Chapter 5

Dying to Die: Bioethical Interpretations

It is precisely by reason of this entanglement, as much as by being open-ended on both sides, that life histories differ from literary ones, whether the latter belong to historiography or to fiction. Can one then still speak of the narrative unity of life?

Introduction

Just as deriving sociopolitical norms regarding martyrdom from the Chananya chronicles is difficult at best, so too is the task of extracting bioethical norms from those sources. Still, contemporary bioethicists invariably turn to this story when they expound upon the dilemmas surrounding euthanasia. Not only do they look to Chananya’s death for guidance, but they also frame their ultimate conclusions regarding euthanasia based on how they read the story of his dying. In this way Chananya’s dying and death become the exemplars par excellence, the models after which and against which subsequent end-of-life care is and should be shaped and measured. In the view of many scholars, contemporary medical care at the end of life should comport to how a Jewish bioethicist reads this story.

Such reliance upon this story inevitably ascribes to it extraordinary power. Its repeated invocation by bioethicists perforce demarcates it as a norm-generating text. For this sociological reason alone, deference to it appears reasonable. Yet, should this be so? No contemporary Jewish bioethicist writing on euthanasia today pauses long
enough to consider why it is that this peculiar story was brought into the conversation in the first place. While all bioethicists point to the Talmudic *Avodah Zarah* version as the primary source for this story, few make the effort to locate it within its larger context, and hardly more than a couple acknowledge that competing versions of Chananya’s death exist in other classic sources. And none explicitly justifies how and why she or he reads the story as such, ending it here and not there, highlighting this detail but not that one. A variety of questions thus merit attention regarding the presence, use, and normative stature of (bits of) this story, that is, questions of prevalence, hermeneutics, and salience.

Before we can attend to these questions, we should take a moment to recall the narrative nature of Chananya’s demise. As shown in Chapter 3, every version of his death is a story. A story, or narrative, necessarily involves connecting at least two events, and through that very connection each event is interpreted against the overarching whole. Be it his reaction to the verdict promulgated against him and the reactions of his colleagues and strangers (e.g., *Sifre Devarim* §307), or the conversations he has with the executioner (e.g., BT *Avodah Zarah* 18a; BT *Kallah* 51b), or the intimate conversations he has with his daughter (e.g., BT *Semachot* 8.11)—all versions stitch together at least two events. In so doing time must pass. Stories thus depict time and change.

They also entail inaccuracies since they present, or better, re-present, those events from particular angles and perspectives. In their retelling of events, narratives highlight certain details and gloss over or skew others. This should not be surprising, for, as the primatologist and neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga has found out, the interpretive center in a brain reconstructs events and “in so doing makes telling errors of perception, memory and judgment. The clue to how we are built is buried not just in our marvelously robust capacity for these functions, but also in the errors that are frequently made during reconstruction. Biography is fiction. Autobiography is hopelessly inventive.”² Such cynicism, if left alone, could fester and undermine the value of this project, as well as the bioethical practice of turning to both biography and autobiography when wrestling with the ethics of complex cases or issues. Instead, we should acknowledge that this fact of inherently errant cognition does not mean that all (personal) narratives or their constituent details are completely non-factual. Nor does it mean that narratives in whole or in part have no value whatsoever when discerning truth or when constructing norms. The challenge is to justify imputing to a narrative, or to particular details