

I have an announcement to make. No panicking or perhaps, no celebrating, but I want you to know that I am looking for a new job. I am applying for a job—not instead of—but in addition to the one that I have here at Brith Shalom. You know – because I’m bored and have nothing to do.

So, I looked and I looked and I looked until I finally found the perfect job. I found the one job that would be a perfect match for me. It was a job that would make use of my Jewish knowledge. It was a job that would make use of my creativity. It was a job that would help to fill the needs of a great many people. And it was a job that I could do part time, in addition to my job here at the synagogue. with which I am blessed and love very much.

I sat down to write a letter of application and a resume for this job, for which I believe that I am uniquely qualified. Can anyone here guess what this job is? It is a job as a consultant with the Hallmark Greeting Card company.

Have any of you gone to the store to buy a greeting card recently? If so, did you have the same two surprising reactions that I did. I went to the store in order to buy a greeting card for a friend of mine who is having a birthday soon. When I looked at the cards that they had for sale, I was dazzled by the range of choices on display. There must have been at hundreds, if not thousands, of different birthday cards from which to choose!

And so, I stood there for a good while trying to make up my mind which card to buy. Should I send my friend a funny card? Or should I send him a serious one? After all, a birthday is a serious event, and he may be offended if I sent him a funny card. AND a birthday is a joyous event, and so he may be offended if I sent him a serious card. I stood there for what seemed forever—holding a funny card in one hand and a serious card in the other and trying to choose to between them. Until finally, I figured out how to decide between them. I looked on the other side of the two cards, and saw which one was the cheapest—and that is the one that I bought. Sorry Mr. Hallmark.

I came away from this experience impressed by the variety of cards that are available today. There seem to be unlimited choices for (a) Bar or Bat Mitzvah, (b) weddings, (c) graduations, (d) Mother’s and Father’s Day. You can buy a card for a sister’s birthday or you can buy a card for a sister-in-law’s birthday. You can buy a card for someone who has had a *simcha* or you can buy a condolence card for someone who has had a loss. You can buy a greeting card for Rosh Hashanah or for Pesach, or for Purim.

However, I noted that even though there were a host of cards for different occasions, there were several categories for which I could find no cards. And so, when I came home, I decided to write a letter to the Hallmark Company and suggest some cards that I believe they should add to their collection of cards. I figured that instead of just sending them a resume, as do other applicants, I would send them some suggestions for cards, and if they liked my suggestions, perhaps they would be interested in hiring me. So. this is what I wrote:

Dear Mr. Hallmark,

I am sure that you know much more about your business than I do, judging by your success. And yet, I would like to offer you several suggestions for cards that I think you should add to your inventory. And, in case, you are tempted to say: “*This guy is a cantor—what does he know about my business?*” - let me tell you that the suggestions that I am going to offer you today are not my own. They come from Shammai, a well-known Sage who lived back in the first century of the Common Era, and they come from Mother Leah and Mother Naomi, and they come from the Torah, all great sources of wisdom. So, if you don’t want to listen to me, perhaps you can hear their words. I am going to make four suggestions in this letter, four suggestions about people whom I believe need and deserve cards, but for whom, to the best of my knowledge, you do not have any. And then, if you want more ideas, you can contact me, and I can give you some more.

The first suggestion is that, just as we have cards expressing condolences when someone is sitting shivah, perhaps we ought to have condolences cards for people who are going through a divorce. I don’t know if you have ever been through a divorce, Mr. Hallmark, but if you have, you surely know that it is a very lonely and a very painful experience, and that people need all the support that they can get when they are going through it.

Our Jewish tradition has a whole network of rituals through which we give comfort to those who have suffered the loss of a loved one. There is *shivah*, there is *shloshim*, there is the daily *minyan*, and there is *yahrtzeit* at the end of the mourning period. If there are all these rituals to mark the death of a person, shouldn’t there be something to mark the death of a marriage? Think about it, Mr. Hallmark. I think that if you look around and see how many divorced people there are in our society nowadays, people who are hurting, you will realize that there must be a big market for such a card.

The second suggestion is this: I looked through the cards for Mother's Day and for Father's Day in the store, and I noticed that most of these cards sound pretty much alike. They all say: "With love and gratitude to Mom—or to Dad—who is the best parent in the whole world". Now I ask you: They can't all be the best parents in the whole world, can they?

Have you ever thought of what would happen if two parents ever got together, and one said to the other: "MY daughter sent me a card, saying that I am the best father in the whole world, and the other one said: "My daughter send ME a card, saying that I am the best father in the world." They can't both be right.

And so, my suggestion is that you leave some more white space on your cards—so that your customers can write in some specific compliments of their own, such as: "*You really came through for me this year when I needed you*", or: "*I am so grateful that you came to my ballet performance this year, even though it meant giving up an important meeting*".

Where did I get this idea? I got it from our teacher, Shammai, in the Talmud. Hillel and Shammai have a disagreement in the Talmud over how to honor the bride at a wedding. Hillel says: "*You should say: Look how lovely she is! Look how charming she is!*" And Shammai says: "*It depends. If she is lovely, you say so. If she is not lovely, then you don't say so, because if you do you will lose your credibility, and you will not be believed.*" Shammai says: "*Find one quality that she has that is special to her and sing about that quality.*" And be honest, says Shammai, because if you exaggerate, if you praise the bride to the skies, you will not be believed——not even by the bride.

And so, I believe that Shammai would say the same thing about cards for Mother's Day or for Father's Day. He would say: praise but don't exaggerate. And he would say: praise—but be specific. Instead of saying: you are the world's best mother, Shammai would say thank you for getting me through school this last year. Or instead of saying: you are the world's best father, say thank you for driving me to school every day, That's specific. And that's honest. And I think that a card like that would be more appreciated than one that is just mushy. That is my second suggestion to you, Mr. Hallmark.

My third suggestion, Mr. Hallmark, is think of all the people in this country who are not the birth mothers of their children, but who raise them. Half the marriages in this country end in divorce, and many of the people in these divorces end up marrying again.

And thousands of people in this country adopt children every year. What kind of a Mother's Day card or what kind of a Father's Day card do you have in your inventory for these people who are not the birth parents of their children but who raise these children with care and with devotion?

I hope that you don't have cards that call them 'stepmothers' because in our society 'stepmother' is a bad word. Ever since the Cinderella story, and probably even before, the stepmother is pictured as the wicked witch of the West. She is described in many, many fairy tales as a monster who mistreats her stepdaughter and makes her into a slave while caring for and favoring her own daughters. And therefore, most of the women whom I know would not be very happy if they got a card that was addressed: "To My Stepmother". And so, my third suggestion is that you and all of us as well, should honor second wives and we should honor those parents who adopt.

The Sages of the Midrash say that adopting is the hardest of all the *mitzvot* in the Torah—bar none, because, all the other *mitzvot* you do once, and you are done with them. You build a Sukkah, and you are finished. You make a donation to your synagogue, and they leave you alone, at least until next year. But when you adopt a child, you sign on to care for this child, 24/7 for a lifetime. And that is why the Sages of the Midrash say that anyone who adopts, and anyone who takes on the task of raising a child whom she has not given birth to, deserves enormous admiration and respect. So may I suggest, Mr. Hallmark, that you put your artists and your card designers to work, and that you ask them to come up with some cards that will pay proper honor to adopting mothers, and to second wives, and to all those who do this sacred and difficult work.

I am not an artist and I am not a designer, so I can't create such a card for you, Mr. Hallmark, but let me offer you one idea for such a card. Do you know who was the first woman in Jewish history who raised someone else's child? I think it was Leah, the co-wife of Jacob. Do you remember the story? Jacob loved her sister, Rachel, who was much more beautiful than was Leah. And so, her father, Lavan, arranged, in a devious way, for Jacob to marry them both. And, for a time, there was a fierce competition between these two sisters. Leah kept turning out children in the hope that, if she gave Jacob enough sons, he would love her. And Rachel felt bitter and unhappy because, for a long time, she was unable to give birth to a child. So, you had two women in one house, both envious of each other, both fighting for the love of the same man. And then Rachel died in childbirth, while giving birth to her second child, Binyamin.

Do you know what happened when Rachel died? According to the Midrash, Leah took over and raised Rachel's child. When she looked at this baby, the Midrash says, all the envy that she had felt towards her sister disappeared, and all she could think of was: "*what is going to happen to this poor child now?*" So, from that day on, Leah raised Rachel's child. And Benjamin turned out pretty well. And therefore, she deserves to be praised as the first woman in Jewish history who raised another's woman child.

And so, if you are looking for an idea to give to your card designers, Mr. Hallmark, may I suggest that you consider calling these cards—not, God forbid, "Stepmother Cards", which has a terrible connotation, but that instead that you call them "Cards for those who follow the example of our Mother Leah," which I think sounds much better.

And this is my fourth suggestion: Very often, in many families, there is **one** person who really loves the children, and who becomes their favorite aunt or their unofficial counselor. Sometimes it is a person who has no children of her own. Sometimes it is a person who is blessed with much wisdom and much empathy, whom kids know that they can turn to whenever they need advice or support or a friendly ear into which they can pour out their problems. Sometimes it is a grandparent. Grandparents and grandchildren get along so well for several reasons. One is that grandparents can always give the child back when they get tired; parents can't do that. Another reason why grandparents and grandchildren get along so well together is that they have a common enemy—the parents. Yet another reason why grandparents and grandchildren get along so well together are that grandchildren are a grandparent's gateway to the future, and grandparents are a grandchild's gateway to the past.

So perhaps that is what you should tell your designers to do: to create a card that grandchildren can give to grandparents once a year, that nieces and nephews can give to their aunts and uncles once a year, or that kids can give to their best adult friend once a year in appreciation for all that they do them all during the year.

I have a friend in California, who, for whatever reason, has no children of her own. This woman, from the day they were born, has given unending love to her niece and her nephew. She is the one who finds the time to share in their simchas. She is the one they turn to when they have problems. When they graduated college, she was the one who rewarded them with a trip to any place that they chose. And

therefore, for this and for the many, many other things that she does for them, they love her, and rightly so.

I can think of one woman in the Bible who was like my friend in California. Her name was Naomi, the mother-in law of Ruth. At first, Naomi was bitter and angry for she had lost both her sons. But eventually, she crawled out of her own unhappiness. Eventually she transcended her own pain, her own sorrow, and she began to think of how she could care for Ruth, the widow of Naomi's son, who had come back with her from Moav to Bethlehem. She became Ruth's manager and matchmaker. And therefore, when Ruth married Boaz and they had a baby, the people of the town said: "*Look, a child is born to NAOMI,*" and it was Naomi who raised the child.

So here are my four suggestions for you, Mr. Hallmark: The first is produce some sympathy cards for those who are going through a divorce—because they need all the strength and all the support that we can give them. The second is: produce some cards that are accurate and not too mushy. If you like this idea, thank the Sage, Shammai for it, not me. The third is honor the many second wives, and the many adoptive mothers who raise children to whom they have not given birth. If you like this idea, thank Mother Leah, who did this for the baby whom her sister, Rachel, left behind when she died. And the last suggestion is to honor those good women, like my friend in California. If you like this idea, thank Naomi, not me.

I hope you will give serious consideration to these suggestions that I am offering you in this letter, Mr. Hallmark.

With every good wish,  
Cantor Mark Levine.

Just in case you have not figured it already, I am not really speaking to Mr. Hallmark today. I am talking to you and me. I am hoping to persuade us to do these four things: to give strength and support to those who are going through a divorce, to give honor to those who care for the children of the people whom they marry, to remind us of what a difficult and what an important good deed it is to adopt, and to remind us that we should be grateful to the teachers and the grandparents and the aunts and the uncles who inspire us and guide us as so our parents.

I suspect that Mr. Hallmark will not listen to what I have said today. But I hope that we all who are listening will hear these words. And to this let us all say: amen.