Deepening the Experience: the Potential for Spiritual, Moral & Psychological Growth in *B'nei Mitzvah*

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CHAPTER 1: ISSUE ADDRESSED BY PROJECT

A. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Permit me to "set the stage": It is a Thursday evening in November and in our temple sanctuary are about 70 families whose children, on a Saturday (Shabbat) in about two and a half to three years, will become bar/bat mitzvah in this sanctuary. Generally speaking, these are upper-middleclass parents (with many non-working mothers) extremely focused on their offspring (often described in popular media as "helicopter parents"), who regularly shuttle their children between the town's extremely competitive secular schools to their after school activities: our religious school, music lessons, myriad sports practices and games—to name just a few. Now they will receive "their dates" at this meeting, and the excitement—along with the anxiety—is palpable. The director of education opens with a brief study piece; I, as cantor offer information about various details and the timeline of key events over the next few years until the service. The senior rabbi also says a few words; including a friendly, but pointed reminder that while bar/bat mitzvah is highly significant, it is also just a step toward Confirmation (in 10th grade). And then he calls the children up to the *bimah* (prayer platform), as, standing with them in front of the ark and bestowing a blessing, he impresses upon the parents what a meaningful moment in all their lives this rite will be. The families are handed envelopes with the dates they have been assigned by my administrative assistant and me—based on birthdates, available weekends during the year, etc. Many parents are pleased with the assigned dates; some are displeased, and there will be subsequent changes and jockeying over the next weeks, even months. Many of the changes are to circumvent competing parties on the same day; avoid other family commitments, and the like, and we will accommodate

their requested changes to the best of our ability, although some of the parents will be rather challenging to work with on this—an issue I will address later in this paper.

The aforementioned timeline includes a *shabbaton* (a "retreat" lasting most of a Saturday) which will take place in the synagogue building when the students are in our 6th grade. Along with various other activities at the *shabbaton*, the children, with the help of their parents, will choose the specific verses they want to read in the weekly *Torah* (scripture) portion, and which they will ultimately discuss in their teaching (*devar torah*) for the congregation during the service on the day they become *b'nei mitzvah*. Next, about six months before the service, there will be an initial *b'nei mitzvah* seminar (or *chavurah*, as we're now calling them) where the children receive various materials—CDs, texts—and then begin working with a tutor on refining the prayers and blessings they have been learning over the years in the religious school (or, as sometimes happens, learning those for the first time). They will remain in tutoring for about eight weeks; the current tutors are women who have been teaching in the school, and doing this training—which requires particular skills—for quite some time. Following those eight weeks, the children will begin working with either the assistant cantor or me, depending on which one of us is officiating at the service. We will take them through the next four months, including rehearsing the service—Hebrew, English, service "choreography", and practicing their reading from the Torah scroll. The officiating rabbi will see the children and their family for a final, "dress" rehearsal in the last week. And in addition to working with one of the cantors, the children and at least one parent will have also attended two more *chavurot* (seminars) led by the assistant rabbi and assistant principal, where topics

such as the parents' "Jewish journey" are discussed; the kids will have received assistance with the writing of their *divrei torah*; and perhaps shared some details about the required *mitzvah* (or "good works") project they are in the process of performing.

B. PASTORAL NEED AND INTERVENTION

Jean Piaget, the late renowned psychologist, noted that in the (healthy) developing child, there seemed to be, along with physical growth, a parallel process of the development of the "morality of cooperation…which puts the primary emphasis on autonomy of conscience, on intentionality, and consequently on subjective responsibility." (Piaget 1997, page 335) And Melanie Klein, another seminal thinker in childhood development, concluded that appropriately parented children are able to use their love for the "primal object" (i.e. the mother) as a "foundation for devotion to people, values, and causes…" (Klein, page 17)

While the background provided in the introduction is the particular course my own synagogue has developed, based on conversations and reports of various colleagues over the years, I would posit that the description represents a typical, and fairly satisfactory example, of what takes place programmatically for *b'nei mitzvah* in contemporary mid to large-size Reform congregations in the US. Nonetheless—and, directly related to my studies in the Doctor of Ministry program—a couple of years ago, I began a process of reevaluating the role of the congregation I serve, and more specifically, my role; along with the other synagogue clergy and teachers, with regard to our work with the students studying to become *bar/bat mitzvah*. Mindful of the words of Piaget, Klein, et al, at this

crucial moment in children's psychological and spiritual lives—and on the cusp of adolescence, my growing interest in reframing and expanding the preparation leading to the rite of *bar/bat mitzvah* from a deeper pastoral and theological perspective began to take shape.

Anecdotally, I had noticed over the years that, at the very least, many of these young people seem to gain some observable psychological/emotional and spiritual growth over the period of the approximately six months they spend with us focused on various types of study, community involvement, and discussion. This is often most obvious through their reports of the *mitzvah* project—discussed in their *devar torah*, along with various insights gained into the section of Torah they read. Therefore, because this is the population with whom I have the greatest, and most frequent, interaction; and if we concur that our role as religious leaders is to assist and guide in the formation of moral, ethical beings—whatever their age; I decided (with the support of the senior rabbi and synagogue president) that it would greatly benefit the congregation as a whole if I undertook an examination of our current synagogue program, while looking for potential ways to strengthen it with regard to the following specific, and, I would suggest, critical questions:

- How does study toward becoming *b'nei mitzvah* tie into the moral development of the child in general, and how well does our current (synagogue) program intersect with, or encourage, this development?
- Does the "village" (i.e. congregation; greater world experienced through the *mitzvah* project) enlarge the student, both morally/religiously and psychologically, as a result, including their God concepts?
- What do they learn about themselves, with regard to the "other"? Do they grow in empathy?

- Is it reasonable to expect study toward becoming *b'nei mitzvah*—including the actual event—to be a transforming experience, both spiritually and psychologically; with insights and connections to the Jewish community that will persist beyond the conclusion of the service and celebration?

- And how can we clergy re-imagine **our** roles, so that we view the time we spend with the students as sacred, and meaningful?

While a number of psychologists and researchers, such as Piaget, Kohlberg, et al have examined the general area of moral development in children and/or young adults with regard to conscience, responsibility, e.g., there is very little—if any—literature I have found that specifically addresses precisely how the process of engaging in a life cycle event like *bar/bat mitzvah* might—or, perhaps more importantly—should, impact the moral, emotional, and spiritual development of the budding adolescent. Therefore, I believe it would be of great assistance to many of us engaged in synagogue work to understand more fully where our young people are developmentally; and thus, the impact of our programs of study on them, particularly in our ever more secular and "wired" culture. Ultimately, perhaps, the principal question to be answered was suggested by Erik Erikson: how will we have contributed to the (development of) "a well-organized ego within a social reality" once a child has completed his/her studies? (Erikson 1968, page 49)

C. RELEVANCE IN A WIDER CONTEXT

While I often hear from numerous colleagues in the cantorate about their frustration with what can admittedly feel like a "daily grind" of seemingly endless tutoring appointments with large numbers of students, I believe our unique access actually offers exceptional

opportunities to help the children deepen and focus their connections to the synagogue and to Judaism, thereby providing the ability for the cantor (and others) to move far beyond the role of "super tutor" in which many find—or may perceive—themselves. This is particularly true in the larger congregations in which many of us serve, as running the "*bar/bat mitzvah* program" is almost always part of the cantor's portfolio. Significantly, it is often the case that the cantor's ability to manage the program generally (including numerous administrative details)—and to relate to the students in positive and meaningful ways—can be an enormous factor in his/her tenure in a congregation. And the perceived success of the *b'nei mitzvah* program can have enormous effects on initial membership, retention of students and their families, etc., so there are serious implications on myriad levels for synagogues. Therefore, it is my hope that this project and write-up might provide an opportunity for at least some of my colleagues—whether rabbis, cantors, or educators—to reflect to a greater degree not only on the quality of their programs, but especially on their presence: i.e. the possibilities inherent for enriching the regular encounters, or meetings, with students, as we become ever more cognizant of the tremendous privilege of being with them on their "journey of preparation" (Milgram, 2004, page 37).

CHAPTER 2: PRINCIPALS THAT GUIDE AND INFORM

A. RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND AND THEOLOGY

Bar mitzvah (literally, "son of the commandment"); but really meaning "one obligated to perform mitzvoth" (Washofsky, 2001, page 149) was the term chosen by our Jewish sages some time in the early Common Era for boys (not girls, in those days) who simply reached the age of 13 and one day; there is evidence of a brief ceremony where these children were blessed by the community after completing their first *Yom Kippur* fast. However, it bears no resemblance to the ritual we have today, notes Rabbi Jeff Salkin (page 7), author of what has arguably become—at least over the last decade and a half or so—the "Ur-text" on preparing for *b'nei mitzvah*: *Putting God on the Guest List*. There is also no mention of bar mitzvah in either the Torah, or any of the other biblical books. While the age of 13 is associated with *midrash* (ancient rabbinic stories) told about Biblical characters (ibid, page 5) the rabbis of old were clearly not blind to the fact that this age frequently was the start of puberty—and therefore also of one's ability to understand the importance of taking on the responsibility of the *mitzvot* (the numerous commandments that make up *halachah*: Jewish law). Indeed, parents of a male who turned thirteen were then considered free of the responsibility of teaching their sons how to observe the *mitzvot*, and offered a prayer: "Blessed is the One who has exempted me from the punishment of this one" (meaning the child!), whom, it was then presumed, was at that point responsible for his behavior. (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, Ramah* 225:2). Rabbi Joseph Telushkin—always a terrific source on Jewish tradition—states in his book, *A Code of Jewish Ethics*, that this parental prayer is part of Judaism's "acknowledgment that we have free will and bear responsibility for our actions (which) is

the essence of human dignity." (2006, page 31) Until relatively recently, however, in Jewish history, there was little that the young man was required to do, when it came to actually leading a service, learning a reading from scripture, etc. During the Middle Ages, boys of 13 began to be called to the Torah and a special, festive meal often followed the occasion. (Washofsky, 2001, page 149) For girls, any kind of ceremony began much later, although in the early Common Era girls did have the responsibility at age 12 (the age at which females were considered mature enough) to observe the *mitzvoth* (Salkin, 1996, page 14). However, it was in the United States that the ceremony of *bat mitzvah* was truly inaugurated, when the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, called his daughter, Judith, to the *bimah* to read the first blessing for the Torah and a section from her own *chumash* (a book containing the 5 books of Moses). (Ibid) It would take some decades, however, until girls were regularly permitted to read from Torah, lead prayers, etc. and for the service leading to one becoming bar and bat mitzvah to be indistinguishable from one another, at least in Judaism's more liberal movements. (Orthodox Judaism now offers bat mitzvah in many congregations, but it generally differs from bar mitzvah: the girls are usually not allowed to read from the Torah scroll; it often does not take place on Shabbat, e.g.)

It is a fascinating evolution of this ritual then, as Barry Kosmin (in Wertheimer 2002, page 233) and others note; writing of the phenomenon of the American Jewish experience, which has become a particularly—and uniquely—fertile ground for b/mitzvah, whether one identifies as Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. Calling it "a quintessential and acceptable American ritual", Kosmin (who has headed numerous

sociological studies of Jews all over the world) cites statistics—in this case, from the Conservative movement—indicating the regularity and pervasiveness of the event. While statistics from my own Reform movement might vary slightly, most synagogue professionals would likely agree with Kosmin that while there appears to be a "decline in participation rates for certain life-cycle events" such as weddings in the synagogue, as well as traditional funeral practices, in "contrast, the...ceremony of bar and bat mitzvah has withstood this general erosion of tradition." (Ibid page 233) Oppenheimer (2005, page 19) notes this as well; wondering (a result of his later-in-life curiosity about the Judaism his parents pretty much ignored) just why it is that the rite of b/mitzvah in particular has not only persisted, but even grown and thrived in our contemporary—and often secular world. He states that the varied people he observed and interviewed for his book "agreed that (services of *b'nei*) *mitzvah* provide occasions to perform, *publicly*, something they considered valuable" whether it was learning the required Hebrew, the appropriate chant, "or even devotion to the simple idea that there are things worth doing just because our parents and grandparents did them." It follows then, that the present-day incarnation with which everyone is familiar thus provides us—the clergy—regular access for a short, but significant period to (often large numbers of) these often highly motivated students, and holding out the potential for study toward becoming *b'nei mitzvah* to be a unique nexus for the opportunity of both spiritual and emotional/psychological growth.

Therefore, it behooves those of us who work with these children to find moments of connection, in a safe ("holding") environment that we provide; where all kinds of questions, whether about God and what it means to be a Jew in the 21st century, as well

where they are along the continuum of psychological and moral development; can be explored in nurturing and respectful ways. Robert Coles, the well-known child psychiatrist and professor at Harvard University, who has done much work in the area of spiritual and moral development of children, speaks of "moral alienation" as part of the adolescent struggle that may accompany the "achievement of independence (which is) the defining task and goal..." of this stage, and in fact urges the adults in the adolescents' lives to look for areas of "connection" which might often be accompanied by the honest sharing of ideas for living lives of meaning and purpose. (Moral Intelligence, page 136) And Rabbi David Wolpe (1995, Page 37) states that "permanent self-esteem" will find no "richer soil in which to (be) plant(ed) than our children" for then we are sending the vital message that we all are "always important" to God.

The Talmud states that parents and God are partners in the raising of a child. Many, if not most, would undoubtedly enlarge this to include teachers and clergy as well in this partnership—for it does in fact "take a village". And the book of Deuteronomy instructs us in several places: for Jews, most famously in Deut. 6:7, that we are to teach the love of God "diligently to (our) children"; one of the ways we teach the love of God is by modeling the love that God has for our children, as we, their clergy, build holy and affirming relationships with them. Salkin (1996, page 22) introduces the image of silence and exile (e.g. between Abraham and Isaac; Jacob and Joseph) to describe the changing relationship between parents and adolescents around this time, urging parents (for whom much of his book is written) to "break through the silence" (Page 23). It seems to me that we clergy (and other teachers) are in an exceptional position to "break through (that)

silence" and help bridge the sometimes ever-increasing gap between the adolescent and parents/authority figures, as the former appropriately begins to separate and differentiate. Kosmin (Ibid, page 238), who not-so-incidentally appears to be one of the few researchers to examine b/mitzvah from a psychological and sociological angle, states that this "is an interesting time to study these young people, since a crucial aspect of the transition is the transformation of the relationship between parent and child, as they renegotiate the terms of control, responsibility and autonomy".

B. CLINICAL PRINCIPALS

Myriad researchers in the field of both religion and mental health—including, or, most especially—those who have examined connections between the two, have identified several of the clinical issues with which I will be concerned. Ana-Maria Rizzuto is a psychiatrist who has done ground-breaking work, using psychological theory to help understand the nature of religious belief. In her book, *The Birth of the Living God*, Rizzuto (page 178) often speaks of feelings about God in Freudian language, for example when she refers to God's being "increasingly cathected" (i.e. invested with emotional significance) "during the pregenital years (reaching) his most appealing moment at the peak of oedipal excitement".

To explain the use of the term "oedipal"—one of Freud's classic "stages"—in layman's words: Sigmund Freud, who coined the term, believed the Oedipus complex (first introduced in his publication, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1900) was the

(unconscious) wish of boys to eliminate their fathers and become their mother's lover; and for girls to eliminate the mother, becoming the father's lover. Freud saw this as a universal, repressed wish; influencing behaviors, and consequently generating enormous conflicts for people.[1] (Kahn, 2002, page 56) For numerous reasons, this subject engenders great debate in the contemporary psychoanalytic community, with no clear resolution, as does Freud's instinctual "drive theory" in general, often versus the theory of object relations. Much of this contention centers around the "nature versus nurture" argument, which, while well worth attention, is outside the parameters of this study.

Returning to Rizzuto, the cathexis to which she refers is similar, she notes, to the "transitional object" described by D. W. Winnicott—and, yet different and special—because unlike teddy bears, blankets, etc., God is "created from representational materials".[2] God, therefore, Rizzuto says further, is then not exactly (or simplistically) the "object of sublimated libido after the resolution of the oedipal crisis" as described—and disdained—by Freud. In fact, for her, God's meaning is dependent on the manner in which the oedipal crisis has been resolved for the child, with particular images enduring through life as a kind of psychic transitional object. Reminding the reader that it is around the time of adolescence that the ability for more abstract thinking and conceptualizing

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[1] Kahn (2002, pages 38-39) delineates Freud's stages as, the oral period: birth to about 18 months; the anal period: 18 months to about 3 years; the phallic period and Oedipus Complex I: 3 years to about 7 years; the latency period: from seven years to puberty; Oedipus Complex II: at puberty; and the genital period: from puberty on. Kahn also reminds us that these stages "tend to fade into and overlap with the next" and that they "also persist, unconscious and hidden, as ongoing background to subsequent stages."

[2] For Winnicott, the all-important transitional object—while indeed often material—was really defined by its use, not its physical character. In his work specifically with the developing child, Winnicott understood the transitional object as the child's solution for managing the tension between growing awareness, understanding of, and ability to operate in his/her outer world—i.e. reality, amidst the perceived greater safety and familiarity of the child's inner world. (Hughes, pages 164-166)

appears, (Page 200) she states in a paragraph I found particularly noteworthy and relevant to *bar/bat mitzvah*,

> All religions provide official or private rites of passage to facilitate the resolution of critical moments. Most of these dramatize the breaking of old bonds and the formation of new bonds between people. By making God or the gods active participants in the process, ritual provides a new opportunity for the reshaping of the God representation and the individual's relation to it. (Page 181)

And so around the age of 12 to 13, just when children are ready to move beyond the period of latency and its (often parental) God images, the process of **becoming** *bar/bat mitzvah* begins. And Coles (who acknowledges his debt to Rizzuto in his writings) speaks of the "ego ideal" of psychoanalytic theory, which may be "(reinforced) by a child's ongoing spiritual reflection" (or, conversely, damaged by it); quoting Anna Freud (*Spiritual Life*, page 99) who notes that children will frequently identify with particular Biblical stories, which tell us much about their "spiritual psychology"—an intriguing term Coles adopted from a mentor (Ibid, page 16). Thus, in discussing the portion of scripture in the *devar torah* they write and deliver to the congregation, we may have insight into what, according to Coles, Miss Freud stated "will have become their own stories—but which ones for which children, and why?" This has great potential for explorations of, as Coles says (Ibid, page 100) "...the religious life they have (thus far) experienced" as it provides us, their clergy, potentially remarkable and exciting opportunities for the encouragement of our students' spiritual and psychological growth, along with assisting in the evolution of their character formation.

Therefore, at the same time, through the *b'nei mitzvah* experience, those children who have not escaped the latency period unscathed; where there exists the possibility of

"long-lasting character traits of inferiority, failure, and defeat" (Berzoff, Page 40); may be afforded the potential for much-needed success and significant achievement, as well as crucial emotional support. And moving into the tumultuous time of adolescence—whether after a successful latency period or not—when, as Berzoff notes, these not-quite-children, not-quite-adults, are primed for "the consolidation of a conscience..." (Page 41); along with the stirrings of separation from family of origin, and—if one subscribes to Freudian theory—the revival of oedipal feelings, we are presented with a liminal period during which the synagogue community in general can have tremendous positive influence. Erikson's observations and contributions on ego identity and the role of the many social "worlds" in which the 12-13 year old now finds him/herself seems particularly relevant to this parallel process, as a context may be provided for "mutual complementation of ego synthesis and social organization". (Erikson, 1968, page 53) Indeed, Erikson viewed as one of the tasks of adolescence the ideal, and idea, of social acceptance, as well as of self-acceptance; that this age most of all "presents a pivotal crisis around the development of a sense of a personal identity." Notably, he also states that the establishment of a "stable sense of self" requires meshing with the specific cultural, social and historical reality in which the adolescent finds him/herself. (Berzoff, 2002, page 115) Kosmin (Ibid, page 238) also picks up this idea, noting that in recent times, particularly, the family has also become far less influential over their children, and sees "formal institutions (as taking) over the responsibility for socialization of children and adolescents..." And Ron Taffel, a contemporary psychologist who has devoted himself to adolescent issues, who states what many of us have observed in the last decades: that "adolescence has gotten younger", believes that, "Adolescents today don't

rebel out of revenge or anger toward their parents. They are merely drifting away, desperate to find a place—where they're known and where they feel comfortable." (2001, Page 8) At the same time, for Taffel (ibid, page 142) among the tasks of adolescence is the ability to "(earn) adult trust and (be) held accountable" to help "teenagers improve their judgment". Indeed, there is also a tendency toward greater risk taking; as well as adolescence being "a time of increased vulnerability to social influences and to the onset of psychopathology, such as mood and substance use disorders" as reported by the NIMH, in a summary from at a meeting on adolescent development and decision making in 2006.

And so, the required "*mitzvah* project" in our program can potentially be an essential piece in building a sense of accomplishment, accountability and social responsibility so potentially pivotal (and with which they may well associate the "spirituality" of social action) for this age group, and thereby offers a challenge to the egocentrism which is often still present. As Schulweis says (Page 32), the "*bar/bat mitzvah* celebrates the mature, ethical idealism of Judaism in their lives", which we in the synagogue community can assist with by broadening their world(s)—and their world-view. The great modern Jewish thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote as Mogul (page 240-1) reminds us, "Judaism does not ask its followers to take a leap of faith, it asks them to take a leap of action." She goes on, "You aren't expected to work out your theology before you begin to live a Jewish life; *na'aseh venishmah*—'you will do and you will understand.'" And Ingall (2005, page 7) maintains that we also have an obligation "to teach our students what is distinctive about Jewish moral values and how they differ from

American moral values." How well we are communicating this to our students, however, will no doubt reflect both our pedagogical approach and their ability to take in information that may be at odds with their individual level(s) of development.

Character and Moral Development and the Role of Parenting and Attachment

Marvin Berkowitz, a psychologist who studied with Lawrence Kohlberg, and who currently serves as an adviser to numerous school districts, organizations, etc, based on his expertise in character and moral development; notes the difficulty of defining just what "character development" (also often referred to as moral development; character education; social-emotional learning, e.g.) really means, and offers a description that might prove helpful going forward. He says,

> Character is the set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable an individual to function as a competent moral agent. In other words, it is those aspects of one's psychological makeup that impact whether one does the right thing, whether it is telling the truth, helping an unpopular student..., resisting the temptation to cheat or steal, or some other matter of moral functioning. (2008, pp. 414-415)

While this project primarily focuses on the role of the synagogue on children's development, I would be greatly remiss in not including and addressing the origins of parental involvement on the child's character and moral development. Speicher (1992) notes the significance of "parental warmth and affection, and positive family relationships in promoting children's moral development." Indeed, she concludes that Kohlberg and Piaget may have under-estimated the effects of parental involvement, while supporting the influences of peers and school experiences. As evidence, she states that adolescent students who scored in the higher stages of Kohlberg's Moral Judgment

Interviews[3] "reported more family communication, more maternal warmth and affection, more positive feelings of satisfaction with their mothers, more parental support, and better interpersonal relationships within the family than did lower stage adolescents." (1992, page 133) In fact, while Kohlberg posited that family influence on the moral judgment of their offspring waned during adolescence and early adulthood, Speicher (1992, page 135), who also worked with Kohlberg, and did her dissertation at Harvard on the connection of family and moral development, offers studies indicating that, to the contrary, positive family interactions actually increased the likelihood that moral judgment grew—and would continue to grow—during this period. And in a follow-up study some years later, when the participants were about 20 years old, reassessment with the Kohlberg Moral Judgment Interview indicated that only the variables which "reflected cognitive stimulation of moral reasoning" were ultimately "predictive of moral reasoning". In addition, homes in which there was greater "freedom to discuss politics and controversial issues...during early and middle adolescence predicted more mature moral judgment in later adolescence and young adulthood." On the other end of the age span, Speicher (ibid) references a study which found that "both maternal and paternal warmth, measured at 5 years, significantly predicted adult social accomplishment 36 years later."

[3]Kohlberg Moral Judgment Interview: Much like Piaget, Kohlberg devised a series of 3 moral dilemmas, where participants were asked standardized questions about conflicting values presented in those dilemmas. According to Reimer (1983) "the subject is asked how the character (in the dilemma) ought to resolve the problem and why that would be the right way to act in this situation...To determine a subject's stage of moral development, the researcher must see how consistently the subject reasons across a range of moral issues." (Page 54)

Berkowitz (2005) observes too that in healthy character development—thus leading to positive moral development—the quality of attachment between parent and child will likely most determine the interaction of child with the rest of the world. Children whose needs are suitably met, and whose parents have provided consistent and appropriate boundaries, will tend to experience the world as a "positive and secure" place, where relationships with others are both desired and sought. This "sense of belonging" in the world provided by parents (Berkowitz, 2005, page 269) is what then makes the ability to foster moral development possible, with the lack thereof subsequently often posing deeper challenges.

It would be useful to consider how numerous developmental psychologists and researchers have looked at the issue of "attachment" over the decades, specifically referring to that which exists between parent and child. Particularly influential was John Bowlby, who viewed attachment as meaning that a child "is strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with specific figure and to do so in certain situations, notably when he is frightened, tired or ill." (Bowlby, 1982, page 371) He contrasts this to actual "attachment behavior" which he posits as what a child engages in to "attain and/or maintain a desired proximity." (Ibid) Bowlby anticipated that the normally developing child would, with relative ease, accept substitute attachment figures by age three; and that by age four and a half to five years, should quite willingly and even happily have the ability to leave their main caregiver (usually the mother) for periods of time. However, he does see some form of attachment continuing beyond that age, stating that "Thus,

throughout the latency of an ordinary child, attachment behavior continues as a dominant strand in his life." (Ibid, page 207)

For Margaret Mahler, the process of separation from mother/caregiver and the individuation of the child begins in earnest around the fifteenth to sixteenth month of age. (Mahler, 1975) By this time, as children have begun walking, and achieving greater cognitive progress, however, Mahler also observed the appearance of a "rapprochement crisis" which is characterized by fear of losing the parent's love (also known as fear of "object loss") and which consequently "manifests itself in a highly sensitive reaction to approval and disapproval by the parent". (Ibid, page 229) Generally though, children are able to resolve and progress through this (both expected and appropriate) "crisis" and then proceed to the establishment of an "increasingly cohesive ego structure" (Ibid), and, through what become internalized objects (i.e. the significant people in his/her life) eventually form appropriate attachments. Yet, those with even the most presumably cohesive ego structure will need to negotiate the often difficult challenges posed by the next great task: adolescent separation.

As others have noted above, Bowlby also states that the adolescent often—though not always begins to experience less persistent ties to parents, and greater ties to "groups and institutions other than the family" (Ibid, page 207) These alternate attachments can be powerful, and sometimes even quite painful as, when adolescents seeking to separate, appear to or seek to completely shut parents out of their life. On the other hand,

positively, these ties can also lead to enormous—and, often life-long "fidelity", to family, nation, people, religion, etc.—as well as to their respective representatives and symbols.

Returning then to moral development, the evidence for the role of teachers and other influential adults then logically expands that of the parents'. Berkowitz (2006) offers a list of those qualities numerous authorities have agreed a child needs to develop, to become a useful and productive member of society, which would (presumably) be supported by the numerous people who are part of a child's life. Those include: honesty, respect, social and emotional competencies, empathy and compassion, leadership for social justice, and critical thinking (Page 684). Speicher (1992, page 133) reported that significant numbers of those adolescents scoring at the higher stages "were more likely to report that books and statements of political figures had influenced their political and social views and that teachers had influenced them at present". Kohlberg had hoped to see much more integration of moral discussion in secular school curricula, finding that following a series of sessions which introduced "cognitive conflict" in students, they began a "process of reconsideration and reorganization" leading to clear upward movement in the moral stages. (Reimer 1983, page 114)

And this, I believe, is where the synagogue and its clergy and staff can be most helpful and valuable to our young people. For, in offering quality programs and caring relationships with our students, we not only increase our likelihood of fostering committed Jews, but are also providing at least some of the necessary ego support that helps make for healthy individuals, who will (hopefully) grow up to care deeply about

their close, personal relationships, as well as about the ills of society. Reimer (1997, page 86), in discussing a successful synagogue religious school he had studied, reports that the director of education there believed "that staff ought to function as anchors of attachment for the children." While the specific reference is to the general K-12 population of the school and its teaching staff, in addition, he of course also notes positively the significance of ongoing interaction of the congregation's clergy with the children (Page 87).

Faith Development

James Fowler (1995), employing the foundational principles of the "structuralists" Piaget and Kohlberg (see Appendix A) for the cognitive development of children, examines the way in which this manifests in faith development as well. Therefore, if Stage 1 is the "concrete operational logic of childhood" (Fowler, page 65)--meaning that, rarely if ever, does the child (of age six or seven, to about age eleven or twelve) venture beyond the ability to take the perspective of anyone except the people with whom he/she regularly interacts—then Stage 2 is "formal operations", which means that the child (or even adult, if he/she doesn't ever progress beyond this point) is able to understand larger concepts and to extrapolate somewhat beyond his/her concrete experience. Those who have moved into this stage are able to "transcend empirical experience" and can then "construct ideal states or regulative norms". (Ibid, page 71) This is where we find most of our students at the time they begin their study for b/mitzvah. He also helpfully reminds those of us who work with these children that,

Education and nurture should aim at the full realization of the potential strength of faith at each stage and at keeping the reworking of faith that comes with stage changes current with the parallel transitional work in psychosocial eras. (Ibid, page 114)

In then coinciding with the stirrings of the "observing ego" and "formal operational thinking" this life-stage of b/mitzvah can therefore lead the child to more clearly understand his/her actions, and growing role in, and responsibility for the world outside the nuclear family—a realization that should presumably transition him/her to a new stage in faith development. The assumption (by Fowler) is that the adolescent is now able to move into what he calls "mutual interpersonal perspective taking" (Ibid, page 73), meaning that one will have the ability to understand not only the "other", but also the perspective the "other" may have of oneself, along with additional people in his/her world. This "third person perspective taking" (page 74) is indicative of significant moral growth and most importantly for faith development, may often lead to a sense of "God as a transcendent third person." (Ibid, page 74). What Fowler (and Kohlberg) calls Stage 3 moral and spiritual growth entails actions that would be expected norms within the boundaries of close interpersonal relationships—but do not yet move into a wider societal, or universal outlook found in Stage 4. We may generally expect then, to have some students at, or transitioning to Stage 3, with most at Stage 2; and few if any, at Stage 4. Reimer (1983, page 34) notes that this "stage of formal operations covers varying degrees of ability to think abstractly" and reminds us, however, that "there is a marked difference in the kinds of abstractions the average eleven-year-old and the average seventeen-year-old can handle." He therefore prudently encourages the use of "substages" with this age group.

Working within the larger "universe" of Erikson's social worlds, yet maintaining the "structuralism" of Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler believes there is strong "interplay" (Fowler, page 107) between these approaches. However, he takes issue with the relegation by Piaget (and later too by Kohlberg) of imagination and symbolism to childhood, understanding that as necessarily limiting the evolution of the moral, accountable self—a self that will view faith rather differently through the lens of later stages. And Rizzuto (1979, page 90) explained the eventual development of actual God representations as "idiosyncratic and highly personalized…derived from (one's) object relations…evolving self-representations…and environmental system of beliefs" as she describes that it is in fact the "ingenuity and creative symbolic ability of the human mind…by the individual to master his private reality, his past, and his contemporary context, as well as of his need for transcendence and meaning in the context of the universe at large." Erich Fromm, in trying to comprehend, and move beyond a limited—or limiting—and historical understanding of God says much the same; he states that "…God is a symbol of all that which is in man and yet which man is not, a symbol of spiritual reality which we can strive to realize in ourselves and yet can never describe or define. God is like the horizon which sets the limitations of our sight." (Fromm, 1978, page 115)

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I expect that Lawrence Kohlberg's well-known work on levels of morality (with appropriate attention to Gilligan's analysis and criticism of his research, particularly with regard to gender) will be particularly helpful. (See Appendix A) James Fowler's classic book, *Stages of Faith* will assist in guiding my assessments of each child's God images, and religious/spiritual connection. However, rather than just asking specific questions, I also intend to employ the means of narrative when interviewing eight children—one boy, and one girl, at each of the following four stages:

- Children who have not quite begun the (approximately 6 month) process
- children just completing the *mitzvah* project
- children just completing the *d'var torah*
- children who are 2 to 4 months post-*b'nei mitzvah*

With the children just prior to beginning their study, I will be looking for indications of how they are currently negotiating the world: e.g., where they are on a continuum of egocentrism versus individuation and differentiation. I will also want to know what anxieties about the world they may be bringing to the process; and how the parenting they've received has been a factor in their ego development thus far. In addition, I will probe their God images and the state of their identification and connection with Judaism, including history and "people-hood". And I would especially want to know in what way, or if, they are able to articulate a sense of morality. And finally, where do they seem to fit in Kohlberg's levels of age-appropriate moral reasoning and development? While no two children are alike, I would be interested in exploring more fully whether there is in fact a

common level (as according to Kohlberg) that exists initially, and whether we are successfully using this pedagogically as a point of entry.

For those who are post-*b'nei mitzvah*, I will investigate the above-mentioned areas, as well as look for the following with regard to outcome:

- How has the experience of sharing—both with their seminar group at the temple (which includes peers and their parents), and with the congregation—of what they have learned/experienced affected them? And did the responsibility for writing and then addressing the congregation (particularly about the mitzvah project) affect them? If so, how much?
- Can they define their sense of morality more strongly now? Do they have a new sense of responsibility for themselves, and/or others?
- How has their level of egocentrism been affected? Have they moved (upward) in their levels of moral and psychological development, with appropriate challenges and frustrations provided by the current synagogue program?
- What is the ultimate "take away" (gleaned from their words) of the experience, psychologically and/or religiously? Conversely, has there been any regression, or simply no change?
- And do my follow-up sessions for the purposes of this project appear to have any impact on them?

I will also be conducting interviews with one or both rabbis of the congregation, along with teachers in the religious school, in addition to providing a questionnaire to the parents of

these eight children. I do want to note that I invited specific children (and parents) to participate in the project—I did not open it to the group as a whole for volunteers. In a letter to the parents explaining my request to interview their children, I informed them that they would be taking part in my project as a parent/child "team" and would receive a questionnaire soliciting their impressions of their children's respective stages of development. These are families I selected because they generally—though not at all exclusively—fit one or more of my criteria: from previous interactions, I assumed the parents—some of whom are, or have been, congregational leaders--would be open and supportive of the project; many of the young people were known to me as intelligent, somewhat reflective, and as seemingly well-integrated into their social worlds; and those children who appeared to me to be having, or had, positive experiences with the process of *b'nei mitzvah*. One of the children had worked with the assistant cantor, who officiated at that service; the rest had worked, or were working with me. And importantly, all the interviews with the children will take place in their homes, not at the temple, with the assumption that the home environment would be most conducive to open conversation—rather than my office, partly because it is the place they are usually expected to "perform" to a certain extent.

I also will not consider possible variables such as IQ, birth order, working versus non-working mothers, and the like, which arguably might have some influence on the data, but are beyond the scope of this project and inquiry.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

A. Observations from Interviews with Children—Connection with the Jewish Community

Fowler (1995) observes that positive relationships with religious communities can lead to life-long connection, and an "emergence of the ego strength or virtue we call fidelity" (page 77). I was keenly aware of this in certain interviews, and this was reaffirmed in going over the transcriptions. For example, in F19-20, the child talks about the greater sense of **attachment** (her word) she now feels to Judaism, as well as her greater sense of commitment. In fact, she expresses great pride in the fact that her parents seem to look to her as their connection to the synagogue (F17). For J., being part of the "chain of tradition" is clearly important (J13), and rises above the more concrete ideas of "being Jewish" noted by E. (and D.), who currently understands this as knowing Hebrew, having the responsibility of attending synagogue at particular times, etc.

On a more abstract level, B. described a strong connection to the community through the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* ("repair of the world" and the term commonly used to describe actively helping the community—both Jewish and secular). And C., while he (somewhat curiously, in C10) focused initially on what must have been door-to-door proselytizing he had experienced, was also able to describe his connection to Judaism in terms of a broader, or more universal view of his life. In mentioning a teacher (in C11) to whom he was grateful for connecting those dots, his desire for a way to achieve the integration of his Jewish and secular life is clear—as is his ability to articulate that.

In A20, this student expresses clearly conflicted emotions about her upbringing as the child of a Jewish mother and Protestant father. While I was not going to introduce the subject, I was pleased that she did in this context—especially because the experience of study for bat mitzvah seemed to have been an enormous turning point in her feeling more secure in her Jewish identity. While this period of study not surprisingly reminded A. of many other things she'd learned in our religious school—in A17 she alludes to events in Jewish history like the Holocaust, which unquestionably affected her—ultimately, her preparation led her to embrace Judaism in a way she had not previously. Describing our tradition as a "hug" was quite an extraordinary image, I thought. It was also a wonderful coincidence that the Torah portion assigned for that particular week provided such a rich well of inspiration and intellectual challenge for A., who, cognitively and morally more able to be reflective than some of the other students, unmistakably enjoyed tackling the content of the Cain and Abel narrative.

B. Spiritual Growth

Most of the children I spoke to about their God images fell into Fowler's stage 2 "Mythic/Literal Faith category. An excellent example was C., when I asked him in our interview how he imagined God:

C6: I know that it's not like a science, it's not proven, that there actually is. It's in your religion to believe in whatever God it is, passed from generation to generation. Like my grandma taught my mother...

DA9: What does that mean for you?

C7: It's just what I've known all my life. There's nothing that can change that; it's just what I've known my whole life. If someone gave another theory of God, I would just decline it, because if someone wanted me to believe something different, I just couldn't.

DA10: Can you imagine God?

C8: I imagine him with his giant book of life; watching the world, and watching some of the bad things that happen.

DA11: That's a tough one, isn't it? What do you think God imagines when things aren't going so well?

C9: Probably wonders who's to blame, why things are happening the way they are. The thing that always bugs me is whether God is a he or a she. Probably it will never be proven.

For Fowler, Stage 2 is characterized by the individual's connection with "the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community" (Fowler, page 149) as well as family, as C6 indicates; this amidst a distinct anthropomorphism, described in C8. At the same time, C. wonders about the "bad things that happen"—typical, too, of Stage 2, and the school-age child's sense of justice and fairness. I have known C. for a number of years, and he has clearly been blessed with a superb and restless intellect, so would not be surprised if, when he actually begins his studies, he is able to begin a clear transition to Stage 3, characterized by "a mutual interpersonal perspective taking of God" (ibid, page 153), particularly as he looks to find meaning in the experience. This, along with his deep sense of wanting to do "good" in the world (amidst his disappointment with those students who want only to focus on the Hebrew

learning) will arguably propel C. to question and reflect much more on the God image he currently—and appropriately, for his age—possesses.

In comparison, in D10, this child offers a clearly anthropomorphic God image, with her description of God as a "being in the sky with a big voice" but adds nothing else; displaying no curiosity or (overt, at least) "tribal" or communal, family or other connection to either God or Judaism. She doesn't seem to have moved beyond the symbolic "voice" of Stage 1.

J., however, appears to have already moved into Stage 3, with his description in J8 and J9 of a non-anthropomorphic God who "gives hope". His ability to weigh what he has learned about the beginnings of life in his science class against his sense that people need a God image that offers the "Stage 3 qualities of companionship, guidance, support..." (ibid, page 156) shows an already reflective persona—one which is able to take the perspective of "the other". And his reluctance to spend much more time with me considering this; telling me that the subject of God was "mind-boggling" and therefore he didn't like to think about it is also typical of Stage 3, where there is either an unawareness of a belief or, as yet, much ability, if any, to examine those beliefs, or the "system" of which they are part.

B. is also able to begin looking at God from a more abstract viewpoint; in mostly benign, non-anthropomorphic terms, "challenging" her to do the "right thing" (B15), although, like J., not quite able to describe any specific image. Her studies have also moved her to

wonder more about the nature and role of God from both a "macro" and "micro" perspective, particularly in light of what she's learned from studying with her peers in the *chavurah* (B17), which seems to place her squarely at Stage 3 as well. Again, her "unawareness of (a) system" (ibid, page 162) of beliefs and values is typical of Stage 3's "tacit acceptance" (ibid, page 161) but her questioning may indicate that she is beginning to transition to Stage 4's "explicit system" notable not least of all for its "quality of choice and personal responsibility" (ibid, page 162) with regard to both faith and identity.

A. also seems to fall into Stage 3, as she, like J., is trying to harmonize the information she is learning in school (she too mentions her science class in A14) with an ability to take the perspective of others—as well as the perspective of others seeing **her.** And in looking to the Torah as the place for God's authority, she still finds meaning in the "conventional" which is once again appropriate in Stage 3, for the reasons noted above.

Rizzuto (page 90) states that when "the private and official God are sufficiently well integrated, religion may also be a lasting source of self-respect and ego-syntonic (i.e. consistent with one's sense of self) replenishment for meeting human needs at any level of development." We might therefore presume (and certainly hope) that these students who appear well on their way to achieving higher stage faith development may be poised for a satisfying religious life, as they grow, both cognitively and chronologically.

C. Emotional Competencies

All the children I interviewed appear to be building sound ego structures at this point in their lives. It cannot be over-emphasized that those who completed—or had nearly completed—their studies felt an enormous sense of accomplishment, whether it was related to learning the required Hebrew passages, or actually standing in front of the congregation to lead a service, and happily articulated that, including those like J. and F., whose parents described them as generally, or previously, anxious children. G spoke of even wanting to repeat the experience (G21) because he found it so much "fun". B. described the sense of connection she felt to Judaism as something she imagined helping her later in her life (B22); while she doesn't use these words, I would suggest that the attachment to Judaism she's developed may help provide a sense of strength and wholeness as she grows. J. commented that he realized, once into the process, that it was not a test; that *b'nei mitzvah* was a "passage" (J14) and that writing the *devar torah* provided an opportunity for him to reflect on that (J15-16), which is helpful information. It also shows, once again, his particular ability to view his experiences from a more developed "third person" perspective. E., although he appears less able to articulate his more abstract emotions, can still discuss the struggle he has with a decision between attending friends' *b'nei mitzvah* and his responsibilities to his hockey team (E8-9). All the children state that they have conversations with their parents on a variety of subjects, and turn to parents for help with decision-making. Levels of attachment appear quite appropriate—though further along in transition toward separation for A. and J. (who also display more advanced levels of faith development, which is not surprising).

The children generally experience the world as a safe place, with parents supplying necessary and appropriate support and boundaries, as well as insight into their children's particular needs and characteristics. Reading the parents' questionnaires however, I noticed that D's mother was the one parent who did not describe her child with any mention or acknowledgement of her particular emotional or psychological make-up. She stated that she and her daughter "talk when we need to talk" with regard to the God question, and generally assumed that her child was simply absorbing various messages, such as the importance of Judaism in the family's life. To this outsider reading her questionnaire, these talks occur seemingly without an effort to check in very much with her daughter emotionally. And while F's mother also said that topics relating to God or Judaism usually only come up in the context of an issue that presents itself; from the perspective of the questionnaire, she seems much more attentive, or tuned in to her daughter's character and inner life—though it would not be helpful to extrapolate too much here simply on that basis.

However, this could explain why I have some concern about D. and her seeming inability to engage in much reflection; and perhaps why she also presents as more childlike—or still in latency—and more strongly attached to her mother than the other students (including C., who is the same age, and, like D. also hadn't started his studies as of the time of the interview), though I would certainly not characterize her as in any emotional trouble. Indeed, I am reminded that Gilligan (1993, page 9) challenges the view that girls need to separate the same way that boys do, saying "when the milestones of childhood and adolescent development in the psychological literature are markers of increasing

separation" that "(w)omen's failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop." Like D., F. also cited her mother as the person she most admired, though was able to discuss her reasons for doing so in a far more reflective manner, showing appropriate signs of separation in F1-3. However, F. is also an 8th grader, while D. was in the beginning of 7th grade when I interviewed her, and chronological age can result in wide swings of attachment at this period.

In sum, therefore, while perhaps unsurprising, it is significant that the families who create the most positive and secure environment at home for open conversation are also providing the ability for their children to learn (and practice) decision-making; as well as encouraging the appropriate separation and individuation, intellectually and otherwise, one would anticipate happening at this stage. Having a synagogue program that also promotes skills such as self-reflection and critical thinking thus can complement the atmosphere in the home (or can challenge it: a dissonance to possibly look out for, though fortunately not one particularly evident in this study).

The students' delight in their ability to employ a new skill set, and then see those skills come to fruition was almost palpable in the interviews. Grappling with a Torah portion—both to learn the Hebrew, and extract some meaning from it—gave them a sense of achievement arguably unrivaled by anything else they've yet done in their lives, as did the ability to lead the congregation in prayer. The only child with (designated) learning challenges was F., who, understandably, was extremely proud to have surmounted the difficulties of dealing with all the Hebrew, in particular; and like the others, she too also

needed to develop—or draw on—time management skills to get the work finished. Indeed, her mother reported that she is "definitely more grown up, more confident and she believes in herself in a way I had not seen previously", also noting that F. is becoming more discerning about her friendships—perhaps reflecting that greater confidence—and a cohesive sense of self on which she was able to draw.

D. Egocentrism

Levels of egocentrism also appear appropriate in these students for the most part. While they do not use this terminology in the interviews, their responses suggest most are indeed being "heard" by their parents, who also—at least as reported in their questionnaires—appear to show great sensitivity to, and interest in their child's emotional needs and general interests. As Bowlby notes (1982, page 354), the question of how the growing child builds his/her "internal world" is enormously complicated, and very much intertwined with the developing object relations (most especially with parents) in the youngster's "physical world". This is dependent "solely (on) the cognitive equipment a child has available when building his models of other people..." and so is consequently related to the ability to then develop the "mutual interpersonal perspective- taking" (see Fowler, above) so vital to both faith and moral development, and, from the perspective of this study, a highly desired outcome of the mitzvah project. Indeed, Fraiberg (1996, page 244) says, in relation to the building of the child's conscience, "(A) good, or an effective conscience must behave like a good and effective parent!" And, I would add, that conscience is also greatly aided by a "good and effective parent", for, as Fraiberg also

noted, the lack of parental attachment can lead to "diseases of the ego, the diseases of isolation, detachment and emotional sterility" (page 300), which is the truest and ultimate "threat to humanity."

The students' mitzvah projects then, had some influence on their egocentrism, though most of the influence really seems to be coming from home—which is, taking into account Fraiberg's observation above, quite appropriate. However, realizations such as E.'s due to the mitzvah project, that not all kids have parents who can "always be home to care for them" (E13) and that every child is "not as lucky" as he is, serves as a good (and typical) example of the powerful synergy that can exist between home and synagogue to benefit and enlarge the child's moral development, when there are similar messages being delivered from both. Nevertheless, this phase of development has both "cognitive and social dimensions" (Reimer, 1983, page 50) and therefore we need to be aware that the child must be at a point where he/she has a clearer understanding of the physical world, to be able to then perform the "role taking" and more mature moral perspective that define this new stage, to subsequently move beyond the egocentrism of the previous stage. (Ibid, page 51)

E. Observations on Parents' Questionnaire

Many of the parents (although the questionnaires all seem to have been filled out by the mothers: an interesting fact in itself, but one that is out of the scope of this project)

described a cultural, but not particularly religious connection to Judaism; they admitted to having minimal information about Judaism, beyond a general Jewish identity, and understanding of the "basics", such as holidays, recent history (the Holocaust and Israel were mentioned several times), or a few customs. They all felt they had strong Jewish "values" (although I am not sure what that means, exactly, and would welcome an opportunity to follow up with this at some point.) A number of parents noted that it was their child who asked to attend religious school, become b/mitzvah, and who was generally interested in deepening their knowledge of Judaism; in fact one of the mothers described herself as having been a "passive" participant in Judaism, and this seemed to be representative of most of them. It is their child, these parents said, who has brought them into the synagogue, and through whom they have learned a good deal more than they knew when their child first began his/her studies, which for many was a most (pleasantly) surprising outcome of the process. There seemed to be an initial assumption on their part that the children would simply go about the business of studying, and the rest of the family would show up on the big day, essentially to see the kids "perform". Therefore, the content of the *chavurot* for the families, with the discussions and educational component, along with the changes gradually wrought in the children were unanticipated for many parents. They generally expressed their delight—even amazement—with their child's confidence and observable emotional growth. This correlates to the sense of appreciation of the process expressed by the students who had already become, or were almost at the point of becoming b/mitzvah.

The senior rabbi observes of the parents (Appendix C), "I believe that most of them are looking not just for a service, but rather for an engaging experience which will be the beginning of something meaningful for their children and for themselves." I'm not at all certain that this is the case initially—at least, on a conscious level—but do agree that to a great extent we ultimately have been able to provide that experience for the parents.

I was very pleased to read of the discussions many of the families report having on God and Judaism, dealing with the "big questions" as E.'s mother said. G's mother, however, noted that the subject of God in relation to her younger son's cancer diagnosis had not come up with G, and that she wasn't "looking forward to that conversation". I would surmise that she is (understandably) feeling quite conflicted about the topic (and could no doubt benefit from some counseling of her own), and therefore hasn't been able to share any of that with her son; or possibly feels she cannot offer answers that are satisfactory in her particular theological system. Sadly, her son is clearly searching for spiritual guidance, and I would hope that an opportunity to discuss that with one of the clergy arises in the near future.

In my introduction earlier, I described many of the parents as "helicopter parents" and most—if not all—moved to this town for its highly rated schools, and ostensible insularity from the numerous troubles that beset the world. However, many parents in town realize—and the ones answering the questionnaire are no exception—that their children need to have at least some recognition that they lead lives of comfort many others (even in the next town, with its large, and poor, immigrant population) can only

dream about, and I believe they are grateful to partner with us in expanding their children's moral growth. And while they welcome the opportunity to show their kids a more global perspective, I feel that through the relationships they and their families develop with us through this process, in addition, we are inviting them to share issues that may hit closer to home, such as the one that G's family has been dealing with. At the same time, I also think that we could be connecting more with the parents at this moment when they are most emotionally accessible, and agree with the senior rabbi who wrote of his desire to "address some of their more private concerns – such as cost of parties, (which is) how the bar/bat mitzvah experience can add to the already high stress levels in many homes – which are clearly also some of (my concerns)"; as well as explore with greater depth and sophistication their understanding and thoughts about Judaism.

UNANTICIPATED RESULTS

One set of parents returned their questionnaire quite late, despite my (polite) request for it on a couple of occasions, including resending them a copy—and their assurance that it was on its way. Of all the families included in the project, theirs is the most active in the congregation, and I found their inability (?) to respond in a timely manner quite curious; the questionnaire also arrived too late to analyze much for this paper. I am not sure whether it was simply the forgetfulness of busy working parents, or downright disinterest on their part, although I was able to set up the interview with their child quickly and they seemed eager to participate at the time. (They are also not aware of the fact that they were a slightly later addition to the project, after I had not heard back soon enough from

another family I had originally contacted.) I had some reservations about dealing with the mother in particular, who several of us on staff have experienced as somewhat difficult. It may be that one or both parents felt some discomfort with all/some of the questions, or didn't know how to answer them. In the end, perhaps this "oversight" was not really about me and this project at all, and while I could assume it indicates a lack of endorsement, or even respect, I believe I dealt with it with equanimity.

Transference and Countertransference

This issue relates to one of the most significant, and unexpected, things I learned over the course of this project and its write-up: a good deal more about me, and the way I often interact with my students. (I will not directly reference my interactions with their parents.) I want to address the issues of transference and countertransference, for as clergy it behooves us to familiarize ourselves with these concepts and their impact on us in so much of our work. First, a definition: As Friedman (2001, pages 94-95) says of transference, this was "among Sigmund Freud's most significant contributions to our understanding of human psychology" and explains it as those "perceptions and experiences of people in the present" which are "colored by experiences with people in the past and by recent or even current environmental influences and relationships". Transference then is the term which refers to a "patient's or client's response to a therapist (or clergy) as imaged through his or her unique psychological lens, rather than to the person the therapist actually is." This phenomenon occurs regularly with our congregants, both young and old, as does countertransference; which is, Friedman notes,

similarly, the therapist's/clergy's "distortion made…from unresolved experiences in the…past." While a thorough review of transference and countertransference is not the focus of this paper, my increased awareness of their effects on the relationships I have with congregants in general, and my students in particular, is extremely beneficial. Indeed, Wicks (2003, page 323) remarks that if one is consistent in behavior with clients, congregants, etc, the counselor (or clergy) can "monitor personal feelings and thoughts" to keep countertransference from "developing and remaining hidden". This can then help in discerning when a situation or encounter with an individual feels unusual, or uncomfortable, as it may offer valuable information about whom we are working with, no matter their age.

It is with that in mind that I can first say I very much enjoyed every part of my interviews with the children, though clearly there were some with whom it was easier to engage, particularly on the weighty matters we discussed. This included B., with whom I did not work directly, and for whose service I did not officiate; this seemed to have no effect on our ability to have an open conversation. Her family is involved in the congregation, and therefore her ability to offer honest answers may at least partly result from the trust she has both in her parents, and then by extension, in those of us connected to the congregation. I did regret not being able to do more follow-up questioning in a number of cases, given the need to stay within the parameters of the interview questions, so as not to skew the data I received. However, at times, for example with E., I did end up doing a bit more probing, or prompting—perhaps making the assumption, correctly or not, that it would be helpful. I decided (quite possibly based on my own countertransference) that he

was occasionally uncomfortable with the questions, and noticed looking back at the interview that I was jumping in a bit too much to "help" him find words. I am sometimes—but not always—aware that my need to be "helpful" can get in the way of the student's need, or desire, to figure things in out in his/her own time, and I may often be projecting some of my own anxiety onto him/her, as with E. In any event, taking the time to pause and really reflect with the students in various places—rather than focusing on my admittedly pragmatic need to complete the interview—might have offered them a chance to consider these areas either anew, or from a different perspective. Reading through the various transcripts, I was cognizant of instances where I might have pursued an issue more with a child, or explained more, as with D. She might have been able to engage in more of a dialogue if I had offered examples of things she might like about being Jewish, e.g. And her mother's presence in the room (notably, this was the only time a parent remained in the room during the interview; the other parents were quite careful to ensure their child's privacy with me) may have inhibited her answers, but unfortunately, I have no way of knowing that. I certainly found myself talking much more, and frequently feeling anxious about the fact that D. didn't seem to have much to say—and wondering what her mother was thinking—either about her child, or the interview questions. In truth, I was a bit annoyed when I realized the mother would be sitting in, and wondered whether, or how, that might inhibit D.—and ultimately affect the quality of the interview. I do wish I had realized that D. may actually have been reassured by her mother's presence: a presence which Bowlby (page 207) describes as "a dominant strand in (the child's) life" throughout latency, until adolescence.

Frankly, I greatly enjoy talking to young people, such as J., A., F. etc., as they are intelligent, thoughtful, reflective and articulate: in other words, they are kids who seem to "get it"; especially once they've been through the study process. In fact, I found myself at once both energized and emotionally buoyed by most of interviews, even on days when I was starting to grow weary of asking the same questions over and over. I almost always find working with my students extremely pleasant, whether in my office, or in the sanctuary, but this opportunity to simply have a conversation (albeit a fairly directed one), without the usual agenda of service preparation—and, in their home environment—felt like a real gift. I don't know if they felt any more of a connection to me after our interviews, but I generally felt much more of a bond with them. It is one of my goals to be more accepting, though, of children like D. for who she is—though I do admittedly wonder how the b/mitzvah process might push or stretch her—and whether she's capable of being open to it. During the interview, when she described a situation she had at camp (D6-8), I had a moment of excitement, feeling that I had finally encouraged her to "dig down" into her feelings. But not every student—or every adult for that matter—is ready, or capable, for a variety of reasons, of "digging down" and I want to work on being patient and more tolerant with where they are emotionally. And simple curiosity about my students, and how each of them experiences and deals with the world, has become far greater as I have progressed on this project, and its write-up; and perhaps as a result, I am finding even greater fulfillment in my work with all of them. Indeed, in some ways, their struggle to define themselves as adolescents mirrors my own desire to take some risks, find new challenges, and grow professionally, even at this point in my nearly 30 year career as a cantor.

However, I may need to examine why it feels so important to me that every child has a positive—even "expansive" experience—beyond just the simple explanation of wanting to do my job well; along with helping to ensure that the Jewish people continues to exist and, more importantly, flourish. It is surely not my job to "save" the Jewish people—or any individual child, single-handedly—nor do they need me to be their mother. A place to start may be with more "welcoming" of my "parts"—particularly the "manager", which wants to "control the environment" in which I find myself, and the "firefighter" which is extremely reactive to perceived threats to my personal "system"—so I can better understand the uneasiness that is present. (Schwartz 2001, page 141)

While the need to pay more attention to moments of transference and countertransference with my students was not an outcome I anticipated, it's clear in going back over the interviews that my reaction to each child—and theirs to me—was, of course, unique in that regard. Some moments stand out more than others. For example, D., although she knew I was going to visit her at home, may still have found it confusing to have me there, and wasn't quite sure how, or how much to open up; and I reacted by becoming anxious—even frustrated—when I assumed I wasn't getting through to her. I now realize that I may have been experiencing, or taking on **her** anxiety that evening. In contrast, however, when I've encountered her recently, she's been much more affable and responsive, and it's conceivable that she now even feels closer to me, as a result of that particular boundary being crossed.

However, because this was a relatively brief, mostly experiential process—rather than a more formal and longitudinal study—in the end, it can be problematic and even unfair to speculate on the possible state of mind of any of these students, or make sweeping predications about their future. And since the interviews of six of the eight children took place near, or after, the service they led, I did not have the benefit of charting an empirical evolution of their psychological, moral or spiritual development over their entire course of study. What I have instead are "snapshots" of each child, at a particular moment, which has at times been challenging to analyze on paper. While the material I've gleaned has certainly been helpful, if I were starting this project based on what I now know, I might follow a group of students over eight or nine months: from just prior to beginning their studies, through the service, and even a month or two after that; interviewing them several times at specific junctures along the way. Having just one interview with each child certainly did not provide the information I would likely have obtained with a longer study. Nevertheless, I would emphasize that the time I did spend with each of them did profoundly affect me, and strongly reinforced my desire to make the experience of becoming b/mitzvah one that truly speaks to all our students, and to their needs at this age, including attachment to, once again, Melanie Klein's "people, values, and causes"—in this case, Judaism.

My own issues with the parenting I received likely have much to do with both the attachment I personally developed to Judaism as a teenager, and therefore my strong desire, or need, to provide my students their own attachment to and identity with Judaism—and perhaps an attachment to me as one of the supportive adults in their lives

as well. Ironically, I was extremely reluctant to become bat mitzvah, until the rabbi at my home congregation—an adult who, to my relief and amazement, seemed to understand me—enthusiastically agreed that I could fashion the service I was to lead in a very different way. While my grasp of the Hebrew required was less than stellar, I prepared and led a "creative service", which in the late 1960's was almost unheard of in the mainstream synagogue. Playing guitar, and singing in public for the first (or nearly the first) time, including popular folk, or "protest" songs; with this rabbi's assistance, I produced a "peace" service, of which I was quite proud, and was talked about for years in our then-small congregation. Writing about my own experience here of bat mitzvah has in fact provided the opportunity for reflection on the evolution of my attachment, and I anticipate this new awareness will be extremely useful toward recognizing the quality and incidences of countertransference, as well as transference, between my students and me, going forward.

This recognition should not preclude me, however, from also looking for increased points and times of connection, and trying to listen with ever greater care to my students. So, for example, if a child tells me that he/she is anxious about the up-coming service, rather than offering an albeit generally supportive, heartfelt "you'll be fine—I'll be right there with you!" I have been asking him/her to talk through with me the specifics of what they are worried about, so we can look at those carefully—and they might feel assured that their feelings truly matter; that I am taking them seriously. For a few students, I sometimes wonder if it is unusual for them to receive the non-judgmental and/or respectful attention of an adult, and sense they are uncomfortable trying to articulate what

is happening for them internally; consequently I proceed with some caution, given this caveat. For most, however, they seem relieved to have the opportunity to share, and name their fears, which include standing in front of a sanctuary full of people, going blank on their Torah portion, etc—all of which I am not surprised to hear, even from seemingly confident kids—but which I know are unique to each one of them. But while this experience can be—and generally is—a significant boost in self-confidence for most, if not all of these children, I want to be mindful that I cannot single-handedly repair the self-esteem of a child already in some trouble—though I can surely always offer a pastoral presence. As Dittes (1999, page102) says, "The pastoral counselor tunes into the feelings that are evident, acknowledges them, names them, welcomes them to the conversation."

Moral Growth

As I began interviewing the children, it became clear that they were almost all confused by, or unfamiliar with the term "moral dilemma" if I decided to use it, though when I explained what I meant, they were sometimes able to think of one—especially the girls, including the one whose cognitive development seemed below that of the others. Whether this truly represents an idiosyncrasy of gender development—so whether the girls' relationships with friends, especially, are more complicated and fraught—is not yet clear to me. Gilligan (1993, page 11) suggests that girls' attachments are different, however, and that they look toward relationship, which "fosters the development of the empathy and sensitivity necessary for taking the role of 'the particular other' and points

more toward knowing the other as different from self". Indeed, D., who had not yet begun her studies, or, therefore, a mitzvah project, displayed a "care for and sensitivity to the needs of others" (ibid, page 18) in D6-8, which challenges the traditional assumptions of Kohlberg and Piaget with regard to morality and development. While I do not believe the issue of moral growth is quite so cut and dried as either Gilligan or Kohlberg have posited, E. for example (in E8-9) seems somewhat more troubled about what decision was correct in the **situation** cited of responsibility to join the games played by his hockey team vs. attending friends' services of b/mitzvah—indicating regard for rules; while both D. and F., and even A. (in A11, especially)—notably, all females—are concerned about **relationships** with family, school or camp friends resolving well, without hurt feelings, etc. Gilligan describes this as typifying the way girls often handle a "moral problem (arising) from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract." (Ibid, Page 19)

While the writing of the *devar torah* offered the opportunity for reflection on both the Torah portion and the mitzvah project, which I believe ultimately, proves extremely valuable, I don't know that an essential "crisis of faith" necessarily occurred, which Kohlberg posited as a necessary piece for moving to the next stage of moral development. Certainly, it would appear that children who appear already poised for stage transition benefited from both the intellectual challenge of grappling with a moral theme gleaned from the Torah portion, and greater awareness (and tremendous satisfaction) that they could effect some (even small) change by engaging in their

respective mitzvah projects. I am thinking of A., in particular, who in A5-6 evidences growth toward Kohlberg's Stage 4, which, as mentioned earlier, is distinguished by a sense of responsibility to the "system" of which she is a part. She was also particularly fortunate in having a Torah portion that presented a classic and quite obvious moral question. In general, though, we do see most of the students moving at least toward Kohlberg's Stage 3, known as Interpersonal Conformity (see Lickona, Appendix A).

Spiritual Growth

It also became apparent with regard to the youngsters' spiritual life, or understanding of God, that what I found correlated well with Fowler's, as well as both Rizzuto's and Coles' findings: their God images were often very much representative of their parental relationships—neither had a number of them really moved beyond the God images typical of latency. However, they all noted that no one had previously solicited their thoughts on the subject, and I will examine this further in chapter 5, as I strongly believe this should be addressed by our staff. And it occurred to me later on that I might have asked them about **prayer**-or the act of praying, specifically—in addition to asking them about God. I was very moved by G's sharing of the fact (G15) that he had sought out the healing prayer in the *Gates of the House* prayerbook that had been presented to him at his service, as one of the gifts from various arms of the congregation. While his description of God as "this big, supreme being with a long white beard, short white hair, who's kind of old, who lives in a big palace in the sky, and watches over us all day" (G13) appears to be an image typical of the latency period, as well as Fowler's Stage 2, his inclination to

pick up the prayerbook, in search of something there that might provide him solace, seems to me a far more cognitively and emotionally developed act typical of Stage 3. G., confronted by the reality of his younger brother's cancer and treatment—and deep empathy for the other kids he has observed receiving treatment as well—was, by these unfortunate events, well-set up for a challenge to his stage of faith. However, I'm not certain we did much more than provide him a book, to address his obvious spiritual needs.

Indeed, I would urge that we synagogue professionals be attentive to what is happening spiritually for our students, and not just to their cognitive or even psychological needs and development. I believe that we often quite wrongly assume that they have no spiritual life—or questions, or yearnings arising from spiritual awakenings at this age—a tremendous oversight on our part. An easy place to begin a conversation on this might be to simply elicit their thoughts about the God image portrayed in their respective Torah portions, whether that happens in their study with me, and/or in the *chavurot* and go from there. These conversations could tell us much about our students, and their developmental and cognitive stages. Perhaps Rizzuto (1979, page 90) stated it best, when she wrote,

> (Children) populate their transitional space generously with fascinating creatures—God among others. The process encompasses the entire period that starts with object constancy and does not cease until adolescence, when new phenomena appear, integrating the old with the new. (Page 190)

Jewish Identity

Numerous observers of the Jewish-American experience have noted that, as Jeffrey Kress (a professor in the department of education at the Jewish Theological Seminary) says, "Jewish children often receive conflicting messages from adult role-models regarding expectations for Jewish identity" as well as that "what they hear (or observe of) their parents may well be very different from the expectations conveyed by their religious school teachers or rabbi." Many of the children I interviewed appear to have received positive, if somewhat vague, messages about Judaism, from family—often from grandparents—and, frequently due to, or even despite, their often obligatory participation in synagogue life during this period. J.'s mother was quite definite in viewing his preparation as a turning point, and as solidifying his connection to Judaism, e.g.

E. had great difficulty, however, with making a leap to any larger connection to Judaism; when I asked him if he felt more connected since beginning his studies, while he said yes, he quickly jumped to the more concrete things—not concepts—he had learned, such as better grasp of the Hebrew language (E24-26).

Oppenheimer (page 253) sees b/mitzvah as the ultimate way to express Jewish "peoplehood" largely—or mostly—because of the element of the presence of a congregation, which is watching, even "witnessing" in a religious sense, the child "proclaim" his/her connection to Judaism in very tangible ways. Certainly, the children I interviewed make that point, in their own words, including E. And J. proudly makes particular note of it, when he mentions the history of bar mitzvah in his family, and how

important it is to him to be part of that tradition, in J11-13, which suggests that we should be extremely cognizant, and encouraging of the impact and worth of these connections on most, if not all, our students.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

A. Implications for Religious Principles

Victor Frankl, the psychiatrist who survived the Nazi death camps, and believed intensely in the need to find meaning in the world—despite what he had experienced, and witnessed—wrote (rather incongruously paraphrasing a quote by Friedrich Nietzsche) that one who "knows the 'why' for his existence…will be able to bear almost any 'how'". (Frankl, 2006, page 80). This strikes me as one of the profoundest statements ever made, and it provides one of the underpinnings of my life, even at challenging moments. And this is what I would want our students to ultimately walk away with, in regard to their religious principles. What does Judaism say about living a life of meaning and purpose? And how are we to do so? Consequently, we need to ask ourselves what skills we are offering our students to help them figure that out—for we would be remiss if we assumed they weren't already pondering these issues. In returning to one of the texts of Robert Coles (1990, page 101), he states it well:

> Children try to understand not only what is happening to them, but why; and in doing that, they call upon the religious life they have experienced, the spiritual values they have received, as well as other sources of potential explanation.

And David Wolpe (1995, page 10) noted that religion "begins in the search"; that it "should help us believe that we matter, that our actions matter, and that we are never alone." At an age where identity, character, and ego formation are at their peak, this concept of one's always having a purpose in the world, as well as being endowed with great worth and dignity is a magnificent gift to bestow upon our young people.

Judaism certainly abounds with lessons for living a moral life as well; Reform Judaism in particular has always considered itself the inheritor of the ancient prophetic tradition to right the wrongs of the world. For example, the prophet Micah famously said, (Micah, 6:8) "It has been told you, O man, what is good: only to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before your God." And even as Judaism surely esteems and rewards intellectual prowess and accomplishments, as Telushkin (2001, page 21) states, "perhaps the primary goal of wisdom is to use our intelligence and creativity to discover how to apply the instruction to 'love your neighbor as yourself' in every situation. While Judaism does not offer the concept of sainthood per se, the idea of or aspiration to become a *tzaddik*—a righteous or good person—is imbedded in each one of our numerous texts over the centuries. Teaching our students therefore that so much of Judaism, and of living a Jewish life, means regularly doing good deeds; that we are to try and understand the perspective of others; in addition to the fact that they each are valued in the world—to us; their family, friends, and to God and the Jewish people—is the best possible result of the b/mitzvah process. While the senior rabbi notes (Appendix C) that it is the affective piece of this experience that ultimately "sticks", more than the "substantive" one, the inculcation of moral values—in the highest sense of that phrase—is no less significant, even as it is also surely related to the positive relationships fostered between the staff and the students.

B. Implications for Clinical Principles

The great Jewish theologian Martin Buber said that "all real living is meeting". (Ross, 2003, page 49) While this is ostensibly a religious quote, that also sums up for me what our role is as pastors for our congregants—be they children or adults. Focusing on the here and now—and being fully present with those with whom we work—is of the greatest importance. Therefore, I realize that my view, after carrying out this project, of each meeting with a child as a potential pastoral encounter—even as he/she is (simply—or not so simply) decoding Hebrew—can forever change the dynamics of the clergy-student dyad. In Genesis 3, God asks the first pastoral question, as many before me have noted, when he inquires of Adam and Eve: "*Ayeka*—where are you?" Understanding this question in its most existential and profound sense, we can then offer a loving and accepting presence on this journey of discovery, to our students and their families. And it is precisely our unique capacity as pastors in congregations to have access to, and some insight into, the interactions of the entire family over the course of significant life passages that frequently sets us apart from therapists, counselors, etc. working in the secular world—particularly during this exciting, but sometimes emotionally fraught time for some.

With that in mind, we also need to be aware of what Coles refers to as "defensive spirituality" (Coles, 1990, page 107), meaning that "a particular child of a particular religious background and psychological makeup (will respond)...in a particular intellectual and moral manner" to the experience of b/mitzvah. And we also need to be aware of what is happening developmentally at this time in our children's lives. In a study reported on by the National Institute on Mental Health, we are reminded—in case

we had forgotten—that teens process emotions quite differently from adults. The study states that, "Using functional MRI (fMRI), a team led by Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd at Harvard's McLean Hospital scanned subjects' brain activity while they identified emotions on pictures of faces displayed on a computer screen.Young teens, who characteristically perform poorly on the task, activated the amygdala, a brain center that mediates fear and other "gut" reactions, more than the frontal lobe. As teens grow older, their brain activity during this task tends to shift to the frontal lobe, leading to more reasoned perceptions and improved performance." (NIH Publication No. 01-4929) We know too that certain disorders can have an initial presentation during adolescence, which sometimes show up as we are working with our students, such as in challenging or defiant behavior, anxieties that seem beyond the norm, etc. And as Rizzuto's studies show, we can also learn much about our students from their God concepts—just how they are "maintaining psychic equilibrium" through those representations—which can help us to better assess and understand their individual needs and strengths. (Rizzuto1979, page 91)

In having some understanding of where our students are emotionally—as we work with the "whole child", we can then also recognize that the b/mitzvah experience can be a safe place to experience—or "try out" greater or increasing separation from parents, as, in a supportive environment they acheive competence in an area and arena with which the parents often are not familiar. It is also significant that the parents themselves can come to see their kids as competent—and as separate from them—in a way they perhaps had not previously. Indeed, the experience of the service often seems to me (and has been reported by parents) as almost magical: forever transforming the parent-child

relationship, as, before their eyes, parents see their children almost literally step through a doorway from childhood to young adulthood. As A.'s mother says, "I was overwhelmed by emotion as I watched my daughter's transformation occur during her bat mitzvah service."

D. WIDER CONTEXT

While it's a rather hokey example, I recently had the occasion to view an old film clip, from Rogers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, where the governess—and teacher—Anna, sings "Getting to Know You" to her young charges. The character clearly delights in learning the traits, quirks, dislikes, likes, etc. of each of these children, and I found myself unexpectedly moved by the scene. How privileged we are, I reflected, to spend the time we do with our young people, "getting to know" them—and what an awesome responsibility we have for a moment in their lives that will forever remain with them! Oppenheimer (2005, page 251) begs his readers that they not be "blind" to the fact of, "the hard of work of (our) children who…(read) from ancient texts and…(who)…inch closer to being Jewish men and women", and we who teach and guide as a part of the preparation for that occasion can play an intrinsic role in their development, both as Jews and as emotionally competent individuals. Indeed, my interviews with the students certainly reminded me in a powerful way just what remarkable individuals each of them are, and the manner in which they bring their very uniqueness to the process. Consequently, when we see them simply as (yet) another child we need to just "get through" the program, we do them—and ourselves—an enormous disservice. It is regrettable then, if the b/mitzvah program in

synagogues is treated as something close to a necessary evil, with the focus almost solely on the cognitive material the children need to "ingest"—rather than regarding this preparation as a "gift of time" when we are given the opportunity to truly affect the direction, spiritually and otherwise, of these children's lives. If we add to that the permanent bonds they and their families can develop with the synagogue and the Jewish community as a whole, the experience can begin to look very different for everyone.

Therefore, in my opinion, while some of the thoughts of our assistant cantor[4] are intriguing (see Appendix E) her suggestion of separating b/mitzvah preparation from the rest of the religious school experience—essentially, permitting kids (especially at the age of 10 or so) to "opt out", would result in a tremendous lost opportunity. In sum then, based on my conclusions from this project, I could quite easily argue that this is precisely the congregational cohort that should be receiving almost a "bombardment" of our attention and resources, given the high stakes involved.

And how to help our students (and perhaps even parents!) move toward a moral Stage 5—the highest stage—which "has a strong social conscience, based on the moral

[4] About the employment of an assistant cantor: because of the large numbers of students—and, therefore—larger number of services to accommodate all of them, we added this position 2 years ago. She, like me, is a graduate of our Reform seminary, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; and along with experience, she brings a highly intelligent, respectful and loving spirit to her work with the students—one of my main criteria for applicants for the position. Due to her hiring, we cut back the weeks the tutor spends with the children, and she and I increased the length of time that we work with them. However, even though this was our solution to the increased work load of preparing so many students in a growing congregation, it is by no means the one that other congregations will choose. In fact, most congregations simply hire additional tutors, which may mean that the cantor—and the rest of the clergy—ultimately spend less time with the children.

principle of respect for individual persons"? (Lickona, see Appendix A), arguably one of the roles of a religious institution? Part of the answer at least lies in challenging them to think beyond themselves, as we have been doing, through the mitzvah project, and deeper text study; and certainly by the modeling that we professionals can do to offer ways to live authentic and meaningful Jewish lives, while also being fully engaged in, and concerned about the world outside the synagogue. By putting moral issues, and real-life situations "on the agenda of congregational learning and living" (Wise, 2005) in honest and forthright ways—including an openness to the doubt that may underlay the "moral contradictions" that are part of our lives (Schwartz, 2005); we strengthen the role and relevance of Judaism and the synagogue in helping to make meaning out of the world around all of us. After all, we want our congregants, whether they are 13 or 93, to come to the conclusion that Wolpe (2009, page 186) does: "On balance," he observes, "Religion increases social stability, enabling people to live happier, more charitable, more productive and better lives."

I would hope that my colleagues around the country—whether they read some part of this in an article, or learn about it from me in a presentation to one of our professional groups, e.g.—might therefore appreciate how profoundly we can positively change so many of the dynamics of our work: for us, and for our students and their families. Indeed, a parent (who was not part of the study) recently wrote the following to me, included in a thank you note; it was as if she had read this paper: "The seminar program and the tutoring process help foster learning, self-exploration and friendship among the students, rabbis, families and cantors. It highlights the best parts of the community that embodies Temple

Beth El." Reading this was of course incredibly gratifying, and gives me great hope and resolve that, in general, we are doing many things right for both our students and their families.

D. THE FUTURE

General Thoughts for Synagogue Professionals

When I first read Rabbi Goldie Milgram's book, *Make Your Own Bar/Bat Mitzvah,* which had been suggested to me as I consulted numerous texts for this project, I had doubts about many of her ideas, although the enthusiasm and passion she displays for connecting students via the process of b/mitzvah to the many facets of their growth, as well as to a vibrant and relevant Judaism, is quite inspiring. Part of my objection however, and perhaps ironically—given the subject of this project, was to her very intense focus on the personalization of the process—including, or especially, an active non-congregational approach to the rite. In fact, she has created a website (Bmitzvah.org), which offers resources for finding tutors, clergy, etc. who will help families create their own individual service, generally outside the synagogue.

Many of us in the synagogue world have become increasingly aware, and wary of private, "backyard" types of ceremonies, and in some areas, these are presenting serious challenges to regional congregations. Not-so-coincidentally, a recent article in the local Jewish Week newspaper featured several programs currently operating in the New York region that offer individualized attention, in a way that participants who were interviewed believe

congregations cannot. A Jewish professional solicited by the writer for his opinion noted that this development should not be surprising, as it is in keeping with the private tutoring or personal attention now offered in numerous other venues, whether for adults or children. While I obviously cannot predict the ultimate impact of these programs on our synagogues, I do believe that we would do well to view them as a "wake up call", making every effort to re-vision our own programs to respond to a very different contemporary reality than that with which many of us grew up. This includes not taking for granted that *b'nei mitzvah* programs—which for many years have, quite bluntly, been the "bread and butter" for many synagogues—will continue simply because of parents' desire to educate their children for the rite. I want to emphasize that we must surely make exceedingly clear the immense significance and context of the communal/congregational aspect of b/mitzvah; but we also need to be attentive to the fact that our people—younger or older—are often searching desperately for points of connection, not to mention a process infused with integrity. The article, which will have been seen by hundreds, if not thousands of people in the New York area, if not beyond—and is likely to spark conversation, if not controversy—also conveys the challenges, or even frustrations of trying to offer a relevant and "meaningful" religious school program in a larger congregation, which speaks to these same needs overall. Several of the students in my study mentioned wanting to harmonize information and concepts they were learning in secular school (particularly in science classes) with what they understood of some of the biblical stories, just for example—and we who work with children in their religious/synagogue world are often not addressing these, and other, potential areas of intersection with their experiences outside the synagogue.

Though this is not news to anyone involved with Jewish education (or any other kind of education for that matter), it still bears repeating that strengthening and updating religious school curricula; as well as increasing the involvement, and hiring (often a challenge, alas) of caring, dedicated teachers and staff at all levels—including clergy—is a crucial piece of the larger picture. Dr. Jonathan Woocher, an expert and consultant in Jewish education, who currently directs the Think Tank for Innovation in Jewish Learning and Engagement, of the Jewish Education Service of North America, has noted the almost paradoxically simultaneous challenges of assimilation and search for deep Jewish experiences so common in our (highly sophisticated, yet often virtually Jewishly illiterate) communities. He wonders, "Can Jewish education adapt itself to a world where every student (and parent) has access to the equivalent of a university library in her or his bedroom or den? Can the possibilities be exploited and the programs and pedagogy be recrafted accordingly?" (2006), also flatly stating that, even as addressing the personalization desired by many in regard to Jewish education is highly problematic; nonetheless, "the provider who can deliver the best 'customer experience' has the advantage". In other words, we should by no means consider the personalization of Jewish education to be a passing fad; rather, we must develop ways for it to permeate and enhance our synagogue programs.

Our Temple Program

Therefore, based on my findings over the course of this project, I began to reconsider a good deal of what Rabbi Milgram suggests, as worthwhile for my synagogue to implement. It is admittedly daunting when one is faced with scores of students to imagine

much beyond the program we have now—where, quite honestly—it can be a struggle to try and create a truly positive and potentially transformative experience for each and every child, and, perhaps—or, hopefully his/her family. Currently, we do manage rather well to generally avoid the "assembly line" experience for everyone involved, particularly these last few years—yet I feel we must do more, for this is an opportunity we will likely never have again. Our children are inundated by activities, responsibilities and copious amounts of schoolwork, and we must do all we can to distinguish the experience of becoming b/mitzvah from their other "obligations". We must help our children attain the skills to do what our synagogue mission statement says: "Through study of our sacred texts, we discover how to fashion lives of Jewish meaning in an ever-changing world" amidst its promise to "nurture the next generation". (See Appendix B)

Shabbaton, *Chavurot*, and Tutoring

I will urge that a number of Milgram's ideas be implemented, feasible even with large numbers of children in the process, such as a journal of the experience, from the start of their studies at the first *chavurah*; and other suggestions from her "*b'nei mitzvah* action plan" or "BMAP" (Milgram, page xvii). And a part of the journal might include a section, as Telushkin suggests (2006, pp 46-47), on character and making moral decisions—including such topics as when it might have been difficult to act ethically or responsibly; not engage in gossip with friends, e.g.—once again helping to connect the dots between their secular and synagogue worlds.

Corresponding to the topic of this project then, the elements of Milgram's *b/mitzvah* action plan in general are critically related to acknowledging—or, even more importantly—quite literally **actively** embracing, and engaging with the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual pieces of the process (page 15) which in our program we've thus far only done indirectly in many cases. A number of her suggestions could be introduced at the *shabbaton* in the 6th grade, when various logistical pieces aren't necessarily in place yet, whether they relate to the party, or the mitzvah project, etc. Some other things to work on there, (particularly as there is great benefit to writing them down) for later follow-up by both the family and staff members might include:

- A self-assessment by the b/mitzvah of his/her learning style (i.e., auditory, visual, etc.; useful knowledge both for learning the Hebrew and for the writing of the *devar torah*)
- A list of important people in his/her life, including mentors (including how all or some of these people can play a part in the day: whether assisting with studying, planning the party, etc.)
- Things/areas the b/mitzvah cares about and is good at (this often is quite helpful with selecting the *mitzvah* project, and is addressed in some measure in our current program)
- Questions about Judaism, including its relationship to the youngsters' world
- Goals the b/mitzvah and his/her family would like to set for the next year or so as they go through the process—social, spiritual, study, etc. (they may very well not be the same for each family member)

Another result of this project will likely be re-imagining the *shabbaton* as much more of a "retreat", rather than the quite adequate, but information-heavy, and "frontal" approach of the current program, consequently providing the benefit of an increased level of proactive involvement of both the students and parents. I will also suggest that a longer weekend away at a camp, conference center, or the like be seriously considered, as an important step beyond the current *shabbaton*.

And I agree with the senior rabbi's idea of dealing head-on with the 7th grade curriculum amidst the acknowledgment that this grade is, like it or not, all about b/mitzvah prep—and therefore using this period of time to its best advantage. He says (Appendix C) "I might like to see this program rethought with one component being a family Torah study with the clergy, as is done in other synagogues, and another component an opportunity for the seventh grade to study in the academy format we employ for our older kids." As he and the assistant rabbi are currently teaching 7th grade on Wednesday afternoons, they will be in an excellent position to help evaluate the existing program (which is itself a new curriculum) and encourage any changes, like the one he suggests. These changes could also provide additional opportunities and time to address some of the subjects I'd like to see included in the *shabbaton* and/or *chavurot*, particularly God, and prayer, which could help to avoid overloading those events with too much material, given their relatively brief duration.

We have also made some changes to the *chavurot* recently, adding more content specifically to study of the Torah portion, which I encouraged, based on my observations

that the kids truly enjoy being challenged. While I had some empirical evidence of this from my interviews with the students—a number of whom stated they had not learned a great deal in the *chavurot* specifically—others on the professional staff also agreed that providing more background and greater intellectual rigor to the study of the portion would benefit all the family members who attend.

And at the moment, we don't do much—if anything—to recognize the students' passage from child to Jewish adult, in the religious school after the service, assuming the kids attend the following week. Creating a ritual or having some kind of informal but appropriate acknowledgment that the status of the student has changed would be both meaningful and fun for all the students, as well as a way of also building community—and encouraging them to return to school, and I will ask our staff to think about this as well.

I want to be sure I make particular note here of my appreciation for the professional staff at the synagogue, all of whom care a great deal about both the students and the quality of the program we offer them, along with their parents. I am extremely fortunate to have a team that both understands the challenges and strengths of synagogues and communities like ours, and is willing to work to continually improve the program. This includes the tutor we currently employ; the other tutor who had been with us for many years, has now left the area, presenting me/us with possibilities for a new approach—as has the current economic climate, since there is less money available for hiring additional people. One rather obvious thing to do first of all is to bring the remaining tutor into the discussions of

the program, rather than simply treat her as an (albeit valued) appendage. Particularly since the tutors are often the first direct contact the children have with their formal study, it is vital to ensure that those we employ are clear about, and share the vision of the synagogue, and that of the rest of the professional staff. Indeed, I derive more and more resonance—and sense of responsibility for these children: for me and those I supervise—in the teaching found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ta'anit* 7b-8a) which states,

Rava said: If you see a student whose studies come as hard to him as iron, it is because his teacher does not encourage him. I believe this is not unlike the "alternative reality" to the usual "rhythms, negotiations, and rules" of the rest of the world which Dittes (page 59) says the pastoral encounter is meant to provide—an "alternative" (and possibly a great relief) to what may be encountered by our students in their secular schools, or even, sadly, sometimes in their homes.

The additional 8 weeks or so I now have with the students due to cuts in the tutoring budget, has turned out to be very constructive—even a blessing. While the time is spent in a class of about six to eight students before they move to individual lessons with me, it still affords all of us additional opportunities to interact and get to know one another. Although the tutor provides updates on the students before they get to me, I now can assess the students' skills earlier for myself—and therefore have the ability to intervene earlier, if necessary, based on first-hand information; as well as create an upbeat, positive atmosphere in which I can encourage both their individual efforts, as well as their support of one another in their studies. And I also offer extra help (often part of that earlier intervention) with much more enthusiasm than I used to, both while the students are in

my class, and when they start their individual lessons. Although synagogue life is extremely hectic, and it's often difficult to find that additional time; since beginning this project, I am committed more than ever to the children (and their parents) feeling fully supported all along the process. If this sometimes results in my working additional hours, it is almost always well worth the effort. At the same time, everyone on the professional staff concurs, as a rabbi quoted by Oppenheimer (page 44) says, that "the child is more important than the text" and we are sympathetic to, and prepared to work with the reality that skill and ability levels can vary greatly. Perhaps then, while it might seem like a trivial change in wording, rather than discussing "tutoring" of the children, we should start using the term "mentoring" which is really closer to the approach I am advocating.

A couple of years ago, I added a bit of ritual to the *bimah* practice I do with the children (it is based on a suggestion from a colleague). Before taking out the Torah for the first time with the students (which they're always very excited about), I send them for a quick hand washing; after they return, and I give them the Torah, we say *Shehechyanu*. I believe that saying the prayer which thanks God for bringing us to that special time helps to remind the children that they are part of a moment that—while obviously highly significant for them—is also far larger than they are, linking them to the generations of the Jewish people.

Date Assignments

With regard to what is seemingly an administrative issue, I have questioned my role as the overseer of the date assignments—a responsibility which varies from one synagogue

to another and which the former senior rabbi used to handle here. When he retired, it fell to me, solely because I was then the synagogue's only full-time, long-serving clergy—rather than out of any thoughtful decision-making. Having done a quick survey among my colleagues on the matter a few years ago, at least a large minority of the time, assignments are instead handled by the principal/director of education or executive director of a congregation—again, a decision apparently only made for pragmatic reasons. Aside from the administrative challenges inherent with managing a large number of families, my principal hesitation about this role centers on the contentiousness that sometimes occurs between a few parents and me, when I cannot give them what they want—and what the effect of that might be on any future relationship. It is relevant to mention that we have particular policies in place about dates, which help manage the numbers, and provide boundaries—which are not always appreciated by parents who may have difficulty with those in their lives in general.

On the other hand, an important insight connected to my personal growth and learning has been understanding that being clergy doesn't always mean being a "pleaser"—that boundary-setting is sometimes (an important) part of the role as well. And in addition, there may also be powerful family or personal issues which play a role in the tussle over the date assignments and pastoral skills can be helpful to elicit that information, perhaps ultimately changing the dynamic. I do think this piece should be considered in any overall re-examination of the program, whether we ultimately kept the same structure or not, as, based on how and why a particular synagogue "department" is handling the

assignments, we should be aware that it is a message we are sending our congregants, even if indirectly.

The blessing the b/mitzvah receive in front of the open ark by the rabbi[5] near the end of the service they have just led is preceded by a minute or so of private conversation with the rabbi on what becoming b/mitzvah has meant to them. While the blessing is a lovely moment—as well as being visually powerful for the congregation—I am convinced since conducting these interviews that it would be enormously useful for the students to have more time, and more opportunity to reflect on their experiences, in the aforementioned journal and in both ongoing and follow-up conversations with one of the clergy or education staff. This could also help in the students feeling more responsibility and "ownership" (as the tutor said; see Appendix D) for the process as a whole, as well as a greater sense of control during the weeks and months of their study. In a related suggestion, I also suggest that we should consider assigning each family a "*madrich*" (guide) from the professional staff: one of the rabbis, cantors, or school directors; who would be a resource and help throughout the process, from the first *chavurah*—or even from the 6th grade *shabbaton*—and onward. Pieces from the *shabbaton*, such as the goals, could be followed up with the *madrich* (in addition to regular "check-ins" with the tutor and cantor). In particular, this might be an opportunity to also discuss and explore concepts of spirituality and prayer; even some creative writing on prayer themes could be encouraged, and perhaps used in the service. The *madrich* also could help the students

[5] At this congregation, the cantors are not involved in the blessing, though both rabbi and cantor do offer it in many synagogues. This is a difficult issue for me; given the pastoral relationship I believe I develop with the students, I feel that one of the most meaningful moments in the service occurs with me excluded as one of their clergy.

identify and wrestle with such questions as understanding the God portrayed in the respective Torah portions; whether the Jewish people have a special relationship with God and the land of Israel, e.g. In addition to the commentaries included in the URJ Torah portion booklets they're given, additional sources of information and inspiration could also be offered to both parents and children, on topics like basic theology (*Finding God*, or one of David Wolpe's books, are all written in a very accessible style, just to name a very few). I felt great regret and sadness, for example, when F. mentioned at the end of our interview that no one (at least in her recollection) had ever asked her thoughts about God before I did. For F. and her peers, our ability, as Wolpe (2009, page 190) says, to offer a "living God…who whispers inside us, the powerful force urging us to goodness and giving us a sense of peace" is an enormously critical tool for navigating through life's ups and downs, and surely a gift we can give that will last far longer than any other they will have received.

I close with these words by Danny Siegel, (known—and beloved—by many as a "*mitzvah maven*") and based on a piece from the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *B'rachot* 17a), as my prayer for *b'nei mitzvah* everywhere:

May your eyes sparkle with the light of Torah,
and your ears hear the music of its words.
May the space between each letter of the scrolls
bring warmth and comfort to your soul.
May the syllables draw holiness from your heart,
and may this holiness be gentle and soothing

to you and all God's creatures.

May your study be passionate,

and meanings bear more meanings

until life arrays itself to you

as a dazzling wedding feast.

And may your conversation,

even of the commonplace,

be a blessing to all who listen to your words

and see the Torah glowing on your face.

Appendix A: The Stages of Moral Reasoning* (from *Raising Good Children*, by Dr. Thomas Lickona; Stages 1-5 adapted from Lawrence Kohlberg)

(Ages indicate reasonable developmental expectations for a child of normal intelligence growing up in a supportive moral environment.)

STAGE 0: EGOCENTRIC REASONING (preschool years - around age 4)	What's Right:	I should get my own way.
	Reason to be good:	To get rewards and avoid punishments.
STAGE 1: UNQUESTIONED OBEDIENCE (around kindergarten age)	What's Right:	I should do what I'm told.
	Reason to be good:	To stay out of trouble.
STAGE 2: WHAT'S-IN-IT-FOR ME FAIRNESS (early elementary grades)	What's Right:	I should look out for myself but be fair to those who are fair to me.
	Reason to be good:	Self-interest: What's in it for me?
STAGE 3: INTERPERSONAL CONFORMITY (middle-to-upper elementary grades and early-to-mid teens)	What's Right:	I should be a nice person and live up to the expectations of people I know and care about.
	Reason to be good:	So others will think well of me (social approval) and I can think well of myself (self-esteem)
STAGE 4: RESPONSIBILITY TO "THE SYSTEM" (high-school years or late teens)	What's Right:	I should fulfill my responsibilities to the social or value system I feel part of.
	Reason to be good:	To keep the system from falling apart and to maintain self-respect as somebody who meets my obligations.
STAGE 5: PRINCIPLED CONSCIENCE (young adulthood)	What's Right:	I should show the greatest possible respect for the rights and dignity of every individual person and should support a system that protects human rights.
	Reason to be good:	**The obligation of conscience to act in accordance with the principle of respect for all human beings.**

tages 1 through 5 are adapted from Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning as described in Kohlberg (1975, 1978, 1981); Stage 0 dapted from William Damon (1977) and Robert Selman (1980).

Parents are often surprised to learn that kids' moral reasoning is so different from their own and goes through such swings as they move through the stages. At Stage 0 (Egocentric Reasoning), which usually rules the roost at age 4 (but may start to show up even sooner), kids' moral logic is...self-centered. Their moral indignation comes from a real belief that whatever they want is fair, just because they want it...

At **Stage 1** (Unquestioning Obedience), often dominant at around age 5, kids do an about-face and reason, "Grown-ups have a right to be boss, and I should do what they say!" At **Stage 2** (What's-in-It-for-Me Fairness), which usually breaks through between 5 1/2 and 7, kids do another flip-flop and think, "We kids have got our rights! Parents shouldn't order us around!" Stage 2 thinkers also develop a fierce but narrow sense of fairness and look at being good as kind of a tit-for-tat deal ("I'll help with the dishes, but what'll you do for me?").

I want to stress that even in the early stages of moral reasoning development, you can't be sure of a child's moral stage just from knowing his or her chronological age. One 5-year-old may be mainly Stage 0, another Stage 1. One 7-year-old may be predominantly Stage 1, another Stage 2. And the higher the moral stage, the more variation there is in when kids reach it. Many teenagers, for example, are still stuck in Stage 2 and are responsible for a lot of...me-centered behavior...Other kids, especially if their social environment has demanded more than a what's-in-it-for-me morality, may begin to

develop Stage 3 (Interpersonal Conformity) as early as the middle-to-upper elementary grades and continue to develop it through their early teens.

At Stage 3, kids are very much concerned about what people think of them. They figure, "If I want people to like me, I'd better be a nice person." By living up to other people's expectations, Stage 3 kids can also feel good about themselves. This kind of thinking can be the source of a lot of cooperative and caring behavior.

But Stage 3 has an obvious weakness: it confuses what's right with what other people want you to do. That's okay as long as the other people are presenting positive moral values (be kind, honest, respectful of others). The challenge for parents of Stage 3 teenagers is to keep them tuned into positive values and strong enough to resist the peer-group seduction to get into things like sex, drugs, and drinking because "everybody's doing it."

Many teenagers, some during high school, some later, come to realize the shortcomings of Stage 3 reasoning and go on to develop the more independent, society-wide perspective of **Stage 4** (Responsibility to the System). They keep the best of Stage 3 -- they still care about people they know personally -- but they look farther and see more. Stage 4 reasons: "There's more to being a good person than pleasing my family and friends. There's a bigger society out there, and I'm part of it. I've got certain responsibilities and obligations to think of."

The particular social system that a Stage 4 thinker feels obligated to may not be the one that most people support. A Stage 4 socialist living in a capitalistic society, for example, would be opposed to the values of the prevailing system. But regardless of their particular beliefs or values, Stage 4 thinkers share a sense of commitment and duty to some kind of a larger system beyond themselves. Most of the time, that system includes familiar social institutions: church, school, family, and country.

When Stage 4 considers irresponsible behavior, it thinks, "What if everybody did it? What if everybody shoplifted? What if everybody did as they pleased? The whole system would collapse." The great majority of Stage 4 thinkers believe that people should obey the law, pay their taxes, vote in elections, take care of their children, help their community, and serve their country. They believe in being a good and conscientious citizen. They're the backbone of any society. Teenagers and young adults who don't develop Stage 4 moral reasoning...lack the understanding of civic responsibilities required for good citizenship.

The major drawback of Stage 4 is that it sometimes gets carried away with the system it believes in and rides roughshod over the rights of individual people. A Stage 4 reasoner might say, for example, that people shouldn't be allowed to assemble to protest government policy if it's going to "stir up trouble" or cause problems for the government. Some societies and some individuals use Stage 4 reasoning to suppress individual freedom in the name of "law and order" or for the sake of a "cause." When Stage 4 sees a conflict between the system and individual rights, it comes down on the

side of the system.

Stage 5, the stage of principled conscience, reorders the moral priorities. It says, "Look, any social system exists to benefit its individual members, not the other way around. No system should ever violate the rights of the people it was founded to protect." The founding fathers were thinking Stage 5 when they told us that if the government doesn't protect our inalienable individual rights, we should throw it out and get a new one! And yet Stage 5 has the highest respect for law, because it knows that law is the chief instrument for securing human rights. But it also knows that there's something even more basic than law which is the reason for law in the first place. And that's morality. Respect for persons.

Stage 5 also has a strong social conscience, based on the moral principle of respect for individual persons. That principle enables Stage 5 thinkers to mentally "stand outside" their social system and ask, "Are things as good as they ought to be? Is justice being served? Are individual human rights being fully protected? Is there the greatest good for the greatest number? And as I go about my personal life, do I show respect for the rights and dignity of all the individuals I deal with?" At present, the research shows, only a minority of adults attain Stage 5.

Appendix B

Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester Mission Statement

Temple Beth El is a Reform Jewish congregation which constantly renews itself as a Sacred Community, a *kehilah kedoshah,* by embracing these eternal values:

Worship, *Avodah*:
At home and in our synagogue, worship and prayer offer connection to God. Jewish ritual, a source of spiritual uplift for individuals and for the congregation as a whole, sanctifies life's joys and comforts us during life's sorrows.

Torah Study, *Talmud Torah*:
Torah is the foundation of our tradition, and its teachings provide content and context for all that we do as individuals and as a congregation. Through study of our sacred texts, we discover how to fashion lives of Jewish meaning in an ever-changing world. We value formal and informal lifelong learning, at home and in our synagogue.

Social Justice, *Tzedek*:
Our congregation pursues social justice, striving toward *tikkun olam,* repair of the world, through deeds of righteousness and loving-kindness. We provide opportunities for our members to act on our Jewish values, inspiring engagement in social action and social advocacy.

Community, *Kehilah*:
We strive always to be a warm, welcoming, inclusive and responsive community, offering comfort, joy, friendship and support to our members. Equally important is our strong commitment to the larger community, both Jewish and non-Jewish, locally, nationally, around the world, and in Israel, linked to us through history and faith.

Our mission is to inspire our congregants' Jewish engagement and to ensure a vibrant Jewish future by nurturing the next generation. We share a commitment to Reform Judaism and furthering individual and communal spiritual growth, while recognizing a range of personal philosophies, practices and needs.

Appendix C: Questions for Senior Rabbi on Temple Beth El's B'nei Mitzvah Program

Q: In what way has the experience of b'nei mitzvah evolved since you've been the rabbi of Temple Beth El?

There are many more kids becoming b'nei mitzvah than in the years when I first arrived in Chappaqua. We have worked hard at maintaining the feeling of attention given every family despite the increased numbers. While I believe in this area we have succeeded, the increased numbers do place great stress on the calendar. My guess in the families can't help feeling like they are pieces of a larger puzzle, for good or for bad.
In part to address this, and in part to take advantage of the attention our families pay to anything they perceive as bar/bat mitzvah related, we have added substantial family education components – first in the sixth grade, and for the past three years in the fourth and fifth grades as well. As a result, the b'nei mitzvah experience feels much better integrated into the religious school and family education curricula than it used to. Some families consider these additional time commitments to be a burden, but most genuinely appreciate them.
The service itself, while remaining a Shabbat service, has come to be more and more geared to the friends of the bar/bat mitzvah. We came to realize that of all those in attendance, it was these kids who had the most to gain. So we try to speak to them. My sense is that, for the most part, this has been quite effective.
Finally, I think the process – from assignment of dates through final rehearsal – is better organized than in my first year. I think we are very clear in writing about every aspect of the experience from the moment they are notified about date assignments. Some may push back on certain policies, but we remain fair in their application.

Q: How do you view the general experience of b'nei mitzvah against the backdrop of the contemporary American synagogue?

There is little question that in a suburban setting such as ours with so many young families living in our community, bar/bat mitzvah drives a large portion of synagogue membership. But that's not a negative: anything that leads families to affiliate is to our advantage. And I believe that most of them are looking not just for a service, but rather for an engaging experience which will be the beginning of something meaningful for their children and for themselves.

We know that social justice work is a successful draw in synagogue life. And the extent to which b'nei mitzvah experiences in synagogues across America include "b'nei mitzvah mitzvahs" is an indication of this. For many kids, this component may be the most meaningful part of the experience. And if they can associate social justice with Jewish values, then that is terrific.

Q: What are your thoughts about the extent and quality of parental involvement in the process? Are there ways would you like to see it change?

I think we have done a good job at engaging the parents in the process from fourth grade on. And I think most of the parents see the value in their involvement. I would like to establish some separate sessions for the parents alone, to address some of their more private concerns – such as cost of parties, how the bar/bat mitzvah experience can add to the already high stress levels in many homes – which are clearly also some of mine. I think such opportunities would be of great value.

Q: When you see many of the students later on as confirmands in 10th grade, what skills, knowledge, or insights from the b'nei mitzvah experience to they appear to have carried with them; i.e., what "sticks" for them?

I believe they look back fondly on becoming b'nei mitzvah, and on the relationships they built with some of their teachers and clergy along the way. From the b'nei mitzvah experience they learned that Judaism cares about a commitment to our living responsible lives. And through the process of writing their sermon, they learned how to articulate this concern. They also know that their synagogue cares about them. Often kids who did not continue on after bar/bat mitzvah will call me with questions, and they would not if they did not think we were present for them. So I suppose what sticks is really more affective and less substantive. But that's ok.

Q: In what ways does the current program mesh with your vision for the congregation, and what would your ideal program look like?

If I take for granted that our Shabbat morning services are going to remain geared to the bar/bat mitzvah families (and I do), then I think those services may have come about as far as they can.

I believe our family education components are effective for those who attend, and most do. But I wish more parents felt compelled to show up in grades four and five, where we try to set the tone for what we want the overall experience to be about.

I wish competition for dates between large numbers of kids on a limited calendar did not result in competition for whose friends will attend which service, and a general sense of exhaustion felt by so many kids on the "b'nei mitzvah circuit."

It remains unclear to me whether our seventh grade religious school program is effective in anything other than preparing the kids for reading their prayers. I might like to see this program rethought with one component being a family Torah study with the clergy, as is done in other synagogues, and another component an opportunity for the seventh grade to study in the academy format we employ for our older kids.

Appendix D: Responses from B'nei Mitzvah Tutor

Q: What is most satisfying about working with the b'nei mitzvah? What *don't* you like?

Most satisfying:

Being able to help the students gain "ownership" of the service, and their portions. (When they appreciate that they are actually chanted words that mean something, and that they may be familiar with, I like stewarding through that thrill.) I love working with them when they are so focused. When it all clicks for them - when they see their place in something larger than just their part - it's very rewarding. Of course that doesn't happen with all students. But I always relish the opportunity to convey my own enthusiasm for a love of leading the service and *leyning*; I consider myself very fortunate to be able to work with the *b'nei mitzvah.*

What I don't like:

I wish all the students could identify vowels and letters properly! I don't like that they come in expecting to only prepare their half of the service when they are sharing a date, and I especially don't like that I allow them to focus only on their half first, because of time constraints.

I also don't like having to compromise on "correct" chants because that's what they're learning in their classes, and the students are extremely resistant to changing what they've learned. This drives me especially crazy with the *v'ahavta.*

Q: What is your idea of success with them?

This is much like my answer to what is most satisfying to me.

There is a time when students with whom we are successful really start getting into it, and are really applying themselves. For many, this means they are gaining confidence in mastery of their prayers/portion, and even beginning to "get" trope. This doesn't only happen with the "top" students, but with those on all levels. It's always great when they realize what they are capable of, and to know they are acquiring skills that will serve them well through their Jewish lives.

Q: What would your ideal program look like--whether it's your "piece" of it, or generally?

Ah - for my part, all the students would come in with better Hebrew skills, and we would go back to seeing them one at a time.

I would like to be able to have classes of different abilities (I recognize that this is very hard to achieve) so that I wouldn't have to balance the child who is breezing through her Torah portion with the one who is struggling with the words/chant of the *V'ahavta.* I

often feel like I am either shortchanging the really capable kids, because they can get it on their own, or not helping the really needy ones enough.

Q: What is most observable about the majority of kids starting the process, and what--if any--evolution do you see by the time they leave your class?

Most kids, when they start, have little idea of the structure of the service. Many are tentative about their responsibilities. Of course it varies a lot by personality. But there is sometimes a transition from "something I have to do," part of the whole party/celebration process, to something that they become proud of themselves for achieving. Again, there's that ownership, and finding their place in the congregation.

Appendix E: Responses from the Assistant Cantor

What is most satisfying about working with the *b'nei mitzvah*? What don't you like?

For me, the most satisfaction comes from the attitude of the student and their family context when they begin. If there is a sense of "Torah excitement," of engagement with Judaism, then I know that they are walking into a situation where the actual day of the ritual will have deep joy and lasting meaning, and is really a step on the way to adult Jewish life.

I am frustrated by the students who walk in as if this is no different than anything else on their "to-do list,' and just want to figure out the quickest way to perform the task and move on to the next thing on the list. They are often quite bright and pleasant, but they don't have a clue and there's not enough time to start now to really instruct them.

What is your idea of "success" with them?

Success is the feeling on the *bima* that day – you can sense whether or not there is anything deep going on. It may be in the amount of healthy anxiety, the obvious love of the family and friends, the unexpected reaction on the part of the family at how much this actually means, the sense of accomplishment on the part of the student, the connection in the end to the rabbi and/or cantor – even if the skills were not all there, these other ingredients may have more impact in the future than competent completion of the task of the day.

What would your ideal program look like--whether your "piece" of it, or generally?

My ideal program would separate the honor of one's first *aliyah* and Torah reading from the age of 13. I think that when one demonstrates the Hebrew competency, the *menschlich* capabilities, the maturity in action and motivation, then one is ready to

become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. It should not be automatic. Traditionally, becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah is automatic, with or without a ceremony – I understand that. But I don't think that the honor of reading Torah, of leading a service, or of delivering a *d'var Torah* should be a matter of course at a certain age regardless of one's capabilities or commitment.

I would separate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation from the Religious School entirely – you can opt in or out. But if you opt in, you begin your studies and your mitzvah work and special classes on ethics and Torah and ritual, and along the way, as you show progress and real commitment, you are given a date to publicly affirm that commitment by leading worship and having an *aliyah* and reading Torah. It would be a more intensive track of regular Religious School that people choose somewhere around 5th grade, maybe? I haven't thought it out that far. But if you can't make the commitment, you can't be in the program.

Is anyone ever asked whether or not they want a date before they are given it two or three years in advance? I don't know of any synagogue where that is the case.

What is most observable about the majority of kids starting their study with you--cognitively, emotionally, etc, and what--if any--evolution do you see by the time they lead the service?

I think that there is always a sense of accomplishment about the process. Even if they come in knowing that they can do this, they are impressed by the actual outcome. I try to stress that as we work together. I don't know that I see a great evolution over the course of just a few months – We aren't really together enough. Time is spent working on the basic skills as opposed to any deep discussions about what this all might mean.

Interview with G.
(Post-*b'nei mitzvah*)
September 21, 2009

DA1 intro: thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned (or will learn) in the seminars with us.
So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas—in fact I'm doing a project to look at this, and that's why we're having this conversation. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know! You are actually the first person I'm interviewing, so we'll see if my questions work!

DA2: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…
G1: Could it be good PEOPLE? Both my brothers.
DA3: Great. What qualities of theirs do you admire, or believe make them "good"?
G2: J. always likes to help, and S. is just a good person.
DA4: S. has been through a lot... *(G's brother, S., had been undergoing chemo for the past number of months, for a brain tumor. Fortunately, the prognosis appears good, at present.)*

DA5: Do any of those qualities help you, or have influenced you in some way?
G3: I've tried to be kind of like J, because usually the big brother can be kind of a bully, and I tried not to be that way, but it's hard sometimes.
DA6: Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem. And did you ask anyone for help?
G4: Um…Well last year, I wasn't doing well in math, and I knew that if I wanted to get into the college I want to get into—which is Michigan—I had to try harder, so I asked one of my old teachers to help me study for my math final, going from probably a 70-something to almost a 90.

DA7: What about any kind of moral decision you've had to make?
G5: Um…don't think that's come up yet, in my short life!
DA8: Who would you ask if you needed to, though?
G6: Probably my parents, and friends.
DA9: Is it possible that since becoming bar mitzvah, if you had to solve a dilemma or something, you think you could handle it better?
G7: Yes, with all the stuff I needed to go through, I became more mature. Now I know what has to be done. Don't know if that makes sense…
DA10: Sure it does!
G8: If I had a problem, I would know that I can go to get help; now I know I can ask other people
DA11: Was there anything you learned about how you want to act, or be in the world, from becoming bar mitzvah?
G9: Well I wanted to try to help people who aren't as fortunate as the people who live in this town. Today in school we watched a movie about people who live on the streets and are dying…
DA12: Do you feel that you're more sensitive or more aware of that since bar mitzvah?
G10: Well the bar mitzvah experience and Hebrew school and stuff… there was a movie we watched in Hebrew school, "Pay it Forward", which really got to me because that showed even one little kid could do something about a lot of people in the world.. I would really like to do that, or try to do that in the near future.
DA13: Wonderful. How about things you have learned from your mitzvah project, or studying an issue in the Torah portion that might have given you insight?
G11: Well, my mitzvah project was the comic books for the proton center *(in Boston, where his brother was receiving cancer treatment*) about (his sibling's name) the Brave. Since I completed that first one--the generic version we sent to the center--I got emails for a couple of personalized ones, which I made of them. I think it came out pretty good and people really appreciated my hard work. We're working on making hard copies of those, but it's difficult.
DA14: How was it for you to get those emails?
G12: It felt **really** good; I was so glad I could help.

DA15: We've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people we admire for their actions or qualities. And sometimes, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". Especially this time of year, we hear a lot about that. So let's talk about the idea of God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. Could you describe that?
G13: Like what he looks like or how he acts? Well based on movies, and fake pictures, etc., I've imagined him as this big, supreme being with a long white beard, short white hair, who's kind of old, who lives in a big palace in the sky, and watches over us all day.
DA16: Has study to become b/mitzvah changed the image or the way you think or talk about God?
G14: Well I don't say "oh my god" so much anymore because everyone says don't take God's name in vain…

DA17: Would you say that you have a different awareness? Did becoming bar mitzvah change the way you think about God?
G15: Yes, especially the way everything turned out with S. and he got through it so quickly. Every night when he was in chemo I would read that book you gave us *(home prayerbook)* with the healing prayer in my head, and think of him in the hospital and that helped a lot.
DA18: Sounds like that was really comforting to you; I'm so glad you had that to help you.

DA19: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
G16: The lifestyle; one of the most important things is being with your family a lot. Over Rosh Hashanah I got to see my whole family and saw a cousin who's a lot older and got to know a lot better. I like the idea of having the whole family together.
DA20: That's great. And who and/or what would you say has the most influence on your ideas about being Jewish right now?
G17: Probably my parents because they made me stay through Hebrew school, because there were some days I didn't want to go. But after preparing for bar mitzvah, I was kind of sad when it ended, and I missed going. You're working up to this one special day, and then it's over; and I enjoyed seeing a lot of people for my bar mitzvah. I really enjoyed preparing for it. Saying prayers, leading service—it was a lot of fun for me and I liked that a lot.
DA21: Did it give you a sense of accomplishment?
G18: Definitely.
DA22: Has studying to become b/mitzvah changed your ideas about what it means to be Jewish?
G19: Yeah, looking at the translation of my Torah portion, because it was about splitting up the oxen and the carts, where they were trying to be fair to the people who worked harder, and God was trying to be fair and make everyone work to their potential, which is what I tried to do with my bar mitzvah studying.

Interview with C.
(Had not yet begun studies)
September 22, 2009

DA1: thank you for participating in this interview, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a

while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned (or will learn) in the seminars with us.
C1: Like fasting on Yom Kippur, and things like that.
DA2: Exactly! Yes, you're an adult—so, many things an adult does in the community, you can do too. I know you haven't started yet, and you're going to be giving me an idea of where kids are before they start, on certain subjects. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

DA3: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…
C2: There are a lot of good people I know in my life, but one person is my dad. He's involved with a lot of things, like the temple, as you know…he's willing to help me with anything…Is a role model to me, preparing me for adult life what's ahead of me…I think that's really important.
DA4: Very nice. So, what qualities of your dad do you admire, or believe make him/her "good"?
C3: Well, he's smart; he went to (Ivy League school). He's willing to help with anything, willing to get involved; won't stop until the job is done right, whatever that is. Whether it's my homework or his work. Basically he's just an all around nice guy, and if something's confusing me with school, he can help me with my school work, or social life. I talk to him and he can clarify it.

DA5: So is that a good influence on you, or your behavior?
C4: Definitely. He's raising my behavior, and pushing me to do that; teaching me about being a good person. If I want to be a mature adult, he's teaching me to do that.
DA6: Seem like he's doing a very good job!
Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem. And did you ask anyone for help?
C5: Once last year I had a math test…open book test…not quite sure how to study for it, but I did study…didn't know what the questions were going to be. Took the test and felt pretty good but got a really bad grade. I was shocked because I never got a bad grade before. I was silent for the whole class. Finally got a moment alone with the teacher and I spoke to the teacher and she encouraged me to upgrade it and I boosted it from the 70's to the upper 80's. It was really helpful.
DA7: Great, thank you.

DA8: I'm going to skip some of these questions here, because they pertain to kids who've been through the (b/mitzvah) process already. But you've done very well identifying who you think of as good people. And we've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people we admire for their actions, which you just did so

well. And from time to time, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". And since we're in the middle of the Holy Days, we might hear that a lot. So I want to get your thoughts on God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. How would you describe that?
C6: I know that it's not like a science, it's not proven, that there actually is. It's in your religion to believe in whatever God it is, passed from generation to generation. Like my grandma taught my mother…
DA9: What does that mean for you?
C7: It's just what I've known all my life. There's nothing that can change that; it's just what I've known my whole life. If someone gave another theory of God, I would just decline it, because
If someone wanted me to believe something different, I just couldn't.
DA10: Can you imagine God?
C8: I imagine him with his giant book of life; watching the world, and watching some of the bad things that happen.
DA11: That's a tough one, isn't it? What do you think God imagines when things aren't going so well?
C9: Probably wonders who's to blame, why things are happening the way they are. The thing that always bugs me is whether God is a he or a she. Probably it will never be proven.

DA12: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
C10: What's really important is how Jewish people don't try to make other people become Jewish. They don't force anyone; they let people make their own decisions. A lot of time people come to our door and ask if we want to join this church. I like giving people options and not pressuring people to convert, not pressuring them to.
DA13: Any thing or person you would say has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?
C11: I actually think it's a Hebrew school teacher I had last year. She taught the culture part last year. We were using a textbook and she was always making connections between Jewish life and the rest of my life. We were learning about the golem, and a lot of history of the Jewish people. She was really inspirational in taking the Jewish part and connecting to the rest of life.

DA14: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think it's important for me to know about your thoughts of becoming b/mitzvah?
C12: I'm not worried about the prayers, or reading Hebrew…What I think is the most important is the bar mitzvah project—actually doing good. I'm not totally decided on it, trying to base it around my life, but want people to connect with it, and with other people. I might do something to do with baseball, maybe at the Cottage School or something. I think a lot of people overlook it, but I think that's a huge mistake because that's the most important part and not about the Hebrew so much. There's so much focus on getting it done and not becoming a good person. Not focusing on the meaning of it. Not just

focusing on the Hebrew letters. Maybe kids, or even parents worry so much about the Hebrew, and they don't focus on being a good person, and becoming a Jewish adult and the meaning of it…
DA15: Sounds like you've put some real thought into this. And that's really where we started, isn't it—talking about being a good person…
C13: There's so much focus on just getting it (learning the Hebrew) "done" and moving on; no focus on the meaning of it…I'm trying to take the bar mitzvah project from an aspect of my life…
DA16: That's just great—I have no doubt you'll succeed with that! You've been a terrific "interview subject"! Thank you so much!

Interview with D.
(Had not yet started studies)
October 7, 2009

(Note: mother sat in on interview)

DA1: Thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. I know you've seen your sisters go through this, so you know about some of this. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you will learn in the seminars with us. *(Brief review, as she seems somewhat unaware of this.)*
So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas, and that's why we're having this conversation. And since you haven't started yet, you're going to help us understand where kids are when they start. You're an example of where kids are at this point. And I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

DA2: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? (It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…)
D1: My mom.

DA3: Your mom? Very nice! You're not the only one to say that, by the way! Can you tell me what qualities of your mom do you admire, or believe made her "good"?
D2: Giving, patient, generous, a good friend.
DA4: Which of those qualities might help you, or have influenced you in some way? *(Need to describe this question further, as she doesn't understand at first.)*
D3: I try to be more patient with my friends, understanding. You know everyone is a certain way, but you just have to know that sometimes someone will get annoyed, but I'm still trying to be the other way.
DA5: And when you're like that with your friends, do you think about the way that your mom is? Or are you first thinking about that right now?
D4: Just right now.

DA6: Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem. And did you ask anyone for help?
D5: *(Asks for more clarification.)* How I fix things?
DA7: What you thought about, if you had a problem…what you thought about; who you might have gone to for help.
D6: My mom, I guess. (*Mother prompts with a situation.)* Well, at camp there was a girl no one really liked and everyone was really mean to her and I felt really bad. I didn't know what to do. I tried to be nice to her, but then the other girls yelled at me for being nice to her.
DA8: Did that make you uncomfortable?
D7: Yeah.
DA9: Did that problem ever get solved?
D8: No.
DA10: Does that still bother you?
D8: Yeah.
DA11: Sometimes we have problems and we just don't know what to do…If you'd been home, would you have gone to your mom for help?
D9: Yeah.

DA12: We've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people, like your mom, we admire for their actions. And from time to time, we hear people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". So let's talk about the idea of God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. Do you think you could describe that?
D10: Being in the sky…big voice.
DA13: Being in the sky, big voice? Anything else?
D11: No.
DA14: Not something you think about a whole lot?
D12: No.

DA15: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
D13: Like going to temple when necessary; on the holy days; going to a certain amount of services each year; Hebrew school.
DA16: So all the things you're expected to do?
D14: Yeah.
DA17: Anything else that's important about being Jewish?
D15: I don't know.
DA18: Who and/or what would you say has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?
D16: Not sure.
DA18: Is there anything I haven't asked you; anything you want to add about any of these subjects we talked about?
D17: Not really.
DA19: Did these questions surprise you? Are they things you usually don't think about?
D18: Yeah, I guess...not really.
DA20: Maybe I've given you some things to think about over the next few months!

Interview with E.
October 20, 2009
(Focus on mitzvah project)

DA1: Intro: thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned in the seminars with us.
So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas, and that's why we're having this conversation. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up—just your initials. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

DA2: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? (It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…)
E1: I was just thinking about Martin Luther King because we've been studying about him in social studies.
DA3: Kind of uppermost in your mind right now? What qualities of Martin Luther King, Jr's do you admire, or believe made him/her "good"?
E2: He had a lot of courage, working for black people and their rights. People were threatening him and they didn't want a black person to have all the rights, basically.
DA4: Anything else?
E3: He worked hard. He wrote speeches and he worked hard at what he did.
DA5: Can you imagine any of those qualities that might help you, or influence you in some way? Or is that hard to imagine?
E4: *(Long hesitation)* A little.
DA6: Anyone else you can think of who has influenced your ideas about being good? If not, it's OK.
E5: Jackie Robinson—kind of the same idea.
DA7: Sounds to me like you're very moved by these men who stood up for what they believed. I don't want to put words in your mouth though…
E6: Yes.

DA8: Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: do you know what a moral dilemma is? *(Doesn't know this term.)*
DA9: So let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem. And did you ask anyone for help?
E7: I guess I've had some difficult decisions, nothing huge—like should I go to my friends' bar mitzvah or my hockey game…
DA10: Seems like a typical thing for a kid your age to deal with. What is that decision between, do you think, when you have to choose between a hockey game and friends' bar mitzvah—what is the debate for you?
E8: Well, I want to go to the bar mitzvah, sometimes because I know that person would want me to come, but I want to go to the hockey game because it's fun, and there's only like 15 kids on the team…
DA11: So are there 2 principles or ideas that you're weighing? Do you feel a responsibility to the team vs…again I don't want to put words in your mouth…
E9: Yes, the team kind of expects me to be there for every game. And I have a lot of bar mitzvahs on a lot of Saturdays. I would feel bad if I said I couldn't go, so I always try to go.
DA12: Do you ever ask anyone for help with these decisions?
E10: Usually my parents, not my friends.

DA13: If you had to solve this dilemma or something perhaps a bit more "earth-shaking" since beginning your study to become b/mitzvah, might you think about it differently?

E11: I guess I would. I guess as I become a bar mitzvah I have to become more responsible; if I see a situation, I have to do something about it, not just sit back. Also with my mitzvah project…
DA14: I was just going to ask you about that, in fact.
E12: Well, I haven't finished it yet. And it's not exactly a project…I'm working at the Mt Kisco Day Care Center with kids about 7 years old and playing with them and helping them do their homework.
DA15: How's that been for you? Do you feel like it's teaching you something?
E13: Yes, these kids are being put into this day care because their parents can't always be home to care for them. They're not as lucky…
DA16: That's had an influence on you? More than you thought it might have?
E14: Yes, I didn't realize it would be this much of an influence.
DA17: What about discussions about this in b/mitzvah seminars (with peers and parents)?
E15: Never really discussed it much there.
DA18: Does writing about it in your d'var torah have any influence?
E16: It doesn't have any real influence in writing it; it's more about the actual experience.
DA19: So the act of sharing it with other people who'll be at the service doesn't have influence; it's really more the experience?
E17: The experience definitely.

DA20: We've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people we admire for their actions. And from time to time, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". So let's talk about the idea of God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. How would you describe that?
E18: It's really tough to imagine. I really don't know whether to imagine a regular person, a regular size. Or something a lot special about him…I know that he's worshipped more than everyone else…
DA21: How has study to become b/mitzvah changed the way you think or talk about God?
E19: Pretty much from the start of Hebrew school in 4th grade we've always talked about God in the prayers…
DA22: Anything else about God?
E20: It's really hard to have a picture…
DA23: I'm not suggesting you do…I'm just curious what you think, and if you don't think anything, that's an answer too.
E21: I know that he rescued us out of Egypt and that's why we worship him. Can't think of many traits or other stuff about him.

DA24: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish right now?
E22: The responsibilities that come with it…being a responsible person; good person; having respect for other people and doing the right thing.
DA25: Who and/or what would you say has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?

E23: Can't think of anyone or anything…
DA26: Has studying to become b/mitzvah changed your ideas about what it means to be Jewish?
E24: yes. It's changed my ideas…I kind of had a basic idea before but...*(he's having difficulty following this train of thought, and asks me to repeat the question...)*
DA27: Think about where you were a few months ago, to where you are now.
E25: It definitely makes me think about it more. I still thought about it, but now I do more of the stuff that comes along with it than before I started. Now when I go to a service, like Rosh Hashanah or something I actually understand what they're saying.
DA28: More connected? Again, not trying to put words in your mouth…
E26: Yes, I also know more Hebrew…I understand some of the roots and stuff.
DA29: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think it's important for me to know about your experience of becoming b/mitzvah?
E27: I don't think so. I think we covered it…
DA30: What was it like to reflect on these questions?
E28: It made me think…it was a good thing.

Interview with J.
(Mitzvah project finished)
October 13, 2009

DA1: Intro: thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned in the seminars with us.
So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas, and that's why we're having this conversation. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

DA2: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? (It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…)
J1: Well, I've been studying Reconstruction in school and one of the people we've been studying is Thaddeus Stevens. He was a leader of a group called the Radical Republicans.

He did what no one dared to do: He helped the blacks at a time when no one really liked them and he was hated by a lot of people for doing these things. He was one of the founders of the 14th and 15th Amendments. He really helped them in succeeding in life…I think he was really a good person because even though there were threats form the KKK and others, he still went through it. In the end he was buried in an African American cemetery, just to prove his point that he just wanted good for these people and he was willing to make such a strong point.
DA3: Great. You've obviously told me what qualities of that person you admire, or believe made him/her "good". Are there any others?
J2: Well--that you shouldn't be completely selfless, because I think that if you are a good person, you should also focus on yourself because if you only focus on others and you're not a high achieving person, you're not going to have any influence on people. You're sort of being selfless by being selfish in a way…you're helping yourself as well as others. So that's another quality.
DA4: Do any of these help you or influence you?
J3: Yeah. What I said before. They'll help me get through school well and set high standards for myself. Later on, once I've achieved that, I can help others do that and reach their goals.

DA5: Here's what may be a little more challenging question. Do you know what a "moral dilemma" is?
J4: I think it's when something crosses between your morals or your ethics. Like if there's a lamb bone on the plate at Passover, and you don't eat meat. So maybe there's a moral dilemma because it's conflicting between your religious views and ethical views.
DA6: OK, good. It could also be a time you may have made a mistake, or tricky situation and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. If you can think of one, you don't even have to tell me exactly what it was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem.
J5: I don't think so, no. Nothing pops up to me.
DA7: If you had to solve a dilemma or something like it now since beginning your study to become b/mitzvah, how might you think about it differently?
J6: I think I would because as I was writing my d'var torah, one of the lessons was to think about the future, not the present. So a lot of people have an issue …like the Arabs and the Jews, and they're fighting over stupid things like they want the land back or Americans and oil, where really in the future this is just going to escalate until a bigger war…
DA8: OK. And what about your mitzvah project? Can you tell me a bit about it and whether it had an effect on you?
J7: Well we tried a lot of different ideas; I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do…I always wanted to raise money for cancer and we had a presentation in school about it. Wondered what just $100 raised could do for a kid. It's not going to cure him of cancer or do anything like that. Then once I started going I realized I had raised all this money and could help others…I realized that if there were 30 other people it could actually help and it made me feel really good about myself that I raised all this money and that I could help others.

DA9: Wonderful! Now, we've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people we admire for their actions. And from time to time, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". So let's talk about the idea of God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. How would you describe that?
J8: My view on God has changed since before and after I started the process for bar mitzvah. First I was learning in science the scientific element of how life started—that it is possible to create life out of elements, so it sort of swayed me not to believe in God but once I went through my study it gave me hope… it's forced me to believe in God, but in a good way...that if I believed in it, it would give me hope and a reason to live. Right now I'm sort of so-so; it's a really big question so I don't like to think about it; it's mind-boggling.
DA10: So you feel you've been challenged…? People can be very overwhelmed by this question. It's really a very difficult one and you don't have to decide anything right now. In fact, being Jewish means we struggle with this question…Has study to become b/mitzvah changed the way you think or talk about God?
J9: I've never really imagined God. It's just a way for people to…it's someone for people to pray to, to give them hope…that's all that I think it is.

DA11: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
J10: Probably bar mitzvah; going through that passage. And also going to temple on the High Holidays.
DA12: So studying to become b/mitzvah changed your ideas about what it means to be Jewish?
JS11: Definitely. In a sense it makes you more Jewish. Personally it makes me feel like I've actually done something with the Jewish culture. I've gone through something that people thousands of years ago would do. It's not just going to temple, which is normal and singing, or whatever but going and leading the service. It actually connects me more with the religion.
DA13: Any sense of who and/or what has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?
J12: Probably my ancestors—my grandparents, parents. They're all Jewish. My dad's whole side—everyone's been bar mitzvah; it's sort of a family tradition.
DA14: So it's important to you to be part of that tradition?
J13: Definitely, to be part of that tradition. So just as my great-grandparents saw my dad be bar mitzvah my grandparents will see me be bar mitzvah.

DA15: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think it's important for me to know about your experience of becoming b/mitzvah?
J14: I think in the beginning it was really overwhelming. I imagined it like a whole big test, like if I didn't learn a verse in a certain amount of time, I would get punished; people would scold me or whatever. Once I got to the middle of it, it occurred to me that this

was for me; that it wasn't a test necessarily for me to pass or fail. This was for me to go through the passage; not to be quizzed or anything.
DA16: Do you remember where you were, or what it was when you realized this?
J15: Probably when I finished my Torah portion, and starting my d'var torah, when it occurred to me how much this means to me.
DA16: It gave you the ability to reflect? I don't want to put words in your mouth…
J16: On what I just did, yeah.

Interview with F.
(Focus on Mitzvah Project)
October 4, 2009

DA1: Thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned in the seminars with us. So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas, and that's why we're having this conversation. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

DA2: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? (It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…)
F1: My mom. She's seems like she always knows what to do and she's really smart; she's good with situations.
DA3: What qualities of hers do you admire, or believe made her "good"?
F2: She's really like…warm and fuzzy; she's really honest and trustworthy and I feel like I could go to her with a problem.
DA4: Do you find that any of those qualities influence you?
F3: Probably; I think that growing up with someone who didn't have those good qualities probably would change a person. I'm a pretty honest person, because my mom rubs off on me; it means you wouldn't know how to act if you didn't grow up with that kind of person.

DA5: Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision or had a dilemma. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem. And did you ask anyone for help?
F4: I'm trying to think of a time…when I went to camp I had to figure out what I was going to do food-wise because of all the allergies…talked to my mom about it… (F. has to be careful re food, so going to camp and dealing with it is a challenge.) Who was going to make meals…
DA6: Right. And what about something that perhaps was bothering you inside; or where you weren't feeling good about a situation--anything like that ever happen to you?
F5: Yes, in 5th grade my friends and I kept getting in fights so easily; it was a new school and really difficult; teachers were complaining; other parents were complaining. It did not make me feel good. I remember being in school and feeling terrible about how I was acting and they were acting.
DA7: Wow—in fifth grade you were already aware of that feeling. Were you able to solve it yourself?
F6: Well, we went to the guidance counselor...the three of my friends all went. We talked it out; we went more than once because we really needed to and we figured it all out.
DA8: If that happened now, since you are a bit older; through b/mitvah experience, would you think about it differently?
F7: Probably I wouldn't have told the guidance counselor; I'd just figure it out by myself; try to get through it by myself; be with my friends and work it out. When you're older you deal with things yourself more.
DA9: Are there things you think you learned through your mitzvah project that would help you to figure that out?
F8: I've learned that I can be a lot more responsible; much more mature. If I try I can really handle a lot of things myself; I learned a lot about responsibility. It also goes back to studying my Hebrew; I have to know what to do because only a few people can help me, like you or the rabbi; my parents can't help me because they don't now what I'm talking about.
DA10: And was there something special you learned from your mitzvah project? *(Developing a guide to gluten-free foods; places to shop, etc.)*
F9: Yes, that even the slightest change can help so many people, and especially when I make my book it will really help a lot of people. Every time my mom walks into Mrs. Green's ("health food" market), to the gluten-free aisle, she meets people and gives them her email address, and gives them an initial list. But when they get the book, it's really going to be a lot easier. I'm really happy about that.

DA11: What about discussing your mitzvah project in your *d'var torah*? How about putting it on paper, and actually talking about it publicly? How have any of those affected you, and the way you now handle these kinds of situations?
F10: It was really kind of hard, because (this) disease is so close to me. It's not the kind of thing you really want to put on a blimp and send out! It was kind of difficult. But the more I say it, the better it feels. And the people who are going to hear me say it—half of them already know me anyway. They know I have celiac disease.

DA12: Does it change the way you feel about yourself? Certainly it's nothing you can control.
F11: Not really; it's not my fault.

DA13: It seems you've learned a lot about yourself and really appreciate the idea of doing the right thing. So we're going to change subjects a bit…We've been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people we admire for their actions. And from time to time, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people", maybe even very recently, since we just observed Yom Kippur a few days ago. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. How would you describe that?
F12: Could you clarify that?
DA14: Sure, glad you asked me to do that! How would you describe what you think about God? For example: Supernatural being that looks over the world; something inside of us?
F13: *(Still wants a bit more clarification.)* I think that God helps everyone; just is always there. I think that God will always be there; that when you get good ideas in your head that's God; not the bad ideas. Only the good things that happen can be God. And I think that God always looks over us to make sure you're ok.
DA15: Have you thought about that a lot? Or is this the first that anyone has asked you about it?
F14: Well, it's the first time anyone has asked me. But when I first got my Torah portion (Genesis 1), and it says that God created the lights and the stars, sun; the vegetables…how God made everything unique; made me think that God did that for a reason; that everyone would be their own person.
DA16: So did preparing for *bat mitzvah* change the way you think about God?
F15: Yes, when I first started Hebrew school I thought God was everywhere because that's how people explained it to us. But now I think differently.

DA17: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
F16: I love how when you're Jewish everyone seems to be so unique; seems to be their own person; and being in a congregation is really, really important. And that's really good because everyone knows someone; I think it's more comfortable that way. I also love Hebrew, I just love the language; I love when people talk Hebrew. It's really cool.
DA18: Maybe you'll learn to really speak Hebrew some day! And I agree: It is a beautiful language! So, what or who would you say has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?
F17: I want to say me! I've been the one…my mom and dad say that I bring them closer to the temple. They do ushering and my mom is very involved. They say that I bring them closer because I'm being bat mitzvah. I think that I have been bringing myself very close to the temple. I've been studying and reading Hebrew more, and I just think it's brought us closer to the temple.

DA19: Has studying to become b/mitzvah changed your ideas about what it means to be Jewish? F18: Can you clarify more?
DA20: Has it changed the way you feel: more connected, or expanded what it means to be Jewish?
F19: Yes. When I was younger, I thought one way; I thought you're Jewish and that's it. Now it's completely different. Now you study Hebrew, go to services, do so many different things; it's just very different.
DA21: Do you have a sense that it means more commitment? Though I don't want to put words in your mouth…
F20: Definitely more commitment. You have to be…I'm looking for the word; maybe attached or connected. You really need to know what's going on, to really know how you're acting; being Jewish and stuff like that. It's very different than I thought it would be.
DA22: And is that a good thing?
F21: Definitely. Now I'm learning, and it's really good.
DA23: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think it's important for me to know about your experience of becoming b/mitzvah?
F22: It's just a huge accomplishment; and I'm really proud of myself. It definitely wasn't easy. And plus having it now, is very difficult; it's at the beginning of eighth grade; lots of homework; I'm just so happy now I'm doing it and continuing on.
DA24: Anything else you want to add? And did any of these questions surprise you; or cause you to think about something you hadn't considered?
F23: Probably the thing about God, because no one has ever asked me before. I may have thought about it, but definitely no one asked before.

Interview with A.
(Focus on *devar torah*)
October 8, 2009

DA1: Intro, thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned in the seminars with us. You remember that, right?
A1: Yes...No longer allowed to act like a kid during services, have to act responsible, do the prayers—stuff like that.

DA2: Yes, those types of things—certainly that's a part of it. So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas, and that's why we're having this conversation. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

A2: You said no one would know who I was…are you going to be showing this to someone?
DA3: Very fair question--well, I'm going to be writing this up for the project, so my advisors would see it, maybe other cantors who would be interested, but as I said, you will not be named specifically…is that OK with you?
A3: Oh yeah--it's fine, just wondered.

DA4: So, here's my first question: let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? (It can be anyone: alive or no longer living—if you said Abraham Lincoln, that's fine! e.g.; can be male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…)
A4: (takes a few seconds to think…) This is going to sound sort of like a cliché but probably my grandma!
DA5: Not a cliché at all—that's lovely. What qualities of hers do you admire, or believe make her "good"?
A5: Well she just kind of understands how to be nice to people, which is sort of lacking in today's society. When it comes to…She was a teacher for thirty years so knows how to talk to people, which says she knows how to say things without being offensive. Which I think is an important quality, because you need to be able to say things, but you can't be offensive--not in today's world!
DA6 Do any of those influence the way you are in the world?
A6: I'm trying to be nicer to people because I can be kind of "honest" in not always the nicest way; kind of like recently I've tried not to be offensive; before I didn't really care, or realize what I was saying; now it's more thinking about what you say before you say it…
DA7: Sounds like an interesting turning point for you.
A7: Yes!

DA8: Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem. And did you ask anyone for help?
A8: OK I don't mind telling you--otherwise it wouldn't make sense. This is not life changing or anything, but we were invited to a wedding from my dad's family in Michigan. I was nine at the time and the problem was that it was the biggest field trip of the year on the same weekend. Everyone was so excited about this…wasn't totally important, but it was a big decision: do I go with my parents or stay here for the field

trip…It took a lot of debate—I did consult my parents; they said they would love for me to come, but wanted me to be happy.
DA9: Was that a lot of inner debate for you?
A9: Yes, a lot of inner debate: do I stay, or do I go…Finally had some help making the decision (situation worked out with family and friends…). My brother didn't even come because he had some other things. Based on where I was mentally, it was really a difficult decision; even though it wasn't life altering or life or death…it took a lot of thought, and helped me become stronger. It made me realize that I have the ability to make decisions, and that things have a way of working themselves out…
DA10: If you had to solve this dilemma or something like it—maybe something a bit more serious, now since beginning your study to become b/mitzvah, would you think about things differently?
A10: You know, I do look at it differently now—looking back on it I have learned more…obviously I'm older. I've learned more about myself, as a person, kind of what it means to me…don't know if I would have made the same decision today…
DA11: How about things you have learned from studying the issue in the Torah portion, now that you've written your d'var torah? Or how about during the discussions in b/mitzvah seminars (with peers and parents)? How have any of those affected you, and the way you now handle these kinds of situations?
A11: What I've learned in the past couple of years is that there are 2 important groups of people in your life—family and friends. That's what I was choosing between—family and friends. And you have to prioritize; not necessarily that one means more to you; just do you want to spend more time with family or friends…Based on what I've learned I guess I probably would have made the same decision, though I'm not totally sure.
DA12: When you discuss the situation in your Torah portion re Cain and Abel did that affect you at all?
A12: Yes, it did! I never really thought about "am I my brother's keeper" concept in my Torah portion, until I started practicing my portion, and thinking about what it meant. *(Proudly quotes the phrase in Hebrew.)* It changed my outlook on the literal keeping track of my brother, and the figurative; being mindful of other people. Since I started learning it, I've been a little bit more mindful of other people…

DA13: We've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, being a good person and identifying people we admire for their actions. And from time to time, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". So let's talk about the idea of God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. How would you describe that?
A13: This is an interesting one! I'm going to start it with the beginning of my learning about God when I first got to Hebrew school. It was 2nd grade and I was 7 and that was the first time I paid attention to God. In my literal, naïve 7 year old mind, I didn't really take in the full meaning of God. What God wants us to do…OK, I kind of grasped the "God does stuff" concept but I didn't really get the "all powerful" concept, where like God talks to Cain. And you can't really mention the Torah without talking about God--they kind of go together. Like I said, naïve little 7 year old…As I got older, I started paying more attention to it. Probably first time it really stuck out in my mind, when in 5th

grade I started going to services, and saw what a service was like and what we did. I started to think about God…that was kind of a turning point. And the day we got our Torah portions that was really my "this is it moment"; it was really a "wow". So that was when I realized "God", and the stories actually had meaning and weren't just "fluff". So as I got older my understanding has gotten more…deep and if I had to give an opinion now, I would say I don't believe everything in the Torah…and we don't have to, but… we can't just be here. There's got to be something more than us. We wouldn't be the functioning, living souls we are without something…
DA14: So your study has moved you in a different direction about God"
A14: Yes, but it's also part of going to a regular school, and studying normal science that doesn't have anything to do with religion and you have to accept that certain things happened...
DA15: Would it be helpful if you were going to school and they could put those 2 things together?!
A15: Yes, but it would be hard with all the different religions…
DA16: Maybe that's something we could address more in our Religious School?
A16: Yes, that might be helpful.

DA17: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
A17: I'm going to start out with a very obvious, shallow answer and say food!…But going a bit deeper—digging down, the most important thing about being Jewish to me, is that we're stubborn. People have tried plenty of times to wipe us out—and we've been "nope, sorry"—can't do it. Or maybe just determined. Being Jewish is being…you've got to be grateful for every day because so many things have happened in the past—in Jewish history. You've got to think about it…There's not many Jewish people out there so you feel kind of special…not unique, but reasonably unique. OK, I believe this and no one else believes exactly this…and I'm good with that!
DA18: Who and/or what would you say has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?
A18: I guess honestly, my Torah portion. It really made me rethink who I am as a person. Don't be jealous, don't be spiteful. You can really ruin a relationship. It all comes back to Jewish values—in the every day world too. But it all comes back to Jewish values as well. It's kind of just affected the way I think about things and the way I think about the Torah. I realize it's not the only story in there—not by a long shot. It's really made taken a step back and realize my own humanity; I will get jealous and want to kill people—they got more attention, or more recognition than me, but I need to take a step back…
DA19: So has studying to become b/mitzvah changed your ideas about what it means to be Jewish?
A19: Studying the prayers and everything has really made a difference too. I put in **a lot** of effort. It taught me a lot of discipline. It's a new alphabet and sounds. You've got to tune your ear, and listen for different sounds. It gave me different ideas, like how did these people five thousand years think of this language?!
DA20: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think it's important for me to know about your experience of becoming b/mitzvah?

A20: OK, yeah. I wouldn't know how to put this in a question…As you may know—and as people reading this in the future will now know, I'm not completely Jewish--my father was raised as a Protestant. I celebrate Christmas. But I am being raised a Jew. I never really believed all of it; I had this other aspect that was always pulling me back…As I studied more to become a bat mitzvah I really figured out how to step back forward and how to surround myself with the Jewish-ness of it. Believe it; question some of it…but believe in God; believe that all people are equal; follow the 10 commandments; basic values that we have. It's made me realize I can take that extra step forward and be enveloped by it. Kind of, for lack of a better word, be smothered by it—but a **good** smothering: like a hug…
DA21: That's really a very nice image! Anything else?
A21: I really want to come up with a big dramatic closing statement but I'm not coming up with anything!
DA22: You've done just great! Thank you so much for your help!

Interview with B.
(Post-*b/mitzvah*)
October 22, 2009

DA1: thank you for participating in this project, first of all, and I want you to know how much your help is appreciated!

I want to explain a bit about why I'm here: When the rabbis, our educator, and I planned our overall program for bar/bat mitzvah, we didn't just focus on the Hebrew you're asked to learn, in order to lead the service, read from the Torah, etc. We also wanted to be sure we included other things we believe are very important for becoming an adult in the Jewish community—things that might impact your life in the wider world as well, especially as you get older. And while no one will be giving you the keys to the car for a while, becoming b/mitzvah has always signaled some important changes in the status of the young man or woman, as you learned in the seminars with us.
So we want to see how well we're doing with some of these other areas, and that's why we're having this conversation. I especially want to emphasize to you that there are NO right or wrong answers here at all—I just want to hear your thoughts and your ideas! You should also know that your answers will be anonymous—that means anything you say to me here will not have your real name on it when I write it up. Also: if you don't understand something I ask you, please let me know!

DA2: Let's think of someone you consider a "good" person. Who is that? (It can be anyone: alive or no longer living; male or female, etc; someone you don't know personally…)
B1: Martin Luther King?
DA3: OK, great. I can probably figure out why you chose him (!), but what qualities of his do you admire, or believe made him/her "good"?

B2: He's very peaceful and good; didn't want to have any violence or anything. And he is very definite about his opinions, which are very good; they're about people being equal and I like that.
DA4: Have you been studying him in school recently?
B3: Yes.
DA5: Have any of these qualities influenced you?
B4: I don't like fighting; I like peacefulness and those are all good things that he had. Those qualities are everything that I would like to be.
DA6: So you feel connected to those?
B5: Yes.

DA7: Now—and this may be a bit more of a challenging question: let's think about a time you may have made a mistake, and realized you had to deal with it somehow; or maybe had to make a difficult decision. You don't even have to tell me exactly what that was, if you don't want to. What I am really curious about is: what you thought about; or what you did to solve the problem.
B6: Umm…*(asks for clarification)* Yeah, I would take all kinds of things that would be what you were going to be thinking about and see if one thing might outweigh the other, to see what would be better for the situation. And think about yourself and anything else and anyone else and what would be better.
DA8: And would you ask anyone for help?
B7: Yes, someone who had unbiased opinions; someone who had maybe been in the same situation and see what they did, and maybe what they think you should do.
DA9: If you had to solve a dilemma or something like it now since beginning your study to become b/mitzvah, would you think about it differently?
B8: Yeah, I would probably think of it more in an overall kind of sense. Think about everything, instead of one specific thing.
DA10: So you think there would be additional factors that you would bring into it?
B9: Yeah, definitely.
DA11: How about things you have learned from your mitzvah project/studying an issue in the Torah portion? Or the discussions in b/mitzvah seminars? How have any of those affected you, and the way you now handle these kinds of situations?
B10: Well, in addition to the fact that my Torah portion *(Kedoshim; Leviticus 19, aka, the "Holiness Code")* was about different things you should do to be a good person, I think about that…that helps. But also thinking things through more…I actually did a lot of thinking over the process.
DA12: So, studying the Torah portion had an influence on you?
B11: Yes.
DA13: How about the mitzvah project?
B12: I felt that…on the situation…it was good because it was the type of thing that I had to do a lot of things to get to it. And I felt that now that I did that I kind of I had to think about a lot of things at the same time…be like…agile; together. And you can't just put things off because it gets worse.
DA14: So it sounds like it required a whole bunch of skills…
B13: Yes. So if you look at and just do things straight on; it will usually be easier than if you don't procrastinate.

DA15: Did you find the seminar discussions helpful for the mitzvah project or *d'var torah*?
B14: I thought the 3rd one was helpful where we actually discussed the actual portion, with writing the *d'var torah.* I didn't learn much from the other ones that I didn't already know.

DA16: We've kind of been talking about how we try to do the "right" thing, and identifying people we admire for their actions. And from time to time, you might have heard people say something like, "God wants us to be good people". So let's talk about the idea of God for a bit. In my experience, lots of people—no matter their age, wonder about God, and I'm curious to hear what you think about, or imagine about God. How would you describe that?
B15: I think that God is kind of like…helping…from…it's hard to phrase this…God is…everything happens kind of for a reason and God kind of makes this happen, I guess. It might turn out right but usually God will want you to do the right thing, so maybe that's why you're put in a situation…
DA17: Do you see God sort of "challenging" you to do that?
B16: A little yes, in a way.
DA18: How has study to become b/mitzvah changed the way you think or talk about God?
B17: I just think about it a little bit more; more after than when before I began. I'm just in that general area, so I try to figure stuff out. And…I just think about it more. It gets to more thoughts of what your opinions are. I guess you do the Torah and you're learning about other people's Torah portions in the seminar and you're wondering how God's in the Torah and now…seeing if we're different or similar to then.

DA19: I'm also very interested in hearing your ideas about being Jewish. What's most important to you about being Jewish?
B18: I think what's most important about being Jewish is the aspect of community and kindness and peace, and being Jewish also means being kind to other people and doing *tikkun olam* and all that. That's probably the most important of all of it to me.
DA20: Who and/or what would you say has the most influence on your Jewish identity right now?
B19: Probably my parents, because I'm thinking about stuff and if I don't have an answer I ask them what they think about something. I will use their answers heavily.
DA21: How has studying to become b/mitzvah changed your ideas about what it means to be Jewish?
B20: I felt very much more part of the community afterwards, and at the end; more than at the beginning when I didn't really understand as much re what it meant. And during the bat mitzvah I thought "it feels good"!
DA22: You mean at the service?
B21: Yes, the service.

DA23: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think it's important for me to know about your experience of becoming b/mitzvah?

B22: Only that I felt…with the community thing that you were talking about before…I don't know how to describe it…just felt that would help me a lot, later. And it felt really good then and I feel more connected; more Jewish even, I guess.

Parents' Questionnaires

Parent of C.

1. I feel very attached to Judaism. It has always been an important part of my life and for my family – more in a cultural tradition than in a spiritual way. I would say though that the anticipation of C's bar mitzvah as well as the process for planning and preparing for it, has reminded me of why it has always been important to me and reminded me of my own childhood experience.

2. I think C. has felt a connection to Judaism for some time now – it helped that he began religious school in Kindergarten. I do think though that he has felt more connected since the process began. I think he feels more responsibility towards Judaism at this point as well.

I think my parents and (husband) and I have had the most influence on C. – our family is not always very observant but C. has always known how important the traditions of Judaism are to us. I think C. has also learned a lot in the Culture part of religious school.

3. I can't think of one difficult situation but I know that C. struggles sometimes with feeling like his friends are breaking rules that he chooses not to break. I think he has a moral compass that comes from a variety of places – home, school and Temple. He always wants to do the "Right" thing. I think some of this is just who he is - it is really his nature – although I would love to think it all came from nurture!!

I am not sure that the process of Bar Mitzvah training has really changes anything for him as far as moral issues is concerned but it has certainly reinforced it.

4. Discussions of Judaism have come up when we are talking about holidays and family traditions. It has also come up when we have discussed bigger issues like death and illness. I generally share these thoughts with C. when he brings it up.

Recently we have discussed the Holocaust many times – C. has been really interested from what they are learning at Religious School this year.

I would say that his bar mitzvah preparation has led to more frequent discussions about Jewish topics.

5. I absolutely think C. has a greater sense of responsibility from his study. He is more confident. I think though that the ability to really reflect will have to come after his bar mitzvah – it is hard I think for him to not focus on the work and excitement now – I hope he will be able to reflect on Judaism and his accomplishments after this process is concluded.

I did not really anticipate the sense of maturity that I see in C. in how he is preparing. We are really proud of him!!

Parent of E.

1. How would you describe your personal attachment to Judaism?
The role of Judaism in my life is that of a guiding and comforting presence. It provides a sense of continuity and grounds us (my family) all in our busy lives especially at holiday times when we can reflect on the past and present, think of our loved ones, and try to live a life where we make a difference.

Please also briefly describe any changes you have experienced in that attachment, or sense of Jewish identity, since your child began the process toward becoming bar/bat mitzvah.

I have felt a renewed sense of Jewish identity since my son began the process toward becoming bar mitzvah. In large part, I am simply present more often in the synagogue and enjoy simply sitting there and listening/watching him practice and prepare. I'm not sure he feels the same way.

2. How would you describe your child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study toward b/mitzvah?

My child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study was somewhat detached in terms of commitment largely due to logistics and a busy schedule but not due to a lack of interest in learning. He has always been curious about and interested in learning about Judaism and has expressed that interest through participation at Seders, adult dinner conversations and learning bible stories.

How would you view his/her comfort with his/her Jewish identity, now that the program is (or is almost) behind him/her?
I think he is quite comfortable with his Jewish identity.

Who, or what, do you believe has had the greatest influence on your child's Jewish identity, thus far? (Name as many as you like.)
I think my son's father and grandfather have been quite influential in helping to influence his Jewish identity largely because they know the prayers at services and Seders and other Jewish holidays and they are able to read Hebrew. My son knows that his father

grew up learning and knowing Hebrew and despite the fact that he is not very observant today, the prayers and the Hebrew are a part of him. I think that is meaningful and impressive to my son.

Certainly the clergy at TBE who have taught my son everything he knows as he prepared to become a bar mitzvah have been hugely influential as well.

3. Please briefly describe a difficult situation or a moral dilemma you are aware of, which your child needed to handle or resolve in the last year.

This is a tough question. Cantor Anesi, you described E. perfectly when I believe you referred to him as "still waters." We don't always know what dilemmas E. is facing because he often doesn't let us know. We are always working on that and talking about the need to talk, but… we do know that when he does face difficult situations/dilemmas he manages to deal with them in his own quiet way, with inner strength and calm and certainly w/o overreacting.

In your opinion, what skills went into making the decision? Where and how do you think (the majority of) those were acquired by your child: e.g., home; school; synagogue?

Home, School, Synagogue! We all need to work together and I believe a kid like mine picks up on messages at all three and beyond to make good decisions and solve problems.

How has your child's involvement in study toward b/mitzvah affected his/her ability to negotiate or understand moral issues, understand other's perspectives: i.e., what kind of changes (if any) have you observed in that area?

Again, we are talking here about an internally reflective child who may make an extremely perceptive observation 6 months from now about something that could have been relevant for this questionnaire. Right now, my observation is that he is not sharing any changes outwardly- he internalizes a great deal.

4. In what context might the subject of God or discussions about Judaism come up at home?

We talk about God and Judaism in discussions at holiday dinners and in talks about books we are reading. My younger sons often ask a lot of questions about why things are… and we try to answer the big questions as best we can. Often we will go to a story like Genesis when our answers aren't clear enough. We have talked about God and Judaism as the ideas relate to the death of their grandmother who they never got to meet.

How and/or when do you share your thoughts with your child on those subjects?

How has the b/mitzvah experience influenced any of those discussions, if they occur—either for your child, or for you?

We haven't had any of those discussions through the process but I expect one will occur this week as we talk about their grandmother who won't be at the bar mitzvah because she died of cancer so long ago. That always seems to be a starter.

5. What changes in your child overall did you observe over the length of the course of study? For example, is there a greater sense of responsibility; is s/he more confident or reflective; better able to moderate emotions—or less so?

Moderating emotions has never been a problem for E., but with that, we don't know what is going on inside. He has always been confident and responsible but never outwardly reflective, but he did mention today with a sense of pride that even he couldn't hide that he didn't realize at the beginning of the process how much work this was going to be and how much time he was going to spend preparing to become a bar mitzvah.

Was any of this anticipated by you? If not, why not?

I'm pleased when I get an ounce of reflection! So to hear that note of pride in the car after his lesson today… I was pleasantly surprised.

Parent of J.

1. How would you describe your personal attachment to Judaism?

Please also briefly describe any changes you have experienced in that attachment, or sense of Jewish identity, since your child began the process toward becoming bar/bat mitzvah.

Before my child began the process of becoming bar mitzvah, I would classify my sense of Judaism as quite loose and led by my husband. I grew up in a very loosely observant home, although I was also raised with a strong ethnic connection to Judaism. My understanding of being Jewish came mostly from history lessons rather than religious study. Immigration, Holocaust information, Israel, etc. Being involved in my son's studying I have learned a great deal about the Torah, what it means to become bar mitzvah and I think this has made me more appreciative and understanding of the basis of our religion. I still have a ways to go though before I understand what I consider to be "enough".

2. How would you describe your child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study toward b/mitzvah?
I believe my son's connection to Judaism before beginning his study was largely as mine was growing up, that is, obligatory and loose. While I believe my husband led us to services more often than I had been led as a child, my children and I both felt differently than my husband about observing our religion. Once again, our connection came mostly from history and ethnic discussions rather than religious study.

How would you view his/her comfort with his/her Jewish identity, now that the program is (or is almost) behind him/her?

Through his studying to become bar mitzvah I feel the whole family has gained a stronger Jewish identity. I understand more what it means to be Jewish and can instill that in my children and I believe he is no more comfortable with being Jewish but certainly feels more comfortable being able to understand and explain what it means to be Jewish.

Who, or what, do you believe has had the greatest influence on your child's Jewish identity, thus far? (Name as many as you like.)

I would like to believe that us, as parents have had a great impact on our children's Jewish identity and I know that J.'s grandparents have had a strong influence as they can tell stories and history that we cannot. I also truly believe that one of the strongest influences at this point are the private tutoring lessons. To be able to sit down with a clergy on a one on one basis and to also participate in the seminars has helped our son be impacted greatly by the clergy, we believe.

Please briefly describe a difficult situation or a moral dilemma you are aware of, which your child needed to handle or resolve in the last year.

J. has been faced with the problem or moral dilemma of sharing his work with others at school, or cheating. He has described that very often his friends and classmates ask him for answers on homework that they have not done. In 6th grade, he did give some information to another student and that student used J.'s exact work in an assignment and Jake was disciplined along with the student for cheating. Unfortunately he learned this lesson through a real life situation. However, now, in 8th grade, he facing this problem more clearly and makes the decision not to cheat, or allow others to cheat.

In your opinion, what skills went into making the decision? Where and how do you think (the majority of) those were acquired by your child: e.g., home; school; synagogue?

A major skill that J. has needed to learn how to solve this problem were social skills. J. felt very pressured in 6th grade to make and keep friends and would never had said no to a friend's request for "help". This year, J. is a much more confident and socially competent person. I think mostly he has learned better social skills through his school life. I would love to say that his bar mitzvah preparation or home life have influenced him greatly, but the reality is that at this age, peer feedback and reinforcement is the most powerful for Jake.

How has your child's involvement in study toward b/mitzvah affected his/her ability to negotiate or understand moral issues, understand other's perspectives: i.e., what kind of changes (if any) have you observed in that area?

The area that I have noticed a change in J. that I think is due to his studying is more empathy toward fellow Jews. I think this has helped his moral development and to know that he is representing his faith and his culture in certain circumstances.

4. In what context might the subject of God or discussions about Judaism come up at home?

We talk about God and Judaism all the time at home. We discuss where we are all at in regard to believing in god, in regard to our observance of Jewish practices and all historical references regarding Judaism. Thankfully, we have a very open communication with our kids about most subjects and religion is no exception. We have watched documentaries on the Holocaust together, we have visited the Holocaust museum, we have researched Zionism, we have studied about Israel at home and we talk to older relatives about what it meant to be Jewish in their years growing up.

How and/or when do you share your thoughts with your child on those subjects? Answered above.

How has the b/mitzvah experience influenced any of those discussions, if they occur—either for your child, or for you? I think our kids are more knowledgeable from the bar mitzvah experience, thus, they can teach me things I did not know. I think the bar mitzvah experience is allowing them to be more interested in the discussions we have and feel more involved in the temple and the things we talk about holiday get togethers, etc.

5. What changes in your child overall did you observe over the length of the course of study? For example, is there a greater sense of responsibility; is s/he more confident or reflective; better able to moderate emotions—or less so?

J. has become so much more interested in this entire process than I ever thought he would be. He has a long story in regard to his studies, not sure if it's relevant here, but I think it's important. Like most 3rd/4th graders he began attending Hebrew school grudgingly. J. has always been a "different" kind of kid who needed extra emotional encouragement, comfort, prompting, etc. While he has always been very bright and capable, he was always a shy, quiet and somewhat anxious kid. This was pervasive in elementary school when his time to study at Hebrew School began. Needless to say, he did not do well at Temple Beth El's program. Aside from not connecting with the curriculum, the teachers, the program, etc. he also had some serious difficulties with two students at Hebrew School. This was absolutely to no fault of the school as it was an issue carried over from secular school. In 5th and 6th grade I argued with J. weekly to attend Hebrew school, but it was like torture for him. He was bullied by these two kids and had not one friend at the school to help him. In 7th grade, I met with Ms. Cosden and we agreed that J. would study independently. This was wonderful for him. He worked with a Hebrew tutor and he and I studied our culture together, a very enlightening and bonding experience for both of us. But, when we began the tutoring and true prep for becoming a bar mitzvah, I thought as did he that we would go through some rituals and get to the Bar Mitzvah tasks one by one to "get it done". I have been incredibly surprised though by the journey over

the past 10 months and how meaningful this has been for all of us in the family. We absolutely do not see it as a "getting it done" task anymore, we are enjoying every minute. We have loved sitting down with our clergy in the different settings and we wish there were more seminars to attend as we will miss those meetings. J. has gained so much more than I ever thought he would. Writing his d'var torah (sp?) has been great (although I don't really know what it says), learning what it really means to become a bar mitzvah has been wonderful and he has gained tons of confidence and knowledge. I am incredibly proud and happy about how this has turned out and I never could have guessed that he would wind up to be such a wiser, more reflective and more confident kid. I will be forever thankful to Mr. Herzfeld, Ms. Cosden, Cantor Anesi, Rabbis Davidson and Mitelman, all who have contributed to this process.

Was any of this anticipated by you? If not, why not? Answered above

Parent of B.

1. How would you describe your personal attachment to Judaism? Please briefly describe any changes you have experienced in that attachment, or sense of Jewish identity, since your child began the process toward becoming b/mitzvah.

I grew up in a fairly observant, conservative household, with my parents (my father) being involved as an officer in our temple. I felt a renewal of my own sense of jewish indentity and the realization of how important it is for my children to understand our traditions as my daughter went through the Bat Mitzvah process.

2. How would you describe your child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study toward b/mitzvah?

B. felt a strong connection to Judiasm and our temple prior to her Bat Mitzvah studies because of our families' involvement in Temple Beth El.

How would you view his/her comfort with his/her Jewish identity, now that the program is (or is almost) behind him/her?

I believe now that the program is behind her, she looks at her own jewish identity, apart from simply attending temple as part of our family – she often tells us "she is an adult in the jewish world"

Who, or what, do you believe has had the greatest influence on your child's Jewish identity, thus far? (Name as many as you like.)

I believe family members, grandparents, and my grandmother (B.'s great grandmother, who just recently passed away, and told of her stories growing up in Eastern Europe and coming to the United States to get away from the pogroms) had the greatest influence on her Jewish identity so far.

3. Please briefly describe a difficult situation or a moral dilemma you are aware of, which your child needed to handle or resolve in the last year.

B. was caught between two very close friends this year who fought throughout the year. She was forced to learn that even girls that she liked very much could be very unkind to each other. She had to face a lot of issues of loyalty and fairness.

In your opinion, what skills went into making the decision? Where and how do you think (the majority of) those were acquired by your child: e.g., home; school; synagogue?

B. developed her interpersonal skills during this experience – and had to use tact and sensitivity to others feelings. I believe these skills were developed throughout her years at school and hopefully in our home where we discuss how others should be treated. I believe that basic ideas about being a good human being (a *mensch*) were discussed at Hebrew School as well.

How has your child's involvement in study toward b/mitzvah affected his/her ability to negotiate or understand moral issues, understand other's perspectives: i.e., what kind of changes (if any) have you observed in that area?

B. has always been extremely kind and perceptive to others feelings. However, her torah portion was actually a list of rules of how to live your life – from cut and dry rules about weights and measures to rules about how to treat people – strangers in particular which is what she discussed in her D'var Torah, to the elderly, to people in the community. This influenced what she chose for her Mitzvah project, which was volunteering at Neighbor's Link, a support organization for recent Latino immigrants. It certainly opened her eyes to poverty in our own community and made her think and hopefully understand other perspectives.

This was a huge change for a girl who has lived a sheltered life, and had not been exposed to these situations before.

4. In what context might the subject of God or discussions about Judaism come up at home?

My girls used to talk about God and what they believed he (or she) looked like when they were younger. For whatever reason, it has not come up recently. Discussions of Judaism

come up most often around the holidays or when they spend time with friends or neighbors who are not Jewish, and then we may talk about differences in cultures.

How and/or when do you share your thoughts with your child on those subjects?

These are things we talk about whenever it arises – during dinner or before bed

How has the b/mitzvah experience influenced any of those discussions if they occur—either for your child, or for you?

The bat mitzvah experience has influenced these discussions in the sense that we have now discussed how important it is to continue Jewish traditions – whether by continuing her Jewish education (B. is continuing with the confirmation program), or for the first time, we have discussed the importance of raising Jewish children.

5. What changes in your child overall did you observe over the length of the course of study? For example, is there a greater sense of responsibility; is s/he more confident or reflective; better able to moderate emotions—or less so?

I have noticed a greater sense of responsibility by B. over the course of study – she (for the most part) took on the tasks of studying for her Bat Mitzvah and participating in her Mitzvah project on her own, with her father and I usually only have to give small reminders. This has carried over into an independence with her school work and taking more responsibility for budgeting time, getting work done in advance with less input from me than in prior years.

Was any of this anticipated by you? If not, why not?

I didn't know whether the experience would be a maturing one for B., although of course we hoped it would. Whether it was caused by the Bat Mitzvah process or simply her growing up, we have certainly seen B. become more mature over the last year!

Parent of A.

1. How would you describe your personal attachment to Judaism? Please briefly describe any changes you have experienced in that attachment, or sense of Jewish identity, since your child began the process toward becoming b/mitzvah.

I have long viewed my attachment to Judaism as "ethnic" and "cultural". I did not become a bat mitzvah when I was 13. I went to religious school on Sundays, and dropped out after about 1-2 years. My friends who became bar or bat mitzvah went to

religious school on Saturdays. I took a passive role toward my participation in going to temple – always went to someone else's temple as a guest.

It has been fascinating to see the changes I have experienced in my attachment to Judaism, and my sense of Jewish identity, since my child began the process toward becoming a bat mitzvah. I very much enjoy being a member of our temple. I have enjoyed accompanying my child to services on Friday nights, and I now enjoy Shabbat, bar/bat mitzvah services and high holy day services, where in the past, I felt I was "enduring" them. I feel a much stronger bond to Judaism since my child began this process.

2. How would you describe your child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study toward b/mitzvah?

A. was the child in our family who wanted to go to Hebrew school. It was her desire that got us to join the temple.

How would you view his/her comfort with his/her Jewish identity, now that the program is (or is almost) behind him/her?

I am very pleased to see the comfort that A. has with her Jewish identity. She very much embraces Judaism, and I know she was very proud of her accomplishment of becoming a bat mitzvah.

Who, or what, do you believe has had the greatest influence on your child's Jewish identity, thus far? (Name as many as you like.)

I believe I have had the greatest influence on my child's Jewish identity. But her education in Judaism came from the temple. A. is a very active learner. She really remembers and has integrated what she has learned in religious school.

3. Please briefly describe a difficult situation or a moral dilemma you are aware of, which your child needed to handle or resolve in the last year.

A. was invited to a bar and a bat mitzvah of two friends on the same day at different temples in different local locations. Although she is friends with both the boy and the girl, she felt that the girl was a closer friend. A. does not like to split her time between two parties; she much prefers to make a choice and go to one. A. also wanted both children to come to her bat mitzvah. A. chose to go to the girl's bat mitzvah. She specifically spoke with the boy in person and explained the situation. The boy was fine with it. Both children did come to Jenny's bat mitzvah.

In your opinion, what skills went into making the decision? Where and how do you think (the majority of) those were acquired by your child: e.g., home; school; synagogue?

A. needed several skills to make her decision – thoughtfulness about others feelings, understanding of her own needs and feelings, decisiveness, clear communication and diplomacy. I believe her decision making skills came from many sources, including home, school, and the synagogue. I think the combination has been a powerful one.

How has your child's involvement in study toward b/mitzvah affected his/her ability to negotiate or understand moral issues, understand other's perspectives: i.e., what kind of changes (if any) have you observed in that area?

I believe A.'s study toward bat mitzvah has contributed greatly to her understanding of moral issues and understanding other's perspectives. Yesterday evening, we were reflecting on (another girl from our synagogue's) bat mitzvah services. It was great to hear A. discussing the Torah passage from the service. She really embraced the story, its lesson and its importance. She really "owned" the teaching.

4. In what context might the subject of God or discussions about Judaism come up at home?

We are incredibly blessed as a family. We often discuss this concept. Being part of a family that has a mixed marriage, our children are very aware that they are Jewish, and embrace Jewish customs, traditions and identity. I believe the temple has played a very strong role in creating this identity. We celebrate the Jewish holidays at home, and at times discuss God. We have also cultivated a strong mutual respect for and with the Christian side of the family.

How and/or when do you share your thoughts with your child on those subjects?

Generally, I share my thoughts on these subjects in quiet conversations with my child.

How has the b/mitzvah experience influenced any of those discussions if they occur—either for your child, or for you?

I believe that bat mitzvah experience has made these discussions much easier, both for me and my child. My daughter is much better educated than I am in Judaism, and I often learn from her. Her understanding of Judaism has really enhanced our conversations.

5. What changes in your child overall did you observe over the length of the course of study? For example, is there a greater sense of responsibility; is s/he more confident or reflective; better able to moderate emotions—or less so?

We observed a significant increase in A.'s self confidence during the course of her study. We also observed her taking greater responsibility.

Was any of this anticipated by you? If not, why not?

We had observed a transformation in our son from his bar mitzvah study and his becoming a bar mitzvah, particularly on the day of his bar mitzvah. We observed a similar transformation in our daughter on the day of her bat mitzvah. The experience in both cases was incredible for all of us. I had not anticipated the transformation we saw in my son. It never occurred to me. I anticipated a transformation in my daughter, only because of what we had seen with our son. However, I didn't really believe it could happen twice. I was overwhelmed by emotion as I watched my daughter's transformation occur during her bat mitzvah service.

Parent of D.

1. How would you describe your personal attachment to Judaism?
Judaism represents a way of life for my husband and I. I have raised our family to make sure that it is part of our life. I love all the traditions and holidays that we have in our religion. The attitudes and beliefs are very inspiring to me and therefore I try to pass it down to my children.

Please also briefly describe any changes you have experienced in that attachment, or sense of Jewish identity, since your child began the process toward becoming bar/bat mitzvah.
As D. is approaching her bat mitzvah I realize how important it is to emphasize the strength that Judaism can bring to our lives. I realize that I do not always share this with her (or my other daughters), and that I assume they understand it. I need to be more vocal and supportive of her in her studies.

2. How would you describe your child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study toward b/mitzvah?
She probably felt it was a requirement by her parents to go to religious school,

How would you view his/her comfort with his/her Jewish identity, now that the program is (or is almost) behind him/her?
She still has a ways to go, but I believe that she is slowly understanding what it means to be a Jewish adult.
Who, or what, do you believe has had the greatest influence on your child's Jewish identity, thus far? (Name as many as you like.)
Myself and her grandmother.

3. Please briefly describe a difficult situation or a moral dilemma you are aware of, which your child needed to handle or resolve in the last year.
There was a girl in her bunk (at camp)that no one liked and she felt really badly about it. D. liked the girls but was unsure how to handle "going against the grain" when her other bunkmates did not like her and they commented whenever D. was nice to her.

In your opinion, what skills went into making the decision? Where and how do you think (the majority of) those were acquired by your child: e.g., home; school; synagogue?
The skills she used which included being a compassionate person were learned from all aspects of her life…school, home and synagogue…I believe that we all have a role in how the kids handle a situation.

How has your child's involvement in study toward b/mitzvah affected his/her ability to negotiate or understand moral issues, understand other's perspectives: i.e., what kind of changes (if any) have you observed in that area?
She is still in the beginning stages so I cannot answer this.
4. In what context might the subject of God or discussions about Judaism come up at home?
We talk about God whenever there is a situation that cannot be understood completely, for example, when D.'s Uncle died, we discussed how God would be there for all of us as we mourn and for her Uncle to ensure he is in a peaceful place.

How and/or when do you share your thoughts with your child on those subjects?
We talk whenever she needs to talk
How has the b/mitzvah experience influenced any of those discussions, if they occur—either for your child, or for you?
D. is gaining an understanding of the role religion can play in our life.

5. What changes in your child overall did you observe over the length of the course of study? For example, is there a greater sense of responsibility; is s/he more confident or reflective; better able to moderate emotions—or less so?
It is still too early to tell.

Parent of F.

1. How would you describe your personal attachment to Judaism?

My personal attachment to Judaism is based on tradition, family values and the sense of community with friends and family. Joining Temple Beth El reinforced the community aspect of this attachment by creating a second home for me, my husband and my children. My daughter becoming a Bat Mitzvah emphasized the feeling of continuity, the need to pass on jewish values and traditions and, most importantly, the need to keep the jewish faith strong within my own family as a greater contribution to the overall future of Judaism in the world.

The Bat Mitzvah process was most meaningful as I watched my daughter shine on the Bima not only for us but for herself. I believe she grew from the entire experience and that she rose to the occasion with confidence, poise and maturity I did not know she possessed.

Please also briefly describe any changes you have experienced in that attachment, or sense of Jewish identity, since your child began the process toward becoming bar/bat mitzvah.

2. How would you describe your child's connection to Judaism prior to beginning study toward b/mitzvah?

I believe there is a lot lost in the education process but in combination with our family's commitment to the synagogue and to the tradition of celebrating holidays with family and friends my child embraces the connection. Because almost all of my daughter's friends are jewish she shares a strong bond with being jewish.

How would you view his/her comfort with his/her Jewish identity, now that the program is (or is almost) behind him/her?

I am not sure if becoming a Bat Mitzvah changed her comfort level with being jewish. I do believe that knowing the prayers and understanding the process has had a very positive impact on her personal being as a more responsible adult.

Who, or what, do you believe has had the greatest influence on your child's Jewish identity, thus far? (Name as many as you like.)

Us – parents, both sets of grandparents, her aunts and uncles and her cousins. I also believe that being a member of the synagogue has been a positive influence.

3. Please briefly describe a difficult situation or a moral dilemma you are aware of, which your child needed to handle or resolve in the last year.

F. made a decision to invite any child to her Bat Mitzvah who had already invited her to theirs regardless of whether she liked them, was friends with them or even wanted them to attend her Bat Mitzvah. There was one girl who invited her and she immediately said she would not go to hers and as it turned out she actually had a camp friend's that same day. In this case, she decided not to invite the girl to hers because she found her to be annoying and didn't really care for her at all.

We ran into this girl at a store when we were buying F.'s dresses for her Bat Mitzvah services. F. came out of the dressing room and was "freaking out." She told the woman who was helping us in the dressing room about what happened and the woman suggested that she call her in a couple of weeks and call and ask her if she was coming because she hadn't heard from her. F. decided to go up to her right then and there and ask her if she had received her invitation and was she coming. Her mom said she had the same situation happen with some people and that they hadn't received the invitation. When we told her that we had no additional invitations we suggested that we could email one to her. We did follow up with this but she ended up getting sick at the last minute and was unable to attend.

The main point here is that F. immediately felt guilty about her decision to not invite this particular girl and wanted to find a way to do so.

In your opinion, what skills went into making the decision? Where and how do you think (the majority of) those were acquired by your child: e.g., home; school; synagogue?

I believe that F. is inherently a good person and a caring human being. By seeing this girl in front of her she started to feel really bad about her initial decision. In the end she did the right thing.

How has your child's involvement in study toward b/mitzvah affected his/her ability to negotiate or understand moral issues, understand other's perspectives: i.e., what kind of changes (if any) have you observed in that area?

I cannot honestly say that her studies of Torah have had any impact. It would be difficult to separate out all the variables which impacted her decision making. I do believe that our family is a big factor.

4. In what context might the subject of God or discussions about Judaism come up at home?

This has not really been a subject of discussion in and of itself. There have been instances relating to family members who are dating or who are in serious relationships with people who are not jewish. F. always listens to our opinions about these issues.

How and/or when do you share your thoughts with your child on those subjects?

Our opinions are shared as these types of opportunities arise.

How has the b/mitzvah experience influenced any of those discussions, if they occur—either for your child, or for you?

The Bat Mitzvah experience has not really been a driving force for these discussions. I view these discussions as an integral part of our responsibility as parents.

5. What changes in your child overall did you observe over the length of the course of study? For example, is there a greater sense of responsibility; is s/he more confident or reflective; better able to moderate emotions—or less so?

I believe the experience started a process which will continue on as F. grows. She is definitely more grown up, more confident and she believes in herself in a way I had not seen previously. She is excited and motivated to do well in school and she is realizing more about the friends who are truly good friends vs. those people who are just acquaintances.

Overall, this was a very positive experience and one which will stay with her for her entire life. We were incredibly proud of how she handled herself during the service and with many of the guests who attended her celebration which followed. One couple actually called me to express how impressed they were with her as they went to say good bye. (A temple family) said that she extricated herself from all her friends to come over to them, hug them and thank them for coming.

Was any of this anticipated by you? If not, why not?

F. has always been a very anxious child and, in many ways, she still is, however the experience of becoming a Bat Mitzvah was a great surprise to us. The confidence she exhibited just amazed us. At no time did F. say she was nervous. It was always about how excited she was for it all.

Parent of G.

1. I have a strong cultural attachment to Judaism. Although I would not consider us to be a "religious" family, I believe we have strong Jewish values.
2. G. had little connection to Judaism prior to beginning study towards bar mitzvah. He is comfortable with his Jewish identity and knows that it is important to his parents, but really does not understand why. G.'s parents and grandparents have had the greatest influence on his Jewish identity. He also identified strongly with our Israeli guide when we visited Israel last summer and took away historical, cultural and religious (certainly political!) Jewish values from him.
3. As you know, G. was faced with a sick younger brother over the last year. (My husband) and I were very proud of how G. and (other brother) rose to the occasion and took care of their brother the best way they knew how. G.'s mitzvah project speaks for itself. He took a situation that frightened him and used it to help others. His comic book is still distributed at the Proton Center in (city) and he continues to get requests for personal copies from patients.
4. To date, we have not discussed God's role, if any, in (younger brother's) diagnosis. I can imagine that it might come up one day. I do not look forward to that conversation. Judaism, for G. right now, means not forgetting the Holocaust. The atrocities of the war then and those that are fought during modern day, are his main focus. Our trip to Israel was probably the best gift we could give our children to instill Jewish identity. G. has already told us he wants to go back on birthright.
5. Although G. "attacked" his course of study for becoming a bar mitzvah with the same lack of vigor he does his school work (he races through and thinks he's done, we think he should be doing more), I am pleased to say he made us very proud on the bima. Not only did he recite his Torah and haftarah portions beautifully (in my unbiased opinion), his level of maturity and calm amazed us. He had to pull that off during a time when his parents were less than fully focused. His confidence shocked us. On that day, he was a wonderful role model for his two younger brothers. We were very proud.

However, to be honest, there is really no greater sense of responsibility or self-reflection, nor is he better able to moderate his emotions. I guess it is unfortunate that the rite of passage of becoming a bar mitzvah comes at the same time as the onset of puberty!

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New York School
Graduate Studies Program

Doctor of Ministry Project Final Approval

To: The Members of the Doctor of Ministry Faculty

I hereby submit the signatures of approval from my advisors and Rabbi Bennett Miller for my completed Doctor of Ministry Project.

The title of the completed Project is:

Cantor Dana Anesi

Student Name	Student Signature	Date

HUC-JIR Mentor's Name	HUC-JIR Mentor's Signature	Date
Reverend Ann Akers		2/17/10

PCMH Mentor's Name	PCMH Mentor's Signature	Date

Rabbi Bennett Miller's Signature	Date

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~~Dana Ansel~~ Student Name	Dana Ansel Student Signature	1/29/10 Date
Jan D. Katzew HUC-JIR Mentor's Name	HUC-JIR Mentor's Signature	1/31/10 Date
PCMH Mentor's Name	PCMH Mentor's Signature	Date
Rabbi Bennett Miller's Signature		2/24/10 Date