

THE STATUS OF THE DYING PERSON

Even in the moments when death is imminent, whether conscious or not, as long as a person draws breath, they are considered just as alive as any person. It is therefore forbidden to hasten their death.

King Solomon said, "The soul of man is the candle of G-d."

The imagery of the soul as a flame and the body as a wick may help to understand the following teaching of the Talmud:

"[A person in the throes of death] is like a languishing flame; as soon as a person touches it, it becomes extinguished."

In practical terms this means that once a person enters the throes of death, it is forbidden to touch them or move them except to provide life-saving medical care or water to drink.

It is also forbidden to begin making funeral preparations while the person is still alive.

END OF LIFE DECISIONS

While we must not accelerate the dying process, we need not prolong suffering by interrupting the natural dying process either. When decisions need to be made, it is best to seek proper guidance. One should therefore consult a rabbi who is expert in the Jewish rulings on end of life issues.

Consider the fact that when death is near, it is often a natural response to want to control the situation, to speed things up or to slow things down. It can be helpful to remember the following:

The soul belongs to G-d and it was given to each of us to perform a special purpose in this world. When that mission is complete, the soul will be ready to leave. Just as we cannot choose the moment of birth, it is equally not up to us to determine when it is time for a soul to move on. Every moment that a soul is in a body there is a purpose, yet bodily existence does not go on forever.

So, in what may seem like a paradox, we embrace life until its very last moment and yet we respect the process through which all physical life comes to an end.

PREPARING FOR LIFE'S FINAL MOMENTS

BY RABBI SHAI TAUB

"Greater is the day of death," wrote King Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes, "than the day of birth."

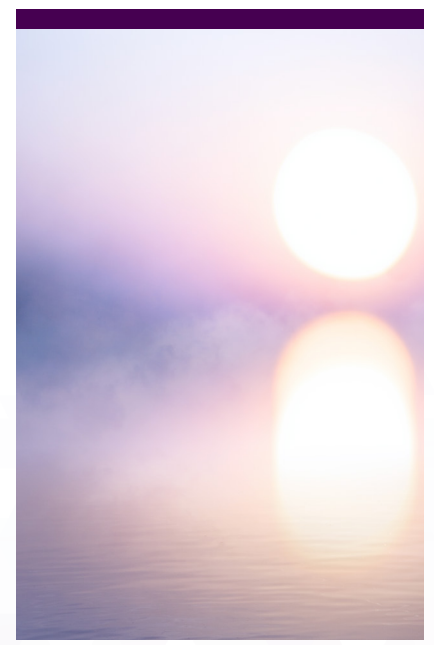
How are we to understand such a curious statement? What was Solomon trying to say?

To understand this, we first have to see each soul as being sent to this earth with its own unique mission. At birth, we begin that mission. Birth is therefore not a time of pure joy, for it is mixed with trepidation and uncertainty. Will we accomplish what we were sent here to do?

Death, on the other hand, is the moment when we know that a soul has completed whatever it needed to do in this world and is ready to move on. So, yes, it is a time of grieving, but it is also a time of accomplishment and clarity.

That is why King Solomon extolled the day of physical passing, for death is not so much the end of life as it is life's culminating moment. When the soul leaves the body, although the dying person may be physically

weak, they have reached the climax of their soul's mission here on earth. It is for this reason that we view the time of physical passing as an occasion of utmost reverence.



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“GREATER IS THE DAY OF DEATH THAN THE DAY OF BIRTH.”

◆ ECCLESIASTES

HEAR O ISRAEL

Because, as we have said, a person’s final moments are actually the apex of their soul’s mission on earth, we try to channel the potency of this time into reaffirming our connection with G-d.

Some of us may be familiar with the fact that throughout the ages Jews have left this world reciting the Shema prayer – “Hear O Israel, the Lord is G-d, the Lord is One.” But it is not only the martyrs of our people who cried out Shema as a final declaration of faith. All kinds of Jews in all kinds of situations have sought to leave this world with the Shema on their lips – whether in their last moments they were being marched to the gas chambers or they were at home and lying peacefully in bed.

When the final moments are near, the dying person should recite Shema and all who are present should do the same.

Here is the transliteration of this short prayer:

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu
Adonai Echad.

(Then in an undertone) Baruch
sheim k’vod malchuto l’olam vaed.

CORRECTING THE PAST

As long as the soul is still in a body, it has the power to correct the wrongs committed here on earth. At no time is this truer than in a person’s final moments when their spiritual powers are at their peak. It is possible, says the Talmud, to redeem a lifetime of mistakes in an instant. Therefore, it is most appropriate that the dying person should use this time to repent with a full heart for any wrongs they may have done in the past.

In Jewish tradition, great importance is given to actually verbalizing this confession. That means not just thinking the words but articulating them with one’s mouth. This does not mean that one must speak one’s confession aloud in the presence of another person. The confession prayer is a private matter between the dying person and G-d. The purpose of pronouncing the words is not so that others may hear, but rather to incorporate a bodily element into the prayer, for physical speech – our tradition teaches – has the power to rectify physical acts. The confession may be whispered in an undertone so that it is inaudible to anyone else.

There is a traditional prayer called “viduy” which literally means “confession” in Hebrew. The wording of this prayer is appropriate for all people. If one wishes to use this text that is found in their prayer books, a rabbi should be able to provide a prayer book and help locate the page.

Additionally, if there is anyone the dying person feels they may have

wronged, they should ask that person’s forgiveness.

unable to do so later.”

If the dying person is not conscious, then those present should recite the Shema and confession prayers on the dying person’s behalf.

“ONE’S ENTIRE PLACE IN THE WORLD TO COME MAY BE ACQUIRED IN AN INSTANT.”

◆ THE TALMUD

WHEN IS IT REALLY THE END?

How do we know that the end is really near?

The answer, of course, is that we can’t ever know. We believe optimistically in the possibility for healing until a person draws their very last breath.

This is no contradiction to reciting the Shema and confession prayers mentioned above. Saying these prayers “early” is not a “bad omen.” It does not “seal” a person’s fate. It’s possible that a person who seems to be at death’s door will go on to recover even after making these final preparations. The concern is the opposite. If a person waits too long, they may not be sufficiently lucid to say the prayers at a later time.

In the words of the Talmud, “Many recite the deathbed confession and live, while many do not recite it and are

BEING THERE

Many times friends and family of a dying person grapple with the question – “Is it better to be there or not be there at the very end?” As mentioned earlier, Jewish tradition sees the moment of the soul’s departure as a sacred time. It is thus a matter of the utmost respect to be present for that moment. Certainly whoever is already in the room should not leave – unless they find it impossible to handle. If one is a kohein, a rabbi should be consulted.

All those present should recite Psalms and even pray for the person’s recovery.

If the person’s spouse and children are not there, they should be brought.

Those present may display their natural emotions but should not cry loudly in a way that may distress the dying person.

Some have a custom of lighting candles in the room, and place one candle near the head of the bed.

If the dying person is conscious and wishes to converse, one may do so with them. It is preferable, however, to discuss matters of faith so that the soul leaves this world while involved in holy matters.

Certainly, no person should be left to die alone; even the presence of a stranger is preferable to no one being there at all.

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