

True Death With Dignity

By Rabbi Kalman Packouz

GOOD MORNING! I have always loved the phrase "Death with Dignity." It conjures for me an image of the Angel of Death dressed in tuxedo with a white tie driving up to the door in a Cadillac Limousine. He rolls out the red carpet and escorts the individual down the aisle to be chauffeured to the next world -- with a string quartet playing "Pomp and Circumstance." But, that's not the meaning intended by the phrase.

Rather, the phrase "Death with Dignity" conveys the right to choose one's departure at a time one determines -- if there is too much suffering, no quality of life, one is a burden on family and friends. In other words, to choose the time of one's suicide when life no longer meets one's criteria of what life should be.

What does it mean to die with dignity?

My friend, Brent (Boruch) Brown had ALS -- Lou Gehrig disease. He chose to embrace life as his body slowly became paralyzed limb by limb. From walking with a cane to a wheel chair to bed ridden ...from clearly speaking to speaking with difficulty, to signaling with his eye lids... Brent chose to accept and bear the pain. He chose to appreciate that every moment in life is precious. In doing so, his courage inspired and uplifted all who knew him -- family, friends, and hospital staff. Brent gave life an elevated, noble quality. He certainly died with dignity.

How about the soldier who heroically saves his squad by diving onto a hand grenade. Is his not death with dignity?

If life is only about physical pleasure, productivity, and looking good, then "death with dignity" is an effective suicide exit plan.

Yet, what if life is more than that? Did the Almighty create this world so we can tally how many steaks enjoyed and how many adventures taken? Does he who dies with the most toys really win?

Nobody wants pain, but should pain be the determining factor in the quality of life? Rather, isn't pain the price we pay for growth and accomplishment -- especially those with greatest meaning: childbirth, raising a family, helping others, strengthening the community, developing courage and character, purifying the soul.

Isn't life more than just seeking comfort, followed by a comfortable exit?

What if the Almighty created us for a higher purpose? What if He instilled into every human being a soul -- and our challenge in life is to perfect that soul through working on our character and overcoming challenges?

What if God has a tailored-made plan for each of us -- providing challenges in order to grow and come close to Him? What if there is meaning and purpose to the way our life ends as well? Are we not doing our soul -- and the souls of our loved ones -- a disservice by shortening God's plan for our demise?

When people ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" they typically define "bad" as that which involves challenge, pain and difficulty.

On the contrary, life's challenges and difficulties are what enable us to grow. Accepting our challenges and facing them with responsibility, courage, and sincere effort -- that is what gives life dignity.

Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz, a Harvard-trained lawyer and expert regarding Jewish Ethics, wrote: "Because all human beings are formed in the image of the Divine, all life is regarded as being of infinite value regardless of its duration or quality. As all mathematicians realize, infinity cannot be halved. If and when some human life is deemed to be less valuable than others, then life as a whole has gone from being infinite to being relative and the lives of us have become cheapened and debased."

Life is not always easy. And the end is often even more challenging. Yet, only by embracing every moment of life can we truly merit "death with dignity."

About the Author

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