A few years ago I had the opportunity to write a study guide for a film entitled “Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance After the Holocaust”. One of film makers was the central character of the story, a wonderful man named Menachem Daum, an Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn and the son of Holocaust survivors. The film is a journey to find the Catholic woman from a small Polish village, who put herself in great danger in order to hide 3 boys for over 2 years during the Holocaust. Those three boys were Menachem Daum’s father-in-law and his two brothers.

Menachem was inspired to take this journey when Menachem’s wife, Rivka, came home one night from a lecture in Brooklyn with a tape of a local rabbi openly preaching hatred of the non-Jewish world. Daum’s first reaction was to raise an outcry in his own Brooklyn community. He was mostly either ignored or resented by the community. His second response was to fly to Israel to discuss the matter with 2 of his grown sons, who were living and studying at a Yeshiva in Israel and had adopted a very strict Orthodox Judaism. Menachem was concerned about his own sons’ inwardly focused version of Orthodoxy and worried this was leading them to a place of growing insularity and intolerance. He brought the tape with him only to learn his sons basically agreed with the rabbi on the tape and believed the world outside was hateful and dangerous and they needed to take care of “their own”. This conversation had a tremendous impact on Menachem and it moved him to take his wife and the two sons to Poland to find and meet the woman who saved their grandfather and his 2 brothers. Menachem believed his sons were becoming seduced
to intolerance by their religious studies, and perhaps by taking them to meet the family who risked their lives to save Jews, they would open their minds. Enduring the bemused tolerance of his sons, Menachem persisted in his search of Honorata Matuszeczyk Mucha, who as a young woman brought food nightly to the hiding place of Rivka's father and his 2 brothers for 28 months. Menachem’s sons met her and her family and learned that she was puzzled, after over two years of hiding, protecting and feeding these three boys, she never heard from them again after the war, not even a postcard. Many years overdue, the Daum family set up a scholarship fund for the granddaughter of the Polish family and made sure the family was honored for the work they did during the war. The question as to whether the Menachem’s sons changed their views on the outside world remains unanswered in the film although they at least acknowledged “there are some good gentiles”.

At the end of the film, Menachem talks about his motivation for taking his family on this journey. He says in the film that there used to be a Jewish tradition called a TSAVA‘A. When you reached a certain stage in your life and you realized you weren’t going to be around forever to guide your children, you would take the most important values that you wanted them to live by and you would commit them to a document, sort of like an ethical will. He says, “I hope they see this journey as my Tsava’a to them. I think it’s like planting a seed. It could take years and years, but that’s my hope.”

We have seen this tradition in our ancient sources: Jacob gathers his sons at his bedside and tries to tell them the way in which they should live after he is gone, in Moses’ farewell address to his people, and David preparing Solomon before he
goes to his eternal rest, asking him to complete the task he had begun but was unable to finish.

The ethical will is designed to pass on ethical values from one generation to the next and to reflect on the deeper meaning of our own lives and share what we have learned with those we love.

This year I lost my father. He was not a religious man in the traditional sense of the word. As a matter of fact, he rarely entered a synagogue except on his grandchildren’s Bar and Bat Mitzvah’s. But he had a deeply spiritual quality about him. He always wanted to talk about God and ask me what I thought God was. He loved sharing his thoughts with me and many times he said I believe God is the universe. At bedtime, instead of the usual fairy tales and other children’s books, he read me the bible - the wonderful stories we all know. That was my only Jewish education as a child but those stories were part of my childhood and are part of my life today.

And although he never sat down and wrote an ethical will or took me on a journey to my grandparents’ places of birth, he left me an ethical will in the form of how he lived his life, with kindness and compassion. He exhibited not just a tolerance for others, but an embracing of others. One time when I came him and asked him about a word one of my friend’s fathers used to refer to someone of a different background, he spoke to me about why those words are cruel and should never be used. He actually asked me not to go to her house again. He didn’t want me to hear that language. He was honest and full of integrity and he lived each day filled with joy and hope. He never complained- NEVER, and loved to laugh and tell stories. I see all of this as his ethical will to me.
In my eulogy, I wrote a letter to my father. I told him his kindness and innocence was a beautiful thing to witness. My prayer for him was my hope that he was in a lighter place- floating in the sweetness and peace he deserved. My prayer for all of us today is that we can reflect on the ethical wills others have left us and that those thoughts and memories can help us think about those we loved, about how we live our lives and the ethical wills we will leave our loved ones - and that this reflection can help make all of us renewed and ready for the new year.

Shanah Tova and G’Mar Chatima Tova