

Rabbi Peter S. Knobel
Rosh Hashanah 5768
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A LETTER TO LILY

I have five grandchildren: Leah, Alana, Heather, Stephen and Lily. Lily is the youngest. She just celebrated her second birthday. After the birth of my other grandchildren I wrote each one a letter, which I shared with the congregation as a High Holiday sermon. This morning is Lily's turn. When my father was serving in the army during WWII, he wrote me a letter which has been so important to me. I wish I had done the same for my sons. I recommend to each of you to write a letter to your child or grandchild which can become part of their, and your, lasting heritage.

Dear Lily,

You are my newest and youngest grandchild. I feel so fortunate that you live here where Grandma and I can watch you grow, and we can develop a deep relationship with you. Being a grandparent is special. Grandma Goodie and I love you so much. You join your sisters Leah and Alana, and your cousins Heather and Stephan, in our special circle of love. Twelve years have passed since I wrote the first one of these letters. Much has changed in those years.

Today is Rosh Hashanah 5769, with its powerful call to repentance and renewal. Each year I anticipate this moment with a great deal of anxiety. It is not because I have to stand up and speak to a large group of congregants, but because the process of change and renewal is so incredibly difficult.

Judaism teaches us that we can will ourselves to be different. It is such an optimistic assessment of the human capacity for change. However, I find it very difficult, as I suspect do most of us in the congregation.

The rabbi's teach us, "Repent one day before your death." The commentary explains since we do not know when we will die, we should treat every day as though it were our last day. This summer Grandma and I saw a movie called "Bucket List." It is about two men in a hospital room who learn that they are dying. They make a list of things that they want to do before they die, that is before they "kick the bucket." I am now working on my "Bucket List."

I am now over sixty-five and as so many of us older people can attest, I do not know where the time has gone.

I have had a great life with so many opportunities and experiences. The things that I experienced have been amazing-beyond my wildest dreams. I am grateful for all my blessings. Yet, as I look back and look ahead, I ask, "How could I have made better use of my time? How can I make good use of the time ahead?"

What has stood me in good stead? My faith in God has sustained me throughout the years. I attribute my faith to my Grandmother who lived with us and taught me to recite the *Shema*, and to pray each night for my family. In the intervening years I have studied much about God, and read so much theology, that I know as hard as I try I will never have clear answers to all my questions. But that has not shaken my simple faith that there is God who wants us to be good, and who hears our prayers and supports us in good times and bad.

My personal prayers do not produce miracles, and the world does not change because of my prayers, but I change. I speak to God as I would speak to another person. I often derive clarity and insight from these conversations. I hope that somehow I will be able to help you develop a faith which is similar to mine. I wish that I would have been more successful in helping others develop a strong sense of faith. While I believe in life of the mind, when it comes to faith I believe we over-intellectualize and find excuses for not believing, rather to be believers. In this age of questioning and uncertainty, faith is suspect, especially among liberal Jews. We act as though we are alone in the universe. My father taught me to believe that there is, at the core of the universe, a power that wants us to be good, that wants me to be a *mensch*. I believe God is constantly calling us and waiting for us to respond. God laughs when we laugh and weeps when we weep. God wants us to perfect creation.

God wants us to wipe every tear, cure every disease, take care of the earth and share its bounty, and right every wrong.

The Reform Judaism which I practice is rooted in the quest for social justice. My rabbis, and those rabbis that I most admire, invoked Israel's great prophets and their critique of society. They thundered the message of peace, justice and compassion, marched in the streets, lobbied in Washington and created institutions to perpetuate their work. Their pulpits and their lives were dedicated to transforming the world. Activism was, and is, the byword of the Judaism that I have tried to teach. My little one, while I hope by the time you grow up the world will be a much better place. I fear that most of the problems we face today will remain in one form or another, and you will be called to act to repair the world.

My constant plea from this pulpit is our need as individuals and as a congregation to engage in the great work of *tikkun olam*, which can only happen if we galvanize the resources of both the private and public sectors to use their power and might to do what needs to be done. My politics are an expression of my understanding of Judaism. My hope is that you and your sisters and cousins will take up the mantle of prophetic Judaism.

I continue to believe that serious Torah study is an urgent necessity for Jewish survival. It helps us to thrive as people and it permits us to engage profoundly with the great issues that our society faces. To stand within this ancient tradition of learning, which teaches us to apply our most important values to today's problems, is inspiring and energizing. Lily, by rooting yourself in Torah you are never alone.

You are part of a great chain of tradition which seeks to make God's light shine brightly in the lives of all of humanity. Text and life are in conversation with one another. Principle and expediency are in dialogue. Opinions clash and we must be willing to listen to the views of others and to respond respectfully with counter arguments until a course of action emerges.

I am a child of the generation whose lives were most influenced by the Shoah and the rebirth of Israel. Human evil is real. Good and normal people are capable of great evil. What happened to us from 1939-1945 has now become a threat to all of humankind, the genocides of Rwanda and Darfur being but the most recent examples. "Never again for the Jewish people, Never Again for any people" echoes in my conscience on a daily basis.

My failures, our failures in this realm, give me sleepless nights and fill me with a sense of guilt and foreboding. The silence of good people is a great sin.

From the brink of destruction we sprung back to life. The survival of the Jewish people and of Israel remains a deep and abiding concern. The greatest miracle of human history is the survival of the Jewish people. It is for me proof positive that we have an important function to perform in this world. We must be a light against the darkness of injustice. We must be a beacon of compassion which illuminates the landscape of cruelty. We must be the torch of peace which warms the cold heart of war. The rebirth of Israel is a glorious and unique opportunity to be part of an emerging Jewish society. This year we are celebrating the 60th anniversary of her rebirth as a sovereign state.

I want everyone to love Israel as much as I do. Wandering the streets and exploring the desert, marveling at the modern technologically advanced society and rooting myself in the ancient stories, creates a connection and identity which I want to pass on to you and to all who are listening this morning. I have worked assiduously for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians and I remain optimistic in spite of the many reasons for pessimism. It has been and remains a focus of my national leadership. My hope is that by the time you are old enough to understand, the Israelis and Palestinians will live side by side in peace and harmony creating a new Middle East.

I believe strongly in interfaith, interracial, interethnic and intra-Jewish dialogue. By truly getting to know people from other traditions we can learn to respect differences and find ways to work together for the common good. Our starting point and theirs is that every human being is created in the image of God. Some of my most important and profound experiences have been with people from other traditions. I have met so many extraordinary people who have changed my life and my attitudes. Sometimes the person is a major religious leader and sometimes the person is simply an ordinary member of a different community. Each encounter is an opportunity to new insight and friendship. Each encounter is a spiritual adventure. In a few weeks I will be part of a small Jewish delegation that will meet with Pope Benedict in the Vatican. I must admit that I am excited.

The pace of change seems to be accelerating. Long held beliefs are being constantly challenged and the open society presents unprecedented opportunities. I have had to change my mind many times.

These changes are difficult and sometimes quite painful, but they come after much study and consultation with others. I believe in dialogue and conversation. These are values I want to pass on to you and to encourage in our congregation. *A machlokhet leshem shamayim*, a controversy for the sake of heaven, is one about crucial issues between thoughtful and caring individuals about a matter of great urgency. Such controversies are the Jewish way. To argue about matters of principle and maintain friendship, never allowing arguments to become *ad hominem*, is something I want you to learn and practice.

One of my central concerns is to maintain a vibrant and vital Jewish identity in an open society. I want you to be a proud and active Jew and to raise Jewish children. This is, and has been, a primary goal of my life and my rabbinate.

I am now in a personal struggle asking how best to accomplish this. Will strategies and decisions of the past serve the Jewish people well in the future? What is the best way to reach out and draw people in? I do not believe that one should be bound by a position just because it is long held. Every position should be open to critical examination, and if it proves to be wrong should be open to revision. Equally important, Lily, one must have the courage of one's convictions. I respect people who change because they have discovered that what they once believed to be true is no longer true because of new information or new circumstances. However, I do not respect people who merely succumb to pressure. One of my great fears is that I do not always practice what I preach. I know there have been times when I should have shown greater courage and when I should have taken greater risks. I know that there have been times when my rhetoric has been greater than my deeds.

I have tried to find ways to keep myself grounded. There is a Chasidic tale about a *chasid* who kept in his pocket two slips of paper. One which said, "For me the world was created," and the other said, "I am but dust and ashes." Laura Gross, a marvelous fiber artist, created a pair of scrolls with these two quotations which I carry in my pocket to remind me that I can do important work, but that I should never let it go to my head. I want you to have a great self-image believing that you can accomplish

anything you set your mind to, and at the same time remember that this does not make you better than anyone else.

On Yom Kippur we will read, "You shall not keep a grudge." This commandment has been so important to me. People waste so much energy being angry with others.

Even when I have not been able to straighten out my relationship with another person and even when I believe that I am the aggrieved party, I forgive the person and try to carry on that relationship as if the problem never occurred. Sometimes this leads to the repair of the relationship and sometimes it does not. I believe that people are basically good and that they do things which are hurtful or offensive either inadvertently or because they cannot help themselves. Grandma says that I am too forgiving, but it is simply hard for me to be angry with another person. When the incident is over it is over, and it is time to move on.

Before I close I want to return to the "Bucket List." I have been giving it much thought, but I must admit that I am not making much progress. It is something I really need to do. There is much I still want to accomplish.

I still want to work for peace in the Middle East and write a book on Jewish Bio-ethics, but what I want most is to share in your life and lives of my other grandchildren and my children and their wives. I want to continue to share my life with your grandmother, the love of my life and my life partner. I want to continue to serve this congregation and the Jewish people.

When you are old enough to read and understand this letter, I hope that its message will have meaning for you. Always remember that I love you and I will always be there in spirit, encouraging you to be the best you can be.

Love,

Poppa Peter