

# Yiddishkeit without Ideology: A Letter to my Son

Avi Haben

Dear Nachum Yehuda,

It is an old custom for fathers to leave their children ethical wills summarizing the moral lessons of a lifetime. In these uncertain times it is perhaps prudent to do so sooner rather than later. It would be a simple matter for me to simply tell you to be fully devoted to a life prescribed by Jewish tradition: live piously and modestly, love your family, be a loyal and kind friend, study Torah, be scrupulous in your observance of mitzvos and so on. But if that were all I felt needed saying, I would point you to the Ramban's letter to his family, which you can find in your siddur. His words are over seven hundred years old and can hardly be improved upon.

But that message, though still entirely relevant, is not in itself adequate for the challenges that you already face. Tradition is, after all, a moving target. What Jews practice today might not be exactly what the books record as the norms of yesterday. In fact, what Jews practice today might be inconsistent with the very values they espouse today. Even the fully committed need to make some hard decisions. In this brief letter I want to help you with some guidelines for thinking about such matters.

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In order to clarify the problem, let me recap some personal history so that you can appreciate the context in which these problems first arose for me. (For you the context is a bit different but the parallels will be obvious enough.) As a child in New York in the 1960's I attended school in what would now be called a haredi institution. What distinguished this school from other, non-haredi, schools was not so much the stricter standard of halakhah to which we were held, but rather the pervasive sense of alienation from everything outside our narrow circle. We were cynical about law and order, about high-sounding ideas, about goyim, about Jews, you name it.

Such an attitude is perhaps easily dismissed as the inevitable consequence of being the children of Holocaust survivors. But in fact it was merely a slightly exaggerated form of an attitude of wary subversiveness that serves as the backdrop for everything Jewish. "*Avadai heim*" – Jews are slaves of Hashem, but, more to the point, of nobody else. In any case, that's what all the real Jews I knew were like; if there were any wide-eyed and bushy-tailed ones, they were somewhere else. To this day I think of alienation and its social corollary, subversiveness, as inseparable from Yiddishkeit. This attitude is deep in my bones (and, of course, I regard it with suspicion).

You won't be surprised to hear that my classmates and I quickly applied this same critical point of view to everything that we were taught. This attitude was bolstered by the fact that, although our parents' sense of identity as Jews was utterly beyond question or even reflection, they themselves were quite cynical about the kind of ideology that our rebbes felt compelled to push. *Gedoilim* don't make mistakes? *Tzaddikim* find jewels in fish? Once upon a time. At some point, we ourselves couldn't help but notice that there were plenty of things that goyim did a lot better than we did. In fact, as we got older we began to suspect that some of our role models might have been a bit more clever than they were wise and that, in a few cases, cynicism about rules and regulations had led to just plain crookedness and perversion. Not that I thought then, or I think now, that the rest of the world is any better but suffice it to say that unpleasant moral dilemmas that pitted loyalty against rectitude arose more frequently than they should have. Beyond all that, for an adolescent kid looking to find himself and

develop his own particular interests and talents, the atmosphere was just a bit stifling. Ultimately, we had to decide between buying into the whole system despite misgivings or leaving. I left.

I didn't go far. In the modern Orthodox institution to which I eventually migrated, the underlying principle was openness. Openness to art and music, to science and literature. Not to mention sports and movies and television. My new friends really were more articulate, more knowledgeable in most areas and often more naturally ethical than many of my friends in the yeshiva world. Of course, I had to get used to the idea of guys with names like Jerry and Stuie who wore jeans and had girlfriends. Apparently, I was hopelessly square but at least I had found what I took to be a healthy rebellious spirit that held the promise of a more thoughtful Yiddishkeit and I identified with it.

There were some problems. The version of Yiddishkeit that was upheld there as an ideal was different in disturbing ways from that to which I had been accustomed. The place suffered from a Litvish coldness that had adapted neatly to the American technocratic mindset to produce a somewhat formal and not very *heimish* version of cookbook Yiddishkeit. You asked somebody there if it was okay to daven in your *gatkes*, they started pulling books off the shelf. Lacking a sense of the *heimish* and hankering above all for middle-class American respectability, they tended to undervalue the little hard-to-pin-down gestures and manners that give substance to Jewish distinctiveness.

Moreover, the yeshivish rule that "if it's not Jewish, we don't like it" was flipped in the modern Orthodox world to read "if we like it, it's Jewish". These two formulations are equivalent in logic books but not on the ground. It turned out that my casually-clad new friends had few rebellious thoughts after all; they were simply practicing Yiddishkeit – often with rather quaint earnestness – as it had been taught to them. It was the *chnyoks* in the yeshiva world, who managed to maintain some emotional distance from the trappings of middle-class respectability, who were actually the subversives. I wasn't quite home yet.

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My experiences were not atypical. The problem wasn't with the particular institutions I attended, but rather with institutional Yiddishkeit in general. To see why both haredi and modern institutional Yiddishkeit are severely handicapped, we need to first understand why the usual dictionary definition of Yiddishkeit is inadequate. It is certainly true that at its core Yiddishkeit is a received set of laws, interpreted and codified continually through the generations by Tannaim and Amoraim, Rishonim and Acharonim – just open the books and there it is. But this definition fails to take into account two critical principles.

First, Yiddishkeit is not simply a set of laws but rather embodies particular perspectives on all that is important. These perspectives are manifest in a web of attitudes regarding, for example, what families and communities are supposed to look like, and in a whole host of desirable character traits. These attitudes and traits were implicit in the Torah given to us at Har Sinai and have taken on particular forms and emphases as a result of our collective experience over the centuries. They include generosity, humility, empathy, alienation, self-deprecating humor, civility, not taking pleasure for granted, argumentativeness, skepticism, awareness of suffering, et cetera. No point in haggling about this list – what I tell you explicitly hardly matters. Such attitudes and traits are imparted from parent to child, from teacher to student, and circulate within communities in a million subtle ways, few of them explicit. Rules can be preserved in books and filed by bureaucrats. Attitudes are implicit, deeper and more defining, but they can evaporate in a flash in changing cultural conditions, especially if not manifested in actions. It is the very essence of Yiddishkeit to preserve these attitudes and pass them on.

Second, every individual has personal needs, interests, talents, character traits and social attitudes. Some of these are distinctly positive or negative and Yiddishkeit takes a firm stand for or against them, but for the most part individual proclivities are simply taken for granted as the backdrop for a life of Torah. People need to eat and to marry, to work and to earn sustenance, to enjoy art and music, to interact with others and to understand them, to defend their lives and their property, to comprehend the workings of nature and to exploit them. I could try to prove to you that Tanach and Gemara are replete with stories in which these needs are assumed and taken fully for granted. But to do so would be unnecessary: you know in your bones that the satisfaction of these needs is fundamental for normal human emotional and intellectual development.

Things sometimes get sticky when certain attitudes which you think of as inseparable from your very self are consistent with the letter of the law but somehow at odds with the attitudes that your family and community are clearly trying to pass on to you. For example, your militantly nationalistic feelings might run up against a tradition of quietism and moderation which strikes you as craven; perhaps your egalitarian tendencies will be frustrated by an unambiguously hierarchical traditional society; your interest in science is liable to be curtailed by a strong focus on *limud torah*; your exceptional artistic abilities could be discouraged as frivolous; your focus on textual and historical aspects of gemara might put you outside the pale of usual yeshivish discourse; your free-wheeling individualistic spirituality is likely to be constricted by a tradition of discipline and conformity; your wanderlust will be frustrated by the demand to settle down and assume traditional responsibilities.

Let me be absolutely clear: where the demands of halakhah are unambiguous, you must submit to them. But how does one navigate between much less well-defined traditional attitudes and strong personal inclinations? When I was your age I didn't know the answer (I still don't) but one proposition that seemed self-evident to me at the time was that it was essential to be consistent. In other words, I felt that I had to somehow make sure that the way I defined Yiddishkeit and the way I defined my commitments given my own inclinations would be perfectly aligned.

I'm now convinced that that commitment to consistency was utterly wrong-headed and is the key to all that is wrong with institutional Yiddishkeit. I shouldn't have been defining either Yiddishkeit or my commitments at all. To do so is to reduce Yiddishkeit to ideology which is exactly what it is not.

Because educational institutions are set up more to impart book knowledge and packaged formulations than hard-to-define attitudes, they are always driven in the direction of ideology. Herein lies their failure. Neither haredi nor modern Orthodox institutions have succeeded in imparting, or even sustaining, the normal *heimish* Yiddishkeit, full of the humor, creativity and authentic *yiras shamayim* that simple Jews have lived naturally in communities around the world for thousands of years. To put it another way, ordinary, knowledgeable, committed Jews have customarily spoken the language of Yiddishkeit as a first language – fluently and unself-consciously. Institutions have taught students to speak the language of Yiddishkeit as a second language – awkwardly constrained by poorly internalized rules of grammar.

The ideologues who ran the yeshivish institutions I knew tried to inculcate a set of ideological commitments so comprehensive and intense as to suffocate an individual's personality. One result of this was a kind of cynicism that sometimes amounted to the complete annihilation of any moral and aesthetic compass. The good news is that this mostly worked on the feeble; the normal people's cynicism extended also to their own education. Most of us lived rather comfortably with, for instance, the idea that in principle great rabbanim have '*daas torah*', whatever that might mean, but that in fact most of the rabbanim we actually knew were, how should I put it, not necessarily especially bright.

Conversely, in some modern Orthodox institutions that I know, many of the subtle attitudes that form the core of Yiddishkeit have been diluted out of existence. What remains is a bare-bones – even if scrupulously observed – halakhah that constitutes a kind of obstacle course that needs to be negotiated in the pursuit of self-fulfillment. But what is worse is that this pursuit of self-fulfillment doesn't consist merely of individuals unselfconsciously pulling received attitudes in directions suited to their own personalities; rather its acceptable forms are defined for one and all in accordance with prevailing cultural tradewinds – nationalism, feminism, humanism, whatever. This can lead to an eviscerated Torah forever subordinated to passing intellectual fads. The encouraging fact is that, in general, fads pass – or else they're not fads after all.

Overall, institutional Yiddishkeit is superficial and inauthentic – in institutions homogenized ideology trumps common sense every time. In the absence of checks and balances, of healthy tension, a sense of proportion and limits is lost and Yiddishkeit itself is diminished and distorted. You probably don't fully appreciate this point yet because you are at that stage in life where things are black and white and it seems important to nail them just right. What I call tension, you call hypocrisy. Time will broaden your perspective.

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To best explain what I think Yiddishkeit really is, let me tell you a little about your great-grandparents. Those of them who survived The War were among the only survivors of their families and their communities. Their language was Yiddish and the standards by which they judged reality were those of chassidus, even if in America after The War they themselves took some liberties with those standards. They were grateful for the freedoms America offered them but regarded the culture of America, including American Jews, as *prost* – vulgar, ignorant and self-indulgent. They belonged to that disappearing league of beardless chassidim, talmidei chachamim who were committed to old-fashioned Yiddishkeit but not at all romantic about it. Their *frumkeit* was neither angry nor naive; it was instinctive. They were personally honest and scrupulous to a fault but exceedingly loyal to their friends, some of whom were a bit less honest. They were, in the world of chassidus, insiders who chose to keep a safe critical distance – not quite in, not quite out. They knew just how long they could extend their anchor chains.

Agudah? Mizrahi? It was good for a heated argument, lots of them, but not much more. (One of them once joked that all that remained from his days as an Agudist was his disdain for Mizrahi.) Whether or not the State was the beginning of the geulah didn't matter to them (though, of course, they prayed that it would be). They didn't blindly support the State because it was the beginning of the geulah and they didn't reject it because it wasn't. They simply supported the State because they felt it was good for Jews.

I'm afraid that it's hard for you to really understand this legacy because it hasn't survived in any of the prevailing stereotypical ideologies here in Israel. Have you ever stood at a Yom Hazikaron ceremony and wept for those who did not survive to share our astonishing fortune at having a state, for the awesome sacrifices we Jews have made to preserve that fortune, for the suffering of our ancestors for millennia... and at the same time cringed at the mind-blowing inanity and vapidness of these pompous, imitative, goyish ceremonies? I hope that one day you will.

Your great-grandmothers believed that their duties consisted primarily of ensuring that their children were provided for, healthy, *mentschlich* and frum Jews. The sacrifices they made to carry out these duties, under circumstances we can hardly imagine, boggle the mind. But don't think for a moment that they did this out of starry-eyed naivete or extreme piety – they were hard-bitten realists who, when the spirit struck them, could regale you with critiques of their community of *leidig-geyers* and *dreykops* that would make Sholom Aleichem blush.

Trust me they were not *tzena rena* ladies and they would laugh hysterically at the thought of women piously attending seminars on the evils of modernity.

One thing they surely would have found even more bizarre is the current fashion of scouring halakhic sources for support for various “women’s issues”. What possible difference does it make what it says in this or that sefer, they would wonder, if everybody already knows what Jews have been doing for as long as we remember? No sefer can change the facts. And besides, if you want to do an aveirah, why bother calling it a mitzvah? As not atypical Polish chassidistes, one of my grandmothers occasionally played cards, the other read novels, both benched only on Shabbos and davened only on *yamim noraim* and at *yizkor* and it never occurred to them to attempt to justify any of these things. Not because they didn’t take Yiddishkeit seriously but precisely because they took it seriously enough not to attempt to redefine it according to their convenience. (Mommy asked me to mention that her bubbes were very frum and did daven every day – and one of her zeides was actually a bearded Litvak.) To take a more extreme example currently making some waves, the notion of single women choosing to bear children would have aroused their dismay but also, perhaps, their pity; the idea of publishing an article to justify such a decision would have simply left them dumbstruck. Altogether, conspicuous displays of eager and unconventional piety always struck them as too earnestly “religious” – in the goyish sense of the word.

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I am not telling you all this to make the point that your great-grandparents were exceptional (though they certainly were – each in their own way). Rather, I am concerned here with precisely those qualities of their Yiddishkeit that were typical of their generation – it was learned, nuanced, human, and authentic. That is the kind of Yiddishkeit I would like to pass down to you. You won't get it in an institution.

You can – and, under current conditions, you must – learn Shas and *poskim* in an institution. But Jewish attitudes must be learned through immersion in family or community, internalized, and lived instinctively. Internalized values lived instinctively don’t ever form a neat consistent package. On the contrary, they are always full of tension between conflicting poles: between loyalty to Jews and loyalty to the values they embody, between the letter of halakhah and its spirit, between conformity and individuality, and so on. This tension is a wonderful, healthy thing – it is the source of a person’s intellectual vitality and creativity. Living a life of Torah means living with tension: Yiddishkeit is not meant to consist of instant solutions to personal problems, canned shallow theology, shlock aesthetics or narrow-minded provincialism. It is meant to encourage the kind of depth and tension that – forgive me for this odd example but I know you'll know what I mean – distinguishes Carlebach from Boro Park rock.

It is precisely this creative tension which distinguishes Yiddishkeit from other civilizations and which has allowed it to survive under impossible circumstances. What is required is a terrific loyalty to tradition down to the most trivial detail, and humility in the face of the accumulated weight of this tradition. This loyalty and humility must be balanced by a creative restlessness that forever challenges spiritual complacency by testing tradition against the very values with which it imbues those who are truly loyal to it.

The enemy of this creative tension is ideology. Ideologues of the "right" fear the fluidity of *Torah SheBaal Peh* (or are deaf and blind to it) and would reduce it all to *Torah SheBikhtav*. In doing so, they reduce a living tradition to ideology. Ideologues of the "left" fear an "outdated" halakhah and would round its edges to render it palatable. In doing so, they too reduce a living tradition to ideology.

You should recognize the rhetoric of ideology since it is all around you, insidiously trying to pry you from your own tradition. One type is peddled by those people who will tell you that there is only one true *derech*. Whatever that *derech* turns out to be, it won't be yours. Any claim that the Jews have always had it all wrong is simply incoherent by definition. If your rebbe tells you that a centuries-old minhag is wrong because the Mishnah Berurah says so, he is not only clueless but also dangerous. If he tries to teach you some strange new topic called "emunah" or "hashkafa", he's probably proselytizing to some questionable ideology of recent vintage, usually radical Zionism or radical anti-Zionism. Steer clear. If you feel an urge to learn machshava, take out a Sfas Emes on Friday night. Remember that gemara wasn't invented in Brisk, Eretz Yisrael wasn't discovered by Rav Kook, and chassidus isn't the private property of Chabad.

Another type of dangerous ideological rhetoric is peddled by those who will remind you that "there are many true paths in Judaism". They are probably not on any of them. Their apparent open-mindedness is usually a cover for the doctrinaire and arrogant conviction that Yiddishkeit as we know it is primitive, unenlightened, and provincial and desperately in need of the civilizing influence of whatever intellectual fashion is sweeping college campuses (which, they will try to persuade you, is what Yiddishkeit *really* was supposed to be all along). Given the choice between those who understand Yiddishkeit but have drifted, or even bolted, away and those who bastardize Yiddishkeit, always choose the company of the former. Ultimately, it's the location of the anchor that matters.

Ideology and self-righteousness do not sit well with *yiras shamayim*, which is much more likely to be found in the company of self-assured humility and a sense of humor. Such humility is rooted in an appreciation of the fact that neither the *Ribboino Shel Oilam's* Pristine Torah nor the Grand Unified Theory of Truth and Justice is likely to reveal itself to any of us any time soon. Ultimately, the least arbitrary choice you've got is whatever flawed version of Yiddishkeit is, at least, your very own. In your case, this is Polish chassidus, pulled this way by the American experience and that way by the Israeli experience; for others it might be something else altogether. Some will go back several more generations in their family tree to find a version of Yiddishkeit that is substantive enough and authentic enough to identify with. Others will find it by joining a compatible community. Inevitably, each person will nudge his or her received Yiddishkeit in the direction that their *shoresh neshama* pulls. But if they try to improve it according to this or that theory they will sacrifice that very quality which ensures Yiddishkeit its eternal meaning – the quality of being a living, continuous tradition.

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The tension inherent in being part of a living tradition has been understood and felt by Jews like your grandparents and great-grandparents for millennia. I want you to feel it too. But it only works if you spend a good deal of time deeply immersed in instinctive Yiddishkeit. Unfortunately, this has become extremely difficult. I don't want to romanticize some mythical innocent past, but the fact is that in many crucial ways the intensity and totality of the Jewish experience has been diminishing. You have been bombarded with too much foreign culture too soon – Yiddishkeit is already in danger of becoming just another life-choice to reflect on. The anchor isn't quite as heavy as it should be and the chains are not quite long enough. I'm afraid that if you pull too hard they will break.

What then can you do to stake your rightful place in the grand procession of Jewish tradition? Well, I can't not say it, do mitzvos and be prepared to make sacrifices for the Jewish people. But you are already serious and scrupulous and in too few years you will, God willing, be a proud soldier. So let me mention a few things that are less obvious.

For one thing, pay attention to all the little things that seem so insignificant to you (as they did to me when I was your age): the *nigunim*, the accents, the *vertlich*, the jokes, and a million

other things. These trivial-seeming items often carry within them some of the deepest messages. Take them seriously and one day they might reveal their secrets. (And if some fall by the wayside, don't despair – such is life.)

Also, learn a lot of gemara. Serious study of gemara is essential for any authentic version of Yiddishkeit: the combination, so central to Yiddishkeit, of fidelity to the details of tradition along with critical scrutiny of those details is largely a consequence of immersion in the study of gemara. There is no easy substitute for it. If you don't learn gemara intensely, you run the risk of growing alienated from that branch of Torah learning which has been the focus of your ancestors' intellectual energies for generations. If you learn it poorly, it can turn you narrow and petty. But if you learn gemara intensely and well, you will develop humility towards the awesome achievements of generations of scholars and, hopefully, you will take your place among them. And you will know when to follow your own muse and when to yield.

Once your anchor is firmly grounded in your received tradition, including deep and broad knowledge of shas, go ahead and stretch your chains as far as they'll permit. The world is full of wonders – good, bad and ugly. Explore as many of them as your heart desires and your responsibilities allow. Get to know them with the familiarity of an insider and the detachment of an outsider.

Finally, continue to be a stubborn and clever critic of received wisdom just as your ancestors were. But always be sure to do so in a way that honors those ancestors and doesn't belittle them.

Ultimately, despite my occasional bouts of cynicism, the message I want to leave you with is a perfectly corny one and it is this: Always remember that Mommy and I are passing you a small flickering flame that we received from our parents as they did from theirs. If you ignore it, if you smother it, if you fiddle with it, it will be extinguished. But if you sit by it and tend to it carefully, if you know when to guard it jealously and when to give it air, if you wander occasionally into the nearby forest and bring back healthy wood – then this small flickering flame will not only warm and light your dark winter nights, but it will be the legacy that you pass on to your children as they will to theirs.