

A Letter to My Grandchildren on Going to College

Dear Rachel and Lucas,

Congratulations on your college acceptances! I know how hard each of you has worked to attain your knowledge and so I am delighted that it has been recognized by your selection by a great college. Bravo!

As you transition to being a college student, I want to share with you some information about your Jewish heritage that I wish was shared with me when I went to college. I suspect that this information will not be covered in your classes and so I want to pass it along to you. I hope that you will take pride in knowing how much of modern civilization derives from the fundamental ideas of our ancestors. You should also take pride in knowing that Judaism has been continuously practiced longer than any other organized religion in the world despite many attempts to prevent its continuity. As the foundational religion for both Christianity and Islam, Judaism's precepts have shaped Western civilization and much of Asian civilization, with billions of people around the world practicing one of these three religions. While each religion has significant differences, they share core religious beliefs that originated in Judaism.

The Ten Commandments are, of course, the iconic contributions of Judaism, but because they are so well known, I will focus on other foundational ideas in the Torah that are perhaps less well known and appreciated.

1. According to the Torah, man and woman were made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). From this central Jewish belief, coupled with the belief that all humans derive from Adam and Eve, comes the profoundly important rockbed principles that all people are created equal and the equally profound belief that because each of us has a spark of divinity, we must treat all people with respect and protect their dignity. The Founders of the U.S. were learned in the Torah, and so the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.." are linear descents of Judaism's central ethical precept. I realize that you take these ideas for granted, but we know from painful experience that many societies do not consider all people to be equal and that they have subjected others to slavery or used them in other ways for their own purposes, with no regard for their rights as human beings. Recent events in the U.S. show that we are still suffering from the legacy of slavery and bigotry in our own country.
2. According to the Torah, because God rested on the seventh day and declared it holy (Genesis 2:3), humans who are created in God's image should also rest each week on the Sabbath, the seventh day. By defining a work week and a day of rest, not only for themselves, but also for non-Jews among them, as well as their animals, Judaism gave the world a great gift that has benefitted workers the world over for millennia.
3. According to the Torah, every seven years Jews who loaned money to other Jews have to forgive the debt (Deuteronomy 15:1) and Jews who have acquired land from other Jews have to give the seller the chance to buy it back for a fair price (Leviticus 25:23). Thus, Judaism established the foundational principle to prevent wealth inequality. The land is also to enjoy the Sabbatical year (Leviticus 25:1), and all of the produce that grows by itself that year is free to all, including animals.

Today, Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and non-religious, faculty members at virtually every university in the U.S. seek sabbatical year leaves traditionally every seven years from

their ordinary teaching responsibilities to refresh their scholarship and research, and to reflect on their careers. It is one of the most treasured academic benefits, but I suspect that many of your professors may not appreciate from whence the concept arose.

4. According to the Torah, every 50th year is a Jubilee year, in which debts were forgiven, land that was sold to others was returned even without payment, and Jewish slaves were set free. The founders of the U.S. were very knowledgeable about the Torah and they placed the Torah's injunction about the Jubilee year on the Liberty Bell. 'Proclaim LIBERTY Throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof' (Leviticus 25:10).
5. Taxation in the Torah had four key principles. First, a half-shekel, a modest amount, was required from every male regardless of their income or wealth to ensure that everyone participated in supporting the communal religious activities (Exodus 30:13). This was coupled with a 10% tax (tithe) on one's produce, ensuring that those who were more prosperous in that year paid a larger amount of money than those who were not as prosperous (Leviticus 27:30). Another 10% tithe for the poor, the widow, and the orphan was to be given in years 3 and 6. The Torah also required that the owners of fields producing food had to leave the produce at the corners of their field untouched so that those who did not have enough food could come and glean the food (Leviticus 19:9). Widows and orphans, as well as non-Jewish strangers are repeatedly singled out in the Torah as worthy of special protections, defining the moral imperative of assisting the most vulnerable members of the community, including those who would be the equivalent of immigrants in our country, regardless of their social station or even their religious beliefs. Finally, as indicated above, during the sabbatical year, the produce that grew without cultivation was available to all in need, not just the owner (Leviticus 25:6).
6. The Torah requires that one treat individuals with disabilities with respect, specifically stating that one should not curse the deaf (who cannot hear the curse) or put a stumbling block before the blind (who cannot see it and will therefore stumble over it) (Leviticus 19:4). This follows from recognizing that all people are created in God's image.
7. The Torah demands that justice be done and that no one is above the law (Leviticus chapter 19. 'You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.' The concept of equality before the law and the impartiality of judges and juries are the prerequisites of a just society. As Jewish law developed, even the High Priest was subject to being found guilty of a crime and punished.
8. The Torah requires ethical business dealings with specific injunctions to use fair measures of weight, length, and capacity in trading (Leviticus 19:35).
9. The Torah required proper stewardship for the land and respect for trees as part of its ecological imperatives. The land belongs to God and so people are stewards of the land, able to produce food in their time and then pass it along to someone else. As a result, the land also took part in the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, being unworked so as to replenish the soil. Amazingly enough, even war did not justify cutting down fruit trees as part of the siege of a city. 'When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down' (Deuteronomy 20:19).
10. The Torah recognized the importance of separation of powers in governance. While Moses was able to single-handedly forge the twelve tribes into a nation with a lot of help from God, upon his death, ritual leadership was entrusted to his brother Aaron as the High Priest, civil leadership was entrusted to Joshua as the head of the army, judicial responsibility was entrusted to the courts composed of learned and impartial judges, and spiritual leadership

was entrusted to the Prophets, who were inspired by God and had the power to anoint and remove the king. The Torah doesn't envision a need for a king, but allows the Jews to have one if they decide that they want one because other surrounding nations have kings. It actually does not give the king any specific powers, but demands that the king follow the law by making his own copy of the Torah and keeping it with him at all times. It also warns against the king amassing too much wealth or too many instruments of war, or becoming arrogant (Deuteronomy 17:14). Thus, there is a moral force above the king and the government, and if a government makes immoral laws, they are null and void.

11. The Torah forbids cruelty to animals, making it not only an injunction for the Jewish people, but a fundamental principle for all nations (Genesis 9:4 and 24:19; Deuteronomy 22:4 and 6).

These tenets of Judaism set the expectations and standards for communal human behavior: to be kind, to be just, to be honest, to have integrity, to be charitable, to be humble, to recognize the spark of divinity in every person, to uphold the dignity of all people, to do good whenever you can, to confront those who use power for their own benefit, and to protect the vulnerable, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

The central feature of Judaism throughout the more than 3,000 years during which it has been continuously practiced is the encouragement of different learned interpretations of the Torah, buttressed by evidence. While we may not view the type of evidence put forward in the Talmud to support positions as compelling, the brilliance of the internal consistency and the tolerance for multiple conflicting interpretations is astounding. This commitment to never-ending questioning and precision in language and thought has prepared Jews to use the same rigor and creativity in advancing the arts, literature, business, medicine, and the sciences. In college you will bring exactly these same skills to your studies. Even though you may not recognize it because you likely take it for granted, you will find that your education in Judaism has prepared you well to bring analytical thinking and creativity to the subjects you choose to study.

When you next travel to Washington, D.C., I suggest that you consider visiting the many places where Moses is reverentially referred to in his role as law giver, including being one of the 23 marble relief portraits over the gallery doors of the House Chamber in the U.S. Capitol, on the south wall frieze of the Supreme Court courtroom and on the Court's east pediment, and in the main reading room of The Library of Congress. Our Founding Fathers recognized that our country's moral status and commitment to justice rests on the law given at Mount Sinai. Regardless of whether one believes that the Torah was dictated to Moses by God or written by humans, it still stands as one of the defining events in world civilization, and you, as a linear descendent of that event, should take great pride in this singular contribution.

I hope this information will stand you in good stead in respectfully explaining your religion to your classmates who may not know much about it, and who may even have misconceptions. I also hope that this extremely brief description of just a few of the elements of Judaism will encourage you to ask your own questions and search out the answers through your own reading, discussions, and ultimately, scholarship. As a result, I am accompanying this letter with a copy of the Torah for you to take with you to college. It will be a valuable reference for you as you delve into many important new ideas.

With my deepest love and best wishes for an exciting and stimulating college experience.

Grandpa