



For Jews, Yom Kippur's message fits well with writing ethical wills



Christy Peterson of Milwaukee (from left), Joan Klisch of Milwaukee, Leah Dobkin of Shorewood and Meg Crosby of Shorewood look at a digital copy of the ethical will Christy Peterson created but hasn't printed. - Image credit: Michael Sears



Rabbi Steve Adams wrote an ethical will for his daughter, Rachel, when she moved to Israel.

By Annysa Johnson of the Journal Sentinel

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Ethical wills allow parents to leave record of values

Someday, when Rabbi Steven and Gail Adams die, their only daughter, Rachel, will inherit all they've acquired in life — their home, their savings, the artifacts and heirlooms that have been passed down and accumulated over the years. And that will come with the inevitable writing of their will.

But for the Adamses, in their deaths their daughter will become the steward not just of their valuables, but also of their values. And those, the rabbi imparted to his daughter in a different kind of document four years ago.

Sitting in a New York airport, waiting for Rachel to board a plane for her new life in Israel, Adams handed his daughter an envelope, whose contents she would read again and again over the years. In that "ethical will," which Adams began writing years earlier, the rabbi encouraged his daughter to strive for peace in herself and in the world, to accept her own limits, and find comfort and meaning in the Torah. "We will pass on our material property, of course, but passing on something of an ethical and spiritual nature is just as important to us," said Adams, who will revisit some of the themes of ethical wills in his Yom Kippur sermon on Saturday at Congregation Emanu-El of Waukesha.

The gift has become an heirloom of sorts for Rachel, 26, who revisits it from time to time, especially when she is struggling.

"For some reason, it just makes me cry — and I'm not a big crier," said Rachel Adams, who works as a barista in Tel Aviv as she charts the next phase of her life. "I don't know if it's just making my parents feel closer or reminding me of the kind of person I want to be. The gist of the letter is how they raised me."

Ethical wills are rooted in Jewish tradition. In the Middle Ages, Jews were prohibited from passing on their wealth, and so they bequeathed instead their ethical and spiritual assets. Examples date as early as the 11th century, but some practitioners trace them to the biblical account of Jacob's deathbed blessing

of his children. In the Milwaukee area, several rabbis have written and spoken on the importance of drafting them.

While ethical wills and what some call "legacy letters" have gained popularity in the wider culture, Jewish proponents see the High Holy Days — the Jewish faith's holiest day of the year begins Friday evening and ends Saturday evening — with their emphases on introspection and renewal, as an ideal time to write them.

"Yom Kippur is that one time of the year when people can stop what they're doing, slow down and reflect," said Leah Dobkin, a Shorewood writer, herself Jewish, who has helped clients draft legacy letters for family members, business owners and others.

"Legacy letters help us make sense of the choices we've made in life, how we've evolved and who we are right now," she said. "They can help you renew your purpose and clarify your values and ethics." Ethical wills can take various forms — a simple letter, a hardbound book, even a musical composition. And while the content will depend ultimately on the writer, certain themes have emerged over the years. Often, they include a historical narrative, a sense of the writer's place in the generations of a family; the writer's experiences and wisdom gained; and their hopes for the future.

Religion may or may not play a role, depending on the author. And many practitioners encourage writers to present the will while they're still living, rather than after their death.

"It can be a great tool for helping define oneself to the next generation — what's important to me, what I stood for," said Eric Weiner, a Mequon marriage and family therapist and author of "Words from the Heart: A Practical Guide to Writing an Ethical Will."

While some will inevitably use the process to nurture a grudge from the grave, Weiner said, he encourages writers to be positive. An ethical will, written and timed well, can start a family conversation and defuse some of the animosity that surrounds decisions about money and business succession.

"It's possible, when one writes this, to bring some healing to a relationship that would benefit from that," he said.

Ethical wills are not the sole domain of Jews. Milwaukee beer baron Capt. Frederick Pabst, a Lutheran, wrote one to his children in 1899 imploring them to take care of their mother and keep harmony among themselves no matter "how one may be favored, or another be frowned upon by the fortunes of the world."

Doris Heiser of Shorewood, who also is Lutheran, first encountered ethical wills while working as director of donor services and development at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. She finally wrote her own this year with the help of Leah Dobkin, giving it to her four daughters on her 70th birthday.

"The whole process was somewhat emotional at time, but wonderful and affirming," she said. "It was wonderful to think how blessed I've been in my life, and each of my daughters was so thrilled."

Jewish educator and singer-songwriter Marge Eiseman wrote her ethical will, not in a letter, but in song, singing it to her twin sons at their B'nei Mitzvah in 2002. In it, she urges them to among other things "smile at people, be kind, take the time to care. Have Shabbat guests, learn to cook and travel everywhere."

Dobkin, who like Eiseman has lost a child unexpectedly, feels a sense of urgency about the writing of legacy letters — about sharing one's wisdom while you can and telling loved ones how much they're loved and valued while they can appreciate it.

"We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow," said Dobkin, who gave her 19-year-old daughter, Hanna Rose, her legacy letter before she died last year.

"Too many people go to the grave without hearing what's special about them," she said. "Too many go to the grave without sharing their stories and their wisdom."





Leah Dobkin of Shorewood shows her son, Seth Bobrow, 18, a special printed book she did for him incorporating an ethical will. - Image credit: Michael Sears



Christy Peterson of Milwaukee (from left), Joan Klisch of Milwaukee, Leah Dobkin of Shorewood and Meg Crosby of Shorewood look over copies of the printed books Dobkin made for each of her children. - Image credit: Michael Sears

Frederick Pabst's will

Frederick Pabst's handwritten will

and above all, be honest
and noble, in all your dealings,
not only with each other, but
with the world.

I want you to always
have a good name.

It is better than riches, and
your greatest happiness will
come from your knowledge
of doing right.

You must first of all be good
to your Mother. No all you
can to make her last days
her best days, and when she
is gone, and you, and you
are left without either father
or Mother, try always to
remember my last wishes
that you my dear children
shall live in harmony & content.

You have all been good
Children, and a great
Comfort to me. My happiest
Thoughts are connected with
you in the hope and belief
that after I shall be called
away, You will, all of you
strive to be kind and good
to your Mother, and to each
other. I have the earnest and
cherished desire, that you
will, after I am gone, strive
to preserve Harmony, and
good will, and unselfish
relations among yourselves.
Try to keep the estate I leave
you together, so far as you
can, and make it productive

of not only of increase and
Substance, but let it be a
Cause for mutual confidence
and affection. Each of you
should yield to the other ^{as} ~~was~~
as ^{is} ~~was~~ necessary to preserve
harmony and union.

Sickness, Misfortune, perhaps
something worse can come
to someone of you, but
my dear children, face it
bravely, and with hearts full
of love for each other, and
do just what you think I
would like to have you do,
if I was present to advise.
and comfort you.

Be generous and unselfish
to each other in case of need.