

A Gift of Values

Yom Kippur 5780/2019

Rabbi Esther Adler, Mount Zion Temple, Yom Kippur 2019

Do you remember what gifts you got for your last birthday? How about your Bar or Bat Mitzvah? High School Graduation? Do you remember the last gift you gave someone? We give gifts to people we love to express our love for them, to say thank you, please remember me, or sometimes for no reason at all.

Take a minute to call to mind a special gift you've received from a loved one some time in your life, one which you hold particularly dear. Think about what it was, and who gave it to you... Now think about what that gift said about the giver, and what it said about you.

I would like to share with you a gift which I received from my mother, who received it from her father. It is my grandfather's autobiography, and taped to the front cover is a letter:

"A word to our children...

Its quite difficult to write a book of your life of more than 70 years in a few paragraphs. But for the endless love that your mother and I had for one another, inspired me and gave me the courage to undertake that task. During the months that I was writing it, I felt that we were living our life all over again, and now that the book is finished, and as I look at the pages I feel again that Mother is still with me is spirit, and I am convinced more than ever that a true love as we had for one another never dies.

In presenting this book to you, my four daughters I want you to know that the only reward I expect and hope to receive is that you will try to follow up our example in life. To be devoted to your loved, and try to be close to one another to the best of your ability.

Fortune and misfortune will come to people during their lifetime, and those who are some more fortunate should assist the others whenever it is necessary.

There is nothing more important in life than the close relationship between brothers and sisters and their immediate families.

If you will and follow up these examples to the best of your abilities, that will be our reward, and I will feel that our struggle and effort during our lifetime has not been in vain...Dad.

Unknowingly, my grandfather had written what is known in Jewish tradition as an Ethical Will. An Ethical Will is a letter to loved ones summing up your life's lessons and expressing your hopes for the people who come after you.

We can find the first Jewish ethical wills in the Torah. In the last chapters of Genesis, Jacob gathers his children around his bedside tells them how they should live once he is gone. In the last chapters of Deuteronomy, we have Moses's farewell address to the Israelites: final words of chastisement, prophecy, and instruction to his people before he dies, in order to make sure all he had worked so hard for would be preserved and carried forward.

One of the most powerful ethical wills in the bible is that of King David to his son Solomon: "I am going the way of all the earth. Be strong and of good courage. Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in God's ways, and following God's laws, so that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you go." (I Kings 2:1-12)

In a symbolic way, the Torah itself is like an ethical will from God to us, God's children.

Jewish literature from the ancient to the modern is filled with these gifts.¹ I would like to share a few excerpts with you. The first, which Nick/Cole will read

¹ The first collection of Ethical Wills was published in 1926 in a two volume work called Hebrew Ethical Wills, by Israel Abrahams. Almost 60 years later, in 1983, Rabbi Jack Reimer published "Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury." Ten years after that, he published a second edition, including a guide for readers to write their own Ethical Wills. Today Amazon lists over 15 different titles on Ethical Wills, most of them 'How To' manuals.

for us is a BIRTH-day gift, a letter from an expectant father, as he waits outside the delivery room for the arrival of his first child.² He later followed up with another letter on her 18th birthday, one on the eve of her marriage, and a final one as he awaited the birth of his first grandchild. The second, read by Michelle/Jean is from a single woman named Kim³, and the third, which will be read by Phil/Stuart is from Catskills humorist Sam Levenson's "Ethical Will and Testament to My Grandchildren, And Children Everywhere:"⁴

To my as yet unborn child,

It is late. Though expectant fathers are supposed to be nervous, I am more restless than worried, and wish you would already arrive.

I am full of expectations for you. It is very important for me that you be joyful. It is likely that you will be named after my father who was an Isaac - Yitzhak, from laughter - so that somehow your name will have to do with laughter or happiness, and that seems right. I do not commend earnestness to you as your chief virtue.

I want you to be caring. May you be able to be either kind or angry for others' sakes. You will know which is appropriate when the time comes. Even more, may you be willing from time to time to risk doing something that may turn out to be foolish, for the sake of a wise concern.

I want you to be clearly and irrevocably Jewish. I do not know if my way will be your way, but your way must be a real way, and a serious way.

I want you to be happy, caring, and Jewish. How I am going to get you to be any of them - ah, now the anxiety begins. I promise you that I will try hard, and I hope that you won't have to pay too much for my on-

² J. Riemer and N. Stampfer, So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and how to Prepare Them, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, p. 170

³ <https://celebrationsoflife.net/ethicalwills/examples/ewill-ex34/>

⁴ Riemer and Stampfer, op.cit. p. 168

the-job training. If you try to forgive my mistakes, I'll try to forgive yours. We are both going to make lots of them.

In any event, my wishes for you and for the Messiah are the same at this moment: May you both come speedily. With love of unknown and untested quality,

Your expectant father.

To my friends and family,

Since I've never married or had children, I have created my family of choice along with my blood family, and you are an exceptional group of people. I have always tried to give you what I value most: honesty, trust and unguarded love.

I think the need to learn has always driven me. I have tried to outgrow myself constantly. I believe that we are part of something incomprehensibly bigger than ourselves, and that we are responsible to strive to understand it enough that we are able to give something back to this life we were blessed with. I wish for all of you, with your busy lives, to remember that all it takes is a good long walk in the woods to remember to listen to the smartest parts of yourself.

I have to say something to anyone who's younger than me. It's amazing to get older. Not necessarily fun, but amazing. Each age has its gifts and its limitations and I hope that every young, middle aged and older person in my life gets the right kind of support to go for the gusto in their age-appropriate tasks. Don't miss a minute of your life by trying to hold on to something whose time is over.

Take care of your health. You're riding around in this incredible vehicle and you need to take care of it if you're going to fully enjoy the ride. No matter what state your health is in, be grateful. Whatever difficulty presents itself to you is a gift, Same goes for whatever joy presents itself.

I've tried to bring something into the world that may not have my name on it when I leave, but that brought comfort, encouragement and spark into people's lives.

Blessings,

Kim

My Ethical Will And Testament To My Grandchildren And To Children Everywhere:

I leave you my unpaid debts. They are my greatest assets. Everything I own - I owe:

1. To America I owe a debt for the opportunity it gave me to be free and to be me.
2. To my parents, I owe America. They gave it to me, and I leave it to you. Take good care of it.
3. To the biblical tradition, I owe the belief that man does not live by bread alone, nor does he live alone at all. This is also the democratic tradition. Preserve it.
4. To the six million of my people, and to the thirty million other humans who died because of man's inhumanity to man, I owe a vow that it must never happen again.
5. I leave you not everything I never had, but everything I had in my lifetime: a good family, respect for learning, compassion for my fellowman , and some four-letter words for all occasions: words like "help" , "give", "care", "feel", and "love."

Love, my dear grandchildren, is easier to recommend than to define. I can tell you only that like those who came before you, you will surely know

when love ain't; you will also know when mercy ain't, and brotherhood ain't.

The millennium will come when all the "aint's" shall have become "is-es" , and all the "is-es" shall be for all, even for those you don't like.

Finally, I leave you the years I should like to have lived, so that I might possibly see whether your generation will bring more love and peace to the world than ours did. I not only hope you will. I pray that you will.

Grandpa Sam Levenson.

These messages were written by people who wanted to leave their dear ones something more valuable than investments, jewelry and china. They wanted to safeguard their beliefs and dreams, the things that won't tarnish like silver or devalue like stocks. Everybody knows it is foolish and irresponsible not to leave a legal will; we invest considerable time and energy taking care of our possessions and protecting our loved ones financially. And today more and more people are recognizing the importance of Advance Directives or Living wills, to make sure their bodies are properly cared for at the end of their lives. Why, then, would we even consider leaving our values up to chance? Even if we don't have children, every one of us has dear ones who will miss us and would carry on what they treasured about us.

When I interviewed for Rabbinic School, one of the questions the committee asked me was "How do you want to be remembered when you die? I thought it was a strange question to ask a 22 year old, but now I see how lucky I was to have been asked. I said, "I would like to be remembered as a mensch." Ever since, I have been trying to live up to my answer. Writing an ethical will asks us that question, and then compels us to follow through.

Ethical wills enable us to extend the meaning of our lives by bequeathing to those who come after us the things which are most important to us in life.[note] Faced with our own mortality, we might find comfort in the knowledge that those things which give meaning to our lives will be remembered, and carried forward.

Preparing an Ethical Will pushes us, in fact, to do all those things we talk about on these High Holy Days: To confront ourselves, to look inward to see what are the essential truths we have learned in a lifetime. To appreciate our successes, face up to our failures, and consider what it is that really counts. It is an opportunity to consider not only what we want for and from our children, but for and from ourselves, our communities, and our world. It can move us to look face to face at our real selves, and inspire us to work just a bit harder to become our ideal selves.

Today there are a number of resources for writing an Ethical Will. Today there are a number of resources for writing an Ethical Will. But one simple approach is to begin is just as I began today: by thinking about what character gifts you received from your parents, from your mentors, from God. Ask yourself what your parents would have passed on to you in an ethical will, or if you can, ask your parents themselves. Ask yourself what you have strived for in your life, what you are striving for now. How you have improved your world since you got here? What still needs to be done? Look at your successes and your mistakes, and what you have learned from them, and write it down. It's that easy: just write it down. Make a list. I tried it, and here is the skeleton of my own ethical will. I have children, and I hope they will take it to heart. But even if I had no children, this is what I would hope for those I hold dear:

Be honest with yourself, so you can be honest with others, and have faith in yourself so you can have faith in others.

Remember the words of Rabbi Akiva: God showed great love for us by creating us in the divine image, and an even greater love by letting us know it.

Learn to love and express your love unhesitatingly.

Be generous. There is great joy in giving.

It is also important to allow others that joy.

Create a Jewish home, and nurture it so that it is always growing.

Lighten up.

Remember, think, and be brave.

We needn't, and in fact we shouldn't wait until death is near to write an ethical will. I read of one rabbi who, with no intention of dying, wrote an ethical will, and now reviews and renews it every summer in preparation for the High Holy Days. Imagine the rich legacy his loved ones will have in this record of his moral and spiritual growth. We owe it to ourselves, to those we love, even to our world, to commit our ethical wills to paper now, then to review and revise them as our changing life situations bring us new insights and wisdom, and also to encourage those we love to do the same.

There is a popular rabbinic teaching: Rabbi Eliezer said: Repent one day before your death. A disciple asked him, "But how do I know the day of my death?" Rabbi Eliezer answered, Repent today, lest you die tomorrow." Now I don't mean to be morbid, and neither did Rabbi Eliezer. But he reminds us how important it is to seize an opportunity while you have it.

On Yom Kippur we spend a good deal of time reflecting on our lives, examining our deeds, and comparing them against our values. This year let us go one step further. After examining the past, let us tend to the future. On this holiest of days, even as we ask God to inscribe us for a blessing in the book of life, may we, created in God's image, inscribe a blessing for our dear ones. Let us inscribe it in the form of an ethical will, an individual book of life, a source of blessing for generations to come.

Jewish Ethical Will Resources

Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper, 2nd Edition by Dr. Barry Baines, Da Capo Lifelong Books; 2nd edition (April 4, 2006)

Ethical Wills & How to Prepare Them (2nd Edition): A Guide to Sharing Your Values from Generation to Generation, by Rabbi Jack Riemer, Dr. Nathaniel Stampfer, et al. | Apr 10, 2015

The Forever Letter: Writing What We Believe For Those We Love

by [Elana Zaiman](#) | Sep 8, 2017

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=ethical+wills+elana+zaiman&ref=nb_sb_noss