

Thank you all for being here with me and my family on this special day, it is so wonderful to be here together and celebrate.

In the last few months, we embarked on a meaningful journey as a family. We explored the options around my bat mitzvah. It was important to me and my family that I got to experience a meaningful connection to my Jewish history and to discover aspects of it that are interesting to me. I'm excited to share with you the stories I learned while I explored my Jewish heritage.

I was especially interested in learning about the women in the ancient Jewish stories. Women's leadership has always been an interest to me that I love learning about. In my learning journey I encountered very inspiring women who were very courageous and were able to change the way people think for the better. I loved the story about the daughters of Zelophehad whose names were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They were part of the group that left Egypt and were about to enter the land of Israel, at that time women could not own property and their dad had died. The dad had not had a son so other than his daughters no one could hold the family name by owning property. The daughters approached Moses and requested that they could own property to remember their father. Moses turned to God and asked him what he should do on their request. God then created a new law and told Moses that the daughters could own property and if there was no son then daughters could inherit land instead.

The reason I was so intrigued by this story is that I was inspired by their confidence to reach out peacefully without causing trouble and that they had the bravery to go on their own together. They challenged authority in a respectful way and eventually got to create a fundamental change in women's rights and awareness of their needs as individuals. With their act, they empowered others to voice their needs and fight for their rights.

Another inspiring character in Jewish tradition was Esther. What I liked about her was how bold she was with her decisions and how she was confident with what she wanted. She was able to play by the rules and through earning the king's trust she was able to cancel the king's order to kill the Jews. This story and a few others like Ester the Queen made me think of how sometimes we accept things as they are and don't feel that we have the ability to influence and change things that bother us. I was also wondering when one should play by the rules and when is it a time to break the rules.

As part of my exploration of courageous changemakers in Jewish tradition, I encountered a famous story about Hillel the Elder. This story is in the Talmud. Hillel lived in the first century BCE in Israel. He was an immigrant from Babylon and he was very smart but very poor. It was very difficult for him to earn money to access the study hall but he made a huge

effort to earn the right amount every day and learn Torah from the leaders of that generation, Shemaya and Avtalyon. One day, he couldn't earn his wage for the day and the guard of the study hall would not let him in for free. So he went up to the roof so he could listen through the skylight. The Rabbis noticed a figure of a man blocking the skylight and went up to check what it was. Hillel was buried in snow unconscious, almost frozen and the rabbis dug him out. They took him inside the study hall and lit fire for heat despite the Shabat. They then said, "This man is worthy for us to desecrate Shabbat for him." One could assume that this dramatic incident got the leaders to be aware of something they weren't aware of before, that not everybody had access and the money to go to learn. There's also a big chance that thanks to Hillel they changed the policy and found ways to let everyone learn. It was interesting to think whether Hillel did this act as a genuine desire to learn or an intentional way to create awareness and catch the leaders attention. Either way, he made a significant change by sticking to his own truth.

Learning about all these inspiring people and the way they created change makes me think about me becoming Bat Mitzvah and how that relates to me as I am thinking about the world around me and things I wish I could change. I am so glad that I had the opportunity to learn about change-making in my tradition, and to realize that the Jewish heritage can inspire us to make a difference, to be involved and to care about other people's needs. I hope I will have more opportunities to explore my tradition deeply and find ways to connect.