



# Ethical Wills: The Most Important Legacy We Leave

Rabbi Cassi Kail



**Days are scrolls. Write  
on them what you want  
to be remembered.**

**- Bachya Ibn Pakuda (11C)**

# What an ethical will is not

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A memoir

An advance directive / living will

A document with legal standing

## The First Ethical Will: Jacob on his death bed

Jacob called out to God: “Ruler of the World,” he cried, “Take not my soul until I have encouraged/instructed my children.”

- Rabbinic commentator **Yalkut Shimoni**

“...when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “Do me this favor... please do not bury me in Egypt. (30) When I lie down with my ancestors, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place.”– Genesis 47:28-30

Israel blessed his sons and his grandsons, speaking to their gifts and their faults, and reminding them that God will always be with them (Genesis 49)

## David's Ethical Will, Chronicles 22:7-13

David said to Solomon, "My son, I wanted to build a House for God...But the word of God came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood... [to] build a House for My name... But you will have a son who will be a man at rest, for I will give him rest from all his enemies on all sides; Solomon will be his name and I shall confer peace and quiet on Israel in his time. He will build a House for My name... and I will establish his throne of kingship over Israel forever.'... Only let God give you sense and understanding and put you in charge of Israel and the observance of the Teaching of your God. Then you shall succeed.... Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid or dismayed.

## Maimonides letter to his son (12th century), Translation from Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim

Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will prevent you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin. Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This radiant quality is the finest of all admirable traits because through humility you will also come to fear G\_d, which will cause you to always think about where you came from and where you are going...

## **Rabbi Judah Ibn Tibbon Ethical Will to his son (1120-1170)**

**..how I swaddled you and brought you up**, how I led you in the path of wisdom and virtue. **I fed and clothed you, I spent myself educating and protecting you.** I **sacrificed my sleep to make you wise** beyond your fellows and to raise you to the highest degree of science and morals. These twelve years I have **denied myself the usual pleasures and relaxations of men for your sake**, and I still toil for your inheritance. I have honored you by providing an extensive library for your use...



Seeing that your Creator has graced you with a wise and understanding heart, I journeyed to the ends of the earth and fetched for you a teacher in secular sciences. I minded neither the expense nor the danger of the ways. Untold evil might have befallen me and you on those travels... But you, my son, did deceive my hopes. You did not choose to employ your abilities, hiding yourself from all your books, not caring to know them or even their titles....Therefore, my son...when I have left you, devote yourself to the study of Torah and to the science of medicine... for you have a wise and understanding heart, and all that is needful on your part is ambition and application.

# Types of Ethical Wills

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Tzavaot (note from beyond the grave)

Haganot (rules for daily ritual and ethical conduct)

Iggeret (A letter written and given to loved ones while alive)

# An Ethical will is an opportunity for

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Introspection

Making meaning from the experiences of our lives

Reiterating what is most important to us

Meaningful conversation with our loved ones

# ETHICAL WILLS

A VALUES VAULT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS<sup>®</sup>

RABBI ELANA ZAIMAN

*THE MEANING OF RECEIVING  
AN ETHICAL WILL*



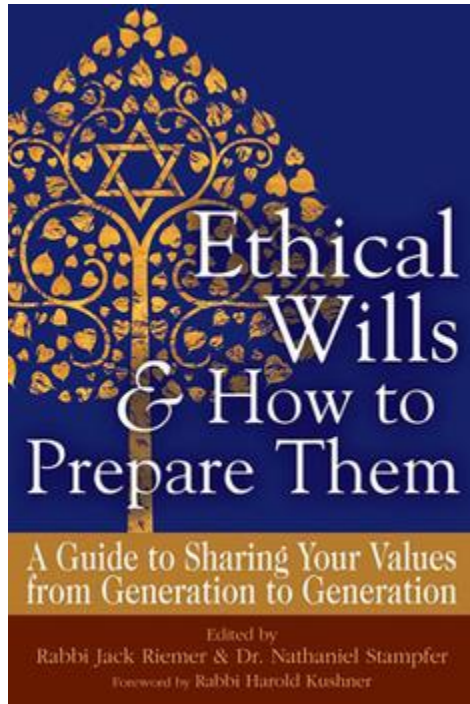
- 1) Reflect on a few of our core values, how you came to them, and how they played out in your life.
- 2) Discuss a few courageous choices, why you made them, and what we learned from them.
- 3) What ideals would you be willing to die for, and why?
- 4) What gives my life meaning? What got you bed out of bed each morning?
- 5) What were the moments of your life in which you truly made a difference/about which you are particularly proud?

- 6) What are a few of the hard-earned lessons you learned? What mistakes did you make that you want others to learn from?
- 7) What traditions or heirlooms are you passing down. Tell the story of the object and the people to whom it belonged.
- 8) Talk about a few people who made an indelible mark in your life. What did they teach you?
- 9) How do you want to be remembered? Why is that so important to you?
- 10) For what am I most grateful?



# TIPS

- Share your humanity, your imperfections, your humor, and your vulnerability
- It matters more what you say than how you say it
- You can't say it all, so focus on what's most important.
- Don't use it to insult/have the last word.
- Video, audio, art, and other media are all legitimate ways to create an ethical will.
- You can share an ethical will at<sup>15</sup>any time.

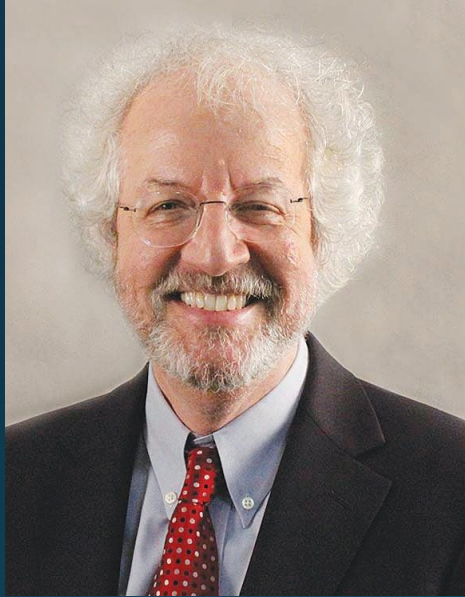


Receiving an ethical will is “sort of like reading a love letter from the beyond. There is a sense of being a voyeur, of eavesdropping on an intimate conversation.”

- Rabbi Jack Riemer



## Rabbi Simkha Weintaub



After my father died, my brother went to my father's office, to the drawer we were supposed to go to when he died. There he found not only the financial files he kept so neatly, but also a letter addressed to the family. It was so wonderful to have an indication that we would have a message from my father to read and to learn from: not just then and there, but for times to come. It was really a Torah of his life, and to this day we get together to talk about it. On his birthday we read and discuss it, almost like giving commentary to his teaching and his life. The letter reflects my father's personality both in its distinctive handwriting and tone. As my father did in life, the letter quotes liberally from the prayerbook and Jewish texts, and I can hear his voice as I read.

Books for further reading:

*What Will They Say About You When You're Gone* by Rabbi Daniel Cohen

*Ethical Wills: The Gift of a Heart* by Robert Alexander

*Ethical Wills-What They Are and How to Write One* by Kari Berit

*Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them* by Rabbi Jack Riemer and Dr Nathaniel Stampfer