

THE
TEMPLE
EMANUEL

Living
Legacy
PROJECT



A Guide

Gary and Merle Orren • Barrie and Carole Greiff

Temple Emanuel Living Legacy Project: A Guide

The Temple Emanuel Living Legacy project is an on-going initiative aimed at encouraging and helping members of the Temple prepare living legacies for their loved ones. A living legacy is a personal statement which conveys to ourselves and to our children, grandchildren, relatives, and friends what has been most important and meaningful in our lives.

In shorthand, we refer to the Temple Emanuel Living Legacy project by the acronym TELL. Just as Moses was commanded at the end of Deuteronomy to “tell” the Hebrew children his teachings, and as we “tell” the story of the Haggadah each Pesach to our children, so we should tell our personal stories and teachings to those who matter most to us.

The TELL project evolves naturally from the Temple’s “Make Your Mark” project. We move from writing a single letter with our families in the Torah, to writing a multi-page letter for our families in our homes.

The purpose of this Guide is twofold. First, it is intended to urge you to prepare a living legacy. Second, it provides you with information and advice to help you get started creating your own personal living legacy.

If we may slightly amend the famous Talmudic injunction, you are not called upon to complete the task [alone], but neither are you free to evade it. Take advantage of the Temple initiative. Let us help you prepare a living legacy. It will be one of the most valuable things you do for your family.

We invite your questions and comments.
Contact us at 617-964-1598 or 617-527-2798, or at gary_orren@harvard.edu or BGreif18@aol.com

Gary and Merle Orren Barrie and Carole Greiff
Co-Chairs, The Temple Emanuel Living Legacy Project

*April 2006
Nissan 5766*

What is a Living Legacy?

A living legacy is a personal statement that expresses what is most important and meaningful in your life, where you have stood and what you stand for. It is an ancient Jewish tradition to pass on personal values and blessings to future generations.

Your living legacy captures the values, experiences, and stories that have made you who you are, and have influenced how you think. It draws meaning from events in your life that were transformational and from those that were (seemingly) ordinary.

What have been the turning points in your life? What are the experiences and who are the individuals that have shaped and stirred you? What are your most vivid memories, your greatest joys and sorrows? What lessons have you learned? What enduring values do you hope to transmit to your children, grandchildren, relatives, and friends?

Your living legacy, therefore, will be unique to you. One size does not fit everyone. Each living legacy must be custom-tailored to each person's "one-of-a-kind" life. Your life has never been lived before, and never will be lived again. A living legacy is one way to capture your uniqueness.

Some people call these statements "ethical will." That term suggests they are best prepared at the end of our lives. We prefer to call them "living legacies" because they are valuable—both for us and our loved ones—at any age, and because they constantly evolve from childhood to late adulthood.

A living legacy is usually expressed as a written document, and you may wish to write yours. However, you may prefer to communicate your thoughts on audiotape or video, or through a mixture of media, integrating photographs, video, and narrative.

Whatever medium you choose, your living legacy is a private, not a public statement. While some congregants may want to voluntarily share excerpts from their legacies, your legacy is fundamentally for the eyes and hearts of your own family and loved ones. You will convey it in the privacy of your home.

וְשָׂנְנָתָם

*"To be is to stand
for..."*

Abraham Joshua Heschel

לִבְנֵי יָדָא

*“Hidden wisdom
and concealed
treasure—of what
use is either?”*

Ben Sirach, *Ecclesiasticus*

*“Teach them
diligently to your
children...”*

Deuteronomy, 6:7

Why Do It?

Your living legacy will hold special meaning both for your loved ones and for you.

Thirteen years ago in 1992, and again in November, 2005 at the Rabbi Samuel Chiel Kallah, our beloved Rabbi Chiel urged us to write living legacies that convey to our loved ones our cherished values and ideals. “It may turn out to be,” he said, “the most precious legacy you can give to your children and your grandchildren.” If you don’t have children of your own, think of a favorite niece or nephew, a special friend, or a junior colleague you have mentored.

Even if you are fortunate to have had occasional “heart-to-hearts” with your children or others close to you, nothing beats putting your words or ideas down in print. Your living legacy will give “spiritual capital” to the people who matter most to you, providing riches far beyond the material possessions you have given them or will bequeath to them in the future. A transfer of values can be much more significant than a transfer of valuables. It’s not only what you earn, but what you learn.

Your distilled memories and personal credo will help guide your family now and in the future. The stories and values you share will foster family continuity by bridging past and future generations, as well as the geographic distances that often separate loved ones.

Your living legacy will be extremely valuable to you as well. Preparing it will give you an opportunity for self-reflection rarely indulged in our hectic, activity-driven lives. It is a chance to pause and conduct a candid personal inventory. It is a chance to refresh your memory, clarify what’s important, and articulate what you stand for. For many people, living legacies bring not only clarity, but also discovery that can help us move forward in accordance with our deeply held values.

Why Do It Now?

Although all of us recognize the wisdom of Rabbi Chiel's advice that we write living legacies, the natural temptation is to put this aside in our "to do" pile. "It's something I don't have to do right now, I'll get to it later."

PLEASE DO IT NOW! Why? First, being human, we often don't get around to doing many of the worthwhile things we defer to another day.

You may think that living legacies are only for senior citizens. We expect that many senior citizens in the congregation will prepare living legacies. That's wonderful. If you are not yet in that age bracket, you may imagine that you will get around to preparing a living legacy when you're older. But living legacies are valuable for people of any age, people in their 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's, or beyond.

Another reason to do it now is that it will benefit both you and your loved ones as a continuing moral compass. You can share your living legacy with your children and other loved ones at significant milestones in their lives—at Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, graduations, marriages, or when they have their own children—or at turning points in your own life—when you celebrate important birthdays and anniversaries, shift careers, face an illness, or retire. Your living legacy is likely to become a springboard for meaningful conversations within your family. And you can update your statement as time goes by.

The process of writing a living legacy may seem a little daunting. All the more reason to do it now when you can take advantage of the TELL project. Write your living legacy when the Temple has formed a committee to help you get started and give you guidance.



"If not now, when?"

Hillel, *Pirke Avot*

ודברת
בם

Getting Started

Many of us are intimidated by a blank piece of paper. Therefore, this Guide includes questions to help stimulate and organize your thinking. More questions and suggested outlines can be found in the resources cited later in this Guide, especially in Barry Baines, *Ethical Wills* and in Linda Spence, *Legacy*.

A good way to get started is to select a question or two from the list below that resonates immediately with you and inspires reflection. Write down the first associations and memory fragments that come to mind. You can elaborate on them and re-order them later. Also later, you can consider other questions that hold meaning for you.

Self

Write a brief description of what growing up in your family was like—attitudes, expectations, finances, etc.

What do I care about most?

What are the main lessons life has taught me?

What are my favorite memories?

What were the favorite quotes, sayings in my house? In my parents' house?

Who influenced me most, for good or bad? What did I learn from them? Which teachers influenced me the most and why?

What have been the most difficult times in my life?

What mistakes have I made? How have I tried to correct them?

What are my greatest talents? Have I used them?

How would I like people to think of me?

What is my definition of success?

What books, films, TV shows, and art have had a special impact on me?

If I wrote a book about my life, what would the title be? What would the chapter titles be about the early, middle, and later parts of my life?

What have been the most humorous experiences in my life?

What person(s) in the history of the world would I like to meet? Who are my heroes—living, dead, or fictional?

What are my most vivid vacation memories? Holiday memories?

What would I like to study and learn more about?

What fears do I harbor?

What have been the biggest surprises in my life?

How have my priorities changed over time?

How do I incorporate what is most important to me in my daily life?

What gives me the most pride?

What have been my greatest challenges?

What experience has required the most resilience of me?

What have been my greatest triumphs and disappointments?

What are my main regrets?

Whose approval has meant the most to me?



Family and Friends

What are my favorite memories of my mother, father, siblings, husband, wife, children, and friends?

What seemed most important to my family when I was growing up?

What attracted me to my husband/wife?

What qualities do I continue to admire in my husband/wife?

What have I learned about parenting?

What have I learned from my children, spouse, friends?

What are some painful events in my family? How were they handled?

What are the main values and ideals I would like to pass on to my family and friends?

What are the things I want to thank my family and friends for?

What are the stories behind each of the objects I am giving to family and loved ones: a tallit? a siddur? a menorah? Etc.

What do I wish for my children, my spouse, and my friends in the future?

What advice and guidance do I want to offer to my children, grandchildren, and loved ones for the future?

What expressions of love, gratitude, blessings do I want to offer to my family and loved ones?

From whom would I like to ask forgiveness, to whom do I owe apologies?

 **Work**

Why did I choose the work I do?

What do I like/dislike about my job?

What have been my greatest successes/failures in my job?

What have I learned at work?

Would I choose to make my living the same way? Why? If not, what would I prefer to do?

 **Community/Religion**

What are the most important communities in my life? Where do I feel I “belong?”

What has been my relationship to Judaism? How has it changed during different phases of my life?

What is my understanding of God?

What spiritual passages, teachings, and rituals have meant the most to me?

How might Judaism be valuable to my family in the future?

The Mechanics of Writing a Legacy

There is no one, prescribed way to write a living legacy. This Guide offers many suggestions for crafting your statement. You should pick and choose whatever resonates most with you. Your legacy must fit your personality and situation.

You needn't be a rabbi or a philosopher to write a living legacy. You are the expert on your own life and personal values. You decide exactly what will go into your legacy, and how you want to express it.

Living legacies typically include one or more of the following four elements:

1. Your personal history (selective recollections from your past).
2. Your values and ideals.
3. Your advice, guidance, and hopes for the future.
4. Your expressions of love, appreciation, apology, penitence, and blessing.

Some people want to write a statement of values, instructions, wishes, and hopes for their loved ones. Others prefer to focus on personal and family history to show where their values come from, how important life lessons were learned, and who taught those lessons. Others like to compile an anthology of family stories. And still others choose to combine these approaches.

There are many ways you can organize your living legacy. We have found four principal methods people use to organize their thoughts:

1. **Chronologically.** Some people find it helpful to organize their reflections historically, focusing on different stages in their life, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

2. **“Concentric Circles.”** You might prefer to organize your legacy in terms of ever-widening spheres of your life—beginning with observations about yourself, then rippling out to your family and friends, your workplace experiences, and finally the larger community. This is how we organized the questions that appear earlier in this Guide.

3. **General Themes.** Alternatively, you could organize your thoughts around a selected number of themes. For example, you might cluster your comments around general topics such as what you have learned from your mistakes, how the immigrant experience affected your family, etc.

4. **Lessons.** A final way to organize your legacy is around the specific life lessons you wish to convey to your loved ones, e.g., never stop learning and improving your mind, help the community and those less fortunate, remember your roots, be willing to take risks.

Your living legacy need not be a literary masterpiece. You don't need to be a gifted writer. What works best is plain and simple language built around your personal stories and experiences. Also, be honest and authentic in what you write. Words that come from the heart, go to the heart.

Certain “prompts” can be extremely helpful in refreshing your memories for your legacy. For example, looking at old photographs and family albums, playing music associated with the era or people you are remembering, handling an object that is special to you or to a loved one, re-visiting a childhood home, neighborhood or some other meaningful physical location, eating favorite foods, preparing a time-line of your life, or diagramming a family tree.

Favorite quotations also can help inspire your writing about your values. For example, if you are a fan of Albert Einstein and his drive for excellence, then his words “We have to do the best we can. This is our sacred human responsibility,” might unleash a flood of thoughts about your deeply held principles. If you are a member of the Maimonides fan club, his observation in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, “The change from trouble to comfort gives us more pleasure than uninterrupted comfort does,” might hold special meaning, and therefore bring to mind thoughts you’d like to share in your living legacy.

Generally speaking, it’s much better to use examples and stories to illustrate your points than to fill your legacy with abstract comments. Anecdotes can make otherwise prosaic generalizations sing out and take on life.

For example, instead of simply saying that his father was an accomplished man, Calvin Trillin in *Messages From My Father* injects life into that point by building it anecdotally. Instead of simply saying that intelligence is multi-dimensional so that mental acuity in one area does not necessarily transfer to another, Barrie Greiff illustrates his observation in *A Life Worth Living* with a story about Larry Bird. And Rachel Naomi Remen concludes we must face our daily hurdles incrementally, undaunted by conventional norms or the expectations of others, by relating a simple story about her mother climbing the steps in the Statue of Liberty. Your loved ones will find your anecdotes clarifying and memorable.

Husbands and wives can decide whether to write separate legacies, or whether to write a single, joint legacy.

Explain in your legacy why you plan to give your material possessions as you do (to family members, institutions, charities, etc.). If you intend to link your values with your financial gifts (e.g., one family who loved the Pesach seder set up a travel fund to pay for dispersed family to come together each year at Pesach time), be sure to write about that linkage in your legacy.

Put more emphasis on the “I’s” than the “You should’s” in your living legacy. It is generally better to be more self-revelatory and personal than didactic and preachy.

If you have shared meaningful thoughts with loved ones and friends over the years—at B’nei Mitzvah, weddings, birthdays, funerals, etc.—you might consider adding those (or portions of them) to your current thoughts in a legacy “notebook” collection.

The key goal is to transmit your values so that they live on. To preserve your living legacy for decades to come, we suggest you write your final draft on acid-free paper. Accordingly, a few sheets of acid-free paper are enclosed in the protective tube mailed to you from the Temple. You may obtain as many additional sheets as you need at the Temple office.

In Conclusion

The TELL project aims to lead us toward a worthy goal that most of us would like to accomplish in our life, preparing a living legacy for our loved ones. The value of this goal is indisputable. Yet, like many valuable goals, this one is easy to set aside.

Writing a living legacy, unlike participating in a project like Make Your Mark, does not take place in a public ceremony on a scheduled date at a committed time. It takes place, instead, in the privacy of your home whenever you feel like doing it. Unlike Make Your Mark, writing a living legacy is a difficult task. It requires a significant emotional and time investment to carefully assess your life, sort out what matters most to you, and convey that succinctly to your loved ones.

That is why the Temple established the TELL project: to gently prod and assist you in accomplishing something you know is valuable, something you would like to do, but something you may not get around to doing.

Set a deadline for yourself, perhaps an upcoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a birthday, a wedding, or an anniversary. Take advantage of the workshops and programs at the Temple designed to help you prepare your legacy. Follow the suggestions contained in this Guide. Now is the time to make a personal commitment to prepare a living legacy, both for yourself and your family.

Other Resources

Barry K. Baines, *Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper*, Perseus Publishing, 2002.

Marian Wright Edelman, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*, Beacon Press, 1972.

Rachael Freed, *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies*, Fairview Press, 2003.

Barrie S. Greiff, *A Life Worth Living: The 9 Essentials*, Regan Books, 2001.

Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, Riverhead Books, 1996.

Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*, Riverhead Books, 2000.

Jack Riemer and Nathan Stampfer, *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1991.

Linda Spence, *Legacy: A Step-By-Step Guide To Writing Personal History*, Swallow Publishing, 2002.

Websites: www.ethicalwill.com, www.personalhistorians.org, www.womenslegacies.com