
Essays

PRAYING TO DIE

Medicine and Liturgy

Jonathan K. Crane

ABSTRACT

Prayer has long been a staple in the proverbial Jewish medical toolbox. While the vast majority of relevant prayers seek renewed health and prolonged life, what might prayers for someone to die look like? What ethical dimensions are involved in such liturgical expressions? By examining both prayers for oneself to die and prayers for someone else to die, this essay discerns reasons why it may be good and even necessary to pray for a patient's demise.

KEY WORDS: *Judaism, prayer, liturgy, death, dying, Judah Ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince)*

Why does [God] give light to the sufferer and life to the bitter in spirit,
to those who wait for death but it does not come,
who search for it more than for treasure,
who rejoice to exultation,
and are glad to reach the grave?
– Job 3:20–22

1. Introduction

All people eventually reach a stage of existence beyond the realm of efficacious curative medicine. Though most can attain comfort through palliative care, a rare few cannot. Everyone, of course, must eventually die. The question at hand regards those patients for whom no further medical intervention will be helpful, whose suffering is intractable and perhaps even unresponsive to palliation: Is it acceptable to pray for someone to die?¹ If so, what are the ethical responsibilities of clinicians

Jonathan K. Crane, Ph.D., is the Raymond F. Schinazi Scholar in Bioethics and Jewish Thought at Emory University's Center for Ethics. The co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Ethics and Morality* (Oxford 2012), the author of *Narratives and Jewish Bioethics* (Palgrave 2013), the co-editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Jewish Ethics*, Crane currently serves as the president of the Society of Jewish Ethics. Jonathan K. Crane, Center for Ethics, Emory University, 1531 Dickey Drive, Atlanta, Georgia 30322, jonathan.k.crane@emory.edu.

¹ The issue of "medical futility" is not new, yet the explicit use of this phrase came into fashion only in the mid-1980s as public debate about America's aging population and

and other care providers who are praying for someone to be released from unalterable and excruciating circumstances?² What might these prayers look like, and what can be learned from such liturgical pleas? In this essay, I turn to the Jewish textual tradition to discern whether such liturgical practices are possible and permissible, and then meditate on contemporary implications of praying for someone's death.³

To begin with there are two versions of praying for death: one reflexive and the other transitive. That is, I can pray for my own death or I can pray for someone else's death. Insofar as liturgical expressions abound in the Judaic textual tradition it should be no surprise that both forms are found therein, though few scholars note this fact.⁴

Yet to understand the nature of prayers for death it may be helpful to consider the obverse: prayers for living and for healing in particular. The quintessential prayer is Moses's plea on behalf of his sister Miriam, who is afflicted with some kind of skin disease.⁵ This affliction, though not fatal, is sufficiently morbid and grotesque to provoke Aaron to appeal to

end-of-life care intensified. Despite and perhaps because of the phrase's popularity, it remains a slippery concept. For example, Rubin 1998 rightly highlights the ways in which this fraught concept is complicated by ethical ambiguities, as well as power asymmetries and differing values between the various parties involved. Brody 1997 and Bagheri 2013 highlight that there is no—and perhaps can never be a—universal practical application of medical futility. Schneiderman and Jecker 2011 stress that though certain treatments may be futile, care never is. This essay raises the possibility that liturgy could be a suitable form of care even when other kinds of treatments are no longer viable.

² It is assumed that praying either for an otherwise healthy individual or for a patient who could benefit from medicinal intervention to die is inherently unethical, not to mention antithetical to medical practice. For example, there is a story of R. Meir praying for neighboring and annoying (but otherwise quite healthy) ruffians to die (*ba'ei rahmei 'aliyuhu ki heihi de-limutu*). His wife, Bruria, reprimanded him, encouraging him to seek the end of sin itself rather than the demise of those who sin. Meir changed his prayers and, lo, the ruffians repented (see B. Berakhot 10a). See Cohen 2012 for a discussion of this *sugya* as it might apply to restorative justice. In addition, King David prayed on behalf of his critically ill son, fasting and genuflecting for a full week. He stopped such prayers and resumed his daily life when his son finally died (see 2 Samuel 12:15–23).

³ Unfortunately, little research has been done on the role of prayer in clinical settings. Periodic database surveys of intercessory prayers exist but these fail to detail the kinds of prayer actually uttered, by whom and for whom (see Roberts, Ahmed, Hall, Sargent, and Adams 1998; Roberts, Ahmed, and Hall 2000 and 2007; and Roberts, Ahmed, Hall, and Davison 2009). Other scholarship does not identify prayers for death as a specific liturgical expression within clinical settings (for example, Cadge and Ecklund 2009).

⁴ Eisenberg 2011—the only extensive collection of relevant texts—does not distinguish these forms. Sherwin notes this distinction but does not investigate the texts adduced (1998, 93). Resnicoff notes the difference but does not delve into them (2003, 102n80). Novak intertwines these different kinds of prayers (2007, 164n43). Herring avers that praying to God to shorten a patient's life is permitted, but does not investigate the texts in any detail (1984, 87).

⁵ It is unclear what precisely *metzora'at kashaleg* is (Numbers 12:10). It could be snow-white scales, leprosy, or perhaps a form of psoriasis.

Moses that she not be as one dead (*'al na' tehi kamet*), as would a dead fetus emerging from the womb with half its skin eaten away. Moses then cries out, "O God, please heal her!" (*'el na' refa' na' lah*) (Numbers 12:11–13). As the eleventh-century French exegete R. Shlomo ben Yitzhak (Rashi) comments, this liturgical expression teaches basic ethics (*derekh 'eret*): that when requesting something from another person, one should first utter a couple of entreaties and only afterwards express one's plea.⁶ Hezekiah ben Manoah (Ḥizkuni) in thirteenth-century France focuses on the repetition of "please" (*na'*) in the phrase: the first is the language of request, the second is the language of immediacy.⁷ Intercessory prayer for healing thus involves at least two steps: establishing a favorable connection with the intended audience and then impressing upon that audience the urgent need for healing intervention.⁸ An illustration of this liturgical structure also exists in prayers for one's own healing, as found in the classic supplication for personal healing that begins "Heal us, O God, and we shall be healed" (*refa'einu 'adon'ai ve-nerafe'*).⁹

The potency of prayer to bring about healing was unquestioned in ancient Judaism.¹⁰ Indeed, the Talmudic rabbis understand that there is a critical link between visiting the ill and prayer. According to R. Akiva (a first-century CE Palestinian rabbi), one who does not visit the ill is like one who sheds blood (*shofeh damim*). R. Dimi (a third- to fourth-century CE Palestinian rabbi) explains this to mean that one who visits the ill prays for the patient to live (*mevakesh 'alav rachamim she-yihieh*), and the one who does not visit the ill prays for the patient to die (*mevakesh 'alav raḥamim she-yamut*). The anonymous redactor of this passage (*stam*) qualifies this to mean that the one who does not visit the ill prays neither that the patient will live nor die (B. Nedarim 40a).¹¹ Both of these positions articulate a strong conviction that were a person to visit the ill and pray on that patient's behalf either for health or death, that prayer would be efficacious.

⁶ Rashi at Numbers 12:13, s.v., *'el na' refa' na' lah*. Unless otherwise mentioned, references to post-Talmudic biblical commentaries are from Katzellenbogen 1990.

⁷ Chizkuni at Numbers 12:13, s.v., *'el na' refa' na' lah*. See also *Da'at Zekenim MiBa'alei HaTosafot*, ad loc., and the eighteenth-century commentary by R. Chayim ben R. Moshe ibn Attar of Morocco, *Or Chayyim*, ad loc.

⁸ Needless to say, God does not immediately heal Miriam but rather mandates her quarantine from the rest of the Israelite community for seven days.

⁹ See Jeremiah 17:14, and below.

¹⁰ See, for example, Psalms 6:2–6. This carried forward into the early Christian ethos, as well. See James 5:14.

¹¹ Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *lo she-yihieh ve-lo she-yamut*: "for behold, one [the person who does not visit the ill] does not know the affairs [condition] of the ill." I use the following abbreviations to refer to classical rabbinic literature: "M." for the Mishnah, "B." to refer to the Babylonian Talmud, and "Y." to refer to the Jerusalem Talmud. All translations from the Hebrew are mine.

This is not to say that Judaism has relied solely on prayer to address illness from the time of the Bible through the rabbinic period and beyond. On the contrary, it has long been understood that human beings are to partner with God in the processes of repairing bodies, eliminating ailments, and even preventing disease. Indeed, textual evidence of medical interventions abound in biblical and rabbinic sources—from the pharmacological to the surgical, from the quarantine of individuals to the mass application of public health measures upon whole populations. Prayer was but another tool in their repertoire and it was well respected even though its precise pharmacodynamics were ultimately mysterious. King Hezekiah is a case in point. He was told by the prophet Isaiah to set his house in order because he was soon to die from his illness. Hezekiah wailed and prayed to God, and God responded through Isaiah, saying, “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. I am going to heal you. . . . I will add fifteen years to your life.” Isaiah then applied a cake of figs to Hezekiah’s rash and Hezekiah recovered (2 Kings 20:4–7). Human liturgy and human medicinal agency go hand in hand with divine response—at least in regard to healing.

But regarding the case of an ill patient for whom no further medicinal interventions are known to be efficacious, and for whom perhaps even palliation has proven to be insufficient to mitigate suffering—what kinds of prayer would be appropriate?

2. “Erase Me”—Praying For One’s Own Death

The first variant of prayers for death is reflexive: praying for one’s own demise.¹² No less a figure than Moses cries for his death—and he does so twice. The first time is after the scandal of the golden calf when the people were increasingly agitated by his prolonged absence atop Mt. Sinai and crafted for themselves a bovine idol. Incensed, Moses has the apostates slain by their fellow tribesmen, and informs the survivors that perhaps he can secure God’s forgiveness for their sins. Back again at the top of the mountain Moses says to God, “Now, if you will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me (*me-ḥeni na’*) from the record which You have written” (Exodus 32:32). This plea to die should be contextualized. Earlier God requested Moses to leave God alone to blaze forth against these

¹² Praying for death is not the same as suicide, even though the desired end is the same. There are several instances of suicide in the Bible, the most famous of which is King Saul (1 Kings 31:1–5; compare with 1 Samuel 1:1–10. See also *Bereshit Rabbah* 34.13; *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 33; and *Vayikra Rabbah* 26.7). Others include Ahitophel (2 Samuel 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:18), and Razis (2 Maccabees 14:41–46). Samson’s demise (see below), while brought about by his own efforts, is more often understood to be a consequence of an act of war than a deliberate suicide. Contemporary discussions about suicide can be found in Dorff 1998, 180–83; Rosner 1979; and Novak 2007, 111–71.

idolatrous people, and so that through him (Moses) a new nation of properly pious folk could arise. Moses demurred, pointing to the fragility of God's reputation among other nations and reminding God of promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that from their offspring—and not from Moses's—a great nation shall emerge. These arguments mollified God (Exodus 32:9–14). Thus Moses's plea to die is more an expression of solidarity than of escape. He would rather be erased along with the rest of the Israelites than be the sole progenitor of a new community. Erasure, it should be noted, is only what God can do.¹³ According to R. Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam, Rashi's grandson) in twelfth-century France, the book to which Moses referred was God's "book of life" (*sefer ḥayim*). Thus, we can reasonably understand Moses's request to be erased as one to be blotted out from life, or, as he says later on in his other, more direct plea to die: "kill me, please kill" (*hargeni na' harog*).¹⁴

In that second instance, the Israelites were grumbling to Moses on account of their monotonous diet of manna: they desired the meat and other delicacies of Egypt. Their disquiet distressed Moses, and he laments to God, "Where am I to get meat to give all this people, when they whine before me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry the entire population by myself, for it is too much for me. If you would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You (*hargeni na' harog*), and let me see no more of my wretchedness" (Numbers 11:13–15). In Rashi's view, Moses would not have requested death merely because of the incessant complaints of this implacable crowd but only because God revealed to him all the punishments destined for them.¹⁵ He would rather die—specifically, he would rather be killed—than witness their trauma. Anticipating (another's) pain thus seems to be sufficient warrant to pray for one's own death.

Moses is not the only character in the Bible to plea to die. Samson, finally caught by Delilah's web of seduction and blinded by the ebullient Philistines, says: "Let me die with the Philistines [*tamot nafshi 'im phlishtim*]" (Judges 16:30). Elijah, frightened that King Ahab would slay him as he did the prophets of Ba'al, fled to Be'er Sheva and then out into the wilderness. Sitting underneath a broom tree, he asks that he might die (*vayishal 'et nafsho lamut*), "Enough! Now, Adonai, take my life (*kaḥ*

¹³ See Genesis 6:7, 7:4; Exodus 17:14; Deuteronomy 9:14, 29:19; 2 Kings 14:27; and Psalms 9:6. The power to erase the memory of another is given to humans only at God's behest (Deuteronomy 25:19).

¹⁴ Rashbam at Exodus 32:32. See also R. Abraham ibn Ezra (Ibn Ezra, twelfth-century Spain), ad loc. Similar interpretations are also found in R. Moses ben Nachman (Ramban, thirteenth-century Spain/Israel), ad loc.; Chizkuni, ad loc.; R. Bachiya ben Asher (Rabbeinu Bachiya, thirteenth-century Spain), ad loc.

¹⁵ Rashi at Numbers 11:15, s.v., *ve'im kakhah 'at 'oseh li*.

nafshi), for I am no better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:2).¹⁶ Rashi, following the early Aramaic translation Targum Yonatan, interprets Elijah’s exclamation to mean, “my life is long enough.”¹⁷

And Jonah, who had successfully warned the wayward Ninevites and inspired their repentance that God found sufficient to prevent the city’s destruction, is so displeased that he prays (*vayitpalel*) to God, “Now Adonai, take my life from me, for my death is better than my life” (*ve’atah ’adon’ai kah-na’ et nafshi mimeni ki tov moti me-ḥayai*) (Jonah 4:4). And, after God causes the growth of a gourd plant to shade Jonah and then causes it to die, Jonah again asks for his own death (*va-yishal et nafsho lamut*). He says, “My death is better than my life” (*tov moti me-ḥayai*) (Jonah 4:8). God inquires, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” Jonah responds, “So deeply, that I want to die” (*hetev harah li ad mavet*) (Jonah 4:9). The book of Jonah, we should recall, is read annually on Yom Kippur, the solemn holiday of repentance, since it bespeaks God’s patience and compassion even for wayward gentiles. This liturgical context reframes Jonah’s cries for death: instead of appearing as superficial, he helps illustrate God’s omniscience and beneficence.

To be sure, men are not the only ones who seek, request, and pray for death. A woman, a matriarch no less, does so as well. Rachel, barren, frustrated, and envious of her sister’s fecundity with their husband, Jacob, says to him, “Give me children or else I die” (*havah-li banim ve’im ein metah ’anokhi*) (Genesis 30:1).¹⁸ Certainly she would rather live, but if Jacob fails (yet again) to give her—or induce God to give her—children, she would rather die. It could have been that without children, her status was untenable.

The question now is who among these biblical personages receives his or her prayerful request for death. Moses twice prays to die and is twice thwarted by God: he must endure the theologically backsliding and gustatorially picky people; his death occurs only upon the attainment of old age. Samson, by contrast, succeeds insofar as he uses his divinely

¹⁶ It is interesting to compare this with Hagar who, perhaps nearby in the wilderness outside Be’er Sheva yet centuries earlier, placed her son under a bush after their water had been depleted. She went and sat at a distance (a bowshot away), saying, “Let me not look upon the child’s dying” (*al ’ereh ve-mot ha-yeled*), and sitting opposite (which could mean facing the child from a distance, or facing away from the child altogether), she lifted her voice and cried. God heard the cries of the boy and an angel of God calmed Hagar, promising that the boy would become a great nation (Genesis 21:14–21).

¹⁷ Rashi at 1 Kings 19:2, s.v., *va-yomer rav*.

¹⁸ It can also be translated as “or else I am dead.” Some might point to this verse as the singular instance of biblical awareness that men can be a contributing factor to a couple’s infertility. Jacob, however, denies this plausibility when he angrily retorts, “Am I in God’s stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Genesis 30:2). Rachel immediately offers a long-utilized solution for such problems: surrogacy—she gives to him her handmaid, Bilhah, with whom he begets two sons.

given strength to collapse the temple upon himself, bringing to death in that single surge of power more people than he killed throughout his lifetime. Elijah sleeps and is awoken by an angel who feeds him (several times) and God assigns him the task of anointing the next round of regents. It could be said Elijah seemingly escapes life alive: he ritualistically visits all subsequent generations of Jews at their circumcisions, after meals, at Passover commemorations, and at celebrations of the end of the weekly Sabbath. To both of Jonah's pleas God rhetorically reproaches him, leaving him to stew with his own prophetic success. And after receiving God's attention, Rachel gives birth to Joseph, who becomes Jacob's favorite son, but she eventually dies while giving birth to her second child, Ben-Oni/Benjamin (Genesis 35:19). With Samson as the exception, biblical prayers for one's own death seemingly go unheeded.¹⁹

There is one rabbinic figure who prays for his own death. Honi the Circle Maker (a Palestinian rabbi from the first century BCE) awoke from a sleep so deep that it lasted seventy years. He encountered a man gathering fruit from a nearby carob tree and was disturbed to learn it was the grandson of the man who planted the tree—the man Honi saw before his nap. As he came to appreciate the extraordinary duration of his sleep he became increasingly agitated. His distress peaked when in the study hall the students recited rules in his name yet refused to believe he was actually the creator of those rules. Their lack of deference distressed him (*ḥalash da'ateih*) and he prayed for mercy and died (*ba'ei raḥmei ve-met*). Rava said, "Hence there is a saying, 'either companionship or death (*'einshi 'ou ḥevruta 'ou mituta*)'" (B. Ta'anit 23a). What spurred Honi to pray for his own death was professional—social—isolation. The mental and emotional anguish of this state was too much to bear and, given the nature of the story's redaction in the Talmud complete with Rava's aphorism, this reason receives rabbinic commendation generally.

3. "Ask For Mercy"—Praying For Another To Die

Curiously there are no biblical instances of praying for *another* person to die. There are, however, at least four rabbinic sources that do. These

¹⁹ There is perhaps one more instance. Job's wife wonders why he endures the boils the Adversary (*satan*) inflicts upon him. Rather, he should "blaspheme God and die" (*barekh 'elohim va-mut*) (Job 2:9). Here the word for blaspheme (*barekh*) is a euphemism, since its usual meaning is to bless (see also Job 2:5). In her view, however, death would be the rightful punishment for this crime; it is not an explicit request to die as such. Job's response to his wife is that just as one receives good from God so too should one welcome evil; and Job said nothing evil (Job 2:10). Of course, he went on to endure even worse afflictions at the hand of the Adversary. Yet he laments his own birth, wondering, "Why did I not die at birth, expire as I came forth from the womb?" (3:11; see also 3:16). Had this counterfactual death occurred, he would "now be lying in repose, asleep, and at rest" (3:13)—and not suffering now.

four can be organized in terms of their explicitness, ordered from the least active to the most. They all continue to demonstrate the early conviction that prayer (for health or for death) is efficacious intervention for the infirm for whom nothing more can be done. The first, regarding an old and ailing woman, highlights the strong connection between prayer and existence. The second concerns an incurably mutilated newborn, the father's devastation, and his liturgical search for his child's demise. The third speaks of combative rabbis who cannot exist without their beloved repartee partners. And the last refers to a handmaid whose astute observations enable her to change her and others' liturgical tunes. Although analyses of these stories follow the printed editions of these texts, I include references to manuscript variants to enrich our study, for not all details of these stories were universally shared across the Jewish world before the invention of the printing press.

The first story is a *midrash* (story), perhaps dating as late as the fourteenth century, concerning R. Yosi ben Chalafta, a Palestinian rabbi in the second century CE. An elderly woman approached him with this complaint, "I have grown too old, and now my life is ugly. I can no longer taste food or drink. I request to be discharged from the world (*ve'ani mevakeshet liftar min ha'olam*)." He asked how she was able to live for so long. She informed him that even when she had other more desirable things to do, she would nonetheless go every day early to synagogue. He instructed her to refrain from going to synagogue for three consecutive days. She followed his direction and on the third day she grew ill and died.²⁰ Physiologically it is fascinating that this old text observes that the first senses to fade among the elderly is taste (and its corollary, smell). It is unclear whether this anonymous elderly woman's physical deterioration was the source of her existential dissatisfaction or its effect. Either way, she had sufficient wherewithal to seek out permission for release from living. Yosi ben Chalafta's investigation discerned a particular habit—her participation in communal prayer—that appeared to be quintessential to her longevity. His permission to stop praying was not insignificant insofar as it included the prescription to stop saying the daily prayers for health.²¹ Though it cannot be proven scientifically that her ceasing to pray for health caused her to die, it cannot be denied that a correlation exists between her new liturgical silence and her relatively quick demise.

Now a strong argument could be made that this woman's object of concern was herself and thus this story belongs in the other category of people praying for their own deaths. A rejoinder to this is that she was merely following the directions of her spiritual and legal advisor who, it

²⁰ *Yalkut Shimoni*, Proverbs §943; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Deuteronomy, *Eikev* §871.

²¹ The *Refa'einu* prayer is eighth in the *Amidah*, the central rubric of daily Jewish prayer services. See B. Megillah 17b; B. Avodah Zarah 8b; and M. Berakhot 2.4.

should be surmised, promulgates rules that permit no exceptions. What he prescribed for her would thus be what he would have everyone else in her situation do. And by extension, as it was unproblematic in his opinion for her to silence herself, it is only logical that it would have been unproblematic for others who otherwise would have prayed for her health to also silence their lips. So this story can be understood as a form of praying for another's death, albeit silently.

And yet, stopping prayers *for health* differs from actively praying *for death*. A second story offers a clearer glimpse into this phenomenon. Jerusalem Talmud records that when the son of R. Ada bar Ahava (a Babylonian rabbi from the third-fourth century CE) was born already circumcised, three scenarios became plausible (Y. Shabbat 19:2/87b). First, in such circumstances the rabbis ruled that *hatafat dam brit* (pricking the penis to extract a drop of blood to symbolize the covenantal relationship between God and humans, specifically Jews) is required since the boy's *brit milah* (circumcision ceremony) is necessarily precluded by the absence of the foreskin (see B. Berakhot 135a). Tragically, when R. Ada bar Ahava's son was pricked to fulfill this obligation, he died.²² R. Avin (probably a third- or fourth-century Babylonian rabbi) offered a different version, saying that the son should become *petzuah dakah*, a man who suffers a form of genital mutilation that precludes him from having children and complicates his marriage possibilities.²³ In response to this suggestion R. Ada bar Ahava fasted for his son and he died (*ve-nita'aneh 'alav ve-met*). The rabbis of Caesaria offered a third version: they said that the child became *krut shafkhah*, another kind of genitally mutilated man that precludes a man's entry into the community of Israel—and R. Ada bar Ahava fasted for his son and he died (*ve-nita'aneh 'alav ve-met*).²⁴

Several mysteries remain clouded in this story. First, it is not clear that fasting is the same as or is tantamount to praying. On the other hand, fasting in the Judaic liturgical tradition is overwhelmingly associated with prayers and holy days, so it would not be unreasonable to assume that concomitant with his refraining from food and drink R. Ada bar

²² According to Moshe Margolies (1710–1780) in his *Penei Mosheh* at Y. Shabbat 19:2/87b (Jerusalem: Hotza'at Me'orot, 1970), while administering this procedure R. Ada bar Ahava accidentally endangered him and he died. A parallel story is found in B. Shabbat 135a. There, R. Ada bar Ahava performs the *hatafat dam brit* himself because the thirteen circumcisers he visited refused to perform the deed since it was on Shabbat. Unfortunately, R. Ada bar Ahava was imperfect in his cut, and his son became *krut shafkhah* (see below).

²³ See David Fränkel (1704–1762), *Korban Ha'edah*, Y. Shabbat 19:2/87b, who says that this status should be ascribed to the son in lieu of even the *hatafat dam brit*. Regarding the other complications, see for example, M. Yevamot 8.1; B. Yevamot 70a, 75a; *Shulhan Arukh*, 'Even Ha'Ezer 5.1.

²⁴ Regarding details of the *krut shafkhah*, see B. Yevamot 70b. The prooftext grounding the exclusion of such peoples from the community is Deuteronomy 23:3.

Ahava was also praying. Second, that he fasted for his son (*'alav*) is certain but what he precisely said in his prayers remains obscure. It could be that he prayed for his son's penis to heal, for his son to regain a foreskin so a proper circumcision could be administered, or for the community to nonetheless welcome him into it.²⁵ On the other hand, some scholars impute to R. Ada bar Ahava both content and reasons for his prayers on his child's behalf. David ben Naphtali Fränkel, the eighteenth-century German commentator on the Jerusalem Talmud, thinks that in response to Avin's suggestion that instead of extracting from his son a drop of blood and therefore considering him a member of the category of *petzuah dakah*, R. Ada bar Ahava fasted "for him that he should die since he would be disqualified (*pasul*) from entering the community" (1970, at Y. Shabbat 19:2/87b). R. Moshe Margolies, in eighteenth-century Lithuania, insists that R. Ada bar Ahava "fasted for him that he should die since he was unfit (*ra'ui*) to enter the community" (1970, at YT *Shabbat* 19:2/87b).²⁶ R. Yitzhak Elchanan Spektor (in nineteenth-century Russia) cites both Fränkel and Margolies to rule, "It is a commandment (*mitzvah*) to fast for him that he should die (*le-hita'anot 'alav she-yamot*), for when one is disqualified (*nafsal*) from the community, his death is better for him (*yoter tov lo*) than his life."²⁷ All of these agree that the isolation (religious, social, legal) due to physical mutilation is sufficient cause to inspire prayers for death.

Though more to the point than Yosi ben Chalafta's instruction for a woman to stop praying altogether, this narrative about R. Ada bar Ahava fasting for his son's death omits certain details. For example it does not have any explicit mention of actual prayers for death. It does, on the other hand, reinforce the other text's conviction that there is a fundamental if not existential link between prayerful activity and living. Perhaps a third text can shed further light on this connection. This story, found in the Babylonian Talmud, concerns the great friends and brothers-in-law Yohanan bar Napacha (Yohanan) and Shimon ben Lakish (Reish Lakish), both of whom were third-century Palestinian rabbis. They enjoyed a healthy bantering relationship, though the law usually followed Yohanan's opinion. It was during one of their passionate and sharp-tongued debates that Yohanan upset Reish Lakish for the last time.²⁸

²⁵ Some of these possibilities are considered in David Luria's *Ḥidushei Haradal* (c. 1838, included in standard modern editions of the Jerusalem Talmud), at Y. Shabbat 19:2/87b.

²⁶ Resnicoff echoes this interpretation when he says, "to save his son from disgrace, he prayed that the boy die and his prayer was answered" (1998–99, 339n263).

²⁷ Spektor 1889, Even Ha-Ezer I:11.

²⁸ The following translates the printed (Vilna) edition of B. Baba Metzi'a 84a, with manuscript deviances noted. Manuscripts include Escorial G-I-3; Florence II-I-8; Hamburg 165; Munich 95; Vatican 115; Vatican 117; Spanish Print (before 1498); Oxford-Bodleian Heb. C. 17 (2661) 69–78.

The mind of R. Yohanan was hurt (*ḥalash da'ateih*),²⁹ and Reish Lakish was hurt (*ḥalash*). His sister³⁰ [R. Yohanan's, who is also the wife of Reish Lakish] came and wept.³¹ She said to him, "Do [forgive him], for the sake of my son."³² He said to her, "Leave your orphans with me; I will rear them" (Jeremiah 49:11a). "For the sake of my widowhood," [she said]. "Let your widows rely on me," (Jeremiah 49:11b) [he replied]. R. Shimon ben Lakish died (*noah nafshei*) and R. Yohanan was pained extremely (*mitzta'er rabi yochanan batreih tuva*).³³ The rabbis said, "Who will go and settle [*leitiveih*]"³⁴ his mind?" R. Elazar ben Pedat³⁵, who is entertaining (*me-ḥadedin she-m'at-teih*)³⁶, went and sat before him. On every word that R. Yohanan said, [R. Elazar] said to him, "There is a *baraita* [a precedent] which supports you." [R. Yohanan] said to him, "Are you like the son of Lakisha?"³⁷ The son of Lakisha would respond to me with twenty-four difficulties to each word I said, to which I would give twenty-four answers, which produced a fuller comprehension of the law. But you say, 'There is a *baraita* which supports you.' Do I not know that what I say is right?" Thus he went and ripped his garments and wept (*beḥi*).³⁸ He said, "Where are you, son of Lakisha? Where are you, son of Lakisha?" And he wailed (*tzuahh*)³⁹ until his mind slipped [from him] (*ad de-shaf da'ateih*).⁴⁰ The rabbis prayed for mercy upon him (*ba'u rabbanan raḥmei 'aleih*), and he died (*noah nafshei*).

²⁹ See also B. Baba Metzi'a 23a, where Honi the Circle Maker mentally suffers, prayed for mercy and died (*ḥalash da'atei ba'ei raḥmei ve-met*).

³⁰ It is his daughter (*bitahu*) in Florence II-I-8.

³¹ Rashi interprets this to mean that she asked R. Yohanan to pray on her husband's behalf (*lehitpalel 'al ba'al*ah). Rashi at B. Baba Metzi'a 84a, s.v., *ve-ka beḥi kameh*.

³² In Florence II-I-8, his daughter says, "[How can you] look at my beloved and not consider him? [How can you] look at my sons and my daughters and not consider him?" To which he replied with the full recitation of Jeremiah 49:11. In Hamburg 165, his sister says, "[How can you] look at my beloved and not consider him? [How can you] look upon my orphan?" To which he replied with Jeremiah 49:11a.

³³ Florence II-I-8 lacks *tuva*.

³⁴ *Leitiveih* could be understood as either "sit with him" or "settle him". This is missing in Escorial G-I-3.

³⁵ In Vatican 117 it is R. Elazar ben Porat.

³⁶ See also B. Niddah 14b.

³⁷ At one level this means R. Reish Lakish, whose full name was R. Shimon ben Lakish; at another level it could mean a citizen of Lakish. In Escorial G-I-3, it inserts before the rhetorical question: "For this you need to force me?" (*l'zeh hutrachti*); this is also found in Munich 95; Vatican 117; and in Vatican 115 (*le-zeh hutzraḥonu*). In Hamburg 165 he retorts, "And this is necessary to legislate?" (*ve-ḥi le-hadin tzrikhena*).

³⁸ Instead of this phrase, Oxford-Bodleian Heb. C. 17 (2661) 69–78 has here, "He was pained extremely" (*ka' mitzta'er avtareih tuva*)—very much akin to what is found above.

³⁹ In Hamburg 165, "He went and questioned (*k'ari*) *Abvi* [meaning unknown], son of Lakisha, where are you?"

⁴⁰ In Hamburg 165 it reads, "until his mind changed" (*ad de-shanei da'ateih*). According to Rashi, his knowledge was ripped from him and he became foolish (*na'akarh mimeno da'ato ve-nishtateh*). Rashi, at BT *Baba Metzia* 84a, s.v., *de-shaf da'ateih*.

In brief, Reish Lakish's illness distressed Yohanan so much that he rebuffed his sister's plea to forgive him for any trespasses he might have caused. It could also be understood that Yohanan impressed upon her the importance of trusting in God to care for her and her children if and when Reish Lakish dies. Upon Reish Lakish's death, however, Yohanan becomes despondent, rejecting the placations of Elazar ben Pedat, who serves as the rabbi's first line of healing or caring intervention. Yohanan wails, rips his clothes, and weeps. He cries in search of his beloved friend and brother-in-law, wailing until his mind slips. It is at this point his rabbinic colleagues re-appear and pray for mercy upon him and he dies.

This story is rich with contrasts. On the one hand there is Yohanan's sister pleading with him to pray for his brother-in-law's—that is, her husband's—health. And on the other are Yohanan's colleagues who pray for his death. There is also the juxtaposition of the mutually enriching repartee between Yohanan and Reish Lakish and the facile assuaging of Yohanan by Elazar ben Pedat. And there is the singular mindset among the many anonymous rabbis in contrast to Yohanan's single mind splitting asunder.

Yet the question remains as to what precisely the rabbis said when they prayed for mercy upon Yohanan. Elsewhere in the Talmud, the phrase “pray for mercy” (*ba'ei rahmei*) is linked with pain and death. One source indicates that there is a tradition that one should suffer in silence and pray for mercy (B. Berakhot 62a). Another, that discusses the 903 forms of death that exist in the world, cites Rava bar Rav Shilah (a fourth-century Babylonian rabbi), who says that a person should pray for mercy even until the last clod of earth is placed on his own grave so that he can have peace (B. Berakhot 8a). Connecting this phrase to pain and suffering is not surprising given that an early Aramaic translation renders Moses's plea on Miriam's behalf (*'el na' refa' na' lah*) as a prayer for mercy: “And Moses prayed for mercy before Adonai, saying, “Through prayers for mercy, O God, have mercy through prayer. O God, who has power over all life, completely heal her through prayer” (*Targum Yonatan*, Numbers 12:13). Whereas for Moses “praying for mercy” means relieving a patient from physical suffering and returning to physical strength and health, the rabbis understand it to seek relieving a suffering patient even unto death. However this archeology of the phrase may be suggestive, it does not provide actual verbiage for prayers for death. What the rabbis said on behalf of Yohanan remains an open question, even though it is clear they sought his death.

A final story does offer such words—but upon close inspection, they may be about something other than death per se. In this famous Babylonian Talmud passage, Judah Ha-Nasi (referred to in the Talmud simply as

“Rabbi”), who redacted the Mishnah at the turn of the third century CE, suffered a debilitating digestive illness.⁴¹

On the day Rabbi died (*de-noah nafsheih*), the rabbis decreed a fast and⁴² prayed for mercy (*ba’ei rahmei*). They said that anyone who said that Rabbi died (*noah nafsheih*)⁴³ would be pierced by a sword. The handmaid of Rabbi ascended to the roof⁴⁴ and said, “Those⁴⁵ above [*elionim*] [immortal angels] request Rabbi [to be among them], and those below [*tahtunim*] [mortal humans] request Rabbi. May it be [God’s] will that those below overturn [*yakufu*] those above.” When she saw how many times (*kama zimanei*)⁴⁶ he went up to the privy, and took off [his] tefillin [prayer phylacteries], and put them on, and how much he was pained (*ke-mitzta’er*),⁴⁷ she said, “May it be [God’s] will that those above overturn [*yakufu*]⁴⁸ those below.” But the rabbis⁴⁹ would not cease (*ve-lo havu she-tikei*)⁵⁰ from their prayers for mercy (*mil-mib’ei rahmei*).⁵¹ She picked up a vessel (*kuza*)⁵² and threw it from the roof to the earth. They⁵³ [the rabbis] ceased (*ishtiku*) from mercy

⁴¹ This translation follows the printed Vilna edition. Manuscript variants are noted. They include: Munich 95; St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187; Vatican 113; Vatican 130; Soncino Print (1487).

⁴² Vatican 130 inserts here “the whole world came to” (*ve-’ito kulei ’alma le-*).

⁴³ Vatican 130 reads *met* (died).

⁴⁴ St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187 inserts that she heard *mala’hei hasharet* (ministering angels) saying, “Rabbi’s death is coming, Rabbi’s death is coming.”

⁴⁵ St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187 precedes this phrase with “Master of the World” (*ribono shel ’olam*).

⁴⁶ Vatican 130 reads *kama pa’amim*; Soncino Print (1487) (*kama zimanei*). Manuscripts that lack this phrase altogether include: Munich 95; St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187; Vatican 113.

⁴⁷ There are four things she observes: frequency of these trips to the privy, removal of tefillin, donning tefillin, and great amounts of pain. Not all manuscripts agree she saw so much. Munich 95 omits her seeing Rabbi’s frequency to the privy, and taking off his tefillin and putting them on. St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187 also omits the frequency, removal and donning of tefillin; but it adds that she saw him hurting greatly (*mitzta’er tuva*). Vatican 113 also omits the frequency, removal and donning of tefillin; and its phrase is “when she saw that he was pained” (*de-ka mitza’er*). Vatican 130 excludes reference to removal and donning tefillin and any indication that Rabbi was pained beyond needing to relieve himself frequently. The *only* time she sees everything is in Soncino Print (1487). Insofar as the detail about taking off and putting on prayer phylacteries is found only in the most recent (and printed) editions of the Talmud, we can conclude that this detail is a relatively late accretion to the story.

⁴⁸ St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187 has *overpower* (*yintzahu*).

⁴⁹ Vatican 130 insists that this was the whole world praying (*kulei ’alma*).

⁵⁰ Munich 95 reads *she-tikamla’mei*, the precise meaning of which I am uncertain.

⁵¹ This is missing in Vatican 113.

⁵² This detail is found only in the Vilna and Soncino Print (1487) manuscripts. According to Rashi, a *kuza* is a copper vessel. See B. Shabbat 66b.

⁵³ Vatican 130 says “the whole world” (*kulei ’alma*).

(*me-rahmei*),⁵⁴ and Rabbi died (*noah nafshei*). The rabbis⁵⁵ said to Bar Kapara, “Go, investigate.” He went, found [Rabbi] had died [*de-noah nafshei*], tore his cloak and turned the tear behind him.⁵⁶ He began and said, “The Erelim [angels]⁵⁷ and mortals [*mitzukum*] grasped [*’achzu*]⁵⁸ the Holy Ark. The Erelim overpowered [*natzohu*] the mortals, and the Holy Ark has been captured [*nishbah*].” They said to him, “He died [*noah nafshei*]?”⁵⁹ He said to them, “You said it,⁶⁰ but I did not say it.”⁶¹ (B. Ketubot 104a)

Contemporary Jewish bioethicists frequently invoke this story when they discuss end-of-life care, especially euthanasia (see, for example, Bleich 1991; Cutter 1995; Crane 2013; Newman 1998; Sherwin 1998). More often than not, they point to this story as precedent for the permissibility of withdrawing life-sustaining medicinal interventions. Without digressing too much, such arguments raise the question of whether the handmaid’s or rabbis’ prayers for Judah Ha-Nasi are rightly analogous to medicinal interventions for a terminally ill and suffering patient. Are prayers the same as or sufficiently similar to medicine? A negative answer appears most logical insofar as medicine’s domain of activity is primarily upon or within a patient’s body; prayers uttered by others do their “work” outside a patient’s body insofar as they are geared toward a divine, not a human, audience (see Novak 1995, 1303).

Medicine aside, other insights arise when we look at this text for what it says about praying for someone’s death. It is not insignificant that the person who instigates praying for another’s death is doubly marginalized: the handmaid is a servant and a woman. She is, however, more than someone intimately familiar with R. Judah Ha-Nasi’s condition; she is a formidable sage in her own right. Elsewhere in the Talmud (B. Mo’ed Katan 17a; Y. Mo’ed Katan 3.1) she offers a novel interpretation of the

⁵⁴ This is missing in Munich 95, Vatican 113, Soncino Print (1487).

⁵⁵ Vatican 130 inserts an editor’s (*stam*) question: They said, “What can we learn from ‘he died’ (*noach nafsheih*)? Who should come [and investigate the veracity of his death] (*m’an ni’ul*).”

⁵⁶ Vatican 113 adds, “He ripped the ripping behind him” (*ve-ka’a kri’ah ’achareina*).

⁵⁷ The Erelim are a specific category of angels in the Judaic angelic pantheon. They are first mentioned in Isaiah 33:7 as crying angels (see the commentaries of Rashi and Radak to that verse). Their location among the other levels of angels is discussed in Maimonides 1974, *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2.7; Eisenstein 1915, *Gan Eden / Gehinnom* §86; *Zohar* 2:43a/Bo. See also B. Hagigah 5b; *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:5; *Eikhah Rabbah* 1:2; *Midrash Pesikta Zutra* to Exodus 33:22; *Zohar* 1:182a, 1:210, and 2:195b–196a. These angels are appointed over the grass, trees, fruits, and grain; as soon as they have done the will of their Creator, they return to the place assigned to them and praise God; see Eisenstein 1915, *Ketapuach Be’itzah Hi’ar*, §262; Silverstein 1994, *Teshuvah*, §26.

⁵⁸ Vatican 130 reads “seized” (*tafsu*).

⁵⁹ This whole exchange is missing in Munich 95.

⁶⁰ This is missing in Vatican 130; St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187; Munich 95.

⁶¹ St. Petersburg—RNL Evr. I 187 adds: And they said, “Oy, oy, the Holy Ark has been captured (*nishbah*).”

biblical injunction not to put a stumbling block before the blind (Leviticus 19:14). She also controls the ebb and flow of students from R. Judah Ha-Nasi's dinner table (B. Eruvin 53b). Both her insights into his students' fealty and her own ethical sensibilities empower her to make sensitive judgments about how best to serve Judah Ha-Nasi's needs and interests. Thus what she does and says in this story cannot be easily dismissed, at least from an ethical or care-provider's perspective.

At first she describes the situation as a confrontation of mutually exclusive requests: those of the humans yearning for Judah Ha-Nasi to remain terrestrial and alive and those of the angels desiring him to ascend beyond life. Her initial prayer—"May it be God's will that those below overturn those above"—seeks divine intervention not so much in the lowly human arena as in the heavenly. She wants God to thwart the efforts of those angelic beings actively seeking Judah Ha-Nasi's demise. Her first prayer thus concerns a power struggle within the heavenly host more than it does the well-being of a fellow human being.

But she then shifts her attention away from the ethereal powers and toward her ailing charge's failing powers. Even though Judah Ha-Nasi was known for painful gastrointestinal episodes, as if for the first time she here and now truly sees his extraordinary discomfort.⁶² As noted above with the manuscript variants of this text, the detail about the frequency with which he went to the privy, which required removing and then donning again his tefillin, seems to be a late insertion into the story.⁶³ Regardless of this inconvenience, her beloved master's awful condition led her to realize that the goal of elongating his life no longer fulfilled his interests or met his needs. She now inverts her prayer to "May it be God's will that those above overturn those below." Whereas earlier she sought God's assistance to curtail angelic powers, her tune changes. Now she wants God to let the (super)naturally stronger ones prevail in this existential tug-of-war. Obviously this prayer is not about Judah Ha-Nasi directly. It concerns his colleagues who vociferously seek his vitality.⁶⁴ She may pray for their prayers to be squelched, but she does not pray for her master's death *per se*.

Curiously, her request goes unheeded.⁶⁵ Or at least, she does not see adequate response within a timely fashion. We should note that timeliness and feelings of urgency are terrestrial phenomena; time is all but meaningless for the eternal. Eager to ease her master's plight, the handmaid

⁶² He cried so loud when evacuating that even the grunts and brays of his farm animals could not cover his screams (see B. Baba Metzi'a 85a).

⁶³ A person with bowel afflictions is exempt from wearing phylacteries (B. Hullin 110a).

⁶⁴ Bleich overstates this when he says, "She begged Rabbi Judah's students to desist from their prayers on his behalf" (1991, 147).

⁶⁵ Moshe Feinstein overstates her liturgy's efficacy, saying that her prayers were received (*tefilatah mekubélet*) (1959–96, *Hoshen Mishpat* II, 74D).

observes his colleagues' incessant prayers for mercy as perhaps some kind of verbal mechanism keeping him trapped in his suffering. If her prayer did not work, release would only come from silence. She therefore devises a scheme to interrupt their pain-sustaining prayers. From on high she throws down a clay urn that loudly shatters on the ground, startling the rabbis from their babble. In this way she demonstrates to God precisely what she wanted and what Judah Ha-Nasi needed: a rupture of routine, a divine interruption of human habit, a revelation.⁶⁶ Through her own devices, she succeeds to cause at least one thing—a moment's silence. And in that brief quiet, Judah Ha-Nasi dies.

Saying that hers were prayers for another's death would be an overstatement, however.⁶⁷ She says nothing explicit about or for Judah Ha-Nasi dying. Rather, with her newfound goal of securing for him final release from his suffering, she prays for heaven's success vis-à-vis human desires. But even this prayer is to no avail. It seems that only action—and not prayer—will achieve the end she now considers best for Judah Ha-Nasi. This is not to say, however, that her actions directly caused his death. On the contrary, her actions model legitimate inaction, or what later Jewish scholars term the permissibility of the removal of impediments (*mesir hamone'a*).⁶⁸

Though most contemporary bioethicists stop their recitation of the story here, the narrative does not stop with Judah Ha-Nasi's death.⁶⁹ The rabbis instruct one of their members to investigate the ramifications of the stoppage of their prayers for Judah Ha-Nasi's continued vitality. Their emissary, Bar Kapara, discovers that indeed their beloved teacher had died and he ritually tears his clothes—a typical early action of mourning. But he then does something unusual: he hides the tear behind him so that when he returns to his colleagues they cannot see the truth of the matter. This physical masking of the truth is matched by his dissembling words that describe a tug of war between angels and mortals over the Holy Ark. This physical—metaphysical, really—struggle between the realms parallels the prayerful challenge the handmaid mentioned earlier. The fact that

⁶⁶ Recall that Moses, too, shatters a clay tablet of revelation so as to awaken the calf-worshipping Israelites to proper theology and ethicality—and this after he personally witnesses the true nature of their circumstance and not relying on hearsay from either God or Joshua (Exodus 32).

⁶⁷ Baeke, Wils, and Broeckaert make such an overstatement, "Not the servant's prayer for his death causes him to die, but the ceasing of praying by the surrounding rabbis" (2011, 788).

⁶⁸ See, for example, *Shulḥan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 339.2 and Rema, ad loc.

⁶⁹ A parallel story of when R. Kahana fell sick contains similar concluding stages. The rabbis sent R. Joshua ben R. Idi to investigate. Upon arrival he found R. Kahana dead. He rent his cloak, turned it backward, and went back weeping. They inquired of him, has he died? He replied, I have not said it, as scripture claims, "He that utters evil tidings is a fool" (Proverbs 10:18). See B. Pesahim 3b.

that the angels won by capturing the Holy Ark reflects the handmaid's second prayer. The rabbis interpret Bar Kapara's oblique metaphor to mean that Judah Ha-Nasi died, to which Bar Kapara points out that they said this, not he.

Bar Kapara's evasion from directly telling the truth merits consideration. His physical and verbal indirection is intelligible only in light of the conclusion articulated at the story's beginning: the rabbis ruled that whoever announces Judah Ha-Nasi's death would be killed by the sword. Lest he also die that very day he had somehow to communicate that which should not—yet must—be said. Even though his initial goal was to see whether Judah Ha-Nasi was still alive, once he discovered the truth he then changed his goal: he wanted to ensure his own vitality. This change of goal thus explains why he physically hides evidence of the truth and verbally obscures it, too.

This story thus exhibits a chiasmic structure:

- A) Proclaiming Death for Announcing Death
- B) Description of Heavenly-Earthly Struggle over Judah Ha-Nasi & Prayer for Earthly Success
- C) Witnessing Another's Actual Status (Judah Ha-Nasi's implacable suffering) Changes One's Goals
- D) Prayer for Heavenly Success
- E) Earthy Interruption Achieves Silence (that is, a shattering revelation)
- D') In Silence Heavenly Success Achieved
- C') Witnessing Another's Actual Status (Judah Ha-Nasi is dead) Changes One's Goals
- B') Description of Heavenly-Earthly Struggle over Judah Ha-Nasi & Proclaiming Heavenly Success
- A') Announcing Death without Receiving Death

The crux of the story occurs between C and C'. The handmaid's exceptional (meaning, it is not repeated or reenacted by Bar Kapara) action of bringing about the conditions in which Judah Ha-Nasi could die (D, E & D') occurs only upon paying attention to the actual condition of the person of concern (C). Bar Kapara's echo (C') of the handmaid recapitulates her investigation of *what is*, of Judah Ha-Nasi's actual condition. However central the handmaid's creative earth-shattering action may have been, it is the fact that she and Bar Kapara *acknowledge reality as it actually is* (C and C') and not as how they want it to be that emerges as the critical issue when caring for the medically futile.

This is no small detail. Both the story of Yohanan and the story of Judah Ha-Nasi describe different kinds of interventions during the course of their ailments. At first Yohanan receives the benign and ultimately annoying placation of Pedat. Such efforts to soothe Yohanan prove ineffective and he plummets into a condition which cannot be treated. So too with Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi. At first his handmaid and his colleagues pray

for his endurance—and these prayers appear perversely effective, since he stayed alive though he did not enjoy restored health. This is not to say that his condition worsened, as did Yohanan's. A different kind of intervention for a completely different type of goal was deemed necessary. Thus, in both stories one kind of verbal intervention (placation or prayer) was attempted until it was found wanting. The ultimate goal of relieving the patient from suffering remained elusive despite those verbal efforts. New strategies needed to be found just as new words needed to be uttered. And here is where we get our lesson: there are times when a change of care is best for the patient, a change in which both words and actions ultimately bring about the conditions that enable someone's life to end.

That is, certain circumstances warrant laboring and even praying for someone's life to end. It is about such circumstances that the fourteenth-century rabbi Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona (known as Ran), the greatest halakhic authority of his generation, rules that "it is sometimes necessary to pray for mercy that an ill person should die" (*pa'amim she-tzarikh levakesh rahamim 'al ha-holeh she-yamut*).⁷⁰ He then offers a case demonstrating when this rule becomes operational. "For example, when a sick person is greatly distressed by his immense ailment, and it is impossible for him to live [or recover]—as it is taught in the Talmud [B. Ketubot 104a]." He then mentions the last story, reciting only the details of the handmaid witnessing the suffering of Judah Ha-Nasi as he went into the privy and removed his phylacteries.⁷¹ According to Ran, her prayer that it be God's will for the heavenly hosts to overpower the mortals meant, "Rabbi [Judah Ha-Nasi] should die" (*ke-lomar de-le-yamut rabbi*).

Note that Ran rules, "It is necessary (*tzarikh*) to pray" for another's death. Such liturgy may be socially required; it perhaps is not a religious obligation per se (as would be a *mitzvah*, or commandment), or a legal one (complete with punishments for failures to do so).⁷² While Ran insists that such prayers be expressed for moribund patients, later legal scholars quibble over whether this is a requirement as such or if it should happen at all. Take R. Yechiel Michael Epstein (1829–1908, Lithuania), who opines, "Sometimes one is to seek mercy for death, for example, if he

⁷⁰ Ran at B. Nedarim 40a, s.v., *'ein mevakesh 'alav rahamim lo she-yihieh ve-lo she-yamut*.

⁷¹ This indicates a Talmudic manuscript tradition in which tefillin are already embedded in the story predating the fourteenth century. Or it suggests that Ran inserted these details here to augment the gravity of Rabbi's condition. See note 46 above.

⁷² Bleich summarizes Ran as saying, "There are circumstances in which it is not only permissible but even commendable to pray for the death of the patient!" (1991, 147). Ran does not use the rhetoric of commendation, however; just the language of necessity. It could be that he viewed such prayers as tragic, and that he wishes circumstances were otherwise for a particular patient. Friedman (1993, 97) views Ran granting permission for such prayers.

suffers greatly from his illness and it is impossible for him to recover, as was the case of Rabbi [Judah Ha-Nasi]" (*Aruch HaShulchan*, Yoreh De'ah 335.3).⁷³ Epstein's ellipsis of Ran's "necessary" increases his ambiguity: is praying for another's death a requirement or merely a permitted action? By contrast, R. Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986, North America) is more akin to Ran's position: "At this point [of realizing that a patient has transcended medicine's comforting capacities] it is necessary (*tzrikhin*) for people to pray so that the suffering patient will die, according to Ran's statement that sometimes it is necessary (*tzarikh*) to pray for death, when it is for the sick person's own good" (1959–96, *Hoshen Mishpat* II, 74D). Elsewhere Feinstein echoes this position and asserts that the law (*halakhah*) accords with the Ran; moreover, even physicians (*rofa'im*) should recognize when it is no longer possible to heal or comfort a patient with medicinal interventions—they, too, should stop their efforts yet do nothing to actively shorten a patient's life, for that would be tantamount to murder (1959–96, *Hoshen Mishpat* II, 73A). In this way Feinstein distinguishes active euthanasia from praying for death: in his view, the latter is permissible whereas the former is not. And Abraham S. Abraham (twentieth century, Israel) concludes that just as it is necessary to pray for a moribund patient's death, that is, for someone else's demise, so too is it permissible (*mutar*) for a person to pray for his own life to be taken from him, as did Elijah and Jonah.⁷⁴ At the other extreme, R. Eliezer Yehudah Waldenberg (1915–2006, Israel) demurs: he sees in these stories neither permission nor requirement to pray for another's death. Indeed, he says that insofar as Judah Ha-Nasi's colleagues did not, of their own accord, stop praying for his wellbeing, praying for someone's death is prohibited (*'asur*).⁷⁵ He justifies this prohibition on the fact that medieval codes of Jewish law (that is, the *Tur* and the *Shulhan Arukh*) do not cite Ran's position. This argument from silence is ironic insofar as the Talmudic text explicitly describes the rabbis becoming silent, and in that silence their "patient" dies.⁷⁶ In all, it would seem that the majority of (Orthodox)

⁷³ Weiner offers this translation: "In my opinion . . . there are instances when one should pray that the sick should die, for example, when the ill person is suffering greatly and it is impossible for him to survive, such as we have seen in the case of Rabbi's maid. Therefore the Gemara here in [B.] Nedarim says that one who visits the sick helps him by his prayers even when he prays for his death" (1995, 33). In short, praying for another's death *is* helpful in certain situations.

⁷⁴ Abraham 1987, Yoreh De'ah 335.5, s.v. *tefilah 'al holeh she-yamut*.

⁷⁵ Waldenberg 1945–94, vol. 5, Ramat Rachel §5, and vol. 7, Ramat Rachel §49. See also vol. 5, Sefer Even Ya'akov, §13.

⁷⁶ Would it be impolitic to wonder whether Waldenberg's reticence to accede to Ran's interpretation because it would mean the handmaid—a woman, and a servant at that—would be the ultimate exemplar and source of this ruling—and not the rabbis, male establishment leaders?

bioethicists, with Feinstein being the most prominent among them, concur with Ran: *sometimes it is necessary to pray for someone else to die.*

4. Motivations to Pray to Die

The textual tradition thus demonstrates two kinds of prayers for death—reflexive and transitive. The several illuminating instances of each kind permit us to see diverging motivations for each.

In regard to reflexive prayers, Moses seeks his own end because the troublesome Israelites frustrate him to no end. Elijah's stems from real worries of political backlash to his prophetic powers, while Jonah's emerges from winner's regret. (To repeat, his cajoling prophesying worked, for the Ninevites repented and God did not punish them as so promised.) Samson prayed for death because his political and physical entrapment and enfeebled condition were too onerous to bear. Rachel's infertility was inescapable, for it was her body she wanted impregnated. And Honi the Circle Maker suffocated in his social isolation and preferred death. With Rachel's motivation being an obvious outlier, it seems that motivations to pray for one's own erasure are political, prophetic, and social in nature. That is, the grievance too difficult to endure is primarily outside the person. On the other hand, it could be argued that Rachel's cry for death was inspired less by her infertility per se than by her jealousy (*te-kanei*) of her sister's comparative fecundity (Genesis 30:1). Her legitimacy as a wife of status was threatened, and this untenable condition was sufficiently demoralizing to warrant request for erasure.

This is not the case regarding motivations to pray for another person to die. Here we see an old woman whose vitality has ebbed beyond joy; a son's irreparable mutilation; a rabbi whose anguish at the loss of his friend precipitates his own maddening despair; and another rabbi who suffers a debilitating and wasting illness. In varying degrees and ways, these sources spur prayers not for life or recovery but for release and mercy and death.

The issues motivating self-referential prayers tend to be disembodied concerns insofar as they do not pertain to the physical bodies of the people involved per se—though Rachel's and perhaps Samson's challenge this description. This contrasts with what motivates praying for someone else to die. Here physical bodies are intimately considered. Specifically, debilitating and irreparable physical and psychical ailments serve as sufficient warrant for praying for someone else to die. Extreme exasperation inspires deadly personal prayers on the one hand, imminent expiration prompts transitive prayers on the other.

Just as motivations for such prayers differ between these categories, so, too, do what they explicitly pray for. Reflexive prayers are blunt: erase me, kill me, my death is better than my life, take my life, let me die. Their

directness contrasts with the circumlocutions of the prayers for others to die. Here people either do not pray (for life, as in the old woman) at all, or they fast (about what precisely, it is unclear), or they pray for mercy for a suffering fellow, or they interrupt the prayers that apparently tether a suffering person to his ailments. They do not pray explicitly or directly for that other person to die. They never utter, “Please God, take this person’s life,” or “God, kill her,” or “His death is better than his life.”⁷⁷ In contrast to Moses’s primal “Please God, heal her, please” (*‘el na’ refa’ na’ lah*), no one says “Please God, kill her, please” (*‘el na’ harog na’ lah*).

Even the confessional prayer said by a dying individual (*vidui*) echoes the directness found in the reflexive prayers for death. Though no ancient version of this prayer exists, most take root in Joseph Karo’s sixteenth-century rendition, which reads, “I acknowledge you, O Adonai my God and God of my ancestors, that both my cure and my death are in your hands. May it be your will to heal me completely. Yet if I am to die, let my death be an atonement for all the sins, iniquities, and transgressions that I committed before you, and may my portion be in the Garden of Eden, and grant me the world to come, which is treasured up for the righteous.”⁷⁸ Permission is granted by Moshe Isserles to expand upon this prayer as one sees fit.⁷⁹ This personal confession begins by beseeching God, acknowledging mortality, and accepting vulnerability to God’s will. The rhetorical shift to accepting death, however, does not turn on an expression of praising God’s decision. Rather, it is phrased in such a way that the dying leverages the impending death for spiritual rewards, the least of which is atonement for past waywardness. In this way, one’s death is meant to be less a release from intractable suffering than liberation to eternal spiritual enjoyments.⁸⁰

Praying for someone else’s death is less straightforward, however. As the texts studied above demonstrate, such prayers involve tact and oblique reference. But taking liturgical indirectness to its extreme could produce obfuscation and confusion, and provide neither emotional catharsis for the speaker or bodily release for the person of concern. Instead, it seems

⁷⁷ Freehof cites *Sefer Hasidim* (#315–18, Frankfurt edition) that comments on Ecclesiastes’ “there is a time to live and a time to die”: “If a man is dying, *we do not pray too hard* that his soul return and that he revive from the coma; he can at best live only a few days and in those days will endure great suffering; so ‘there is a time to die’” (1995, 199, emphasis mine). *We do not pray too hard* for a medically futile patient to remain animated. This is not so much an active prayer for the person to die but a decreasing or perhaps cessation altogether of praying to keep that person animated.

⁷⁸ *Shulḥan Arukh*, Yoreh De’ah 338.2. B. Shabbat 32a and *Shulḥan Arukh*, Yoreh De’ah 338.1 state that the nearly dead are encouraged to make such confessions.

⁷⁹ Gloss on *Shulḥan Arukh*, Yoreh De’ah 338.2.

⁸⁰ A version said by others for one who is unable to recite it also requests religious rewards for the dying. See, for example, Wolfson 1993, 52.

roundabout prayer is the best way to go. This includes silencing prayer, fasting, praying for mercy, and even interrupting prayers. However different these four rhetorical strategies may seem, they nonetheless share four interlocking elements: 1) careful and direct assessment of the person's actual bodily and mental condition; 2) evaluation that that condition is irreparable and insufferable as it is; 3) conviction that the only release from that intractable condition cannot be achieved through any other means besides death; and usually, 4) prayerful articulation for divine mercy and compassion for human suffering. These elements are not found in—and perhaps are not necessary to—praying for one's own death. Put succinctly, indirect liturgy for another's death requires direct investigation.

5. Reflections

It is often the case that prayers bespeak more about the speaker than about the spoken object. For this reason we should pause to analyze these narratives of praying for someone else to die with a critical reflexive lens. For example, in which ways are prayers explicitly *for* a patient's death also implicitly expressions *of* or *about* a care provider? When does care and prayer for an inexorably dying patient shift to attending to oneself?

A longstanding assumption operating behind much of Jewish ethics is that every moment of life is infinitely valuable. Indeed, some contemporary Jewish bioethicists speak of this assumption as proof that the tradition writ large supports or condemns a particular biomedical practice. Such arguments gloss over the fact that the textual tradition does *not*, in fact, hold all moments of life infinitely valuable, nor does it think that all human lives are equally infinitely valuable. The litany of rules pertaining to capital punishment is but a simple and obvious example. Those people guilty of, say, murder, have forfeited their right to life and the law takes it upon itself to see to their execution. Similarly, rules that permit aborting a fetus because of lethal complications for the mother also bespeak and reinforce the idea that not all lives—even potential lives—are equally valuable. Laws for lethal self-defense as well as the host of regulations regarding warfare also demonstrate that Judaism cherishes human life *as if* it is infinitely valuable, but this *as if* does not prevent the tradition from making difficult decisions when certain lives may and must be forfeited.

These prayers for death share in this, more complete and complex, assumption. Specifically, they presume that compromised quality of life must be considered when designing and performing care for the dying.⁸¹

⁸¹ Some bioethicists, like Bleich 1991, consider quality of life as a value external to Judaism and thus dismissible. He makes this argument many times throughout his many essays on end of life care.

Extending temporal existence is certainly a laudable task and resources should be deployed for that goal; hence the popular invocation of *piquah nefesh* (saving a life) as a rationale for most every kind of medicinal life-saving intervention. But this is not the only value at stake in Jewish society generally or in Jewish concerns about end of life care in particular. The quality of an individual's life is as much a desiderata as most anything else. If after thorough and direct investigation it is found that nothing further can be done to assuage an individual's overwhelming anguish, it is understood to be *both good and right*, moral *and* legally protected—*necessary* even—to enable that person to experience existential release. Now we must be clear that praying for someone to die is *not* the same, nor should be considered similar to, actively hastening another's death. On the contrary. Praying for another person to die would be more akin to passive euthanasia, not active euthanasia. Just as passive euthanasia is relatively more palatable to contemporary Jewish bioethicists than active since it “allows” patients to die unencumbered by “heroic” interventions, praying for patients to die should probably also be welcomed as another way to “allow” patients to die.⁸² Indeed, even Feinstein supports this claim.

With this assumption now identified, let us turn to the characters who work with it: the ones who “pray” for someone else to die. Chalafta's permissiveness to the old woman to absent herself from prayer bespeaks a kind of acquiescence to ultimate finitude. As inescapable as mortality is, struggling futilely against it when life is already abhorrent is vacuous, vain even. Chalafta thinks it better to capitulate, quietly, contentedly. Ada bar Ahava's fasting for his mutilated son's death demonstrates a form of penance forged on guilt or regret about putting his son in lethal danger. He would rather his son be alive and healthy, to be sure, but this cannot alter what transpired or his role therein. In Yohanan's colleagues' prayer for his mental anguish to end, they express anxiety more about mental acuity and decline than physical demise. This is understandable, given their guild's celebration of intellectual prowess. And Judah Ha-Nasi's handmaid's double prayer and ultimate intervention in others' prayers forcefully illustrates her deeply felt ambivalence about mortality—or, more precisely, about her master's mortality. Four stories, four kinds of transitive prayers for death, four distinct motivations.

It is significant that the persons praying speak for different reasons. The Jewish textual tradition has taken pains to preserve these texts and the very real emotional dimensions of the characters within them. This enables modern readers—and care providers—to read themselves in and through these characters. Just as those ancients felt awkward in the face of mortality, just as they felt guilt, or anxiety or ambivalence, so too may

⁸² See Crane 2013.

we moderns welcome and wrestle with our varied and dynamic emotions as we tend to fragile and dying others.

And in our tending to others, we also attend to something more profound. As Kierkegaard put it, we attend to the will of God:

The immediate person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon, is that *God should hear what HE is praying for*. And yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when *the person praying* continues to pray until he is *the one who hears*, who hears what God wills. The immediate person, therefore, uses many words, and therefore, makes demands in his prayer; the true man of prayer only *attends*. (Kierkegaard 1959, 97)

Such attention to the will of God—to the fact of human finitude and that the quality of human existence matters—is significant both to the patient and to the care provider. It enables each to find release: from enduring implacable suffering for the one, from using increasingly impotent medicine for the other.

Still, however much such stories about praying for someone else to die differ, they uniformly portray something critical about caring for those who have reached medically futile stages of existence. In every instance, regardless of the care provider's own attitude about mortality, prayer—and specifically, prayer for death—remains a critical and legitimate component of proper attendance to the dying patient. Inasmuch as the *vidui* is the last prayer a patient says or others say on a patient's behalf, it could perhaps be altered and invoked here. "I acknowledge you, O Adonai my God and God of my ancestors, that both my/his/her cure and my/his/her death are in your hands. May it be your will that I/he/she no longer suffer in extremis, by full healing if that is Your will, and if not, by death."

REFERENCES

- Abraham, Abraham S.
1987 *Nishmat Avraham*. Jerusalem: Schlesinger Institute.
- Baeke, Goedele, Jean-Pierre Wils, and Bert Broeckaert
2011 "There Is a Time to Be Born and a Time to Die' (Ecclesiastes 3:2a): Jewish Perspectives on Euthanasia." *Journal of Religion and Health* 50.4 (December): 778–95.
- Bagheri, Alireza
2013 *Medical Futility: A Cross-National Study*. Hackensack, N.J.: Imperial College Press.
- Bleich, J. David
1991 "Care of the Terminally Ill." In *Jewish Values in Health and Medicine*, edited by Levi Meier, 141–61. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

- Brody, Howard
 1997 Medical Futility: A Useful concept? In *Medical Futility: And the Evaluation of Life-Sustaining Interventions*, edited by Marjorie Zucker and Howard Zucker, 1–14. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cadge, Wendy, and Elaine Howard Ecklund
 2009 “Prayers in the Clinic: How Pediatric Physicians Respond.” *Southern Medical Journal* 102.12 (December): 1218–21.
- Cohen, Aryeh
 2012 *Justice in the City*. Brighton: Academic Studies Press.
- Crane, Jonathan K.
 2013 *Narratives and Jewish Bioethics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cutter, William
 1995 “Rabbi Judah’s Handmaid: Narrative Influence on Life’s Important Decisions.” In *Death and Euthanasia in Jewish Law*, edited by Walter Jacob and Moshe Zemer, 61–87. Pittsburgh, Penn.: Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah.
- Dorff, Elliot
 1998 *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics*. Philadelphia, Penn.: Jewish Publication Society.
- Eisenberg, Daniel
 2011 “Praying for the Death of a Patient: A Halakhic View.” 3rd International Conference on Jewish Medical Ethics. July 10. Available at: http://www.torahinmotion.org.c1.previewmysite.com/medical/sources/is_it_permitted_to_daven_for_patient_to_die_for_syllabus_final_draft.pdf (accessed April 20, 2012).
- Eisenstein, Julius
 1915 *Otzar Ha-Midrashim*. New York: J. D. Eisenstein.
- Feinstein, Moshe
 1959–96 *Responsa Iggrot Moshe*. 8 vols. New York: Balshon.
- Fränkel, David
 1970 *Koraban Ha’edah*. Jerusalem: Hotza’at Me’orot.
- Freehof, Solomon B.
 1995 “Allowing a Terminal Patient to Die.” In *Death and Euthanasia in Jewish Law*, edited by Walter Jacob and Moshe Zemer, 197–201. Pittsburgh, Penn.: Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah.
- Friedman, Fred
 1993 “The Chronic Vegetative Patient: A Torah Perspective.” *The Journal of Halachah and Contemporary Society* 26 (Fall): 88–109.
- Herring, Basil F.
 1984 *Jewish Ethics and Halakhah for Our Time: Sources and Commentary*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc.
- Katzellenbogen, Mordechai
 1990 *Torat Chaim Chumash*. 7 vols. Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook.

- Kierkegaard, Søren
 1959 *The Journals of Kierkegaard*. Edited by Alexander Dru. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Maimonides, Moses
 1974 *Mishneh Torah: The Book of Knowledge*. Edited and translated by Moses Hyamson. New York: Feldheim.
- Margolies, Moshe
 1970 *Penei Mosheh*. Jerusalem: Hotza'at Me'orot.
- Newman, Louis
 1998 *Past Imperatives: Studies in the History and Theory of Jewish Ethics*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Novak, David
 1995 "Judaism, Bioethics in." In *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, rev. ed., edited by Warren Thomas Reich, 3: 1301–8. New York: Macmillan Library Reference.
 2007 *The Sanctity of Human Life*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Resnicoff, Steven H.
 1998–99 "Jewish Law Perspectives on Suicide and Physician-Assisted Dying." *Journal of Law and Religion* 13.2: 289–349.
 2003 "Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide in Jewish Law." In *Public Policy and Social Issues: Jewish Sources and Perspectives*, edited by Marshall J. Berger, 79–107. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Roberts, Leanne, Irshad Ahmed, and Steve Hall
 2000 "Intercessory Prayer for the Alleviation of Ill Health." *Cochrane Database System Review* 2: CD000368.
 2007 "Intercessory Prayer for the Alleviation of Ill Health." *Cochrane Database System Review* January 24.1: CD000368.
- Roberts, Leanne, Irshad Ahmed, Steve Hall, and Andrew Davison
 2009 "Intercessory Prayer for the Alleviation of Ill Health." *Cochrane Database System Review* April 15.2: CD000368.
- Roberts, Leanne, Irshad Ahmed, Steve Hall, Catherine Sargent, and C. Adams
 1998 "Intercessory Prayer for Ill Health: A Systematic Review." *Forsch Komplementarmed* 5, Supplement S1: 82–86.
- Rosner, Fred
 1979 "Suicide in Jewish Law." In *Jewish Bioethics*, edited by Fred Rosner and J. David Bleich, 317–30. New York: Sanhedrin Press.
- Rubin, Susan
 1998 *When Doctors Say No: The Battleground of Medical Futility*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Schneiderman, Lawrence J., and Nancy S. Jecker
 2011 *Wrong Medicine: Doctors, Patients, and Futile Treatment*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sherwin, Byron L.

- 1998 "Euthanasia as a Halakhic Option." In *Jewish Approaches to Suicide, Martyrdom, and Euthanasia*, edited by Kalman J. Kaplan and Matthew B. Shwartz, 80–97. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc.

Silverstein, Shraga, ed. and trans.

- 1994 *Orchot Tzadikim / The Ways of the Tzadikim*. New York: Feldheim.

Spektor, Yitzhak Elchanan

- 1889 *Responsa Ein Yitzchak*. Vol. 1. Vilna: n.p.

Waldenberg, Eliezer

- 1945–94 *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer*. 20 vols. 2nd ed. Jerusalem: E. Waldenberg.

Wolfson, Ron

- 1993 *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing.