

ASSISTED SUICIDE

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we begin the Sefer of Shemos - the book of exile and redemption. It begins "V'eleh shmos bnei Yisroel haba'im Mitzraima (1:1)" - and these are the names of the children of Yisroel who came to Egypt. Although this had been mentioned already in Breishis, this descent into Mitzraim, this commencement of the galus (exile), must begin this book of galus.

A new king arose in Mitzraim "asher lo yada es Yosef (1:8)" - who didn't know Yosef. Rashi explains that he chose to act as if he didn't know Yosef. He chose to ignore the tremendous debt of gratitude that Mitzraim owed to Yosef.

The Kli Yakar explains that this passuk is explaining the folly of this Paroah. He didn't know what had happened with Yosef. He didn't comprehend that as much as the brothers had tried to destroy Yosef and his dreams, the will of Hashem had prevailed. He didn't learn that lesson. He didn't know Yosef. He foolishly thought that he could stymie that Divine Will.

Chaza"l (Sotah 11a) teach that Paroah summoned three advisers to help decide how to deal with his 'Jewish problem': Bilaam, Iyov and Yisro. Bilaam advised Paroah to enslave Bnei Yisroel. Yisro ran away. Iyov sat silently. Bilaam's heavenly retribution was death at the hands of Bnei Yisroel. Iyov received incredible 'yissurim' - agonizing bodily afflictions. Yisro merited having descendants who became members of the Sanhedrin.

Wasn't the murderous advice of Bilaam far worse than the silence of Iyov? Why did Bilaam merit a relatively quick, painless death while Iyov had to endure a full year of torturous pain? Rav Chaim Shmuelovitz explains that the Torah here is revealing to us that life itself is a gift. Bilaam was punished far more severely than Iyov! He no longer had this gift of life! Even with all of his suffering, Iyov was alive.

In our 'Jack Kevorkian' day and age we find this hard to accept... What kind of life is a life filled with suffering?

I'll take the liberty of deviating from my usual format and enclosing a letter written to me by a talmid (student) some time ago and my response to him. (I've edited a bit and removed his name.) Perhaps it will help shed some light on this issue.

"Dear Rabbi Ciner, I hope all is well with you and your family.

As you may know, the issue of doctor assisted suicide for terminally ill patients has become a

hot one here in the U.S. A new statistic shows that over sixty percent of the country agree that it should be allowed. The case for it is even being heard by the Supreme Court. I understand that since this isn't an issue of simply pulling the plug, the Torah would forbid any such actions. And if one is still capable of performing a mitzva, any mitzva, that would probably be reason enough to forbid assisted suicide or suicide period. But then, when an animal is suffering we are required to put it to death. Why shouldn't we show at least the same kind of mercy towards another human being.

Thank G-d I'm only asking out of curiosity, though I would like to know what the halacha is in regards to this.

Thanks."

I responded as follows:

*Dear ***,*

Hi, I hope all is well. Halacha would certainly forbid this. Let's understand why. I would imagine that even the staunchest proponents of this 'physicians assisted suicide' would agree that there should be a minimum age requirement. In other words, whether that age would be set at four, nine or eighteen, they would agree that if a terminally ill child younger than that would request a physician assisted suicide, we should not fulfill his wishes. Why is that? Clearly because we feel that he doesn't have a mature enough understanding of life in order to make such a decision.

Judaism believes that the only one with a clear enough understanding to take life is the One who gives life. The gulf between the level of our understanding and that of a nine year old is infinitesimal when compared to the gulf between Hashem's understanding and ours.

I remember hearing a story of a doctor who couldn't bear watching the misery of a terminally ill, suffering patient who clearly was imminently going to die. He 'mercifully' pulled the plug. A few nights later this person came to him in a dream screaming that he had only needed a few more hours of yisurim (suffering) and then would have been worthy of entering a very high level of Gan Eden (paradise in the world to come). Now that his life had been prematurely ended, that opportunity was taken away. Now, whether you want to view that dream as a true spiritual visit or as the subconscious thoughts of a tormented individual, we do believe that this world is simply the preparatory corridor leading to the next. Every moment here is part of the Divine plan. Taking a moments life away from a person is depriving him of that G-d given opportunity. Very possibly depriving him of what otherwise would have been his in the world to come. All and any who try to subvert that Will haven't grasped the lesson of Yosef. They too, like Paroah, 'don't know Yosef'.

There are six constant mitzvos that one can fulfill at all times. These are:

- 1. To know and to believe that there is a G-d who created this world and all that it contains. He is actively involved in all that transpires here. He took us out of Mitzraim and He gave us the Torah.*
- 2. To not believe in any other god or source of power.*
- 3. Belief that Hashem is One.*
- 4. To love Hashem.*
- 5. To fear Hashem.*
- 6. To not be swayed after our hearts (heretical thoughts) or after our eyes (adultery and other worldly desires).*

Regardless of one's physical condition, these mitzvos are fulfilled through thoughts. Certainly if one uses those moments to draw close to Hashem with t'shuva (repentance), those few moments would drastically alter one's afterlife.

There is a famous story of the Vilna Gaon's wife and a friend who used to collect charity for needy causes together. They had agreed that whoever would die first would visit the other in a dream and would tell of the reward waiting in the next world for this mitzva. True to the agreement, the friend visited the Gaon's wife after her death. "Do you remember the time we went to the wealthy man and there was no answer at the door? We began to walk away and then we saw his carriage pulling up. We both said 'There he is', but I raised my arm to point in his direction and you didn't. For that extra effort that I put into the mitzva, I was recorded in a totally different book. It was considered an entirely different type of mitzva."

The reward for a moment's fulfillment of a mitzva or even part of a mitzva is immeasurable. Depriving an individual of such an opportunity is a vicious form of cruelty, certainly not an act of mercy.

The situation is completely different by animals. Animals have no neshama (soul) and no afterlife. The purpose of their existence is to aid man in his lofty mission.

The Mishna (Brachos and Megilah) states that if one prays by saying, "Hashem, you showed your compassion to the nest of a bird (the mitzva of shiloach hakayn - sending away the mother bird), have compassion on us!", we are told to quiet him. The Talmud explains that this is not a proper prayer because it makes Hashem's mitzvos into compassionate acts whereas they are, in fact, decrees.

The Ohr Yahel explains as follows. By praying in such a fashion, we are transforming the mitzva into the compassionate will of Hashem. That is missing the whole point! We know that Hashem is compassionate! The mitzva is a decree that must be fulfilled in order for us to learn to be compassionate. To transform us into compassionate beings. Perhaps, if the animal will no longer be able to function here and it will be in pain, its purpose is now to

enable us to be merciful by putting it out of its misery.

By an animal we see the whole picture, by man we hardly see a drop in the ocean. By an animal we are equipped to make such a decision and to show mercy, by a human being we are not.

May we recognize the incredible gift of life - the wealth of opportunities that each moment of life offers - and utilize them to the best of our abilities.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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