Euthanistic Prayer

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Imagine this scenario. A person suffering in pain. Incurable. Depressed. Unable to eat. And the son or daughter attends synagogue every day praying that God should send this unfortunate person a *refuah shelemah*--a complete cure.

Here is the question: Should one pray to the Almighty to allow this person to continue to suffer, or rather should one pray for the beloved's speedy death?

Is one allowed to pray for someone's death?

The halakhic stand against euthanasia is well known, and this paper is not dealing with active interventions to hasten someone's death. But may we cease asking for a full (miraculous) cure, and ask God to end the agony by ending the life of the dying person?

Our question is really not new. In fact, there has been a fair amount of halakhic discussion of the matter for the past two millennia, and some of the literature will be presented here.

I was alerted to this matter by a scholarly article by Loike and Tendler in *Hakirah*, vol 21; many of the sources are mentioned in that article.

Of course, when one is tending to a suffering incurable loved one, a person is always hopeful that God will send the cure, that the next medicine will do the trick, that the next doctor will have the magic bullet. One would never dream of praying for a relative's death-certainly not while the patient is dependent on that person, and certainly not while one is in the thick of things.

But perhaps one must be urged to think of the patient's situation and quality of life in realistic terms, and perhaps true love of the patient should drive one to pray for an end of the beloved's life.

In Bavli Nedarim 104a, it is written:

"When R Dimi came from Israel (to Babylon) he said: Anyone who visits the ill causes that he will live and anyone who does not visit causes that he will die." The Gemara asks: In what way are his actions the cause of that result? If we say that anyone who visits the ill pleads for mercy that he will live and anyone who does not visit the ill pleads for mercy that he will die, does it enter your mind that he will pray for mercy that he will die? Rather anyone who does not visit the ill does not pray for mercy for him, neither that he will live nor that he will die."

The Ran, Rabbenu Nissim (14th century,Spain) comments:

"It seems to me that this is what is meant--there are times when one must pray for God's mercy to let the sick person die, for example when the patient is suffering a great deal from his illness and it is not possible that he will live.

In Bavli Ketubot 104a we read:

Ketubot 104a:3

The maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi **ascended to the roof** and **said: The upper** realms **are requesting** the presence of **Rabbi** Yehuda HaNasi, **and the lower** realms **are requesting** the presence of **Rabbi** Yehuda HaNasi. **May it be** the **will** of God **that the lower** worlds **should impose** their will **upon the upper** worlds. However, **when she saw how many times he would enter the bathroom and remove** his **phylacteries,** and then exit **and put them** back **on, and** how **he was suffering** with his intestinal disease, **she said: May it be** the **will** of God **that the upper** worlds **should impose** their will **upon the lower** worlds.

And the Sages, meanwhile, **would not be silent,** i.e., they would not refrain, **from begging for mercy** so that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would not die. So **she took a jug [*kuza*]** and **threw it from the roof to the ground.** Due to the sudden noise, the Sages **were** momentarily **silent** and refrained **from** begging for **mercy, and Rabbi** Yehuda HaNasi **died.**

From this story, we see that the Rabbis were praying for a complete cure for this most important sage, but they were not taking his agony into consideration. It was his personal attendant who realized how he was suffering. She took the initiative to get the life-sustaining prayers of the sages to cease, and then her prayers for his death indeed were effective.

But let us go further. The case of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi dealt with a person afflicted with a physical illness.

Below we shall read of Honi and his prayer to die because of his feelings of depression.

As a bit of background- Honi just returned from a 70 year Rip Van Winkle nap and:

B Taanit 23a

Ḥoni **went home and said to** the members of the household: **Is the son of Ḥoni HaMe’aggel alive? They said to him: His son is no** longer with us, but **his son’s son is** alive. **He said to them: I am Ḥoni HaMe’aggel. They did not believe him. He went to the study hall,** where he **heard the Sages say** about one scholar: **His *halakhot* are as enlightening** and as clear **as in the years of Ḥoni HaMe’aggel, for when** Ḥoni HaMe’aggel **would enter the study hall he would resolve for the Sages any difficulty they had.** Ḥoni **said to them: I am he, but they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect.** Ḥoni **became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. Rava said: This** explains the folk saying **that people say: Either friendship or death,** as one who has no friends is better off dead.

Here we see that Honi, because of a loss of status that caused much upset, prayed successfully for his own death. And this was recorded with no objections in the Bavli Talmud.

In the following text, we see where a mental state and its subsequent behavioral alterations cause the community of Rabbis to pray for the death of a great sage.

B. Baba Metzia 84a:

Ultimately, **Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish,** Reish Lakish, **died. Rabbi Yoḥanan was sorely pained over** losing **him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm** Rabbi Yoḥanan's **mind** and comfort him over his loss? They said: **Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp,** i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish.

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat **went and sat before** Rabbi Yoḥanan. With regard to **every matter that Rabbi Yoḥanan would say,** Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would **say to him:** There is a ruling which **is taught** in a *baraita* **that supports your** opinion. Rabbi Yoḥanan **said** to him: **Are you** comparable **to the son of Lakish?** In my discussions with **the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me** in an attempt to disprove my claim, **and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the *halakha* by itself would become broadened** and clarified. **And** yet **you say** to me: There is a ruling which **is taught** in a *baraita* **that supports your**opinion. **Do I not know that what I say is good?** Being rebutted by Reish Lakish served a purpose; your bringing proof to my statements does not.

Rabbi Yoḥanan **went around, rending his clothing, weeping and saying: Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish?** Rabbi Yoḥanan **screamed until his mind was taken from him,** i.e., he went insane. **The Rabbis** prayed and **requested** for God to have **mercy on him** and take his soul, **and** Rabbi Yoḥanan **died.**

Note the final entry: the great R Yohanan, being bitterly depressed over the loss of his brother-in-law,friend, ,became so upset that eventually " his mind was taken from him" At this juncture, with the severe loss of quality of life, with the Rabbis probably feeling that such behavior by a leader of the Jews was an embarrassment, they prayed for his death.

And the Bavli is not the only evidence of euthanistic prayer. In fact, in the example below, from the Yalkut Shimoni, we see that an action is actually taken, albeit indirectly, to hasten one's death.

Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 871

...

An incident occurred in which a very old lady appeared before R Yossi she said: “Rabbi, I have grown too old and now I live a miserable life. I have no taste and I wish to die.”

He said to her:” what daily (special) mizvah do you do?”

She answered:” I admit that even if I have matters that I really enjoy, I overlook them to arise early to attend prayers.”

He said: “Refrain from attending synagogue for three consecutive days.”

She did this for three days and on the third day she died.

From the above four citations we may note several criteria that caused the permitted euthanistic prayers.

R Judah was in extreme physical pain.

Honi was bitterly depressed over his loss of status.

Rabbi Yohanan became disoriented, if not senile or delusional.

And the senior citizen was just miserable about the “rust” of her golden years.

And in each case we see no objections to the wish for death.

There is an extensive discussion of the permissibility of euthanistic prayer in R. Obadiah Yosef’s *Yalkut Yosef*, Y.D.335. He cites, among others, the *Arukh HaShulhan* who permits such prayers for the incurable who is in pain. Rabbi Hayyim Palachi, *Hikekei Lev* I Y.D. 50 ruled that while it is permissible to pray for a suffering person’s death, the patients’ own immediate family should refrain from such prayers. (Rabbi Marc Angel has noted that it is appropriate to simply pray that the Almighty should have mercy on the suffering person, without specifically referring to death.)

During my four and a half decades of medical practice (ophthalmology) I met many patients who found their lives to be not worth living .Arthritis,visual loss,

deafness, and many other aspects of the golden years were just too much for them to bear. I would often dismiss them with a cliché, such as “but think of all the wonderful grandchildren that need you so”-but they rarely took such adages with any degree of consolation.

In the late 1970’s I examined an elderly nursing home patient first in her facility, and then, in order to better evaluate her, in my private office. She was poorly sighted, severely arthritic and just plain miserable. She had a moderate form of dry macular degeneration with significant visual loss. I felt that this would not progress much during the few years this patient had to live.

She asked: “So how bad are my eyes?”

I replied; “They will be good till 120.”

She looked at me with a chilling expression and seriously said: “If you curse me to 120, then I curse you to 150.”

The next time you make a prayer of *refuah shelema* for your beloved, think if you are indeed making the correct prayer.

PS “Euthanistic Prayer” is a term coined by the author.