

Letter to Suzannah, Part II

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In the spirit of this election season, this message has been approved by Suzannah and Richard Cicale.

Dear Suzannah,

The last time I wrote you a public letter was the Yom Kippur after we celebrated your becoming bat mitzvah. I was still fresh from the glow of that spectacular Seattle summer weekend when our family, friends, and congregation celebrated your coming of age among the Jewish people.

When you were a newborn, I remember sitting in our cramped New York City apartment, looking at you in amazement all wrapped like a peanut, and exclaiming to Poppy “I can’t believe she’s going to walk and talk and even become bat mitzvah...*some day!*” Poppy laughed and said that I should enjoy it, even the rough spots, because before I turn around your bat mitzvah will be here. “I just hope I’m there too,” he joked. And thank God, he was. He was on our bima passing Torah to me and Dad so we could pass Torah onto you.

And oh, how Poppy’s heart would burst with pride if he could see you today. Because now you’re 3500 miles away on your college adventure, navigating a new life of your own. For the past year, you, Dad, and I have prepared for this leave-taking. Throughout the year, I have told every B’Mitzvah family that I’ve worked with, “Enjoy it, even the rough spots, because the time between B’Mitzvah and high school graduation goes by in a flash.”

Having you gone, I imagine, is what it feels like to have a phantom limb. My heart is as filled with worry and wonder as it was from the moment you were born. Only now, I can’t keep my eye on you, protecting you from the dangers of the world. It’s a blessing, really; Dad and I know that. We are in awe of the adult you’re becoming—self-possessed, strong-minded, with a solid moral compass. As Poppy would say, it’s a crapshoot and we got lucky.

This is our first Yom Kippur that we are spending apart. I realize I’m writing this letter more for me than for you; to ensure that the Jewish life that Dad and I have created for you continues to inform your choices as you move toward full independence.

It’s so Jewish to start the year with Yom Kippur, contemplating mortality, reviewing our misdeeds, seeking and giving forgiveness. I know it sounds morose, Sweetie, but we do this because Judaism is passionately, vehemently, vigorously, life oriented. We take this day to prepare ourselves for the next chapter of our lives, making sure that we’re in right relationship not just with ourselves, but with others, and with the divine however we understand it. Yom Kippur compels us, through reflection and repair, to live a fulfilling, purpose-filled life, today, *now*, because tomorrow is promised to no one. On Yom Kippur, by engaging in *teshuvah*, we give ourselves the gift of letting go and moving on. This is why it’s the holiest day of the Jewish year.

As you heard me say on Rosh Hashanah, one must *participate* in Judaism and the Jewish people to reap the benefits of our tradition. We are, by design, a relational people. In the mythic landscape of the Jewish world everything depends on *b'rit*, mutual, covenantal, full-hearted relationships. The love of God with humanity. The love of God with the Jewish people. The love of God that engenders our system of *mitzvot*, our sacred responsibilities and rituals. Looked at in one way, the *mitzvot* are a system of spiritual practices that aim to deepen our connections with each other and with God. They are a training in mindfulness, in helping us to be fully present, and seeing the interconnectedness of everything in the universe.

I had an *aha* moment last year regarding *mitzvot*. It was a Friday evening, early enough in the spring before the grad parties and graduation rituals had begun. Still, it was a hectic time. The unrest across college campuses was at a fever pitch. I was relieved that you felt safe in your high school, and that whatever uncomfortable moments you encountered you handled with your usual aplomb and stoicism. I was also consciously trying not to bring the pressures from work home with me; but you know me well, and you know when I am under stress. The plan that Friday evening was for Dad to pick you up from your tennis game, one of the last of your high school career, and I would meet you both back home after I led Shabbat services.

I don't remember the specific service that night, but I can tell you that overall Shabbat services were a salve for me during this last heart-wrenching year. I am moved to tears when I think of the community members who had the courage to make it to services in 5784, to believe in Shabbat, to believe in a world that still overflows with blessing, even as it is marked by warfare and pain. To take a rest, a break, from the noise and hubbub of the world. To put your lot in with others who seek the same. To sing and pray and feel less alone.

I don't remember the service, but I do remember that first step outside into the cool spring air. I was breathing deeper than I had beforehand. The trees were budding. The sky was still alit with a golden hue, streaked with blue, violet, and pink, a majestic Western sunset. With relief, I realized the long winter was behind us.

I arrived home before you and Dad. I opened the front door, and a shaft of the same golden light was shining on our dining room table, across the wine cup, challah, candles, and all the trappings for hard shell tacos, or Taco Shabbat, as we call it, the only Shabbat meal that Dad can make entirely on his own. In that moment, I thanked God for Daddy. Out of love for you and me and the Jewish values we hold as a family, Dad always ensures that the presence of Shabbat is in our house, especially during the weeks when I can't find a free moment to help. That set table reminded me that sometimes *mitzvot* feel like obligations, responsibilities, but really, they are vessels where love is poured into and strengthens our relationships with each other and God.

As you know, when I was a young woman, I studied Jewish philosophy. I stumbled then on the story of Franz Rosenzweig who lived in the early 20th century. As a young man of the bourgeoisie class, Rosenzweig moved to Berlin, a thriving metropolis. He was ambitious, and upon the advice of his cousin and friend, both of whom had recently converted to Christianity, he decided he, too, would be baptized. He was not overly religious, and converting out of Judaism would improve his social standing and job prospects. Always a discerning man, Rosenzweig decided to defer his baptism until after the

Days of Awe, wanting to spend one last Yom Kippur with his people before taking the plunge into Christianity.

Something happened to him on that Erev Yom Kippur—something about the open Ark hollowed out of Torah scrolls, and the melancholy notes of Kol Nidre rising and falling, awakened in him a deep-seeded feeling of *commandedness*.

Rosenzweig never divulged exactly what happened for him that night; it remains a mystery. He emerged from Yom Kippur rejecting Christianity and recommitting to living a Jewish life. He began to take on *mitzvot*, one at a time, making them his own, not intending to reject modernism, just drawn to the ancestral ways of Judaism. A few years after his Yom Kippur experience, Rosenzweig was asked if he lay tefillin, the prayer boxes some Jews adorn on their head and arm during morning prayers. He answered, “Not yet.” Not yet. Not because he intended to become traditionally observant, but because he found ever deepening meaning and possibility in engaging in authentic Jewish acts and understanding the universe based on authentic Jewish values. He saw this as an ongoing process. Rosenzweig died at only 42, and yet he lived fully. Today, he’s considered one of the great Jewish philosophers to shape modern Jewish thought.

I’ve always been moved by Rosenzweig’s story, undoubtedly because it reflects my own path. You know Nana and Poppy raised me in a home heavy on culture, light on religion. I had to find my own way into living a religious life. I remember the very first time I kept Shabbat. I was living alone, and I felt so awkward standing there, lighting those candles, and haltingly reading the prayers from a photocopy. Now, all these years later, I can’t imagine living life without demarcating one full day a week to all that I hold sacred.

It has been said that Jews take a leap of action instead of a leap of faith. Something transformative happens when you *do* Judaism. Some mystics teach that the Hebrew word *mitzvah*—commandment—is related to an Aramaic word which means to join. Every *mitzvah* we engage in is another link, securing the invisible lines of connection that weave the universe together, and tightens the bonds between us. In Judaism, we hold our responsibilities to each other as sacred and show our love through our actions, just like Dad did when he set up Taco Shabbat for you and me.

Still, sometimes we fail each other. I am thinking of all the horrific violence we bore witness to in 5784. It’s interesting to note that Judaism has no single word for sin; instead, our tradition has 22 different words for the various ways we lapse in our moral judgment. Every time we engage in a wrongdoing, it habituates us just a little more to ignore the cost of our damaging behavior. And, thinking about 5784, we are reminded that there is real wickedness in this world; there are people who intentionally hurt others and derive some kind of ghastly gratification from it.

Yom Kippur is dedicated to *teshuvah*. The English translations of this word—atonement, repentance, penitence—all have an undertone of the Christian concept of original sin. We Jews see the *mishigas* in the Garden of Eden with a more generous view of human nature. Judaism believes that to be human is to be beloved by God; to be born with appetites that allow us to fully enjoy the world and each other physically, emotionally, intellectually; and to have the ability to do good things and bad things with those appetites. In Judaism, moral consciousness and moral choice are God’s gift to humanity.

Yom Kippur invites us to see ourselves as we *really* are, the good, the bad, and the ugly secrets we share with no one. Whatever wrong we've committed, Yom Kippur opens the space for us to make a different choice moving forward. Judaism is here to help us to fully accept ourselves as we are—our failures, mistakes, and sins alike. To care for ourselves enough to *want* to change—to repair the brokenness in our lives and release ourselves from regret and self-chastisement. Yom Kippur, our day devoted to *teshuvah*, opens new possibilities for the new year. With luck, we emerge from this day feeling a sense of *commandedness* and a readiness to begin anew. The goal of today is to restore our covenantal relationships and recommit to our sacred obligations.

Yet if Yom Kippur is to be transformative, each of us has moral choices to make. In this way, as different as Daddy and I are, we're also very much alike. We've both *chosen* Judaism for ourselves. We've built our home together on the foundation of Jewish values. We've chosen to center our lives on *brit*, *mitzvot*, *teshuvah* to strengthen our bonds with each other and with you, Sweetheart.

It's hard to believe that you no longer live full time in our family home. This is the joy and heartbreak of this new phase of our lives. Our job in raising you is mostly done. Of course, Dad and I will always be here. Of course, our home will always be your home. And I hope you know, Suze, that Judaism will always be your home, too.

My prayer on this first Yom Kippur that we are spending apart is that you hear the call of Kol Nidre—those haunting notes that rise and fall and rise again—beckoning you, reminding you that you can always return to the deepest part of yourself. That choice is now yours, and yours alone, to make.

As I said to you five years ago:

Breathe in, sweetheart, and rise up to your full strength.

Breathe out and share your gifts with the world.

And in every moment, with every breath, know that the love Daddy and I offer you flows from the Source of all being.

May God bless and protect you, Peanut; and may God bless the whole human family with peace.

I will always love you,

Mom