



Yom Kippur 2009

"DESTINY AND DIGNITY"
by **Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

For the past few days at least, or perhaps even for the past few weeks, if one believes such a thing, groups of Jewish angels have been convening in heaven – or wherever they meet. They have been comprising the longest-running Death Panels ever. Their mission has been to draw up a list for the deity as to who among us shall live and who shall die in the coming year, and, if the latter, by what method. For years they have had at their disposal an assortment of ghastly ways for us to die: by fire, by water, by sword, by wild beast, and on and on it goes. That list, of course, has now been updated to include death by drunk driver, death by friendly fire, death by epidemic, death by ethnic cleansing, death by living too long, death by childhood illness, death by no fault of your own except for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is not a pretty picture.

What their criteria is or was for making their selections remains unclear. In fact, it all seems quite arbitrary, random and capricious, which is among the reasons we don't believe in them. Certainly, if it was a choice between who was naughty and who was nice, it seems that naughty far too often gets passed over and the nice get taken young or well before their time. Over and over again in Jewish stories someone complains about why a particular tzadik or righteous person is weighted down with tsores, woes, and why a gonif, a thief, goes about freely.

Now some worry that with socialized medicine and a comprehensive health care program we'll not only have a rationing of resources but we'll also decide not to give any care out to some people and basically abandon them to their deaths. The first to die, according to this imaginary plan of forced euthanasia, will be the elderly. But if that were the case we all know that there are countless numbers of older people who actually wish they could get on the list, not be excluded from it. Sustained by no or little extra life supports at all, they are not a drain on the system. But their lives have dwindled down to a bare existence. At some point they would rather let go than hold on, if they have enough self-awareness to even voice that request. But their hearts and otherwise healthy bodies won't comply. They would not agree with the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes who says (9:4), "For as long as a person is joined to the living there is hope." For them, "a living dog" is not necessarily better than "a dead lion."

We also read in the Bible (I Samuel 31:2) how the Philistines fought against Israel and how King Saul was critically wounded in battle. He feared the shame of capture. So he asked his armor bearer to kill him. But the armor bearer refused. So Saul was forced to fall on his own sword. Then, not to be left out, his armor bearer took his own life as well.

In the next chapter, an Amalekite came to David, Saul's successor, and told him a different account. He said that he had come upon Saul who said, 'Stand over me, kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I am still alive.' "So," said the Amalekite, "I killed him because I knew that he could not survive." To the Amalekite's surprise, this noble act, fabricated or not, did not win him praise from David, but rebuke. "How dare you slay the king, the Lord's anointed? Your blood be on your head." And he ordered the Amalekite slain.

So much for assisted suicide in the days of the Bible. The first helper dodged the request, but then took his own life anyway and the second got his own head handed to him.

My father, who will turn 89 in a few weeks, has spent the last few years first in assisted living and now in a nursing home. He's in a good institution where he gets proper attention, he has our care and that of my cousins, but every so often he asks me, or more often my cousin's husband who is a doctor, to help him die. I listen to him respectfully, but even if I had the means or the inclination to help him, I don't think he's ready. That's because in practically the very next breath he asks when I'm coming to visit or he has an errand he wants me to do for him. At times he has been forgetful and confused but on more than one occasion he has called me to make sure I'd seen a particular article in the Times that I may have missed. For now, at least, his vital signs remain strong and his life, on whatever precipice it hangs, is still worth clinging to.

However, I can't say the same for others I see in the nursing home. Each time I visit I feel affirmed in my conviction that there is no such thing as intelligent design when it comes to aging and the end stages of life. I know people still die peacefully in their sleep, but why must so many suffer the stretched out months if not years of indignity and pain and, in many cases, abandonment, that precedes that moment of release?

A story is told about two shlemiels who were philosophizing.

"You know," said the first, "when you consider how much heartbreak life has in it for us, death is not really a misfortune. Many times I think it's better if a person is never born at all!"

"You're absolutely right," said the other. "But how many of us are that lucky? Not one in a thousand!"

The Talmudic rabbis actually debated this very subject. And not just for one random Shabbat afternoon. In fact, we're told that the dispute waged on for two and a half years. The School of Shammai asserted that it would have been better for humans not to have been created than to have been created. The School of Hillel took the opposite view and maintained that it is better to have been created than not to have been created.

They finally took a vote and decided that it would have been better for humans not to have been created than to have been created, but now that we have been created, we ought to investigate our past deeds or, as others say, our future actions.

The beautiful irony of this debate is that had humans not been created in the first place Talmudic rabbis never would have emerged on the scene to debate this very topic and go on about it for years. Now that I think about it, maybe those rabbis were in their own retirement home. Television hadn't been invented yet. They had nothing else to do. So they debated and argued ad infinitum and that actually gave their lives worth.

As for assessing our past deeds or our future actions, that makes sense. And that's what Yom Kippur is about.

We think about our own lives and take stock. Of how we have lived so far. Of how we hope to live for the future. Without knowing at all what turn of events lies ahead and what number of years are allotted to our lives.

We will also pause, in memory, to recall those loved ones whose lives enriched and shaped ours, and

who made their own mark on the world. There are no future actions to consider for them, but we can assess their past deeds and accomplishments and how they negotiated their own set of struggles. In the spirit of forgiveness, we will try to accept their imperfections. And, most preciously, we will appreciate how their lives gave joy and meaning to ours.

For us the Book of Life is not written by a panel of angels or a deity, but by our deeds and by the events that befall us. Nobody is saying anything about life being easy or fair or just or without pain and struggle, but even then, it's how we deal with it that matters. And, hopefully, we'll decide, with the School of Hillel, that life is largely or mostly worth living.

May the year ahead be a good one, filled with joy, purpose, satisfying debates that have no end, and a daily appreciation of the wonderful gift of life.

Shana Tova.