

Death be not Proud: or Live and Help Live

- Basil Herring.

The Supreme Court has finally issued its long-awaited ruling: it's official—Americans do not have a fundamental right to be helped to kill themselves. And the States are free to pass or enforce State laws outlawing such assisted suicide. It goes without saying that for us, as Orthodox Jews, as traditionalists, or if you will social conservatives, the ruling is to be greeted with relief and approval, upholding as it does, the traditional abhorrence of suicide and mercy-killing, or any active termination of life by human causation.

And so the Supreme Court has finally issued its long-awaited ruling: it's official—Americans do not have a fundamental right to be helped to kill themselves. And the States are free to pass or enforce State laws outlawing such assisted suicide. It goes without saying that for us, as Orthodox Jews, as traditionalists, or if you will social conservatives, the ruling is to be greeted with relief and approval, upholding as it does, the traditional abhorrence of suicide and mercy-killing, or any active termination of life by human causation. But it is not yet time to celebrate. To the contrary, the debate over the termination of life, and the morality of helping our loved ones, or patients, do that, has just begun. As Prof. Lawrence Tribe put it, "the decision leaves the hard questions for another day." Now every state will need to review and rehearse the arguments all over again, as new laws are proposed and debated. And each of us, like it or not, will need to articulate our considered opinions in this most painful, and repercussive, cultural and religious dialogue. And given the fact that in survey after survey a clear majority of Americans believe that a person is entitled to terminate his or her life, with assistance, the outcome of that debate is surely far from a forgone conclusion. And with the value of life under such deflationary pressures, from the infanticidal behavior of teenage mothers at motels and prom balls, to the increasing readiness to flirt with, and even advertise, death via drugs, AIDS, or a variety of dangerous lifestyles, the eventual outcome of that "death-debate" is far from certain.

Put differently, while this country is apparently not yet ready to adopt the policies of the Dutch, it is not inconceivable that one day soon we will reach the point where they are now. And what is that point? As Dr. Herbert Hendin, a psychiatrist who has studied Dutch euthanasia (or mercy killing) in detail, describes it, "Virtually every guideline established by the Dutch to regulate euthanasia has been modified or violated with impunity... The Netherlands has moved from assisted suicide to euthanasia, from euthanasia for people who are terminally ill, to euthanasia for those who are chronically ill, from euthanasia for physical illness to euthanasia for psychological distress, and from voluntary euthanasia to involuntary euthanasia." Is such scenario waiting in the wings in this country? He and others feel that it is not only quite possible, but here it could be even worse, in terms of the numbers and kinds of people who would be affected, with Kevorkian figures in every community, ready to dispense that cliched panacea of "death with dignity," to a population with growing numbers of the old, and the very old, the depressed and the incurable of any age, the uninsured and those on life-support in one degree or another, who have become convinced, due to what Judge Rehnquist yesterday called "subtle coercion and undue influence," that they are a burden for their loved ones in a youth-oriented, fun-worshipping, society.

If ever the price of freedom was eternal vigilance, it is now: as the country, and indeed all of the Western civilization, moves to the next stage of the “earnest and profound debate about the morality, legality and practicality of physician-assisted suicide,” predicated upon one’s views on the value of life, and the priorities of choosing life over death—it is none more than we, who will have to take up the cudgels of traditional values, and life-enhancing behavior, in an increasingly non-traditional, utilitarian, society. For indeed this is a profoundly Jewish and religious issue, one in which our voice should be heard, spoken in clear and cogent tones, as fully responsible and caring members of society, lest we find ourselves one day in the position of some Dutchmen who today have taken to carrying a “passport for life” in their pockets, so they won’t be “ethanized” in medical emergencies without their consent.

Now it is to that end of explicating and promoting a compelling Jewish vision of life, rather than of death, that I would like to share with you this morning, two stories, involving two absolutely extraordinary women, and their respective responses to the imminent threat of death, under the most extreme circumstances.

The first is a woman whose story we have just read: Rachav the Harlot, in this morning’s haftorah, the woman of Jericho who provided hospitality and protection to Joshua’s two spies. Here was a woman of ill repute, her house open to the men of Jericho and other cities, ostensibly a woman living a life without redeeming transcendental value. And yet, of all her townsfolk, she alone recognizes the truth, that as she puts it “the Lord is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” And in return for her protection of the spies, she exacts a promise: “preserve alive my father and my mother, my brothers and my sisters, and their families, ve’hitzaltem et nafshoteinu mi-mavet, ‘and thereby you shall save our lives from death.’” And indeed she saved her life, and that of her family, in extremis.

But it is even more than that: listen, if you will, to how Chazal, understood her greatness. As you know, she asked the men for an ot emet, a “sign of truth,” by which her family’s lives will be saved when the killing begins. The designated sign, is of course the crimson rope which will be attached to her window. But that rope possessed a much deeper significance. The Gemara in Zevachim 116a, as explained there by Rashi, says as follows:

Said Rachav: “Dear God! I have sinned using 3 things, now let those same 3 be my source of forgiveness. For whereas my customers used my rope, my window, and my bedding—I also used those same 3 to save your Israelite spies, and your people Israel.

As explained by the Israeli scholar, Rabbi Israel Ariel, this Gemara teaches us the real spiritual power of Rachav, i.e., to turn the very instrumentalities of sin and death, into unstoppable forces of redemption and life. Or if I were to put it differently, Rachav teaches us the power of renewal, hidden deep within us, the ability to redirect our energies, heretofore devoted to a life of failure and dissolution, to a higher goal. Rather than live life in the gutter and on the fringe of society, where disease and dissolution lurk—to discover sublime meaning and purpose, transcendental and incomparable beauty and value. This, no matter our miserable station, no matter how bleak or discredited our objective condition! Salvation of an entire people, the rabbis are teaching us, can come from even a despised and rejected prostitute!

Even more: the Gemara Megilla 14b states: “Rachav the Harlot later converted and married Joshua! And 8 prophets, who were Kohanim no less, came from her: Neriah, Barukh, Shariah, Makhsiah, Jeremiah, Chilkiyahu, Chanamel and Shalum.” Indeed these last 4 prophets were present at the destruction of the First Temple, rebuking the people for their moral and spiritual failures, but also inspiring them at the moment of destruction, as did Jeremiah when he paid full price for his nephew Chanamel’s field, just before the destruction of Jerusalem, never to give up hope, never to lose sight of redemption, always to hope for life and salvation, no matter how bleak the prospects or how dark the horizon. Where did they draw the strength for such courage and vision? From their matriarch Rachav, who saved her life and that of her family, when death and destruction were imminent. And from their patriarch Joshua, who withstood the gloom and pessimism of his fellow spies when confronted with an overwhelming Canaanite nation, instead to affirm faith in God and the abiding prospect of triumph over evil. Faced with death and euthanasia, when tempted to embrace despondency and despair, the lesson Rachav and of Joshua, is to choose, instead, life.

Allow me to conclude with my second story, of another Jewish woman, and her holy response to her imminent death. The story is found in Yaffa Eliach’s Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust.

An Aktion took place in the Bochnia ghetto. Among the people caught that day was an especially large number of young women. The women knew full well what would happen to them. They discussed something among themselves, and selected a spokeswoman. She was a very attractive young woman in her early twenties. She walked over to the German officer in charge and said: “We know the inevitable. You will murder us as you murdered the other innocent Jews before us. We demand that you grant us our last wish.” “Granted,” snapped the German, as his hand lovingly caressed his pistol. “And what is it, may I ask,” he said in a derisive tone. “We demand that the mikveh, the ritual bath house, closed since your occupation of our town, be reopened, heated, and cleaned, and that we be permitted to take our ritual bath of purification,” said the young woman.

For more than half a day, the women cleaned the mikveh, and filled it with water. Then they cleaned themselves, and immersed themselves in water, as prescribed in the Laws of Purification.

As they were led off to be shot, the German officer asked for the young lady who had approached him earlier in the day. When she stood before him, he said “you are a filthy race, the source of all disease and vermin in Europe. Suddenly before your death you wish to be clean? What spell did you cast in that ritual bath house of yours?” “Cleanliness and purity of body and mind are part of our tradition and way of life. God has brought our pure souls into this world, in the pure homes of our parents, and we wish to return in unity to our Father in Heaven.”

The German officer took out his pistol from his holster and at close range shot the woman between the eyes. Most of the other women were also killed that day.

Indeed our society would do well to learn from their sainted lives and their horrendous deaths, that it is God alone who brought our pure souls into this world; and He alone Who should take them back; that it is not for us to determine when those souls, pure or otherwise, are to be

returned to Him in His glory, and in accordance with His inscrutable wisdom. Indeed life is often perplexing, not short of suffering, even unto death. Sometimes, as in the Bochnian ghetto, the choice as to life and death is not ours to make. At such times it is for us accept death with all the strength and purity at our command, as our holy martyrs have taught over the generations. But at all other times, it is our privilege and responsibility, to affirm life and redemption, as taught to us by Rachav and by Joshua, those paragons of our people who defied death and despair, generation after generation, down through history, even till end of the 20th Century.

May we soon see the fulfillment of the prophetic prophecy: Bila ha-Mavet la-Netzach: that indeed, God will destroy death forever!