

# The Ethical Will

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*For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of Adonai by doing what is just and right, in order that Adonai may bring about for Abraham what Adonai has promised him.*

GENESIS 18:19

These words marked the beginning of the custom of one generation's leaving an ethical will for the next. For centuries parents have left a document for their children through which they bequeathed a spiritual, moral, and ethical legacy. In essence this document is just another way in which we transmit the fundamental values of life's dignity and sanctity and fulfill our responsibility to pass on these values to those we leave behind.

A personal ethical will is a gift that a parent gives his or her child. It is a testimony about living—a prescription based on one's own experiences for living a righteous life.

Albert Vorspan, former senior vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, once described the challenge of leaving behind an ethical will in the following way:

What is the true legacy I can leave my own children?

It is not stocks and bonds and notes and precious stones. It is not even such wisdom as I may have accumulated in my life. For what is man and what is life? I have lived and I will die, but the deepest mysteries of life will no doubt be as unclear to me at the end as at the beginning.

Each of us is but a puff of smoke in eternity. What is immortal about us is that we are part of an undying Jewish people. The wisdom which has been distilled in 3,000 years of unique history is the greatest legacy a Jew can leave his children. For it is not economic wealth, but moral and spiritual treasure which I can pass on to my children as did my ancestors through one hundred and twelve generations, stretching back to the midsts of Sinai. What I owe them is a chance to grasp a faith to live by.

*Jewish Values and Social Crisis* (New York: UAHC Press, 1968), p. 193

Jewish writings have provided us with numerous examples of the ethical will. From biblical to contemporary times, the spiritual heritage of our people has been transmitted

in uniquely personal ways. Some of these examples appear in a section on ethical wills in *Gates of Mitzvah*, pp. 139–143, published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The classic book on the subject is titled *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, edited by Israel Abrahams. In the foreword to the revised edition, Judah Goldin writes about the meaning of the ethical will: “The Hebrew ethical will is not mere valediction but an audacious attempt at continuing speech from father in the grave to children in a reckless world. The teacher’s absence is not the end of instruction. It was said a long time ago, When the dead are quoted, their lips move.”

We can continue to teach by participating in this ancient mitzvah of leaving for our children an ethical will. It should be compiled with the same detailed thought and planning that we devote to creating a will that instructs about the distribution of our property and assets and conveys our wishes regarding medical treatment.

What instructions, reflections, and impressions do we wish to share with those we leave behind? Based on your experiences and your life, what values of faith and community, of love and life, can you share in order to benefit those who remain? What dreams remain unfulfilled? What advice needs to be shared? What promises need to be kept? What legacy for living can you impart?

In a world of increased complexity, we often search for lessons of truth to pass on to the next generation. Thus we have the ethical will. One of the most beautiful and simple examples of the ethical will comes from the Chasidic tradition and concerns the instruction given by Reb Zusya as he lay dying. It seems that the students of Reb Zusya came to pay one last visit when they heard that his death was imminent. They entered his room and found him trembling. “Why are you afraid?” they asked. “Have you not been in your life as righteous as Moses?” To which Reb Zusya replied, “When I stand before the throne of judgement, I will not be asked, ‘Reb Zusya, why were you not like Moses?’ I will be asked, ‘Reb Zusya, why were you not like Zusya?’”

**MY PERSONAL ETHICAL WILL**

FROM \_\_\_\_\_

TO \_\_\_\_\_

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DATE \_\_\_\_\_