

# DEAR MR. PRESIDENT

*by Yudit Brown*

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When I was in second grade I wrote a letter to the President of the United States. I had something of crucial importance to discuss with him, and I made it clear that it was an emergency. He never answered.

So I tried the vice president, but he didn't answer either. I was deeply offended. I could not understand why they weren't answering me. After all, when I wrote to my teacher during the summer of first grade she wrote back, and nobody was busier than she was.

I decided to write again. I checked the address in the yellow phone book, and painstakingly wrote it out in large purple letters on my favorite stationery. I then wrote SOS underneath, and proceeded to write my letter on matching stationery paper.

I began the letter with a compliment on the great job he was doing as president. (All presidents love compliments.) I then went straight to the point. I asked him if he could please, please come down to our school in three more weeks on Tuesday afternoon. I wanted to "show 'n tell" him to the class. It would be my turn then. And this was an emergency, because no one had ever brought the president to our classroom yet. He could give a small speech, not like the long ones he always does, and then I would give out doughnuts and he could leave. If he absolutely could not make it, I would be willing take the vice president instead.

But a few days passed and there was no answer in the mail. I figured there must be something wrong with the mailbox, and that my letter never got transferred to the one in the White House.

I asked my mother if there was a better way to send important letters, and she told me, yes, there was Federal Express. But when I asked her to send my letter that way, she stubbornly refused and nothing I said could convince her otherwise.

Finally, I decided on my last option. I would try another mailbox. Maybe a different one would work better.

Two days before show 'n tell, I received an envelope from the president. Inside was a portrait size picture of him, and under the picture he had signed his name.

I was furious. What was I expected to do with a portrait size picture of the president's ugly face?

I wrote him a letter raging that when I would grow up I was never gonna vote for him, and, here -- he could have his picture back.

That was the last time I ever wrote a letter to the president.

In fact, that was the last time I wrote any letter at all until the end of the year, when one evening I had an explosive argument with my brother.

I loved chewing pens. When I was doing homework, writing or thinking, I was chewing off the top part of a pen. My mother always told me to stop -- I was deforming all the pens in the house. My father told me that I was ruining my teeth, and my brother teased the life out of me.

One day he walked into my room while I was peacefully chewing on a pen. He grabbed it out of my mouth, and gleefully informed me that I was not allowed to chew on pens any longer. They weren't kosher.

I told him to hand me back the pen immediately.

But he held the pen over his head gloatingly, danced around my room in circles, and said that he couldn't give it back to me. I was chewing something treif.

I argued that the pen was definitely kosher because I had bought it in a Jewish grocery store. But he said it made no difference -- there was no supervision symbol, no hechsher on it.

I said that it didn't matter, because I wasn't really eating it. But he held up the pen close to his eyes, and said, actually, I sure was.

So we argued and yelled until he finally said that I could ask the biggest rabbi in the world, and he would tell me that pens weren't kosher.

I said fine. I was gonna ask the biggest rabbi in the world. My brother looked at me, and burst out laughing. He laughed and laughed and finally said that he would even give me the address of the biggest rabbi in the world, and I could send him my silly question and see that he was right.

He pulled out a "Torah card" from his pocket and showed it to me. It was a picture of Reb Dovid, one of the biggest rabbis in the city. This man is busy day and night assisting people's lives and dealing with important community issues. I carefully wrote down the address on my homework pad, and kicked my brother out of my room. He was still laughing and yelled through the door that Reb Dovid got millions of letters from people, and that I was dreaming. He would never answer my stupid letter.

But I wanted to know if a pen was tref, and did it really need a hechsher to put it in my mouth? I also wanted to know how much I was allowed to hate my brother, and was it a smaller or bigger sin than eating non-kosher?

So I wrote the letter and sent it that evening before I went to bed.

I went to school, failed a math test, argued with my brother and received a letter at the end of the week. Reb Dovid wrote back. It was a long letter. He wrote that he was delighted with my letter, and I should continue to write to him whenever I have a question. He said that my questions were good ones, and he had spent a lot of time thinking and looking through many holy books before he was able to answer. He could tell I was an intelligent person, and that I liked to think, and then he answered my questions.

Pens, he answered, are a lifeless object, so the concept of kosher is irrelevant. But even if it wasn't a problem according to Jewish law, I should try to stop chewing pens was because it was an annoying habit that ruined the pens, and it probably bothered whoever else wanted to use it.

He once had a friend who also loved chewing pens, and then one day he chewed right through the ink tube and had a black mouth for a week.

After that his friend always put a little mustard on top of the pen he was using, until he got used to chewing his fingernails instead of the pen...

He also said that it was okay to hate my brother. My brother probably hated me sometimes, too, but we would become friends when we grew up. For now we only annoyed each other, and it wasn't really hating. He hated his sister, too, when he was younger. She would boss him around, and he never listened. Today, they are best friends.

I put the letter in a separate folder, and sat down to write another one. And another, and another, and another...

Could you push off Shabbat to Sunday if it was an emergency? Was I allowed to tell my friend's secret only to my mother and my teacher and my other three friends? Could I ask God for a new dress while davening?

Was I allowed to slap my teacher, if it was only in a dream? Could I "borrow" a snack from my friend if she didn't know?

Almost every week I wrote a letter, and almost every week Reb Dovid wrote back. He was always happy to receive my letters. Sometimes he wrote that my questions became difficult for him, and he had to consult with another rabbi. Did I mind? And could he read the last letter to his wife? She would enjoy it so much.

How was my annoying brother? Did I do well on the Chumash test? I should read the book, "Goodbye, Friend" -- an intelligent person would enjoy it.

What was I doing in the summer? Of, course, you should write to me then. Here is my address in the mountains...

My daughter didn't like day camp either, but in another few years you will start going to sleepover camp. Now, that is fun... Yes, you can definitely tell your mother that you don't like the new school shoes, it all depends on how you say it, and I'm so happy that you made friends with the new girl in your class. I see that you have a good teacher this year, your questions are on a high level.

It was Purim time, fourth grade, when I received the last letter. It was his longest one.

He would no longer be able to answer my questions. He had to go away soon... But here was the address of his good friend who knows all about Torah, and can write letters even better than he had. His friend loves letters like mine, and I should write to him whenever I felt like it. He had enjoyed my thoughts so much, and he knows that I would grow up to be a great person.

You are a smart girl, he wrote, and always must remember that what makes you so smart is that you ask questions.

Reb Dovid died two days after I received the letter. They told us about it in school, and we heard many stories about him. Everyone went to his funeral, and they wrote all about him in the weekly newspapers.

They published an article he had written before he passed away but I couldn't really understand it. His letters were much simpler.

I showed the letters only to my parents, and then hid them all in the back of my drawer. Once after he died, I wrote him a letter, but no one knew the address of Paradise. Instead, I wrote to his wife and asked if she knew how long Reb Dovid was planning on staying in heaven, and did he ever come to her in a dream, and when he did could she ask for the address? I wanted to write to him.

She wrote back that Reb Dovid would be in heaven until Moshiach came, and, no, he didn't come to her in a dream, and no, heaven has no address.

Then how, I wondered, did anyone know where to go when they died? And where was Moshiach all this time anyway? In heaven, or hiding somewhere on earth? At first I thought of waiting for Moshiach to write my next letter, but when a few days passed and he hadn't arrived, I decided he was taking too long. Until then, I would write to the other rabbi that Reb Dovid had told me about.

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