



# Decisions *of* Fate

**GUIDING JEWISH VALUES FOR MAKING  
LIFE-AND-DEATH DECISIONS**

**JLI FLAGSHIP COURSE  
SPRING 5784**

Most of us have an overall desire to do what is right, and we can often intuitively identify an appropriate and ethical approach to fairly typical developments. Life, however, is far from straightforward, and we sometimes encounter scenarios that are multifaceted and ethically complex. Especially challenging are dilemmas involving health, medicine, and mortality. Faced with difficult choices, our moral confusion is exacerbated by the high stakes involved—life or death often hinges on a single decision.

If this has been true throughout history, it has been significantly amplified through the advent of modern medicine. Yesterday's science fiction is today's reality and standard. In terms of medicine and health, this is an incredible blessing. At the same time, it has invited a proliferation of ethical quandaries, the likes of which could hardly have been imagined until now.

Examples of these dilemmas include: What degree of risk should we be willing to take in the pursuit of long-term healing? Are we obliged to prolong life even at the cost of terrible suffering? Under what circumstances is an abortion a moral option?

When sudden circumstances cast us directly into the deep end of thorny moral quandaries, we may feel overwhelmed, lost, and unable to reach any decision with confidence. Even after conclusions have been reached,

decisions made, and consequences delivered, we might remain plagued by guilt due to our internal uncertainty as to whether we made the right call.

This four-part course, *Decisions of Fate*, plumbs the strata of Jewish law in search of clarity. It analyzes ancient Torah principles and paradigms and applies them to the quandaries of today, providing sensitive guidance through the modern maze of medical decision-making. Its interactive lessons examine common dilemmas in the light of genuine Jewish perspectives, and effectively demonstrate that the wisdom of our ancient tradition can provide immeasurable assistance in reaching difficult decisions with confidence and moral clarity.

The course is eye-opening, allowing participants to discover the value of a fresh and broader perspective that considers simultaneously the welfare of body and soul. It strikes a balance between profound ideals and practical realities, and offers much-needed relief during times of intense personal pain and confusion. Moreover, the course's benefits far outlive the individual dilemmas it dissects, for the principles upon which its guiding values are predicated are also offered as keys to living a life of serenity and meaning, regardless of our state of health.

## **LESSON 1**

What is Judaism's overall attitude toward healing? How far may we go in our attempt to heal or seek a cure? What degree of risk is acceptable in such pursuits?

This lesson clarifies that our quests for cures are fully compatible with faith in G-d, and that Judaism mandates health precautions and care as a religious obligation.

The lesson then addresses the question of taking immediate risks to life in the pursuit of long-term healing. In principle, Jewish law endorses taking risks where there is the chance of long-term healing, but there are a range of views regarding the precise parameters of what level of risk is tolerable, and what circumstances are considered dire enough to justify such measures.

## **LESSON 2**

Is assisted suicide a legitimate course of action for an individual who endures tremendous suffering? What form of medical care should be provided to terminally ill patients?

This lesson establishes the fundamental Jewish belief that human life is sacred, and that each moment of life pulsates with spiritual purpose and potential beyond its scientific measure. Jewish law prohibits assisted suicide and any act that directly invites death. At the same time, the Jewish approach also seeks to ameliorate pain and suffering, and points to instances in which we have no halachic obligation to administer certain treatments to terminally ill patients.

This lesson provides practical spiritual tools for those facing end-of-life hardships, and guidance on supplying advance medical directives to ensure a patient receives treatment that accords with their moral and religious beliefs.

### LESSON 3

Does Judaism consider a fetus a living being? Under what conditions might Jewish law sanction an abortion?

This lesson discusses the Jewish belief that a fetus possesses a soul, and analyzes the disagreement between authorities of Jewish law as to whether the soul's presence imbues a fetus with a status similar to an already-born human. There is consensus among all authorities that an abortion is considered a grave measure, and under typical circumstances it is a strictly prohibited act. On the other hand, when a mother's life is endangered by her fetus, abortion can even become an absolute halachic obligation. The lesson discusses halachic views that permit abortion in additional extreme circumstances.

### LESSON 4

Judaism famously lends significant sanctity to human life, but what does it say about a human corpse? Does the sanctity persist after death? Is it permissible to donate a body to science?

This lesson explores the Jewish principle that the human body is sacred in life and also in death. Judaism teaches that both body and soul are considered delivered to a person as Divine deposits, and that when G-d reclaims an individual's breath of life, we are expected to return their body to the soil (from which humans were originally formed) as complete as possible, and without undue delay. Jewish law mandates that a human cadaver be treated with utmost dignity and respect after death, and—subject to certain limited exceptions—generally prohibits autopsies. Donating a body to science denies the body burial, and is similarly proscribed.