands. In choosing my mitzvah project, that's what I was drawn to. I've always enjoyed being a helping hand, but recently that has been more about occasionally helping a friend with a task or a problem, or helping within my own family. Not to say that doesn't mean anything, but I did previously enjoy offering help to strangers, whether one-on-one or through an organization. Although M'Yad L'Yad was not my original choice for my mitzvah project, I think it worked out quite well.

There were several options presented to us during a special class, and each one held a special set of qualities and offerings for its intended clients. While researching different options, and reviewing the many organizations and individual approaches to helping people anywhere, on any level, I continued to find myself drawn to those entities where I could be more physically involved. However, there were a couple of entities that stood out for me during the class presentations. The first one was a specially-formed fundraising effort which was created because of the child of one of our classmates. Her youngest son had cancer, and especially as a mother of a young boy myself, it truly hit home for me. Wouldn't it be wonderful if getting involved in this effort actually resulted the happiest ending? Unfortunately, this sweet soul eventually succumbed to his illness, and it took me a while before I was able to truly focus on choosing another option. Despite the many opportunities out there, this one hit home immediately, since too many of us have either watched someone (or several someones) suffer the debilitating effects of cancer or have lost them to the battle. The experience, in addition to watching the mother of this boy suffer so, left me stuck in my own memories of people

I've loved and lost to some terminal disease. Although I have been and always will be a person who will donate to reputable cancer care organizations, it was just too difficult to embrace that as my mitzvah project at the time.

When I was ready, I began to research other options. I first considered the organization of another classmate which basically involved emotional trauma care, but I wasn't sure I'd be the best fit for that, since it seemed to involve primarily suicide prevention, and I just didn't feel equipped for that.

Hatzilu was another organization I considered, since it involved more of what I had experience with and was a little more inside my comfort zone. Whereas I do believe it's healthy to step outside your comfort zone from time to time in life, I preferred to get involved with a project where I knew I could make a difference. Oddly, my phone calls and emails to the organization were not returned for a few weeks, and I realized I needed to move forward and find another option. I did not want the experience of my mitzvah project to be a rushed one, where my focus would be more on getting it done on time, rather than gaining any insight or fulfillment from it. Not having my efforts responded to was so odd and disheartening to me, because I had been under the impression that these organizations had a difficult time getting good volunteers, but not receiving any kind of response left me with quite a different impression.

Ultimately, I was able to connect with another wonderful local organization, M'Yad L'Yad (again, through a classmate who was already involved with them), and I was put in touch with a very involved and responsible contact person who not only returned my call immediately, but she set me up with an assignment in that very same call. M'Yad L'Yad is

an organization that anonymously connects volunteers with local individuals or families that are struggling. It is anonymous in order to protect the recipient's privacy and to avoid embarrassment should the volunteer know that person or family. The assignment involves creating a sort of care package of items four times each year that the recipient needs, such as food, clothing, toiletries, etc. We can also include gift cards to the stores where they shop, and these stores are listed in your information packet. It is at the volunteer's and recipient's discretion to exchange a friendly note or not, and there are designated UPS drop-off points that take care of the shipping via a code number provided by M'Yad L'Yad.

Initially, I wasn't sure that this should be my project, since it seemed that I was simply doing a little shopping, tossing it into a box, and not really being very involved. However, I realized that just because it did not involve an excessive amount of time, effort and money, or face-to-face contact, it did not mean that I wasn't really doing or accomplishing anything. It took me some time to just close my eyes and imagine myself as one of the members of my recipient family and how I would feel when that package arrived. Imagining the package coming on a day when I had little food in the house, and suddenly there was the supermarket gift card included. Imagining that without a car, it might be difficult to get to the store to buy toilet paper, and there in the box was a whole package of rolls. I began to realize that it did mean something, even if I could not see or touch the results. Then came the phone call from my contact person. She called to let me know that the package had been received by the family, and she profusely thanked me on their behalf. She explained how excited and moved they were about what I had sent and about my friendly note introducing myself. When I first spoke with her, she had told me that she

was having trouble placing this family, since many volunteers prefer to have a specific type of person or family to help and preferred to purchase only very specific items (!!!). I found that to be awfully strange and defeating the purpose of volunteering, so I immediately told her to assign me to that family. I'm glad I did, because I wondered if they might have felt even worse about their situation once they realized it was a problem having them placed!

Ultimately, I did choose to add a little something on the side in addition to M'Yad L'Yad to fulfill my hands-on needs. I recently discovered that a friend works for Meals on Wheels, and I made sure to be included any time she needed help delivering meals. She sent me out to a few homes a couple of weeks later, and just having that opportunity to knock on someone's door, introduce myself as a representative of this organization, and see the smiles on their faces when I handed them these meals was very moving for me, as it provided that missing connection I missed.

My efforts to commit to and complete a particular project have helped me to regain that sense of connection to helping others that I had not much time for in a while. I realize that I had been missing that vital link that had always made me feel that I was accomplishing something. Somehow, I had let that fall by the wayside for a while, but having this assignment as a requirement of our Bat Mitzvah course has brought me back to who I have always been. I do not intend to leave this effort behind once our big day is over, as I am grateful for that gift.

**MAZAL TOV!
ADULT BAT MITZVAH
CLASS OF 5773**

**Carol Breshin
Elise Epstein
Stacey Goldsmith
Dorene Greenberg
Melissa Hafkin
Lee Hauptman
Lisa Hindi
Zita Jospa
Fonda Leibowitz
Marilyn Leibowitz
Rhoda Meshover
Arlene Pickus
Anita Reis
Elise Smith**