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of West Boynton Beach
Member of USCJ

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Rabbi

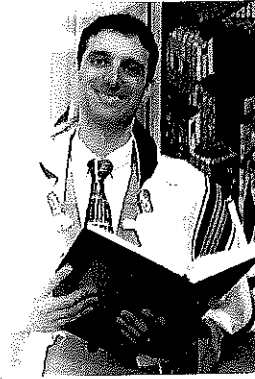
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Jewish Ethical Wills

A Study With

Rabbi Edward C. Bernstein

(adapted from material compiled by Rabbi Elana Zaiman and her insights)

Genesis Chapters 48-50:

Jacob blesses his grandsons and his sons.

Proverbs 1: Verses 8-9

“My son, heed the discipline of your father,
And do not forsake the instruction of your mother;
For they are a graceful wreath upon your head,
A necklace about your throat.”

Proverbs 31:

A mother charges her son, Lemuel, King of Massa.
“Do not give your strength to women,
Your vigor, to those who destroy kings.
It is not for kings... to drink wine:
Nor for princes to say: ‘Where is strong drink?’
Lest they drink and forget what is decreed,
And pervert the justice due to any that is afflicted...
Open your mouth for the dumb,
For the cause of all who are to be destroyed.
Open your mouth, judge righteously,
And plead the cause of the poor and needy.”

Akiva

Pesachim 112a-112b:

Our Rabbis taught:

Seven things did Rabbi Akiva charge his son Rabbi Joshua:
My son, do not sit and study at the highest point of the town;
Do not dwell in a town whose leaders are scholars;
Do not enter your own house suddenly, and all the more your neighbor's house;
And do not withhold shoes from your feet.
Arise early and eat, in summer on account of the sun (heat), and in winter on account of the cold;
Treat your Sabbath like a weekday so as to avoid needing help from other people,
And strive to be on good terms with the man upon whom the hour smiles.

THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

BY NAHMANIDES

Hear, my son, the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the teaching of thy mother! Accustom thyself to speak in gentleness to all men, at all times. Thus wilt thou be saved from anger, the fertile cause of sin. As our Sages say: "Over the man of wrath rules every manner of Gehinnom, and it is written: Remove anger from thy heart, and [thus] put away evil from thy flesh.

Evil here (in the passage of Ecclesiastes) is nothing else but Gehinnom, as when it is said (in Proverbs): 'And the wicked for the day of evil.'"⁴

Being delivered from anger, there will arise in thy heart the quality of humility, better than all things good! For "the reward of humility is the fear of the Lord."⁵ Reverence is thus the fruit of humility. For humility it is that must impel thee to lay to thine heart always the memory of whence thou comest and whither thou goest,⁶ it is humility that reminds thee that in life thou art but a worm, and the more so in death; it is humility that warns thee that the One before whom thou must be judged and called to account is the King of Glory. "Behold heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him"⁷—how much less the hearts of the children of men! "Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord."⁸ Pondering over all these things, [the exaltation of God, the lowliness of man], thou wilt stand in awe of thy Creator, and be on thy guard against sin.

Endowed with these qualities, thou canst but rejoice at whatever lot befall thee. If thou indeed takest humility for thy rule in life, holding thyself modestly before the world, a God-fearer and a sin-fearer,—then will there rest upon thee the spirit of the Shekinah⁹ and the radiance of the divine Glory, and thou wilt live the life of the world to come!¹⁰

And now, my son! Understand clearly that he who prides himself in his heart over other men is a rebel against the Kingship of Heaven. Such a one presumes to adorn himself in the robe of the Omnipresent. For it is God, enthroned, who wears the mantle of majesty.¹¹ And wherefore shall the heart of man be puffed up? Is it because of wealth? It is God who maketh poor and maketh rich.¹² Or is it because of honor? But honor is of God.¹³ And how shall a man boast in an honor which is his Maker's? Does he glorify himself because of his wisdom? Lo, God "removeth the speech of men of trust and taketh away the sense of the elders."¹⁴ In a word, all are equal before the Lord. For in His anger He bringeth down the high and in His good pleasure He elevates the low. Therefore debase thyself and let the Omnipresent raise thee up!¹⁵

Accordingly I will explain how thou must habituate thyself to the quality of humility in thy daily practice. Let thy voice be low, and thy head bowed; let thine eyes be turned earthwards and thy heart heavenwards. Gaze not in the face of him whom thou dost address. Every man should seem in thine eyes as one greater than thyself. If he be wise or wealthy, it is thy duty to show him respect. If he be poor and thou the richer, or if thou be wiser than he, be-think thee in thy heart, that thou art the more

guilty, he is the more innocent. If he sin, it is from error; if thou sin, it is with design!¹⁶

In all thy doings, words, and thoughts, and at all times, regard thyself as one standing before the Omnipresent¹⁷, with His Shekinah upon thee, for the glory of the Lord filleth the universe. Let thy words be spoken in the deepest reverence as though a servant addressed his master. Hold thyself abashed before all men, and if one call thee do not answer noisily, but respond without agitation and in lowered tones, as an inferior would use to his superior.

Read in the Torah regularly, so that thou mayest be able to fulfil its precepts. When thou risest from the book, think closely over what thou hast learned, perchance there may be some thing in it for thee to translate into conduct. Examine thine actions at morn and at eve, and by this means all thy days will be passed in repentance.

And when thou prayest, remove all worldly considerations from thy heart. Set thy heart right before God, cleanse thine inmost thoughts and meditate before uttering thy devotions. Act thus all thy days, in all things, and thou wilt not sin. By this course thy deeds will all be upright, and thy prayer pure and clean, innocent and devout, and acceptable before the Lord. As it is written: "Thou, God, wilt direct their heart, Thou wilt cause Thine ear to attend."¹⁸

Read this Letter once a week, and be as regular in carrying out¹⁹ its injunctions, by its aid walking forever after the Lord, blessed be He; that thou mayest prosper in all thy ways, and be held worthy of all the good which is treasured up for the righteous!

¹ Prov. 1.8. Some versions omit "the teaching of thy mother." But Nahmanides' wife certainly was alive when the writer was compelled to leave Spain for Palestine.

² T. B. Nedarim 22a. See other quotations in support of this moralization of Gehinnom in *J. E.* v, 584.

³ Eccles. 12.10.

⁴ Prov. 16.4. On Nahmanides' conception of the soul, see S. Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, first series, p. 140.

⁵ Prov. 22.4. ⁶ Mishnah Abot 3.1.

⁷ I Kings 8.27. ⁸ Jer. 23.24.

⁹ i. e. the "Divine Presence". See Abelson (op. cit. next note) ch. iv.

¹⁰ For Nahmanides' views on the future life see his *Gate of Requital* at the end of his treatise the *Law of Man*. As to the "radiance" (*ziv*), he conceived it almost as a mystical union of the soul of man with the soul of God. Cf. J. Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 87. See also my *Glory of God*, p. 44f.

¹¹ Ps. 93.1. The word *nnn* means both pride and majesty.

¹² I Sam. 2.7.

¹³ I Chron. 29.12.

¹⁴ Job 12.20.

¹⁵ T. B. 'Erubin 13b.

¹⁶ For rabbinic parallels see Derek Erez *passim*.

¹⁷ On the application to God of the term *Ma'om* (lit. Place, here rendered Omnipresent), see *J. E.*, iii, 460.

¹⁸ The first clause of the verse (Ps. 10.17) runs: "Lord,

Thou hast heard the desire of the humble." The verse is applied also by Samuel b. Nahman (T. J. Berakot end) to enforce the moral that only the prayer of a devout heart avails.

¹⁹ Or: "once a week at least; so as to carry out, etc."

is vanity, for it is impossible to penetrate God's actions and uncover their meaning.

Moses our Teacher, on whom be peace, wanted to find out and asked: *Make me know Thy ways.* But as even he could not attain this, we need not concern ourselves about them. In any case, this world, which is as naught, has been created solely because of the world-to-be. God in His manifold kindness has made the passings of this world to enable us to do good and serve Him well. Also, there is a limit of seventy years in this toilsome world, of preparations for the next; hundreds of thousands of people do not reach even this age. But the world-to-come exists for ever.

Oh how abundant is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee. Happy is the one who has his reward in the everlasting world-to-come. The sorrows and troubles man suffers here are temporary and last but a while. And when time has flown, the poor man, as does the rich man also, lays down his life—there is no difference. Furthermore, the poor man, who has suffered so much in his lifetime, dies in peace, for every day was for him a living death, ever hoping that it would fare better with him in the next world. And always thinking that God owed him this as his due. All his consolation lies in the future world. *When shall I come and see the face of the Lord.* According to my limited understanding, I therefore think that his suffering is not too hard to bear.

But, my dear children, what need to speak longer on this? I began writing this, with the help of heaven, after the death of your pious father, to stifle and banish the melancholy thoughts which came to me during many sleepless nights. We are strayed sheep that have lost our faithful shepherd. I have spent many sleepless nights and for fear of falling into a melancholia. I arose in the wakeful hours and spent the time writing this.

I do not intend to write a book of morals, for I am not able to do so. Our wise men have written such books; and we have

BOOK ONE

In the year of Creation 5451 (1690-91) I begin writing this with an aching heart, as will follow later. May the Lord make us rejoice as often as He has afflicted us and send our Messiah and Redeemer speedily. Amen

All that the Lord has created, He created for His glory. The world was founded on loving-kindness. We know that the Almighty, blessed be He and blessed be His name, in His goodness and mercy created all things. He is not in need of any of His creations which He in His grace has made in diverse kinds for the use of us sinful mortals. Every created thing is of some use, more than we realize or imagine. King David, on whom be peace, asked, of what use are the fool, the wasp, and the spider in the world? But he found out in good time. First God and then these three saved his life—as is written in the Book of Kings. Anyone who wishes to know can read in Holy Writ.

It is known that many pious live sad and lonely lives, suffering hardship and misery in this passing world while, in contrast, rogues enjoy much honour and great comforts. They and theirs have riches while, on the other hand, it fares badly with the righteous and their children. We ponder: How is it that Almighty God, who is just, permits this? But this also, I think,

the Holy Torah, from which we may learn what is useful and what will lead us from this to the future world.

We must hold fast to the Torah. As an example: a ship full of passengers sailed the sea. A passenger on deck leaning towards the waves fell overboard and began to sink. Seeing this, the captain threw a rope and called to him to hold it tight and he would not drown. We in this world of sin are as if we swim in the sea, not knowing at which moment we may drown. But Almighty God, who created us without sin—through the sins of Adam, the Evil Spirit overpowers us—also created hosts of angels without any evil inclinations, to do His work. They do good only. Besides these, God created beast and fowl who know nothing of good; and then man in His own image, with sense like the angels, but also with will to commit—God forbid—evil, or do good. But gracious God threw us a rope for our guidance, to which to hold fast and so save ourselves. This is our Holy Torah. Hold tight to it and you will not drown.

This I beg of you my children: Have patience. If God sends you an affliction, accept it meekly and do not cease to pray. Perhaps He will have mercy. Who knows what is best for us sinful folk? Who knows if it is good to live in great riches and have much pleasure, enjoying all that the heart desires in this transient world; or if it is better if the Heavenly Father holds much from us in this sinful world so that we can have our eyes always fixed on heaven. Our gracious Father: call on Him with hot and sincere tears every moment. I am sure that the True and Good Lord will show mercy and redeem us from this long, sorrowful exile. Great is His mercy. He is full of graciousness. What He has promised us, that will come to pass. Only, let us be patient.

My dear children, be devout and good. Serve the Lord God with all your heart as well if things go well with you as when, God forbid, all is not well: *As we have to bless God for good, so also must we for evil* [Talmud].¹ If He punishes you, do not be too grieved. Remember everything comes from the Lord. Should,

God forbid, children and dear friends die, do not grieve too much, for you did not create them. Almighty God, who created them, when He desires takes them again to him. What can the helpless mortal do? He himself must go the same way. If God afflicts you that you lose money, the Highest who gives, takes: naked were we born and naked must we depart. All the money in the world does not help. So, my dear children, no matter what you may lose, be patient, for nothing belongs; it is only lent.

When then should a person grieve? When a day passes in which he has not performed a good deed. And much more shall he grieve if, God forbid, he has sinned. We were created only to serve God and observe His commandments and to hold fast to His Holy Torah: *For that is thy life and the length of thy days* [Deut. 30:20].

It is also the duty of a man to support his wife and children respectably. *By he who is charitable all the time* [Talmud] is meant he who sees to the wants of his wife and children. God, blessed be His name, helps him and if he helps the poor—then it is well with him. Such labour is also a merit, for the great heavenly Father arranged everything with wisdom. A father loves his child; the same the nearest relatives one another. Without this the world could not exist.

Almighty God did all this in His infinite mercy that parents should love their children and help them to do right. And then the children seeing this from their parents; do the same to their children.

For example: There dwelt on the sea shores a bird that had three fledgelings.² Once, seeing that a storm was coming and that the sea waves rose over the shore, the old bird said to the young ones, "If we cannot get to the other side at once we shall be lost." But the birdlings³ could not yet fly. So the bird took one little one in his claws and flew with it over the sea. When halfway across, the parent bird said to his young one, "What troubles I have to stand from you, and now I risk my life for you. When

I am old, will you also do good to me and support me?" On which the fledgeling replied: "My dear beloved father, just take me across the sea. I will do for you in your old age all that you demand of me."

On this the old bird threw the birdling into the sea so that he was drowned and said, "So should be done with such a liar as you." He flew back and returned with the second one. When they reached half-way across he spoke to this one as he had to the first. The little bird promised to do all the good in the world. But the old bird took this one and threw him into the sea, saying, "You also are a liar."

He flew again to the shore and brought the third birdling. When he came midways he said to him, "My child, see what hardships I undergo and how I risk my life for your sake. When I am old and cannot move any more, will you be good to me and support me in my old age, as I do you in your youth?"

To which the little bird answered his parent, "My dear father, all that you say is true, that you take great care of me and my need. I am in duty bound to repay you, if it is possible; but I cannot promise for certain. But this I can promise: when one day I have a birdling of my own, I will do for my young as you have done for me." On this his father said, "You speak well and are also clever. I will let you live and take you across the water."

From this we can see that God gave the unreasoning bird sense to bring up his young; and the difference: how parents toil for their children while they, if they had the trouble with the parents as their parents with them, would soon tire.

To return again to our purpose. People should love one another, for it is said *Thou shalt love thy neighbor* [Lev. 19:18]. This is a principal point. But we very seldom find in these times that a person loves another with his heart. On the contrary. If one can ruin another he will do so. That parents love their children is no surprise. We find the same among unreasoning creatures who have young and look after them until they are grown

Gluckel or Haamein

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and can fend for themselves. And then they are left to themselves. We humans are in this sense better. We seek to support our children till they are grown; not only when they are small, but as long as we live.

HEREBY ETHICAL WILL
ISRAEL ABRAHAM

8



Hirsch Moshe Zaddok

This will was written by the last Jew of Kovno, Hirsch Moshe Zaddok. It was written inside the cover of a book, and was discovered by the writer's brother, who escaped Kovno at the start of the war and returned with the victorious Soviet forces.

To every man and woman! They treated us like animals in the forest. Seven days and nights we hid in an attic with no food or water. The heat was fierce. On the eighth day they rained grenades on us and torched the building. We managed to reach the cellar but the entire building was engulfed in flames over our heads.

Brothers! Avenge us! We were once more than fifty thousand souls in Kovno and now there remain but a few. We too await the end. Our revenge will come when you destroy the very last of the wild beasts!

Show them no mercy, just as they had no pity on us. Repay them for all their crimes on behalf of all those they tortured and killed. Only then will mankind be rid of these snakes who dare call themselves humans. Brothers! *Vengeance*—this must be your sacred mission in life.

Hirsch Moshe Zaddok

One of the Jewish victims



A Mother's Will

Published in the ghetto newspaper Warsaw-Krakow, 1940, this will was signed only "Your Mother."

Judaism, my child, is the struggle to bring down God upon earth, a struggle for the sanctification of the human heart. This struggle your people wages not with physical force but with spirit, with sincere, heartfelt prayers, and by constant striving for truth and justice.

So do you understand, my child, how we are distinct from others and wherein lies the secret of our existence on earth?

Knowing this, will your heart still be heavy, my child? Will you still say you cannot stand your fate? But you must, my child, for so were you commanded; it is your calling. This is your mission, your purpose on earth.

You must go to work alongside people of other nations . . . and you will reach them that they must come to a brotherhood of nations and to a union of all nations with God.

You may ask, "How does one speak to them?" This is how: "Thou shalt not murder; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not covet; love thy neighbor as thyself. . . ." Do these things and through their merit, my child, you will be victorious.

So that your values live on—

Jack Demin . NATHANIEL STAMPER

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Harold

I address myself to my children—to all of our household. My father died at the age of 83 and I have a premonition that in this, my 83rd year, I too will be called to my final resting place....

My deep concern is for your mother. What will become of her if I should be the first? She is so dependent on me. I pray to God and ask Him to prolong her sister's life so that they may spend the rest of their lives together. By that I mean that Fanny should move in with Mom.

... All my life I have tried to help others without expecting anything in return—and now I make a simple request—call Mom if possible every day—visit her once a week—dine with her once a week—call her and tell her what you want for dinner—make her laugh, have the children call, and visit her once in a while. When she is away, write to her frequently. Do it not as an obligation but because I know you really love her and want to make her happy.

Forgive me if I hurt you by suggesting this—I mean well—I am very proud of you and love you all dearly. I am grateful for the many blessings He has showered upon us one and all. In fact I feel that we have received more than our share of *naches* [parental pleasure].

And now I must make a confession. For the past few months I have gradually developed a hate for money and what it does to people. I honestly feel that if one reaches the stage where he has provided fully for his family and himself, the balance does not belong to him. It is a lend-lease from the Almighty to distribute to charity. If I survive I will try to spend the rest of my life seeking out avenues of worthwhile charities, preferably in Israel.

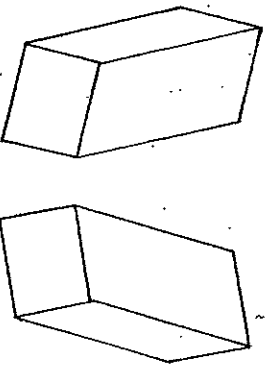
Mother and I lived modestly. I never succeeded in convincing her to buy a mink coat. She always felt that was showing off. I lived the same way. If we lived luxuriously we could never have helped the families for most of our married life.

You have now reached the stage where you can broaden your philanthropy and in larger amounts. I hope and pray that my and your children

will follow the same pattern. The children should have begun long ago. Teach them to put aside from their allowance and from any money they earn for charity. Do it now.

Above all—be forever vigilant for those in need and don't wait until they ask you—that is humiliating.

One last request—when the time comes for my last journey, I would like Mother's and my casket facing each other—she on my right side—all it needs is to place the caskets at an angle, like this:



Fare Well

LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER

Maya Angelou

Dear Daughter,

This letter has taken an extraordinary time getting itself together. I have all along known that I wanted to tell you directly of some lessons I have learned and under what conditions I have learned them.

My life has been long, and believing that life loves the liver of it, I have dared to try many things, sometimes trembling, but daring, still. I have only included here events and lessons which I have found useful. I have not told how I have used the solutions, knowing that you are intelligent and creative and resourceful and you will use them as you see fit.

You will find in this book accounts of growing up, unexpected emergencies, a few poems, some light stories to make you laugh and some to make you meditate.

There have been people in my life who meant me well, taught me valuable lessons, and others who have meant me ill

LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER

and, have given me ample notification that my world is not meant to be all peaches and cream.

I have made many mistakes and no doubt will make more before I die. When I have seen pain, when I have found that my ineptness has caused displeasure, I have learned to accept my responsibility and to forgive myself first, then to apologize to anyone injured by my misreckoning. Since I cannot un-live history, and repentance is all I can offer God, I have hopes that my sincere apologies were accepted.

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution.

Never whine. Whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighborhood.

Be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity.

I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native American and Aleut. You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all. Here is my offering to you.

Ethical Will Worksheet

Names of people to whom I leave testament	I love you for	I'm sorry for ...	I forgive you for...	Thank you for...	My hopes for you are...