



Around the Shabbat Table

**Special Issue
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This week's writers: BJE Nassau/Queens Center staff

Introduction

While this was scheduled to be an “off week” for Around the Shabbat Table, with most of our schools going on vacation, current events relating to the tragic case of Terry Schiavo give us an opportunity, if not an obligation to discuss end of life issues. Personally, the case has motivated me to look at things that I’d rather not think about: wills, power of attorney, living wills. In each of these issues, there are important Jewish ethical questions.

You may want to use these ideas simply to address the current news events, or to personalize it and discuss your own family’s thoughts and plans.

Background

If you read the newspapers, listen to the radio or watch television you are familiar with the outline of the Terry Schiavo story. At its most basic, the situation appears to be that Terry is, according to the majority of doctors who have examined her, in a persistent vegetative state, with no consciousness or awareness. Her husband maintains that she had expressed to him the wish not to be kept alive in such circumstances. Her parents, on the other hand, believe that she is aware and conscious on some level, and wish to continue feeding her through a tube which had been surgically implanted years ago.

To see a timeline that outlines the major events in this case, go to: [BBC Schiavo Timeline](#) .

The situation is certainly tragic. Decisions about end-of-life care and treatment, or lack of it, are emotionally charged under the best of situations. People have differing views about what is or is not the right thing to do. Even when the patient has made clear his or her wishes in advance, there are often pressures on caregivers and guardians to make decisions that have profound consequences.

In order to bring this discussion to your family, we are providing you with a number of Jewish perspectives on end-of-life issues that we suggest you make a part of your discussion.



Jewish Considerations

Rather than outline all of the issues relating to Jewish ethical and legal views on end-of-life, you will find a number of important links below. Please choose those articles that are of interest and use them as an introduction to these issues and to a selection of Jewish views on the subject:

The link below is to www.jewish.com, a wonderful site with information from various streams of Jewish thought. The article summarizes Orthodox, Reform and Conservative views on what is and is not permissible at the extreme end of life.

See: **Jewish views on end of life**

www.VirtualJerusalem.com is another useful Jewish site. This article contains direct quotations from British Orthodox rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, Orthodox rabbi J. David Bleich, Professor of Law Daniel B. Sinclair, Conservative rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, Reform rabbi Peter Knobel, British Progressive rabbi Danny Rich

See: **Judaism Now**

This fascinating article, by Yaakov Neeman and Eliot Sacks, examines the approach of Israeli courts to end of life issues. It refers extensively to Jewish sources, and makes interesting comparisons between the legal systems of Israel and the United States. In particular, sections 16 – 20 describe Jewish law relative to active and passive euthanasia, as well as the guidelines for stopping life support. One conclusion drawn by the author seems to be that the modern emphasis on individual autonomy presents a serious challenge to traditional Jewish thought.

See: **Jewish Virtual Library**

This responsum to the question of quality of life and euthanasia seems to address at least some of the issues of the Terry Schiavo case.

Central Conference of Reform Rabbis

A wide range of materials regarding end-of-life issues, including living will forms, a number of viewpoints of Orthodox Judaism and of other religions can be found at:

Beliefnet

Finally, this week's Jewish Week (NY) includes an article with input from a number of local and national rabbis on this case. You can read it at:

The Jewish Week



For Your Family's Discussion

- 1) What do Jewish sources say about end-of-life issues?
- 2) Are there differences between and/or among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist thinkers? What are those differences?
- 3) Would knowing what Jewish sources say help me make decisions about my own life and the lives of those I care about?

Towards An Action Agenda

- 1) While these issues are difficult to discuss, it is important that every family express its wishes should (God forbid) any unexpected medical situation occur. In New York state, you can find an introduction to the legal process of planning for health care and making your wishes known. This site even has some of the forms recognized by the state (if you're out of the New York area, be sure to check your state's website): **New York Forms for Health Care Planning**
- 2) In the greater New York area, UJA-Federation and partnering agencies have taken steps towards supporting families facing end-of-life issues. You can learn about some of these initiatives at **UJA-Federation of NY**. Specific initiatives are taking place regionally in the area. You can learn about these at **NY Area Jewish Initiatives in End-of-Life care** .
- 3) In any discussion of end-of-life issues, the question of organ donation must be considered. You can learn about the Orthodox opinions in support of organ donation, including its organ donation forms at **Halachic Organ Donation Society**. The Reform position of organ donation, as well as its organ donation card is found at: **URJ** . An article by Rabbi Joseph Prouser (of Little Neck Jewish Center) summarizing the position of Conservative Judaism is found at: **USCJ** .



Best wishes for your good health, for long life and for a Shabbat Shalom.

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org



Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan, project coordinator, at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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