

Lea Winter's Message at the bar mitzva observance of brother Shai Winter
29 August 2009 – 9 Elul 5769
Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel

Shabbat Shalom. When a child reaches the age of mitzvot, he is expected to follow the commandments and to hold greater responsibility in his life for taking care of himself and for making his own decisions. It is no challenge for Shai to distinguish between right and wrong, for he never does anything that he knows is wrong. We have observed, though, that he is continually proving to us that we can trust him with greater levels of responsibility. We may not be able to leave him home alone or expect him to get himself ready for school, but he can cook himself dinner. If we told him to sit and study for his bar mitzva celebration for ten minutes, he would probably decide that he'd prefer to memorize every city the Ringling Bros. Circus visits on its cross-country tour.

During the past few months, as we were helping Shai prepare for reaching the age of mitzvot, he has encountered many opportunities in which to learn how to take on greater levels of responsibility. A few months ago, Shai expressed interest in coming to shul for Shabbat morning services. After going to shul on only rare occasions for years, Shai has come to shul almost every Shabbat for the past few months of his own volition. While practicing getting ready for shul, Shai learned how to get himself dressed. While going to shul with him – us walking, he on his scooter – we would teach him to stop, look, and listen for cars at every crosswalk. He still needs reminders sometimes, but he more-or-less has learned how to cross the street safely.

If something doesn't make sense to Shai, or if he doesn't see a point to it, he won't pay attention to it. If we give him instructions with the singular intention of keeping him safe, if he doesn't understand why it's important to follow the directions, he is likely to disregard them. When he rides his scooter to shul, he often gets ahead of the rest of us walkers, so we ask him to stop at the street corners and wait for us before crossing the street. Normally, he would go ahead and cross the street on his own instead of waiting for us to catch up with him. When he first started going to shul regularly in the past few months, we anticipated such a situation, so we made him stay close to us. I was away for four weeks in July, during which time my father had been working with Shai on following his instructions to stop on the street corner. When I went to shul with them for the first time after I returned home, I wondered why my father let Shai travel ahead of us, out of sight. But by the time I could see him again, I saw him standing on the corner, waiting until we caught up to cross the street.

Shai may do things differently, but he often does them better because he sees the world differently. He has a great sense of humor, he never does anything out of malice, he can find the best in people, and he is comfortable being himself in front of people. After all, how many people have given a devar Torah in a top hat?

Sometimes it appears that Shai isn't paying attention to conversations around him, while in truth, he is always listening. He may be playing, or singing, or making up a story about the circus, but he still hears what is being said around him. Last autumn, my grandparents were preparing to sell their house, which was next door to ours, and move to Florida. None of us

had directly told Shai that they were moving – we had only spoken about it among ourselves, perhaps while Shai was in the same room or in the car with us; though he never appeared to be listening or reacting to what we were saying. One day, though, when my grandparents were sitting in our kitchen with us, Shai came in and said “Grandma and Gramps are not moving to Florida!” None of us had any idea that he knew they were going to move, but he had been paying attention all along.

Since Shai doesn't let on that he knows what's going on around him or what is being said around him, people tend to talk about him in his presence. They assume that he is in his own world and tuning them out; and to add to the problem, he won't say anything and will rarely react to what's going on, even if it's bothering him. About ten years ago, I was waiting in line at an ice cream store with Shai. He didn't really want to stand still, not seeing the point to waiting in a line when the ice cream was at the front of the line. He accidentally pushed a woman and her teenage daughter, who were leaving the store. I, then about six years old, immediately apologized and explained that he had autism. They remarked as they exited the store, “Someone should teach that kid some manners. Who does he think he is, knocking into people like that?” I was so frustrated and upset, I still remember the incident. Another time, when I was around the same age, I was walking around a library with Shai when two little boys started making fun of him. I don't remember exactly what happened, but I do recall threatening to punch them. They left him alone after that. What upset me the most was not that these people were ridiculing a person whom I loved dearly, but that I knew that Shai was aware of what they were doing. He didn't cry, or glare at them, or cower – he probably kept singing, or happily wandering around the ice

cream store or the library. He knew, though, that these people did not like him and did not respect him – for no reason that he could understand.

Having felt the cold stare of intolerance and ignorance every day as I walk down a street with Shai, wait to be served in a restaurant with him, follow him around a playground, it's wonderful that the welcoming, open-minded, and respectful community at [BEKI](#) has made this shul a comfortable and refreshingly understanding place where Shai can enjoy his bar mitzva celebration. Thank you all for supporting Shai as he grows into a young man and continues to teach us about people, life, and what it means to be happy. Shabbat shalom.