Temple Emanu El

High School Graduation Shabbat Service

Friday, May 7, 2021 • 25 Iyyar 5781

Mazel Tov

Hannah Appel
Tovah Elia
Zach Hall
Izzy Lashley
Olivia Messina
Shayna Robertson
Grant Titlebaum

"Jewish learning is living!"

Messages

Dear 2021/5781 Graduates and Families -

Mazal Tov and Congratulations are insufficient greetings for those of you who have maintained your Jewish education through 12th grade and your families who have sustained you in this process. In a world that offers many worthy distractions and attractions, your class represents the sha'ar yeshuv - the saving remnant that is most likely to secure and maintain the future of our people and faith. We pray that, in a form of your choice, you continue your involvement, attachment and contributions to Jewish life on campus and well beyond.

~Rabbi Steve Denker & Cantor Dave Malecki

What a journey this year has been! It is almost unimaginable that your Senior Year happened without us coming together for boisterous meals and singing before TEEn Kolel classes on Monday nights, youth group events, and more. For years, you've been an integral part of Temple Emanu El Teen Leadership and the Sunday Religious School; we are proud of all you've done, past and present, showing grit and determination in following through this year! We look forward to watching what you do next as you spread your wings outside of the Cleveland community. Please keep in touch and come see us when you're around!

~Beth Mann & Eileen Sadowsky

The graduates were asked to write a reflection on what connects them to Judaism, and what memories or significant learning experiences they will take with them to college. The following pages contain their unedited responses.

Hannah Appel

G-d is all around us in many different ways and places. I connect to G-d and Judaism by participating in many things throughout my life such as being a part of NFTY and TEMTY youth group, going to temple every week, going to Shabbat services, becoming a bat mitzvah and attending other bar and bat-mitzvah services and getting confirmed. I personally connect with Judaism because I am proud to be Jewish and proud of everything I do.

Growing up every week going to temple and Sunday school was not my first choice of what to do, however now I am able to realize just how important and special to me it really was. I learned about all the different holidays and everything about being Jewish. Not every Jew believes in G-d, however I believe that G-d is always watching. I believe that G-d created the universe, the earth, and us. I believe that everything happens for a reason and that G-d is looking down on us to make sure we are okay even if it seems like the worst is happening. Although I believe that G-d creates everything, I don't believe that G-d can fix everything that goes wrong because bad things do happen. I do believe that G-d does the best possible job fixing problems and even though not everything can be fixed, some things can be mended. I also believe that G-d can provide wisdom and guidance when it is most needed.

Throughout high school I participated in NFTY and TEMTY youth group with my brother and was able to feel connected to G-d and my Judaism and also make friends and participate in other traditions that I will remember forever. I am going to college next year at Kent State University and one of the concerns I had with going to college was about staying connected with my Judaism. While being at college it is very important for me to still celebrate the holidays and traditions and just have a safe place to be. I am very thankful because Kent has an amazing Hillel and I am looking forward to all the opportunities and I know that I will have a place to fit in and connect with my Judaism more at school.

Besides believing in G-d and going to temple, I am proud to be Jewish because of my family. My great grandmother who survived the Holocaust recently passed away, and it is so important to keep her story alive. She meant so much to me and I was able to learn a lot about Judaism from her. Family means everything to me and not only keeping my family's story alive, but celebrating our Judaism also. I am proud to be Jewish and connect with my Judaism forever and one day raise my children Jewish as well.

Torah Elia

"Music is the emotional life of most people." This is a quote I recently came across, and it was said by Leonard Cohen. It's true, music is the deepest, most sincere way to understand someone's emotions, and their most genuine feelings.

Music has always been the biggest thing that connects me to Judaism. I've found great communities of fellow songleaders and musicians within the temple, NFTY, and Camp Wise, along with many other places. I feel a strong connection to songleading, one of my favorite places to be in the whole world is up on the bima in the chapel, or in the Camp George dining hall leading my friends in Shabbat services. Songleading has opened many doors for me within the Jewish community. It allowed me to go on a weekend-long Teen Songleading seminar in Chicago, and it helped me get a job this summer at Camp Wise.

In addition to music, social advocacy and social justice are important aspects of Reform Judaism that I also connect to. I am proud to identify with Jews who want the world to be a better place. I have enjoyed so many wonderful opportunities through Jewish social justice events like L'taken in Washington DC, as well as other programs through the RAC. I've gone on many hikes to clean up parks and learn about environmentalism. I've run programs about Israel's sustainability efforts and I've led services about antisemitism. Judaism has opened up doors for me to learn more and ways for me to educate others.

There are many memories I will take with me as I go onto college. I will remember the countless bus rides at 6am to Canada, and all of the electrifying song sessions and friendship circles I led. I will remember coming to temple every Monday night, getting to spend two hours with my friends, planning programs. I will remember how we all hung around in Beth's office, staying much longer than we were supposed to.

There are also many learning experiences I gained from my time at temple. I learned how to effectively work with large groups of people, I learned that being a leader does not mean being the center of attention. I learned that I get joy from teaching others. Overall, music, social justice, and the people connect me to Judaism. I am glad of the person I am today because of this Jewish community. Thank you.

Zach Hall

Judaism has always played a big part in my life, since as early as I can remember I have been attending Jewish school and been involved with my Jewish community. Living in London and being Jewish is strange because there are not that many Jews in London, which made me value my Jewish identity and Jewish friends all the more. Going to temple every week gave me a nice reprieve from my fast paced life and I enjoyed spending time with my Jewish friends.

Being Jewish in America (especially in Cleveland) on the other hand is a completely different story. Here, I found that there were lots of Jewish people at my school and in my area. It was a welcomed change to be surrounded by people that I could share my Jewish identity with on a daily basis, not just at temple once a week (although I of course enjoy temple too). I have found that I love being part of a Jewish community, whether that is a temple, or Jewish summer camp, or just being with Jewish friends at school. And I will try and find a nice Jewish community to share my Judaism with in college, and then in my later life as well.

Izzy Lashley

For as long as I can remember, Judaism has been a part of my life. Whether it was here at Emanu El, at camp, or at NFTY, my Judaism has always been the one thing I have been sure of. When asked of what connects me to Judaism, I always know my answer, the community.

In my (possibly biased) opinion, there is not a single community in this world like ours. No matter where you go, one can always be comforted by the fact that there is almost always someone Jewish. There is a little known song called Wherever You Go by Larry Milder, it says "You're never alone, when you say you're a Jew." I feel like as a reform teen, I did not really feel the impact of what these words meant until a few years ago. As the percentage of antisemitic crimes rised rose around our community in recent years, I have become prouder and prouder to say that I, Izzy Lashley, am a member of the Jewish community. I have never seen a community as strong as us, a community that will band together, regardless of where you are in the world. We have proved again and again, that we are a force to be reckoned with, that we as a people are not going anywhere.

Being a part of this community has given me experiences and skills that not many others outside of it can say that they get. Heightened leadership skills, the ability to lean into my own discomfort, and definitely the capability to play a pretty mean game of Jewish geography are just a few I can name. I never feel more comfortable or at peace than when I am sitting in a synagogue, or at camp, or even in the middle of some random forest in Michigan, surrounded by this kehilah. Every Jewish community is unique in their own way, I am lucky enough to be a part of one as large as Cleveland. However, we as a society are adaptable, and even if you find yourself in somewhere as random as Des Moines, you'll never feel alone, because just as Mr. Milder says "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish."

Olivia Messina

My first thought when I saw this prompt was, "I'm really going to have to summarize because my whole life has been impacted by my Judaism so one page just isn't enough." I've had a pretty typical Jewish teen life. I attended a Jewish preschool and 13 years of religious school. I've had a consecration, bat mitzvah, confirmation, and now, graduation. I could've easily been one of those people who stopped going to Temple after my bat mitzvah, who felt like they didn't need more school, who just zoned out of all my religious school classes. But my attention never swayed. It took me a while but I figured out why. The stories, life lessons, learning where I came from, and learning who I could one day become. I've allowed Judaism to become engraved in my identity and become a lens through which I view everything in my life.

Standing on the Bima at my Bat Mitzvah in 7th grade, reading from the Torah, chanting prayers, I developed a sense of enduring pride and connection to my Judaism. Choosing to explore that connection, I became a Madricha for 5th and 6th graders. I helped them learn about their Jewish history and understand the importance of Judaism to their personal identity. Taking what I learned through the years and teaching it to others helped further engrain my connection and pride in my religion, so much so that I chose to seek out more opportunities and experiences. I was led to NFTY and TEMTY, both of which changed my life in amazing ways. I developed lifelong friendships, created enduring memories, and got the chance to come together with other teens who are equally as passionate about Judaism.

In 2012, my life changed forever when I found my greatest connection to my Judaism and something I can't live without, Goldman Union Camp Institute. I never thought camp could change my life so much. It's made me independent, taught me the value of living in the moment and treating each moment as a memory worthy of keeping. As I got older, I found myself taking more time to really absorb the experiences and Judaism around me. During evening services, I'd sit on the benches, surrounded by beautiful nature, listening and saying the prayers, feeling grateful for the opportunities I've been given to experience this year after year. In 2019, GUCI gave me the indescribable opportunity to spend a month in Israel. It was like nothing I had ever experienced. It strengthened my connection with myself and my Judaism in so many ways. It created lifelong memories and bonds that I will never let go of. As I prepare to return to camp this summer as a counselor, a producer of the GUCI magic instead of a youthful experiencer of it, I plan to do my absolute best to help other children absorb everything GUCI has to give them. With each summer day full of Judaic moments—prayers before and after meals, daily evening services, Shabbat celebrations, Shiur lessons, different holiday celebrations—camp taught me to be grateful for and to love Judaism, to continuously embrace it no matter what anyone else says. Now when I look around at my GUCI family, I get an overwhelming sense of gratitude for my Judaism because without it, I wouldn't be the person or Jew I am today and I wouldn't have the amazing home I've returned to every year since 2012.

I know for a fact that all of the opportunities, life lessons, and experiences I've had in my Jewish life will follow me wherever I end up. Throughout our history as Jews, we've faced so many hardships but we've always come out on top, content with who we are, and our pride, purpose, and courage untouched by others. Without my Judaism, I may have learned these lessons eventually, but I'd never be able to embrace them or understand them in the same way. I love the person that Judaism has made me, and I can't wait to see who I'll become as I live my life in the ways it taught me, full of love, hope, strength, respect, confidence, courage, gratitude, mitzvah, perseverance, purpose, compassion, integrity, and purpose

Shayna Robertson

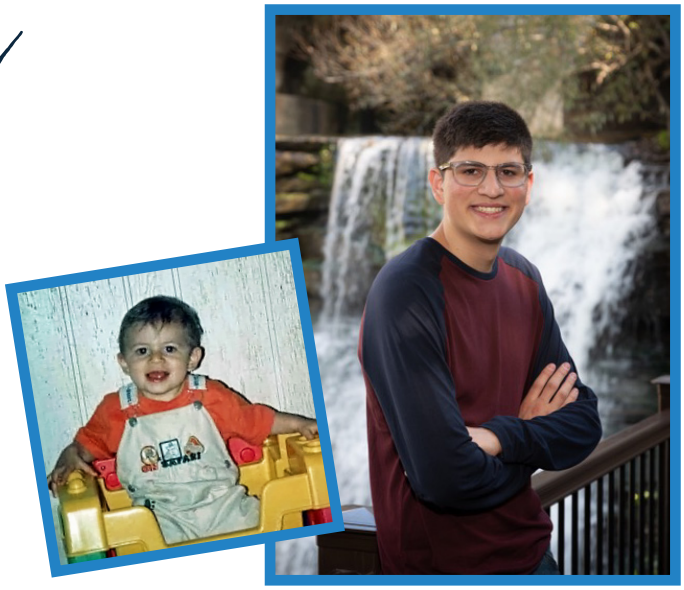
I am connected to Judaism by all my education and all the rights of passages I have accomplished over the years. I don't even know what it is like to not be Jewish. I went to Jewish preschools, summer camps, Sunday school and experienced all the milestones along the way. I know I can go to any temple in the world and feel comfortable. The melodies of songs may be a little different, but the words will always be the same. I enjoy the traditions of celebrating holidays with my family and of course cooking all the delicious foods that help make the holidays.

One way for me to connect to Judaism is taking what I know and teach people more about Judaism and explaining more than what history books are telling us at school. In some cases it brings up many unanswered questions from my classmates that sometimes I don't have the answer. Then we look up the answer to the question and have a discussion.

I value my family's traditions and hope to carry on many with my own family someday. A great example is that my grandma always made tons of hamantaschen and shipped them to family and friends near and far. Now that she is gone, my mom has continued the tradition and with the help of my sister and I and a few friends, we make close to a thousand every year. Our friends who aren't even Jewish look forward to the cookie delivery. This tradition is very special to my family.

I have never worked harder on achieving a goal than preparing for my Bat Mitzvah. Months before the event I studied with tutors and the Cantor. This taught me that working hard towards a goal was achievable with diligence and perseverance. As I go forward in life, I will use this tool to conquer whatever.

Grant Tittlebaum



As I sat down to write this essay, I thought to myself about the first part: "What connects you to Judaism?" As I thought about it I realize, I don't know what connects me to Judaism. My first thought was my family, they have always been there for me. They wanted me to pursue after my bar mitzvah unlike some other people in my class. My grandma is very religious and she believes all her grandchildren should be confirmed from religious school. My second thought was my parents. They had always pushed me to complete religious school all the way up to confirmation. They did however recommend I continue till graduation. My third thought was myself. This is when I realized that I knew what connected me. Without yourself you don't have the will to study. Others can try to force you, but at the end of the day, the only thing that needs to connect is yourself.

I have also learned that you can help others to understand or others can help you. This is what I feel I have learned from religious school. Once you connect yourself to Judaism you can help others connect, or others connect themselves and then help you connect. I have learned that helping others is a way of life but to do that you need to help yourself first. I think this is why on airplanes they say "When the oxygen mask drops down. Please place it over your nose and mouth. To secure pull on the straps on either side to tightly secure your mask before helping others."

Graduation Recognition Awards

The Ner Tamid Award
For always being present & *shining* as a
Madrichah & youth group member

The Perserverance Award
For grit & dedication in completing TEE High School

The Ruach Award
For personal leadership & spirit

The Marvin L. & Cissie Gardner Scholarship
For outstanding & consistent scholarly attainment

The Harry Ratner Prize
For excellence in scholarship & dedication in TEE High School

Parent Messages

Mazel Tov Hannah ~

As the great-grandchild of Holocaust Survivors, you are living proof that resilience and hope can triumph over hate and destruction. May your Jewish heritage always remind & inspire you to stand against all forms of prejudice & bigotry, as you make your way into the world. We are so proud of you for graduating, but even more proud of the smart and wonderful person you have become!

We love you! Mom, Dad, Noah, & All of Your Proud Grandparents

That you are here—that life exists and identity, That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

(from the poem, O Me! O Life! by Walt Whitman and the movie, Dead Poets Society, one of Tovahs favorite movies.)

Tovah ~ everyday you amaze us. You have done so much more with the temple and your Jewish education than we could have imagined from when we first sent you to Jewish preschool and summer camps. What a pleasant surprise this has been! We look forward to seeing how you continue with your Jewish identity and incorporate it into your future. This quote seems to fit the occasion, because you have so much good to offer the world. Take your time, enjoy every minute along the way and be proud of all that you have accomplished.

Love, Mom and Dad

Zachary ~

You have gone from an inquisitive toddler in the Gan at Bromley to a tall teen in Monday school at Temple Emanu El. In between, you had an amazing experience as a Bar Mitzvah in London, you had many memorable experiences and made loads of friends at Camp Wise and on your Israel Leadership trip. Many of those friends are joining you on your next adventure. What a journey it has been! You turned the challenge of moving from London to Cleveland as a 13 year old boy into opportunity. Today we are celebrating the end of your formal Jewish education at Temple Emanu El but we know that your journey has only just begun. We look forward to continuing to watch you learn about Judaism and your Jewish identity as you take this next step at University. Always remember your community, your roots, and follow your heart and your life will be full of blessings.

We love you. Mum, Dad and Sops

Dear Izzy ~

Mazal Tov on your Religious School Graduation! We know it is cliche, but it is truly unbelievable that pretty soon NFTY & Temple life (as a child) will be a memory for you. But what a memory!!! We are so happy that your friends, your plans for the future, your whole being has been shaped by the Jewish Community around you. Congratulations on the job well done, on getting involved, on being fearless, on facing challenges with gusto, on giving it your all in everything that you do!!

Love, Mom and Dad

Olivia ~

We are so proud of you and everything you have accomplished. We can't wait to watch as you continue on your life's adventures. We love you!!!

Dear Shayna ~

We are so proud of the young woman you have become. Your journey of education has hit another milestone as you graduate from Sunday school, but we hope it is not the end, and you will continue to be a valuable member of the Jewish community. You always amaze us with your pure heart, friendly smile and honestly that makes you such a special person. We wish you happiness and satisfaction on your next journey. Be happy, know that you are loved and don't let anything stand in the way of your dreams.

Love, Mom, Dad, Rachel and Cooper

Grant ~

We are so proud of you. You bring us joy every day and we cannot wait to see all that you will be able to accomplish in the future.

All of our love, Mom, Dad and Aaron

Temple Emanu El

Rabbi Steven L. Denker
Daniel A. Roberts, Rabbi Emeritus
David R. Malecki, Cantor
Renee Higer, Executive Director
David Sperling, President

Eileen Sadowsky, Education Director
Beth Mann, Youth & Family Program Director