

# A Letter to the New POTUS

Rosh HaShana 5769

Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland, MA

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*I wrote a letter to someone... Only I don't know to whom. I know I wrote it to one of two people, but I'm not sure who I'll be sending it to. It's dated November 5, 2008, and it's a letter to the next President of the United States.*

November 5, 2008

Dear Mr. President-Elect,

*Mazel Tov!* I am sure no one is happier than you that the election is finally over, except perhaps for your wife and family. It seems to me that the presidential campaign has lasted forever, and I haven't been the one crisscrossing the country, kissing hands and shaking babies, giving speeches and interviews, and, of course, constantly raising money.

I send this letter to you at the moment of your election, Mr. President, but I write these words to you on Rosh HaShana, the day when Jews everywhere in the world say these words: *Hayom harat olam*: Today, a world is being born. We read in our Torah this morning the story of the Creation, and we assert on this day that a new world is taking shape. And we ask each other: what kind of world is it going to be?

On this Rosh HaShana, Mr. President, people come into the sanctuary with deep and conflicting feelings of fear and hope. There are more unknowns than usual this year. And I share those feelings. Frankly, I am scared of the direction in which our world is moving. And while there is a temptation for me to write to you about specific issues, I am going to resist that urge. First, because I know I will, God willing, have many opportunities to write to you and to Congress about specific policies that are important to me and my community. But also because your election means something more to me.

You see, sir, you are the first new President to be elected in the lifetime of my children. Your predecessor President Bush came into office when my oldest son Avi was an infant. And like every parent on the planet, I see issues in my community and around the world in a very different way since my children were born. When my children go to sleep at night, they recite the *Sh'ma Yisrael* – the Jewish declaration of God's Oneness – and I think about the legacy that we will hand them and their children. From the environment, to the economy, to America's moral standing in the world, I worry about

how the choices we make today will affect the world they and their children are going to inherit.

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Throughout the campaign, you spoke the language of a man of faith. I'm not so naïve; every politician does that. In August, both you and your opponent stood together on the stage of Reverend Rick Warren's megachurch in Lake Forest, California, and declared that America's religious heritage is a fundamental part of the tapestry of our nation.

Today, I ask you to be less religious and more religious at the same time.

It is true that I ask you to be less religious. Religion – especially in politics – is too often an ugly battering ram that is used against one's enemies. It's been employed to shut down scientific research; it's been used to end debate and discussion with the insistence that "it is God's will." I remind you that the great insight of the framers of the Constitution was the separation of church and state. It was not because they were atheists. Many of the people who forged our nation were people of profound faith. But they saw what the churches and monarchies of Old Europe did not see: that when churches and states become enmeshed, the result is usually bad government and bad religion.

Remind your friends that America is not a Christian nation. The First Amendment built in a clause that asserted that in America we would never establish an official faith of the United States. And I thank God for that all the time! You see, as my Rabbi David Saperstein has repeatedly taught, no group in America has benefited more from the separation of church and state than the Jews have.

Our grandparents remember a time when colleges and universities had strict quotas of the numbers of Jews who were allowed to be in each class. They remember country clubs and town pools which were "exclusive" – which meant Jews were not welcome. In Wayland, Massachusetts where I work, some of the founding families of my community remember when neighborhoods had unwritten rules – No Jews Allowed. But those days are long gone. Today, those who must fight from being excluded are other minorities, most especially Muslim-Americans. But Jews have found a comfortable home.

No, America is not a Christian nation. But it is a religious nation. And so I also ask you today to be more religious in your outlook. I ask you to look into the depths of your religious faith, and especially the texts we share in common: namely, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. In the words of those God-thirsty men who ran around the Judean countryside some 2500 years ago, you'll rediscover some of the most sublime visions of encounters with God that have ever been given voice:

**Amos**, a shepherd who lived in a time when the economy was strong and the land was full of plenty, witnessed the exploitation of the poor and the humiliation of the most desperate people. He warned of a time when “justice would well up like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.”<sup>1</sup>

**Isaiah**, who, when his kingdom was besieged with troubles from within and from enemies on the outside, had the audacity to envision a time when nations “would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation would not lift up a sword against another, and never again would they study how to make war.”<sup>2</sup>

**Jeremiah**, who spoke words of sympathy to victims and truth to power; he was a leader who, as the saying goes, “comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.”<sup>3</sup>

You see, sir, to be religious does not have to mean being oppressive, small-minded, anti-science, or homophobic. Those are the worst attributes of the shallowest types of religion. To be truly religious takes guts, humility, and deep reflection, and the willingness to seize the decisions that are under our control while putting faith in God for those things that are beyond our control. And the wisdom to know the difference.

I know that’s a difficult balance. As the saying goes, many folks want to serve God – but usually only as advisers.

I want, in my President, someone who stands in awe of Creation and recognizes the responsibility to be a caretaker for the planet. I want a President who recognizes that every human being is made in the image of God. I want a President who, as a believer, is humble enough to hear all the sides to an issue before making a confident decision. One who remembers not to show deference to the rich and powerful, but who pursues justice at every turn. The challenge of religious living is to remember that each decision, each action, each word that we speak has the potential to build or destroy. Judaism teaches that that is true for everybody – but how much more so it must be for you.

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I worry about America’s moral authority in the world. You might notice I haven’t said much in this letter yet about Israel. Don’t get me wrong: Israel is part of my soul, my very life. So it is for the Jewish community. I hope that you learned a certain lesson from the campaign: The Jews of America disagree about many, many things – it’s sort of

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:24

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 2:4

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Finley Peter Dunne, on the job of journalists: <http://www.accd.edu/sac/j-p/comfort.html>

a Jewish pastime to argue with one another – but we are united in our love and support for the State of Israel.

It's just that sometimes politicians and the media think that Israel is *all* we care about. The truth is, our love for Israel is part of the fabric of all those values we cherish. The best I explanation I ever heard of this came from your former colleague, the great African-American congressman from Alabama, Artur Davis. Once I was at a rally that was protesting the anti-Israel hate on a college campus, and Congressman Davis was the invited speaker. He said: "I support Israel because I was born in Montgomery, I live in Birmingham, and Selma is in my district." He was saying that the legacy of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movements of the '60's includes a free and safe Israel for the Jewish people. He knew that – despite what our enemies say – loving and supporting Israel comes from a universal commitment to justice and fairness and peace.

As Israel struggles with a nuclear Iran and making a lasting peace with the Palestinian people, it will need a strong American partner by its side. I worry that America does not command the respect that it once did. I hope you can make America and Israel stronger by articulating a foreign policy where America remains a leader in the world's moral issues – the environment, standing up to fascist regimes, and protecting the world's most hurting and desperate people.

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And that is what I think the children of America need from you most right now, Mr. President. I have worked with thousands of children and teenagers over the years. And all of them have been above average!

But they are under an enormous amount of pressure. In the crucible where I live, our children are pulled in myriad directions every day. They are encouraged to grow up far too quickly. Everything in their life is becoming more programmed, more micro-managed, and feeds more fully into the world of competition and superficial success.

As America's foremost leader, you set the moral tone for our national conversations. Remind them that the happiest lives are those that are lived by giving and serving others. Let the President be a role model for children, and show them that a life of public service is a noble goal to aspire to, not a cynical way to make money for one's cronies.

One of the great rabbis of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He marched with Dr. King and led the religious voices against the war in Vietnam. But more important than either of those things, he articulated why struggling to hear God's voice in the din of the modern world is more crucial now than at any other time in history. At the very end of his life, Rabbi Heschel was asked by an interviewer, "What is your message to the children of today?" And this was his answer:

**I would say, let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can, everyone, do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all the frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence.<sup>4</sup>**

Mr. President, you have in your hands the opportunity to create a new conversation for this generation.

Most of the children in our Temple community are fourth- or fifth- generation Americans. Their great-grandparents were the first generation in their families to go to college. Their grandparents were the first to move out of the cities and build homes in suburbia. Their mothers were often the first women in their families to have full-time careers. And each generation was more successful than the last. The bar is set astoundingly high.

Mr. President, you can inspire our children to strive for something more. Inspire them to use that will to achieve things that will benefit not just themselves, but all Americans and the whole world. Create the incentives for our children as they get older to be the generation that invents clean, renewable sources of energy; that invents cars that get 100 miles to the gallon or don't even use petroleum at all; that uses technology to feed the world and serve those who are most hurting. Give them college financial aid for volunteering in America and around the world, as an alternative to military service. Change the culture: Use your bully pulpit to encourage every high school graduate in America to take a year off before college to do Mitzvah-work (that is, the work of World-Repair). That is a message of cultural change that can only come from the Highest, Most Respected Office in the Land.

I recall the words of Rabbi Bernard Raskas:

**We have lost the art of vision. We live in a plastic age in which things come to us many stages removed from their natural states. When this happens, we often end up believing that even the most valuable things are trivial. Violin music is nothing but horsehair scratching on catgut. Love is nothing but the activation of hormones. A sunset is nothing but light filtered through dust particles in the atmosphere. But this is a very partial and unsatisfying view, for music is enchantment, love is wonder, and a sunset is beauty. And the person who can truly see each leaf and each blade of grass as a living miracle is blessed with vision and wonder.<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, New York: Noonday Press, 1996, p.412.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard S. Raskas, *Heart of Wisdom II*, 1979, Burning Bush Press, p.21

Mr. President, if you can inspire that art of vision that has been so lost, if you can speak to that fear and estrangement in the modern world that only can be relieved through selfless service to others, if you can articulate a morality tempered by humility – than I pledge myself to do everything I can to help make your first four years in office a success.

For Jews, this season is a time of looking inward. We sift through the different parts of our lives and ask hard questions: Are we truly happy? Are we living up to our highest values? Are our lives moving in the direction we want? Are our relationships getting the love and attention they need to blossom – or are we allowing them to die on the vine? *Hayom Harat Olam* we said today: Today a world is busy being born. My Rosh HaShana prayer is that it is world fully invested with meaning and with hope for us and our country and our world.

My children are waiting for you. The children of the world are waiting for you. May God bless you, and all of us, at this Season of New Beginnings.

Sincerely, and In Peace,

Rabbi Neal Gold