

## **Therefore Choose Life -- Rosh Hashanah 5766**

Some months ago, President Bush held a press conference on Stem Cell Research. He stood before the cameras against a carefully chosen backdrop. Arrayed behind him were parents and their babies. But these were not just any babies – they all had one thing in common. They were born from surplus embryos.

The message was shockingly clear: an embryo is a life. And had these embryos been used for research – these beautiful babies, cooing in their parents' arms, would not have come into world. That was a defining moment for the Christian Right who, based on their religious convictions, are committed to preserving what they call, a "culture of life."

What we have on our hands is a full blown political, social, and religious debate. And, personally, I think this debate is so important, that I'm willing to devote a Rosh Hashanah sermon to it.

I'm not a doctor or a scientist, but I do see a lot of illness and death. When a member of our congregation develops Parkinson's disease, or battles cancer, or has organs that do not function properly, I think to myself – in the future, this could be curable. We are on the latest, greatest frontier of medical science. When we figure this biotechnology out, we will be looking back at our current medical practices as Medieval, almost barbaric. Certainly, in our children's lifetimes, we will have unlocked the door to genetic cures that, today, would seem almost miraculous.

The problem is, the key is in our hand, but we are being prevented from inserting it into the lock. And why is that? How is it that our government is withholding funds for conceivably the greatest medical breakthrough of all time?

It's religion. And that's an area I happen to know something about! So, let's walk this through.

First of all, what is embryonic stem cell research? At least from a lay standpoint, it's fairly straight forward. It goes like this.

As we know, many infertile couples get pregnant through In-Vitro Fertilization. A woman's eggs are fertilized in a laboratory, and then the most promising ones are implanted for pregnancy. Once the woman becomes pregnant, the question then is, what to do with the leftover embryos? The normal practice is simply to discard them. They are literally days old, or frozen to their current state, and they are no longer needed. So, away they go.

But, Stem Cell researchers make use of these embryos that would otherwise be discarded in a lab. They culture stem cell lines out of them. Because of all the different kinds of stem cells, those that come from human embryos hold the most promise. First, an embryonic stem cell is totally unformed – it has not yet differentiated itself into any one particular kind of tissue. And second, unlike other stem cells, as it grows up, it is malleable. It can actually become any one of a whole variety of adult cells.

So, what Stem Cell Researchers are working on is, giving instructions to a stem cell to grow into something specific – like nerve tissue, or a heart muscle, or cancer fighting cells.

Stem cells can then be injected into the human body, sent to a problem area, and actually perform an internal repair job. This is like a spacewalk to perform repairs in flight, only inside the human body.

Then, once we figure this out the next step could really be remarkable. The potential exists to clone new organs, that are an exact tissue match to a person's body. If I were to need a heart transplant, a new heart could be grown that my body would not reject, which is currently one of the greatest dangers of organ transplantation. Even more amazing!

So, what's the problem with all of this? It sounds great. The problem has to do with the ethics involved. For example, who is going to regulate exactly how this technology is used? What will prevent us from degrading human life by turning women into egg donors who make their living at it? Or, conversely, how can we prevent the wealthy from using genetic engineering to breed themselves into a super-race – stronger, smarter, faster than the rest of us? The ultimate genetic extreme makeover, you could say!

But, there's even a more basic moral problem than that – the one that has everyone in an uproar. And that is, are we allowed use the embryo in the first place? The status of the embryo is where all the religious controversy comes in.

According to fundamentalist Christians, the embryo is life. Whether it's living within the mother's body or inside a petre dish, it is considered an actual life. For the same reason they believe abortion is murder, they believe stem cell research is murder. In their view, that embryo is a person, with every right except perhaps the right to drink, drive, or vote.

But here's what I want you to know. We Jews disagree. In fact, we disagree adamantly. For us, the embryo is not actual life – it is potential life. And when we're faced with a choice between saving a living, breathing person, or sparing an embryo, we save the actual person who is living in our midst.

If pregnancy threatens the life or health of a mother, we perform an abortion to save her. And the same goes for an embryo that would be discarded in a lab. It should be used for research that could ultimately save or heal someone afflicted with a serious disease.

Our tradition is very clear that it is a mitzvah, a righteous obligation to use all available knowledge to heal the ill, and "when one delays in doing so, it is as if he or she has shed blood" (Shulchan Aruch, Yorei De'ah 336:1).

In Judaism, we have a hierarchy of values. And the supreme value, our trump card, is *Pikuach Nefesh* – the saving of actual life, even if it means sacrificing potential life to do so. And when we are faced with that choice, what distinguishes our position is that, in Judaism, abortion is not murder, and embryonic stem cell research is not murder. It is rather the sacrificing of potential life, to save actual life, which we consider to hold the greatest sanctity.

So, now I would imagine that you're asking yourselves whether all branches of Judaism share this view. What about Orthodoxy – surely Orthodox Jewish Law has to be more stringent!

Well, let me share with you what the O.U., the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, along with their Rabbinical Council of America says:

Life saving abortion is a categorical imperative in Jewish biblical law. [And] Mastery of nature for the benefit of those suffering from vital organ failure is an obligation. Human embryonic stem cell research holds that promise . . .

The O.U.'s position on this matter . . . clearly states our support for this potentially life saving research and that it should be supported by federal funding. . . . The O.U., joined by the Union for Reform Judaism, spearheaded the effort to put the entire organized community on record in support of this position . . .

I think that's pretty clear. The entire spectrum of Jewish tradition supports embryonic stem cell research! And we Jews are not the only ones. We are joined by the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, and 60-70% of voters, depending on which poll you believe.

But, here we are, in a situation where a moratorium has been imposed on Federal Funding for research on all but a small number of decaying stem cell lines. The incredible medical promise that

awaits our children and grandchildren, is being held prisoner by a Fundamentalist Christian ideology.

I would say, we American Jews have some soul searching to do! How did we allow the Christian Right to seize the moral high ground on this issue? They are preaching to the pews, lobbying in Washington, circulating values-based voter's guides – and where is our voice? How have we empowered them to overrule the majority of Americans and our own religious sensibilities on saving life?

The U.S. House of Representatives has already passed a bill overturning this sorry state of affairs. In May, they passed the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005, with tremendous support from both Republicans and Democrats. And right now, a companion bill is before the U.S. Senate. The problem is, even though it has strong bipartisan support from prominent senators on both sides of the aisle, including Bill Frist, Oren Hatch, and Arlen Specter, it is now stalled in committee for fear of stirring up too much controversy right before the November elections.

But, with our continued pressure, it could also clear the Senate. And then, there's only one major obstacle to finally opening the doors for federal funding – a presidential veto which, unfortunately, is a certainty based on the president's current position.

And I tell you, this is totally unacceptable! All politicians, all Americans are entitled to their cherished religious views. But, one narrowly held religious view should not dictate our public policy, especially when life itself is at stake!

Today is Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we sound the shofar to awaken those who slumber, to stir ourselves from our complacency. Today is the New Year, when we celebrate the birth of the world, and re-assert our role as co-creators and healers with God.

Perhaps we all need this wake up call! We have not been vocal enough. We have not lived up to our responsibility to preserve and sustain life. How can we relinquish our role as healers and life-givers, when the tools are right at hand?

The Shofar urges us to action, before it is too late. "Whoever delays in healing the sick, it is as if he or she has shed blood!"

The Senate has the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005. But, it has to be brought to the Senate floor for a vote. Our senators must hear from us that they have our full support. The bill will then reach the president's desk and he, too, must hear from us. It's going to take an avalanche of emails, letters, and phone calls to capture his attention. I don't know if we can change his mind. But life is at stake, the very thing entrusted to us on this Rosh Hashanah, and we can't sit back and fail to act.

I have shared with you what Judaism teaches on this ethical issue. But, as we know, knowledge alone, Torah without action – is meaningless.

That is why you have each received an action flyer from our ushers. I would urge you to take it home with you and add your voice to this national debate. Write letters to the editors of our newspapers, contact your representatives in office, let our president know that our religious ideology will be violated by his veto. This is not a partisan issue for Republicans or Democrats. Support for Embryonic Stem Cell research crosses the aisles of Congress, and encompasses a clear majority of Americans.

All of you are familiar with the stories of many stem cell research advocates. Actors like Michael J. Fox and Christopher Reeve, national figures like First Lady Nancy Reagan have all devoted themselves to sharing their messages and their stories.

With the same hope and conviction, I want to leave you with my story. Some of you know that I have a brother who lives in Baltimore. Of the three siblings in my family, he was the one who inherited a family illness called mylo-neuropathy. It is a genetic disease that leads to the disintegration of the sheathing covering nerves, so they can no longer conduct electrical impulses, sort of like an electrical wire without insulation. As a result, my brother's legs have been impaired, and he lives mainly in a wheelchair, as did our grandfather, and many of our aunts and uncles.

As it happens, I know I am not a carrier of this disease. I know this because my extended family, which is very large, is the subject of a study at Harvard Medical School, and through this genetic study, I have been screened out. Unfortunately, many of my cousins are not as lucky. The disease is progressing through the next generation, just as it has for generations before. The unbelievable thing is, this illness could conceivably be cured through gene therapy. But, because embryonic stem cell research is so hamstrung, the cure will now be even longer in coming, and more generations of my family will needlessly suffer.

There are so many people in this world, with every conceivable disease, who deserve better – who deserve our compassion, our healing, a *real* "culture of life."

Our rabbis say, that "one who saves a single life, it is as if he or she has saved an entire world." I tell you, there are worlds to be saved. As God's partners in creation, I ask that you join me in saving not only their world, but the world of our children's children.