

Does anyone here own a pet? I'd like to tell you about my first pet.

When I was 10 years old I got a pet turtle. I was so shocked. Like every kid, I wanted a pet for as long as I could remember. Until that time in my life my family had often moved, so my pet of choice -- a dog -- wasn't an option. With apologies to those named Richard -- my turtle's name was Richard, after my best friend in the 6th grade. Actually, his name was Richard the Turtle (he had a middle name: 'the'). There isn't much that I could do with my turtle. I was never able to teach him to roll over, and it didn't really work out when I tried to take him for a walk. But I have fond memories of watching Richard swim back and forth in his plastic bowl -- a little dish filled with water, and a small dry 'island' in the center complete with a plastic palm tree.

When Richard the Turtle passed about a year later, I have a vivid memory of how I, then 11 years-old, cried, put my little friend in a shoebox, took him out to a field, and buried him.

That was the first funeral I officiated at. Who knows -- maybe that foreshadowed my later becoming a rabbi!

Most of us think our pets say a lot about who we are. Why else would we proudly proclaim our loyalty on T-shirts and in online profile pictures?

What our choice of pet says about our personality, beliefs and lifestyle has been researched through peer-reviewed studies. Additionally, there's quite a bit of information out there from market surveys from the pet industry.

Who owns a dog?

If you have a dog, research shows you're more likely to:

- consider your pet part of the family (compared with other pet owners)
- not have a college degree (compared with people who don't own dogs)
- be extroverted, agreeable and conscientious (compared with cat owners)
- proportionally more than in other states, live in Arkansas, New Mexico, Kentucky, West Virginia, orMissouri!

Anyone have a cat?

One cat owner said, "I started life as a dog person. Then later in life a cat corrected my error."

If you have a cat, you're more likely to:

- be divorced, widowed or separated (compared with other pet owners)
- live in an apartment (compared with other pet owners)
- be college educated (compared with people who don't own cats)
- be open to new experiences (compared with dog owners)

Bird? You're more likely to be unemployed, and describe yourself as polite and caring.

Horse? Be nonaggressive and easygoing -- if you're a female. If you're a male horse owner, you tend to be aggressive and dominant. Whoa, cowboy!

Rabbit owners?

The most introverted and neurotic of all pet owners, according to one study.

And if you own a turtle, you're more likely to be hardworking, reliable, describe yourself as rational and goal oriented -- and be a future rabbi named 'Smason' (OK ...that last part, I made up).

All of this isn't 'hard, verified science.' But like with our pets, there are other things that describe us....and define us.

One thing that certainly defines us is our actions.

The Talmud states that when a person arrives in the World to Come, we're asked a series of questions in a review of our life. The bad news is: When we die, we have a final exam. The good news is: We're given the questions in advance. The first question we're asked relates to honesty. "Were you an honest, straight-shooter when it came to money, business, and respecting the property and material possessions of others?"

This time of year is graduation season. And in high schools, that means that 'Senior prank season' is upon us -- that glorious time of the school year when graduating seniors say goodbye with one final act by which they can be remembered. Did you see in the news this past week that there were some high school seniors in Maryland who pulled a doozy of a prank? Five students broke into their high school at 3 a.m. and released 72,000 ladybugs!

Where do you even get 72,000 ladybugs? According to the police, one of the students is believed to have bought them on the Internet. You can get everything on the Internet! But why would students release so many ladybugs into a school, you may be asking? To that, I have absolutely no answer whatsoever.

This story doesn't look like it will have a happy ending for the pranksters, as it's being taken VERY seriously. The students have been charged with burglary, property destruction and disruption of school activities. Not quite the legacy or defining moment they hoped for, I'm sure.

Another type of defining moment is how we treat others. Judaism identifies the most important category of mitzvos as *Bain Adam L'Chaveiro* -- mitzvos between ourselves and our fellow. Exceptionally good treatment of others can result in an exceptionally brilliant defining moments.

One beautiful defining moment was created by Ben Moser this past spring.

Ben Moser is a high school senior in Pennsylvania. By all accounts, Ben is a popular, talented guy;

he's good-looking, and a star quarterback on his football team. But it wasn't Ben's exploits on the field that created his defining moment.

When Ben was in fourth grade, he made a promise to friend and classmate Mary Lapkowicz. The promise was simple: When it came time to select a date for high school prom, Ben was going to take Mary. Their teacher, Tracey Spogli, noticed even then how hard Ben worked to include Mary -- who is a child with Down syndrome -- in games and activities. Tracey said,

"He watched over her constantly. If she was looking like she wasn't having fun, he would go over and talk to her. He would pull her in to what ever activity they were doing. He just always watched out for her."

As Ben and Mary grew older, they attended different high schools, but Ben never forgot his promise to Mary. This past spring Ben surprised and delighted Mary by asking her to her prom. Ben and Mary remain firm in their belief that there's nothing particularly noteworthy or extraordinary about their relationship. Ben sees the humanity in Mary (and vice versa), and the two are content to leave it at that.

Mary's brother Tom said,

"A lot of grade-school aged kids may have stayed away from my sister Mary or thought she was weird because she has Down Syndrome. But not Ben. He always looked out for her, always made sure to pick her on his team at recess and even made a promise to her in 4th grade to take her to the prom someday. 7 years later, he made good on that promise and in the process put a smile on Mary's face & restored my faith in humanity."

Following the prom, Ben's mother Linda Moser expressed her great pride and happiness in a Facebook post. "Today was probably the proudest I have ever been of my son in his lifetime to date! He has grown into a man with a big heart, a deep sense of putting others first, and most of all making people feel special and loved."

How would you like to have a young man like that for your brother? How would you like to have a young man like that for your son? How would you like to have as *your* defining moment what Ben Moser did for Mary Lapkowicz?

The story is told about Reb Anshel Rothschild, founder of the renowned Rothschild philanthropic dynasty, who was once asked the size of his wealth. Learned Jew that he was, Reb Anshel responded by quoting a verse from our *Parsha* (Numbers 5:10): "A man's *kadashav* [sacred donations] shall be his, and what a man gives to the Kohen, it shall be his."

Commenting on the redundancy, Reb Anshel said, "The only possessions I know are secure are the ones I have dedicated to charity. Those donations, no one can take from me. Whatever else I own, who knows how secure these assets really are? Therefore, to me, they count for little."

The familiar message here is: You only have what you give. Why? Because when you give, you not only benefit the recipient, but the deep joy you experience is "worth its weight in gold." True riches!

But on a deeper level, the Torah is telling us that what you give defines you. Your possessions become transformed into your essence when you give of them to others. And those things that you give - material and otherwise -- no one can take from you.

At times, we're defined by our potential

Amarah Friedman, whose Bas Mitzva we celebrate today, is a young woman brimming with potential.

Julie told me that Amarah came home from school on Friday with an award in hand called the "Rammie". Apparently the entire 7th grade class had voted on various categories of "*Who was most likely to....*" Amarah won "*Most likely to help an old person across the street.*" How wonderful it is that Amarah was recognized by her classmates for her generosity of spirit. She is truly sensitive to others, kind at heart and the light of her mother and father's life.

But Amarah has so much more than her formidable potential. She's defined not only by her incredible talents and skills, but her actions and accomplishments. Take a deep breath, and listen to some of them!

-- Amarah is a dancer-- ballet, toe, modern, jazz, and did competitive ballroom dancing for a brief time with a partner from 1st - 3rd grade.

-- Amarah loves to read and considers herself a writer. She took 2nd place (runner up) in the St Louis Variety club middle school writing contest last fall. While many of her classmates will be lounging around this summer, Amarah will be taking an advanced 3-week summer writing program.

-- Amarah is a natural performer. She has performed professional opera company, "St Louis winter opera " for La Boheme and Tosca. I have no idea what those are, but I'm impressed! She has loved classical opera since she was two years old.

-- Amarah played piano for many years since she was four, but recently gave it up in middle school. She joined her school tennis team this year for the first time.

-- Amarah enjoys very much coming to shul, and is serious and engaged with her Judaism. She has been studying for a year and a half in advance of her Bas Mitzvah and looks forward to traveling to Israel in order to meet Shiffy, the Bas Mitzvah girl that she is twinning with.

-- Amarah has a delightful sense of humor, in addition to her many interests and activities that are broad and deep.

Is it only that our pets define us? That's not 'turtle-ly true'!

Mazel tov to Amarah, a young woman of great potential AND accomplishments. Thank you Julie and Amarah, for being part of our community. May Amarah, and all of us, continue to be defined by our Torah accomplishments and acts of giving.