

## The Mitzvah of Caring for Those in Need Sarah Berman

My torah portion for my Bat Mitzvah was Parashat Behar-Bechukotai. This parashat has a lot of meaning for me because it was the same parashat as the day I was born and is a connection to my mom and my father who died shortly after I was born. I wanted to connect the importance of Chesed (acts of loving kindness) to my Bat Mitzvah service and celebration because it's already an important part of my life and my family. From the time I was a young child my mom has always stressed to me the importance of caring for others and for our community. She taught me that the Acts of Kindness we perform not only benefit those in need, but bring fulfillment to ourselves. I wanted to share this with my family and friends and tie in one of the three major themes of my parashat which was "The Mitzvah of Caring for Those in Need."

Some of the mitzvah projects I am involved with are: collecting and distributing toiletries to Deborah's Place which is a shelter for homeless women and the Night Ministry which is a shelter for homeless teens. The collections are an ongoing project which I continue to do. I never knew how a small bottle of shampoo or soap can make such a difference in someone's life. I help make and deliver Shabbat and holiday meals to homebound senior and for the past four years I have visited a senior who is bed bound and celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday last January. I gave a portion of my Bat Mitzvah money to Pennies for the Planet, which is an organization which helps to protect the land and animals of our world and to Mazon, which is the Jewish Response to Hunger. Mazon helps families in need of food in the United States, Israel and around the world. All these Acts of Kindness have taught me the personal lesson of how important it is to care for others and for our community; always with respect and dignity. The gift I have received from being involved is greater than anything I have done for any of these people.

Last year I began to volunteer as a referee for the Special Olympics program. As a result of volunteering with Special Olympics I decided to get involved with Operation Mazel Tov. This program resulted in a special twinning which I was able to share my Bat Mitzvah day with an Israeli child with special needs. My experience with Special Olympics taught me a great

deal about people with special needs. I have become empowered by the people I have met and they have taught me a great deal about myself, the power of love and friendship and having the ability to accomplish anything I want to.

I have also learned that one of the greatest acts of kindness is giving a person their dignity and letting them maintain their independence and accomplish goals they have set for themselves. Giving someone the ability to find a future for themselves and to become a part of a community is the special gift I can give to someone. I have been given the ability to study Torah and become a Bat Mitzvah. I strongly believe that by giving the gift of Torah to another person and sharing the rite-of-passage of the ritual of becoming a Bat Mitzvah I have made a huge impact in someone else's life.

Since my Bat Mitzvah I continue to be active in my community. I read Torah on Rosh Hashanah and I am reading Torah again on Shabbat morning December 4th. The collection of toiletries is ongoing and I have put out collection boxes in my school and have written letters to different hotel chains for donations. Once a month I am a referee for the Special Olympics and find that volunteering gives me an incredible feeling every time I'm at an event. I look forward to celebrating my friend's 101<sup>st</sup> Birthday this January and share all her wonderful and insightful stories when I visit her. I hope to return to Israel one day to meet Dina and her family and share stories of our Bat Mitzvah celebrations. My family and I continue to support The Masorti Foundation and Operation Mazel Tov, the importance of this program is that it continues to ensure that one more group of Jews, children with special needs, is included within the Jewish Community.

The word for "charity" in Hebrew is tzedakah from the root *tzadee deled koof* meaning "right", "just", and "morally correct", I have been taught and always try to personally follow the commandment of tzedakah. I am grateful for having the opportunity to have a Bat Mitzvah and for my parents and my community who have instilled in me the responsibility of tzedakah.