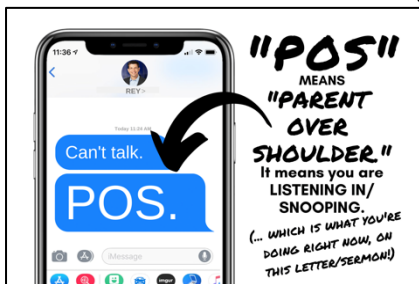


**A LETTER TO OUR KIDS:**

Okay, first, I know you **hate** being called “**KIDS**.” You’re **right**; it’s not fair – you are now young adults, **capable** of making **self-assured decisions**, of **seeing more** of the world than I did at your age, thanks to the fact that almost all information ever accumulated by the entire history of humankind is now available at your **fingertips**, or really, your **thumb-tips**.... So yes, you are **smarter**, or at least able to **gain knowledge faster**, than I or we ever were. But I’d like to teach you a few things:

First, **this thing** – it’s called... a **LETTER**. I have written it with my **hands**, **not [show]** my **thumbs**. It’s **like an email** – which to you, is also archaic – so let’s call it a really long text message, or an **Instagram** post without pictures. Boring, but effective.... Heartfelt... complex, nuanced...

Next: **[tap chest]** I’m **sorry**, I wish this were more personal – but there are a lot of **people “listening”** in on this letter. Most of them are thinking, **Look at the 46-year-old talking about “our kids.” HE’s a kid**. Well, I’m **not** the **bar mitzvah boy** I was when I got here to Adath Israel – that was the first thing I said to you, my first Rosh Hashanah sermon. I’m **not old**, but there are **plenty** of people around here that **remind** me: I’m **not young**, either. Like Goldilocks, I’d **like** to think I’m **juuuuuust right**....



That’s why, at this point, now, I’m **writing to you** – **Our Kids**, the **Next Generation** – because I want you to **HEAR** some messages from me while I’m **just in-between, juuuust right** – **young enough** that you might **hear** me, **old enough**

that maybe **my generation and older** might also **learn** something from this exercise of writing a letter. **So here goes:**

**FIRST:** In the spirit of this day: **I’m SORRY. Chatanu.** I... **WE...** have **missed the mark**. We have **not given** you something that for **generations**, in good times and bad, was **taken for granted** among Jews. I’m not sure we’ve gifted you our **Jewish... PRIDE**.

Honestly – and for this, I’m asking not just those younger than I am, but all of us: **HOW PROUD ARE WE** of our Jewish identity? How **PUBLICLY proud** are we – like, we’d **display it with gusto in mixed company**, talking about it, puffing up our chests a little?

I fear a **deficiency of pride** may be the cause of almost all of our concerns about Jewish continuity. If we’re **not proud** – **openly, fiercely, publicly** proud, of who we are, where we came from – then the issues we have with **assimilation**, with **lost identity**, with **decreased connection** to **Israel** and **Zionism** – they all arise, at least in part, because of that **deficiency of overt, public pride**.

A **brief history lesson**, to illustrate the point: In the 1970s, there was a **controversy** between leading Reform Rabbis and the Chabad Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Reform Rabbis implored the Lubavitcher Rebbe to **stop** the relatively new practice of huge Chanukah lightings in public squares– saying that in America, we should practice our **religion in private**, indoors. The Lubavitcher Rebbe refused – saying that we should **publicize our miracles**, that that is the essence of Chanukah. We should be proud.



**Where do WE come down** on that debate? We’ve done the **Shofar Relay** across Lower Merion, proudly proclaiming the holiday season from here to Wynnewood, blasting it past houses with and without **mezuzah** on their doorpost. **How proud** are we, in the public sphere, of our Jewishness? And what is the basis of that pride?

Are we proud... or are we, *instead*, a little... *sheepish*, of **broadcasting** our unique identity, different from those around us, whether we like it or not?



I recently heard Auburn University's basketball coach, **Bruce Pearl** (a **JEWISH** coach at Auburn, in Alabama!) - share how he was asked: "Could you just be a **little less... Jewish?**" His response? "**No, I can't be LESS Jewish. I AM Jewish – and proud of it!**" Coach Pearl took his entire varsity team to **Israel**, to share his heritage, and theirs (as most of them were Christian)... to talk about how his **ancestors** were **enslaved** and killed in the Holocaust, and some of his **players' ancestors** were killed and captured in Africa and brought here as slaves. He connected – because of his pride, his ownership, of his past. **Are we that proud** – like Bruce Pearl, like the Lubavitcher Rebbe, like those of us who blew shofar across Lower Merion last week – **are we proud enough?**

Are we proud that we're a People who have **survived against all odds**, *despite* being victims of the **worst crimes** in human history? And **is it enough** to be proud to have **survived**? To our next generation: Does that do it for you? Or is survival just "**table stakes**" – and you *expect more* in order to feel proud?

You **SHOULD expect more** than just survival! Who wants to be the one who **crawls across the finish line** at the marathon – don't we want to be the one who breaks the ribbon, arms up in victory pose?! Along the **spectrum** of Jewish experience – from "**JOY**" to "**OY**" – you **SHOULD expect more JOY** than OY! We *should* be **proud** to be a People who have **THRIVED** (not just survived) – a People who have **given humankind** its **most foundational principles** of **social justice** (leaving crops of our own for the poor)... of **work-life balance** (we invented the weekend, with Shabbat)... of **women's rights** (the ketubah)... so much more.... **Are we proud?** Would we **crow** from the rooftops: **I AM JEWISH – HEAR ME ROAR!**

You *should* expect more! Are you – are WE – **PROUD**, to be part of a People who are **NOT perfect**, but are **STRIVING** in that direction... Each Shabbat is called a "**taste of the world to come**"... Each day in the **reborn Land of Israel**, the Jewish State, another **affirmation** that it is *reishit tzemichat ge'ulateinu* – the first **budding of a great redemption?**

Are we **proud, despite and with** our imperfections? Are we proud that we've arrived at a point where we have the **luxury of self-critique** *about* our imperfections? Is **Israel perfect?** **No!** Is **America perfect?** **No!** But is **perfection** the **prerequisite** for the pride I seek, the pride I worry that we've not given you? **No!** David Ben Gurion, Herzl, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Channah Senesh, Golda Meir, Maimonides (*all of my Jewish crushes*) – they all operated Jewishly in a world that they **KNEW** was far from perfect. Every one of them had a **crisis of faith** in their lives. But their **love**, their **pride**, came from a belief in their **POTENTIAL** for **something... MORE perfect**. They believed we could build **something more perfect - by trial** and yes, by a **LOT of error**.

Because, **that's what love is: *Not* band-wagon latching on to something already perfect, but loving it *despite* its challenges.** To our **next generation**: When we first fall in love, it's **all a dream**. Then, we start to build a **real life** – and that dream is **tested** and **battered** – and you love it – *despite and with* its warts. **Did we fail [tap chest]** to give you that love, that pride, that devotion? **Do WE still have it**, even the older generations?



Because *without* it, we're nothing more than **fair-weather, band-wagon fans**. I mean, I'm talking to a **Philadelphia crowd**, at the beginning of Eagles season, the end of Phillies season. With our...*frustrating*... **sports history** – we

can't be fair-weather fans. In Philly sports, there hasn't been enough fair weather. We have to be **in it** – proudly, for the long haul. It takes love and pride to hang with someone who is flawed and imperfect.

**Have we raised fair-weather fans** of Jewish identity and connection? I know we told you about the persecutions, and I know we told you about all the miracles: The Maccabees, 2200 years ago – a model for the Israeli army, defending against seven nations, 75 and 70 and 55 and 49 years ago – not to mention more recently. Did we make you proud – or did it **fade**, when celebrating Chanukah and Purim became **too childish**, to dress up, to play *dreidl*?

Maybe you feel like we didn't give you the **whole picture** – that we **sugar-coated** it to build an artificial pride: That in 1948, *although* the Arab armies told the Arab villagers to flee, that they'd sweep in and exterminate the Jews, and then the Arabs could return to their homes... that in the context of war, some Arabs *did* lose their villages.... That for **security** reasons, the Israel Defense Force sustains a **difficult status-quo** that **challenges our menschlichkeit, despite** our dozens of **offers to sacrifice land and even security** for promises of peace, **IF** ever a true peace partner would arise. Maybe the **survival** of the Jewish People, even the **thriving** of the Jewish People in our ancestral homeland, isn't enough. Maybe you **want more** – the **whole picture**, an *owning* of an imperfect history... maybe you feel, **Next Generation**, that we didn't give you enough of that whole picture.

But again, forgive me – but in this case, NO: as you'd say, **sorry-not-sorry**: Because even in retrospect, I don't think I'd do it differently. You see, I was **determined** to give you that sense of pride, **first** – so that **LATER**, you could SEE the whole picture, while not abandoning your love. Let's learn again from being an **Eagles fan**: Imagine someone



new came to town, no team affiliation, and I wanted to convert that person into a Philadelphia Eagles fan. What would I do? *Teach him "Fly Eagles Fly," the chant E-A-G-L-E-S [tell story: standardized spelling/literacy test, and evaluators could not figure out why young Philadelphian children were all scoring off-the-charts on ONE question – how to spell "eagle" – had to change it to "beagle"]... if I wanted to make a fan, I'd buy them a jersey.... I'd tell the story of the Super Bowl (how I cried that night).... I'd take to a game... Would I START with, "Well, a couple of quarterbacks ago, we had this guy who was imprisoned before that for animal cruelty..." No – I'd focus on the good stuff!*

Now, I would **not deny** that there are **other narratives** out there: I *might* say, I'm *sure* there are **good people** who are Cowboys fans... but would I show that potential fan the *Cowboys* highlight reel?! (*It's all ancient history, anyway...*) I mean, sure, I'd *acknowledge* other narratives – but I'd focus on the **best of OUR story**, even if it's not the **ONLY** story, and not even the **WHOLE** story.

Just like with the Eagles – in telling you the story of our People, of Israel, I **start** with the story of the **miracles**. But **OF COURSE** I know that the **miracles aren't the whole story!** They weren't the whole story at **Chanukah**, **either** – the Maccabees were *awful* rulers after they won the Chanukah war against the Greeks, I've told you that. **King David had a guy killed** to get with his wife. So too, we've talked about Israel with **nuance**, and we've struggled about the ways that our **OWN** Jewish community here in America may not live up to its ideals, and what we can do about that...

So maybe, as the Parent and Grandparent Generations, we **weren't perfect** – and **[tap chest]** Yom Kippur is a perfect time to own that... But the question stands: Can we **gain that pride?** Can we **RE-gain that pride?**

Maybe you've **TRIED to be proud** – but you've felt **how hard** it can be... On the college campuses, on social media –you get **creamed** by the **new anti-Semitism**, the **anti-Israel venom** from peers and professors – did we give you **enough pride, enough information, enough assuredness** in the **just-ness** of your Jewish identity and your right to safety and self-determination in the world's only Jewish state? When they call you out and intimidate you with their hatred, assuming your Israel politics because you are Jewish...





Are we **proud enough, secure enough** online and on campus, to say what America knows to be true – that **Israel is America's best ally**, exporting cybersecurity and other tech to the US? That **forty-five years ago** this year, **Egypt's President Sadat understood** that, when he visited Jerusalem and accepted a “permanent peace based on justice...” – Israel gave up half of its land-area for that peace – and was proud to do it.... **Are we proud** that overwhelmingly Israel is willing to sacrifice security and land and homes for peace? **Two years ago, UAE and Bahrain** realized it was worth it to have Israel as a friend, and quietly Saudi Arabia has realized it: Are we proud that Israel is finally being welcomed into the **community of nations**?

Maybe it's an **ironic** problem: Maybe we've **arrived SO confidently** as Jews in America, we're SO self-assured, that we take our **Jewishness for granted**. Maybe we **haven't been threatened enough**.... But to our Next Generation, I would **never wish** that on you – to HAVE to affirm your Judaism, because others are threatening you, **BASED** on your Jewishness. That is **not** why prior generations struggled – so *you* would have to struggle, some absurd “hazing” rationale for Jewish continuity. Just as **King David had to fight** so that his son **Solomon**, whose **name means “PEACE,”** *Sh'lomo* – so that Solomon could enjoy that legacy – so too did **prior generations endure** the “OY” – so that you, **WE**, could **celebrate more** of the “JOY.”

But a **LITTLE concern**, a **LITTLE “OY,”** a **LITTLE worry**, wouldn't hurt, would it? It **MIGHT** shake us **out of complacency**, right? You know that old Jewish joke about the classic Jewish telegram: “Start worrying... details to follow.” To the Next Generation: **What is more foreign** to you: The idea of a **telegram**... or the idea that **worry** is part of what it means to be Jewish?



Historians talk about the “**lachrymose view** of Jewish history and continuity” – that **each Jewish generation cries** out that it will be the last generation of connected Jews... until the **next generation** comes along, only to cry that IT will be the last generation, thus disproving the worries of the *prior* generation. But next generation – I ask you: Do you have **enough pride, enough connection...** to **CRY** over that?

You come from a **long line of criers** over Jewish continuity – going all the way back to **Jacob**, the Patriarch, the third generation of Jews. Legend has it that at the end of his life, Jacob gathered his sons to his bedside and cried that it would all end with him – the legacy that his Zeide Abraham had founded, his kids wouldn't carry on. Now, Jacob knew that Judaism **wasn't perfect** – after all, he had **earned** the **second name Yisrael, Israel**, which means “the one who **struggles** with God.” Jacob, Israel, knew that **Judaism wasn't easy, wasn't perfect, provoked struggle and strife** – and he **cried** that his kids wouldn't carry it on – until they stopped him and said, “**Shema Yisrael** – listen Israel, listen Jacob, listen Dad – we know what to do, **we get it** – listen, Israel, *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* – we get it, we know what to carry on, the essence: *Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* – Adonai is our God. **We got this, Dad.**”



To our **next generation**: **Maybe you got this**. Maybe WE should **just shema, listen** to you. Maybe, you have a **better way to ensure** it, than we did, when we just **worried you into existence**, as the Next Generation.

It's fine to buck the trend of history, if there's a better way. Maybe it's **cool** to be **counter-cultural**, nowadays. Dara Horn sees us Jews as proof that “...it **isn't necessary** to **believe** what **everyone else believes**, that those who **disagree with their neighbors** can **survive** and even **flourish** against all odds.”

I admit it: I'm **not cool**... I mean, I'm cool for a rabbi, but that **bar is so low**, you can **trip** over it. Is it **cool** to be **distinct, different, counter-cultural**? Does **that** make us **proud enough** to keep this thing going – pride that we're different? If so, I could get behind that. After all, we've really always been **distinct** – whether when **God reminded**

us to be a **light unto other nations**, or whether **those nations reminded** us by **ostracizing** us, **scapegoating** us, placing us outside of culture... until we decided to build our **own nation**, our **own culture**, our **own state**.

I **worry** – *not just* for our kids, but *especially* for our kids: Our challenge is *not* that we **didn't** give you the story. It's that we **didn't give you the PRIDE**. The *feeling*, that **comes WITH** the story. The **feeling** that comes with telling it at the Passover seder – that **this story didn't happen just once**, but that it is **STILL** happening, *b'chol dor va-dor*, in every generation: that **we are HERE** – **DESPITE** the fact that **Pharaoh** wasn't just killing baby boys in the Nile, but he was killing our Jewish spirit... We are **HERE, THRIVING, DESPITE** the Soviet Empire, to which Putin aspires to return – the Soviets weren't just stifling a few Jews' desire to make Aliyah – they were **ENDING** Russian Judaism... We are **HERE, DESPITE** Hitler's plan to relegate us to **HISTORY**, a museum-piece, and instead we proclaimed **AM YISRAEL CHAI** – the **Jewish People LIVES, NOW** – not just back then, as a memory.... And yes, **we're NOT GOING ANY WHERE, DESPITE** the fact that **Iran** doesn't want to help the Palestinian People have a state – Iran wants a **Puppet Palestinian Proxy** to be an **agent of Jewish extermination** – so the choice with Iran is **not** between **War Now**, or **Peace Now** – it's a choice between **War Now**, or **Nuclear War Later**, in just a **few years**, with our **very right to exist in question**. **Are we proud** that there is a Jewish State that for the first time in two millennia is **powerful enough to pledge not to surrender** that right to determine our own fate, our own story? **Are we proud** to find ourselves, time and time again, in the center of history's most critical moments?

**Do we have enough pride** in our story, in who we are – to **stand up in THIS moment**, and to **cry out** that there **may not be another generation** to do so – so like Jacob's Children, that next generation can cry back to US: "*Shema Yisrael* – We're here, Israel, we get it, we're not going anywhere" - ?

Sorry this is such a long letter, kids. I **hope** you **get to the end** of it.... But I **wasn't just talking to you**, if you couldn't tell. I'm **worried** about **all of us** – but I also have **reason to hope**, *despite* it all.

Because *even if* I'm **worried**, I know this: It's **not too late**. It's not too late to **gain that pride**, that surging feeling in your gut when you **realize** what we as a People **can do** and **have done**... that **pained feeling** when we **fall short** and know we can do better... *both* feelings because **you love this People** and are so proud to be part of this People.... That "**tuning in**" more closely to news or conversation when you hear the word "Jew" or "Israel"... That feeling when you're in a room and **you know** what the response is when someone says (*let's try it*) "*Sheket b'vakaSHAH*" [*HEY!*]... that **pride**, that **togetherness**, that *kishkes*-style love.

**To EVERY generation** in this room: That is **my berachah** for **you**, for **our kids**, for **their kids**, for **all of us**. That **pride**, that **love**... Because **when we feel** that pride, that love – we will **know the blessing** of being one of **Jacob's**, of **Israel's, Children**, saying with me, proudly, defiantly – **singing with me**: [*SING*] "*SHEMA YISRAEL, ADONAI ELOHEINU ADONAI ECHAD*." *Didn't that feel good* – just to **sing that together**? - proclaiming it, and knowing that **three thousand years of OUR FAMILY** have said it.... **AND**, thanks to **our children** - that **many thousand more years** to come will **echo it, affirm it, proudly, lovingly, eternally**. *Keyn yehi ratzon*....

Signed, with love, with pride – in **ALL** of you,  
**Your Rabbi.**

[Place note in envelope, seal envelope]