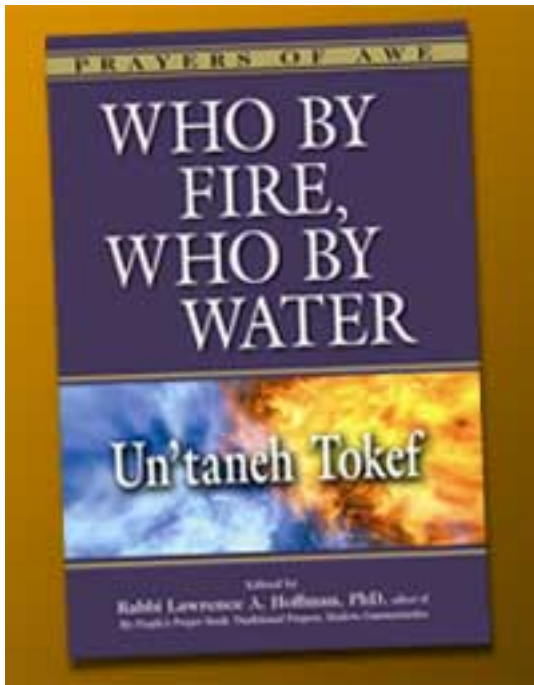


Lessons Learned from Living Through Challenge #2, by Eric and Jill Epstein



On Yom Kippur, three Congregation Or Ami members shared sermonettes throughout the service on Lessons They Learned Living Through Hardship. These Jewish TED Talk/Yom Kippur Social Sermons were each moving individually and very inspiring as a whole. Read about [How a Whole Congregation Wrote its Rabbi's Yom Kippur Sermon](#).

Lessons Learned from Living Through Challenge by Eric and Jill Epstein

It is often said that God will not give you more than you can handle. When our third child Ethan was born, he must have wondered if God was right and whether he was up for the challenge of truly enlightening us.

Challenge is a relative and dynamic term. One person's challenge is another's day-to-day existence. Our son [Ethan is within the Autism Spectrum](#). Just uttering those words – Autism Spectrum – used to be a challenge for us. Now, we laugh at the label, as Ethan is so social and happy defying customary views of such a diagnosis. The truth is that the only spectrum we deal with these days is the spectrum of goals we have been blessed to look forward to accomplishing.



Jill, Ethan and Eric Epstein

When Ethan Became a Bar Mitzvah

We used to wonder if Ethan would ever speak, and now we have to hold him back from pushing Rabbi Paul aside at the bimah. Congregation Or Ami has become such an important place for Ethan for many reasons. When our first son, Andrew, became Bar Mitzvah, we were so worried that Ethan might distract from the services that he was sequestered to the sound-proof kids' room. Ethan would have none of that, as he grabbed a prayer book and took part in the services on the bimah with a quiet calm we had not seen previously.

Seven years later, Ethan was leading services at his own Bar Mitzvah service with that quiet calm we had become accustomed to. Although Rabbi Paul, Cantor Doug and Diane Townsend were prepared to modify the service as needed, Ethan would have none of that and participated as fully as another Or Ami student. Gazing out to a crowd of friends and family, Ethan unrehearsed exclaimed, "This is my moment!"

Of course, tackling Ethan's special needs is a team sport. That "moment" didn't happen without a team of teachers, educational therapists, speech therapists, and behavioral therapists to challenge his short-comings head-on and who stood proudly with Ethan for a very special Aliyah. These challenges merely amplify his accomplishments.

Former Or Ami President Michael Kaplan swears that Ethan will be President of Congregation Or Ami someday. Such a statement seems as challenging as his Bar Mitzvah service was seven years ago. Why not set this as his next goal? We have learned that you hit what you aim for, and if you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time. Isn't that a lesson of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer? That life will necessarily throw challenges our way. Our job is to reach out and find ways of finding goodness and blessing nonetheless.

For Ethan, he seems to have a special companion on this unlikely and challenging course of life that draws him to services on many a Friday evening. When Rabbi Paul once asked him in front of the Congregation what draws him to Temple. In a sentence that was simultaneously simple and yet complicated, Ethan answered, “I feel close to God.”

And we have no doubt that God is particularly close to him too.

G'mar Chatimah Tova. May you be sealed for a blessing in the Book of Life.

[Listen to Eric and Jill Epstein's Sermonette \(at 00:33:40\).](#)