

Ethical Wills: A Very Short Guide

What is an ethical will?

The concept of an ethical will, or “Zava’ah” in Hebrew, goes back to the time of Jacob. Ethical wills can be considered a 3,500-year-old tradition. In the Torah, Jacob gathers his 12 sons around him while on his deathbed and gives them an oral ethical will in which he articulates moral guidance and burial instructions. Jacob requests not to be buried in Egypt but in Canaan, in the cave of Machpelah with his ancestors. He also offers his children a final blessing.

In the middle ages, The Rambam, Nachmanides, and other great scholars would leave a Zava’ah – an ethical will to their students. Detailing life lessons learned and their expectations of their students. In modern times, ethical wills have been written by men and women of every walk of life, detailing their moral understanding of the world, and their hope for future generations. Writing an ethical will can give you a deeply meaningful experience, while engaging with your own mortality.

That sounds like it’s for Very Serious People. Why should we do it?

An ethical will is a living document that you can start, stop, revisit and rewrite. This makes them ideal for young couples (and families). They’re a way to think about the values you want to see manifest in your lives as individuals and together. They’re a way to talk about what matters to you from the traditions you both grew up with and what you want to change, cultivate and discard. There’s no way doing this won’t bring you closer as a couple or family. And it’ll be a great way to look back over your lives together when you are old.

What could we possibly say that someone will remember?

*We promise that something you say will live on. You can’t *necessarily* control what that will be. Take Judah The Pious. You’ve never heard of him, but if anyone you know is an Ashkenazi Jew, you’ve probably heard about his ethical will. He’s the guy who said you should not name a child for a living relative. He was also obsessed with witches.*

How Jewish do we have to be to write an ethical will?

You do not need to be any kind of Jewish. You can both be Jewish and do it, but you could be bringing together different faith traditions, no faith traditions, very conservative or very liberal ones. Bring all your stuff. (And remember that if you do identify as Jewish, your Judaism is yours to define and it is legitimate. There are no “bad Jews” here.)



We're convinced. How do we start?

With many thanks to Rabbi Steven Abraham of Beth El Synagogue in Omaha, Nebraska, we have some questions for you and your partner to consider together. You can write the answers down in any form that speaks to you. A letter, an essay, a poem; you can sing it, you can collage it. You need not address anyone in particular. Though it's common that if people do have children that's who they're thinking of, it can be for just yourselves, your parents, friends, all of the world, or even God if such an idea appeals to you.

- What are each of our core beliefs and values?
- How have these beliefs and values manifested themselves in our lives? Are there further ways we'd like them to?
- What teachings from our parents, grandparents or siblings that speak to us do we want to pass on?
- What 2 or 3 life lessons need to be written down?
- What are we grateful for in life?
- Sometimes imagining that you only have a limited time left brings to mind the things in life that are truly important – what are those things for you?

Additional Resources:

[My Jewish Learning: Ethical Wills](#)

[Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them: A Guide to Sharing Your Values from Generation to Generation](#)

[So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How To Prepare Them](#)

[On Purpose: Life Lessons in Life and Health from the Frog, Dung Beetle, and Julia](#)