

# Losing a Loved one . . . a Jewish guide to end-of-life issues

## Senior generations pass on priceless gifts

Parents and grandparents can easily prepare ethical wills for their loved ones

By WENDY WALL

Writing an ethical will, or a *zeva'oth*, is an ancient custom dating back to when Jacob gathered his sons to his side to share his blessings. While the roots of this custom are ancient, the tradition is very current and gaining in popularity. In recent years, the New York Times and Business Week have written about the growing trend in preparing ethical wills.

An ethical will is not used for the disbursement of property; it is designed to share wisdom with the next generation. It is used to give comfort and explanations regarding family traditions and values. One does not need an attorney to draft an ethical will, but it can be attached as a codicil to a traditional property will or trust.

According to Rabbi Steve Morgen of Congregation Beth Yeshurun, "This is the place to bequeath spiritual wealth and wisdom." He believes

elders should not chide the younger generation or vent anger, but guide them in a more productive way. "Try to phrase things in such a way that they will hear and listen to what you say, because they feel loved. This is a place to share what you have learned in life, what you hope they will value."

### Rabbi Morgen shares what parents and elders may include:

- Lessons and experiences they utilized to guide their lives
- Stories of the family's evolution and how that shaped each generation
- Bits of Jewish wisdom and how their faith sustains them
- Jewish traditions and values that keep the family strong

"As an example, typically the older Jews provided funding for the Jewish institutions in their traditional wills.



They understood how these institutions support the community and keep it strong. This is the place to explain to your children the wisdom of why we need to support these institutions and how they continue to support our way of life," said Morgen.

### How to write an ethical will

First, relax. This is not a test. Many shy away from an ethical will because they believe they are not a wordsmith. This is not an exercise in good grammar; this is a time for reflection. Writers should consider their funniest and happiest moments, moments that changed their lives. How did their children bring joy to their lives? What is the definition of success? How has G-d shaped this family? What are the favorite family traditions and why? Parents can use these questions and the bullet points above to begin brainstorming.

The fastest and easiest way to create an ethical will is to put a pen to the paper and simply write it. This is the perfect place for writers to express their unique personality and what is in their hearts. When drafting the will, keep future generations in mind by using acid-free paper. Also, use a high-quality ink.

Now, start writing. This is the venue to share matters of the heart. Describe family anecdotes, funny stories and happy musings about the family. Share why specific family traditions are important. Writers can explain how and why they lived the way they did. Did the events surrounding them dictate certain responses? Most of all, this is the place to show love.

### Styles of ethical wills

There is no wrong way to create an ethical will. Originally, they were presented orally to the children upon someone's deathbed. Now, people can write an ethical will, record it orally or even utilize video.

The ultimate gift is to have an ethical will recorded in video format. Video allows the family to see that person, hear their voice and experience the nuance of their personality in how they present themselves – tangible benefits that can't be experienced in any other format. Video does not need to be expensive and, like photographs and scrapbooks, is a gift families will enjoy for generations.

"Most people think they need to be somewhat famous to have their family put on video, but when I ask them now, what they would do to see their grandparents or great-grandparents on film, they smile. To them it's priceless," said Stefani Twyford, founder of Legacy Multimedia, a video-production company that helps families chronicle history, share life stories, connect generations and preserve their memories.

"Ethical wills can take an afternoon to record, and edited with a few choice photographs and mementoes, can be turned around in a fairly short time," said Twyford. "But, you probably don't want to wait until family members are on their deathbeds to create a video. Concerns about vanity may make some people uncomfortable being filmed for posterity. Try to take advantage of the time in life when elders are reflective of their lives and in good enough shape to handle a recording session."

No matter the medium, ethical wills can provide a lasting, healing balm on any family during a time of crisis. They can give understanding and love and are the ultimate gift from any parent or family member. Rabbi Morgen referred to Psalms 37:25: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." He explained, ". . . you've seen three generations and the children will grow up prospering because you give them the wisdom you've learned from life." That is the purpose of an ethical will.

Wendy Wall is president of *W Communication*.