

## An Example of a Medieval Ethical Will

This is an excerpt from a longer document entitled the “Rule” or “Rules” drawn up by R. Asher (c.1250-1327). This passage appears in the volume *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, edited by Israel Abrahams (Facsimile edition 1976, The Jewish Publication Society of America.)

These are the things to which thou must give heed, if thou wouldst depart from the snares of death, and bask in the light of life!

Be not prone to enter into quarrels; beware of oppressing fellow-men whether in money or word. Never feel envy or hate. Keep far from oaths and the iniquity of vows, from laughter and anger which confuse alike the spirit and the mind. Use not the name of God for vain purposes or in foul places. Rely not on the broken reed of human support, make not gold thy hope, for therein lies the first step to idolatry. Rather distribute thy money where the Lord so wills, He can make good thy deficit! ‘Tis a fine and right course to think little of thy virtues and much of thy vices; to magnify the mercies of Him who made thee and provideth thy sustenance in due season. Act not aright from hope of reward, nor avoid the wrong from fear of punishment; but serve from love. Esteem the utterance of thy money as of less import than the utterance of thy words; issue no base coin from thy lips, weigh thy words in the balance of thy judgment. Hide behind the walls of thy heart what is said in thy presence, even though thou be not pledged to confidence. If thou hearest the same report from another, say not: “I have heard it already!”

Habituate thyself to wake at dawn, and to leave thy couch at the song of the birds. Rise not as a sluggard, but with eagerness to serve thy Maker! Be not a drunkard or a glutton, lest thou forget thy Creator and fall into sin. Look not at him who is above thee in riches but at him who is below; turn thine eyes to thy superior, not to thy inferior, in the service and fear of God. Rejoice when thou sufferest reproof, hear counsel and receive instruction. Exhault not thyself over thy fellow creatures, but be humble of spirit, and like the dust on which all tread. Speak not insolence with a haughty neck, lifting high thy forehead, thereby rejecting the fear of Heaven. Never do in private what thou wouldst be ashamed to do in public, and say not: “Who will see me?”

Raise not thine hand against thy neighbor. Circulate no false reports; slander no man. When men address thee in unseemly fashion, be not too apt with insolent retort. Let no man hear thee in the street, bellow not like a beast, but let thy voice be soft. Put not thy fellow man to the blush in public. The first of all fences against wronging thy fellow man is the avoidance of covetousness. Never be weary of making friends, consider a single enemy as one too many. If thou hast a faithful friend, hold fast to him; let him not to go, for he is a precious possession. But entice not friendship by adulation and hypocrisy, and speak not with a double heart! Retain not thine anger against a fellow-man for a single day, but humble thyself and ask forgiveness. Let not thy heart be high, saying: “I am the injured party, let him make the first overtures.” But,

every night before thou retirest to rest, forgive whoever has offended thee. If men curse or revile thee, answer not a word, be of the insulted, (not of the insulters)!

Keep thy feet evenly in the track, holding thyself firmly in the middle path in the satisfaction of thy appetites. So, be neither accessible to all nor a recluse from all. In all thy moral characteristics seek the mean, turning neither to right nor left. Rejoice not overmuch, for remember that thy life is a breath; formed from the dust, thou wilt end with the worm! Be not offended at trifles, lest thou gather enemies without cause. Pry not into other men's secrets. Be not overbearing towards the men of thy city; yield to the wishes of others. Will that which God wills; rejoice in thy portion, be it little or much; pray continually to God that he incline thine heart unto His testimonies. Never show ingratitude, but do honor to everyone who opens a door for thee to earn the necessaries of life. Never utter a falsehood, but be faithful to all men, irrespective of creed. Be not slow to offer the greeting of peace to all, be they Jew or Gentile; and never give a fellow-man cause for resentment.

Show invariable hospitality to wayfarers; welcome them with a smiling face. When they take their leave, provide them with food for the journey, accompany them for a space, let them depart with a cheery farewell. Break not thy body by intemperance, thou mayest be betrayed into indecent speech and suffer thereafter remorse. Never be angry with thy wife; if thou put her off from thee with thy left hand, delay not to draw her to thee again with thy right hand!

Be ever responsive to the call of charity. Never contribute less than half a shekel annually, and at one time. Give every month and every week the full amount that thou canst spare. On no day let there be lacking some small gift before prayer. Pay the "continual offering" every Friday. When thy means reach a tithable amount, set aside the tithe. Thus wilt thou possess an every-ready store, at hand for all occasions of loving-kindness, whether to the living or the dead, whether to the poor or the rich.

Enjoy nor food nor drink without benediction before and after, tendering thanks to Him who hath satisfied thy longing soul. Cover thy head when thou namest God. Let thine innermost being be stirred when thou speakest of Him; be not among those of whom the Scripture says: "With their mouth and with their lips they honour Me, but they have removed their heart far from me." Wash thy hands before prayer and meals. Sanctify thyself in all things; never behave with levity; let the fear of God be upon thee. Before meals, and before retiring to rest, regularly read the Torah, and derive from its pages topics for table-talk. Direct thy household in accordance with the Law, in all matters needing direction.

Pray not as a matter of rote, for prayer is the service of the heart. If thy child address thee, and speak not from his heart, art thou not angry? How then shalt thou, insignificant wite, act in presence of the King of the universe? Be not as a servant to whom hath been committed for his own good an important work and he hath spoiled it! How shall such a one stand before the King? How excellent would it be to ask pardon for praying "Pardon us" without sincerity! Relax not confession for thy sins morning and evening, nor omit to remember Zion and Jerusalem with a broken heart and bitter tears. And when thou recitest the verse which bids thee love the Lord thy God, speak as one ready to deliver up life and substance for His sanctification, thus fulfilling in thy person the words of the Singer: "For Thy sake are we killed every day."

Yet have a whole-hearted confidence in Him, and believe in His special providence, for the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, and He regards all the ways of a man. Day and night let thy lips make mention of Him. When thou liest down luxuriate in His love, and in thy dream thou wilt find it. When thou awakest thou wilt delight in Him, and He will direct thy paths. So fulfil all thy virtuous acts in the spirit of humbly walking before Him. This is the service which He has chosen, this the service acceptable in His sight!