

# LETTERS TO THE NEXT GENERATION

REFLECTIONS FOR YOM KIPPUR



Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

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## Introduction

*The booklet is dedicated in memory of*

*Susi and Fred Bradfield ז"ל*

*who, in their lifetime, instilled in their children  
and grandchildren a deep love of Judaism  
and the importance of its values.*

*Their commitment to Judaism,  
the Jewish people and to Israel  
has remained an inspiration to their family  
and to all who knew them.*

*Their lives were "letters to the next generation".*

*May their memory always be for a blessing.*

*Yom Kippur is the day of days, when we give an account of our lives. We reflect on what has happened to us and what we plan to do in the coming year. To help this process I've written some thoughts that may evoke reflections of your own, for each of us must make his or her own decisions and no one can make them for us.*

*I've cast them in the form of letters written by a father to his children who've just become parents in their own right. I've done so because it's a way of discussing the big decisions that shape the rest of our life for us and those close to us. They are fictional letters, but the issues they raise are real.*

*Not all of us are married; not all are blessed with children; yet we can each make a unique contribution to the Jewish people by the life we lead and the kindness we show to others. Rashi wrote: "The main descendants of the righteous are their good deeds". Every good deed is like a child.*

*The single most important lesson of Yom Kippur is that it's never too late to change, start again, and live differently from the way we've done in the past. God forgives every mistake we've made so long as we are honest in regretting it and doing our best to put it right. Even if there's nothing we regret, Yom Kippur makes us think about how to use the coming year in such a way as to*

*bring blessings into the lives of others by way of thanking God for all He has given us.*

*May God bless all of us for the coming year. May He hear and heed our prayers. May He forgive us and help us forgive others. May He grant you, your family, and the Jewish people throughout the world, a year of health and peace and life.*

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

*Tishri 5770*

## *Letter 1: The most important legacy*

DEAR SARA, DEAR DAVID, I am writing these letters to you as Yom Kippur approaches, because it's the day on when we ask the deepest questions about our lives. Who are we? How shall we live? What chapter will we write in the Book of Life?

It's also a time to say the things we've left unsaid. The most important thing your mother and I want to say is that you are our beloved children. You have given us more joy than you can ever know. In all of life, you were God's most precious gift to us.

Perhaps there were times when we said things to you, or you to us, that we later regretted. Please wipe them from your memories. God forgives us: let us forgive one another. Life is too short for anger or anguish. Now you have both married and become parents. May your children give you the joy you gave us.

What inspired me to write these letters is the old Jewish custom that parents write their children *Tzavaot*, "ethical wills". It's based on the idea that the most important legacy we can give our children is not money or possessions, but spiritual ideals.

I truly believe that. Give your children too much money or material gifts and you will spoil them. They will grow up unhappy and unfulfilled, and in the long run they won't thank you. It will damage them and your relationship with them. Tradition was right. The best things any of us can give our children are values to live by, ideals to aspire to, an identity so that they know who they are, and a religious and moral heritage to guide them through the wilderness of time.

Children grow to fill the space we create for them, and if it's big, they will walk tall. Ideals are big; material possessions are small. Ideals are what make life meaningful. People may *envy* others for what they earn or own, but they *admire* others for what they are and what principles they live by – and it's better to be admired than to be envied.

That is what Yom Kippur is about. Judaism sets the bar high. It's a demanding, challenging religion, but that is its greatness. If I were to define what it is to be a Jew, I would say it is to be an ambassador for God.

We were never asked to convert the world, but we were asked to be living role models of justice, compassion, chessed and *tzedakah*. We are the people of the Book, who put learning and study at the pinnacle of our values, to show that faith is neither ignorant nor blind. We were asked to live our faith, day by day, act by act, through the complex choreography we call *halakhah*, the intricate beauty of Jewish law. Judaism is a religion of high ideals translated into simple daily deeds.

That's what we received from our parents. It's what we have tried to give you. It's what we hope you will give your children. Not expensive clothes or holidays or the latest

mobile phone. These are distractions from life, not life itself. Life is made by what you live for.

I say this to you at this holy time because I've seen too many people make the same mistake. Their marriages fail or they have a breakdown in relationship with their children and they ask, "What did I do wrong? I gave them everything". True, but not true. They gave them everything *except* what mattered: time, attention, selfless respect, and genuine, ethically demanding, spiritually challenging values.

Ideals will bring happiness to you and your children.

## Letter 2: The price of things and the value of things

SARA, DAVID, these have been tough times. Financial collapse, economic recession, and uncertainty ahead. People have lost their savings, their jobs, even their homes. What do you do in times like these? The best answer was given by an American politician: *Never waste a crisis*. You learn more in bad times than in good.

The Chinese ideogram for 'crisis' also means 'opportunity'. Perhaps that's why the Chinese have been around so long. Only one language I know goes one further, and that is Hebrew. The Hebrew word for 'crisis' is *mashber*, which also means a birthing-stool. In Hebrew, crises are not just opportunities; they are birthpangs. Something new is being born. That's why Jews have survived every crisis in 4,000 years and emerged even stronger than they were before.

What the financial collapse should teach us is that we were becoming obsessed with money: salaries, bonuses, the cost of houses, and expensive luxuries we could live without. *When money rules, we remember the price of things and forget the value of things*. That is a bad mistake. The financial collapse happened because people borrowed money they didn't have, to buy things they didn't need, to achieve a happiness that wouldn't last.

## Letter 2: The price of things and the value of things

The whole of consumer society is based on stimulating demand to generate expenditure to produce economic growth. This involves turning genuine values upside down. Advertising creates a thousand blandishments that focus our minds on what we *don't* have, while real happiness (as *Pirkei Avot* tells us) lies in rejoicing in what we *do* have.

So in a curious way a consumer society is a mechanism for creating and distributing unhappiness. That is why an age of unprecedented affluence also became an age of unprecedented stress-related syndromes and depressive illnesses. The most important thing any of us can learn from the present economic crisis is: think less about the price of things and more about the value of things.

There was one moment in the Torah when the people started worshipping gold. They made a Golden Calf. The interesting thing is that if you read the Torah carefully you'll see that immediately before and after the Golden Calf, Moses gave the people a command, the command of Shabbat. Why that command, then?

Shabbat is the antidote to the Golden Calf because it's the day when we stop thinking about the price of things and focus instead on the value of things. On Shabbat we can't sell or buy. We can't work or pay others to work for us. Instead we spend the day with family and friends around the Shabbat table. In shul, we renew our contacts with the community. We listen to Torah, reminding ourselves of our people's story. We pray, giving thanks for all the blessings God has given us.

Family, friends, community, the sense of being part of a people and its history, and above all giving thanks to God:

these are things that have a value but not a price. Or, to put it another way: a basic principle of time management is to learn to distinguish between things that are *important* and things that are *urgent*. During the week, we tend to respond to immediate pressures. The result is that we focus on what's urgent but not necessarily important.

The best antidote ever invented is Shabbat. On Shabbat we celebrate the things that are important but not urgent: the love between husband and wife, and between parents and children. The bonds of belonging. The story of which we are a part. The community that we support and that supports us in times of joy or grief. These are the ingredients of happiness. No one's last thought was ever, "I wish I'd spent more time in the office".

Hard times remind us of what good times tend to make us forget: where we came from, who we are, and why we are here. That's why hard times are the best times to plant the seeds of future happiness.

### *Letter 3: Being a Jewish parent*

SARA, DAVID, I want to talk about children. God has blessed you both with children. They are the joy of our life, as of yours. Enjoy them. Spend time with them. Play, learn, sing, *davven* and do *mitzvot* with them. On nothing else will your time be better spent. The love you give them when they are young will stay with them throughout their lives. Like sunshine it will make them flower and grow.

Having children is more than a gift. It's a responsibility. For us as Jews it's the most sacred responsibility there is. On it depends the future of the Jewish people. For four thousand years our people survived because in every generation, Jews made it their highest priority to hand their faith on to their children. They sanctified marriage. They consecrated the Jewish home. They built schools and houses of study. They saw education as the conversation between the generations: "You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home or travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up".

They saw Judaism the way an English aristocrat sees a stately home. You live in it but you don't really own it. It's handed on to you by your ancestors and it's your task to hand it on to future generations, intact, preserved, if possible

beautified and enhanced, and you do so willingly because you know that this is your legacy. It's what makes your family different, special. To lose it, sell it or let it fall into ruins, would be a kind of betrayal.

And that is the point. Today, on average throughout the Diaspora, one young Jew in two is deciding not to marry another Jew, build a Jewish home, have Jewish children and continue the Jewish story. That is tragic.

Your mother and I didn't spend too much time talking to you about our own family histories. But the truth is that virtually every Jew alive today has a history more remarkable than the greatest novel or family saga. It tells of how they were expelled from one country after another, how they lost everything and had to begin again. They were offered every blandishment to convert, but they said 'No'. They sacrificed everything to have Jewish grandchildren. And today when being a Jew demands almost no sacrifice, when we are freer to practise our faith than ever before, Jews are forgetting what it takes to have Jewish grandchildren.

So how do you hand your values on? By showing your children what you love. Rabbi Moshe Alshich, the sixteenth century rabbi, asked in his commentary to the *Shema*, "How do we 'teach these things' to our children? How can we be sure that they will learn?" His reply? "The answer lies in the verse two lines earlier: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might". What we love, they will love.

There are many reasons for the high rates of assimilation in Jewish life, but one is fundamental. We are heirs to several generations of Jews who were ambivalent about being Jewish.

I don't pass judgment on them, neither should you. Between the 1880s and the 1930s they lived through an age of antisemitism. Then came the Holocaust. Who would blame anyone in those days for saying, as did Heinrich Heine, "Judaism isn't a religion, it's a misfortune".

But we are long past those days. One of the greatest gifts you can give your children is to let them see you carry your identity with pride. Your mother and I tried to show you as best we could that for us Judaism is our legacy, our stately home, our gift from those who came before us; the greatest attempt in all of history to create a life of justice, compassion and love as a way of bringing the Divine presence down from heaven to earth so that it etches our lives with the soft radiance of eternity.

We can't live our children's lives for them. They are free. They will make their own choices. But we can show them what we love. If you want Jewish grandchildren, love Judaism and live in it with a sense of privilege and joy.

## Letter 4: Jewish education

SARA, DAVID, send your children to Jewish schools. They are the pride of our community. They are our best investment in the Jewish future. A generation ago, Jewish schools were often seen as second-best. They're where you sent your children if they couldn't get in elsewhere. Today, rightly, they are a first choice for many. That is a tribute to their excellence.

But they are more than that. For Jews, education is not just what we know. It's *who we are*. No people ever cared for education more. Our ancestors were the first to make education a religious command, and the first to create a compulsory universal system of schooling – eighteen centuries before Britain. The rabbis valued study as higher even than prayer. Almost 2,000 years ago, Josephus wrote: “Should anyone of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls.”

The Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built temples, the Romans built amphitheatres. Jews built schools. They knew that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. So Jews became the

people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. How can we deprive our children of that heritage?

Can you really be educated without knowing Shakespeare or Mozart or Michelangelo or the basic principles of physics, economics or politics? Can you be an educated Jew without at least a basic familiarity with Tanakh and Talmud, the classic Torah commentaries, the poetry of Judah Halevi, the philosophy of Maimonides, and the history of the Jewish people? Jews in Eastern Europe used to say, “To be an *apikores* (heretic) is understandable, but to be an *am ha'aretz* (ignoramus) is unforgivable”.

My children, I hope we taught you enough to know that the first duty of a Jewish parent is to ensure that their children have a Jewish education. For almost a century that whole value-system was in disarray because Jewish life was in disarray. Jews were in flight from persecution, first from Eastern Europe, then from Western Europe, then from Arab lands. They were preoccupied by rebuilding their lives and ensuring that their children were integrated into the wider society. Jewish education was a casualty of those times. But not now. Today we've begun to recover something of the tradition. Yet our standards are still far too low.

The world is changing ever faster. In a single generation, nowadays, there is more scientific and technological advance than in all previous centuries since human beings first set foot on earth. In uncharted territory, you need a compass. That's what Judaism is. It guided our ancestors through good times and bad. It gave them identity, security, and a sense of direction. It enabled them to cope with circumstances more

varied than any other people have ever known. It lifted them, often, to heights of greatness. Why? Because Judaism is about learning. Education counts for more in the long run than wealth or power or privilege. Those who know, grow.

“All you children shall be taught of the Lord” said Isaiah, “and great shall be the peace of your children”. Give your children a deep and wide Jewish education and you will be giving them the peace of knowing who they are and why.

There are only two other things more powerful still. First, practise at home what your children learn at school. Children need to see consistency. Otherwise they become confused, and eventually rebel.

Second, *let your children be your teachers*. Over the Shabbat table, let them share with you what they have learned at school during the week. You will be amazed at the pride you give them because you have allowed them to give something to you.

## *Letter 5: On being Jewish*

SARA, DAVID, you may wonder from time to time why your mother and I care so much about being Jewish. It’s a fair question, and this is my honest answer: Somehow, long ago, Jews were touched and transformed by a truth greater than themselves.

They were the first to encounter God as a presence within yet beyond the universe. This changed everything, for if there is only one God and every human being is in His image, it means that every human being has non-negotiable dignity. It means that human life is sacred. It means that in some ultimate sense we are all equal. And if the universe is the free creation of the free God, then we, in His image, are also free. From this flowed the system we call morality and all it implies by way of personal and collective responsibility.

Jews were the first people to understand the significance of human responsibility and freedom, the first to conceive of a society of equal dignity, the first to understand that right matters more than might, and a whole list of other insights that eventually revolutionised Western civilisation. Judaism inspired two other religions, Christianity and Islam, that between them today count more than half the six billion people on earth as their adherents. And even when Jews

rebelled against Judaism, they did so in world-changing ways: Spinoza, the founder of political liberalism, Karl Marx, the revolutionary, and Sigmund Freud, the doctor of the soul. I think all three were profoundly wrong, but they were all profound.

And Judaism is as relevant today as it ever was. Non-Jews admire Judaism for our strong families and communities, our commitment to education and the excellence of our schools, the emphasis we place on *chesed* and *tzedakah*, on practical acts of kindness and generosity. The Jewish voice is sought on questions of medical, social and business ethics. People respect Judaism for its wisdom and insight. It has integrity without fanaticism. It has strong principles without seeking to impose them on others. It has humour and humanity.

Of course, Judaism is demanding. There are so many laws, so many details, that you can sometimes lose sight of the big picture. It's like the first French impressionists. At first people could see only brushstrokes and confusion. It took time before they realised that Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and the rest were capturing the play of light on surfaces and producing a whole new way of seeing. Judaism can look like a blur of laws and customs, until you realise that it's a whole new way of living. *Halakhah*, Jewish law, is about translating the highest of ideals into the simplest of acts.

Here's the paradox: Most people think that more people would keep Judaism if only it were easier, less demanding. Why all the commandments, 613 of them? Wouldn't it be better if we made being Jewish simpler?

Let's see. Think of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Which of the three is kept, on average, by the greatest number of

Jews? More people keep Pesach than Sukkot. More people keep Sukkot than Shavuot. That's true wherever you go in the Jewish world.

Now ask, which is the most demanding? Pesach is by far the most difficult. It involves cleaning the house, koshering the kitchen, using special utensils, and much else besides. Next comes Sukkot. You have to buy a *lulav* and *etrog*. You have to make a *Sukkah*. Easiest by far is Shavuot, which has no special *mitzvah*, unless you count staying up late on the first night for a *Tikkun*. So, *the harder a festival is to keep, the more people keep it*.

Now think of the hardest day of all, one in which there is no eating or drinking, no joy or celebration, on which you spend the entire day in shul, thinking of all the things you did wrong. A perfect formula, you would have thought, for making sure that no one keeps it at all.

But of course the opposite is true. Yom Kippur, when all these things happen, is the day on which more Jews come to shul than any other in the entire year.

It's counterintuitive but true: *the things we value most are the things that are the most demanding*. That's true of study; it's true at work; it's true in sport; and it's true in matters of the spirit. Things that cost us little, we cherish little. What matter most to us are the things we make sacrifices for. If Judaism had been easier, it would have died out long ago.

Never doubt that it's a privilege to be a Jew. Head for head our people have done more to transform the world than any other. There are easier ways to live, but none more challenging. God asks great things of our people. That's what made our people great.

## *Letter 6: Jewish wisdom*

DEAR SARA AND DAVID, wisdom is free, yet it is also the most expensive thing there is, for we tend acquire it through failure or disappointment or grief. That is why we try to share our wisdom, so that others will not have to pay the price for it that we paid. These are some of the things Judaism has taught me about life, and I share them with you:

- Never try to be clever. Always try to be wise.
- Respect others even if they disrespect you.
- Never seek publicity for what you do. If you deserve it, you will receive it. If you don't, you will be attacked. In any case, goodness never needs to draw attention to itself.
- When you do good to others, it is yourself, your conscience and your self-respect, that will be the beneficiary. The greatest gift of giving is the opportunity to give.
- In life, never take shortcuts. There is no success without effort, no achievement without hard work.
- Keep your distance from those who seek honour. Be respectful, but none of us is called on to be a looking glass for those in love with themselves.
- In everything you do, be mindful that God sees all we do. There is no cheating God. When we try to deceive others,

- usually the only person we succeed in deceiving is ourself.
- Be very slow indeed to judge others. If they are wrong, God will judge them. If we are wrong, God will judge us.
  - Greater by far than the love we receive is the love we give.
  - It was once said of a great religious leader, that he was a man who took God so seriously that he never felt the need to take himself seriously at all. That is worth aspiring to.
  - Use your time well. Life is short, too short to waste on television, computer games and unnecessary emails; too short to waste on idle gossip, or envying others for what they have, too short for anger and indignation; too short to waste on criticising others. "Teach us to number our days", says the Psalm, "that we may get a heart of wisdom". But any day on which you have done some good to someone has not been wasted.
  - You will find much in life to distress you. People can be careless, cruel, thoughtless, offensive, arrogant, harsh, destructive, insensitive, and rude. That is their problem, not yours. Your problem is how to respond. "No one", a wise lady once said, "can make you feel inferior without your permission". The same applies to other negative emotions. Don't react. Don't respond. Don't feel angry, or if you do, pause for as long as it takes for the anger to dissipate, and then carry on with the rest of life. Don't hand others a victory over your own emotional state. Forgive, or if you can't forgive, ignore.
  - If you tried and failed, don't feel bad. God forgives our failures as soon as we acknowledge them as failures – and that spares us from the self-deception of trying to see them as success. No one worth admiring ever succeeded without

many failures on the way. The great poets wrote bad poems; the great artists painted undistinguished canvases; not every symphony by Mozart is a masterpiece. If you lack the courage to fail, then you lack the courage to succeed.

- Always seek out the friendship of those who are strong where you are weak. None of us has all the virtues. Even a Moses needed an Aaron. The work of a team, a partnership, a collaboration with others who have different gifts or different ways of looking at things, is always greater than any one individual can achieve alone.
- Create moments of silence in your soul if you want to hear the voice of God.
- If something is wrong, don't blame others. Ask, how can I help to put it right?
- Always remember that you create the atmosphere that surrounds you. If you want others to smile, you must smile. If you want others to give, you must give. If you want others to respect you, you must show your respect for them. How the world treats us is a mirror of how we treat the world.
- Be patient. Sometimes the world is slower than you are. Wait for it to catch up with you, for if you are on the right path, eventually it will.
- Never have your ear so close to the ground that you can't hear what an upright person is saying.
- Never worry when people say that you are being too idealistic. It is only idealistic people who change the world, and do you really want, in the course of your life, to leave the world unchanged?
- Be straight, be honest, and always do what you say you are going to do. There really is no other way to live.

## *Letter 7: Living Jewishly*

**I**N MY LAST LETTER I spoke about some of the things I learned from Judaism about life. In this, I want to share some of the things I have learned from life about Judaism.

- Never ever be embarrassed about being a Jew. Our people has survived so long and contributed so much, that you should see being Jewish as an honour and a responsibility.
- Some people look down on Jews: they always have. In which case, we have to walk tall, so that, to see our face, they are forced to look up.
- Never compromise your principles because of others. Don't compromise on kashrut or any other Jewish practise because you happen to find yourself among non-Jews or non-religious Jews. *Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.*
- Never look down on others. Never think that being Jewish means looking down on gentiles. It doesn't. Never think that being a religious Jew entitles you to look down on non-religious Jews. It doesn't. The greatest Jew, Moses, was also, according to the Torah, "the humblest person on the face of the earth". Humility does not mean self-abasement. True

humility is the ability to see good in others without worrying about yourself.

- Never stop learning. I once met a woman who was 103 and yet who still seemed youthful. What, I asked her, was her secret? She replied, “Never be afraid to learn something new”. Then I realised that learning is the true test of age. If you are willing to learn, you can be 103 and still young. If you aren’t, you can be 23 and already old.
- Never confuse righteousness with self-righteousness. They sound similar, but they are opposites. The righteous see the good in people; the self-righteous see the bad. The righteous make you feel bigger; the self-righteous make you feel small. The righteous praise; the self-righteous criticise. The righteous are generous; the self-righteous, grudging and judgmental. Once you know the difference, keep far from the self-righteous, who come in all forms, right and left, religious and secular. Win the respect of people you respect, and ignore the rest.
- Whenever you do a *mitzvah*, stop and be mindful. Every *mitzvah* is there to teach us something, and it makes all the difference to pause and remember why. Mindless Judaism is not good for the soul.
- When you *davven*, reflect carefully on the meaning of the words. Remember too that in *davening* we are part of a four-thousand-year-old choral symphony, made up of the voices of all the Jews of all the countries in all the centuries who said these words. Some said these prayers in the midst of suffering; others as they faced exile and expulsion; some even said them in the concentration camps. They are words sanctified by tears, but now we are saying them in

the midst of freedom. The prayers of our ancestors have come true for us. Therefore our prayers honour them as well as God, for without them we would not today be Jews, and without us carrying on their tradition, their hopes would have been in vain.

- Don’t worry if you can’t keep up with the congregation. One word said from the heart is greater than a hundred said without understanding or attention.
- Always be willing to share your Judaism. On Shabbat or the festivals, invite guests into your home. Once a week, learn with people who know less than you. The difference between material and spiritual goods is this: with material things – like wealth or power – the more you share, the less you have. With spiritual things – like knowledge or friendship or celebration – the more you share, the more you have.
- Never be impatient with the details of Jewish life. *God lives in the details*. Judaism is about the poetry of the ordinary, the things we would otherwise take for granted. Jewish law is the sacred choreography of everyday life.
- God lives in the space we make for him. Every *mitzvah* we do, every prayer we say, every act of learning we undertake, is a way of making space for God.

## Letter 8: Faith

SARA, DAVID, these are difficult times, times of risk and danger, recession and uncertainty. Don't think I am being naïve if I say: these are the times when we need faith. Not blind faith, naïve optimism, but the kind of faith that says, we are not helpless and we are not alone.

The Jewish people have been around for longer than almost any other. We have known our share of suffering. And still we are here, still young, still full of energy, still able to rejoice and celebrate and sing. Jews have walked more often than most through the valley of the shadow of death, yet they lost neither their humour nor their hope.

Faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty. Faith does not mean seeing the world as you would like it to be; it means seeing the world exactly as it is, yet never giving up the hope that we can make it better by the way we live – by acts of *chein* and *chessed*, graciousness and kindness, and by forgiveness and generosity of spirit.

In Judaism, faith does not mean “believing six impossible things before breakfast”. No faith respects human intelligence more. Jews argue: we take nothing for granted. We say, “The Lord is my shepherd”, yet no Jew is a sheep. We are commanded to teach our children to ask questions.

Ours is a questioning religion. What then is faith?

Faith is the knowledge that we are here for a reason, and that in our journey through life God is with us, lifting us when we fall, forgiving us when we fail, believing in us more than we believe in ourselves. This is not wishful thinking. It is a fact. But it is not a simple fact.

Just as we have to train ourselves to listen to great music or appreciate great art, so we have to train ourselves to sense the presence of God in our lives. That training comes in two forms. One is Torah, the other is *mitzvot*. Through Torah we learn what God asks of us. Through *mitzvot*, we practise doing God's will. That is how we open ourselves to God. Faith allows us to take risks and face the future without fear.

Sometimes we think that matters of the spirit are insubstantial compared to the battles of the real world. But consider this: the financial collapse came about because of a loss of *confidence* in institutions. Banks stopped lending because of a breakdown in *trust* in the ability of borrowers to repay. Trust and confidence are spiritual things, yet the market depends on them. The word ‘credit’ comes from the Latin ‘credo’, which means, *Ani maamin*, ‘I believe’.

After an earlier great crash, Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”. Faith defeats fear, and gives us the confidence to survive every loss and begin again. Don't believe that faith is a small thing. It isn't. Whatever else you do in the coming year, practise your faith and renew it daily. The Jewish people kept faith alive. Faith kept the Jewish people alive.

So what do you do if, God forbid, you find yourself in the midst of crisis? You lose your job. You miss the promotion you

were expecting. You find yourself with a medical condition that requires a major change of lifestyle. You make a bad investment decision that costs you dearly. You find an important relationship in your life under stress. Any of the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, can plunge you without warning into crisis. How do you survive the trauma and the pain?

There's one biblical passage that's deeply helpful. It's the famous, enigmatic story in Genesis 32 in which, at night, Jacob wrestles with an unknown, unnamed adversary: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak". It was this passage that gave the Jewish people their name, Israel, meaning, "One who struggles with God and with man and prevails". The key phrase is when Jacob says to the stranger, "I will not let you go until you bless me". *Within every crisis lies the possibility of blessing.* Events that at the time were the most painful, are also those that in retrospect we see most made us grow.

Crisis forces us to make difficult but necessary decisions. It makes us ask, "Who am I and what really matters to me?" It plunges us from the surface to the depths, where we discover strengths we didn't know we had, and a clarity of purpose we had hitherto lacked. So you have to say to every crisis, "I will not let you go until you bless me".

The struggle isn't easy. Though Jacob was undefeated, he "limped". Battles leave scars. Yet God is with us even when He seems to be against us. For if we refuse to let go of Him, He refuses to let go of us, giving us the strength to survive and emerge stronger, wiser, blessed.

The oldest question in religion is: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But there are two ways of asking this question. The first is, "Why has God done this to me?" Never ask this question, because we will never know the answer. God cares for us, but He also cares for everyone and everything. We think of now; God thinks of eternity. We could never see the universe from God's point of view. So we will never find the answer to the question: "Why me?"

But there is another way of asking the question. "Given that this has happened, what does God want me to learn from it? How is He challenging me to grow? How is He calling on me to respond?" Asking it this way involves looking forward, not back. "Why did God do this?" is the wrong question. The right one is: "How shall I live my life differently because this has happened?"

That is how to deal with crisis. Wrestle with it, refusing to let it go until it blesses you, until you emerge stronger, better or wiser than you were before. *To be a Jew is not to accept defeat.* That is the meaning of faith.

## Letter 9: Making a blessing over life

SARA, DAVID, Yom Kippur is the day on which we give a reckoning of our life, remembering how short life is, and how important it is, therefore, to live it well. “Teach us to number our days”, says the Psalm, “that we may get a heart of wisdom”.

What we know we can lose, we learn to cherish. That’s why the Jewish people at the dawn of its history suffered slavery so that ever after they would value freedom and fight for it. It’s why Abraham had to come almost to the point of losing his child, so that Jews would love and cherish children. Those lessons were so deep – burned into our collective unconscious – that they’ve lasted for thousands of years.

It’s no small thing that on the holiest day of the Jewish year *we think about the possibility of death, so that for the rest of the year we will love life*. Jews are the people who more than any other see God in life – this life, down here on earth.

Many other religions didn’t do this. They thought that God was to be found in life-after-death, or in a monastic retreat, or in mystical ecstasy. For them the holy was *somewhere else*. For us the holy is in the here-and-now. The Jewish toast is *le-chayim*, “To life”. Moses’ great command was *Uvacharta va-chayyim*, “Choose life”. From Rosh

Hashanah to Yom Kippur we pray: “Remember us for life, King who delights in life, and write us in the Book of Life for Your sake, God of life”.

To find God you don’t need to climb mountains, cross oceans or travel to a fabled land. God is in the breath we breathe, the acts we do, the prayers we say, the love we give. God, vaster than the universe, is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Our first prayer every morning is *Modeh Ani*, “I thank You, living and eternal King, who has restored my soul in mercy”. Thank You, God, for giving me back my life.

The whole of Judaism is a sustained discipline in *not taking life for granted*: the thanks we say in our prayers, the blessings we make over every pleasure, the way kashrut turns eating into a holy act and the laws of Jewish family life sanctify the act of love. Shabbat stops us from travelling through life so fast that we never get to enjoy the view.

The financial crash should teach us something. You can invest in the stock exchange, but the market can crash. You can invest in a house but prices can fall. You can follow secular trends but they can deceive and disappoint and leave you counting the cost. The best investment is in a life well lived, a life of meaning and principle and purpose, if possible framed by a happy marriage, a warm and embracing family, and a strong and supportive community.

Judaism helps us find these things. It sanctifies our families and homes. It gives us values to share with our children. As a way of life, it’s been tested for longer than any other. As a source of wisdom, it is unparalleled in its depth and breadth.

Judaism gives us roots to keep us grounded and wings to help us fly. *Mitzvot* train us in healthful habits of the heart.

Prayer is the renewable energy of the soul, and faith is its satellite navigation system. Every blessing we make is a way of saying Yes to life. God is the God of life and Judaism is the religion of life.

Throughout history the pendulum has swung between two kinds of society: puritanical cultures that distrust pleasure, and hedonistic cultures that worship it. We do something better than either: we *sanctify* pleasure, taking our most physical drives and dedicating them to God. There are many faiths throughout the world, but none that has led a tiny people for so long, so profoundly, to find joy in life.

And yes, life can be hard and full of the possibility of loss, pain, disappointment and grief. But the solution is not to avoid taking risks. It is to cultivate the things that give us strength: the love of family and friends, the support of a community, the habit of prayer that allows us to lean on God, and the faith that God has faith in us, forgiving our faults and giving us the strength, after every failure, to begin again.

Judaism was the first religion in history to place love at the heart of the spiritual life: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might. Love your neighbour. Love the stranger. The greatest love song in all religious literature is *Shir ha-Shirim*, The Song of Songs.

And what we love most – because that is where God is to be found – is life itself. That is our greatest strength. It enabled our ancestors to survive every persecution. It helped Holocaust survivors to survive. It gave the Jewish people the courage to rebuild the land and state of Israel. That's why our greatest prayer on this day of days is: "Write us in the Book of Life". We don't ask for wealth or fame, stardom or

success. We don't pray to be spared trials and tribulations. We just ask for life.

That is what Judaism is: a life of love and a love of life. All the rest is commentary.

## Letter 10: Finding happiness

SARA, DAVID, not everything in the coming year will be under our control. It never is. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed ...” The book is being written now but we don’t get to read it in advance. Even in the twenty-first century, when human beings have decoded the genome and photographed the birth of galaxies, there is one thing not even the greatest Nobel prize-winning scientist knows: what tomorrow will bring. We live with uncertainty. That is the human condition and always will be.

But what matters *will* be under our control. How will we act and react? Will we behave honourably, graciously, generously? Will we help others? Will we make sacrifices for the sake of our ideals? Will we live for something bigger than the self? Will we honour, praise, respect, admire? Will we give hospitality to the lonely, comfort to the bereaved, and support to those in need? Will we give our family time? Will we give our soul the space to breathe? Will we love and thank God? Will we enhance other people’s lives?

These are the questions we should ask ourselves on Yom Kippur. For it is not what happens to us on which our happiness depends. It depends on *how we respond* to what happens to us. So in this, my last letter to you before Yom

Kippur, let me share with you ten secrets I’ve learned from Judaism. They will bring you happiness whatever fate has in store for you in the coming year.

1. *Give thanks.* Once a day, at the beginning of the morning prayers, thank God for all He has given you. This alone will bring you halfway to happiness. We already have most of the ingredients of a happy life. It’s just that we tend to take these for granted and concentrate instead on our unfulfilled desires. Giving thanks in prayer focuses attention on the good and helps us keep a sense of proportion about the rest. It’s better than shopping – and cheaper too.

2. *Praise.* Catch someone doing something right and say so. Most people, most of the time, are unappreciated. Being recognised, thanked and congratulated by someone else is one of the most empowering things that can happen to us. So don’t wait for someone to do it for you: do it for someone else. You will make their day, and that will help make yours. *Alenu leshabe’ach* means, “It’s our duty to praise”.

3. *Spend time with your family.* Keep Shabbat, so that there is at least one time a week when you sit down to have a meal together with no distractions – no television, no phone, no email, just being together, talking together, celebrating one another’s company. Happy marriages and families need dedicated time.

4. *Discover meaning.* Take time, once in a while, to ask the Yom Kippur questions, “Why am I here? What do I hope to achieve? How best can I use my gifts? What would I wish to be said about me when I am no longer here?” Finding meaning is essential to a fulfilled life – and how will you find it if you never look? If you don’t know where you want to be,

you will never get there however fast you run.

5. *Live your values.* Most of us believe in high ideals, but we act on them only sporadically. The best thing to do is to establish habits that get us to enact those ideals daily. That is what *mitzvot* are: ideals in action, constantly rehearsed.

6. *Forgive.* This is the emotional equivalent of losing excess weight. Life is too short to bear a grudge or seek revenge. Forgiving someone is good for them but even better for you. The bad has happened. It won't be made better by your dwelling on it. Let it go. Move on.

7. *Keep growing.* Don't stand still, especially in the life of the spirit. The Jewish way to change the world is to start with yourself. Anne Frank once wrote: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world".

8. *Learn to listen.* Often in conversation we spend half our time thinking of what we want to say next instead of paying attention to what the other person is saying. Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give to someone else. It means that we are open to them, that we take them seriously, that we accept graciously their gift of words. The keyword in Judaism is *Shema*, which simply means "Listen".

9. *Create moments of silence in the soul.* Liberate yourself, if only five minutes daily, from the tyranny of technology, the mobile phone, the laptop and all the other electronic intruders. Remember that God is in every breath we breathe. Inhale the heady air of existence, and feel the joy of being.

10. *Transform suffering.* When bad things happen to you, use them to sensitise you to the pain of others. The people who survived tragedy and became stronger as a result did not

ask, "Who did this to me?" They asked, "What does this allow me to do that I could not have done before?" They didn't curse the darkness; instead they lit a candle. They refused to become victims of circumstance. They became, instead, agents of hope.

Life's too full of blessings to waste time and attention on artificial substitutes. Live, give, forgive, celebrate and praise: these are still the best ways of making a blessing over life, thereby turning life into a blessing.

Sara, David, our beloved children: you will never know how many blessings you have given your mother and me. The best we can give you is to pray that God help you to be a blessing to others. Be the best you can, be an ambassador for Judaism and the Jewish people, use each day to do something demanding, and never be afraid to learn and grow.

We love you. May God write you and your children in the Book of Life.

The front cover illustration is "The Book of Life II" by Shraga Weil.

Weil was born in Nitra, Czechoslovakia in 1918, and studied at the Academy of Art in Prague. He produced his first graphic works during World War II, which he spent as a prisoner. After the war, he sailed for Israel on an illegal immigrant ship. He arrived in Israel in 1947 and became a member of Kibbutz Ha'ogen, where he lived and worked until his death on 20 February 2009.

His works include the doors of the main entrance to the Knesset and the President's residence in Jerusalem, the ceramic walls of the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv and the wooden panels in the Israel hall at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. His work blends modernism and tradition, and is marked by his vivid use of biblical and rabbinic motifs. In 1959 he was awarded the Dizengoff Prize.

In this serigraph, Weil blends images of the Book of Life, an open window expressing the possibilities of the future, and blazing light and green leaves symbolising the Jewish rebirth, individual and collective, he experienced in Israel.

It is reproduced courtesy of the Safrai Gallery in Jerusalem, [www.safrai.com](http://www.safrai.com), where many of his serigraphs and posters can be purchased.

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