

# FROM SINAI TO SELF: WRITING YOUR ETHICAL WILL



## VALUE

# HUMAN DIGNITY

## *Kavod Habriyot*

Shavuot celebrates the giving of Torah at Sinai, a moment when our people received not only laws and teachings, but a legacy meant to guide and uplift every generation. That legacy was not meant to remain on the mountain. It was meant to be lived, shared, and passed forward. In our own lives, we also carry wisdom, stories, and values that deserve to be shared. An ethical will is one way to do that. Rooted in the Jewish value of *Kavod Habriyot*, honoring the dignity of every person, an ethical will focuses on the spiritual wealth we leave behind: the lessons, blessings, and truths we want to give to those who come after us. Today, we will explore what matters most to us, name the values that shape who we are, and begin putting them into words so they can become part of the legacy we leave.



**TIMELINE: 90 MIN**

BEGIN WITH INTENTION | 5 MIN

FRAME: SHAVUOT, TORAH, AND ETHICAL WILLS | 10 MIN

PERSONAL REFLECTION | 10 MIN

ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES | 20 MIN

START YOUR ETHICAL WILL | 15 MIN

FULL GROUP SHARING | 20 MIN

BRING YOUR LEARNING HOME | 5 MIN

END WITH MEANING | 5 MIN



## WHO FACILITATES THE SESSION

This session is co-facilitated by the Community Leader and the participants:

**The Community Leader's role** is to open and guide the flow of the session, introduce activities, keep track of time, and model openness by sharing a personal example.

**The participants' role** is to engage fully in both the activities and the facilitation. This can include reading source material aloud, introducing prompts, leading small-group discussions, and inviting others to share.

Everyone in the room is responsible for creating a warm, respectful environment where honest reflection is encouraged, silence is welcomed, and all voices are valued. The goal is to learn with and from one another, not just from a single facilitator.



## MATERIALS

- Pens
- Journal/Notebook
- Relaxing/contemplative background music (optional)



## FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Please remind participants to bring a journal. There is also space for writing here for those who forget.

**You don't need to be an expert or have written an ethical will yourself.** Your role is to create a **warm, thoughtful** space for **reflection** and **conversation**. Encourage **honesty** over polish, and **process** over product.

- **Model vulnerability:** Share something small from your own values or story to open the space.
- **Honor silence:** Don't rush to fill quiet moments.
- **Make it spacious:** There's no right way to do this. Affirm that everyone is on their own journey.
- **Review:** The Additional Resources on p. 59, which can be helpful if someone feels stuck in writing.

**PART I**

**BEGIN WITH INTENTION**



5 MIN

Looking for ways to start your session with purpose?

Turn to the Universal Guide on p. 4 for simple, meaningful ideas to open your gathering with presence, connection, and shared energy.

**PART II**

**FRAME: SHAVUOT, TORAH, AND ETHICAL WILLS**



10 MIN

**Shavuot commemorates the moment we received Torah at Sinai.**

We often think of Torah as a set of laws, but another framework to understand Torah is as a **legacy of values**. In this way, Torah is a kind of **ultimate ethical will**, transmitted not just to one generation, but to the entire Jewish people for all time. An ethical will passes down what matters most: values, life lessons, memories, and love. Jewish tradition includes many ethical wills, from Jacob’s blessings to his sons to Moshe’s final speech in the Book of Deuteronomy. Ethical wills focus on **spiritual wealth** rather than material wealth.

**Today, we will ask:** *What values do you want to pass forward? What wisdom defines you? What legacy do you hope to leave?*

**PART III**

**PERSONAL REFLECTION**



10 MIN

Creating an ethical will is an invitation to focus on what truly matters: the beliefs, values, stories, and memories you hope to pass on.

This table is a starting point. You have 10 minutes now to begin filling it out. You are not expected to finish it, and you shouldn’t feel pressure to write complete sentences or polished thoughts. This is a chance to pause, reflect, and jot down what comes up for you, whether in words, phrases, doodles, or symbols. *Let it be messy. Let it be real.*

<p><b>VALUES</b></p> <p>What principles and values guide your choices?</p>	
<p><b>WORLDVIEW</b></p> <p>How do you make sense of the world and your place in it? What stories shape how you see others?</p>	
<p><b>MEMORIES</b></p> <p>What moments have shaped who you are and how you live?</p>	
<p><b>LEARNING</b></p> <p>What wisdom have you gained about living, relating to others, and navigating the world?</p>	

## PART IV

## ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES



20 MIN

Now, before you begin drafting your ethical will, **take a few minutes to reflect with a partner or in a small group.** The process of writing something so personal and meaningful can bring up unexpected resistance. Talking through these challenges can help you move forward with greater clarity and kindness toward yourself.

In your group, explore one or more of the following questions. You don't have to cover them all. Just notice what resonates.

1. **Who** am I writing to, and if it's hard to name, why is that so?
  - Are you writing to a specific child? All your children? A future generation? A friend, a student, your community, or someone who isn't here yet?
  - What feelings come up when you imagine that person reading your words?
  - Is there someone you wish you could write to, but feel unsure how?
2. What **relationships** feel too complicated to include, but too big to ignore?
  - Are there people or situations in your life that stir pain, anger, or unresolved tension? Are you tempted to leave them out completely, or to over-explain?
  - How might you acknowledge complexity without having to solve it?
3. What if **I don't know** what I want to say?
  - Do you ever feel like you're "supposed" to have something wise to pass on, but you're not sure you do?
  - What happens when you hit a blank page, or worse, a blank mind?
  - What's one way you can move forward even if you don't have the perfect words?
4. What if **I'm not ready**?
  - What's making you hesitate?
  - Is it perfectionism? Emotion? Fear of saying too much, or not enough? Or is it something deeper, like the fear of facing your own mortality?
  - What would it take to write as you are, not as you think you should be?

## PART IV

# ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES



20 MIN



Scan to explore the Shomer Collective Glossary

Encourage one another to be **honest**, not polished. **The goal isn't to fix these challenges now, but to name them so they don't hold all the power when you begin to write.**

You can also explore the glossary of terms from Shomer Collective found at the end of this workshop, or scan the QR code on the left. This glossary offers gentle, thoughtful definitions of Jewish concepts and rituals related to death, mourning, and memory. **Shomer Collective** considers end-of-life as a sacred and meaning-filled stage of life. Their resources support individuals and families to approach mortality with clarity, dignity, and connection to Jewish wisdom. We're grateful to include their work in this session as a companion to ethical will writing and legacy reflection.

## PART V

# START YOUR ETHICAL WILL



10 MIN

You've reflected on what matters most, your **values, worldview, memories**, and learning and named some of the **challenges** that may arise.

Now, it's time to begin.

You'll now have about 10 minutes to begin writing. This is not about creating a finished product—it's about giving shape to your voice, your heart, and your hopes. You might only capture a single idea or write a few short lines. That's more than enough.

You can choose one of the prompts below to guide you, or simply begin writing whatever rises to the surface. Use any format that feels natural—letter form, journal entry, notes to your future self, or even fragments. **There's no right way to begin—only the courage to do so.** Allow your words to come however they come.

## PART VI

# FULL GROUP SHARING



20 MIN

Let's come back together as a full group to reflect on the process so far. This is not a time to read your ethical will aloud, rather **a space to share what surfaced for you along the way.** You're invited to speak from any part of the journey:

- A moment of insight or surprise during the personal reflection or small group conversation
- An emotion, hesitation, or breakthrough that showed up during the writing
- A sentence or phrase you wrote that felt true or meaningful
- A challenge you're still sitting with
- A personal reflection on mortality—perhaps sparked by something in the glossary

You don't have to have it all figured out. This is about going through a process together.

START YOUR ETHICAL WILL

Lined writing area for starting an ethical will.

## PART VII

# BRING YOUR LEARNING HOME



5 MIN

Here are a few ways you might bring this learning home:

- **Invite a partner, sibling, or friend to join you:** You might carve out time together to each create your own ethical will—or reflect on your values side-by-side.
- **Explore other creative mediums:** Your ethical will doesn't have to be a letter. It can include a recorded video, a playlist of meaningful songs, a photo montage, or even a slide deck. Choose the formats that feel most true to you.
- **Choose one small step to continue the work:** Maybe it's writing one more story, asking a loved one about *their* values, or setting a reminder to revisit your ethical will during a future holiday or family moment.

**You don't have to finish it now. But you've started.** And just like Torah, the transmission of wisdom begins not with perfection, but with the choice to pass something on.

## PART VIII

# END WITH MEANING



5 MIN

Head back to the Universal Guide on p. 4 for thoughtful ways to close your gathering with reflection, gratitude, and a sense of shared purpose.

## Continue the Journey



Order your copy here

For deeper reflection, we recommend *The Art and Practice of Living Wondrously*, especially the chapter “Wisdom for Times of Loss.” It offers gentle, grounding insights for navigating grief with presence, compassion, and meaning.



Experience YOMM App

If today's experience sparked something for you, consider continuing your journey on **Yomm**, the Momentum app. You'll find courses, reflections, and inspiration to help you keep exploring your values, deepening your legacy, and living, with intention, including *Conversations that Matter* with Celeste Headlee. Headlee, a journalist, public radio host, and author, is best known for her book *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter*. She focuses on how courageous, honest dialogue can bring you clarity, connection, and healing when it matters most.



Listen to the audiobook

For those who want to go deeper into the Jewish wisdom around loss, mourning, and the values we carry forward, we recommend *Remember My Soul* by **Momentum founding director Lori Palatnik**. It's a compassionate, accessible guide to Jewish mourning practices, and a window into how values and memory are transmitted through time.



Purchase the book

## PART VIII

## END WITH MEANING



5 MIN

For those who are ready to keep writing, here are some additional resources from JADE to help you continue shaping your ethical will at your own pace.

## Additional Resources

## OUTLINE IDEA

- **Opening:** I write this to share what matters most—what I've lived, learned, and hope to pass on.
- **Family Legacy:** Stories and events that shaped our family.
- **Personal Journey:** People and experiences that made me who I am.
- **Spiritual Life:** Rituals, texts, and moments of meaning.
- **Ethical Commitments:** Values I tried to live by; one piece of guidance I'd offer.
- **Closing Blessing:** My hopes and blessing for your journey.

## WRITING PROMPTS

- These are the moments that shaped me the most.
- This is the world I came from and how it shaped me.
- These are the lessons life taught me, sometimes the hard way.
- These are the causes I hope you'll carry forward.
- I hope you know how deeply I love you, and how grateful I am for...

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What 3–5 values are essential for a good life, and where did they come from?
- How have they shaped your choices?
- What's one way you've passed them on?
- What advice would you give your younger self?
- What's one way you've passed on your values, or hope to?
- If you could give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?

JADE  
websiteThe Hineni  
Tool

## About Our Content Collaborator

JADE (Jewish Association for Death Education) is dedicated to bringing Jewish wisdom, ritual, and meaning into one of life's most challenging experiences: death and dying. Recognizing that many Jews lack education about Jewish death practices, JADE provides spiritual and educational resources to help individuals and families navigate end-of-life moments with clarity, dignity, and comfort. Their resources on ethical wills invite individuals to reflect on the values they want to pass forward, not just at the end of life, but throughout life.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS



Shomer Collective  
website

**Aninut** - the period between death and burial. The *onen*, or the survivor who is in this in-between time, is exempt from usual obligations as they attend to the business of preparing for the funeral and burial, and are in the acute stage of grief.

**Avelut** - the period of mourning, initially, from burial through *shiva*, the first week. This period continues for 30 days for most relatives (spouse, sibling, child), and for one full year (counted as 11 months and 1 day) when mourning a parent.

**BDE** - *Baruch Dayan ha-Emet* — Blessed is the Judge of Truth — phrase said upon hearing of a death, also said at the time the clothes of the mourner are torn/ribbon is affixed prior to funeral.

**Chevra Kadisha** - sacred burial society. Traditionally, the *Chevra Kadisha* would take care of all tasks related to preparing the body for burial. In some communities, this is still the case. Members of the burial society function anonymously.

**Hamakom Yinachem Etchem** - *hamakom yinachem etchem b'toch sha'ar avlei tzion v'yerushalayim* — may God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem - this is the traditional phrase said to mourners by those offering condolences at a house of *shiva*.

**Hesped** - eulogy.

**Kaddish** - a prayer sanctifying God's name, recited in a quorum of ten (*see minyan*). Kaddish is recited by mourners during *shiva*, during *shloshim* (the first 30 days), and for the death of a parent, for a full year (11 months and 1 day.)

**Kever/Kevura**- grave/burial.

**Kriah** - cutting, as in the cutting of a ribbon to be worn during the week of *shiva*, or the tearing of one's garment over the heart, signifying that this person is in mourning.

**Minyan** - literally, number or count. Judaism elevates the importance of collective gathering and worship by identifying certain prayers, such as kaddish, as communal. These prayers are said only among a quorum of ten who are obligated in worship, called a minyan.

**Shiva** - literally, seven, as in the seven days of mourning following the burial. During *shiva*, mourners stay at home, with family and friends taking care of their basic needs, sending or preparing food, and visiting to offer comfort. After *shiva* ends, it is customary to take a walk around the block to signify reentry into the world before actually returning to work and other worldly tasks

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Shloshim** - the first 30 days after burial, when mourners are gently reentering the world while still in acute grief.

**Shomer** - one who guards, as in one who watches over the body in the time between death and burial. This is often done in shifts when the time between death and burial is extended.

**Shmira** - the act of guarding, as in watching over the body in the time between death and burial. Those watching over the body are often volunteers or may be paid by the funeral home.

**Tachrichim** - burial shrouds, made from linen, cotton, or muslin. A set includes loose pants, a loose top, booties, mittens, and a cap.

**Tahara** - literally, purifying. *Tahara* is the ritual washing of the body, done by members of the sacred burial society, generally, in a room within the funeral home. The washing is done in silence, with the leader of the group speaking directions softly, as needed, and the recitation of a minimal amount of liturgy, or singing of melodies.

**Tallis/Tallit** - prayer shawl. It is customary to bury one who used a prayer shawl in their prayer shawl, over the burial shrouds. One corner of the prayer shawl is cut before the casket is closed, to signify that the person wearing the shawl can no longer perform the responsibilities (praying) associated with wearing the shawl.

**Vidui** - confession, said at the bedside of the dying, by the dying if possible.

**Yahrtzeit** - the one-year anniversary of death on which it is traditional to say *kaddish* and to light a 24-hour candle. In Yiddish - *yahr* = year, *tzeit* = time.

## CUSTOMS IN A SHIVA HOME

**Door:** the front door is left open for those paying a condolence call; the mourner is exempt from needing to greet guests during *shiva*.

**Food:** is brought/provided for mourners. Eggs, a symbol of life, are eaten at the first meal following burial.

**Mirrors:** mirrors are covered, as mourners are unconcerned with vanity during *shiva*.

**Shoes:** mourners do not wear shoes, but may wear slippers, while others not in mourning keep their shoes on.

**Stools or low chairs or stools:** mourners traditionally sit in low chairs, on the floor, or on a couch with the cushions removed as they are experiencing grief and are not comforted by material comforts such as plush couches and chairs.

## CUSTOMS SURROUNDING BURIAL

**Procession:** the hearse may drive by the home of the deceased on the way to the burial, especially in the case of a communal leader, allowing a greater number of followers/mourners to participate in the act of accompanying the deceased to their final resting place. The hearse is followed on foot for some distance by those wishing to accompany the deceased on their final bodily journey.

**At the Cemetery:** the hearse may stop several (or 7) times, so as not to rush to the burial, respecting the deceased.

**Shoveling:** mourners participate in the shoveling of several feet of dirt, after which, the gravediggers can finish the work. The shovels are often turned backward at first, to show reluctance to perform the act, and left in the dirt for the next person, again, to slow the process, and allow each participant to take on the task on their own.

**Leaving the gravesite:** those attending the burial will form two lines through which mourners walk, symbolizing their entry into the formal period of mourning

**Washing:** wash hands upon leaving the cemetery, and/or upon returning to the house of mourning.