

Suicide – The Jewish Perspective

Among the major Jewish denominations—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—the predominant views regarding suicide do not differ either in law or tradition. The Book of Deuteronomy makes clear what we should do when it says, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have put before you, life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, - if you and your offspring would live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19) J

Judaism teaches that how we are born and how we die are in God’s hands. Life belongs to God, not to the individual, and it is a gift to be treasured. The Biblical basis for the injunction against suicide has been derived from the Noahide laws: “For your lifeblood too, I will require a reckoning.” (Genesis 9:5) Taking a single life – even one’s own - is seen as taking the life of the entire world; saving a single life is seen as saving the entire world.

(Yorah Deah, 345) Taking your own life is viewed as a very serious violation of your responsibility to God and society if you are in your right mind, in part because it denies you the opportunity to repent. In Jewish law, there is no right to self-mutilation or suicide since you are only “renting” your body from God. People who die by suicide cannot be buried inside a Jewish cemetery; spaces for them are reserved just outside the cemetery.

It is important to note that the Jewish law against suicide is only one narrow aspect of the far wider and more important idea that God loves humans without qualification and indeed created us uniquely in the Divine image. The Torah is thus given as a guide for living rather than merely as a preparation for death. This same idea is constant throughout the Bible and Rabbinic writings.

Jewish teachings never condone suicide, but Jews tend not to blame the person who dies by suicide. Indeed, Jewish communities feel a profound sense of tragedy and loss when someone takes his own life. They try to understand the death and not be judgmental toward the victim. The suicide is condemned, but not the person.

Some commonly understood explanations for why Jewish people end their lives include severe depression or other psychological problems and major life stresses. Jews generally attribute responsibility for a suicide to these conditions and try to help the survivors. They believe that suicide is not an act against God when the victim’s psychological state prevents him or her from being in full control of their capacities.

In general, Jews believe that most suicides can be prevented. Suicides are seen as psychologically based, so Jews usually search for ways to intervene in time. It is important, for example, to take actions such as giving a person food and water, personal affirmations, and physical comfort, and to get the person the care he needs. It is also important that rabbis and seminarians have access to training and resources for suicide prevention.

To further the progress of faith communities in preventing suicide, the national Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) convened an Interfaith Suicide Prevention Dialogue, which was supported by the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Participants included representatives of the five largest faith groups in the United States: Christian, Jewish, Islamic,

Buddhist, and Hindu. The complete document can be found at http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/faith_dialogue.pdf

Representing the Jewish faith were Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, U.S. Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and Dr. Kalman Kaplan, Professor of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois in Chicago (UIC) and Director, Program in Religion Spirituality, and Mental Health, sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation at UIC.

(Quotations are from the Jewish Publication Society --JPS)