

REMEMBER ME: ETHICAL WILLS

Facilitator's Guide

Grades: 6-Adult
Time: 2 hours
Subject: Ethical Wills

Overview:

Can a person decide how he or she wants to be remembered? What are the deeds and ideas by which we would want others to remember us? This lesson will explore Jewish traditions and values related to memory. Students will be introduced to the concept of an ethical will, and will examine the challenges and difficulties involved in a person's attempt to write his or her memories for future generations.

Our principal tools for this study will be: a "letter to an unborn child" which students will write and have the opportunity to compare with some ancient and modern ethical wills and a midrash from Kohelet Rabbah which explores the value of *Shem Tov*—a Good Name.

Procedure:

I. Letter to an Unborn Child

1. Begin this lesson as a guided fantasy. Before handing out the materials, ask students to close their eyes and relax. Read them the scenario from the top of the first page.
2. Ask students to reread the scenario and then write a letter to their unborn child. Assure students that they will **not** have to read their letters to the class or show them to anyone. (Depending on the group, allow them seven to twelve minutes.)
3. Debrief this part of the experience with the following questions: (Keep this brief, no longer than ten minutes. Do not ask students to read their letters.)

a. What was the most difficult part of the assignment?

NOTE: responses will probably include both "I couldn't imagine having a baby" and "It was hard to think about what I would want a kid to be like."

b. What was most interesting (same note as above)?

c. Did writing these letters teach you anything about yourself?

d. What do you think your parents would have written before you were born? (Not necessarily for discussion at this point.)

II. THE ETHICAL WILL

1. Introduce students to the concept of an ethical will using the “What is an Ethical Will” page

Most of us have heard of a **last will and testament** in which a person distributes material possessions after his or her death. Many of you might also have heard of **living wills** in which people make advance decisions about medical care in the event they become incapacitated.

The tradition: The **ethical will** is a Jewish tradition dating as far back as the Bible. It is a written statement, like the one which you wrote to your "unborn child." A parent, teacher, or other relative attempts to put into words the lessons learned and the values lived by during his or her lifetime. By writing this "letter" they hope to pass this legacy on to their children and future generations.

The challenge: An ethical will is, in a sense, an attempt to shape the way in which one is remembered. That makes it very important, very challenging, and, some might say, dangerous. A mother writing an ethical will is faced with the temptation to write of lessons which she wanted to teach or wishes she had taught during her life, but did not. An ethical will has the potential to be a cherished family testament, but it also has the power to anger or confuse the readers. It can make us immediately think of the person who wrote it, and remember who they were and what they stood for, or to make us feel very guilty by describing a person whom we never knew. No document can replace the example which a father or mother sets through his or her actions.

As we read these selections from ethical wills, ask students to think of their feelings as they wrote their letters. Try to imagine how these people, who were writing these documents "for real" must have felt.

2. Read the selection from Iggeres haRamban. Ramban (**Rabbi Moses ben Nachman**) was one of the greatest Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages. He is the author of some of the most important commentaries on the Bible and Talmud. He lived in Spain in the 13th century, the "Golden Age," and ended his life in the Holy City of Jerusalem.
 - a. Read the text.
 - b. Underline the words or phrases which express the values that Ramban wants to pass on to his children.
 - ❖ humility...respect for all people
 - ❖ study...leading to good actions
 - ❖ prayer...leading to thoughts of God
 - ❖ belief in "following the path" of God.

- c. Why should you "regard every person as greater than you?" Regarding others as greater than oneself ensure humility.
 - d. Why does Ramban ask that the letter be reread once a week? As a constant reminder.
3. The next two excerpts are taken from modern ethical wills written in America. The language will, most likely, be more familiar to students, closer to what they might have written in their letters. These will illustrate the ethical will as a contemporary form of Jewish expression. Note: the mother and father are not related. Have students read these quickly.

Underline the words or phrases which express the values that each parent wants to pass to their children.

Mother: family, harmony, sharing

Father: harmony, family, Judaism

4. Have students reread their letters and respond to the questions in the lesson (below).
- ❖ Reread your letter. Underline the words that express the values/lessons you wanted to teach you child. List those values in the space provided.
 - ❖ Below, list one value or lesson that you would like to add to your letter:

III. Midrash: Koheles Rabbah

The midrash comments on the first half of the verse from *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) 7:1 which states, "A good name is better than good (fragrant) oil..." This midrash uses additional examples to expand the comparison between "*Shem Tov* (a good name) and "*Shemen Tov*" (good oil).

- 1 Read the midrash. Explain any difficult words or concepts briefly. Ask students to add two lines to the midrash (space provided). Ask students to read their new lines.
- 2 What words could you substitute for "good oil?"

Possible answers: (all material things) money, jewelry, possessions, houses, buildings, etc.

- 3 What is the midrash saying?

The good oil, the material things we amass during our lives are short lived, they will not be remember very long. A "good name," our legacy, can last for generations.

IV. Sholom Aleichem

Sholom Aleichem was a great Jewish writer. Maybe you have heard of some of his stories. His stories of Tevye the Milkman was the basis of the popular play and movie, Fiddler on the Roof. He left an ethical will

- 1 What was Sholom Aleichem's main message? Though he was world famous he wanted to be remembered as a humble Jewish writer, take care of wife, remember him with joy, live peacefully, take care of the poor, honor his Jewish name.
- 2 How does he tell his children about a "shem tov?" Children, bear with honor my hard-earned Jewish name and may God in Heaven sustain you ever
- 3 Have students answer the last three questions on the page and then review their answers.

- a. Definition of "good name.

The midrash does not define a "*shem tov*." Shem tov does not refer only to one kind of person. Perhaps we can substitute the term legacy. A person's legacy, whatever it may be, will outlast his or her material wealth.

- b. Ethical wills and "good name"

The concept of an ethical will reflects the midrashic juxtaposition of shem tov and shemen tov. The traditional will that a person writes is the equivalent of "shemen tov," while the ethical will is the "shem tov."

- c. New sentence to their "letter."

You may not want to ask students to read their new sentence. but ask them what they thought about while writing it.

IV. FOLLOW-UP

This lesson is a great way to open dialogue within a family and to involve parents in your classroom. If you are not using this lesson as part of a family learning experience, encourage students to discuss the lesson; and especially their letters, with their parents. Make sure to ask about it at the beginning or your next lesson. Ask several students to write an article, or anonymously share their letters in a school newsletter or synagogue bulletin.

FAMILY EDUCATION

This lesson, with minor adaptations, is a wonderful experience for a family education setting. If you choose that setting, consider beginning the activity with parents and children separate. While students write their "letter to an unborn child" and learn about and read the ethical wills; have the parents (or grandparents) begin by reading the ethical

wills and then, while listening to the song, write five lessons/ideas/values which they hope to pass on to their children.

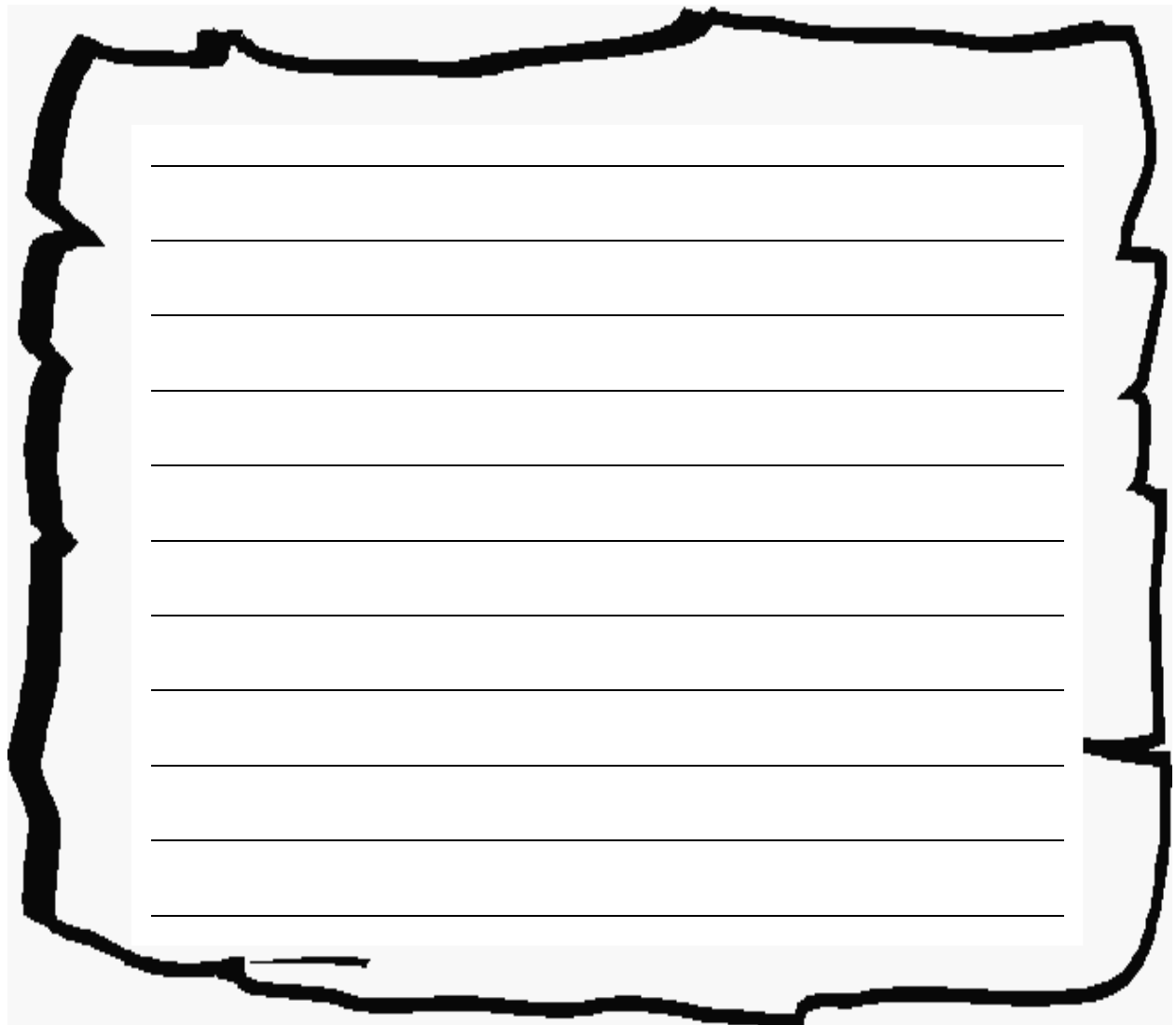
From this point, follow either of the following options:

Conclude by asking each group to discuss the question in the follow-up section, that is, create an ethical will for your family. As a closing question ask participants to share what they feel that they have learned from this experience.

REMEMBER ME: ETHICAL WILLS

IMAGINE...You are going to be a parent. Not "years from now, but in the next few days! To say the least, it will be quite an adjustment. Before the birth of your child, close your eyes, take a deep breath and think for a moment about having a child. What are your hopes and dreams for your child? What kind of person do you hope he or she will be? What kind of Jewish person?

Use the space below to write your thoughts down down in the form of a letter to your unborn child which you will present when he or she is ready to start a family.



A large, irregularly shaped frame with a thick black border, resembling a torn piece of paper. Inside the frame, there are ten horizontal lines for writing.

WHAT IS AN ETHICAL WILL

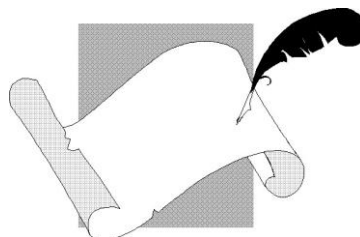
This Jewish custom of writing is called an **Ethical Will**. Parents would write a letter to their children in which they would try to tell them all that they had learned in life, and in which they would try to express what they wanted most for and from their children.

The first ethical wills are found in the Bible. There are numerous Biblical examples of such counsel. The first is in Beresheet (Genesis) 18:19 with G-d speaking to Abraham: "For I have singled him [Abraham] out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the L-rd by doing what is just and right, in order that G-d may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." The Bible records several other instances, most prominently the blessing of Jacob (Genesis 27:27), the dying request of Jacob to Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 49:1-27), the address of Moses and Joshua to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 33), and the advice of David to his son Solomon (I Kings 2:1-9). We also find in Proverbs 1:8 the admonition, "My child, heed the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the instruction of your mother." The tradition has been maintained throughout Jewish history.

What is an ethical will? It is a letter which a parent writes to his/her children. In it, a mother describes what she has learned during her life and the lessons she hopes to pass on to her children and future generations. Some are very lengthy and contain many details, while others are only several sentences in length. An ethical will becomes part of a family's inheritance and heritage. It is considered by some to be much more important than the passing on of material possessions.

It's something very real that you can leave your children, a piece of yourself, more valuable than any cars, house or jewelry. You want to tell them what's important to you. How you'd like to see them live their lives. How you feel about them. Pass on what life has taught you.

An ethical will can preserve a memory and, to some extent, shape the way that a person is remembered. That is one of the greatest challenges and the greatest dangers in writing an ethical will: We all wish we had done more in our lives...we have to fight the desire to be remembered for things that we wish we had done, but never got around to doing. Here are some excerpted examples of ethical wills. As you read them, ask yourself what they tell you about the authors. How do they compare with your letter?



IGGERES HA Ramban

One well-known example is the Iggeres haRamban (The Ramban's Letter) written to his oldest son. Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1195-1270), tells him to pursue self-control, improve of his character, and to act with the purest of motives:

"Listen, my child, to the instruction of your father, and do not forget the teaching of your mother." (Proverbs 1:8) Speak with kindness to all people always. This save you from anger, the major cause of misdeed...Always be humble; regard every person as greater than yourself...Study Torah regularly so that you can fulfill its commandments. When you finish your studies, think carefully about what you have learned; try to translate your learning into action...When you pray, do not think about worldly matters, think only of G-d...Read this letter once a week, and be regular in carrying out its requirements. By doing so you will always walk in the path of G-d and you be worthy of all of the good which is due to the righteous.

1. Underline the values that Ramban wants to pass on to his children.
2. Why does he ask that the letter be reread every week? _____

An American Jewish mother wrote to her children:

This is your mother's last wish. After I am no longer with you, you should always be together, be healthy and happy; and of what is left in money I want you to share equally with each other.

From an American Jewish father to his children:

Somewhere among these papers is a will made out by a lawyer. I hope this will not cause any bad feelings among you. I am more concerned with having you be left something that is vastly more important...Live together in peace! Bear no regrets towards each other... Help each other... Carry on your Jewish traditions with dignity. Though you may discard trivial things, never discard your Jewish faith. You cannot live out your years happily without it.

- 1 Underline the words that tell you the values the mother and the father want to pass on to their children.

2 Reread your letter. Underline the words that express the values and lessons you want to teach your child. List them below. _____

3 Write one value that you would like to add to your letter. _____

What follows is taken from Koheles Rabbah 7:1 , a midrash on the book of Koheles. The midrash attempts to more fully explain the meaning of the verse. Read it carefully.

"A good name (*shem tov*) is better than good oil (*shemen tov*)."

What does it mean?

Good oil sinks, a good name rises

Good oil is temporary, while a good name lasts forever.

Good oil is expensive, a good name is free.

Good oil is useful in life, a good name is useful in life and in death.

Good oil can only be gotten by the rich, while a good name can be gotten by the poor as well as the wealthy.

Good oil is spread from the bed-chamber to the dining-hall while a good name is spread from one end of the world to the other.

In the space below, add two lines to the midrash.

Good oil _____

a good name _____

Good oil _____

a good name _____

Sholom Aleichem was a great Jewish writer. Maybe you have heard of some of his stories. His stories of Tevye the Milkman was the basis of the popular play and movie, Fiddler on the Roof. He left an ethical will that said:



Wherever I may die, let me be buried not among the rich and famous, but among plain Jewish people, the workers, the common folk, so that my tombstone may honor the simple graves around me, and the simple graves honor mine, even as the plain people honored their folk writer in his lifetime. ... My last wish for my successors and my prayer to my children: Take good care of your mother, beautify her old age, sweeten her bitter life, heal her broken heart; do not weep for me -- on the contrary, remember me with joy; and the main thing -- live together in peace, bear no hatred for each other, help one another in bad times, think on occasion of other members of the family, pity the poor, and when circumstances permit, pay my debts, if there be any. Children, bear with honor my hard-earned Jewish name and may G-d in Heaven sustain you ever, Amen. -- **Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916)**

What was Sholom Aleichem's main message? _____

How does he tell his children about a "shem tov?" _____

Using the midrash and Sholom Aleichem's ethical will write your explanation of "shem tov'." _____

Look back at the ethical wills. Do they help you to understand "shem tov?" _____

Read your "letter to an unborn child" again. Based upon our studies and discussion today, add one new sentence to your letter. _____
