

Dear Oliver,

You are my sixth and youngest grandchild. Grandma Goodie and I love you dearly, and we marvel that we have been blessed with so many grandchildren, all of whom live near us and are a regular presence in our lives. We looking forward to watching you grow and develop into the fine person that I know you will become. When my father, your great grandfather, was stationed in Key West Florida during WWII, he wrote me a letter. When I was old enough to read it and understand it I knew that this was a precious gift-- a real treasure. Sadly I did not follow his example and write a letter to your father or your uncle when they were born. I have tried to correct that error by writing a letter to each of your sisters Leah, Alana, and Lily, and your cousins Heather and Stephen. As I have done now five times before, I am sharing the letter with the congregation on the Yamin Noraim (The Days of Awe). Since this is the final time I will deliver a Kol Nidre Devar Torah to the members of Beth Emet as the Senior Rabbi of the congregation, I want to share with you and with them what I call the Ten Commandments For Living A Meaningful Jewish Life.

1. Treat every human being as precious.
2. Remember! Family is the cornerstone of a Jewish life.
3. Get a great education
4. Enjoy life
5. In a place where there are no men strive to be a man
6. Make a difference in this world
7. Think before speak!
8. Pray as if everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on you.
9. Do not hold a grudge
10. Remember: It is amazing how much you can get done if you do not care who gets credit

Oliver, I want you to know that I do not consider these Ten Commandments to be mere aphorisms. They are not just pithy phrases. Over the course of my life they have become for me a philosophy of life. They are guideposts by which I judge my behavior. They are a summary of what I have found to be wise and important. Others will develop different lists.

1. Treat every human being as precious.
 - a. To me the most important verse in the Torah is Gen.1:27 which teaches us that every human being is created *btzelem elohim* (in the image of God). It is the starting point of ethics. I believe that every human being is special, unique and of immeasurable worth. I have tried hard to train myself to look at each person and to see in his/her face the face of God. Sometimes it is difficult because it is easier to turn away, especially when we feel some revulsion to the person or when looking at the person creates an obligation that I do not want to accept. We have obligations to ourselves and to others.

- b. Hillel taught us: **אם אין אני לי. מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי. מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו. אימתי?**
If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself what am I? If not now, when? (Avot 1:14)
 - c. The Torah teaches us to love the stranger as ourselves because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. This injunction extends our work beyond ourselves and makes concern for those who are outside our own group equally important to that of our own group. This commandment should motivate us to work for justice and equality. It should inspire us to fight racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia. The stranger and we are all created in the image of God. We are brothers and sisters. We are all members of the human family.
 - d. The corollary to “You love the stranger as yourself” is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” I understand this commandment to mean that we are to love other Jews. The preservation of the Jewish people is extremely important to me. I believe Judaism, at its best, makes an important contribution to creating the type of world which would please God. To love Jews does not mean to love everything Jews do. My disagreements and even battles with Jews who hold radically different worldviews than my own never prevent me from being deeply concerned about their welfare. When another Jew suffers, I share in that suffering. It is my Judaism which makes both love of the stranger and love of the members of my own people essential to my way of life.
2. Remember! Family is the cornerstone of a Jewish life
- a. The original Ten Commandments contain the mandate “Honor your father and mother.” The Torah knows that it is our parents who give us life and teach us how to live. In some cases honoring our parents is quite simple, as they are the type of people whose behavior inspires honor. In some cases it is far more difficult. Honoring them is complex. It does not mean slavishly following everything they do or want, but it does mean taking seriously their concerns, needs and desires. Good parents, and you are blessed with them, will teach you good values and train you to be independent.
 - b. You are also blessed with three older sisters. I am an only child and never had a brother or a sister with whom to share my life. Being a brother can be a challenge. I hope that you and your sisters will remain close and that they will always be there for you and you will always be there for them. I have seen too many families torn apart by bitter sibling rivalry. A close, supportive and loving relationship is a real blessing. I hope you will strive throughout your life to respect your sisters and that each of you will respect the other no matter what direction your individual lives will take in the future.
 - c. From Grandma Goodie’s and my perspective the most important imperative is a commandment which I just invented. Love your grandparents. Seriously, Grandma Goodie and I were each blessed with wonderful grandparents who influenced our lives. We feel privileged that

we live near you and your sisters and your cousins. Grandparents can often offer a perspective on life that is different from parents. It is not necessarily better. It is your parents' responsibility to raise you, but grandparents can be a helpful sounding board and support when you need it. We also have terrific stories about before there were televisions, computers and cell phones.

- d. My hope and prayer for you is that you find, as I did, a great life partner. There is no greater gift than to have a life partner who is also your best friend, who will support you and encourage you when you need it and will know how to criticize as well.

3. Get a great education

- a. There is nothing more important in Judaism than being educated. The Mishnah teaches: לא עם הארץ חסיד: an ignorant person cannot be pious (Avot 2:6). To be an educated person means to learn about many things and to explore many disciplines. I am always grateful that I went to a college that required me to learn about science, art, literature, foreign languages, philosophy and psychology. It is important not to concentrate too early. Education should precede deciding on a career. I worry that in our competitive world too many young people become fixated on learning only what will be useful in making a living. In a rapidly changing world breadth should take precedence over depth. There will be time to develop depth in your chosen field after you have become an educated person.
- b. Judaism teaches us: ותלמוד תורה כנגד כולם: that of all the mitzvot, Torah study is the most important because it leads to all of the other mitzvot. (Mishnah Peah 1:1). I want you be a knowledgeable Jew. Our texts contain wisdom and if carefully studied will enable you to find the correct path on which to travel through life. Judaism is a sophisticated adult religion. It requires that you bring to it the intellectual skills which you acquired in the rest of your education. Judaism will not survive on the basis of what we can teach you in religious school, and while day schools will give you a deeper foundation than supplementary schools, there is no substitute for serious academic training in Judaism which will enable you to continue to explore throughout your life the precious legacy which has been bequeathed to you. I hope you will enhance it and pass it down to the next generation.

4. Enjoy life

- a. Judaism is not about self-denial. The Mishnah teaches us, "In the future, we will all have to answer to God for all that our eyes saw of God's wonderful world but did not partake of. (Kidushim 4:12)
- b. What a powerful thought. *We will have to answer to God for not enjoying ourselves, for not appreciating the wonderful blessings contained within this world.* This is not hedonism. It is not about excess. However, it does teach us that God has blessed us with the ability to enjoy physical, intellectual and spiritual pleasures. We are supposed to share our bounty

with others and we are supposed to help set the conditions that will enable others to also experience the world as filled with pleasure and significance. Our primary goal is not to get into Heaven but to live life to the fullest in this world.

- c. Grandma Goodie, as part of her email signature has the following quotation LIFE IS TOO SHORT FOR LONG FACES-----SMILE AND ENJOY LIFE
5. השתדל להיות איש ובמקום שאין אנשים. In a place where there are no men strive to be a man (Avot 2:5)
- a. This applies to both men and women. In one sense this means to be a Mensch. It means to be a decent person. My father taught me that while he did not believe in God he believed there was something in the universe that demanded that we act in kind and ethical ways. But the Mishnah means even more.
 - b. It means as Shakespeare wrote “To thine own self be true.” (Shakespeare *Hamlet*) It means to act with courage and integrity. It means to stand up for what is good and right and just and be counted. It means to be an activist. It means to decry evil. It means as we read in the Torah when you see someone sin you should rebuke them and to not bear sin because them. הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ נָלֵא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו הַטָּא: *Gates of Repentance* teaches us, “Silence is the sin of all good people.”
 - c. It further means to not be afraid. Fear clouds the mind and prevents us from acting in a forthright manner. When I have failed to act because of fear or when I have acted out of fear, I have always regretted my actions or my inaction. Live by principle. But do not be afraid to change long held positions just because they are long held. Remember as Socrates said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Keep learning and keep growing.
6. Make a difference in this world
- a. When I was younger I believed that I could change the whole world. I have come to understand that this is not a realistic goal. My hope is that I have changed a few lives, mine included. However, that does not mean we should not try. When I become dispirited I remind myself by singing Jeff Klepper’s melody to the Mishnah from Avot לא עליך המלאכה לגמור. ולא אתה. בן חורין לבטל ממנה “It is not incumbent to you to finish the task but neither are you free to desist from it.” (Avot 2:21) By the way Oliver, do not ask me to sing it. If you want to hear it I will give you a copy of his CD.
 - b. A quotation from the prophet Micah which I learned as a young child in religious school has been the byword of my actions. וּמָה-יְהוָה דֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ בִּי: “What does God require of you? Only to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) The Judaism which I practice is rooted in the faith that God demands that I do justice and love mercy, and that I seek justice and

- c. Today my motto for success is: if the world is a little bit better because I lived then I will have lived a significant life.
7. Think before speak!
 - a. Judaism takes seriously the sins which are committed through acts of speech. It equated the embarrassing of another person to the shedding of blood. Once something has been said it can never be withdrawn. I have told the story many times about the gossip who goes to Rabbi Meir to do *teshuvah* repentance and he tells the person to get a feather pillow and open it in the market place and then retrieve all the feathers. The lesson is obvious. Once you have said something it cannot be retrieved. Today we have new and potentially even more destructible instruments. They are emails, text messages and tweets. Who knows what will be available when you grow up. The extent, range and permanence of these new communications are potentially far more destructive than simply speaking badly to or about another person in public. They can come to haunt us at unexpected times and to destroy people long after what has been said is proven false. Equally important: do not post anything about yourself which you will come to regret later.
 - b. Since each of us is created in the image of God, when we diminish another we are in fact diminishing the image and presence of God in the world.
8. "Pray as if everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on you." (Ferdinand Isserles)
 - a. Develop a rich prayer life
 - b. Somebody has said there are only two kinds of people in the world. There are those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, God," And there are those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good God, it's morning."
 - c. I have tried to start every day and end every day with a prayer. It sets the frame for the day. I recite the Shema morning and night. I then engage in a simple child's prayer for my family. Then I use the words of the Amidah
שְׁמַע קוֹל, נוּ, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, חוּס וְרַחֵם עָלֵינוּ, וְקַבֵּל בְּרַחֲמִים וּבְרַצוֹן אֶת תְּפִלַּת, נוּ תְּפִלַּת
כִּי אֵל שׁוֹמֵר עַתְּפִלוֹת וְתַחֲנוּנִים אַתָּה, כִּי אַתָּה שׁוֹמֵר עַתְּפִלַּת עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְיָ שׁוֹמֵר עַתְּפִלַּת
And then I just talk to God. It is difficult for me to emphasize how important these conversations have been. No I do not hear voices but I believe I receive an answer, and if it is not an answer at least God is a good listener. I have no idea whether prayer changes God but certainly prayer changes me.
 - d. One of my favorite quotations about prayer is found Gates of Prayer, "Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will."

9. וְלֹא-תִקֶּם וְלֹא-תִטַּר אֶת-כְּנִי עִמָּךְ (Leviticus 19:18)
- a. The Torah is so wise in this passage which we read on Yom Kippur.
 - b. One of the most important lessons I learned is that holding grudges is a waste of time and energy. It embitters one's life. I hope that when I have been wronged by another person it will be repaired through *teshuvah* (repentance) followed by forgiveness on my part, but when that does not happen I have learned to let go of the anger and the hurt. The temptation to seek revenge is great but it is foolish. It accomplishes nothing. People must live with the consequences of their own behavior. Seeking revenge only prevents us from the other important work that we have been assigned. I know how hard it is to do *teshuvah*, therefore I assume that if it is hard for me it is hard for others. I do not want to condemn the faults of others which I find in myself.
10. Remember what President Harry Truman said, "It is amazing how much you can get done if you do not care who gets credit."
- a. I really liked Harry Truman; he was my favorite president. His other quotation which I try to live by is, "The buck stop here." I even have a letter which he wrote to me in response to a letter I wrote to him after he had retired from the Presidency. These pieces of wisdom have stood me in good stead. While it is nice to receive credit for things that we do because we all appreciate the thanks and the accolades, if that is what is most important to us then we limit our ability to get others to work with us and to use their talents and skills and lots of important stuff does not get done.
 - b. My greatest accomplishments are things that others have done and where I may have inspired or empowered them.

Finally, Oliver, I want you to know how much I love you and how much I hope I will be able to watch you grow up and become an adult and bring a new generation into being. When you are older I hope you will read this letter and find that some of things which I have written will enhance your life. In this, my final Kol Nidre Devar Torah as Senior Rabbi of Beth Emet, I hope that others will find my advice to you valuable for them and that it will inspire them to write similar letters to their children or grandchildren.

Oliver, I wish you a life of good health and blessing. I pray that you will live a significant Jewish life and that you will remember Grandma Goodie and Poppa Peter fondly.

With all my love,

Poppa Peter