

## **ETHICAL WILLS:**

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**By Larry Morrell “**

**IF THEY ARE FORGOTTEN, DID THEY EVER EXIST ?? “**

**OR**

**“ IF YOU ARE FORGOTTEN, DID YOU EVER EXIST ? “**

How many have heard of an **Ethical Will ? or Tzavaa**

How many know what an Ethical Will is ?

How many have written an Ethical Will ?

You may be wondering what does an Ethical Will have to do with genealogy research. That is both a good and a valid question. My aim this evening is to try to explain why they are related and why they are both important. Before we get into the Ethical Wills aspect of this presentation, let me first go through the process of genealogy research.

### **SOLOMON MORRELL 1858—1936**

This really doesn't give you much information about my great grandfather Solomon Morrell. He died well before I was born. I never met him. I never spoke to him. Nor did I ever have any contact with him. What I do have, however, is documentation and information about his life. I do have some information about his life. I do have some information to put on that dash between his date of birth and his date of death. Normally when starting genealogy research, we gather as much information as we can about the person being researched from living relatives that may have known the person, such as my great grandfather.

So now that we have something to start with, we anxiously proceed to gather more information. To start with, I usually go to the last US Federal Census ( 1940 ) where I may find information about the person being researched. If I find nothing on the last Federal Census ( 1940 ), I will go to the next earlier one ( 1930 ). I keep going back until I get to the first Federal Census where the relative will be found. From the different forms of the Federal Census, I am able to glean a lot of

information that will lead me to other information such as: ( in no particular order ) Age when the FC ( Federal Census ) was taken, year of birth, where he was born, where his parents were born, if he was naturalized, when he came to the United States, other family members, occupation, street address where living etc. From this I can use this information to gather additional information such as World War 1 draft registration which will provide information not found on the FC forms. I can search city directories to get a history of movement and occupations. I can search birth records, death records, marriage records, immigration records and more. All of these provide additional information that I may not of had before. What I am doing is basically creating an information data base about a long forgotten ancestor.

So, now we have gathered all of these stone hard facts, these dates, these places, what do we really know about our ancestor ? Going back to that dash between the date of birth and the date of death, we really don't have much to add other than facts, just cold lifeless facts. So we really have not discovered much about this ancestor as a warm living individual have we ? It's just like a tree. You have the outer surface of the bark that gives the tree an appearance. But, underneath the bark of the tree, you have the growth rings that give the tree substance. Genealogy research and Ethical wills are just like a tree. One gives the outside appearance, the other gives meaning and substance.

Now that's where the "**ETHICAL WILL**" comes into the equation. How do **YOU** pass on to your descendants information about you that will add to " that dash " between your date of birth and your date of death. What information ? Before we go into that, let's first talk about "**ETHICAL WILLS**". Just what is an "**ETHICAL WILL**" ? There are quite a few really good books and a lot of information on the internet that explain and give examples of "**ETHICAL WILLS**" They go a long way back in Jewish history to the days of our forefathers. The earliest example is that of Isaac. At his time of death, he wanted to pass on to his eldest son, Esau, his birthright. However, he was deceived into passing it on to his other son, Isaac. The next and more well known example is when Isaac is dying, he calls all of his sons together and gives each one a blessing, instructions about their future-essentially his "**ETHICAL WILL**". They have a long history in Judaism that was once almost forgotten, but is now be revived.

So Nu, you ask, what is an ethical will ?

## **ETHICAL WILL PRESENTATION - AN ETHICAL WILL:**

### **“ PRESERVING YOUR LEGACY OF VALUES”**

- ❖ How many have heard of an **Ethical Will ? or Tzavaa**
- ❖ How many know what an Ethical Will is ?
- ❖ How many have written an Ethical Will ?
- ❖ **What is an Ethical Will ? The modernized term is Legacy Letter**
  - A very ancient Jewish tradition going back to Biblical days when Jacob called his sons together and gave each a blessing and instructions for the future. *Genesis Chapter 49*. Much later there is reference in the New Testament-Book of *John Chapters 15-18*. The earliest one found still in existence is from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. An Ethical Will is a lovely Jewish custom that has been neglected for too long. It is now becoming more in vogue.
  - When we think of a will we usually think of a legal document intended to divide our property, provide financial security for loved ones, heirs or bequeath to organizations or institutions.
  - A non-binding, non-legal often a written document. They can also be an audio format or even a video format. The latter will also preserve the voice of the person doing the Ethical Will.
  - A document that passes on to your descendants your beliefs, philosophies and ideals on various topics to your loved ones. The purpose of an Ethical Will is to preserve your values for future generations. Because this is not a legally binding document such as a “ **Living Will**” or a “ **Last Will and Testament**”. This does not instruct about medical procedures nor does it pass on to your descendants material goods and wealth. An Ethical Will passes on values-those

values that make you who you are-those values that make you an individual. The **DASH** mark between your date of birth and your date of death. Quite often the contents are shared while the author is still alive, but does not always have to be this way. They should NOT be used to manipulate or control, cause guilt, scold, or blame.

❖ **What does an Ethical Will contain ?**

- As Rabbi Jack Reimer of Boca Raton-a major player in the revitalization of Ethical Wills said, *“ if they are willing to take my property, they should be at least willing to consider my values”*. Nathaniel Stampfer states in his book, *“So That Your Values Live On-Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them”;* *“ The most precious thing we leave behind when we die is not our property, it is our legacy of values and beliefs.” Dr. Barry Baines-my cousin*

❖ **Key Word or subject matter:**

- Honesty, Integrity, Credibility, Conduct, Education, Learning, Financial Security, Life Cycle events, Jewish Traditions, Philanthropy, Regrets, Accomplishments, Mistakes, Strengths-Weaknesses, Family, Favorite Expressions, Israel, Synagogue, Jewish Heritage, Jewish Holidays, Jewish Survival, Tzadakah, Tikun Ohlam,, Responsibility, Wishes for the future and what ever else you desire to pass on to your family

❖ **How long is an Ethical will ?**

- Long-Short-there is no set length for an Ethical Will. They can be a short simple blessing or as long and complex as an autobiography. They contain those thoughts, ideas, principals and values that you want to be remembered by. You can pass on family history, family stories, family lore etc.

❖ **Why Write and Ethical Will ?**

- This will allow you, the individual, to be remembered as a person. You are not just a name, a date of birth, a place of

birth, a date of death and a place of death. **YOU** are that plus everything in between !! **The Dash Mark !!** You are much more than what is written in an obituary. You are a person who should be remembered as a person. How many of you know much about your grand parents or great grand parents as individuals ? That is one of the purposes of an Ethical Will.

❖ **How to Get Started...**

- Do it...you will find it a difficult, time consuming project. You will find it to be an enjoyable, educational, introspective project that yields a self of accomplishment. It allows you to come to terms with your mortality. It allows you to recall your life, your values, your principals. It allows you to pass on to your descendants who you are...who you were. This is why making an Ethical Will is so important either in written form, audio format or video format. Also remember, an Ethical Will is a work in progress until the very end. It can be amended, re-written, revised at any time.



Resource books:

*Ethical Wills; Putting Your Values on Paper/* Dr. Barry K.

Baines, M.D.

*Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury/* Edited/annotated

by Rabbi Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer

*So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to*

*Prepare Them /* Edited/annotated by Rabbi Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer

There are many many web sites to assist and many many more books on the subject. I have listed just a few to get you started. Remember, every Ethical Will is different as they should be.

**“ AND SO GROWS THE TREE “**