5778 Yom Kippur Morning

Rabbi Yaron Kapitulnik

A Good Enough Man

Dear Roni, Tom, Danielle and Yonatan,

It’s hard to believe that this is the 5th year I am writing you a letter on Yom Kippur and sharing it with my congregation.

My first letter was addressed only to Yonatan, immediately following his birth on the 2nd day of Rosh HaShanah in 2012, and since then it evolved and became an annual letter to all 4 of you.

But this morning Yonatan, you will have to forgive me because this letter is not for you, but rather it is for your sisters, who dominated much of the year, I am calling the “year of the girls.”

The year begun with one of the most exciting, empowering, inspiring and gratifying events I have ever experienced in my life. On January 8th, your sister, Danielle became a Bat Mitzvah.

She stood on the Bimah at our temple, the little Jewish girl, that just 5 years before, choked when she tried to bless her older sisters during their B’not Mitzvah, and with a profound sense of pride in who she is, lead us in worship, chanted Torah, shared words of wisdom – and turned into a young Jewish woman, just like that, in front of my eyes.

We are blessed to live in a Jewish society that takes such rituals for granted, but I don’t want to do that. I want us to stop for a moment and understand, together, how significant that moment was.

You see, becoming a Bat Mitzvah is much more than the new dress, the hairdo, the party or the families gathering together. It’s much more than the months of study, the reading of Torah for the first time, or delivering a D’var Torah.

Becoming a Bat Mitzvah is **our** contribution, it is **us** adding **our** voice, and by **our** and **us,** I mean Reform Jews, to one of the most important revolutions of the 20th century. The fight to create a just and equal society where women's rights are human rights.

I will not try to make a list of all historical wrongs that humans have done since we started recording history, but if I did, somewhere very high on that list would be how throughout history, the basic rights of women were crushed, their voices silenced, and their contributions ignored.

I still find it hard to believe that it was not until 1920, in this country, when women were given the right to vote. For too long we allowed ourselves as a society to take advantage of the talents and strengths of women and yet not allow their voices to be heard.

Years before they could vote in this country, women worked hard to lead it, to leave their mark on it. It was the women of this country that invented the life raft, the fire escape, the car heater, the medical syringe, the modern electric refrigerator, the windshield wiper- all life-saving and changing innovations.  Not to mention- they invented ice cream…lifesaving on its on merit.

And yet, they were never seen as equal to men.

And it’s hard to believe, that it was not until a Saturday morning in March of 1922, when twelve-year old Judith Kaplan, the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan stepped forward and stood just below the Bimah at her father’s synagogue in NYC, with the Torah scroll covered, but in sight, when Judith recited the Torah blessing, read a portion of the Torah in Hebrew and English from her personal Chumash. Historians like calling this “the first Bat Mitzvah in the U.S.” despite it being very far from the full experience we know today.

Judith Kaplan recalls..."That was enough to shock a lot of people, including my own grandparents and aunts and uncles...but no thunder sounded, no lightning struck.”

It was not until 1931 when this ritual took place in a Reform temple, and not until the 1960’s, when it started to really catch.

Still today, among us, sit so many women who have been deprived as youngsters of their privilege and birthright - to read Torah. If you are one of these women, I encourage you, I beg you, to claim your right, talk to Cantor Alicia about her Adult B’nai Mitzvah class. Enrich your life and inspire others by becoming a Bat Mitzvah.

Later this year...11 women and one man will complete two years of study and become adult B’nai Mitzvah in our temple. If you are one of these students here with us, or if you had an adult Bat Mitzvah, please rise...

As a movement, we gave a voice to younger and older Jewish women, and that is a big source of pride. But it took us until 1972, to ordain Sally Priesand as the first American female rabbi, second only to Regina Jonas, who was ordained in 1935 in Germany.

Who would have believed, even in 1972, that in our days, a seminary called Yeshivat Maharat, created by Orthodox Rabbi Avi Weiss would train Orthodox female clergy!

And as a movement, we had the vision and courage to change our liturgy, thousands of years old. As Reform Jews, we no longer say in our morning blessing: “Praised be you Adonai, for not making me a woman” nor do we say the gentler version; “Praised be you for creating me as you wish.” As proud Reform Jews we say, every morning, men and women together: “Baruch Ata Adonail Eloheinu Melech Ha’olam Sh’asani Be’tzelem Elohim, We praise you, Adonai, for you have created us in the Image of God.”

It was our movement, and the voices of these great women that began this revolution, and it is your voice, my amazing daughters, Roni, Tom, and Danielle, that will be added to the great women that came before you, that will ensure our future as a just egalitarian community.

In our tradition, we have always had Jewish heroines. Women who lead us and inspired us: our Tanach, our bible, is full of brave and courageous women - who had their voices heard, from the devotion of Sara, Rebecca, Lea and Rachel, to the pain of Hannah crying out to God, from the courage of Miriam leading the people through the sea in dance and song, to the righteous Michal who stood up to confront King David. From the faith of Ruth, the Moabite – the great-grandmother of King David who chose to be Jewish by declaring “my people are your people”, to the wisdom of Deborah the prophet, judging her people.  And in modern days, be it in Israel with Golda Meir, or in the United States with advocates for women such as Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elana Kagan, or Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, who I spoke about last night and who is known for her book “Lean in” - About Women in the American workforce.

And not to speak about the ULTIMATE ISRAELI AMERICAN - who inspired millions of men and women alike - GAL GADOT - WONDER WOMAN!!! Who recently received 2nd place in the Jerusalem Post’s list of most influential Jews in 2017!

We always had heroines. But it is not enough to be inspired by those who came before us. It is our task to create a new generation of women who can lead...Roni, Tom and Danielle, you carry on your shoulders a great responsibility. Embrace yourself for an audacious and long journey.

And we have a long way to go…. because it was not until Tuesday this week, that Saudi Arabia announced it would allow women to drive, ending a long-standing policy that has become a global symbol of the oppression of women in the ultraconservative kingdom.

Until the new policy is implemented in June of 2018, there will be more Israeli women flying F-15 fighter jets than woman driving cars in Saudi Arabia!!!

We have a long way to go, and I want you to be prepared. That is why I “strongly” encouraged you, Roni and Tom, upon your high school graduation to attend a one year gap program in Israel – and you chose to attend the Israeli Reform leadership development Mechina, a true year of personal growth.

Making this decision was not easy, and it involved many difficult conversations, and even some tension, that was challenging. I am so proud of both of you, and today is the appropriate day for us to ask each other for forgiveness for any hurt that might have been caused by the process. But I think it’s safe to say, that a month into your amazing experience, you are already realizing that the struggle in making a difficult decision was well worth it.

I think you are realizing that through the intense study, the endless hours of volunteering, the challenges brought by managing group dynamics between 53 people sharing one roof, the amazing scholars and discussions you are having, how this year will give you tools to face, what I am sad to say, is a difficult reality of succeeding in life, as a woman in the U.S.

When you start your studies at George Washington University in Washington D.C next fall, you will discover that as much as we have advanced as a society, when it comes to how women are treated, there is still a long way to go.

You will be returning to a culture in which, and it’s very hard to get clear numbers, 23% of undergraduate female college students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation. And the numbers are probably much higher. We know so, because many women never report being assaulted. They don’t believe it will help - and how can you blame them when Brock Turner, a former Stanford University swimmer, received a far too lenient six-month jail sentence for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman in 2016.

You will be returning to a world that after graduation, will underpay you for the same work you do as your male colleagues. Fifty-four years after the United States passed the Equal Pay Act, women still face a substantial gender wage gap across the spectrum.  Today, on average, a woman earns 79 cents for every dollar a man earns. And even if you earn what you deserve, remember what Sandberg wrote in her book; “Success and likability are positively correlated for men and negatively for women. When a man is successful, he is liked by both men and women. When a woman is successful, people of both genders like her less...Aggressive and hard-charging women violate unwritten rules about acceptable social conduct. Men are continually applauded for being ambitious and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty. Female accomplishments come at a cost.”

It’s not going to be easy.

You will be returning to a world where, when the day comes, and you decide to build your own family, and please take your time… you are most likely to face the cruel decision between being a fulfilled mother or having a successful career.

Because in a country that is still arguing if maternal care should be a mandatory medical right, we are light years away from letting mothers and fathers have maternal and paternal paid leave, allowing them to balance between their career aspirations and their desired role as parents. In her book, Sandberg wants us to imagine “A truly equal world... where women run half our countries and companies, and men run half our homes.”

You will be returning to a country that still must break some very important glass ceilings.  Did you know that in January of 1937, the Gallup Poll, then in its second year of existence, posed this question: “Would you vote for a woman for president if she was qualified in every other respect?”

Sixty-four percent of Americans said “no.” Today that question is obviously a very charged political issue that I have no intention of discussing. But from different polls and studies, it is probably safe to say today that approximately 10 to 20 percent of Americans are not ready to vote for a woman to be president - REGARDLESS OF THEIR POLITICAL AFFILIATION, even in 2018, it might not matter if your name is *Nikki Haley* or *Elizabeth Warren,* you are still facing tens of millions of people that don’t believe you can do the job, just because you are a woman.

So, I worry for you, and pray for all of us - that we will live to see a real change.

And when I come to think about it, the change really must start with ME -and I need to apologize to you, my dear girls because this letter is not for you. You have done all that you can to set yourself up for success.

You went to the best possible schools and have perfect …(ummm…that D in Spanish…well almost perfect) grades. You travelled the world and saw so many ways people live, think and believe. You have always engaged yourselves in community service and worked as hard as you could to fight for the causes you believe in.

So actually…this letter is for you – Yonatan, my little son!

Because it is only when you and your friends grow up with a different mindset, that change will happen.

If we are ever to break the glass ceiling for women, it is only because men will partner with women in doing so, it will only happen when women will know that they can stand on our shoulders.

It is only when men understand that it is up to them to become active in the pursuit of this goal, that real change will happen. When men understand that women have already done all they can to push this wagon forward - and now they need you, Yonatan, and they need me, and all the fathers, grandfathers, brothers, husbands and uncles, in our congregation to be their partners in moving it more.

We need to understand that we might not be able to change cultural norms overnight, but we can make small changes in our personal life, in the lives of our families and friends and our communities. It’s not enough to be a guy that treats women with respect -  you must be the guy that actively stops a friend or co-worker from making a sexist joke, or a chauvinistic comment.

True change will only come when we allow ourselves to speak about and encourage our sons to take dance lessons, and our girls to be chess champions. Because if we don’t, the gender stereotypes introduced in childhood, will be reinforced throughout our lives and become self-fulfilling prophesies.

True change will come when men are no longer are asked to help with chores around the house because they see themselves as equally responsible for them.

True change will come when we as a Reform movement stop paying female clergy less than we pay a male in the same position and offer paid maternity and paternity leave - WE should lead by example, just as we did when we called girls to Torah, started ordaining women and changed liturgy to fit our values in the 21st century.

My dear friend, Profesora Dafna Haker from TLV university, (inspired by Kay Hagan) calls it being “A Good Enough Man.”

And let me tell you, Yonatan, that the father of Brock Turner from Stanford University is not a good enough man. In his appeal to the judge he dismissed his son's crime as "20 minutes of action." I have a responsibility as a father, not just to protect my girls, but even more so to show you, what it means to respect women, so that they won’t need protection.

Yonatan, you don’t have to call yourself a feminist, you don’t have to even like the word. But you do need to appreciate, that just by being born a male, you already have an advantage in this world, you are already ahead. And I do expect you to grow up to be “A Good Enough Man.”

I pray that I will always be good enough myself, and set an example.

My letter today, is one of my ways I hope to be a part of bringing about this change.

So, on this day of atonement, I ask for forgiveness, for I know I have not been a good enough man, and I turn to Adonai, and ask for the strength to continue to fight, to identify the times my voice is needed, and to be resilient enough to recognize that when I fail I will use those experiences to become a better man– for the stakes are too high – this is a battle we cannot lose.

God strengthen us this day. Hayom

God bless us this day, Show us kindness this day, Hayom

Now and always support us with the strength of your righteousness. Hayom

(Sing Hayom)