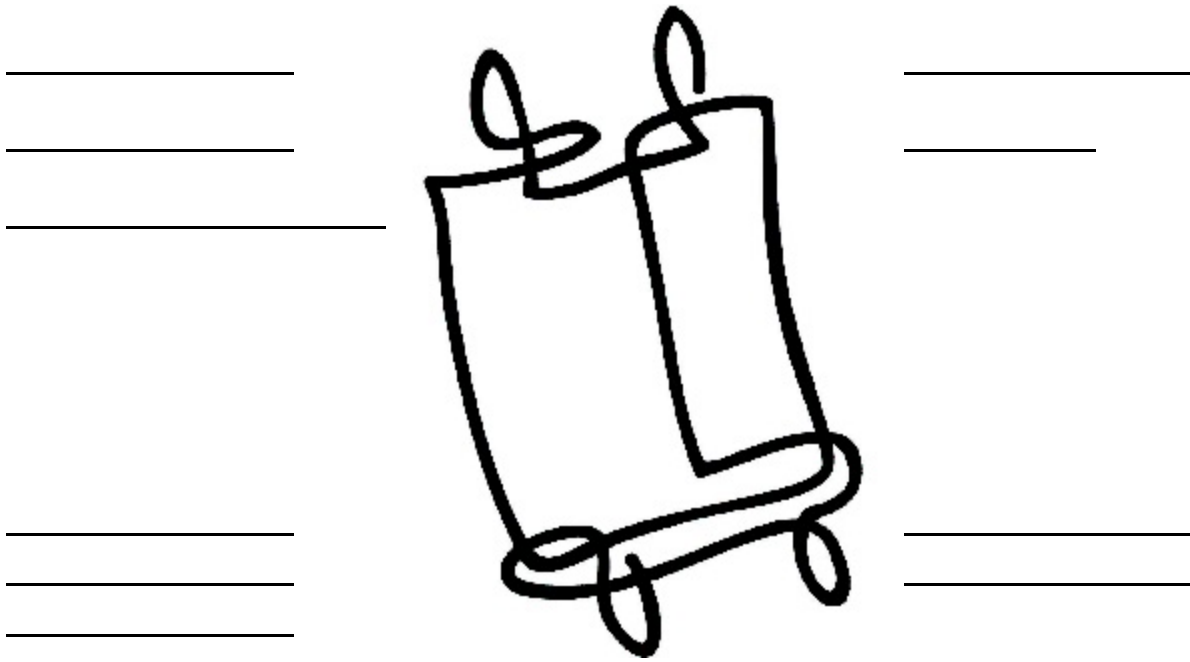


# **Confirmation Reflections**

**June 11, 2011    9 Sivan 5771**



*“Embrace The Possibilities”*

**Temple Ahavat Shalom**

**Rabbi Barry Lutz**

**Rabbi Shawna Brynjegard-Bialik**

**Rabbi Dalia Samansky**

**Cantor Jen Roher**

## A Special Thank You To All The Parents

Dear Mom and Dad,

Without you I would not be where I am today. Throughout my life, you have always been there for me. You have supported me in all my endeavors and comforted me when I failed. I have learned so much from both of you, from photography and sailing to Springsteen and Ellen DeGeneres. Although we argue a lot, we always find a solution to our problems. Over the years, both of you shaped me to be who I am today. You continue to inspire me and open my mind to new ideas. In my time under your care, you taught me how to laugh and how to cry. You taught me when to work and when to play. You explained what is right and what is wrong, but most important of all, you taught me how to love. I am struggling to express my appreciation of you, but there simply are not enough words in the English language to communicate my gratitude towards both of you. Unfortunately, I will have to settle for a simple .... Thank You.

*Anonymous*

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## **Sean Adler** ☆

During my early years as a child, I was enrolled in Hebrew school at a conservative congregation. Being a young kid at a temple that was very strict and reprimanding was really tough. Soon after, my parents told me that we were switching congregations. I was dreading this move because I thought that all temples were the same and I was going to get the same out of this experience as I did when I was at my previous temple.

My first experience at TAS was a memorable experience. A good friend and fellow Confirmation class mate, Evan Lowell, had brought me to his Sunday school class for the day. It was an absolute 180 from what I had experienced prior to Ahavat Shalom. I was eager to become a part of these kids and come to school twice a week rather than dread going to school for two hours.

Over the years being at TAS I grew a liking to my religion, primarily because becoming older, I was able to understand more about Judaism. I learned about pieces from the Torah, Jewish stories and Jewish holidays.

As I approached my year of becoming a Bar Mitzvah, I questioned what everyone said about becoming a young man and being a crucial part of the Jewish community. Once I became a Bar Mitzvah, I didn't feel any different. I didn't feel like a man, I definitely didn't look like a man, and I didn't act like one either. However, what I did realize, is that becoming a "man" in the Jewish community isn't something that you become after one day; it is something that you grow into overtime.

Proceeding my Bar Mitzvah time, I was asked by my parents if I wanted to continue my learning at TAS with the attending of Confirmation classes. Because of the experience that I had at TAS previous to my Bar Mitzvah, I didn't have to think twice about this decision. I was ready to start that day.

The following fall my classes began and I was with all of my friends. I enjoyed many aspects of Judaism, whether it was cooking or history. I knew that TAS had a lot more to offer to their students than just strict, tedious classes. TAS had changed my view completely on Judaism and how I feel about my roots, ancestry, and religion.

## **Ariel Bernstein** ☆

Hello everyone and welcome. My name is Ariel Bernstein and I am so excited to be here today. My years of Confirmation have been such an amazing journey and I cannot believe it is all over. Throughout this year, I have been in the process of becoming more conscious about the social issues of the world we live in. I have realized many things about myself, mostly about how passionate I am about social justice and social action. This year has really transformed much of my understanding about what social justice really means. Social justice is about making the world around us a better place through spreading consciousness and making active efforts not only to change the world, but also to understand it. A huge factor in my ability to see social justice so clearly was my experience in Washington D.C. at L'Taken. Working the Religious Action Center and learning that we really do have a voice in this country gave me even more hope that we can make a difference.

As my passion for social justice has strengthened, I have realized that different people in my life approach social justice and social action with different ideas in their heads. I have come to understand that not everyone has the same mind set, for some people have a greater understanding than others. For example, some people may be very conscious of one issue and know nothing of another issue. Some people may not think about the deep meaning behind any volunteer work they are doing, or some people may only think about the meaning and nothing about their actions. Because everyone is so

different, I have developed a theory to identify where we are individually in terms of our understanding of social justice. It is a fluid model that can truly assess where someone's individual mind set is. In addition, it can help us work towards the goal of truly understanding what we can do to make a difference.

The first level of this model is acting. This is participating in social action projects, but with no deep understanding. Many people volunteer all the time, but too often there is no true connection in their minds. For example, volunteering at a homeless shelter is an amazing mitzvah, but the reason so many people don't do it regularly is because they don't feel anything for it. They do receive that feeling of gratitude from giving back to their community. Mostly, they do not have an internal connection and understanding of the issue. So the experience is only really beneficial for the recipients, which is good, but not enough to be considered true social justice.

This leads into the next level, which is understanding. This level is when people start to gain a true understanding and sense of awareness about an issue. They see what the problems are and how they affect the world. Therefore, it triggers the drive to want to make drastic changes in the world regarding the issue. This newfound awareness, however, often comes with the idea that the only efforts that count are the big ones. A while ago at a youth group event, a woman came and talked about a company she started that sells bracelets made by two men in Costa Rica. Her brother found them and thought that their bracelets were amazing. These two men were extremely poor, so they decided to help them out and sell bracelets for them. It is now a good-sized company with a portion of the profits going to support the lives of these two men and their families. After hearing about this, my sister approached me and told that she thought they were being selfish by keeping so much of the profits for themselves. She said that they should be donating more money to these men, and because they weren't, their efforts were not genuine. So, even though my sister had an understanding at this point, she seemed to have the idea that in order to change the world, there needs to be huge progress all the time.

What I told her was that even though only a portion of the profits of this company were going to these two men in Costa Rica, this money still changes their lives and counts towards something. I told her that it does not matter how big or small the effort is, for it still makes a difference. This didn't actually resonate with her until a few months later when she saw one of her friends wearing one of these bracelets. This friend had bought it in a boutique and had no clue what it really meant. My sister then understood that being aware of what we are doing, even if it is just buying a bracelet to wear, makes a huge difference, no matter how big or small the action is.

That is the final level of my social justice continuum: actualizing. At this level, we are integrating the ideas of acting and understanding in order to make social justice a reality. We are conceptualizing everything we have learned to gain a connection and a passion for the issue we are working with. Therefore, because we now have this passion, the work we have been doing becomes beneficial beyond just the recipients of the action. It becomes universally rewarding, which is why I love social justice. Changing the world to help the people around me is an amazing feeling. But, I love social justice because I want to make the world a better place for myself to live in. I want to live in a world where I feel comfortable, and where I can feel as though what I am doing is really making a difference.

So, my message is to truly assess where you are in your mind set with the final goal of being able to actualize any newfound awareness you might have about an issue. This is what changes the world, and I am confident that it is possible if we make it possible. Thank you.

## **Scot Bujarski** ☆

I have been attending Jewish based learning my entire life. I started at the North Valley JCC for preschool, then I went to Aleph through to Confirmation here at TAS. I have also been attending New Community Jewish High School for three years. Now, because of this lifelong “connection” with Judaism I have created my own ideas about what significance Judaism holds in my life.

To be frank, despite my many years of Jewish Education it has only been recently that I have found a real connection to Judaism. What has really caused me to become closer to Judaism is a mix between going to NewJew and going to Confirmation this year. At school it isn't so much the religion I have connected to, but rather the culture and the people that I have come to know and the culture I have been exposed to through many years of classes in Jewish values and events. My enrollment at NewJew has not been the only thing that has caused me to connect more with Judaism; it has also been because of Rabbi Shawna and our fantastic conversations about religion and God. Not only through these conversations have I learned what she believes but I have also learned how much of a difference there is when it comes to a belief in God. Even with learning all of these different belief structures and ways that people define their beliefs I can't help but make my own decision on beliefs has a whole. My main philosophy is that people should not be defined by the beliefs that they hold. Now in no way am I trying to insult any of the beliefs that people have, I strongly support your decision to hold that belief. Just for me personally I think that whether or not your beliefs contradict with another person's beliefs, you shouldn't look at them with scorn, a person should be defined by their actions. This includes how you act toward other people and how you treat them on a regular basis. This does not mean that acceptance is unconditional, I am not advocating support of harmful beliefs or behavior. People should be able to talk about their beliefs, not to worry about being politically correct all the time, to express themselves without worrying about offending others. People should be able to talk to each other without fear of being defined by what they say- a person's ideals are their ideals. The goal of communication is to help others understand your point of view, not to talk them out of their belief. Thank you for listening to my beliefs.

## **Sean Bujarski** ☆

Last time I was standing here on this bima, I was thirteen years old, leading the congregation during my Bar Mitzvah. However, these memories are hardly stellar. If my memory serves me right, I broke out into tears halfway through my torah portion when I mispronounced a word. Regardless, I am not the same person that I was four years ago, or even the same person that I was last year. And although this change could be attributed to a number of factors, much of this was caused by my involvement in both TASTY and NFTY.

While many of you may be familiar with our Temple Youth Group TASTY, you may be unfamiliar with NFTY, the overarching national organization that TASTY is a part of. However, this is a largely incomplete description of NFTY. It could be better described as a weekend in Jewish summer camp, or perhaps “a weekend surrounded with fellow Reform Jewish teenagers with a series of interesting and thought provoking programs”, if I may sound like a brochure for a moment.

However, for me these descriptions are still incomplete. For me NFTY is more than a weekend away, it's a family; its more than a group of Jewish teens, it's a collection of teachers. And my short time in NFTY has opened my eyes more than I could have imagined.

Allow me to explain. Prior to this year, and prior to becoming active in NFTY and TASTY, I was not what you would call talkative. Class discussions were out of the question and random people walking up to talk to me was easily the scariest event, short of death itself.

And then I joined the TASTY board, the first stage of my “transformation.” To be honest, I joined for

purely selfish reasons, I thought it would look good for college. However, as I walked into the first meeting of the year there were two things I never expected. First, that my fellow board members were some of the coolest people I had ever met, and second, that Ilyssa Cooperman, our TASTY advisor, would demand that every board member go to the Leadership Training Institute, the first NFTY event of the year, or be kicked off board.

Needless to say, I was terrified and as the weekend drew closer I seriously contemplated abandoning TASTY so I would not have to go. But Ilyssa and my friend forced me to go despite my fears, and I'll always be grateful for that.

So I went to LTI, and there I experienced something that changed my views of those around me. It was the last night of the event, and we had just spent four hours at the Santa Monica Pier. So everyone grabbed hands, and while singing a prayer for Havdallah, walked down to the beach and spiraled into a circle. And so, sitting there, with my arms around complete strangers, singing prayers I haven't said for years, I felt that I was among family. I felt accepted.

Coming home from LTI, I could feel that something had changed. I was more social, if only slightly. I was more active in TASTY, and I had a drive to go to as many NFTY events as possible, whereas before I wanted to avoid them. I ended up going to the event that is widely considered the worst event, NFTY Elections Kallah, and there again I was accepted into the family of NFTY. And there again, NFTY taught me to see the better side of people.

However, I am still far from completing my transformation. I'm still hesitant to talk to people, and even at NFTY events I'm still a bit of a loner. And yet in spite of this, I still strive to change even further.

## **Katie Cullen** ☆

Truthfully, I never thought Judaism really had an impact on my life. Yes, I celebrated the holidays, woke up early on Sunday mornings to go to religious school, sat fidgeting in services, and ate challah, but it wasn't until this year that I was able to see how much Judaism has radically changed my perception of my place in the world. I always thought of being Jewish as just something I was born into. When I was younger, being Jewish seemed more like a curse that was placed upon me at birth than anything I would want to be. I didn't understand the point of it all. Was it to make God happy? Was it to get to heaven one day? I wasn't sure. It all seemed like a complete and utter waste of time. Either way, every Sunday morning, my mom would wake me up bright and early and drive me to TAS, first for religious school and then for Hebrew school. We learned about the holidays, life events, symbols of Judaism, and then moved on to learning Hebrew and chanting blessings. I always seemed to be successful, but the question still remained. Why? Why was I doing all of this? What was the point? Even my Bat Mitzvah wasn't enough to convince me that all this Judaism stuff made sense. I had learned an entire torah portion in Hebrew, had translated it into English, and had written a speech on how much those words related to my life as a thirteen-year-old girl, but what did that prove? Did doing all of that finally make all of my doubts about Judaism go away? No. Not that there were not points in my Jewish education that touched me deeply. Learning about the Holocaust in Dalet class was moving. My problem was that I didn't understand how people from a different period in time could be so closely connected to us. Was it just because we had all gone to religious school and sat through services? In my days at L'Taken in Washington D.C., I was able to figure it out. It's not all about the exact words of the torah or the bitter taste of the marmor. Judaism is about shaping your life and beliefs into the best that they can possibly be. As we sat with candles in front of the Jefferson Memorial to celebrate Havdalah, I realized that I was part of something bigger than myself. I was part of a community, one that I knew I could always count on.

## **Greg Field** ☆

The word Confirmation stems from the word confirm, which contains the Latin root; “con” which means “together” and the root “firmare” which means strengthen. These two roots completely exemplify my past 10 years here at TAS. We have a Confirmation class that has come together, to strengthen our Jewish identities, and I believe we have done so. Personally, when I came in 2nd grade, I was scared of what would happen. It turned out it wasn’t so bad after all, and as I progressed through my Hebrew School days, I became more and more fond of my inner Judaism, but I really wasn’t sure why I was going through it. Starting in 6th grade, I attended a Catholic school, and that’s where my Jewish roots really brought me to who I am. I was being taught a lot about the Christian religion, and I was scared that I was going to branch away from my Jewish roots, but TAS. really prevented that from happening. I learned so much more about my heritage, ranging from the original language itself, to the Holocaust, wherein my people were persecuted to lengths that I cannot even begin to explain. Whether I should go through Confirmation or not was something that I had to look within to decide. I made so many friends in Confirmation that I will hold in my heart forever. After 9th grade I transferred to New Community Jewish High School, which I can honestly say was the best decision of my life. Now I can be confirmed, knowing who I am as a person, as well as a Jew. I am proud to say that being Jewish is an essential part of my life. One time where my appreciation and understanding of my religion showed was on this year’s L’Taken trip to Washington D.C. I used my overall knowledge of Jewish text and ideals to make a proposal as to why we should drill for oil, mixing my knowledge of Judaism and aspects of my country, showing how Judaism is everywhere. Also, I felt in touch with God when we had Havdalah Services on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial, and that moment I will never forget for the rest of my life. I’ve realized that overall as Jews, we have a connection, and we automatically have a special bond between each other, that will be there forever. I would like to quote an old song that we as a class learned years ago. Please feel free to sing along, “Wherever you go, there’s always someone Jewish, you’re never alone, when you say you’re a Jew. So when you’re not home, and you’re somewhere kind of newish, the odds are don’t look far, cause they’re Jewish too.” And to answer the question that my class has asked, yes, we can get a hot tub. Thank you.

## **Cole Gee** ☆

When I think about Temple Ahavat Shalom, do you know what I think of; Food.

No, I’m just kidding, although food is always a big part of any Jewish experience, TAS has really been a major influence of my growth as a Jewish person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the beginning of my educational career, pre-school, I was enrolled in the ECEC at Temple Ahavat Shalom, which was my first “school” that I attended, from there on out, I worked my way up the ranks of my Jewish education as a member of my own Jewish community to stand before you today and get confirmed.

As you may or may not know, I executed my Eagle Project on TAS’s campus, installing four benches and helping create both an appealing entry as well as a comfortable sitting area for my fellow temple congregants. I also painted the entry wall closest to the parking lot a more appealing color, all the while fixing the damage to the wall as much as possible. Being able to incorporate my scout life and my life at TAS really showed me that my life with my congregation was more than just texting behind the back pew during Friday night services while the rabbi was giving a sermon. No offense to you rabbi.

Because of my connection with Temple Ahavat Shalom, many doors were opened to me that really changed my life for the better. Without TAS, I wouldn’t be involved in TASTY, our totally rad youth group that gave me the connection that I have with so many of my friends, I wouldn’t have been given the chance to attend NFTY, one of the organizations that opened my eyes to many different realities and friends, and most of all, I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to enjoy my Bar-Mitzvah 110%, because

when I was up on stage I knew that everything was going to be A okay. After all, Cantor Linsky and Mr. Dr. Rabbi Barry Lutz were next to me the whole time, and what more could you want on your Bar Mitzvah day.

NFTY, the North American Federation of Temple Youth led me to be the passionate Reform Jew I am today, with set thoughts and ideas of not only my faith but also my life and my surroundings. Without TAS, the chances of me getting involved in NFTY would have been extremely low.

I can safely say that being Jewish is something that makes the well rounded human being that I like to believe I am today stand out amongst the crowd. Without TAS, I wouldn't have such a strong connection to Judaism, I wouldn't be an active teenager in my community, I wouldn't have such strong beliefs, and I wouldn't be someone who has the leadership skills that I do now. In fact, I think that if it didn't have Ahavat Shalom, the only thing that I would still have is my good looks.

Rabbi Lutz played a very important role in my life. Not only was he the embodiment of what I was looking for in Judaism, all the answers, which really just ended up to be more questions, but also a Rabbinic leader that is a friend to me. Rabbi Lutz and I had a conversation once about when he first became a rabbi. The congregants didn't know what to call him. Did they call him Rabbi, Rabbi Lutz, Mr. Lutz, Mr. Barry, they were all very confused. But the congregants went through many titles for him, eventually stopping at Mr. Rabbi Lutz. Now this is quite a title, but as we kept talking he told me he had received a doctorate, so now he was Mr. Dr. Rabbi Barry Lutz, hence, why I refer to him like that today. The great thing about this conversation we had was that it made me understand that Rabbi Lutz is not just my rabbi or mentor, but also my friend; someone I can talk to about life in general, someone I can just hang out with and share a joke with. An adult that I could go to when I had a question. An adult that I could call when I could use some outside food at camp.

We are all a part of a greater community of Jewish teens around the world. We have the power to make a difference. We have the power to change lives, and the reason for that is because of our education from Temple Ahavat Shalom, our home, and our safe haven. Now that my life has been changed by TAS, I make it my personal goal to change Temple Ahavat Shalom for the better, and I challenge all of my fellow Confirmation friends to do so as well. Shabbat Shalom.

## **Rachel Goodwein** ☆

I've been going to Temple Ahavat Shalom for the past nine years determined to learn all I could about my religion. Along the way I've befriended so many special people that have made the learning experience that much more interesting. I have seen Rabbi's come and go. I have seen Cantor's come and go. I have seen teachers come and go, yet here I stand, in front of my family and friends completing my requirements to be confirmed. My best friend, Naomi, who I have known since the third grade, has shared my TAS experience and helped in my maturity and relationships in the TAS communities. We have heard Mrs. Lieberman complain about our closeness and inseparability, and teamed up in Mr. Lowenstein's class where we challenged and outdueled Jason and Sean in a class activity. My time with Naomi at TAS has helped me develop an independence and gain separation that grants me the ability to ask questions and think for myself. As our friendship has grown, Naomi and I have developed more freedom and self confidence, although I am still quite shy in many situations I have learned to rely on myself rather than her to make decisions or form opinions for me.



Religious School, Bat Mitzvah preparation and Confirmation have all been opportunities to ask and learn about the traditions, beliefs and teachings of my ancestors. Over time, my determination to get confirmed increased, along with my curiosity to discover my true feelings on religion. My rebellious thoughts and feelings towards the lessons in class started to trouble me. Was there really a G\_d? What proof do I have? Am I praying to a non-existent belief? Unfortunately these questions may never be answered, so now I am challenged with the question of G\_d's existence and to wonder if G\_d and the Torah are simply morals on how to be a respectable human being. I would however like to believe when I pray for the health and safety of loved ones, someone hears and honors my plea. These questions made me more inspired to stay at Hebrew School to learn people's different perspectives on religion and Judaism. I have learned that I am not the only person filled with questions and that over time my classmates have been eager for answers as well. We have had inspiring debates on G\_d's actions. There have been many different opinions and thought on whether our destiny is shaped for us or that we shape our own. I believe we shape our own destiny. Our lives are made up of decisions we make, some right and some wrong. I am glad I made the decision to be confirmed and learn more about Judaism, because in doing so I have been shaped into the person I am now, constantly asking the questions that will help push me to get the job I one day hope to have of being a set designer. The continuing challenges and unanswered questions regarding my Jewish beliefs may one day be answered, but I am sure that in the future my friends and I will be recalling the long discussions we had once had and share our new insights.

Despite my confusion about certain aspects within my religion I am very proud to be a Jew and I am proud to be the only person in my family besides my dad to become confirmed. I am pleased to be here with all my friends preparing to take on the world and its challenges.

Thank you.

## **Jason Greenwald**     ✨

We did it! What seemed like an unattainable goal has been achieved. From ECEC to Confirmation it all seems so fast. It has been a journey of enlightenment and a search for why we are Jewish. Who would have thought the answer was simple. To accept one's faith is not only spiritual, but brings a sense of understanding. In the beginning I didn't comprehend Judaism and why it was so important. I currently live in Valencia which does not nearly have the same Jewish population as Northridge. Many of my fellow classmates do not understand this diverse culture and trust me "Borat" didn't help. Many of my friends would often ask me if I was Jewish. After explaining to them that I was Jewish many would ask ignorant questions but it wasn't their fault because they didn't know any better. What is that little hat that you put on your head? Did you have a Bar Mitzvah? And the million dollar question, "Are you rich?" I would often laugh and shrug off these jokes, but ever since I have found my religion, it has changed the way I answer these questions. I no longer laugh but I am intrigued by these jokes. I now know how to respond to their curious nature. I want to inform and teach them about my religion and why it is so misunderstood. My hope is for my friends to see Judaism in a positive light. Coming to religious school was an immense learning experience for me. From learning about the Holocaust to the different types of religions and why they are followed. I also had the pleasure to meet some great friends who I have conversed with and learned about their experiences with Judaism. I've also learned about where they lived. Most importantly a trip I will never forget is Washington D.C. As a group we all came together and became a family sharing TAS with others around the country. We draw to a close in this chapter of our life, however we will never forget who we are and our religion. We don't know where life will take us or what will happen in the future, but by being Jewish, it will always unite us as one. Judaism is such a diverse religion and a culture like no other. The food is on a whole other level which will always win me over. The history behind it

reminds us that we will always prosper even through the hard times that seem bleak. I am now proud to say I am Jewish and I will say it with the utmost respect. This marks the end of the beginning for me. I will continue to follow Judaism with an open mind to new ideas. I will continue to take part in this amazing congregation and always do my mitzvahs. My havarah has been there since I was a child and I hope it keeps going so I can keep attending. I thank my family especially my mom and dad who forced me to go to religious school after long practices on the field. I now understand why they did this and am thankful for it. Judaism will always be there for me through failure and success.

## **Amanda Hirsch** ☆

As long as I can remember, Temple Ahavat Shalom has been my second home and the people here my second family. I started at Temple Ahavat Shalom before I was born. Most of my early memories were made here. Even before starting at Mommy and Me, I remember taking my sister to preschool here. I wanted to stay so bad, I would walk over to the art table, take off my sweater and attempt to join the other kids before my mom scooped me up and took me home. In Mommy and Me I made lifelong friends. Preschool, then Religious School, then Hebrew School, then Hebrew High, and now, Confirmation. Throughout those years, I was involved with the Temple more than just attending classes because my mom taught at the preschool where I loved to help. I would even fake a tummy ache so I could go to work with her. Aside from Temple, I was part of a Havarah. Many of the people in my Havarah have become my second “aunts, uncles, and cousins.” Furthermore, my dad plays on the softball team, which is fun to watch and allowed me to meet even more wonderful people.

My sister made her Bat Mitzvah look so fun and easy. Training for my Bat Mitzvah was tougher yet more rewarding than I could have imagined. On the day of my Bat Mitzvah, I was really nervous, but once I begun and said “please rise” and everyone stood up, I felt relieved and powerful because all those people were there for me.

The High Holidays are the time of year we are all most Jewish in a sense that we show up at temple in force, but it’s honestly my favorite part of the year, as a Jew, because I know I’m part of something, and everyone’s together, and I feel much closer to G-d. I love going to Temple on those days; even though I complain about getting up.

Since I’ve been at Temple for all of my life, it is my life, and it is very important to me. Even though I don’t have time to come every week, I wish I did because I have grown up with these people. They are like my family and I will always remember the impact they have made on me. We all got so close in Washington D.C. and if we could go back again, I think we would all take up that offer.

I couldn’t imagine my life without being Jewish, and even though this Confirmation marks the end of me being taught here, I know I’m going to continue my Judaism in college and join a University Hillel, wherever I end up.

I was lucky enough to go to Israel with the Temple two years ago. It was one of the best experiences of my life, even though some of us got really sick. During the times we were healthy, I was able to connect with my inner self there, and reinforced how I felt about being Jewish and a good person. It was also special that my grandma was able to go with us; since it had been her lifelong dream. It was great to see her face light up and sometimes cry at all the places we toured. I loved spending time with

everyone; especially Rabbi Lutz and Debbie.

I want to thank my parents for making me come to Hebrew School when I didn't want to and to my sister for setting a good example. I also want to thank my extended family for all their support and love; especially my family, who is not Jewish, yet supports me 100%.

Even though things were always changing here at TAS, one person who stayed consistent throughout my whole journey was Rabbi Lutz. I can't thank him enough for all his encouragement and words of wisdom. I am truly blessed to have the most wonderful Rabbi in the world.

## **Josh Issler** ☆

For the majority of those who don't know me, hello. My name is Josh Issler. I am deathly allergic to peanuts. Because of this allergy, I've lived my whole life with the motto "it's better to be safe than sorry." This year I've adopted a new saying. "It's better to be happy than safe."

I look around me and see rock stars stuck in white-collar jobs, I see actors teaching, and I see a lot of unhappy people. "Golden handcuffs", some say, "It's too risky", others say. Well, I say "Do what you love and don't look back".

Call me an idealist, that's fine. It's what I am, and I don't consider it an insult. But have you ever tried asking people what they do for a living? Have you ever followed up with a new question; why? I have. A lot of people can't think of an answer, or answer with "money." A few say it's because they love what they do. Those people are my idols; I want to have that answer when I grow up.

This year I've taken a lot more risks than I have in the past. I've taken harder classes, started hanging out with a new group of kids at schools, met a pretty girl, and went on crazy adventures with my friends. I can safely say that I did not live safely. And it was awesome. I love my life, and no, I am not sorry.

You guys know what I mean. I didn't know half of you before this year began, but then we went to DC. We met new people and had an awesome time. We took the risk of getting to know each other, and look how well it went. Although I'm not going to miss Hebrew School, I am definitely going to miss you and all the memories that we created this year. Especially that one with a few people in the bathroom of the capital building. You know what I'm talking about. It was way too windy.

To my classmates, don't forget your dreams. Don't get caught up in something that you don't like. You only have one life to live, make it worthwhile. In the words of Thoreau, "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

## **Zachary Kelfer** ☆

First, I would like to thank you all for coming, it means a lot to all of us. Now Confirmation has not always been this close knit group of kids that you see now, in fact before the D.C. trip most of us would only spare a hi to the others. Everyone had a set group of people they would be with at Confirmation, and we didn't need to spend time with anyone else. I'd like to tell you all that I loved Confirmation that last 4 years, I'd love to tell you that it was one of the most life changing experiences I have ever had, but that wouldn't be honest. Now, however, I do love Confirmation; I want to go every week I can, I want to see all the new friends I've made, I want to enjoy the last couple months. Yet now, it is over. It went by so fast, I remember like it was yesterday sitting in a room listening to three ex-rehab people telling me how terrible drugs are, I remember Alligator River, I remember Rick's "intro to Guitar Class." Well, you might

ask, that all seems fine and dandy but what did you actually learn from this class? Why should my children be confirmed? Simply put, I learned what I was going to believe in the future, what I would someday like to raise my kids with, and I learned more about Judaism than I had learned in all the years I had at Hebrew school. I realize now that I do appreciate Judaism, and I may not be the type of person who is going to go to every Shabbat service, I do want to at least attend the High Holy Days. I know I now would actually like to continue the tradition of Judaism in my family and help instill the values of Judaism in my children. Confirmation actually discusses the interesting things in Judaism, the contradictions, the morals, and the different beliefs in God. I personally believe in God, but I understand not believing in God. Confirmation has helped solidify some of my views in Judaism and helped me to decide the role religion is going to play in my life. I'd like to thank you all for coming and congratulations my fellow students!

### **Danielle Kent** ☆

I never wanted to write one of those typical sob story Confirmation speeches where I tell you all about how Judaism has saved my life and made me into the person I am today. Honestly, up until recently, I hardly felt a connection to Judaism. I went to the ECEC, attended Hebrew school, became Bat Mitzvah, and went through Confirmation without feeling that I truly belonged at Temple. I went to Temple for my friends and to appease my Mom, but it was mainly a hassle. I was hesitant to even attend the L'Taken trip, despite the stories I had heard from former confirmands, because I had no interest in a three day Jew-fest with random outbursts of song and dance. To some of you I'm sure that sounds like the best thing ever, but I digress. Anyway, with some pressure from my friends, my Mom, and the Rabbi, I decided to give L'Taken a shot and I am so thankful that I gave in. L'Taken brought our Confirmation class together by allowing us to see that we can make a change in the world. And by allowing us to spend every waking minute together in a hotel for four days, but that's another story. I think one of the most poignant workshops that I remember from L'Taken was one led by Donald H. Whitehead Jr., the author of a book called Most Unlikely to Succeed. He stood before us looking disheveled and dirty and spoke quietly into the microphone telling us his life story. From the beginning, most of us wrote him off as a homeless man who could not amount to much. As he continued to speak, though, he would slowly shed a layer of clothing every couple of minutes. His voice grew progressively louder and he gained poise with each word. When he finally shed his last layer of clothing, he was standing at the podium in a suit looking like a businessman off of Wall Street. His story was about how he had a history of substance abuse and how it had taken him from being elected by his high school as Most Likely to Succeed to a homeless shelter begging for food. When he had hit rock bottom and stood in line waiting for food, a volunteer said to him, "I'm glad you're here." As a homeless man he had been neglected for so long that simply hearing that his presence was appreciated was enough to get him on the track towards sobriety. He is now a successful author and a perfect example of how a person can completely turn their life around with just a little bit of love and support. When I returned home from Washington D.C. I was determined to do my part to help people help themselves, so I called the food bank MEND and they told me that they would love for me to volunteer. I was definitely expecting something a little more hand to mouth. I wanted the satisfaction of knowing that I was helping someone. But eventually I realized that helping someone is not about making me feel good. Helping someone is about knowing that you're making them feel good, otherwise it is a selfish act. So I now sacrifice my Saturday mornings to volunteer at MEND doing whatever they ask me to do. I mainly sort donations and sometimes help prepare food, all the while knowing that the small effort I am making is contributing to something greater than me and

in my efforts to repair the world and fulfill the Jewish mandate of Tikkun Olam, I have come to realize that Judaism has impacted my life more than I had ever thought it could.

## **Julia Kramer** ☆

“Truly great friends are hard to find, difficult to leave, and impossible to forget.”

L' Taken created a community of people who came together from all around the United States. It created a community made up of people who would have never met otherwise. A community of people who truly believe that making a difference in the world is their purpose and duty in serving not only their Jewish Community but other communities in need around the world. The first night we arrived, we walked around the dining hall introducing ourselves to the other Confirmation students, from other Temples in other states. New Jersey, Georgia, New York, Boston, Oregon, and even different Temples from right here in California, came together in one room to celebrate our weekend dedicated to Social Justice and Tikun Olam. The separate Temple communities from all over the United States came together as one to make a change and use our voices to speak to our Congressmen about the issues closest to our hearts. More than 200 of us scattered around the hotel with our computers, papers, pens, pajamas, coffee, and our determination to write the speeches we hoped would make an impact on our Congress. The once separate communities had become a family, a L'Taken community of teenagers whose goal was to prove to the world that we have voices, we do care about the issues in our society, we do care about our future, and we can make a difference. It didn't matter where we were from, we all had the same goal in mind, to make our voices heard loud and clear. Whether they're strangers or friends, there was a strong sense of community and family that was created during this experience. Our arms wrapped around each other, whether we knew each other's names or not, we rocked back and forth singing the songs that are sung by Jews everywhere, holding over 200 hundred candles up in the air, as if to tell the world, “we're here, and we are here to make a difference.” In Washington D.C. we really were each other's family, we took care of each other, we had once in a lifetime experiences with each other, and we created a connection with one another that can never be broken. I feel like all the years of Hebrew school, our Bar and Bat Mitzvah's, and our years of Confirmation were all leading up to this one culminating trip that really put everything into perspective. It showed me that a community and a family is defined by those who have one common goal, who are willing to support and be there for one another, and raise their voices together in unison. The friendships that have been created here are defiantly hard to find, impossible to forget, and one's that I refuse to leave. Thank you Confirmation class of 2011, I love all of you!

## **Jason Lauer** ☆

Wow!...Hebrew school sure has gone by fast. It feels like I just had my Bar Mitzvah a week ago. Although it feels as though I have blown straight through Hebrew School, I know that I definitely got my money's worth for the 5 years that I have been a part of TAS. Ever since day one, back in seventh grade, I have been learning things about my culture and about the rest of the world that I never knew existed. I have made new friends with many similarities, not just because we are both Jewish. And of those friends, I never really got to know most of them until this year, when we went to D.C. on our L' Taken trip, and shared many laughs and good memories with each other.

It's kind of weird to see how much people can change in 5 years. We have all grown to become such different kids than I had imagined. We all went through stages of popularity, unpopularity, good looks, bad looks, niceness, meanness, seriousness, and laid backness. But now, when I look at all of us, I just see one group of people who don't care what one another looks like, and who don't judge each other in any aspect, but rather, who have all grown to accept each other for who we all are and who like each

other based on our own individuality.

I see today, not like on my Bar Mitzvah, where it was all about me becoming an adult...but rather, a culmination of all the good times we have shared together. A realization that we all will grow up to become different people. We should remember one another, and be grateful for one another for whatever we all do with our lives.

For all the laughs and happy moments I have experienced with them, and hopefully future moments to come, I want to thank the Confirmation Class of 2011 for all they have done to shape me into who I have become today.

I would also like to thank all the teachers I have had here at TAS for guiding me to where I am now, and teaching me many things about Judaism as well as other worldly events.

I would also like to thank my parents for pushing me to go to Hebrew school for the past five years, and for everything else that they have done to make me who I am today.

Lastly, I would like to thank TAS for giving me the opportunity to celebrate my religion, and taking me through my Bar mitzvah, and now Confirmation.

## **Sarah Lazear** ☆

Something I am passionate about are the decisions teenagers make which can permanently affect their future. I believe it is important to encourage my peers to make smart decisions, which will make a beneficial difference in their lives. Through my experience of being in high school I have heard of people making those bad decisions such as dropping out of school or taking highly addictive drugs. I am not embarrassed to speak my mind on the subject of people making poor choices. Although I'm not perfect as a teenager, I feel it is important to share what I know with others.

I definitely don't choose all the right choices. I'm positive I'm not the only one who's not perfect. Judging from experience I have seen my peers decide on making damaging decisions. I feel obligated to educate others on why I think their decisions are not a good choice and then give them my reasoning.

I also have experience working with teenagers through my work at a free teen clinic as a teen staff member. I have seen horrible situations with teenage girls and boys; for example, girls getting pregnant at a young age, teens being afraid of having an STD. Most of their situations could have been prevented if they were taught effectively how to stay away from being put in those situations. I feel my job is helpful to a lot of people. I enjoy helping others, which I have realized throughout the time I have been working there. I feel I have learned a lot through my training and I think I have been educated enough to advise others.

In the past I hadn't realized that I have found it so important to help others. Recently though, I feel it is a passion of mine because when I hear of people making those mistakes I become educational. If I feel their decisions are not the right ones to make, I will share with them my opinion. If I were to make those decisions that I'm uncertain of, I would hope someone would give me their best advice as I would give to them. I don't necessarily like telling people what to do and I don't think giving them my opinion is considered being bossy, but I think it is more of me trying to help another. To me, the feeling of helping others is my greatest passion.

My beliefs may one day be answered, but I am sure that in the future my friends and I will be recalling the long discussions we had once had and share our new insights.

Despite my confusion about certain aspects within my religion I am very proud to be a Jew and I am proud to be the only person in my family besides my dad to become confirmed. I am pleased to be here with all my friends preparing to take on the world and its challenges. Thank you.

## **Rachel Lertzman** ☆

Think of the person you always want to be around. Imagine the group of people that make you laugh and feel good about yourself no matter if you're day was going well or not. Picture in your mind those who are always there for you and you are always there for them in return. Right now, I'm imagining my friends to fit all these definitions. My friends are my everything. Without them, I honestly do not know how my life would be and how I would survive all the challenges that are presented to me, this including those difficulties that come with Junior year. Yet behind the heavy curtain of the Junior year doom, there was so much light shining into my life, and this light source was always my friends. Of course, I've had friends since before this year, and I've been lucky enough to have been close friends with some people in my Confirmation class for some 9 years now. But not until last summer did I really understand the power of friendship. I was a CIT for 8 glorious weeks at Camp Alonim and I can say hands down it was the best experience of my life. I bonded with 73 other teenagers for 2 months like I never imagined was possible, and by the end of the summer, I knew I had made friends that I will call best friends for the rest of my life. I remember crying for days and even now, I still become slightly depressed every time I think about the amazing summer and how I wish I could go back to it. I feel this same way about our DC trip, L'Taken. I can confidently say that this trip was the second best experience of my life. It's hard to even explain why it was so magical. Perhaps it was the incredible hotel rooms, the awe of the historic political landmarks, the endless surprise birthday celebrations (we left the day after my birthday), the midnight tickle fights, or the active involvement in lobbying to Congressmen and Senators. But I think that out of all these amazing aspects that most definitely led to the excellence of the trip, I believe that the thing that made me love this trip the most was how close I got to all you wonderful people, the Confirmation class of 2011. Every single moment you could find me laughing at the next new inside joke we invented...Can I get a Hot Tub? What that means I really can't even tell you, but it was just so moving that I could get on an airplane with a group of kids that I never was really all that close with and the second we land, instantly we become a tightly knit family laughing so hard we cry, and simply enjoying each others company. It always amazes me how the people you feel the closest to are a lot of the time the people you became friends with the quickest. I remember we kept saying how "we're the best temple group here because we're the closest, all the other groups barely like each other," and I think that our family bond really was the key to the extraordinary experience I had and strengthened the power of the memories we will always share. This year, I've also created new memories and created friendships through being on TASTY board, going to NFTY events, and joining my school a Capella group. I mean, I only went to two NFTY events all year, and I became good friends with SO many people, that I miss all the time. More than half of my a Cappella group are seniors and in the last few days of school, we just cried and dreaded the thought of going through each day without seeing each other. In my choir, we sang this song titled, "It's so hard to say goodbye to yesterday," and these words apply to my life and to my friends in so many instances. The closer I get to people, the harder it becomes to accept the fact that all good things must come to an end at one point and that we must all move onto the future. From all my dear friendships, I've acquired separation anxiety. I have the hardest time saying goodbye to the people who have created the best memories of 11<sup>th</sup> grade with me, and those who always make me feel simply and genuinely happy. So, as you could imagine, I feel this same sense of separation anxiety leaving my years of Confirmation and leaving the people who helped me write one of my favorite chapters of my life. From this year, I learned about myself that it is my friends that serve as my true inspiration and drive to succeed in life. They make me want to be a good person and I always strive to make them proud. When

we leave friends, we don't lose them, and I don't plan on losing the friends I've made here. We leave this evening knowing that we have learned together and played together and created a friendship together that we will forever preserve in our memories. Through my sadness of leaving CIT summer, I take the same sadness with me in leaving Confirmation classes, but I must remember the most important phrase I have ever learned: "Do not cry because it's over, but smile because it happened." I smile right now, content to know that all the years we shared together did happen, and changed me as a person for the rest of my life. I love you guys, thank you.

## **Evan Lowell** ☆

Good morning. Before I begin this speech I would like to address two quick details. Number one, there are far too many people here that I care about deeply to thank everyone, so I would rather do so in private. Two, during this speech, I will be expressing my views regarding society and am using this time to communicate my ideas. Now onto my speech.

Thomas Jefferson once referred to a person's duty to their society as "a moral person, and every member of it is personally responsible for his society". Throughout my years of education and Jewish learning, I have learned many things. None were as important as discovering my beliefs about humanity and society thanks to my time with Rabbi Lutz. I believe that society as a whole, has repeatedly demonstrated that it not only fears, but cripples its own progress and advancement. This is not to say that I think people are innately bad, but rather I say this because I think there is hope. Society is slowly improving, but it seems every time we take three steps forward we take two backwards.

Despite our progress, there are still far too many major issues that are prevalent throughout society such as racism, sexism, classism, unjustified wars, genocides, abuse, and political and economic corruption. I recognize as I'm sure most of you do, that drastically changing even one of these monstrous problems will be difficult because they are rooted so deeply into our lives. I do wonder though why these issues have been allowed to develop to the extent they have. I think these issues stem from each person's influences on society as a whole.

Now logically, it makes no sense that 'bad' ideas of one or two people would ruin society for the rest of us. But unfortunately these ideas are like cancer in that they are hard to detect until they are too late; they spread rapidly; and their effects are irrevocable and devastating. These cancerous ideas weaken society as a whole and are broadcasted both consciously and subconsciously through propaganda, media, and legislation. I think that even if a few people have the most minute generalizations or ideas, they spread and accumulate, ultimately affecting the entire society. We take the various messages we receive to create our virtues and beliefs about how everything in life and the universe functions. This is how I think prejudice or discrimination develops within a society. We help perpetuate these assumptions and prejudices by simply breathing in the vast smog of images that surround us.

I believe the first true step to changing anything is by actively paying attention and becoming aware of these discriminatory and or prejudiced ideas and actions. Judaism has taught me to "leave the world a better place than I found it" and I implore all of you to do the same. I refuse to live in a society filled with such widespread hate and contempt that is hidden just beneath our noses. I believe that we, as Jews, are obligated to stand up against societal oppression and fight for a change. Of course, I don't expect anyone to drop their careers or dedicate their entire lives to altering societal stigmas, but next time someone makes a homophobic comment or uses a racial slur, don't ignore it. Because doing so only propagates the system of oppression and hate that cripples society's advancement towards a more equal, just, and free civilization. Thank You.



## **Nathaniel Pyle** ☆

I have been coming to TAS since I was in pre-school, so it has obviously helped shape who I am today. It has taught me numerous things not only about what it means to be Jewish, but also how to solve certain problems that may arise while one is growing up. Throughout Hebrew School and Confirmation I have been surrounded by amazing peers and teachers, who help me get through my day to day life. The friends and memories I have made with my fellow classmates will stay with me for the rest of my life and will be something that I cherish. Although I do have questions regarding the general idea of religion itself, I still consider myself to be Jewish. Judaism helps people obtain guidance and provides a solid foundation from which to navigate life's difficulties. The rich culture and history of this amazing people makes me proud to be able to say that I am a part of it.

## **Tyler Ross** ☆

Before I start I wanted to thank my parents, TAS teachers and Rabbi Lutz and Rabbi Shawna for their support over the past years. Without you I would not be standing up here today.

I started Hebrew school in the fourth grade. I was originally very reluctant to attend, not feeling a connection to the prayers, or Hebrew language. I saw the Sunday morning and Tuesday afternoon classes as a waste of my time. In fact, I managed to slack off so much that by the time my Bar Mitzvah rolled around, I was behind in my studies, I had to get extra tutoring for the prayers and my torah portion. Through some work of magic, I managed to memorize all of the Hebrew and meet all of the requirements for my Bar Mitzvah within the last few days, and led a successful ceremony.

After my Bar Mitzvah, I had always thought I would quit attending the "dreaded temple". However, for some reason I decided to keep coming. Throughout the next few years, I grew closer and closer to the temple class. The new curriculum, spanning from teenage issues to world conflicts, pulled me in with an interest I never had for the prayers, or for Hebrew.

I have learned important lessons from attending both Hebrew school and Confirmation classes. I now understand two things, I now feel connected to the Judaism, the traditions and values, between what I have learned at home and here at TAS. The other thing I have learned is that sometimes my parents can be right, when you are a child; it is impossible to see the big picture. I want to let my parents know that I too will make my kids to go to Hebrew school, it did help form values and build great friendships, thank you for making me attend.

These years of Confirmation all led up to the L'taken trip to Washington D.C., which was truly a life changing experience. The first thing I said to my parents when I returned from the trip was "I wish we had gone on that trip when we started temple, in 4th grade". The trip brought the class and Rabbi Lutz closer together, and I now feel more at home than I ever did at temple before. I have built lifelong friendships, and love all of the kids in my class. As I stand here today, ending my journey through Confirmation, I can honestly say that, despite my initial dislike of the course, I am sad to leave. The past few months in Confirmation have been incredible, and I am glad to have stayed in the class throughout the years.

## **Daren Shechtman** ☆

I am a Jew, and after the few years I have spent here in Confirmation Class, I'm now proud to say it. When I was younger, I wasn't exactly sure what it meant to be a Jew. I celebrated the High Holy Days, I went to Temple, I did what I thought it meant to be a Jew. But now I realize that thinking you're a Jew and believing you're a Jew are two entirely different things. Temple Ahavat Shalom has shown me that, before I attended Confirmation class here, I felt very distant from my religion. I never had a Bar Mitzvah and I spent very little time in Hebrew school when I was younger. Now just four years later, I feel closer

to my religion than ever before. I have grown close to my amazing class, full of wonderful new people I met just in the 8th grade. They treated me no different, I was a Jew among Jews, and I was not the odd one out of the bunch. I was where I was meant to be, with people who had the same questions as me, the same beliefs. I remember it vividly, when I walked into Confirmation class the first time, after weeks of my mom trying to convince me to go, I finally gave in and decided to try this out, I was skeptical at first, having more school after school, but it was nothing that I thought it was going to be. I remember walking into the office and meeting Oshrat. She knew I was kind of uncomfortable in a new Temple and showed me around a little. Then we finally came to my class, as we walked in, I saw my teacher, Terry Wunder. He was so energetic and friendly; this wasn't like any other teacher I had seen before? So I introduced myself to the class and sat myself down next to someone who would later become a really close friend of mine, Cole Gee. He and Jake Speyer showed me around the place, introducing me to new people, all the fun things you can do while on break, and I started to realize something. This wasn't like school at all, it felt like another home, and that's what it soon came to be. The classes I have taken over the years have taught me so much that I didn't know about my religion.. Everyone helped me understand and to learn, it was the most amazing learning environment, and especially a fun one too. I have had cooking classes where I have laughed so hard it made me cry, making amazing food that I never thought I would taste like a style of charoset from the middle East. Every class I was in I was having a blast, learning and becoming closer with my friends every time we met on Tuesday. Soon it didn't feel like I had to come back there every Tuesday anymore, it started to feel like I wanted to go back. Every time I would leave I would be thinking about the next time I would get to come back and what new things I would get to experience next time. Confirmation has brought me closer to Judaism than I ever thought I would be. Talking about life with other people my age who have the same problems or same ideas, thoughts, and questions, has shown me that were not alone out there in the world. And I have become closer than ever with my class. Now after the four years I have spent here, it is sad to say that our time together as a Confirmation class is coming to a close. But my time here has been amazing! Everything I have learned about my religion has brought me closer to being a Jew, and to myself. I now know what it means to be a Jew and I can now proudly say, I am a Jew.

## **Jacob Speer** ☆

I'm on the pursuit of happiness And I Know Everything That Shines Ain't Always Gonna Be Gold I'll Be Fine Once I Get It; I'll Be Good. Although not everyone likes the artist Kid Cudi, we should all be able to respect what he has to say; because we are all on the pursuit of happiness in one way or another. We may not realize it, but each and every day we subconsciously try harder and harder to reach happiness and each and every day it seems like we made no progress to achieving it. I used to believe that true happiness was unattainable, that we could only get a few short moments of it. Then I realized something, it's not whether you have true happiness for a long time, but rather if you enjoy the time you actually are happy. Recently I went to Washington D.C. with a group of my fellow confirmands and had a great time where I was able to more closely understand this country's intricate government and explore our nation's capital. Leaving D.C. I realized that was not what was important about this trip, what was more significant is how close me and my fellow confirmands got. We were able to return to L.A. and have more jokes than ever and we were constantly laughing and having a good time. And that's when I figured out when you are truly happy, true happiness is when you can sit in a room with a bunch of friends and have a huge smile on your face for no apparent reason. If you are able to smile while no one is saying anything, or while talking about absolutely nothing, then you are truly happy. I realized that those moments, the ones where my mouth hurts from smiling so much are the moments that have gotten me through high school, that will get me through college and will allow me to have a happy and healthy life. I honestly can't tell you that I'm always happy, but when I am, I enjoy every second of it because I know that this moment

is something to cherish and I recommend that each and every one of you sitting here tonight start enjoying the happy moments you have with each other because they won't last forever. Before I get off this bema, I'd like to thank all my friends, family, and teachers, for giving so many moments of happiness and always making me happy to come to temple.

Thank You.

## **Jake Speyer** ☆

With Judaism, it's always about the questions. With adolescence, it's always about the answers. Strangely, this leads to tension not only within the religion, but also with the culture, traditions, and teachings of Judaism – which is where many families (including mine) have experienced what is commonly referred to as “the rebellious teenager”. But what changed between: he was such a blessing when he was three years old, to only caring about The Rugrats and Little League, moving forward towards school, grades, girls, and stress? Identity. As a young child, my identity was given to me. I was granted any opportunity I could ever ask for in terms of sports, extra curricular activities, social life, or entertainment. If you happened to ask me what I identified with when I was 10, even after being fully enrolled in Jewish preschool and attending Sunday school practically ever since birth, I most likely would have joked about wanting to be Ron Weasley or Steve Jobs. No wait, I wasn't that intelligent back then – I would have said I wanted to be Bill Gates. Yeah, Bill Gates or Ron Weasley. In other words, I did not know myself or understand anything larger than myself. But surprising enough, the points in my life to which I recognize as transforming and creating my identity revolve entirely around Judaism.

The first comes from the most magical and life changing environment that I have been honored to ever experience – Camp Newman in Santa Rosa, CA. Over the past seven summers I have been involved in programs that have educated about homelessness, AIDS, Israel, gossiping, the socio-economic structures of countries worldwide, and much much more. But it wasn't until this past summer, in a program called Avodah (which is Hebrew for “Work”) that I first began to understand what my identity is. During one of the hottest summer days in the middle of the Summer, I snuck to the top of the camp onto a water tower with one of my best friends, Andrew Young. Conversing over about four Israeli chocolate bars, the ones with the pop rocks inside, we began to talk about our belief in God and the role that God has within our lives. While I was, and still am uncertain as to what power is beyond us, for the first time in my life I realized that God is not a being that controls our daily activities, life or death, floods, or lightning from the sky, but simultaneously the most incredible and powerful thing that I could ever fathom. Now it wasn't until about four months later during a National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) event, once again sitting on top of a Jewish camp – this time Camp Hess Kramer in Malibu – that my thoughts began to return and solidify regarding God. I have recognized that God exists, that I can see and touch God, and that my prayers do not go unanswered. Take a second to look around. This ark, this stage of worship, this sanctuary; it is not a gateway between us and something above; it is a hearth for our Jewish community. Furthermore, the connection that we have to one another is not only where God exists, but it in itself is God. We are truly made b'tzelem elochim (in God's image). There is a song that we as a Confirmation class learned when we were young. We sang, “look into the eyes of someone next to you. Look into their eyes and see their N'shamah. Look into the eyes of someone next to you. Look into their eyes and say, Halleluiah”. Look into the eyes of the person sitting next to you. If you look deep enough, you'll see a reflection of yourself – an image of God. Another example is the Mourner's Kaddish: a prayer that is said as a community to recognize the life of someone who has recently passed. This is not a modern interpretation of the prayer, but even historic translations show that the words that we say after someone has just died are words of praise, happiness, and healing for those who are left behind. During the Amidah, the heart of our worships, we pray to recognize our ancestors, to remember our traditions,

and to give reverence to what is holy in our lives, just to start.

Without the help of many people in my life, I would not be here today believing strongly in what I believe in, with a firm foundation under my feet. To begin, I would like to show my appreciation for all of the educators within this institution. Temple Ahavat Shalom has always been a home for me since preschool, and I know that will never change. Specifically, I would like to show my appreciation for Sonia Lieberman. Ever since Aleph (fourth grade Hebrew school), Sonia has spearheaded my strength within Judaism and my strive to keep learning and developing my thoughts. Thank you to all of the educators here, you have been my relentless guides. Additionally, I would like to recognize my parents. Mom, Dad, life gets tough and I know how hard it is for you two. I love you, and thank you for all of the opportunities that you have and continue to give me. None of your efforts go unnoticed. Finally, I would like to recognize all of my peers within NFTY, the URJ, and my Confirmation Class. We've made it, but let's not let this be the end. Keep the swag alive, and always remember what we have learned together and know that we'll always be best of friends.

I used to firmly state that I believe in Judaism as a culture, not a religion. But now I believe in almost the contrary. I do not light the Shabbat candles regularly, you won't find me saying the Sh'mah every night before bed, and in all honesty I don't think I've fasted for Yom Kippur ever. But between Jewish camp, Jewish leadership organizations, and incredible opportunities focusing around Judaism including Temple Ahavat Shalom, I have begun to recognize my developing identity. While Judaism is always about questions and adolescence about the answers, I have recognized that to discover the self, some questions need to go unanswered.

My name is Jake Speyer. I am a teenage boy, I am a Junior, I have red hair, and I love being Jewish!

## **Naomi Weisz** ☆

"Friendship... is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything" – Muhammad Ali. Over the course of the year, we confirmands have learned about social action, mitzvot, comparative religion, God – but beyond anything else, we have learned about being a Jewish community. As much as I regret to admit it, before this year most of us in this class were not exactly close friends. Even after being in the same Hebrew school classes for 9 years or more, in some cases, we had never had a bonding experience that truly connected us to one other and to our foundation of Judaism. And now all of a sudden, in our very last year of attending TAS as students, this phenomenal opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. arises. I'm pretty sure everyone here knows enough about the trip without me summarizing it, so in a nutshell, it was amazing. We met Jews from all across the country, learned the reform Jewish stance on many political issues, but most importantly we had the chance to become great friends. I dare say that all of us really got closer and more comfortable with one another. Looking back, I cannot imagine my life had I not made the decision to go to D.C. It sounds ridiculously cliché, but I know my fellow students know exactly what I'm talking about. We formed a community, and I'm pretty sure that is the entire concept of being Jewish.

Growing up in a family of Holocaust survivors, the Jewish community has always been a priority to me. My ancestors were annihilated for their religion, because out of fear, nobody was willing to act upon Hitler's insanity. This contributes greatly to the reason why the Jewish people are so intent on social action. We want to be the ones standing up for those that do not have enough willpower and don't deserve to stand alone, and we want to be the ones that are always tolerant and open-minded to change.

Going back to what I said earlier about making friends and becoming a community, I believe that the fact that we are a progressive people and we do want coexistence (not to say other religions don't), are the reasons we are able to bond so easily with others. Our values and traditions bind us together so that we may be best friends with people that share our religious beliefs, and people that have completely opposite or nonexistent religious beliefs. No matter where a person's values lay, Jews have some amazing affinity for making friends with everybody and anybody. Food and friends are pretty much all we need.

Overall, I know the year was not all about the D.C. trip, but to me, that pretty much sums it up. I learned some Jewish perspectives that I had no idea even existed, made new friends, took way too many pictures, bonded immensely with my classmates...but in the process I basically confirmed myself as a Jew. All of us there formed a community. And to those best friends that I've had forever that may not have gone on the trip (Rachel Goodwein!), this year has provided just another year for us to be the best of friends and see each other every week. The pride and happiness that this entire Confirmation year has given me both when I'm at temple and when I'm basically anywhere, confirmed in my mind who I am: that I am Jewish, I am proud to be Jewish, and I will be Jewish for every single moment of the rest of my life. And I hope to always keep in touch with this small, happy, Jewish community of confirmands both on Facebook, and in my heart.

Congrats class of 2011! And thank you.

**“It's Ways Are Ways Of Pleasantness And All It's  
Paths Are Peace”**

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