



THE LASTING GIFT

living
testament
to your core values
and beliefs
becomes
the one bequeath
only you
could make.

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What's the best gift you ever received? Was it the steering wheel attached to a slab of wood your grandfather built for you when you were 4? Or was it the pearl necklace your great aunt draped around your neck at 16? Was it the weekend in Paris your wife surprised you with when you retired? Or was it the birthday party your family threw in honor of your 80th?

I've received many wonderful gifts over the years: toys, stuffed animals, bicycles, jewelry, clothing, kitchen appliances, money, travel and books. I've received gifts of words, hugs, compassion, love and presence (the complete present-ness of another). However, the gift to which I return over and over again is the letter I received from my father when I was 14. Actually, it's a letter my father wrote to all his children: me, my sister, Sarina, and my brothers, Ari and Rafi.

This letter was no ordinary, everyday kind of letter. This was not a letter to say "hi," a letter to say "I miss you" or "I love you." This was not a newsy letter to fill us in on his daily doings. This letter was my father's ethical will.

An ethical will is a letter we write to the people we love (the people we will leave behind when we die) in which we pass on our most cherished nonmaterial possessions: our values, guidance, wisdom, hopes and love.

What prompted my father to write his ethical will at the still young and healthy age of 38? No terminal illness, no pending catastrophe inspired this act. He was a healthy man in his prime, enjoying a full life as a congregational rabbi, as husband to the woman he loved since he was a teenager and as father to four children between the ages of 9 and 14. He was simply following an ancient Jewish tradition dating back to Medieval times in which fathers (and later, mothers) wrote their children letters to impart their prescriptions for living meaningful Jewish lives by following the values, rituals and traditions they deemed important.

“For my father there was no escaping the page,
where his words and his very being sat in bold relief.”

In Hebrew these letters are known as *tze-vah-oat*, or commandments. It is believed by the scholar Judah Goldin that the term “ethical will” might indeed have originated with Israel Abrahams, who in 1926 compiled and edited a book of these early letters, titled *Hebrew Ethical Wills – Ethical*, because these letters imparted ethical and moral values, and *Wills*, because of the import of these letters. These letters were meant to live on after the deaths of their authors, to be a stand-in for them when they were no longer living.

Some fathers wrote their ethical wills when they felt they were nearing the end of their lives. Others began the process in their earlier years and amended their ethical wills over time. Still others wrote their ethical wills during times of travel or extended separation from their families when they feared for their safe return.

So, what did my father impart to us, his children, in his ethical will?

He wrote these kinds of things:
... that he expected us to take care of our mother, because by so doing we would be honoring him and honoring her for giving us life.

... that we must respect and care for each other always, even if love wasn't always possible.

... that we strive to grow in our tradition.

... that he appreciated our different points of view, even when we disagreed with him, and even when he tried to intimidate us.

... that we must take care not to judge others because who knows how we would act in their shoes.

And he wrote of his love for us. When I first read my father's ethical will, I cried. To this day when I read it, it often brings me to tears. Here was my father being himself to the core, more himself than I had ever known him to be. Here was my father admitting his faults, his failures and his weaknesses. Here was my father being human.

Let me be clear. Had my father never written an ethical will, I would have known who he was and what he stood for. I would have known his values, as he lived and continues to live his values. But I would not have known how he understood himself, his strengths and his weaknesses, his virtues and his shortcomings. And I would not have known which values were most important to him.

You see, my father understood that in order to fully impart all that he wanted to say he had to put himself on the page. For him there was no escaping the page, where his words and his very self sat in bold relief. He understood that once he committed his words to the page, we, his descendants, could read his words over and over again whenever we wanted to hear his voice and feel his presence.

My father handed me his ethical will in 1978. To this day, I continue to read it. Yes, we communicate by email and we talk on the phone, though our day-to-day emails and phone calls don't carry the same depth of emotion, nor are they meant to. (My father hates the phone. His usual greeting when any of his children calls is, “Hi. I'll get your mother.” If he

stays on the phone for any length of time, we assume it's because our mother's not home.)

So, when I want to hear my father's voice in a deep and personal way, I read his ethical will. It connects me to him when I need that connection. When I'm angry with him. When I'm in awe of him. Or, when I simply miss him because he lives in Baltimore and I live in Seattle. It helps me better understand him, myself and our relationship. It also takes me back to the time before my youngest brother, Rafi, died of Ewing's Sarcoma at the age of 11. My father's ethical will serves as a memorial to my family of origin — once six, now five, and still very much a family.

It was to my father's ethical will that I returned before I wrote an ethical will to my son, Gabriel, when I was 44 and Gabriel just shy of seven. Somehow hearing my father's voice, his values, and his admissions of imperfection, gave me the strength to write to Gabriel, to tell him about my own values, to acknowledge his strengths and weaknesses (some of which we share), and to ask for his forgiveness for the times I didn't get it quite right.

While ethical wills have their roots in the Jewish tradition, one doesn't have to be Jewish to engage in this tradition. People of all faiths, and people who do not align with any faith tradition, are choosing this approach to impart their values, wisdom, guidance, hopes, expectations and love to the people they love.

It's an awesome task.

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Think about it. What would you write to your children or grandchildren, your nieces or nephews, your husband or wife, your brothers or sisters, or your close friends? What stories would you tell to highlight your values, or to acknowledge the values that your loved ones are already living? What would you tell them about you, about them? Is there something for which you need to ask their forgiveness? Something you

need to forgive? How would you impart your love?

I encourage you to try this. Sit down before a blank piece of paper, or open a new file on your computer. Write “Dear... .” Continue writing. Let your heart speak what you may, or may never, have voiced out loud.

After it's done, you have a choice. You can pass on your words while you're still alive, or you can leave them to be found

after you die. I lean toward passing on our ethical legacies while we're still alive so that we can continue to work on our relationships. But either way, understand this: You will be changed by the very act of writing your ethical will, and you will have left a gift to which your loved ones can return again and again to hear your voice and to feel your presence. A gift your loved ones could have received from no one else but you. ♦

Sources:

Some sections of this work are excerpted from Elana Zaiman's upcoming book, currently titled *Letters to the Living*.

Abrahams, Israel (1926, reprinted in 2006). *Hebrew Ethical Wills: Volumes I & II*. Jewish Publication Society.

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