

Dear Elijah,

Wow. What a year it's been. You spent most of it in the warm embrace of the womb. But during your first few months here on the outside, we've been through a lot. We've witnessed the strain on the world splitting around us, and thankfully, the strength of the covenant (our brit) holding us together. We brought you into the covenant on your eighth day of life, in keeping with Jewish tradition. It was a beautiful Saturday evening in mid-July. We had explained to your sister that we were having a party to welcome you, and she enthusiastically helped your father and grandmother decorate the Garden Room with colored table clothes and potted plants. We had wine ready to pour, ice cream ready to eat, and a room glowing with the happy, summered faces of our community ready to surround you.

The ceremony opened with song and prayer. Your aunt and uncle carefully carried you into the room, and then placed you into the gentle embrace of your grandfathers. Your father, sister and I watched with adoration and anticipation. It was only when the mohelet (the female mohel) was about to perform the actual circumcision that Addy picked up on the fact that this wasn't such a typical party – that there was more going on. She started clinging to my leg and seeking my attention, and my initial thought was: *Why can't someone else insert themselves and help right now?* My newborn son is about to have a public medical procedure, and yet I am the one trying to keep Addy quiet – how did this happen? But then I surrendered to the moment, knelt to her height, and held her hand. Addy asked: 'What is she doing to Elijah?' Not sure how to respond, I quickly went with: 'That woman's a doctor; she's helping him.' All true, and satisfying *enough* to Addy...

But today, as we celebrate your first Rosh Hashanah, I want to offer a better answer. I want to try my best to convey to you what this brit – this continually complex yet most central covenant – is all about. I want to share what I am still discerning about being a Jew in the world in 2017, largely thanks to you and your sister – my teachers.

The first pillar of the covenant is what we call *Gemilut Chasadim* or ‘Acts of Loving Kindness.’

But essentially, it’s all about *showing up*. Like most pregnant mothers who learn they’re having a baby boy, one of my early reactions to the news was: ‘OK. So I guess this means we’re having a bris. This will be a new experience.’ But unlike your sister, I wasn’t so worried about the circumcision itself. I trusted a doctor and seasoned mohel to do it well. My worry was about who would actually show up – for me, for you, for us, for the covenant. This wasn’t a new fear. It’s one of those recurring worries planted long ago without any grounding in reality.

But trusting that people will show up is part of faith.

The truth is that people had no trouble showing up to the Garden Room that evening. People drove in from Boston and the Berkshires. Parents came after traveling up and back to camp for visiting day. It was amazing. And I shouldn’t have been surprised, because people had been showing up all week. The day we came home from the hospital, two women separately showed up at our door – one bearing a small Carvel ice cream cake and one carrying a bag of the softest, nicest, most organic baby goods. But it wasn’t what they brought that was so memorable, though the ice cream cake was kind of perfect.

What struck me is that they just came. They didn’t ask. They didn’t call first. They didn’t inquire what we needed. They just showed up at the door. Both women had recently given birth, so they may have been operating with that motherly wisdom that it’s impossible to know when a newborn will be sleeping or nursing or whatever, so best to just go. And I am so glad they did. Because it can be hard to just show up at someone’s door, even for happy things like babies. It can be so much easier to hide behind decorum or deference. I’m as guilty as most for over-asking those often unanswerable questions, like: When would be a good time? Is there anything you need? Sometimes we don’t know what we need, and sometimes it feels too hard to ask for what we really want, which is simply company, and the simple yet profound assurance that we are not alone.

The covenant begins when we show up for one another, for family and friends, for members of our community that we *kind of* know, and for strangers halfway around the globe. Sometimes

we show up for others, because they *really* showed up for us. Other times we show up for those we love, even though they didn't or couldn't show up for us. The reason doesn't so much matter. What matters is that we walk up to the door and insert ourselves into their lives.

We often call this pillar of Jewish living *Gemilut Chasidim* – acts of loving kindness. What makes these acts loving – whether we're showing up for a shiva minyan, or for sorting and sandwich-making for Midnight Run, or for a march in Washington – what makes them loving is that they are done without asking. We discern what is needed or desired, and then proceed, without stopping, through the boundaries that separate me from you. That's love. That's chesed. That's what the world needs from us more and more.

In the book of Kings [1 Kings 19:10], the prophet Elijah angrily complains to God, saying "the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant..." They have been unfaithful, and Elijah wants to give up – on the people, on the project, on everything. Then, according to rabbinic midrash, God responds by commanding Elijah to be present at every single bris for all time – to be a witness to this beautiful demonstration of loyalty by the Jewish people [Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 29].

That's why we have Elijah's chair at each ceremony. And that's why we're not supposed to invite people to a bris, but simply announce it. Because who would want to miss an opportunity to meet the Prophet Elijah?! But I think it's more that the covenant rests on people showing up for each other without being asked or invited. The covenant relies on us showing up out of love. And sometimes, Elijah, you just need to open the door and let yourself in.

Pillar #2: Avodah. We usually call it 'worship,' but it's really about surrendering some control over the flow of time. When I told people I was pregnant, the conversation usually went like this: 'When are you due?' they would ask, and I would say, 'Early July.' Then practically everyone would have the same response. They would say, 'Perfect timing!' Without fail, 'Perfect timing!' Perhaps what made the timing perfect was my having a summer baby, or missing the quiet months at the synagogue, or giving birth before the real heat arrived. Maybe they meant all

those reasons, or none of them. To this day, I still don't know. But I do know that I was skeptical, because Addy's arrival in the spring seemed pretty perfect to me, and what I'd hoped to replicate.

When it comes to timing, it seems like we spend most of our lives rushing or waiting, or rushing through the wait. Toward the end of my pregnancy, I had rushed to ready myself for the slight possibility that you would arrive early. Then, when you didn't, you somehow seemed late before your due date had even arrived. During that endless final week, I quietly told myself "These are our days waiting for Elijah." And then after all of that, you were right on time.

It's hard waiting for moments you desire but cannot control. We need to be open and ready, but not too rigid – not too attached to a certain day or time or outcome. And it's not easy at all. I ultimately went into labor (perhaps you decided you were ready), while I was sitting in a hospital bed waiting to be induced. It was an unusually busy Friday at Greenwich Hospital, so after being told that they would induce labor, we waited more than 8 hours before actually seeing a doctor who could do so. But those hours your dad and I spent together waiting were really special. It was the most unstructured time we've shared in a long time. We were simply together, waiting but not rushing through the wait. I think we needed it. We made each other laugh, a lot, and made a final decision on your name. Knowing that it could be a long night ahead, we shared cups of Starbucks coffee, and ate too many mini pints of Haagen Dazs ice cream. It was time out of time. It was time we didn't choose, but it chose us. It was perfect.

This summer at home also kind of felt like time out of time. It was a gift for which I am grateful. And it was a challenge. For the most part, the time flew by. Days and weeks would pass, but I would have trouble recalling what exactly we did. There was a lot of waiting for you, Elijah, to finish feeding or to fall asleep, and once you did, there was a lot of rushing to actually get out the door. And when I found myself with time alone just with Addy, I often felt pressure to make it feel special, even perfect. But trying to make time with a 3-year-old feel perfect can quickly backfire into tantrums and tears all around.

Because we don't pick perfect timing. It picks us. Perfecting timing strikes often when we least expect it. Like that evening when Addy was screaming and crying, and then you, Elijah, started screaming and crying. Just when I was ready to add my own voice to the symphony of sadness and despair, I heard Addy quietly begin to sing. With tears still flowing from her eyes, she had walked over to me and you, started to hug you, sing to you, and slowly sort of soothe you. It was a perfect moment for a new mother of two.

Perfect moments often emerge out of imperfect ones. And I think we just need to remember to stay open to the possibility, and to make sure we're not blind to the holiness of those moments of alignment when they do arrive. Then we need to name them, elevate them, and surrender to them.

To make Avodah real, we each have to become an *eved* – a servant who surrenders some control, over the flow of time, over the unfolding of our lives. What I'm talking about involves more than setting aside time in our schedules for days like today to gather and pray to the Holy One, because the Source of Life speaks to us when we least expect it:

After Elijah cried out to God in despair, God's actual response in the Bible, not the midrash, was this: "Come out," God called, "and stand on the mountain before Me." And God passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks [by the power of God]; but God was not in the wind. After the wind — an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake — fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire — a still small voice [1Kings 19:11-12].

Our work becomes one of discernment, of opening ourselves to those amazing moments of contact, connection and alignment...Moments when we aren't waiting or rushing, when life somehow sweetly surprises us, grabs our hearts, and feels pretty perfect.

Pillar #3: Torah, OR: Debating the details with humility and love. I learned I was pregnant about a week before the presidential election, and I spent the night of November 8th on our living room couch slowly curling into a smaller and smaller ball. I couldn't tell whether pregnancy symptoms were starting, or if my stomach was processing more quickly than my mind that the election was going in a direction I hadn't fully been able to imagine. So many of us were stunned by the results, because we'd been living inside the warm embrace of our echo chambers. We'd been reading our favorite columnists who tell us what we already think but just so eloquently, and we'd been viewing and liking the Facebook posts of our friends. We were shocked by the results, because we've basically stopped talking to people who think and feel differently than we do. In many ways, we've forgotten how to disagree, and we've really forgotten that to be Jewish is to love debate and to debate out of love.

We have a lot of work to do as a country to re-establish a sense of unity among our growing diversity, and to build understanding and compassion across differences. But before we can work together out in the world, we have some real work to do right here in our congregation. We need to ensure that the disagreements among us serve as a source of strength, not fear. In the weeks after the inauguration, with the Travel Ban announced, EPA regulations rolled back, and Planned Parenthood threatened, many of us felt called to respond and act. Our moral compasses were motivating resistance to the policies coming from the White House. We wanted our Jewish values to guide us, and our Jewish community to support us. But there was real concern that responding to political matters felt too partisan, and could alienate members of our community with different perspectives on immigration, healthcare or taxes.

We struggled with a path forward, because somehow we as a congregation (and we're not alone in this), we started operating *as if* our sole purpose was to keep everyone happy, comfortable, and in agreement...But that's a major misunderstanding of Judaism.

Our real purpose is to engage in sacred debate. That's how our shared story and values came to be. That's how Torah speaks, holding together two different, even conflicting versions of how the world was created and all that followed. That's how our ancient rabbis taught, with a

commitment to always retaining minority opinions. And that's what it means to be Jewish: To disagree from a place of love. We're obligated to argue, but the goal isn't to persuade or win. The goal is to draw on all available wisdom, and to break down our routine habits of mind. Rather than raising our defenses or entrenching our positions, debate should open us up to new possibilities, and ultimately bring clarity about what the world needs from us right now.

We have to debate the details, because the foundations in Torah are for us to make real.

Torah tells us to love the stranger for we were strangers,

but it's up to us to figure out the details of immigration reform.

Torah tells us to heal the sick, but it's up to us to improve Obamacare.

Torah tells us to care for the poor, but it's up to us to create jobs and strengthen schools. Torah points the direction, then we debate the details.

That's what we're doing here. That's our spiritual work. It will serve our families, our congregation, and our country. But to do it well, we need a framework grounded in respect, humility, trust, and practice. It will require real discipline and faith to develop this kind of discernment, because finding the verses of Torah that simply support our political instincts isn't the kind of Judaism I'm talking about. I want us to really to open ourselves to our multi-vocal tradition and to the divergent interpretations of our peers, to hear all sides of these enduring debates, and then, only then, to make a judgment about what's the best path forward. Because the political world needs our Jewish wisdom and morals, and it needs us to model how to debate the details with love. The world needs us to show up, and the timing is now. So we better strive for productive dialogue, not unanimity, because we'll never get there. And given the strain on the world, we just can't be late!

There's a term TEKU that appears at the end of unresolved rabbinic debates. Some claim that TEKU is an acronym, standing for *Tishbi yetaretz kushiyot v'abayot – Elijah the Tishbi will resolve all unanswered questions and longstanding disagreements*. I love this tradition, because your namesake, Elijah, is a builder of bridges and resolver of conflicts. But I also love how this tradition affirms the present – that questions, debates and disagreements define our current

reality. Nothing is changing anytime soon, not until the arrival of the world to come. So we better get better at embracing the discomfort of not agreeing with everyone.

Elijah, just to be clear: We don't think you're here to announce the world to come. We just want you to help hold the space until we get there. We need you to teach us to love debate again. With humility and love, my son, I need you to argue with me. I need you to surrender some control. And I need you to show up – for me, for our family, for the Jewish people, and most of all for the world. This is what it means to live in the covenant and live out its wisdom. If I ever forget this, please be sure to remind me, and I know, I just know, your timing will be perfect.

With love, hope and pride,

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