

## Kol Nidre 5784

### "Why Be Jewish? A Letter to My future B'nai Mitzvah

Dear B'nai Mitzvah of the future,

It is the year 2050, though I wrote this letter many years ago, 27 to be exact. I'm not sure what the world looks like as you read this letter, preparing for your Bar or Bat Mitzvah. I hope to be the one preparing you for this special day, but if I'm not privileged to do so, I still want to leave you with these words to answer a question you may have asked yourself or been asked many times: "What's the point of being Jewish? What is the purpose of Judaism? Why do I have to perform all these rituals?" I'd like to invite you to see Judaism through my eyes, if only for a few minutes while you read this letter. I want you to see the beauty of Judaism, to share my passion for our Torah. Give me a few minutes.

Being Jewish is both a privilege and an obligation.

You are part of a living people with nearly four thousand years of history. Very few people in the world have the privilege of being part of such an ancient culture. There may have been older cultures, but the vast majority of them have disappeared, while we are still here. I know that learning Hebrew can be a bit challenging, but isn't it wonderful to think that you will be reading the oldest continuously spoken language in the world? No other people have maintained a language for 4000 years!

You are part of something much greater than yourself, your family, and many of your friends. You are part of what someone once called an "eternal people," a people that refuses to die and reinvents itself in every generation. Just being a part of something so wonderful is worth it. However, I want to tell you that being Jewish is also a responsibility. I know at your age, you may not like to talk about responsibilities and obligations, but as you are about to celebrate your Bar-Bat-Bnei Mitzvah, this is what being Jewish is all about. You have inherited a letter in your hands, a letter that will be part of your life forever, but that letter must continue after you. Perhaps your parents haven't told you this, but you are a messenger. Judaism didn't start with you, and it shouldn't end with you. You have a responsibility to the past, but especially to the future. Not everything is the same; not everything is equal. You are neither better nor worse than other friends from different cultures or religions; you are different, and you bring something unique to the world; and being different is good.

## The Messenger and the Message

Over 3300 years ago, we received a message. A message that, in some form, was recorded in the Torah, the book from which you will read some passages at your Bar Mitzvah. Since then, every Jew became a bearer of a message; we became a people of messengers, a people who love to tell stories, a people with a very particular message to share with the world. It's worth being Jewish not just because our parents are Jewish, or because it's a beautiful way to live our lives (we'll talk about this later), but because without Jews, the world would be a very different place (and I'd like to say, a bit darker). We have a mission. You have a mission. And your first mission, Agent 007, is to discover that you are a messenger. The second is to find out what that message is. Here, I'll summarize part of that message for you:

1. God is one, creation is one, and humanity is one: We were the first people to affirm that there was one God who created a unique and irreplaceable world, and that this God created the first human couple from whom all humanity descends. You must continue to affirm that there are no multiple gods, that money is not a god, that states are not gods, that football players or singers are not idols to be worshipped. You must continue to pass on the message that God created a single world and us as partners in His creation, and that if we destroy it, He will not create another world. You must continue to convey the message that we all have the same origin, regardless of the color of our skin or our parents' wealth. We are all children of God and of Adam and Eve.
2. There is hope: We were the first to believe that history does not simply repeat itself in a circular fashion, that not everything will end in an Armageddon or great chaos, but that there is a future, there is hope. The world is a beautiful place, yes, with problems and challenges, but it can be a better place. Perhaps you don't know this, but we call this concept "Messiah." You must convey the message of hope in the world; that is the message of every Jew. When others see a problem, you must find a possibility; when others criticize, you must offer a solution; when others talk about darkness, you must bring light. Don't feel too pressured; a Rabbi once said, *"You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."*
3. We should function as a model for others: Part of our message lies in our own behavior. It's not just what we tell the world it should be, but also what the world should see in us. I'm not saying that everyone necessarily lives up to this, but it's what we should strive for, according to the message we received at Sinai. Have you ever been with your parents to see a model home? When a housing development opens, not all the houses are built, but there's one that's a model of how the others should look... that's how we

Jews should be. A model to be imitated. The prophets called this "Or LaGoyim," a light unto the nations. I don't know if you're aware, but many people not only "born Jewish" but also from other backgrounds choose to convert to Judaism. And when I ask them what they have seen in Judaism (in this model home!), many say: family, a sense of unity, joy in religious services, a respect for traditions, mutual assistance... and this is what we should aspire to. God, in that letter we call Torah, gave us a manual to inspire us and live an exemplary life. We should aspire to put it into practice so that others can see it and be inspired to live better lives too.

Never forget that Judaism has a message for the world, and you are a messenger... and if you don't deliver that message, no one else will...

### The Holocaust and Israel

By 2050, as you read this letter, the State of Israel will already be 102 years old, and you might take it for granted as just another country in the world. Surely, by the time you read this letter, you won't have survivors of the Holocaust to tell you their stories firsthand. Let me tell you why Israel is not just another country and why the Holocaust is not just another episode in universal history.

### The Holocaust

You're already in the seventh grade. You've had classes on American and world history in middle school. You know that there have been great tragedies, persecutions, and many episodes of discrimination throughout history... but the Holocaust must be different for you. It cannot be just another story. It's the story of your family, even if none of your ancestors perished. It's the story of your people. It's the story that, even unknowingly, changed your life over 100 years ago. You know what happened in the Holocaust; I'm not here to retell it. You can find the historical facts in any history book under the title: Holocaust... but Jews talk about the Holocaust and the message of the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the culmination of over 2000 years of persecution for our people, it was the final wake-up call. And from that moment, we added one more message to our eternal work: "never again." We swore that this should never happen to us as a nation again, and we vowed that "never again" should this happen to any other people. And that message of "never again" is also your message; it's also your history. In the face of every act of anti-Semitism, you must stand up and say "never again." When another friend of a different race, religion, or culture is discriminated against, you must say "never again." Never again will we allow someone to be aggrieved, insulted,

violated, or killed because they are different. That is the Holocaust; this is your history, and you cannot escape it.

## The State of Israel

I'm sure you take the State of Israel for granted. I'm sure you think that Israel, like any other country, has always existed... let me tell you that it's not the case... that Israel is the dream of 2000 years of history. Let me tell you that my grandparents were born when Israel didn't exist, that my parents were born when Israel was a poor and endangered state, and that I, your rabbi, was born when Israel became a military, economic, technological, and cultural powerhouse. I'm not a prophet, so I don't know exactly what Israel will look like by 2050. I can tell you that in 2023, Israel isn't going through one of its best years; there are internal disputes over which ideology will dominate Israel's future. You will see who won the dispute. What I do know, and what you should know, is that Israel is not just another country. Israel is a miracle. It's a miracle for the Jewish people and for humanity. Israel added one more message to the many messages you must pass on to the world; as Herzl wrote over 150 years ago, "If you will it, it is no dream." Israel gave us Jews a sense of security again, with Israel, Jews began to walk the streets with their heads held high. Israel reminded the world that sometimes dreams take time to materialize, but with effort, tears, and yes, often suffering, dreams can come true.

## Your Jewish Life

I can't even imagine what apps you'll be using in 2050, what technologies and metaverses will exist at that time... but you can be sure that Jewish traditions will still be there! Isn't that incredible? Have you heard of the telegraph? Have you heard of landline phones? Have you heard of the radio? Or television? Ask your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents... they were things of the past... but what's impressive is that no matter how much technology changes, Jewish practices, traditions, and rituals have stood the test of time. And this is the secret of our eternity. Yes, we are messengers, yes, we have a message, but we also have a means to remind ourselves and the world what those messages are. They are the rituals. That's why traditions are so important to us, not because they are mere relics of the past, but because they are secret codes to never forget the important things in life. Maybe you won't understand them at first glance, and there are many for this letter, but let me give you some examples:

- Values and holidays: We hide the most important values of life as codes through our holidays, and to never forget them, we repeat them once a year. Here are some examples:

- Joy: Being joyful is a great mitzvah, said a rabbi centuries ago... that's why we have Purim to work on our happiness and find reasons to be happy.
- Freedom: Being free is one of the most important things, being able to choose our own destiny is essential... that's why we have Passover to remember our long journey from slavery to freedom and appreciate the power of being free.
- Study: Perhaps it's not your favorite thing at thirteen, but knowledge, reading, and studying are some of the most important values of your people, which is why we have Shavuot and Simchat Torah to honor the Torah by studying and dancing with a scroll in our hands.
- Forgiveness: We all make mistakes, we all deserve forgiveness, and we all have the ability to forgive. Sometimes it takes a bit more work to achieve it, and someone has to remind us, which is why we have Yom Kippur.
- Family: Family is the most important thing, and during the week, we are often busy with school and work... and even when we have dinner during the week, we're looking at screens (do you still have screens in 2050?)... that's why Jews have Shabbat. A day dedicated to reuniting with family, where at the Shabbat dinner, we sing old songs to come together over something other than the week's news, where we light candles to bring light to a world that's often dark, where we go to the synagogue to realize we are not alone.

And so on, but you understand now, right? Each holiday has a hidden message to be revealed, an eternal value of our people.

### In Conclusion

This is how I understand Judaism. This is how I live it. You have to choose how to live your own Judaism. One of the many commandments of our people (613!) is that you must write your own Torah (don't worry, for now you just have to read a part). Even our kings, upon ascending the throne, had to write their own Torah, and although their parents may have been kings and handed down a Torah as an inheritance, they had to write their own. Why? Because in every generation, LeDor VaDor, we are obligated to rewrite our own Torah, to give our Judaism its own unique and different meaning. Don't be Jewish because your parents or grandparents are Jewish. Be Jewish for yourself. Enjoy it for yourself. Take what you want, leave what may not be significant to you at this moment, but study, learn, and know before you decide. You are the heir to a wonderful culture, as Hillel said: "Do not separate yourself from the community,

be a part of it. Let your Judaism be a Judaism not by birth but by choice, choose it every day because it's worth it to be Jewish. "

Before I finish, I want to tell you that if you are celebrating your Bar-Bat Mitzvah at Temple Kol Ami Emanuel in 2050, it's thanks to your grandparents and parents, even before they fell in love, even before you were born. A group of people, including your parents and grandparents, believed in this community, in its future. They believed in renewing and expanding this Sanctuary where you will read Torah, those letters with a secret message. They believed in continuing this education center, expanding our classrooms, where you will learn and question. They believed in this community center, renovating our ballroom, where you will celebrate with friends and family. But more than anything, they believed in you, in your future as a Jew and a human being, that you would learn to be a messenger and understand the message. I invite you to remember them and all those who believed in you when you read this letter, at the moment of your Bar Mitzvah, when you read from that ancient scroll.

In 2050, you will be the messenger. You will read this letter, and I hope you find a message that inspires you and reminds you why it's worth being Jewish.

With all my love and blessings for this special day, happy Bar-Bat Mitzvah!

Rabbi Uriel Romano

Yom Kippur, 2023

P.S. Do you still have bagels in 2050? If not, go find one; they're delicious!