

YK Sermon 5769 (2008): Living a Life with Purpose
By Rabbi Michael Schwab

When I was in High School my English and Literature teacher gave us an assignment that I will never forget.

She asked us to write our own eulogy.

At the time, having only been to a couple of funerals, I barely understood what that meant. In fact, when the words first came out of my teacher's mouth, I thought I had misunderstood. The assignment just sounded so morbid and somehow not OK. Especially to me, coming from a Jewish culture, where mention of death or disease in reference to someone who is not dying or sick, is taboo to say the least. However, I had not misunderstood. The assignment was given and I wrote it.

Putting aside the question of whether my teacher should, or should not, have assigned such an essay to High school students, looking back, I can now see the wisdom of the exercise. In asking us to write our imagined eulogy, what we would want to be said about us after we died, my teacher was really asking us to create a vision for the lives we were living. She was asking us to articulate for ourselves the kind of person we wanted to be. She was asking us to think about how we wanted to conduct ourselves while we still had time on earth. And she was asking us to do that as High School students, with our adult lives hopefully ahead of us, not after most of the chapters of our lives had already been written. I realize now that the assignment was not morbid at all – it was an exercise full of hope, wisdom and a zest for life.

At its core, the lesson of such an assignment was that we need to live our lives with purpose. We need to live lives of meaning, ones that fulfill their potential in every sense of the word. And to do so, we need to know what we stand for, what we believe in, what we want to accomplish and what we hold dear. We have to create a vision for our life and attempt to make sure that our energies align with that vision. Yet, ironically, to discover such a vision for the future it is often best to look at life backwards, to ask ourselves what we would like to be remembered for, what we would like to leave behind, what we would like our legacy to be. Projecting backwards, in this way will, in fact often help us decide how we want to move forward.

In that regard, you may recall an e-mail that was widely distributed over the last couple of months that contained a very depressing condolence notice about a woman named Dolores. I checked the authenticity of the e-mail with watchdog organizations, like Snopes, which report that it was indeed authentic, unlike most of the messages that are forwarded to us. I will read it to you, minus the full names of the people involved:

Dolores, born in 1929 in New Mexico left us on August 7, 2008. She will be met in the afterlife by her husband, Raymond, her son Paul Jr., and daughter Ruby. She is survived by her daughters, and son, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. I apologize if I missed anyone.

Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society, and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. I speak for the majority of her family when I say that her presence will not be missed by many, very few tears will be shed and there will be no lamenting over her passing. Her family will remember Dolores, and amongst ourselves we will remember her in our own way, which were mostly sad and troubling times throughout the years. We may have some fond memories of her and perhaps we will think of those times too. But I truly believe that at the end of the day ALL of us will really only miss what we never had, a good and kind mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. I hope she is finally at peace with herself.

As for the rest of us left behind, I hope this is the beginning of a time of healing, and learning to be a family again. There will be no service, no prayers, and no closure for the family she spent a lifetime tearing apart. We cannot come together in the end to see to it that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren can say their goodbyes. So I say here for all of us, GOOD BYE MOM.

What a heart-wrenching and terribly sad piece. The condolence notice depicts a woman who clearly lived her life with no sense of priorities or values; nothing to leave as a legacy to those who will live after her. Therefore when she died, there was nothing to be said, except for that sad statement I just read. And despite the fact that this account is probably too extreme to describe almost any situation we likely know ourselves, it can and should serve as a reminder to us that we need to live a life that is value driven, during which we nurture the important things in life, even if they are difficult, like working on our relationships, fighting for a cause we believe in and making time to care for others in this world. For when we live our lives the way Dolores seems to have, we let our eulogies be written for us. Therefore, the message is: we have to live life now in the way we want it to be lead so that we can create our own legacy and decide for ourselves what we leave behind. When we live a purpose-driven life it is we, through our actions, who decide what our eulogies will say.

One more direct way to leave a legacy of your own choosing is by composing what is called an ethical will. This powerful document is a written statement, usually only a couple of pages, that includes instructions for life, morals, values and family stories that one generation hopes to pass on to the next. As Charles Osgood said on CBS radio, "Ethical wills leave their loved ones with "values" instead of just "valuables". They remind us that the most precious thing we leave behind when we die is not our property; it is our legacy of principles and beliefs. When most of us think of a will, we think of a legal document intended to divide up one's property and provide financial security for our heirs. This is important too.

However, this is another kind of will, one that has long been in use in Jewish history and its aim is to bequeath a spiritual legacy, a heritage of values. Those who write ethical wills --often parents writing to their children or grandparents to their grandchildren-- try to sum up what they have learned in life, and to express what they want most for, and from, their loved-ones. More importantly, however, because they are written while we are alive, ethical wills are windows into the souls of those who write them. They not only

pass on the wisdom acquired in a lifetime but help the writer him or herself better understand their own vision of an ideal life. A vision that will allow us the kind of perspective to enable us to evaluate how we are currently living our lives. Composing such a will can be a life-changing exercise and can and should be done at any age, during any stage of life.

Rabbi Jack Reimer, a colleague, wrote a wonderful book in the 90's on composing ethical wills. In it he includes a guide to writing one's own, which is a great resource to help each of us get started. In addition, he also helps provide context to help us understand how meaningful writing such a document can be. For example, he reports that one family told him that the parents decided to actually read their ethical will to their children while they were still alive. An idea that I firmly endorse. They wanted to use the document they wrote to help their lives in the present, not simply to guide those that came after them, once they were gone. Rabbi Reimer says in the book, I quote, "The children who heard the letter told their parents that they were surprised to find out that some of the things in it were of such great importance to their parents; and the parents replied that they were surprised to find that the children did not know how strongly they felt about these things. The experience brought them closer together and led to a much better understanding between them. Things that the parents thought they had said, had never really been communicated to the children. And the children felt as if their parents had expected them to be mind-readers, instead of saying what was in their hearts." The ability of such an essay to bring meaning, understanding and bonding to families, couples and the individuals who write them, is truly remarkable.

To illustrate this further in a more personal way I share with you the beautifully written reflection of another colleague, Rabbi Yair Robinson, on his experience composing his own ethical will. He wrote:

It was, at last, a quiet moment.

Our families had left some days before, the baby was asleep, and Marisa was resting at last. Even the dog had found some sense of equilibrium and was dozing in the hallway outside our study.

Everyone in the house was dozing, but me. I had one more task to perform, one more responsibility.

In that quiet moment, I wrote the most important document I could imagine. It was not a sermon or an article or even the beginnings of a book. I wrote a letter. I wrote a letter to my son.

The letter isn't long; not more than a page or two. I filled it with my hopes for him, my blessings, my imaginings of his future life. I filled it with some instruction, some minor descriptions of me.

Why did I write this letter? I wrote it because that's part of being a father in Judaism; my

father did it for me, and now I do it for Shai.

We as a people understand the importance of memory. Memory is not merely a connection to the past; it is not mere nostalgia. At its best, Memory is a catalyst for the future. We remember those we loved in life, those who inspired us and taught us, and those memories give us impetus to make our lives better, to live up to our own potential, the potential those beloved, departed individuals saw in us. I want Elishai to have that, even if, chas v'shalom, something should happen so that he never knows me. I want him to know my pride and love, have some sense of who I am, as any child should have of a parent. I want his heart to be filled with some pride, and find something in my life to aspire and affirm his own.

That is the most any of us can hope for; to be remembered and to know that our memories—our lives—have meaning. That is why we turn to the memories of our loved ones. To grieve, to feel their physical absence from our lives, but also to remind ourselves of who those people were to us, so that we can turn again to our chosen tasks, that we can turn again to life.

I won't tell you what I wrote; that's for him alone, someday. God willing, I'll be able to share that letter with him personally, and we'll share the memories that parents share with their children, that loved ones share with each other, so that when I am gone, and he sits on this Yom Kippur day, he remembers as we remember. And in our remembering, may the hearts of children be turned to parents and the hearts of parents to children, that our memories inspire us, renew us, and make us young again.

What beautiful description of the power of writing such a letter, the power found in creating and communicating such a legacy. Doing so creates a tangible memory that has the capacity to bring families closer, bring enlightenment to the author and create an inheritance that can be handed down l'dor va dor, from one generation to the next, as an inspiration to live life better and more fully.

You may be surprised to know that the writing of such ethical wills has been a Jewish tradition since as far back as the time of the Torah. Those who know their Biblical stories will recall that on his deathbed, our patriarch Jacob called all of his children together and: expressed to them his thoughts on life, communicated his dying request to be buried in Israel and gave each of his children a personal message. Moses was another great figure who did the same. Knowing that he would not go with his children, the Children of Israel, into the Promised Land, he addressed them in word and writing, the entire nation, teaching them all of the values and wisdom he had accumulated. Essentially, the whole Book of Deuteronomy, known as Torat Moshe, was his ethical will -- the legacy he left to all of his descendants, which we still read today. Later, King David also communicated an ethical will, this one addressed to his son before he died. In it he too bequeathed to the next generation his spiritual legacy and sage advice. Each of these great figures of the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, recognized the importance of creating their own legacy by communicating to those they loved the accumulated wisdom and values they cherished over the course of their lifetimes.

Yet, one of the most well known ethical wills today is one that was very recently

composed, which is actually a video you may have seen on TV or YouTube, entitled The Last Lecture. The lecture, as it was called, was given by a Professor named Randy Pausch. Randy taught computer science and engineering Carnegie Mellon University. In his mid-forties he was at the top his field, a world-renown expert in virtual reality. He was the cofounder of the Entertainment Technology Center and he was a consultant for Google, Electronic Arts as well as Disney's famed Imagineering group. However, unfortunately in September, 2006 Randy was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and in August 2007 he was told that he had only six months of good health left.

Therefore, in September of 2007 Randy decided to deliver a "Last Lecture" entitled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams". Carnegie Mellon had a history of holding a series of theoretical "final talks" where professors had a chance to impart whatever wisdom they would like, in a one lecture format, an ethical will to the students of sorts. Unfortunately for Randy this was not theoretical; it really was to be his final lecture as a professor. In it Randy passed on what he felt were the most important lessons he learned in life, very little of which involved his deep knowledge of computer science. What he spoke about were relationships, dreams and values. At the end of the lecture the crowd of four hundred gave him a long standing ovation. A reporter from the Wall Street Journal, Jeffrey Zaslow, was in attendance and wrote an article about the talk. He also posted a brief segment of the lecture on the web. He was surprised and overwhelmed at the enormous response he received from readers and viewers. People wrote how moved they were by the lecture, how inspiring it was. Soon the lecture made its way to YouTube and at this point it has been downloaded and viewed over 7 million times. The lecture was quickly turned into a book that became a best-seller and Randy was interviewed by Oprah, Diane Sawyer and countless others before he died in July of this year. Clearly, something about this lecture resonated with, and inspired, the millions of people who watched, read or heard it.

Part of the popularity of his lecture was due to the wisdom of what he said. However, what I think struck people the most was the fact that he spoke from his heart, honestly and clearly about what he believed life to be all about. He communicated to us in a succinct and powerful way, a life led with purpose. And one could see during his talk how leading a life with clear goals and priorities can sustain someone, even through the tragedy of what he was enduring, even though he would not lead the life he had expected.

On this Yom Kippur I would like to share with you a few of the highlights of his powerful lecture, for much of what he taught speaks to the themes of the day and further demonstrates the type of wisdom that can be communicated in an ethical will. One lesson he began with he expressed as, I quote, "Brick walls in life are there for a reason. They let us know how badly we want something". Using examples from his own life, he illustrated to us all that roadblocks and failure are part of life and something that we need to learn from. They help us understand our priorities and motivate us to create either different goals or to engineer a different way of achieving what we want. Challenges are there to help us understand how much we really desire what we were trying to attain.

Subsequently, he added, "Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted". What he is saying is that most of what we learn, we learn indirectly. His

example was his dream of playing football for the NFL. He never made it, but the experience of being on his High School team and having a coach push him to improve himself, to be a leader and to learn new things, helped him immeasurably in life. It wasn't about football per se, but what he learned from preparing to play. We must remember to learn from all of our experiences and recognize what we have gained even if we failed to achieve our original goal. On a day when we recall many of our shortcomings and failures this is valuable advice indeed.

However, my favorite piece of wisdom, which is so appropriate for the High Holiday season, was, "If you wait long enough, people will surprise you and impress you. Everyone has a good side, you just have to be patient". An optimistic view, yes. Overly optimistic, maybe. However, it is certainly true that people are never as one-dimensional as we think. And while they may have hurt us any number of times, there is most definitely a side to them this is likable, and more importantly, redeemable. It is often difficult to think that way about people who have caused us pain or about those we do not like, but as Professor Pausch said, having a generous and forgiving attitude towards others actually makes our own lives easier to live. Grudges and anger take up a great deal of energy and they rarely lead to anything productive or helpful.

The flip side of that teaching he phrased diplomatically as "Arrogance will limit what you can accomplish in the world". Self-confidence is great, but we are all still simply human beings, who need help, often fail and make plenty of mistakes. There is no reason to be arrogant. Perhaps more importantly though, it is a fact that people are turned off by arrogance and do not respond well to it. Therefore, it will truly restrict what we can achieve in life.

Similarly, as Prof. Pausch stated, those who are not arrogant can also understand the truth that, I quote, "Your critics are the ones who really care. When no one is criticizing you that is when you should really worry". Appropriate feedback, however hard to hear, is crucial in helping us to improve ourselves. We need to be modest enough and strong enough to hear other's criticism of our actions. And instead of reacting by defending ourselves, we need to be able listen, to look inside and say, 'maybe he is right, maybe I could be a little better in this area'. Those who bother to give you feedback are usually the ones who love you, the ones who want or need you to be better and the ones who will also support you and celebrate with you when you do improve.

Finally, Randy taught that most of all, relationships are the key to happiness. The lessons he imparted during the lecture were all explicitly presented as based on interactions he had with certain key people in his life. These relationships, he said, are what matter most. To demonstrate the value of the people who mean something to us in life, he even held a brief birthday party for his wife, using the limited time he had for his own final lecture, for her. And it was on the note of he relationships that he ended his presentation, with what he called a "head fake", a term from his football days, which is a motion with your head that is used to fool the person guarding you into thinking you are going in one direction, when you are really headed in another. The "head fake" of his lecture, he said with a smile, was that the presentation he gave wasn't actually for his students or for any

of us; it was really for his kids. Through his talk, he was leaving them his ethical will.

You don't have to be as charismatic as Randy Pausch, though, in order to compose an ethical will. You don't have to be a great writer or a Biblical figure. As one website advising people writing ethical wills states, "You are not trying to win the Pulitzer prize". You don't need your ethical will to be played on YouTube. You just have to speak from the heart. You also don't have to write it in one sitting and you can always edit as you go. There are no rules you must follow. The key is to begin, for the process is just as important as the result. It is the act of composing that will help you identify for yourself what values and priorities you have in life, will help you decide whether your time and activities have been spent in consonance with those values and priorities and will lead to an ability to communicate those values and lessons to others.

And there are tremendous resources to aid you in this process. There is, as I mentioned, Rabbi Reimer's book. There are a number of websites that give you tutorials and questions to answer to help get you started. There are endless examples of other people's ethical wills, on-line or in books, that include those of young people, people with children, seniors, people in good health, people struggling with their health – all types of people in all kinds of situations. Almost everyone can do it and this endeavor can truly be a life-changing exercise no matter what stage of life you are in.

Therefore, I want to stress, that the point of creating an ethical will or thinking about the legacy we want to leave behind is not an exercise about death; it is about life. People like our patriarch Jacob, all the way through to Randy Pausch, have created such testaments to teach us how important it is to live, specifically to live life purposefully, to live a life guided by core values that are articulated and clear. These figures model for us the significance of having a vision for our lives and of communicating that vision in words and with each action we take throughout our lives, in order to leave a legacy of our own choosing that can inform our lives now and have meaning to those who come after.

Tomorrow we will recite the Yizkor service, when we remember our loved ones. During the service we will talk about life and death, ultimate meaning and the judgment of God. All of these things as well, according to Judaism, are not only about death, but also about life. Remembering and thinking about those who have gone before us should give us: guidance to choose our values, strength to accomplish our goals and inspiration to continue to push forward even when things are difficult. That is why the name for a cemetery in Judaism is not only the house of death but also the house of life. For those whose loved ones have died more recently, this may be too difficult at this time. But, for most, this message of life was precisely what my English teacher was trying to teach us back in High School with her assignment, what Randy Pausch was trying to accomplish with his Last Lecture and what Yom Kippur and our Jewish tradition are trying to teach us. We must look back to look forward. We must gain strength from the past to live with purpose in the present and future. For when we create a vision for our lives and then communicate that vision to those we know and love, we inspire them to live with purpose as well, which allows all of us to fulfill our tremendous God-given potential, as partners with the Divine, and to really effect Tikkun Olam, the betterment of the world. As the

saying goes, modified a little by me, “if you aim at nothing you will surely hit it. But if you set for yourself meaningful goals, no matter which way life turns you about, you always have a compass to point you in the direction of home”. G'mar Hatima Tovah, may we be sealed for a year of clarity, purpose, direction, connection and meaningful deeds. Amen.