

A LETTER TO ALANA

By

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Dear Alana,

When I was born my father your great grandfather was in the army and he wrote me a letter, which my mother saved for me. A short time after your sister Leah was born I wrote her a long letter, which I hope will be important to her when she grows up. You are the newest precious love in our family. Seeing you fills my heart with joy and my prayer is that I will have the privilege of watching you grow to adulthood. I know that your parents have hopes and dreams for you and they will share them with you. You have a wonderful older sister Leah. You were born on my mother's birthday. Your great grandmother Lotta was a wonderful person. For me the date of your birth creates a unique sense of continuity. Your father Seth had a very close relationship with her. She loved him unconditionally and they shared a special bond. This morning I wish to share with you some thoughts. I know this will not make much sense to for a long time.

Today's Torah portion shakes me up. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his miracle child. What a terrible story! It is scary. What kind of a God tests a person with such a test? What kind of a father says yes with out the hint of protest? What kind of husband does even tell his wife so that she can protest the impending loss of her son or at least say goodbye. A relationship with God and with our tradition is not easy. Most of prefer a different approach, which smooths out the rough edges. The story is a struggle about the meaning of family. At the request of his wife Sarah, Abraham drives out his first born Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar. Through God's intervention neither Ishmael nor Hagar die but they came close. The book of Genesis believes in a quid pro quo form of justice. Abraham and Sarah must suffer the potential loss of their son so that they can full appreciate the experience of Hagar and Ishmael. You cannot know another's pain until you have walk in that person's shoes. The experience of Ishmael's near death and Isaac's near death both at the hands of their father and with the assent of God allow the two brothers to reconcile and comfort each other when Abraham dies. Together they buried their father Abraham in the cave of Machpela. It is a hard lesson for a little girl. It is a hard lesson for all of us. I treasure the story and hearing it Rosh Hashanah. I wish we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael with it as well. In the Conservative and Orthodox synagogue it is read on the first and the bind of Isaac is read on the second day. There is so much to be learned from the stories but I will save that for another time when I can tell you or read to you the story and you can ask questions and we can try to understand it together. But suffice it to say, it is hard to be a child and it is hard to be brother or a sister and it is hard to be a parent. These will be the most important relationships in your life. Natural tensions and natural rivalries must be tempered with loving concern. Family is precious. It is a complex and changing institution and it requires

constant maintenance. We are fortunate that we live close together but today families are spread across the globe and this means even greater challenges.

Grandma Goodie and I are thrilled to watch how your parents have taken to parenting two children. They are gentle loving and patient. Watching them with you big sister Leah has a joy to behold. But they are marvelous now in sharing their love and teaching Leah to share them and to add you to her love circle. I know the two of you will inevitably have arguments and there will be sibling rivalry that in the end our prayer is that you will be best friends. *Ledor vador* from generation to generation new life fills us with hope about the future.

The pace of change has seemed to accelerate in recent years. I know every generation says the same thing. The material and technological progress which allows us to do and experience things never thought possible even a generation ago is mind boggling. Commercial jet transportation that allows me breakfast in Chicago, lunch in New York and dinner in Chicago still fills me with wonder. I still am amazed every time the airplane lifts off the runway and rise miles into the heavens. I marvel at the fax, the cell phone, the Internet and the computer upon which this *devar Torah* was composed. I doubt that they will be marvels for you. You will take them for granted like I take indoor plumbing and electric lights for granted. The world is smaller and smaller and communication measured in nanoseconds. Our ability to know what has happened instantly and to be present at events far away from where we live is beyond belief. But has it improved our ability to know and to relate to each other? We are present at the horrors of hate crimes and wars and natural disasters. Is it real life or just theater?

My response to the changing world is anchored by a deep commitment to Judaism and faith in God. *Al sheloshah devarim ha olam omed al ha Torah ve al haavodah ve al gemilut chasidim* "The world stands on three things on Torah, worship and deeds of living kindness." In this one I find a summary what it means to be a Jew and live a Jewish life. A Jew must be learned. Our tradition teaches the ignorant cannot be pious. A relationship with God and the Jewish people is found in shared moments of worship, the celebration of holidays and life cycle moments and in the private devotions of our hearts. God Torah and Israel are one. Learning and observance must be translated into genuine caring for others. One good deed may be enough to get the Messiah to reveal himself.

In spite of constantly falling short of the ideal, I am optimistic about the possibility of improving the world. Jewish ideals are a constant challenge. They set a high standard for conduct. Altruism is a mitzvah which is governed by clear minimal requirements. Loving one's neighbor is not an abstract emotion but a set of obligations. Tzedakah is commandment to provide dignity to those whose lives have been wounded by economic ills, by societal injustice, physical or mental limitations. Judaism teaches us that real owner of wealth is God and faithful stewardship is what God demands. The halacha Jewish law tells how to care them out and aggadah story tells about people did even more than is required. Judaism is a realistic tradition that recognizes we are often selfish and self-absorb that we are sometimes lazy or callous. It constantly gives opportunities to re-think our lives and re-create ourselves. In fact it mandates at

least minimally every year that we enter into a whole season of personal and communal reflection. It is the hardest thing to do to look honestly at yourself and to make changes. One of the quotations which rabbis repeat most often is repent on day before you death. Since we do not know when we will die, each new day is the time for change. Most of us will not change radically, but if we can add each year at least one new mitzvah the accumulated personal, family and communal change will be significant.

As you get older you will tire of hearing me say that for me the most important verse in the Torah is Genesis 1:27

<sup>27</sup>And God created Adam in God's image. In the image of God, God created Adam; male and female God created them.<sup>1</sup> Human beings are unique among God's creation. The differences we perceive in skin color, physical and mental characteristics are superficial from an ethical perspective. Each person is worth a world. Our unique nature makes us partners with God in completing and perfecting creation. We are responsible for the planet, for the way we treat the environment, how we treat other animals, how we share the world's resources and how we treat each other. It is an awesome role but a great privilege. Our understanding of this role is constantly being challenged by new knowledge and by changing circumstances.

This verse makes clear that women and men share equally in the divine image. In a matter of decades, Judaism has been responding differently than it had for thousands of years. First there were small changes. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah took their place in the Amidah along side Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the founders of our people. Then Miriam's role as prophet and leader has begun a process to recover Torah Miriam (Miriam's Torah) to stand next to Torat Moshe (Moses' Torah). Governance, ritual, ethical decision making are being transformed because of the new role women are playing in Judaism and in society. You are growing up in a world where women's voices and experience will transform almost every discipline and every vocation. The possibilities will be greater for you than for your mother and your grandmothers. I am excited by the fact that you will not be limited by your gender.

One of things I have learned is that one may never say never. Long held positions have crumbled as I have experienced life and as I have studied our tradition and contemporary thought more completely.

I was a greater expert on many things when I was younger. I knew how to tell parents how to parent before I was one. I told people how to deal with aging and infirm parents before I had to deal with my mother's illness. I assured others I know what they were going through when it turns out that I did not have a hint. The most important prayer in our tradition is Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohaiynu Adonai Echad. It is affirmation of one God is the essence of Judaism but the

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<sup>1</sup>*Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures*, (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society) 1985.

command to listen and pay attention. Speak less and be there more. Especially in painful moments try to comfort with caring touch and a respectful silence. I am sorry. I love you.

As I write this letter, the Israelis and the Palestinians have taken renewed steps toward a comprehensive peace. I am very hopeful. Peace will win out in the long run. Israel is very important to me. While aliyah is the remotest of possibilities, I try to visit minimally once a year. I have become involved in the Zionist movement at time when it is in severe decline. It is so important as Jews that we understand that our faith fate are inexorably bound in a covenant. We as a people have an important role to play in the perfection of humankind. Israel as nation state is a unique opportunity which should be a source of spiritual, intellectual and religious sustenance. But this cannot happen unless the Jews of the world learn from one another and help one another. The exemplary power of flawed but constantly striving nation-state and working with a diaspora striving to transform its own societies has a power that is yet untapped. The soil and the history, the new and the old, the mystery and the vulgarity are magical for me. Unlike a growing number of my Israeli friends for me Jerusalem exudes the ethos of the connection between heaven and earth. I want Israel to remain a Jewish state a home for Jews but one which is open and pluralistic and multi-religious. How can we have it all. Everything is changing in the Jewish world.. We have become more concerned about Jewish life here. Israel important as she is will not replace Judaism. For years it seemed that Auschwitz would overwhelm Sinai but the tragedy which we must never forget is taking as it should a back seat to Torah and Israel and her rebirth will mean more not as the central given of the contemporary Jewish life but an opportunity to experience Torah in a place where we have power. Programs like Birthright Israel which will allow every young Jew to go and experience Israel for him/herself are important and can have profound effects on those young people and the Jewish community as a whole. However, in North America where Judaism must be made to live in significant new ways. Jewish institutions especially Federations and Synagogues will have work together to provide access and personal and material to revitalize the religious life of the community. Some federations have begun to fund in significant ways synagogue programs investing in youth workers and family educator and creating impressive adult education programs. Religious school are in need of restructuring.

Recently there has been an upsurge in hate crimes. In the neighborhood where Grandma and I live and where your father and your uncle Jeremy grew up an African American man by the name of Rick Byrdsong was murdered, Orthodox Jews in Rogers Park and Korean student in Indiana were the victims of the same gunman, three synagogues in Sacramento California were torched and JCC nursery school was attacked. I tell you this not to frighten you but to warn you that we human beings can be dangerous to one another. Good people are often silent in the face of hate as long as it is not directed against them. In our silence we hope to protect ourselves by being anonymous. In our silence, we often allow our peers to perpetuate stereotypes. Ethnic and misogynistic humor which remains unchallenged is a cultural time bomb waiting to explode. When we laugh at rather than with another we diminish their dignity. Its is so easy to slip from seemingly harmless rhetoric into dehumanizing language which permits the

most awful atrocities. The newspapers and the electronic media are filled with violent crimes many motivated by hate.

I think of you Great grandfather Lothar who left a very comfortable life in Germany and immigrated to the United States because of rising anti-Semitism. His perspicacity saved his life. I often wonder what are the signs that a place is unsafe and it is time to move. I do not mean to depress you. I am optimistic about America but I still worry. The random nature of the violence and the virulence of the hatred make it hard to defend against. On the other hand the official policy of our government and of so many ordinary people is that anti-Semitism and racism are wrong. These horrible incidents are both a wake up call to good people that we cannot take each other for granted. We are building new coalitions and reviving old one. May be we can pick up where left off after the initial successes of the civil right movements. I still believe in the concept of a messianic age. I have never given up on the Reform Judaism of my youth that promised that we could really make a difference. I hope you will come to share my vision and we will walk together toward a better world.

We are becoming more fully aware of the diversity in our world. Protestant Catholic and Jew does not even begin to describe the religious landscape. Black and white together now needs to be amended to include Asians, Hispanics, native Americans and the white ethnics. Class and gender sexual orientation all need to be factored into the equation.

When the least of us suffers injustice all of us are vulnerable. This is a long held and precious belief. It is has been a guide post in helping me re-examine my attitudes on many things. For a long time as many people of my generation older I was homophobic. I must admit it was not until about a decade ago when I served on the CCAR Ad Hoc Committed on Homosexuality in the rabbinate and became the principal author of the final document did I confront the issue. Now I count among some of my closest colleagues gay and lesbian rabbis. My work recently with the CCAR Ad hoc Committee on Human Sexuality led me to write a long halachic examination of Reform Judaism's understanding of marriage and of gay and lesbian relationships has convinced me that we must ritualize and sanctify those relationship which are intended to be permanent covenantal relationships. We cannot hope to strength heterosexual marriage and describe a Jewish sexual morality without recognizing that gay and lesbian relationships have the same potential for kedusha and the same possibilities for abomination as heterosexual relationships. This position remains controversial and I know that since I am sharing this letter publically with our congregation that some people will be offended. But the ethics of intimate relationships is extremely important. I have recently written an article which condemns adultery as part of a book by the colleagues on the Ten Commandments. To condemn adultery seems such an obvious thing but common wisdom in the rabbinate suggests that it is a subject better left unexplored.

There was a time when the Ten Commandments appeared in the daily worship service but they were removed because early Christians challenged Judaism by claiming that the Ten Commandments were only binding obligations of Judaism. While the Ten Commandments are

by no means the whole of Judaism, the observance of all of them would be a fine start. If Alana you concentrate on all ten of them you would be a good Jew and a wonderful human being.

While your father and Uncle Jeremy were growing up I did not make the time and I did not have confidence to teach them some things that I think and thought, were very important. I know you parents will teach you to say the Shema nightly as your sister Leah does and as I do thanks to my grandmother. You will learn the basic blessing and be surrounded by loved one at the holidays. But I hope that I will be able to teach you and your sister and your soon to be cousin to read the texts of our people. I hope you will come to love them the way I do and that they will become your story and your guides in a deep and fulfilling way.

I grew up in a world which was changing but from the time I was a little child until I was a rabbi for almost seven years I prayer from the same prayer book. It provide a stability and a continuity. I absorbed the words and I could recite much of it by heart. Its vocabulary still punctuates much of my speech. Now we are in the midst of a flurry of prayer book writing. A new siddur for the Reform movement will hopefully be in use by the time you turn five. I hope it formula will resonate for you the way the old did for me. But you will be a child of the internet and of the computer. Will you want an interactive prayer book? Will you want it customized to you tasks? Will you attend a virtual synagogue? I have a dream some would say nightmare of each morning your arising before school login on to a virtual minyan and when ten of you were present the service would begin. Geography will not be a limiting factor in your life. As techniques get better and cheap you will be in relationship instantly and almost intimately with people around the globe. Will this virtual world propel us to create new more intimate in the same place communities? Distance learning is just beginning to take off. You will be able to learn from the best. But is there any true substitute for being there? Cloning, artificial insemination and other reproductive technologies will mean that conception and reproduction will be possible for those for it was difficult or impossible. Will technology override nature? Will the factory replace the womb? I know these seem like strange ruminations from a grandfather who are only just beginning to recognize as a presence and even when you first will be able to read the letter it will be strange and incomprehensible. But I am a believer in love and intimacy and soulful physicality. Rabbi Harold Schulweis tells the following story. Why is the abbreviation for the name of Adonai two parallel Yuds? When one Yud, when one Jew is close to another Jew, when one give another his or her hand in loving support God's presence is with both of the them. The two Yuds must stand side by side for it to designate the name of Adonai. One cannot be above the other. When one is above the name Adonai is broken." There is no substitute for human contact. This story applies in many situations.

The pace of change is rapid. It is impossible to predict what the world will be like in five years much less twenty years. I am concerned about the kind of world that we adults bequeath to you. I am painfully aware how little I have actually done. When I am about to despair I am reminded of the Mishnah which Cantor Klepper has made into a wonderful song. *Lo alecha hamelacha ligmor ve lo ata ben horin libatel mimena* Rabbi Tarfon used to say it is not [incumbent] upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to refrain from it. (Avot 2:16)

I have one final text for you. It is from the Mishnah but it appears in the daily morning service. These are the obligations without measure: their fruit we eat now their essence remains for us in the life to come: *kibud av ve aim* to honor father and mother; *gemilut chasadim* to perform acts of love and kindness *hashkamat beit ha midrash shacharit vearvit*. *Hachnasat orchim* to attend the house of study daily to welcome the stranger; *bikkur cholim* to visit the sick; *hachnasat kalla* to rejoice with bride and groom; *levayat ha meitto* console the bereaved; *iyun tefillah* to prayer with sincerity; *havaat shalom bein adam lechaveiro* to make peace when there is strife. Talmud Torah *keneged kulam* But the study of Torah is equal to them all (because it leads to them all. I hope that you will learn the Hebrew as well for it says much more than the English.

The metaphor for this season is the Book of Life. Your book is still on its first page. It is made of incomprehensible signs and marking. But there are also pictures of tears and smiles because God has recently adopted the digital camera as the preferred recording device for the first year. I pray that your book will be long and filled with stories of love and fulfillment.