

STATEMENT ON ASSISTED SUICIDE

This paper was approved by the CJLS on March 12, 1997, by a vote of seventeen in favor, one opposed, and two abstaining (17-1-2). Voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Samuel Frint, Baruch Frydman-Kohl, Nechama D. Goldberg, Arnold M. Goodman, Judah Kogen, Vernon H. Kurtz, Alan B. Lucas, Aaron L. Mackler, Lionel E. Moses, Mayer Rabinowitz, Joel E. Rembaum, Avram Israel Reisner, Joel Roth, and Elie Kaplan Spitz. Voting against: Rabbi Gordon Tucker. Abstaining: Rabbis Shoshana Gelfand and Paul Plotkin.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

Since God infuses each human life with inherent meaning by creating each of us in the divine image, thereby guaranteeing ultimate value regardless of a person's abilities or quality of life; and

Since Judaism views life as sacred and understands human beings to have life on trust from God; and

Since God's creation and ownership of our bodies puts the decision of when life is to end in God's hands; and

Since we nonetheless have both the right and the duty to seek to cure, to relieve pain, and to provide comfort care, including social, emotional, and psychological support to all who are ill; and

Since current efforts to rein in costs for medical care threaten to transform any permission to aid a suicide into a perceived duty to commit suicide, shifting the burden of proof to the one who wants to remain alive;

The Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has adopted a rabbinic ruling (תשובה) by Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff affirming that:

1. Suicide is a violation of Jewish law and of the sacred trust of our lives given us by God.
2. Assisting a suicide is also a violation of Jewish law and God's sacred trust of life. No human being may take his or her own life, ask others to help them do so, or assist in such an effort.
3. Patients and their care givers nevertheless have the tradition's permission to withhold or withdraw impediments to the natural process of dying, as described in two responsa by Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff and Avram Israel Reisner, previously adopted by the Committee and published in the Spring 1991 edition of the jour-

nal, *Conservative Judaism*, and as applied in the Committee's *Medical Directive for Health Care*, written by Rabbi Aaron L. Mackler on the basis of those responsa.

4. Physicians must assure that patients are given sufficient pain medication as part of their duty to provide medical care, as mandated in Jewish law.
5. In the context of nuclear families, divorce and far-flung families, the mitzvah of ביקור חולים (visiting the sick) becomes all the more imperative in our day that it was in times past to counteract the loneliness that terminally ill patients often face. Individual Jews and synagogues should see this as an important priority of their Jewish commitment.
6. Requests for assistance in suicide are often an expression of the patient's extreme suffering, despair, psychiatric depression and loneliness. The Jewish tradition bids us to express our compassion in ways that effectively respond to the patient's suffering while adhering to our mandate to respect the divine trust of life. Among such options is final care at home with the help of palliative ministrations, including hospice care, to provide the social and emotional support severely sick people need. The approach of death can provide an opportunity for the patient, family and friends to have meaningful closure and final reconciliation.

EDITORS' NOTE: A "Resolution on Assisted Suicide" reflecting the language of the above statement was adopted by the Ninety-Eighth Rabbinical Assembly Convention in Jerusalem in 1998. See Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly 60 (1998): 290-291 (English), 293-299 (Hebrew).