

CHOOSING LIFE (AND DEATH)

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Rabbi Jonathan A. Stein

Someone you love is critically ill. The problem may be cancer, a stroke, a heart attack, a car accident. Extensive modern technology, a vast array of lights, plugs, tubes, and medical equipment displaying digital numbers and making beeping, whirring, buzzing sounds confront you in the hospital room. A talented team of doctors and nurses can sustain life, but only on a machine. You sense what's coming...the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the incomprehensible. Someone must decide what to do. There is denial, confusion, shock, fear, anger, sadness and, beneath it all, undying hope for recovery. About this time, you might choose to call your rabbi, and, as if the words themselves that you about to utter contain the power of life and death, you whisper the ultimate question: "What should we do if they ask us about turning off the machines?"

U'vacharta b'Chayim! "Choose Life!" We will read these powerful words in tomorrow morning's *Torah* portion. "See, I have set before you this day life and death..." "*U'vacharta b'Chayim!*" "Therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live!"

Judaism is a religion of choosing and of life. Our tradition teaches that God has created us truly free to make moral decisions, to do good or evil, right or wrong. Moreover, Judaism commands us to make those choices that affirm God's infinitely precious gift of life.

Every day we make dozens of decisions, but rarely must we literally choose between life and death. Few of us are emotionally prepared for the time when we might have to make such an important judgment for someone we love or, perhaps, for ourselves. Nevertheless, such moments, occur. And when they do, they can be excruciatingly painful.

Although we live longer today than at any other time in history, none of us will live forever. The *minyan* service we pray at a house of mourning contains this thought, "All things pass; all that lives must die. All that we prize is but lent to us, and the time comes when we must surrender it. We are travelers on the same road that leads to the same end." Many of us, however, will come face-to-face with death in the shadow of the complex and interconnected world of sophisticated medical technology, legal ambiguity and bio-ethical uncertainty.

Modern medicine has brought us many miracles—babies born to couples who might otherwise be infertile, organ transplants, laser surgery, and gene therapy. However, our increasingly sophisticated technology is often problematic as well. "I wouldn't want to be kept alive that way," has become a motto in American society. No one wants to be a Karen Quinlan or a Terri Schaivo. We'd rather orchestrate our death as gracefully as did Pope John Paul II. Dying patients and their families are increasingly looking for ways to humanize death, to stop technology or the legal system from transcending human and humane considerations when there is no reasonable hope for recovery. We all know that certain illnesses and injuries can leave us stripped of everything that makes life worth living, that we or our family or friends can become prisoners of physical indignity and

spiritual pain. Modern medicine and technology sometimes unwittingly distort natural processes, leaving us more afraid of living than of dying.

What does Judaism have to say about this? As is often the case, Jewish tradition represents a balanced approach. There is a considerable discussion in our literature about a person in the throes of death; in Hebrew, such a person is known as a *'goses.'* On the one hand, Judaism strictly forbids any action designed to hasten death. The soul is a gift from God, and only God can take it back. The span of our life is a loan from God, and only God can call the loan due. Hence, all forms of active euthanasia and suicide are against Jewish law and ethical thinking. Judaism considers any pro-active step that hastens a person's death unnaturally as tantamount to murder.

On the other hand, a person who is terminally ill but rational is not required to prolong his or her life; nature may take its course without anyone's interference. Many Jewish authorities would go even farther. There are several *halachic* rulings that state that if there is anything which is hindering the departure of the soul—the *Talmud*, for example, mentions a knocking noise near the person because someone is chopping wood, or if there is salt on the tongue of a *goses*--and it is preventing the person from dying--then it is permissible to remove such a hindrance to death. Sometimes, life-saving machinery can become such an impediment. Some rabbis go so far as to forbid the use of medicines that unnecessarily prolong life and delay an inevitable death. Others say that we should stop praying for the recovery of a *goses*, and some say that, when all hope is lost, we may even pray for their death.

While rabbinic authorities differ over a Jewish definition of death, even the most stringent experts agree that there may come a moment when no natural life functions can be sustained independently. In such a situation, Jewish bio-medical ethics permit a family and a physician, in good conscience, to cease treatment and to remove life support. And even though it may depress respiration and thereby hasten death somewhat, the use of morphine for pain control is considered appropriate. At that critical juncture when no realistic hope for recovery exists, a *goses* should be afforded a painless and peaceful death.

No doubt, many of you have already prepared a "Living Will" in order to avoid such an untenable situation for yourself. Jewish tradition affirms the use of this document. While the *Talmud* never addresses the question directly, it does emphasize the necessity, if possible, to fulfill the wishes of a dying person. Thus, if a Jew has signed a Living Will to avoid prolonging his or her life artificially, and the situation arises which calls for it, we should honor the person's request to die with dignity.

However, you should be aware that your Living Will might not be sufficient to cover all circumstances and situations that may arise in the event that you cannot communicate your wishes directly. Empowering people to take control over their own dying involves a complex matrix of ethical, religious, economic, legal, medical and practical concerns.

Although this sermon is not a plug for lawyers, a complete plan for health care decision-making may, in fact, require the careful drafting, coordination and execution of several legal documents including a Living Will, a Health Care Representative appointment and a Durable Power of Attorney. Family members, physicians, trusted friends and clergy can help formulate the intent, but an attorney with expertise in these matters can be an indispensable source of counsel to help make sure that one's health

care choices are unmistakably expressed and legally delegated. This is particularly true if your choices include the termination of intake of medicine, food or water. Only a valid set of documents can insure that our wishes will be followed, especially if our family and/or physician do not agree with each other or with our stated wishes.

In addition, while we're talking about this difficult subject, I want to put in a plug for Hospice and palliative care. The Hospice movement has revolutionized the way people die—and all for the better. I applaud those who work in this field. Hospice allows the terminally ill to die without pain and with their dignity intact.

Tomorrow morning we will read those famous words, “See—I have set before you this day life and death.” Our Jewish prayers and beliefs affirm that life is singularly precious and that every one of us is responsible for the command *U’vacharta b’Chayim!* “Choose Life!” Yet, *Yom Kippur* is the one day each year when we also confront both the fragility of life and the relentlessness of death. Each of us can help spare those we love the agony of having to literally choose life or death for us. We can sit with our spouses, children, parents and siblings, life partners and close friends, clergy, doctors and lawyers to review these issues and make our wishes known. It can be terribly difficult to face these questions. Details about a funeral, choosing a grave, making pre-arrangements, even writing a will—these are taboo subjects for many of us. However, our Jewish devotion to living and loving life also requires an honest recognition of the reality of our human condition. In a few months, Shaaray Tefila’s Caring Committee will publish a pamphlet that describes Jewish funeral and mourning customs; each of you will receive a copy. We also have a form that can help you think through various details concerning burial arrangements and funerals. If you contact my office, we will send you copies.

Unfortunately, as people die, they are often experience a spiritual anguish that is as deep as any physical suffering. Helping someone to discover their spiritual resources is a necessary part of relating to them as a whole person. A *refuat haNefesh*, a healing of the soul, is what we should seek when it is apparent that a physical life on earth is drawing to an end. Allowing a person to express emotional pain and struggle is one way to help heal their soul. When we are terminally ill, we may be frightened about dying, concerned about what will happen to our spouse and children, filled with anger about our suffering, and feeling despair and bitterness at the loss of our future hopes and dreams. We may cling to illusory hope about the ability of medical care to provide a meaningful life for us. Or we may be more focused on the possible life-prolonging aspect of a particular therapy than the quality of the time we have left.

A doctor, family member, friend, or clergyperson who can help us verbalize our fears and hopes might be able to help ease the spiritual pain just a bit. Talking about it often helps bring terminally ill people the reconciliation and peace they really need. Most of us are reticent to talk about such important questions with our loved ones, even, or especially, when someone is dying. We’d rather discuss the weather, the news or the Yankees. Everyone may be trying so hard to protect everyone else and themselves from sadness and tears that we avoid the most important thing going on in our lives.

So what do we say to someone who is dying? We can begin by asking questions: Can you help me understand what it has been like for you to be so ill? What have you found the hardest to deal with? Is God or religion important to you as your face your illness? What do you think happens after we die? Are you afraid? What keeps you going?

What brings you the most comfort? What are your sources of strength? And we can say: Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you. Goodbye.

Tomorrow morning when we gather for *Yizkor*, our thoughts will turn to those who sat with us in this sanctuary last year and in years before, and whose presence we dearly miss. And as we mourn them, we confront our own deaths. Will we be here on *Kol Nidre 5767*? Will our family and friends gather to mourn our death this coming year? Who indeed shall live and who indeed shall die? These questions not only haunt us, but can also motivate us. Ironically, the most difficult challenges of all are not about our deaths, but about our lives! We should be more afraid of living poorly than of dying painfully.

For that reason, in addition to a Living Will, I suggest that this year, each of us also think about writing an Ethical Will. An Ethical Will is a compelling Jewish tradition. The *Torah* records that our ancestor Jacob first started this custom when he called his sons to his bedside and blessed each of them individually. Over time, the Ethical Will has become a beautiful way for us to bequeath to our families the accumulated intangible wisdom that we have amassed in our lifetime. It involves writing a letter to our family to express our love and affection, to let them know our hopes and dreams for them after we are gone, and to articulate those ethical values and moral ideals by which we hope they will live.

Two excerpts will demonstrate the power of an Ethical Will. A Mr. Benjamin Roth wrote such a will to his children in 1854. One paragraph from it says: "Always seek to keep your conscience clear; never commit an action which you will have to regret afterward. Think carefully about everything you contemplate doing before its execution, and consider its consequence, so that you will act only after due consideration."

And Sholom ben Menachem Nachum Rabinowitz, otherwise known as Sholom Aleichem, wrote, "My last wish...and my prayer to my children: Take good care of your mother, beautify her old age, sweeten her bitter life, and heal her broken heart. And the main thing...live in peace, bear no hatred for each other, help one another in bad times, think on occasion of other members of the family, pity the poor, and when circumstances permit, pay my debts, if there be any. Children, bear with honor my hard-earned Jewish name and may God in Heaven sustain you ever."

If you are interested in pursuing this unique Jewish tradition, I can provide you with some helpful resources.

Judaism's ultimate message is its insistence that we best confront death by choosing life! *Yom Kippur* comes to instruct us that if, God forbid, the coming year forces us to face our own death or the death of a loved one that we will have lived our lives fully and to the best of our God-given potential. Confronting our own deaths while we still live can be a powerful spiritual experience that will connect us ever closer to God, to our family and friends, including those who have already died, as well as reminding ourselves of that which is of ultimate importance in life.

U'vacharta b'Chayim! "Therefore, Choose Life!" Let this *Yom Kippur* day we have now begun inspire us as it is meant to—to live each day as if we have truly confronted the possibility that we may die tomorrow.

Dear God, grant us the honesty, insight and courage to do so.

Amen.

