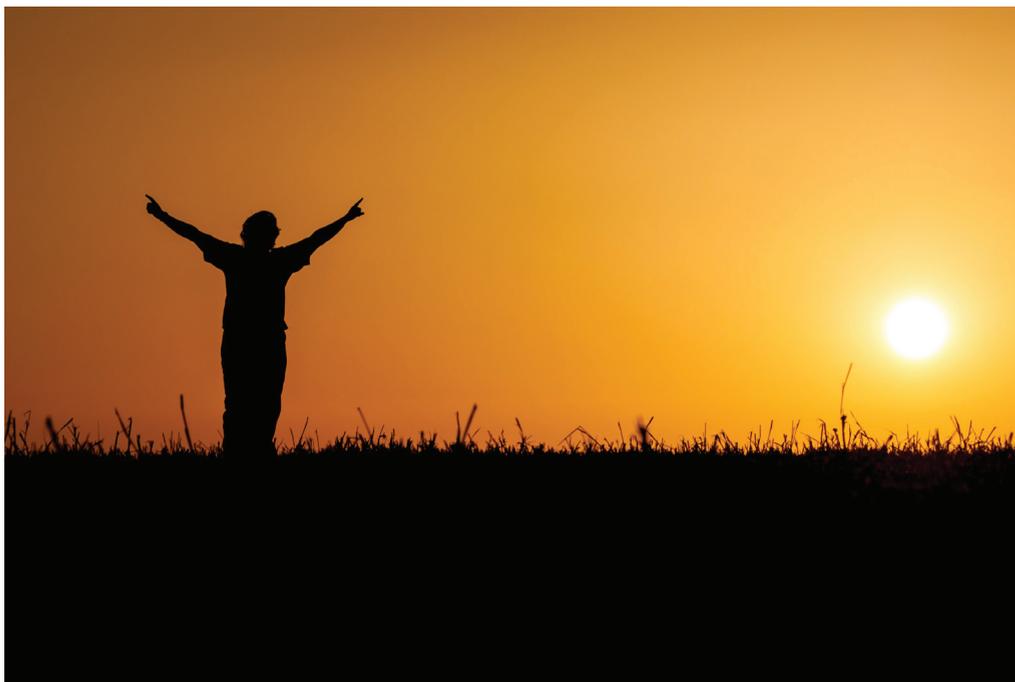




RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

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File under
THE VALUE OF LIFE



CHECKING OUT... AND CHECKING IN

Ask not what life can do for you but what you can do with life.

DR. DAVID GOODALL IS NO LONGER WITH US.

The 104-year-old scientist traveled to Switzerland from his home in Australia last week, weary of life and in a wheelchair, but not otherwise disabled or seriously ill, and ended his life. Assisted suicide is legal in the Australian state of Victoria, but only, to Dr. Goodall's vexation, for the "terminally ill."

In Switzerland, though, anyone of sound mind can opt to dispatch himself, and Dr. Goodall was assisted in his suicide plans by the groups "Lifecircle," "Eternal Spirit" and "Exit International," all dedicated to helping people achieve their demises. A representative of the latter group accompanied him on his trip.

Exit International also, it was reported, launched a funding campaign to help upgrade the scientist, presumably at his request, to business class.

That last, seemingly irrelevant, detail got me thinking. A man is done with the world, about to end his life. But he'd like more legroom.

At first thought, hey, why not? But on second one, his preference struck me as oddly relevant to the issue of assisted suicide itself, which has been legalized in several states, and which a bill before the New York State legislature proposes to do in the Empire State.

Needless to say, we must oppose such "progress." Permitting people to enlist doctors to end their lives opens a Pandora's box of horrors.

Among them, as my Agudath Israel colleague Rabbi Mordechai Biser recently testified before the New York State Assembly Health Committee, are pressures patients would feel from doctors or family members to choose suicide; the inequalities of health care delivery systems that tend to discriminate against the poor, handicapped and elderly; the psychological vulnerability of the severely ill; and the risk of misdiagnoses.

He also spoke of "the historical disapprobation of suicide... one of the pillars of civilized societies throughout the generations"; and noted that, in many cases, better treatment of pain or depression could dissuade a patient from seeking death.

All true, of course. But I find myself pondering... that business class upgrade. I think it signifies — at least in this case — an attitude about life that is the antithesis of the Jewish one.

I remember once being asked by a reporter about

Judaism's stance on a certain "right." I explained that Judaism isn't about rights, but responsibilities. There could be no more basic a Jewish truism, of course, yet the reporter found it astonishing, admitting that she had "never thought of life that way."

I tried not to let my own bewilderment at that statement show, but the fact that so fundamental a Jewish concept had been eye-opening to the reporter was, well, eye-opening to me.

It shouldn't have been. The operative principle of so many people's lives today is the pursuit of possessions, comforts and, yes, rights. They ask not, to paraphrase JFK's speechwriter, what they can do with the gift of life, but rather what the gift of life can do for them.

And so a man about to end his life is understandably concerned, even until that end, with extra legroom. *Chap arein.*

Harav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*, once recounted the saga of a young Jewish man who, in a swimming accident, became a quadriplegic.

The handicapped man had told Rav Weinberg how the first twenty-odd years of his life had been spent enjoying athletics, and how his fateful accident had seemed at the time more devastating than death.

Now he was hampered by his condition not only from swimming but from so much as scratching an itch on his own. He could not even, he discovered, kill himself, which he desperately wanted to do. And no one would help him achieve his desire.

Frustrated by his inability to check out, he was forced, so to speak, to check in — inward, to a world of thought and ideas. Pushed from a universe of action, he entered one of mind.

If his life is indeed now worthless, he reflected, *then was swimming and scratching literal and figurative itches really all that defined its meaning before?*

That question led him to the realization that a meaningful life is independent of a physically active one. And he was led, in time, to his forefathers' faith. Later, he mused that his paralysis had been a gift; for without it he would have remained a mere swimmer.

Dr. Goodall never realized what the ex-swimmer did about life, and was gratified to be able to spend a few of his final hours in business class. ■

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