

FOR CLASS #6

Ethical Wills

Ethical wills are a way to share your values, blessings, life's lessons, hopes and dreams for the future, love, and forgiveness with your family, friends, and community.

Ethical wills are not new. The Hebrew Bible first described ethical wills 3000 years ago (Genesis Ch. 49). References to this tradition are also found in the Christian Bible (John Ch. 15-18) and in other cultures. Initially, ethical wills were transmitted orally. Over time, they evolved into written documents. 'Ethical wills' are not considered legal documents as compared to 'living wills' and your 'last will and testament' which are legal documents.

Today, ethical wills are being written by people at turning points and transitions in their lives and when facing challenging life situations. They are usually shared with family and community while the writer is still alive.

Ethical wills may be one of the most cherished and meaningful gifts you can leave to your family and community.

There is a lovely Jewish custom, one that is unfortunately not sufficiently known in our time, of writing what is called an ethical will. Parents would write a letter to their children in which they would try to sum up all that they had learned in life, and in which they would try to express what they wanted most for and from their children. They would leave these letters behind because they believed that the wisdom they had acquired was just as much a part of the legacy they wanted to leave their children as were all the material possessions.

The first ethical wills are found in the Bible. Jacob gathers his children around his bedside and tries to tell them the way in which they should live after he is gone. And Moses makes a farewell address, chastising, prophesying, and instructing his people before he dies. David prepares Solomon before he goes to his eternal rest by warning him whom to be wary of when he becomes king, and by asking him to complete the task he had begun and was unable to complete. The Apocrypha, the Talmud, medieval and modern Hebrew literature all contain examples of ethical wills parents left their children.

Many years ago Israel Abrahams published a splendid collection of these medieval wills entitled *Hebrew Ethical Wills*.

An ethical will is not an easy thing to write. In doing so, one confronts oneself. One must look inward to see what are the essential truths one has learned in a lifetime, face up to one's failures, and consider what are the things that really count. Thus an individual learns a great deal about himself or herself when writing an ethical will. If you had time to write just one letter, to whom would it be addressed? What would it say? What would you leave out? Would you chastise and rebuke? Would you thank, forgive, or seek to instruct?

An ethical will is not an easy thing to read. There is a sense of being a voyeur, of eavesdropping on an intimate conversation, of reading a love letter from the beyond. Those who read these documents should do so with reverence and with gratitude. We tread carefully here, and we read with a sense of privilege.

An ethical will is not an easy thing to receive. There is the temptation, an almost irresistible one, for parents to try to persuade after death what they were unable to persuade during life. There is the temptation to repeat once more, to plead once more, and to impose a burden of guilt from the grave.

The famous and much-quoted letter of Ibn Tibbon is an example of such a castrating and guilt-producing will. Over and over again in his will he berates his child and reminds him how much he has done for him, and then he ends with the instruction that the child should read this will regularly. One can only shudder to think of how much harm such a will can do. One must be able to accept a will as well meant, even if its instructions are sometimes burdensome. One must be able to take it as words that come from the heart and that hopefully enter the heart. One must be able to accept it as an adult receiving instruction from an adult, or else the ties that bind become ties that choke and cripple.

The wills of our time come from many countries and from many kinds of people. Some were written by scholars, some by simple men and women. Some were written in freedom and safety, from the comfort of a desk, and some were written in trenches and bunkers. Some were written in English, some in Hebrew, Yiddish, or German. All are precious spiritual documents--windows into the souls of those who wrote them.