

---

## Jewish Ethics Investigation Response

Religion forms the foundation of morality for many societies and individuals and continues to inform the ethical views of adherents within a contemporary society. The relevance of world religions in modern society is undeniable as it plays a predominant role in shaping responses to complex ethical questions that have been raised in recent years due to modern scientific developments. According to esteemed professor of religious studies, Peta Goldberg (2009) the term ethics can be defined as a “a major branch of philosophy, encompassing proper conduct and good living.” Ethical philosophy is a topic surrounded by much debate and controversy as what is considered morally acceptable can differ greatly depending on a number of factors including structured ethical approaches that people draw upon, one’s personal experiences and religious teachings. Concepts relating to issues of life and death raise many ethical dilemmas. Due to the development of biomedical technology, there has been a subsequent increase in the power of humankind within the domain of life. Death is a universal experience; no matter culture or religion, it is inevitable. However, the approach to the concept of death can vary significantly depending on religious views which ultimately ground adherents in their thoughts and philosophy regarding end-of-life concepts. Beliefs of Jewish adherents are primarily established through literary and oral traditions within the Talmud; however, due to social changes and the advancement of a pluralistic society there are changing perspectives within varying sects of Judaism. Religion plays an extremely relevant role in shaping the moral framework of adherents; ethical decisions are primarily based around the teachings found within sacred texts. However, the teachings that adherents prioritise over another can vary depending on the sect they identify with and other external factors such as personal experience.

An ethical issue that is highly controversial and debated currently is euthanasia, also often referred to as assisted suicide, and is derived from the Greek word euthanatos meaning ‘easy death’ (BBC, 2014). Within a modern context, it is used to describe the “process of intentionally terminating a person’s life to reduce their pain and suffering” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016). While it can be generalised that this act is considered morally unacceptable within Judaism, it cannot be said conclusively. The overriding importance of preserving human life is illustrated by the sanctity of life approach which is predominant in Jewish teaching. However, the plurality of beliefs is reflected in the debate on ethical dilemmas, such as euthanasia. Due to the various branches within Judaism and the complexity of the ethical decision-making process, there is no one standpoint or definitive answer regarding the moral correctness of euthanasia. There is a clear aversion to euthanasia in the bible, and is it regarded as a form of murder by some, but other teachings come into play such as compassion and alleviating suffering; what teaching an adherent chooses to place of higher importance can depend on personal experience and other factors.

Religious teachings found within sacred texts play a central role in the ethical decision making for Judaists and set out the framework for ethical approaches. The specificity of Jewish ethics consists in providing an answer to this question by addressing religious authorities, whose writings are preserved in traditional Jewish literature. In other words, confronted with a contemporary ethical question, rabbis address the rich Jewish tradition of textual sources, in order to provide an answer. Jewish ethical reflection arises out of specific cases when individual Jews are confronted with an ethical dilemma and can ask a rabbi for guidance. In this sense,

---

Jewish ethics is case-based and concentrated on concrete human behaviour rather than on general claims of faith and theology (Kellner, 1978): "It's a tradition of ongoing questioning rather than one of absolute theological law passed down from above" (Goldsand, 2001). God is omnipotent and omnipresent and continues to work in the world, each adherent has an individual and unique relationship with the Divine and thus perspectives often vary. Traditionally Judaism has been a law-based religion, with virtually all aspects of life governed by a comprehensive system of laws, called halacha, meaning 'the way' (Newman, 1992). It is referred to as the Jewish religious law which can be defined as follows: "normative rules for conduct, laws that instruct the faithful on the sanctification of everyday life" (Neusner, 2002). Jewish law is so important as it is required to be upheld in order to maintain the covenant, which is the basis for the idea of the Jews as the chosen people. The first covenant occurred when God promised to make Abraham the father of great people and in return, his descendants must obey God, hence, it is crucial for adherents to follow the law of God (Bible Gateway, 2011). The Jewish law consists of a corpus of texts, ranging from the Torah, the Talmud and other codes of Jewish law. These greatly inform how adherents respond to various issues and offer guidance on finding answers to ethical questions and the interpretation can vary between individuals.

Sacred writings are a fundamental aspect of a religion's ethical standpoints as these texts communicate core features of the belief system. The Talmud is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology as it is the collection of the Mishnah (oral Torah). This informs the decision making of adherents and acts as a guide for Jewish life. The Hebrew Bible frequently confronts readers with the finiteness of man's existence. Ecclesiastes 3:1–2a states: "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven: there is a time to be born and a time to die". Death is an inescapable fact; it is an absolute truth that is decided by God and cannot be changed. The certainty of death, however, is covered up with unanswerable questions. The circumstances in which it will come are not predictable and beyond reach of human knowledge. Thus, it is often interpreted that it is no human's place to interfere with this sacred process, rendering euthanasia as morally unacceptable conduct. The extent to which this is taken as literal truth varies depending on the branch that one identifies themselves with. The US National Institute of Health released an article detailing different perspectives with Judaism on Euthanasia and discussed how within the Orthodox sect, for example, Rabbi David Bleich is a radical opponent of euthanasia and an advocate of an absolute sanctity-of-human-life approach (Wils, Baeke, & Broekaert, 2011). Orthodox rabbis address the halacha as an absolute divine norm, believing that Jewish law has to guide Jews through their lives and daily life choices and reject any modern adjustment. On the contrary, when confronted with contemporary issues, Reform Jews hold to a dynamic and progressive revelation; the Torah is mainly seen as a human writing, based upon human beings' understanding of God's will and thus can change with advancements in society.

The different sects within the religion can also play a role in responding to ethical dilemmas as Reform are more likely to adapt to change while the Orthodox tend to stick to a literal interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Regardless of the varying branches, euthanasia and all other types of suicide are almost unanimously condemned in Jewish thought, primarily because it is viewed as taking a human life that belongs to God. There are different types of euthanasia which furthers the complexity of the debate. Passive euthanasia can be defined as withholding or withdrawing therapy that can keep someone alive. Whereas, active euthanasia refers to deliberate intervention to end one's life by an act rather than omission. The Talmud forbids all acts that might hasten death, and this ruling was upheld by the medieval Jewish law codes.

---

However, in a famous passage, the 13th-century Rabbi Judah the Pious ruled that one should remove obstacles which prevent death. Rabbi Moshe Isserles codified this ruling in his commentary on the authoritative 16th-century law code the Shulchan Aruch, writing that, “if there is anything which causes a hindrance to the departure of the soul...it is permissible to remove [it] from there because there is no act involved, only the removal of the impediment” (National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2011). Thus, traditionally, the basic principle governing end-of-life issues is that nothing can be done to hasten death, but all hindrances to death can be removed. However, the practicalities and logistics of this are complicated by modern medical technologies that enable doctors to prolong life with medications and machines which facilitate respiration and nutrition.

Ethical approaches and personal commitments and experience are also major influencing factors for adherents; these can change the teachings that an adherent will focus on in order to make ethical decisions. One example is the Hippocratic Oath, which was introduced between the third and fifth centuries BC and is the first recorded rejection of euthanasia as it says, 'I will not administer poison to anyone when asked to do so, nor suggest such a course,' (National Library of Medicine, 2002). Thus, it is an obligation under duty ethics (deontology) for medical professionals to act in accordance to this set of principles. While religion is a major factor in many adherent's opposition to the notion of euthanasia, it can be seen that other factors also have an impact. Due to the complexity of the topic of death, there is no definitive answer and standpoints can largely vary. Interviews put out by the Australian Jewish News offer multiple perspectives to be observed when posed with the question 'should euthanasia be legalised?' One response from the office manager, Emma Lipson, is a strong yes as she believes “everybody should be given the right to choose”, suggesting that her personal belief put the teachings of compassion and liberty first over key Jewish teachings such as the sanctity of life. On the contrary, Professor Phillip Nagley states that “the answer is definitely no, it is against Jewish law”; however, he acknowledges that the need to prolong life in certain situations by intervening is unnecessary but still stands by the wrongness of intervening to end life. This is supported by the third interviewee, Henry Buch, who claims that God created each person and humans cannot make the decisions that should be God's and may interfere with God's plan. The Book of the Pious states: “Be kind and compassionate to all creatures that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in this world,” this verse is open for interpretation, one adherent may believe compassion would be to end suffering while another could view this value as better fulfilled through palliative care. In this one round of interviews, opposite ends of the argument can be observed. Judaism is a living religion that has to be relevant for time and context, thus, as euthanasia has become more widely accepted worldwide, Reform Jews are more influenced by modern developments and are more likely to take this into consideration. While the arguments differ, it still remains that religion is a major influencing factor on ethical issues as all of these answers, regardless of whether they were for or against the legalization of euthanasia, were brought back to certain Jewish teachings.

Religious teachings within sacred writings remain a fundamental aspect of an adherent's moral framework and ethical decisions. The teachings found within Jewish scripture ultimately are the primary source of knowledge and guide individual adherents in their life as well as allowing the foundation for the religion to be set out. The varying sects create divergence when it comes to life and death related concepts as Reform Jews are more likely to accept modern adjustment and change with the advancing needs of society while the Orthodox sect tends to take a very literalist and dated approach.

---

## REFERENCES

1. Australian Human Rights Commission. (2016, May). Euthanasia, human rights and the law. Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/euthanasia-human-rights-and-law>
2. Australian Jewish News. (2020). Mixed reaction to euthanasia bill. Retrieved from <https://ajn.timesofisrael.com/mixed-reaction-euthanasia-bill/>
3. BBC. (2009, July 21). Euthanasia and suicide. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/jewishethics/euthanasia.shtml>
4. Bible Gateway. (2020). Bible Gateway passage: Genesis 17 - Common English Bible. Retrieved from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+17&version=CEB>
5. Campbell, C. (n.d.). Euthanasia and Religion. Retrieved from [http://gero.usc.edu/AgeWorks/fall\\_session2012/tdl/gero500/readings/Week15.pdf](http://gero.usc.edu/AgeWorks/fall_session2012/tdl/gero500/readings/Week15.pdf)
6. Encyclopaedia Judaica. (2008). Euthanasia. Retrieved from <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/euthanasia>
7. Federbush, S. (1952, January 1). THE PROBLEM OF EUTHANASIA IN JEWISH TRADITION. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/0bcdd06eda44e5636847c24e97a4232c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1817128>
8. Gurkow, L. (2012, March 28). Murder or Compassion? Retrieved from [https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/1816661/jewish/Murder-or-Compassion.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1816661/jewish/Murder-or-Compassion.htm)
9. Journal of Religion and Health. (2011, December). Jewish Perspectives on Euthanasia. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-011-9465-9>
10. The Lockman Foundation. (1995). 11 Bible verses about Euthanasia. Retrieved from <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Euthanasia>
11. MOSHE, J. (2019, December 5). Euthanasia 'contrary to Judaism'. Retrieved from <https://www.sajr.co.za/news-and-articles/2019/12/05/euthanasia-contrary-to-judaism>
12. My Jewish Learning. (2003, June 26). Euthanasia: A Jewish View. Retrieved from <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/euthanasia-a-jewish-view/>
13. Stern, K. (1984). Quality of Life, Human Suffering, and Euthanasia. Retrieved from [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-82239-1\\_15](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-82239-1_15)
14. TASC. (2017, May 17). Religion in Society. Retrieved from <https://www.tasc.tas.gov.au/students/courses/humanities-and-social-sciences/rlp215115-2/>
15. Wils, J., Baeke, G., & Broekaert, B. (2011, January 21). 'There is a Time to be Born and a Time to Die' (Ecclesiastes 3:2a): Jewish Perspectives on Euthanasia. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3230754/>