

A LETTER TO MY GRANDSON STEPHEN

Dear Stephen,

As I write this you are rapidly approaching your first birthday. I love you very much. It is so much fun to watch you move from stage to stage. Living near you and your sister and your cousins Leah and Alana has made the last eight years especially joyful. You are my fourth grandchild and the first boy. When your cousins Leah and Alana and your sister Heather were born, I wrote a letter to each of them and I shared it with the congregation. I decided to begin this tradition because when I was about your age my father was away in the army and he wrote me a beautiful letter. The other reason is that although I am in good health and I expect to live many years, Yom Kippur reminds us that we do not know what the future will bring and I want you to have something from me which tells you what I think is important. I know you will not be able to read this letter by yourself for a long time and then it will still be a while before you fully understand what I am saying but I hope that someday that this letter will be important to you and may serve as a guide for how you will conduct your life.

Grandma Goodie and I love you very much. As does your Grandma Donna. I am so lucky to have Grandma Goodie in my life. Her love and support has made my life worth living. Stephen, the most important thing in anyone's life is to find a soul mate and I found mine. Grandma Goodie has helped guide me now for almost forty years of marriage. She is strong and wise and I find that she gives great advice. In fact, when I do not follow her advice, I get myself into trouble. I know you will find her to be a wise woman. On this Day of Atonement, I ask her forgiveness for the many times that I inadvertently hurt her feelings or ignore her needs. Elaine, I love you. Stephen, I know the two of you are going to have a lot of fun together and you will learn a lot from her.

Stephen, you are a very fortunate child because you have been born into a loving family who will support and nurture you and provide you with an environment which will allow you to thrive. You were named after two very special people. Stephen is after your grandfather Stephen Feinberg who tragically died very unexpectedly and much too young. I liked him a great deal and we enjoyed each others company. He was a talented and creative business person, generous, and intelligent. I felt privileged to get to know him and I learned a lot from him. I know he would have adored you and spoiled you rotten. When you get older your mother will tell you all about him. Your middle name Lee is after my father and your great grandfather Lothar. He was the most honest person I ever knew. Although his formal education stopped before university, he was cultured, well-read, and knowledgeable. He believed in a moral universe and that it was most important to be a Mensch. Although his level of Jewish knowledge and observance was minimal, he demonstrated by the way he lived that what really mattered was being an ethical person. In 1932, against the wishes of his parents, he left Nazi Germany in the wake of rising anti-Semitism and because of his foresight and bravery our family survived. Every day he read the New York Times from the first page to the last page. Every morning when I read the Times I think about him.

Your Grandma Goodie's family came from Eastern Europe. Their story is the story of pursuing the American dream. While my family was very small, they were a large family. Grandma Goodie grew up with cousins and family circles. Things that I never experienced. Her Grandfather Sam Kushner was one of the sweetest people I ever knew. He was in the hat business and was known as Sam the Hatter. When your grandma told him that I was the "one," he gave me a hat. It was his sign of acceptance. Grandma's father Micky was a pharmacist had a great sense of humor and when he found out that I wanted to be a rabbi, after he got over the shock, he told me that I would need a good sense of humor and be a good politician. It was great advice but I am afraid I still can't tell a joke. Like so many of the men in our family he died young. Your Great grandmother Mildred, may she live to be 120, had a very hard life and she raised your grandmother Goodie to be a very special woman and GG, as she is called by your sister Heather, loves you very much.

I also want to tell you about my grandmother Bessie Emmerglick, my mother's mother, who lived with us. She was less than five feet tall and very quiet. Every day, twice a day, she would sit in her chair in what we called the sun parlor and read her *siddur*. She taught me to pray. She taught me to say the *Shema* and the *Veahavta* every day and to say a simple prayer which I still say every night. "Dear God take care of Mommy and Daddy etc " The list of names has changed over the years and now it includes many members of the congregation who have asked me to pray for them. From her example of simple piety and this simple straight forward prayer I developed a serious relationship with God. Over the years I have found that simple direct conversational prayer helps me resolve many dilemmas. I try to speak to God every day. In all the major crises of my life I have turned to prayer for strength and insight. Somehow, in each instance, God has been present. It is hard to explain. It is not an extraordinary experience. In fact it is very ordinary but if I pray long enough and hard enough I achieve a special clarity that helps me make good decisions or accomplish an important task. I feel strengthened when I feel weak and uplifted when I am depressed. There are no miracles or prophetic messages, just a sense of clarity and of having been listened to.

One of the formative events of my life was the Shoah-the Holocaust. I was born in 1943, and too young to remember it directly, but my family had many survivors and their stories were part of the constant conversation of family gatherings. Human cruelty and radical evil were made real because they happened to my family. I have spent most of my adult life trying to find ways to combat the evils of prejudice. The violence and inequities which plague the world tear at my conscience during every waking moment. I love the United States but I am constantly disappointed that she does not live up to her greatness. That is why I involve myself in the politics. Judaism teaches that we must speak truth to power and that we must strive to make our society just and compassionate. We are not permitted to be bystanders. Judaism is not about being a Democrat or a Republican but it is about which candidate or which party at the moment will move us closer to the ideals of a society that is concerned about its weakest members and respects each person because they are created in the image of God. It is about what is the best way to achieve peace and security in a strife torn world and how to protect the rights and liberties

which have made the United States different from every other country. It is about how to stand up to the forces of evil and how to transform enemies into allies. It is about health care, housing, job training, protecting the environment and fair labor practices. This is the lesson that I learned from the Shoah.

My mother Lotta was a dedicated and observant Jew and we joined Bnai Jeshurun, a classical Reform Congregation in Newark New Jersey, when I was very young. What I learned in synagogue transformed the intimate God of my sweet and pious grandmother into a God who demanded justice and required us to be activists in solving the world's problems and helped me to find a language to express the angst that I learned from the Shoah.

When I graduated from high school my grandmother sent me on what was then called the NFTY Bible Tour of Israel. I returned from that trip committed not only to the great prophetic message of classical Reform but to Israel which is the grand adventure of our people rising from the ashes of the Holocaust and from two millennia of powerlessness into what is now a powerful modern nation. All of this would eventually translate into my becoming a rabbi.

For me the two greatest influences in my life have been my family and my synagogue. My family taught me important values and the synagogue taught me how to become part of a community of concern. I cannot over emphasize how important I think the synagogue is. I worry about its future. Family and synagogue together are the major source for creating dedicated members of the Jewish community. The preservation of Judaism and the Jewish people is important because I believe that they offer a vision about what the world can be. Living a committed Jewish life not only makes for a better future for the world, but enhances our personal existence. It provides meaning and community. The synagogue is the one place, if given the proper attention and the proper resources, that can be transformative. I hope that you find it to be such a place. In fact I hope that you make it into such a place. As an adult I hope you will be a learned, practicing, praying Jew who is deeply involved in the synagogue and a major portion of whose tzedakah goes to support the synagogue. I believe the future of the Jewish people and of broader community depends upon the strengthening of the synagogue and on the daily practice of Judaism.

Over the years I have found a few quotations from our sacred literature to which I constantly return. One of those is taken from Pirkei Avot *Al shelosha devarim haolam omeid al hatorah, veal ha'avodah veal gemilut chasadim*. "The world stands on the three things Torah, worship and deeds of loving kindness." They are the three legs of the table of Jewish life. If you remove one of them, the table becomes unstable. I believe the neglect of any one of them is a grave error in the long run. The synagogue and home must cooperate to inculcate them as part of our daily lives. One of things that I hear all the time is how busy we are. That life is so much more complicated than it used to be. In each generation we try to see that our children have the maximum experiences possible and that we prepare them for the world in which they are going to have to live in as adults. Regretfully for many, Jewish education and Judaism have become just

activities of no greater or less importance than any other. The goal is Bar/Bat mitzvah. Performance on that one day is what it is about it and then the party.

This year there was a very distressing set of articles in the newspapers, a phenomenon called the faux mitzvah. It was a story about non-Jewish children having parties to mimic the parties which Jewish parents give to celebrate Bar/Bat mitzvah. The article filled me with sadness because it is clear to me that what Bar and Bat mitzvah have become in our society is an opportunity for conspicuous consumption. Non Jews have begun to envy and copy one of our worst traits. At this moment in history the major reason to join a synagogue and to give your child a Jewish education is so that you can bring it to a spectacular end with a party to end all parties. Instead of having found a way to convey the importance of living an engaged and committed Jewish life in which Bar/Bat Mitzvah is just a step along the way, we have created a puberty rite that marks the end of formal Jewish education and formal Jewish living for so many in our community. Nothing would please me more than for you and your sister and your cousins to develop rich adult Jewish lives. In the years ahead I intend to continue making this an emphasis of my rabbinate. Judaism is an adult religion. We are the best educated and wealthiest Jewish community in history. The resources are immense and we need to find a way not to squander them.

Stephen, I hope by the time you can read this letter what I am saying will no longer be true. I am deeply concerned about the future. The world has become a more dangerous place. While when I grew up we were concerned about nuclear war, it never seemed to have much impact on my daily life. I worked for nuclear disarmament and was pleased that we made some progress, but even though the cold war is over and we are not worried about Russia and it seems that as China becomes more prosperous she is more of an economic threat than a military one, we are not safer. The nuclear arsenals, while diminished, still pose the threat of omnicide- the destruction of everything. The terrorism threats from extremist groups continue to hang like the sword of Damocles over our heads. Radical nationalist Islam, the white supremacists, and all the fanatics who believe that their way of life is threatened by some enemy or another, accept terrorism as a legitimate tool in their causes. The almost daily beheadings in Iraq, the new nuclear threat from Iran and North Korea, the suicide bombings in Israel and the counter attacks in Gaza and the West Bank, overwhelm me with anguish. Our tradition teaches "seek peace and pursue it." The commentators tell us that it requires us to go wherever we need to, to accomplish it. Whatever you choose to do in life I hope that you will be an active advocate for peace.

Israel is a very important part of my life. It is the most significant development in Jewish life in more than two thousand years. I say that because it represents the ultimate challenge. Can a great religion be the guiding force behind a modern state and do so in a way that creates just open and egalitarian society? It is the homeland of the Jewish people. It is nurturing a new and very different Jewish culture. I believe it can be the beginning of a fundamental change in that whole region. While as I write this it seems very remote. I have not given up the dream of Palestinians and Israeli's joining in a peaceful partnership. At the moment there are many reasons to despair. In the year ahead I will continue to join with Jewish, Christian and Muslim

leaders to encourage whoever is President to make Israeli Arab Palestinian peace a priority. I hope you will find a deep connection to the land and the people.

Stephen, since you are the youngest and I believe the last grandchild I will have, I want to share one thought that I shared with each of your cousins Leah and Alana, and your sister Heather.

In Leah's letter I shared texts which were important to me. This is the text I want to share with you.

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.**

In Alana's letter I shared this thought. 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 knew 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 an affirmation of our belief in one God which is the essence of Judaism but more importantly **it is a commandment to listen and pay attention. Speak less and be there more.** Especially in painful moments, a loving embrace, an extended hand and a respectful silence speak volumes. The statements "I am sorry. I love you" provide great comfort.

This is the thought I shared with your sister Heather. Stephen, 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 open the eyes of our spirits 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.

Stephen, I am looking forward to watching you grow up and to being a significant part of your life. God has blessed me with a wonderful life. Your grandmother Goodie, whom I love with my whole heart, has stood with me and supported all my involvements over the years. She bore a disproportionate share of raising your father Jeremy and your Uncle Seth. We are so pleased that they both are wonderful young men who found great wives and are now raising wonderful families. Coming to Beth Emet has allowed me to live a personal and professional life that has Judaism at its center. No one has been granted more blessings than I. God of my mothers and fathers, my God, bless my grandson Stephen with the kind of abundant blessings that you have granted me. Please walk with him as you have walked with me.

I love you Stephen
Poppa Peter