

Rabbi Leah Cohen

Beyond the End

This was a singular year for Temple B'nai Chaim in which we reached a new milestone. For the first time I had more funerals in one week than I had B'nai Mitzvah. The first week it happened I was alarmed, then it happened again, and then a third week. As a congregation, we have lost more loved ones this year than in any previous year. Not because of any specific tragedy or epidemic, rather simply because of the truth, we are getting older. Individually and as a community we are just starting to awaken to this reality.

We ask ourselves, what lingers after the end? After the funeral and after the shiva. When the voice on the cell phone disappears, the message saved so many times that eventually the ether claims it. When the memories of our loved ones start to grow fuzzy, then all the distinct shared moments merge into a single looming entity of what once was, then even that burns down from a blazing flame to just the soft glow of embers.

We know this happens. We hate to think of it and we hate to talk about it. "*B'char b'chaim*. Choose life. *Carpe diem*. Seize life and live it to the fullest," we extol ourselves, cheering one another ever onward. But every race, no matter how short or long, no matter how well run, comes to an end. After the cheering comes the silence of this truth.

Yom Kippur addresses this certainty with a juxtaposition of ritual and theology that is odd in its own way. The entire 24 hour period is an extended oxymoron; today we are rehearsing our death. Even though death is not something that can be practiced, we do everything we can, just short of dying, to come as close as we can to death. We fast, we refrain from worldly pleasures, we ignore our fleshly existence and focus on our spiritual one. With prayers and song we spend the day isolated from the outside world focused entirely on our inner world.

However, the concept of death, either as a natural condition of our mortality or as a divine punishment is challenging for us to grasp in spite of our best efforts. We are just too conditioned to not take death seriously while we are still in the midst of life. In some ways this thinking is self destructive when we treat our natural resources and our bodies as if they will always be here. On the other hand, there is probably a dose of sanity in this collective denial since we might otherwise become truly paralyzed with fear or completely unmotivated to get out of bed if we really embraced the fact that we're all going to die one day.

Perhaps the best we can do with death is tacitly accept that it is coming sooner or later and there will be consequences. This detached acknowledgment which most of us share usually takes the form of admitting that our death might impact others, if not ourselves. So we buy life insurance policies, prepare a will, get a cemetery plot and as the time draws near make our final arrangements. All of this is done in service to others, because our death is not really our problem.

Though we are the protagonists in our life, ironically, we often do not see our role in death as that important. However tonight, I would like to offer another possibility for your consideration, a different ending to the story. I am speaking now in very practical and rational

terms. Of course there are a myriad of ideas about what happens to the soul and a variety of Jewish teachings about the after life, but I am not talking about those mystical ideas at the moment. Rather, I mean something much more tangible.

Today, on this most holy day of the year, let us revisit a very beautiful and meaningful Jewish tradition that many people are not aware of, but that goes back to biblical times. There is the potential; I would say even a sacred obligation to leave a legacy of our spirit to our loved ones. The practice of writing an ethical will as a lasting inheritance for one's children and future descendants is evidenced in the Talmud and practiced in Jewish communities up till the present.

Rabbi Jack Riemer, a well written authority on the subject, describes an ethical will as a letter that parents write to their children "in which they try to sum up all that they have learned in life, and in which they try to express what they want most for and from their children. They would leave these letters behind because they believed that the wisdom they had acquired was just as much a part of the legacy they wanted to leave their children as were all their material possessions."

Think for a moment how precious it would be, if you were in possession of such a document in your family. Each ethical will is as different as the person writing it and each addresses the unique situation of that family, but there are some common themes that frequently re-occur. They often express important personal values and beliefs, hopes and blessings for future generations, life lessons, and words of love, gratitude and guidance. Sometimes they include messages of forgiving others and asking for forgiveness as well. Older ethical wills at times contained burial instructions which can be included today too.

The Book of Deuteronomy which we read from this week can be seen as one very long ethical will that Moses leaves for his offspring once he realizes that he will not be entering the Promised Land with them. Let its content and intent inspire you but do not be daunted by its length. I was surprised to find that most ethical wills fit neatly on only one sheet of paper. But length is not the biggest challenge when it comes to tackling this project.

First one must consider why write an ethical will? If we are honest in confronting our own mortality, we might discover a desire to have something of ourselves be remembered once we are gone. As befits this season, the process of writing an ethical will reveals first and foremost what we value the most and what we stand for. It is a great way to learn about ourselves.

Furthermore, by articulating what we value now, we can take steps to insure the continuation of those values for future generations. The exercise of identifying what matters most to us clarifies what we want to work on and prioritizes our efforts. In this way ethical wills not only benefit the recipient, but also the writer. As we approach the end of our lives, writing an ethical will can provide a sense of completion by creating something of meaning that will live on after we are gone.

Although ethical wills are not considered legal documents the way a living will and a last will and testament is, they nonetheless bequeath something of worth to their beneficiaries. For each of us have unique stories that if we don't share will be lost forever. Consider the stories that have informed and delighted your life and how precious they are to you now. Our personal

histories are fascinating to our families and help strengthen their sense of rootedness and belonging to something larger and more enduring than their present life. Consider how your story might one day inspire your own children and grandchildren.

But as with any endeavor, there are some pitfalls to be wary of. Beyond the challenges of style, content and length when distilling our enduring message, when we must also consider the recipient of the letter. Rabbi Riemer writes, “There is the temptation, an almost irresistible one, for parents to try to persuade after death what they were unable to persuade during life. There is the temptation to repeat once more, to plead once more and to impose a burden of guilt from the grave.” Clearly we would want to avoid this danger least “the ties that bind become ties that choke and cripple” as Rabbi Riemer cautions.

Writing an ethical will can happen at any time and the right time is when it is right for you. Although we might think that this is something to be saved for one’s deathbed, today, ethical wills are being written by people at turning points and transitions throughout their lives. They can be shared with family and community members while the writer is still alive. People are sometimes surprised to learn what is really important to their parents, and parents can be surprised that their children are so surprised. We think we are communicating these values all the time, but sometimes a concise written document can put things in a new and focused perspective.

When is the right time to write an ethical will? Looking into this subject I learned that it is a process that takes some time and is best not rushed. Close to the end of life is a possible time if energy and time permits. Writing an ethical will at this time can add a transcendent dimension to our lives by providing a link to future generations. But the conditions of one’s passing may not exactly work out as planned and no one really knows when one’s last day might be.

Therefore we may want to consider some other times that might be perfect for articulating our values and beliefs and sharing our stories with our children. For example, writing an ethical will at the time of engagement can help a couple clearly understand each other's values, and can contribute to building a foundation of common principles for the marriage. An ethical will composed when parents are expecting or at the birth of a child can provide a basis of common values upon which to approach childrearing and serve as a tool for communicating those values as the children grow up.

When we launch our children into the adult world, is another chance to compose an ethical will. We can send them off with a clear understanding of where they come from and at the same time identify important values in this new stage as empty nesters. Really, anytime from middle age and beyond is a fitting opportunity to harvest our life experiences, convert these experience into wisdom, and allow for the fulfillment of the responsibility of passing this wisdom on to future generations

Ethical wills may be one of the most cherished gifts we can leave to our family and community. Yet many of us have never considered writing one. I wonder how many people here tonight have an ethical will? I don’t and I wonder why not. I understand its value and am not a stranger to writing. I have lessons and stories I would like to share with my family. I have hopes

and aspirations, gratitude and blessings I would love to offer them in writing for them to have after I am gone, when my voice and my smell have long since vanished.

Yet, like many of you, I have not availed myself of this meaningful tradition. Though I might conjure up some reasons why, I wonder if there are other people who are also interested in pursuing this opportunity as part of their spiritual legacy. I wanted to put this idea out to the community tonight to think about. Maybe some would like to pursue this idea alone. Some might simply want resource suggestions to help them. Perhaps there are even those people who after thinking about this idea might want to take part in a group experience, like a workshop or series designed to guide us through this process. For others, this whole idea may be so foreign or they may be so focused on other life priorities that really the time is not right for them to pursue this possibility now, but maybe later. Also, as I consider our congregation, I am aware that many of our members have older parents who they might want to encourage to write an ethical will while they are still able to do so too.

Tonight as we contemplate our own mortality and the consequences of our words and deeds, I simply bring this offering as a possibility, something to consider for the year ahead. Think about it, pray about it, and if it feels right send me an email and in the title write Ethical Will. I will collect your responses and see where we go from there.

Who knows, how this idea might evolve. I know I have been greatly enriched by your stories and beliefs, your values and aspirations, all the words you have shared with me over the years in my office and over tea, at eulogies and B'nai mitzvah speeches, in times of great joy and great sorrow. I have been deeply touched and feel so privileged to have heard from you. I can only imagine how your children, and your future generations would feel to know these words too. Maybe one of our greatest accomplishments in this new year might be to work together on this timeless project that we might bequeath *mi dor le dor*, from our generation to the next, the best of who we are.

Ken Yehi Ratzon