

## **Ethical Wills -- Leaving a Legacy**

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Sept 2015

We know that businesses have mission statements that help define who they are. Can you guess what Business this is from their mission statement?

“We share the experience of selling *goods* that make you happy, giving service that makes you smile, ... showing love and care in all our actions, to enrich as many lives as we possibly can.”

So is what Business is it?

- Is it a Toy store?
- A candy shop?
- A Soup Kitchen?
- Is it Ashley Madison?

It is a deli. Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor, MI. A deli whose goal is -- to make you smile. I finally made it to Zingerman's for Shira's Graduation weekend, and you know what? It was really a great experience. There was line out the door, but there were people stationed along the way to help. They handed you a menu at one point, brought coffee samples and food samples up and down the line. They made it the kind of line where you talk to strangers (maybe that is just a Michigan, Mid-west thing).

When you got up to the counter they “forced” you to take a taste of the side salads before you ordered.

Someone from the kitchen, in this busy restaurant, came out to talk to us about the Gluten free options.

Everyone was so friendly. We had to wait for our food for a while, but staff came over to check on us while we sat at the table and waited.

I did not read the Zingerman's mission statement during my visit, but I felt it. I had a particularly pleasant and joyous experience in a crowded deli, with a long line, on a busy weekend. I experienced Zingerman's mission statement.

Do you have a mission statement for your life? Do you live it?

Six years ago I wrote down my core values. I came up with Integrity, Compassion, Balance, Wisdom, Creativity and Family. Not quite a mission statement, but some pretty good guiding principles, which I refer to when making choices about how to spend my time.

This year I thought it would be a good idea to update my list. I did some of the classic exercises but they weren't working, especially since I already had my old list in the back of my mind.

Around this time I bought a piece of art for my office. There was a space to personalize the art. I looked for a quote, but nothing was speaking to me, so decided to write my own. It turned out to be a series of short pithy sayings.

**Make god's will, your will.**

**Find kedushah, holiness, in everyone.**

**Pursue tzedek -- righteousness and justice.**

**Be generous. Make a difference. Create Beauty. Be kind.**

I realized that this was my mission statement. My guiding principles. They are the concepts that are most important to me. The ones that I hope I live my life by every day. The ones I use to make decisions, the ones I hope you have experienced through our interactions and the ones that I pray I have taught to my children.

David Brooks calls these “Eulogy values.” In his book, *The Road to Character*, he contrasts “Eulogy values” with “Resume values”. **Resume values** are those items we list on a cv or résumé to show the world how great we are. They reflect our skills and external accomplishments. **Eulogy values** are character traits that define our core.

Even when we can articulate them and know what we value, they are not always easy to cultivate. Brooks says, “most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop profound character.”<sup>i</sup>

Society doesn't help. We are rewarded for our career success with status and money. If we describe our self as a doctor or a trader, or even a rabbi, people are much more impressed than if we describe our self as a nice person or a caring soul.

Vic Strecher is a professor of Public Health at University of Michigan. His 19 year old daughter, Julia, died from complications of a heart disease she contracted as a baby. Her death was life changing for him, as you can imagine. Nothing made sense anymore, all of his beliefs about life and death, disease, risk and change were up-ended.

In his despair, he immersed himself in research and came across the story of the Dung Beetle – an insect that has one purpose in life and that is to create a ball of dung by rolling it in a straight path, like a snowball, not caring what gets in its way.

When the dung beetle reaches its destination in “celebrates” with its mate. Getting this dung ball to its spot is crucial for the beetle's survival. And nothing can get in its way. Strecher wrote about it in a graphic novel called “On Purpose” in which he stresses the importance of core values and mission, about having a clear purpose to guide your life. He too talks about emphasizing the right values and contrasts self-transcending values vs. self-enhancing values. He says,

Research shows that self-transcending values (what Brooks called eulogy values) are more likely to create well-being and greater willpower to change behavior than what we might call “self-enhancing values” (resume values).<sup>ii</sup>

Rabbi Abraham Twerski teaches “Lo nitna Torah eleh l’tzoref bah et ha’briyot – Torah was not given to humankind for any purpose other than to refine people.” (Bereshit Rabba 44:1) To help us live our best lives through Torah values. To develop, our character. Judaism has always asserted that to live a meaningful life we have to realize that we have a transcendent purpose and that God has given each one of us a job to do and that we only have a finite amount of time in which to do it.

A great way to access our purpose and discover our God given job is look backwards. To see where we want to end up. To write our own eulogy.

I have found it very hard to write my own eulogy. While I know it would be effective in pointing out where I am falling short and where I am on the right path, it is just too difficult and frankly, too creepy.

So in searching for a way to help me clarify my eulogy values I remembered the Jewish practice of writing an ethical will. Creating a document or a letter to be read after one’s death to family members. In a legal will you bequeath money and worldly goods, in an ethical will you leave values and principals that you have found useful in your life.

My Grandfather, Justus, wrote several letters near the end of his life that passed on his acquired wisdom to us. I love pulling them out and rereading them. I don’t need them to remember what he taught me, but I like hearing his teachings in his own words and seeing them in his own handwriting.

On his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday he writes: “In discussing money, it is apparent in our civilization that this is a necessity for living, raising and educating a family and providing for old age. However, it should not be an all-consuming obsession but rather should take its place in relative importance. A person’s occupation should not be a chore engaged in solely for remuneration. One should derive pleasure in his job with a feeling of accomplishment and pride.” 2/13/1999

I could have written this for him ... it really speaks his truth as he lived his life as a doctor – until he died at age 94.

I asked you, members and friends of Temple Beth Torah, to write your Ethical Wills. The response was great and I have learned so much from you over the past 30 days. Sometimes I found myself nodding along and at other moments laughing aloud. I enjoyed learning what motivates you and what you value the most and from whom you learned your values.

Well, it wouldn't be fair of me to make you do all the work, so I'd like to share my Ethical Will with you.

Dear Shira and Ari,

You have already acquired so many of the traits that I would wish for you. You are honest and ethical. You care about other people – ones you know personally and people of the world whom you can help. I hope you will always work to balance your own needs with those of others. Remember it is okay to be selfish, sometimes. You need to take care of yourself. At the same time balance your needs with those of people in your immediate world -- family, friends and colleagues and with the world at large.

Live in a way in which you do well, but also do good.

While living a purposeful life is important and keeping your big guiding principals in mind, is essential, I hope you'll strive to balance between planning and being purpose driven with just living your life and letting things happen. Finding the balance between being goal oriented and responding to the moment, trusting that you are prepared for whatever comes your way. Knowing that your life is unfolding just the way it should be. For me, that means, trusting in God.

In the period around the Holidays I am reminded that making the holidays special is worth the effort. I have to give credit here to Grandma and Pop-pop and Savta and Sabba – they have been the main cooks and bottle washers on many of these occasions. But that is another lesson as well. It is okay to ask for help when you need it.

I also love how these celebrations connect me to my grandparents and to my parents and to you, Shira and Ari. You have both learned so much from your grandparents: Tenacity, a love of learning, curiosity, the commitment to the larger society as they all volunteer and head organizations; They have passed on a sense of generosity of which we have been beneficiaries.

In putting all this together, I have three principals that sum up what I think is most important in life – Be grateful, be generous and be kind.

**BE GRATEFUL**

We have always made a big deal about Sukkot.

Do you remember the year you slept in the Sukkah and could see the stars through the schach? I think it was the second or third night of the holiday. Then later in the week our sukkah actually blew upside down from a hurricane. It was kind of scary, but it was amazing to really understand the commandment to build a sukkah that could blow away in strong wind. A sukkah that isn't stable and secure like a house.

The sukkah is a reminder that life is fragile. That we need to treasure each moment. That we can't and should not hide in our 4 walls, in our warm house protected from the elements and the woes of the world. We are reminded to appreciate the power of nature, the destructive and the life giving elements. And then to appreciate the openness of the walls that remind us to connect with neighbors and friends – to let people into our lives.

Each year we entertain, and have people over to share in this holiday. We are busy and tired ... Sukkot always comes 4 days after Yom Kippur (whose idea was that?) but I'm always so thankful that Abba puts up the Sukkah, that I decorate it and that we put in the extra energy to invite guests over. The hard work and the effort remind me how lucky we are to be able to entertain and to have a house, that usually allows us to choose when we connect with the elements. This sense of gratitude leads me to want to say thank you. The best way to say thank you, is do for others, pay it forward.

And that leads to my next point.

### BE GENEROUS

Be generous with your time and money. Tzedakah is about righteousness, doing the right thing to make the world better for everyone. Remember that you have been given amazing opportunities and to pay them forward. When we have outgrown our clothes we don't throw them out, we donate them. When disaster hits we go volunteer, especially Sabba. I don't go to the soup kitchen as much as I would like to, but when I do, I feel the power of Tzedakah – of trying to create balance in our the world. My few hours teaching yoga at the Wyandanch camp were some of my favorite moments this summer. I love how you are both involved in the world. At this point in your lives you don't have a lot of money to donate... well, you have my money. Shira, you pointed out that going to nursing homes and singing with autistic kids through Smile Bringer Singers was your tzedakah in college and Ari your involvement in Mini Chefs is similar. Whether it is time or money, always do something that takes you outside of yourself and your own needs.

It can be difficult to choose whom to help. A suggestion for choosing: Look in your own backyard. For me that often means Long Island, Israel, and causes that effect people I know. Give time to causes you believe in and fight for things that are worth fighting for -- democracy, freedom – to think, feel and believe freely, human rights, to protect Israel and the Jewish people. Find a few organizations that connect to your values and mission and then support them as generously as you can.

### BE KIND

I want to share a story I recently heard that captures what I think is most important in life – being Kind. In Hebrew we would say doing *Chesed* – acts of loving kindness.

Drew Dudley (Tedx Toronto 2010) gives a great Ted Talk about Lollipop Moments. He says, I went to a small university... and on my last day there a girl came up to me and she said, "I remember the first time that I met you." And then she told me a story that happened four years earlier. She said, "On the day before I started University I was in the hotel room with my mom and my dad. And I was so scared and so convinced that I couldn't do this; that I wasn't ready for university that I just burst into tears. " [But my Mom and Dad convinced me to try the first day.] "And so, I went the next day and was standing in line getting ready for registration and I looked around and I just knew I couldn't do it. ..., I knew I had to quit. And I turned to my mom and my dad to tell them that we needed to go home, and just at that moment you came out of the student union building wearing the stupidest hat I have ever seen in my life. It was awesome.

And you had a bucket full of lollipops. And you were walking along and you were handing the lollipops out to people in line and talking about [a charity]. And all of a sudden you got to me, and you just stopped. And you stared. It was creepy. And then you looked at the guy next to me, and you smiled, and you reached in to your bucket and you pulled out a lollipop and you held it out to him. And you said to him, 'You need to give a lollipop to the beautiful woman standing next to you.' " And she continued, "I have never seen anyone get more embarrassed faster in my life. He turned beet-red and wouldn't even look at me and just kinda held the lollipop out like this." [shyly giving the lollipop] "And I felt so bad for this dude that I took the lollipop and as soon as I did you got this incredibly severe look on your face and you looked at my mom and my dad and you said, 'Look at that. First day away from home and already she's taking candy from a stranger!'"

And she said, "Everybody lost it. And I know this is cheesy, but in that moment when everyone was laughing, I knew that I shouldn't quit. And I haven't spoken to you once in the four years since that day, but I heard that you were leaving, and I had to come up and tell you that you've been an incredibly important person in my life, and I'm going to miss you."

And she walks away. And I'm flattened. She gets about six feet away and she turns around and smiles and goes, "And you should probably know this too. I'm still dating that guy four years later."

A year and half [later], Drew got an invitation to their wedding.

Drew didn't even remember that moment. But it was a Lollipop moment. A moment in time when kindness lead to more kindness, in unimaginable ways.

When have you had a lollipop moment? A moment where someone said something or did something that you feel fundamentally made your life better, that they might not even remember?<sup>iii</sup>

This is our task, Create moments of kindness in other people's lives. Figure out what they need and just surprise them with it. Every year the President of the

Temple sends me flowers from the congregation and every year it brings this giant smile to my face and even surprises me. It is a lollipop moment just when I need it most. Thanks.

Speaking of being kind. I came across a quote from that fountain of modern wisdom, Facebook, that really made me think twice. It said:

**We don't have to agree on anything to be kind to one another.** (Toby Mac #speaklife) It was a "wow" that I hope you will take to heart. Kindness – civility, good manners are for everyone, not just the people you like and agree with. We are obligated to go beyond political and religious differences to connect to that oneness in the world.

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And one more thing. "I love you." We were always pretty good at saying I love you to each other. But on Sept 11, 2001 I couldn't remember if I had said "I love you" to you when you left for school and to Abba when he left for work that morning. Since then, we rarely end a phone call or leave the house or go on a trip without articulating that we love each other. I know you know that we love you and of course, vice versa, but it makes me feel good every time we say it aloud. So lets keep on saying it. I love you, always.

Love,  
Eema

PS I know you will both do well. But don't forget to do good, along the way.

So what ever you call them eulogy values, self-transcending values, Torah values or just valuing doing good over doing well, it is worth your time and energy to write them down for yourselves or others and then to live by them. Having a mission statement gives us direction when life gets tricky, and when we have hard decisions to make. Writing an ethical will makes you pare down to your essentials. Leaving it for others is just a bonus for them. If you send me your ethical will, I'd be delighted to add it to our Elul Stories and share it with the congregation. Living a good life is more meaningful when we do it together.

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<sup>i</sup> David Brooks. The Road to Character. P. xi

<sup>ii</sup> On Purpose: Lessons in Life an Health from the Frog, the Dung Beetle and Julia. Victor J. Strecher, PhD. P. 73

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/drew-dudley/leadership-ted-x\\_b\\_1989764.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/drew-dudley/leadership-ted-x_b_1989764.html)