On the Occasion of Zachary Stoller's Bar Mitzvah
Rabbi A. Brian Stoller
Parashat B'reishit 5787 / October 9, 2026

The Jewish philosopher Bachya ibn Pakuda said, "Days are like scrolls. Write on them what you want to be remembered."

I thought about this last Friday night at Simchat Torah when we were all gathered around this chapel holding two Torah scrolls wide open—one rolled to the very end of *Deuteronomy*, and one rolled to the very beginning of *Genesis*.

It was a liminal moment between past and present. An invitation to learn from what has been and write the next chapter of what will yet come to be.

So that when our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren open those scrolls wide on Simchat Torah, they will look into them and see what we wanted to be remembered—about ourselves and our community, and the mark we hoped to make on the world.

When Lindsay and Zachary were little, I used to ask them every morning on the way to school: "Kids: What are the four most important values?"

And they had learned to say: "Kindness, honesty, respect, and love. Kindness means being nice. Honesty means not lying. Respect means listening to your parents and teachers. And love means caring for others."

It was our daily family liturgy.

What I did not understand at the time is that, even as my children were dutifully reciting the most important values Karen and I wanted them to know, they were also quietly developing their own. And as they grow, I see those values showing up in the human beings they are becoming.

Zachary embodies not only kindness, honesty, respect, and love; he also radiates values that make him—as his grandfather Donald Flayhart used to say—uniquely *himself*.

Those special Zachary values are empathy, creativity, and fairness.

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Zachary has always been sensitive to other people's feelings.

He's a quiet kid, and he's often focused on watching TikTok videos on his phone—so you'd think he's lost in his own world.

But he's not.

Somehow, he is completely tuned in to everything that is being said around him.

Karen and I can be talking about some heavy emotional topic—and, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Z pipes in from the back seat to ask a perceptive question or offer a thoughtful piece of advice.

If one of us is upset or stressed, he picks up on it—even when we're trying to hide it.

He'll look at me and say: "You good?"

He feels other people's needs.

A couple years ago, I took him out for pizza at Gino's, because Karen was out of town and I was rushing to get to an evening meeting.

I was just trying to get us fed, but I'll never forget what he said to me: "I love having this special father-son time together."

Recently, Karen was planning to take Lindsay to visit a college in North Carolina, just an hour or so from where the kids' grandmother Joanne lives. Karen asked Zach if he wanted to go.

"How old is Grandma?" he asked.

"Grandma's 80," Karen told him. "Why?"

"Hmm," he said. "I should probably go see her."

A few weeks ago, his other grandmother Jeanie texted him to say mazal tov on getting an A on a test or something, and she mentioned to me that his response had made her feel so good.

When I mentioned this to him, he smiled and said, "Yeah, when I text Gammy and Pappy, I try to write like a Boomer, in full sentences with punctuation, because I know that makes them happy."

Zach's empathy makes him a good friend, a loving son, and an especially "effective" little brother—because he knows how to push Lindsay's emotional buttons at exactly the wrong moment.

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Zachary also values creativity, and he is unafraid to express his individuality.

He likes to experiment with his hairstyle, his clothes, and his jewelry, and he doesn't much care what other kids say. He proudly describes himself as "alternative."

I really admire that about him.

He loves to draw and play the trombone—and he's even been composing his own music and teaching himself to play the trumpet.

He explained to me that he loves video games so much because they engage his imagination and spark his creativity.

I think Zach is unique because he is both right- *and* left-brained.

In addition to being artistic, he has a sharp analytical mind. He is a master at using logic to debate with his parents and blow our arguments to smithereens.

And as a rabbi, I have to say: for a 13-year-old, he is quite a theologian.

He is an avowed atheist, and yet he is also deeply curious about God.

Last spring, he asked me to explain Maimonides' concept of God to him—and we debated it for quite a while over dinner.

I don't know what path Zach will choose when he gets older, but we can easily see him as a musician *or* an engineer, a lawyer *or* a philosopher, an artist *or* a programmer.

Whichever direction he goes, his creative spirit will guide him.

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Finally, Zachary is committed to fairness and justice. This no doubt grows from his empathy.

The seeds have always been there, but I have really seen them blossom in the last year.

One Friday in January, Zach came home from school really shaken because his friend's dad had been arrested that morning by immigration officers, and no one knew what would happen to him.

Zachary told us he thought it was unfair and unjust.

A mentor told me once that *people* are *texts*—and we can learn from them just like we learn from books.

Each person has their own unique Torah to teach from their experiences, their qualities, and their values.

My son kindled a flame in me—and I believe he has helped me become more compassionate and sensitive to human suffering.

After that incident, Zach and I made signs and attended rallies together to show our support for our immigrant neighbors.

He was and is *my* moral role model. And I'm grateful to him for it.

Zach is also passionately opposed to AI because of the damage he says it causes to the environment, to the brain, and to human creativity. So, he refuses to use it—and he reprimands Karen and me when we do.

And Zach is rigorously nonmaterialistic.

Not only did he not want a lavish bar mitzvah party, but when we asked him what swag he'd like for the weekend, he responded adamantly: "The purpose of a bar mitzvah is to read from the Torah. I don't want any of that stuff!"

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Zachary Stoller learned from his parents to be kind, honest, respectful, and loving.

He taught *himself* to be empathetic, creative, and fair to everyone.

Z—you are already writing a beautiful story on the scroll of your days, and Mom and I are deeply proud of the young man you are becoming.

May the new Torah cycle that begins this week with Parashat B'reishit be a year of learning, growth, health, and joy for you, for our family, and for the world.

I love you, Bub. Mazal tov!