

An Ethical Letter

Benjamin M. Roth to His Son Solomon, 1854

Translated by ALBERT H. FRIEDLANDER

Ethical testaments, wall placards, and letters have a literary history among Jews going well back into the Middle Ages. This genre of literature is still found today among Jews.

The following ethical letter was written by Benjamin M. Roth in Hechingen, Wuerttemberg, Germany, in 1854, just a century ago. It was handed by him to his son Solomon Roth, prior to the departure of the latter for the United States.

Benjamin M. Roth, a teacher in the Jewish school of Hechingen, was a well-educated man, inclined toward advanced ideas, much to the dismay of his school board.

Solomon, the son, had departed from the parental home in 1851, a lad of fourteen, and had acquired considerable training in business in Cologne, Germany. When he landed in the United States, three years later, he was met in Philadelphia by his elder brother, Moses. The two then headed for Milwaukee; they had very little money.

Upon the death of their father, Solomon and Moses brought their mother, their two sisters, and their younger brother to Milwaukee. The latter fought as a Union soldier throughout the Civil War.

After his arrival, Solomon peddled notions to the farming community around Milwaukee for about a year. He then acted as a book-keeper for the largest wholesale dry goods firm in Milwaukee for something like three years, and saved enough money at least to think about marriage. His boardinghouse happened to be the home of Mr. and Mrs. Simon Feist, who had emigrated to America from Oppenheim, Germany, some years before. When Solomon met them they were already well-Americanized. In the household was a very beautiful daughter, Regina, who became his wife a few years later.

After their marriage in 1862, Solomon took his young bride to the village of Monroe, Wisconsin, where he established a general store with

Albert H. Friedlander is rabbi of United Hebrew Congregation, Fort Smith, Ark. The ethical letter of Benjamin M. Roth and the data on the family have been made available through the courtesy of Albert S. Roth, a grandson of Benjamin M. Roth. A copy of the original German manuscript of the ethical letter is in the American Jewish Archives.

the little capital he had saved. The business was successful, but the young man had larger ideas; he moved with his wife and three children to the metropolis of Milwaukee, where he engaged in what is known as the packing of leaf tobacco. At that time leaf tobacco was an important item in the agricultural economy of southern Wisconsin. In the pursuit of his business, Roth traveled considerably, and on one of his trips he met the well-known Cincinnati cigar manufacturer, Samuel Lowenthal. Impressed by the personality and capacity of Roth, Lowenthal invited him to become a member of his firm. As a result of this offer, Roth liquidated his Milwaukee business and joined the firm of S. Lowenthal & Company. That was in 1879.

The family, consisting of Roth, his wife, and three children, moved to Cincinnati. Several years later, he purchased the entire interest of Mr. Lowenthal and formed the cigar manufacturing business of Roth, Bruner, & Feist. This firm grew to such proportions that in 1902 it was bought out by the American Tobacco Company of New York. Roth, then sixty-five years of age, retired. He died at Cincinnati in 1911.

* * *

My Dear Son:

It is doubtful whether we shall see each other again in life; and from afar I cannot warn you against such dangers as often threaten youth. Yet, even from the furthest distance I shall think of you only with fatherly love and tenderness, and will at all times do everything in my power to help you. No sacrifice is too great for a father's love to bring willingly. In whatever situation you may find yourself, turn to me; and I will always show you that I am yours with an unending love, now and forever. Always have confidence in me. Before you give your confidence to a stranger—trust your father.

At this moment of our parting, since I can no longer be near you, let me give you the following precepts for life to take with you. Obey them, follow them, and you will never be unhappy. Whatever situations you may enter into, you will be able to take hold of yourself, to comfort yourself; and God, to whom I pray daily for your welfare, will let it be well with you.

1. Always seek to keep your conscience clear, i.e., never commit an action which you will have to regret afterwards. Think carefully about everything you contemplate doing before its execution, and consider its consequences, so that you will act only after due consideration. A sure test of a clear conscience is an unclouded temperament and a cheerful spirit. Since you have received both from nature, seek to preserve them.
2. Consider what you possess as a trust given you by God. Be thrifty

with it, and seek to enlarge it in an honest manner. Consider it just as much the possession of your brothers and sisters, and therefore . . . let no sacrifice appear too great for you. Wealth should never come to diminish your honor and your clear conscience. Also, never say in the manner of the cold Englishman or American: "Help your own self!" Instead, aid rather to the full extent of your powers every poor man and anyone who needs your help. In short: be thrifty for yourself, that you may be able to aid a suffering humanity with your wealth.

3. Never leave the religion that is yours by birth, the faith of your parents and ancestors. Neither wealth, nor friendship, nor the possibility of a brilliant career in life, nor seduction, nor even the love of a girl should move you or have the power to make you change your religion. Should you be forced, partly through circumstances, partly because of the dictates of reason, to omit the ceremonial observances, you must nevertheless under no circumstances depart from the basis of religion: "The Eternal, your God, is one, unique, single being." Reason and conviction can never force you to desert Judaism, since the Jewish religion is really the only one whose basic teachings can be brought into harmony with philosophy. Therefore, desertion would be for worldly advantages, and these are never valuable enough to sacrifice the Eternal One or our conscience. I feel I must recommend this to you doubly, since you have a tendency towards frivolity which could lead you to an easier acceptance of this type of seduction.

Also, never have any contact with missionaries. You do not have enough knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. That way, you cannot engage in disputations with them; for they could easily lead you astray. Consider them therefore only as self-seeking cheats, or as ranting visionaries, as I have come to know them. And, indeed, in my conversations with them I frequently exhibited them as such in the presence of company, something I could do since I have studied Scripture from my childhood days. And yet, even then it was a difficult task.

4. Do not become acquainted—not to mention closer relationships—with women. Be polite and well-mannered towards them; for the rest, as far as it is possible, keep your distance. Consider them like a sharp, pointed toy, with which one can play only occasionally—and then with the greatest of care. Seek to keep your heart free; guard it; and be not seduced by the tempting, destructive speech and actions of your contemporaries. This last demands your closest attention.

Have no relations with a prostitute. Her breath is poison, her word the bite of a snake; and they are all alike. However, let me add here, in praise of Jewish womanhood, that with a few exceptions they have preserved much purer morals than the girls of other races; and they have contained themselves from selling their charms for money.

I recommend the above to you in particular as injunctions to be followed. With your fine appearance and cheerful temperament you will be exposed to many temptations and opportunities in regard to women. And I do not want to say much on this point, leaving it rather to your wisdom and unspoiled instincts. My deepest prayer is that you may guard the latter; and, if it is your firm intention to remain pure, the good Lord will aid you in this task.

5. Do not trust a stranger; and, certainly, do not confide in him, particularly if he flatters you. In general, be reserved and discreet towards all. For many a wolf wears lamb's garments, and a true, honest friend can be recognized only after years of close acquaintance, and after he has passed many tests. But then, value him as a jewel—and a rare jewel, at that. If someone confides a secret to you, guard it; but do not make him your confidant in return. Again, this is a point which I must emphasize to you, since you are a trusting soul. But you yourself have already had experiences of this nature in your travels. Young as you are, you yourself know that men do not always mean what they say.

6. Never exhibit money or articles of value in front of a stranger, in an inn, or in any public place where strangers may be found. Even when you are with your acquaintances, do not act boastfully in regard to your possessions. On the contrary, rather claim to be poorer than you actually are. For there is no greater lure to crime than the great god Mammon; and needless bragging has brought misfortune to many a man.

7. Throughout life, whether you are in good or evil circumstances, keep your parents and your home in your mind. Guard firmly your resolution to return to them, even if only after many years (unless they are able to come to visit you). No matter when, no matter what the circumstances surrounding you, they long for you; and they will receive you with open arms.

8. Do not try to see everything because of an overwhelming curiosity. Avoid any locations or places that threaten danger. Do not place yourself in danger through willfulness, carelessness, or excessively brave or needless action. However, be brave and determined where danger cannot be avoided, and, at the critical stage, keep your presence of mind. For presence of mind has often turned away the gravest dangers, and has saved others when the danger seemed overwhelming.

9. Avoid the company of drunkards and merrymakers. Should you, by accident or because of unavoidable circumstances, find yourself in their presence, leave the room and the location they occupy. Suffer an insult rather than get into an argument with them, for such people cannot

really insult a man of honor. As a general rule, let yourself be insulted rather than insult others. Be particular to avoid all quarrel and argument. Meet everyone in a polite and friendly fashion. If you believe that someone has slighted you, lock your sensitivity and your anger into your heart; and forgive the offender.

10. Avoid gambling; and seek to occupy your time with useful things. Any occupation is better and more honorable than gambling; for before one becomes aware of it, one may become an inveterate gambler. Gambling is the most destructive of vices. Much as I must criticize the excessive reading of novels, which damages one's sensibilities and the heart, and makes one weak and woman-like, if time must be killed which could be used for so many pleasant and useful occupations, such reading is preferable to gambling.

11. Be frugal and economy-minded. Save each heller as you would a gulden; for he who needlessly spends a kreutzer will never save a gulden. Seek to acquire wealth in an honest manner; and preserve it through economy. But let not this economy turn to miserliness. Be very saving in regard to your own needs, and limit your needs to the utmost. Avoid unnecessary luxuries, unless it be a matter of doing good. If you save without being miserly, no one will be able to entice you into acts of dishonor or crime.

12. Be meek and patient, and seek to acquire the character and patience of your mother. Through many years of continual suffering and pain she showed herself, in this manner, to be a true angel of patience. Be, as she was, forgiving when injustice or misfortune seeks you out; and strive in this to emulate your all-forgiving God.

13. Sunlight and moonshine are powerful lamps. But the light of your reason must eclipse them; i.e., do nothing in haste, nothing without due thought.

14. Passions are the mightiest of all tyrants. Give them one finger, and they will at once take all of your body and soul. Seek, therefore, to keep free of them; and give them no opportunity to rule you.

15. Those who hate and envy us can bring much evil upon us; but the greatest evil can be brought upon us through our own soul when it walks the paths of foolishness and error. Therefore, seek to avoid them in every way of life; strive to set yourself against their power.

16. Great tribulations bring us into bad habits; and once we become accustomed to a habit, it becomes second nature to us. Therefore, do not learn any vices; and let no habit become a passion to you.

17. The lying tongue of viciousness can do us great damage; but our

own tongue can be still worse. Therefore guard your mouth and tongue. Consider each word before it crosses your lips, for he who guards his mouth and lips is exposed to no danger. Particularly guard yourself against saying what you think during revolutionary times—no matter to which faction you belong. Do not enter into political discussions, and always remain in the background on such occasions. Live a private rather than a public life.

18. Do not count too much on the favor of a personage, whether he be highly placed or of low rank. But least of all rely on the favor of a great man. Their promises are an empty sound, their words a gust of wind. They prefer you as long as they need you; once the need is gone, they do not know you any more.

19. Give in to necessity, and patiently bear what fate has in store for you. That which is done cannot be changed; and what has been decided on high cannot be nullified or avoided.

20. Despise and avoid the man of invectives, the calumniator, and the hypocrite. They would entice you and then use your words against you; and avoid a fool the way you would avoid a mad dog.

21. Long have I pondered, searched, and examined as to what constitutes man's true happiness. I have found only one bliss for him: virtue and fear of God. Hold fast to both of them, if you desire to attain happiness.

And thus I transmit to you, my beloved son, these rules for life. Seek to follow them. I particularly recommend to you that you seek to emulate your brother Moses and that you obey him; partly because he is your older brother, partly because he has an excellent, steadfast, and firm character. I do not censure you for the fact that big-city life and your growing up among strangers have in some ways been detrimental to you. This is the reason why you have almost discarded by now that steadfastness of spirit which you took with you from your parents' home. It remained longer in Moses, who stayed at home till he was seventeen, and whose character could therefore develop further. Really, you could not give me more pleasure than by living together peacefully and in brotherly harmony; as you could also give me no greater pain and sorrow than by not doing this. I do not doubt that both of you will follow my wishes, and in that way you will also fulfill the words of our sages [Hebrew]: "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to live together in unity."

I assure you that my whole happiness exists in the happiness of my children. Believe me, no sacrifice would be too great for me to bring willingly if I could make you happy. It was a great inward struggle for

me (and I had to conceal my feelings from you as from mother) to send you away from me while you were yet so young. But it was your firm desire—and I did not want to take it from you. For all eternity my feelings towards you will be those of the deepest love.

And with this I give you, now, my blessing; may it follow you on all your paths with the words [Hebrew]:

The angel who hath redeemed me from all evil bless thee; and let my name be named in thee, and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac; and mayest thou grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.

The Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.

The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.

God make thee as Ephraim and Manasseh, like Moses in his humility, like Solomon in his wisdom, like Samson in his strength, like Absalom in his beauty, like Hezekiah in his righteousness, and like David in his reverence.

Hechingen, June, 1854

B. M. ROTH

THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES with its staff of technical experts welcomes your interest in its efforts to preserve the living history of the Jew in America.

If you have papers, manuscripts, journals, record books, and the like at home, that are gathering dust in some chest or attic, the ARCHIVES would welcome them as your gift. Let us preserve them for you and the future.

Photostat and microfilm services are available to reproduce documents.

May we cordially invite your full use of our resources and facilities?