

A LETTER TO MY GRANDAUGHTER LEAH  
ON HER FIRST ROSH HASHANAH

Dear Leah,

Fifty three years ago in 1943 when I was born, your great grandfather, my father Lothar, was away serving in the United States Army, and so he wrote me a letter. Although I was there with your grandmother when your father Seth and your uncle Jeremy were born, I should have followed his example and written them each a letter, but I didn't. Today I want to rectify that error by writing you a letter on this your first Rosh Hashanah. I hope that others will follow this example and do the same for their children and grandchildren because these family documents become more meaningful with the passage of time.

Grandma and I are thrilled about your birth and we love you very much. You are a very fortunate child because you have wonderful loving parents. It is such a pleasure to watch them with you. We feel so fortunate that you live near us so that we can see how you grow and change. We pray that your life will always be filled with health, blessings and with love.

Leah, Today I am going share with you some thoughts about being Jewish, and offer you eleven texts to live by. (The top ten plus one for inflation.)

Leah, Your story does not begin with your birth, or even the birth of your parents, nor even the birth of your grandparents. Your story begins with Abraham and Sarah. It is their discovery of God and their journey to create a new way of thinking which is the origin of your story. Your story spans a continuous history of four thousand years. Your family were slaves in Egypt, kings in Israel, prophets in Babylonia, philosophers and prime ministers in Spain, victims of pogroms, Zionists, revolutionaries in Eastern Europe, scientists, political and cultural leaders in Germany, victims of Nazi genocide, and teachers, trade unionists, doctors and lawyers in the United States; founders and citizens of the State of Israel. Your story is written in the Tanach and Talmud; it is prayed in the Siddur and Mahzor; music and art celebrate your heritage; Jewish thought and science explain the universe; midrash and mysticism draw you close to God; law and ethics teach you righteous conduct. Your family has a proud history. There is much we that know about the past, but because the texts and stories were written and preserved by the men of your family and, therefore, so many of the tales and achievements of the women of your family have disappeared. They are not recorded anywhere. Now is an exciting time because the women of this age are finding and creating Jewish her-story. (Her-story in contrast to his-story) I know that you will write your own chapters.

Why does the story matter? On the simplest level, because it is your story it belongs to you and will tell you who you are. More importantly, however, your story--our story--is about our continuous relationship with God. You might think of it as an conversation between you and some one who never tires of listening. Leah, to be a Jew means to speak with, to wrestle with, to

embrace and to be embraced by God. (Yes, Grandpa talks a lot about God. As you grow up you will discover that many people think differently than I. Many find God talk very problematic. You will have your own way of understanding, but whatever way you come to understand God, I hope that it will be important to you.) Your conversation is not a solitary one. It is part of a much larger dialogue which includes all the other Jews in the world. It is a collective I—Thou relationship with the Eternal One of the Universe. This is a difficult conversation. The lines of communication are not always clear. I find that sometimes it is a very frustrating encounter. I suspect that it is frustrating for God, as well. But our very existence as a people is tied up with God. At Mt. Sinai we promised to faithfully hearken. We said, “Naaseh VeNishma.”

Fundamentally, Judaism has meaning only when it is understood as service to God. Our primary question is, What does God want me to do? What does God want us to do? There is no more basic, nor a more important question. It is a difficult question to answer. A long time ago, as described in this morning's Torah portion, Father Abraham thought that God wanted him to sacrifice his son Isaac, and without even discussing it with Mother Sarah, he set out to do it. It turned out to be a test of loyalty, -so some people say. Others say, Abraham misunderstood his role, God wanted him to refuse even to make the journey. Abraham was supposed to say, “God does not want human sacrifice.” In a strange and difficult way both interpretations are right. Sometimes God wants great sacrifice from us. A sacrifice that may even hurt the ones we love the most. Other times, God demands that we reject what seems to be the normal expected path of our society and take a risk that something is commanded of us when it may appear not to be. It is important to look for the ram in the thicket, so we'll know that the expected action is wrong. The only way we discover what God wants from us is to read and re-read the stories with the eyes of our time. Listening carefully to what our heart tells our head. I know of no other possibility. We Jews are readers of text and tellers of stories.

I now want to return to the question, What does God want us to do? Some Jews, they call themselves Orthodox, believe the answer is very clear. They abide by a complex code of deeds which are prescribed and interpreted by the rabbis. I do not fault them, but many of their answers are not my answers. But they clearly and importantly understand that being Jewish involves discipline and daily re-enforcement. They set an example for us by swimming against the cultural tide. We, in the liberal community, have rejected much in the code. Even the idea of code we find difficult. Our openness is our strength and our weakness. Sometimes our openness becomes a lack of caring, an excuse to do little or nothing. Sometimes our openness brings a fresh response to old dilemmas or a brilliant new response to a changing situation. Freedom is a great blessing, but only when it is matched with duty and responsibility.

I know that I have been speaking a lot about God but Judaism is concerned more about doing than believing. The text of what we believe is what we do. Judaism is repairing the world specifically because we are Jews. It means being ever aware of the fact that we have obligations to the Jewish people and that at the same time we have obligations to all humankind. We are the descendants of Adam and Eve as well as Abraham and Sarah.

In some ways it is easy for me to tell you how to be Jewish. Study Torah and observe mitzvot. Do justice because that is what God requires of you and care for the oppressed because you remember that you were a slave in Egypt. Take care of the planet because God made you a caretaker of God's world. Count the days of your life according to the Jewish calendar because it is a reminder that you are a Jew, and because our sacred days will teach you the values by which to live. Recite the Shema in the morning and at night. Belong to a synagogue. Attend it regularly. Give tzedakah. Visit Israel and spend a year of college studying at an Israeli university. Marry someone who loves us, someone who is Jewish and have Jewish children. When written that way it sounds so simple. I know it is far more complex than that. So let me teach you eleven texts which over the years have served me as guides to being Jewish and serving God. I know that this will seem overwhelming. I also know that as you mature, you will have to find your own texts.

**1. Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed** (Genesis 32:9)

Leah, The name of our people Israel means God wrestler. Wrestling implies struggle but it implies intimacy, as well. Enemies wrestle and lovers wrestle. In wrestling we grow and we change. Wrestling can be exhausting and dangerous, but little that is worthwhile is achieved without significant effort. Jacob/Israel may be our father but we are also the children of Leah and her sister Rachel and Bilhah and Zilpah, their maidservants. We have to wrestle with their stories, as well. The wrestling of our mothers and fathers-- women and men together and separately, created the Jewish people. Our struggle is both with God and other human beings and most importantly, it is with ourselves. In this wrestling match we can become the person we want to be. We can make a difference in the world.

**2. Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know it** (Genesis 28:16)

God is full of surprises. God appears in our lives often when we least expect it. We need to be open to God's presence. A great chasidic rabbi said, God is found wherever we allow God to enter. God may be found in the awaking of a flower, in the awesome majesty of a mighty mountain or in the gleaming rays of the dawn of a new day. God may be found in a mother's look of pride, or in the sweet passion of a lover's kiss. God is present in test tubes and computer chips. God is found in the helping hand when another really cares, like when your dad helps a kid extricate himself from a gang, and when your mom teaches a child whose parents are illiterate to read. Wiping tears, binding wounds, making smiles, righting wrongs, these are all places to meet God. But more importantly, I hope in your lifetime that you experience a moment of real clarity which will set you on a path which will give meaning and direction to your life. I had such a moment when I was called to be a rabbi. I wish the same kind of experience for you.

**3. All that the Eternal has spoken we will faithfully do! Naaseh VeNishma** (Exodus 24:7)

This one is a real challenge, especially today when people think of themselves as individuals. We are part of a group—the Jewish people . We are all bound by a promise not of our own making. Each of us in every generation stands at Sinai and renews the covenant with our actions. Our task is to translate this promise into a clear set of regular commitments. We have a collective responsibility because we belong to a community, and the welfare of that community and the mission of the Jewish people must be a priority for us. We must pursue the common good. Part of this means doing things that make us different from others. Part of this means that we have to balance our personal interests against those of the group. Our primary pronoun is “we” not “I”. Keeping the Jewish people alive and healthy is one of our most important responsibilities.

**4. And God created humankind in the divine image, in the image of God. God created humankind; male and female God created them. God blessed them (Genesis 1:27)**

*Betzelem elohim*, in the image of God, this is one of my favorite phrases. It is the starting point of Jewish ethics. Women and men are both created in the image of God. Every human being is equal in God’s sight. Each person is unique and precious and must be treated that way. We all have common ancestors, Adam and Eve. Every person’s substance is drawn from the dust of the four corners of the earth and is given life by the breath of God. The worth of a person is measured in the rabbinic statement that if you save a single human life, it is the equivalent of saving the entire world. When we look at people who are different from us, we must see that they are created in the image of God.

This leads directly to #5

**5. When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong the stranger. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the ETERNAL am your God (Leviticus 19:33)**

A society is judged by the way it treats its weakest members--the immigrant, the poor, the very young, the elderly, the ill, any minority . The world can be a cruel place for people who have few rights and no one to protect them. Now in America we Jews live in freedom. We are well educated and secure. Life at the moment is filled with blessings. It is precisely at this moment that we must remember that we were slaves in Egypt. Only if we can still experience the bitter sting of the taskmasters lash, we will be able to empathize with the stranger and treat him/her with dignity, caring and compassion. For me, this is one of the most important lessons for us to remember. As long as there is one person on earth who is suffering oppression, our slavery has not ended. We must view ourselves as being in Egypt with him/her. Only when they are redeemed will be redeemed. The maror is more important than charoset; the bitter herb must always dominate the apples and wine until there is not a single person on earth who feels the pain of degradation brought about by prejudice, intolerance, or the desire for domination.

**6. You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:1)**

We strive to go beyond goodness to holiness. In our lives we attempt to imitate God and live according to principles and practices that uniquely set us apart as Jews. Holiness is a striving to connect everything we do with God--with a higher purpose. Holiness means that what we do is more than convention; it is not just a human invention that its ultimate source is God. It is mitzvah. Lighting candles on Friday night brings Shabbat into our lives; the kidush separates the Shabbat from the rest of the week, connecting us to creation and the Exodus from Egypt, and the rejection of normal weekday activities put us in tune with life's meaning and our role in the cosmos. Havdalah returns us to the ordinary with a sense that the ordinary can be transformed into extraordinary. Every moment becomes an opportunity to elevate even the most mundane activities into the realization that our very existence is a miracle, and that life has within it the possibility of sanctification—connecting ourselves with the experience that life is more than a chance encounter with randomness. Life has purpose and direction in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary. The world is not ultimately empty, because at the heart of the universe is a force which requires goodness and love. We can discover this love by living our lives in response to the story and practices of the Jewish people.

7. **My beloved is mine And I am his.** (Songs of Songs 2 :16)

The Song of Songs is a beautiful love poem. It is my favorite book of the Bible. It is honest about the emotional and sensual side of love. It is a joyous celebration of two people who are deeply in love. The male and female characters are equal partners. There is a real mutuality between them. They appreciate each others beauty, and they teach us that through love we see the uniqueness of another person in a way that only a lover can experience and appreciate. Although you are only six months old, my fondest wish for you is to find a life partner with whom you can truly share all that life has to offer. The sweetness is far sweeter and the bitterness is quickly dissipated. Life's meaning is significantly enhanced when you have a soul-mate who makes you more you than you would have been if you had not found your other half. Faithfully love is the greatest gift in life.

8. This next text is a little difficult because it depends upon a pun, a word play in Hebrew. There was a very wise woman her name was Beruria. She is one of the very few women Torah scholars who are quoted in Talmud. Her husband was R. Meir who himself had the reputation of being one of our greatest sages. Therefore, it is significant that in this story she teaches him about the concept of proper prayer and a proper attitude toward the people who are plaguing him.

**There were once some highwaymen in the neighborhood of R. Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. R. Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife Beruria, said to him: "What makes you think that such a prayer is permitted?" He said, "In Psalm 104 :35, it says, `let sinners cease'". In order to understand what follows, you need to know that Hebrew is written without vowels. In the Psalm we find a word made up of the letters chet tet aleph yod mem from the root chet tet aleph to sin. Now let's continue**

**Beruria said, "Meir, you have misread the word. You thought it said, 'hot'im sinners, but it in fact says says hattaim sins.'" Meir replied, "Beruria, look at the end of the verse- it says: 'and let the wicked men be no more'. It must mean that sinners will cease and therefore it is proper for me to pray that they die." Beruria said, "No Meir, the correct interpretation is 'When sins cease, there will be no more wicked men!' Therefore, it is better that you to pray that they repent, and then there will be no more wicked men." He did pray for them, and they repented.** Based on Berachot 10a

Beruria teaches us that we must work to eliminate the evil behavior, not the evil doer. It means we believe that people can change and that we have a responsibility to help them change. We must remove the conditions that cause people to act in violent and destructive ways. We are called upon to alter the social and economic conditions that deprive people of hope and a sense of belonging to society that will make them participating members of the community. Creating the possibilities and the opportunities for change are most important. A just society must also be a compassionate one. Our system of justice must rehabilitate criminals into useful citizens, not merely punish them and return them to the streets more violent and disillusioned than when they entered. Sadly our system of justice must also protect us from the people who cannot be changed. Leah, Beruria was right, but Meir also had a point. Some things are not as simple as they appear at first glance.

**9. The world stands upon three things, upon Torah, upon prayer and deeds of loving kindness.** (M. Avot: 1:18)

This is a complete program of Jewish living. If any one of these elements is missing our Judaism is in danger of collapsing. To be a Jew one must know Torah, one must recite the texts of the siddur, the prayer book, regularly to reinforce our commitment to Jewish values, and then one must go out into the world and do good. I believe that Jews and Judaism potentially have a unique role in preserving the world. Knowledge, combined with prayerful reflection and acts of random and especially planned kindness and caring, can make a significant difference.

**10. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation; They shall never again know war.**  
(Isaiah 2:4)

The elimination of war and the weapons of war will enable us to create a world in which all will be able to live up to their full human potential. War threatens creation itself. Too much of the world's resources are wasted on weapons. Therefore, people are not able to have the basic necessities of life, and we are not able to devote the time, energy and resources to correcting the flaws in the universe so that social and physical ills will be cured. I believe the swords can become plowshares and spears, pruning hooks. Tanks and missiles can be houses, hospitals, and schools.

11. **Johanan said: ...One day [Honi] was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, “How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?” The man replied: “Seventy years.” He then asked him: “Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?” The man replied: “I found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted these for me so I too plant these for my children [and grandchildren].” based on Taanit 23a**

We are always building for those who come after us. We may never see the fruit of our labor, but we have a responsibility to leave this world a little better than we found it.

I know Leah that you are worried that this letter will never end. I look forward to the days and years ahead when you can read this letter for yourself and understand it. I hope we will be able to study Torah together. May God grant your parents and all of your grandparents and all those who love you the privilege of watching you grow to adulthood, standing with you under the chupa, and holding your children in our arms. Now I wish to thank God for the gift of life and the ability to celebrate this first Rosh Hashanah with you. I begin with the traditional blessing and conclude with a new version of the blessing written by Marcia Falk, who in beautifully inclusive language, includes the experience of women as well as men.

*Baruch ata adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh* Blessed are you Eternal Our God Ruler of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and permitted us to celebrate this wondrous moment. *Be Peh malei shirah uvilshon shofaat rina nevarech et ein hachayim ve co nitbarech.* Our mouths are filled with song, our tongues overflowing with joy. We bless the source of life and so we are blessed. *Nevareich et mayan chayeinu shehechaynu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh.* Let us bless the flow of life that revives us, sustains us and brings us to this time.

Love and kisses,

Grandpa