

Jonathan's Speech

Several weeks ago, I attended an exhibition wrestling match between Cloonan and Rippowam. That might not seem like such a big deal to you, but it was to me. You see, if it weren't for the fact that I am standing up here today becoming a bar mitzvah, I would have been on the mat that day, wrestling for my team.

I was sitting near the front yelling out advice to my teammates, especially the one in my weight class. Since I had wrestled this opponent before, I was pointing out his weak spots and suggesting a couple of moves that would work against him. I knew that the guy would be especially vulnerable to the "Gater Move," where you basically roll over and escape. Rippowam won that day, and I wonder if Cloonan might have done better if I had been able to wrestle.

My Torah portion of Vayikra is about the sacrifices that were brought in the days of the Torah. After the temple was destroyed, sacrifices were replaced by prayer, study and acts of kindness. But although those sacrifices were done away with, there are other types of sacrifices that we have to make all the time. For me, missing out on wrestling this year was a big sacrifice. While I haven't given up a lot of other things, I've been devoting a lot of time to my bar mitzvah studies for many months. It was not always easy, but I have to admit I've enjoyed this learning process. It has also helped me to appreciate the sacrifices made by others.

Now when I see my Dad schlepping all his work on vacations I can understand the sacrifices he's making. And when my mom takes us all over the place to our activities, I realize that this takes time away from her being able to do other things. (Of course, I can't imagine anything she would *rather* be doing than spending so much time driving me!)

Several years back, there was a famous case of a high school football star who gave up a scholarship and promising college career in order to donate a kidney to his grandmother. It's hard to imagine a sacrifice any bigger than that.

Later this month, we'll sacrifice by not eating bread for a week. Passover is all about sacrifices – in fact, two of the items on the Seder plate remind us of ancient sacrifices: the shank bone and the egg.

Volunteering means sacrificing your time, but like the old sacrifices at the temple, it's all for a good cause. For my mitzvah project, I've been helping in an ESL Kindergarten classroom. I've gotten to know some of the kids very well. My Spanish is OK, but I have to have my dictionary out all the time just to be sure I understand what the kids are saying. As hard as it is for me, it must be an even greater sacrifice for them, because their language is not the main language of the country. But as I've learned this year, we all have to make some sacrifices at some point. My standing up here proves how important it is to make sacrifices sometimes, with a larger goal in mind. (thank yous)

Mitch's Speech

Shabbat Shalom!

Life has taught me always to look on the bright side. That's not always easy to do, especially this week. In two days, it will be the fifth anniversary of 9-11, probably the most depressing day this country has ever had. Just last month, I saw the movie, "World Trade Center," and it reminded me of how everybody felt on that devastating day. I can remember being at school that day and all of a sudden my aunt came to my school and picked up my cousin Jon, my sister and me and took us home. When I heard what happened, I was shocked and frightened. I can still remember that moment like it was yesterday.

If 9-11 is the most depressing day of the year, this week's portion is the most depressing parasha of the year. It talks about the curses that will be brought upon those who do not follow the laws of the Torah. These consequences are described in great detail.

Fortunately, my haftarah balances the Torah portion by explaining how we can look at the bright side. It's as if the rabbis were consciously trying to balance the dark news with the promise of something better tomorrow. And since two weeks from today we begin a new year, this haftarah helps to get us there in the right spirit.

In my own life, I've discovered several ways to help me focus on the bright side. When my team loses a baseball game, I always remember that there will be other games. I try to put the loss behind me as quickly as possible.

I'm also inspired by my favorite baseball team, the New York Yankees, how they coped with so many injuries and ended up in first place by early August.

I also like to cook. I've learned how we shouldn't cry over spilt milk, and when an egg breaks, you can make a great omelet.

For my mitzvah project, I've been visiting residents at the local Hospice. Because these patients are close to death, it's very sad for me to see them. So I have been visiting them and my goal is to talk to them and try to make them see the bright side of things. I even tell them some jokes, reading to them from a joke book that I bring in. They always laugh. But most of all, I just talk to them and listen to their stories. My mitzvah project has meant a lot to me. For people don't have much time left, every moment is precious and every visitor is special. For some of these patients, I'm the only visitor they have. It's taught me not to take so many things for granted.

So even though my portion is so depressing and 9/11 is coming in two days, I have that becoming a Bar Mitzvah means learning to look on the bright side and always knowing that tomorrow will be a better day.

(thank yous)

Morgan's Speech

Shabbat Shalom!

Many of you know that I am a huge Red Sox fan. (*And no, the rabbi didn't tell me to speak about this!*) I've only been to three baseball games in my life, but one of them happened to be a Red Sox Yankees game at Yankee Stadium, just a month ago. This was the first time I had ever been to Yankee Stadium. It's really a beautiful place. (*Not as good as Fenway, of course, but what is?*) I especially like when you walk through the tunnel and suddenly the whole stadium opens up before you and see a field that is so green it's almost shiny in some spots, framed by the white facing of the stadium roof and the black background way out in the bleachers. Even though it was raining lightly that evening, the sky still looked beautiful, and it just felt right that baseball would be played here.

As I looked around, I also saw 50,000 people, most of them in pinstriped. I must say that my Dad didn't quite warn me that the Red Sox t-shirt and cap I wore that day might attract some negative attention. My mom had advised me to be on my best behavior and now I knew why. It felt like all 50,000 people were looking at me. During the game, there was a fight in the next section over and the police had to come break it up. The Red Sox supporter started to wave his cap cheering on the Sox and riling up everyone in the section. I started cheering them on as well, but my mom told me not to get involved. People all around me were yelling.

It wasn't really scary, believe it or not. It just made me more proud to be cheering my team on. The fact that the Sox were winning 14-3 might have been part of it as well. Being a Red Sox fan in Yankee Stadium was sort of like what it must have felt like to be one of the Israelite spies in my Torah portion. In the story, Moses sends twelve spies to scout out the promised land. All of them came back saying that the land was beautiful and bountiful – flowing with milk and honey. But ten of the spies were scared to death. They said to Moses and people that the inhabitants of the land were giants and that they felt very small, like grasshoppers in their own eyes. They didn't think the Israelites had a chance to conquer the land. Because of the spies' bad report, the Israelites panicked and complained and finally they were punished by having to wander in the Wilderness for 40 years.

That might seem like a long time, but the Curse of the Bambino lasted over twice as long, for 86 years. That's because the Red Sox and their fans always felt like grasshoppers. They didn't believe they could win, once Babe Ruth was sold. That's how all Red Sox felt on the night of Game four in 2004, when the Sox were down 3 games to none and one run down in the 9th with Rivera in. But, as you may have heard, they won. That Sox team taught us all how to believe in ourselves and never to feel small.

After forty years of wandering, the Israelites finally learned the same lesson. My haftarah shows how far they had come. By the time Joshua sent two spies into Jericho, the roles were reversed and the Israelites were the ones who were feared. Sort of like how I felt as a Red Sox fan at Yankee Stadium.

Actually, it is a lesson I learned even before the Red Sox won. I've always known how important to be proud of who I am and where I come from. My grandfather was very proud both to be Red Sox fan and a Jew. The last time I saw him before he passed away this past winter, we watched the movie "Fever Pitch" together, a film about the Red Sox, of course. I'll never forget how much we enjoyed watching it together.

It's interesting to note that one of the most famous symbols of Boston is a grasshopper. It sits on the weathervane atop Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, a place I love. That grasshopper was put there in 1742 and has survived fires, renovations, wars and even the American Revolution. So what was a symbol of fear in the Torah has become a symbol of victory and overcoming all odds. It's the spirit of that grasshopper, then, that I will want to share with the world as I become a Bat Mitzvah.

My mitzvah project has also involved helping others to believe in themselves. Only in this case, the others are horses. I've been spending time working with disabled horses at a project called H-O-R-S-E, which is described in my booklet. I'm also helping to lead Shabbat services at Greenwich Woods, a senior's residence.

(thank yous)

Alex's Speech

A few weeks ago, the rabbi was asking me what I wanted to do when I grow up. I guess that now that I'm a Bar Mitzvah I have to begin thinking about long-term goals. It so happens that I am especially good at certain things, including, not necessarily in order of importance, baseball, skiing, golf and watching TV. I've also developed a real interest in medicine over the past year. So I'm stuck and need your advice. Which career path do you think I should choose: (raise your hand if you prefer...) baseball player, golfer...or doctor?

Maybe I won't **have** to make such a tough decision. It so happens that I am very good at multi-tasking. I am able to I.M. twice at the same time, while also doing my homework and listening to music. I must admit that I've never skied on a golf course will hitting a golf ball with a baseball bat, but I'm pretty good at multi-tasking nonetheless.

In my portion, Moses is a real role model for me in multi-tasking. Within a few chapters, we see him performing three very different functions. He acts as a parent figure and therapist for the children of Israel, who always seem to be complaining. He also is a prophet and leader of the people who encourages others to take on leadership roles. And finally, at the end of the portion, Moses is, of all things, a doctor, healing his sister Miriam.

So Moses was a great multi-tasker, but he probably could have delegated better to have others do some of his hard work. His father in law Yitro advised him to do just that. Still, it was good that he could put all of his talents to use.

That's what I want to do too. As part of my mitzvah project, I've taken some of my friends to a research lab at Yale New Haven Hospital to learn about new treatments for breast cancer. It was exciting for me to look at a tumor through a microscope and also to learn that we are actually very close to gaining government approval for a new medicine, now in trial, that will help most patients manage or even cure the disease.

This mitzvah project has taught me a very important lesson: whatever work we do, whether it's one job or many different ones, the important thing is somehow to make a difference in the world.

(thank you)

Michelle's Speech

Those of you who know me know that I especially love math and science. I've always gotten great grades on those subjects because I'm so interested in them. Everyone in school knows that I want to be an orthopedist – it's been an interest of mine ever since Jason started teaching me about the bones of the body.

I found it very fitting, then, that my portion begins the book of numbers and it contains lots of numbers – a counting of the Israelite people as they wandered in the wilderness.

Jews have always had mixed feelings about counting people. While a census is important at times, we also don't want to turn people into numbers. All too recently, Jews experienced in the Holocaust what it is like when that happens. Not long ago, a survivor came to our Hebrew School class and showed us the number tattooed on his arm.

Even so, math and science have been very important parts of Judaism. Right now, we are at the very end of the period known as the "Sefira," which means counting, as we count the days between Passover and the holiday that takes place at the end of this week, Shavuot.

Also, some great mathematicians and scientists have been Jews, most notably Albert Einstein. I am very interested in him – I put him down in my All About Me as my favorite Jewish hero. I've done a little research about him and one thing that I have found interesting is that he is able to combine science and religion. He used to say about his research, "I want to know God's thoughts,..... the rest are details.." He also said, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

One more thing. My portion isn't just any old census, it is a *military* census. They were counting those men old enough to fight in a war. But when Moses was commanded to count them, God used the expression "Se'oo et rosh," which means to count heads – but literally

means to “lift up” their heads. When you lift up a person’s head, you see their eyes. And when you see their eyes, you realize that they are not numbers – they are human beings.

I tried to do the same thing with my mitzvah project – to lift the heads and lift the spirits of American Jewish soldiers in the Persian Gulf region. I sent about a hundred packages out to soldiers right before Hanukkah, complete with a card, menorah, candles, gelt and of course, a draydel. I got letters back and you can read some of them in my booklet. For Passover I sent more packages out and I plan to do it again. I wanted to do this in part because my Dad is involved in the military.

Another mitzvah that I’ve done this year also has a military connection. I blew the shofar several times at services during last fall’s High holidays season. In ancient times, the shofar was used as a call to battle. Now we use it as a call to repentance. In Hebrew, a term for repentance is “heshbon ha-nefesh,” which means “accounting of the soul,” and it’s all about counting up our good deeds and our bad ones during that time of year. So, in a strange way, even the shofar is connected to my interest in math and science.

As I become a Bat Mitzvah today, I hope that I will be able to do the kinds of things that will make my life count for good.

(thanks yous)

Speech

Good morning and hello. In case you didn’t know by now, today is Rosh Hodesh. Rosh hodesh means, literally, the “head of the month.” Every month presents us with a new chance to start over, whether its trying something new, buying something new or getting better at something old. I have always been excited about new things -- except for food. (Especially fish).

Going to John Jay Middle school was a real change for me a couple of years ago. I wasn’t comfortable there at first because I hardly knew anyone, but I was still excited. I knew I would eventually make a lot of new friends and have a great time. As I look around at all my friends here, I can say that that has definitely happened.

At the end of last summer I tried something I thought I would never do: Scuba diving. I was so excited when my mother told me I was going. I felt my heart beat fast but I knew it was going to be amazing. When I dove in, as I felt the water splashing on me, it felt both relaxing and thrilling at the same time. I saw all different kinds of colorful plants that were amazing to look at. As I swam, the scuba instructor directed us to a deep hole at the bottom and way down in it was a shark. The shark was sleeping. We tried to swim *verrrrry* quietly, being careful not to wake the shark. As you can see, I made it.

Today I am wearing something for the first time that, while it is new for me it is actually very old. It is also very important to me. This cameo around my neck belonged to my great great grandmother Rebecca, who I was named after. As you see in my Bat Mitzvah booklet, Rebecca was full of spirit and joy just like me!

Rebecca passed the pin to my great grandmother Dorothy. My great grandmother gave the pin to someone very special in my life -- my grandma Jackie. My grandmother gave the pin to me, because I was named after Rebecca, her grandmother, who meant so much to her. This pin means so much to me as well. Knowing that It has gone from generation to generation, I hope that Rebecca will be happy to know I am wearing it on this special day.

Talking about family brings me to the family that has been at this temple. My mother's and aunt Stacy's bat mitzvah, my parents wedding my sister's and my baby naming, my sister's bat mitzvah and now mine. My family has gone through so much here.

But there is something special about having my bat mitzvah on a Rosh Hodesh and having it here. My mother had her bat mitzvah here on Rosh Hodesh – *not too long ago* -- then my sister did too, also on Rosh Hodesh and now, keeping the tradition up, I am having mine on Rosh Hodesh as well. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

For my Mitzvah project, I am working with a five-year-old autistic child who doesn't have the ability to talk. At first it was awkward to meet Benjamin, because as you know, I LOVE to talk. But now we have a great relationship. I've learned how to understand what he is asking for and how I can help him. For him, every step he takes opens a door to something new, and I feel very lucky to have the chance to share that with him.

A former chief rabbi of Israel once said in the 1940s, "The old becomes new and the new becomes holy." Combining the old Jewish tradition of Rosh Hodesh with my old family tradition, today we are celebrating something both old and new, and something very holy. On this Rosh Hodesh as I step into the world of Jewish adulthood, I hope I can help others the way Benjamin has helped me.

Thank yous...

Philip (Nussbaum) 's Speech

Many of you here know that I love to travel. I've been to many places around the world, including Australia, Prague, Rome and Anagotta (which, for those who may not know, is the last inhabited Caribbean island between North America and Europe.

But of all the natural places I go, I love mountains the most. I've been to all kinds of mountains, including ski resorts like Bromley, Okemo and Beaver Creek, and when in Australia I also saw Aires Rock. Mountains inspire me – and Vail inspires me most of all. When I am on top of the mountain, I get a feeling like I get nowhere else, like I'm on top of the world. (You if you want to get technical, I'm *always* on top of the world, because it is a sphere, but you know what I'm getting at). From the top, all the cars look like ants. You can see for miles and miles around. There's nothing blocking your view, unless you happen to be in a cloud – and by the way, it does NOT taste like cotton candy. Some of the clouds are below you. And it feels like all your problems are below you as well.

As I ski down the mountain, I try to take a little of the thrill of the mountain with me, and I treasure those memories when I go home.

It's interesting that my first portion is named B'har, which means, "on the mountain." The mountain that the Torah is speaking about is one I've never been to – Mount Sinai. The portion summarizes some of the laws that were given there. Fittingly, the very last words of my second portion and of the book of Leviticus are "b'har Sinai," "on Mount Sinai."

The last line indicates that all the commandments were give there. But we know that not all of them were. According to some commentators, while not all of the commandments were given on that spot, the spirit of Mount Sinai stayed with the people wherever they went. Wherever a person hears the voice of God and is guided by the Torah, that person can be considered as being on top of Mount Sinai.

So I have one more mountain to add to my list. As of today, I've been on top of Mount Sinai, not physically but symbolically. From this mountain the view is amazing. I can see

my friends and family from here. They don't look like ants, though. They all look life-sized! But the thing I see most of all is my life, past, present and future, and my connection to my family and to the Jewish people.

One way I show that connection is by doing mitzvot and helping other people. For my mitzvah project, I have collected used video games, which I will be donating to the pediatric department of Stamford hospital.

(thank you – remember to wish Randi Mazal tov and happy birthday to Mrs. Hammerman)

Randi's Speech

A few weeks ago, I was looking out the windows, paying full attention to the service of course. I've always thought that the courtyard outside the temple walls was beautiful.

I was pleasantly surprised to find out that my portion was about nature, and how we should care for the environment. My portion discusses that every 7th year even the land gets to rest just like we do every 7th day. We're told that the land doesn't really belong to us; it actually belongs to g-d. It's just our job to take care of it.

For me there's no place better to experience nature, besides TBE Of course, than my camp, Camp Weequahic, in Pennsylvania. On Friday night we have services, and recite a very special poem. Which is found in MY booklet, you know the pink one, on the very last page.

Insert Poem Here-

For the past couple of years I've grown a vegetable garden in my backyard, all by myself, okay maybe just a little help from my dad. We've grown carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, pumpkins, and peas. We've tried to pull off the occasional watermelon but they usually come out looking like grapes.

According to the Jewish callener next year is the sabbatical year, the resting year for the land. Although those laws only apply to the land of Israel, I'm thinking of giving the land a year off so that it can replenish itself. And maybe then we would be able to grow a watermelon. I'm sure the animals will be hurt when they figure this out.

Which is a shame because I also love animals. That is the reason why for my mitzvah project I've decided to volunteer at Rippowam Animal Hospital. Since last fall I've helped care for the animals including hurricane Katrina victims. Working with the animals has helped me understand my responsibilities to the world around me, as a bat mitzvah, and a Jew.

Thank yous, and Mrs. Hammerman's birthday, oh and mazel-tov to Phillippee

Yoni's Bar Mitzvah speech

This past Pesach, I took a trip to Barbados with my uncle's family, my brother David, and my grandmother. In some ways it was like going back to Egypt. It was hot, it was sandy... and there was Matzah.

Actually, there wasn't really matzah there – we had to bring it with us. Their supermarkets are located mostly at gas stations, and you can't find a single box of matzah there! In fact, you can't find any **Jews** there as well, (except maybe in the hotels).

So we took matzah with us – five boxes of assorted varieties, along with kosher for Passover pasta, cake mixes, desserts, and candies.

Our suitcases were very heavy, just like the sacks of food brought out of Egypt by the Israelites. The **only** difference was that our suitcases had rollers! I have no idea how our ancestors made it through the Sinai desert without rollers!

Once we got there, we learned the true meaning of verse 33 of my parsha:

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him, you shall love him as you love yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.”

All the rental villas in Barbados come with the full time staff. We had a cook and a butler. Neither one of them had ever heard of Passover before.

We had to explain to them that this is our special holiday, and during this holiday we can't eat bread.

They were not very happy to hear that, because they had to change their standard menu and cook differently for us.

Although our holiday tradition seemed very strange to them, the cook and butler went out of their way to make us feel comfortable. The cook replaced breadcrumbs with cheese or matzah crumbs, and she cooked lots of potatoes, trying to follow my aunt's instructions.

They set a good example of how not to wrong a stranger in their land. We became very friendly at the end, and I learned that in Barbados they follow all the British traditions. I made myself a promise that if they ever decide to visit us in Stamford, I'll be prepared to serve them an afternoon tea with English biscuits, and play a game of croquet with them, to make sure that they don't feel strangers in my land! And I won't bring up the subject of matzah!

I had a completely different experience celebrating Passover in Israel a year ago. You certainly do not feel like a stranger there. It's easy to find matzah in every store, and almost **everyone** is Jewish. On top of that I have lots of my family there. There is no doubt in my mind that even after taking into consideration the special treatment that we got in Barbados, I would definitely prefer to celebrate my next Passover in Israel.

This year I was lucky to be in Israel during the Tu Bishvat holiday. Both my cousin Leeza and I are celebrating our B'nai Mitzvah this year. Our families have organized this trip so that we could plant a garden of trees in Israel in the memory of our late grandfather, Herman Gavronsky. Our grandfather was a big supporter of Israel, and we have decided that our Mitzvah project should be establishing a living memorial for him in Israel. We have raised more than \$3000 for our Mitzvah project, and helped to beautify the land of Israel by personally planting the trees in Modiin, a city near Jerusalem.

(thank you)

(Annie Cohen)
Ross' Speech

Those who know me, know that I am, shall we say, interested in technical design. To put it another way, I could rewire this entire sanctuary sound system in about a minute. I mean, in my HEAD I could, but in reality it might take a four to five hours. When I look at a room, I don't just look at what you see on the surface – in my mind's eye I see what the room **COULD** look like – and how it could be better. So I've taken the liberty of coming up with a few brief suggestions as to how to make this sanctuary more functional and a more comfortable place to pray. If you take my suggestions, I have a feeling that even God will want to spend more time here. But more to the point, the room will feel more like a place where holiness dwells.

It's interesting that my portion is sort of doing the same thing. It describes different types of things that grow on houses, called *tza'ra'at*, that caused a house to be considered “sick.” Basically, back then, people felt that whenever something unexplainable happened, it was a signal from God that there was something wrong that needed to be corrected. So if fungus

were growing outside the house, it meant that people might not have been treating one another that well *inside* the house.

The whole goal was to make the environment more God-friendly, filled with kindness and free of strife and selfishness. They understood that the physical setup had a lot to do with that.

I understand that too. When I design a set for a show, I work with the lighting to create an environment that capture just the right mood for each scene. I also have to make sure that the sound is just right to make sure everyone is heard everywhere on the stage. I do the same thing for some short movies I've made, as well as videos and montages. (Hold up business card) *And for anyone who is interested, I can give you my card after the service!*

Last summer, I positioned a light for a scene in a camp play. One rainy day, we had Shabbat services in the performing arts center. Unknowingly, a staff member placed the Torah on a chair precisely center stage. When I was toying with the light before the service, I turned on a source four and it happened to be focused on one precise spot: center stage, and that Torah. So when I turned on that light, the makeshift ark lit up and the Torah glowed in the spotlight. It all seemed meant-to-be. It was at that moment that I realized that my talent for technical design could bring a real feeling of holiness even to a makeshift synagogue at camp.

So imagine what I could do for this place. So here are just a few quick suggestions off the top of my head. Excuse me if some of the language confuses you.

First thing we need is a 24 channel console mixer. We also need some new wireless mikes, some omni and uni directionals – we DEFINITELY need a snake – and some boundary mikes would benefit us greatly. Most of all, we need some active wall mounted monitors with XLR ¼, 8 ohms each. Now the room will REALLY rock during Shabbat unplugged!!!!

That's about all for now – anything more and I'd have to charge you.

My mitzvah project also involves my talents. In addition to stocking shelves at the food bank, I'll be creating a televised public service announcement for the food bank of lower Fairfield county. And that's not all. All the invitations we sent out have contributed to water conservation in Israel with the help of the Jewish National Fund. In a way, Israel's beautiful lakes and rivers are part of God's technical design.

Thank yous (Ross Neugeboren)

Jessie's Speech

Many years ago, a party was thrown for a certain grandfather of mine. His name was Les, short for Lester. A friend proposed a toast and said, "Less is more!" That basically sums up my whole portion in three words. Sometimes, doing more of something is appropriate, while on other occasions, it is not.

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, tried to overdo their sacrifice at their fathers Inauguration as High Priest of the Israelites. Instead of the everyday, normal animal offering, they brought a strange fire to the sacrificial altar. As a result, they were blown up, or in other words, burnt to death. Commentators say that the two brothers may have been drunk, which is why today, priests are not allowed to drink any kind of alcohol. This is definitely an example of less is more.

After the little incident with the fire, Aaron remained completely silent. In a way, he may have been showing that in some cases, there is just nothing to say.

I, on the other hand, disagree. Most of you out there know that my first rule in life is that silence is overrated. (pause for laughs)

My Torah portion, Shemini, also includes information about the laws of kashrut (kash-root), and lists the animals we are and are not allowed to eat. The kosher laws tell us that not every animal can be taken of its habitat and eaten.

My portion tells us all about the things that we should not overdo. Well, right now, I'm going to tell you all of the things we can carry to far. In my opinion, you can never talk too much. Also, you don't want to under-do your kindness to friends and family, or your talents. Mine include gymnastics, dance, and musical instruments. Finally, I can't get enough of Lake Greeley Camp. My friends from camp are irreplaceable.

Another thing you can never do too much of are mitzvahs. For my mitzvah project, I have been volunteering at my elementary school, Roxbury. My volunteer work varies from helping in my second grade teachers class, to assisting with the buses at the end of the day.

Thankyou

Mollie's Speech

I know this is not the most exciting parsha, filled mostly with sacrifices, but I've learned long ago that there is much to the Torah than meets the eye. In fact, my portion becomes very interesting when it meets...the nose.

In my portion, it says that some of the sacrifices created "a pleasing odor to the Lord."

It's very strange to read that. How can God smell things – and why would it matter that a sacrifice smells good? So I thought, maybe this idea of God smelling things is really teaching us something else.

Maybe it's teaching us that Judaism needs to involve all the senses. Hearing is very important. We hear the shofar and hear ourselves saying the prayers – including one that begins with the word, "hear," the Sh'ma. Judaism is filled with wonderful sights, like reading and seeing the glow of the candles. When we kiss a siddur or the Torah, we are using the sense of touch, and as for taste – there are many special tastes in Jewish tradition, like the hallah and the wine on Shabbat and the special foods of Pesach.

And then there's smell. It's the sense that is most neglected but also the most needed. By mentioning that God smells things, the Torah is teaching us that even the sense that seems least important serves a valuable purpose.

My favorite Jewish smells are etrogs, fresh baked hallahs and spices at Havdalah. In fact for tonight's havdalah service, I've made up dozens of spice packets so that we'll all be able to smell the sweetness that is Havdalah. The smell of the spices of havdalah comforts us as Shabbat is departing because, while the memory fades, the smell stays with us all week, until next Shabbat.

Smells do stay with you, for better or for worse! And Judaism is all about remembering things. Smells trigger memories. For me, being Jewish has a smell of its own – it's the smell of a fresh rose coming out of the ground in the beginning of spring.

Another thing about smells is that a little goes a long way. Just a few pieces of a spice can change the whole mixture and be very powerful. It's sort of like the Jewish people. There aren't very many of us, but we've made a powerful impression on the world. We've made a difference.

Throughout Jewish history, there have always been a few people who have helped us in difficult times, even when others have harmed us. They are like spices too – a little goes a long way.

I love the smell of bubblegum lollipops. I love the taste too! As I keep licking away, the smell gets better and better, until you get to the middle, the sweetest part.

I think that's also similar to being a Jew. The more we learn from the Torah, the deeper we go in our studies, the sweeter it gets.

That's also true about doing mitzvot. For my mitzvah project, I go to Brighton Gardens every month to help lead a Shabbat candle lighting and service. I've gotten to know the Jewish residents well and I enjoy listening to their stories.

(Thank you) (Mollie Steinmetz)

Jeff's Speech

Shabbat Shalom!

Today is Shabbat ha-gadol, the Sabbath before Passover. In the old days, this was one of only two times all year when rabbis would give a sermon. That sermon was all about the rules of Passover.

Passover has lots of rules, some of them quite strange. If a Martian were to visit earth and see what Jews do to prepare for Passover, they would think that it's **very** strange. Cleaning every corner of the house, throwing bread away, eating "crackers" for a week, and then having this very long meal where you have a plate in front of you with all these weird things on it, like parsley, a hard boiled egg and mashed apples.

The rules might seem strange, but life is filled with strange rules.

As many of you know, I love baseball, so much in fact, that I've studied the rulebook from cover to cover. And let me tell you, if you think Passover has strange rules, baseball has even stranger ones:

Did you know that in little league, a pitcher can't wear a long sleeve white shirt under his uniform – has to wear solid colors. It might seem strange, but there's a perfectly good reason behind it. The batter will not be able to find the ball as it's being released if the pitcher is wearing a white shirt.

While that rule makes some sense, I discovered several others that don't seem to make any sense at all:

Did you know that theaters in Glendale, California can show horror films only on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday? And did you know that you can't plow a cotton field with an elephant in North Carolina and in Lehigh, Nebraska it's against the law to sell donut holes? Every citizen of Kentucky is required by law to take a bath at least once a year. I think it should be at least once a week! Oh, and it's against the law to whale hunt in Oklahoma. (Think about it...)

According to law, no store is allowed to sell a toothbrush on the Sundays in Providence, Rhode Island. Yet these same stores are allowed to sell toothpaste and mouthwash.

In Saudi Arabia, a woman reportedly may divorce her husband if he does not keep her supplied with coffee. But women were banned by royal decree from using hotel swimming pools in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, in 1979.

In Riverside, California, there is an old law on the city's books that makes it illegal to kiss unless both people wipe their lips with rose water.

In New York State, it is still illegal to shoot a rabbit from a moving trolley car.

That last law actually makes some sense. I always hate it when someone shoots a rabbit from a moving trolley car.

It is true that some laws can't really be explained – but sometimes just the idea of having rules is important.

The word seder means “order.” Having so many rules on Passover gives the holiday a special sense of order. The same thing goes for my house. Having rules in my house, like ‘clean up after yourself,’ or don’t talk back,’ keeps things orderly there. Just as in baseball, we need to obey the rules so we can keep on playing the game. Passover keeps us all in the game of being Jewish.

For my mitzvah project, I’ve been helping kindergarteners at Davenport Ridge elementary school. I worked with them on things like spelling, math and how to read. I’ve had a fun time working with them.

(thank yous) Jeff Cooper

Jeffrey’s Speech

When it came time for me to decide on a mitzvah project, I had one requirement: it had to be fun. I wanted it to be a happy place. The more I thought about it, the more I realized there was only one place that could fulfill these requirements. And so, yes, I chose hospice.

Really! I’m not kidding. I do have an advantage, because I’ve gotten very comfortable there. I was there a lot when my Grandma Esther was at hospice for nine months before she passed away. I was about 8 at the time, so I don’t remember everything, but I do remember one thing in particular: my Grandma Esther always kept a bowl of candy next to her bed on the night table, and as many of you know, I like candy. My mom always would tell me I couldn’t have any candy, but my grandma Esther used to give it to me anyway.

My portion describes the breastplate worn by the Cohen, which had twelve precious stones on it. Each stone represented one of the twelve tribes. This teaches us that each tribe was unique and had something special to offer. In the way, every person is a precious jewel, unique and special.

I’ve seen this first hand at my Mitzvah Project. I visit Hospice about once or twice a week. I see all the residents and spend extra time with a couple of them.

The first day I got there I met Emma. She basically ran the place, telling the nurses what to do and not letting them cut up her grapefruit. For about three weeks she was like that. Then, one week when I came in, she didn’t look so good and was in bed. She was like this for the next three or four weeks. Sometimes I would talk to her and other times I would sit and hold her hand. I learned what to say to someone who really can’t speak, just quick yes or no answers. Or I would tell her about something that’s going on in the outside world.

At the beginning of February, she really didn’t look good and I came in the next time expecting the worst. And there she was, sitting up in a wheelchair, bossing everybody around again. She is her own kind of person – nobody tells her what to do – a perfect role model for me. Then I didn’t go for a couple of weeks because my mom and I were sick. In the middle of March we saw one of the nurses at Brocks and she told us that Emma had passed away. I was devastated, but I bet you Emma’s still ordering people in heaven.

Sometimes I wonder why God made the world with diseases. I do know, though, that God is also in our hearts, reaching out in love to those who need us. But I wish God would lead us to the cure for cancer, just He led Moses and the Jewish people out of Egypt.

My volunteer work at hospice has helped me to realize that every life is precious, like a jewel. That includes those who are ill and those who are well.

I'd like to thank some people who have been real jewels in my life...
 (thank yous – don't forget at the end to wish Mazal tov to Matthew) Jeffrey Rich
 Matthew's Outline

The end of portion is also the end of the book of Exodus. It's interesting that God appears to Israel in a cloud by day and fire by night as they go on their journeys. The Torah is teaching us that God takes on different forms for different situations. How many of us have looked up at a cloud and seen God? There are times in our lives when we may not recognize that God is there.

This past December 23, it was hard to imagine that God was anywhere near me. That was when I broke my leg. I was in a wheelchair for a few weeks and then on crutches for another few weeks. Amazingly, here I am today, three months later, able to play sports, and walk and run.

The injury was very frustrating. Aside from missing basketball season, while I was in the wheel chair especially, it was hard to get around school and I needed the help of others just to do the simplest things.

But now, looking back I realize that there were some good things that came out of it as well. One thing I learned was how it's a good idea not to mess around too much. There are some risky activities that are simply not worth doing.

I also learned how important it is to be able to walk. I can now appreciate my legs more. I now also understand how important it is to be able to rely on other people at times. During the first few weeks back at school, Eric Cooper helped me get around school, pushing the wheelchair. It was actually fun at times, and we got to get out of class five minutes early. I know that should I ever see a friend in a similar situation, I'll be more likely to be the first to offer help. I also learned that I'm a fast healer – and it's sort of amazing that bones can heal like that.

So maybe in this situation God wasn't in a cloud, but God was the silver lining that we found in the cloud, and that cloud finally lifted. When I finally got rid of the crutches, I was able to walk, it felt real good. I haven't tried anything too bold yet but I feel great.

In truth, I learned how to make the best of a bad situation long before I broke my leg. As many of you know, my mother and grandmother both have had cancer and they've inspired me in many ways. I'm dedicating my mitzvah project and this bar mitzvah to them. My project was to sell flowers for the American Cancer Society.

(thank yous – don't forget to say Mazal tov to Jeffrey) Matt Zielinski

Billie's Speech

One word I've hearing a lot late is team. Today is in fact Opening Day of my softball team's season. And today Ross and I have teamed up to become b'nai mitzvah. I've always enjoyed working on teams – in fact I'm on two softball teams, House and All Stars.

One thing important about being on teams is having everyone come together to reach the same goal. And part of that has to do with not just what we **do**, but what we **say**. We have to voice our support for our teammates.

In our practices, we don't just go over how to run the bases or how to bunt. We learn how to communicate. If there's a fly ball we learn to call out "I got it," so there won't be a collision. We also have signs to take a pitch or swing away, and making sure that we get them right can make the difference between winning and losing.

But there's another more important kind of communication that goes on in teams – words of support.

When someone is up at bat, we have different cheers that we do. They get passed down by the older kids. Sometimes the cheers involve dancing in the dugout. Some of them are very funny. The idea is that we want to express support in our own way.

We have a team rule that when someone comes out of the game, they have to keep cheering for everyone else. Words of support can **really** make a difference.

My portion speaks about leprosy, which is often compared to gossip. The reason is that the word 'Metzarah,' or leprosy, can be acronym for "Motzi Shem Ra," meaning, basically, bad language. One reason the two are compared is that a person with leprosy is forced to be isolated from the community, and a person who speaks gossip all the time also ends up alone, because people won't want to speak to him or her.

It's hard to have a team when people are doing that. When someone on my team makes a lot of mistakes, sometimes those on the bench wonder why that person is out there instead of them. Usually it's not so big a deal, but words might be exchanged and that's definitely not good for team spirit.

If you lose because somebody missed a ball or ran this play wrong and then you complain about it, this is not showing team spirit. Having team spirit means that no matter what the final score is you play as a team and win and lose as a team.

When I get in the car with my dad after a game, I explode with reasons like can you believe she missed this, and what were the coaches thinking by putting her in the game. This is gossiping but if you are going to gossip, it is **better** to gossip with someone like a parent, instead of a friend or teammate, because you know they won't tell anyone else. But the best thing, would be not to gossip at all, but to use our words to cheer everyone on.

Just as words of support stick to you and give you a warm feeling all over, for my project I collected several boxes of winter clothes and donated them to St Luke's Lifeworks so that many people might have that same warm feeling all over.

Billie Katz

Jonathan's Speech

Several weeks ago, I attended an exhibition wrestling match between Cloonan and Rippowam. That might not seem like such a big deal to you, but it was to me. You see, if it weren't for the fact that I am standing up here today becoming a bar mitzvah, I would have been on the mat that day, wrestling for my team.

I was sitting near the front yelling out advice to my teammates, especially the one in my weight class. Since I had wrestled this opponent before, I was pointing out his weak spots and suggesting a couple of moves that would work against him. I knew that the guy would be especially vulnerable to the "Gater Move," where you basically roll over and escape. Rippowam won that day, and I wonder if Cloonan might have done better if I had been able to wrestle.

My Torah portion of Vayikra is about the sacrifices that were brought in the days of the Torah. After the temple was destroyed, sacrifices were replaced by prayer, study and acts of kindness. But although those sacrifices were done away with, there are other types of sacrifices that we have to make all the time. For me, missing out on wrestling this year was a big sacrifice. While I haven't given up a lot of other things, I've been devoting a lot of time to my bar mitzvah studies for many months. It was not always easy, but I have to admit

I've enjoyed this learning process. It has also helped me to appreciate the sacrifices made by others.

Now when I see my Dad schlepping all his work on vacations I can understand the sacrifices he's making. And when my mom takes us all over the place to our activities, I realize that this takes time away from her being able to do other things. (Of course, I can't imagine anything she would *rather* be doing than spending so much time driving me!)

Several years back, there was a famous case of a high school football star who gave up a scholarship and promising college career in order to donate a kidney to his grandmother. It's hard to imagine a sacrifice any bigger than that.

Later this month, we'll sacrifice by not eating bread for a week. Passover is all about sacrifices – in fact, two of the items on the Seder plate remind us of ancient sacrifices: the shank bone and the egg.

Volunteering means sacrificing your time, but like the old sacrifices at the temple, it's all for a good cause. For my mitzvah project, I've been helping in an ESL Kindergarten classroom. I've gotten to know some of the kids very well. My Spanish is OK, but I have to have my dictionary out all the time just to be sure I understand what the kids are saying. As hard as it is for me, it must be an even greater sacrifice for them, because their language is not the main language of the country. But as I've learned this year, we all have to make some sacrifices at some point. My standing up here proves how important it is to make sacrifices sometimes, with a larger goal in mind. (thank yous)

Peri's Speech

As I was learning about the Golden Calf story in my portion I found myself asking a basic question" why in the world would a group of people start bowing down to a gold statue of a cow? It all seems a little strange, even taking into account that the people were afraid because Moses had away for so long.

I tried to understand it from the point of view of someone living today. While people these days don't tend to bow down to cows, there are many who do worship gold. So maybe the Torah is trying to teach us that we should never raise material things to the level of God. As we look through my portion, we find that the Torah teaches us to focus less on special *things* and more on special TIMES.

One of the most special times for Jews occurs every week: the Shabbat. It so happens that in the chapter *right* before the Calf incident, we learn about the Shabbat – in fact, we find here a prayer that we say during services and at the Kiddush: "V'shamru."

Did you know that when the world was created, the first thing that God called "holy" was the Shabbat? Not a thing, not a place, not a golden calf – not even the golden city of Jerusalem was first to be called holy.

So we have to wonder why Jews consider times more important than things.

Possibly, it's because a thing remains with you, or if you lose it you can just get another one. But if you waste a moment, it's gone forever.

(*look at watch*)

There will never another 11:15(?) on March 18, 2006 again! And I will never have another Bat Mitzvah day again...

...except at Camp Tevya.

When you attend my camp for 13 years, you take part in a Bat Mitzvah ceremony on the second to last Shabbat of the season. So the way I look at it, I have eight years to go until my next Bat Mitzvah day.

Speaking of Camp Tevya, some of my most special moments have happened there. I love camp so much that I go the website almost every day. They have a clock there that is counting down until camp begins, right down to the second.

And although every moment is special at camp, there are some that are extra special, including: slipping and sliding in the back room, trying to stay up all night on the last night (but it never works); the trips to roller skating and the water park, and of course, Shabbat. My favorite camp times also include whenever there is a thunderstorm late at night and the girls in my bunk all cling to one another screaming. That might not sound like much fun, but it actually is, because it makes that night different from all other nights.

Gee – a night different from all other nights... I *think* I've heard that phrase before. As the youngest in the family, I've often asked the four questions at the Seder. And today, my haftarah reminds us to prepare for that most special holiday.

And there also are so many *family* times that have been special – the cruise with my grandparents for their 50th anniversary, playing cards with my grandma, going to Minnie Mets games with my Pops (and yes, there *can* be special times without the Yankees or the Red Sox), or simply baking desserts with my family. From the time I was very young, I've learned how special times are far more important than things.

I even have gotten to enjoy special times as part of my mitzvah project – Every week I play cards with the elderly at Brighton Gardens.

So as I become Bat Mitzvah today, just 101 days until camp – and 4,565 days since I was born, I know this is a day like none other and I'll remember it forever.

Thank yous...

Abby Leibowitz: Shabbat Zachor Speech Abby Leibowitz

Shabbat Shalom and welcome to Temple Beth El. This morning's torah portion is all about remembrance, but even more so about being a team. As I stand up here today, I stand alone, yet I know that I am part of one huge team, the Jewish people.

My torah portion teaches us never to forget that horrible day when while traveling to the Promise Land, we were attacked by the Amalakites. Picture this, young men leading the way up front, women and children following, and the elderly taking up the rear. The Amalakites came from behind, and therefore attacked the weakest. Although distraught, we were able to defeat the Amalakites when we pulled ourselves together and worked as a team.

It seems that this principle is present in many aspects of our daily lives. For instance, many of you may know that I am a synchronized skater. For those of you who are not familiar with the sport, synchronized skating is figure skating as a team; 20 girls on the ice at once, simultaneously performing the exact same program. One of the reasons I chose this unusual sport is the team aspect.

A few years ago, there was an unfortunate skating accident at one competition, and let's just say the ambulance got some usage. One girl had fallen, and because a team keeps going even when there is a fall, her arm was, sadly, skated over. Suddenly, the team came together and started to appreciate the little things, like a good practice, or a funny joke a little bit

more. They got through it by working together, just as the Jews have always done through hard times.

Although it is sad to say, people are often brought together by rough times. Another example of this is the Purim story. Queen Esther, in the beginning, did not publicly associate herself with the Jewish people, but when her people were in danger of being destroyed by Haman, she risked her life to save them. Once part of a team, always part of a team.

So although today I stand up here alone, I know that there are many people behind me. Some not here with us anymore, some not with us yet. But as long as I am here, I am a Jew, and am therefore responsible to do my small part.

Over the past few months, I have been working with the Special Olympics and teaching middle and high school kids how to skate.

Thank You's

In my torah portion, Acharei Mot Kedoshim, the laws of Yom-Kippur are discussed. In the torah, it says that two goats are selected for the atonement ritual. One is randomly chosen to be the "bad-luck" goat. All of the peoples sins are symbolically placed on this goat and it is sent off into the wilderness. However, how did the people decide which goat was the "bad-luck" goat? It was all based on chance. They had a lottery.

Many things in life are based on luck. None of us can completely control our destiny. When something bad happens, you just have to make the most of it.

I don't have a lot of experience with goats, but recently I've been spending time with a dog who has also had lots of bad luck. For my mitzvah project I adopted Jamie from the Stamford Animal Shelter. It all started in early February when I received a call from the Stamford Animal Shelter. I was confused as to why they were calling me but soon found out. A few years earlier, I had put in a request for a small hypo-allergenic dog through an organization called JASPER, which works out of the shelter. The organization had sent out e-mails and flyers, which volunteers, including me, had hung up around town. I was very excited when they told me that a dog was available, and we made plans to visit and see if she and our other dog Sam would get along. So that Sunday, after Hebrew school of course, we drove down to Magee Avenue to take a look at our future puppy. The two seemed to get along well and we filled out the forms. Two days later we brought her home.

Now, there seems to be a pattern with our family and getting dogs, we always seem to get them without consulting Dad. Of course, he wasn't too happy when we brought home Sam 8 years earlier, and now Jamie. It was a challenge training her and getting her and Sam to get along, because as it turns out they weren't as good of friends as we thought they were. Night walks were tough and I often found myself getting very frustrated, but I learned some valuable lessons about patience and responsibility.

I've also learned about the need to be sensitive to those who are less fortunate, the ones who always seem to get the short end of the stick. There are lots of scapegoats in society, those who are so unlucky as to be blamed for someone else's shortcomings. The term "scapegoat," comes from the goat in my portion. The Jewish people have all too often been the ones to suffer. The Holocaust would have to be the most dramatic example of scapegoating, but there have been many others. Welcoming Jamie into my home has helped me to become more responsive to those in need.

Before beginning my journey to becoming a bat mitzvah I didn't have such a good idea what it was all about. Sure I knew that after becoming a bat mitzvah I would be seen as an adult in the Jewish community, and hey, I would get a big party and be nearly done with Hebrew School. My family and I aren't as observant as we could be, but becoming a bat mitzvah has really opened my eyes to Judaism. I have learned the components of a service and can now really appreciate and sit through a full Saturday morning service.

Life isn't about where you end **up**, it's about what you learn along the **way**, what you experience. What I will take away from this is something that will be with me forever, a better appreciation and a feeling of even more belonging in Judaism. I now feel more connected to the Jewish religion and that by far is the best gift ever.

(thank you) – don't forget to include a mazel tov to Yoni

Lauren's Speech

A few minutes from now, this service will end with Havdalah, something that especially my camp friends will know a little about. At camp, havdalah is one of the highlights of the week, especially for the older groups. The whole camp makes a circle around the kids from the oldest bunks and we do the blessings over the wine, spices and candle. The candle, which represents the start of the new week, looks beautiful glowing in the darkening sky. Seeing those intertwined wicks reminds us of how connected we all are. Havdalah fills me with feeling of true spirituality.

My Grandpa got that same feeling when he was at a hospice during the final months of his life. It was actually a Dominican facility, but he gained great comfort from the way everyone attended to his needs. The people were so understanding and sincere, to say the least. As he got more helpless, the people helped him more and more. They even helped him to hear Jewish services on the radio every Friday night. He loved that. That filled him with a true feeling of spirituality.

These two examples of real spirituality stand in contrast to what we see in my portion, the worst example of idolatry, the Golden Calf. When I was studying this story, it made me start to think about the kinds of false idols that exist today. I thought of three examples that I would like to share with you:

The first false idol is prejudice. Too often, we are put in situations where we allow our prejudices to take hold of us rather than a spirit of generosity. We need to be tolerant of people with different backgrounds. I learned early how dangerous it is to pre-judge people and think badly of them before getting to know them. If you do that to others, they'll likely do it to you as well.

Another false idol, especially for kids my age, is conformity. Think of all the people who wear the same brands all the time, simply because everyone else is wearing them. Yes, including me. But at least I recognize the danger. My sister Rachael has a strong sense of herself – *trust me, I know that* – and she is not afraid to stand apart, no matter how great the pressure. I admire her for it (although she may not know that), but she is NOT my idol.

The third type of false idol is the person who has TOO strong a sense of himself or herself – to the point where nobody else exists. If we're only thinking of ourselves, we fail to sense our connection to the people and world around us. I've come to be very concerned about the rainforests, for instance, even though they are in South America. I've also learned, from my experiences with Color Guard, what it is like to be part of a team. When you are on a team,

everyone is connected. Each person give a little bit of him or herself to make a diversified group come together as one.

All in all, I've come to realize that idolatry is what happens when people feel disconnected. When there is no havdalah candle, no team, no helpful hands, nothing but yourself, all that's left is a void. The ancient Israelites had a void too – Moses had gone up to the mountain for forty days. They filled that void with a Golden Calf. I fill my life by reaching out to help others and to help the world.

For my mitzvah project I'll be giving tzedakkah project to the Rosary Hill Hospice, where my grandfather stayed, and I'll be doing hands-on volunteer work this summer in Costa Rica.

(Thank yous)

Julie's Speech

I've loved art almost all of my life. It began with drawing pictures when I was very young. I especially like painting, sculpture and drawing. Even when I was really young, I would cut up clothes for my Barbies and even gave them haircuts.

But most of all, I've always liked to make art that makes people happy. I make birthday and get well cards and sometimes my parents ask me to make cards for them as well.

A little while ago, I began creating colorful, patterned designs and discovered I have a special talent. Now I make them for birthday gifts and for family and friends; and I made a very special one for my mother's birthday.

Considering how interested I am in art, I was amazed to discover that my Torah portion is all about art. In it, the design and building of the sanctuary in the Wilderness are described. Not only that, but we also learn the name of the most important artist in the entire Bible – Betzalel. There's even an art school in Israel named for him.

What do we know about Betzalel?

The Torah says that God singled him out by name because he had a great skill, ability and knowledge of every kind of craft: working with gold, silver, copper, stone cutting and woodwork. He was a master designer.

The commentators asked what are the differences between the three kinds of talent that an artist has – why does the Torah say that he had “Skill, ability and knowledge?”

One answer given is that an artist is inspired by three things: her own skilled training, her experiences and last but not least, God.

When I create something, I can't really say how it begins. I just pick up a pencil and draw. What guides me? I don't know really. Maybe it's God.

Betzal'el's name means “in the shadow of God.” In a way, every artist works in God's shadow. Everything we create has a little of God in it, especially when what we create is used to help people, because there is nothing that makes me feel better than when the things I do put a smile on someone's face.

I used to cut Barbie's hair – and last month, my hair was cut- that was my last big “art” project. I wasn't the artist in this case so much as I provided the supplies -- as I donated over 10 inches of my hair to Locks of Love. The wig that is created from it will, I hope, put a smile on the face a child who has cancer.

I guess I can sum things up by saying that the best kind of art that I can create is art that comes straight from the heart.

(thank yous)

Chad's Speech

This is a time lots of things are ending and lots of things are beginning too, and some things are beginning to end. And this is the end of the beginning of my speech and the beginning of the end of this service!

But seriously, it's a time of transition, and not just because I am making the transition from childhood to Jewish adulthood today. Last Sunday, which also happened to be my birthday, was the Super Bowl, so football is now over. Meanwhile, this coming Thursday, pitchers and catchers report to spring training.

Going from football to baseball tells us that spring can't be far away. Today's Torah reading tells the same thing. We read about the crossing of the Red Sea, when the Israelites made their transition from slavery to freedom. The escape from Egypt that we read about today will also be celebrated two months from now, on Passover, which is also our celebration of spring.

This week we celebrate another Jewish holiday, Tu B'Shevat, which in Israel is a time when people go out and plant trees, another sign of spring.

Today is called Shabbat Shira, the Shabbat of Song. As you can see, there's plenty to sing about: trees budding and baseball starting means lots of good things can't be far behind. Soon I'll be outside swimming and playing baseball. There's a lot to look forward to.

One important message of my portion is that you can't be afraid to leap into the future. There is a legend that the Red Sea didn't split until an Israelite named Nachshon walked into the water. The Sea didn't split until the water got up to his neck. Nachshon was no great hero – just a regular guy. But he had the courage to take that first step.

As a bar mitzvah, I know that this is a time when we look far into the future and dream about what will happen – not just a few weeks away, but years from now. I can imagine myself in years, at 23, having finished college. I might be a billionaire, simply from selling stuff on e-bay, or a baseball legend who will beat the Red Sox. Again. But whatever I am, one thing I know about the 23 year old Chad... I'll always be close to my family and proud to be a Jew.

I'll also continue to do mitzvah projects like the food drive I'm doing now, which you can read about in my booklet.

(thank yous)

A.J.'s Speech

I can still remember how amazing the sight was two summers ago at the Fleet Center in Boston. I watched from the stands as hundreds of athletes from all around the world paraded in, carrying flags from home countries. And they all had one thing in common, something that they also shared with me: they all were Jewish.

As the opening ceremonies for the Maccabi games continued, we all stood and sang Hatikva and paid tribute to the Israeli athletes murdered at the Munich Olympics. It all made me feel how special it is to be a Jew.

This summer I'll get to be *part* of the procession, as I march representing Stamford, at the Maccabi games that will be held here. I'll be playing baseball and am very excited to get to play with my Jewish friends from other parts of Stamford and the surrounding areas. These are people I usually compete against so it will be nice to be on the same team for once.

I'm also looking forward to meeting new people from other states and around the world. There will be delegations from Poland, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, L.A., Toronto, Venezuela

and Israel. I'll be excited to watch the other athletes in their sporting events and cheering them on. I'll even be hosting some of them at my house. I'm very lucky that the games will be held here during the first year that I am eligible to participate.

Although I wouldn't mind winning a couple of games, I know that it is not all about winning. More than winning, it's about trying your best. And more than that, even, it's about being proud to be a Jew.

My Torah portion is about that very same thing. As the tenth plague was about to hit Egypt, the children of Israel were commanded to put blood on their doorposts so that the angel of death would "pass over" their homes. The rabbis asked the obvious question: Wouldn't the angel of death already know which homes the Israelites lived in? Why would he need such a visible sign in order to skip those houses? The answer they gave is that the Israelites needed to put blood on the doorpost in order to prove that they were ready for the freedom they were about to gain. They had to show that they were not afraid to show the world that they are different.

As a way of remembering their courage, we now put a mezuzah up on our doorposts. That's one way we show how proud we are to be Jews. Another way is to participate in the Maccabi games.

Loyalty is not something that is found too often these days. We even live in a time when a Red Sox centerfielder can become a Yankee centerfielder overnight! A dear Red Sox fan of our family lamented the loss of loyalty when he told us that the old timers would never ever jump teams, especially to their arch rivals. But that's not the case now.

That's why the Maccabi Games are so important. It's also why becoming a Bar Mitzvah is so important. It is my chance to stand up and state before the entire world – or at least a few hundred of them – while holding the Torah before the ark – that I am proud to be a Jew.

Another way Jews show pride is to perform acts of kindness. For my mitzvah project, I've collected hundreds of pounds of food from my neighbors and friends and have been donating to the Lower Fairfield County Food Bank.

(thank yous)

Zachary's Speech

(Grandfather Speech)...

Wait! This isn't my speech!

This is my grandfather's speech, which he read in 1936 at his Bar Mitzvah. But it doesn't sound like a 13 year old who wrote it!

Back then, Bar Mitzvah speeches were usually written by the rabbi – in this case, Rabbi D. B. Stolper wrote it. So week after week in those days, kids would get up there and read what the rabbi wrote, almost as if they were robots. In my opinion, to become a Bar Mitzvah is the opposite of becoming a robot.

And I know all about both becoming a bar Mitzvah and programming robots, because I've done both.

Becoming a Bar Mitzvah is all about making your own choices and not letting anyone tell you what to do (except for God and occasionally my parents).

For the last three years, I've been competing in Lego tournaments with the school team. Last year, we even made it to the nationals in Atlanta. My job has always been to do research and sometimes program the robots that would go on the mission board and help in

the research presentation. I've programmed robots to do things like collect CDs from a table and bring them back to me. I've even programmed a robot to sing – although I never got it to learn my haftarah.

In my portion, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and says to them, “Don't blame yourselves, God sent me to protect everyone from the famine.” What Joseph is saying here is that when his brothers sold him as a slave, God was programming them to do it and they were not responsible for what they did. Things turned out O.K., but the brothers are still to blame for their actions, because while God is looking out over the whole world, but I believe God never forces someone to do something that they don't want to do.

Now that I am a Bar Mitzvah, I know that I have to assume full responsibility for all my choices. Otherwise, I'd be nothing more than a robot.

One of the choices I've had to make was the mitzvah product I decided to do. For the past several months I've been helping out at Stamford Hospital, where my Mom works. I've enjoyed doing it and I know I've made a difference for some of the patients. I'll also be donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to
(thank you)

Phil's Speech

It was Shakespeare who asked the question, “What's in a name?” That question is answered by my Torah portion, whose title is “Sh'mot,” a word that **means** “names.” In fact, the entire book of Exodus, which we begin today, is called “Sh'mot” in Hebrew.

The beginning of the portion tells us the names of the Israelites who went down to Egypt, where they later became slaves. Some commentators have said that one reason Israel was later freed from slavery was that they never stopped using Hebrew names, even after several centuries in Egypt.

So names are very important in strengthening Jewish identity. I know that my name does that in several ways. My Hebrew name is Peretz. I'm named for my grandfather on my dad's side, who died before I was born. I have a lot in common with him, as I do with other relatives. In his younger years he was a football player, which I also love to play. He also a professional trumpet player. I've played since fourth grade and now I'm in a band. By the way, the instruments you see here on the bima will be donated to the music programs of the Davenport Ridge and Rippowam schools.

Also, the name Peretz means, in Hebrew, “to burst open.” This describes perfectly the way I am on when I'm on a snowmobile at my uncle's in the mountains, or the way I am on a football field. Whether on offense, as a tight end, or on defense as a corner back, I'm always to burst toward the ball, toward the goal line or toward some unlucky person *carrying* the ball.

“Peretz” also describes what happened to my arm last October! It broke when I was going down a slide – real fast – but fortunately it healed pretty fast too. I really **learned** from that experience. It taught me how important it to be able to count on others to help you when you need it and that no one is ever alone.

On the other hand, this is the second year in a row that I've broken the same arm, and I didn't get nearly as much sympathy this time around. So I guess I won't bother doing **THAT** again.

There are some other interesting things about my name. My full Hebrew name, the one used to call me up to the Torah, includes my parents' names as well. Also, on my Dad's side

there are three Mikes, all named for my great grandfather, and four people named for my great grandmother Betsy. Names are how we keep people's memory alive, but even more than the memory; we emulate their good qualities with our deeds. While in English people talking about making a name for themselves, which means to become famous, in Hebrew, to make a "name" for yourself means to be kind and good.

It's interesting that what makes the truly greatest players great is that they care about the name on the front of their jerseys more than the name on the back. When the Patriots were introduced at the Super Bowl in 2002, they did not want to be individually announced, but rather as a team. Since then, every team at the Super Bowl has been introduced that way.

So what's in a name? As you can see, a lot! Now that I am a Bar Mitzvah, I know that my name is a very precious thing. As I grow, I hope that it will come to be associated with kindness and generosity as well as with that Peretz "burst" of energy. Most of all, my name will proclaim for all to hear, how proud I am to be a Jew.

(more about mnitzvah project??)

(thank yous)

Danielle's Bat Mitzvah Speech

My Torah portion focuses on the story of Joseph and problems with his family. Just in the first chapter **alone**, we read how the brothers are jealous of Joseph and Joseph is insensitive to **them**. Also, their father Jacob is **clueless** and therefore unable to deal with these problems. In fact, Jacob makes the problem **worse** by favoring Joseph, giving him a coat of many colors. **Then**, to top it off, Joseph has dreams where he appears to be ruling over his family, and in the end, the brothers are **so angry** that they are unable to even **speak** to Joseph. The "Joseph Story" would have turned out much differently....if only Joseph had been a little more like...**me!**

For instance, I believe family is the most important thing in life; but obviously, Joseph did **not**. I have a very close relationship with my younger brother, Andrew. As odd as it may sound, we rarely ever argue. I am very supportive of him and he is of me. I am proud of the things he does, such as school work, football and karate and I encourage him all the time. In fact, believe it or not, I brag about him to others! I also try to be sensitive to his feelings and to cheer him up when he is down. In return, he has learned from me, my Mom, Dad and Freda, to do the same for me, as well as others.

Not only am I proud and loving sibling, I also have a skill that could have been very helpful for Joseph and his brothers:

As many of you know, I have been cheerleading for the past three years and it's one of my favorite activities. There are many important characteristics a cheerleader must have:

- 1) You must be a good teammate, loyal to your squad even if it means giving something up for yourself.
- 2) You must be able to trust your teammates, and they must be able to trust you, for instance, when you are catching them or throwing them in the air.
- 3) You must have spirit and support you team regardless of whether they are winning or doing poorly

And most importantly, 4), you have to be perky, optimistic and cheerful!

If Joseph and his brothers had been cheerleaders, the story would have turned out very differently. A "cheerleader" would have helped Joseph's brothers understand him, and then they might have been supportive instead of jealous. They would have been able to resolve their differences.

The funny thing is Joseph could have been a very good "cheerleader." He was very charismatic, good looking, and he even had his own uniform -- the multicolored coat Jacob gave him (again, he could have used this to his advantage, instead of being a "show-off" he could have used it to gain trust and respect, he could have also shared it with his brothers.) Joseph's biggest problem was that he had to be the center of attention. Even when he was asleep, in his dreams, everyone was bowing to him. A good cheerleader is able to focus the attention not on them but on the whole squad and the football team they are cheering for. Joseph's brothers were also part of the problem. They simply weren't cheerful enough, which is what led to their jealousy and mistrust. Since the brothers were not cheerleaders, instead of catching Joseph, they let him fall into the pit.

I was taught to always look at the glass half full, not half empty. If Joseph's brothers were more open-minded and optimistic, perhaps they wouldn't have been jealous and Joseph wouldn't have been so self-centered. Judaism teaches us to be cheerful as it says in the Talmud, "One should always greet everyone with a smile." The strange thing is that the one who said it, Shammai, wasn't a very happy person himself, but he understood how important it was to be cheerful. You could say that he was the World's first cheerleader!

I have learned many important things from being a cheerleader (not just cheers and stunts). I have learned to put everything into whatever I do, to always look at the bright side, to be responsible and respectful of others and that it is fun to help others have fun!

In that way, my being a cheerleader has been the driving force behind my mitzvah project. Cheerleading has helped me accomplish challenging tasks:

For example, some people are afraid of working with older people. For the past year, I have worked closely with seniors at The Smith House. I've even made a close friend "Ethel" who just turned 101. She has Alzheimer's disease so she doesn't always remember me, which is difficult for me, but we always play games and I see her become more cheerful each time I arrive. Being a "cheerleader" for these wonderful people, has not only been good for them but I also get a great benefit from our visits -- I feel happy knowing I was able to bring cheer and smiles to many lonely people. I am very proud I have been volunteering at The Smith House, I also convinced a friend of mine to join me.

Also, I have a great-grandmother (I call her "GG") who I love and admire very much. She is terrific! GG lives alone in her own private home. She is happy to be in her own home, but I know she is often lonely. I try to call her sometimes just to be "cheerful" and I know she enjoys this very much. This is one of the reasons I decided to work at The Smith House.

Making other people happy, makes me happy -- Joseph should have tried this - he probably would have had a much happier life, filled with love and respect from his brothers.

I would to thank the Rabbi, Cantor, Bracha, my Hebrew School teachers, my parents, Andrew and Freda. Also, a special thank you to my Aunt Judy for all the beautiful things she made for this special day, including the lace head covers.

Bens speech

The title of this week's portion has a bit of irony in it. Although it is called cha Danielle's Bat Mitzvah Speech

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yey Sarah, Sarah dies at the beginning. This title is hinting to us that something about Sarah remains alive even after she had died. And that "something" is the spirit of friendship and kindness.

Sarah was related to Abraham in a lot of different ways. When they went to Egypt she was his sister, and it happened again later on. When it came time for Ishmael to go she was his advisor, and when she heard she was going to have a baby at age 90 she was a source of comfort and laughter. But most of all she was his partner and they traveled the known world together. Wherever he went she went. Except for that final journey. When Abraham took Isaac to moriah to sacrifice him Sarah was left behind. That bond of friendship and trust with Abraham was broken and she could not survive that.

But her spirit of friendship did survive. Later in the portion, Abraham set eliezer, his servant, back to haran to find a wife for Isaac. On his way, Eliezer prays to G-d to show kindness to his master Abraham. The key word is "kindness" or "chesed" in Hebrew. And kindness is something that breaks down boundaries in relationships. Eliezer is no longer Abrahams servant, he is Abrahams friend.

Rivka in turn shows kindness to Eliezer the servant, then she goes one step beyond that, offering water to his camels as well. As soon as that happens, Eliezer knows that she is the right person for Isaac. When she is brought back Isaac loves her immediately and he brings her into Sarah's tent. In a very real way, Sarah has returned because her spirit of kindness has returned to their family. It is interesting to note that almost immediately after Isaac marries Rivka, Abraham realizes that he shouldn't be alone and gets married once more. Everybody needs a friend. I was very lucky to have someone that could be a special partner to me. My uncle Alan was MY special partner. I could talk freely about everything with him and he would understand. And like Rivka he went above and beyond with his acts of kindness. He never watered my camels but he picked me up from bar mitzvah parties long after midnight. When he passed I realized that I needed other people, just as Abraham came to understand that. It has brought me a lot closer to my family.

It has also helped me to appreciate the fact that my friendship can make difference to others. Over the last year and a half I have developed a special bond with another student through the friendship circle. It is funny, the first friendship circle really happened in my portion, where Sarah's spirit of friendship and kindness came full circle back to her tent. Thanks yous....

Alana's Speech

You may be wondering why it seems like there are almost as many people here today as there are on the high holidays. Believe it or not, we actually cut down on the guest list. ☺ You may not realize it, but friends are very important to me. I have many different categories for friends. Friend who make me laugh, friends who get me through hard times, friends from camp, friends from Cloonan, friends from Hebrew school, friends who are human, and friends who are not. (My dog, Biscuit)

My portion is sort of a step by step guide to making friends. Abraham shows us the way. The first thing we see in the portion is the way Abraham welcomes guests. In Hebrew this is known as Hachnasat orchim.

The key is empathy. Abraham knows what his guests are going through. He's been a traveler in the desert too. So he goes out to greet them, gives them food and drink, and involves his whole household so that everyone can share in this mitzvah.

In the portion, we also learn that there are times when it is ok to tell a white lie for the sake of friendship. When God tells Sarah that she is going to have a child, she says "That's impossible, my husband is too old," but when God relays the conversation to Abraham, God quotes Sarah as having said that she is too old. In that way God spares Abraham's feelings. Also, Abraham stands up for the little guy, even know he didn't know them. He argues with God against wiping out the city of Sodom.

So with these guidelines in mind, I'd like to present to you something I've been working on. So here they are, Alana's top 5 secrets to a long-lasting friendship.

1. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. And I don't just mean those cool sandals I bought at the Naot factory outlet in Israel.
2. Pretend that everyone is part of your family. At an Absorption Center in Israel, the kids ran up to us like we were long lost relatives, like the way Abraham ran up to greet the three angels.
3. Be honest. I missed my friend's party to go see a different friend's play on opening night. Because I was honest, no one was upset, and everything worked out great.
4. But there are times when you don't want to be too honest. For example, if one of your friends comes into school wearing a totally insane outfit, you will not tell them that to protect their feelings.
5. There are also times, like when people say offensive things, that you need to overlook them, and give them benefit of the doubt. You should know when to help a friend out by protecting them from unkind words.

These are my five top secrets to a long-lasting friendship. Here's one more. When you share an incredible experience with people who you care about, they will become your friends for life. I feel that way about my friends who I traveled to Israel with this past summer and with all the people we met there. It's obvious that Abraham's spirit lives on in the land that he called home. Some of those people were involved in the mitzvah projects described in my booklet, at places like Yad Eliezer and Yad Lakashish.

And by the way, while you're in the booklet, look at the photo of me and my friends 2 pages from the back. It was taken from the exact spot described in my portion where Abraham and Isaac saw Jerusalem for the very first time.

“Thank you”

Mike's Speech

There is someone very special here today whom I would like to welcome. Catherine Ho, who has been our family's nanny for 19 years, has a birthday today. Happy birthday! (sing???)

Aside from being like a second mother to me, she has been an inspiration over the years, especially recently. Earlier this year, she was diagnosed with a serious illness, and these past several months have been very difficult for all of us. I've worried about her constantly. I'm so happy that she is well enough to be here today. It's a tribute to the strength of her own spirit, which enabled her to survive many years in a labor camp in China, sent there simply because she believed in God.

Jewish tradition would teach us that part of the reason she is here is that people have cared so much about her. The Talmud teaches us that if you visit a sick person, it takes away 1/60 of the illness. For the past few months I've been visiting her weekly and I can see that my visits have lifted her spirits. She's been teaching me Chinese and she's been telling me about China. We hope to one day be able to go to China together.

In my portion, we learn about the Jewish value of visiting the sick, or *Bikkur Cholim*. At the beginning of the portion, God appears to Abraham. We know from the end of the last week's portion that Abraham had just been circumcised at age 99, so it was probably a very painful experience. The rabbis looked in the Torah for examples of God's behavior to indicate how people should act, and *bikkur cholim* was very important to them. Now I can see why.

Throughout the centuries, *bikkur cholim* has been seen not just as being considerate and helpful, but as a spiritual practice that brings us closer to God. There are clear guidelines as to how this should be done. It's important to visit at a time that is comfortable for the patient and to let the patient steer the discussion in the direction they want it to go. It's also important to be able to listen more than to talk, and not to be afraid to laugh or tell a joke once in a while. It's also important not to stay too long if the patient is getting tired. It's really not a matter of rules, however, but of common sense. And the main thing is to show you care, in any way that you can.

Now that I am 13, I will be able to take these lessons I've learned and apply them not only to people I know, but to people I don't know, and to put smiles on the faces of patients in Stamford Hospital. When Sam became a Bar Mitzvah he visited the hospital every Friday for almost a year. I am planning to follow in his footsteps for my mitzvah project. (add thank yous)

Austin's Speech

Two years ago, I started playing football and I immediately fell in love with it because I love to tackle people. Since I play linebacker, in a given game I might make up to 7 or 8 good tackles and a couple of assists. When I stop a running back in the open field it feels great. So when it came time to writing this speech, it was natural that I would want to discuss the connection between being Jewish and playing football.

Did you know that in my portion, Abraham was clearly the world's first Jewish football player? He combined all the skills that a football player needs:

- He had tremendous strength and took on an alliance of armies
- He had the courage to rescue his nephew who was a prisoner of war.
- He was a real team player, forming an alliance with several kings
- He was a strategist, knowing how to put people in the right places to avoid trouble, which he did with his shepherds.
- And he had the ability to play in pain.

There is no doubt that Abraham could tackle anything that came his way, Even the title of the portion, which is God's command to him, can be translated not just "Go forth," but "Go long!"

When I decided to play for the team, I remember telling my mother...and she said, sarcastically, "Ask your father," as if she thought he would say no. But it turned out that he supported me. It was only then that I began to realize how few Jews play football. I think it's because a lot of parents are concerned that their kids will get injured. Despite this, some of the greatest football players have been Jews...well, at least some pretty good ones. Why, there's even a Jewish football player on my favorite team – Josh Miller, the punter on the Patriots. There's also Jay Fiedler, a quarterback on the Jets. Tom Brady, my favorite player, is not Jewish, but the owner who drafted him, Robert Kraft, is.

And just this year, the NFL voted Benny Friedman into the Hall of Fame. Friedman, who died in 1982, was a star quarterback in the 1920s and 30s, and then a coach at Brandeis University. He was one of the greatest passers of all time. You can read about him in my booklet.

So as I become a Bar Mitzvah, you can see why I am proud to be carrying on a long tradition of Jews and football.

For part of my mitzvah project, I've been helping out at Waveny care center; I'll also be donating to and volunteering at the New Canaan Food Bank (thank yous)

Emma's Speech

At the beginning of my portion, Abraham is told by God to leave his homeland, his birthplace and his father's house, for a land that God promises to show him. It's interesting that Jewish history could begin only when the people were far from home.

I can understand that idea, because I've done something similar. I've found a place far from home that has become a second home to me, a place that has helped me to grow. It is my second home: Summit Camp in Pennsylvania.

If I can explain why I love Summit so much, it will help us to understand why Abraham needed to leave his home.

At camp, I get to make my own decisions. I get to choose what I'm going to eat, or what I'm going to buy on trips to the nearby mall. At home, I'm not quite as independent.

For instance, at home, I can't eat more than two sweets a day! I can imagine that Abraham and Sarah had that very same problem. But once they left their home, they got the chance to make those very tough choices on their own. Of course, at camp everything is sugar free, but I still manage to find sweet things from time to time.

I will admit that camp is not quite as comfortable as home. My bed at home is in fact *much* more comfortable. And at camp, it can get so hot that you can't sleep. It can also get pretty messy in a bunk (but I guess that's not so different from my room at home). And both

at camp and at home, clean up time comes much too often for my taste! For Abraham and Sarah too, it was much less comfortable on the road. For Abraham and Sarah too, it was much less comfortable on the road. At one point, in my Torah reading, Abraham even asks Sarah to pretend she is his sister, so that Pharaoh won't kill him. But sometimes being not so comfortable inspires us to do some creative thinking.

When I'm at camp, I'm usually very happy. But there are times when I miss home. Abraham and Sarah also might have gotten homesick for their country. But being homesick can be a good thing – it means you really care about the ones you love, and you never forget where you came from. Jews have always been careful to remember the past, no matter where we have gone.

Here are some other things I love about camp: wall climbing, high ropes, trampoline, free swim, banana boats, tennis, and, believe it or not, the food, which gets better every year. But the thing I love most is the people – when you are away from home, you often give people a better chance to become your friend – you spend much more time together and you need each other more; you depend on each other.

When Abraham and Sarah went to their new home, they also made many new friends and had some amazing adventures.

I am proud to be following in their footsteps today.

For my mitzvah project, I'm donating money to the ASPCA to help animals who suffered because of Hurricane Katrina.

(thank yous)

David Markowitz 's Speech

You may have been wondering what that strange looking structure is outside the window over there (*point out the window*). It's called a Sukkah, and I helped build it a few weeks ago. I worked on it for nearly four hours, but it was so much fun that the time went by really quickly. The festival of Sukkot is all about building – all the mitzvot for the holiday involve the hands – things like taking the Lulav and Etrog (except on Shabbat) as well as building the Sukkah, I'm very proud to include that Sukkah among the list of my many building projects.

I've always loved building things and someday I hope to be an architect. You name it, I've built it: planes, boats, houses, animals, submarines and dinosaurs. I have dozens of building sets and models in my closet and room. I'm particularly proud of a project I did in the 5th grade. It's a model of the Brooklyn Bridge made out of sticks. (*hold up photo?*) Anyone want to buy it?

I love to learn about historical monuments and places, especially in Washington DC.

What makes all of these other buildings different from a sukkah? Well, for one thing, they are built to last and hold up even in very bad weather. But the sukkah is one construction project that's supposed to be built in such a way that it could pretty easily fall apart. The idea is for us to leave the strong shelters of our homes and move into this fragile dwelling. Another difference is that the blueprints for building a sukkah are supplied by God. In that way, it's supposed to be somewhat of a Jewish dream house, the ideal home.

What makes it so ideal, when rain can easily leak through the roof? The sukkah teaches us that we should always keep our doors wide open to help those in need. When you are in a sukkah, you will be able to hear if they need help, and they will be able to hear you too.

The most important mitzvah involving a sukkah is to welcome guests. Several years ago, my family housed an Israeli soldier who was working at the JCC summer camp. We had

such a great time that we did it again the following summer. When a building has no heating, like the sukkah, people have to generate their own warmth, and that's exactly what the sukkah helps us to do. The sukkah reminds us that life is best enjoyed not when we are hidden away in our warm, safe houses, but rather when we extend our arms and open our hearts to other people.

Through my mitzvah project, I've been able to extend my own arms out into the community. Aside from building our sukkah, I've also spent time at the food bank and cleaning up parks in downtown Stamford.

(thank yous)

Jeffrey's Jablon Speech

One thing that I always do is strategize. I always play games with my parents (and occasionally Amanda too), and the more strategy, the better. You name it, I play it: checkers, chess, Monopoly, Clue, Sequence, and Cranium and all kinds of card games. OK, I don't play backgammon, but my mom was really good at it when she was a kid, so I'm sure I'll learn it someday.

Even more active sports involve lots of strategy, and I play those as well: ping pong, tennis, baseball, basketball, and even miniature golf. What they all have in common is that, in order to do well, you have to be thinking several moves ahead.

Jews have always done well in games involving strategy because we've had lots of practice in the way we study Torah and Talmud. And in Israel, they've had lots of practice having to fight so many wars. But it's interesting that there really is no Hebrew word for strategy. The word they most often use is "Istrategya." Another word they use is "Shefa," which is also the word for the "holiness that flows from God." Maybe this is teaching us that sometimes it is better not to dwell too much on strategy but instead to "go with the flow." Maybe it's also teaching us that all strategy begins with God and flows from God.

In my portion God creates the world and sets things up for history to begin. The six days of creation were followed by Shabbat. Creation is strategic, you have to plan what you do all week, but Shabbat is a day when things just flow; we don't have to organize so much.

Later in the Garden of Eden, I get the feeling that the whole thing was a real set up by God, who was thinking a few moves ahead when He told Adam and Eve that they could eat anything in the Garden except for the fruit of THIS tree. God really wanted them to eat that fruit, which is why He told them not to. In other words, God is *verrry* tricky.

Later on, God leads Cain to be jealous of Abel, like a chess player setting him up for a fall.

So we learn all about strategy from God, but in the end, what we learn most of all from this is that we have the freedom to make our own decisions. God plays the game along with us, but we move our own pieces.

So, just in case God wants my advice, if I had been strategizing the Creation, I would have done things differently. For instance, I would have given people an extra eye behind their heads. Actually.....maybe not, because everytime Amanda and I would have one of our very rare arguments in the car, my dad would claim that he has an eye behind his head. When we got out of the car we would check his hair. Another thing I would do if I created earth is that I would make pigs that could fly and dogs that can't jump over gates.

Now that I've finished playing God, I need to strategize my way to the end of this speech.

For my mitzvah project, I am going to be donating books and board games to shelters housing victims from Hurricane Katrina. (change if you want)

Thank yous..

Dan's Speech

Those of you who know me know that I love to explore. I'm definitely not a "sit-in-front-of the TV kind of guy. I'm always asking my friends, "What are we going to do?" And for me, the possibilities are endless:

One of my favorite things to do is biking. I take long bike rides about 4 times a week and I love to discover new paths. Did you know that there is a cool path right by Black Swamp in Springdale? The path leads to ... uh ... nowhere. It's a dead end. But it's really fun. You have to go over rocks and under low branches. There are even a few bridges. It's a real challenge!

Also, I love to roller blade. I have a wooden ramp that I got for Hanukkah. I can do 360s and different tricks in the air! (But whenever my mom comes out, she reminds me to be careful). I also walk my dog while in roller blades – actually, she walks me.

What I love to do most is skiing. Vail is my favorite mountain because it's a real challenge. My brothers and I always look for tree-skiing trails, where you basically are weaving through trees on a narrow path in the woods.

As you can see, I'm not one to look for the easy way. Whether on skis, skates or on foot, whenever I cross a new path I can't wait to take it. I even spent this summer at Wellesley College's Exploration Program, where I learned how to expand my horizons even more. For this reason, I really feel for Moses. At the end of my portion, God tells Moses to go on top of a high mountain. Moses goes up there, something I'd gladly do as well. But instead of skiing down (like I would), he only gets to look across the river to the other side. He gets to see the beautiful land but knows he will never be able to enter. Even worse, he knows that he will die up there.

I'm sure what I would have done, but it would have been frustrating to see this new path and not be able to explore it. If I were him, I might have taken my staff and skied down the mountain.

I can also relate to Moses because he was a real explorer throughout his life. So was David, the main character of my Haftarah. David experiences almost every natural disaster imaginable: thunder, lightning, earthquakes, floods – you name it. But David comes through it all. It takes a lot of faith to be a good explorer. You have to trust yourself – and God – to choose to go down unknown paths.

My mitzvah project, Person to Person, is a great charity. There people donate clothes and food and those less fortunate come and shop for no fee. When I am there, I sort clothes and food, and help people to find what they are looking for. Dan Lazerus
(thank yous)

Isaac's Speech

My portion's name is officially "Noah," but the title should be, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Or, as Nike would say, "Just do it!"

Unfortunately, we're not talking about a Nike commercial here, but about God repeatedly destroying the world. The portion takes only ten generations after the world was created. And then suddenly, God wants to take it all away and start over. There's actually a rabbinic story where God created and destroyed the world many more and never being satisfied. Finally, after the flood in Noah's time, God realizes that it will never be perfect and so He

promises that He will never destroy the world again. In doing this, God realizes that people have flaws, we're not robots, and that there is a need to accept those imperfections.

At the end of the portion, we read about the Tower of Babel, where people's flaws appear again, as they built a tower hoping to reach heaven. God makes it so that they all speak different languages and cannot communicate. In this way, God solves the problem without having to destroy the world.

People today also have to learn how to strike the balance between aiming high and accepting the fact that we won't always achieve our goals.

I've seen that in my own life. This past season, my little league team could easily have gone 20-0. We did go to the city tournament, which we should have won. We ended up the season 18-2 because of bad luck. I've learned to accept it, even the bad calls by the umpires. Can you believe that I pitched a one-hitter and LOST! But I've learned not to get upset about these things...and to keep a cool head. Getting mad hurts no one but yourself. Just ask David Wells.

Some baseball players use foreign substances like steroids or Vaseline in the bill of the cap, to enhance their performances. I would never put a foreign substance in the bill of my cap – I put it on my shoelaces... (just kidding). Clearly, they have not learned the lesson of my portion. We need to accept that we are not going to be perfect.

I also love to dive, and that is definitely a sport where reach for your limits and learn what they are. Your body tells you when there is a dive that you can't do. On the other hand, there have been times when I've really pushed my limits and did better than I ever thought I could.

And then there's Bar Mitzvah. Did you know that my haftarah has a degree of difficulty of 7.8? I had to work very hard to prepare for today. But my goal wasn't to be perfect but to challenge myself to go beyond where I thought I could go. Thanks to my teachers and tutors, I've accomplished what I set out to do.

The world might not be perfect, but as the sages said in the book Pirkey Avot, *"It's not your job to finish the work, yet you are not free to disregard it either."* So I'm doing my part to make the world better by going down to the food bank in Stamford every Friday and helping to sort the food so it can be sent to those in need. I've been doing this for more than a year.

(thank yous...)

Jonathan's Speech

This morning, I am celebrating my commitment to the ideals of the Torah. As I was learning about my portion this past summer, it occurred to me that the Torah is similar to another series of books that is special to millions of people. I'm speaking of course about Harry Potter.

The more I thought about it, the more similarities I found.

Let's begin with my portion. In Nitzavim, it is made clear that the Torah is being given not just to the people who were present, but to all Jews everywhere, and forever. In Harry Potter, Harry's parents are killed by Voldemort, but they live on in their son in so many ways.

When Voldemort tries to kill Harry as a baby, the curse backfires and Voldemort is weakened. This reminds me of a similar story in the Torah, where the magician Bilaam (*Beel-uhm*) tries to curse the Israelites but ends up blessing them instead.

In my portion, Moses pleads with the people to be loyal and united. He says, “You who stand before me today,” and he includes just about everyone in their society, from the highest to the lowest. Moses died at 120. Albus Dumbledore dies at about 150 – (oops, I didn’t mean to give that away), and he was a lot like Moses, leading the young wizards and witches through troubled times. He fought for good and in the end, was always able to defeat evil.

In the latest book, the “sorting hat” encourages students to adopt unity and brotherhood in order to defeat the enemy. Only through the cooperation, loyalty and adherence to the traditions and rules of the Wizardly world will they be safe. If you look at the beginning of chapter 30 in my portion, Moses is saying the exact same thing. There is no talking hat in the Torah, though.

But there are other special garments, like the tallit, which I’m wearing for the first time today, with the special fringes, or tzitzit, that remind us of the commandments. Harry and his friends wear wizarding robes to show their connection to their school.

Hogwarts, the school of wizardry, is a place to learn and increase your wizarding skills, much like Hebrew School – or a Shabbaton, where you grow in Torah observance and get closer to God (although the Shabbatons I’ve been to have mostly included late night Bingo and guys dressing up as girls. Also, Hogwarts is a seven year program, just like Hebrew School. It takes that long for us to begin to fully understand and be able to use the magical powers of Judaism.

So I stand up here today to tell you that “Today I am not Muggle.” I know that as a Jew, I possess special powers that can bring goodness to the world. Just recently, I organized a paper goods drive and volunteered at the Ferguson Library and JCC. This coming year, I also plan to tutor at Roxbury elementary school.

My comparison to Harry Potter has one basic flaw. If the series is like the Torah, then that means JK Rowling is like God. But we know that’s not true. JK Rowling is richer....

(thank yous with Matthew)

Good morning. My Bat Mitzvah is a special one because tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh. Because of this, I have a special part added to my haftarah, a story that tells us about the nature of friendship, something that is very important to me. Here it talks about the friendship of David and Jonathan. David helped out King Saul, Jonathan’s father, in the war when David killed Goliath. After that, Saul became jealous of David, not only for slaying Goliath, but for having been chosen by the prophet Samuel to succeed Saul as king in Jonathan’s place. David, as you remember, was the youngest of his brothers and a Shepard who became an instant star. Saul was very angry about this and sent out many people to try to search out and kill David. Fortunately, for David, he survived. Otherwise, the Bible would look very different!

Jonathan did not know about his father’s plans but was suspicious that his father was jealous of David. Jonathan decided to try his theory and told David not to show up at a couple of banquets and see his father’s reaction. At the first banquet Saul did not mind that much, but the other time David did not show up, Saul became outraged. That was when Jonathan knew it wasn’t safe for David to stay in the area. Jonathan snuck out of the second banquet and gave David, who was hiding in a field, a sign that told him to leave.

My Torah portion, Re’eh states, “You shall open your hand wide to your brother and sister, to the poor, to the needy.” Jonathan was doing just that, helping his friend. But in doing so,

he betrayed his father. It's a real dilemma as to whether he was performing a mitzvah in helping his friend, or breaking a commandment in not honoring his parent.

This mitzvah of opening your hand relates to people in different ways. For instance, some people decide to feed the homeless, while others only go as far as helping their friends study for a big test.

Also, the beginning of my portion talks about choices, how we each are called upon to choose between being a blessing or a curse. In a way, Jonathan was doing just that. He could either, help his friend and save a life (a blessing), or let Saul take David into his clutches and kill him (a curse). Jonathan chose to be a blessing and helped David escape. Life is full of hard choices, if you choose to look at it that way. For example, you could choose to study hard in school, get into a good college, and find yourself working in a high paying job, or you could choose to slack off, not get into a good college, and find yourself working in a lousy job.

Now I've never been faced with Jonathan's dilemma. I've never had to choose between being a good friend and honoring my parents. Of course I've never been in a situation where my friend is a Shepard and if I let my father get a hold of her, he will kill her and I will become the next king of Israel...

My parents are very supportive of what I do, like horseback riding, so I don't have to worry about disappointing them. However, on some of the smaller things, like whether to sleep over at a friend's house when I have work to do, I occasionally disobey them. But in my semi-young life I haven't disobeyed my parents to save a friend yet, and I might never do that because these days, people don't kill people to have their sons become king, so I don't have to worry about that.

If I had to handle a situation like Jonathan, I would do exactly what he did. I have the very best friends and love them to death and I would do almost anything for them, just like Jonathan and David.

Some of my friends have two legs, and others have four, like my cats, my hedgehog and the horses I ride. As with Jonathan and David, sometimes the friendship is communicated not with words but with actions. When riding a horse, what you say to the animal matters much less than your position in the saddle and the movements of your legs. When I ride my favorite horses, Millie and Bonito, there is so much trust that I can usually get them on the bit, which basically means that they have put all their power in my hands. That must be similar to the way David and Jonathan trusted each other.

In the same spirit, for my mitzvah project I'm going to be collecting supplies for a pet adoption center called "Scat," which houses abandoned or mistreated cats.

(thank yous...)

Thank you all for coming to my very special day. Let me just say that without the help of Bracha, Rabbi Hammerman, Cantor Littman, and Cantor Jacobson, I would not have been able to perform my Bat Mitzvah service. I also would like to thank my supportive family and friends.....(add???)

Greg's Speech

Doesn't it often seem that life is so **unfair?** **Bad** things always seem to be happening to **good** people.

I'm a **huge** sports fan. In almost any game you can pick out several plays and say, "**That was unfair!**"

It's not so bad in **football** because of instant replay. In **basketball** it's pretty bad. I'm still mad about a call in the 2004 NBA Finals, when the Lakers were treated **unfairly** by the refs against the Pistons.

But it's worst of all in **baseball**, because almost all the **balls** look like **strikes** and the **strikes** look like **balls**. The rabbi says baseball is unfair **also** because some teams can have a 200 million dollar **salary** structure. Even as a Yankee fan, I can agree that that is unfair.

The world has **lots** of injustice. The Torah even **tells** us so. In my portion of Shoftim, we find the famous verse, "**Tzedek, tzedek tirdof,**" which means, "Justice, justice you shall pursue." The sages asked why the Torah needed to have the word justice appear twice.

One reason might be that the world has **so much** unfairness that we have to **double our efforts** in order to make it more **just**.

The other reason is expressed by the commentator Rashi, who said that it is not enough to **pursue** justice – you have to do it **in just ways**. For example, you can say to a referee before a game, "Make sure to be fair to both teams." But you can't say, "Make sure to be fair to both teams, because if you are not, then I will spread nasty rumors about you."

Wouldn't it be great if all of life were like sports? We could walk around with penalty flags and toss them at people who do something wrong. When the whistle blows they could sit in a penalty box for two minutes or marm off some yardage or get to do the play over. I think that something like messing up a Torah blessing might be worth a good ten yards.

In the end, we can't fix all the injustices of the world, but we need to do our best to make things more fair. How?

The Torah tells us how:

- by appointing honest judges who won't take bribes.
- By not favoring the rich or the poor
- And by defending those who cannot defend themselves. In my portion, the Torah even defends trees. It tells us not to cut down trees when fighting a war against a city, because the trees are innocent and defenseless.

But even when there are good judges who do pursue justice life can still be unfair. Even God isn't fair all the time. There are lots of things bad about the world, but rather than complaining about how unfair everything is, we should be glad simply to be alive.

For my mitzvah project, I helped to organize swimming races for the Connecticut Special Olympics. Some of the participants would well spend all their time complaining that life is unfair. But instead, they were so happy to be competing and it was really inspiring for me and everyone else.

(add more if you want)

Thank yous...
Melanie's Speech

Shabbat Shalom. For those of you who don't know me – and even for those who **do** – I'd like to give you a quick guided tour of my life. So climb aboard the tour bus, put on your seatbelts...and here we go.

On your **left**, ladies and gentlemen, you see...my **room**. The walls are painted bright red and **blue**. It's not my mom's **favorite** but she **tolerates** it. One of my walls is filled with names of **songs**. One day during a recent vacation, my friends and I just took some markers

and wrote names of songs on lined paper, songs from “Hairspray,” “Footloose” and “Wicked.” By the way, they are all the same show – and that show is also my life.

What do I mean by that? Well, first, let’s continue the tour.

On your right, you see my closet. Clothes and shoes galore! My friends always say that they can’t imagine anyone in these clothes except me. I have clothes to suit different moods, sweatpants from Bobs for comfy days and jeans and skirts from Havana, for when I want to be more dressy.

Oh, and over there, in the pile of who knows what, there is my Bat Mitzvah book with my Torah and haftarah portions in it. And all these things express the same thing: individuality.

I’ve never been afraid to be my own person and maybe a little different from the rest. I pride myself in standing up for what I believe in and standing out from the crowd. My friends respect that and often go to me for help or advice.

In my Torah portion, the people of Israel complain a lot – they behave like an unruly mob, or as the portion itself calls them, “riffraff.” In the middle of this, two individuals, named Eldad and Medad do some unusual things and everyone expects them to be punished. But instead, Moses says, “if only everyone could be a prophet” like them. Moses understood that God’s spirit can be in all individuals, not just in leaders like him. Moses then created a leadership team of 70 individuals to help him out.

Also in the portion, we read about the Menorah. On Hanukkah, when we light the candles with my cousins, we often have four different menorahs – simple for the adults and more colorful for the kids. The hanukkukiyot may be different -- but the light from each one is equally bright.

That light is in all of us. As my haftarah states, it is a light of the spirit. “Not by might and not by power but by My spirit says the Lord of hosts.”

OK – so back on the bus everyone. Over there you see my dogs, Max and Izzy. They are individuals too! Max weighs 200 pounds and Izzy weighs 12 pounds. But believe it or not, Izzy is the boss. He has a real mean streak. He guards the food, he’s always the first one out the door and won’t let Max out of his sight. No one will ever mistake one for the other.

And, I suppose, no one will ever mistake me for anyone else either. (pause)

Since I am such a dog lover, for my Mitzvah project I’ve been collecting toys, blankets, biscuits and treats to Adopt – A – Dog.

(Adam will do his speech, then the thank yous together)

Adam’s Speech

Mazal tov, Melanie. I’m glad we could do this together!

The first words of the haftarah that we just chanted are “Rani V’Simchi bat Tziyon,” “Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion!” With this, the prophet Zachariah (Za – CHAR- ya) celebrates the Jews’ return to Jerusalem after an exile that lasted an entire generation. The first temple had been destroyed in 586 BCE and the Jews had feared that they would never return to their homeland. But, miraculously, they were able to return and build the second temple.

There is no greater joy than having a second chance – being able to regain what was lost so long ago.

I know exactly how that feels, because I am a Red Sox fan. It's almost as if the prophet were one too. Note the similarities: The Exile began in 586 and it was exactly 86 years between World Series victories for the Sox. The Exile ended with the dedication of a Menorah. The Sox exile ended with a toss to Mientkiewicz. The Menorah described in my portion is a symbol of faith. And at Fenway, there was a big sign saying "Keep the Faith," with a picture not of a Menorah but of Manny. Did you know that the Red Sox not only have a Jewish general manager, but last year they had the most Jewish players of any team: 2 – Gabe Kapler and Kevin Youkilis. Finally, please open your *humashim* to the very bottom of page 838. (WAIT) The prophet says "I am going to bring my servant the Branch." What is this branch? According to this commentary, it is the "branch of David" who has been chosen by God to bring victory." Well, that's exactly what happened. The bat – or branch – of David – David Ortiz, is what made the difference for the Sox.

I know it might seem strange that I am a Red Sox fan, but my Dad lived in Boston for a few years and he became a big fan, so he passed that down to me. There were some tough times. When they were down three games to the Yankees, it would have been easy to give up. But I kept watching and rooting. And the rest is history.

The Red Sox teach us never to give up hope and that there will always be another chance.

There is always next year, even if it takes 86 of them for something good to happen.

My Torah portion teaches us that there is always next MONTH. It speaks of a second Passover, which was arranged a month later for those who could not observe it the first time because they might have been away or sick and unable to bring the Passover sacrifice.

Second chances are important not only in baseball and in holiday celebrations, but in all of life. For instance, when I have fight with a friend, I always look for a way to resolve it so that each of us can have a second chance. I never will give up on a friend. In sports, even if my team is always losing, I always keep trying my hardest, never giving up hope that we can turn things around. Whenever I do something wrong at home and my parents want to punish me, I speak to them about the importance of giving a second chance. In fact, I think it is important to give 3rd, 4th and 5th chances as well. After all, the Red Sox had 86 of them.

When Moses tried to get Pharaoh to let the people go, and Pharaoh kept saying no, Moses kept coming back to him, giving him nine chances before that terrible final plague.

Sometimes it takes a long time for that next chance to come. For the Jewish people, it was almost 2000 years before we had the chance to have our own country, but we never gave up hope. And I'm really happy that I'll be going to Israel this summer with my family on the temple's trip. I'll get to see first hand how beautiful the country is and how the Jewish people have taken advantage of this long awaited chance to return home.

For my mitzvah project, I have been helping young children at the JCC once or twice a week, helping them with homework and playing with them in the pool and out on the playground. And when they fight, I try to teach them to give one another second chances too.

(thank yous will Melanie)

Ali's Speech

Pomerance

A few minutes ago, we all stood up to recite the words that we say whenever we finish a book of the Torah, "*Hazak Hazak V'Nitchazek.*" "Make us strong and let us be strengthened by the Torah." In saying these words, we are trying to gain strength and confidence so that we can go out and put these words to use.

The problem is that much of the Torah reading itself seems to be doing just the opposite. The portion contains a number of blessings and curses as a way of motivating the people to follow the commandments. But there are only a few blessings and lots and lots of curses. It's customary to read them quickly and in an undertone because they are so frightening. The rabbis understood the power of positive thinking and didn't want all these warnings to demoralize the people, to crush their spirits rather than motivate them to do good deeds and walk in God's ways.

I agree that we need to focus on the positive. In fact, long before I had begun to study my portion, I was thinking about how important it is to put a smile on people's faces. So last fall my family decided to do something about it. We planted over 500 daffodils and tulip bulbs at the entrance to the temple.

One day last month, one of my friends told me that the flowers were starting to grow. I told my mom and we went to look and sure enough, some green leaves had begun to sprout through. We kept coming back every few days and the flowers kept getting bigger and bigger. By Passover, they looked beautiful, rows and rows of flowers, yellow, red, orange and white. I began to hear from people. My neighbors, who aren't Jewish, mentioned that they had driven by the temple and saw some beautiful flowers – and they didn't even know that we had done it!

I know that in some small way, this project helped to lift people's spirits. If the flowers help people to be in a good mood whenever they are here, that puts us in the right frame of mind to pray and to make the world a better place. As Anne Frank said, *"Whoever is happy will make others happy too."*

That's what I like to do best...lift people's spirits – including my own. As many of you know, I participate in lots of sports. When I'm playing a game, I get myself into a positive frame of mind by imagining myself scoring a goal in soccer or water polo, getting a good hit or winning a golden game in tennis, breaking a record in the pool, sinking a winning basket, sinking a long putt in golf, or making it to the bottom of the mountain safely when I am skiing. By thinking positively, I can accomplish most of those things. And if I have the proper frame of mind, I can help my teammates to as well.

Once when a friend was sad because her grandmother had just died. So I made it my personal project to lift her spirits. First, I asked her questions about her grandma to help her talk it out. Then, I told her that I knew how she felt. And then I tried to make her think of funny things that we've done together – this helped her get through the rest of the school day.

So the most important lesson that I can take from my portion is the verse that's not even in the Torah. "Hazak Hazak v'nitchaek." We may only say it five times a year – but these words can help us to gain strength and a positive outlook every day.

Aside from the flowers, I've done several mitzvah projects this year, including sending money to American soldiers in Iraq, donating canned foods to the food pantry, helping the teachers out at Newfield Elementary School and bringing presents to Kids in Crisis. You can read more about my projects in my booklet.

(Thank yous)

Misha's Speech

Thank you, Sarah. Aside from the priestly blessing, today's Torah portion also contains a description of who devoted himself entirely to God. No, I'm talking about a Jedi knight. I'm talking about the Nazerite.

The Nazerites refrained from drinking wine, eating grapes and cutting their hair. The most famous Nazerite is the subject of today's haftarah, Samson.

Samson was a great hero in the Israelites' battles against the Philistines. He had extraordinary strength. But he had a fatal flaw, and eventually he gave in to the beautiful but evil Delilah, who got him to share his greatest secret – that the source of his strength was in his uncut hair. I wondered that too. It wasn't so much that his hair was his strength, but that it symbolized his Nazerite vows. So when the hair was cut, the vows were broken, and he lost his power.

What's most interesting here is the meaning of the names. Samson comes from the Hebrew word "Shemesh," which means "sun." Delilah comes from the word "lilah," which in Hebrew means "night." So here is a case where a hero of light gave in to the forces of the dark side. And to make it complete, when he lost his strength, the first thing the Philistines did was to blind him. His world became completely dark.

You may have already guessed that I am a huge Star Wars fan. It so happens that the latest episode of Star Wars came out on my birthday. And in this episode, Anakin, like Samson, gives in to the dark side and becomes Darth Vader. Not only does he turn evil, but he kills many Jedi, including Mace Windoo. So the question of the hour for both Anakin and Samson, is, "What makes a good person give in to the dark side?"

Jewish tradition says that each of us has a good inclination and an evil inclination, or, in Hebrew, a "yetzer ha-tov" and a "yetzer ha-ra." An ancient Chinese religion called Taoism, has a similar idea, called yin/yang, which tells us that in everything that's good there is a little evil and in everything that's evil there is a little good. So it's very easy to slide from one to the other.

We often fall into the dark side because of fear, a lack of discipline or self pity. Anakin believed he lived a tortured life; what he looked at was: how he was a slave, how his mother died, how he had to leave her behind and how he had killed hundreds of sand men in his anger after his mother's death. He failed to look at all the good things he had going for him: his freedom, his love, Padme, his status as a Jedi, a father figure in Obi-wan, and his promising future as a leader among Jedi.

But even after he became Darth Vader, his final act was an act of goodness, which was to save the life of his son, Luke, from the evil Lord Sidious, killing himself in the process. Samson meets a similar fate, as he gains his strength back at the very end and kills a number of the Philistines who had been mocking him, crashing down the pillars of the arena around him.

As I grow, it's doubtful that I'll be like Samson or Anakin. But I wouldn't mind being like Luke. But right now, I'm Jedi trainee, a student of Jedi-ism – I mean *Judaism*.

As Mel Brooks would say, "May the Schwartz be with you."

For my mitzvah project, I have been collecting money for the nature conservancy with the goal preserving forests. Also, I've been volunteering at Bulls Head animal hospital. I enjoy taking care of the animals there.

(thank yous)

Sarah's Speech warnock

In my portion, we read the blessings that the Kohanim – the priests – used to recite. In our day, these same blessings are often heard at special events like...ah... TODAY!

The Kohanim played an important role in those days. They were spiritual healers. People came to them with their problems and the priests listened. The third of the three blessings is

interesting in that it shows how much of a healer the Cohen was. The Hebrew expression, usually translated as “May God bestow favor upon you and bring you peace,” can also be translated as, “May God listen to your prayer and forgive your shortcomings,” or “May God give you the benefit of the doubt.” In this way, the Cohen helped people to forgive themselves for the errors of their ways. In short, the Cohen was like a therapist. But now, the role of the Cohen has been pretty much discontinued. So, in our day, where do people go instead of going to a Cohen? Well, I can tell where my friends go... To me! (flip sign over – “the doctor is in”)

Yes it’s true. My friends have been coming to me for years. I’ve handled dozens of problems. I’ve been giving them advice on everything from dealing with a parent’s surgery to two friends not talking to each other over a dumb miscommunication. My friends call me their personal psychologist.

Unlike Lucy, I don’t charge people for my services. I believe that advice is priceless. Here are some of the lessons that I’ve learned:

One: It’s a real responsibility to have the trust of people in need. It’s important not to take sides and to be fair, sensitive and wise. Otherwise you can really make the problems worse. Think of how Lucy never failed to make Charlie Brown feel more miserable about himself.

Two: The most important thing is to listen.

Three: You’ve got to be able to forgive others in order to help them. I’m never angry at anyone for more than an hour – and as result, I don’t think anyone has been angry at me for more than a day. Well, there was this one person whom I tried to apologize to – but I couldn’t find him.

Four: it’s really, REALLY important to be able to listen! Once you listen, and begin to understand where the other person is coming from, it’s much easier to end conflicts. I try to get people to apologize to one another. That’s the first step – just like in the Cohen’s blessing.

Another important thing is that people need ways to vent their anger. I recommend to people that they write down their feelings to let it all out – maybe to write a letter or an e-mail -- Only don’t send it! It’s a big problem if you send it!

One way that I vent is by writing poetry. That’s why so much of my poetry is sad even though I’m such a happy person.

My dogs are great at dealing with conflict. They are good listeners, and they fight over a bone – we call it a “Power-bone,” and work things out eventually.

So, the priestly blessing of peace has a lot to teach us, not only about our hope for peace in the world, but in how to bring about peace right here, between the 7th graders of Cloonan and Temple Beth El.

As you might have noticed, I especially love dogs, so for my mitzvah project, I’m collecting dog toys and other dog-related items to donate to Adopt-a-dog. And I’m also donating my professional psychological services, free of charge, to anyone here – this is for a limited time only, because at the end of June, I’m charging five cents!

(thank yous)

Dani’s Speech

When you drove up today and saw the sign out front say “Feinberg Bat Mitzvah,” some of you may have gotten a feeling of *déjà vu*. It may seem like an event – but it really isn’t. Between myself, my mom and my three siblings, there have been five Feinberg B’nai

mitzvah over the past ten years. So you see, it isn't an annual event – it doesn't happen every year.... It happens every **TWO** years.

Not that anyone's counting or anything....

Actually, my portion is all about counting. In fact, the book of the Torah that we're starting today is even called, "The Book of Numbers." Coincidentally, this is the same portion that was read by Seth, Stevi and my mom. It must be some kind of record.

I am the last of my generation to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. But although my household has been filled with sound of the same tapes and CDS of blessings so many times before, it feels very different this time around.

I can understand why Judaism talks about how careful we need to be when counting things. In the Torah, Moses is told to count the people and the Hebrew expression for "counting" is literally to "lift up their heads." When we count people, we want to be careful not to turn them into numbers. So even though I am the fifth to become bar or bat mitzvah over the last ten years, this one cannot be compared to the others.

For one thing, while I've counting the days until today – every day for the past three months – I've been doing a different kind of counting as well. Two months ago, I discovered that I have type one Juvenile Diabetes. The news was quite a shock to all of us. I had spend four long days in the hospital recovering and learning how to treat myself once I got out. I learned how to take my blood sugar counts every two hours, every day. I'll probably be doing this for the rest of my life.

When I first started doing this, the numbers fluctuated tremendously. When they went up I would get worried, and when the numbers went way down, that would be even worse. My mood changed with every reading of the numbers. But now I've learned how not to overreact to higher numbers. I know that my responds differently to different activities and foods. I've learned a lot about my body from this experience – more than most people would know about theirs. I've also learned not to let numbers take over my life.

So this has been a very different Bat Mitzvah experience for me and my family – because of what I've been going through and because of what my dad's been going through. In fact, I might be the only bat mitzvah student who was able to recite a healing blessing for her father who was undergoing surgery at the same time she was writing her speech.

Psalm 90 contains the verse, "Teach us to count our days that we gain a heart of wisdom."

While we have to be careful about the things we count, we also have to make sure that every day counts. The counting that I am doing by testing my blood sugar is helping to remind me of that. And my father's inspiration has helped me to appreciate every day all the more.

One other way to make every day count is to give tzedakkah. My mitzvah project is to donate money to the Kidney cancer foundation and to Juvenile Diabetes research. In September I'll be attending a Diabetes Walk with friends and family.

Thanks yous...

Chelsea's Speech

In my portion, we read about the uniqueness of the Cohanim, the ancient priests. Among these priests the most special was the Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, who could be distinguished from the others by his unique vestments.

I had a chance to look at a picture of the High Priest's full wardrobe and it *was* impressive! It made me wonder a few things, like whether he was able to dress himself, with all those

accessories like those pomegranate shaped bells and that heavy plate of precious stones worn on his chest. Those stones clashed, by the way. He even wore a girdle.

If you couldn't tell, I am big on fashion. I agree with the Torah that you can tell a lot about a person from the way that person dresses. If I were dressing the Cohen today, I would suggest a real makeover. I would start by getting rid of some of those extra layers. I would feature bright colors that could really light up a room. All the priests would wear clothes from well-known designers so that they would be easily recognized in a crowd. I would top things off with an Armani tie to fit any occasion: menorahs on Hanukkah, a matzah pattern on Passover, a star of David on Israel's Independence Day.

And....Oh, yeah,... the beard has gotta go.

When I shop, which is often, I usually look for what I know is "in." Right now, double layered polo shirts are in. I like to wear pinks, greens and yellows, because these are happy colors and I'm a happy person. Clothes really express what you are feeling. In this case, you can judge a book by its cover, because your personality shines through what you wear.

But in the end, do clothes really have the power to change how you feel? Do they make you friendlier, happier, kinder or more honest? They can help make you happier, especially when you are wearing something like new pair of Juicy Couture pants or a new hot pink polo that you've been dying to get forever.

Despite this, in the end, we need to be able to find happiness no matter what we are wearing. For the High Priest, the clothes may have made him look more like a leader, but I think that being a leader comes from deep within us, not from what we wear on the outside. It's what's inside that counts the most.

(pause)

For my mitzvah project, I've been working at the Sunrise Assisted Living center, setting up for parties, serving food, calling Bingo games, trivia contests and giving out prizes.

(thank yous) (welcome the soldiers from Israel)



The model were prepared by Moshe Levin for his book *Meleket Hamishkan*, Tel Aviv, 1968. High priest: 1. blue band, פתיל תכלת; 2. mitre, מצנפת; 3. gold plate, נזר; 4. onyx stones with names of the tribes (6 on each stone), אבני המלתאם; 5. robe of the ephod, מעיל האסוד; 6. breastplate, חשן; 7. blue band, פתיל תכלת; 8. band of the ephod, חקב אסוד; 9. ephod, אסוד; 10. bells of gold and pomegranates of dyed wool and linen, פעמורים ורמונים; 11. coat, כתנת; 12. girdle, אבנט. Common priests: 1. headdress, מצנפת; 2. coat, כתנת; 3. girdle, אבנט.

This is from page 1065 in the "P" volume of Encyclopedia Judaica.

Seven is my lucky number, and my portion, Behar, is all in sevens, which is also, the Jewish lucky number. Shabbat, the rest day of the Jews, is on the seventh day of the week, and the Shmitah year is the seventh year. The portion talks about the Shmitah year, and how everyone, including the animals, would relax, and not have to worry about the land.

Wow, if I could take a whole year off from doing work and just hang out, would be like paradise.

I have always loved animals. My cat, Silver, is always treated like a princess. It is as if she has the Shmitah year all the time in my house. She thinks that the asecond bed in my bunk bed is her own, and sleeps there all day, that is, when she isn't on my stomach or lap. She gets extra treats when I feed her, and the best of toys.

I love animals so much that I can't bear to kill the smallest of insects. If I see a little bug on the floor of my room, I stretch out my hand, let it climb on and take it outside for it to be free. This is true for ladybugs, beetles and even spiders.

I lead bees and mosquitoes to the door, letting them go outside again. Yes, it is true; I have killed an ant---once, at my camp, about two years ago. Ever since then, I have watched my step.

Tzaar Ba'ale Chaim is a Jewish value promoting kindness to animals. I have done some research on this concept, and I have learned a few important things. Did you know that declawing a cat is contrary to the Jewish law, because it can harm the cat at such a young age? Also, it prevents cats from defending themselves and from exercising their muscles. I wouldn't ever think about declawing a cat, and my cat, Silver is not declawed.

Another aspect of Tzaar Ba'ale Chaim is to feed an animal before yourself. Animals are not able to get food themselves inside the house, although Silver has climbed above the sink, to the fish tank, and almost ate my fish.

In the Torah, a famous story is known about Rivkah and Eliezer. Eliezer is trying to find a wife for Yitzhak and he sees a beautiful maiden at a well. He goes over to her and offers help. At the well, she says "May I offer you and your camels a drink?" With this act of kindness, Eliezer knows that she is the perfect woman for Yitzhak.

Treating animals with kindness helps us to be sensitive to the needs of other people as well. Being kind to animals, has taught me to be kind to other people, especially towards people who suffer from Breast Cancer.

For my Mitzvah Project, my family and I are doing a walk in New York City that supports breast cancer research, and we have done this walk for five years and counting. Also, last year, my family and I rose over \$10,000 to find the cure. My cousin, who is in the congregation today, survived breast cancer. She has inspired me to continue to the race and hopefully, one day, find a cure. In the past years, my Grammy would do the walk with us, and my Poppy would wait at the end for us. This year, sadly, they cannot. I also know that they are here in spirit, and will support me throughout life. Also, my grandpa is here in spirit, and getting nachas as he watches me read become a Jewish lady.

Up here on the Bimah, are bushes in memory of my Grammy and Poppy. Later on, they will be planted by their graves in the cemetery next to the temple. Weiner

Thank yous.

Todd's Speech

If you don't know me, one thing you need to know is that I've always liked to make people laugh. In fact, some might call me a bit of a clown. I am known for being spontaneous. For example, back home I chipped a granite counter with my ear. I think that the only person ever to chip a granite counter with his ear would be me.

So earlier this year, when my class visited the sanctuary and we were told that we have two Sephardic torahs that are never used, I decided that I was going to use one of them for my Bar Mitzvah. So I just became the first Bar Mitzvah to use a Sephardic Torah at temple Beth El.

You might not be surprised then, that one of my great heroes and role models is Patch Adams. Patch Adams has a skill that I've always wanted, to help people in the hospital with mental and physical illnesses with laughter. He might not be Jewish, but in my heart he is a mensch. Not long ago, Patch Adams visited Israel and saw an 8 year old Israeli terror victim. After Adams was finished, he was no longer suffering from depression. At Hadassah Hospital, Adams gave lessons to Israeli and Palestinians on how to become "clown doctors," giving patients empathy and support.

In my portion of Metzarah, we read about people who become outcasts from the community because they were sick. It was the job of the priest or Cohen to go out of his way to heal these victims. He would go outside the camp to heal them, and not wait for the patients to come to him. Back then, healing was as much spiritual as it was physical – sort of like the way it is for Patch Adams. Adams understands what the Torah teaches, that the way to heal someone is to lift their spirits.

Like those people in my portion, the Jews have often been outcasts, fleeing many places because of their beliefs. One of the most famous examples was when the Jews had to leave Spain in 1492. Some of them ended up in South America and then, 350 years ago, some Jews fleeing Brazil ended up only a few miles from here. I'm glad we were welcomed on these shores. It is in their honor that I am reading from the Sephardic Torah today, and in honor of our special guest, Jonathan Sarna. I hope that when he writes his next history book, he will include that little historical note that I was the first.

As a Jew, and as a fan of Patch Adams, I've learned how important it is to reach out to those who are down and out, with the goal of putting a smile on everyone's face. It's fitting then, that for my Mitzvah Project, I've been volunteering by being a role model and friend to children younger than me.

Thank yous... (do at home)

Michelle's Goldstein Speech

There are some real advantages to becoming a bat mitzvah exactly one week before Passover. For one thing, no one has been pressuring me to do the annual spring cleaning of my room. That's a good thing, because there is more stuff in my room than in all of the other rooms of the house combined.

For those who don't know me, I am a collector. Here are some of the things I've collected over the years: hundreds of stuffed animals, state quarters (I just got California!), key chains, hotel keys, decks of cards, ticket stubs from everything I've ever attended, plus a note on who I went with. In short, I never throw anything out, so spring cleaning is a real pain for me.

But, as hard as it is to clean my room, there are some rewards. I often find things that I thought I had lost; and some of them are real hidden treasures.

My portion of Metzarah talks about how some homes were quarantined because they were considered impure. You might be wondering how a home can be impure. The commentators on the Torah spoke of how a home becomes impure when people inside argue and there is no peace. Another way they become impure is by becoming too cluttered. That's why we are supposed to clean thoroughly just before Passover, (even though, as I've stated already, my bat mitzvah temporarily excuses me from that).

There is also a legend that the ancient Israelite's homes were infested by a plague of mildew because the Amorites, who lived there before them, hid secret treasures in the walls. The mildew was God's message to them to take apart the walls; in that way they could find the treasure!

I must admit that as much as I don't like cleaning, there are times when I also come across hidden treasures. Just a few weeks ago, I was cleaning one area of my room with my sister Lauryn, and we found a teddy bear.

Doug's Kempner Speech

Those of you who know me know that, aside from my family and Judaism, there are two things that I love more than anything else in the world: the Mets and my saxophone. I play guitar too, but the thing I love about the saxophone is that it gives me the opportunity to improvise. You can really feel the music.

What does it mean to improvise? For me, improvising happens when you know something so well that you can change things on the spot. The notes on the page almost become a part of me and the music flows out. It's a real expression of freedom.

Today's special portion contains many of the laws and instructions for Passover. Rituals help us to remember what happened, but, as with the sax, the notes can only become a part of you if you play them. So the rituals of the Seder remind us of the story of the Exodus. In my portion, we read of how the Israelites were told to put some blood on the doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their homes. That had to take a lot of courage, to do that right in front of their Egyptian masters. It would be like my wearing a Mets cap in Yankee Stadium.

The Matzah reminds us of how fast we left Egypt. Notice that I said "we." Actually, I wasn't really there... but by eating the matzah every year, it becomes so much a part of me – just like the music of my saxophone.

The rituals of Passover don't really change from year to year. But I change, and every year these rituals mean more to me. Even though I am now officially an adult, I'll still get to do the four questions at our Seder. So the more we do Passover, the more it becomes a part of us.

Becoming a Bar Mitzvah is similar. I practiced my portion over and over until it also became part of me – (despite how incredibly long my haftarah was!) Once you learn these things, you can really begin to improvise.

In fact, I'm improvising right now! (*rabbi comes up and says "Oh no you're not – read what's there!" – think about whether you want to do this*) It's not all about rituals and prayers, of course. Doing mitzvot can also become part of us. That's why the mitzvah project is an important part of the Bar Mitzvah experience. For my mitzvah project I've been working at the JCC for the past five months, helping in different areas. I especially like working with young kids, helping them with their homework and playing with them. I'm also looking forward to going to Israel with my family and the temple this summer.

Lindsey's Speech

Happy New Year!

No, the ball didn't drop in Times Square last night. And no, we aren't dipping apples in honey. But in the Torah, the month of Nisan, which the Torah calls the month of Aviv – the Spring month – is considered the first month of the new year. And since today is the first day of that month, well, Happy New Year!

As you may have guessed, today isn't really the New Year. But it is Rosh Hodesh, the new month, which is an important holiday as well. In fact, Rosh Hodesh was the first mitzvah given to the Jews, and this Rosh Hodesh, the one just before Passover, was the focus of that commandment when it was given.

The Jewish months are based on the new moon. Rosh Hodesh occurs when the first crescent of the new moon appears in the sky. For our ancestors, that first sign of the new

moon was a reminder that even when things seemed very dark and **hopeless**, there was always the possibility of new **beginnings**.

It's with that in **mind** that I decided to make the cause of Tsunami relief my **mitzvah** project. Millions of people are helping out because they believe that southern Asia can start **over**, and that these donations can help them to rebuild their broken lives. I believe it **too**, and I've also helped by buying Tsunami relief bracelets. The company I bought them from donates one dollar for each bracelet purchased, to the UNICEF Tsunami relief fund, which helps the tsunami victims.

I bought the **bracelets** instead of just donating **money** because it makes people more aware of this cause when they see someone wearing a bracelet. So after the service my friends will be able to receive a bracelet, and I would really **appreciate** it if you would **wear** it to make others more aware.

There were many different bracelets I could have selected, but I chose the one I did because it has Israel's colors, blue and white. I'm proud that Israel, despite all its own difficulties, was able to send much support to tsunami victims. In addition to the bracelets, I have made a contribution to "Save the Children" Tsunami relief fund. "Save the Children" is a wonderful organization, because it focuses more on the children and rebuilding their lives. After all, children are the future.

We all have to remember that the Tsunami was a natural disaster and innocent people were killed and wounded. My mitzvah project means a lot to me because I know that I've made a difference to the people in southern Asia. My mitzvah project is also very important for my becoming a Bat Mitzvah, because as I become a Jewish woman, I'll remember how I helped during this disaster.

As I become a Bat Mitzvah today, I am grateful that I am Jewish and I will always carry on the Jewish tradition.

Daniel Judd's Speech

Many of you know that it is a real miracle that I am here today. When I was five years old, I spent three quarters of a school year in the hospital. I had seven operations and few expected me to live. Thanks to an experimental drug never before tried on someone my age, combined with lots of patience and love, by the next year I was living a normal life. And here I am.

My portion of Tzav includes details about the sacrifices that our ancestors brought. These days, we've replaced sacrifices with prayer and Torah study, but one aspect of the old system could not so easily be replaced. When people sacrificed their animals, bringing them to the Cohen to be slaughtered, they gained a real appreciation for how precious life is.

In a sense, what I went through had that kind of impact. It taught me never to take life for granted.

Psalm 90 states, "Teach us to count our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom." I've learned over the years that the best way to count our days is to make every day count – to appreciate every day that I am alive.

This lesson can be applied to all kinds of activities. For example, when I play chess, I need to be planning every move very carefully, sometimes planning 5-10 moves ahead as well. If you waste a move it gives your opponent a big edge. You can very easily lose the entire game because of one careless move. So, just as every day counts, every move counts.

And every choice counts.

Becoming a Bar Mitzvah means that I've made the choice to do mitzvot. For my mitzvah project I've made sandwiches for the Midnight Run, supplying food and clothing for the homeless; I've also donated wrist bands to raise money to send chess sets to people in Iraq; I've also taught chess to children for the past four years.

All of these things are small ways that I can give back just a little for the miracle of my being here today.

(thank yous...)

Laura's eber Speech

I can't believe that I am here, I have been waiting for this day for a very long time- Well, at least since Erica's Bat Mitzvah. I feel like I am standing at the point in time where my past and my future meet. And that is not just true about my life, but it is also true about the world around me. Tomorrow is going to be the first day of spring. (And it has been a really long winter.) And in a few minutes, Shabbat will be ending when we say Havdalah and a new week will begin.

A couple of years ago, I wrote this poem called "Time." Little did I know at the time how it would fit so perfectly with this day. Here it is: (type in poem)

Time passes so quickly that we need ways to connect to these special moments of change. One way to do it is through poetry or prayer. Our ancestors did it through sacrifices. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is Korban, which means, to bring closer or to connect. My Torah portion, Tzav, describes the different sacrifices that people brought to mark important moments in their lives.

We don't do sacrifices anymore, but we have other ways to bring ourselves closer to God. For me, when I say the Sh'ma, I close my eyes and focus on me and God. One of the exercises that we do at karate is meditation. This meditation centers me and helps me clear my mind for the challenges that lie ahead. Very often, as part of my meditation I will think of the Sh'ma. I feel a sense of peace and harmony at those moments. And after this, I am ready to do things that I had never thought possible, like defeating an opponent twice my size.

In fact, I am not the only one who has overcome tremendous obstacles. The Jewish people are relatively small in numbers, but we still have accomplished great things. One of the main reasons for this is that we have always been able to appreciate and look back on the past, live fully in the present, and focus on the future, as I am doing right now.

One way that Jews connect to the world around us in through tzedakkah. For my Mitzvah project, I am donating a portion of my Bat Mitzvah money to help Tsunami victims, and I am distributing flyers and posters to support the MS Walk, on April 10th.

Lizzy's Speech

It's a story that we all know very well. It's extremely popular right now. It's a battle between good and evil, where the enemy is out to destroy our hero. But in the end, the hero

is saved by the combination of wit, heart and courage, and the enemy is left hanging in mid air.

Of course you know this tale. No, I'm not talking about the Purim story; I'm talking about my favorite all time classic, the "Wizard of Oz." The two are very similar. First of all, the great heroes of both stories are women: Esther and Dorothy. Both of them have to face their fears head on – Esther confronts Haman and the King, Dorothy confronts the Great and Powerful Wizard and then the Wicked Witch.

But things are not always as they seem. Ahashverosh ends up looking much more foolish than your typical king. Meanwhile, the Wizard turns out to be anything but great and powerful. And the witch, it turns out, ends up simply being misunderstood – that is, if you believe the version of the story that is now a hit Broadway show.

"Wicked" just happens to be my all-time favorite Broadway show. Just as the "Wizard of Oz" makes it clear who is good and who is evil, "Wicked" turns everything upside down. All the people we thought were good turn out to be bad, and the Wicked Witch, whose name is Elphaba, in the end, turns out to be the character with the most intelligence, heart and courage. Meanwhile, Glinda, the "Good Witch" turns out actually to be selfish, shallow and, for lack of a better term, "ditsy."

In its own way, "Wicked" is also very Purim-like. Purim is a time where everyone wears masks and things really get turned upside down. The message of the holiday is that things rarely are as they seem.

But there's one problem with all this. If we can now see the some good in the wicked witch and some bad in Glinda, does that mean that we should also be looking for flaws in Esther and Haman's soft side?

In my Torah portion, there's an account of how Aaron's two sons died tragically in an accident after they brought an unauthorized offering to God. Most of the commentators – and the Torah itself – claim that they deserved their punishment. But there are others who wonder whether they were really wicked or just curious and whether their fate was necessary. In almost every case, Judaism tells us, we can't know the whole truth about a person, and there can be hope even for the most wicked among us.

Except for Haman.

The Purim story shows us that despite all the masks and all the confusion, some things remain clear. There are certain people, like Hitler or Osama bin Laden, who are fall into this category.

Meanwhile, even though Esther may have been flawed, she has been a role model for me in my own experiences. There have been times when I had to stand up proudly as a Jew to defend my people, just as she did.

I'm very proud to be a Jew. How could I not, given my own family history. (*a sentence about great grandmother – plus anyone else?*) And I show my pride in the ways I help others. For my Tzedakah project, I've been entertaining residents at nursing homes, and my program is filled with Jewish music, including songs like Lechi Lach and Hatikva. But the song that they love the most is "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

Come to think of it, that's a pretty Jewish song too.
(thank yous)

Sarah's benjamin Speech

Shabbat shalom! Today is Shabbat Shekalim, and in my maftir portion I read about how everyone was expected to give a certain minimal amount for the upkeep of the tabernacle in

the wilderness. Everyone gave the same amount, half a shekel. But my regular portion describes ways that many people gave much more, to the point where Moses had to stop them. So we are shown different ways of giving. I think this teaches us how important to give in different ways. I'm very lucky that I've had the chance to do just that.

For the past couple of months, I've working with a 1st grader with special needs. I see Meghan once a week and I've been teaching her how to read. Every time she sees me, she gets really excited and gives me a huge smile and a hug.

Once a month, my mom and I go to Brighton Gardens to welcome Shabbat with the residents there. It's so special to bring a smile to their faces too. I sing the blessings, light the candles and read to them. They especially like the "Adventures of K'tonton," a book I always loved when my mom would read it to me.

Over the years, I've experienced many other ways of giving – like playing Bingo with the seniors at Tandet Center, painting a wall at the JCC for Mitzvah Day, serving food at the homeless shelter almost every Thanksgiving and welcoming people into my Sukkah every year.

Sukkot is one of my favorite holidays (it's tied with Hanukkah, which has an unfair advantage). Every year, we add a new decoration to our family Sukkah. We might decorate a new wall with cards and then paint the rest with a special design, like a family tree, or harvest theme. We toss cornhusks onto the roof, set the table and eat lots of meals there. We always invite people over and every year we have an open house.

At the end of my portion, Pekuday, the text talks about how God's presence fills the sanctuary. That tabernacle, like my Sukkah, must have been very beautiful. But God's presence isn't there simply because the place was so beautiful. It's because of the many acts of giving that took place there. That's also what makes my Sukkah such a special place to be.

It says in the midrash that "charity lengthens ones days and years." I'm not sure if giving in different ways to so many people will help me to live a longer life. But I know for sure that it will help me to live a better one.

(thank yous)

Lee's Gordon Speech

Those of you who know me know that I love baseball. Those who don't – well, now you know! In baseball, I've discovered that you have to have a real good memory – most of the time. You always have how many outs there are, who is on which base and what the score is. When a ball is hit to you, you have to have fast reflexes.

On the other hand, it's also important to forget certain things from time to time -- like when you strike out or when a ball is hit through your legs. If you don't forget these things quickly, they will influence the rest of your game.

The same idea goes for relationships. There are times when friends let you down, but you have to know that they are still your friends. Sometimes it's just better to forgive and forget.

My special torah portion and haftorah are all about when it's not OK to forgive and forget. Amalek attacked Israel in the Wilderness when they were tired and hungry and they attacked from the rear, where the weakest people were.

Jews are commanded to remember what Amalek did to us, and we are also commanded to wipe out their memory. In other words, we have to remember to make them forgotten. According to tradition, Amalek is the ancestor of Haman and all other villains of Jewish

history. My haftorah speaks of how King Saul had the chance to destroy Amalek, but he failed to do so. In the Purim story, a direct link is made between Haman and Amalek on the one hand, and Mordechai and King Saul, on the other.

The Talmud states, “Who is a hero? He who makes his enemy into a friend.” In most cases, Judaism favors forgiveness, but here, with Amalek, we are supposed to dwell on the past.

I can understand that. While I usually feel that it’s important to move on, as a Mets fan, there are certain things that we just can’t forget. For one thing, when Mike Piazza was hit by Roger Clemens. And also, there was the 2000 World Series when the Yankees crushed the Mets, unfortunately. And finally, it really bugs me that the Yankees spend so much more than the Mets – until now.

In short, the thing that we can’t forget is the Yankees. They have become this generation’s version of Amalek, the Evil Empire.

As I become a Bar Mitzvah today, I can assure my family that I will remember all the important things that I’ve learned from you – about being kind to others and humble when speaking about myself; about my Jewish heritage and being proud of who I am and where I come from.

For my Mitzvah project, I collected food from my neighbors to donate to the Lower Fairfield County Food Bank. I had sent a flyer out to all my neighbors and so far I’ve collected about _____ boxes of food.

(thank yous)

Matt’s benjamin Speech

Did you realize that in the five seconds that I have spoken, we’ve all gotten **older**? Not only **that**, but later tonight, daylight **savings** time will begin, and in the blink of an eye, we’ll all be an **hour** older. In fact (*look at wrist*) I already changed **MY** clock, so we should be at the **party** by now.

My portion, Tazria, teaches us how we can respond to the many changes around that take place in life. The first part of the portion deals with **childbirth**. When a baby is born, it’s a time of great **transition** for the family. It’s very mysterious and confusing. So the Torah gives us different **rituals** to take this mystery and help give it **meaning**. One of those rituals is **circumcision**. As painful as it may sound, a Brit Milah is a time of joyous celebration, a time to welcome a boy into the community.

A Bar Mitzvah is also a time to celebrate transition, a time when a boy becomes a man. So after this service, Dad, I would like to borrow the **car**!

Yesterday was April Fools Day. In the middle ages, the idea was to make mischief on the first day of spring. Probably this was a way of showing how mixed up and confused the change of seasons can be.

For Jews, this is a time of transition in **another** way. We clean our houses to prepare for **Passover**, the holiday that changed the Jewish people **forever**, taking us from slavery to **freedom**.

So as I now become a Bar Mitzvah, I know that I am growing and changing all the time. But I look forward to all that the future will bring – and I really **do** want to borrow the car. Seriously.

(Tzedakkah project? Thank yous)

Delancey's Speech

As most of you **know**, my favorite person in the world isn't **here** right now. Come to think of it, she's not even a **person**. Of course, I'm speaking about **Roxy**, my **dog**. *(hold up large picture)*.

I worked on my parents for about three years, **begging** for a dog. Then, a little over a **year** ago, she flew in from Canada. It was love at first sight. Roxy is **so cute** that even the **simplest** things she **does** make me **happy**, like when she **nuzzles** me, or turns her head when she gets **confused** or hears a word she **knows**, like "cheese" or "walk" or "Scooby," or jumps up on the couch that she's not **allowed** on and urges me to rub her **tummy**. I even love it when she steals food from the table. The simplest things can also be the most enjoyable.

In my portion, the last letter of the first word, **Vayikra**, is **smaller** than the rest. Commentators have come up with a number of explanations for that tiny "**alef**." The word "vayikra" means, "**God called to Moses**." One possibility is that it reminds us that Moses was very **humble**. According to tradition, when Moses was writing the Torah, he was **so** humble that he wrote in the word "**va-yikar**" which means that "God happened upon Moses," but God insisted that the word be "Vayikra," showing that God had a special relationship with Moses. Moses **agreed**, but he was **so humble** that he made the alef **smaller**.

Another way of looking at it is that when God called, Moses thought all the hard work was already **done**. They had **left Egypt**, gotten the **Torah** and built a **sanctuary**, so what more was left to **do**? God calls to Moses, "Vayikra," to tell him that the most important work is yet to **come** – the sacrifices of daily **worship**. The message here is that the things that matter most are the simple things we do **every day**.

The same is true for **us**. The simple things we do every day can also be **more important** than the **big events**. What I'm doing today is **important**, but it means **very little** if it weren't for all the little things I do on **other** days, like donating my clothes to **Goodwill** or helping my brother and sister with their **homework**.

We are right now in the Jewish month of Adar. The rabbis said, "When Adar enters, our joy increases." In Hebrew, the word for happiness really means "acceptance." For a Jew, to be happy really means to appreciate the **little** things. But I already **learned** that from Roxy.

I also learned to appreciate the little things from those near to me who have recovered from illness. My mom has been real inspiring to me because of all she has overcome during the past several months. My aunt has also been an inspiration and she helped me with my tzedakkah project. I'm giving bracelets to all my friends that will support the Diney Goldsmith Breast Cancer Research and Education Foundation.

(thank yous)

Jaime's Speech

There's a small little town in the Pocos called Honesdale. It's about as ordinary as a town can get. Just outside of town, a few hills away, is Camp Tawanda. When you first drive up to it, there's a long road lined by bunks and a grassy knoll. The bunks are all dull maroon-ish brown color, with porches up front. Each bunk has a wooden bunk bed in each corner, with wooden cubbies in between and a bearable bathroom in the back. The boy's camp is up the hill and the lake is across the road. On a path down toward the waterfront there is a toboggan slide. The pool is on the right and the lake on the left. The mess hall is at the top of the grassy knoll. It's filled with long tables and salad bars, with the kitchen in the back. On the other side of the kitchen is the canteen, where they have ice cream, soda, vending machines, a piano, pool table and some games.

You are probably wondering why I'm explaining what my camp looks like in such detail. If you look at my Torah portion, you will see dozens of verses describing in great detail every aspect of the portable ark and tabernacle built by the Israelites in the Wilderness. It's from these details that we can see the holiness of the place.

Just before the tabernacle is described, the portion includes a law about Shabbat. Because of that, the rabbis connected the kinds of work done in this construction to the kinds of work prohibited on Shabbat. The rabbis understood that just as details make a place special, they also make a day special.

The details go beyond the construction. The buildings alone are not what makes Towanda such a special place. It's also about the memories I have and the friends I've made. Behind the girl's campus is a soccer field, and behind that is a track. *Right over there.* I first learned how to ride a bike over there.

Back near the entrance of the camp, in the field house, with 400 kids screaming at this camp-wide event. Pink Floyd's "Is Anybody Out There?" is playing in the background as a laser show goes on. Before I knew it, my first Camp Towanda Olympics, or Color War, had broken out.

It's those small details close to your heart that make a place special. Like the time I carved my initials into my cubby. We're really not supposed to, but one year we did it because we weren't really aware of the rule. Last I saw, the markings were still there.

In the end, what makes a place special is not buildings, and not even just the memories – but the people. That's what makes camp so wonderful, and it's what makes a synagogue holy. It's what makes a day like Shabbat holy as well.

When they made the ark in the Wilderness, it's interesting that they were instructed to line both the inside and the outside of it with gold. The rabbis said that this is to show how people should be the same on the inside as on the outside. That is another thing that makes both camp and a synagogue so special: they are filled with people who match the spirit of the location.

Becoming bat mitzvah means that I can now do some of hard work that goes into making the world more holy. I am doing this in part through my tzedakkah project (*add more after the event...some of my reflections*).

(thank yous)

Danielle's Speech

SLOW DOWN!!!!!!

About two years ago, I was walking with some friends toward Rockefeller Center to go ice-skating. It was a rainy day. As we got closer to the rink, we saw a homeless man sitting by the curb; he was holding a piece of scrap metal over his head as an umbrella. My friend's dad had brought along a box of tzedakkah with him and we were discussing how to distribute it. As we approached this homeless man, we felt badly for him and decided to give him all of the money in the box. (TAKE A BREATH! PAUSE)

My friend's dad reached down, gave him the box and opened it for him to see what was inside. He looked shocked for a second, then he smiled and said "Thank you." As we walked away, I felt really good. It was the smile that made us feel best.

My portion of Terumah explains why I felt so good. At the beginning, the people of Israel are asked to give Terumah – which means voluntary gifts, for the building of the Mishkan-the sanctuary in the Wilderness. Strangely, the opening verse says "Vayikhu li Terumah." God is saying, "Take for me Terumah." It doesn't say that we give these gifts, but rather that we take them. The message seems to be that when we give to others, we are getting something very meaningful in return. I found that out with the homeless man, and in other ways as well.

Last Passover, I delivered bags of food to elderly Russian Jews in Stamford. I've also volunteered to help with the kids at Kinderplace at the JCC. It's nice to live in a community where people are always caring about the young and the old.

These kinds of things always seem to happen in Israel. I'll be going there in a couple of weeks to celebrate with my family over there. In the half a dozen times I've been there, I've always been able to notice how kind everyone is. You always see people giving to one another – even to total strangers.

On the way back from my last trip to Israel, at the airport there was an Arab woman holding her injured baby. She spoke no English and it looked like she had never traveled before – the airport seemed so strange to her. She needed help to find her way, so my mom and I agreed to help her. We assisted her with her passport and brought her to her gate. As we left her, she gave us a blessing.

From small gestures like these, maybe some day there will be peace. It all begins with acts of Terumah, gifts of the heart.

Erica's miles Speech

This coming week is Thanksgiving, and it is at a time like this that I appreciate how miraculous it is that I am here. On my mother's side, my great grandfather had a wife and child killed in the pogroms in Russia a century ago. On my father's side, my grandparents were the only ones in their families to survive the Holocaust. This past summer, it was incredibly moving for me to visit Israel and Yad Vashem with them. So you can see why I appreciate how much my family went through, and how much they sacrificed, for me to be standing up here today.

The Torah has many stories about the ways people make sacrifices for their families. We can see that especially in my portion of Vayetze. In the story, Jacob thinks he is marrying Rachel, but at the last minute, he is deceived and marries Leah instead. Most commentators blame Jacob's father in law Laban, who did, in fact, set up the deception. But when you think about it, for this to happen, Rachel had to play along. One commentator tells us that Rachel and Jacob had a secret code so that he would know it was really her under the veil

who he was marrying. But, according to that **commentary**, Rachel understood the custom of her **community**, where the eldest **had** to marry first, so she revealed the secret code to her sister. Some rabbis have said that this was a great example of sisterly love, that Rachel gave up her own **happiness** so that her sister could find a **husband**.

As you all **know**, I would do the **exact same thing** for Melissa.

I know that in the **Holocaust**, many people stayed with their **families** when they had the chance to **leave**, while **others** made the very **difficult** choice to **leave their** families in the hopes that they might be able to save them. The choice must have been very **difficult**, but either **way**, people risked **everything** to help their loved ones. When I was in Israel, I learned that there have been many similar stories of **heroism** during these past few difficult years.

For my tzedakah project, I've been volunteering at the Friendship Circle, a group that helps children with special needs. Every week I spend time with **Zachary**, who is nearly two. Through this project, I'm learning that a small sacrifice of my **time** can make a big **difference** in someone else's life.

The kind of compassion that Rachel showed for her sister **Leah** is something that she **also** showed for **others**. Because of this, Rachel is seen as a mother figure for all **Israel**. If I can show that **same** kind of concern for Zachary, I'll be learning the most important **lesson** that my portion has to teach.

(thank yous)

Mitchell's Shapiro Speech

Like many other kids whom you've heard up here before, I **love** sports. My favorite sport is hockey. Yes, it's true – my mother let me play. (*pause for laughter*).

You might not **know** this, but hockey is a pretty rough sport. But at **some** point I **realized** that I could still be close to the game I love, without having to get all bruised up!

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine told me about what it's like to be a **hockey** referee. I **liked** the idea -- so I decided to **try** it. Now, I referee **lots** of games and I'm hoping to pursue it as a **career**.

When I looked at my portion, I realized that in many **ways**, a referee is like God. No, I'm not comparing **myself** to God, but I do see some interesting **connections** between what God does in the **Creation story** and what a referee does on **the ice**.

First of all, did you know that the first thing God created in the beginning, was a **hockey player**? It says in the Torah, "And God said, let there be **light**." But in **Hebrew** the word for **light** is "Or." So God created Bobby **Orr** first.

But what **is** creation after all? It's taking something that was completely without **form** and giving it some **order**. So God separated the heavens from the earth, and the waters from the land; and a hockey rink separates the **red** line from the **blue** line.

Here's the second way that being a referee is being like God. After the Creation was finished, then God made rules. You can't play the game without **rules**. No slashing, no charging, no going offside, and you can't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But sometimes there are people who **break** the rules – that's when you need God to figure out what to do that will be fair and **just** – and that's **also** when you need a **referee** to do exactly the **same** thing.

Referees are often called upon to break up fights. In my portion, **God** had to do the same thing with Cain and Abel. Unfortunately, Abel died, and Cain got sent to the **penalty** box – in fact he was banished from the **game**. Fortunately, no one has died yet in any of the games

I've refereed. I haven't had to break up any fights yet either, primarily because the kids are in third and fourth grades.

And in the end, if I've been fair and the game has been played cleanly, the players will respect me. No referee could want anything more than that...except to get paid, of course. Well, the way I see it, we are looking for the same things from God that players look for from a ref: Some basic fairness and a clean game.

For my tzedakkah project, I'm going to be donating some of the money I receive from refereeing to the Echo National Jewish Institute for Health, an organization that provides important medical information and referrals for patients and their families. My grandfather died of cancer a few years ago, and in his memory, I want to make sure that all people will get the medical treatment they need.

Thank you

Travis' Speech

Many of you know that I've always loved **animals** - and since I was very young nature has been a big part of my life. When I play with my dog Paniolo, I ponder about the marvels of the environment and my connection to all the animals within it. He's always barking to go **outside** and once he is out there, he runs and runs and runs and then finally plops on the **ground**. With his tongue hanging out and his paws crossed, I wonder how he looks at the world through **his** eyes. It must be **great** to be so connected to nature. He hears things I can't **possibly** hear. He **sees** things with such **keenness** when he is **outdoors** that I can't even possibly **begin** to understand.

Back inside, during a storm, it **thunders** and Paniolo howls and barks. How sensitive he must be - I wish that **humans** could be so sensitive to the environment and the rhythms of **nature**, but unfortunately they are **not**. If only we could realize our importance as a part of the "circle of life," just like Paniolo.

The Sukkah helps us to do just **that**. When we are in the Sukkah, we are part of **nature**, surrounded not by **material** items, artificial light and heat, the way we are in a **house**; but **instead**, we are surrounded by **branches**, **fruits**, and walls so thin and **shaky** that a strong wind could easily blow them down. You can hear the birds **chirping** and trees swaying in the **wind** when you are sitting in a Sukkah - you **can't** hear them in your house.

When the pilgrims came to America and were looking for some guidance in the Bible from which to model their holiday of **Thanksgiving**, they chose **Sukkot**. Some may call Sukkot the biblical **Thanksgiving**, but in **fact** Thanksgiving is the American **Sukkot**. Being out in the Sukkah **does** make you thankful - for being alive, **and** for the world around us.

When we become more sensitive to the environment, we start to do more to **protect** it. I've always been concerned about endangered species, such as the Arctic and Mexican **Wolf**. For the past two years, I've been a volunteer at the Wolf Conservation Center in South Salem New York. I help maintain the grounds and raise money for the wolves. Every time I go to the center and see the **wolves**, I'm amazed at their **gracefulness** and how they fit so perfectly into their environment. But despite that, I have to remember that there are only about 200 of the **Mexican** and about 1,000 of the **arctic** wolves remaining in the entire world. Their **survival** is in our **hands**.

So as my mitzvah project I'm going to continue to do all I can to save the wolves. I think that becoming a Bar Mitzvah means doing all that I can to be a part of the world and make a positive contribution.

(Thank you)

Andrew's Speech

My Torah portion, Ki Tavo, is filled with blessings and curses. It has many blessings, but many more curses. It was designed to warn the Israelites that all their actions have consequences, good or bad. The word "curse" is probably a bad translation, since when we think of a curse, we think of two possible things, neither of which are what is being talked about here.

For us, a curse can be a swear... or so I hear, although I would have no way of knowing anything about that. Or, when we think of a curse, we think of a spell that was placed on some person, thing, place – or baseball team – or football team – giving them bad luck. But here, there is no spell, and no swearing. There only consequences.

The Hebrew word for curse, *K'lalah*, comes from the root "kalal" meaning "slight" or "trifle." What it's saying then, is that when the Israelites sinned, it diminished them – they became less important in God's eyes and in their own. It's as true now as it was then. When people do things that they shouldn't, they start to feel very small and ashamed.

So we can ask whether it is appropriate for Jews to believe in these other kinds of curses, the ones not found in my portion. For example, my good friend Rabbi Hammerman here believes that there is a curse on his beloved Red Sox. As a Yankee fan, I just think the whole curse thing is an excuse for blowing the big games. It also isn't fair to those teams that win. The Yankees didn't beat the Red Sox last year because of luck, but because they are the better team – and have a very rich owner. The same goes for the past 80 years, or however long it's been since they sold Babe Ruth.

I do not believe in this excuse called a "curse."

However, my beloved Buffalo Bills are *indeed* cursed. OJ Simpson, one of the only running backs with a 2,000-yard season, was a great team player, but he had some, shall we say, domestic problems. Ever since he was a Buffalo Bill, the Bills have been losers. In the late '80s and early '90s, they lost an unprecedented four Super Bowls in a row. In one game, the winning kick was going straight through and then a mysterious wind blew it wide right.

When you think of it, it's so clear what is a curse and what is a blessing. Some blessings are double edged and some curses are blessings in disguise. When Aaron Boone got hurt last winter, I was furious. But because of his injury, the Yankees went out and got Alex Rodriguez. On a more serious note, September 11 was a terrible tragedy, but it did bring Americans together and made us a more powerful nation.

As many of you know, my mom has had to overcome some real hardships; but the blessing in disguise is what we have here today. My family is closer than ever and we've learned how important it is to celebrate every moment of every day.

For my tzedakkah project, I raised over a thousand dollars for a walk for cancer last June. I went door to door and called lots of people, because I wanted to do it in honor of my mother, a cancer survivor. I even brought three friends with me on the walk. In this way, I took the curse of cancer and turned it into a blessing of help.

I hope I will be able to find other ways to be a blessing for people in the future. But there is no such thing as curses. I believe the Bills will win a Super Bowl in the next ten years, just to prove that point. However, there is nothing I can do about the Red Sox.

I swear!

(Thank yous)

Max's Lesser Speech

As I was studying my portion of Netzavim, I noticed something **peculiar** about verse 27 of chapter 29. It speaks of some of the consequences Israel will face for violating the **covenant**. When you look closely at that **verse**, however, it appears that what **seems** like a punishment might not be a punishment after **all**. The verse says, *“The Lord uprooted them from their soil in anger, fury and great wrath and cast them into another land as is still the case.”*

So the punishment was that the Jewish people would be **scattered** throughout the world. What’s interesting is that the word “va-yashlichem” which means “and **cast** them,” has an enlarged **Lamed** in the middle.

Whenever something like that occurs in the Torah, commentators try to explain it. One modern commentator, Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, noted that the Hebrew letter **lamed** comes from the Hebrew word, “l’lamed,” to teach. This shows that God exiled the Jews from Israel to give us the opportunity to teach other **nations**. So it’s not a **punishment** so much as an **opportunity**.

My family has certainly taken **advantage** of that opportunity. I have been to or lived in Hong Kong, London, Tokyo, New Delhi, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, Turkey....and **yes**, even as far away as **Hartford**. Wherever I go, this verse teaches me that as a Jew I am there to teach Jewish values and share my experiences, just as I also learn so much from the people who live there.

I can remember one time, while I was living in Hong Kong, when I went to the mainland for a long weekend with my grandmother and some friends. The friends were **Kosher**, and I spent the trip watching them, so when I got back I decided I wanted to try keeping Kosher myself. I was probably the first person in **history** to go to China and come back **Kosher**. China is so far from the mainstream of Jewish life that the simple act of eating dairy in a **hotel** there can connect us to Jewish culture. Maybe we are sent to foreign **lands** to learn more about **ourselves**. The Lamed, after all, doesn’t just mean to **teach**, it means to **learn**.

When my family went to Tokyo, we were thinking of **moving** there. We visited possible places to live, possible **schools** and also a possible **synagogue**. It was **amazing**. There was basically nothing Jewish in the entire **city**, yet all of a **sudden**, we walk up to the **synagogue** and see a **mezuzah** on the door.

(Argentina???)

I’ve had the chance to see how there are so many similarities between different Jewish **communities**. All pray the same prayers, all come together to celebrate important milestones. They all even seem to have the same food at the **Kiddush**: hallah rolls and grape juice. There are very few **differences** – **one** of these differences is that international Jewish communities are usually smaller. Even though they are smaller, something about being away from the Jewish mainstream unifies the community **even more**.

Being away also made me appreciate it when we came back to Stamford. The Jewish community here has the same friendly attitude – **especially** Temple Beth El.

Stamford is, after all, just another of those far-flung communities of the exile. Come to think of it, the expression “far-flung” probably comes from this word, “va-yashlicham.” So here I’m doing some teaching **too** – using Jewish values and experiences to teach tolerance to others. For my mitzvah project, I have decided to become a teen trainer for the Anti-Defamation League. The program that I will be teaching will enable Jewish and non-Jewish children to confront anti-Semitism. (*explain more?? Mention that it’s in the booklet*)
(*meeting???*)

Thank yous...

Jonathan's Rosenberg Speech

Sometimes I like to ponder the most difficult questions of life. I'm inspired in this quest by a great hero and role model of mine: Bartholomew J. Simpson. Yes, THAT Bart Simpson, the one who stars in a weekly TV series and the one who authored one of my favorite books, "Bart Simpson's Guide to Life." Here are some of the profound questions he asks:

"If there's life on other planets are there aliens in heaven too?"

"Could God create a corn dog so big that even God couldn't eat it all?"

"Wouldn't eternal bliss get boring after a while?"

"If money is the root of all evil, then how come we have to have jobs?"

"If I spent all my time praying instead of studying would I get better grades?":

"When the three little pigs said, 'not by the hair of my chinny chin chin,' what were they talking about?"

"Why did God create tape worms?"

And then that eternal question, "Why are we yellow?"

Before I start turning this into a BART Mitzvah, let me get to my point...

In my Torah portion, it says in verse 28, "The secret things belong to God, but the revealed things belong to us and our children forever."

The Torah seems to be teaching us that we can only go so far in trying to answer the most perplexing questions in life, before we drive ourselves crazy. There are lots of hard questions to ask, like, "Why did God allow the Holocaust to happen? And, why is there suffering? And, why were we put on earth?"

With this verse, the Torah seems to be telling us to lighten up, and to focus less on the questions we can't answer and more on the things we can control, like helping others and doing other good deeds. As for those impossible questions, that's why Jews have always been so good at humor. It helps us to lighten up when things get complicated. Humor helps us to get a grip and to remember what's really important.

Allow me explain – with one of my personal favorites:

A rabbi and a priest were good friends. One day, the priest wanted to do something nice for the rabbi. He thought a while and said, "I should wash his car." He goes over to the rabbi's and washes the car. Right when he's finishing and tosses the bucket of water on the car, the rabbi comes over the window and is shocked at what he sees. So, later on, he runs over the priest's house and rips off the bumper of the priest's car. The priest runs out and says "What are you doing?"

The rabbi says, “Don’t play dumb! I saw you baptizing my car...”

As you might be able to tell, I’m hoping some day to be a stand up comic in the long tradition of comedians among the Jewish people. Jewish humor has always been our response to life’s toughest questions – and it has always helped us to focus on doing good and making others happy.

That’s also been the focus of my tzedakkah project. I have been collecting food for the food bank from my neighbors for the past five months. At one point a few months ago I had donated over 100 pounds of food.

(Thank yous)

Alison’s Greenwald Speech

I’ve learned many things over the years at our Hebrew School, and it **all** can be summed up by a simple **song** taught to us by Nurit. *“It’s good to be **good** but it’s **better** to be **better**...and you can be much better if you **try!**”*

That seems to me to be the main **lesson** that Torah is trying to teach us in this portion of Korah. This theme is brought up even before the portion **begins**, as the very end of **last** week’s portion dealt with the **tzitzit**, the fringes of the **tallit**, and it says that we wear them “in order that we be holy to God.”

In this portion, Korah rebels against Moses, complaining that Moses shouldn’t place **himself** above everyone **else**. He and his supporters said, *“You have gone too **far**, for all **the community** are **holy**, **all of them**, and the Lord is in their **midst**. Why then do you raise **yourself** above the Lord’s congregation?”*

At first glance, Korah’s statement makes **sense**. We all **ARE** holy, so what gave Moses and Aaron the right to stand above everyone **else**?

The commentator Yishayahu Liebowitz states that there are **two** kinds of holiness: the holiness that we are **born** with – in other words, what we **ARE**; and then there is the **other** kind – the holiness that we strive **to BE**. Korah was only concerned about that **first** type. But Moses, and Judaism are much more concerned with the **second**. And that was the fallacy of Korah’s **argument**. It isn’t enough that we **are** holy, we also have to try to **BE** holy. We should never be completely satisfied with who we **are** and what we have **accomplished**.

One look at my **schedule** will tell you where I **stand** on this. On a typical day I might have Hebrew School, homework, swim practice, jazz band, junior choir, other music practicing and my tzedakkah projects. The list could go on **forever**. I’m constantly striving **to improve**, academically **and** athletically. At the same time I also want to be satisfied with who I **am**. So in a way, both Korah **and** Moses are right. I know that I already **am** good, but I know that it’s **better to be better!**

In the same way, I love the fact that I was **born** Jewish, but I also know that **being** Jewish is something that I always have to **become**; through the way I live my **life**. That’s what becoming Bat Mitzvah is all **about**. I can now appreciate why my **mother** decided to become Bat Mitzvah here just a few years **ago**.

Part of my becoming **better** is in how I help **others** to have better lives. I’ve done several tzedakkah projects over the past **year**, including working with special needs children at the JCC pool. These are kids with physical disabilities -- and to see the smiles on their faces as they are released into the **water** and can swim **freely** is something that could make your heart **melt**. After we swim for almost an **hour**, we end the session by singing some good-bye

songs that are **always** followed by **hugs**. The friendships that are made at these sessions are **very special**. To see the smiling faces of these children is to understand the **true meaning of holiness**.

So, as Nurit's song says, **it is** good to be good, but it's **better to be better**, and **best** of all is to make the lives of **others** better. That's what Korah **didn't** understand.
(thank yous)

Matt's Speech

A few months ago, I was watching a lunar eclipse. When I looked out the window at about 7 in the evening, all I could see was a crescent. I kept checking every 45 minutes or so, and watched as the earth's shadow spread across the lunar surface. When it was all over, the crescent was on the other side.

It was amazing to see how quickly the moon's shape changes. And you really had to be looking closely to notice it. That's the thing about the moon – it's always changing and sometimes even disappearing, but then it always comes back.

The sun, on the other hand, pretty much stays the same and always looks the same. Unlike the moon, you don't have to look for it in the sky—you know where it is. And today, of all days, it hardly moves. Because tonight, at 8:47, is the summer solstice.

The word "solstice" comes from the latin "sol," (Sun); stisit; (stands). For several days both before and after each solstice, the sun appears to stand still in the sky – that is, it's noontime elevation does not seem to change.

So today is the summer solstice. Chalk one up for the sun. But not to be outdone, it's also a big day for the moon. Because this, you see, is Rosh Hodesh. The Hebrew word for month, "Hodesh" is almost the same as the word for new "hadash" because it is the day when the new moon is first seen. So on the same day that we are celebrating the sun's permanence, we are also celebrating the moon's renewal.

In many ways, the Jews are like the sun and the moon. Like the sun, we are permanent. But like the moon, we are always renewing ourselves. We are like the sun and the moon, but we don't worship them. Perhaps we have a greater similarity to the moon. Like the moon. The Jewish people aren't the largest or shiniest or most noticeable, and sometimes it might look like we have disappeared. But we always come back. And although it is weaker than the sun, the moon, unlike the sun, can appear in the sky both during the day and at night. And it can appear anywhere in the sky. There are Jews everywhere as well.

I experienced that recently, as I attended a cousin's Bar Mitzvah in Chile. In fact, he is here today! Chile is half a world away, yet here was a Jewish community so much like our own, with similar services and the same Torah. But they eat a LOT less starch than we do! What I would have given for a French fry!

Like the moon, hunger can also appear anywhere, and I don't just mean for French fries. There are many people even here in our own community who are hungry. That's why I decided to volunteer my time at the Stamford Food Bank a few months ago. You can also see food baskets on this bima that I will be donating to the food bank.

So I'm glad to be celebrating my first day as a Bar Mitzvah on the first day of summer and the first day of the Hebrew month of Tammuz. Happy Rosh Hodesh! Nussbaum

David's Aronica Speech

If you didn't **know** me before today, you are possibly wondering why I am wearing a pink **shirt**. Or you may be **wondering** why I have palm trees on my **tie** and a tallis with purple

stripes. Those who do know me are not surprised at all by my choices, because I am known for occasionally wearing things out of the ordinary. I like the idea of having a bold sense of style.

My friends sometimes joke with me, but for the most part, they think that it's cool – most of the time. People especially liked the “Ranger Dave” hat (*take it out and put it on*). Little did I know at the time I put it on that I was doing a very Jewish thing.

My portion tells the story about the twelve spies who scouted out the Promised Land and came back with their report. Of the twelve, ten thought that it was a bad idea for the nation to go up there, while only two, Joshua and Caleb, dared to be different. I read some commentaries on this passage indicating how a good leader needs to focus on the positive rather than being dragged down by the people, even if that leader is himself afraid.

When you are dealing with a large crowd, a mob mentality sets in, especially when rumors begin to fly. Everyone starts to panic and it's very hard to not be brought down by it. That's why it's important to wear funny hats from time to time. That's what gives me the training to stand out and be different, so that when I really need to, I will be able to.

The recent movie “Mean Girls” is a good example of how rumors spread quickly and how peer pressure can be so powerful.

In the Talmud, Hillel says, “I am not for myself, who will be for me?” This shows how, for Judaism, it is important to trust your instincts and stand up for yourself. But Hillel added, “But if I am only for myself, what am I?” By that he means that self-respect is not enough – you have to help others too. And Hillel concludes, “If not now, when?” That means that it's not enough to think about standing out from the crowd by helping others, you've got to do it.

And that's what I've done with my Mitzvah project. I've been working with clients from ARI and helping them learn to play basketball. Doing this has taught me a lot about being different and also a lot about how not to be afraid of those who are.

(thank you)

Michael Kahn's Speech

You are about to hear a fish story. What is a fish story? It's a tale that is elaborated on every time it's told. Usually it involves a fish that gets bigger and bigger over time. The Torah can be compared to a fish story. Each generation adds an additional layer of commentary, and the impact of the Torah grows and grows. Also, Rabbi Akiba said, “As water is home to the fish, Torah is home to us.”

As you can probably tell, I am a big fan of fish, as well as a big fan of the Torah. I love everything about fish: researching them in their natural environment, swimming with them (I mean voluntarily), catching them, eating them and even reading about them in the Torah.

In fact, there they are in my very Bar Mitzvah portion, as if it was destined to be. In the portion we read about how hungry the Israelites were and how they longed for the fish that they ate in Egypt. Some commentators believe that while they were complaining about not having fish, it really indicated a spiritual impoverishment. The nostalgia for the time in Egypt when fish were free and plentiful, is also nostalgia for a time when the people themselves were slaves and had no responsibility to sustain themselves.

Nostalgia is a dangerous thing. We all tend to look back at “the good old days” and make them better than they actually were. In that way, we tend to write fish stories about our past.

By the way, you won't believe this, but I almost caught a 70-pound sailfish last winter in the Florida Keys. I'm serious! Well, maybe it was 65 pounds, but unfortunately it got away.

So it is true that we tend to make the past look better than it was. What's true for memory, is also for anticipation. There was this time when I saw the most incredible casting rod at Modell's. I had to have it! So I got it, and after using it a few times, I realize that it wasn't such a great rod after all. Sometimes the desire for something ends up being greater than the experience of the desired object itself.

So I can understand how the Israelites fooled themselves into having warm memories of their time in Egypt. And I can also understand why their fear and uncertainty as wanderers in the Wilderness, even though they were now free, created a certain spiritual impoverishment that was symbolized in the Torah by the lack of fish.

Many people today feel that same spiritual and physical hunger because of poverty, and for my mitzvah project, I am going to be contributing to Sea Share, a program that distributes seafood to underprivileged families.

It was the perfect mitzvah project for me. I love fish and I love food. Also, fish bring luck, according to Jewish symbolism. The numerical value of the Hebrew word for fish, *Dag*, is seven. And seven is considered a very lucky number in our tradition. A derivation of the word *dag* is a verb found in the Torah, *vayidgu*, which indicates prosperity and fruitfulness.

A fish protected Jonah. Fish also symbolize mystery and awe and even messianic hope.

That's also true for other religions, including Christianity.

So you can see why I consider this *d'var Torah* to be a fish story. And now that I've "cast away" my childhood, I look forward to reeling in a lifetime of Torah. Michael Kahn (thank yous)

Tobin

Craig Tobin's Speech

I've always been looking up. One of my first memories, in fact, was of looking up. I was about two years old and there I was, looking up at my two brothers, my sister and my parents, and feeling really small.

I thought I would never grow to be their size.

Not that that was totally bad. It was nice knowing that these people would always be around to protect me; but it was frustrating thinking that I would never be able to stand up for myself – that there would always someone to step in front of me and take care of things.

Then there was the time when I was about 4 and I was reaching for the cookie jar on the top shelf. I screamed for help and my brothers quickly came, grabbed the jar, took some cookies – for themselves – and left the room. They actually pretended that they were going to give a cookie to me, but then pulled it away at the last second. I remember thinking to myself, "Will this ever change?"

I even felt this way just a year ago. It was the first game of the of the baseball season, I was facing the best pitcher in the league. I couldn't do a thing against him, striking out three times, once with the tying run on third. My confidence was really at a low. Coincidentally, we faced the same pitcher two months later in the season's final game. The first time up, I felt much more comfortable, so I took a big cut at the first pitch...and hit a weak fly ball to left field.

The next time up I got an infield hit, a slow grounder to third that I beat out. Then, the third time – it was the final inning and we were losing 6 to 5 with runners on second and

third and two out. The count ran to three balls, two strikes. The pitcher threw a fastball on the outer edge I swung and smacked it to center field. The two runs scored and we won the game.

I can now understand what the Israelite spies felt like when they returned from their mission. Two of the twelve came back with a positive report. But the other ten were convinced that they could not succeed. As they put it, the inhabitants of the land were giants and could not be defeated. Meanwhile, the text states that the spies felt like grasshoppers, in their own yes. Not in the eyes of the giants, but in their own. Because they felt so small, they were never able to overcome their fears, and the people therefore had to wander for 40 years in the Wilderness. Once they grew up, in their own eyes, they were able to defeat giant opponents, and the nations of the region feared them.

As the youngest of four, I've had the chance to grow up a little faster. There may be some disadvantages, like never getting to sit where I want in the car, but there are advantages as well. I've really learned how to share and, when you're the youngest of four, you never really get yelled at when something big happens!

And the best part of it is that by the time I finish growing, I'll probably be able to look down on all of them!

One thing that has helped me to grow is my mitzvah project. Over the past year, I've been tutoring kids at the Newfield elementary school, working with them on reading, spelling, math and whatever else the teacher wants me to do. It has been a very rewarding experience.

I'm also going to be donating some of my bar mitzvah money to the American Cancer Society and the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Thank yous...

Craig's Speech

It was pleasant late summer evening and I sat in a luxury box in the Meadowlands watching my beloved Jets play the Giants. During the first half, Chad Pennington dropped back to pass, scrambled to the right and was tackled from behind. He tried to break his fall, doing the thing that any of us would naturally do. He stuck out his right arm. But he fell the wrong way and his wrist was fractured.

As he walked off the field, he was holding that arm in pain and I could tell that it was bad. There were tears in my eyes. *Seriously – there were! I'm a sensitive guy!* All Jet fans are one family and we all felt at that moment that our dreams of a Super Bowl season had gone up in smoke, put in the hands of a 40 year old quarterback named Vinny. Nothing against him, but no one could replace the Chad. All hope was lost.

As a fan you become very attached to your sports heroes, and Pennington is one of favorites. But when they get injured, as so many inevitably do, fans tend to forget them and move on to other heroes. But not New Yorkers. Jets fans wanted to show the young quarterback how much they were behind him. So fans began talking on the Jets' Web site to see if anything could be done for him, beyond the typical cards and flowers.

After much debate, a number of fans decided to chip in for a beautiful custom-made plaque to present to Chad for a quick recovery. They also made a sizable donation to the Leukemia

Society in memory of Chad's father in law, who had died of the horrible disease on the same night that Chad was injured.

When Pennington was presented the plaque in the hospital and told about the donation, he seemed genuinely taken aback. He was extremely moved. He said, "What a nice gesture. This is very thoughtful."

In the end, Pennington made a very fast recovery and returned more than a month before he was expected to return, and he led the Jets to a number of victories. I think it is very possible that the good wishes of the fans helped his recovery along.

In my portion, Moses is confronted with the severe illness of his sister Miriam. Having seen Chad walk off the field that night, I can understand how Moses felt when he saw his sister smitten with leprosy. When someone you love is sick, you always get this helpless feeling, even when there's a doctor in the house!

Moses did what came naturally to him – he prayed. His prayer for Miriam's recovery is the first known spontaneous healing prayer in the Torah. It was a short, five word plea: El Na R'fa Na Lah. And it worked! In this case, it was a little faster than Chad's recovery, but in both situations, the prayers of loved ones helped the healing process along.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Abba son of Hanina said: "He who visits a sick person takes away a sixtieth of his pain." Modern science has shown that this statement is true. A simple visit can lift the spirits of the patient enough to speed the healing process in the body.

Over the years, I've spent lots of time hanging out at the hospital while my dad did rounds. Often I would go up to the pediatric unit, where I would talk with the kids, play video games with them and cheer them up. One kid was about to go in to get his tonsils out. He really looked afraid when I came into the room but by the time I left, he was smiling. I remember feeling really good when I left that day.

So I've come to understand that healing is more than just taking the right medicine. Prayer plays a big part as well. And thanks to that healing, maybe THIS will finally be the year of the Jets.

As part of my Tzedakkah project, I'm going to be donating some of the Bar Mitzvah money I receive to Adopt-A-Dog, in honor of my dog Annie.

Thank yous

KARP Lauren's Speech

Those of you who **know** me know that I've always **loved** animals. In fact, I've volunteered at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center for the past two and a half **years**. I go there once a week, almost **every** week, and I do everything from "mucking" the **stalls** (which means "**cleaning**") to picking the donkeys' **hooves**. Not only that, but I've also had the privilege to hold a lamb **just** a few days **old** and to clean up the after-birth of a **calf**.

It's exciting to hold a new life in your hands. It really gives you the feeling of **responsibility** and the confidence that you can protect a life that is so **fragile**. The young lambs are usually a little **frightened** to come up to me, so I try to approach them with **caution**. Then I try to sit next to the **mom** or **close** to the babies themselves. Eventually, I build up their trust and they allow me to **hold** them.

My portion relates to this because it speaks about the consequences of the **choices** we make. Some of these **consequences** are not very **pretty**. That's because most of the choices we make have a big impact on not only our **own** lives but the lives of **others**. The important point here is that in our lives we **all** have to make choices. Even though we may make the

wrong choice, we almost always have a second chance. In other systems of law of those ancient times, there were no second chances. But the Torah always holds open a glimmer of hope for new opportunities, no matter how discouraging things get.

If a lamb doesn't trust me at first, I always have another chance to build up that confidence, even if it's weeks later. The most important thing is that, when I'm holding it, I know that I have the power of life and death literally in my own hands, and that the choices I make need to be responsible ones.

One time, I was trying to pick the donkey's hooves, and the Jacob ram got jealous and came at my hip and rammed me. It hurt, but immediately, I know that I had to take action. I grabbed his horn and held his head down for a few seconds. By doing so, I showed him who is boss, an important lesson to build up his discipline – and my confidence. Sometimes, choices have to be made instantly.

Life is full of choices, both easy and hard; not just on the farm, but on the field or on the ice, and in the classroom too. Whether I'm playing hockey or socializing with my friends, there are always tough decisions that are bound to be made. But no matter what, when things don't go quite right, there's almost always a second chance.

Thank you

Schneider Matt's Speech

Last year I began attending an after school club known as C-PEP, where we learn engineering techniques. We've made model boats out of Styrofoam, magnetized levitating cars and one of my favorite creations, a bridge made solely from hundreds of coffee stirrers. The bridge that I made was able to hold over 40 pounds. Imagine that when you stir your coffee tomorrow morning. Sometimes the little things add up, when there is a guiding purpose organizing them.

The underlying theme of my portion is how the little things add up to something very big, something that the Torah calls holiness. In every aspect of life, the littlest, least noticed actions are the building blocks to a just society.

At the end of the portion, we are instructed to watch what we say. Speaking comes so easily that we often forget that our words can have a real impact, especially when they are destructive. Last year I had a chance to see Congress in session. I saw how the representatives used language so skillfully to forge compromises and make laws. But, believe it or not, even in Washington, sometimes our representatives resort to name-calling and ill-advised words.

Doing good can be habit forming. I had a friend at school who was always holding doors open for people. One day, I asked him why he does it. He replied that it was just a habit. So one time, he was called down to the school office and I questioned him as to what happened. He said that he had found a wallet that had fallen while someone was walking through a door he was holding open, and he had brought it to the office. The owner wanted to give him a reward. All this from the simple act of holding doors open.

Our tradition helps us to develop these good habits by providing us with an organized system of holidays and rituals that help to remember where we've been and understand where we are going. The entire calendar for the Jewish year is found in my portion. In the course of the year, all the little things we do add up to some important lessons, everything

from cleaning the house before Passover to holding the etrog and the lulav on Sukkot. At this time of year we count the days between Passover and the next major holiday, Shavuot. We have two other holidays coming up tomorrow. One is Lag B'Omer, and the other is Mothers Day. My dad gets my mom flowers every year for Mother's Day. I'm sure she would agree that all the little things add up.

I've learned this lesson in many different ways. We keep a garden, so I see how little seeds grow into plants as tall as me. For my tzedakah project I've been visiting with seniors weekly at the Stamford Senior Center for the past eight months. I've done everything with them from creating scrapbooks to helping them to log onto the Internet. I even rearranged their library so that all the books are alphabetical on the shelves. The only problem was with the books written in Russian. It may seem like a little thing, but for the seniors it meant a lot to be able to find the books they are looking for.

So as I become a Bar Mitzvah, I've found that just as a single grain of sand can be mixed to form the largest block of concrete, so can one simple act of kindness lead to a lifetime of holiness.

Thank yous...

Andrew Gilbert 's Speech

In my Torah and haftarah portions, people some very strange and risky things. In fact, these strange antics are links the two together.

In the Torah portion of Shmini, Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer what is called a "strange fire" as their sacrifice. Unfortunately for them, things get out of control and they are consumed by the fire.

In the Haftarah, King David is leading the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and he starts dancing wildly in the street, jumping and whirling around, to the point where his wife gets all embarrassed and angry at him.

In both cases, important people are doing strange things to express their joy and love for God. But where Aaron's sons go over line, David is seen to be acting appropriately, although not the way you would expect a king to act.

When I think of David doing his wild dance, it reminds me of a professional wrestler named Scotty, who does a dance called the Worm whenever he wins.

As many of you know, I love to watch professional wrestling. I'm sure David's wife would have had a problem with it, but like David, I see the wild moves of the wrestlers as something almost like praying. Sometimes it goes a little over the top, like in a TLC match when they hit each other with tables, ladders and chairs and bodies are flying everywhere! But it's all in fun, especially when you compare it to David's much more violent match against Goliath.

Just as our ancestors looked for ways to express themselves creatively through their bodies, today athletes are doing that in the ring. They've come up with great ideas, like the Royal Rumble, where one man gets to defeat 29 others. Then there are the "buried alive" matches, where the opponent is thrown into a pit and his body covered with dirt. They even came up with a "wash the loser's mouth out with soap" match. Very creative – and the best thing is that it's all spontaneous and unrehearsed!

Did you know the name that the Israelites called God just after they crossed the Red Sea and escaped from Egypt? That's right, they called God, "The Rock." As they sang and danced, just like David, they cheered their champion, just like WWE fans do when the wrestler

known as “The Rock” performs one of his signature moves, like “The People’s Elbow” or “The Rock Bottom,” when he slams his opponent to the ground. Here’s something interesting. The Rock owns the rights to that name. So now God will have to pay The Rock in order to be called by that name.

So, as you can see, there is a lot to like about professional wrestling. Obviously, our ancestors were big fans.

Mitzvah project – (describe here in a sentence)

Thank yous (write them here)

D’var Torah
Brenda Heyison

Shabbat Shalom! As most of us are aware, the first night of Pesach is in just a few days. Most of us also are aware of the common practice to recline at the Seder when drinking the four cups of wine. This action symbolizes our freedom, since the slaves used to eat while standing on their feet, and by reclining we are doing the opposite.

But, as with so many questions of Jewish ritual, the question arose as to whether women should recline as well? Of course, you know what I think! But it was interesting to follow the arguments of rabbis throughout Jewish history as they discussed this topic. Keep in mind, that all the rabbis who explored this topic until very recently were men.

The Talmud says "A woman (at her husband's table) need not recline; but if she is an important woman, she must recline." (Pesachim 108:a) So, the answer to this question depends on the status of the woman.

As is often the case with Talmudic discussion, it gets very complicated. For instance: The Rashbam says that she should not recline because it’s not appropriate behavior since she is subordinate to her husband. That doesn’t say much for the Rashbam, since slaves could recline, but married women could not.

A second opinion, given by Rabbenu Manoah, says "She is not obliged to recline since she is busy preparing and serving the food." So according to both of these interpretations, it is OK for a woman to recline, as long as she is not married! But if she is married, why would that diminish her importance?

Rabbi Eliezer bar Rabbi Judah adds to this in saying, "In her husband's house a woman need not recline, but if she is an important woman and her husband is not strict with her, she must recline."

The modern scholar M. Ish-Shalom says that "Indeed, it was the custom of the Romans as well to eat reclining; but the women did not eat reclining for reasons of modesty, except for important women whose clothing covered their legs entirely."

So we must ask ourselves ‘What is an important woman?’ Actually, the Tosafists, who lived in 12th century Germany, said “All our women are important and are obliged to recline." If the reason for a woman not to recline at the Seder was subordination to her husband, as interpreted by Rashbam, then thanks to the distinguished status of women in Ashkenazi society their husbands no longer would mind if their wives recline.

However, only the region of the Tosafists accepted this answer. Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rema), who lived in the 16th century, wrote "All our women are considered important, but it is not their custom to recline because they follow Raavyah who said that in our time one does not recline." In time, Sephardic Jews accepted the Tosafist’s explanation, while the

Ashkenazi Jews accepted Raavyah. This is where the argument stands today: Sephardic women tend to recline and Ashkenazi women do not.

Even though I am an Ashkenazi Jew, I agree with the Tosafists and recline on Pesach. However, to those men who disagree, I wish you the best of luck in telling your wives or mothers that they are not important enough to recline at the Seder.

So what did I learn from doing this little exercise? I certainly learned that the Talmud can be confusing. But I also learned that it can be very exciting to delve more deeply into the details, no matter how complicated it can get. And finally, I came to realize that this huge treasury of knowledge is as open to women as it is to men, and maybe now some women will begin to add to it. And that makes us pretty important.

(describe tzedakkah project and add thank yous...)

Ronnie's Speech

Those of you who know me well know that I love reading. I will often read the same book over and over. My record is eight times, and that was for a book that was over 300 pages long!

The reason that I like reading books over and over is that I find new meaning each time I do it. My mom tells me that when I was little I would listen to the same Barney tapes over and over.

There is a saying about the Torah, "Turn it again and again and you'll always find more in it." We read the same Torah every year. When we finish on Simchat Torah we immediately start again with Genesis. But every year we learn something different from it.

My portion, Vayakhel and Pekuday, speaks of the rituals of Shabbat, rituals developed from the descriptions of the building of the tabernacle in the Wilderness. Every seventh day, on Shabbat, we do the same things we may have done the week before. But each Shabbat is a little bit different. The more you experience something, over and over again, the more you get out of it.

Today is a special Shabbat, Shabbat Parah, which reminds us that Passover is coming soon and we need to clean up our homes to get ready. The Parah purification ritual that we read about this morning was so unusual that many commentators said there is no explanation for it.

Passover and Shabbat have a number of rituals that gain meaning over time. On their own, some of those rituals seems strange: Opening the door for an invisible guest, dipping things into salt water and asking four strange questions. But these rituals gain meaning for us as we repeat them again and again.

Even aside from Judaism, rituals are important. In just a few weeks, it will be opening day for baseball. Each year that special day tells us that spring is here and everyone's hopes are high, especially if you root for the Mets or the Red Sox.

As I am now a Bat Mitzvah, I know that I'll be participating in many important rituals, including reading of the same Torah reading that I read today, at our morning service on Monday and Thursday. It will be the same reading, but the experience will be very different. And through the years, I hope to be able to read this same portion, along with others, again and again.

I am going to be volunteering for ARI, (describe in a short phrase what you'll be doing).

Thank yous

Josh Fox Speech

Today is a special Shabbat called Shabbat Parah, literally, the Sabbath of the Cow. In the maftir Torah reading, we read about a strange purification ritual involving the sacrifice of a red cow. Ironically, the regular portion for today also involves a cow – the Golden Calf that the Israelites worshipped in the Wilderness. A medieval commentator links the two, saying that cow’s death made up for the sins involving the calf.

Another irony is that my bar mitzvah happens to fall on this Shabbat Parah, because I love animals. Even my last name is an animal! So it’s appropriate that this is the Shabbat of the Cow, although a cow might be one of the few animals I DON’T have. Not really, but I have a chinchilla, a frog, a finch and a pug named Fuzzby, which we got a year ago last November.

Fuzzby is very friendly, if occasionally a bit hyper. But she can be real calm – when she’s asleep, which is about 16 hours a day. She likes to fetch, but she prefers people toys to dog toys.

Because I love animals so much, at an early age I decided to become a vegetarian. Now that I’ve studied some about the Jewish concern for animals, my decision makes a lot more sense. Judaism sees animals as needing our protection. The laws about kindness to animals are called “Tza’ar ba’alay Chayim,” which means, “feeling the pain of living creatures.”

The Torah teaches us that animals should rest on Shabbat just as people do. Also, if an animal has fallen, we are obligated to help it up – even if it is the animal of our enemy. The Talmud teaches us to feed our animals before we feed ourselves. We do that with Fuzzby. Fuzzby prefers to eat before we eat, so that she can bother us at the table while we eat.

We also read in the Torah that an ox and a donkey should not be forced to plough together, because the donkey would see the ox hewing its cud and would think it’s eating and therefore feel bad, and the ox would have to pull more than its share, since it’s stronger than the donkey.

It’s really remarkable how sensitive the Torah is to the feelings of animals. I guess the idea is that if we love animals in this way, we will also learn to give more love to other people. For my tzedakkah project I’m doing both – I’ll be training Fuzzby in how to visit nursing homes and hospitals, through an organization called the “Good Dog Foundation.” Then I’ll be bringing her to visit different places in the area.

Thank you...

Alexa’s Speech

Take a look at the Eternal Light to my left. It has lit the way for the Jewish people for thousands of years in dark times. This light is first mentioned in my Torah portion, Tetzaveh. I’ve always known it was there, but a few weeks ago, it made a much larger impact on me that it ever had before.

I was in the temple and upset, so I went to sit in the chapel upstairs. I sat in the front pew. You would think that it would be scary to sit in the dark silently, but it wasn’t totally dark. The eternal light was dimly shining and the miniature Yahrzeit lights were illuminated.

The peacefulness of the room comforted me. I could feel a real presence around me – like God was there telling me that it was OK.

My portion explains that the Eternal Light was lit with olive oil, and in a way, the Jewish people resemble olive oil. The more we are beaten down, the stronger we become and the more light we bring.

Today is Shabbat Zachor: the Sabbath of Remembrance, when we recall those who have persecuted the Jewish people. Among them were the Amalekites, whom we read about in the special maftir and haftarah.

But the Jews are certainly not the only people who have persecuted through the ages. The Irish have suffered a similar fate.

Many of you who know me know that I have a passion for Irish Dancing. For the past five and a half years, I have done nothing but eat sleep and breathe Irish Dancing. It has become a huge part of my life. Back when the Irish were being persecuted, the British forbade dancing. The Irish would dance with their arms down, so that when the soldiers came to their homes, they would look through the half door and the dancers would appear to be just jumping when they were actually dancing. Their arms may have been down but not their spirits. This is very similar to the story of the dreidel, where the Greeks would not let the Jewish people study Torah, so the Jews would play dreidel, which would appear to be a game, but they were actually studying Torah.

Just as the eternal light keeps shining, as the Jewish people keep persevering, and as the Irish people keep dancing, so will I—forever and ever.

That's why I've chosen to share my love of Irish dancing with others, because, doing something I love to make other people happy is a real mitzvah. So, for my Mitzvah project, I will be dancing at nearby nursing homes.

Thank yous...

Rachel's Zabronsky Speech

As I was preparing for my Bat Mitzvah, I began to ask myself why is it so special to be a Jew? As time went by, I came to realize that what makes Judaism so special is that it helps us to reach out to others, to get beyond ourselves. My Torah portion hints at that. In this portion, the Israelites receive the Ten Commandments. But it is clear right from the outset that this special gift was given to us in order to share it with the rest of the world. We know this because the portion is named for Jethro, Moses' father in law, who was a Midianite, not an Israelite. So right from the start, it is clear that we need get beyond ourselves and look to help others whenever we can.

I learned that lesson in a very painful way, just at the time I was studying the lessons of my portion. Most of you know that about a month ago I tore my ACL while playing soccer. It was an accident. I collided with two other people. They walked away from it. But I couldn't get up. I was taken to the hospital and felt a lot of pain – and maybe a little bit sorry for myself. But when we got to the emergency room, I saw little boy, maybe 2 or 3 years old, who was getting stitches in his forehead. He was crying out for his mother. When I saw his pain, I felt more sympathy for him and was less concerned about my own condition. Even now, as I face several months without being able to do the thing that I love the best, play soccer, I refuse to allow myself to get depressed. I figure this gives me the chance to focus on other sports, like swimming or running track, even, and I also understand that, all in all, I'm very lucky.

Even before these past few months, I learned how important it is to care for those less fortunate than myself. My dad has a life-long friend whose 9-year old son is autistic. His name is Ethan. Ethan has made a big impression on me. The last time he was up here we hiked to Mianus Gorge. Because of his condition he isn't very social, but I watched movies with him and played with him to draw him out. I felt really good when he smiled at me.

Ethan seems to be pretty happy with his life. Knowing Ethan has made me feel grateful to be healthy but it also makes me want to help people like him.

So as part of my mitzvah project here, I helped in a study of autism at Mt. Sinai Hospital. People were tested for memorization skills and then their brains were scanned by an imaging machine. I helped the doctors record the results was very interested in how you could see clearly the differences between those who are and are not autistic. Knowing this has made me even more sympathetic to those who have autism and makes to help them all the more. So I am going to be volunteering at Roxbury School in a special class for autistic children.

One of the commandments in the Torah is to love our neighbor as yourself. While it is important to love ourselves, it is more important to get beyond ourselves. My recent injury and my relationship with Ethan have helped me to do just that.

(thank you)

Dana Katz Dana's Speech

My Torah portion consists of the final three plagues, which are locusts, darkness and the death of the first-born child. It also describes how the people were to celebrate Passover.

Out of these three plagues, I believe that one is not really a plague – darkness. Why is this plague different from all other plagues? Well, for one thing, why couldn't the Egyptians just light candles? And for another, what's so bad about living in darkness for a few days, anyway?

There are lots of good things about darkness: For one thing, night tends to be quieter and you get to sleep easier. From my house at night, I can even hear the train several miles away. Night is the time when most people are able to think most clearly and be creative. Without darkness, there would be no chance to dream.

I can remember spending a few hours in a very dark cave in New York State called Howe Caverns. It was hard to see, yet very peaceful and I wouldn't call it a plague. According to their Web site, 14 million people have gone there since it opened 75 years ago.

One thing I noticed when I went to Howe Caverns is that once your eyes get used to the dark, it doesn't seem so dark. I've noticed that before when I've gone camping, or in general on dark nights when I've been outdoors. One thing about the Jewish people is that we've experienced so many dark times, such as the Holocaust and the Exodus itself, that we've learned how to cope with it. It is fitting that the Passover Seder, described in my portion, can only take place when it is dark out. And all Jewish days, not just Passover, can begin only when the sun has set. It's important to note that the Jewish calendar is set up according to the phases of the moon, not the sun.

So physical darkness isn't the real plague here. The commentators stated that it was more of a fog, but also that for the Egyptians it was spiritual darkness -- more like depression. Also, it not that they couldn't see the suffering that was around them, but that the Egyptians chose not to.

So if I were to draw up a list of the ten worst plagues, darkness would be not be on that list.

But the darkness of war would be. That's why for my tzedakkah project I designed and sent a number of hand made Chanukah cards to Jewish American soldiers in Iraq. I'll be doing the same things this coming Passover. And the baskets you see here on the bima are filled with art supplies that I'll be donating to children who are facing their own dark times in the hospital.

Thank yous....

Arielle Rubin Speech

A couple of weeks ago, my Dad was watching the news and he called me over and pointed to the TV. It was showing a series of photos of Mars, in color, the most detailed photos of Mars that people on Earth have ever seen. It was so detailed that you could see every bump and shadow on the chrome colored rocks. When I saw that, I stood there in awe. I felt the same way a few months ago when I looked up into the sky at camp and saw Mars as big and as close its ever been to Earth. It was a big neon orange ball in the sky.

I've always loved to look up to the sky. I remember when I was really little, getting out of the car and looking up at the moon, and then asking myself when the Jewish month is going to begin. I had learned in Pre School that the Jewish calendar is based on the cycles of the moon, so I was curious. To me, the Jewish calendar is a lot more sensible than the secular one. All you have to do is look up and the sky and you'll always know whether the month is at the beginning, the middle or the end. Our ancestors didn't need a TV, computer or calendar to know these things. (I have *no idea* how they could live without the computer...).

So Judaism encourages us to look up at the sky often. Life is all tied into nature. Even the word "month" chodesh, is connected to the Hebrew word "chadash," which means "new." At a time when the moon is new, our month begins. And that is today!

Not only is this Rosh Hodesh, but it's the beginning of the new month of Shevat, during which we celebrate Tu B'Shevat, the new year for trees, and a time to reflect on our connection to the world around us.

Now I love to look up. I wouldn't want to go to outer space – I'm terrified of roller coasters and I'm afraid of heights. But I love to look up. When I look up, I begin to ponder, "Where does the universe end and how long is forever?" Then I usually get a bad headache. Really! No joke!

Just think – the Jewish calendar causes us to feel that wonder simply because it makes you look up just to find out what day it is.

I care about trees too – and not just because of Tu B'shevat. In school we were discussing what deforestation is doing to the environment. At lunch when I have a can of Snapple, my friend wants to take my can and crush it as a joke, because she knows that I get really annoyed when I see people littering and destroying the environment. That's why I think electric cars are the way to go.

My Torah portion speaks about the Ten Plagues, many of which caused environmental damage. Many of them still exist in some form today. They had cattle disease, we have Mad Cow. They had pollution in the water, we have pollution all around us.

But we can make a difference. All it takes is a little more caring about our world. Each of us can begin simply by recycling. And that sensitivity to nature begins, for every Jew, by feeling the wonder when we look up.

The canned goods you see in these baskets on the bima are going to be donated to the Food Bank of Lower Fairfield County. I also donated dozens of my old stuffed animals to the Food Bank for their recent tag sale. So through my efforts to feed the needy, I've also been able to do some recycling to help the environment.

Thank you

Adam Pollack Speech

I've been a vegetarian all of my life. I was raised that way because it is healthy and the right thing to do. Most of the people in my family are vegetarians – even our nanny has recently converted.

My first year at camp, my vegetarianism caused some complications. We have cows at my camp, and right around Visiting Day, one of the cows decided that I came too close to him – so he charged at me. As I was falling down I cried out, “What did I ever do to you?” No one has been kinder to cows than I have! My family even adopted two cows from a farm sanctuary, a place where animals are saved from being slaughtered. Because of us, Dolly and Alby will live long, productive lives and will not end up in your Happy Meal.

Jacob in my Torah portion is a great role model for me: He loved animals and in fact was the most successful animal breeder in the entire Torah. One might say that sheep “flocked” to him.

He even married one! “Rachel” in Hebrew means ewe – that's e – w – e and she met Jacob while shepherding her father's sheep. Soon Jacob became a shepherd himself, caring for sheep, receiving his wages in sheep, dreaming of sheep, and finally leading his flocks back to the Holy Land where he will present his brother Esau with a huge gift comprised largely of... sheep.

Jacob was so animal friendly that a case can be made that Jacob was, at least for part of his life, a vegetarian: According to the midrash and later rabbinic texts, Esau and Jacob not only had opposite interests but opposite natures as well. Esau was a hunter who killed animals, and Jacob was a shepherd who bred them. Esau made venison for his Dad – Jacob cooks only one meal that we know of – and it was lentil soup, a fine vegetarian meal. I happen to be a great fan of lentil soup – especially with a dash of curry and some couscous. Even at the end of his life, Jacob's descendants were shepherds in Egypt.

So now that I am a Bar Mitzvah, I am faced with a big decision. I rarely have worn leather, but now I need to decide whether to wear tefillin, which are only made of leather. After exhaustively researching the matter, I have decided that I concur with a view offered by Richard Schwartz, a proponent of Jewish vegetarianism. Since no cow will have died specifically for the purpose of making tefillin, and since there's really no other viable option, it's OK to use them. So I will.

For my tzedakah project, I've been helping out at Just Cats, caring for the animals and even on occasion, singing to them when they are about to be operated on. I'll also be donating 100 trees to the Jewish National Fund in memory of Ilan Ramon.

Ben Friedman Speech

There is a very moving scene in my portion, where Isaac gives each of his children a special individual blessing before he dies. As I was reading this, it occurred to me that I took part in a very similar scene not that long ago.

I've always been close to all my grandparents, and I had a special relationship with my grandfather Seymour, who died a little over a year ago. Two or three days before he died, he called me and my siblings to his hospital bedside, each of us alone, one at a time. There, like Isaac in the Bible, he gave each of us a special blessing. Like Isaac's, the blessing contained advice. He told me to stay out of trouble and to take care of my siblings. He said, "Be proud of who you are" and that I should go on with life and love life as it is. Throughout his life, he taught me how to do just that – to be proud of who I am and to love my family and appreciate the world around me.

The more I think of Isaac blessing his children, the more I realize how much I have in common with Isaac's oldest child, Esau. Esau often gets short shrift from commentators, but he really wasn't a bad person. For one thing, he did care about family, especially his parents. And for another, he loved the world around him – he was a man of nature. I remember my grandfather taking me on walks to his pond and the other ponds up the street – I love that pond (I caught a turtle there once and my Great Aunt Enid and Great Uncle Abe, who couldn't be here today, and uncle wrote a book about me called "Ben and the Turtle."). I also caught lots of frogs.

My grandfather also used to take me to the farm nearby, where he would pick huge sunflowers for each of us.

My love of nature and animals continues on. Last summer I was bitten by half a dozen snakes – one time a friend had to pry a garter snake off my finger. I've also caught a fish with my bare hands on two occasions. Esau might have been a good hunter, but I could give him a run for his money as a fisherman.

Part of my grandfather's blessing was that I be proud of who I am, both as an American and a Jew. He fought for America in World War Two as a mortar gunner. And as a leader of Betar, he worked for Israel's independence and security. He was very proud to be a Jew. When he was in the hospital, he told me he would not miss my Bar Mitzvah for the world. He may have died 15 months ago, but you can see that in my life, he is still very much here. Through Isaac's blessing, he continued to be present in the lives of his family. Isaac said to Jacob, "May those who bless you be blessed." I feel that I have been blessed too.

For my Tzedakkah project, I am going to be donating money to the American Cancer Society, pups for peace and toward the purchase of an ambulance for the ARMDI, the Israeli version of the Red Cross. I am also volunteering as a junior farm curator at the Stamford Nature Center, where I take care of farm animals.

(I'm leaving it up to you as to what you feel is appropriate to add here – a few details at most)

(thank yous)

Leonard's Speech

Those who know me know that I love to write. I've written over a dozen short stories over the past few years. The only problem is, I've only finished one or two. It's interesting that God seems to have the same problem in my portion. The Creation is completed and everything seems to be OK – God even says that it is "very good." Yet, within a few chapters, everything falls apart and by the end, the stage is set for everything to be destroyed in the great flood, which we'll read about next week.

There's a legend that God actually tried to create the universe several times, only to give up and start again.

This past summer I was in a program at Amherst University where I got to take classes both in creative writing and on theories regarding the Creation of the Universe. In reflecting on these classes, I came to realize that there is a connection between the two. Whenever I write a story, I am creating a universe with words.

In the Torah, the universe is created with words as well. So that makes everyone who writes sort of a mini-God in his or her own way.

So, having seen how the Creation as described in Genesis worked out, if I were God's teacher I may have been generous and given God a "C," even though the whole experiment failed. Can't fault God for trying.

But since I like to create worlds myself, and since my portion is Beresheet, I have some suggestions for God as to how to make this world better. I asked a few of my friends for their suggestions as well. So here are a few that might help God next time around.

First of all, I think it would be very helpful if people could understand animals. If I could talk with my dog, for instance, we could work out an arrangement whereby he wouldn't leave the property, and that way we could remove the invisible fence. In addition. I would lower the volume on the dog's bark.

Also, I would write it in to God's blueprint for Creation that every restaurant would have chicken fingers on the menu – really cheap.

While I'm at it, I would have school start at noon and all weekends be three days.

I would keep the four seasons but subject the weather to majority vote. If people vote to have a huge snowstorm on January 3, then there will be one. That way no one will ever be surprised.

I also wish God had built more tolerance into human nature. We'd have fewer wars and people wouldn't get so anxious all the time.

I'd end all poverty and discrimination, and do away with weapons of mass destruction.

All these things would make the world a much better place to live, and increase the chances that this time, the Creation will last and God won't have to go back to the drawing board.

Since I recognize how valuable reading us and how words create worlds, for my tzedakkah project I am going to be donating books to the Ferguson Library. 10/2004

(thank yous – not more than a page – do at home – e-mail me a copy when you are done.)

Cooper

Bryan's Speech

It was just a typical day in the life of a 12 year old. I had a Bar Mitzvah lesson scheduled for 3:30, and a football practice was beginning at 2. The night before, my Mom tried to convince me that it wasn't a good idea to go. But I insisted that I had to go. So I went. At about 3, or just a few minutes before I was going to leave the practice, I went up for a pass along with a teammate. We collided. He went one way, and I went the other, landing awkwardly on my wrist. The good news is: I held onto the ball. The bad news is: I broke my wrist (*hold hand up*).

The first thing I thought was that it was definitely broken. The second I thought was: I have a broken wrist and my Bar Mitzvah is two months away. The third thing I thought was that I should always listen to my mother.

Since that moment, life has not been the same. I have not been able to take notes in school and it's been very difficult to write on tests. When I take a shower I put a bag over my cast so that it doesn't get a drop of water on it. It's been very hard to take the dog out because he gets distracted by my cast. When he first saw it he started sniffing at it like it was a bone. It also hasn't been easy tying my shoes. Sometimes my Mom ties them and I feel like I'm five years old.

Although I'd much rather not have broken my wrist, this experience has taught me many important lessons. It has especially taught me not to take my ability to use my arm and hand for granted. I've learned to be more sensitive to those with disabilities.

My portion, *Lech lecha*, also teaches us that important lesson. At the end of the portion, Abraham is circumcised, an operation that can be very painful at the age of 99. It probably hurt him even more than my accident hurt me! In the very next chapter, God appears to Abraham, and the rabbis concluded from this that it is a great mitzvah to visit people when they are sick. It is called *Bikur Cholim*. We need to have sympathy for those who are disabled or ill. I can appreciate how important this is, since so many have helped me by carrying my books, taking notes, and so many other things.

At the beginning of the portion, God instructs Abraham to "be a blessing," so that the families of the land will be blessed through him. I try to be a blessing to others as well.

This year, for my tzedakkah project, I was the personal trainer and t-ball coach for Joseph Lupinacci, a six year old with Down syndrome. He had gone to school with my sister and when I met him I wanted to help him. So for two months I helped him learn how to get into a batting stance, and to hit the ball. I ran with him to first base and taught him how to field ground balls. When he got his first hit, he was jumping up and down and I was almost as excited. When he threw a runner out at first, it was another classic moment.

Even more than my wrist injury, Joseph has taught me the importance of being sensitive to the feelings of others. In addition to my work with Joseph, I've also done volunteer work at the Food Bank and helped my sister learn how to read. Even with one working wrist at the moment, I can still do a lot of good in the world.

Thank yous
(family, teachers, cantor, etc...) try not to use more than a page, double spaced for the thank yous...

Jarad Evans Speech

This morning I would like to take this opportunity to compare two of the greatest human beings who have ever lived, two people who never knew each other but have a lot in common. One of them appears in my Torah portion and the other will appear on Fox TV tomorrow at 4. Yes, I'm talking about Moses...and Brett Favre.

I've known each of them since I was a little kid. When I was about four I got a poster of Brett when I received my first issue of Sports Illustrated. Around that time, I learned about Moses at a Passover Seder.

What do these two great heroes share? Well, both are very accurate passers. Moses was very accurate at hitting rocks to get water from them and throwing down his staff to turn it into a snake. He also threw down the Ten Commandments very accurately. He hit the ground on the first try!

Both of these people were great leaders, in large part because they were willing to take risks. Moses had to believe that miracles could happen. He had to follow the instructions of an invisible God who had not helped the suffering through years of slavery. He also had to come to trust in his own abilities to lead, even though he had a speech impediment and was pretty old when he began to lead the people.

My portion begins with the words “Atem Netzavim hayom, as Moses instructs the people to take a stand today. Netzavim means not only to stand, but to take a stand. He was able to take a stand when necessary.

Favre, like Moses, had to believe in himself from an early age. He was a backup for the Falcons and was traded to the Packers. When the starter got injured he took over and never looked back. He has played in more than 170 consecutive games, even when injured. Last year he played with a knee brace after suffering a sprained knee against the Redskins. He took advantage of a bye week and came back against the Dolphins and had a great game. Like Moses, he knows how to play hurt. And he’ll take lots of risks, flinging passes into triple coverage and hitting the receiver for a touchdown.

One columnist wrote last year, “The man has played in 165 straight games, which is completely absurd in a sport this violent, especially at a position where concussions are as common as huddles. Mountains are less durable than this guy – and age less well – and are easier to climb.

Moses also aged very well. The Torah says he was still strong and youthful, even as he climbed the mountain to die. But he knew when it was time to call it quits and hand over leadership responsibilities to Joshua.

There have been many rumors about when Favre will retire. Some thought he was ready to hang it up this year, but the latest stories indicate that he might play as many as three more years. Whenever it happens, he will know when it is time.

But when he leaves, I’ll still be a Packer fan. Just as the Jewish people survived with their new leader, so will the Packers go on after Favre is gone. For both the Packers and the Jews have a great history, and both are bigger than one person, even two of the greatest leaders of all time. And both come from a land of milk and honey, or at least cheese and crackers.

Favre and Moses are role models for me. I hope that as I grow up, I’ll be able to inspire others as they have inspired me.

Even now, there are things I can do to be an inspiration to other kids. That is why as my tzedakkah project, I have filled these baskets on the bima with sporting goods that I will be donating to Kids in Crisis. I bought each item myself knowing that it will bring some joy to children who are less fortunate.

Thank yous (do at home)

Fogel Josh’s Speech

As you undoubtedly know by now, today is the first day of Sukkot. Sukkot is a holiday that celebrates the harvest and gives us a chance to become one with nature. We do that by constructing temporary dwellings called “Sukkot,” and by using bundles of branches called the Lulav and a lemon-like fruit called the Etrog.

Ever since I can remember, my family has built a sukkah for this holiday. What I feel is so special about our sukkah is that when the sun is setting, you can see through the walls and it

feels like you are in the forest. I also enjoy decorating it by hanging dried fruits, flowers and colorful artwork from the ceiling. A sukkah by design is supposed to be strong enough to stand on its own but weak enough that a hurricane would knock it over. That also helps me to feel close to nature when I am in it.

Whenever you look up through the sukkah's roof, which is made from branches and other natural items. You are supposed to be able to see the stars. This also helps me to feel at one with nature, even the nature that exists beyond this earth.

I've always been interested in space and followed closely the tragic journey of the space shuttle Columbia. Ilan Ramon, the Israeli astronaut, saw the world from a completely different point of view. During one of his revolutions around Earth, he was passing over Israel. He saw that Israel was like an oasis in the desert, filled with green forests. But he also saw the need to plant more trees. So, In a televised conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Ramon said, "I call upon every Jew in the world to plant a tree in the land of Israel during the coming year. I would like to see at least 13 or 14 million new trees planted in Israel exactly one year from now, on the anniversary of the launching."

In a way, the picture of Israel from space looks similar to a patchwork quilt of browns and greens and blues. So for my mitzvah project, I decided to create a quilt for a terror victim's family in Israel. * (put in details about the family if you get them on time)

The Jewish people are like a patchwork quilt as well. We are living all around the world and are all very different, but we share a common destiny. And today, Jews everywhere also share this festival and the experience of enjoying the beauty of nature out in the Sukkah.

More on tzedakkah???

Thank yous...

Chuchinsky

Tali's Speech

Becoming a Bat Mitzvah the day before Yom Kippur has its advantages. Yes, I will have to fast for the first time, but I won't be hungry because of all the eating I am doing this weekend. (pause) But seriously, both Bat Mitzvah and Yom Kippur are really about the same thing: taking responsibility for my actions.

On Yom Kippur, we atone for the sins of everyone – we take responsibility not just for ourselves but for everyone else as well. As a Bat Mitzvah, I also know how important it is to take responsibility for my own life. I've had to make some difficult decisions as to juggling my busy schedule. I had to cut out some of my ballet to do orchestra and to cut back on piano in order to have more time for homework.

Today, on the eve of Yom Kippur, I can now begin to understand the type of responsibility my dad had to take exactly thirty years ago, on the same date in both the Hebrew and English calendars, when he fought in the Yom Kippur War. He had a reunion with his battalion just a couple of weeks ago.

My portion, V'zot Ha'bracha, speaks about responsibility and leadership in at least three different ways. First, Moses blessed the Levites by saying that they would become leaders of Israel. Interestingly, I am a Levite on my dad's side and a Cohen on my mother's. Later, as Moses continues to bless the tribes, he mentions Issachar and Zevulun in the same sentence. The commentaries say that one was a merchant and the other tribe very studious, so they were mentioned together in order that they take responsibility to care for each other.

Also, Moses dies at the end of this portion. Naturally, he wanted to live on and enter the land, but he understood that the people would be better off with someone else at that point, although he was still strong and vigorous, so he stepped aside for Joshua. Ironically, he showed great leadership by giving up his leadership.

I understand the importance of being a leader and not a follower. I just began at my new school and already I ran for vice president of the student council. And I won! I try not to follow the crowd, to meet new people, to greet everyone with a smile, as our ancient rabbis advised us, and to hold no grudges. I also try not to listen to gossip, especially when someone tells me not to be friends with a given person. I try to make my own judgment on such matters.

I also know that I can be a leader by helping Jews here and in Israel understand one another. I can help people here to appreciate what life is like in Israel. The beach is warm and clear, and the chocolate milk is really good. It comes in little Baggies! People are very friendly there, and maybe I can bring some of that spirit back here.

One way I can help do that is through the volunteer project I'll be doing. My mom, brother and I are forming the Chuchinsky Woodwind Trio. We'll be visiting various nursing homes and other places, including here, to play our music. I've also been doing community service work at school.

(thank yous)

Vatman David's Speech

Hi.

I have to be careful with what I say today, because, believe it or not, the word "Sukkah" is actually a swear in Russian. Well, now that that's over... Actually, it's fascinating to see how one word can mean different things, depending on your cultural background. And the Jewish people have so many different cultural backgrounds, coming from so many different places. My family came over from Lithuania and Ukraine years before I was born, and that is part of my background as well. And although I have lived in Stamford almost all my life, in some ways I feel like part of that culture too. Jews have been wandering all over the world for thousands of years and have taken a little from each culture. The secret of Judaism's survival has been in how remarkably it has adapted to different settings.

On Sukkot, we remember the wanderings of the Israelites in the Sinai desert. But we also think about all the places Jews have wandered since then. One of those places was right here in America. Not only did my parents sail to these shores, but so did many other Jews over the centuries, beginning with a large group of Jews who set sail in 1492 with the man whose life if also remembered today, Christopher Columbus.

(look up how many Jews were on his ship)

But as good as it has been for Jews to wander all over the world, it's also good to be able to stay put and settle in one place. My haftarah speaks of how, after many centuries, the ark of God was brought at last to a permanent resting place, the temple in Jerusalem.

For my tzedakah project I am going to be donating some of my bar Mitzvah money to HIAS, the organization that helped settle my family here in America.

(thank yous)

Weisman Jordana's Speech

Shabbat Shalom. This portion is the only one that is entirely made up of poetry. It contains Moses' final speech to the people before he dies, and it appears in the form of a poem. In this poem, Moses focuses on the lessons he has learned in his long life and how Israel needs to heed the advice of its elders as they near the journey's end.

Last year, my language arts teacher taught us a unit on how to write different types of poetry. We ended up creating books of poetry, using all different styles. I love to write poetry and have written dozens of poems as well as lyrics to about 15 songs. With poetry, unlike other forms of writing, you have the freedom to write what you want – there are no rules of style and punctuation.

The themes I've written about include, coping with change, love, illness and growing up. One of these poems, found in your booklet, is actually perfect for this Shabbat Shuvah and the season of repentance. It's all about how we always try to change for the better.

It's called "Wings."

(read Wings)

There are probably several reasons why Moses decided to give his final address in the form of a poem. Poetry has layers of meaning so people could interpret it in different ways. Also, poetry is easy to remember, and Moses makes the point that his advice is very important. Finally, poetry expresses the deepest feelings of the poet. It helped to express himself at a very difficult time – just as poetry helps me.

That's why most of our prayers are in poetic form – they help us to express our deepest feelings.

Poetry and music go hand in hand. Most great songs begin as great poems. Moses' poem sounds even better when it is chanted. As one who has written for and been part of a band, I know the importance of music in the lives of young people. In that spirit, I am in the process of raising money for the Stamford schools' Project Music program. My contribution will enable some students to have music lessons.

(thank yous)

Bass

Alex's Speech

I assume that most of you are expecting me to speak about baseball this morning. But I also have another interest that some of you may not know about: I really love to cook!

This is how it all began: One night I was scrolling through the channels on my TV and I stumbled upon channel 29, the Food Network. The show looked interesting, so I decided to watch it for a while. I really got into it and began to watch it whenever it was on. And I even got my friends into it. It's called "The Iron Chef." The show is about two chefs who compete against each other to invent new dishes with a secret ingredient revealed at the time of the contest.

A few weeks later, I decided to try my own luck in the kitchen. I began cooking up some great meals, one of them being my trademark marinated grilled chicken, using ingredients that I picked out of the refrigerator that looked like they would go together. These ingredients include barbecue sauce, hot sauce and cayenne pepper. *I wish I could tell you more, but I can't.*

Whenever I went to my friend's house we would get up early and whip up a full breakfast. I just love to cook.

My love for food ties in perfectly with this harvest festival of Sukkot. It begins only five days after the fast of Yom Kippur, and Sukkot is just the opposite. All we do is eat. That is why Sukkot is called *Z'man Sim-cha-tay-nu* the time of our joy. Which raises the question, why does food give us so much joy?

For one thing, it is a great outlet for creativity and self expression, a I've discovered through my cooking.

Also, food gives us a way of sharing our joy with others. One of the prime mitzvot of Sukkot is hospitality. We invite guests into the sukkah to eat. There is an ancient custom where we invite a different hero from Jewish history on each night of the holiday.

In addition, food also enables us to perform acts of tzedakkah, to share the harvest with the poor and needy in order to make the world a better place.

As some of you may know, I've been collecting food for the past ten months as my Mitzvah Project. I've collected 2,500 lbs of food thanks to many of my friends and family. The food has been brought down every month to the Lower Fairfield County Food Bank and has fed the equivalent of 170 people three meals a day for a week, or 3,570 meals.

What have I learned from the experience? In a general sense, I've learned the importance of tzedakkah, but I've also learned some important guidelines regarding food collection that I want to share with you:

Some days there is much on the shelves but some weeks it's bare. There is a particular need for rice, a very popular dish among the population served by the Food bank. I've donated many heavy bags of rice myself.

Through this project, I've come to understand what it must be like to do God's work – to feed the hungry, welcome those who are need of hospitality and make something special out of raw ingredients.

If it weren't for food, there could be no life. That's why we are so thankful for it – and why when the Pilgrims wanted to invent a holiday to express their thankfulness for the harvest, they looked to Sukkot as a model.

(Thank yous)

Brittany's Speech

In a section of my portion, Moses suddenly says something that has provoked much discussion for thousands of years. Moses tells the Israelites,

“To this day the Lord has not give you a mind to understand, eyes to see, or ears to hear.”

What does this sentence mean? How could God not have given us mind, eyes or ears?

One reason that I like is found in our chumash. It says, *“the ability to understand, to see or hear the divine significance of events may be granted or withheld from humanity. One may see great wonders but remain entirely insensitive.”*

In other words, God gave us these abilities and left it to us to use these gifts effectively and not to be an insensitive person.

Some people unfortunately walk through life not realizing or understanding the miracles they are seeing. Miracles, no matter how big or small, are equally amazing, but many people take them for granted.

It's a miracle to wake up in the morning, (and my parents I'm sure will agree). Good health is a miracle. It's also a miracle to have friends and family that care about each other and I also think it is a miracle to have you all here to share this day with me.

Last summer, me and my mother were stuck in horrible traffic on the way home from dance class. To pass the time, we began talking about miracles. We talked about how thankful we were for not having been involved in the horrible crash, for having a cell phone in the car to reach our family, for not running out of gas, and, last but not least, for being alive.

Did you know that for Moses to notice that the burning bush was not burning up, he had to stare at it for at least five minutes. For Moses, seeing was not enough – he also needed patience, which is a big part of realizing miracles.

While getting ready for ballet class, sometimes I just sit there and look at my feet, much like Moses stared at the burning bush. This has helped me to appreciate what my feet have given me and how much I really do love them. No matter how gross my feet appear, dance, especially ballet will always be a part of me. For about a year I've been on point. No matter what type of ballet I'm doing, I always have a happy feeling inside of me, even though I spend 45 minutes at a time literally on my toes. I know that this is an art that many people cannot perform, and that is part of why I appreciate the miracle that I can.

Some day there will be a miracle when they come up with a cure for cancer. Many people that I adore and love have either passed away from some type of cancer or are recovering. A person here tonight is recovering from a certain type of cancer and I am thrilled that she is able to be here with me tonight.

In honor of these people, my tzedakah project will be to donate a portion of my Bat Mitzvah money to the Bennett Cancer Center. I also participated in the recent Bennett Cancer Center Walk.

Perhaps one of the greatest miracles of all is healing. All of those who are sick, even if they are unable to recover, can still be healed. They can be healed through love.

(thank yous)

Stephanie's Speech (Mom is Kathy Walker)

As many of you know, I love to swim and have been swimming competitively for the last few years. I recently calculated that during the summer, I spend up to one third of my waking hours each day in the water. In the winter it isn't much less than that.

Today's Torah portion contains many laws about relationships, including those between parents and children. It discusses what to do when a child is overly rebellious and also talks about how the sins of parents should not be placed on the children and vice versa. In Jewish tradition, it is very important that parents be responsible to teach their children but they also have to be able to let go so that the children can grow up and make it on their own.

You might be interested to know that the ancient rabbis considered swimming to be a very important skill that parents were supposed to teach their children. It wasn't enough to teach a child how to read or earn a living. Swimming was considered a basic survival skill, as important as anything else. I'm not exactly sure why they thought swimming was so important. All of life, not just in the water, presents us with challenges where we can either "sink or swim." It has been that way for me.

When I was younger, believe it or not, I was very quiet and shy. But when I joined the swim team I was forced to make new friends because I knew no one and it helped me to gain self-confidence. Now, I'm very outspoken and you can't get me to stop talking – except when I'm under water!

Swimming has also taught me that I have to push myself to the limit. Even if I'm tired I have to give it everything I've got in order to better my time in the water, and in the rest of life, to achieve my goals.

My experience on swim teams has also helped me to appreciate what it means to be on a team – to rely on teammates, to root for them and to work even harder so as not to let them down.

Swimming has also helped me to realize my own limitations. I'm a pretty good swimmer, but there will always be someone out there who is a little bit better. But I don't have to be the best at everything – I just need to work my hardest, and then to accept whatever happens, even if I don't win every race.

For Jews, more important than winning the race helping those less fortunate to keep up. In that spirit, I've chosen _____ as my tzedakkah project. (describe it) I'll be donating some my Bat Mitavah money to it. (Add your thank yous and e-mail back to me

Rachel Cohen

Rachel's Speech

I've been spending a lot of time lately taking care of children. Last spring I spent several Mondays volunteering at Special Olympics where I practiced with a number of children in the pool. In addition, I'm now doing a good amount of babysitting for friends and neighbors, and I also sit for my sisters a few times a month. I'm been keeping track of how much my mom owes me over the past three years. She's promised to pay up eventually, although she is allowing me to buy things on credit. One of the things I did buy already was a fish tank.

I have always liked water animals, since I am a swimmer myself. In third grade I write a story that I became a fish (???). For the past two years, I've been in the aqua-science club at school and have learned a lot about taking care of fish. Last fall I got my first fish, a Chinese Fighting Fish, and I learned how to change the water and keep it well fed and happy. I (more fish???)

Fish aren't the only creatures that I like, besides my sisters of course. There's also, Sam, my poodle, who sleeps on my bed every night and is the favorite of all my friends. Taking care of Sam has been good practice for me for taking care of my sisters and other kids. And that is exactly as the Torah intended it to be.

My portion contains 72 laws about how we should treat one another. Several of them have to do with being kind to animals – or, as Jewish law later called it, “Tza’ar Ba’a’lay Chayyim.” It doesn't literally mean “Kindness to Animals, though; instead it means “feeling the pain of other creatures.” The idea is that if we learn to be kind to animals, we will also have more sympathy for other people. So in the portion, it tells us to return lost animals to their owners, to help an animal that has fallen, and to chase away a mother bird before taking her eggs. At first, I thought that was a strange law and was glad to hear that many Torah commentators are confused about it too. But then it made sense to me, since I am a baby sitter too, just like that bird sitting on her babies. There are certain things that no mother should have to witness.

Caring for animals teaches us lots of things. It teaches us humility – the Talmud teaches us that even the mosquito was created before the human being. Animals teach us responsibility. It says in the Talmud that we should feed our animals before we feed ourselves. And animals teach us patience. My mom says I have a lot of patience with the kids, and I think I learned some of that from the way I responded to Sam when he went to the bathroom on my

carpet and chewed my furniture. He also eats paper. I also learned patience from the way my Dad handles my soccer team, which scored only once all season, and that was one that the other team knocked it in their own goal.

My experience with animals has certainly taught me to respect all creatures, including and most especially human beings.
(thank yous)

Paul's Speech Springer

Good morning. Thank you for joining me on my special day today. I realize that my being up here as a Bar Mitzvah means that I've taken on many new responsibilities.

In my parsha, the main theme has to do with power and responsibility. It describes the obligations of those who are in leadership positions, like kings, generals and judges, or shoftim, which just happens to be the name of the portion! It also talks about people who have power because of what they say or what they do, such as murderers and witnesses to murder. And no one has more power and more responsibility than a group of judges dealing with capital punishment.

When dealing with capital punishment, witnesses had to be 100% sure, and if the person was convicted, the witnesses had to participate in the punishment. Of course that almost never happened – only once in 70 years did a Jewish court condemn a person to death. Even in our day, Israel has only sent one convicted killer to death – and that was Adolph Eichmann. Capital punishment is mentioned lots of times in the Torah because life is of infinite value, but that's also why it was rarely practiced.

Some of you may not be aware that I am a black belt in karate. My *hands* could be a form of capital punishment. But I have learned to use my powers for good.

Karate has three basic rules, all of them relating to the responsible use of power: 1) We are supposed to respect everyone; 2) we need to show discipline in all that we do; and 3) we need to show self control.

These three rules also apply to being a Bar Mitzvah. I am responsible for repairing the world – or at least to begin the job. I'm doing that in several ways: through the new tzedakkah endowment fund project that I am doing with the Jewish Community Endowment Foundation – I'm the first from this synagogue to be participating in this project. Another way I try to show responsibility is by setting an example for others, just as my parents have set such good examples for my sister and me. I would REALLY be able to show my responsibility if I had a DOG! (hint hint).

One inspiration to me is my great grandfather and namesake, Paul Springer. The torah that I have read from today was donated my grandfather in memory of the passing of his father and my great grandfather. (ask dad about anything else).

One verse from my portion sums it all up "Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof" which means justice justice shall you pursue. No matter how much power you have you should never let go of that goal.

(insert thank yous)

Matt's Hirtenstein Speech

Thank you Jessica. It's a pleasure to be sharing this day with you as well. What a coincidence – your mom had this portion, and so did my Dad. So for each of our families this is a déjà vu kind of day.

Something else that we share is the fact that it took a lot of hard work to prepare for today, and that requires discipline. It is through discipline that we earn the blessings that are so much a part of this portion.

Speaking of discipline, our Torah portion discusses a particular group of people called Nazerites, who made a commitment to live a very disciplined life, staying away from worldly pleasures, such as eating grapes, drinking wine and cutting their hair. The best known example of a Nazerite in the Bible was Samson, whose birth was the subject of our haftarah.

I just got my haircut...guess I'm not a Nazerite! But in some ways, maybe I am. Nazerites used their sense of discipline to channel their efforts into a focused mission. I'm still working on that focus from time to time, but in one respect, I am as focused as I'll ever be. I channel lots of energy into my reading. I love to read.

I read at least 4 books a week, including many long books of up to 1,000 pages. Reading books takes a lot of discipline – and it helps me to clear my mind of all distractions.

Also, through my reading, I've encountered many characters who themselves were like Nazerites in their disciplined approach to life.

Take Drizzit, for example, from the Forgotten Rome series. For those who might be interested, he is a dark elf who forsook his own people because they were evil. He is the top warrior among warriors, sort of like Samson – and he rarely ever slips up. He also practices every day sort of like my Bar Mitzvah training. Thanks to the constant encouragement of my mother, I practiced at least 45 minutes every day.

There's also Tam al' Thor from the "Wheel of Time" series, who harnesses his emotions, forcing his mind to go blank, so that he can focus completely on the task at hand. This type of discipline is called "the void in the flame," and he rarely misses with his bow because of it.

Earlier this year, we learned about Ghandi in school. He was also like a Nazerite, except for the hair thing. But it took tremendous discipline to be non violent. How could you not want to hit somebody in the face who is oppressing you? I don't agree that pacifism is always the right thing. He got beat up so often while doing these non-violent things. It must have taken tremendous discipline. And you've got to give him credit: after years of getting hit in the head, he won.

I guess you can say that anyone who achieves that level of discipline will win out in the end. As the ancient rabbis said, "Who is strong? The one who controls his emotions."

Because I love reading so much, I will be donating hundreds of books to the "Make a Wish" foundation, giving a book to each child in the participating family. You can see the books here today.

(thank you)

Jessica's Dowdle Speech

My portion contains one of the world's oldest prayers, the one called the priestly blessing. In ancient times, the priest, or Cohen, used to bless the people with three special, short blessings, asking that God protect us, shelter us and give us peace. The rabbi and cantor will be using this same blessing as their blessing to me in a few moments.

Words of blessing can have special power – but all words have power. Simple phrases like "thank you," "please," "Are you OK?" and "I'm sorry" can change everything. And a simple get-well prayer, like the one we just did here, can actually help a sick person to feel better. Just the knowledge that people are saying it – that they care – can help a person to heal.

And I know that my words are important too, especially today. As a Bat Mitzvah, I know that I have the power to help the world in new ways, and to be a blessing to others. So, in honor of my portion and the blessings found in it – and in honor of the fact that this was also my mother’s Bat Mitzvah portion – I’ve come up with a list of ten new blessings to add to the ones found here. It is traditional for Jews to recite 100 blessings each day, but for now I’ll start with these.

Blessed are You Adonai or God, for helping me to be here this morning and bringing me to this wonderful moment.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, for helping me survive swim practice.

I thank also, Adonai our God, for the movies on long airplane rides, not to mention portable TVs in cars. And for Cinder, the horse I love to ride.

Blessed are You O Lord, for providing me with the right answer when the teacher calls on me!

I thank you also for the ability to forgive -- and for the ability to remember.

I am also eternally grateful for cell phones and AOL, and equally thankful for the life-giving power of the ocean and the warmth of the sun.

Blessed are You, Adonai, for summer vacations and Cranapple juice, for good friends and little brothers – well... let me think about that some more...

Words are very powerful, but so are actions. When we recite a blessing it reminds us that we also should be a blessing, through acts of kindness and tzedakkah. It is in that spirit that I’ll be donating some of my time and money to an organization called Pegasus, which enables physically people to have the experience of riding horses. I love to ride and want others less fortunate to share that experience.

Speaking of sharing experiences, I am so happy to be sharing this morning with Matt, who will be speaking next. I’d also like to thank (complete the thank yous here – and e-mail this back to me when it is done)

Alex’s Speech

If you look at the entire Bible, you will find very few structured services with set prayers. In those days, most people would cry out spontaneously rather than read something prepared for them in advance. My portion, Ki tavo, contains one of the few set prayers in the Torah. It was to be recited by Israelite farmers bringing their first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. This formula, which is now also found in the Passover Haggadah, recounts the ancient history of the Jewish people as slaves in Egypt.

The funny thing is, nowadays most of our prayers are set – written out for us to pray, even without feelings behind them. I kind of wish that that things were still the way they were in biblical times. How can we accept blindly something that doesn’t necessarily move us? I have trouble finding meaning in many of the of the prayers that we recite. I wish we had the chance to say our own. People should have the freedom to express their prayers their own way so that we can really feel what we pray.

That’s what I like about Michael Jackson’s music. When he starts to sing, there is tremendous energy in the room, with a powerful combination of vibrant music and dance.

What’s more he puts everything he has into every note.

His song, “Man in the Mirror” almost reads like something we would pray on the High Holidays. It calls on us to help other people in need and to make a difference with our lives. He emphasizes that we should make the decision to do good things without others forcing or

influencing us. Otherwise our actions, like our prayers, become meaningless if there is no feeling behind them. (read some of lyrics????)

As much as I like Jackson's music, his songs shouldn't be in the prayer book either. Each of us should have our own prayer book, containing our own ideas and feelings, not the prayers of others.

Prayers are not the only things that need to be done with feeling – so do mitzvah projects. I try to do mitzvot every day, everything from holding doors for people to the Ruach Noar program at the JCC, to visiting the homeless shelter on Christmas Eve to delivering meals to Gilead House for the Temple to delivering toys to the children at Stamford Hospital.

(donation??? Israel??? Nir???)

Tzedakkah is all about sharing what we have with others. I also am sharing this day with my Bubbe. Finally, she's becoming a woman – in the Jewish religion. It's nice for me knowing that that is now able to do something that was not possible for her when she was my age.

(put thank yous at the end, after Ethel's speech)

Ethel's Speech

Alex, I'm very flattered that you were willing to share one of the most important days of your life with your Bubbe. Not all Bar Mitzvah boys would think was cool.

I think there should be fixed prayer, although I do believe in modernization. Prayer connects us to the past. Otherwise we stray from the things that tie us to our ancestors. Our prayers connect us in time and space to other Jews and make our services recognizably Jewish.

(Talk about a personal experience with prayer – when a child). Becoming Bat Mitzvah evolved for me it was my way of gaining a personal relationship with prayer.

(My message for Alex (what I most want to impress upon him) – to accept Judaism and pass it on.)

If Michael Jackson can help you to understand Judaism, all the better. But my hero was Frank Sinatra – and the song of his that reminds me most of prayer is "My Way." In fact, it also reminds me most you, Alex – and your mother.

The Jewish people have always lived by that credo – we've done it our way. And Alex, I hope that you always will.

(???)

Haley's Ratner Speech

When the rabbi asked me what I might want to talk about today I mentioned that my mom and I had been discussing it and had decided that I should talk about "something happy." We decided not to pick a subject is depressing or sad.

I've always liked to make others happy, through jokes, praise, or simply by smiling as much as I can.

I'll use many different strategies to make people happy – my friend Jaci was moving to Atlanta a few weeks ago, and we had a party in school and everyone was sort of depressed and sad. So I went over to Jaci and said, "Thanks for moving, the party was great!" She started laughing. That made both of us feel good.

This past Thanksgiving, I made a group of homeless people happy by cooking a huge turkey and baking cookies for them. When my family brought the food down to Pacific House, some of the residents were standing outside and helped us bring it in. They were thrilled.

A couple of weeks ago, my class sang for the elderly at Westfield Court. Most of the seniors were smiling brightly – though a few fell asleep and began to snore. Throughout this school year, I've also been writing support letters to Israeli soldiers, both in school and on my own. Since they don't write back, I can only imagine the smiles on their faces.

Making people happy is a skill that is as important as reading and math. It all comes down to making them feel special every day, during ordinary times as well as special occasions. My portion, B'Midbar is a celebration of the unspectacular – it reminds us to celebrate the uncelebrated. While other portions of the Bible focus on the big wigs – Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Abraham, Sara, etc. this one focuses on the little people. Here we read a census including all those names we will never see again in the Torah.

When God commands Moses to count the Israelites, God says "s'eu et rosh," lift the head. Don't simply "count" them, but make them feel like they are much more than a number. See the face, lift their chin up, let each individual stand tall and proud

Also, the book of Numbers takes place in the Wilderness. The people leave Mount Sinai behind them, and go from the mountaintop to lesser-known, average places. This book describes the people as they actually are, living in the unnoticed places, living out their routine lives, but keeping their heads high. As our Humash commentary states, "Life is lived not so much in the grand moments as in uncelebrated, ordinary times."

These are the times we have to celebrate – not just today on my Bat Mitzvah day, but everyday. I'm pretty happy today; but the key will be to be happy tomorrow. I know I will be – except for all the thank you notes. Also, through my bat mitzvah studies, I've become happier. And I hope this speech will make you happier too.

I would like to thank my mom and dad for putting my bat mitzvah together and helping me through it. I'd like to thank my brothers for helping me when the studying got too tough and knowing just the right time to take me out for ice cream. I'd like to thank Rabbi Hammerman for helping me put together this speech, Cantor Jacobson for preparing me for this day as well as Bracha Moshe and Judy Aronin. I'd like to thank all my teachers at Bi Cultural for helping me to get to where I am now. And I'd like to thank those who came from near and far to share this special day with me.

Ryan's Erskine Speech

This holiday of Shavuot is also called "Z'man Matan Torah-tay-nu," the festival of the giving of our Torah. It's interesting that it is not called the "festival of the receiving of the Torah." Why? Because while the Torah was given at one time on Mount Sinai, it is received every day, whenever it is opened. And every time it is opened, we learn something new. As it says in Pirkey Avot, in the Talmud, "Turn the Torah again and again, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow with it, for nothing is better than it." It is said that each letter of the Torah contains 70 different meanings. The key is always to be able to look at the Torah and at being Jewish with fresh eyes.

I decided that for my Bar Mitzvah I really wanted to look at the Torah with fresh eyes – so just a few weeks ago, and in fact one hour before I was to meet with the rabbi to plan this speech, I got contact lenses.

It wasn't easy to get them in. It took about 25 minutes for each eye and for the next couple of days things were blurry and it felt as if an eyelash were stuck there. Suddenly, everything felt different. Every time I woke up I would reach for my glasses. When I walked around, I would expect to feel the frames against my nose. They weren't there.

Everyone I know gave me a funny look when they first saw me. A few people took a while to notice. The first time I played tennis, my instructor was trying to hit the ball lightly, thinking I had forgotten my glasses. The first day back at school, a few of my friends asked me how many fingers they were holding up. They were shocked when I got it right. There were three. The cantor was so focused on my progress at my lesson that she didn't realize it for a while. My art teacher, on the other hand, didn't notice at all. But the rabbi's dog noticed right away. So did mine.

It works both ways, because as my service project, I've volunteered at a local animal hospital and I can remember one time observing a dog recovering after surgery. The dog was sleeping for a long time, then after a while it opened one eye, tried to get up, wobbled and fell back down. That dog was rediscovering the world, a world that had changed for him, through fresh eyes. Some times it takes a while to get used to it.

As for me, it wasn't such a huge change to see myself without glasses, because at home they are off half the time anyway. But knowing that other people are looking me differently has affected me in a Clark Kent – Superman sort of way. I'm the same person that I always was, but there's something about me that's different – and no, I do not have X-ray vision. What's different is that I'm a little more independent and a little more responsible to take care of myself, and a little more aware of how others look at me. This experience has helped me to look at world through fresh eyes.

For many centuries, each generation has looked at Shavuot through fresh eyes. Originally, in the Torah, it was a simple festival celebrating the wheat harvest. Later, when the Jews were kicked out of the Land of Israel, they needed to reinvent the holiday. So, calculating the dates given in the Torah, they figured out that the Torah itself was given on this holiday. More recently, Shavuot has become once again a celebration of the Jewish people's connection to the Land of Israel.

So now that I'm seeing the world through fresh eyes, in a few weeks I'll begin to see it through fresh teeth as well: I'll be getting braces. So that means that not only will I see the world through the lens of Torah, but with every bite, my mouth will be exploring new forms of CHEW-daism.

Thank yous

Poser

Ariel's Speech

Good morning. Happy Rosh Hodesh Sivan and, oh yes, happy Rosh Hodesh June as well! Rosh Hodesh simply means "the beginning of the month," so this is really a *double* Rosh Hodesh. This year June and Sivan are completely aligned, from beginning to end, as each has 30 days. And it's very rare that this happens. The last time a Hebrew and secular month were aligned was November and Heshvan of 1984.

You may wonder why I spend a half an hour in the rabbi's office researching this little bit of trivia. It's because counting is very important to Judaism and to my life.

Counting is so important to Judaism that an entire book of the Torah is called "Numbers," and we happen to have started that book yesterday. We're also counting the days of the Omer, and today is day 45, just five days before Shavuot. This week we also count down the three days before Shavuot, known as Shloshet Ye'may Hagbalah, the three days when the Israelites prepared to receive the Torah, which has the TEN Commandments. Numbers everywhere!

With the Omer, it's interesting that we are counting up rather than counting down to being at Mount Sinai. It's as if we are going up the mountain, one step at a time, to prove that we want the Torah more than anything.

And today it's a little like I've climbed Mount Sinai myself by coming up to the Torah - and all that practicing! I've been counting down to this day for months. My parents have been counting down ever since we got the date. The day we got the date, my Mom wanted to go right to Hazzan Rabinowitz to get a tape. I didn't exactly start studying that day, but we all started counting.

And from the moment this day is over, I start counting again - 25 days before I go to camp. I can't wait!

This has been a crazy year for me in terms of numbers. Because we moved twice, I had to memorize two phone numbers and two addresses. It took me only a day to memorize the phone numbers, but the zip code took a while. I think I know it now. I've also been doing my mitzvah project at St Luke's Lifeworks, working with pre-school children. Every Friday Danielle and I have been going, and the kids really like us. We usually do snack and story time with them. My kids love the books and songs teaching them how to count. So when it comes time for us to leave, and they start clinging to us, we say, "We'll be here again in seven days," and we count the days, one at a time, so they will understand. It's almost as if they have their own weekly Omer. And it helps me think about how important it is to treasure each and every day.

My mom says to me, "You shouldn't take a day for granted. You never know what will happen tomorrow."

And speaking of my mom, one more thing, while we're counting. Not only is this a double Rosh Hodesh, this is also the second time someone in my family has become Bat Mitzvah on this pulpit on Rosh Hodesh. My mom was one of the first girls to become Bat Mitzvah on Rosh Hodesh here.

That was only a few years ago. Since she made a promise not to embarrass me today, I will not tell you exactly how many!

(Thank you...)

(e-mail the final copy back to me - and practice reading it s-l-o-w-l-y, looking up at end of each sentence - keep your finger on the place - don't forget to SM Alyssa's Speech

A few weeks ago, I did a major project for school on Golda Meir. The assignment was to write about any president or prime minister, and I really wanted to do someone from my heritage. There were lots of names on the list, but only a few were women, and I wanted to do a woman, and, well, everybody knows Queen Elizabeth already, so I went right for Golda.

I'm really glad I did. I did lots of research and I soon got to know her very well. In many ways she's become a role model to me, although I could do without her smoking habit, her difficult family life and her less than glamorous fashion statements. But I admire deeply her warm hearted good sense, her courage, her ability to get through tough times, her remarkable power to influence others and her love for Israel and its people.

I can relate to Golda in many ways. Like her I am independent, willing to stand up for what I believe in. Also, Golda was known to be rather, shall we say, talkative. SOME people have accused me of that from time to time.

Golda's life was almost like a great novel. She grew up in Milwaukee after moving from Russia to escape the pogroms. Interestingly, my grandfather's family took a similar path,

from Russia through Wisconsin. Golda ran away from home at 14, following her sister Shayna to Denver. (Don't worry, Mom and Dad, I'm not going anywhere). In Denver, she became interested in the Jewish National Fund, which led her to decide to move to a kibbutz in Palestine. On the kibbutz, Golda became so good at raising chickens that people from all over the country came to learn her methods. Eventually she was "plucked" from the Kibbutz to take on a role in politics, but what brought her first to the country was her love of the land. The JNF's purpose was to raise money to buy more of the land so that Jews could settle there.

My Torah portion, B'har, also focuses on the special love that Jews have for the Land of Israel. It tells of the "Shmee-ta," year, the seventh year when the Land would rest – almost like one long Shabbat for the Land. Jews don't do this elsewhere, nor is it done anywhere else in the world. It showed a great love for the land, but also for creatures living on it, including animals. As one who loves animals, I was glad to discover that any fruit that fell from a tree during the Sabbatical year was to be left for animals or passers-by to eat. It's almost like all those sample tables at Stew Leonards (*Pause*) – you can walk in with an empty stomach and walk out with a full one, and then there's always something left over to feed the animals at then farm.

Most of all, what Golda had, which my portion also teaches, was the love for the Land of Israel. This week there is a minor Jewish holiday called Lag B'Omer, where, in Israel, youth groups everywhere will light bonfires, have picnics and take hikes on the land. There is a special bond between the land and all its people. I hope that soon Arabs and Jews will be able share that land together in peace. More than anything else, Golda wanted peace in her country. Maybe the time will come soon when not only will the land rest during the Sabbatical year, but the armies will too.

Golda chose the Hebrew last name "Me'ir," which means "bringer of light." I hope to do that in my life. And one way to accomplish that is through is giving tzedakkah. I will be donating some of my Bat Mitzvah money to an organization called "Books, Fairs and Bonnets," which provides comforting gifts to help children cope with the effects of cancer.

Agatstein Alex's Speech

It all started on Hanukah of 1997, when my parents gave me the best gift I ever got; a ping-pong table. That very night I fell in love with ping-pong. I practiced and practiced and practiced until finally three long years later I was able to beat my dad. I loved the game and everything about it; and wanted to play every moment I could.

Within two years I was already competing in tournaments. What would you know, at age 9 I ended up surprising both my mom and dad and took home the first place trophy in the Stamford tournament. For two more years I won first place again.

Now you are probably sitting there and wondering what does this have to do with my torah portion. Well, My torah portion is all about the terrible consequences that will happen to the people of Israel if they do not obey the commandments. It goes in to great detail; telling you a long list. Believe me you wouldn't want any of the things mentioned to happen to you.

Over the years the people of Israel have not done anything to deserve the bad things that have happened. However bad things have happened to us.

The greatest example of this is the holocaust. I struggle with the idea that God could let this happen. But that's very normal because the name "Israel", means, "to struggle with God."

Jews have been struggling with God for centuries.

It's almost like we are playing a game of ping-pong, with God on the other side of the table. God serves and I have the choice to return the ball or not. He then challenges me with a difficult shot, and that shot determines how I will respond. For example, if the ball is hit way over to my left, I have to turn to the left and reach up to hit the ball. How I hit it, is up to me. If it is a hard shot, then I just try to get it back over the net, however if it's an easy lob, I can slam it. It all depends on how God places the ball.

So in the same way, God throws challenges at us; earthquakes, hurricanes, and terrorists. It all comes down to how we respond. Life isn't made to be easy. We have to play the ball that's served us. If we can return the hard shots it's a real triumph. The key to ping-pong as with life is that you get to better your position. Eventually you can put yourself in a position to win.

For my tzedakkah project I'll be donating a ping-pong table, and teaching lessons to children at a local homeless shelter. Maybe then I can help put them in a position to win. Thank you.

Peter's Speech

My portion of Emor describes the role of the priest, or "co-hayn," and the strict guidelines defining what a cohen has to be in order to qualify for leadership. This is probably the right time for me to let you in on a little-known secret. You see, I am a cohen, based on the first requirement, which is that your father has to be a cohen. But that's only the beginning. The cohen also had to be a perfect physical specimen. So I guess I qualify in that way as well. *(pause)* In all seriousness, the torah states that a cohen could not have any physical defect, could not marry certain kinds of people and had to be a man. In our time, we've gotten around some of those restrictions, but of course nowadays the Cohen doesn't do as much.

In our time, we also no longer believe that you have to be perfect to be a leader and role model. In fact, we admire leaders most by how they are able to overcome their flaws. I understand that first-hand, through my interest in basketball, my favorite sport.

Now as you may have noticed, I'm not particularly tall. But despite this, rebounding is one of my great strengths. In part that's because I am a good jumper; but it's more because of my timing, positioning and most of all, hard work and desire.

Being successful in basketball comes down to wanting it more than the other guy. When I play high school kids on my street, I can out-rebound them, even though they are taller than me – it really frustrates them.

Even in the NBA, great players are role models not because they are perfect, but because they overcome their imperfections. Patrick Ewing never won a championship, but Knick fans honored him by retiring his number a few weeks ago. They appreciated his hard work. Michael Jordan won 6 titles, but in his career he lost more championships than he won. And even when he did win, he was often sick or injured and yet was still able to come through. As Jordan himself has stated, "I can accept failure, but I can't accept not trying."

He also said, "I've failed over and over again in my life and that is why I succeed."

Imagine...Michael Jordan saying that he has failed. I only hope to fail in my life as much as he has. It may not make me a better cohen, but it will make me a better person.

One way we become better people is through acts of tzedakkah. I've been involved in the Ruach Noar project at the JCC this year, and through it have performed many acts of kindness, everything from playing bingo at a nursing home to cleaning up the sheep pen at the nature center.

Thank yous (do at home, than e-mail the speech back).

Danielle's Shapiro Speech

“My fellow Americans...and South Africans...and Canadians. Today is an historic day. Not only is it my Bat Mitzvah, but I am now declaring my candidacy for President of the United States for the election of 2028. As most of you already know, I would like to be the first Jewish woman president of the United States.

My portion, Emor, talks about the qualifications to be a Cohen. If I had wanted to run for the priesthood, these requirements would have made it impossible for me to run for that office. For one thing, your father has to be a Cohen. Also, you need to be a “perfect specimen.” No handicaps are allowed or blemishes. You can't marry someone divorced...oh yes, and you need to be a man.

I think this is unfair, because people with handicaps have a lot to offer (I work with many underprivileged children, who are no different from us, and I've learned about people with AIDS through my mom. I also have a cousin in South Africa who has a handicap and he could teach us much about making the most out of life.

It is important to note that Judaism agrees that people with handicaps can be excellent leaders. The Cohen was just one type of leader, there are other models of leadership – and no one's perfect!!

We need to remember that in the United States – all our Presidents lately have been people who, above all, look good on TV. President Franklin Roosevelt was in a wheelchair, but no one saw him because there were no TVs yet, and when he spoke he used a brace to hold himself upright.

I think Americans are ready for a President who is different! A president who is different in two ways! A president who is a woman, and a president who is a Jew.

I think people should choose a president not by appearance, not by religion, race or age, but by whom they are inside.

I have the qualifications. I've been president of my student council twice.

I can multi task! I was just in the production of Grease all the while practicing for my Bat mitzvah, dealing with schoolwork and going to dance three times a week. And at home, I make my bed every day, -- well, almost.

When I am your next president – in 2028 – I will fight for true equality for all. No one should be treated differently just because of ...being different!

When I am your president, I will definitely make malls stay open later. I would make the United States give more support for the homeless and the poor. I support health insurance for all. And last but not least, I would like the world to show more support for Israel, as I do think that ever since Sept. 11, Americans realize what Israelis go through every day.

In closing, I would like to say, there may be a Jewish President before me, or a woman president before me, but trust me... no one will be as uniquely qualified as me. And if I don't become President of the United States, a lawyer or an actor, I'm going to run for Cohen – or maybe President of Iraq (I hear the job is open). There should be no barriers to leadership in Jewish life, or America or anywhere else.

Thank you very much and God bless America.

Of course, you don't have to be President to perform acts of kindness and tzedakkah. For the past six months, I have been working at St Lukes Life Works, where I volunteer with 3 and 4 year olds, many of whom are from homeless families and after today I am going to

plant 18 trees in Israel, one in honor of each table of guests at my reception, in memory of Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut. I will also be purchasing much needed equipment for my 13-year-old cousin in South Africa, who is wheelchair bound.

Thank you

Sarah's Speech

Several weeks ago in French class, my teacher tried an experiment. He'd been noticing some problems in the class and decided to use an exercise to help teach us the dangers of scapegoating. The class was divided into insiders and outsiders. The insiders were instructed to isolate the outsiders, using rude comments and insults, and then afterwards we discussed how it felt to be on either side of this exercise.

I was lucky enough to be an insider, and at first, I must admit, it felt empowering to control someone else's fate. But then I began to get a feeling in the pit of my stomach that this is wrong. Others felt like that too, and this experiment made a big difference in how we all got along – for a couple of weeks...

My portion speaks of the ancient rituals of Yom Kippur. One of them involved sending a goat out into the Wilderness. The goat symbolically carried the sins of the people with it. The term "Scapegoat" comes from this ancient tradition.

In verse 29 of chapter 16, the Torah instructs us to practice self-denial, in other words, to fast on Yom Kippur, and it states that these laws apply not only to the citizens but also to strangers residing among them. The commentary in our Humash states, "each of us carries a stranger inside us that is alien to our essential self. Each of us must confront this stranger as we examine ourselves on Yom Kippur."

Part of being a Jew is feeling the need to reach out to the stranger, because we have also been strangers in strange places and because, deep inside, we still feel that pain. After all, it hasn't been that long since the Holocaust, as we'll be recalling this coming week on Yom ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Although the Holocaust occurred 60 years ago, there is still plenty of anti-Semitism in Germany, and it is still hard for many Jews to relate to Germans. But the situation has become even worse in another European country, one that also had shameful moments 60 years ago: France. It's ironic that the exercise I did in school was in French class, because the French have often been accused of treating Jews as strangers in their midst. A recent study states that last year there were more than 300 registered acts of bias and almost 1,000 cases of verbal abuse. Over two thirds were directed against Jews – and that was six times more than 2001. "The quantity of attacks aimed at the Jewish community has truly exploded," the report said.

And as much as the French may have ill feelings toward Jews, now, many Americans are feeling the same way about the French and many have called for a boycott of France and French products – even renaming French fries "Freedom Fries." Even my French teacher is now being called "the Freedom teacher." My problem with all this is that I really want to go to France this summer. And the problem with THAT is that my mom doesn't want to go.

Maybe you all could help. (JOKE??)

Seriously, we all have to ask ourselves whether it might be time to get over our resentment toward the French. As we discovered in my portion, and as I learned in my French class, we all have to learn to accept the stranger in our midst.

One segment of the population that often feels like outsiders are the Elderly. That is why I am donating a portion of my Bat Mitzvah money to the Jewish Home for the Elderly in Fairfield in honor of my grandmother.

(thank yous)

Sam's Speech

My portion is called Aharei Mot, "after the deaths," referring to the deaths of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu in a flash fire as they brought an unauthorized sacrifice. The Torah portion then goes on to describe the atonement rituals of Yom Kippur, which were put in place, it seems, as a response to the Nadav and Avihu tragedy.

The commentators offer many different explanations for these deaths. Some see it as a punishment for their actions, others less so. One explanation is that Nadav and Avihu died because they reached too far toward the heavens, trying to get closer to God than is safe for mortals. Their names indicate just that: Nadav means "willing," and Avihu means "God is my father." They got dangerously close to God and were consumed by a huge fire.

Earlier this year, tragedy struck, as the space shuttle Columbia was seen coming down to earth in a fireball, killing all seven astronauts aboard, including the first Israeli astronaut, Ilan Ramon. In many ways, this flash fire reminds us of Nadav and Avihu. The astronauts also pushed the limits of safety in order to explore the heavens. The Columbia tragedy has helped to understand that in either case, death was not a punishment but a natural consequence of our desire to explore beyond previous limits. It's part of what makes us human; and it can't be avoided. We should not look down on Nadav and Avihu, but admire their courage and learn from what went wrong.

Ilan Ramon was more than just an astronaut – he was a representative of the entire Jewish people and a role model. He fought in the Israeli Air Force and two decades ago he destroyed an important Iraq nuclear reactor that would have threatened Israel and many other countries. As the child of a Holocaust survivor, he also represented the darkest period of Jewish history, and he brought up in space several artifacts related to the Holocaust. One of those items was a Torah that had been used at a Bar Mitzvah service in Auschwitz.

Also, he brought a drawing imagining what earth would look like from the moon, drawn by a 14 year old named Peter Ginz. Peter lived in the Terezin camp at that time, but shortly after that he was sent to Auschwitz, where he was killed. At Terezin, he was the editor of a secret newspaper published by Jewish prisoners there. He was yet another example of someone able to break earthly limits by imagining life in space, far away from the suffering he saw around him.

Although I live in much easier times than Peter Ginz and Nadav and Avihu and I'm not an astronaut like Ilan Ramon, I'm inspired by them to stretch my own limits and reach for the stars.

In memory of Ilan Ramon and the other Columbia astronauts, I have donated 200 trees to be planted in Israel. Before he died, Ilan Ramon had requested that people plant 13 million trees in Israel over the coming year. The name "Ilan" actually means "tree," and I would like to do my small part to help achieve that goal.

Thank yous....

Michael's Speech

It was the writer Christopher Morley who said, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” That’s what my portion, Metzora, is all about. It talks of how the priests would purify people and objects that had become contaminated. The Torah looks at simple funguses that grow on houses as symbolizing immoral behavior inside the home. The people would have to take apart the home and scrub off every bit of mold – and by doing this, it also reminded them to clean up their own act, and be kind, honest, noble and pure.

We Jews do the same thing as Passover approaches. We sweep out all the crumbs of bread. It might be boring and hard work, but it helps to bring out the true spirit of the holiday. Sometimes you have to do the dirty work to make the world a better place.

I had the chance to experience that very thing in my school. I’m one of about 15 students who belong to an after-school club called Character Counts. The purpose of the group is to help the community. One Tuesday last fall, we met in a classroom. The instructor then gave us each a plastic spoon and said, “Here. Start scraping.”

We were told to go into the cafeteria and scrape away all the gum from beneath each table. I walk into the room and immediately head for the table used by my class. I sit there every day but I’ve never looked at the underside before – yet somehow I’ve known that the gum is there – especially when I put my knee up. It’s one of those disgusting sights that we usually choose to avoid.

No avoiding it now...

With 14 long tables in the room and easily a hundred pieces of stale gum beneath each table, the task was impossible. I began scraping at it with the spoon. Each wad took about five minutes to remove. When I flicked one of the first ones off, it hit a friend. We were there for a half hour or so and all together we were able to scrape off only about 40 pieces of gum in all.

I didn’t feel as if I had accomplished much – so much was left behind. But maybe I did some good after all. The ancient rabbis taught, “It is not up to us to finish the job, but neither are we free to desist from it.” So I did my little bit, leaving the rest for future generations.

And also, I am doing a little bit of good by speaking about it now. Like the fungus on the houses, this gum is the symbol of a much greater disease that goes on among the people inside: disrespect for the property of the school and a complete lack of respect for the learning environment.

I know I’ve learned something. When I was on Nature’s Classroom a few weeks ago, I saw a potato chip bag and an empty apple juice can on the trail up by Lake George. I picked it up and gave it to the counselor.

As Jews we call this tikkun olam – repair of the world. Another way we repair the world is through acts of kindness, known as “Gmilut Hasadim.” Aside from my work with the Character Counts, I do other volunteering at the Bennett Library and I will be making a donation to

(name of charity for soldiers)

Thank yous...

Dara’s Speech

I came to Beth El when I was in 2nd grade and almost immediately, I loved coming to services. I can recall going to Junior Congregation, which I called “Junior Combination,”

and especially enjoying getting the candy at the end. Then we would go downstairs and huddle around the Kiddush table. And there was this man who would always begin singing a song. I didn't know what it was for a long time, but then I figured it out. It was called "V'Shamru." And so I called this man, "The V'Shamru man."

Two years later I joined Junior Choir and discovered that V'Shamru man had another name – it was Hazzan Rabinowitz!

V'Shamru has always been special to me because of that. Whenever I hear it, I think of cookies and brownies. And those memories are part of what makes Shabbat special to me. That prayer was a prime motivation for me to come here over and over again. And the funny thing is, I never really knew what the words meant, until very recently. In a way, the meaning of the words had little to do with the meaning of the prayer for me.

That's what ritual is all about. When you do an act over and over again, it takes on a life of its own. Today's special reading talks about the rituals of Passover. When you look at them, they seem very strange. You sprinkle lamb's blood on the doorpost. Then you broil it over fire and eat it, with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. Not the most appetizing combination, if you ask me. But for anyone who has been to a Passover Seder, you know that it makes perfect sense. What would a Seder be without bitter herbs and matzah? Actually it would be WONDERFUL without bitter herbs, but it wouldn't be a Seder.

Of course, a key aspect of the Seder is that we always ask questions about these strange rituals. Four come to mind.... And these rituals all add up to an experience that has made Passover special for the Jewish people for thousands of years.

My regular Torah portion of Shmini also is filled with rituals that are often hard to explain, including information about sacrifices and the dietary laws.

There are other rituals in daily life that seem strange but have gained meaning over time. Many of you know that I happen to love Broadway shows and I do a lot of acting. Now before every performance people say the strangest thing, "Break a leg." Do they really want the actors to break their legs? Of course not, but it's become a ritual which brings good luck. I did some research and it's interesting to note that some people think that the expression originated with German and Yiddish expression, and others trace it back to the Hebrew word bracha, which sounds like "break" but means "blessing." It's not surprising that a ritual like this might have Jewish origins, because Jews love to create rituals. I learned that years ago, when I first heard "V'hamru Man" and had cookies and brownies at Temple Beth El.

An important ritual of Passover preparations is helping the poor. For my tzedakkah project I have been collecting baby items for mothers who can't afford them. I'll be donating them to Person to Person.

Thank yous...

Taylor's Speech

It is with great joy, appreciation for my family and my teachers and admiration for those who have traveled before me that I take this step today.

This portion is not the most interesting – unless you happen to be a dermatologist. It's about the purification of the leper and the steps taken to reintroduce the leper into society when she had been cured. Leprosy is a skin disease which we rarely if ever see today. I am familiar with and can relate to issues of the skin, given my own experiences.

As an infant, I was constantly crying and would scratch and claw at my scalp. It was discovered that I was allergic to my formula and later that I had eczema, which is a skin allergy. I know that my skin problems, while chronic, are not life threatening and are very

treatable. For this I am very thankful. Nonetheless, I can relate to what the Torah is talking about here.

I know what it is like to have a rash that constantly itches.

I know what it is like to have to wear long sleeves and long pants to cover up the rashes.

I know what it's like to have to constantly take care of my skin with various medications and lubricate it all times. In fact, one babysitter remembers me as the kid she had to lather up with moisturizer and medication.

Through all my experiences I've come to understand how important skin is, but at the same time how it's what's inside a person that counts. Beauty is not skin deep. The rituals described in my portion for bringing the leper back into society try to get people to look beyond the illness on the surface. Through these purification rites, people came to be accepted for who they are, despite their disease.

Illness is often a test – for the person who is stricken, and for the rest of us as well. In ancient times, while lepers were outcasts they were quickly brought back into society. Do we do the same thing for those with serious illness? No one should be against because of allergies or illness. Awareness and acceptance is the key.

At school, I have often encountered ignorance about my allergies: what they are, how to treat them, and what precautions need to be taken in the classroom. Not every student has been sympathetic or helpful. So I've decided, for my mitzvah project, to set up a program dealing with asthma and allergies in Stamford's public schools. Toward that end, I wrote a letter to the Mayor, the Superintendent and the city's health director, including a series of suggestions as to what needs to be done. For instance, I suggested that there be a safety kit at each end of the school building, and some teachers especially trained to handle emergencies if there a student can't make it to the nurse. Can you believe that some teachers are still making bird feeders using peanut butter? So I suggested that they use fluff instead. I've tested it on birds. It really works!

So far I have met with the school nurse and Mayor Malloy.....

I hope that this type of program will be implemented to help students everywhere, just as it would help me.

The thing about illness, which my portion explains clearly, is that the human body has an amazing capacity to heal, especially when the soul is allowed to heal. Over the past four months, my mom has been doing an awful lot of healing, and I know that this process has been helped along so much by the way people have cared. I've even been doing my little bit to help. And mom, I must say that I am really looking forward to the day when you will be able to do the laundry once again.

THANK YOU

Michael's Speech

My portion, Tzav, talks about the sacrifices that were brought by the ancient Israelites to the Temple. Since the Temple was destroyed, Jews have stopped bringing animal sacrifices as a form of worship. Now, instead, we pray and perform acts of kindness. But I wanted to understand better what these sacrifices really meant. I researched a web site that explained how it must have felt for the ancient farmer to bring his favorite little animal -- let's call him "Little Fluffy" -- to be killed, cooked and shared with the priest. It must have helped them to appreciate their food by making eating a more spiritual experience. In giving up "Little Fluffy," they felt a little extra pain, but it was worth it because he tasted so good.

Little did I know that I was also bringing sacrifices to the temple – to Temple Beth El, that is -- although I wasn't killing any animals. Before each lesson for the past six months, I've been bringing bags of rice and cans of tuna to place in the food box upstairs. By doing this, I've helped people receive food who can't afford it. In a sense that weekly offering has been an important part of my Bar Mitzvah lesson – even helping me to learn about my portion, although I might not have realized it at the time.

A couple of months ago, I visited the food bank with a group of kids and spent a few hours putting food on the shelves. I got to see where my weekly donation has been going. I learned that in 2001, the food bank distributed 537,122 pounds of food, which assisted 41,000 people in this area.

And to think, some of them are eating my tuna right now. My little bags of rice have made a big difference, for these other families, and for me too. Because every time I eat rice or tuna, I'll be reminded of how good it can feel to feed the hungry. Just as the sacrifices helped our ancestors to appreciate the food they were eating, and to feel the pain of "Little Fluffy," I also have a greater appreciation for the food I eat because of my weekly offering.

Thank yous...

Andrew's Speech

Most of the Torah is filled with wonderful things. In the prayer book it says of the Torah, "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace"... EXCEPT FOR MY PORTION, that is.

The portion, Tazria, is filled with illness, death, gross fluids and just about every disgusting thing imaginable this side of David Wells' sweat socks. It might have been better had the Torah not included this portion at all – except that it teaches an important lesson: We can't avoid the unpleasant realities of the world.

Tazria teaches us to recognize disease rather than ignore it. We should recognize it so that we can get rid of it and cure those afflicted by it.

Judaism teaches to confront our failings rather than ignore them. That's what repentance is all about on the High Holidays.

So in that spirit, I've decided to devote myself to eliminating the one weakness of my basketball abilities: shooting free throws.

As many of you know, I am a great player, and more than that, very humble. I can shoot inside and hit the three like Ray Allen. I can pass like Jason Kidd and I can rebound like my dad's all time favorite player, Wilt Chamberlain. My problem is that I shoot free throws like Wilt Chamberlain too. I'm not sure why it is such a problem, whether it's concentration, mechanics or simply not bending my knees. No matter what I try, they just don't fall. I usually hit about 40% of my shots.

Perhaps the main problem is that good players are expected to sink their free throws -- and that makes me nervous. It's just me – the ball – and the basket. It's sort of like right now: it's just me – the Torah – and God.

But hey, this isn't so bad. I worked very hard on my Bar Mitzvah readings and all that hard work paid off.

And so, in the spirit of this Bar Mitzvah, I decided to apply myself in the same intensive way to improving my free throws. I decided to face the unpleasant reality head on. I spent a week thinking of nothing but foul shots. In math class I figured out the ration of the spin to

the diameter of the basketball. In social studies I tried to imagine how Yao Ming learned to shoot free throws in China. In Hebrew School, I imagined shooting from right to left. And then I hit the gym and spent an hour alone, just shooting free throws. By the end of the session, I was hitting about 60%, a dramatic improvement.

Now I understand why it was necessary to have my portion in the Torah. You need to be able to see the problem before you can clean it up. And only by confronting it directly can we make progress.

One problem that our society clearly needs to confront is that of hunger. It is in that spirit that I will be donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to Mazon, the Jewish response to Hunger.

Thank yous...

Harrison's Speech

Have you ever wished you could predict the future? Well, it was possible for the priests after the Israelites left Egypt. Priests used something called Urim V'Tummim. They used this when an Israelite asked them about big events that were about to happen, like wars, in order to get God's advice. It was like having a crystal ball.

Now it so happens that I have got in my possession the ORIGINAL Uurim and Tummim, for use today only. (Hold it up) As you can see, it says "Cane," which means "yes," on one side, and "lo," which means "no," on the other. So I am going to ask some important questions that are on everyone's mind during these difficult times.

First and foremost: Will the Jets win the Super Bowl next year? (flip)

- Will we got to war with Iraq? (flip)
- Will I ever become a pro athlete? (flip)
- Will I ever become a rabbi? (The rabbi told me to say this) (flip)
- Will Mitchell and Peri ever stop fighting? (flip)
- Does God really watch the Dallas Cowboys through the hole in Texas Stadium's roof? (flip)

Finally, something else important: Is God a Yankees fan? (flip)
Does this thing really work? (hold it up) We don't know. In some ways, it's better not to know things like this in advance. Otherwise, it would seem like God is pulling all the strings, when in truth we are the ones who have to make these things happen. If I am to become a pro athlete, it will be because of my hard work, not because of a simple prediction. That is why Urim and Tummim are no longer used in Judaism.

In the past year I've read poetry of mine to the residents of a nursing home. This year for my community service project, I will be working as a helper at a rehab center (?).

I would like to thank Cantor Jacobson, Bracha Moshe, Judy Aronin, all the teachers and my parents for helping me with my Hebrew studies. I would also like to thank Rabbi Hammerman for helping to prepare this speech with me. (any more???) Finally, I would also like to thank all of you who came from near and far just to see me today.

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Justin’s Speech

As some of you know, I am a black belt in Tae Kwan Do. I first became interested in this form of Martial Arts when I was about five, when I was first introduced to it. And about a year and a half ago, I earned my black belt, the highest ranking, which means that I can defeat opponents much bigger than I am. In tournaments, I’ve beaten people who weigh twice as much as me. I’m pretty confident, but to others looking on, it must look like a miracle.

In the Hanukkah story, there are really two miracles mentioned. One is that the Maccabees were able to defeat an army much larger and stronger. In the special prayer added on Hanukkah, called Al Ha-Nisim, we thank God for that miracle. And at times I know how the Maccabees must have felt.

The other miracle of Hanukkah is that the Jews had enough faith to light the menorah in the temple even though there was only enough oil for one day. The oil lasted for eight days. When you have faith and when you believe in yourself, you can accomplish amazing things. (Hold up Siddur)

If this Siddur were a block of wood, I would be able to break it in half. Don’t worry – I won’t! As a black belt, I am able to cut through 1¾ inches of wood. The key is not to let yourself be overcome with fear, and in fact, to aim for below the board, not at the board itself. The first time I tried it, I stopped, and it made a big thump and *man* did it hurt! (Shake your hand). But the next time, I wasn’t as nervous and I made it, and my hand didn’t hurt at all.

Standing up here becoming Bar Mitzvah, I feel much the way I felt when I first cut through that board. I’m not nearly as nervous as I used to be when I stood up here for the first time. It is all a matter of faith.

Joseph faced impossible odds when he was thrown into a pit and later into jail, but he rose to become second in command to Pharaoh. He had the courage to interpret the dream of the king and to give him difficult advice.

One other important fact about Tae Kwan Do is that it should never be used unless you are attacked. It is a defensive art. The Maccabees preferred not to fight on Shabbat, but when they were attacked, they fought back, and because of this defensive pose, they were able to fight back and prevail.

It's much like the way America fought back after being attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, 61 years ago today. And it's also the way Israel has been, when constantly having to defend itself.

I'm glad that I've been able to take the lessons of Judaism and the lessons of Tae Kwan Do and blend them together to make me a more mature, honest and responsible person – and one willing and able to stand up for what I believe in.

Standing up for my beliefs also means standing up for others, especially those who are less fortunate. I will be planting a tree in Israel in honor of my Bar Mitzvah, and I will also be going to Waveny House in New Canaan to help the elderly celebrate the holidays. I've also been doing some volunteering at the New Canaan nature center, taking care of the animals. (write the thank yous at home)

Thank you to Cantor Jacobson, Hazzan Rabinowitz, Judy Aronin and Bracha Moshe for preparing me for this day.

Brian's Speech

As you probably realize by now, there's a lot going on this week. There's Thanksgiving, the first day of Hanukkah, my Bar Mitzvah, there's Shabbat, of course, and the Steelers are playing Jacksonville. Plus, we begin the story of Joseph in this week's portion.

My goal was to try to tie all of these things together in one speech and not have the speech last as long as that oil that kept the Temple's menorah lit for eight long days. That's when I realized that that miracle of the oil holds the key. Because each of these events teaches us that little things can add up and amount to something great.

For the Hanukkah story, that small amount of oil somehow kept the menorah burning for eight long days. And it started a holiday! Thanks to that little bit of oil, every Jewish kid was smiling last night. The little things do go a long way.

In the Joseph story, small characters play huge roles. Like the man, who doesn't even have a name, who tells Joseph where his brothers are herding and changes the whole course of Jewish history. And then there's Potiphar's wife who has Joseph sent to jail, and the butler, who eventually gets him out. These people's names are not stated anywhere in the text.

As for Thanksgiving, well, the first thing that comes to mind is football of course. A few years ago the Steelers were playing the Lions on Thanksgiving. The game went into overtime and then the strangest thing happened. During the coin toss, Jerome Bettis of the Steelers called heads, but the referee heard tails and subsequently gave the ball to Detroit. That mistake led to important rule changes and also a Steeler loss.

Sometimes the best way to overcome a huge problem is to go one small step at a time. Right now thousands of Jews are suffering in Argentina. I may not be able to help all of them, but at least I can start by helping one. So that is exactly what I am doing. I am sponsoring (blank) a student in Argentina so that he can attend a Jewish day school.

(possibly discuss email exchange). I hope that in some small way I will be able to make a big difference in (blanks) life.

Thank yous.

Jeff's Speech

My portion is all about the travels of Jacob, from his home of Canaan to his ancestor's homeland in Mesopotamia, which, by the way, is now called Iraq. Even its title has to do with traveling, since "Vayetze" means, "And he took off." On the first night of his journey, Jacob has a dream about angels who are also traveling, going up and down a ladder, and then God assures him that he will be safe on his journey. Probably this dream came as a result of Jacob's own fears of traveling alone for the first time. (Or the restless night could have been caused by the fact that he was sleeping on a rock.) With all this concern for traveling, it's fitting that that the traditional Jewish traveler's prayer includes a verse from the end of this portion.

My journeys have been very much like Jacob's. Over the past five years, Chelsea and I have traveled alone well over fifty times, visiting my Dad, grandparents, aunt and uncle. Fortunately, none of them lives in Mesopotamia. At first it was frightening. We said good-bye to my mom and then got on the plane, where the flight attendant took us and sat us down in our seats. She told us to press the orange button if we needed anything and not to get off the plane until everyone got off. My Dad met us at the other end and we quickly got used to these procedures.

Being on a plane so many times gives you the opportunity to lots of funny things. We keep ourselves busy looking at people on the plane, imagining what they are saying to one another. And then there was that woman with the big hair who sat next to us, and that very heavy guy who complained that his seatbelt didn't fit. There've also been nice people who have sat next to us, like that old lady who kept forgetting our names -- *for three hours* -- or the lady who kept giving us coloring books during a flight from Texas to Philadelphia. After last September 11th, the next time we flew was just before Thanksgiving. We felt a little uneasy getting on the plane and kept looking for suspicious people. They checked our bags really carefully. We saw Ground Zero from the air. That might have been the first time I said the Sh'ma before takeoff.

Traveling so much has its upside. You can look out the window and see mountains, glaciers, farms, cities and bodies of water. You can also listen to different kinds of music. One time we flew to Alaska on a series of short flights. Since we were sitting in first class for eight hours we saw three great movies and had great meals in comfy chairs. They even gave us Mimosas -- don't worry, Grandma, no alcohol.

Unfortunately for Jacob, they didn't have non-stop first class camel service in those days. But otherwise, we have a lot in common. No matter how far I travel, it always feels great to come back home.

I am donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to a 9/11 victims fund, because I know that some people weren't able to return home safely on that tragic day.

Thank yous....

Mike Rich Speech

Wednesday, October 2, history was made in the rabbi's office. I made an overhand shot from the third step up in the back of the office into the Nerf hoop basketball overhead. No one had ever made such a shot before.

Hitting that shot from the top step reminded me of the story of Jacob's dream, found in my portion. In that dream, Jacob saw angels going up and down a ladder that stretched to heaven. A commentary on the verse in our new Humash suggests that in how we approach God, just as with many other things in life, we have to do things one step at a time. Most of the time we can't hit our first shot from the top step. Usually we have to begin at the bottom and work our way up. Sometimes you can get lucky, like the Angels did -- not in this story, but the Anaheim Angels, when they beat the Yankees -- but most of the time you have to work your way up.

That happened to me in baseball. It took me three years to make the all-star team. I worked really hard, especially to improve my fielding, and I got there. The same is true in the major leagues. You need to build a solid farm system and develop your own talent if you are going to be able to compete. That's why the Yankees are so much better than the Red Sox.

It takes a while to excel. You work your way up from the bottom. The Yankees were horrible in the 80s and early 90s. They worked rung-by-rung, bringing up Williams, Jeter, Petite and Rivera. To date, they still have a strong farm system.

Israelis also have worked step by step to try to achieve peace. It's not easy but they must take a step-by-step approach. It's not going to magically happen.

The Holocaust also occurred in a step-by-step process, only in this case, the ladder was going downward. Tonight is Krystallnacht, the anniversary of the great pogrom against the Jews of Germany in 1938. On this night, over 200 synagogues were destroyed and many people killed or injured, and thousands sent to prison camps. When Hitler saw that the world hardly notices, he realized he would have the freedom to take the next step in his war against the Jews. The Holocaust really began with Krystallnacht. It took many years for the Jewish people to emerge from that struggle.

And tonight, I begin my climb upwards as a Jew. As I move forward, I take with me the full support of my family. One symbol of this is my grandfather's tallit, which I am wearing. And another is my kippah, embroidered by my late Aunt Joan.

Another way of climbing the ladder of Jewish commitment is by giving tzedakkah. In that spirit, I'm going to be donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to Derek Jeter's "Turn Two" foundation, dedicated to helping at-risk youth.

Thank yous....

Piskin Jason's Speech

There's one big lesson that Isaac and Rebecca learn in my portion that I also have learned: It's not easy to be a parent. Because, just like all you parents out there, I've learned that you never stop worrying about your children -- even if they happen to be pets.

Many of you know that my dogs have always been important to me. Unfortunately, my youngest dog Max, a bearded collie, passed away two weeks ago. After it happened, we all felt bad about it. But no one has taken it as hard as Skipper, my golden retriever. Whenever someone comes to the door, Skipper jumps up to see if it's Max. When it isn't, he walks away with his head down and often begins to cry.

Of the two dogs, Max was favored by almost everybody because he was a show dog and we were all so happy for him when he won. At those times, my family would also try to

give Skipper some extra attention too. We didn't want him to feel neglected. Through this experience, I've learned that not only does a parent constantly worry about his kids, but that it's very hard to treat them equally.

Just like Max and Skipper, Jacob and Esau were very different. Esau was an outdoorsman, a hunter, while Jacob was the quiet one, preferring to study all day. If they had been dogs, Esau would have been a German shorthair pointer and Jacob would have been a – well, he would have been a cat. And they got along like cats and dogs.

But the big problem wasn't how they treated each other, it's how unequally their parents treated them. Isaac preferred Esau and Rebecca favored Jacob. From my dogs I've learned that it's important not to play favorites, because we have to take into account their feelings and address the needs of each one. Elie Wiesel wrote the following about Rebecca's treatment of Esau. "His own mother seemed to resent him. She pushed him aside. Why didn't she love him? Because he preferred games to study? Because his hair was long and red? Because he was always walking around armed? Because he was constantly hungry? She was hostile to him, that seems clear. And unjust."

I'm very lucky that my parents treat all their kids completely equally...at least I think so. My Torah portion is an important reminder of what can happen when parents forget how important it is to do just that.

It's not only children who deserve special treatment. All people who are hungry or who are suffering do too. That's why I'll be donating these food baskets to the local food pantry and a portion of my Bar Mitzvah money to Yad Sarah, which provides medical supplies for the needy in Israel.

Allison's Speech

Those of you who know me, know that I love to ask questions and watch game shows. I practice a lot by playing trivia games such as Brain Quest or who wants to be a Millionaire. I love Jeopardy, Wheel of Fortune and random programs on the Game Show Network. So in that spirit here's a double bonus question: Abraham challenged God, repeatedly, asking God to reconsider which decision? A) Ordering Abraham to kick his son Ishmael out of the house. B) Ordering Abraham to kick his wife Hagar out of the house. C) Ordering Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Or D) Wiping out the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

If you answered D you are correct. Abraham challenged God only when God decided to destroy the two evil cities. However, when it came to Abraham's own sons and wife, he did nothing. God gave Abraham four chances to argue by repeating the command in four different ways. God said, "Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac." But Abraham did not say a word.

Asking questions is always important. From the moment Jews learn to speak, we are taught to ask questions. At my family's Passover Seder, I still ask the four questions. My fifth question is why do I always have to be the youngest child.

I enjoy questioning my elders, although only respectfully. But, most of the questions I ask or answer are fairly trivial. Now that I am a Bat Mitzvah I will be able to respond to the BIG questions as well, whether about God, family, friends, or the hard decisions an adult must make. One of the most difficult things to learn is how to differentiate between trivial question

and the important ones. Since I have had so much practice with trivial questions, hopefully I will be able to answer the important questions of life.

One important question is how to find ways to give to others. As my tzedakkah project, I will be donating some of my Bat Mitzvah money to Kids In Crisis. I hope I will be able to help those kids to understand and find answers to the difficult questions they face every day.

(Thank Yous)

Lauryn's Speech

According to the Talmud, "Clothing is considered to be a person's glory." I happen to agree with that line. The clothing you wear expresses who you are. For example on September 11th everyone dressed in red, white, and blue. That showed patriotism and that the United States in one.

Clothing is very essential to the Jewish tradition. In my Torah portion, the first thing Adam and Eve did after eating the forbidden fruit was to cover themselves out of embarrassment. According to legend, the first act of kindness ever performed was when God made Adam and Eve real clothes.

Clothing helps reveal our Jewish identity. Almost everyday I wear a Chai necklace. The necklace tells the world how proud I am to be a Jew. I'm not wearing it today but I am wearing a tallit. The tallit reminds us of the 613 commandments. If you around at many of the people, especially men in here you will find a kepah covering their heads. (Extra credit goes to those with purple ones.) The kepah reminds us to be humble before God.

There are many other types of clothing that are part of the Jewish tradition. For example on the High Holidays, the rabbi and cantor wore white robes. The robes symbolize purity.

Modesty is important in Jewish law. What you wear tells a lot about the kind of person you are. After all, it is one of the biggest decisions you make when you wake up in the morning. There is a neighborhood in Jerusalem called, "May a shi a reem" which is an ultra orthodox neighborhood. You are not allowed in unless you are dressed conservatively. Women must wear long skirts and long sleeve shirts that are not low cut. Men must be wearing kepahs, however there is not really a dress code for men. How unfair is that???

On Purim, which is like a Jewish Halloween, Jews dress up in bizarre costumes. It is interesting to come on Purim and see the rabbi dressed up as Fred Flinstone, or elmo, or even Scooby Doo.

They say that the clothes make the man (or woman). We can also say that the clothes make the Jew.

Tzedakah is just as if not more important than clothing. For my Bat Mitzvah project I will be going to visit elderly homes to read to those who can't read themselves. I've also been involved in a project of making chocolate molds with all of the money going to support a

family in Israel. I will also be donating a portion of my Bat Mitzvah money to a breast cancer foundation.

~*~*~ Brad's Speech

It all started only a few years ago, around the time my grandmother's baby grand piano was brought into my house. My grandmother and mom had always wanted me to take lessons, and I had too, and now here was a chance to do that. Right away, my piano teacher noticed that I have a good ear for music and I blew through all the beginner's lessons in no time. Now, just about two years later, I'm playing complex classical pieces like Beethoven's "Für Elise."

I've played in front of classes at school, I've done other recitals and I play all the time in front of friends and family. I've come to love music, and I've seen how helpful music can be in bringing people together. I suppose that's it's often called "the universal language." In the "Tower of Babel" story at the end of my portion, a universal language wasn't such a good thing. Having only one language made people feel too powerful, to the point where they thought they could reach the heavens. According to legends, they cried more when a brick was lost than when a human being was hurt. So God decided to scatter them and confuse them with lots of different languages.

But we were left with one language that everyone can understand: music. Music is so important because it can bring the whole world together. Think of how people everywhere were changed by the Beatles style of music back in the '60s, and by groups like U2 today. I have a feeling music probably helped Noah on his journey. There are stories about how Noah never got a minute's sleep because all he did all day was feed the different animals. But with all those birds, elephants, horses and the occasional hyena, there must have been lots of good music on board. There were even a couple of beetles, there.

Last month on Rosh Hashanah, I had the chance to be a soloist at our services here. It was very exciting. In a small way I helped to bring the congregation together. As I grow up, I hope to do the same thing for the world with my music.

We also make the world better through acts of tzedakkah. I'll be donating the food baskets that you see here to
(thank you)

Hilary's Speech

Those of you who know me know that I love to swim. There's a very special feeling when I jump into the water. It changes my whole mood and makes me feel more alive. My favorite stroke is the backstroke. It's strange in that it's easier to move forward in the water while I'm on my back. There's a feeling of gliding through the water with just a few movements of my arms and legs. But the key to the backstroke, or any stroke for that matter, is that you have to keep moving.

I learned this at an early age. When I used to swim with my Dad at the JCC, he would hold me, but every once in a while he would let go. One time when he let go, I panicked, and didn't know what to do when I was swimming by myself. Instinctively, my arms and legs moved me forward to my Dad. My body understood that in order to survive, you need to keep moving ahead.

In my portion, it says, “Zechor yemot olam, beanoo shnot dor va dor,” “Regard the days of ages past, understand the experiences of previous generations.” The word used for “experiences” here is “sh’not,” which literally means “years.” But the word also has a second meaning: “changes.” If you translated it as “changes,” it changes the whole meaning of the passage. It would read, “Regard the days of ages past, understand the *changes* of previous generations.” One of the most important experiences of all generations is how they cope with change.

In this poem, God is often referred to as a “rock,” meaning that He is unchanging. But human beings have to change. Like the person who is swimming, we always have to be moving forward.

But sometimes, the only way to move forward is to go backward. What am I talking about? Today is Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Repentance, really, the Shabbat of “return.” For Jews, sometimes the act of changing doesn’t mean to become someone very different, but to return to who you really are. Just as swimmers can move forward on their backs, so do we move forward in our lives by doing Teshuvah, by returning.

On Rosh Hashanah, we speak of the importance not only of Teshuvah, but also of tzedakkah. As my mitzvah project, I have decided to volunteer to give swimming lessons to younger children at the JCC. Also, I delivered meals on wheels and participated the recent Bennett Cancer Walk.

(thank yous)

Alyssa’s Speech

As many of you know, this is the festival of Sukkot. What you may not know is that on Sukkot we usually hold in our hands and shake the lulav and etrog. You may be wondering where it is right now. We don’t use it at this service because it is also Shabbat. However, I’d like to show it to you because it will help you understand what I am talking about (*pick up lulav and etrog and show it to everyone*).

The lulav and etrog are a collection of four different things that grow: branches of the palm tree, willow and myrtle and this lemon-like fruit known as a citron. When we wave them, they help us to recall the importance of wind and rain for the next season’s crops to grow. But they also teach us other important lessons.

Some rabbis have said that these four things represent four different parts of the body. The lulav is the spine, the willow the mouth, the myrtle represents the eyes and the etrog, the heart. When we hold them all together and shake them, the message is that all parts of our body need to be one unified whole in expressing our thanks and our joy in prayer.

I can really understand the idea of all the parts of the body working as a single unit. When I do gymnastics, every part of my body has to work together for the routine to be successful. Legs, knees, arms, eyes, hands, back – if they don’t all work together, I’ll probably hurt myself.

Also, we learn from this that when we give, we should give all of ourselves; when we do anything, it should be whole-heartedly. Just as we prayed primarily with our mouths, with words, on Yom Kippur, on Sukkot, we also pray with our hands, by shaking the lulav. And it’s even possible to pray with your hair.

This idea has become real to me, in that I've chosen to do a special mitzvah project that is calling upon me to make a real sacrifice, rather than just talking about it. I'm going to be donating locks of my hair, about ten inches worth, to a charity known as "locks of love." "Locks of love" is a non-profit organization that provides hairpieces to financially disadvantaged children across the country suffering from long-term medical hair loss. So my hair will be used to help a child who has lost her hair to feel better about herself. It's nice to know that part of me can make the world a better place in this way.

For my tzedakah project, I'm also going to be donating the food baskets on the bima to Person to Person.

Thank yous...

Jablon Amanda's Speech

My portion contains a very curious statement. Chapter 29 verse 28 states, "The hidden things concern the Lord our God; but the revealed things belong to us and our children, ever to apply the all these teachings." What makes this verse even more confusing is that the Hebrew words for "us and our children" have eleven dots over them.

What does this mean? The dots have confused rabbis and commentators for centuries. I have my own explanation. The dots are there to remind us that some answers might not be understood for generations, but that if we keep on asking the questions, our children and grandchildren might someday be able to answer them. Like how can we cure AIDS? Or how do we achieve world peace?

If you know me well, you know that I like to ask questions. Not just ordinary questions, but hard-to-answer questions. Just the other day I was asking the rabbi why we eat apples on Rosh Hashanah? Why not oranges? They're both sweet. And why do we dip in honey? What about Chocolate sauce, or sugar, or maybe even whipped cream? Then I asked, "How do we know that we aren't little puppets being controlled by a much bigger life form? How do we know that the Exodus really happened? How did we get last names?"

My grandfather told me that I should be a philosopher. I'd love to, but at this point I think I'd rather be a dentist. But whatever I turn out to be, I'll never stop asking questions. To be a Jew means to ask questions. The word Israel means "to struggle with God." "Who is God" and "What does God want of us" are the questions that none of us can really answer. As my portion seems to be saying, sometimes we shouldn't even worry about finding the answers. But we should never stop asking the questions.

We should ask, and wonder, but we should also act. For my mitzvah project I have been volunteering at Rippowam Animal Hospital two to three times a week, helping to take care of animals. I'll also be donating a percentage of my Bat Mitzvah money to the Alzheimer's Foundation and to Adopt a Dog.

(thank yous)

Elena's Speech

As many of you know, I love to read. A good book or poem can make you laugh, cry, smile and think about important issues in your life. Books have always been very important to Jews. That's why we're called "The People of the Book." Next week on Rosh Hashanah, we'll pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life for the next year. According to the legend,

God determines whether we are to be inscribed into that book, but through repentance, prayer and charity, we can change the decision.

It's no surprise, then, that the last two things that Moses does before he dies is: 1) writes a book and 2) reads a poem to the people. The poem is written down in my portion. It's almost as if, in reciting this poem, Moses is trying to write himself into the book of life, so that he'll be remembered in a special way.

I believe that every parent has the opportunity to write his or her children into the Book of Life by teaching them how to read. I even believe that parents in this country have the obligation to know how to read English in order to give their kids the best chance to succeed. As the Talmud says, "no one is poor except for one who lacks knowledge. A person who has knowledge has everything. A person who lacks knowledge, what has she?"

Those who are unable to read miss out on some of the best things, like the poems of Shel Silverstein. One of my favorites goes like this:

"Some dummy built this pencil wrong,
the eraser's down here, where the point belongs."
And the point's at the top so it's no good to me
It's amazing how stupid some people can be."

This amusing poem teaches lots of lessons, like the fact that it's best not to blame others all the time for our own faults. Moses actually does just that in his poem, as he is rather bitter. Also you learn that sometimes you have to turn things upside down to solve the problem.

I'm not sure I can solve every problem by turning things upside down, but the rabbis did say that if you turn the words of the Torah over and over, you'll always find new meanings in them. You can see that there are lots of books up here on the bima, which I'm going to be donating to Literacy Volunteers. I hope that the kids who read these books will discover the same kind of happiness that I have enjoyed through books.

(thank you)

Daniel's Madwed Speech

I don't know if you might have noticed, but my portion, Tzav, begins on a significant page in our new Humash. It's page 613. That is an important number in Judaism, because it's the number of mitzvot that appear in the Torah. It's interesting in part because the word Tzav means "commanded," and comes from the same Hebrew root as "mitzvah." My portion contains several commandments regarding sacrifices, and the rest of the book of Leviticus is filled with other commandments.

This is also Shabbat Ha Gadol, the Sabbath before Passover, when, traditionally, the rabbi would give a long sermon detailing the many mitzvot of observing Passover.

It is impossible for a Jew to observe all 613 mitzvot, since many deal with life in Israel in the days of the temple. It is also very difficult to observe all the mitzvot of Passover. Being a Jew is difficult, because Judaism sets the bar very high.

That's something I've learned how to do as a Jew, and I've also learned it from swimming. As many of you know, swimming is a big part of my life. For the past several years, I've spent part of almost every day in a pool, working to sharpen my skills and improve my times. That effort has paid off, as last month I set a national record in my age group for the 200-yard butterfly and (*here is where you put what happened this coming weekend in the states*). My goal is to go to the Olympics some day. Talk about setting a high bar!

In order to go to the Olympics, I'm going to have to drop 15 seconds off my current time, maybe more. That will not be easy, to say the least, although I have taken 10 seconds off my time just this year. One thing for sure: it will take an incredible amount of work and sacrifice. Even now, I'm sometimes so tired that I can't get out of the pool and sometimes I ache so much that I need a heating pad.

I also know that I'll have to sacrifice many things in order to achieve this dream. I won't be able to spend as much time as I'd like with my family and friends and I'll miss out on other leisurely activities like tennis and bike riding.

But, but just like the sacrifices described in my portion were to my ancestors, the sacrifices I make are worth it to me. It feels really good to accomplish something through hard work, to stretch myself and earn what I deserve, even if I don't quite reach the high bar. I've also made many friends along the way and I know I'll meet many more. Even if I never make the Olympics, it will have been worth it just to try to get there.

Other Jews have been to the Olympics, including the greatest swimmer of all, Mark Spitz. The difference between Mark Spitz and me, aside from seven gold medals, is that he gave up Hebrew School to pursue his dream -- and I didn't. It hasn't been easy for me to combine the two, because the bar is equally high for each. But that just makes it all the more of a challenge for me to stretch myself and be a more disciplined person. Thus far, for sure, all the sacrifices I've made have been worth it.

One of the 613 mitzvot -- a very important one -- is to give tzedakkah. It is also a very important Jewish value to teach sensitivity to our environment and animal life. That's why I'm going to be donating some of the Bar Mitzvah money I receive to the Natural History Museum in New York.

(thank yous)

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(thank yous)

Laura's Speech

It's impossible to become a Bat Mitzvah this year without thinking about what happened on September 11 and what it means for the world that I am now becoming a part of. In looking at these events, and in looking at my Torah portion, I think it all comes down to sacrifices. In the middle of what was a terrible tragedy, there were some people who emerged as heroes, who made the supreme sacrifice -- their lives.

There are so many stories. I heard one story of an old woman who was staggering slowly down the stairs of one of the towers. She never would have made it, except that a man who was running down the stairs stopped when he saw her, slowed down and helped her reach safety at the bottom. I also heard about a man who saved a woman's life as the towers were collapsing by pushing her under a parked car.

And then there were all the police and the firefighters and soldiers. Hundreds gave their lives, helping us to realize just how these people risk their lives for our country every day. As all the people were running down the stairs to get out, the police and firefighters were running up the stairs.

My Torah portion describes how in ancient times, people brought their animals to Jerusalem as sacrifices. I'm glad we don't do that anymore. As many of you know I am an animal lover, so I can understand how powerful this ritual must have been for them. It was a real reminder of how precious life is and how quickly it can be ended. I've also done a lot of reading about the Holocaust, and the many sacrifices made back then by heroes like Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands and thousands of Jews, risking his own life.

And now we have our own heroes. It's sad that something like this had to happen for us to finally appreciate being alive and how much others risk on our behalf.

As I get older, I'll undoubtedly be called upon to make sacrifices of my own, though probably not as great as those made by the others I've mentioned. In the meantime, I'll be ready to make all the little sacrifices that add up and really make a difference. For example, I'm going to be volunteering to help out at a nursing home and I give up lots of free time on weekends in order to ref soccer games for little kids. I'll also be donating some of my Bat Mitzvah money to the Red Cross and to the local pound.
(thank yous)

David's Speech

Have you ever felt God's presence all around you? If you have, what kind of place has made this possible? What makes a place feel holy? When I was younger I would sit in the chapel upstairs and when the light mysteriously went on over the ark, I would think that God's presence had turned it on. Aside from the synagogue, when I was growing up there was one other place that gave me a sense of God's presence: and that was to be on the 107th floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center. I say the south tower simply because I never went up in the north tower. But I went to the top of the south tower about eight times.

Why was it so special? From the top, I could look down on the beautiful world that God has created. I could see Stamford from there, usually, and on really clear days, I could see up to the Tappan Zee.

It was also special because it was so close to my Dad's office. On September 11, that was not such a good thing. I was very worried when I heard what happened, but, when my dad made it home that afternoon, I was overjoyed to see him. It was as if God had brought my dad back to me.

I think that a place is holy when it makes you feel close to everyone you care about, or when it makes you feel amazed, or secure and cozy, or thankful.

My portion describes a very holy place to the Israelites who had just left Egypt. The tabernacle in the wilderness, called the Mishkan, was designed as a place where the people could sense God's presence and feel closer to God. That's what the World Trade Center was, too -- and in fact, what it still is. Funny thing is that after September 11, it's even more special now. It is still a holy place, even without the buildings. The memories lead us to caring, which leads us to thankfulness for those who made it out alive and for those who gave their lives for others. The terrorists went after the World Trade Center because they knew it was a special place for us. The funny thing is, it's even more special now.

In that spirit, I'd like to donate some of my Bar Mitzvah money to help victims of terrorism in Israel and the US.

(thank yous...)

Rachel's Speech

It's so easy to criticize the Israelites for worshipping a Golden Calf, and they were punished harshly. But I can understand why they did it. They gave up hope that Moses would return and they wanted to feel close to God. What's interesting is that the Torah understands this need too, and in fact gave us the answer one chapter before the Golden Calf problem.

The answer is that instead of things making us feel closer to God, the Torah teaches us that times are what bring us closer. Shabbat is called a "sign," or in Hebrew an "ot," of the relationship between God and Israel. The major festivals are also mentioned in my portion, after the Golden Calf incident. We learn from this that we don't need an object to feel a special connection to God.

Who needs a Golden Calf when you have family celebrations like mine? On Passover some years we have had up to 20 people at our Seder -- and I always get to make the matzah balls for the soup. A year ago, my family built and decorated a Sukkah; it may even have been as beautiful as the sanctuary in the Wilderness described in my portion. We made the walls out of decorated sheets and invited the congregation over. This year we had over 60 people at our house for a Hanukkah party, and there was menorah for each person. Unfortunately, a candle fell and lit the tablecloth on fire. Everything was OK in the end -- except for the tablecloth.

And then there's Shabbat. Our Shabbat dinners are incredible. After the meal is over, we sing Birkat Ha'Mazon and we sing Shabbat and camp songs. When Sarah and I sing "Rise and Shine," we jump out of our seats. It's pretty funny to watch. It's especially good when my grandparents can be there. After a tough week, it's great to relax and just be with my family.

So I don't need a Golden Calf, because our special times help me to feel close to God. And today, my Bat Mitzvah day, just might be the most special Jewish time of all.

Tzedakkah helps make every day to be special, for someone else and for myself. Before our Shabbat meal, we always put tzedakkah in or tzedakkah boxes and decide where it will go. I visit the Smith House once a month to play games and entertain the residents. I've also served Christmas dinner at the homeless shelter. I am also going to be donating my centerpieces from my reception to

Thank yous...

Erica's Speech

It has been said that there's no secret so close as that between a rider and his horse. I think that this is true for other animals too -- there are secrets that are kept between special friends, human or not, that no one else can understand. I feel that way about all animals, including my horse Buddy, my two dogs, three hamsters and the fish.

So I was fascinated to find out that my Bat Mitzvah would take place on Shabbat Parah, literally, "The Sabbath of the Cow." Now this wasn't just ANY cow, but the Red Cow, which helped to purify our ancestors of their sins. We read the special portion for Shabbat Parah this morning. This comes to show that we need animals to help us strengthen our relationship with God because animals are innocent and help us to recognize what we've done wrong and how we can be better people.

This afternoon's double Torah portion, Vayakhel-Pekuday, teaches us the laws of Shabbat. We learned a few weeks ago, from the Ten Commandments, that the Shabbat is a day of rest for animals too. I agree with the Torah's recognizing the importance of animals and the need to show kindness and compassion.

At the end of Pekuday, we learn something interesting about God. God appeared to Israel as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, in each way protecting them from harm. Just as God looked out and protected the Children of Israel, we're also supposed to protect our animals. In some ways, we're like God to our animals. It's interesting how, just as people sense God's presence in different ways at different times, so do animals sense us.

When I step into the barn to visit Buddy, his ears perk up to see me. When I ride him, I feel that he is calm and sure that we are working together as a team. When we are jumping, the horse needs to sense that last little reassuring squeeze from me telling him that I am here and it is OK to go. It's that same kind of comforting touch that a child feels holding their

parent's hand walking the streets of New York. It's the same way Israel felt in the Wilderness with God. It's a challenge for us to try to sense God's presence in these difficult times.

One of those ways to sense God's presence is to reach out to other human beings. About 6 weeks ago, a terrorist attacked the Bat Mitzvah celebration of Nina Kardashova, in the Israeli city of Hadera. Six people were killed, including the girl's step grandfather and uncle, and many were injured. I decided to reach out to Nina and wrote her a letter, a copy of which appears in my booklet. I'm also reaching out to people nearby. A few weeks ago, I went to Brighton Gardens, a local residence for seniors, and called out numbers for Bingo. I chose to work with the young and the old because I feel that both groups should be made to feel special.

(thank yous.....)

Sam's Speech

My portion, Mishpatim, contains many laws for forming a just society. Most important among them is the idea of helping those who are least able to help themselves, especially widows, orphans and the stranger. Over and over, the portion tells us to love the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. I can really relate to that, because every stranger I meet in Stamford could actually be someone I am related to.

That's because, my parents adopted me when I was an infant. Although I do not know who my birth parents are, I do know that I was born in Stamford.

I can actually relate to this commandment in two ways. Not only do I understand that total strangers might actually be relatives, but I also know how lucky I am to have been loved and chosen by my parents. I was in foster care for several weeks -- so for a while I was an orphan. At one point my parents were going to adopt someone else but that didn't work out. Then, it was my good fortune that they found me, and then even luckier that they chose me.

Verse 30 speaks of Israel as a "holy people." The idea of the Jews being a "Chosen nation" is often misunderstood. We're no better than any other nation, we just have special responsibilities.

I think I can understand what it means to be a chosen person. Some parents have children when they are not ready to. My parents were very ready to have a child -- and when I came along, they chose me. It is a special feeling to know that I was wanted in that way -- as a child by my parents, and as a Jew, by God.

And now, as a Bat Mitzvah, I understand that it is now my responsibility to love the stranger. Just as I was chosen and loved by others, so have I been entrusted by God to do the same for others.

One way that I can do this is by giving tzedakkah. I would like to donate some of my Bat Mitzvah money to Multiple Scleroses Society, in honor of my mom.

(thank yous...)

Evan's Speech

I have the good fortune of having in my Bar Mitzvah portion the Ten Commandments. As I was studying the portion, it occurred to me that while these are very important commandments, they're not the only ones. Since the term Bar Mitzvah means to be responsible for the performance of mitzvot, or commandments, I decided to figure out what my own Ten Commandments might be, based on my own concerns and hopes.

So here they are:

- 1) Do not destroy the earth that God has given us. For everything on the earth has a purpose and is holy.
- 2) Thou shalt pick the Rams in tomorrow's Super Bowl, but thou shalt not wager with point spreads.
- 3) Help people in need as best you can, because everyone counts in the world -- everyone is equal -- love your neighbor as yourself.
- 4) Thou shalt not pretend thou art God, because no one can be God; nor shall thou try to understand all my ways or see God face to face, unless you happen to be Moses.
- 5) Thou shalt move all services at Temple Beth El to Hawaii until the end of winter (the rabbi made me say that one).
- 6) Thou shalt set high standards for thyself and believe in your goals and pursue them without giving up.
- 7) Thou shalt eat of the four basic food groups daily: pizza, cake, ice cream and chicken -- or anything that tastes like chicken.
- 8) Thou shalt not destroy landmarks and commit other acts of terrorism, but if people do, thou shalt eliminate the terrorists.
- 9) Thou shalt not torture anyone whom you capture in war, unless his name is Osama.
- 10) Keeping in mind that there are still evil people out there, and all the other lessons of September 11, thou shalt enjoy each moment of life if it is your last, because God has given us the gift of life and we should not waste it.

While I've chosen these ten to start, there are many others that I could have picked. These just say something about what I'm thinking right now. Years from now, I'll be able to look back at these and remember how I felt on this day about my growing responsibilities as a Jew.

One of those responsibilities is giving tzedakkah to make this a better world. In that spirit, I'll be donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to the Stamford Nature Center, where I have volunteered to help out over the past couple of years.

(tzedakkah) Ganz

Tanz Alan's Speech

Those of you who know me know that I love musicals and even plan to be an actor, making it an amazing coincidence that my Bar Mitzvah turned out to be on this Shabbat Shira, the Shabbat of Song. This being the most dramatic portion of the entire Torah suits me perfectly. Imagine this scene: the children of Israel rush through a raging that has miraculously split, making it to the other side safely. Then, just as the Egyptian army is about to catch them, the waters collapse down on them and they all drown. Sounds like it would make a good movie!

Now if I were to have a part in this movie, at first glance I think I would love to play Pharaoh. But on second thought, maybe I'd be better off playing Nachson, the Israelite who, according to the Midrash, was the first to set foot in the Red Sea. Only once he was almost completely immersed in the water did the sea finally split. I usually like to play people who aren't like me because it makes me realize that my problems are smaller than I realized, at least in comparison to the guy I'm playing. Now Pharaoh -- he had problems: no army, no

first born son, no slaves -- although it's safe to say that he brought all those problems upon himself. Nachshon, on the other hand is more like me: fearless...and a little bit crazy.

If I played Nachshon, I'd have to try to recall a time when I felt the same way he must have felt at the shore of the sea, about to step into the unknown. In many ways, it's like the experience of jumping on stage for the first time, not knowing whether I'm going to mess up. It's also comparable to being up here right now. I'm about to enter the murky waters of adulthood, and who knows where that will lead.

In the end, acting is fun, but the drama I'm part of today is real, and the part I'm playing is me. Through the many roles I've had, I've always found that the more I recognize the problems of others, the more I understand how lucky I am.

In that spirit, I would like to donate some of the Bar Mitzvah money I receive to (or volunteer at the Tandet Center).....
Thank yous...

Josh's Speech

My portion, called Yitro, includes the Ten Commandments. While I have no problem with the Torah's choices, I decided that this would be a nice opportunity to reflect on what my own ten commandments might be like. So, after much thought, here they are:

- 1) *Thou shalt not be forced to do what anyone else wants you to do.* It's very important for people to form their own opinions and make their own decisions, regardless of what others say. On the other hand, the original Ten Commandments tell us to honor our parents, so I suppose that I would listen to what *they* tell me from time to time.
- 2) *Thou shalt not pick on or take advantage of anyone.* Everybody should be treated equally. There is no reason to be picking on or taking advantage of anyone, when it would only hurt someone's feelings.
- 3) *Thou shalt never miss the cutoff man when throwing to home plate from the outfield.* This is a very important fundamental of the game of baseball. If you do not hit the cutoff man, it is bound to be a wild throw. This could cause other base runners to score and may even cost you the game! If you do hit the cutoff man, you have a chance of getting someone out or keeping the game within reach.
- 4) *Thou shalt not hurt another human being or any living thing, except maybe your sister, if she is really making you angry!* All kidding aside, you should treat others like you should want to be treated. Violence is just not necessary.
- 5) *Thou shalt not judge people by appearances alone.* You should allow yourself to get to know others before deciding what they are really like. Don't let your friends decide for you whom to like or not like.
- 6) *Thou shalt always try to make or promote peace.* You see, in my house, there's not much peace. There's peace between the parents and kids, but not between my dog and my cat. All they do is fight. They also don't like to be near each other, so my cat stays upstairs and my dog stays downstairs.
- 7) *Thou shalt not expect the Vikings to stay down for too long, even if they missed the playoffs this year.*
- 8) *Thou shalt continue your Jewish studies long beyond the Bar Mitzvah year (the rabbi told me to say that).*

9) *Thou shalt not be greedy or selfish.* There are always people everywhere who have far less than you. Instead of always wanting more and wishing for things you don't have, you should give to those who are in need. Which brings me to...

10) *With that in mind, thou shalt donate tzedakkah.* And that is exactly what I am going to do. I'll be donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to ...

(thank yous)

Evan's Speech

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(tzedakkah)

Thank yous

Matt's Speech

Some of you know that my absolute favorite thing to do in the world, except for studying Hebrew, that is, is snowboarding. I guess the reason I love it so much is that it gives you an incredible feeling of freedom. Imagine being at the top of a hill, with the whole world in front of you – there’s a feeling that no one can stop you from doing something that you love. And then you begin to pick up speed, going down the hill. There is a rush of air as you jump off a “kicker,” and for a second, you are flying – all your troubles are behind you; your mind is at ease.

Then, suddenly, you realize how fast you are going, and you become a little frightened for yourself and others in your path. You’re afraid that you might accidentally clip someone else and cause an accident to occur. But on the other hand, you love the feeling and don’t want to slow down. Sometimes freedom involves having difficult choices.

Finally, you are at the bottom of the hill, you look up and see how far you’ve come and you have a real sense of accomplishment. And then, back on then lift for another run, you feel like you are going home again.

My portion talks of God’s promise to redeem the Israelites from Egypt. At one point, we see five different expressions for how they will be liberated. God says, “I will redeem you, I will free you and deliver you, I will take you to be my people and I will bring you into the land.” Then first four expressions were taken by then rabbis to be the reason for having four cups of wine at the Passover Seder. And the fifth freedom is for the fifth cup at the Seder table, the cup of Elijah.

Because of my interest in snowboarding, I can understand that there are different types of freedom. As you go down the hill and pick up speed, freedom implies more responsibility, to yourself and others. That’s also the case as you get older and become Bar Mitzvah. It’s not enough to have freedom to do what you want, it’s also important to make sure that others are free from want and from fear. President Roosevelt spoke of that in his famous Four Freedoms speech in 1941. At this point, we are especially in need of freedom from fear and terrorism.

And the final freedom, the one represented by Elijah’s cup, is the freedom to be secure at home. I have that feeling when I return to Vermont, and I now have that feeling even up here on the bima – right now. That’s also the feeling the Israelites had when they returned to the Promised Land. And I’m sure they felt a little bit nervous and excited when they first arrived, just as I feel right here right now.

Now that I am a bar mitzvah, I need to take my new responsibilities seriously. Jews show this by giving tzedakkah. I will be donating some of my Bar Mitzvah money to St Lukes Community services, a shelter that helps out those families in desperate need of a home – the fifth freedom we’ve been talking about.

Thank yous...

Corey’s Speech

Years ago, at my mother’s 5th high school reunion, she was searching for a ride home. Her best friend was unavailable, so she decided to get a ride with another friend. She was about to take the ride, but she was reluctant to because this friend was going to be stopping off at a bar before going home. At the last minute, an acquaintance, a man, stepped forward and offered her a ride. Later on that night, my mother heard that her friend, the one who had been going to the bar, had gotten into a terrible car accident. There were no survivors. If it

weren't for that man, who came out of nowhere, my mother, my siblings and I might not be here today.

In this week's parsha, Joseph is having trouble locating his brothers in the vicinity of Shechem. He comes across an unidentified man, or "ish" in the Hebrew, who tells him that the brothers have headed for Dotan. If that man had not been there to direct Joseph to his brothers, where he was later thrown into a pit and sold to traders, then he never would have ended up in Egypt, nor centuries later would Israel have been enslaved, nor would we have been redeemed in the Exodus, nor would we have gotten the Ten Commandments. So if it weren't for this "ish," just as with that other "ish" at the reunion, I wouldn't be here today. Neither would any of you.

It's an interesting how the littlest link in a chain holds everything together. Each one of us has a little bit of that "ish" inside. We all matter. It is said that each of us carries within us a piece of someone else's jigsaw puzzle. We may never fit, but some act of kindness we perform might complete that other person's puzzle. As my father once told me in basketball, if I do the little things, like positioning for a rebound, then bigger things will happen. So not only does every person matter, but everything that every person does matters. When you put all the pieces of everyone's puzzle together, it maps out God's plan. But if we don't all do our part, that grand puzzle might never be completed.

So we all should strive to grab every opportunity to make a difference. Even by giving simple directions or offering someone a ride, we can change the world.

That's also why tzedakah is so important to Jews. I'll be donating some of my bar mitzvah money to the Alzheimer's Foundation and to the families of the victims of the World Trade Center attack.

Thank yous....

Ben Chuchinsky Speech

Have you ever had one of those days where you wished there were two of you because you were so busy? Well, I've had one of those years. Imagine trying to combine all of these activities. On Mondays I have orchestra practice until 7:30. On Tuesdays I have Hebrew School. On Wednesdays I have piano and clarinet lessons. On Thursdays I have Bar – I HAD -- Bar Mitzvah lessons. And on Fridays I have a tennis clinic. And I'm even busier on the weekends. I'm so busy that I had to give up soccer for this year. And oh yes, there's that thing called school.

When I come to think about it, my schedule isn't such a bad thing, because it shows that I have a variety of interests. It's good to be a complete and well-rounded person. Looking at my portion, I can see that Ya'akov and Esav weren't so well-rounded, and that's where they got into trouble.

The two biblical brothers were twins, but they were far from identical. Commentators say that they were complementary, with each twin representing one half of a complete personality. Each one has qualities that the other one needs. Ya'akov was gentle, smart and a Torah scholar, while Esav was sporty kind of guy who liked to go hunting. They struggled and were rivals even in Rebecca's womb, and that continued throughout their lives. If only they had been one person, they would have been complete.

I try to be as well-rounded as I can be. Aside from my sports and music, I have an advantage of being half-Israeli. I have family here in America as well as my family in Israel. I have friends in both countries also. I feel that I am very lucky to have this connection to Israel – it

helps to make me whole as a Jew. Being in Israel is very different from being here. For instance, I love the food there, especially the falafel. The falafel over here is like day-old hallah compared to falafel in Israel. On other hand, you really can't get good rhubarb pie over there. In America, I get to play lacrosse, which they really don't have in Israel. On the other hand, if you really want to see some great soccer players who my age, Israel is the place to go.

Part of becoming a Bar Mitzvah is learning how to take control of your life and balance all of your interests. It's also about taking what you've learned and applying outside the classroom. If only Ya'akov had known that, he might have done something sporty once in a while, and if only Esav had known that, he have studied Torah once in while. I've learned that, in order to be whole, it's important to find a balance of both.

Part of being a Bar Mitzvah is also doing tedakkah. In that spirit, I'm going to be volunteering at the nature center once every week for a month. I think I can it squeeze in between orchestra and tennis, but I really have a problem with the fact that those sheep won't take a bath every once in a while.

Thank yous...

Carly Falkoff Speech

As many of you know, I love music. And I've tried many instruments, including, the recorder, piano, and piccolo, but my favorite of all is the flute. The flute is my favorite because it's sound is unlike that of any other instrument. It stands out, but in a gentle way. In Hebrew, the word for flute is "halil," which comes from the root word "halal" which means "hollow." The flute is indeed hollow, but the sound fills the empty space.

Now you may be asking yourself what this has to do with becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Well, the flute isn't mentioned in my portion, but at the end, the Shofar is – at least indirectly. As Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, an angel stopped him. In Isaac's place, Abraham sacrificed a ram. A shofar is made of a ram's horn, and one of the reasons we blow it on Rosh Hashanah is to remind ourselves of this story. Interestingly, the word "halal" in Hebrew means wounded or pierced, which is what almost happened to Isaac. Whenever we feel that kind of wound or emptiness, it is the music that fills us up. It is the music that fills the hollow feeling of sadness or despair, and also fills our lives with happiness and purpose. The shofar does this for the Jewish people. The flute does this for me.

I like to play classical duets, because when I share the experience of playing music, the music is even more powerful.

There are a couple of differences between the flute and the shofar. With a shofar, you can't control the exact sound that is going to come out. There's a certain mystery to it. And

while the flute has a very soft sound, the shofar is often harsh and shrill. One instrument calls us to attention and the other soothes us. We need both of these in our lives. I'm glad I've had both in mine.

As a Bat Mitzvah, I've learned many ancient melodies that have now become a part of my life. And I understand that it is the music that I will make that will fill the empty spaces.

And for my tzedakkah project, I'd also like to fill empty stomachs. I will be donating cans and non-perishable food items to _____

Thank yous:

ARONICA Molly's Speech

Today I read from the final portion of the Torah. After an entire year, through five long books and numerous adventures, it all ends here. And it ends with a very important word: Israel. And at the moment the Torah ends, the people of Israel are just about to go into the land of Israel for the very first time. It's the end of a long journey, from Creation at the beginning, to this moment where the journey is completed.

As many of you know, I love to cook. It's a very big part of my family. My parents are both great cooks and they've inspired me to become a good cook also, in different ways. My dad learned how to be a good cook from his dad, who had an incredible garden. My dad has taught me some important techniques, like how to grill and how to whip up classic Italian dishes. My mom also learned from her mom, and she also designs cookbooks. No matter where I am, I'm surrounded by cooking.

One of the things I love to make is chocolate decadence cake. The finished product tastes spectacular, if I have to say so myself. But it takes many steps of preparation to get there. You start with raw cocoa, which by itself tastes horrible. However, if you mix in some sugar, eggs, milk, and other ingredients, the result is pure heaven. My other specialties are garlic bread and matzah balls with grandma.

The Torah is much like a recipe. Both start with chaos and assorted ingredients and end up with something special – for the Torah, Israel is that finished product. And Sukkot also is a celebration of both the beginning and the end of this process. We end the Torah and begin it again with Bereisheet, and we collect the crops for this year's harvest and pray for rain for next year's crops. And by returning to the beginning of the Torah every year and by returning to the Sukkah, it helps us to appreciate our traditions.

And aside from cooking, another tradition in my family is being part of Temple Beth El. My family has been a part of the congregation for four generations, from the very beginning. And with all that tradition, today we celebrate something very new: I'm the first in my family to become Bat Mitzvah. So, just like the Torah, I'm beginning and completing something at the same time.

In keeping with the theme of harvest, I'm going to be donating the food baskets on the bima to Person to Person. I'll also be making a donation to ARI and the _____
(thank yous)

Zachary's Speech

In today's portion, one of the most important events in Moses' life takes place. He is commanded to speak to a rock so it will give the people water in the desert. Instead, Moses strikes the rock with his staff. It still gives them water, but Moses is punished severely. He is not allowed to enter the Land of Israel.

At first glance, this seems very unfair. Why such a severe punishment? Maybe the Torah is trying to teach us that it is always better to talk than to hit. That's why we have the United Nations, so that disagreements do not end in wars. Even though the UN isn't perfect, without it the world would be one big battlefield.

Imagine a world where everyone talked out his or her problems. As many of you know, I love to play hockey, and how different it would be if the players sat down to chat instead of dropping their gloves. As a goalie, it would certainly make my job easier since there would be no power plays against me.

It could also be argued that the reason that Moses didn't talk to the rock, and the real reason for his punishment, is that he wasn't really listening to God. Talking by itself, without listening, won't get you very far. Sometimes, in fact, you can communicate without talking. In the novel "The Chosen," which I read recently, one Hasidic rabbi doesn't talk to his son at all, but rather communicates through silence. I don't encourage it, but the silence taught the son more than any words could have about the importance of listening.

I learned about the importance of listening in a different way. My grandmother used to tell me stories about all the places she had traveled to, all over the world. She always found a way to make them exciting. Like the time she went to Alaska and her boat caught on fire. Or about how all the immigrants came to the Lower East Side. Hopefully, I listened well enough to be able to recount these stories to my grandchildren – her great great grandchildren – someday.

So good listening leads to constructive talking which is always better than hitting. In fact, that's how my brother and I always work out our differences! ☺

This would be a better world if more people would talk to each other. For the past few weeks, I have been visiting elderly residents of Edgehill, a senior's residence here in Stamford. I have been talking with individuals, and playing board games like Scrabble for about an hour a week. I hope to continue doing this over the coming weeks.

(thank yous)

Greg's Speech

There's something important that I would like to share with you this morning. At this very moment, about 90 miles away in New London, my AAU baseball team is playing an elimination game in a tournament that will determine whether the team gets to move on in the states. That's going on there, and I'm here.

Now you might be thinking, "Of course he's here. It's his Bar Mitzvah." And it was an easy choice for me. But it still was a choice, and if I didn't care about being Jewish, the choice could easily have gone the other way. So now I understand what Sandy Koufax went through when he decided not to pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series when it fell on Yom Kippur. He spent the day in services in Minneapolis, while his team lost to the Twins, 8-2. But he did win two games in the Series, including the seventh and final game. So maybe this is a good omen for my team.

Both of my portions speak to this matter. The first one, Achare Mot, teaches us about how Yom Kippur was observed in Biblical times. Just like Sandy Koufax, our ancestors made sacrifices to be holy. A key part of the Yom Kippur observance is found in verse 29, where it says, "ta'anu et naf-sho-tay-chem." Literally it means "afflict yourselves," but the rabbis understood it to mean that we should fast. The real meaning of the phrase is that we should practice self-denial, and that goes far beyond just fasting. Judaism teaches us that life isn't all fun and games. Of course that's what I wish it was, but part of the added responsibility of

becoming Bar Mitzvah is learning that it is not. And so, today, I am practicing self-denial by missing that game.

My other portion, Kedoshim, talks about being holy. It contains a number of the most important principles of Jewish morality, including the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. To be holy means to be different and to be special. And that is what it means to be a Jew. Sandy Koufax understood this and was willing to stand out. In missing my game today, I was standing out as the only Jew on my team. The coach understood and even tried to have the game postponed. I'm not sure how my team will do today, but standing up here right now, I feel like a winner.

Part of being holy is helping others through acts of kindness. As my tzedakkah project, I'll be donating my Dad's leftover bagels to a local food pantry. I'll also be donating part of the money I receive to the American Cancer Society (...)
(thank yous)

Ross' Speech

Last summer, I began preparing to become Bar Mitzvah without even knowing it. My family was at the pool club celebrating my brother's birthday, when one of Greg's friends went down the water slide and had trouble swimming back to the side. Instinctively, my dad, my friend and I jumped into the water to help him out. After that, the boy came with me and we sat down together and we talked and he thanked me. He was so happy; it made me feel kind of like a hero.

I've since discovered that what I did is a very important lesson found in my Torah portion. It says in chapter 22 that we must return items that have been lost by our neighbor. And then it adds, "You shall not hide yourself," which commentators have interpreted to mean that we shall not be indifferent. That verse is why what I did at the pool wasn't just a nice thing to do, as a Jew it was an obligation, a Mitzvah. Doing things like that is what being a Bar Mitzvah is all about. Did you know that in American law, it would have been perfectly OK for me to have stood by the side of the pool and not done anything? Indifference is not the Jewish way.

Elie Wiesel, who witnessed the Holocaust, has said that the opposite of good is not evil, but indifference. At the end of my portion we are commanded to destroy the evil nation Amalek, who attacked the Israelites from behind in the Wilderness. We can't be indifferent to evil, and Amalek lives to this day in other forms. Indifference is why the Holocaust was allowed to happen.

In my life, I show that I care in many different ways. I often come home to spend time with my brother, even it means leaving early from playing sports with my friends. Also, my family has been very involved in delivering meals to Gilead House. And for my Bar Mitzvah tzedakkah project, I'm collecting sports equipment to donate to underprivileged kids. I thank all of those who have helped out with that today.

Now that I am officially a Bar Mitzvah, I'm going to look even harder for ways to help others and make a difference.

(thank yous)

Joanna Shapes Speech 8/2000

When you hear the word "opportunity," what does that mean to you? For me it means taking advantage of the chances we have in life to "make a splash."

Tonight is my big chance to make a splash for the Jewish people and for my family. I had the choice not to become a Bat Mitzvah; but I chose to for it had special meaning: I am the first girl in my extended family to become Bat Mitzvah.

Halfway around the world, tonight, thousands of people have their chance of a lifetime at the Olympics – some of them are literally making a splash in the swimming and diving events, which conclude tonight with the 4 x 100 meter Medley Relay Final.

It's appropriate that the final poem recited by Moses in my Torah portion mentions water, and he recited it as the people were on the banks of the Jordan River. Moses recited one other poem found in the Torah, many years before on the banks of another body of water, after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. So these poems mark the beginning and end of Israel's time in the desert, 40 years marked by a series of missed opportunities. Moses himself missed a big opportunity by disobeying God, and because of that he wasn't allowed to cross over into the Promised Land. Meanwhile, the rest of the nation had to wander for 40 years because they, too, lacked faith.

The people could have given up at that point, but they didn't quit. Neither did Moses. So he sang his final song by the water's edge.

As you know or likely have heard, I love to swim. Just as with Moses and the Olympians, I also find opportunity by a body of water. I can recall back when I was three or four and how I could hardly stay afloat. Now I have the ability to compete in events as long as 500 yards and even longer. I've come a long way, but I know I have room to improve. I hope to have opportunities to become an even better swimmer. I've learned that what counts the most is dedication and the desire to be the best you can be. In swimming, as well as in life, that's what it takes to make a splash.

Judaism has always taught that we can make a great impact on other people's lives and the world through giving tzedakkah and performing acts of kindness. I'll be donating a portion of my Bat Mitzvah money to the burn unit of Bridgeport Hospital to others in the same situation that I faced last year.

(thank yous)

Rebecca Fox 8/2000's Speech

Last spring in my language arts class, I was given an assignment to write a letter to my future children. It was supposed to be six paragraphs, but I really liked the assignment and when I sat down to write, before I knew it I had written 11 pages. I plan to give it to my children when they reach the age of 12, which is how old I am now.

The letter tells about my daily activities and my family, tells of my goals for the future and gives advice to my children. I especially advise them always to be themselves and not to follow the crowd – most of all, to be responsible.

When I was looking at my portion, I realized that the Torah itself is like a letter being handed down to me by my parents, which I will someday hand to my children. And the lessons are very similar. My portion is all about taking responsibility for ourselves in how we judge others, in pursuing justice and in protecting the environment. It also instructs us not to blindly follow the lead of powerful kings and false prophets. Finally, the portion also reminds us to care for those who are strangers. I can think of no better advice to give to my children than what I found in this portion.

The advice I gave to my children in my letter, along with the lessons learned from the Torah are also good guidelines for my own life: to build a better world, to be responsible and

not to follow the crowd. 'm glad to have the chance to be the first in my class up here; in that way too I am setting an example for my own children as to how to be a leader. And since I'll be telling them all about this day, I hope that when they become Bar or Bat Mitzvah, they will want to write a letter to their children too. And, as I wrote at the end of my letter, I will tell them again, "I hope I have been as wonderful a mother to you as my mom is to me."

My portion speaks of the pursuit of justice. The word for justice in Hebrew is tzedek, which is connected to the word tzedakkah. As my tzedakkah project, I am going to be working with younger children who need special attention.

(Thank you)