



new london
synagogue



Rembrandt, Jacob and the Ethical Will

My relationship with this week's Torah reading is dominated by Rembrandt's extraordinary *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*. The Book of Genesis, that began with such cosmological promise, comes down to this; a patriarch on their deathbed passing on a blessing to the generations to come. The emotions are folded in like the drapery Rembrandt uses to surround his imagined scene.

Life feels tenuous particularly at this time of year; the fragility of the Biblical narrative is matched by the darkness of the season. From the lengthening lists of our Yartzheit prayer and from my experience navigating the road that leads from Shul to cemetery and back, I know this is the time of year many of us lose our dearest relatives to illness and old age.

What to do? Bless.

Facing the end of his own life, Jacob takes an opportunity to set out a vision for the future of his family. In truth, it's a deeply complex passage; inspired by prophetic insight or, less religiously, partialities and grudges accumulated over his life. But each son, and the two grandsons; Ephraim and Menashe, receive their moment of address, "each person according to their blessing did [Jacob] bless them."

I have two touching books on my shelves, both called *Ethical Wills*, both edited by Jack Reimer. The first, "Ethical Will: A Modern Jewish Treasury," was published in 1987. It's purely a historical collection of great wishes, blessings and charges laid down by Jews through history, both the great and not-so-great. It was a thing; with the wisdom gained in life, an older person would commit in writing a charge to the their descendants – the Hebrew term "Tzvaot," from the same root as "Mitzvah," suggests a desire to compel, much, of course, like the English term for an end of life disposition, "will." It's not about the physical property, it's about the values and lessons that should be lived on beyond even our death.

The second, "Ethical Wills & How to Prepare them: A Guide to Sharing Your Values from Generation to Generation," is now in its second edition. It does what it says on the cover. The question, for all of us, younger or older, feeling more close to the kiss of angel of Death, or (perhaps foolishly) somehow immune from the certainty of mortality, is a great one. What is our blessing for those who come after us. What is it that we pass on from the insights of our life. I commend the exercise.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Jeremy