

My Ethical Will

Today is the holiest day in the Jewish year. The sabbaths of sabbaths. And despite the joy we feel at the bitter end during *havdalah*, it is mostly a solemn day. We deprive ourselves of life-sustaining measures, such as eating, drinking, and for some, even bathing. (Good thing we're socially distanced!) In addition, we dress in white, the color of our burial shrouds. We also pray that we are worthy enough to be inscribed in the Book of Life. So much of what we do and say on Yom Kippur is to remind us that our lives are brief and most importantly, that they are in the hands of God. On this most holy day we come face to face with our mortality.

One of my roles as a rabbi is to spend time with individuals as they approach the end of their lives. It is a sacred duty and I am always humbled to share space with them and their loved ones. Sometimes I will recite the deathbed confessional, or *viddui*, on the person's behalf if they are not well enough to read. I check in with the family members, making sure everything is in order so that when the time comes, there will be as little to plan as needed. I am lucky to be supported at Beth Israel by a dedicated team of lay leaders who assist with all facets of this part of life's journey.

While this can certainly be a beautiful time for many families, it can also be a time of great anxiety and fear for all involved. This is especially true when death sneaks up on us and there is little time to mentally and emotionally prepare. For those lucky enough to have spoken with their loved ones about their wishes and make the necessary arrangements, the end can truly feel like a smooth transition from one realm to the next.

Over the last few years, our wonderful Care Committee has hosted sessions on preparing for the end-of-life. We have heard from hospice physicians, spiritual care providers, funeral home associates, the head of our *hevra kaddisha* and cemetery committees, myself, and others who are in the roles of helping us prepare for death. We have asked you to fill out your own wishes as pertains to Jewish burial and mourning rituals. However, there is one aspect of end-of-life planning that we have not touched on

which I believe is just as crucial as all the other steps and it is something each of us can go home and do as soon as we please.

My friends, I encourage all of us to write our ethical wills. Don't be confused by the name. An ethical will has nothing to do with allocating assets and valuables to loved ones. It is, however, a document which expresses one's wishes and advice for those left behind. It imparts life lessons and other bits of wisdom one has acquired as opposed to material possessions. This is a document which ought to be treasured and read over again by those who are lucky to receive one.

Writing an ethical will is actually a Jewish custom that goes back to the very beginning of our people's story. Jacob is the first person recorded who gives his children this special gift. Jacob speaks to each of his twelve sons. Sadly his daughter is left out. With some he is kind and with others he is harsh. He speaks from his heart and lets them know what his final wishes are and tells each of them the kind of people they have become. Jacob was lucky to have had this moment with his children.

Ever since that deathbed scene, Jews have continued to bequeath to their children, and others they leave behind, an instructive account of the ideals and traits closest to their hearts. This custom became formalized sometime in the Middle Ages and many of these documents are accessible to us today. There are troves of them in collections that can be accessed online or in libraries all over the world. This past summer I read close to 100 of them. Some of the most moving ones were written by victims of the Holocaust either shortly before being captured or even in the cattle cars and in camps.

However, this custom has come out of vogue in recent years. My guess is because to write an ethical will one must come to terms with one's own mortality. In today's culture, at least here in America, this is the last thing we want to think about. We would much rather consider ways to prolong our lives. What foods are now the best for promoting long life? Which supplements, products, and exercises will keep us feeling and looking young? Judaism is certainly not a morbid tradition, but it is realistic. The High Holy

Days are a stark reminder that life is precious and anything can happen at any moment. Life is not entirely in our hands.

I suppose another reason why people today choose to put this off is because they feel they have plenty of time to write their ethical will. What's the rush? We probably feel we have an endless supply of days left on this planet, but we don't. As the Steve Miller Band lyric goes, "time keeps on slipping slipping slipping into the future." We all know there is nothing more precious than time and writing an ethical will is one way to bottle up time and gift it to those we love.

Many of us spend our lives accumulating possessions, even hoarding things, with the thought of leaving them for others. I have found that passing on assets to the next generation can be complicated and many times leads to familial conflict. Plus, no child wants to sort through so much stuff. But the saddest part about our desire to leave our possessions behind is that we think doing so will somehow express to our loved that we loved them. If we truly want to leave behind something that will have a lasting and profoundly sentimental effect, then I encourage all of us to write an ethical will.

I have begun writing my own ethical will for my children. It is just a draft and I hope to make revisions to it for as long as I am able. With great humility, I share these words of love with you so that perhaps you will feel charged to do the same. And if you are hesitant for any reason, perhaps the Jewish saying, "Words that come from the heart enter the heart" will speak to you and give you the encouragement you need.

Dear Eytan and Shoshana,

The two of you, along with ima, are the world to me. My most heartfelt prayer is that each of you get to experience, for the remainder of your lives, the same happiness and love that I feel whenever we are all together. There is nothing better. Regardless of what we are doing, spending time with you fills my cup and I never take one minute for granted. I hope that you will be as lucky as I have been.

Part of this luck was finding the perfect life partner. There is not a day that I don't realize how fortunate I am that Ima and I happened to be living at the same time in all of human history and connected so many years ago at Jewish summer camp. Finding such a partner is not a given in life. Some search their whole lives and never find the right person. I hope you don't have to search too long. It might just happen that you find the right person when you least expect it. They might find you. Whenever that time comes, you will know. Trust your instincts. I hope you know that whomever you are lucky enough to spend your life with will be someone your Ima and I will love and respect. As long as they inspire you to be your best and treat you with love and respect, it does not matter what their background is or which faith they grew up with. Should that not be Judaism, I know that you will show them the beauty of our people and they will embrace joining a Jewish family.

I trust that Judaism will always be a part of your lives. But the way you choose to practice your sacred heritage does not need to mirror the way I practice it. Create new traditions and always keep learning. Never for one moment feel that you are not authentically Jewish enough. Remember that no Jew is any more Jewish than any other Jew. You come from a long line of family members who served their Jewish communities in a multitude of ways. Find the way that speaks to you and serve with love.

I hope you will see how relevant our Torah is. Each year we read this text over again and each year I find new meanings and lessons that I never knew before. Our Torah is a wellspring of wisdom. In my years of studying and teaching Torah, I have also come to believe that in many ways it is more akin to a mirror than a history book.

Think about God and not just when you're in synagogue. Struggle with this relationship and talk to your rabbi about it from time to time. They will like nothing more than chatting with you about God and Torah over coffee or a beer.

Build a sukkah with friends and family.

Steer clear of long and boring seders. The point is to be engaged, not to fall asleep at the table.

Keep the Chanukah tradition of 4th Night for Others.¹

Always dress up on Purim but don't feel the need to get too drunk that you can't tell the difference between Haman and Mordecai. It's not worth it.

Don't work on our holiest days of the year, even if the last place you want to be is in shul.

Be proud to be a Jew and don't be afraid to share your heritage with others. It is through this sharing that will lead to others letting go of their prejudices.

Find work that you love. No matter what it is, if you love it you will be successful. But know when to stop working. And be comfortable saying "no." Always give credit to those who helped you succeed. Should you find yourself in leadership positions, do not hesitate to say, when appropriate, "you might be right."²

When you are not working, take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Some of my favorite times are being outdoors with you, whether at a ballgame or in the water. Marvel at the mountains, trees, oceans, stars, and the natural world that surrounds you. Appreciate how infinitesimally small you are in the infinite cosmos we are soaring through. Think of me when you admire God's creations.

Live music is worth the price of admission. Bring a dog into your family. Be mindful of what you put into your body and may that guide your relationship with kashrut. Express gratitude often and help others discover the gifts they have.

Your grandma RhoRho likes to say, "Everything has a way of working out." It's true. If I hadn't struggled so much in my pre-med classes in college and been so unhappy working in the financial world, then I never would have pursued the rabbinate and perhaps the two of you never would have been

¹ Thank you Meredith Attar for introducing this tradition at Beth Israel.

² Thank you Daniel Feller.

born. Life will get hard and complicated at times but you will get through it. Lean on others to help you. Open up to those you trust. Let your Jewish community support you. Heartache will find you, but with good friends, close family, and community, you will persevere. You may forever be changed, but remember that without cracks, light has no way of entering.³

Give people the benefit of the doubt. Don't judge people solely based on one transgression alone. Know that people can change and most do it on their own timeline. It will almost always be a waste of your time trying to change other people's minds. Try your best to see the world through other people's eyes. Every single person has struggled at one time or another. Some hide their trauma well. Help others celebrate their uniqueness that others find threatening. Always stand up for justice and model compassion and kindness. Remember that none of God's creatures are better than any other. All that exists and ever will exist is merely stardust.

When the time comes, say kaddish for me. The words themselves don't matter as much as the act of reciting this ancient prayer that our ancestors have said throughout all of Jewish history. Show up for others when it's their time to say kaddish for their loved ones. After this one shabbat a year when my yahrzeit is observed, go out for sushi and listen to reggae. Most importantly, give yourself some space to try and feel my presence.

Being your parent, along with ima, is the most fulfilling part of my life.

*With abundant love,
Abba*

³ Thank you Leonard Cohen