

SWIMMER IN JERUSALEM

A Musing on Assisted-Suicide

Rabbi Avi Shafran

Last week, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a bill making physician-assisted suicide a federal crime - and thereby raised an alarm among those who favor allowing doctors to help patients end their lives. For me, the renewed debate brought back the image of a man who currently lives in Jerusalem. Once suicidal himself, he insists that the most wonderful thing that ever happened to him was his swimming accident, when he became a quadriplegic.

His story came to me via a well-known and respected head of a Jerusalem yeshiva. The handicapped young man was a personal acquaintance and had told the rabbi how the first twenty-odd years of his life were spent cultivating an athletic physique, honing muscles to perform at their optimum -- and how his fateful accident had seemed at the time more devastating than death.

A graceful athlete mere moments earlier, he was now unable to move in any useful way, barred by an obstinate spinal cord and an army of rebellious neurons from playing ball or swimming laps, from eating or going to the bathroom - even from so much as scratching an itch - on his own. He could not, he discovered, even kill himself without assistance, which he desperately tried to garner, to no avail.

Frustrated by his inability to check out, so to speak, he began to turn in -- inward, to a world of thought and ideas. Pushed decisively from a universe of action, he entered one of mind.

If life is indeed now worthless, he wondered with newfound seriousness, then was running and jumping and swimming and scratching literal and figurative itches really what defined its meaning before?

That quandary, and pursuant ones, led the wheelchair-bound ponderer to contemplate the very meaning of creation itself and -- to make a long and arduous journey of self-discovery seem misleadingly trite -- he concluded that spirituality is the key to meaningful existence. Where he was then led was to his forefathers' faith, to what has come of late to be called Orthodox Judaism, and it is in the multifaceted realm of intense Jewish observance and study that he thrives to this day.

Most remarkable, though, was his auxiliary and inescapable realization -- that had he not suffered his paralysis, he would never have thought to consider the things that led him to his new, cherished, life.

The rather dry issue of states' rights will likely be the gist of any legal challenge to an eventual federal measure that will effectively trump state laws permitting physician-assisted suicide, like the current one in Oregon.

But a more trenchant concept to be included in any consideration of assisted suicide is "quality of life." Are some lives, the question essentially goes, to be considered less valuable, less meaningful, less purposeful and hence less worthy of society's protection than others?

Legislators and judges facing the issue of assisted suicide will contemplate many questions, but none of more enormity than whether American society is ready to define what makes life worth living, and to act on such definition by allowing ill and depressed people to enlist the help of doctors to kill themselves.

Men and women in extremis often find themselves facing the question of life's meaning. Not all of us at the end of our too-short journeys will experience epiphanies, but all of us have the potential to be so blessed. And many of us, even if immobile, in pain and without hope of recovery, might still engage important matters - matters like forgiveness, repentance, acceptance, commitment, love, G-d - perhaps the most momentous matters we will ever have considered over the course of our lives. Cutting such vital engagements short is no less tragic than ending a pain-free, undiseased, young and vibrant life.

And so as the host of constitutional and moral issues swirling around the issue of physician-assisted suicide are weighed in Congressional halls and judicial chambers, the weighers would do well to contemplate, too, the edifying story of a once-promising swimmer in Jerusalem.

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[Rabbi Avi Shafran serves as public affairs director of Agudath Israel of America and is the American director of Am Echad]