

## Faith and Family: An Open Letter to Caleb on Becoming Bar Mitzvah

2020 Parashat Bamidbar

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Caleb, this is not how we originally planned to celebrate you becoming bar mitzvah; this is not how we wanted to mark the moment that our little baby boy has become a young man with the speed of, well, a receding hairline and greying beard but a mother who grows more beautiful every day.

These are difficult times, my son, but they are not the first difficult times. We are blessed by the presence of your 100-year-old Zayde, your great-grandfather Wolf Gruca, who became bar mitzvah in Poland the same year that Hitler came to power in Germany and a mere six years before the Nazis began their destruction of European Jewry. In his day it was difficult to be a Jew. But your Zayde is a survivor and with my grandmother of blessed memory raised three wonderful children, including your grandmother, your Savta. Your Savta Starr devotes every ounce of her being to caring for us, her family, and to creating the environment in which we can feel God's presence. Zayde, Savta: we love you and we are grateful.

On the other side of my family, your great-grandfather Harry Starr of blessed memory, came to the shores of this country as an immigrant in the first decade of the twentieth century and became bar mitzvah in the shadow of the First World War. Whereas in Europe it was difficult to be a Jew, in America in the early 20th century, it was difficult to be Jewish. But in this way your great-grandfather Starr was a survivor too, because he, along with my grandmother, both now of blessed memory, raised three children, including your grandfather, Saba Starr. With your Savta, Saba devotes every ounce of his being to caring for his family and to creating the environment in which we can feel God's presence. Saba's selflessness is made all the more evident by the fact that three days ago he celebrated his 70th birthday, but he wanted the focus of the week to be on you and not him. Happy birthday, Dad. We love you and we are grateful.

On your Eema's side, as Jews in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, it was neither easy to be a Jew nor easy to be Jewish. But your Savta Line of blessed memory and your Saba Line were and are, along now with Miss Betty, entirely devoted to family and to creating space and time in which to feel God's presence. Miss Betty and Saba Line, we love you and we are grateful. And with profound love we remember, Caleb, your Savta, Carol, for whom you are named, and we feel her presence today. Caleb, your Savta and Saba Line raised a woman, your Eema, who works tirelessly for God, for her family, for our community, for our people, and for the world. May you be blessed with a life partner who gives as much to others as your Eema gives to all of us. May you be blessed with an *ezer k'negdo*, a help-mate, who partners with you in seeking faith and in building family. Rebecca, for our children, our life, and for all that you do and all that you are, I love you and I am grateful.

Caleb, faith and family sustained our ancestors through their challenges and faith and family are tools that can nourish us today. Unlike previous generations, it is much easier in our world to be Jews and to be Jewish. But it is not all that easy to be part of a global community confronting a pandemic. So we again turn to our family, which includes the Jewish People locally and around the world, and we turn to our faith and

the laws and rituals of faith that Judaism offers us. In so doing so, through faith and through family, we are made stronger, holier, happier. Through family and faith, we are given the opportunity to live lives of meaning and purpose: yes, lives of gratitude, obligation, and joy. Because of God's presence and because of each person that surrounds you, albeit digitally right now, you too, my son, like generations of Jews before -- you are a survivor. You are strong and resilient. Most of all, you are not alone and you never will be alone. We are nourished and sustained by our faith and by our family, which very much includes our community. Because of God, because of your family, because of your community, and because of the Jewish people, you are loved every single day.

Caleb, Jewish history demonstrates that faith and family are the key tools to survival. Faith and family are also the ingredients expressed most fully in your favorite day of the week, Shabbat. It is necessary to note, too, as our sacred scripture reminds us often, the perpetuation of faith and family requires effort. In your Torah portion this morning, Parashat Bamidbar, we read of what happens as a result of family stepping up for one another and for God. Tribe by tribe a census was conducted of our biblical ancestors with the goal of ascertaining troop numbers. Tribe by tribe each of the descendents of Israel -- the children of Jacob -- raised their heads in acknowledgement of their obligation toward their brothers and sisters. Tribe by tribe as one family they had transformed into one nation that withstood slavery in Egypt and tribe by tribe they trekked a 40-year journey across the Wilderness. Tribe by tribe they renewed the Abrahamic covenant and accepted the Torah, receiving their blessing of a home in Israel and a special relationship with God. It is through that relationship, that covenant, that we are also commanded to bring light to the world by fighting for justice and by seeking peace, by lifting the fallen and by healing the broken. Faith and family are the gifts that God offered Abraham and that continue to be our gifts today; and the price of obtaining those gifts is the effort we put toward practicing our faith and strengthening our extended Jewish family.

Caleb, thirteen years ago, Eema's Eema -- your grandmother Savta Line -- died one month before you were due to be born. One can imagine the bittersweet joy, then, that we experienced as your Eema went into labor. We made it to the hospital with no problems, and settled into our room. We began the inevitable waiting that often comes with childbirth. 25 hours later—yes, 25 hours later, you, our beautiful son, were born. They placed you into my arms first and, overwhelmed with emotion, I thanked God with a traditional Jewish blessing: "... *shehechyanu vikiy'manu vihigianu lazman hazeh*: Thank you God for having given us life, having sustained us, and for having allowed us to reach that sacred moment in time." Of course, right after saying this special blessing, I uttered additional words of "holiness." The second thing that you ever heard, after *shehechyanu*, was the University of Michigan's fight song, *Hail to the Victors*.

Your Eema and I were on top of the world. Another twenty-five hours passed, though, and I went from thanking God to pleading with our Creator. One month after her own mother died and one day after becoming a mother herself, your Eema Rebecca went into respiratory distress from an allergic reaction to some medication the hospital had given her. I raced into the hall looking for help and the first face I saw "happened" to see was your mother's doctor making rounds! I rushed the doctor into the room. In

those scary moments of fear for your Eema's life and of wonder at how I might raise a child by myself, I prayed to God with all my being that God might protect us with the divine sheltering presence. As medical intervention allowed the crisis to pass, I once again thanked God for the gifts of life and health. I experienced a similar profundity of gratitude to God again three years and three weeks after your birth, as your brother Ayal came into the world too, with -- thank God -- much less drama than you.

Now, thirteen years after we lost Savta, thirteen years after I feared that we would lose your Eema, and thirteen years after the day you entered the world and changed my life forever, Caleb, you are blessed to stand here this day with all the honor, insight, and joy of being a Jew. You stand here because of the generations of our ancestors who, with tremendous effort, prioritized faith and family and relied on faith and family to survive. Likewise, you are blessed to stand here this day in this sacred place with all the dignity, the wisdom, and the celebration of being a Jew because of the generations of families who realized that we not only survive because of faith and family, we thrive because of them. In the good times too our lives are made exponentially better because of faith and family. Today, in the midst of our great joy, we thank our family whose presence and whose love make life worth living: Thank you Congregation Shaarey Zedek; thank you Hillel Day School; thank you Camp Ramah; thank you Jewish Detroit; thank you Shalom Hartman Institute; thank you to our family of friends; and thank you to our family-family. Thank you all. We love you all.

In the difficult times, my son, our load is lightened and made sweeter by belief in God and by the fellowship of our village. In the joyful times, life is made richer by family and faith. And at all times, through family and faith -- through God, Torah, and the People Israel -- the purpose of life is made evident before us in our call to bring justice and to seek peace, to lift the fallen and to heal the broken. Indeed, life is all about faith and family, and please remember always, that faith and family are sustained only through heartfelt effort.

Mazel tov, Caleb, my son. We are so very proud of you. May you be blessed with health and joy until 120. May you be blessed with the knowledge that through faith and family you are not alone; that through an awareness of God's presence and active participation in community and with your family, you are loved every day. And, in return, Caleb, for the blessings of faith and family, may you make the effort always to perpetuate faith and family, friendship and community for all those who are around us. And let us say, Amen. I love you. And mazel tov to us all!