



**SJCS Gala Address
February 28, 2010**

Good evening. My name is Davey Friedman and I'm a 20-year old Whitman College student and a proud graduate of the Seattle Jewish Community School. It is wonderful to be here tonight and to see a school that's thriving and growing with each year. It is wonderful to be in a room full of community members who are so interested in this amazing place. It is wonderful to see so many new parents, who probably look and feel a lot like my parents did when SJCS was in the basement of Congregation Beth Shalom in 1992. A lot has changed since then but I believe that there is something fundamental that has remained consistent here throughout. I can see that SCJS is continuing to do for today's students what it did for me. At SJCS, I realized that I have a people and a history. As I grew up and *grow* up, that sense of connection has fostered an inner drive to understand the past, to connect, and to be part of forging a future for the Jewish people.

When I graduated from SJCS Elementary School, I really didn't know what to make of my Judaism. I knew that many of my friends were Jewish, I knew that I enjoyed reading and writing in Hebrew, and I knew most of all that I better not show up to Shacharit without a Kippah. But I certainly did not understand all the complexities of life, all the twists and turns of Jewish history, or the intellectual value of Torah study. Basically, I graduated with good feelings— a close connection with my teachers who I knew cared about me, a sense of community fostered by good parents and good kids. It was not until much later that I discovered, and in fact I am still discovering, what an SJCS education really means.

Until I went off to college, I was reasonably well-connected with a Jewish community. I didn't always go to the synagogue, but Judaism played a significant role in my development. I went to the Jewish Day School in Bellevue for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, I was employed by Congregation Beth Shalom as a Bnei-Mitzvah tutor through high school and most importantly, on Friday nights I made sure I was home for Shabbis before I went out and got into trouble. Jewish life was just my *pattern* of life, and I took for granted that it was so readily available to me. When I arrived at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, however, I was in for quite a shock. Walla Walla, while climatically a desert, also happens to something a desert for Jews. Walla Walla's only tiny synagogue is less of a congregation and more of a loose

association of a few families who get together on high holidays. There are no regular services, no Sunday school, no Rabbi. But I knew nothing of all this when I called the phone number for Congregation Beth Israel I got from Google, hoping that they would hire me as part of their Bnei-Mitzvah training staff. The answering machine I got was perplexing, it said "Shalom, you've reached Congregation Beth Israel, we'll be gathering again for Pesach April 21." Well, it was September when I called. Confused as I was, the message happened to include a cell phone number for the Shul's president and I called him eager for an explanation, and a job.

Our conversation was bleak – apparently the Walla Walla Jewish community had for years struggled to establish itself as a meaningful force in people's lives, but with the small number of Jewish families in the area, the best they could do was fly in a Rabbi from Orange County twice a year for holidays and encourage Jews from the Tri-Cities and Northern Oregon to drive in and join.

Hearing that, I figured my tutoring job was out the window, so I politely thanked him. But before I could say goodbye, he asked why I had called in the first place. When I told him I was a well-trained Bnei-Mitzvah tutor in need of employment, he gasped (gasp). Suddenly he was talking at lightning speed, telling me that there were two Jewish families that were new to Walla Walla and desperate to Bat-Mitzvah their 11-year-old daughters. He informed me that he had just recently broken the news to them that there was no one to train the girls within 100 miles.

What great timing, I thought, and I contacted the families and got to work immediately. Neither Lauren nor Madeline had ever read a word of Hebrew but I was determined that they take the process as seriously as the students I had worked with in the past. Surpassing even my own expectations, both girls succeeded in learning 45 minutes of Shacharit, memorizing trope for Torah readings, mastering their Haftorah portions, and writing D'var Torahs. After 10 months of twice weekly sessions, they were fully prepared. Madeline flew to New Jersey to be Bat-Mitzvahed in her Mother's childhood synagogue.

But Lauren and her family stayed in Walla Walla. The family hired the Orange County Rabbi, and Lauren was officially Bat-Mitzvahed in the spring of 2008. Lauren's was the first Bat-Mitzvah in Walla Walla – and in all of South-Eastern Washington – in 36 years!

Lauren's simcha made a big splash in the community. She made the front page of the Walla Walla Union Bulletin (I made page 8). But more importantly, other

Jewish families in the area have since taken an interest in performing this tradition for their children. I've received many an anxious call from families wondering if I intend to be in Walla Walla long enough to tutor their 8-year-olds.

I've continued my work in the Walla Walla Jewish community despite the current lack of Bnei Mitzvah students. After a summer of study with my own tutor and former SJCS Head of School, Joyce Shane, I led Congregation Beth Israel in Rosh Hashanah services, opening the shul's doors to Jews in Walla Walla, at Whitman, and in all of Eastern Washington. People came all the way from Spokane and my parents drove in from Seattle. The Walla Walla Jewish community is still small and struggling, but I like to think that I helped it take a few needed steps forward.

Though no one could have known it the day I began kindergarten, it was SJCS that gave me the knowledge, the drive, and the confidence to forge a Jewish identity for myself in the most unexpected place. The skills I brought to Walla Walla were important. But even more important was the identity I forged at SJCS, grounded in an intrinsic feeling of worth as a Jew and a deep-rooted desire to find for myself – or build myself – a community, much like the one students experience here at SJCS.

These values will stay with me as I leave college and venture into the real world. I am currently writing my senior thesis about U.S.-Israeli relations, I plan to focus my graduate work in Middle Eastern studies, and I hope one day to work on efforts at peace between Israelis and Palestinians as a member of the U.S. Foreign Service.

My experience at SJCS has been inseparable from my life's pursuits -- in academia and in the community. Wherever I end up, the mortar and bricks of learnedness, leadership, and Derech Eretz in my life were laid right here in the classrooms of SJCS. Giving Seattle's children the opportunity to experience this education, this place, as their first fundamental experience as Jews is a priceless gift that will inform the rest of their lives. I encourage you with all my heart to support the Seattle Jewish Community School with all your hearts. Thank you very much.