

# Parshas Vayechie- Your Ethical Will and TEAM Shabbos

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## Your Ethical Will and TEAM Shabbos

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine

Yakov was nearing the end of his life. His children surrounded him and Yakov wished to know if his life's mission had been accomplished. More than anything else, Yakov yearned to establish the Jewish Family. Was he successful in sharing his values and ideals with his children? Yakov is enormously satisfied when his children declare in unison, "Hear O' Israel," just as you believe in one G-d, so do we.

Unfortunately it isn't always that way. Sometimes people reach the end of life and find that there was a terrible disconnect with their loved ones. There is a story of a doctor who had dreamt all his life of going into research and trying to find the cure for a significant illness. The mere concept of the challenge motivated him enormously. But although he shared the idea with his brothers, he never shared it with his wife. What bothered him most (as he shared in his memoirs written after his wife's passing) is that he was sure that if he had shared his dream with his wife she would have agreed to the change in career and salary. But he never shared the dream with her. So she never knew.

Or the story of a very wealthy man who left millions in his will to Torah institutions, much to the surprise of his children. The children were all well off. They had no misgivings; but they were enormously surprised. As one child put it, "We never knew this was so important to him."

Some people write an "ethical will" to be read after their passing. In it they share ideas that they considered priorities in their lives. But even better than an ethical will is to share your ideas and values during your lifetime. When the ethical will is finally read after your passing it should not come as a shock to the people who loved you most. Don't just think about your ethical will and write it privately. Share its content with those who care about you, so that they will not later say, "Oh, I never knew that it was so important to him/ her."

In order to write an ethical will we must clarify for ourselves what our priorities are. We live in a most affluent generation. Driving down the street I am struck with the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. Supermarkets are, thank G-d, flooded with many choices of food. Pharmacies with life-saving drugs can be found on almost every corner. Even gas stations, “to fill ‘er up” are waiting at our service. The question we should ask is: to what higher purpose do we wish to use all of these blessings?

Unfortunately, in the haste of things we sometimes lose focus.

A number of years ago I received a brochure from a nationally acclaimed Jewish camp. It advertised a beautiful, state of the art campus, multiple pools, and even serve kosher food from their specially designed kosher kitchen. I thought to myself, “What a blessing. What an amazing camping experience.”

And then I noticed the following words: “Kosher meals are served daily. Kosher style meals are served during extended trips.”

I became very agitated. I wondered. “With all of our society’s affluence, why can’t they design extended trips in a way that accommodates authentic kosher observance?”

Then I realized that it isn’t really their fault. To a great extent it is my fault, and the fault of people like me who never shared our “ethical wills.” How should the administration know how important kosher is to the Jewish community if we never shared our thoughts with anyone? If I don’t articulate my view that there is a problem, people have a right to say, “I never knew this was so important to you.”

So I decided to write a letter.

After expressing my heartfelt thanks for their offering Jewish youth an exceptional camping experience, I wrote the following.

“Included in your brochure for the summer camps was a simple statement that read, ‘Kosher meals are served daily. Kosher style meals are served on extended trips.’ While I admire the honesty of the statement, I would like to explore the actual policy with you.

“A great milestone in many people’s spiritual journey is when they choose to observe kosher. Some choose to go all the way; others permit themselves to “cheat” outside the home. In either case keeping kosher is an admirable step in a Jew’s life. Ultimately, however, when the Torah speaks of kosher observance it was referring to both in and out of the home. Complete observance of the mitzvah involves observing kosher even when we are away on trips.

“It is my feeling that your camp is selling itself short when it shows that kosher is something to be observed on site but not on extended trips. An entire generation of our precious children will grow up thinking that it is normal for people to preach a priority and then bend

the rules when things get inconvenient.”

My one letter to the camp got no response, which is not surprising. The gratifying moment that Yakov had when his children responded “Your values are our values” didn’t just happen. It was the result of years of dialogue and expression on Yakov’s part. On a regular basis, he shared what was important to him with his loved ones. That same technique should be used by all of us in our private lives and in our relationship with the Greater Jewish Family. Share your dreams and priorities with your loved ones. They might not listen to you, but they will certainly hear you. At least they will understand, and will never say, “I never realized that this was so important to you.”

In our time, one’s “ethical will” takes on greater significance in both a religious and legal sense. Many end-of-life decisions are left to the discretion of one’s relatives and doctors, who may not share the same perspective on the value of life and the after-life as we do. But, the law provides methods of disclosure to ensure that your wishes and priorities should be respected. Of concern in our generation is the trend towards passive euthanasia as well as a trend away from the sacred, traditional burial observance and toward cremation instead. Judaism teaches that the body is sacred, both during life and afterwards. It is only through the physical body that we were able to do mitzvos. This is a priority that needs to be expressed in our Ethical Will.

I therefore take the moment to applaud NASCK (National Association of Chevra Kadisha), which has designated this Shabbos, Parshas Vayichi, the Parsha in which Yakov expressed his ethical will, to encourage communities throughout the United States to explore and spread awareness of the need for End-of-Life planning. This involves the Halachic Living Will (Healthcare Proxy), Reaching out to those around us to prevent cremation (The Emes Card), and the Halachic Will (Halachic Inheritance Instrument). For more information please see their website [TEAMShabbos.org](http://www.teach613.org). Additional resources are available on my website at <http://www.teach613.org/encyclopedia/lifecycles/bikur-cholim-visiting-the-sick/>

May the efforts that we expend for the sanctity of life be a merit for longevity. May we all be blessed with a long and productive life.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos.

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