

# Confirmation Reflections 2015

May 23, 2015     5 Sivan 5775

*“The Torah Is A Tree Of Life For  
Those Who Hold Fast To It, And  
Those Who Uphold It Are Happy”...Book Of Proverbs*



## **Temple Ahavat Shalom**

Barry M. Lutz, Senior Rabbi  
Jennifer Roher, Cantor  
Shawna Brynjegard-Bialik, Rabbi  
Gail Karlin, President



## Brian Card

Hi, I'm Brian. I've been attending Temple Ahavat Shalom since Kindergarten. I've been coming here once a week, on different days depending on my age, for 12 years, along with my peers and some of my best friends. All of us have grown up with each other to get to this moment.

All those lessons we sat through, learning Hebrew, having our B'nai Mitzvah, meant way more than just two hours of us listening to a teacher. It taught us a culture.

Part of knowing all the stories and values of our past are definitely culture, but the two hours once a week and a weekend once a year was just enough time for us to develop the super weird relationships and friendships we have with each other. No one else understands what we mean when we tell them we're going to Hebrew School. We gained more than those lessons all these years. We gained character, opportunities to be ourselves, endless friendships, stories, and much more. Everything we have experienced and learned here, we will take with us to the next chapter of our lives whether it be college, or another path and will continue to be with us for our entire lives and maybe even influence other people's lives through our actions.

L'Taken has also taught me a lot. I feel like I really did make an effort to save the world. Ever since I lobbied for renewable energy sources to help persuade the vote of our congressman, I felt satisfied knowing that I made an effort that would affect our children and future generations. I'm enlightened that I did that. It was so mature. Everyone tells us that one person can make a difference. People continue to talk about individuals who have to inspire us to go and do it ourselves, like it's a passion of ours, but a good amount of my peers and I have not been able to relate to those programs. This program puts us in the position to choose what we are passionate about and make a difference, and now I truly believe that an individual has the power to affect millions.

Well, with power comes responsibility. Just as I can help change the world for the better, I can change it for the worse. All of you are listening to my words, what I have to say. I have the power up here on the bima to influence your mood and day with words coming out of my mouth that can potentially be anything. They can be destructive or influential. Prior to L'Taken, I thought my actions were insignificant. I didn't notice that they define who I am. Now, I stand here and want to inspire you to use your power that you have just by being yourself to influence others and the people and world around you positively. Thank you to all my teachers that I've had here, thank you Rabbi Lutz for L'Taken and everything else you've done for me, thank you all for coming out here and listening, and thank you TAS for helping build a strong foundation for me and building a good part of who I am as a person, for all my memories, for some of my best friends, and my connection to Judaism.



## Daniel Covelli

What do I believe in? It's a good question. I believe in a lot of things. I believe in the morals taught through the Torah, I believe in economic equality, I believe knowledge is the key to success. These beliefs all define who I am but become irrelevant when you look at the bigger picture.

Time seems to be slipping through my fingers. After the SAT, summer will come, then it will go, school will start back up, and before I know it, I'll be sitting through my first college lecture. Only yesterday, did it feel like the first awkward days of high school. Since then, I have physically and mentally grown from a child into a young adult. The freedoms and pressures of self-autonomy will soon be thrown upon me. From then on life will come and go. I am fully aware at 17-years-old that life is short. I'm sure many of you in this room know that already. Maybe this fear of the unknown is why we are here; maybe it's why we cry or why we love. But for me coming to terms with my mortality has brought me to one conclusion that my only goal in life is to live a happy one. What makes a person happy is subjective to the individual, and for me, happiness is achieving a goal and being able to know that I did something.

I recently have come to acknowledge this as an important goal in my life. This realization struck me during L'Taken. Besides waking up an hour late and constantly having the Rabbi on my back, L'Taken was a powerful experience for me. Not only did I get to visit our Nation's Capitol, but I was given an opportunity to make a difference. While deciding on a topic for the speeches we would give to our congressman, one topic stood out from the rest. It struck me like lightning, I said to myself, "I want to leave the earth knowing that I at least tried save it." Lobbying for renewable energy was my vehicle for fulfilling this new goal I had set for myself. My partner Brian Card and I gave our speech to our congressman, and we were promised that Brad Sherman's vote would be in favor of The Renewable Energy and Efficiency Act. Knowing that I had done something, however small it was, made me happy. I left D.C. with a genuine sense of fulfillment.

Whether it be L'Taken, assisting teachers on Sundays, Tuesday classes, or retreats, TAS has provided me with happiness and a connectedness to the Jewish community. From 1<sup>st</sup> grade on, TAS has come to symbolize something much more than just a synagogue. The people I have met along the journey to this very moment have changed me in a fundamental way. Not only have my classmates and I grown up together, we have created a bond I hope is never broken. As I go on to adulthood, I will remember TAS; I will remember it for making me happy. Thank You.



## Gillian Evenas

Hello, my name is Gillian Evenas. I have been attending Hebrew School here at Temple Ahavat Shalom since 4th grade. Ever since I was young, my parents have always encouraged me to go to Hebrew School so that I could develop my Jewish identity. Part of attending Hebrew

School was preparing for my Bat Mitzvah. While studying, I would always procrastinate and tell myself that I just wanted to give up. Looking back on this wonderful moment in time, I see the significance of this event in my life. I am so glad that I followed through with my decision to continue to study the Jewish traditions. Being able to share that with my family and close friends was an amazing experience. Becoming a Bat Mitzvah symbolizes becoming a young woman in the Jewish community. I feel that this also marks a point in time when my relationship with "God" should have become stronger. This did not happen. I was encouraged by my mother to have a relationship with God, but I never felt the importance to. As of right now, I still do not believe in God, nor am I sure that there is a God. My identity as a Jew is not defined by my belief in God; rather, it is defined by the manner in which I lead my life, the people I surround myself with and the actions I take. Whatever there may be out there, I think that my connection to the Jewish community, my heritage and my culture are what matter most.

On April 3, 2012, my home had been vandalized by two of my best friends who attended my Bat Mitzvah, sat at my dinner table with my family, and met my grandmother, a survivor of the Holocaust. There were swastikas and the word "Jew" (as if that's a bad thing) in maple syrup on my front porch. I felt targeted for something that I cannot control, for something that I take pride in. Almost 70 years after this atrocity, I sat with my father, scrubbing swastikas off of my own home. This was a huge slap in the face, but as I look back now, I see how ignorant some people can be. I will have to face these kinds of incidents throughout my entire life, but they will make me a stronger person. Although this event does not define me, I definitely learned more about my Jewish identity. I learned the importance of having strong ties to the history of my family and knowing where I come from and what my family has endured. I also learned that there is anti-Semitism everywhere and it is up to me to empower myself and not let events like these affect me but rather allow me to learn and grow.

Another event that I am very grateful for, is the opportunity I had to go to Washington D.C. with my Confirmation class as a part of the L'Taken Program. Throughout the year, we learned about the difference between social action and social justice and how we, Jewish teenagers, can make a difference in our communities. This was probably one of the most influential experiences I have had so far. Being in a historical place with people I have grown up with was amazing, and being surrounded by Jewish teenagers from all over the country who have the same interests as me was pretty inspiring. I was exposed to issues and topics that I would otherwise not have been introduced to in depth outside of this program. This really inspired me to want to continue my studies of these topics when I go to college and eventually pursue a career in.

Throughout my time at Temple Ahavat Shalom, my relationships with Clergy members have grown. Rabbi Lutz, Cantor Roher, Barb, and Rabbi Shawna have all influenced me to become a better person. They continue to encourage me with my growth as a Jewish individual. I want to thank you for your help, guidance, wisdom, encouragement, knowledge, and dedication. Thank you, Mommy and Daddy, for pushing me to continue my Jewish journey. And to my friends in the Confirmation Class of 2015, I have enjoyed growing up with you and watching all of us become wonderful and unique individuals. I wish you all the best and continued success in all that you do.



## Arleigh Frumes

Hello, everyone. I'm honored to be here tonight, I never thought I would be standing here with so many amazing people that have shaped my life in so many ways. Tonight, I am going to ask you some questions.

Who is the person that helps you without hesitation when you need help?  
Who is the person that cares  
for you when you are ill and comforts you when you are sad?  
Who is the person happier than you when knowing you are happy?  
Who is the person feeling sad when seeing you are suffering?  
Who is the person encouraging you when you feel helpless?  
Who is the person that is always with you when you feel lonely?  
Who is the person that tells where you should go next when you are lost?  
The answer is a friend.

A friend is the person who you can talk about everything with.  
A friend is the person who understands you most;  
a person who you want to be in a good state.  
A friend is the person you will be thinking of,  
their loyalty, and the days you've spent with them.  
A friend is the person who will share the happiness with you when they are happy;  
a person who loves you with all of your flaws.  
A friend is the person who said to you: "cry on my shoulders" when you cried,  
and the person who is with you through thick and thin.  
A friend is the person who will support you even though the whole world  
has deserted you.

Friendship is something that we cannot buy,  
it is only one small part of your life, but can change your whole life.  
With friendship, you will feel the world is so bright, and so beautiful, you will be happy.  
With friendship, you will start cherishing your life, loving your life,  
and at the same time you will hope no matter where they are, your  
friends will be fine and when you are not there by their side, they will take good care of  
themselves. Even a tiny thing will remind you of everything.  
With friendship, your world is different.

My life at TAS has given me the opportunity to have these kinds of friends in my life. Without them I would not be the person I am today. We have fostered friendships since Kindergarten. They have stood by me through various tough situations in my life, such as my Bat Mitzvah, disagreements with my amazing mother, and most importantly they have supported me through my feelings of self-doubt. We have bonded together

through Confirmation, L'Taken, and all the drama high school brings. I know when I come here on a Tuesday night, I will be greeted by a family who will tease me, challenge me, and encourage me.

A good example of that would be, presenting our PSA earlier this year. In the beginning, some of us were just there to work on a project. By the end, having spent hours together, addressing a controversial issue, our passions were inflamed and our friendships were strengthened. I am blessed to count these people amongst my close friends.

I am honored to have grown up in this community. My entire life I have been surrounded by amazing friends, teachers, and clergy. You have all shaped me in more ways than I can express. I am forever grateful to be a member of the TAS family.



## Chandler Gee

Good morning, today is truly an amazing day for me and my fellow confirmation class members. At a time like this, it is very important to look back and see what this temple has done for my life. I have been at Temple Ahavat Shalom for as long as I can remember, and since I started here until now, I have changed a lot. Being a member here has done so much for me as a person. It has taught me lessons that will benefit me for the rest of my life.

One of the lessons I have learned is to always give back. Through Ahavat Shalom, I have done volunteering from mitzvah day to the many charities that come by and this has shown me how easy and fun it can be to make a difference for somebody. I'll carry this with me for the rest of my life and will always try to give back.

Not only has this amazing temple inspired me to be a better person, but so have all the amazing people of the congregation that lead by example and make me want to better myself. I have seen the people here, and all the amazing things they have done, which makes me believe that I can do great things as well. One person I have admired for as long as I can remember is Rabbi Lutz. Rabbi is one of the most amazing people I have ever met. He has led me and my family through all the milestones in our Jewish lives, and he has always been calm, cool, and collected like no one I have ever met before. No matter what the situation is, he handles it with ease, and no matter what questions I ask about Judaism, he always answers in a way that makes everything seem so clear and always comes from a truly neutral stand point.

With my 17 years of knowing Rabbi I don't think I have ever seen him upset. He is a role model that I know I can always look up to and hope to have the character that he has, which is why I admire him so much. He is not the only one in our congregation to act like this. No matter who I encounter at TAS, they always seem to be such pleasant and understanding people. Like Ilysa Cooperman for example. Coop has been amazing to me since the first time I met her. She was always so fun to be around and always treated me and my brother with respect. She was one of the first people to push me to act like an adult and take care of certain tasks on my own.

There are so many amazing people that belong to TAS, and as I look out, I see amazing people no matter where my vision lands. Which is why I would like to take some time now to turn to the people around you and thank them for setting such a great example for me and everyone else in our congregation, you all motivate me and my peers to be the best we can be. Take some time to look back and be thankful for what we have here and thank the neighbors around you.





## Eden Glaser

Hello everyone. My name is Eden Glaser. I'm the type of person who likes to talk a lot about things that are important to me. Be it Judaism, Orphan Black, or the inequality inherent in the English language, I have a lot to say. Thus, the freedom I have in crafting this speech is

virtually unbearable as I cannot choose any *one* thing that I feel passionate enough about to share. For those of you know me, you know I have a fervent passion for being articulate. So now that I said that, and for most of you, that's all you know about me. I guess my next task is to prove my eloquence and extrapolate upon the idea that I think I know what I'm saying.

The thing is this: our world is arbitrary. Religion, television shows, prescriptive grammar rules, and everything in between really don't have a reason for being the way they are. Granted, this is not a revolutionary realization in the scope of all human thought. Yet, it is quite the revelation for my sixteen-year-old self. Let's talk about opposites because they don't really make sense to me. Dogs and cats? Chocolate and vanilla? I mean, I don't think either of these pairs are diametrically opposed. Dogs and cats have a lot in common: four legs, soft fur, and a knack for being so adorable that we are willing to bring them into our homes and treat them like family. Cocoa beans and vanilla pods are both brown dicots that can be transformed into some really good ice cream. So why do they have to oppose each other? Why do we insist on ignoring the vast similarities between things and focus solely on what sets them apart?

I steadfastly believe in the existence of non-duality. Sure, black and white are opposite; the complete lack of and complete presence of visible light, respectively. However, when we apply these terms to morality, we like to ignore the fact that gray exists. Thus, as a result of our arbitrary classifications, gradients are ignored; people are marginalized. This is an issue. If we step back and look at humanity as a whole, it is easy to point out the things we have in common. People all exist in the gray. We cannot be polarized. People cannot be opposed because there is too much middle ground between us.

I find it rather irksome that people are classified by arbitrary distinctions. Discrimination based on gender, sexuality, religion, skin color, and others – which all exist on a gradient, mind you, is such a large problem. Prejudice is societally ingrained, our brains don't have resources to realize what we are fed about others is practically insane. Thus, in our culture, horrific discrimination is sustained. The truth is simple; our human tendency to divide is innately inane.

If there is anything I have learned this year between D.C., God-talks, and the International Baccalaureate Program, it is this: I will not stand for arbitrary classifications of people. People are people. And because I am using this forum to vent my beliefs about things I wish were different, I ask you all, none of you are exempt, to keep an open mind. Don't *change* your mind because some sixteen-year-old decided to be indignant, just never forget to keep it open and accepting.

I am concluding my speech with lyrics from Kimya Dawson's *Complicated*. Indulge me, and please act as if they were written for you because a reminder never hurts. "To make this world work, it takes all different kinds. We all have different tastes, different strengths, and different minds. So it doesn't make sense to generalize. And it doesn't make sense to judge with our eyes. We need more compassion, we need to be kind. If you open your heart, you might like what you find." Thank you.



## Alexander Goldbloom

Experience. This is what has shaped me into the person that I am today. Obviously, I don't have as much experience as others, as I am only 16-years-young. Even as a 16-year-old, I understand that life is indeed fleeting and that no one lives forever. Being that our time is short, it's important to me that my time isn't wasted. This means that I don't want to spend my time doing things that don't benefit me or that I don't find valuable.

Each person finds value in and enjoys things differently than any other person, so often one person's wants and needs come into conflict with another. We live in a world of compromise. Being that this is the case, I try to find value in everything and anything I do rather than only doing things that I predetermine to be what I "want" in an experience.

The joy in my life comes spontaneously and randomly, not in situations that I have planned out for my own enjoyment. There are over seven billion people on this planet, and to assume that I have the power to create my own experiences would mean that I somehow have the power to control and deny all of the wants and needs of every other person that would cross my path – which is absolutely ludicrous.

I thank my parents for making me do new things that I didn't want to do. Without this, I would not have been able to discover what I do enjoy to do. I wouldn't have a love for reading, or fishing, or eating salad without the help of my parents. Without my parents, I never would have been made to go to TAS as a child and learn about Judaism, which has become a large part of my life. Here at TAS I have learned to lead my life in the manner that I do and I have formed the bonds that lead to my most cherished friendships. Beyond the individual things that I learned to enjoy, I also discovered how I can develop as a person and live an exciting life by being open to enjoying what comes my way.

How does this all relate to living a Jewish life? Well, often times, for one reason or another, people are prevented from pursuing their goals and enjoying their lives. They live in poverty, or don't have access to health care, or their rights and liberties are limited. Basically, there are numerous lives that are not allowed to be experienced to their full potential. During our trip to D.C., we spoke with our elected officials in an effort to work towards social justice. As we are able to live our lives any way we choose, we as Jews have a duty to make the lifestyle available to all people.

I don't believe that a God exists, especially one who helps people. Now, the IDEA of God most definitely does exist. An idea of justice and righteousness and loving kindness is something that is present in the mind of any Jew who was made to attend Sunday school by their parents. Now this idea is something that we as Jews can exemplify through our beliefs and actions. Like I said before, God doesn't help people-we do. We have the power to improve the lives of those around us through any means possible. And having the ability to do something that brings good into the world necessitates that we must utilize this ability.

Though it took me a very long time to figure out what points I wanted to make in

this speech, I didn't want to drone on for long. The world we live in is chaotic and things rarely go the way we plan them. This is why we, well, at least I, must live a life that seeks out formative and joyous experiences rather than a life that feels unfulfilled due to idealist expectations that could never truly be achieved. Furthermore, we must also strive to both eradicate and prevent the further development of the environment that we live in today, where people are unable to have gratifying lives due to limits that have been imposed upon them. So what I've tried to get at is simple – go with the punches that are sent your way and help those who have been knocked down already. Thank you.



## Kayla Hamburg

Love. Love has always been my favorite emotion because I believe it is the most complex. It is the only emotion that I can think of with a positive and negative connotation. Love is part of human nature; everyone loves someone or something. Love is essential to peace, prosperity, and happiness. I love a lot of things and a lot of people. I love my entire family, I love my closest friends, I love my pets, I love music, I love photography, I love the beach, I love Disney, I love camp, but a very big interest of mine is theatre.

I enjoy being on stage and seeing the audience enjoy what I am doing and appreciate how hard I have worked. Even being on stage is a part of wanting love, striving for love. People that are on stage are there to get other's affection and attention, not that they don't get enough, but they want more. A good example, someone I always loved is Marilyn Monroe. People hear her name and think of all the bad decisions she made, but in reality the only thing she ever wanted was love, and I don't see how that is bad, she did whatever it took to get her name up in lights and to be remembered. Isn't that what all of us want?

I think love is strong enough to solve most of the world's conflicts, past, present and future. With love, war between people could be prevented. With love there would be less homeless, poor, starving, abandoned people in parts of the world. With love there could be more life. If we all just took a little more time to stop thinking about ourselves, we would realize how amazing the rest of the world could be with a little bit more love and compassion. Tikkun Olam. Repair the world.

This year when I went on the L'Taken trip with this Temple I decided to lobby for the concept of torture. I'm not sure who's aware of this but there are war prisoners in parts of the world that are being tortured to give up information about plans their people had. Yes, maybe these people committed crimes, and yes maybe they killed a lot of people, but guess what, they have a mother, they have a spouse, and they have a child that is waiting for them to come home. These people feel love and while they made some bad, maybe even inhumane decisions, they don't deserve to be treated as less than anyone because Btzelem Elohim, we are all made in the image of God. We are all equal, we all feel, we all think, we all LOVE. That's why I choose that topic to support because I think it needs the most help; I think the government needs to address the basic hierarchy of needs before it can begin to think about anything else.

Something else I love is being Jewish. I am so lucky to have been raised in this community. I'm so lucky to be able to go back to camp every summer and learn life lessons. I'm so proud to say that I am Jewish, I was born Jewish, I had a Baby Naming ceremony, I had a Bat Mitzvah and now I'm being Confirmed. While attending Hebrew School here I have learned so much, not only about my religion, but how my religion connects to my everyday life and how I can use the concepts of Judaism for the rest of my life. I feel that without being so connected to my religion I wouldn't be the person I am today. During Confirmation Class this year, we were able to examine different ideologies,

and even after learning about so many different ways to live my life, I choose to live with Jewish ideologies and traditions. I love the culture, and the traditions, and the stories and God. In this religion, love is a very highly discussed topic, in every story, song, or concept; you can always relate it to love.

“Measure your life in love.” This is a line from the song “Seasons of Love” from *Rent the Musical*. This quote really stands out to me because we should all measure our life in love. We don’t need to measure in daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee, in inches, in miles or in strife, we should measure in love. When it comes down to it, all you need is love to make you happy. Love is what life is made of.



## Shane Harrington

Hi, my name is Shane Harrington, and I am seventeen-years-old. You know, I cannot believe that I am already being confirmed: It's only been a few weeks since I started Hebrew School, right? Before I came to Temple Ahavat Shalom, I was in attendance at Temple

Ramat Zion. Throughout my years there, the group of kids in my grade started getting smaller and smaller until it got to the point that I would be the only kid at class every few weeks. This didn't discourage me from wanting to stay though, but my parents insisted on moving me to TAS. I remember complaining that I did not want to have to deal with going to Hebrew School twice a week instead of just once. Despite my complaints, I started my first year at TAS in 4th grade. I cannot imagine what would have happened if my complaints were heard and I didn't end up going here, and I'm glad that I don't have to. Now, I could go on forever explaining why it was a good decision coming to TAS and how it has changed my life, but that's not the point I'm trying to get across.

In the seventh grade, my family started to look for a new house to live in. Of course, I was opposed to the idea of moving. How could I leave the house I grew up in? How could I leave all the memories behind? Well, let me tell you, I did not want to hear the answer to those questions. Yet, instead of getting answers, I got a new house: a fantastic house – not to mention, my own room. After living in it for the past four and a half years, I have nothing but good things to say about the place. If my intention is not yet clear, I can name a couple more examples. Joining the Cross-Country Team in ninth grade and cutting my hair short last year.

All these are bigger, more obvious examples, but they are in no way the most important. A simple change of mind can be just as powerful, just as influential. Well, there it is. Change. I have always been afraid of change, and as I get older I can see that this is a very bad thing to be afraid of. My parents won't always be able to make the decisions for me, so I cannot let myself lose the opportunity to bring about change. And this isn't an epiphany I had last night, I've struggled with this for a long time, but it's a good thing I have. The problem has forced me to take everything into consideration, especially the things I don't agree with. I've started to question my own thinking to truly understand what I believe in, and it has paid off in more ways than I can explain. I am more confident in myself to accept all point of views, especially when making a decision that could change my life.

If it wasn't noted before, all of the examples I gave earlier of changes I went through were all fully dependent on my parents. If it weren't for them showing me that change isn't all bad, I might not see the world as I do now. A wisdom that I am lucky to have been given, for it can only prove helpful in my quest into the world. I'll never be able to thank you enough. For everyone else in attendance, keep an open mind, it comes in handy. Thank you.



## Myahn Haroush

A Rabbi recently told me a beautiful story about how the Jewish community is a long chain of history connected by stories. He discussed how this chain is and has always been unbreakable: sturdy throughout and never once damaged. I tried to imagine this perfect chain, and put faces to the links that brought our community together, but I realized that I faced an internal conflict: our chain of history and community is not perfect—and that is why the Jewish community has been able to prevail time and time again. Throughout our history, the Jewish people have had the strength of our chain tested, and each time, the chain stayed connected, proving that we are a united people who can withstand the most arduous and scarring pain. We have always *been* the group at a disadvantage, the victims of an inherent hatred and of oppressive conditions.

Within the last century, millions of Jewish people have fled these conditions in search of a better life in America. And within that century, we have never forgotten the pain that we faced, and that, unfortunately, we still face today. The Jewish community has always remembered, and has always recognized its position as a disadvantaged group. We fought against anti-Semitism after the Holocaust, and stood by the sides of Black Civil Rights leaders in the 1960s. We were their brothers and sisters, fighting as people with the same experiences.

As we move further and further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jewish people have prospered. While we only represent 2% of the US population, Jewish people make up 25% of the 400 wealthiest Americans. 46% of Jews earn more than \$100,000 a year, compared to 19% among all Americans. While this new generation of Jewish people has risen up in social ranks, simultaneously we have tended to distance ourselves from people struggling in the country that we call home. No longer are civil rights as much a priority of the Jewish people as a whole as they once were. Fewer people are standing up to injustice with those that sacrifice their lives day in and day out, fleeing harm and brutality as fighters. Unfortunately, the individuals and organizations that have are less and less representative of the Jewish people. We promise to never forget. But have we forgotten? Have we abandoned the people we used to link arms with in solidarity?

As one of the most privileged groups in American society that adamantly stands for social justice, it is the *duty* of the Jewish people to recognize the disadvantage we have faced in our past and build upon that to help others in their fight for civil rights in America today. It is our duty to embrace our imperfect chain, and strengthen it with the links of others, creating a community built on our past and made for a future of justice.





## Adam Howard

Throughout the history of mankind's existence, there have been ambitious men and women searching for a true purpose and trying to find the meaning of life. And I wish I could tell you that there is one answer, one unifying idea that ties together the entire force of the world – but I can't.

There is no true meaning of life because purpose is relative to the individual, and even if someone miraculously found a single true meaning, there would at least be one person there to disagree. Life isn't about trying to find meaning or purpose; it's about what you leave behind for the world to remember.

Every single one of us has a story, and it's being written every single day. The most beautiful thing in the world to me is the fact that there are so many people in this world, and each new person you meet knows something that you have never heard about before. This has helped me find my purpose in life, which is filmmaking. I want to capture as many stories as possible and turn them into art pieces that last in the world forever. This is my calling. In a nutshell, I will be a storyteller for a living. Not only telling my own stories or stories of those I meet along the way, but stories I get to craft around characters I create. The purpose of filmmaking, although it is often lost in translation today, is not to make as much money as you can and regurgitate sequel after sequel after sequel, nor is it solely to provide entertainment for a generation that is in a constant need for it. The real purpose of it is to tell stories. To teach lessons. To capture the beauty of our world through a unique lens and to allow it's meaning to be interpreted for eternity. Sounds exactly like Torah, doesn't it?

I now quote one of my personal favorite films of all time, *American Beauty*. "I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever. Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember... I need to remember... Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it, and my heart is just going to cave in."

As much of a struggle as it is for so many of us to find a purpose in life, this quote can help you. The world is full of beauty and with beauty comes opportunities to become a better person, because once you can recognize that beauty, you naturally shift your focus towards it, and it can change who you are as a person. So go out and find what you see as beautiful, and that right there is your purpose in life.



## Chase Kassan

It wasn't hard for me to think of a subject for my Confirmation speech. The hard part was finding the motivation to put my pen to paper. But once I did, I started thinking about some of the more important things in life; Good Family, Good Health, Good Friends.

As far back as I can remember it has always been easy for me to make friends. Every new place I would go, I would make some sort of friend, whether it was human, animal, or even an inanimate object. Like this one time in Mexico, I was about 5 years old, and my parents bought me a puppet. I named him Pablo and he was my new best friend, or cuddles my snake, or even my pet rat, whatever it was, I could make it my friend. Then, I started making human friends when I was just a toddler TAS, my parents got a phone call because I got caught kissing a girl behind the activity room. As scared as I was to learn what my parents would say to me, I was relieved when my Dad uttered those three words, "That's my boy."

Now, I have really come to understand the true definition of the word friend. To me, my friends are the people who make my every day easier. They care about me as much as I care about them. After all, in order to have a good friend, you have to be a good friend. Things like trust, genuine concern, listening, sharing, laughing, crying, loving, setting goals, reaching goals (like today's celebration), are all so important.

Some of my best friends are from this Temple. Many of you may also be familiar with the Jewish Youth Organization called BBYO. Basically, it's a Jewish Fraternity for Teenagers. Talk about quality friends...without these guys, I wouldn't be half the man I am today. Through thick and thin, good and bad, causing trouble, and then causing even more trouble, these are the guys that have my back, as I do theirs. These are the guys I hope I journey through life with, and these are the guys I am more than thankful to for accepting me for who I am and what I stand for.

Today is a great celebration for me and all of my friends here at TAS. As we travel on to College and Career, please remember that friendships are the foundation with which to cherish our past, and build our futures.

Good luck to all of my friends.



## Rachel Kinzler

I struggled writing this speech. I wasn't sure I wanted to come up here and talk about the big moments in my life and how they shaped me, or about how I've overcome some of the challenges associated with being a teenager. Finally, at 11:52 PM on a Sunday night, I realized that

this speech is really quite simple, therefore I'm writing about simplicity. I'm writing about simplicity, because I believe that the simple things in my life make me the person I am. If you know me at all, you know my life is far from simple. I am constantly moving, sometimes not even having enough time to breathe, which is why the simple things that hold my life together are more important than any other significant moment, place, or thing.

I'm 16-years-old, and I've got my entire life ahead of me. In first grade, we learned about the weather. My teacher, Ms. Summers, is who inspired my idea of becoming a meteorologist. That quickly changed in the third grade, when I began to fully commit to dance by dancing 4 days a week. That's when I realized I wanted to be a professional dancer. Now along with hoping to be a professional dancer, I found my love for English Literature in my AP English Language Class, hoping to be a writer, as well as finding my passion for acting after a recent audition for a performing arts college.

While striving to be a professional dancer, writer, and actor, I've been fortunate enough to have the quality of knowing what I want to do for a career and I've learned the steps of how to go about it. The downfall to all of this is that I've been living my life from big moment to big moment. It wasn't until about a year ago, when I realized the big moments are not as memorable as the small ones. Out of my 200 plus dance performances, I couldn't tell you about the details of the choreography, the song I danced to, or even where the performance took place. What I can tell you though, is about when I met Jenny Tuell for the first time in dance class, or about all the times Chase Kassan would come over on Tuesdays to do homework because he needed the right kind of motivation to help him.

The days in my life that have shaped me, are the ordinary Mondays, the days where nothing really extravagant happens. For me, the days, sometimes weeks that go by and nothing important occurs, it's those days where you find your true self.

Some people go through life worrying about the next step or the next obstacle they're going to face, or even the planning of the next event. Why do that to yourself? We all know that in life we are going to have heartbreaks, things are not going to go the way we planned, we are going to have to face challenges we don't want to. In my favorite movie, *The Breakfast Club*, John Bender says, "Screws fall out all the time the world is an imperfect place." Nothing and no one is perfect, the world itself is simply imperfect. So why live your life in fear? Do the things you know could hurt you anyways, because it doesn't matter what knocks you down, all that matters is how you pick yourself back up and try again. It's your presence in your own life that defines who you are. And it's those little moments of fear and victory that have defined me.

I didn't want my speech to be about this magnificent time I had at this one place with certain people. I'll remember the first day of Kindergarten where I was terrified because I didn't know anyone, the day my dad taught me how to ride my bike while camping, and the day my mom taught me to read "Good Work, Amelia Bedelia" the book about the maid who took every chore literally. Those days are what have guided me to be the person I am. Not the person I strive to be, but the person I am. It has taken me quite some time to fully accept the simplicity within me. I'm not perfect, and there's so much more to my life. Until then, I'm going to focus on the simple days because those simple days are what will get me to the day where I can finally say, "I made it."



## Paige Kramer

A few years ago, I went to Israel with my family, along with the rabbi and several other Temple members. Although there were many places and activities that I loved while in Israel, there are two memories that stand out the most: going to Tel Aviv and planting trees in a

forest outside Jerusalem.

Tel Aviv was gorgeous and it made me feel a sense of community even though there were hundreds of people on the beach. While I was there, I noticed all the culture and life that was surrounding me, and it amazed me that everyone there looked and sounded different. We all shared one thing in common and that is the appreciation for Judaism, the freedom, and land we have because of our ancestors. That sense of community was extended when we had a Havdalah Service, overlooking the Mediterranean at sunset. This was an inspiring moment because it was so unique and unlike all the other Havdalah Services I have been to. It was so peaceful, and I was able to feel connected to everyone surrounding me. Listening to the crashing of the waves and watching the sun go down while the candles burned, was a very powerful moment and a once in a lifetime experience.

While in Israel, I also had the chance to plant my own tree. This was a special moment because I always thought about the tree that would be planted in my honor for my Bat Mitzvah. By getting to plant my own tree in Israel, I didn't have to wonder who it was planted by or where it was planted, I was able to know that there is in fact a tree in Israel for me. By planting it myself, it was like I left a piece of me in Israel. It was also a great experience because I was able to have my family and rabbi with me. Not only did this make me feel closer to Israel, it made me feel closer to the people around me as well. After this trip, I realized that having a strong sense of community is important and that feeling has remained with me here at TAS.

Before going to Israel, I never felt a real connection to the country, but by going there and being able to have this amazing experience, I developed an appreciation for Israel, Judaism, and the Jewish community. As my time here at Hebrew School is coming to a close, I know that the people I have met and the things I have learned will stay with me forever.



## Jacob Labowitz

Camp, NFTY, and TASTY have all shaped my Jewish identity. These programs have taught me that Judaism is a fun way for me to express myself. My involvement in them can be directly accredited to the TAS community of teachers and Rabbis that inspired me to become

passionate about my religion.

At NFTY SoCal, my region, I have really connected with members of my Confirmation class, camp friends, and other new people in my life. NFTY is a very accepting community, where I can be who I want to be without my actions being inhibited by others. I have learned who I really am through NFTY, someone who loves being an active participant in the Jewish teenage community. Some of my most powerful memories are when two or three hundred kids are sitting under the stars doing Havdalah together. It is a fun way to connect with people who have similar experiences to me and develop friendships that will last a lifetime.

I have been on the TASTY board for two years now, going on three this next year. I have learned to plan fun events for my peers and have fun at those events. I have really become close to all the members of the TASTY board, making relationships that I hope will not fade as the Confirmands and current seniors prepare to go to college over the next year and a half.

In February, twenty-two Confirmands went to Washington, D.C. to bond with hundreds of Jewish teens from across the country on various social issues in America. I lobbied on the topic of raising the minimum wage. It was interesting to understand more about the United States' Legislative Branch and everything that goes on in Washington, D.C. L'Taken is an interesting way to get a possible start on making change in the nation, although it is a little rushed, learning about, becoming passionate about, and presenting a topic from the Religious Action Center's point of view, all within one weekend. My overall experience with L'Taken was fun because I got to bond with my fellow Confirmands for five whole days. That was the most meaningful part of the L'Taken trip to me, solidifying bonds with my fellow Confirmands so that I do not forget them as we all make our way to college.

My home away from home is my Jewish summer camp, Camp Alonim. I have been attending this amazing camp since the summer after 3rd grade, when I was a day camper. I went with 3 of my best friends, who remain my best friends today. I soon tried sleepaway camp with those friends and managed to steal another one of my friends away from our rival camp, Camp Ramah, that summer. The following summer all of my friends left me, except for one. Last summer was our culminating camper experience when we were Counselors In Training (CITs). I got to bond with 87 teens in my age group last summer and 4 amazing advisors. I made a lot of lifelong friendships that I will always cherish. Traditionally, the CITs circle the camp for Shabbat song session, while we are all in our Shabbat whites. This year, instead of watching the CITs and envying their position, I got to be one of those CITs and surround the entire camp, which was a

really unique experience. This next summer, I have been given the amazing opportunity to become a Geshet, or a day camp counselor. This will be a full circle for me, from looking up to my day camp counselors when I was 9 to being the counselor who is hopefully being looked up to by 9 year olds. I can't wait for all the new encounters that I will have this summer. I am really looking forward to truly giving back to one of the communities that has helped raise me.

All in all, my experiences with the Jewish community have been widespread. The most important things to me are all the friendships I have made and all the memories that I will forever hold dear.

Thank you.



## Aaron Rubanowitz

I do not consider myself to be very religious in the sense that I pray or attend services every week — I've never been a huge fan of that. Every time I was forced to go to a service, I just seemed to grow more and more frustrated with my religion. I felt like Judaism was being

forced onto me. My grandparents would always say, "Oh, Aaron, you're going to be a Rabbi with a last name like that — Rubanowitz." Nonetheless, from the earliest I could remember, I was always told to be proud to be Jewish. I did not know what it meant to be Jewish, much less what there was to be proud of. I've always asked, "What does it mean to be Jewish?" And my great-grandma would say, "My little-shtunkkullah, you must be proud to be Jewish," — She didn't really answer my question. She was a little "furnished." But she was right. With a little guidance from family and teachers, but especially from my Grandpa, I have been able to scratch the surface of this question. Thus far, I have learned that being Jewish is not exclusively about praying and studying the Torah — though that certainly works for some people. To me, being Jewish is embracing the culture of Judaism that has been in the making for thousands of years. A culture of relentlessness, a culture of persistence, a culture of never giving up. I learned this by studying the history of my Jewish ancestors:

Despite being enslaved in Egypt — we persisted.

No matter how hard the Nazis tried to exterminate the Jews from the face of the earth — we persisted.

In spite of years and years and years of anti-Semitism and persecution — we persisted.

It is this relentless nature that is one of the main characteristics of Judaism. This relentlessness manifests itself in nearly every aspect of Jewish life, especially in work ethic. And I can say that this has certainly made me the person that I am today. When something does not go my way, when a door closes, I always look for that other door. This work ethic that Judaism has subliminally instilled in me, has allowed me to be successful in what I have pursued, whether it be academics or athletics. No matter the challenge or opposition, my parents who learned from their parents who learned from their parents and so on, have taught me to persevere, to never give up — a mindset that, of course, is rooted in the Jewish culture that I have been immersed in throughout my life.

My Grandpa, my Papa, has taught me the most about what it means to be Jewish. He is a survivor of lung cancer 3 times, he lives with one lung, and he is an amputee. No matter what challenge has been thrown his way, he has not given up. He did not let cancer get the best of him, he did not let his problems get the best of him — he persisted. And he continues to persist. He embodies this Judaic culture of persistence. He is a living reminder of why I am proud to be Jewish.

I am still learning what it means to be Jewish. I will never be done learning what it means to be Jewish, but I do know that I am proud to be Jewish.





## Abraham Sculler

Hello, my name is Abe Sculler, and I have a question for you. What is Judaism? Jew-die-ism. It is such a weird word. The definition on Google is the monotheistic religion of the Jews. But what is the difference between being a Jew and being Jewish?

Personally, I think it is based on your commitment and dedication to the people and congregation that it's about. For me, I have been in TASTY, NFTY, and camp. Each of these has changed my life enormously. I've been in TASTY since my freshman year of high school, and I had been in the pre-requisite programs before that such as TASTY 678 and Club 45. Throughout the years of TASTY, I have made many friendships and made my bonds with my current friends much stronger.

I started NFTY, in my junior year of high school and I only went to one event, but that event changed me as a person and as a Jew. Something else that has shaped me as a Jewish person is going to a conservative high school program called Los Angeles Hebrew High School. This program has allowed me to get Hebrew as a credit for my high school language. While there, I have taken classes that aren't Hebrew such as Judaic Studies and T'fillah, and I have gotten to see what conservatives think of being a Jew.

The last thing I want to speak about is camp. Over the past seven years, I've been going to URJ Camp Newman. This past summer I was in a program called Avodah, which means work in Hebrew, and I did just that. I would do camp cleanup and ran Yom Sport. Another thing I did while I was there, was I got the opportunity to spend a week on a camp Kibbutz. I did chores there.

Now, I want to go back to my first question, what is the difference between being a Jew and being Jewish? I hope that you noticed that throughout my speech I used them interchangeably. They are interchangeable but they have a very different connotation. A Jewish person has the connotation that they are either not sure if they are Jewish or if they are insecure about their Judaism. On the other hand you have being a Jew, which says you are proud and sure about your beliefs. For us Confirmands, we were finding what it meant to be a Jew, not Jewish. So I want to ask you do you consider yourself a Jew or Jewish? Thank you.



## Andrea Seligman

All my life I've been met with shock and disbelief when I say that I'm Jewish. Everyone I tell has the same reaction, "Oh, really? But you don't look Jewish!" As if everyone's looks live up to their stereotype. They seem to think that being Jewish is like being Asian or Hispanic,

like it's an ethnicity and not a religion that anyone can be a part of. That is not what it is.

You can't choose your ethnicity, but you can choose to be Jewish. You can choose to join a community of people that will see you through all of your achievements, a community that will be there to celebrate milestone events in your life that will be there to turn to in a tragedy.

Being Jewish is about coming together under one belief and do good in the world together.



## Charlie Sigal

Being Jewish, what does it mean? It has been said that you can be whatever you want to be if you believe in it. I believe I am Jewish, but the question is, did I meet the requirements of being Jewish. It took me a long time to find the answer to this question, but then I realized, yes I

did.

From my journey starting from birth, I accepted the great adventure of understanding characteristics of being Jewish without even knowing about it at first, but as I got older, I started to realize who I really was. Being Jewish has made me realize how great of a person I am. I joined this Temple because I wanted to become more spiritual with my religion and I wanted to know more about my culture. I joined this Temple to help me find peace over the problems I was going through. The best thing about going to Temple was meeting new friends I can bond with. Most of my classmates at Temple have helped me learn great ways to study Judaism and be the person I am today.

Before I came to the Temple, I was just an average teenager who had passion for hobbies. My biggest passion was football. I loved playing the sport so much, but when it was taken away from me, I was depressed and stressed because I didn't know what to do. So one day, I decided to find a way to calm myself down, and I told my Dad, "I want to become more spiritual with my religion." He told me, "Ok" and he found this Temple, Temple Ahavat Shalom. My first day here, I was shown around and introduced to every student in my classroom. From that day, I felt like I was welcomed to a new family. I say this because the number one idea I learned about the Jewish culture is bonding. I was able to learn more about what it means to be Jewish by bonding with a lot of people I met at the Temple including students, teachers, and rabbis. All these events of my studying Judaism at Temple Ahavat Shalom has brought me up here today, and I say proudly that I am glad to be Jewish.



## Victoria Solkovits

There is something special about Judaism. While I agree that we are important and unique through our connection to Torah and Adonai, I would argue that what makes Judaism so special and essential to me is the lessons, morals, and ethics it teaches to students. For the past

four years, I have immersed myself in Judaism and everything it has to offer. I am extremely confident that if it were not for my Jewish connection, I would not be the person I am today.

Four years ago, I was welcomed into the Jewish community with open arms. Although I didn't really know anything about the religion, no one stopped to teach me all that there was to know. I was a shy middle school student, who didn't really have a solid friend group and didn't know how to stand up for myself. However, in my classes here at TAS not only did I learn what the Jewish meaning was behind my favorite songs, not only did I get to "Hang Out With the Rabbi" (for a few weeks at least), but I learned why my position in the world was important.

My Jewish journey has been marked with realizing that with Judaism came the quest to become a better citizen through social justice and social action (I'll save you all the diabetes reference, but nonetheless it DID help my classmates and I understand the difference). I soon found out that in order to be the kind of Jew I wanted to be, I would have to get more involved and more active in my Jewish life.

Suffice to say, I think I have fulfilled that goal pretty well thus far. In ninth grade I joined the TASTY board as Treasurer, and it's been my home ever since. I have helped lead Jewish-centered programming that has taught my peers important social values such as the importance of feminism, making services more interactive, or making the craziest latke the mind can possibly think of. Through TASTY, not only did I get to lead personally, but I got to work with and learn from over 30 of my peers over the past three years, learning what is important to them and how Judaism connects to their lives. It is this interaction and sense of community that has made me capable to find what matters to me socially.

I know that a lot of us have probably already spoken of the L'Taken trip, but I would be lying if I said it was not the most fulfilling experience I have ever had in connection with my Jewish faith. While freezing to death in D.C. was a worthwhile experience in itself, my favorite part was connecting Jewish values to the issues I think are most prominent and important for all of society today. I was able to get closer with my friends while at the same time writing and learning how to share my opinion with our Congress. That trip reinforced the idea to me that you do not need to be extremely religiously involved in order to be a good Jew. For me, being a good Jew is defined by how you take the lessons you learn from your Jewish education and apply it to your life and the lives of others. Through my journey, I believe my Jewishness is one of, if not my best qualities. If it were not for this place, I would be missing a significant part of my life.

I feel that it is only right that I thank a few people tonight for getting me to this point, since it by no means was a solo journey. First off, the Evenas family for bringing me here and showing me how rich and exciting this community is – Gillian for sitting with me in an hour long Hebrew study session before TAS High every Tuesday. My teachers, Rabbi Shawna and Rabbi Lutz and Cantor Roher, especially for being initially taken aback by my quest to become a Bat Mitzvah, but being supportive nonetheless. My classmates, who I can confidently say many are people I consider family. It is with your support and love that I have enjoyed and loved every Tuesday and every event. And lastly, my parents, who had to sit at the dinner table one random night and accept the fact that “I wanted to join the Temple”. My father, for attempting the prayers at services, and above all my mother, who dove in headfirst to a religion and set of ideals she knew nothing about. It is with your love and support that I am here today, and for that I will always be in your debt. Thank you all, for helping me find my voice.



## Jennifer Tuell

Innovative, original, inspiring - these are a few of the words that will be used less and less to describe our future leaders if we continue to over-encourage conformity. Conformity is driven by internal as well as external pressures. For example, students continue to succumb to the bystander effect, which often manifests itself in a failure to intervene in the face of injustice, such as bullying. That failure typically results from an internal fear of separating from the herd and becoming the bully's next victim. Most people carry this herd mentality into adulthood, and as a result, march blindly with the herd as it passes by those (like the homeless) who need our help. Also from an early age, students feel pressure to conform to the crowd in the way they dress, speak and act. Granted, there is always a group of kids who pride themselves in being nonconformists such as Goths. Ironically, however, these subgroups tend to be internally conformists even as they rebel against the larger group.

Rather than helping students break free from the internal and external pressures to conform, educational policies actually reinforce the concept of conformity by forcing students to learn and, ultimately, think the same way. Kids are being taught to memorize great thoughts, rather than have great thoughts of their own. On the surface, American society celebrates the new. Too often, however, people in power encourage students to passively agree with pre-existing ideas rather than inspiring them to formulate new ideas of their own. The American educational system seems intent on building an army of obedient students who can easily fall into line once they enter the job market after college.

To be honest, I am really scared for the future. In my English class we have explored several texts that talk about the problems future generations will have to face. Kids are being taught to think the same and never ask questions. We need to teach kids critical thinking skills and encourage them to think outside box. Schools have the responsibility to prepare students for the future. Environmental and social problems that future generations will face cannot be solved with a cell phone app. In college I hope that I am introduced to a variety of opinions so that I can create change in the world. I have been taught to think freely and question everything and still I feel unprepared to face the world after college. Unfortunately, our current policies likely will not prepare students to create necessary change. Rather, educational programs exacerbate the problem of conformity by institutionalizing it and set students up for failure.

I am not saying that there is no place for conformity in society. On the contrary, the success and safety of our society is largely predicated on our willingness to conform to certain rules, guidelines and traditions. When children are doing their homework, brushing their teeth respecting their elders, there is no reason to encourage them to do otherwise. When your friends are pressuring you to get good grades, be social and not do drugs, conformity is clearly the best choice for both the individual and society as a whole. Outside the bounds of health and safety, however, conformity is not always the

best path.

Ultimately, mankind's success is largely attributed to certain people's willingness to break from the herd and dare to be different. Indeed, evolution itself occurs through mutations. If we want to live in a progressive society, we must "mutate" constantly and take charge of the change we want to see in the future. If free thinking becomes the norm, that truly would be something worth conforming to.



## Joseph Voge

Here we sit in a Jewish sanctuary, a place for prayer and gathering of Hebrews for centuries. In here, we choose to connect with our Creator through prayer, another old practice. In here, some would argue, is where the presence of a higher power dwells. But what truly makes

the synagogue holy? If in the Jewish Temple lingers the presence of God, is this divine presence in other houses of worship?

There are many different ways that man has constructed worship in order to answer “the big” questions. But what really is the difference between all of us. We live in a world dominated by what we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. In the art of worship, these senses are stimulated uniquely depending on which religious practice we follow.

Perhaps in the physical practice of praying, we limit ourselves to only what our bodies can sense. Perhaps in order to contact a higher being outside of the physical realm, we must take ourselves out of what is tangible and put ourselves in a place that is more Divine—by opening ourselves, opening our hearts and minds and souls. Perhaps, to properly pray, we must put not our bodies, but our minds and souls in the same realm in which G-d dwells in to properly interact. Perhaps then we will experience the true beauty of worship, and maybe what will follow is an understanding of our own godliness.

I think that's where the presence of the Divine is; not necessarily written in the Bible or the Torah, but simply within us. No, we are not the creators of Earth, we are simply creations, creations that progressed past a cave and a stick to build observatories and art galleries and rose through the atmosphere and into the cosmos. Perhaps an old man in the sky is watching over us, or merely put us on His celestial shelf to sit and collect dust...no one truly knows. But I do know that the power of a higher consciousness and authenticity sleeps inside us. I know it sounds corny, but to me that consciousness and authenticity is love. I don't mean romance necessarily, but the kind of love you feel when you understand the true beauty of nature and companionship, when you are moved by a higher sense of understanding and acceptance. It is a love that comes not necessarily through praying, but, rather, when you grasp with sheer admiration the wonder of simply existing. In such moments there is a feeling of authentic love so intense that it makes your eyes tear up with love, not for one person but for all humanity and all life.

For me that happens most often with music. My first experience of this kind of authentic moment was when I heard the song Let It Be. As a six or seven year old, this Beatles song instantaneously reminded me of my dad, who had died before I was able to sing a word. To this day I know that song and those words, "there will be an answer, let it be," embody his spirit. I do not find it a coincidence that I sense an un-seeable and benevolent presence nearby when I hear that song. This music has spontaneously created a spark of emotion so genuine and powerful that I break out in tears. This beautiful creation has reached out and grabbed my soul, so strongly that I've felt the presence of a higher power.



As humanity has progressed through time, the paradigm of the Creator of the universe has shifted from many to one, from polytheism to monotheism. Then from this idea sprouted more religions and ideas, more terms and more cultures, all of them claiming to be true. Some promise demise in the afterlife, should a person choose to follow a different theology, and others interpret the words of who they worshiped to argue that murdering for this movement is acceptable, or in some cases, necessary. Is this the same Lord who teaches ultimate love and kindness towards one another, to honor and respect each other? Does this being take figure as an invisible man in the sky, does he or she take sides on war, does he or she in loving each and every one of us, send us to a fiery pit of hell, tormented by the other "undesirables" without hope of redemption? It must be logical to think that a being awesome enough to create a universe, unique to the last atom, would have a more pragmatic way than to deal with bad behavior by imprisoning a soul in a realm of torment.

I don't mean by any of this to bash any specific religion or belief, but I mean to attack the intolerance of man. I mean to disagree with anything that allows any negative thoughts, actions, or ideas that pollute the beauty and sanctity of humanity's quest to understand what is beyond him or herself. Maybe the answer to the universe doesn't have to be found by, searching the Internet or by praying. Maybe we just have to open our minds and continue growing as living and sophisticated beings.

I desire to no longer live in a world of war and pollution, but to inspire a world of more positive characteristics. So let us choose to prioritize peace, simply because a difference of government or belief is not a reason to take a life. Let us choose to adopt a more environmentally friendly energy system not because we're "pinko liberal tree-huggers" but because we ourselves are a part of the environment, and we ourselves come from nature — as a valuable and pure masterpiece of art.

I am Jewish. I choose to follow, and will always follow, the theology of Judaism, which I hold dear to my heart. This is where I have experienced sacred things: community, ancient beliefs, and ceremony. There have been times when I have felt a higher presence, one so touching that it brought tears to my eyes. But I don't necessarily believe that everything the Torah, nor any other religious manuscript, says is true. No, my Judaism is inspired out of respect for my ancestry, my bloodline that has been passed down for centuries. I was born a Jewish person, and that is how I will choose to identify for as long as I walk this earth.

But my personal practice is not necessarily "Jewish," nor my beliefs. I meditate; I watch lectures and learn theories of inter-dimensional beings and the universe. I play music. These are personal choices I make day to day that I feel in my soul are acceptable and enlightening. I do this not because I feel an obligation to a higher power, not because someone told me to, but because I, as a human being, blessed with the ability to think am enriching my being in these ways.

I have come to accept that there are many different beliefs out there. I have come to notice that life consists of a lot of people who think they're right, telling me what to do and what to believe. But, frankly, it doesn't matter if I accept what they say or do what they do. The practices I have chosen help me open my own heart to anything and everything. I feel a higher sense of consciousness and authentic life.

Here's what I have come to know: I know love. I know that we, not as Jews,

Muslims, gays, Americans, Palestinians, communists, or conservatives, but as HUMAN BEINGS, are capable of love.

Love, is sacred. There is a reason why the brave men and women on September 11th aboard Flight 93, called their families and friends to say "I love you" before crashing in a field in Pennsylvania. There is a reason why Martin Luther King Jr. marched the streets of Birmingham and Selma and other segregated cities before being assassinated. And there is a reason why Jimi Hendrix said the words "when the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace."

Each and every single one of us is capable of love. It doesn't favor one race or one religion. It does favor those who choose to open their minds and hearts. Those who choose to find love in the smile of a child, who feel love as part of their spirit, and who give love through their thoughts and actions. These, I believe, are the ones who truly possess a righteous soul.

So let us follow a spiritual practice to enrich ourselves, not because we have to but because we want to. Let us nurture the flame of love and surround ourselves with those who do the same. But above everything, let us learn how to live in a way in which we all may walk this world as brothers and sisters under the same sun and same planet.

I challenge you to daily do everything you can to make yourself grow. I challenge you to respect and admire and find beauty in what is different and what is the same. I want to challenge you to really know what it means to say "I love you." I come to you today as a human who was born to create and argue logically and to think critically, as someone who recognizes the beauty of his peers and who seeks to give everyone as wonderful of a community as the one he is blessed with. That is what makes the sanctuary sacred, it's what makes the subways and hospitals, apartment complexes and government facilities holy. Where love exists, sanctity exists. The true beauty of life lies within us all, and to neglect the long road of finding who you are is not only a disservice to yourself, but to all humanity.



## Grace Vogel

Hi, I'm Grace Vogel. I have always been a huge Harry Potter fan. You can ask any of my friends and they will confirm it. I loved reading the stories and watching all the movies. While I did dress up as the characters for Halloween and wait anxiously for the release of each

book and movie, Harry Potter was never merely a story to me. I found a connection in it to the real world. There was a hope that there could be more to this world than the mundane order that I knew, instead there could be this extraordinary magical realm living just beneath. I could not see it but I could believe in it. I found a way to make Harry Potter a part of my life even when I knew that it could not exist. I was dedicated to it. Though I never got my Hogwarts letter or my own wand, I made Harry Potter a truth to me.

I have always struggled with the concept of God. Which meant my association with Judaism was always questioned. "How can you be a Jew and not believe in God?" This struggle has made it extremely difficult for me to connect to Judaism, on the whole. I felt like prayers had no meaning if there was no God to be praying to, and the traditions were nothing more than that, traditions. No matter which denomination's service I went to, which Hebrew School or camp I attended, I never truly felt connected to Judaism. I was really worried. How could I relate to something like Harry Potter, something so surreal, and not even find a place for myself in the Jewish community, which was sitting here accepting me into it. I wanted a spark, something that clicked, something like my relationship with Harry Potter. I wanted to know that even if God wasn't real, I could still make Judaism a part of my life.

I'm not going to lie, I still haven't truly found that distinct spark that I was looking for in Judaism, but I was able to find a place where I felt comfortable, a place where I felt accepted. When I was at camp, the summer before tenth grade, I finally felt a connection with Judaism. After spending three weeks with Jews the same age as I was, I began to understand that Judaism is a community, a group of people who all had one thing in common. Even though I didn't connect to the services or the Torah Study, I could connect to the people. I understood that Judaism is a collective history, the struggle of a people and pride within that nation. I felt that for once, that was something that could apply to my life.

I know that Judaism is much more than a religion for most people, and I made that my reality. I do not believe in God, and I disagree with many of the restrictions that Judaism places upon me. Thus, Judaism is not my set of beliefs, I do not let it define my views. Instead, it is an open door, which when I finally decided to look through, greeted me with open arms.

Though I may still have difficulty connecting to the beliefs, I have to be grateful to Judaism for the opportunities I have been given, the different communities I am able to be a part of. I've been able to go to camp for the last ten summers of my life, I've been involved in TASTY and Diller, and I've made amazing friends. Also, through experiences

like L'Taken, I have been able to develop my social identity, my views on the way the world operates, and how I feel I can make a difference. I think that is where my spark lies, within these communities. It might not be as instantaneous as my link to Harry Potter, but Judaism can connect to me in ways I am beginning to realize now, but also in ways I will discover as I grow up.



## Nicole Wilhelm

Hello wonderful friends, family and members of the congregation. It is so great to be up here speaking to you all; I never thought my journey would go down this path. That's actually what I would like to talk about, my journey. Each aspect of my religious training has led up to this

moment and has contributed to my journey in becoming who I am. I have been at Temple Ahavat Shalom since I started preschool here at age three. Almost instantly, I made lasting friendships that made my experiences better. As I continued on in Consecration, AKA elementary school, friendships came and went as we all focused on our Jewish studies and Hebrew training. My bat mitzvah was probably an important memory that exemplified all of the hard work I put into my formal Jewish education. My bat mitzvah also helped me gain maturity and self-confidence.

While my Hebrew education ended after that, many activities and amazing teachers kept me actively involved at the Temple. I went to become a T.A. and take care of many wonderful kids who go to this Temple. Each student has taught me something inspiring or made an imprint on my journey. Also, I have gotten to work with many different teachers on a professional level and it taught me responsibility and leadership. Another activity this Temple had to offer was the Purim Shpiel. As crazy as Mrs. Arana seems, she has a heart for all of the students she teaches and this activity taught me the importance of family and friendships. One of the most important activities from this Temple that was offered to me was my experience on TASTY Board, the leadership committee for teens. I have been on this board for three years so far, and it has been the most important step of my journey. I was a different person before I joined and I have become a better version of myself by being on board.

I was not always as confident as I am now. I used to be really shy and introverted. I would feel uncomfortable at Hebrew school, and I was really awkward. However, after my Bat Mitzvah and the years after, I have grown into my own skin, and have had many accomplishments. One of my favorite years was this year and the L'Taken trip because of the many memories I created as well as the chance to advocate for something I really care about. I also became really close with my whole grade, and I trust them all completely. This year specifically I broke my boundaries that previous me would have set and I am proud of all the decisions I have made.

There are many people I owe thanks to for contributing towards my journey. First I would like to thank both Rabbis for this amazing year possible. From Rabbi Shawna's determination to Rabbi Lutz's sass, you both taught me a lot. I would also like to thank all of my past teachers as well. You all helped me in my journey and I have learned everything about my Jewish education thanks to you all. Another thank you that should be given is to my parents. They drove me to Temple all the time, and I'm here a lot and they paid for Hebrew School because they believed in the importance of my education and took action. Also, like I mentioned I consider everyone in my class as a friend but there are a few people who have been there for me through everything. I would like to

thank Arleigh Frumes, Erika Rehhaut, Kayla Hamburg and Jacob Labowitz for always being there to support me, and being the best friends a girl could have. Finally, I would like to thank all of you, for listening to my journey. I have become the person I have always dreamed of being, and it was great sharing that person with you.

