



*Noahide Laws & Lifecycle Course*

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**Lesson**

**46**

*Life Threatening Illness & End of Life*



***Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy  
Certification Program***

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# *Lifecycle IX:*

## *Life Threatening Illness & End of Life*

### **Introduction**

Illness and injury, especially when life-threatening, are stressful for the patient as well as for his family, friends, and community. The outcome is usually uncertain and, as in all situations of uncertain outcome, it is all too easy to panic and lose one's bearings. It is important to remember that everything, especially life and death, is in the hand of the Holy One, blessed is He. In the fog and fear of uncertainty our faith in God is the all-important beacon that guides us through the storm.

Our approach to the spiritual challenges posed by dangerous illness depend on the patient's chances for recovery

### **When There is a Chance of Recovery**

#### **Praying for the Very Ill**

When someone is very sick and, God forbid, their life is threatened it is proper for anyone who is capable to pray for the patient's recovery. The Talmud states:

*One who can pray for the ill and does not is called a sinner.<sup>1</sup>*

The prevalent custom is to say Psalms for the merit of the sick person. Most Jewish editions of the Psalms include lists of those appropriate (we have also enumerated these in an earlier lesson).

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<sup>1</sup> *Brachos 12b*. However, some say that this only applies to *tzaddikim*.

Many Jewish communities have *Tebillim*/Psalm groups that gather weekly to recite *Tebillim*/Psalms for the sick. **[Rabbi Bloomenstiel: This practice is appropriate for the Noahide community as well. Not only does it provide the benefit of healing the sick, but it also builds cohesion among Noahides as well as a sense of community and unity. Organizing such groups for Noahides, at least as I see it, should be strongly encouraged.]**

### **Changing the Name**

When a person is gravely ill and their life is seriously threatened, it is appropriate to change the name of the sick person. This is usually done when recovery is uncertain. There are a number of reasons for this custom and it appears, in general, to apply non-Jews as well as to Jews.

.By changing one's name the heavenly decree against him also changes.<sup>2</sup> According to some, it has a metaphysical effect on the soul and destiny of the sick person.<sup>3</sup> The name should be changed to that of a relative or righteous person who lived a very long life. It is also appropriate to change the name to Raphael – the name of the angel of healing.<sup>4</sup>

Changing the name may also be accomplished by adding a name to the patient's existing name. When doing so, the new name is added to the beginning of the patient's name preceding his original first name.<sup>5</sup>

This practice is rooted in mystical concepts whose exact relevance to Noahides needs more research and study. Therefore, many of the specific practical details are still a little unclear. For example, there is an established Jewish service for changing or adding a name. However, there is no corollary service for Noahides. It is uncertain if such a ceremony is even necessary.

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<sup>2</sup> *Darchoi Moshe* 2, *Rama* 10; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 192:2; *Aruch Hashulchan* 335:12. See also *Rosh Hasbanah* 16b with *Maharsha*; *Minchas Elazar* 2:27; *Sefer Chassidim* 245.

<sup>3</sup> *Ritva* to *Rosh Hasbanah* 16b, *Sefer Ha-Chinuch Mitzvah* 311; *Lerush* 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Keser Shem Tov* p. 643.

<sup>5</sup> *Sefer Keroei Shmo* p. 305.

## When the Doctors Have Given Up Hope: The Inevitable End

Once the doctors have given up hope for the patient's recovery and all that remains is waiting for the end, our approach to the sick person changes slightly.

### Praying for the Terminally Ill

There is a principle in Torah thought called *ain somchin al ha-nes*, we do not rely upon miracles.<sup>6</sup> The theological import of this idea is vast and far beyond the scope of this lesson. In short, a person should never expect God to perform miracles for him. On a practical level, this principle extends to praying for miracles as well. When God has established something as natural or scientific order, we do ask God to change that order. We will discuss this concept in greater detail in the live lesson.

Once the doctors have given up hope on a patient, according to many we must be careful to temper our prayers so that we do not ask for miracles. Some suggest<sup>7</sup> that we pray instead that the suffering of the sick person and his family be removed, or that God's will be done in the way that minimizes their suffering. Alternatively, we should pray for the welfare of the patient's body and soul. Many hold that, at this point, any prayers specifically requesting healing or recovery are, de facto, requests for the miraculous. Accordingly, some hold that once the doctors have given up hope on a patient there is no obligation to continue praying.<sup>8</sup>

However, there are authorities who understand the prohibition against praying for miracles to be inapplicable to cases of life and death.<sup>9</sup> Others hold that this prohibition only applies to praying for miracles which would be beyond natural explanations.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, one may pray for a very unlikely yet naturally explicable cure.

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<sup>6</sup> *Brachos 54a & 60a* and many other sources. This principle is universally accepted and a fundamental concept in Torah thought. However, its exact application is sometimes unclear. According to *Bechor Shor* to *Shabbos 21b* and *Genuras Ari, Ta'anit 19a* the prohibition does not apply to an exceptionally righteous person.

<sup>7</sup> *Halichos Shlomo* Tefillah 8, *haarab 56*. See also *Sefer Chassidim 794*; [Rav Akiva Eiger](#) on O.C. 230:1.

<sup>8</sup> See source in *Mitzvas Bikur Cholim* pp. 237.

<sup>9</sup> *Einayim Le-Mishpat, Berakhot 10a, 60a*.

<sup>10</sup> *Bechor Shor*, *ibid*.

Once the doctors have given up hope it is advisable to the situation with a Torah Scholar to determine the best spiritual course of action.

**Praying for  
Death of One  
Who is suffering**

The [Ran](#)<sup>11</sup> permits prayer for the death of one who is suffering. The *Aruch HaShulchan* 335:3 agrees with the Ran as do many *poskim*.<sup>12</sup> According to these *poskim*, even in such cases we should not pray explicitly for the person to die, but only that God take his soul and end his suffering.

This Ran is controversial and has created vigorous debate among many, many Torah scholars. Most modern *poskim* accept the Ran's view as theoretically correct, but practically unusable.<sup>13</sup> Others outright reject it.<sup>14</sup> According to this latter group, the Ran's was only commenting in explanation of the Talmud's discussion and not making any practical statement of law.

Any practical question about this issue must be asked to a competent rabbi.

**Euthanasia**

Killing someone who is in the process of dying or very near to death is still murder.<sup>15</sup> We do not have the right to choose when a person deserves to die. Nevertheless, a Noahide may passively allow another person to die to relieve their suffering.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, if a Noahide of sound mind<sup>17</sup> refuses medical attention it is permissible to grant his wish.

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<sup>11</sup> *Chiddushim Nedarim* 40a, d.h. Ein.

<sup>12</sup> See also *Tiferes Yisrael* to *Yoma* 8:7. The *Minchas Shlomo* 1:91:24 records this as the position of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. *Yalkut Yosef, Yoreh De'ab* 335 and the latest edition of the *Yalkut Yosef* on *Hilchos Bikur Holim* and *Aveilut* 63-66 both state that [Rav Ovadia Yosef](#) accepted the Ran as Halacha and actually relied upon it in practice.

<sup>13</sup> See the [Shevet HaLevi](#) X:292:3; *Chikrei Lev* YD 150; [Igras Moshe](#) CM II:74:1. See also [Teshuvos Ve-Hanbagos](#) II:82.

<sup>14</sup> [Tzitz Eliezer](#) V, *Ramos Rachel* 5. The *Shome'ab Tefillah* II:24 cites other *poskim* who agree with the [Tzitz Eliezer](#).

<sup>15</sup> Maimonides, *Hilchos Melakhim* 9:4; *Rotzchim* 2:7.

<sup>16</sup> This is because non-Jews are not commanded in Lev. 19:16. See also *Tosafos* to *Sanhedrin* 59a.

<sup>17</sup> If a person is not of sound mind, then we may not listen to him. See *Igras Moshe* CM II: 73 to 75.

## Near Death

When death is close at hand, and one could pass at any moment, it is prohibited to move or even touch the patient since any disturbance could extinguish the fragile flame of life.<sup>18</sup> This does not apply when one is trying to help save the person or alleviate his suffering.

### Respirator

If a patient is on a respirator, the machine may be turned off once the patient is considered clinically dead.<sup>19</sup>

## Organ Donation

Organ Donation is praiseworthy and a great fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *chesed* – doing kindness for others. The harvesting of organs is often problematic. Many hospitals harvest organs when the patient is very close to death yet not actually dead. Many times, the life of the patient is extended artificially in order to allow for the harvesting.

This practice is not permitted under Noahide law.<sup>20</sup> Harvesting the organs at this point hastens the death of the patient and is akin to murder. The patient must be clinically dead before the organs may be removed for transplant.

This is prohibited even if the recipient of the donated organ is gravely ill.<sup>21</sup> As we learned in the prior lesson on abortion, it appears that Noahides may violate any of their commandments for the sake of preserving life. However, it is extremely doubtful if this includes the transgression of murder.

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<sup>18</sup> *Shulchan Aruch YD 339*; *Igros Moshe CM II: 73* writes explicitly that this is the *halacha* for Noahides as well.

<sup>19</sup> *Tzitz Eliezer XIII: 89*.

<sup>20</sup> This can be derived from the Jewish law; see *Igros Moshe YD II:174*.

<sup>21</sup> *Igros Moshe ibid*.

## Summary of the Lesson

1. When there is a chance for recovery, we must pray for the sick person.
2. When the chances of recovery are uncertain, it is often proper to chance the name of the sick person. The details of this for Noahides are a little fuzzy, however.
3. We may not pray for a miracle. Therefore, when death is a medical inevitability we must be cautious with how we order our prayers. It is a good idea to discuss the issue with a Torah scholar when the sickness has reached such a point.
4. If the patient is suffering greatly, and death appears close, there are those who permit praying for the person's death. However, this is a very sticky subject. Since no two people pass in the same way, each case needs to be treated according to its unique details. A Torah scholar should be consulted.
5. Euthanasia, even for those who are suffering, is considered murder.
6. It is permitted, though, to passively allow a patient to die if they are suffering tremendously.
7. When death is close at hand it is prohibited to touch or move the patient.
8. A patient may not be removed from a respirator until they are clinically dead.
9. Similarly, organs may not be harvested from a donor unless the patient is actually deceased.