My Letter to the President
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Dear President Bush,

This is the fourth letter that I have written to a President of the United States in my lifetime. The first letter was written nearly 25 years ago on a piece of three color lined newsprint they used in school to teach us cursive. You probably have the letter in Smithsonian some place. I hope it is kept near Fonzie's jacket and Archie Bunker's sweater. The letter was written to your hero, President Reagan and it wished him a speedy recovery from his gun shot wounds. I know that he got the letter and really appreciated it, because he sent me an autographed picture of himself on a horse. I remember showing it to my mom, and telling her that the president was going to be okay, because his doctors were already allowing him to ride a horse after being shot. I don't have the picture anymore, and I know that because of his battle with Alzheimer's President Reagan doesn't remember taking the picture, and maybe not even being shot. But as long as my mind is able I will never forget that fateful day, or the image of the president waving to me on the back of his horse.

The second letter I wrote was while I was in college, and it was written to your father George Herbert Walker Bush. That letter is more than likely in my FBI file, rather than the Smithsonian. I had just finished a political science course where we were discussing the Gulf War, which had just erupted only days before. Our professor was making a convincing argument that this was another example of failed US diplomacy, and economics rather than principle leading yet another generation off to fight a war that was not in our interests. She made a convincing argument that the war was really fought so that big oil and gas companies could make a profit, and I wrote your father a letter telling him how wrong I thought it was for young people to have to die so that oil companies would not lose a few pennies on a barrel of oil.

I never heard back from your father on that one, not even a picture of him on the back of his horse (why do all president's ride horses? It makes one wonder if you have to have a horse to be president?). Well we fought the war anyway, and we won. And yes indeed, those oil and gas prices have sure be more stable because of it.

The third letter I wrote to a President was actually a couple of months ago, when I wrote you about the struggle for peace in Israel. I asked you to remain engaged in the peace process, and even made some suggestions about rekindling some ideas from President Clinton's presidency with regard to negotoations and status issues. Never heard back from you on that letter, and just so you know I am still waiting for my horse picture as well.

If you are still reading this letter, I wanted to take a few minutes and offer my advice and perspective on an issue that you have been quite vexed with in the last few weeks. According to news reports, you are engaged in a deeply moral and spiritual struggle with whether or not to allow federal funding for stem cell research.

As I have established myself as a skilled advisor to many presidents, including your father and your hero President Regan, I thought it only fitting that I offer you my advice and perspective on the issue. Like you, I am a deeply spiritual person, and I find a great deal of wisdom and insight in the religious teachings of my faith. And so what I share with you is not only my perspective on the issue, but that of Jewish tradition, and to the extent that our community ever agrees on anything, the views I am about to share are those of the Jewish community.

According to news reports, one of the issues that you are struggling with the most is whether stem cells constitute human life and should therefore be protected. I know that the Pope, (to whom I have also written letters, but again, no horse pictures) has spoken with you on the Catholic view that life begins at conception. I understand that your views on abortion and the death penalty, though seemingly quite inconsistent with one another, are informed by your deep religious faith, and that Christianity leaves little room

for interpretation on these matters. The Jewish tradition teaches a different and I think insightful, perspective.

At a minimum, the Jewish view is that life begins after 40 days, and all developments prior to that are not given any special status at all, in fact the Talmud refers to the embryo prior to 40 days as 'just fluid'. Forty days, you may note roughly corresponds to the onset of 'quickening', the first noticeable movement of a fetus in a womb.

The more widely held view within Jewish tradition is that life begins when the child's head breeches the mother's womb and takes its first breath. By either the most limited or the most widely applied Jewish view the embryos in question are not given the status of a human life. In addition, the location of the embryo, inside or outside the womb, is important to consider as well. Embryos that remain outside the womb, as is the case with all discarded embryos in question, have no chance to become children, and therefore according to Jewish tradition is a sacred commandment, a mitzvah to use them for research that may save lives. In fact, according to many rabbinic scholars, it is not only permitted, but there is a Jewish mandate to do so.

And this brings me to my second point. While we could stand and debate our various religious perspectives on the subject, I think there is a larger issue at stake here, and that is the potential to save a life. Both of our traditions place the highest value on saving a human life, it is, in fact, the basis for many of your views on abortion. The Jewish position is equally emphatic about the moral and ethical imperative to save a human life. The concept is called *Pekuach Nefesh* (you can ask Ari Fliesher your press secretary to help you with the pronunciation) and it implores human beings to do whatever is necessary to save the life of another. The concept comes from the Talmud, where the rabbinic scholars make the compelling argument that to save one human life is to save the entire world. Arguing that from that human life, generations upon generations will be born, great leaders will arise.

But the argument as to why you should permit federal funding of stem cell research, has its basis in a book common to both our faiths. In the book of Deuteronomy, which Jews throughout the world have begun to read just this past month, we are taught that while only God can create life, God has charged human being with the sacred responsibility to do everything possible to preserve it. It is from this same section of the bible that we read the verse, "I have put before you this day life and death. Choose life so that you and your children may live." This passage which our people will read again this Yom Kippur; reminds all of us of our unique responsibility toward our fellow human beings. We are, contrary to Cain's cry to God, the keepers of our brothers and sisters. And while you may interpret that to mean that you must keep, guard and protect the discarded embryo which will never become a human life, I and Jewish tradition see it much differently. Our divine imperative is to help those who are living, particularly those like President Regan who are stricken with horrible illnesses that are in desperate need of treatment and cure. Stems hold, according to Rabbi Moshe Tendler, Professor of Medical Ethics at Yeshivah University (that's in New York, near Bill and Hillary) are, 'the hope of humankind.'

Mr. President, I close this letter with the heartfelt observation that yours is not an easy job, especially when you must make decisions that seem to be more in line with the responsibilities of God, rather than those of a human being. But then again, our challenge is not to be God, but to be God-like in our actions, to see ourselves as being created *Betzelem Elohim* (again, ask Ari), created in the image of God, and thus partners in the important work of sustaining and enabling human life. The debate over abortion is for another time, this is a debate not over taking life, but over using the divine gifts that we have been given to endeavor to save those who are already living, indeed as the Talmud proclaims to save the entire world.

Thank you for your time Mr. President, and I look forward to receiving my picture.