

A LETTER TO MY SONS

By

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Dear Drew and Owen:

In today's culture we like to think that we have shattered most taboos. We talk to our children about sex, about drugs, about mental illness. Still, strangely, I don't hear much talk between fathers and sons, between mothers and daughters, about God, about faith, about Torah. I mean *real* talk – not the easy platitudes of television religion – about what it means to be a Jew in the 21st century and, more to the point, what it means to be a Jewish man. As the two of you stand proudly at the brink of full adulthood, I want to start that conversation.

As a Jew-by-choice, I feel like the man who falls in love with a brilliant and beautiful woman who is taken for granted by those who have known her for a long time — think Cinderella with a *kippa*. I don't want either of you to ever take Judaism for granted.

Though you may not understand it as such now, being a Jew is a gift. *An absolute gift.*

But it's a gift that all too often is being abandoned in the back of the spiritual attic. We are struggling through a time when Jewish men are vanishing (of their own volition) from our communities, from our synagogues. I don't want you two to grow into jaded men who would rather usher on Yom Kippur than humbly walk inside the sanctuary and pray. I don't want you to become men who think that Sunday morning softball and dropping the kids off at Hebrew school is what makes a Jew. I have no use for drive-by Judaism.

As a man who has been stunned wide awake by Judaism, by Torah, been *radicalized*, I want the two of you to know soul-deep that Judaism doesn't start and stop with the synagogue parking lot. Real Judaism can suffuse each moment of each day – if you let it.

It saddens me to watch Jewish men shun their birthright, let it rot and grow brittle like the leather on their grandfathers' tefillin ... to treat Judaism as if it were an ethnic accessory to be shrugged on and off at will ... treat it as if it is just another entrée in the cultural buffet, rather than what it truly is: A profound covenant with the God of Abraham, Jacob and Moses.

We are trapped in a shallow culture of seduction that sends the message that men of faith are sissies; the man who prays with heart and soul is somehow suspect. Well, boys, I'm here to tell you that real men *pray* and *sing* and *study* and *walk humbly* with their God. And in their fear – yes, fear – of faith and commitment, many Jewish men have ceded their children's lives of the spirit to their wives, acting as if Judaism were women's work, like cooking, sewing and scrubbing the toilets.

Sure, it can be frustrating to be a man of faith in this culture of hollow desire. I mean, I'm not frustrated in my faith, but by other Jews' (and non-Jews') reaction to it: some are made uncomfortable by it ... some treat it as a quirk, a charming tic, like keeping a Lionel train in the basement ... others are smug in their disbelief, and cluck knowingly. Some see it as weakness. That God stuff is O.K. for kids, chicks and old ladies, but men — *oh, come on.*

It is easier, certainly, to obsess over how the Knicks and Lakers are going to do this season. To ooh-and-aah over the latest sleek idols made by BMW and Porsche. To admire your very expensive pecs in the mirror. To buy your season tickets to the local synagogue, and only show up for the big games – you know, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah and maybe the occasional bar or bat mitzvah. (Hey, maybe we'd attract more men if we built skyboxes above the bimah and served beer and burgers during services.)

We are slaves to the culture of the self. Where has humility fled? We need many more bent shoulders and far fewer breast-beaters. Only in humility can you be open to the awe that the Holy Breath should inspire. To get ahead in our corrupt culture, we are told to

brag, encouraged to flog our pitiful selves as if we were deodorant or pork sausages. But, boys, we were not made to praise ourselves. We were made to praise Adonai, made to praise all Creation. In the same way that the Eternal contracted to make room for Man, so Man must contract his piggish ego to make room for the Eternal.

I know, I know, it's not cool to pray, not hip to wrap yourself in a tallit. But men and women of faith have to do some very uncool things, have to live their lives in opposition to the heedless whirlwind of the 21st century. You have to flip the mirror-shades into the Dumpster and walk humbly with Adonai. You have to let Torah – that Holy Turpentine – strip the varnish of falseness from your soul. You have to admit – and this is hard – that your mewling, pathetic self is not why the Universe exists. You were made to be a Divine Spark – a Ner Tamid – that prays, sings, studies and tries to heal the world.

The hipsters -- the casual Jews who have reduced their Judaism to a set of graven images: lox and bagels, a spritz of Yiddish, the films of Woody Allen – are cultural scarecrows whipping in the wind, buffeted by the cheap, the faddish. Their heads are stuffed with the straw of mere information, but no insight.

There are so many ways to burn our precious days, so many ways to avoid the big questions, to shun God, to try to lead a Teflon life. Drew and Owen, don't become one of those men who spurn our tradition to chase wind: the candy-apple-red Hummer, the Deal, the third home in Aspen, the trophy wife. It's your souls that matter in the Economy of Holiness: The goal is to be the opposite of wanting.

You need to understand that some mornings when I pray I feel barely tethered to this earth. You need to understand that when I read that 20th-century prophet Abraham Joshua Heschel, he almost always carries me back with him to Sinai. You need to understand that when I look at the Hebrew script of Torah, I don't see mere letters, I see the ancient, transcendent tents of Jacob billow and snap.

We survived slavery in Egypt, the razing of the Temple, pogroms and persecutions

beyond reckoning, the Holocaust. But I put this question to you, my sweet, Jewish sons:
Can we survive a future of Jewish fathers who buy a new suit, sheepishly show up as
strangers on bar or bat mitzvah day, awkwardly pass the Torah on to a still-unformed 13-
year-old – and then never come back?

That very real image nearly makes me weep. I know that there are some who would write
my deep feelings off as the zeal of a convert. But, boys, there's one last thing you need
to understand: In this day and age, we're all Jews-by-choice.