



Praying for the Terminally Ill to Die

"And Moshe cried out to Hashem, saying, Please G-d, heal her now"

(Bamidbar 12:13)

This Posuk in this week's Parsha is the source for the age-old custom to pray for the speedy recovery of someone who is ill. It records the Tefilah of Moshe Rabbenu for his *Tzara'as*-stricken sister Miriam and, as *Chaza"l* note¹, his Tefilah does not even mention her name. They therefore concluded that one does not need to mention the name of a sick person when praying on his or her behalf².

As we have discussed previously³, one of the purposes of the Mitzvah of *Bikur Cholim* is for the visitor to see the abject state of the person and be inspired to Daven for him (*Tur, Y.D. 335*). Therefore, even if one will not actually see him (such as when it would be undignified for him to receive visitors) it is still a Mitzvah to enquire after him from an adjoining room so as to hear his pain and be stirred to Daven (*Beis Yosef*, in the name of the *Ramban* in *Toras ha'Adam* p17). In fact, the *Rema* (*Y.D. 335:4*) rules that if one does not Daven for the patient one has not fulfilled the Mitzvah of *Bikur Cholim*!

For this reason, the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Y.D. 335:4*)⁴ rules that one should not visit a sick person at a time of the day when one would not be inspired to Daven for him. During the first three hours of a day he is likely to be feeling better and one may get the impression that Davening for him is not such a pressing need. During the last three hours of the day his condition may have deteriorated and one may believe that all hope is lost and not Daven for him. Therefore, one should visit at other times of the day.

¹ *Yalkut Shimoni* ad. loc.

² However, the *Rama* (*O.C. 119*, in the name of the *Mahari"l*) contends that this is only the case when praying in the presence of the patient. When not in his presence, the name should be mentioned explicitly in the *Tefilah*.

³ *Re'eh* 5778 and *Vayera* 5779

⁴ Based on the *Rambam* (*Hilchos Aivel* 13:6)



In the following paragraphs we will discuss the gripping question of whether there are occasions where it is actually proper to Daven that a person **die** instead of praying for his recovery:

The Gemara in *Nedarim* (40a) cites *Rav Dimi* who says “anyone who visits the sick, causes him to live, and anybody who doesn’t visit the sick causes him to die”. The Gemara explains that *Rav Dimi* was saying that “anybody who visits the sick **will pray that he live, and anybody who doesn’t visit the sick will not pray neither that he live nor that he die**”.

The *Ran* (ad. loc.) notes that the Gemara implies that when a person visits the sick there are occasions that he should pray that they die⁵, namely, when he sees that they are suffering and there is no chance that they will recover. In fact, this was famously done by the maidservant of *Rebbi* who Davened that *Rebbi* should die because she saw how greatly he was suffering (*Kesubos* 104).

However, other *Meforshim* take issue with the *Ran*’s proof from the maidservant of *Rebbi*. The Gemara says clearly that the *Chachamim* of the time were urgently Davening that *Rebbi* should recover! This implies that one should Daven for somebody who is sick in spite of his terrible suffering.

Rav Chaim Falagi zt”l (*Chikekei Lev Y.D.* 50) answered that the maidservant of *Rebbi* was considered to be a *Talmid Chacham*. (*Chaza”l*, in fact, learnt several Halachos from her conduct - see *Mo’ed Katan* 17a). In this instance, the fact that she Davened for *Rebbi* to die shows us that it is the correct thing to do and the *Chachamim* of the time who did not do so were perhaps not aware of the extent of *Rebbi*’s suffering. The very fact that the Gemara records her actions and does not comment that they were worthy of censure is proof enough that they were correct.

However, *Rav Vosner zt”l* (*Shevet ha’Levi* 8:253) argues that one cannot bring proof from the maidservant of *Rebbi* because she was so great that she could sense that *Rebbi* was soon to be summoned to the next world. She therefore felt it was correct to Daven that his suffering be put to an end. For those not of that stature, doing so would be improper. Furthermore, *Rebbi* was a *Tzadik* and *Tzadikim* are considered to be alive even after their passing, and perhaps there is a greater

⁵ As the Gemara says that “anybody who doesn’t visit the sick **will not pray neither that he live nor that he die**”. This implies that if this person had visited the sick person he may have had cause to pray that he die.



allowance to Daven for the death of a *Tzadik* and end to his suffering than there is for others.

Ha'Gaon Ha'Rav Asher Weiss *Shlit"a* cites another Gemara which appears to prove that one may Daven for a sick person to die. The Gemara in *Bava Metzia* (84a) records that after the death of *Reish Lakish*, his *Chavrusa Rav Yochanan* was so distraught that he went out of his mind. The *Chachamim* of the time Davened for him and he died. *Shu"t Mishneh Halachos* (10:202) argues that this proves that one may Daven that a person be put out of his suffering. However, as Rav Weiss pointed out, it is possible that the *Chachamim* merely Davened that Hashem do what was best for *Rav Yochanan*, and not explicitly that he die⁶.

The *Netziv* (*Ha'amek Shaala, She'ilta* 93) also writes of the notion of Davening for a person to die. He cites the Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* (17a) that records how *Rav Papa* went to visit *Rav Huna brei d'Rav Yehoshua* who was deathly ill. When he saw that *Rav Huna* was about to die, he instructed the relatives to prepare burial shrouds⁷.

How was *Rav Papa* allowed to give instructions about matters regarding burial when it is forbidden to do so before death? The *Netziv* answers that *Rav Papa's* intention was to hint to *Rav Huna's* relatives **that they should Daven that he die** as he believed that *Rav Huna* was terminally ill, not that they should actively prepare for the burial.

However, Rav Waldenberg zt"l (*Tzitz Eliezer* 5, *Ramat Rachel* 5) argues that it is permitted to prepare burial shrouds before death. In fact, one may make all of the preparations for burial when not in the presence of the person who is dying⁸. Moreover, the Gemara goes on to say that *Rav Huna* actually recovered! How then could it have been correct to Daven that he die?

In truth, people can have certain merits that help bring them back from the brink of death⁹ and indeed doctors can be mistaken with their dire prognosis. It is

⁶ Rav Weiss also cites a *Yerushalmi* (*Yevamos* 45a) that implies that one may Daven for a person to die: *Rav Ada bar Ahava* had a son who was born already circumcised. In attempting to take "*Dam Bris*" from the child, *Rav Ada* accidentally made him into a *Petzua Daka* (or perhaps a *Krus Shafcha*). **Rav Ada then fasted and Davened for the child to die so that he not suffer** during his lifetime.

⁷ *Rav Huna* ultimately recovered and *Rav Papa* was embarrassed for what he had said.

⁸ The *Netziv* also raises this point in his additions to *Ha'amek Shaala*

⁹ This was the case with *Rav Huna*. The Gemara explains that he survived because he had always been "*Ma'avir Al Midosav*".



not uncommon for people to live for many more years¹⁰ after the doctors had said they were soon to die or would not live beyond a certain time. Rav Waldenberg concludes that we have no ability to determine when people will die or the value of the time they have left, and we should certainly not Daven for them to die.

The conclusion of contemporary Poskim is that the Halacha does not follow the *Ran* on this issue. While *Aruch haShulchan* (Y.D. 335:3) does cite the *Ran l'Halacha*, the fact that all of the other Poskim do not do so, implies that the Halacha is otherwise. One therefore should not Daven for a person to die under any circumstances.

Igros Moshe (C.M. 4:74) contends that even if the Halacha were to be in accordance with the *Ran*, it would only be possible to Daven for a person to die when one was certain that he would not survive. Since we are no longer able to be certain of this, there are no practical circumstances where it is possible to do so¹¹.

Rav Moshe also maintains that in the circumstances that it is permitted to Daven for a person to die, it seems that there would be no obligation to attempt to save his life. It would be counterintuitive to simultaneously actively pray for his death yet try to save him. Rav Weiss however argues that it is not counterintuitive and one would still be obligated to attempt to save him¹².

Rav Chaim Falagi (ibid.) adds that the possibility of Davening for a person to die does not apply to the sick person's relatives. In their case, the motivation may be tainted by the desire to rid themselves of the difficult job of caring for him and therefore they may not do so. Furthermore, it would not be *Derech Eretz* for a person to Daven that his relatives die.

In conclusion, the clear decision of contemporary Poskim is to forbid any Tefilos for a person to die. This is due to several reasons:

- 1) Not everybody agrees with the *Ran* and the Poskim do not cite him in Halacha.
- 2) Even if the Halacha would follow the *Ran*, we have no way of determining if a person is certainly going to die.

¹⁰ Sometime with much less suffering than would be expected.

¹¹ Rav Wosner *zt"l* (*Shevet ha'Levi* 10:292) also writes similarly as does Rav Asher Weiss *Shlit"a*.

¹² Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l* (*Minchas Shlomo* 1:91:24) also concurs with this *Psak*.



- 3) Every moment of life is precious, particularly when a person is suffering, as that serves to atone for his sins.
- 4) Some Poskim hold that when a person appears to be terminally ill and will not recover, it is permitted to Daven to Hashem that He do what is best for him, rather than Daven that he recover. However, Rav Weiss ruled that one should not do so and should Daven for him to recover as is the custom on behalf of all people who are sick.