



On Euthanasia / Assisted Suicide

The Bible begins with God's creation of Heaven and Earth, followed by a description of God breathing life into man. Judaism ascribes infinite value to human life, setting aside almost all other Biblical laws as necessary to save one. It says in Leviticus 18:5: "And you shall guard My statutes and My judgements that a man shall do them and live in them, I am the Lord" — implying, as the Talmud says (*Yoma* 85b), that one should not die in them. Jewish legal codes require that one save even a severely and permanently disabled person, whether physically or mentally, even for a few added moments of life (*Sh"A OC 329:3*, *Biur Halacha* there).

The Founding Fathers identified life as the first of the "unalienable rights" acknowledged in the Declaration of Independence — an inherent endowment from our Creator, independent of human authority. The concept that life is of such inestimable value that we cannot limit or compare it remains a foundational ethical principle.

Prohibitions against suicide come as an obvious corollary to this concept. Suicide requires that one believe his or her life so lacking in value that death is the superior option, which, according to Biblical ethics, is built upon a false premise. The idea that we can determine when it is appropriate to end a life is the antithesis of the notion that human life is of infinite value.

Euthanasia, even with a patient's explicit consent, is still more problematic than suicide itself. The use of medical doctors to facilitate suicide upends the conventional definition of "medicine" — a craft dedicated to enhancing and preserving health. From the Bible to the Hippocratic Oath, a doctor's foremost obligation is to avoid intentional harm to the patient. Jewish law expressly forbids hastening even the death of a dying person (*Sh"A YD 339:1*). Judaism can only support permitting nature to take its course, called a "Do Not Resuscitate" order in modern medicine, and even that only under carefully limited circumstances — as, for example, where a patient is facing a terminal illness and intractable pain.

If we permit suicide to be viewed as something that can be facilitated by doctors, the right to life itself becomes a malleable concept — as promoted by some of today's foremost contemporary philosophers, based upon a school of thought led by Peter Singer, a professor at both Princeton University and the New College of the Humanities in London.

Singer argued as follows, in a paper published in 2009: "During the next 35 years, the traditional view of the sanctity of human life will collapse under pressure from scientific, technological, and

demographic developments. By 2040, it may be that only a rump of hard-core, know-nothing religious fundamentalists will defend the view that every human life, from conception to death, is sacrosanct."

In Singer's view, the right to life is not inalienable, but tied to a being's abilities and senses. Not only does he favor euthanasia for "the terminally or incurably ill," but for severely-disabled infants whose "parents think it better that their newborn infant should die." He entertains circumstances where saving a mouse from a burning building might be preferable to saving a human being, considering inherent preference for human life "speciesism."

This attitude leads inexorably to a slippery slope whose next steps may already be foreseen. Doctors may claim the authority and expertise to disagree with family members on when euthanasia should be done. Insurance companies may refuse to cover ongoing life support for a patient on the grounds that his or her life is no longer worthy of expense.

We should all fear a circumstance where others outside the immediate family or designated proxy could attempt to make decisions for patients unable to properly communicate or make deliberate decisions on their own. In the United Kingdom, the Family Division of the High Court ruled that the parents of Alfie Evans could not remove their child from a hospital that deemed his case hopeless; instead, the hospital was permitted to remove life support and hydration against his parents' wishes. Alfie then continued to breathe for several hours without support, contrary to doctors' confident predictions. Yet the courts still refused to permit him to be flown to Italy for continued treatment, although an air ambulance was standing by.

Medical doctors are no more qualified than others to determine when life is "worthwhile" or should be terminated. Although thalidomide babies were sometimes left to die, survivors express gratitude for being alive despite their obvious limitations.

Contrary to Singer's bold assertions, modern scientific discoveries have only accentuated the ongoing relevance of the traditional perspective. Although it has been the target of extensive laboratory research, abiogenesis, the development of organic life from inorganic matter, has yet to be duplicated. Even more so, the field of computer science has made incredible strides in every area of interest save one: the development of an independent consciousness within a computer, to match that found in human beings. Engineers remain no closer to achieving this objective than when research began in the 1950's — as we have no scientific understanding of that which the Bible refers to as "the spirit of life," that which God breathed into Adam.

The facts are very much against the school of thought led by Singer, and any move to permit doctors to terminate lives moves America away from its moral foundations, the principles which helped develop it into the world's most powerful, yet peace-loving country, and the leader of the free world.

For Further Reading

"End of Life Choices in Halacha [Jewish Law]," Daniel Eisenberg MD, JLaw.com, 1999.
<https://www.jlaw.com/Articles/EndofLife.html>

"Halachic Guidelines to Assist Patients and their Families in Making 'End-of-Life' Medical Decisions," the Rabbinical Council of America, Aug. 10, 2009.
<http://www.rabbis.org/pdfs/hcpi.pdf>

"Jewish ethical guidelines for resuscitation and artificial nutrition and hydration of the dying elderly," Rabbi Zev Schostak, Journal of Medical Ethics, June 1, 1994.
<https://jme.bmj.com/content/medethics/20/2/93.full.pdf>

Peter Singer FAQ page: <https://petersinger.info/faq/>

"What's happened to Thalidomide babies?" Frederick Dove, BBC.com, Nov. 3 2011.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-15536544>

The Coalition for Jewish Values
<http://cjvalues.org/>

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6 Cheshvan 5779
October 15, 2018