

*September 26, 1976*

*Letter to My Son*

**D**ear Son,

You may recall that when you began to study Torah more than a decade ago, your mother and I made a party in honor of the event. Jews were wont to do this in years gone by. Now you leave us to become a student at the university. And again we rejoice that you have attained a milestone, one which will help you deepen your learning, broaden your vision, acquire new skills, and cultivate new friendships. But this time we are also filled with misgivings - with anxiety. How will your new career affect your loyalty to our people and our heritage? Will your separation from family change your values-system? Will you exercise your new freedom to reject your past or will you exercise it to make that past more poignantly your own?

Indeed many of your peers wait precisely for this juncture in their lives to break with home and community - as if this were the longed for moment of emancipation. And that is why they sever the ties forthwith. They do not even wait for a challenge. They were never happy with their heritage and they exploit the first opportunity to shed it.

Perhaps that explains why I am impelled to write you now - before you leave us - and I do not wait for you to encounter the first threat to your affinity for the ways of our fathers. If I can, I want to avert your imitation of your peers. What is more, the response

\* Editor' s note: This column was written seven years after the youngest of Rabbi Rackman' s children graduated from college. It was written at the request of a publisher and has been reprinted frequently.

of the Jewish student to his first challenge on campus frequently determines how he will cope with all that follow. And I want to prepare you for that response. If it will be one that will be an affirmation of your Jewishness, we and our people will be blessed. If, on the other hand, it finds you weak and vascillating then there will be a continuous erosion that will break our hearts - but even more it will ultimately plague you because you will have forfeited pride in yourself and your background.

There is a world famous academy for the training of military officers at which all students - prior to their first chapel session - are asked to line up for the particular denominational service they want to attend. Because the Jewish students are always a tiny minority in the group, there are invariably a few who hesitate to identify with their Jewish comrades. That hesitancy often costs them the respect not only of their fellow-Jews but also of their Christian classmates. Their first response is crucial. Either they stand up on the first call for what they are - or they never get another chance. As in the games of chess we were wont to play with each other - the opening often made the difference between victory and defeat. So it is with your first challenge in your new environment. Your opening declarations are most important.

Do not deny or conceal your Jewish identity and do not hesitate to be different. Yet, you may ask, why should one maintain a stance which makes one overly conspicuous? Is it not more normal to adjust and acculturate and don the coloration of one's environment? No, my son, it will be to your advantage even as a student to cherish the value of individuality, of personal uniqueness. You must not lose your identity in a pool of sameness with other human beings. Respect all mankind because of that which all men have in common - the inviolable endowment of personality - but be firm in the knowledge that you are what you are and must give expression in the classroom and in the dormitory, in social and intellectual circles, to your own feelings, views, interpretations, and your own mode of living. You have heard me say that the most creative spirits in human history, though very much influenced by their environments, were always somewhat alienated from them. And it was precisely this modicum of alienation that enabled them to be critical of their surroundings, and enrich human thought.

They innovated because they were alienated. Perhaps this also explains why Jews were, and still are, so creative. We were never truly at home anywhere. The feeling of at-homeness, conceived and nurtured in the cradle of uniformity, is not healthful for human progress. And by being yourself - Jewish in thought and deed - you will discover that your uniqueness will come to the fore in your response to every phase of learning in which you will engage.

I remember how I once shook a class and its instructor as he tried to point out that some parts of the Bible could not have been written in Moses' time because the ideas expressed in them were too advanced for that period of human history. Consequently he assumed that they were authored centuries later and interpolated into Sacred Scripture. This is a favorite technique of ancient historians. I simply challenged the assumption that in a given century we cannot find men whose ideas are as disparate as those of Adolf Hitler and Albert Schweitzer in our own era. If an atomic war should put an end to our civilization, and an archaeologist a millennium hence will dig up traces of what once was, would he also place Hitler in the Middle Ages and Schweitzer in the twenty-fifth century? A classic instance of what I mean when I urge you to be yourself is to be found in the way Louis Brandeis, a famous American jurist and Zionist, reacted to Plato's "Republic" when he was a student at Harvard University. While the professor heaped praise on the immortal Plato and his finest dialogue, Brandeis reacted as a Jew committed to the centrality of family in social progress and he demonstrated how ridiculous Plato's conception was. You will recall that it was Plato who projected as an ideal the elimination of family ties for the two upper classes of his three class society. But as Brandeis incisively saw, "Plato's fathers are to dearly love their children and sacrifice their lives for their sons and daughters - whom they have never seen, whom they can only suppose to exist. He imagines a class of men in his society who possess all the physical power, who enjoy the respect and admiration of the state, but who nevertheless have no desire to accumulate property, who have no tendency toward despotism, and this though all the nobler feelings which usually fill men's breasts have been killed at their birth or eradicated, although they have had

no education in what is elevating and ennobling, on the contrary, whose greatest virtue is to be violent and brutal, whose pleasures debauchery, the emoluments of whose profession unlimited concubinage and mandatory infanticide.”

Only an independent student, immune to the levelling pressure of the classroom atmosphere, can articulate a different point of view and expose the stupidity of that which so many before hesitated to challenge.

That is why I say that your readiness to be different will even make you a better student. But it will also make you a better man.

Political philosophers always dreaded the effects that democracy would have on individuality. And in our day, preoccupation with, and the worship of, science and technology are a greater threat than democracy ever was. Science has internationalized thought and enterprise, which is good, but at the same time the very internationalism and universality of its discourse and its symbols are a threat to the diversity of personal and uniquely human expressions of thought and feeling such as poets were wont to give us. Technology has been even more of a leveller. And by being human in a Jewish way of life we enrich the diversity which aggrandizes man's ultimate freedom to know and be himself. And need I tell you what this will mean to the survival of our people! Our survival as a people depends upon the readiness of at least a cadre of Jews everywhere who will have strong feelings of Jewish identity and will inspire others similarly to declare and be themselves.

While it is your initial response to your new environment that concerns me most deeply now, I am not so naive as to believe that once you have coped with your first challenge there will be nothing else to fear. You must also be made aware of the fact that you are entering the academic world which for centuries has demeaned Jews and Judaism. Today, fortunately, Jews gain admission both to the student bodies and the faculties. There was a time when even this was not easily achieved. But our heritage has not fared as well. For Toynbee that heritage was a fossil of Syriac civilization, and even if your professors do not verbalize their agreement with Toynbee, they share his point of view. They do not have to express their concurrence - they do it by their consistent neglect of

the Hebraic component of western civilization. And I want to sensitize you to this intellectual dishonesty on their part. Even when they are Jews, they propagate the "big lie" that western culture is the legacy of Greece and Rome when in fact its greatest blessings are Hebraic in origin! That lie has been repeated so often that even Jews believe it, despite the fact that it denigrates them and their past. I could write volumes about this. I vividly recall how strongly I reacted, when I was a student, to the view stated in most textbooks that political theory began with the Greeks. I lived to see new textbooks edited which included selections from the Bible. However, that that same Bible was the source from which political theorists continued to derive their inspiration for the most revolutionary ideas of the Middle Ages and the modern period was rarely alluded to. In the development of both political and economic democracy it was the Jewish heritage that was far more significant than the Hellenistic heritage but even when that was recognized it was referred to as the gift of Christianity. Yet it was precisely the Old Testament, and not the New, to which the credit is due. The anti-Semitism of academia was of a "higher," subtler species, and you must prepare your antenna for it.

Let me cite a few simple illustrations. It was Judaism, and not Hellenism, that exalted man. Judaism gave man a divine dimension as it posited the creation of man in the divine image. Perhaps that is why Renaissance scholars so cherished the Bible, and studied Hebrew that they might read it in its original tongue. It was also Judaism, and not Hellenism, that emancipated man from the grip of fatalism and enabled him to soar and conquer the earth, and the heavens as well. Our benevolent God gave Adam fire and bade him use it for his happiness. Unlike Prometheus we did not have to wrench it from the gods and suffer punishment for our daring. And it was Judaism and not even Rome, that placed justice and equity, goodness and morality, at the pinnacle of man's striving. There is virtually no area of the lives of western peoples that has not been affected by Judaism. True, the aesthetic dimension may have come from Greece. But the drive to the good and true is from us. Yet, the text-books you will use, and the lectures you will hear, will blithely ignore this. Who, in a world diseased with prejudice against the Jew, would care to acknowledge how much is

owed to us! And this unrelenting ignoring of our contribution to civilization does incalculable harm to the egos of Jewish students. They imagine that all pastures are greener than theirs.

Even in an environment in which the knowledge of history is central to all disciplines, it is forgotten that both the preoccupation with history and the philosophy of history are Hebraic in origin. Michael Grant, the distinguished British historian, has demonstrated that the Hebrews, not the Greeks, wrote real history half a millennium before Herodotus. But the timing does not really matter. The fact is that Europeans were influenced more by the Bible than by Herodotus, and why the reluctance to give thanks where thanks are due!

I cannot anticipate the countless situations in which you will be confronted by the assault on your pride in your heritage. I only bid you to be aware of the fact that it will come. And Jewish professors as much as Christian ones will share the guilt. They craved acceptance in your new world and they had to pay the price that Heine paid in Germany, and Chwolson in Russia. I pray that you will have more integrity and be less gullible.

Unfortunately it is not only with regard to our past that there will be a continuous assault on your pride as a Jew, but even more so with regard to the Jewish situation in the present.

The fact is that the nations of the earth are giving increasing recognition to the right of all ethnic and racial groups in liberation and self-determination. The number of sovereign nations in the United Nations grows from year to year. Yet there is very little enthusiasm anywhere - even in the democratic countries and certainly not in the communist world - for the Jewish liberation movement and the right of Jews not only as individuals but collectively as a people to be captains of their fate and masters of their own destiny.

When other peoples seek what we seek they are accorded empathy and praise. But we are told to be content with a modicum of freedom wherever we live. We are to reconcile ourselves to the freedom we enjoy to be like others - but not necessarily to be ourselves. I hope I do not have to labor this point. But your classmates will need to be reminded of it. They will be in the vanguard of liberal, progressive movements. They will seek to enlist your help.

By all means identify with all causes that will redound to the advancement of universal peace and justice - but do not hesitate to seek it for your own people as well. One does not love humanity any less because one loves one's own too. Indeed those who can love only humanity at large - as Rousseau did - are usually incapable of loving any one at all - as he couldn't.

The Jew, with a strong sense of Jewish identity, who does not hesitate to lead his own distinctive Jewish life, and seeks to master much of human wisdom with a Jewish stance, can champion his people's cause as well as humanity's. He learns how to maintain a proper balance between particularity and universalism, which was the special gift of the Biblical prophets and their descendants. The university should not make you exclusively the universalist. Your vision will then be blocked by the forest and you will fail to seek the health of the individual trees.

With respect to one more issue, you will find your new environment quite devastating. Most universities in the west are committed to the philosophy of relativism in ethics. I will have more to say of this when I discuss your personal behavior. However, this philosophy - which is very much sustained in our day by the anthropologists - is also a threat to your Jewishness. Judaism is predicated on the existence of an absolute right and wrong, even if we cannot always fathom them.

I cite but one example from the writings of Professor Emil Fackenheim. A Jew cannot accept the notion that Hitler may have been right from his point of view, or from the point of view of his cultural milieu. A relativist in ethics might well argue that it may not have been so wrong that Hitler sought to liquidate six hundred thousand German Jews for the greater happiness of sixty million Germans. After all, what is so wrongful about sacrificing one mortal for the benefit of one hundred! Certainly the greater happiness of the greatest number was thereby served.

And Fackenheim is not the only modern philosopher to reject the modern point of view. In this connection there were Greeks too who believed that there was a right and wrong that transcended man. And Judaism is firmly rooted in that conviction. When your classmates or professors try to shake you in your commitment to that notion, use Fackenheim's argument. By the same

token, I do not have to remind you that Judaism's ethics are not rigid. There must always be a balancing of interests or equities. Some values yield to others. Even some wrongs are occasionally right. The important thing is that you remember that the challenges you encounter are not new ones. Greater Jews than you and I have coped with them before. I plead only that you do not surrender your convictions, your pride, and your identity, without carefully examining the merit of the challenge. Be as much of a skeptic with regard to what you are being offered as you will be forced to be skeptical with regard to that which you bring to your university experience.

Yet how does one manage, in the face of so many challenges, to retain one's identity as a Jew and one's pride in the Jewish heritage? My son, the answer is one provided by the Bible - by the literal meaning of its mandates. You must choose to be different and permit Jewish observances to keep you aware of that difference. The Jewish way of life is our tactic to keep us continuously aware of our separateness - of our uniqueness - of our vocation as individual Jews and as a people. And if one truly wants to cope with the intellectual challenges of the university and not forfeit one's birthright as a Jew, then one must observe the commandments to make one continuously conscious of the role that one can and ought play in one's new environment.

You have often heard me give more philosophical rationalizations of the Jewish way of life. You have heard me explain the dietary laws as the Jewish way of sanctifying the very process of ingestion. You have heard me relate many of the specific rules pertaining to the preparation of meat to the problem of man's brutalization. As for the Sabbath you have heard me expound upon it as the greatest device yet conceived to preserve man's personal freedom, reconcile him with nature, emancipate him from the bondage of time and the machine, etc. etc. But I do not now stress these more sophisticated approaches to the Jewish tradition. It may be paradoxical but precisely when you are on the threshold of more advanced learning I become simplistic and stress the most elementary justification for the observances - their serving as a reminder to you as to who and what you are.

I do hope that you will not stop there. On the other hand, because you will be broadening your horizons it is very likely that

you will discover deeper meanings for all that constitutes the Jewish way of life. My own preoccupation with social, political, and legal philosophy prompted me to appreciate our heritage more than I ever did before. Others have enriched their Jewish experience through the mastery of other academic disciplines - especially history, psychology, ethics - even aesthetics and biology. But you will discover the treasures the more readily if the search is one you are goaded to make all the time precisely because you are deporting yourself as a Jew.

It is only with a sense of uniqueness that an individual can live meaningfully and creatively as a person and that applies to a people as well. The greatest contributions to human progress have been made by men who opted to be different, who challenged the majority or dissented from the general consensus. The very existence of the Jewish people was, and continues to be, such a challenge and dissent. And because of it we enriched civilization in a measure totally disproportionate to the smallness of our number.

There are many sound philosophical and ethical rationalizations of particular commandments in the Bible but the overall impact of all of them is to make you aware of the fact that you belong to a group of human beings that is expected to be special and to do exceptional things for God and all mankind. And that also explains why daily prayer is so important. For one who prays regularly, God and His will are items of continuing, unrelenting concern. And it is that concern that I urge you to keep alive. I do not expect anyone to be immune to doubt with respect to God's existence or to ambivalence with respect to the efficacy of prayer. Yet even the moments of wrestling with one's doubts help to keep faith alive. Faith remains a live option to one who prays. And that is what is so important especially in one's youth. Experiences in later life deepen faith and make it meaningful. In youth one is more apt to dispense with it as unnecessary. However, even the habit of prayer will keep you involved at least in the process of religious thought and action and that is why I urge it so strongly upon you.

Moreover, as a Jew who prays you will be so helpful to other Jews in your new environment. I can assure you that will be needed at one time or another by classmates. And your availability and knowledgeability will help to form, on many occasions, a tiny Jewish community on campus. The sentiment of Jewish sol-

idity was always nurtured by prayer in a Minyan and you will be able to make a contribution to comrades and our people as a whole by your commitment to the routines of your life at home.

You know that I am not a Freudian but who will gainsay that the sexual drive is strong and perhaps in this connection you will find at the university the greatest personal challenge to the values and mores we have sought to transmit at home. What can I now add to that which your mother and I have said before?

Neither your mother nor I, nor anyone else for that matter, should invade your right of privacy. Thus what you will do is a matter of conscience between you and the girls you will meet. Except for truly heinous and criminal behavior you are accountable only to God and your own psyche for that which you will do. But not to your psyche alone. One overriding consideration must be what you will do to the psyche of the girls with whom you will establish relationships - social and sexual.

If you were a girl I would perhaps impart even stronger words of caution. But society being what it is, and especially men being what they are, women bear the greater burden in the consequences of sexual promiscuity. Yet men ought to act with a sense of responsibility. Nothing in our tradition is as important as respect for one's fellow-man. The use or exploitation of another human being exclusively for one's pleasure without regard to the evil done to that person is the cardinal sin of Judaism. It is abuse of another's divine image. And your peers are giving little thought to the significance of deferred gratification, avoiding harm to anyone now, and intensifying the pleasures of the future precisely because one can then live with one's conscience, and experience no self-destructive guilt.

Perhaps the standard ought to be: How would you want your own daughter to be treated by a male, when you will have a daughter? Of course one can retort that that is an old-fashioned idea. But what is old may be the encapsulation of universal experience. To have sex without love is degrading to both parties to the act. And if you love someone, the least you seek is not to do harm to the beloved.

In this connection Judaism is at one and the same time most permissive and most exacting. From the point of view of sanctions

it is permissive - only incest and adultery are punishable. However, from the point of morality, it bids one, on one's honor, to respect the inviolability of one's beloved except when God even makes it a Mitzvah to unite body and soul in an act of love.

This is a high standard. I can only urge it upon you and pray that you will try your best to live up to it. But here, too, the observances of Judaism play a very subtle role. Living as a Jew will cause you to respect yourself. With a proper amount of self-respect one is loathe to demean one's self. Then one acts only in consonance with that self-respect and induces the same feeling in others. The vulgar and the base make one sick at heart and are avoided.

You will recall, dear son, that instruction given by Hillel to a prospective convert to Judaism. The sum total of the Torah is the Golden Rule - the rest is commentary.

The sum total of all that I have written is that I want you to perform the Mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem - sanctifying God's name in everything that you do. The essence of that Mitzvah is not martyrdom, although it sometimes calls for that. However, our sages define it differently. "So act," they enjoin us, "that all who behold you will say, 'Blessed is that man's God.'"

It is thus that I pray you will act. And you and we shall rejoice.

Love, Dad.