

I. Maimonides letter to his son (12th century) Translation from Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim

“Hear, my son, the instruction of your father and don’t forsake the teaching of your mother.” (Quotation from Proverbs 1:8). Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will prevent you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin. Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This radiant quality is the finest of all admirable traits because through humility you will also come to fear God, which will cause you to always think about where you came from and where you are going...Therefore, I will now explain to you how to always behave humbly. Speak gently at all times, with your head bowed, your eyes looking down to the ground and your heart focusing on God...

Consider everyone as greater than yourself. If he is wise or rich, you should give him respect. If he is poor and you are richer or wiser-- than he, consider yourself to be more guilty than he, and that he is more worthy than you, since when he sins it is through error, while yours is deliberate and you should know better! In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before G_d’s presence. Act with restraint in front of everyone. Torah should always be learned diligently, so you will be able to fulfill its commands. When you arise from your learning reflect carefully on what you have studied, in order to see what in it that you can put into practice.

Examine your actions every morning and evening, and in this way every one of your days will be spent in teshuvah (repair of one’s actions, returning to God). Concentrate on your prayers by removing all worldly concerns from your heart. Read this letter at least once a week and neglect none of it. Fulfill it, and in so doing, walk with it forever in the ways of the blessed God, may he be blessed, so that you will succeed in all your ways. Thus you will succeed and merit the World to Come which lies hidden away for the righteous. Every day that you shall read this letter, heaven shall answer your heart’s desires. Amen, Sela!



Hamrah Senesh

Hamrah Senesh (1921 - 1944) immigrated to Palestine from her native Hungary just before the outbreak of World War II. She volunteered for the parachute corps and was dropped behind Nazi lines to work with partisan forces. She was captured by the Nazis and after months of imprisonment and torture was executed in 1944. In addition to a legacy of heroism, Hamrah Senesh left a collection of poems and a personal journal that reveal a gifted, sensitive spirit. She wrote this letter in December 1943, and arranged to have it given to her brother upon his arrival in Palestine should she fail to return from her mission. As it happened, he carried the diary before her departure. He was able to read the letter, then return it to her for security reasons.

Haifa

December 25, 1943

Darling George!

Sometimes one writes letters one does not intend sending. Letters one must write without asking oneself, "I wonder whether this will ever reach its destination."

Day after tomorrow I am starting something new. Perhaps it's madness. Perhaps it's fantastic. Perhaps it is dangerous. Perhaps one in a hundred—or one in a thousand—pays with his life. Perhaps with less than his life, perhaps with more. Don't ask questions. You'll eventually know what it's about.

George, I must explain something to you. I must exonerate myself. I must prepare myself for that moment when you arrive inside the frontiers of the Land, waiting for that moment when, after six years, we will meet again, and you will ask, "Where is she?" and they'll abruptly answer, "She's not here."

I wonder, will you understand? I wonder, will you believe that it is more than a childish wish for adventure, more than youthful romanticism that attracted me? I wonder, will you feel that I could not do otherwise, that this was something I had to do?

There are events without which one's life becomes unimportant, a

worthless toy; and there are times when one is commanded to do something, even at the price of one's life.

I'm afraid, George, that feelings turn into empty phrases even though they are so impassioned before they turn into words. I don't know whether you'll sense the doubt, the conflicts, and after every struggle the renewed decision.

It is difficult because I am alone. If I had someone with whom I could talk freely, uninhibitedly—if only the entire burden were not mine, if only I could talk to you. If there is anyone who would understand me, I think you would be that one. But who knows... six years is a long time.

But enough about myself. Perhaps I have already said too much. I would like to tell you a few things about the new life, the new home, as I see them. I don't want to influence you. You'll see for yourself what the country is. But I want to tell you how I see it.

First of all—I love it. I love its hundred faces, its hundred climates, its many-faceted life. I love the old and the new in it; I love it because it is ours. No, not ours, but because we can make ourselves believe it is ours.

And I respect it. Not everything. I respect the people who believe in something, respect their idealistic struggle with the daily realities. I respect those who don't live just for the moment, or for money. And I think there are more such people here than anywhere else on earth. And finally, I think that this is the only solution for us, and for this reason I don't doubt its future, though I think it will be very difficult and combative.

As far as the kibbutz is concerned, I don't think it is perfect, and it will probably pass through many phases. But in today's circumstances it best suits our aims, and is the closest to our concept of a way of life—about this I have absolutely no doubt.

We have need of one thing: people who are brave and without prejudices, who are not robots, who want to think for themselves and not accept unmoded ideas. It is easy to place laws in the hands of man, to tell him to live by them. It is more difficult to follow those laws. But most difficult of all is to impose laws upon oneself, while being constantly self-analytical and self-vigilant. I think this is the highest form of law enforcement, and at the same time the only just form. And this form of law can only build a new, contented life.

From

So that Your Values Live On:

Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them

extraordinary satisfaction that only those who have raised children can know. I am grateful to you for providing some of those choice satisfactions. It is true that there were times in the past when I would have or maybe did mumble the old curse, "May you have children like you." It turns out that I can still say the same words but now they have turned into a blessing. Alisa, may you have children like you.

With a love that is eager to discover new dimensions,
Your child's alarmingly and perhaps enduringly inexperienced

Grandfather.



Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman (1918-)

The career of Herbert A. Friedman epitomizes a life of service in the highest degree. Few leaders have played a more prominent role in Jewish affairs during the past half-century. He has served as rabbi in Denver and Milwaukee, and he was the Executive Chairman, Executive Vice President and Vice Chairman of National United Jewish Appeal for twenty years. Beyond that, beginning with service as a chaplain in Europe during World War II until today, as Director of the Werner Jewish Heritage Foundation, his career has been intertwined with major events in the Jewish world. In his will he writes about those critical times and about the events on the American and world Jewish scenes in which he actively participated. He writes, too, about his beliefs and about his hopes for the reader, making his ethical will, abridged here, both illuminating and inspiring.

1. Opinions, Actions and Conclusions

A Legacy

I hope my years will roll on, but prudence warns that this should not be taken for granted. Therefore, in this eighth decade of my life, let me start to leave my legacy of opinions and conclusions, beginning with four subjects: What I believe, what I have done, what I have learned, and what my dream is for you.

1. *I believe* in the uniqueness of the Jewish people. Even as we share the quality of human-ness with all others of the species *homo sapiens*, still we are absolutely different in so many ways. And if we were not different, we probably would have disappeared as have all the others who started on the path when we did. Let me bring to mind three elements of our uniqueness. First there is the covenantal nature of our birth as a nation, in which we were linked to a God and a moral code. Next, this was succeeded by the acceptance of an eternal destiny through the concept of redemption by a Messiah, for both themselves and all mankind, in which a better world would be born for all humans to enjoy. How incredible! And lastly, there came the notion that this moral covenant and Messianic redemption must

also be linked with a specific land—a homeland, gained and lost, gained and lost—but the very dreaming of which provided the strength to endure the passage of the centuries. Now the land is gained again, in our own time. How miraculous!

2. I believe in Israel's gift to mankind. Alongside our uniqueness and separateness and particularity, a special quality of universalism exists in a measure which no other people or nation on earth, large or small, possesses. We are a people which truly believes in the brotherhood of man, whose sacred books stress that all men come from one father.

3. I believe the Diaspora is an integral part of the creative genius of the Jewish people, and our history offers plentiful proof of this thesis. The Diaspora has been a fruitful hinterland, providing intellectual spark and charismatic personalities. The American Jewish future is as yet unknown. But if it finds its way and maintains its Jewish identity in the midst of unprecedented freedom, there is the possibility that it will outstrip all previous Diasporas in terms of what it might achieve for Jewish creativity and continuity. So, here are the four seminal, simple beliefs that have directed my deeds and ruled my life: The Chosenness of the Jewish people; its linkage to a land; its universal message for all mankind; and the creativity of its ever-loyal Diaspora.

II. *What I Did*

1. *Helped Create the State.* According to my theory of what constitutes a meaningful life, action is the indispensable ingredient. Otherwise, one is not a participant, merely a theorist or even worse, just an observer, a couch potato. When the moment comes for action it must be seized immediately, or it will be lost for good. I have been very fortunate in my life since many opportunities for action did come my way. I seized them all and have been richly rewarded with a wonderful feeling that my days have been well spent. Other times, I saw certain needs and created the action scenarios myself, not waiting for others to do so.

It took me years to position myself so that I could do something about these inadequacies, but I set out on a course and stuck with it

doggedly, finally reaching the point where, at the end of the war, I was in Germany, a chaplain, an American army officer, and was recruited by David Ben Gurion himself, into the Haganah. I worked actively in that role for three years in Europe, 1945-1947, smuggling Jews and guns, people and weapons, both needed to fight the inevitable War of Independence. Trains, trucks, food, camps, guides, ships—all had to be organized in a sweeping orchestration which brought the surviving remnant of Jews from as far away as the Russian republics in Asia down to the French Mediterranean coast—with Germany at the heart of the operation—for here the quarter million people we moved were housed as they came from the east, and were staged for transfer to Palestine. How many working Haganah men do you think were involved in this massive migration? Perhaps 200 on land and another 200 at sea. Can you believe it? The accumulation and shipping of weapons was also done by fewer than 100 people. It was the greatest period of my life.

2. *Helped Gather in the Exiles from the Four Corners of the Earth.* This opportunity came through the position I held as the Chief Executive Officer of the National UJA for two decades: Morocco was taken over by Moslem rule in 1955 when the French departed, following which the first pogrom took its casualties. We started to move small groups of Jews illegally across to Gibraltar, then we pushed for larger groups, openly, on French ships to Marseilles. One third of a million were transmigrated.

Yemen sent 50,000 on an airlift, and Iraq expelled 120,000 who were also flown to Israel within the 15-month limit allowed.

We moved 2000 per week for 50 weeks straight, from the Rumanian port of Constanza on the Black Sea to Haifa. A total of almost 400,000 Rumanian Jews were moved in less than a decade.

And so it continued, as the sovereign state of Israel in the greatest humanitarian effort in the entire history of the Jewish people gathered its children, from country after country, through the double dedication of its won citizens and free Diaspora Jewry.

3. *Helped Awaken the Sleeping Giant—American Jewry.* [Following the Suez Operation in 1956] Two major efforts were required—one,

IV. *What Is My Dream For You?*

1. *Learn how to catch history by the tail and ride with it.* Don't be caught unawares, don't be left behind. This means thinking ahead. Develop the art of prediction, which is based on an analysis of the past, plus some crystal-ball gazing, plus good luck. Most people are afraid to do it, but it is not hard, once you habituate yourself. Set scenarios for yourself, it's wonderfully enjoyable...an exciting game!

2. *Learn how to catch your own children (and grandchildren) by the tail.* Everyone understands that the major challenge facing the great and powerful Jewish community in America is the struggle against the indifference which comes from ignorance and leads to easy assimilation and intermarriage in this permissive society which has no barriers against Jews. Everyone also understands that the remedy lies in replacing ignorance with knowledge, but the remedy is difficult to apply. Children must be saturated, from an early age, with the "naturalness" of being Jewish by what they learn and do in school, at home, and with their friends. A day school education is the best process, and more and more parents are turning to it thus improving the schools at the same time. But the majority of children are not in day schools, and these children must get as much Jewish education as you can give them, plus reinforcement at home through Shabbat and holiday observances, plus summer camp with other Jewish kids, plus trips to Israel beginning around age 10, plus a year in Israel later on, plus, plus, plus...

This is your effort to combat intermarriage, but if it happens in your family, then you must start all over again with your non-Jewish son-in-law or daughter-in-law, seeking to transmit Jewish feelings and knowledge to them, urging conversion, if this be possible. And whether there is conversion or not, then at least your grandchildren must be given a Jewish identity and be brought up as Jews. Sit your grandchildren on your lap and tell them the story of their people, as you practice the holidays with them. Catch them, hold them, don't let them slide away. You can do it, with love and tact and a strong determination. My dream is that, like the little Dutch boy who kept

his finger in the dike to keep the sea at bay, each one of you will become the keeper of an unassimilated people, which lives with its two identities, American and Jewish, in separate harmony.

3. *Be generous with money.* We in the middle class indulge ourselves. We give ourselves almost everything we want. Always remember that part of your budget, part of your cost of living must be the three-fold responsibility of supporting the infrastructure of your local community, maintaining Israel's strength, and helping individual Jews in need, be they Russians or Ethiopians or anyone. You all know the word *Tzedakah*, and the concepts behind it. You have the same obligation to perform *Tzedakah* as to put bread on your own table.

4. *Be aware of the needs of all humanity,* not just the Jews. While we are very particularistic, tribal, ethnic and, some say, even clique-ish, nevertheless we also possess a parallel streak of universalism in our mission which mandates us to care for all people. This streak is responsible for our liberal sentiments toward minorities, underprivileged, homeless, and other underclasses of mankind. All of this is subsumed in the phrase *Tikheit Olam*, which requires us to work for improvements in society as a whole. It is an important part of authentic Judaism, which put Heschel in the front ranks of the civil rights marches with Martin Luther King and caused Elie Wiesel to take up the cause of the Cambodians. These are good role models to follow.

5. *Be civilized, kind and understanding.* If you are looking for a role model, take the prophet Micah (chap 6 verse 8): "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what God requires of you: Only to do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

6. *Do your duty and keep your faith in Israel—the people and the land.* Duty and courage are fierce and fiery words. They moved Moses and David and Ezra and the Maccabees. And may they move you, in sons and daughters of Israel, today. Vision and perseverance are perhaps even more important words because they give sustenance for the long, long, endurance required to face a future with confidence.

STEP I: HOW TO DECIDE ON TOPICS: SOME SUGGESTIONS

Getting started often is difficult. Here are some introductory sentences to help you enter this rewarding effort.

- These were the formative events of my life...
- This is the world from which I came...
- These are some of the important lessons that I have learned in my life...
- These are the people who influenced me the most...
- These are some of the favorite possessions that I want you to have and these are the stories that explain what makes these things so precious to me...
- These are the people in our family and these are the causes for which I would like you to feel a sense of responsibility...
- Some of the Scriptural passages that have meant the most to me...
- These are the mistakes that I regret having made the most in my life that I hope you will not repeat...
- This is my definition of true success...
- This is how I feel as I look back over my life...
- I would like to ask your forgiveness for... and I forgive you for...
- I want you to know how much I love you and how grateful I am to you for...

STEP II: HOW TO ORGANIZE AND WRITE WHAT YOU WANT

TO SAY

Having selected and completed some of the topics suggested above, and/or written down a number of your own, write each of these at the top of a separate sheet of paper. Treat each statement as a topic sentence and expand it into a paragraph or develop it into a section of any number of related paragraphs. Many or all your topics may warrant such development. Some topics may require more than one page. In that case, attach same-topic pages to each other. (An alternate plan for organizing your writing is on the following page.)

Arrange the pages in sequence, that is, in the order in which you

ALTERNATE PLAN FOR ORGANIZING YOUR WRITING
 Briefly fill in some or all of these statements, or others you wish, on a single sheet. This serves as an outline for expansion on separate sheets of paper. Then proceed as suggested in Step II.

<p>OPENING</p> <p>I write this to you, my _____, in order to _____.</p>	<p>THE FAMILY</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My parents, siblings, antecedents were/are.... 2. Events that helped shape our family....
<p>RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES, INSIGHTS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The ritual(s) of most meaning to me.... 2. Specific teachings from Jewish source(s) that move me most.... 	<p>PERSONAL HISTORY</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People who strongly influenced my life.... 2. Event(s) which helped shape my life....
<p>ETHICAL IDEALS AND PRACTICES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ideals that found expression in my life.... 2. I would like to suggest to you the following.... 	<p>CLOSING</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My ardent wishes for you.... 2. May the Almighty....

wish the parts to be in the final form. Rearrange the parts until you arrive at the sequence you desire. Read all the parts through for coherence, making needed changes or corrections. If you have used quotations, now is a good time to check their accuracy.

Rewrite or type the entire manuscript. It is recommended that this be considered a *draft* of the final document. It is useful to set it aside for a few days or weeks then re-read and edit it from the perspectives presented in the next section.

STEP III: HOW TO PERSONALIZE AND STRENGTHEN THE LINKS

Special Words

Some words are worth a thousand pictures. Are there such words and expressions, loaded with special meaning for you and your family? Your use of these in your ethical will are bound to resonate for your loved ones. In re-reading your draft, therefore, consider including some of these to evoke important memories and insights. If some of these like Bar Mitzva, Seder, Shabbat, Brit, Kiddush, Confirmation, Israel, are associated with specific events in the life of the family, perhaps these special events ought to be remembered in your ethical will.

Favorite Sayings

Are there favorite sayings often used in the family that should be preserved? One family recalls that their mother used to tell the children at meal time *Est Kinderlach, vet ihr hoten koyach tzim lermen*. (Yiddish for "Eat children, so you can have strength to study well.") It is for them a deeply cherished recollection which they have in turn transmitted to their children.

Anecdotes

Do you have or wish to find a suitable anecdote to help illustrate a point you have made in the draft of your ethical will? Here is an example:

A skier, separated from his comrades in a blizzard, became lost and disoriented. He fought valiantly to stay awake and moving, against the bitter wind and the blinding snow. But after

several hours, his strength ebbing, feeling his struggles to be in vain, he lay down to comforting sleep but certain death.

But as he moved to lie down, he stumbled over an object in the snow. Glancing at the object that had made him fall, he realized to his surprise that the object was a *man*. He cleared the snow from the face and body, placed his ear to the man's chest, and detected a heart-beat. Quickly, he began massaging the limbs of the other vigorously to restore circulation, and in so doing, he restored his own. When the man returned to consciousness, he helped him to his feet.

Supporting each other, the two walked on... until they reached safety together.

This story has appeal in the context of an ethical will because it underscores the ethical view that brotherly love demonstrated by kind deeds, charity, encouragement, volunteerism, etc., is as basic as any necessity for maintaining human life and preserving the human image in man.

How Much Is Enough?

How much or how little to elaborate on any idea is an individual matter. There are ethical wills in this volume that are brief; they simply list the ideas dearest to their writers and of motivating force in their lives. Others are longer because they expand the major ideas and explain how they were expressed in the lives of their writers. If you choose to list several ideas or principles, however, keep in mind that they should be able to stand alone. Here are several examples:

- Reality can be an extension of our dreams.
- What each of us does is significant and makes a difference.
- Collectively and individually we are always *emerging* and are capable of becoming more than we are.
- Each of us can find his and her human-Jewish fulfillment and personal perfection only in concert with others in a community of action.
- We are all responsible, ultimately, for one another.

- When we identify with the ideas and causes of the Eternal People and with the institutions which give them continuity, a touch of immortality becomes our own.

Note that each of these statements is a complete sentence and expresses a single idea. Each can, of course, be elaborated upon and discussed. But whether to do so or not is up to you. Although it is often true that "more is less," it is not always true. It is not true of an ethical will if you have the desire to elaborate.

Important Dates—Yahrzeit

If there are Yahrzeit dates which you wish to have observed, you may want to request this in your ethical will, as some of the writers of wills found in this book have done. Surely, reciting the Kaddish on the anniversary of a relative's death and at Yizkor memorial prayers are among the links that bind the generations.

If some of these elements are to be added to the draft, it may be possible to do so without re-writing or retyping the entire draft. When you feel the text is ready, consider the section that follows.

STEP IV: HOW TO PREPARE THE ETHICAL WILL DOCUMENT IN

OTHER FORMATS

The great majority of ethical wills are prepared in written or printed form, on paper. Although some have been audio or video taped, the favored mode has been the written. In this form it is durable, easily reproduced and framed. Keep in mind, too, that even if taped, your text needs to be written out first.

If written or typed, it is advisable to use acid-free paper. Many documents written on acid-free paper have remained in superb condition for hundreds of years. Such papers are widely available in specialty stores. Also, if the ethical will is to be written by hand, a fountain pen should be used rather than a ball point because the ink in ballpoint pens is usually oil-based and very often causes the ink to "bleed" through the paper. These precautions will help preserve the valuable document against time and environmental factors.