



Reprinted from Moment Magazine, March/April 2013, "Ask the Rabbis" column

***"In counseling people about end-of-life care,
what Jewish principles have you found most valuable?"***

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Thirty years ago, when my mother was terminally ill with ovarian cancer at the age of 58, a morphine drip was gradually increased in her final weeks and days. The purpose was two-fold. First, to mitigate any pain, and second, to allow her to relax and sleep and possibly help her to die. I saw both of these goals to be consistent with my Jewish values of compassion, alleviation of suffering, and preservation of my mother's dignity.

Judaism teaches that we should not hasten nor delay death. But we can withdraw or withhold treatments that prolong life unnecessarily. The classic story is of the dying person who is distracted by the sounds of a nearby woodcutter. It is only when the woodcutter is removed that the person can peacefully expire.

Even when death is not imminent, we can also call for comfort-only measures, as I have now instructed my father's nursing home as a way to aid my 93-year old father who has been ready to die for a number of years already, but whose otherwise good health thwarts him in this goal.

Some believe, on the other hand, that we should always go the extra mile to extend someone's life. But sometimes our best end-of-life care – as proxy for the dying person – is, with empathy and kindness, to help his or her family members let go.

When it becomes our own "time to die", let us hope that we, too, can face this final stage of life with courage and dignity and the steadfast support and comfort of our loved ones.