

In my almost 20 year in the rabbinate, I have learned that if we don't tell our children, our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, our students, of our past than no one else will and we will be lost. At first meetings with Bar and Bat Mitzvah students and their parents, I ask the child their Hebrew name and who they are named after. Often the students know the first part of their Hebrew name (they do not know their parent's Hebrew names) and the relationship with that specific relative. In continued conversation, their Great-Uncle Bernie, or Great- Grandma Rose comes across as a name floating in history. Imagine if these children had not only photos of the person for whom they were named but letters, diary entries, an ethical will. What if we not only put together photo albums of the living, but also of the dead? They would be remembered as fleshed out real people- with foibles and desires, who loved and who valued. And the children who held their name would feel connected.

In Judaism, the tradition of leaving a spiritual legacy has its roots in the Tanach. In parashah Vayetze of Genesis, Jacob gathers his twelve sons by his bedside as he is about to die. He offers them both blessing and curse according to their actions in life. He leaves them words and a mission. Thousands of years later, we, his ancestor still have Jacob's missives- what he wanted for his kids and perhaps what he wants for us.

In the Talmud and later responsa, these ethical words are called tzvaot (wills). Many have been preserved from the medieval period forward and it is most interesting to see how the values are often similar from generation to generation. Ethical wills are most often written around the High Holidays when we begin to think about our own mortality and how we want to be remembered. These words that I have penned are not only for my children and grandchildren, but also for the child who will someday bear my name and for you, my dear congregants.

My Dearest Bailey, Jackson and Sophie,

These are perhaps the most difficult words that I will ever write to you, but I want you to know some things about your Mommy, your Daddy, yourselves and the world in which you were born into.

Today is the most sacred day of our Jewish year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The symbols and liturgy of Yom Kippur could not be filled with more reminders to count our blessings and to try to understand the miraculous nature of this world. From the sound of the shofar which he heard on Rosh HaShannah, which wakes our soul to prayers written over the centuries, we are told over and over again how precious life is.

After watching the three of you grow from newborns with inquisitive eyes to toddlers with your own ideas, opinions and stubborn natures, to tweens, Daddy and I have never been more aware of miracles. With the help of God, we

created you, and with the help of God and the support of family and community, we pray to continue to shape you into giving, loving people.

Bailey, Jack and Sophie- there are times when I hear you call Mommy and it brings me both the greatest joy and the most overwhelming sense of responsibility. Daddy and I have faced many challenges in our lives- but being a parent to the three of you is the greatest and the most fulfilling. There is much that I want to teach you about life... much that I want you to know about how to becoming good and decent people...about becoming learned and active Jews...about evolving into the Bailey, Jackson and Sophie that you are meant to be. And the themes of these days of awe could not be a better time to convey some of these thoughts.

As a rabbi, I often speak about being in the present, living in the moment, but my children, it is very difficult to do so. Not only for me, but you will see for you as well. At this stage in your life, everything is the present. Future and past are not yet concepts you understand. It's now and now only. As adults, we forget that lesson and look towards the future or live in the past. It takes great will to stop and step away from our lives for a sense of perspective. It often takes a miracle to smack us in the face and remind us to be grateful.

Daddy and I could not have gotten smacked any harder- three blessings in two years. Your healthy sturdy bodies are miracles, Yom Kippur remind us of the fragility of life. We do not know what can happen to us at any time. This has become cliché but only because it is the most profound truth. Our world is replete with disease, disaster, accidents and acts of terror. As a rabbi, I have comforted children who have suddenly lost parents and parents who have suddenly lost children. Life is not fair... and there are never any answers. My children, there is a randomness to this beautiful and painful world that God created. I have stopped asking why, because there is only silence as a response, and so I have learned that it's more important to act- to comfort the mourner, to reach out beyond yourself to those in pain, to be a loving presence. We are all responsible to bring healing to this world. For if we do not, that no one else will.

Continue to become who you are meant to be- even if that means that you challenge the status quo. Shakespeare said, "To thine own self be true." Learn what is in your soul. Learn your strengths and your weaknesses. Control what you can control and leave the rest up to God. A great teacher once told me, we make plans and God laughs. Words could not be truer.

There are those of us here who have made plans for our lives, done everything that we thought was right and just, but somehow what we dreamt of, what we imagined did not manifest in reality. We wonder where we have gone wrong and have a difficult time seeing that we are not the creators of our own destiny; it is just the way life turns out. I am blessed with all that life has given me; but there are those who would look at my life with the opposite

perspective. The richest people that I know are the ones who are constantly striving to be better people, to learn more, even when they could be satisfied with their current status in life.

Be cognizant of your struggles, and you will struggle, while never taking your blessings for granted. The greatest of our blessings is our continued health. Our tradition tells us that each of our bodies is called a *Mikdash Me'at*... a small sanctuary. We are by our very nature holy and our bodies are holy. Treat them that way. Keep them clean, brush your teeth twice a day, floss, eat right (your mother is trying to), and exercise. Judaism does not stress an ascetic lifestyle but it does teach us to celebrate in healthy and appropriate doses. Allow yourselves to dance. When life is good...when you are filled with joy, express that joy, from the deepest recesses of your heart, let your laughter bubble over. Take time to truly notice and treasure your body. There are a series of blessings that we Jews say every morning called Nissim B'Chol Yom. In them we thank God for allowing us certain freedoms. Each blessing has a corresponding motion from wiggling our toes to stretching our legs and embracing the world with our arms. There is even a blessing for going to the bathroom. So my babies, if everything works, praise God.

This afternoon we have a special service called Yizkor- remembering. In our tradition, we remember and give honor to our ancestors. You are all named after special people. Bailey, your first name is for Daddy's Dad, Barry. He was a very complicated soul, and struggled much in life but his greatest joy was being a Dad. Jackson, you are named for Daddy's, Grandpa Jack who was one of the gentlest, kindest souls one would ever hope to meet- Grandpa Jack was one of my true loves. You are also named for your great-great grandfather Jacob, who helped to raise Papa into the incredible man that he is. Without Jacob in his life, Papa would be someone different. Sophie you are named for Daddy's Grandpa Sy who taught Daddy to fish and who had great business acumen. You are also named for Nana's daddy Stanley, who had the ability to make us laugh and cry at the same time. Each of you has a middle name beginning with the letter A for Nana's mommy Anne, a woman of tremendous strength of character. Your great-grandmother was like a reed; she blew with the wind, the vicissitudes of life, but always sustained her firm roots. We miss these people each and every day. But we still feel their love. They are all a part of you. Memory is one of the most important abilities that human beings possess. Specifically, Judaism teaches us over and over again to remember. Look at our Hagaddah as an example: Rabbi Akiba teaches in the name of Rebbe Tarfon who teaches in the name of Rebbe Shmuel who teaches in the name of Rebbe Joshua. Our sacred texts are covered with the imprints of generations before. Whether we like it or not, who we are and what we do comes from those who modeled living for us. We remember them in times of pain and in times of joy; in anguish and in complacency. We are commanded to remember everyone from our patriarchs and matriarchs to those in our own family. Occasionally, we try to run away from family identity- at times for a good reason- but in the

end we must acknowledge those who came before us and the lessons they taught. Every life, every soul teaches, through both positive and negative example. Take those lessons and make them your own. Memory is a hallmark of these days of awe.

Another hallmark of these days is justice. We stand before God the judge and examine our actions. Judaism obligates us to tirdof, tirdof tzedek, pursue, pursue justice. Everyone deserves freedom. Everyone has the right to have food in their belly and clothes on their back. Everyone has the right to worship God the way that they want and to raise their voice in protest.

Speaking about justice and acting upon it are two very different things. You will see as you grow that the world in which we live seems unjust. You will see people who are sick and starving. You will see people without homes. People who are frightened and lost. We were slaves thousands of years ago in Egypt and we know how it feels to be the stranger in a strange land. Follow our obligation to love the stranger. Stand up for injustice. Do what you can to make a difference in this world.

Part of that means that you need to care for the world. We are just learning of the tremendous damage that generations past have done to the earth with our technology. The Torah has taught us that we let the land lay fallow for part of the Sabbatical year and for the entire Jubilee year. Unfortunately, we have not always taken God's word to heart. You will bear the brunt of the earth's wrath. So take care of her. Treat her gently. You see your father's careful recycling- if he had his druthers the entire world would be environmentally sound. My children, if you help to reverse some of the damage that we have done to this earth than your children and your children's children will be able to dance in flowers, make angels in the snow, jump in puddles rather than live with the fear of tornados, monsoons and tsunamis.

God created Eve as a helpmeet for Adam. It is our prayer that you find a helpmeet in life, a partner to love and share your days. I feel very lucky to have found my joy with your father. Our relationship is not always perfect, but we continually work towards making it better. You are lucky enough to be surrounded by couples who make love look easy: Nana and Papa, Lili and Uncle Jon, Aunt Jeri and Uncle Elliot, Tara and Abby. Know that each of these relationships take work- all relationships take work if they are to work. May you each find another soul who compliments your own- be it man or woman, - and may you and your partner create Jewish families of strength.

You are already outgoing children, who stop to smile and say hello to everyone who might cross your path. You never know what that smile may mean to another- your light may help someone to change their life at a crucial crossroad.

Seek out friends and create authentic caring relationships. Learn to be vulnerable, to open yourself to others- be truthful. Know that within our family, you will have your deepest friends. Bailey and Sophie and Jack, may you always look out for each other, may you always protect each other, and may you be mirrors for each other. No one will love you as fiercely as your siblings- my closest woman friend is my sister. And I pray that you will be devoted to each other as I am to her.

Bailey, Jack and Sophie, you know that I am a rabbi and what this means. You have had my full attention for many years. Now, I feel blessed to stand on the Bimah again. Know that you will always be my top priority. I will make every effort to be there when you need me. Being a rabbi fills my soul with joy. I am able to live my passion each and every day. But first and foremost, I am your mommy. It is what I was born to do. And it is my most important responsibility to you and to the world.

Part of what I hope to teach you is how living a Jewish life makes a difference. Daddy and I will give you the foundation, with the help of our community but you should know that we want you to love being Jewish on your own terms. Religion is very important to your father and I. Daddy was raised in a community where he was ostracized for being a Jew, where he had swastikas carved into his locker. Rather than running from Judaism, he embraced it. When we met, he belonged to two synagogues as a single member and he was not afraid to date a rabbi and what that might mean for his future.

Religion is complicated. People use it to begin wars and cultivate hatred- which never was the intention, or ever will be the intention of faith. Unfortunately, many people assume that religion demands steadfast belief. What it's really about is asking the questions and engaging in the struggle. The politicizing of religion has sent many away from the doors of any organized religion in disgust. But Judaism is not about politics. It's about awakening, encouraging, cultivating and expanding our curiosity. People come to shul for different reasons: to honor their parents, to honor the memory of those who were killed in the Shoah, to fight against persecution, for community, for self-fulfillment, whatever the reason this place has the potential to change lives. If we open ourselves to God, then God will open to us. Faith and reason can co-exist- and they do in Reform Judaism. But I ask that sometimes you suspend reason and jump into faith- surrendering can lead to wholeness.

Finally, I ask God to help us raise you with integrity and humility, believing that what we do with our limited time on earth does and will make a difference. Acknowledge your failings. Say I am sorry and mean it. Be proud of who you are and what you accomplish. Remember to say please and thank you, there is no one who needs to do anything for you- we are all equals on this earth.

We are very lucky. We have all we need: a supportive and loving family, a supportive and loving community, enough food on our table, shelter over our heads and hearts that continue to grow.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life for a year of health, blessing, growth of mind and spirit, understanding, graciousness, faith and peace.

My three living angels, my malachim. May you continue to teach your mommy about herself and about you.

I love you.