

DEAR HEATHER

By

Peter S. Knobel

"Birth is a beginning, death is a destination and life is a journey." Alvin Fein's words provide us with a wonderful metaphor for thinking about life. Each of us makes this journey stage by stage. As parents and grandparents, we desire to provide a road map which will help our children and grandchildren find the correct path to a successful and fulfilling life. In truth this is an impossible task because no two people can take exactly the same journey. If we cannot provide a map, perhaps we can provide a travelogue, which offers some guidance. A couple of years ago I found among my father's papers such a document. It revealed a great deal about him and his world that I had not known. Rarely do families consciously prepare and preserve such documents for posterity. Finding a first hand account of a parent or grandparent's journey is often a matter of serendipity, but it is like finding a buried treasure. Such a chronicle is far more precious than any material legacy.

While I failed to provide my sons with such a chronicle, I have tried to remedy the situation by writing a letter—an ethical will, spiritual travelogue the musing of a grandfather, who is also a rabbi, to each of my granddaughters. In March of 2000, our children Alyssa and Jeremy had their first child, our third granddaughter, Heather Morgan Knobel. This morning I will share my letter to Heather with you and with her parents and her grandparents and her great grandmother and her aunts and uncle.

Dear Heather,

I had the privilege of meeting you when you were only minutes old. Your grandmother Elaine and your Grandmother Donna and Your Grandfather Steven and I stood outside the birthing suite experiencing every moment of your mother's travail and waiting to hear you cry. You made such a sweet sound. You gave voice to your entry into the world. Our first glimpse of you was through a slightly open door as your father marveled at his daughter. Your birth was a *nes*, a miracle. At the realization that you were whole and healthy, our *shehecheyanu* was a profound moment of joy and thanksgiving, as well as, relief. The tension of birth is the anticipation of happiness and the anxiety of the unexpected. You are truly blessed because you have been born into a loving family at a time of great prosperity and in a world, which promises unlimited possibilities. I am optimistic about your future. Family is at the center **of all our Jewish values**. It is the place where we learn what it means to be a person and what it means to be a Jew. As the stories about the birth of Isaac and Ishmael, as well as, the binding of Isaac, which are the Torah portions for Rosh Hashanah, illustrate family, presents its difficulties, as well as, it's blessings. The primacy of family is basic to my understanding of what Judaism teaches. The complexity of families requires extreme efforts to draw people together, to forgive each other and to create a supportive, nurturing and loving environment. The Genesis narratives speak about inevitable conflicts but also describe power instances of support, reconciliation and blessing. Making these stories your own will help to make the wisdom of Torah integral to your life. I am

confident that your family will do everything possible to provide you with blessings and opportunities to bless each other.

This leads me to a story about an unusual woman. Your grandmother Elaine has a friend. Her name is Susie Canziani. They were roommates at the National College of Education. Suzie is a devout Catholic with a profound sense of God's presence. Her life has not been easy but her attitude is truly inspiring. She lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, yes there is an Oshkosh, Great! The annual Oshkosh air show is very famous and it draws people from around the world.

Suzie and her husband Mario own some small apartments. The day before the air show, as she was preparing empty apartments to be shown to potential renters, she found in the building what she thought was a prospective tenant. He was a foreigner and extremely tired from a long journey. Communication was quite limited because of his strong accent. After trying to convince him of the virtues of the vacant apartment, she learned that all he really wanted was to rent a room for the air show. There were no rooms to be found from Milwaukee to Appleton. He was so tired that she let him take a nap in the hall while she completed her work. After further conversation, she learned that he was an Israeli pilot; he had flown to Chicago and driven directly to Oshkosh stopping along the way several times to sleep.

But, all Suzie could see was a stranger with no place to stay. She knew she could not turn him away, so she decided to take him home. Now she had a problem, what would she tell her husband? In her car, with an Israeli pilot following in his rental car, a scene from the New Testament came to her. It was the story of Joseph and Mary having their child in a manger because there was no room at the inn. Now, she knew her husband could not refuse the stranger. (This story reminds me of the many rabbinic stories about Elijah or the Messiah who are disguised as strangers and only one act of kindness will be enough to bring the new age). Mario was not happy but he had no choice. Suzie welcomed this stranger into their home. In the past Suzie took in members of her family who were in trouble and others even when she was not sure where she would get food for the next meal.

It was an incredibly enriching weekend for Suzie and her family. The pilot invited her to visit his home in Jerusalem. But, the story has another twist. Mario was expecting two friends to arrive by helicopter for the air show. The problem was there was not enough room in the family car to transport everyone to the show. Now Suzie knew why the stranger had come. Suzie believed that God sent the stranger as a solution to her problem because he had a car. She exemplifies for me a religious person. She performed the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming the stranger. Although that is not the way she would have phrased it. Her home is like Abraham and Sarah's tent, which is open on all sides. In this day and age it is a hard model to follow. One might describe her trust in God and her generosity as naïve. For me Suzie is the counter testimony to a world of distrust and lack of faith. Suzie's goodness is born of her faith. People like Susie encourage and inspire me. Heather, I hope your Judaism will inspire you to look for the goodness in people and to see in the exigencies of life more than serendipity but the possibilities of the Divine Presence. Religious faith is not about belief but about action. Who knows, the stranger you welcome may really be Elijah or the Messiah, and your one act of kindness will be enough to redeem the world.

Suzie's faith has a confidence that mine does not. I am often asked how can I believe in God after the Holocaust? How can I believe in God when we need only turn on the evening news to experience human cruelty? How I can believe in God when I know first hand so many instances of life's injustices? Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg taught me something that I have found very helpful. It is called moment faith. He wrote: "After Auschwitz, faith means that there are times when faith is overcome. Since faith is a response to the Presence in life and history, this response ebbs and flows. **The difference between the skeptic and the believer is, "the frequency of faith, not certitude of position."** (*The difference between the skeptic and the believer is, "the frequency of faith, not certitude of position."*) What I understand by this statement is that faith does not overcome doubt. It does not wipe away the questions. Faith does not solve the mystery or the riddle of God's seeming presence or absence. Faith, however, is an attitude that allows me to assert meaning and value to life. It allows me to believe that at the core of existence there is a caring presence. Heather, My father Lothar, your great grandfather believed in what he called an ethical universe. He believed that being a Mensch, a truly good human being is not a matter of mere convention but a requirement built into the structure of the universe. When goodness is allowed to flower in society and blossom in us, it is utterly transformative. In moments of pain, suffering, and injustice it will strengthen us and give us the courage to go on.

My relationship with God is not an easy one. I am often angry at and disappointed in God. But I am angrier and more disappointed in myself and other human beings than I am in God. I try to follow the dictum. "Pray as if everything depended upon God and act as if every thing depends on you." It is easy to blame God for our failures. But what really troubles me is Cain's response to God's question, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Too often this is also our response to human suffering.

The Torah recounts the incredible story of Jacob wrestling with a being who is both human and divine. As a result of this struggle Jacob's name is changed to Israel the God wrestler. For me faith is a wrestling match. It is the intimate struggle with a profoundly loving presence and dark and cruel absence. It is a wounding and bruising love-making which makes my life profoundly meaningful and joyous and painful at the same time. Faith is not a matter of doctrine but a way of living. No theology satisfies my intellectual and spiritual yearnings. I still seek the answers to life's questions in the wisdom of our sacred texts and sages of our own day. They often provide a way to articulate my thoughts and concerns but their wisdom is only a tentative solution to the mysteries of the universe. It is mystery and opportunity for service that inspires me. It is mitzvah, the commandment that ultimately turns life into a sacred pilgrimage.

The historian Robert Chazan has written, "The challenge of difference more than anything else has stimulated creativity over the ages." A distinctive Jewish way of life is essential for the human future. This may be an arrogant statement which is not in keeping with homogenization of our age. Globalization, with all of its benefits, still threatens the uniqueness of individual cultures. The immense freedom of the United States has restored the melting pot as a metaphor for American culture. Our universalism (our concern for all of humankind), must be rooted in the particularism of Judaism. I know that this is a bold assertion. Let me give just one brief example. As Jews we count time in relationship to Shabbat. Sunday is *Yom rishon le Shabbat*, the first day toward Shabbat Monday is *Yom Sheni* the second day toward Shabbat and so on. Shabbat is about an ideal world where creation is appreciated and conserved, where

humankind's needs are met and we experience Shalom (wholeness). Shabbat properly observed with worship, study, rest, family, friends and delight is a foretaste of our ultimate hopes and dreams. Judaism frames the day, in the story of creation and the exodus from Egypt. We are part of human history as the descendents of Adam and Eve and we are characters in Jewish history as we emerge from Pharaoh's Egypt. As a liberal Jew my definitions of the mitzvot of Shabbat differ in some ways from Orthodox and Conservative Jews. There is room to adopt the concepts of the Tanach and rabbinic Judaism and adapt them not to fashion but to new understanding of the way to sanctify life. Through our difference we can challenge the world to transform Shabbat from a weekly island of *kedusha*, (holiness) to a daily practice of righteousness. My hope Heather is that you will be more successful in your Shabbat observance than I. Remember! Creativity is born of difference. The tension between being like everybody else and being different at the same time can be uncomfortable, but it is the essence of being Jewish and necessary if we are to carry on the tasks of being an *Am brit*, a covenant people and an *or legoyim*, a light to the nations.

The poem that I quoted in the introduction to the letter ends with the following line:

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey
a sacred pilgrimage
to life ever lasting."

At the heart of the universe is Mystery with a capital M. I believe that nothing is lost. I cannot fully explain this faith. It defies science and logic. In spite of this I feel the presence of the past working in my life. I want to share a story with you from a beautiful book that I read this summer entitled **My Grandfather's Blessings** by Rachel Remen. I had the opportunity to hear her speak and tell this story at a conference on Judaism and Healing at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. She is an incredible physician and listening to her is a joy and inspiration. By the way, Rabbi London is trying to arrange to bring her to Beth Emet.

The story is about Dr. Remen's patient, Ahiro, who is in the final stages of prostate cancer. Her task is to help him deal with the fact that he is dying. As part of their conversation, they entered into a dialogue about life after death. He believed firmly that death is the end. When he asked Rachel if she believed in life after death, she answered, "I do not know." Her answer fascinated and irked him. During their next-to last meeting, he again raised this issue.

Hearing my "I don't know," he began to laugh. "Rachel", he said, "I am an educated man. I must believe death is the end. But just in case it isn't, I will come back as a great white crane and give you some sort of sign that I lost the argument." Their conversation continued with Rachel teasing him that the white crane was too obvious and a little like the duck on the old Groucho Marx show. Then Rachel told him "Perhaps you'll find another way," The story continues: He looked at me for a

considerable moment. "I will do something that you will recognize," he said suddenly serious.

Only a few months later, this remarkable man died. Shortly afterward I was in the TransAmerica building in the downtown business district of San Francisco, waiting for an elevator to take me to an appointment. The building is tall and so the elevators are quite slow. This gives everyone a few minutes to themselves. In this brief time, I found myself thinking of Ahiro and how much I missed being able to talk to him. I remember some of the many extraordinary things I had discovered about him and what a delightful man he had been.

At last one of the elevators arrived. It was empty. And so with my heart and mind filled with memories of this relationship, I stepped in. The doors closed, and the elevator started upwards so abruptly that I was thrown slightly off balance I glanced down hurriedly to regain my footing and there lying on the floor of the elevator was a single, large, perfect, white feather.

Rachel concludes: In my mind I continue my discussion with Ahiro. As always, he has presented the issue in a way I did not expect, and he has certainly raised the level of the dialogue. I still do not know if there is life after death, but perhaps that is not really the point.

I am deeply moved and touched by the story. As with Dr. Remen, the story does not definitively answer for me the question, "Is there life after death," but it keeps the dialogue going. Heather, keeping the dialogue open is the key. It is through old and new stories that I discover important truths. Simply retelling them without committing myself to a single explanation opens me to all the possibilities of meaning and mystery. I have learned that what seemed so clear yesterday, is not so clear today and what seemed impossible yesterday now seems to be true today.

Heather, these words from Gates of Prayer, express what I am trying to tell you:

Days pass and years vanish, we walk sightless among miracles. God, fill our eyes with the seeing and our minds with knowing. But there are moments when your presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see wherever we gaze the bush burns unconsumed. And we clay touched by God, will reach out in holiness and exclaim in the wonder, "How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it."

It is so important to keep our eyes open to the spiritual possibilities of life. Meaning and value can come when we least expect them. It may be a chance encounter with another person. It may be a question on an exam. It may take place when you are alone with nature or when you are in the midst of a crowd. Such moments leave us forever changed and forever enriched.

What is so hard, my precious little one, is to make the time to really listen. We often are so distracted with the business of our lives that we have forgotten how to really be present for another person. It is a skill we must all practice. It is in the moment of true listening that souls meet. When that happens everything changes. The barriers of separation disappear and our humanity shines forth. The other becomes ultimately precious. Then we value and feel valued. Real listening means hearing beyond the words. We can listen with our eyes or with our hands as well as with our ears. The distinction among the senses breaks down. Then life is truly with people and it is a blessing.

Your Hebrew name is Chana Meira, Gracious giver of light. Like your great grandmother Sunny and your great grandfather Micky, may you be a source of light and grace to those around. May we, your family, nurture these qualities in you.

Finally I want to offer you a summary of Judaism. It is a well-known quotation from Mishnah Avot. Al sheloshim devarim ha olam omeid al ha Torah ve-al ha-avodah ve-al gemilut chasadim. The world stands upon three things, Torah (Knowledge, Study, Principles, Ideas), Avodah (Worship, practice, religious experience), Gemilut Chasadim (loving deeds which repair the world). While each of these is important, each one may not be equally important at any one time. In fact some of us are better at one than the other. A life rich in learning, religious experience and caring deeds is worthy of being called holy. Holiness does not imply perfection. Holiness is an attitude and a striving. Strive my little one to feel God's presence, to learn much about our faith and our people and to care deeply for others. I hope you do not mind Heather, I have shared this letter with our vast extended family at Beth Emet.

Today is Rosh HaShana 5761. It is the day when we take an accounting of our lives before God. Your birth has given me the opportunity to try to think about what I believe and try to explain it to you. I hope that when you are older we can read this letter together. By then I know I will have other stories to tell you and we will learn together.

Here is my grandfather's blessing to you. May God bless you with strength and health. May God grant you wisdom and insight. May God open your heart and hands to the goodness and beauty in this world. May God sustain your parents. May the cup of life be overflowing with sweet blessings. I toast you with our most precious blessing, Le Chaim, to life!

Love,

Grandpa