

*Nicole Rosenberg's Bat Mitzvah speech*

I want to thank all of you for coming to Martins' and my b'nai mitzvah. I'm sure no one is questioning why Martin is doing this; He's Jewish, he can have a Bar Mitzvah like so many other 13 year old boys if he wants to, and being the naturally hard working boy, or should I say young man, that he is, he chose to have one. My situation, on the other hand, might be a little more puzzling. So I want to take this opportunity to give some explanation behind my decision to have a Bat Mitzvah 10 years late.

Unlike Martin, I was not a naturally inquisitive or hard working child. Throughout elementary and middle school I was unremarkable. I was a lazy, sleepy, frail child who showed no interest in school, sports, books or any other activities, let alone Judaism. I struggled through Sunday school for a few years, but with parents who themselves understood very little of the Jewish education I was supposed to be receiving, and without a strong push to keep going or to begin studying for a Bat Mitzvah, I quietly dropped out and forgot all about being Jewish for a while. If not for Zimmerman's yearly Passover seder, I might have forgotten completely.

In high school I started to show some interest in my Jewish roots. For a little while there was a small Jewish club on campus, which I joined. That must have been my first step towards trying to connect with my Jewish identity.

In college the search for my Jewish identity continued. I joined a Jewish sorority, spent two years interning at Hillel, was President of the Jewish Student Union for one semester, and was the campus ambassador and organizer for an event called Jewlicious.

During my year abroad I made several trips to Germany. During one trip, I decided to visit the Sachsenhausen labor camp just outside of Berlin. Naturally this was a very emotional day. We all know about the horrors of the Holocaust, but seeing where it happened, walking on the same ground, is truly disturbing and painful. Looking around the silent grey camp, I kept thinking, "Why did this happen? How could this have happened?"

During another trip, I went to visit my grandfather's brother Boris, whom I had never met before. Boris is a deeply religious man. He wakes up at 5am every day to go to the synagogue. Boris and I got along very well, so I felt comfortable asking him the question that so many Jews wish could be answered: Where was God when the Holocaust happened? Was he on vacation when it started, and by the time he got back 6 million Jews were already dead? Or did He sit up there with his hands tied, unable to do anything about it? Was he teaching us a lesson, punishing us for something? If so, what on earth

did we do? Believe in Him? Was that our mistake? Well, we sure learned our lesson, then, didn't we? So Boris, I asked, after such a hard lesson, why do YOU still believe?

I wish I could remember his exact answer; something about God being an idea within our selves, not some awesome being with a birds' eye view of the world, with power over everyone in it. God is a personal guide for living our own lives. Different for everyone because we customize it. Some people don't call it God at all. An atheist might just call it a conscience. A sense of right and wrong. Obligation to help others. An alarm clock set for 5am. What ever rules you choose to live by, that's your God. So my God is different from your God, and I may not even believe in God and you might pray to Him daily, but we're both Jews just the same. That's the one thing that will not change, no matter what we believe, no matter how we grew up.

When I moved home after college, Martin was right at the age when he needed to decide weather or not he would have a Bar Mitzvah. I had told him that if he decided to do it, I would do it with him. There are two reasons why I told him this: First, I really truly wanted it. In my ongoing quest to connect to the Jewish culture, this is a big step that I never took, and I feel somewhat disconnected because of it. I knew that if I didn't do it now, I probably never would. I'm no longer in college, but I'm not too busy with my own life yet. So this might actually be my only chance. Second, and equally as important, it's a way for me to do something special and very meaningful with my brother, which is rare for siblings with such a large age gap.

As far as why I wanted a Bat Mitzvah at all, it's another step in my search for a connection to my Jewish roots, of course, but it's also something more.

I don't feel a huge connection to God, at least not in the sense of God being some sort of divine external being, but I do feel a strong connection to Jews and feel very real pain for all the suffering that the Jews have endured in the past simply because they were Jewish. My family emigrated from Russia to the United States largely because of the way they were treated as Jews. Because of this same oppression, their own Jewish identity was silenced in many ways. Having a bar or bat mitzvah was practically unheard of. Neither our parents, nor our grandparents nor any of their siblings even considered having one. Though their Jewish identity was stifled in this sense, in other ways they were never able to escape being identified as a Jew. This impacted every part of their lives, from who their friends were, to being admitted into a university, to being hired for their chosen profession. Since we are here now and not there, I feel that it's beyond my right to have a bat mitzvah; it's kind of an obligation. Why did my parents bring me here, if not to live a life where I can be free to associate with Jewish culture and traditions and still have all

doors open to me? Back there, this freedom did not exist, and doors were slammed shut left and right. I'm standing here today largely out of principal.

In Emor, what stood out to me most were the Appointed Times for Meeting, which relate to holidays throughout the year. Specifically, Passover is the one thing that I can relate to the most, because it is my strongest and most consistent tie to Jewish culture and traditions. As I mentioned before, if not for our yearly seder at the Zimmermans, I might not have had a tie at all, and I might not have longed to strengthen it over the years. I might not have spent so much time on Jewish student life in college, and I might not have cared for a Bat Mitzvah.

I think the point of these meetings is largely about connecting with other Jews and tying back or staying tied to the culture. Traditions like Passover remind people of the greater community of which they are a part, regardless of whether or not they believe in a God. Believe in Him or not, at a time when all other things are set aside in honor of a Jewish holiday, Jews all over the world are connected by the same family values and traditions. I like how this connection feels. I feel it today, especially when I sing the Shema Israel because I know what it means to Jews all over the world. Now, I feel more connected than ever before, and I'm grateful to my family and everyone here for sharing this day with me.