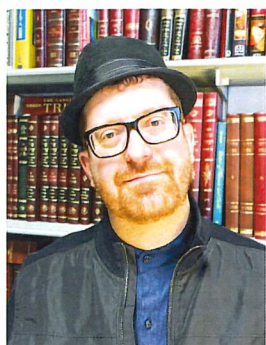


Writing for the Heart: The Jewish Tradition of Ethical Wills

Rav Aubrey Glazer



“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12).

For centuries, Jews have passed down not only property and possessions, but also values, wisdom, and blessings. This transmission has often taken the form of what our tradition calls a *“tzava’ah”* - an ethical will. Unlike

a legal will, which distributes material assets, an ethical will conveys the spiritual, moral, and emotional legacy of a life. It is a letter across generations, a bridge between ancestors and descendants, and a way of saying: This is what I have learned, this is what I cherish, and this is what I hope you will carry forward.

The roots of ethical wills stretch deep into Jewish history. Recall for example how in Genesis, Jacob gathers his children to bless them before his death, offering words of guidance and prophecy. Moses, too, delivers a farewell address in Deuteronomy, urging the people to choose life and remain faithful to the covenant. These are not legal documents, but spiritual testaments. Then by the 11th century, Jews in Europe and the Middle East were writing formal ethical wills. Rabbi Judah ben Saul ibn Tibbon (12th c., Spain) left his son a remarkable letter urging him to study Torah, cultivate humility, and care for books as sacred companions. These documents often blended practical advice with heartfelt exhortation: “Guard your tongue from evil speech,” “Be generous to the poor,” “Remember the dignity of every person.” Fast forward to the 19th and 20th centuries when ethical wills became more personal and intimate. Immigrants wrote them to children who would grow up in new lands. Survivors of the Shoah left them as acts of memory and resilience. Today, ethical wills are being rediscovered as a practice not only for the end of life, but also for moments of transition - retirement, marriage, becoming a grandparent, or simply pausing to reflect on what matters most.

In a world overflowing with information but often starved of wisdom, ethical wills remind us that our deepest inheritance is not wealth but values. They answer questions like:

- *What do I stand for?*
- *What stories shaped me?*
- *What blessings do I want to give my children, my community, or even my future self?*

Writing an ethical will is not only a gift to others - it is also a spiritual practice for the writer. It clarifies priorities, heals relationships, and transforms memory into meaning. In the words of one contemporary rabbi, “An ethical will is less about what you leave behind and more about how you live right now.”

Our upcoming Ethical Wills Workshop on November 9th for the Rick Pinsky Brunch Speaker Series is designed to guide you through this sacred and creative process. Whether you are a seasoned writer or someone who has never put pen to paper, you will find a welcoming space to explore your voice. Here’s what you can expect:

- **Learning the tradition:** We will study classic examples of ethical wills, from medieval sages to modern Jewish thinkers, discovering how each generation shaped the form to meet its needs.
- **Practical guidance:** Through structured prompts and gentle facilitation, you will begin drafting your own ethical will. You don’t need to finish it in one sitting - the workshop is about beginning the journey.
- **Sharing and community:** Participants will have the option to share excerpts in small groups, creating a circle of listening and support. Often, hearing others’ words sparks new insights into our own.
- **Creative flexibility:** Your ethical will can take many forms - letter, poem, story, or even a blessing. There is no “right way,” only your way.

Many of us sense that life moves too quickly, that our days are filled with tasks but not always with reflection. Writing an ethical will is a way of slowing down, of naming what endures. It is also a way of strengthening bonds across generations. Imagine your children or grandchildren, years from now, opening a letter in your handwriting, hearing your voice, and feeling your presence. That is a gift beyond measure.

And you don’t need to wait until the end of life. In fact, writing an ethical will now can shape how you live. It can inspire you to align your daily choices with your deepest values. It can remind you of the blessings you already carry, and the blessings you still wish to give.

We invite you to join us for this meaningful workshop. Come with your stories, your questions, and your heart. You will leave not only with words on a page, but with a renewed sense of purpose and connection.

As the Psalmist teaches, **“Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom”** (Psalm 90:12). Writing an ethical will is one way of numbering our days - not in fear, but in gratitude, courage, and love for generations to come... Let us gather to write, to share, and to bless the generations.

PrayerLab Shabbat

Are you curious about the choreography of prayer and ritual life in the synagogue services? Join us as we continue our interactive prayer lab service. Bring your questions and curiosities.

Saturday, November 15 @ 9:30 am