

Assisted Dying: A Jewish Perspective

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The debate over assisted dying touches on profound moral, ethical, and theological questions. Within Judaism, the discussion is rooted in traditional texts and principles, yet it is informed by evolving interpretations that address contemporary realities. The tension between the sanctity of life, compassion for those suffering, and respect for autonomy reflects the complexity of Jewish thought on this deeply sensitive issue. Drawing upon traditional and modern sources, as well as various denominational perspectives, this essay explores the Jewish stance on assisted dying, addressing active and passive euthanasia, the alleviation of suffering, and broader ethical considerations.

Sanctity of Life: A Core Principle

At the heart of Jewish teaching is the sanctity of life, grounded in the Torah and later rabbinic interpretations. The creation story in *Genesis 2:7* declares, "*And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*" This verse establishes life as a divine gift, sacred and inviolable. Human beings, created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God), are entrusted with the care of their lives, but not with ultimate authority over them.

The *Talmud* expands upon this principle with the doctrine of *pikuach nefesh*—the obligation to preserve human life, which overrides almost all other commandments. For example, breaking Shabbat to save a life is not only permissible but mandated. This prioritisation of life reflects the Jewish conviction that every moment of existence holds infinite value, regardless of a person's health, age, or circumstances.

- *Genesis 9:5-6*: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did God make mankind."

A Reform Jewish Perspective by Rabbi Mark Washofsky, Ph.D.

Jewish tradition holds that since life is a gift from God, it is to be cherished until its last moments. We are instructed not to take any actions that may accelerate death. All of us wish to avoid pain and suffering, and none of us wishes to see a loved one in agony. But suffering does not, in and of itself, justify the taking of a human life.

Jewish tradition does not demand that we struggle against illness with all our might until the bitter end. Our duty is to practice medicine, to heal, to save life; and once it becomes clear that our technologies no longer serve what we would define as a reasonably therapeutic purpose, we are permitted to withdraw those treatments, even if in doing so we allow a patient to die sooner than he or she otherwise would have died.

Indeed, since tradition suggests it is forbidden to delay unnecessarily the inevitable and imminent death of a terminal patient, it is arguably our obligation to discontinue these therapies. The struggle to respectfully and carefully make end-of-life decisions for our loved ones and for ourselves is particularly difficult.

Our obligation to heal the sick and to care for them does not include assisting a patient to end his or her life. Judaism has always held that assisted suicide is incompatible with our teachings. Such practices are rife with the potential for tragic abuse and are incompatible with Jewish teaching, as we understand it.

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- Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4: “It was for this reason that Adam was first created as one person, to teach us that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world.”

This view is echoed in a responsum by the Orthodox chief rabbinate to the UK Parliament’s 2005 Assisted Dying Report, which states, “Since Judaism regards human life as sacred, euthanasia and assisted suicide are almost universally viewed as prohibited, whether carried out with or without the patient’s permission.” The prohibition is rooted in the belief that life’s sanctity is absolute, and humans should not intervene in a way that undermines God’s dominion over life and death.

The Jewish Perspective on Death

In Judaism, death is regarded as a natural and inevitable part of life, not to be feared but respected as a transition to the next stage of existence. The Torah describes death as a return to God, with *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes 12:7) stating, “The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” Jewish tradition affirms the sanctity of life, emphasising that life is a divine gift and that human beings are stewards rather than owners of their bodies (*Genesis 1:27, Deuteronomy 30:19*). However, this reverence for life is balanced with a recognition of the inevitability of death, reflected in the Jewish practice of mourning, which honours the deceased while supporting the living. The *Talmud* (Berachot 17a) teaches that the righteous do not fear death, as they see it as a continuation of their connection to God. At the same time, Jewish law (*halacha*) prohibits actions that hasten death unnecessarily, underscoring the belief in the intrinsic value of every moment of life. Rituals such as the recitation of the *Kaddish* and the observance of *shiva* reflect Judaism’s focus on the dignity of the deceased and the importance of community in the face of loss. Jewish thought encourages acceptance of mortality as a call to live meaningfully, embodying the values of *chesed* (loving-kindness) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) during one’s lifetime.

- *Ecclesiastes 12:7*: “The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”
- *Genesis 1:27*: Humanity created in God’s image.
- *Berachot 17a*: The righteous approach death without fear.

In Jewish thought, the value of life is measured not solely by its length but by the quality and meaning imbued in it. This is reflected in the teaching from *Pirkei Avot* (4:17): “*Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life in the World to Come.*” This principle emphasises that a single moment filled with purpose, righteousness, and virtuous actions holds greater significance than an eternity devoid of such meaning. Similarly, the Talmud reflects that time is not merely about duration but about the richness of achievement and the ethical quality of how it is lived. These teachings highlight the importance of living a life of purpose, dignity, and compassion, rather than focusing solely on prolonging its days.

Talmud *Ketubot 104a* :

The maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi ascended to the roof and said: The upper realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and the lower realms are requesting the presence of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. May it be the will of God that the lower worlds should impose their will upon the upper worlds. However, when she saw how many times he would enter the bathroom and remove his phylacteries, and then exit and put them back on, and how he was suffering with his intestinal disease, she said: May it be the will of God that the upper worlds should impose their will upon the lower worlds. And the Sages, meanwhile, would not be silent, i.e., they would not refrain, from begging for mercy so that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would not die. So she took a jug and threw it from the roof to the ground. Due to the sudden noise, the Sages were momentarily silent and refrained from begging for mercy, and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died.

Active and Passive Euthanasia: A Key Distinction

Jewish law (*halacha*) makes an important distinction between actively ending a life (active euthanasia) and allowing a natural death to occur by withholding extraordinary means of prolonging life (passive euthanasia). Active euthanasia is categorically forbidden, as it is seen as equivalent to murder. This principle applies even if the person whose life is being ended consents to the act. The *Talmud* (Sanhedrin 74a) maintains that life must be preserved at all costs, with no justification for taking life under any circumstances.

- *Talmud Sanhedrin 74a*: “All commandments are overridden for the sake of saving a life.”

However, Jewish tradition has always recognised the complexity of end-of-life care, particularly in cases of prolonged suffering. In *Ketubot 104a*, a moving narrative describes how Rabbi Judah’s disciples prayed fervently for his recovery, despite his excruciating pain. When his maid realised that their prayers prolonged his suffering, she dropped a clay jar to interrupt their supplications, allowing him to die peacefully. While not a formal legal ruling, this story reflects a compassionate understanding of the human condition, suggesting that there are circumstances where allowing death is a merciful act.

Suffering and Compassion in Jewish Ethics

Compassion (*rachamim*) is a central value in Judaism, shaping its response to suffering. While Jewish tradition emphasises the sanctity of life, it does not ignore the profound physical and emotional pain that terminal illness can bring. The balancing of life’s intrinsic value

with the alleviation of suffering is a recurring theme in Jewish ethics.

In contemporary discourse, Reform Judaism has taken a more progressive stance, acknowledging the moral complexities of assisted dying. The Union for Reform Judaism’s position on the issue underscores the importance of personal autonomy and dignity, recognising that for some individuals, the decision to end their suffering may be an expression of their humanity. This compassionate approach aligns with the Jewish imperative to care for the vulnerable and honour the dignity of every person.

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Two Talmudic discussions:

Berachot 5b: The Rejection of Pain and Suffering

*“Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Elazar said to him: I welcome **neither** this suffering **nor** its reward. “*

The phrase *“neither this suffering nor its reward”* comes from a story in *Berachot 5b*, a tractate focused on blessings and spiritual resilience. This passage recounts individuals who reject the notion that suffering is inherently meaningful or spiritually valuable. By stating that they do not wish to endure suffering or receive its supposed heavenly rewards, these figures assert a profound autonomy over their own experience.

This rejection challenges a theological worldview that regards suffering as a test or pathway to spiritual growth. Instead, it frames suffering as something the individual has the right to refuse. In doing so, the Talmud articulates an important Jewish value: that pain, in and of itself, is not inherently redemptive or necessary for spiritual health. The individual is entitled to seek relief, and sometimes such relief requires the intervention of another person.

Taanit 23a: The Loneliness of Honi haMa'agel

“Honi became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. “

In *Taanit 23a*, Honi haMa'agel, a figure known for his miraculous prayers, experiences a tragic and disorienting end. After a long sleep of seventy years, he awakens to find himself alone and unrecognised. Lonely and frightened, he prays for death, and God grants his request.

This story highlights the psychological and emotional dimensions of suffering. For Honi, it is not physical pain but existential despair—loneliness, disorientation, and the loss of community—that makes life unbearable. His plea for death reflects a deep-seated human need for meaning, connection, and dignity. This insight has important implications for the discussion on assisted dying. It suggests that the Jewish ethical framework must consider not only physical suffering but also psychological and spiritual anguish when addressing end-of-life decisions.

Palliative care

The emphasis on easing suffering is also reflected in the Jewish support for palliative care. Palliative care aims to provide comfort and manage pain without hastening death, enabling individuals to live their remaining time with dignity (*kavod habriyot*) and minimise suffering (*rachamim*). Palliative care not only enhances quality of life but also addresses the emotional and spiritual needs of patients and their families, embodying the holistic approach advocated in Jewish tradition.

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Judaism views the relief of suffering as an essential part of healthcare. While the sanctity of life (*kedushat hachaim*) is a core value, this does not necessitate prolonging life at all costs. Jewish law permits withholding or withdrawing extraordinary medical interventions that serve only to extend the dying process without hope of recovery. For example, a patient on life support who is suffering immensely may choose, with rabbinic and medical guidance, to have the machinery turned off if their condition is irreversible. Such decisions are framed within the Jewish principle that the quality of life is as important as its preservation.

One key focus in the discussion is the permissibility of **palliative sedation**—administering medication to alleviate pain even if it may hasten death as a secondary, unintended effect. Jewish law follows the doctrine of *double effect*, which allows an action with two outcomes—one positive (relieving pain) and one negative (shortening life)—so long as the intention is solely to achieve the positive result. This principle ensures that alleviating suffering is prioritised, while preserving the overarching prohibition against actively causing death.

Jewish tradition understands that suffering is not limited to physical pain but includes psychological, existential, and spiritual distress. Palliative care, therefore, must include support from chaplains, rabbis, or other spiritual advisors who can provide comfort and help patients find meaning in their experiences. This approach honours the Jewish belief in the soul's journey and the importance of a peaceful and dignified transition at the end of life.

Palliative care can serve as a compassionate and ethically appropriate alternative to assisted dying. Many requests for euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide stem from fears of unmanageable pain or a loss of dignity. By providing robust palliative care, these concerns can often be alleviated, offering patients a humane path that aligns with Jewish ethics. Rabbi Dorff calls for expanding access to palliative care, especially for those in underserved communities, ensuring that every individual can benefit from its holistic and patient-centred approach.

However, the implementation of palliative care faces significant challenges, including:

- **Access Disparities:** Not all patients have access to high-quality palliative care, particularly in underfunded or rural healthcare systems.
- **Public Awareness:** Many patients and families are unaware of the benefits of palliative care, leading to underutilisation.
- **Stigma:** Misconceptions that palliative care is synonymous with giving up on life may prevent patients from seeking its benefits.

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Autonomy vs. Divine Sovereignty

One of the central tensions in the debate over assisted dying is the conflict between individual autonomy and the belief in divine sovereignty over life and death. In modern secular ethics, autonomy—the right to make decisions about one’s own body and life—is often considered paramount. This view is particularly prevalent in debates surrounding assisted dying, where individuals advocate for the right to choose the timing and manner of their death.

Jewish tradition, however, takes a different stance. It regards life as a divine trust, not as personal property. This theological perspective limits the scope of autonomy, asserting that human beings are stewards of their bodies rather than owners. The belief that God is the ultimate arbiter of life and death challenges the modern emphasis on personal choice.

Nevertheless, this theological perspective is not monolithic within Judaism. Progressive movements, such as Reform Judaism, place greater emphasis on the ethical importance of autonomy, particularly in cases of terminal illness. By framing the decision to end life as an individual’s choice made in consultation with their community, medical professionals, and family, these movements reconcile traditional Jewish values with contemporary ethical concerns.

Reform Judaism’s Nuanced Approach

Reform Judaism has historically engaged with ethical questions in light of changing societal values, often offering more flexible interpretations of Jewish law. In the context of assisted dying, Reform Judaism acknowledges the complexity of the issue, striving to balance respect for life with compassion for those who suffer.

The Union for Reform Judaism’s official position advocates for carefully defined safeguards to prevent abuse, while supporting the right of terminally ill individuals to make decisions about their own end-of-life care.

Jewish Perspectives on Suicide

Genesis 9:5 And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. 6 “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.

Judaism traditionally prohibits suicide, viewing it as a grave violation of the sanctity of life (*kedushat hachaim*). Life is considered a divine gift, and human beings are seen as stewards of their bodies rather than owners, meaning the intentional taking of one’s own life is likened to murder. This principle is grounded in biblical teachings, such as *Genesis 9:5-6*, which emphasise that life belongs to God.

However, Jewish tradition demonstrates deep compassion for those who die by suicide, especially when it results from mental illness or unbearable emotional distress. In such cases, rabbinic authorities often rule that the individual’s judgment was impaired, thereby exempting them from full accountability, reflecting the Jewish commitment to empathy and the recognition of human frailty.

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This approach reflects a commitment to the Jewish value of *kavod habriyot*—human dignity—emphasising the importance of treating each individual with compassion and respect.

Broader Ethical Concerns

Judaism also considers the broader societal implications of normalising assisted dying. One major concern is the potential for abuse or coercion, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the elderly, disabled, or economically disadvantaged. Critics warn that legalising assisted dying could create pressure on individuals to end their lives prematurely to avoid being a burden on their families or society.

Jewish groups have highlighted the need for robust safeguards to protect against such risks. These include ensuring that decisions are made freely, without external pressure, and that individuals have access to comprehensive palliative care and emotional support.

Judaism's emphasis on communal responsibility further informs its ethical stance. The mitzvah of visiting the sick (*bikur cholim*) exemplifies the Jewish commitment to supporting those in need, fostering a sense of community that can help alleviate feelings of isolation or despair. By creating a compassionate and supportive environment, Jewish communities can address some of the underlying factors that lead individuals to consider assisted dying.

End-of-life care

In the debate around assisted dying and suicide, it is crucial to avoid judgement of those seeking these options, particularly when they are in profound physical or emotional pain. Judaism teaches us to see the individual before us, recognising their unique struggles and circumstances, rather than generalising or condemning their choices. The Talmud's principle of *chesed* (loving-kindness) calls us to respond with empathy and care, especially in moments of vulnerability. While it may be difficult to accept the idea that death could be perceived as a solution, our role is not to impose our own perspectives but to offer presence, support, and compassion to those who have made these decisions, as well as to their families and loved ones. Rabbi Elliot Dorff, in his writings on end-of-life care, emphasises the importance of recognising human suffering and offering dignity and understanding in response. Similarly, the story of Rabbi Judah the Prince's passing (*Ketubot 104a*), where his students allowed his soul to rest by ceasing their prayers, reflects the value of being attuned to the needs of the suffering individual. By embracing this compassionate approach, we uphold the Jewish values of respect for human dignity (*kavod habriyot*) and the imperative to provide comfort in life's most challenging moments.

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Conclusion

The Jewish perspective on assisted dying is shaped by its deep respect for the sanctity of life, its recognition of human suffering, and its commitment to ethical responsibility. While traditional Jewish law prohibits active euthanasia, it allows for passive measures that enable a natural death. At the same time, Progressive movements within Judaism, such as Reform Judaism, have embraced a more nuanced approach, balancing compassion for the suffering with respect for life's sacredness.

This diversity of thought reflects the richness of Jewish tradition, which continues to grapple with complex ethical questions in light of changing societal norms. By engaging with these issues thoughtfully and compassionately, Judaism offers a framework that honours both the sacredness of life and the dignity of the individual. In doing so, it provides a meaningful contribution to the broader debate on assisted dying, reminding us of the profound ethical responsibilities we bear in caring for one another.

Sources:

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Assisted Dying And Abortion

The debates surrounding assisted dying and abortion address profoundly different moral and halachic principles in Judaism, and conflating them risks oversimplifying their complexities. Assisted dying focuses on the ethical dilemmas of alleviating suffering and the sanctity of life at its end, while abortion considers the potentiality of life and the rights of the mother versus the foetus. In Jewish law (*halacha*), the mother's life and well-being take precedence over the foetus, especially when her health is at risk (*Mishnah Ohalot 7:6*), reflecting a nuanced view of the unborn as potential life rather than full life. Conversely, the sanctity of life for someone already living is absolute, even in the face of suffering, though there is space for compassion and relief through palliative care or passive euthanasia. These issues require separate moral frameworks and careful consideration of context, and combining them could obscure the distinct values and priorities Judaism applies to each.