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Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple  
New Brunswick, New Jersey

## **An Open Letter to my son, Zachary Charles Fellman**

L'shana Tova.

After months of dreams and worries, we welcomed Zachary Charles Fellman into the world just a few weeks ago. As we prayed for his health in utero, we tried to imagine what our child might be like. Our summer was filled with conversations about the future—what we hoped for our child, what we hoped for ourselves as parents-to-be.

Then, one evening in late August, Zachary was born, and we realized that all the prognosticating in the world could not have described our little boy. We realized that he is a world unto himself, and that we were blessed to be a part of his life. Then we had another realization: after finally reaching the peak of one treacherous summit, another, even larger mountain beckoned. Now we have to figure out how to raise our son.

Tonight, with your permission, I want to share my thoughts and dreams for Zachary's generation, the newest generation of Jews. His and their challenges will be great but not unprecedented, their opportunity unimaginably unlimited. On this Yom Kippur, let me share with you an open letter to Zachary and to his Generation.

My dear Zachary,

Tonight we mark the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar year, Yom Kippur. In the years to come, you will learn all about this and other holidays. Some years you will hopefully enjoy powerful and moving days of reflection on Yom Kippur. And in other years, I suspect you might say your old man talked too long, or that you really had a hard time fasting.

I hope that in time you and your generation will come to see that Yom Kippur involves much more than the particular customs and prayers of the day. I hope you and they will recognize the enduring values of Yom Kippur—the values of repentance and introspection, of evaluation and renewal.

On Yom Kippur, when we pause from all that is ordinary and familiar and place ourselves in an uncomfortable place, I hope you will come to recognize the enduring importance of family in Judaism. I hope you will see the beauty of our story as a people.

And I hope you will come to treasure your role as God's partner in the continuing perfection of our world.

So easily, Zach, people look at Yom Kippur as an individual experience, a day devoted to the self. I believe that nothing could be further from reality. Yom Kippur provides us a day to dwell on family, and the role of family in Jewish life. Yes, we must make a personal accounting of our actions during these Days of Awe, these Yamim Noraim, but so too must we pause to see the beauty and brilliance of Judaism as a family-based faith.

You see, Zach, while your learning at religious school is important, and while your involvement in the Temple, in youth groups, and in Jewish organizations gives your life fullness and enrichment, the family remains the central focus of Jewish life. Our kitchen table at home represents the single best study hall for the practice of Judaism.

Your mother and I spent much time considering the kind of Jewish home we would create. In fact, we continue to discuss the matter, and our Jewish home continues to evolve. Our home, your home, contains the heartbeat of the Jewish family.

Whenever you enter our house, look up at the doorway, and notice the Mezuzah. Recognize not just the artistic beauty and the following of a Mitzvah, a command in Torah, but also a symbol of the way of life of our home. That Mezuzah reminds us to keep God in the forefront of our minds, on our lips, in our conversations. Everything we do and say, we do or say in the presence of the Almighty. That Mezuzah reminds us of the sanctity of our world and all the encounters we will enjoy in it.

Look around at the bookshelves, Zachary. You'll see lots of books on politics, philosophy, history, sports, psychology, novels, and lots and lots of books on Jewish subjects. We Jews are a people of words. Your mom and I have a house full of books not for decoration but for edification, to make our lives as full as possible.

Look in the kitchen, Zach, and see the focal point of Jewish life. No, our faith does not entirely revolve around food, but mealtime provides us with an incomparable opportunity to interact with each other and our sacred tradition.

On the simplest level, notice the food. In our home, we choose to follow certain Jewish dietary rules. We follow the rules so that we can welcome any Jew into our home for a meal, so that we can recognize the sacred even in the mundane animal instincts of eating.

But much more than the food, listen to the conversation at the table. Notice that we try to share as many meals together as possible. And when we dine together, we focus on each other, not the newspaper or the television. Our conversations run the gamut—from the day's news to interesting subjects encountered at work or school, to the deeper questions of life.

And especially on the holidays, Zachie, spend time savoring the mealtime experience. Look around the table and take a mental picture. See the generations of family gathered

together to celebrate in a spirit of love and commitment. Notice that we all make an effort to wear our finest and use our best manners. Listen as we begin and end the meal with blessings, thanking God for all that we enjoy.

And ask questions, Zach. Ask lots of questions, even if your mom and I act as though we are tired of all the questions. Keep asking. Ask us not just about what we do, but why we do it. Ask your grandmothers and grandfathers about the holidays of their childhoods, and about their families. Ask your aunts and uncles about their experiences, and even ask about how your dad behaved at holiday meals in his youth! And listen to the guests at our table as they share their stories, their journeys. In all of those discussions, Judaism will live and breathe for you, and will offer you a path toward a life of contentment and fullness.

Your mother and I hope that our home will be more than just a physical shelter for you. We hope that it will also provide a shelter from life's storms, and be a place of happiness and learning, and just as it was for both of us during our childhoods, we hope that our home will help you develop a love and a passion for all of Jewish life.

And someday, when you establish your own home, we pray that it will be filled not only with Jewish books and Jewish conversation but also with Jewish souls. If Judaism is to have the rich future of our dreams, then both my generation and your generation have work to do.

For the adults of today, we must do all that we can to help people see the beauty Judaism can bring to life. And as you grow, you and your peers will face the same challenge of keeping Judaism a thriving, living entity. Learn from our struggles, our successes and our failures. Be willing to experiment, to try new ideas. Family life has sustained the Jew for countless generations. Embrace the bond of family, and in your own family, write the next chapter of Jewish history.

Zach, if you listen to your father, and I am sure you will soon tire of doing that, you will notice that I spend a lot of time talking about things that happened long ago. It's not that I hold little regard for our present or our future. Rather, I believe that the more exploration we do of history, the better we can understand our own times and the clearer our hopes can be for the future.

For me, being a history buff is part of being Jewish. Our Jewish past overflows with examples of heroism and bravery, endurance and success. And our history also contains the tears of generations who suffered while preserving our way of life. A former president of the United States whom your father respects greatly said it best, Zach. Harry Truman once noted that the only thing new in the world is the history we have not yet read.

In studying our history, I hope that you and your generation will find answers to the questions you confront. If assimilation remains a key issue, go back and read of the Hellenist period, when Jews were part of the Greek world. Or go read about the glories of

Spain, and discover how Jews lived and thrived in Spanish society while maintaining strong Jewish identities.

If exploring questions and answers and investigating deeper meanings in life beckons, go open a volume of Talmud. Read the discussion between the sages of old. Then add your own voice to the discussion. Find your role as an equal to the great thinkers of the past. Let their explorations and their answers guide you.

If, god forbid, you find yourself living in a time of difficulty for Jews, and we pray that time will never again come to pass, go back and look at the darker chapters of Jewish history. Find that Jews always discovered ways to remain true to our tradition, even under complete duress.

Open the Bible, Zach. Read it as sacred text, then re-read it as literature. Appreciate the artistry of the text, and then read it again to grasp a bit of our history. Learn about the journey of our people in the wilderness, and learn about the great kingdoms of David and Solomon. In history, you may not find all the answers to the problems you confront. But you will find an unparalleled level of guidance to lead you through whatever challenges you may face.

A great sage taught, *Hafoch ba v'Hafoch ba*. Turn it and turn it and you will find meaning. That sage was on to something. Go back into history. Explore. Delve. Dig. Discover. Turn the questions in your head, and turn the answers, too. And when you and your generation do that, you will find that our Jewish history can guide you into our Jewish future.

Zecharya, your mother and I will do all that we can to help you learn and grow and appreciate all that surrounds you. But perhaps the most important lesson we can teach you is the profound truth of your partnership with God. You and the members of your generation have a special role in this world. You are God's partners.

At the moment that you came to be, now nearly a month ago, you entered the world in a crowded room. Doctors and nurses were present. Your mother and I were present. And God was present. And in all of your actions, and all that you do in life, you will always have a partner by your side. God needs us as Jews to be sacred partners. And we Jews need our partnership with God to enable us to reach out and make our world more whole, more complete, more filled with Shalom.

Our partnership with God carries both rights and responsibilities. While it is our great good fortune to be linked with God in partnership, we also carry the obligation to do all we can to perfect our world.

My generation has tried to solve problems of homelessness, hunger, and inequality. We have made great strides. But your generation will face the task of completing the job your parents were unable to fulfill. Too many in this world lack the most basic of needs, and as Jews, we are commanded to meet those challenges.

When bad ideas arise from misguided leaders, you and your generation will be called upon to restore sanity. When those with means forget about those in need, you will be the ones who will be charged with opening eyes that do not see. When justice is needed, it will be you and your generation who must hear the call, and it will be you and your generation who must respond with speed and with conviction.

Zach, your partnership with God stretches even further than the notion of social justice. Partnership with the almighty means striving to see in everything you encounter a spark of divinity. Sometimes that task will be easy, and at other times more challenging. But the more you are able to see the sacred at work—in actions, in nature, in the faces you encounter, the more you will be able to work with God for the betterment of all.

Most importantly Zecharya Tzadik, your partnership with God means that you carry Godliness within you, and likewise, God carries some of you. So easily, we all forget that little bit of God that resides in us all. We look in the mirror and instead of seeing the eternality of the divine in our own souls, we see the mortal warts and scratches we all carry. You and your generation can do better. Yours can be the generation that recognizes the inherent holiness in all people, and creates a world filled with respect and honor for that sanctity.

One of my most prized books is a small volume published in 1929. This little blue book was purchased by your grandfather, my father, while he was in college. He signed the book and dated it in 1954. Then, in 1997, he wrote a note to me, and gave the book to me. The book is called Why I am a Jew, and it was written by Edmund Fleg.

Fleg dedicated the book to his unborn grandson. Sadly, that grandson never came to be, as both of Fleg's sons lost their lives in the dark days of World War II. Your grandfather, in his note to me, spoke of considering himself that unborn grandson. You, then, are, in some ways, the great-great-grandson of Fleg, and you are an heir to his words and his vision.

Fleg, who had ventured away from Judaism in his life, came to recognize some of the beauty and power of Jewish thought and Jewish being. He vocalized his belief in a list of twelve statements, each rich with clarity and meaning. Those statements have guided me in my life, and I hope they will guide you and your generation as well.

Wrote Edmund Fleg:

I am a Jew because born of Israel and having lost it, I felt it revive within me more alive than I am myself.

I am a Jew because born of Israel and having found it again, I would have it live after me even more alive than it is within me.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel asks every possible sacrifice of my soul.

I am a Jew because in all places where there are tears and suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because in every age when the cry of despair is heard, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the message of Israel is the most ancient and the most modern.

I am a Jew because Israel's promise is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because for Israel the world is not finished, men and women will complete it.

I am a Jew because for Israel, humanity is not yet created; humans are creating humanity.

I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its Unity above nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because above humans, image of the Divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

Zachary, the future for you and your generation stands limitless. I and all of us who came before you will wait with bated breath to hear how you and your generation will complete Fleg's thoughts, and complete that simple sentence, "I am a Jew because...."

With love and devotion,  
Your Dad