

A Jewish Will to My Children

Dear Mia and Adam,

My beloved children...I write these words to you as this year's High Holy Days approach, and I am moved to do so by the themes inherent in them. Rosh Hashanah is all about the birth of a new year, and your births – while seemingly only moments ago – are now eight and eleven years in the past. You are now old enough to begin receiving these messages from me now, and I hope that your understanding of them only deepens and expands as you grow.

So too, Yom Kippur is upon us, and this is a day that we set aside to confront our own mortality. While I like to think of myself as a relatively young man – and while many in our Temple Beth Shalom community continue to confuse me with one of the bar mitzvah boys – at this time of year I am reminded that my days on earth are numbered, and that I do not know their total count. I want to be certain that I have conveyed these thoughts to you while I am able to do so...and hopefully I will have many decades left to persistently and annoyingly remind you of them.

In 2010 I taught a class on composing an ethical will – a lasting written legacy of our morals, values, and deeply held beliefs to pass on to our children and the generations that follow. Well, it only took me seven years and a sabbatical to get around to writing one for the two of you, or at least this beginning of it. Let's consider this Chapter One, as we rabbis are not known for our brevity in sharing important messages.

I feel compelled to begin with reflections on my Judaism, as it informs so much of who I am, what I believe, and what I value most highly. You may think that it was a foregone conclusion that – as rabbis' kids – you would grow up in the TBS Children's Center, and in Mayim, and at the Rashi School, and at Eisner Camp...yes, I can see your eyes rolling at the seemingly ludicrous amount of Judaism in your lives. But please know that your mom and I did not choose to immerse you in these places because I was called to the rabbinate. We did so because we understand that this millennia-old tradition which you are inheriting remains invaluable for meaningful living.

Many in our world are abandoning their religious traditions today, our own included. While, blessedly, our TBS community continues to thrive and grow, other synagogues are shutting their doors, and some longstanding Jewish institutions are faltering, in many cases due to a Jewish population that feels alienated from what Judaism has to offer us in the 21st century. If it is, in fact, the case that the thinking, the rituals, and the communal commitments of our tradition have run their course and have nothing left to offer the thoughtful modern human being, well, then it's been a good run. Yet, I firmly believe that this is not the case. To the contrary, from my vantage point, Judaism remains a rich treasure trove for us - as relevant, meaningful, and impactful for our lives today as at any time in our people's history.

It has been said that in our day, all Jews – not just converts to the faith – are Jews by choice, as we are all free to opt out of this tradition at any time. So, why have your mother and I opted in, and why do we hope that you will grow to continue to choose Judaism for yourselves and for your own children someday? Here's a list – albeit incomplete - of some of the reasons I find most compelling, each grounded in a Jewish text that is central to my being and that I hope will find a way to the center of yours:

1) The Torah begins with our people's Creation myths. When it is time to create the humans, God declares that we are to be fashioned *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God.¹ Why does this matter? Because it creates several of Judaism's foundational understandings of what it means to be human. First, you – your life, your very being – are invaluable, a direct reflection of all that is Holy in the universe. But before you get too full of yourselves, this Torah truth forces us to see the world through another important lens...not only are you created *b'tzelem Elohim* – but every human, the ones you love or admire and the ones who frustrate you to your core, the ones who behave ethically and the ones who clearly do not...they too all have the spark of the divine within them. This notion guides us to see all people – regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or political viewpoints – even people who root for non-Boston sports teams – as being created in God's image. In a contemporary world that seems to savor every opportunity to disrespect, disregard, and disenfranchise the “other,” I am proud to be part of a faith tradition that insists that we do just the opposite. As Rabbi Art Green notes, being created *b'tzelem Elohim* “calls us to boundless respect for each human life, a valuing of human difference and individuality, and a commitment to fair and decent treatment for each person.”² In our burgeoning global society that serves as a constant reminder that our fates are bound up with the rest of humanity's, these commitments are more important now than ever.

2) As the tales of creation continue into the second chapter of Genesis, we read that God placed the first human in the Garden of Eden with instructions to work the land and to protect it.³ It is from this verse that Jewish tradition understands us – all of us - to be *Shomrei Adamah* - Guardians of our Earth. It is now clear that your generation, and the ones that follow, are going to need to do a great deal of work to repair – or at least prevent further damage to – the planet that we have too often mistreated or callously neglected. Our Sages imagined God showing Adam around the Garden and saying: “All I have created, I created for you. Take care not to corrupt and destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there is no one to repair it after you.”⁴ I am inspired by a faith tradition that celebrates our partnership with God in the ongoing process of Creation and that reminds us of our responsibilities to do our part to insure its future health.

3) While we're on the topic of Creation...I love that the Torah begins with two completely different stories of how our world came to be. To me this is a clear indication – among many - that the Torah never understood itself to be a history book

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Arthur Green, *Judaism's 10 Best Ideas*, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, pp. 15-16.

³ Genesis 2:15

⁴ Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:20

and never presumed to have a definitive claim on the origins of our universe. This speaks to me profoundly as it helps to relieve us of the need to perpetuate the false dichotomy between science and religion, a claim often grounded in discrepancies between Biblical accounts of creation and those proffered by the scientific community. Science exists to help us understand our universe – grounded in observable fact, testable theories, and verifiable experiments, and these are vital. Religion, at its best, is simply asking a different set of questions...namely, now that we are here, living in this world with its natural order and laws of biology, chemistry, physics, astrophysics and beyond...how should we live? How should we think of ourselves in this cosmic order? How should we look at others, and how should we treat them? How do we define what is right and just, and how do we pursue those noble goals? These questions are also invaluable in crafting a life worth living, and the tradition you inherit will provide you countless opportunities to do so.

4) “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”⁵ Shabbat is one of the great gifts that Judaism has given the world. There is no reason whatsoever to count time in weeks – except that our Torah told us to, and in so doing, our Jewish tradition helped all of humanity to see that we cannot labor at our daily toil seven days a week. We need to set aside time as sacred – distinct from the critically important work we do all week long that enables us to earn a living, grow, and be productive members of society. You know well that there is nothing your mother and I value more highly than the precious and fleeting time we all have together, and Shabbat – as Heschel taught us – is like a “palace in time.”⁶ It is a glorious opportunity to refocus on what matters to us most, to pause from our lives’ stressors, and to rededicate ourselves to the people we value most highly and to bless them. But Shabbat only works if you actually pause from your weekday routines and make that time special. Don’t forget to do so.

5) Rabbi Hillel taught: “In a place where there are no people behaving in civilized ways, strive to be a *mentsch* – a truly humane human being.”⁷ Judaism provides myriad frameworks for helping us to be truly good people. While the list of Jewish expressions of what makes a *mentsch* are too numerous to list here, I’ve found these character traits to be particularly important: Don’t speak about others behind their backs, and don’t spread gossip. It’s not your information to share, and our tradition likens it to shedding another’s blood...in our age of rampant bullying and cyber-bullying we know just how damaging our words can be.

Don’t lie. When you lie – and cheating is a form of lying - you make it impossible for others to know the truth, and in our tradition, this is a great crime. If we can’t know truth, we can’t make thoughtful, deliberative decisions about the best course of action. You don’t have the right to rob others of that ability. Our world is providing plenty of horrible role models for us on this account...don’t follow their misguided leads.

⁵ Exodus 20:8

⁶ The Sabbath, by Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar Straus Giroux,

⁷ *Mishnah Avot* 2:6

And finally, when you do mess up, own it, apologize for it, and make things right. Apologizing is not a sign of weakness...an inability to see your own faults absolutely is. We dedicate this entire season of the Jewish calendar to *teshuvah* – to mending what we’ve broken in our relationships. When others have done you wrong and they offer apology, try to forgive them...the grudges we hold eat away at our souls. And when you’ve hurt another, however uncomfortable, don’t pass up the opportunity Judaism provides to return to your better self and to help others return to you.

6) Our Jewish tradition is not solely concerned with how we treat those people with whom we are in relationship. Thirty-six separate times, the Torah reminds us to take care of “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in our midst”...those who – by definition we are not likely to know personally. Ours is a tradition committed to understanding – and then acting to remedy – the plight of those who find themselves on the margins of society. Please do not lose sight of them. Too many times in our people’s history – in our own family history – we have been those who were persecuted, chased from our homes and left to fend for ourselves. We are blessed, now, to be in a position to support such souls. To ignore our responsibility to help would be a shameful forgetting of our own past.

7) “*Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof...*” – “Justice, justice, shall you pursue.”⁸ Mia, you will chant these words from the Torah when you become *bat mitzvah* in two years’ time. One of the ways in which we bring about positive change in our world is through giving *tzedakah*. Other religious traditions speak of charity – a word which connotes an emotional attachment to the recipient. *Tzedakah* is, by definition, different. Its roots are in the concepts of righteousness and justice. We have an obligation to give of our resources...period. That said, we hope that you will continue to give with joy in your hearts, that you’ll support specifically Jewish institutions and causes – because if we don’t, no one else will – and also support those beyond the boundaries of our community. Both are critical. And acting righteously does not end with our philanthropic contributions. We are charged with actively pursuing justice - fair and equitable treatment for all, commanded to lift our voices in support of the weak, to advocate for the poor, to fight for the rights of those who are unable to fight for themselves.

8) After a long night of wrestling, the angel said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel...”⁹ We are proud to bequeath to you a place among the Children of Israel. This name is significant as Israel means “one who will struggle with God,” and we hope you do just that. There are countless theologies – innumerable understandings of the Divine in Jewish tradition. Learn from them as you forge your own relationships with God. And when you find the mere notion of a deity challenging, remember...you’re in very good company. Most important to us is that you are able to stand in awe at the wonders of our world, that you remain open to seeing traces of the Divine in the relationships you share, and that you understand yourselves to be part of – even intimately connected to - something bigger than yourselves. So, too your membership

⁸ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁹ Genesis 32:29

among the Children of Israel comes with a second home in the land of Israel. Few places in the world are as glorious and as complicated. Your love of our people's native land has already begun to bloom, and that is a commitment worth thoughtfully nurturing as you grow.

9) Rabbi Hillel taught: "Do not separate yourself from the community."¹⁰ Perhaps what your mom and I value most highly – and what we want most for you – is that you come to experience the blessings of Jewish community that we have known. Our lives have been profoundly shaped by the souls that surrounded us in our synagogues, in youth group, at summer camp, and during our times living in Israel. These experiences are what moved me to dedicate my life to building Jewish communities. Indeed, there is, perhaps, nothing more glorious, more inspiring, or more life-affirming than sharing our joys and sorrows, our longings and hopes, our accomplishments and failures with those who are walking life's path alongside us. In Hebrew, the word for any gathering of people is *kahal* - קהל. But the word for "community" is *kehilah* - קהילה – the result of adding the letters *yud* and *heh* - two of the letters from God's ancient name - to any gathering of folks. Indeed, when we join together to intentionally create such communities, we invite the Holy One to dwell among us as well.

10) And finally, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught: "One who is full of joy is full of love." Jewish tradition does joy like no other, and at the very center of Jewish life is a profound sense of love...for God, for our people, for our neighbors, our family, our friends, our community, and for ourselves. May you never doubt how loved you are – even at your early age there are already countless souls who care for you so deeply. And may you – in turn – continue to find others worthy of your love throughout your days.

This, my children, is a snapshot of your spiritual, moral, and ethical inheritance. I guarantee you that it will be more valuable than anything you'll receive in my other will – and unlike any material possessions I bequeath to my children, you won't need to divide this inheritance between you...each of you can receive 100% of what I share here if you but choose to make it your own. May these blessings enhance your lives as they have nourished mine, and may you grow to safeguard them, cherish them, and share them with the generations yet to come.

¹⁰ *Mishnah Avot 2:5*