
Interview: Dr. Ram Ishai

'Please don't let anybody decide whether life is worthwhile or not'

Dr. Ram Ishai is president of the Israel Medical Association and was interviewed by a representative of the Club of Life, the international pro-life organization founded in 1983 by Helga Zepp-LaRouche to counter the genocidal propaganda of the Club of Rome, the leading institution of "limits to growth" ideology. *EIR* prints this interview as a contribution to bringing to public attention the spread of euthanasia as an economic "solution" being proposed under conditions of economic crisis, just as it was under the Nazis half a century ago.

In the last issue of *EIR*, we published an interview with the secretary of the World Medical Association, Dr. André Wynen, on the fight against euthanasia. *EIR*'s own views have been expressed in numerous articles and editorials. (See in particular, Vol. 14, No. 29, July 24, 1987, Editorial; and Vol. 14, No. 39, Oct. 2, 1987, "Euthanasia returns . . . as economic policy," pages 24-35).

Q: Dr. Ishai, you are the head of the Israel Medical Association and one of those fighting euthanasia. Could you please describe your general moral view on this matter?

Dr. Ishai: I think that the problem of euthanasia lies in the contradiction found in the Hippocratic Oath, between the oath to relieve suffering and the oath to protect life. In the Jewish approach there is no conflict, because the sanctity of life is an absolute value, regardless to its quality, and one moment of life is considered equal to an entire life. One has to mind not to come all the way from the best interest of the patient to the slippery slope of entrusting the doctor or another person with the right "not to prolong" a patient's life.

Q: Could you please tell us what the Jewish religion says on this matter?

Dr. Ishai: The Jewish attitude toward euthanasia is that "any form of active euthanasia is strictly prohibited and condemned as plain murder"—as expressed by Rabbi Emanuel Jakobovits, the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom. As for passive euthanasia, the Jewish law differentiates between the dying person—in whom death is expected to be imminent—

and a patient who may lie for weeks. In the first case, the withdrawal of medical therapy that is sustaining artificially the patient's life, can be permitted. In the second case, the discontinuation of instrumentation and medical treatment is not permissible. The Mishna states (Semahot 1:1): "One who is in dying condition, is regarded as a living person in all respects." Maimonides prohibits any action that might hasten death. On the other hand, rabbinical authorities state that "it is forbidden to hinder the departure of the soul by the use of medicine" (Beit Yaakov 59).

Q: We just learned that some forces in your country have tried to introduce a "patient's bill of rights" which would allow a patient to refuse treatment—very similar to the beginning of the pro-euthanasia campaign in West Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. Could you tell us something about the background of the bill and whether it has any chance of passing?

Dr. Ishai: In fact, there is nowadays in Israel a restlessness around the subject; people do not understand the real meaning and they mix euthanasia with living wills. I didn't hear about action to pass a bill legalizing euthanasia, which is considered illegal in Israel. But, a member of the Knesset has brought in a bill on living wills. Now the draft has not succeeded in passing in the first instance. According to this MK's [Member of the Knesset] explanations, the bill is aimed to permit the withholding of extraordinary therapy sustaining artificially the patient's life. But, in the discussions, it appeared that he was not only led by the intention to help the elderly person in agony or distress, but also by socio-economic factors. He explained to the special committee for social affairs of the Knesset, that "the situation in the homes for the aged is unbearable and so is the economic burden for the society."

In the meantime, a lawyer is trying to set up an "association for the respect of human dignity," with the same intention: not to use "extraordinary means of treatment when life has lost its meaning." So far the project has no large audience in the Israeli public.

Q: What do you think are the true reasons of the people who want to implement euthanasia?

Dr. Ishai: I think that people who want to implement euthanasia are led by good intentions. Most of them really think that they are acting for the good of the incurably ill, without any hope of cure, and who live in severe pain and distress. They generally feel that life is appreciable only if it has a minimum quality.

Unfortunately, even if one accepts the fact that life in itself is not a supreme value whose preservation takes precedence over all other considerations, even if one accepts the fact that a life which is no longer productive or pleasurable, may not be prolonged; even then, there is no criteria for the stage of deterioration, and who is to decide that this life is not worth preserving?

For the Jewish conception, a man does not enjoy the right of self-determination with regard to questions of life and death. Furthermore, if we do not consider the right of the patient himself to decide on the subject, what is the right of relatives or doctors to make the decision?

Besides these honest people who are well-intentioned, we have to mention other people whose intentions are less pure. Under the name of enhancing the dignity of life they pretend to protect society against the unproductive, the mentally ill, and generally the aged. We are not far from the "final solution" praised by the Nazis.

Be that as it may, all these people, the well-intentioned and the others, are not respecting the autonomy of the patient as they pretend, but rather act in a paternalistic way, deciding themselves what they think is good for others.

Q: In an article in the *Jerusalem Post* you were quoting as saying: "In present-day conditions, euthanasia could be performed to avoid economic burdens on society." Could you please tell us what leads you to this estimation? Is this related to the cuts effected by the Israeli government in the health sector?

Dr. Ishai: As we have seen, one can perform euthanasia to free an incurably ill [person] from pain and agony; another thinks it is "absurd," spending such an amount of money to prolong a life which is no longer "worthwhile." To all that, we have to add those who may act unconsciously due to lack of manpower, cost-containment, the need for "triage" (selection); they cannot grant each patient the time and the attention he needs, and they finally practice involuntary euthanasia.

In general terms, one can say that once there are limited resources, there are priorities and there are people who deliberately do not receive the care they deserve or need.

Q: You are well informed about the situation in the Netherlands, where euthanasia is practiced already to such an extent, that old and sick people refuse to go to a hospital or to an old-age home because they fear they may become victims

of "mercy-killing." In these days the first cases of euthanasia for people sick with AIDS have been made known. Do you think there is a danger that euthanasia could become the answer to AIDS?

Dr. Ishai: One has not to minimize the seriousness of the problem that AIDS states for the patient, for his family, and for society; but to think of euthanasia as a possible answer to AIDS, is contrary to all the foundations of medicine.

Unfortunately, to diagnose AIDS is until now to pronounce a verdict of death; but the attitude of the medical personnel cannot be dictated by panic or influenced by ancient taboos like the connection between sex and death. There is a great deal to do just now, until a curative treatment will be found; we have to treat complications in order to relieve suffering and prolong life. Actually, people treated early enough, can return to work and lead an almost regular life for a longer period; furthermore, we can remove stress since we know that anxiety may overwhelm the person and he may sink in depression and lose hope.

Q: West German law does not prohibit assistance to suicide, while the West German law 216 forbids killing on request of patients. Dr. Hackethal, whose offenses you know, uses this legal complication to further his aim to get euthanasia reestablished.

Could you please tell us what the legal situation in Israel is in this respect?

Dr. Ishai: I think that the question of suicide and assistance to suicide, states a problem different than euthanasia, since suicide can be without any connection to the health condition. In Israel, suicide is not considered a criminal offense, but assistance to suicide is assimilable to homicide—manslaughter.

Q: Dr. Ishai, sometimes—if one sees very evil things happen in other countries—it is very important to intervene. We would like you to address the conscience of Western politicians and their populations—especially in West Germany and in the Netherlands—in a final statement of yours.

Dr. Ishai: I am sure that most people who practice euthanasia think that they are acting mercifully by putting an end to the life of a patient; but they are wrong. Nobody can know what is really good for this patient at the very moment, and the right to die does not give to anybody the right to kill. They are wrong because there is today no contradiction between the ethical promise to relieve suffering and the promise to prolong and protect life. We have nowadays sufficient weapons to relieve pain and moral suffering and assure the quality of life until the end. They are wrong because the permission to kill under any condition and for any good intention will immediately lead to "mercy killing" like the final solution of the Nazis.

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