"When I was Alive": Jewish Ethical Wills as Egodocuments

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Just as gravity existed prior to Newton, so did egodocuments, including Jewish ones, exist before the Dutch scholar Jacques Presser coined the functional term "egodocuments" in the middle of the 20th century.[1] In fact, in some form egodocuments can be found as early as the Hebrew Bible. For example, the book of Nehemiah, which is supposed to be an account of Nehemiah's activities to restore the Jewish settlement in Jerusalem, as recounted by him, is a text which is certainly in accordance with Rudolf Dekker's definition of egodocuments: "texts in which an author writes about his or her own acts, thoughts and feelings".[2] The question of course is whether this book was penned by the "real" Nehemiah (and is, in that case, an authentic egodocument) or was only ascribed to this author (in which case it belongs to the genre of fiction). The boundaries between egodocuments and other genres, mainly fictitious, in Jewish literature (as in other literatures) are blurred. The book of Nehemiah serves as an example of the complex position of egodocuments in Jewish traditional literature. On the one hand, it supplies, as it were, a model for the theoretical possibility of such a text, in which a person talks about himself; but on the other hand, the justification for the existence of this text lies in the importance of Nehemiah's story in the Jewish national and religious realm, and not in the idea that personal experiences are inherently interesting. In the first instances of Jewish egodocuments justification for the individual to tell about himself (only much later about herself) inheres in the "bigger" picture.

Heine once said that, for Jews, the book was a portable homeland.[3] Perhaps because Jews were engaged in constructing the boundaries of this imaginary motherland in their literary endeavour, they wrote very little directly about themselves. Jewish culture is mainly textual, and the traditional Jewish literature is vast, but in it egodocuments are extremely rare. Until the modern period (with a few early modern exceptions)[4] we find almost no Jewish autobiographies. This genre begins in Hebrew literature as late as the second half of the nineteenth century,[5] with the 1863 publication in Vilna of *Aviezer* by Mordechai Aaron Ginzburg. On a smaller scale, there are but a few places to look for personal remarks in traditional Jewish writings: in introductions to books, in which the authors now and then relate something about themselves; or in some, not all, Hebrew poetry, in which a personal tone can sometimes be traced.

Jewish egodocuments are mainly modern – but they begin, like most modern phenomena, in the early modern period, and have their roots in the medieval peri-

od, again like most early modern matters.[6] However, the topic of this article is a genre that can be seen (and was seen[7]) as one of the roots of Jewish egodocuments: Jewish ethical wills.[8] In them the author gives moral instruction to his children or to other readers, instead of or combined with the more usual directives regarding his property. Or, to use Israel Abrahams' definition, "the express directions of fathers to their children and of aged teachers to their disciples".[9]

Ethical wills are a sub-genre of Jewish ethical literature. This broader genre has been defined as a literary corpus of a popular nature intended to provide practical instruction to individuals and society.[10] The genre emerged around the tenth century, as part of the Muslim-Jewish cultural encounter. Actually, the influence of this encounter shaped most of the distinct genres of medieval Jewish literature, because ancient Hebrew literature (the Bible and Talmud, for example) knows no genre differentiation. Several genres are mingled together in the ancient texts, and even the shift from one to another is not always clear. Yet in the ninth century Jewish literature underwent a process of organization and differentiation of genres. Among them are philosophy, law, grammar, mystical writings and ethical literature as well. The founder of many of the new genres was Saadia Gaon, and he authored an ethical chapter, the last chapter of his classical *Opinions and Beliefs*. Jewish ethical literature has its origins in Arabic *Adab*[11] literature, and in the Greek tradition of economic-ethical treatises on the proper way to run a household. Jewish ethical literature is still a living genre in the framework of Jewish traditional literature. New books are being written (although usually not very impressive), and the classical works are being printed and can be easily found in appropriate bookstores. Ethical wills as well are written today, and a few of the main works are still being printed, and can be found in bookstores specializing in traditional Jewish books.

The first compositions of Jewish ethical literature were written in Arabic and exhibit the influence of Arabic philosophy and culture. They were rapidly translated into Hebrew, and so continued to have an impact on Jewish culture in other Jewish cultural zones as well. Among the first translators was Judah ibn Tibbon (1120-1190), whose translation from Arabic into Hebrew of *Duties of the Hearts*, the first classical work of Jewish ethical literature, was the result of a twelfth-century initiative by Provençal Jews. Judah ibn Tibbon also wrote the first Jewish personal ethical will, which is one of the most beautiful examples of this genre as well. Like Jewish ethical literature in general, although in the beginning following an Arabic pattern, Jewish ethical wills became an independent Jewish genre. A closely related genre to ethical wills is epistolary writing.[12]

Before, I specifically used the phrase "personal ethical will," because not all ethical wills are personal. Out of the corpus of about 250 printed ethical wills,[13] I would estimate that 20 percent contain elements that can be defined as egodocuments. From its inception this genre was used for pseudepigraphic writing, in compositions falsely ascribed to sages and great medieval figures, including the rabbinic sage Eliezer, Maimonides, Nachmanides, and Rabbi Judah the Pious, not to men-

tion the famous testaments ascribed to the tribes in antiquity.[14] There is also a medieval Hebrew will ascribed to Aristotle. According to it the philosopher wrote to Alexander the Great, his pupil, that he was renouncing all his philosophical ideas, because he understood, on the threshold of death, that the Law of Moses is the only truth.[15] Pseudepigraphic wills are of course not egodocuments. They are literary works. However, personal ethical wills are also not necessarily egodocuments. Only in some of them do authors speak directly about themselves, and even then they do so in just a few short paragraphs.

Ethical wills are devoted mainly to ethics, and they are formulated in a general and not a personal way. In that sense, ethical wills are not egodocuments but rather superego-documents. This might be related, among other factors, to the fact that they are written in Hebrew, the holy tongue, and not in the vernacular languages of the Jews, which were their spoken mother tongues. Hebrew was mainly a high cultural language, and roughly speaking it could be described as the language of the Jewish traditional super-ego. Yet in ethical wills sometimes a personal note or tone can be detected. The scattered personal sayings are interesting and important, because they may provide a rare glimpse of what members of traditional society had to say about their lives and themselves.

The high season of Jewish personal ethical wills dates from the seventeenth century onwards, lasting for about two centuries. This is the time when most ethical wills were written, and in that period they were also printed, usually not long after the death of their writers. More popular ones appeared in a number of printings, sometimes in small collections of two or three ethical wills. Yet in the selection made by the printers of the earlier material in the genre, the pseudepigraphic wills were much more compelling than the personal ones. The few medieval personal wills had to wait until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to be printed by scholars. The interest in the personal will is a sign of modernity.[16]

Ethical wills can be used as a source for studying several important topics, such as attitudes toward death,[17] emotions in general and expressions of regret in particular, or changes and developments in ethical values over time. This article will discuss two topics: family relations in ethical wills, and books and learning. To illustrate these topics I shall refer to wills from the twelfth and from the eighteenth centuries. The final part of the article treats the ethical wills of three generations in a single family. Naturally, this treatment does not exclude other possible strategies for analysing Jewish ethical wills as egodocuments.

FAMILY RELATIONS IN JEWISH ETHICAL WILLS

The first Jewish personal ethical will that we know of, as mentioned before, is the ethical will that Judah ibn Tibbon wrote for his son Samuel in the late twelfth century. Judah started a dynasty of translators from Arabic to Hebrew, and his son Samuel (1160-1230), who translated Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* from the

original Arabic, is considered the greatest of all medieval Hebrew translators. Samuel's son Moshe (died 1283, Judah's grandson) and grandson Jacob (1236-1307, Judah's great-grandson) were translators as well. Samuel was not only a translator but also a philosopher and writer in his own right.

Judah's ethical will contains interesting personal evidence about this father's complex emotional relationship to his son. He mentions that he did not remarry after his wife's death.[18] He says he did this out of compassion for his son, whom he did not want to place in a stepmother's care. This father's great love for his son is intertwined with awareness of the sacrifices he feels he made for his son's sake. "For whom indeed do I toil but for you and your children?" asks the father (61). "If I gave you advice you rejected it, even though you never succeeded when you acted against my counsel" (71). The tangled relationship of love and blame is illustrated in the following lines.

> You know what I suffered in bringing you up ... You know this, and everyone knows it, but for my great devotion you would have died, or lived deformed. Remember these things my son, and take it to your heart to hear my voice and carry out my instructions. It is very important that you should fulfill my directions regarding your diet. Slay me not before my time! You know my distress, my soul's sorrow, and my fear for you in your sickness. Better death to me than life, that I look not on my wretchedness. As you know, you are visited with sickness yearly, for my sins, the chief cause being unwholesome food (75).

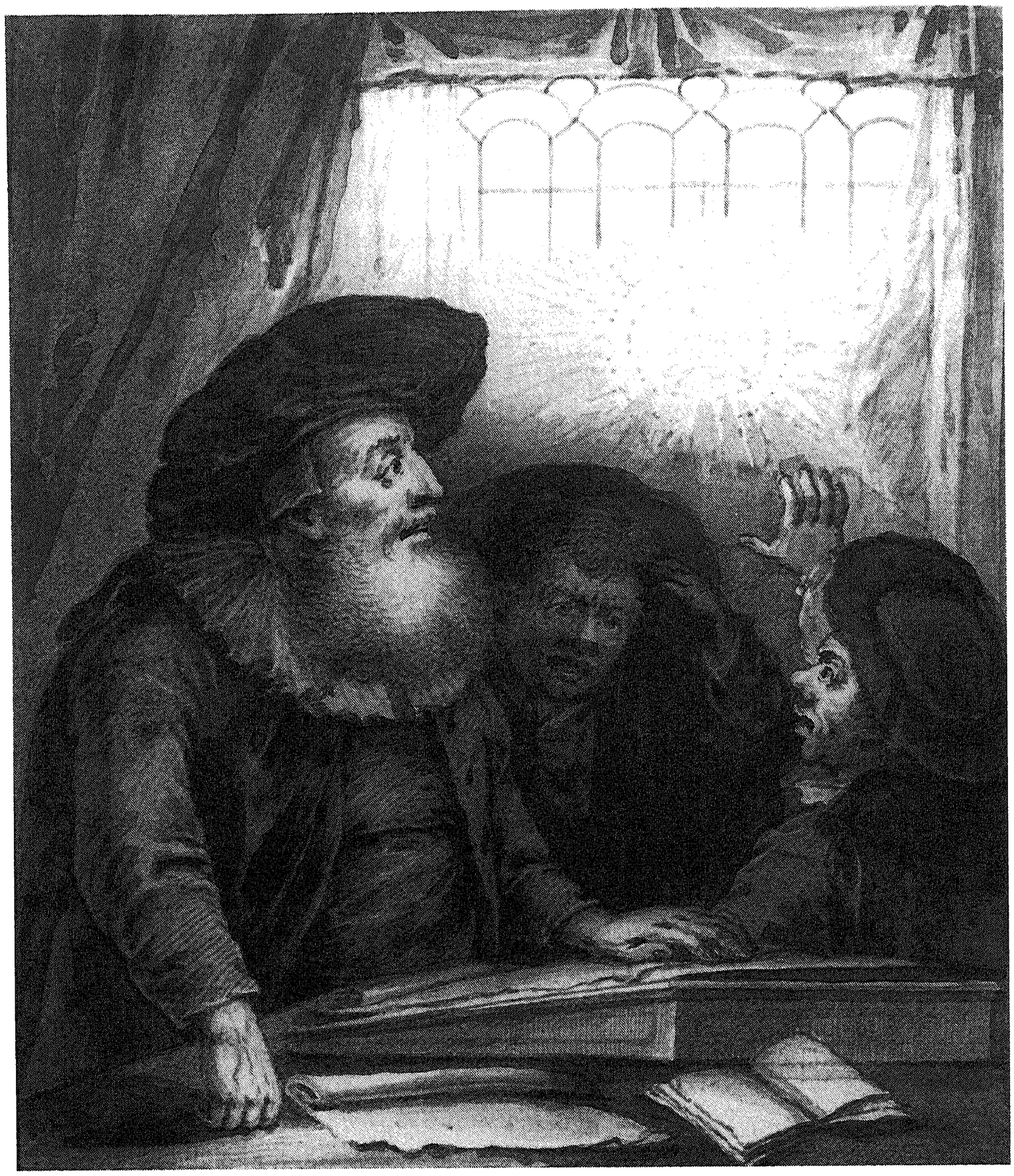
The stereotypical Jewish mother is here embodied in the shape of a medieval Jewish father. This might of course serve to strengthen the "white legend" of parent-child relations, that is, the notion that medieval parents loved their children in an emotional way similar to what is considered the common emotion of parents in modern times.[19] Nevertheless, Judah ibn Tibbon voiced many complaints about his son. He blames him for not listening to his father, not appreciating him, not showing him his writings and not consulting him in his commercial dealings (71). Moreover, Judah rebukes his son for his careless Hebrew and Arabic handwriting (59, 70) – a matter of grave importance, in his opinion; for not looking after the many books he brought him – not even knowing in which boxes they are kept and which of them had been lent to others; for neglecting his collections of medicinal herbs (68), and for much more. Luckily, we know about the achievements of this son, Samuel, from his fine works and translations and from other sources. Otherwise his description in the will, which reveals the intricate father-son relationship, might have caused us to disregard the son.

The treatment here of the material found in ethical wills regarding family relations is phenomenological rather than historical. It seems to me that certain models recur in different times and places, rather than displaying a developmental process.[20] Therefore I will permit myself to make a leap in time and turn to another aspect of father-son relationships according to a later source, the ethical will of Alexander Suesskind of Horodna, an affluent Jewish merchant and author. His ethical will was first printed immediately after his death in 1794. These are his words:

> My beloved sons, I testify that I had many children, but, because of our many sins,[21] I did not merit to raise all of them – I never kissed any of them, I never held them in my arms, and I never had an idle talk with them, God forbid. I constantly remembered the warning of the Mishna to refrain from children's talk.[22] Because of our many sins, there is no greater cause for wasting time that should be devoted to studying Torah than talking to children about nonsensical and stupid matters. In so doing, every minute such a person transgresses the positive commandment to speak of Torah and not of idle matters ... Therefore, my beloved sons, please be extremely careful not to indulge in childish talk ... I testify, my beloved sons, that I was exceedingly mindful to teach [my children] the benedictions for food and drink, and the rest of the benedictions. Even when my children could not yet talk well, I said the benedictions with them for eating and drinking and the grace after meals. From teaching them that I derived more pleasure than from all worldly pleasures, because I pleased the Lord our creator, may his name be blessed and his memory be exalted for ever and ever.[23]

The first part of the quote seems to correlate with what Rudolf Dekker has called the "black legend" of parental attitudes toward children.[24] This father states that he has never shown even the slightest physical affection to any of his offspring. Yet the story is not so simple. The continuation indicates that Alexander Suesskind's avoidance of physical expression of emotions does not indicate a lack of feeling for his children, rather the contrary. He says that "the pleasure one derives from it [i.e., playing with children] is the greatest of all pleasures", but this in his opinion is only a proof that it is stems from the temptation of the evil spirit.[25] He tells that whenever he got a letter from his children, or even just heard that they were well, he would express his gratitude to God with a private prayer.[26] Nevertheless, his deep parental emotions are all channeled into initiating his offspring into the fulfillment of the Jewish commandments. From other sections of this will and from the rest of his writings we know that Alexander Suesskind entertained an immense awareness of divine providence in his life. He relates that he used to praise the Lord enthusiastically many times a day, whenever he felt that something good had befallen him. Among the examples of this habit of his, he notes that he praised the Lord when his snuffbox fell out of his pocket but did not open, so nothing was spilled.[27] Therefore, for Alexander Suesskind, teaching his children to recite their benedictions, and guiding them in the process of acquiring both the correct formulas and the habit of reciting them, is not only a way of educating, but also of sharing a profound part of his life. It is true that the intenseness of his religious and spiritual life, together with his view of how his time was most appropriately spent, left no place for this father to kiss, hug, or talk idly with his children. Nevertheless, he tells them (and us) that the time he spent teaching them their religious duties was the best time of his life. The combination of the love of God and the love of offspring was for him the sweetest of all pleasures. Thus, while the legend is not entirely black, it is not totally white. We might also imagine (or hope) that their mother behaved differently.

It should be emphasized that this author has to stress the point of his disapproval



Portrait of R. Naftali as a rabbi, by Johan Nothnagel, drawing (Das Staedel, Staedelsches Kunstinstitut und Staedtische Galerie, Frankfurt am Main).

of playing with children specifically because playing with the children was the common inclination in his family, as well as of other Jews then and in other periods. The recurring theme of condemnation of playing with children, as opposed to studying Torah, which can sometimes be found in Jewish literature, testifies that Jews were consistently fond of this activity, although some writers did not approve of it. In the case of Alexander Suesskind, the very writing of the will, as well as parts of its content, are indicative of the importance of his children in his religious and emotional life. Indeed, this importance is manifested in a way that we might find

-צוואות
הגאון הגדול המפורסם מוהר"ר
נפתלי הכהן זצ"ל
שהיה אב"ד ור"מ בק"ק אוסטרא • ובק"ק פוזנא
והגליל • ובק"ק פראנקפורט דמיין • ונתקבל
לנשיא לארץ ישראל לק"ק צפת
וכשעלה במחשבתו לעלות לארץ הקדושה • ובא לעיר
קונסטאנטינא כתנקש לישיבה של מעלה ונאסף
אל עמיו • וכמנהג נאמתתו כתיבת ידו צוואה הזאת •
ונשתלחה כתיבת צוואה הזאת מהתם להבא • ובא לידי כי
בן נכדו אני • אמרתי הואיל שיעלה לקיים דברי המת •
אקימנו כברא מוכה אבא ואני אבא • אבא אבא רכב ישראל
היושבים במתיבתא דרקיע תגיבו ותגולי מגלי עלי שאקיים
לעשות המסך ואמת שעושים עם המתים שאינם מנפים
להשלים במולם גמול כא עלי זכותם יגן עליכו • הנאתי
אותה לבית הדפוס לזכות הרבים בדברים עבריים • קחו מוסר
לכם • ואל תחוסו לכספיכם • וחיי חיים נאהליכם • כ"ד
המוחן במלאכה
יצחק בהרב מוהר"ר שמשון הכהן זצ"ל :
נדפס בעיר המהוללה ברין
בשנת ת"ק"י"ז לפ"ק

Front page of the ethical will of R. Naftali ha-Cohen Katz, Brune (Germany) 1757. The printing was initiated by Shimshon, the great-grandson of the author (Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem).

difficult to understand, but we should listen rather than be judgmental.[28]

Another aspect of family relations is the attitude toward one's wife. Several wills contain words directed to the author's wife, thanking her for her help and support. Another topic that recurs is the question of what the widow should do after her husband's death. Children are called upon to take their mother to their homes and to respect her, and some authors even specify which child seems best suited for this task. Rabbi Naftali ha-Cohen Katz, who was in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the chief rabbi of Posnan and afterwards of Frankfurt am Main, says that his wife should choose with which son or daughter she wishes to live, adding: "you should choose a good place, so you will be sure that your son or daughter-in-law will not offend your dignity. On the contrary, that they will respect you greatly, as you were with me, when I was alive."[29]

A unique example is found in this ethical will of Rabbi Naftali ha-Cohen Katz,

which was one of the most popular wills. He reminds his wife of an agreement they once made, in an intimate moment of love. Now he regrets this, and does not want his wife to act as was agreed:

> My beloved Esther, once from our great love we clasped hands and mutually promised that when either of us two died, the other would pray to die soon afterwards, that we might quit the world together. However, this wish was not right, and you have my pardon if you live a hundred years. I altogether undo our compact. If you die first, which God forbid, you must do the same.
>
> I ask you not to marry again, that no one will touch your body any more. Although I need not ask you of this secret,[30] because of your piety, and since your place in the world to come is reserved for you, your share will be as mine and your lot will be my lot.[31] You are also too old to be wed. However, I add these words out of my overwhelming love for you. I will pray for you that you should live.[32]

This passage supplies a rare glimpse into emotional moments in the life of a seventeenth-century Jewish rabbi, but we can only imagine the context. There is a moment of tremendous closeness between the husband and wife, and then the idea of a future separation seems awkward. The couple decides that they will ask God that one die soon after the death of the other, so the separation will not last long. Apparently this idea brought with it some condolence. Afterward the husband regrets this. He thinks this is not religiously proper. However, it is not clear whether he said so to his wife in person, or has just written this in his will, thus revealing their intimacy for future readers.

Asking the wife not to remarry is an example of the correlation between theoretical material and emotions. It is not only that Rabbi Naftali believes that a marriage of his widow might be troublesome in the world to come or after the resurrection of the dead, but he also rejects this idea emotionally. Maybe we hear this request because it was easier for him to convey it in writing than in conversation.[33]

The interesting historical question is, of course, whether we can trace a change in family relations between different places and periods. As far as I could discover, there is no clear evidence for such a change. It seems that familial emotions depend on personality and character, which are both unique and recurrent at different times, rather than being the product of an era.

BOOKS AND READING IN JEWISH ETHICAL WILLS

Another feature of Jewish ethical wills is the attitude of their authors toward books and texts. The obligation to study Jewish texts is a fundamental aspect of Jewish religion and culture. In Jewish ethical wills we find much advice regarding when, how, and what to study. These are the words of a famous passage from the ethical will of Judah ibn Tibbon, mentioned earlier:

> My son! Make your books your companions, let your cases and shelves be your pleasure grounds and gardens. Bask in their paradise, gather their fruit, pluck their roses, and take their spices and their myrrh. If your soul be satiate and weary, change from garden to garden, from furrow to furrow, from prospect to prospect. Then will your desire renew itself, and your soul be filled with delight.[34]

Similar advice, to move from one topic to another in order to avoid fatigue in learning, is found in Rousseau's *Confessions*. In any event, metaphors are only part of Judah ibn Tibbon's instructions to his son concerning the correct attitude toward books. In another passage he gave him practical advice on library management:

> Examine your Hebrew books at every new moon, the Arabic volumes once in two months, and the bound codices every quarter. Arrange your library in fair order, so as to avoid wearying yourself in searching for the book you need. Always know the case and the chest where the book should be ... And cast your eyes frequently over the catalogue, so as to remember what books are in your library ... Never refuse to lend books to anyone who has not the means to purchase books for himself, but only act thus to those who can be trusted to return the volumes ... If you lend a volume make a memorandum before it leaves your house, and when it is returned, draw your pen over the entry. Every Passover and Tabernacles call in all the books out on loan.[35]

The bestowal of somewhat compulsive advice is typical to this will. He asks his son to go over his stock of medicinal herbs once a week (68), to pay great attention to his Arabic and Hebrew handwriting (59), so that his writing will always be beautiful: "the beauty of a composition depends on the writing ... on pen, paper and ink, and the beauty of the writing of a letter is indicative of the author's worth". He rebukes his son for his careless writing: "do not swallow up the [Hebrew letter] *yod* between the other letters, as you always do" (69-70). He wants his son to write a page each day (65), and so on. It seems that these strategies were necessary for Judah himself, who had to change his cultural environment when he left Spain for Provence at the age of thirty. However, his son, who was the only male child in the family and probably raised with much love and attention, had a more relaxed attitude to life. These differences in character and temperament worried the father even more.

Typically for a genre that belongs to Jewish ethical literature, many authors of wills stress the importance of studying ethical literature as well, and not only the classical texts, namely Talmud and halakhic writings. Since mastery of the Talmud and the halakhic codifications was the principal way to acquire status and power in traditional Jewish society, scholars naturally directed their main efforts to those texts. It was precisely the marginal place of ethical literature in the curriculum that led authors of wills to emphasize it. Another recurring motif in many wills is a request to read this very will at fixed times, ranging from daily, to once a week, once a month, every holiday, or once or twice a year, thus regularizing the presence of

the testator and his text among the readers.[36] Reading the will becomes a family ritual. Just as religious rituals express the fundamental myths of a culture, so too family rituals convey the constructing family myth, in this case the story that the family patriarch tells about the family's values, reactions, and attitudes. The family myth as structured in ethical wills is usually not only a story about the family history or its founder, but rather an enumeration of the traditional values that he saw as important.

The attitude toward books and learning found in ethical wills can also be traced in the new genre of the first Jewish autobiographies, beginning, as mentioned above, in the nineteenth century. To quote Shmuel Werses, the prominent scholar of the Jewish Enlightenment:

> When Jewish intellectuals talk about themselves, they are not interested in their inner life or in the growth or maturational process. Their primary interest is in a repetitive discussion of the books that they have written, which are the expression of their learnedness.[37]

In Christian Europe, the early modern awareness of writing egodocuments had its roots in the traditional genres of (religious) confessional literature and (secular) account books. Before the Hebrew Enlightenment autobiographies, the traditional genre of ethical wills functioned in a similar way, and the idea of the autobiography as a will can be found together with the idea of the autobiography as a confession.The more extensive writing of ethical wills, prominent in the second half of the eighteenth and in the nineteenth century, parallels the beginning of Jewish autobiography. It is as if the early modern impetus to write about oneself manifested itself in a new genre as well as in the revival of a traditional genre. Again, this parallels the relationship between Christian autobiography and the new autobiographies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

THE ETHICAL WILLS OF THE HOROWITZ FAMILY

The ethical wills of the Horowitz family, written by three consecutive generations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, show change and continuity in the self-definition and self-expression of leading rabbinic figures. The ethical will of Rabbi Abraham Horowitz, the annotations of his son Rabbi Jacob, and the ethical will of Rabbi Abraham's grandson, Rabbi Shabtai Sheftil Horowitz, were written in a momentous era in Jewish social and intellectual history. Rabbi Abraham was born in the mid-sixteenth century, his sons Rabbi Jacob and Rabbi Isaiah lived until the first quarter of the seventeenth century, and his grandson, Rabbi Shabtai Sheftil, who died in 1660, witnessed the great crisis of the destruction of the Jewish communities in eastern Europe in 1648. The Horowitz family produced a line of respected rabbis, whose members were both great scholars and religious communal leaders.

The writing process of the Horowitz family members is one of continuing personal and familial dialogue. It was their practice to edit their writing over time,[38] to

הקדמה

אולי ח׳ ברוך רחמין. וחסדו יאיר עיני ויטה לבי ולבב בני
לגלה מעקבות אבותי הקדושים אשר בארץ המה • וזכותם
יעמוד לנו ולבנינו • יהי רצון מלפני אבינו שבשמים שאזכה
עוד להוציא לאור על מזבח הדפוס ספר הנכבד בית רחל
שחיבר אא״ז הגאון הג״ל שהוא ספר גכבד • וכולל דבריב
עמוקים הן בנגלה והן בנסתר • ואזכה לראות בנים ובנ
בנים לעסוק בתורה ובמצות אמן ואמן :

צוואת הגאון מוהר״ר נפתלי כ״ץ זצ״ל

ה׳ נתן וה׳ לקח יהי שם ה׳ מבורך מעתה ועד עולם
כתיב כי לא ידע האדם את עתו וגו׳
וכתיב למען יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו וגו׳ • ואלו הוא
כמו שני כתובים המכחישים זה את זה • כי פן תטרוף השעה
חלילה " כי ימי האדם הוא כצל עובר • ויש לחוש למיתה
פתאומיות חלילה • או שימות בלא דבור • והיכן הוא והיכן
אמרותיו • לצוות את בניו • והבאים אחריו בהמות ירעו •
וחייב אדם להוכיח ולתקן מעשיו קודם מותו • כמו שמצינו
ביעקב ובמשה ובדוד שהוכיחו סמוך למיתתן • ואיה כל אלה
כי ימות פתאום חלילה יבא הכתוב השלישי להכריע ביניהם "
באומרו והחי ויתן אל לבו דברים של מיתה ולכין צוואה בעודו
בחיים טובים בבריאת גופו ובתקפו • וכה עלה על דעתי
לעשות ועשיתי גם אני :

אתם בניי יצ״ו אשר חנן אותם אלהים בכם ונתן לי אלהים
בזה המה בניי הכשרים הם ארע אמת לאפוקי בניהם
משהיתים המה נגעו בני אדם אין לי עסק בהם ולא מהם ולא
מה מהם ולא מתמונם כי בני זנונים המה וכבר שלחתים מעל
פני ורחיתם אותם אל ארץ גזירה ארץ לא עבר בה איש ולא
ישב אדם שם • שם תהא מיתתם • ושם תהא קבורתם • כי
לא ירשו עם בניי ואין להם חלק ונחלה עמנו • רק אני מצוה
לבנים הכשרים הגולדים לי מאשתי הכשרה הצנועה במעשיה
היא נקראת בשמה הנאה לה אסתר שינדל תי׳ בת הגאון
הגדול

On the right – the last page of the introduction of Shimshon, great-grandson of R. Naftali ha-Cohen Katz; on the left – the first page of the text of the ethical will of R. Naftali ha-Cohen Katz. Taken from the Brune 1757 edition (Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem).

relate to the writings of other family members, to quote each other and to add emendations (*hagahot*), that is, exegetical comments, to their own work and to the compositions of other family members. The family carried on a tradition of learning, speculation, and shared references to family writings and oral traditions, as well as of correcting and elaborating on the written texts.

The ethical will of Rabbi Abraham Horowits, entitled *Yesh Nohalin,*[39] was completed in 1598. His son Jacob, who added emendations to his father's ethical will, published it in Prague in 1615. To the second printing (Amsterdam 1701), the ethical will of Abraham's grandson, Shabtai Sheftil, was added. Since that time the text has been printed in this threefold manner. It soon became a very popular text, printed a dozen times in the late nineteenth century. Glueckel of Hameln described in her autobiography how the text of Rabbi Abraham's will was read aloud to her in an oral Yiddish translation.[40]

The family's notion of memory is expressed in the opening words of Rabbi Abraham's will. He explains why should one leave his sons a moral inheritance in the form of an ethical will. Such a will is eternal and therefore a true inheritance, as compared to an ephemeral material heritage. He adds that the father who leaves such a will shall have double merit. First, he shall be rewarded in the next world for

the directives that his sons fulfill. Second, not only will the sons remember their father when they follow his testament, but they shall also mention their father's name when doing something that he obeyed. This, he says, "is a great advantage and satisfaction for the soul of any dead person, when he is mentioned for the better, because then his lips move in the grave, so it is as if he were not dead."[41]

Rabbi Abraham's son, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, is the author of the important ethical work *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit* (*The Two Tablets of Covenant*). His entire book was written in living memory of himself, when he left his rabbinic position in Prague and all of his belongings to settle in the land of Israel in 1627. This voluminous compendium is actually a very extensive[42] ethical will, encompassing much of his lifetime literary productivity. His son Shabtai Sheftil testified about his father: "He was always reproving his sons and his household to keep the way of the Lord ... Therefore when he thought to go to the land of Israel he was quick and started to write a composition for his sons and their offspring and the offspring of their offspring till eternity, so that they should have a memory book."[43]

In the writings of Isaiah's son, Rabbi Shabtai Sheftil, memory appears in a different context. He says that, because of what he terms "the third destruction that took place in our time in the year 1648", a reference to the massacres of 1648-49 in Poland and Russia,[44] people might forget their family lineage, and therefore transgress the laws of incest. Consequently he records his family tree for his sons, commanding them to pass this knowledge on to their sons and their offspring. This is his way of responding to his fear of the loss of family memory and identity; a fear perhaps grounded in Rabbi Shabtai's personal history. After Shabtai's mother died while he was still young, his father remarried and decided to leave his son forever and settle in the land of Israel. The father gave his son no advance warning of his plans to leave, and they were revealed to the son one day before his departure. This is how he describes his reaction:

> My soul was coupled with his soul ... When the time came close I held him and did not let go and cried loudly, "My father, my father, why do you do this to me, discarding me?" And my father answered me, saying: "What can I do, my son, this is my firm decision."[45]

It seems that his father's journey undermined the stability of intergenerational family relations. For Rabbi Shabtai Sheftil, family relations belong to the realm of memory and not to physical presence in the real world.

A reference to a weak point in the family myth is found regarding the topic of drunkenness. The traditional Jewish custom is to preach and say Torah-novelties during meals, especially at festive gatherings. Apparently Horowitz family members used to drink during big ceremonial meals, to lighten their tongues. Both Rabbi Abraham and his grandson Rabbi Shabtai Sheftil regret this habit. The grandson adds that it made him depressed and also gave him a bad headache.

The ethical wills of the Horowitz family reflect an attempt to shape family identity by writing compositions that are partially egodocuments in nature. Yet here

again the personal words are only part of a larger ethical text. The shaping of the family's identity is intertwined with spiritual and moral identity, as part of the larger Jewish group.

CONCLUSION

Ethical wills are one of the internal sources of Jewish autobiography. There are several similarities between the new nineteenth-century autobiographical genre, which is linked to the decline of traditional Jewish society, and the traditional genre of ethical wills. In neither is the writer's personal experience central. Both will-writers and autobiographers share a didactic purpose: just as the traditional writer is much more interested in conveying his moral teachings to his children or to other readers than in telling incidents of his life or expressing his emotions, so too the writers of the first Jewish enlightenment autobiographies. The focal point of their writing is moralistic, or stresses the changes that they think must take place in Jewish society, and their own personal experiences sometimes illustrates these points. This demonstrates an important feature of the literary construction of Jewish identity from the medieval to the early modern period: its moral-collective rather than its individual focus.

For their writers, the wills served as a means of preserving their identity and memory after their death. For us as readers they shed light on how Jewish identity was formulated and constructed in the past. The need to preserve identity is felt more urgently in times of crisis. Such a crisis can be the outcome of an outer catastrophe, or an inner feeling of absence. Ethical wills were written out of an awareness of a coming absence because of death. Maybe this is part of the reason they flourished in the early modern period, an age with a growing sense of abandonment. It is out of this feeling of the absence that is drawing near that a fifteenth-century father asks his son with moving frankness: "My son, remember me always. Let the image of my portrait be ever before your eyes, never leaving you".[46] Ethical wills, like other egodocuments, reveal the emotions of those who seek remembrance, not only for their great deeds, but also for their personal mode of fashioning their life.

NOTES

1 I first studied Jewish ethical wills in a seminar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under the instruction of my teacher Professor Zeev Gries. I wish to use this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to Professor Gries for all that I have learned from him, and for his constant generosity, support, and encouragement. Professor Gries has also kindly read a draft of this paper and made useful comments. The beginning of the title is taken from the ethical will of Rabbi Naftali ha-Cohen Katz; see note 29 below.

2 Rudolf Dekker, *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography in Holland: From the Golden Age to Romanticism* (Houndmills: Macmillan 2000), 12.

3 On the echoes of this idea see Zeev Gries, "The Jewish Book as an Agent of Culture in the 18th and 19th Centuries", *Jewish Studies* 39 (1999), 32 and note 74.

4 The famous examples of early modern Jewish autobiographies are Leone Modena, Glueckel of Hameln (written in Yiddish), Solomon Maimon (written in German), and some mystical autobiographies. See

Mark R. Cohen et al., *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's* Life of Judah (Princeton, 1988); *Denkwürdingkeitnen der Glückel von Hameln* (Berlin, 1913); Salomon Maimon, *Lebensgeschichte* (München, 1911); M. Faierstein (trans.), *Jewish Mystical Autobiographies: Book of Visions and Book of Secrets* (New York, 1999).

5 The classical but short discussion of the first Jewish autobiographies is by Shmuel Werses, *Trends and Forms in Haskalah Literature* (Jerusalem, 1990), 249-260 (Hebrew). For a novel and moving analysis of the material found in all forms of Jewish enlightenment egodocuments (without using this term), see idem, "The Jewish *Maskil* (enlightened) as a Young Man", in his *"Awake, My People": Hebrew Literature in the Age of Modernization* (Jerusalem, 2001), 67-114 (Hebrew). For a study of later Jewish biographies, see Alan Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiographies*, Bloomington 1989.

6 On the problematics of the concept of "beginning," see Moshe Idel, "On Binary 'Beginnings' in Kabbalah Scholarship", *Aporemata* 5 (2001), 313-337. On the important difference between beginning and threshold, see Gert-Jan Johannes, "The Development of the Literary Field and the Limitations of 'Minor' Languages: The Case of the Northern Netherlands, 1750-1850", *Poetics* 28 (2001), 349-376.

7 Albeit, without the usage of the comparatively new term "egodocuments".

8 The best compilation of Jewish ethical wills in translation is still the bilingual edition of Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia, 1926) (reprint 1985). However, Abraham's definition of ethical wills is vast (see note 15 below). Studies of this genre are few. See Israel Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills", *Jewish Quarterly Review* III (1891), 436-484; IV (1892), 333-334; Joseph Dan, *Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature (The Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period)* (Jerusalem, 1975), chapter 5, 92-104, and the bibliography there, 283-287 (Hebrew); Zeev Gries, *Conduct Literature (Regimen Vitae)* (Jerusalem, 1989), 51-53 (Hebrew); and Joseph Dan, "Wills, Ethical" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971) vol.16, col. 530-532. On the cultural meaning of the notaries wills, with an extensive bibliography, see David J. Malkiel, "Jews and wills in Renaissance Italy; a Case Study in the Jewish Christian Cultural Encounter, *Italia* 12 (1996), 7-69.

9 Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills", 436.

10 I am using here Shmuel Werses' definition as found in his doctoral dissertation, "Studies in the Ethical Literature of the Jews in Spain (13th-15th Centuries)" (Jerusalem: Hebrew University 1947), 6 (Hebrew). The introductory book to the genre is Dan, *Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature.*

11 *Adab* refers to Arabic ethical literature. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden, 1960, s.v.), 'adab', I, 325-329. In it there is also a subgenre of ethical wills. See ibid., s.v. 'wassiah'.

12 On the didactic usage of letters and epistolary manuals see Zeev Gries, *The Book in Early Hasidism* (Tel-Aviv, 1992), 31-32, 117-118 (Hebrew).

13 The basic list of Jewish ethical wills is B. Wachstein's in *Qiryat Sefer* 11 (1935), 235-244, 372-383; 12 (1936), 98-108 (Hebrew). Additions can be found in A. Ya'ari, *Qiryat Sefer* 34 (1959), 381-387. A basic bibliography (rather dated) in English can be found at the end of Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills", and in his collection, *Hebrew Ethical Wills.* Ethical wills in unprinted manuscripts are rare.

14 See M. de Jong, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text* (Leiden, 1978).

15 See Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills", 446; Norman Roth, "The 'Theft of Philosophy' by the Greeks from the Jews", *Classical Folia* 32 (1978), 53-67.

16 The sharp distinction between personal and pseudepigraphic wills is not made in Abrahams' beautiful collection.

17 See for example Avriel Bar-Levav, "Ritualization of Death and Life: The Ethical Will of Rabbi Naphtali Ha-Kohen Katz", *Judaism in Practice*, ed. Lawrence Fine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 155-167.

18 Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 75. References in page numbers to this will are to this translation, and the English translation of the quotes is based on it.

19 The term "white legend" is used here after Rudolf Dekker, *Childhood*, 4, for the positive image of parenthood and childhood in the past. It is opposite to the "black legend", their negative image.

20 However, this does not imply that ethical wills (or, for that matter, Jewish ethical literature at large) cannot be used as an historical source; only that it is not used here. See the approach of Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills", 444-445, who thinks that "Our ethical literature belongs to no one period", and that "the Jewish code of morality is without variation, and the noblest ideas form that code". Abrahams' approach to this matter is apologetic.

21 This is an idomatic Hebrew phrase, reflecting the responsibility one should take for his or her troubles, because God is just.

22 *Ethics of the Fathers* 3:10.

23 Alexander Suesskind of Horodna, *Will* (Vilna, 1834), fol. 24b.

24 See note 19 above.

25 Alexander Suesskind of Horodna, *Will*, fol. 25a.

26 Ibid., fol. 15b.

27 Ibid., fol. 19a-b.

28 Rudolf Dekker has kindly informed me that a dislike of "children's play" can be found also in Dutch and other pedagogical works of this time. However, learning to recite the benedictions can be understood also as a kind of a (serious) game or play. On religious games see Avriel Bar-Levav, "Games of Death in Jewish Books for the Sick and the Dying", *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 5 (2000), 11-34.

29 *The Will of Rabbi Naftali* (Berlin, 1729), fol. 20b.

30 The secret is probably connected to the resurrection of the dead, or to reincarnation. According to some theories, there are complexities in the relationship between a resurrected wife and her resurrected husbands, if she remarries.

31 This is a phrase found in the Babylonian Talmud, (*Avoda Zara 18b*), in which a person shares his lot in the world to come with someone else.

32 *The Will of Rabbi Naftali*, fol. 20a-b. Part of this passage is quoted in Abrahams, "Jewish Ethical Wills", 442; however, Abrahams omitted most of the request not to remarrry.

33 This is not, of course, the only possible explanation for writing. For example, Rabbi Naftali might have written it because he wanted his attitude to be known publicly, especially to his family.

34 Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 63.

35 Ibid., 80-82.

36 See Gries, *Conduct Literature* (note 8 above), 12-13; Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 99, 228; *The Will of Rabbi Naftali*, fol. 24a-b.

37 Shmuel Werses, *Trends and Forms in Haskalah Literature* (note 3 above), 253.

38 We know this both from remarks in their writings, and from the existence of several editions for some of them.

39 This is a halakhic phrase, taken from the beginning of chapter 8 in tractate *Baba batra*. The literal meaning is "some [people have the right to] inherit". The original context in the mishna is laws of inheritance.

40 See the Yiddish edition of her memoirs, ed. David Kaufman (Pressburg 1892), 264. I thank my teacher Prof. Chava Turniansky for this reference.

41 *Yesh Nohalin* (Amsterdam 1701), fol. 3a. The notion that the lips of the dead person are moving in his grave when something that he has said is repeated in his name on earth is found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 93a.

42 The Amsterdam 1698 edition contains 422 folios (that is 844 pages), in large folio format. A modern edition (Jerusalem, 1993) is printed in 5 volumes.

43 The introduction of Rabbi Shabtai Sheftil to *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*.

44 These massacres, which accompanied the Cossack revolt under the leadership of Bogdan Khmelnitski, had a shocking affect on the Jews. See H.H. Ben-Sasson(ed.), *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976), 656-657.

45 Shabtai Sheftil Horowitz, *Vavei ha-Amudim* (printed at the end of his father's *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*), introduction, fol. 2b.

46 *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 233. In fact this is a quote from a previous text, but the author quotes it because it expresses his emotions.