

COMPASSION AND COMFORT CARE AT THE END OF LIFE

A Resolution of the UAHC Adopted at the 63rd Biennial Convention of the UAHC in Atlanta, Georgia, December 1995

BACKGROUND: Because the synagogue is the focus of our communal life and the setting of our collective deliberation about life's most important events, we affirm the obligation of the synagogue community to educate its members regarding Judaism's belief in the dignity and sanctity of human life.

As the end of life approaches, the choices before us become difficult and troubling. Possibilities of survival engendered by medical technology may also unnaturally prolong the dying process. Our movement has already affirmed the right to refuse medical treatment that only prolongs the act of dying, but it is clear that not all needs are met by withholding or withdrawing medical treatment at the end of life. There are those who, nearing the end of life's journey, would choose to live. We have yet to assert the obligations that our community has to those who cannot be cured of their disease but whose future promises nothing but pain and suffering. While we acknowledge that many would choose not to endure such a life, most such choices do not need to be made when adequate palliative care and support can be provided.

Guided by the mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh*, we must strive toward an achievable goal: to provide a quality of life that is at least tolerable for each one whose journey ends in pain and suffering. Our effort must ensure that only rarely will that choice be beyond human strength. We assert that most of the tragic choices to end life can be avoided through the combined efforts of caring doctors, clergy, providers, family and community.

By providing caring support for families and assisting in the development of hospices and similar environments where spiritual and physical needs are met, our congregations can help preserve the meaning and purpose of our lives as we approach the end of the journey.

THEREFORE: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations resolves to:

1. Address our society's needs to provide adequate comfort care at the end of life;
2. Develop and distribute more educational and programmatic material regarding a liberal Jewish approach to end-of-life decisions;
3. Develop and distribute material that would raise awareness of the issues of pain and suffering and quality of life in order to enable sound decision making by all concerned;
4. Encourage the expansion of opportunities for rabbinic and cantorial students and rabbis and cantors in the field to participate in training programs designed to develop skills in end-of-life issues;
5. Call upon our congregations to develop connections with Jewish hospice programs in their communities and to explore their creation where they do not exist; and

6. Call upon the Committee on Bioethics to work with the Central Conference of American Rabbis Committee on Responsa to provide us with guidance with respect to physician-assisted death and active voluntary euthanasia.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

1. A Time to Prepare: A Practical Guide for Individuals and Families in Determining One's Wishes for Extraordinary Medical Treatment and Financial Arrangements. Union for Reform Judaism Department of Jewish Family Concerns: Committee on Bioethics. New York: UAHC Press, 1994.
2. Union for Reform Judaism Department of Jewish Family Concerns: Committee on Bioethics. Congregational study guides: Voluntary Active Euthanasia-Assisted Suicide, 1993; Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources, 1994; The Role of Pain and Suffering in Decision Making, 1996.
3. Death and Euthanasia in Jewish Law. Walter Jacob and Moshe Zemer, eds. Pittsburgh/Tel Aviv: Freehoff Institute of Progressive Halakhah, 1995.
4. CCAR Journal, Spring 1997. Special issue on Assisted Suicide. See especially p. 11, CCAR Responsa Committee, "On the Treatment of the Terminally Ill."
5. CCAR Responsa contains a wide variety of Reform responsa on the subjects of euthanasia, relieving the pain of dying patients, the use of drugs at the end of life to relieve pain and associated topics, as well as recent volumes of responsa published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Many of the essential responsa are reproduced in the congregational study guides published by the Union for Reform Judaism Department of Jewish Family Concerns: Committee on Bioethics.
6. Tough Choices. Al Vorspan and David Saperstein. New York: UAHC Press, 1992.
7. Medicine and Jewish Law. Fred Rosner, ed. New Jersey and London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1990/1993.
8. Modern Medicine and Jewish Ethics. Fred Rosner. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1986.
9. A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die: The Ethics of Choice. Barry Kogan, ed. New York: De Gruyter, 1991.
10. Cotemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis Newman, eds. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
11. Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society. Daniel Callahan, M.D. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987/1995.
12. Health and Medicine in the Jewish Tradition. David M. Feldman. New York: Crossroads, 1986.

13. *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia and Individual Freedom.* Ronald Dworkin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
14. *Moral Matters: Ethical Issues in Medicine and the Life Sciences.* Arthur Caplan. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995.
15. *Tradition and the Biological Revolution: Application of Jewish Law to the Treatment of the Critically Ill.* Daniel B. Sinclair. Edinburgh University Press, 1989.
16. *How We Die.* Sherwin B. Nuland, M.D. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
17. *Final Exit.* Derek Humphrey. New York: Hemlock Society, 1991.
18. *Death and Dignity: Making Choices and Taking Charge.* Timothy E. Quill, M.D. New York: WW Norton & Company, Inc., 1993.
19. *Active Euthanasia, Religion and the Public Debate.* Chicago: Park Ridge Center, 1991.
20. *Journals.* Many journals and periodicals have addressed the subject of assisted death from a variety of perspectives. Examples from non-Jewish sources are too numerous to mention. Indeed, Jewish sources are quite extensive. Some key examples are: "End Stage Medical Care: A Halakic Approach," *Conservative Judaism*, vol. XLIII, no. 3, Spring 1991; *CCAR Journal*, Fall 1990 and Winter 1991; "Rabbi Moshe Feinstein on the Treatment of the Terminally Ill," *Judaism*, vol. 37, no. 146, Spring 1988; *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, issues of October 18, 1991, November 1, 1991, May 29, 1992, and November 27, 1992; "Quality and the Sanctity of Life in the Talmud and the Mishnah," Moshe Tendler and Fred Rosner, *Tradition*, vol. 28, no. 1, Fall 1993.
21. *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics.* Elliot N. Dorff Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998.