

Letter to my younger self



Imagine if, just at the start of your life's journey, you received a letter from someone just like you — but a few decades more accomplished — advising you how best to nurture your inborn gifts, and how to avoid the inevitable pit along the way.



In this collection, seven accomplished gentlemen from different corners of the Jewish world and different spheres of achievement pen a letter to their younger selves.



What would they have done differently?

What worked out perfectly?

What do they wish they had known from the start?



Go for it, a young Yisroel Lamm advises his younger self, push yourself and get a formal education in music. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, looking back over his years on the pulpit, remonstrates the young rabbi within: if you can't be a man of the people, this job isn't for you. Rabbi Abba Cohen warns the young advocate to always walk the straight and narrow path and avoid the trappings of power.



With the tools and materials we've been given, and the scene set before us, these letters are a chance to set the canvas just right — before the painting begins

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BY *Riki Goldstein*

MR. BENZION FISHOFF

Mr. Benzion Fishoff, a senior Agudath Israel *askan* and patron of the Gur *chassidus*, is an executive of the Metropolitan Bank in Manhattan.



“The first thing is to take stock of what Hashem has given you”



Dear Younger Benny,

You’re starting out with a life to rebuild and a family to support. What was in Lodz will never be again, for the world you knew has been trampled. They call America the Land of Opportunity. But what is opportunity, and how will you use it?

I have seen many people fall into a business. One young man marries a diamond dealer’s daughter, another a caterer’s daughter — that is opportunity knocking, to get to know the inside of a business, to be brought into a field.

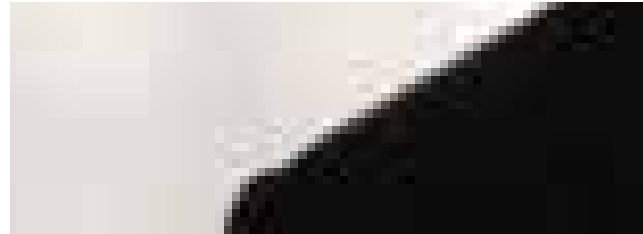
Opportunity is an interesting concept. Ultimately, every opportunity is from Above, for the Gemara says that a person is placed into a fitting family. Of course, he is given his own aptitude and skills too. Opportunity can be an inborn talent or a hobby, a special interest or a gift, even a family legacy in a certain field. Ask an older businessman how he got into his field and he will inevitably tell you “My father had a carpet factory in Germany, so when I came here I went into carpets.” Or, “As a child I loved cars, I knew the ins and outs of every model, and loved to get my hands under the hood.”

The first thing is to take stock of what Hashem has given you and take them as the opportunities they are. They are your ticket to ride. Then, get yourself training. And work hard.

Benny, your familiarity with the Far East from the years of exile in Shanghai presents an opportunity to network there. You already have connections in Japan and Hong Kong. Hashem has placed you in the right place at the right time; you have to take the business opportunity and run with it.

When you start out, with Hashem’s help, you may see success. Then you’ll want to expand. In business, once you make some money, it’s very hard to control yourself and rule over your emotions. Yet keeping your money is a lot harder than making it. So many business owners see some success and jump too quickly ahead to the next stage. A man opens a restaurant and is doing well. He decides to buy a building and make it five times as large. But there was enough business for a small restaurant, not a big one, and he’s lost everything.

Careful. Calculated. Make the most of the opportunities you receive, and guard against tempting risks. *Hatzlachah*.



RABBI PAYSACH KROHN

Rabbi Paysach Krohn is the author of the multivolume Maggid Series, an international lecturer, and professional mohel.



“Only tell a story if you really believe it’s a great story”



Dear Younger Paysach,

People ask me all the time whether I’m nervous when I speak. The answer is that *I’m nervous when I prepare*. I’m anxious because I want to say the right thing and I want to find the right thing to say.

I would like to advise you: When asked to speak, choose a subject carefully. Don’t choose something that you know already. Choose a topic that excites you, something that is new and fresh. Be excited to learn all about your topic, then prepare it with great enthusiasm. Throw yourself into it.

Don’t get up to speak without preparing from the ground up and believing in every word you say. Only say a *pshat* if you really think it’s a great *pshat*. Only tell a story if you really believe it’s a great story.

You have to love the speaking that you do. Only do it if you love it, if it excites you. You can’t do this just to put bread on the table. If you are in it with all your heart and soul, if you have inspired yourself and you’re passionate about each message and each story, that passion will reach your audience.

You are starting out, Paysach. Find people you think are expert

in your field. Observe them well, and figure out what makes them successful. Learn from the Maggid of Yerushalayim, Harav Sholom Schwadron. In the same speech he can make his listeners laugh and cry. From Rav Gifter *ztz”l*, learn about love and the fire and passion for Torah. From Rav Shimon Schwab, learn about eloquence and brilliance. From Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, learn about the power of well-thought-out, creative speech.

Another thing, young *maggid* — avoid hotels. Stay with people in the community, and you’ll forge a connection to the places you visit and get to meet the most amazing people. In Chile, in Argentina, in Switzerland, in South Africa — it is a privilege to meet these Yidden, and you won’t find them in a hotel.

Lastly, I know that you want to please people. But neither you nor anyone else can please everyone all the time. You’ll do your best, and some will say you are wrong. That’s okay. As long as most people are happy, you’re probably doing a good job.

Give of your best, every single time.

DR. ROBERT GOLDSCHMIDT

Dr. Robert (Moshe Yaacov) Goldschmidt is the founding dean of the Lander College of Arts and Sciences at Touro in Flatbush. He received *semichah* from Rav Gedalia Schorr *ztz"l*, and has led a distinguished academic career as vice president and dean of students at Touro College.



“There is one guarantee in life, and that is that things will always change”

Dear Younger Robert (Moshe Yaacov),

You have received your degree, graduated with honors. Well, congratulations. But let me tell you what the school of life has taught me: your learning is not over. Do not become complacent and do not stop learning. Do not stand still. You must improve your skills and learn new ones as demanded, and grow. Comfortable as you are, always be prepared to adapt and move forward.

There is one guarantee in life, and that is that things will always change. Change can be tumultuous, tectonic — as it was in my life when it brought me from Communist Romania to France to New York — or it can be incremental. Change can be difficult, forcing one to learn and adapt oneself endlessly, but ultimately, we are not in charge and we have no choice — you must learn to embrace it, or it will be forced upon you.

Change, challenge, and growth are the essence of life. Understand that our responsibility also is to change and better ourselves. Whatever field you are in, whichever job you land, your journey is not over. The economic reality changes and transforms. You will see markets rise and crash.

Life contains adversity. To help you overcome potential pitfalls, I advise you to find yourself a mentor whom you deeply respect. Seek out your *shver*, Reb Moshe Sherer *ztz"l*, who will teach you so much about public service and integrity, and Dr. Bernard Lander *z"l*, founding president of Touro College, who will enable you to guide so many students toward a rewarding *parnassah*.

Your parents, who sacrificed their comfort and moved to a new land for their children’s Torah education, taught you that a life of value and public service is both better and more satisfying than a life spent in pursuit of wealth. Let your attitude be one of service. Never forget to ask what you can do to help others.

Be ambitious, young Robert! Set your sights high and think big. Each person has a unique job that only he can accomplish, a mission in life that only he can fulfill. With effort and application, work and patience, you can achieve what you set out to do, climbing the ladder of growth rung by rung. Nothing worthwhile happens overnight, but believe, commit, and persevere and you will reach your goals.



RABBI ABBA COHEN

For the past 27 years, Rabbi Abba Cohen has served as Washington representative for Agudath Israel of America, which opened the first Orthodox Jewish advocacy office in the nation's capital. He advocates on a wide range of foreign and domestic issues.



“Being a mensch is more important than anything on your résumé”

Dear Younger Abba,

A daunting task awaits you. You will be rubbing shoulders with power and influence while advocating on behalf of Torah Jewry. You will be representing Torah values to the outside world while engaged in activities that will profoundly affect your community. But you are an anomaly, a dark suit and beard among the blazers and clean-shaven faces. You'll bring a different perspective, distinct priorities. You are not the Jew, and yours is not the Judaism, that Washington has known. Will you be perceived as irrelevant? An outcast? Will you succeed in this milieu?

Know that “success” comes in many forms.

There is the kind of success that comes when you help shape legislation or public policy beneficial to your community. But there is also an intangible form of success, the *kiddush Hashem* that comes through words and action, character and comportment.

Sometimes you'll accomplish a task simply by making an “effort.” Indeed, you are called a *shtadlan*—one who tries—because in a world that is run by a Higher Force, we are here simply to give our best shot. And success does not always involve grandiose “*klal*” achievements; you might simply be asked to ease the burden of just one suffering Jew. That might bring the greatest satisfaction of all.

Know, also, the standards by which true success is judged.

Be truthful and sincere, principled and consistent. Respect others and express appreciation. Being a mensch is more important than anything on your résumé: It will gain you the trust and respect of those in the highest echelons of government. Beware, too, the glitz, glamour, and power of Washington. Don't be beguiled. Your work is not about your honor, image, or influence, but about representing Torah values and serving the communal good.

Who and what you represent must always be at your work's core. Don't say what you shouldn't; don't go where you shouldn't; don't distort your views to make them more palatable to others. Some will say that your code of social conduct puts you at a lobbying disadvantage. The exact opposite is true. Torah adherence *helps* you in your work. Government officials want Jews to be Jewish.

Remember that you will be scrutinized by both friends and adversaries. Stay far from the inappropriate and unseemly. The possibility for *chillul Hashem* hovers above and the consequences are inestimable. They will ultimately reflect on the community and Torah Judaism itself. No justification, no possible benefit, can outweigh the tragedy caused by *chillul Hashem*.

Above all, you must love all Jews. Much success!

RABBI AVROHOM KATZ

Rabbi Avrohom Katz is a writer, teacher, and sought-after lecturer. He is the founder and principal of Bais Chaya Rochel Seminary in Gateshead, England.



“Don’t ever expect gratitude for your efforts or become bitter at its absence”



Dear Younger Avrohom,

You are young and inspired, enthusiastic to teach, and you have chosen *chinuch habanos* as your main area of influence.

As you embark on your career, keep in mind what a wise man once said: “Your students will not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” If you want to be a *mechanech* of any age or gender, you must genuinely care for your students. Respect them — treat them as you would your own child.

When they understand how much you care, the lines of communication will open. That is when you can begin to teach.

You have prepared your *shiurim* well, and you will deliver them with passion. But as crucial as is your grasp of the Torah *hashkofos* is the need to make sure that you understand your students. Tune in to them so that you can resonate with their moods, worries, and issues. Adapt the material and presentation to the age and stage of your students. Then you can speak, not to a classroom, but to their hearts and minds.

You will teach those lessons with all of your energies. You will put all your heart into your words and think your *shiur* has changed the course of Jewish history. Don’t wait for feedback, appreciation, or compliments, because they’ll be long in coming. But that’s okay: A *rav* also gives a mind-blowing Shabbos Hagadol *derashah* and never gets any praise. Such is life. Don’t ever expect gratitude for your efforts or become bitter at its absence.

If you want to succeed in working with this generation, do not complain and do not criticize. If the students are not listening to you, don’t blame “the chutzpah of today’s generation.” Remember: a bad workman blames his tools. If you find that your students are distracted and not paying attention, invariably the fault will be yours. Analyze and rectify.

Which subject is the most important? The most crucial lesson you can teach a Jewish child is *yedias Hashem*. Lack of this knowledge is akin to essential vitamin deficiency. The *yesodos ha’emunah* are every Jew’s heritage. So many today are unfortunately lacking the fundamental knowledge of Hashem’s existence and the Torah’s truth. The most precious present that we can give any Jewish child is the rock solid foundation on which our Jewish life is built.

Keep the above in mind, and pray for success.

Rabbi Akatz

Dear Younger Yisroel,

It is becoming clear that despite the seven years you have invested in your Ph.D. in engineering, your heart is elsewhere. That other place is called music.

The Jewish music industry barely exists, yet your parents and *rebbeim* are advising you to pursue your heart's calling — as long as you have the engineering degree to fall back on for *pamassah*. Go for it.

Sruli Teitelbaum was the owner of the first trumpet you blew, back in Camp Agudah in 1964. Why not take up the musical opportunities his brother Rabbi Eli Teitelbaum is offering you? He believes that Jewish music has a future, and his bands and albums are a great way to start.

Some musicians have questionable reputations. You will be an anomaly in the world of music — a yeshivah boy with a yarmulke. Work hard to maintain your own reputation, and always associate with the many fine, creative people in the industry.

People both inside and outside the music world are offering you advice. Listen to them. Get a formal education in music. It seems hard now to find time with your college schedule (and it will be considered completely unconventional for a Torah Vodaath yeshivah boy), but there are educational avenues available and it can be done.

Another thing: Be willing to go out of your comfort zone and accept new challenges. Growth comes from challenge: learn a new skill diligently and experiment. Then the work has that fresh feeling.

Remember what Rabbi Josh Silvermintz advised you when you worked for him in Camp Munk? "Whatever job you get, do these two things. First, always throw in a little extra for your client or for your boss. Second, approach every project with the excitement and freshness of your first day on the job." He was right. Especially in the music field, where your "product" comes straight from the *neshamah*, you need that excitement.

You will be part of something that is nascent, but has the potential to explode far beyond the dreams of the skeptics who doubt your choice. *Hatzlachah*.

Yisroel Lamm

YISROEL LAMM

Yisroel Lamm is an arranger, conductor, and trumpet player in the Jewish music field. He has conducted many albums and concerts during his career, including HASC A Time for Music and *The Philharmonic Experience*.

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"Be willing to go out of your comfort zone and accept new challenges"



Dear Younger Emanuel,

So you are drawn to the pulpit rabbinate. That's great, because we need talented, dedicated rabbis in our shuls. But first, two caveats:

1. If you tend to look down on people who are less *frum* than you, or less learned, then please do yourself — and Judaism — a favor and enter some other field. Those who are looked down upon quickly sense that in your heart of hearts you demean them.

2. If you enter the rabbinate because you are attracted by what you see as deference and respect, you will soon enough be disabused. In some communities you might be venerated: you will be someone who supposedly has some *entrée* into the ways of Heaven. But in other communities you will be viewed as simply another employee, subject to the whims and instructions of the board of directors — who, in keeping with their title, will attempt to direct everything you do.

Praise and criticism come with the territory. Don't take either too seriously. The praise is only perfunctory, given because it is expected; the criticism is also by and large only perfunctory. If it is warranted, try to correct things. If it is wrong, just forget it.

Bear in mind that although the pulpit rabbinate is spiritually rewarding, it is not an easy life. Your time is not your own; you are on duty seven days a week; you and your family are viewed under a microscope; you are subject to criticism that is at times highly unfair. These downsides should be expected, but contributing to your community's spiritual growth far outweighs the negatives.

If you decide to go ahead, bear these points in mind:

1. Set aside serious time to study Torah. As a rabbi, you are more than an executive. You are a spiritual leader. Learning is not only good for you religiously, but will also make you a more effective rabbi. Ground yourself in Jewish sources rather than in the *New York Times*.

2. Take your tasks seriously, but not yourself.

3. Don't worry about results. Your task is to plant seeds and then water them with words and deeds. Ultimate results take time. Be patient. Let G-d worry about the results.

4. Your every action teaches Torah. How you interact with people, how you treat your staff, your general *menschlichkeit*. All of these transmit powerful lessons.

5. Remember: everyone is lonely. Be a good shepherd. Show concern for people as individuals. Assuaging loneliness not only will attach them to you, it is also an act of *chesed*.

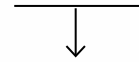
6. Although your board may view themselves as your boss, your real Boss is in Heaven. The successful *rav* is not he who has a large, influential synagogue. Your success will be measured by how many lives you affect positively, how many people you bring back to G-d and His Torah.

7. Most important: Pray daily that G-d guide you. You can use His help...

EMANUEL FELDMAN

RABBI EMANUEL FELDMAN

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman was rabbi of Atlanta's Congregation Beth Jacob for 40 years prior to his retirement in Jerusalem. He writes a biweekly column for *Mishpacha* magazine, and served as editor-in-chief of *Tradition* magazine for 13 years.



"Your task is to plant seeds and then water them with words and deeds"

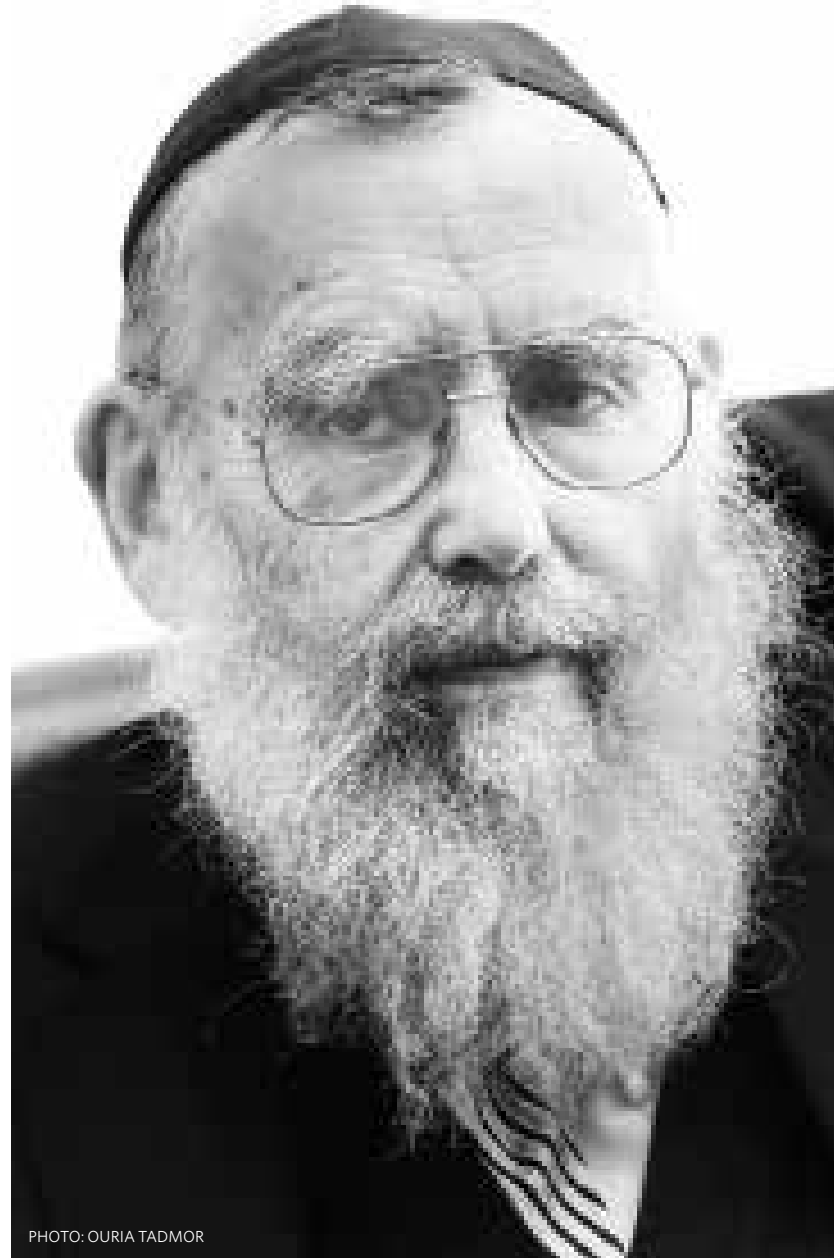


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