

## Miriam's Bar Mitzvah Speech for William

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It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to share in this particularly special Bar Mitzvah. I've always admired and shared the Cope's pioneering spirit. This Bar Mitzvah is special in its uniqueness and in the fact that it's a first in our area.

In many surface ways, you can't even tell that these people are Jewish. Yet I know that in this family there is a deep sense of heritage, history and culture. There is also a strong commitment to fulfilling the responsibility of educating children to become links in the chain of Jewish tradition. So we may well ask "Are religious family rituals necessary in order to feel Jewish – to act Jewish...to become Jewish.... what does it really mean?"

William, today is the beginning of your public commitment to questioning and learning. Ultimately, you like all of us will ask...Who am I? What defines me as a human being? Where do I fit, and what's important to me in my life?

Today I urge you to question further, What part of Jewishness is already in you? By that I mean for you to think about whether you feel a little different on a Friday or Saturday? ... to think about what customs and traditions you do already know and practise and those you don't? and just how do you feel when you see people demonstrating other faiths?

And the corollary of that, not only what part of Jewishness do you already know, but what about *you* is Jewish? Is it the way you behave, the way you think about people of other faiths, because of what you know about our own history...or maybe it's just how you feel at Christmas time, or in the fall when it's time for Jews to reflect and make amends.

William, I'm so confident as one of your teachers that you are a good person, that you already do and will continue to honour your Jewishness however you uniquely experience it, and however it is expressed through you by your words and actions.

By becoming Bar Mitzvah today you are formally declaring your willingness to be literally a Son of Mitzvah – of good deeds...righteous acts. I know from your Torah study you have considered Noah's actions seriously and I encourage you to revisit it again and again to see it from yet a new perspective...to continue to define for yourself what truly is righteous living. Every time you read Torah, you will be stimulated to think!

Suddenly, and perhaps without really feeling it just yet, a larger community is embracing you today. You have joined a group in which you have a shared identity. Anywhere in the world you will find refuge and comfort among Jewish people. For this, you too in becoming Bar Mitzvah acknowledge your responsibility to this larger community...the safety and well being of Jewish people everywhere ...and even beyond our community to people of all faiths all over the world.

Miriam Shell Sept. 28, 2002

Earlier I said that I was honoured to participate in this special event and began explaining why it was special. Yes it's true, the Bar Mitzvah itself is special and learning about being Jewish is good, but you William – you are the most special thing about today.

Actually, I saw you before you even knew about me – I was with Arlene in the fall of 1997, after I had just moved to Parksville. We were in front of the Barber Shop on 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave in Qualicum Beach when we ran into your Mom, Audrey. Well, there I was on the sidewalk on a gorgeous sunny afternoon in Qualicum Beach listening to two high powered fast talking Jewish women. Who would have ever thought? I was looking for work, they were talking Hebrew lessons, and I liked them both. William, you were eight at the time, and oblivious to all this, you sat calmly in a chair in the Barber Shop, getting your hair cut.

Well, we did get together and I've enjoyed many lessons that spilled over to discussions with Audrey and Bruce. William was and is a great student, well behaved, introspective, honest - since then, we've had many interesting chats over the holiday customs, history, or ethics. One of his proudest achievements, as he studied Hebrew, was learning to sing one of our most important prayers – The Shmah, which in fact talks about passing Judaism from generation to generation just as Audrey and Bruce are doing. I hope this will always remain a valued memory from your childhood, William.

Now, if you'll come up here. It is common for a rabbi and a synagogue to give you special gifts at your Bar Mitzvah – usually these gifts are objects or books to remind you that Jewish tradition regards education as a life-long concern leading ultimately to study for its own sake. When asked the question “Is study greater, or doing ie. acting?”, A great teacher, Rabbi Tarfon said, “Doing was greater.” Another learned scholar, Rabbi Akiva said, “Study was greater.” In the end, after discussion they concluded together, that study was greater, for it *led* to doing.” (Kiddushin 40b) And so, in keeping with this practise, it is truly my pleasure to encourage your continued study by giving you this gift: A Guide to Every Day Practise and Observance of Judaism. Consider it a reference book to turn to with any Jewish question at all.

Mazal Tov to you and Yishur Koach (Congratulations and Righteous Strength/Power)!