

WOMAN TO WOMAN – *Heart to Heart*



| Rabbanit Chana Henkin,
Dean of Nishmat



| Atara Eis, Director of
Nishmat's Miriam Glaubach
Center and U.S. Yoatzot
Halacha Fellows Program



| Michal Roness, Coordinator of Nishmat's
Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselors project in
cooperation with GEFEN Fertility Organization



| Dr. Deena Zimmerman, senior public health
official in Israel's Ministry of Health and
Director of yoatzot.org

**THE NISHMAT CENTER FOR ADVANCED TORAH
STUDY FOR WOMEN PROVIDES ASSISTANCE
DURING THE CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC
AND FOR 30 YEARS PRIOR**

Nishmat, the Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women opened its doors in Sept. 1990. A group of English speakers in Israel approached Rabbanit Chana Henkin to open a school which would open the highest reaches of Torah learning to women—and give members of this group Torah on par with their advanced academic backgrounds.

Beside Rabbanit Henkin, Dan and Jocelyn Polisar, Evelyn Gordon, Yael Hazony and others were instrumental in establishing Nishmat.

"Nishmat began as a center of Torah learning for women. An ethic of communal responsibility permeated the school and was responsible for its growth trajectory" says Rabbanit Chana Henkin, Dean of Nishmat. "From six women in a Kiryat Moshe living room, Nishmat now operates out of a 7-story campus in Jerusalem's Pat neighborhood, that houses 150 students in residence as well as several kollel families (the wives studying in Nishmat's kollel). Nishmat is part of the Torani Zionist stream (like yeshivot hesder). It operates programs for women of all ages and backgrounds, including a life-changing 4-year advancement program for Ethiopian-Israelis, as well as an active community service division. Nishmat created the role of Yoetzet Halacha, and is the only institution in the world graduating Yoatzot Halacha. "We built a rabbinic consensus around our work, and today Yoatzot Halacha are backed by rabbis across the spectrum," explains Rabbanit Chana Henkin.

"Nishmat's Yoatzot Halacha (women advisors in Jewish law) serve women all over the world who seek support navigating questions that relate to women's reproductive health and halacha. Women feel much more comfortable discussing these issues with another woman, and are more likely to arrive at a more thorough answer when they feel they can mention even incredibly personal information. Speaking with a woman enables them to be exceedingly vulnerable while maintaining their dignity. "

"Yoatzot Halacha have studied the halacha for endless hours, from the Talmudic foundation to today's practical rulings. We have studied the medical and psychological topics which intersect and inform how these laws should

be applied, and how they impact the woman and the couple," adds Yoetzet Halacha Atara Eis, Director of Nishmat's Miriam Glaubach Center at American Friends of Nishmat.

"My personal responsibility is overseeing Nishmat's Miriam Glaubach Center, our branch in the United States, which both educates and certifies Yoatzot Halacha all over the United States," adds Atara Eis. "But very quickly, women from Canada, England and Australia wanted to participate as well, and the online nature of our program, even before the pandemic, enabled us to spread our network to qualified Torah students from these countries as well. We have over 25 communities- over 50 institutions- employing our 27 Yoatzot Halacha all over U.S., Canada and England. Sometimes women call a community-based Yoetzet with basic questions that they easily could have looked up on yoatzot.org, which has hundreds of articles, thousands of questions. Not every question requires a personalized answer, but women want to talk out their questions with their yoetzet. Sometimes relevant details come out in conversation, exposing different halachic, medical or emotional considerations that would otherwise not have come up."

Yoatzot Halacha help women with stressful reproductive physical and mental health situations. Eis says: "When I guide a woman over a long period of time, I try to imagine what it would be like if she didn't have her own Yoetzet... starting over each time she picked up the phone to get halachic guidance.

I'm thinking about a young woman diagnosed premenstrual dysphoric disorder- far more severe than premenstrual symptoms many women experience. Despite dreading separation from her spouse and feeling

very distressed about it, she also had a tendency to be strict on herself about halachic observance and needed to be talked down from declaring herself niddah when she really wasn't. We worked on this for years, and she was supported by mental health professionals, and the situation has improved dramatically."

Yoetzet Halacha Michal Roness, Coordinates Nishmat's Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselors project in cooperation with GEFEN Fertility Organization.

"Upon completing my studies in the Keren Ariel Program at Nishmat, slowly the women of my community started to turn to me to ask me questions about Taharat Hamishpacha. When men would ask my husband, a rabbi of a small congregation in Ramat Beit Shemesh, if they could ask a question for their wives, he would answer them that he does not deal with these halachot and it is preferable if their wives contact me directly. Women of my community and the surrounding area now know they can call me with questions about women's health and halacha. Topics range from questions about immersion, the 7 clean days, contraception, fertility and especially during the recent pandemic - mikveh hygiene and health. Often, I don't know how women received my number or who they are but at that moment I make myself available to try to give them, the correct halachic information and

the needed emotional support for the particular challenge they are dealing with at that time. “

“A woman in my community struggling with breast cancer had to go to the mikveh and was sensitive to being exposed before the Mikveh attendant. In addition she had markings and small bandages on her body during her radiotherapy treatments which she was not allowed to remove. She asked if these markings would be considered a barrier to her immersion. After discussing the question with Rabbi Yaacov Warhaftig, the Rabbi of Nishmat's Yoatzot Halacha program, I guided her how to immerse in her situation. At the same time she had the stress and vulnerability of reuniting with her husband and accepting her body after a difficult operation. We decided together that if I called the Mikveh lady before her appointment, explaining the situation and the Rabbi's psak, it would ease her nervousness about the situation. I was glad that I was able to alleviate some of her stress during this very challenging period in her life,” said Roness.

“After 13 years of being an address for women of my community and assisting women at all stages of life on Nishmat's hotline, we identified a need for extra training in the complex challenges of the fertility journey. With Rabbanit Henkin's leadership and the professional guidance from the Gefen fertility organization headed by Dr. Karen Friedman, a special cadre of experienced Yoatzot Halacha trained as fertility counselors. We realized that the questions and issues that arise during fertility treatments needed more than a phone call or a hotline. They needed a personal address that women could turn to throughout the process not having to start their story from the beginning each time. The Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselors offer personal meetings with couples or the woman to discuss the halachic issues behind the medical and psychological issues that arise. During the pandemic, these consultations have taken place through Zoom allowing a personalized face to face meeting without compromising health regulations.

In these days of the pandemic, women are very edgy about going to mikveh. At the beginning of the pandemic, a rebbetzin from abroad phoned Rabbanit Henkin to ask if she had to use the mikveh. She was terrified of infection, but her husband—the rabbi of the community—felt she should be setting an example. Rabbanit Henkin told her she was not a “prisoner of the sword” who was obligated to risk her life (if she felt she was doing so) to use the mikveh. However, Rabbanit Henkin also explained exactly what the concerns truly are—not the water itself, which is chlorinated and does not carry viruses, but rather congregating of women, either inside or at the entrance. During the first few months of the pandemic, this information became available to the public, thanks to Nishmat's ongoing communication with Israel's Ministry of Health.”

Dr. Deena Zimmerman, a senior public health official in Israel's Ministry of Health and Director of www.yoatzot.org, says that the Nishmat received the first question concerning the coronavirus pandemic arrived on March 1. “Within a week we managed to collect the relevant medical and halachic information and created four landing pages for these special times. We had more than 40,000 entries to these pages, proving how vital the information was for the public.”

With rabbinic supervision, Nishmat runs the Golda Koschitzky Women's Halachic Hotline (02-6404343) nightly, a website, www.yoatzot.org, in 4 languages (Hebrew, English, French, Spanish), staffed by 25 Yoatzot Halacha, as well as a Research Institute where 8 Yoatzot Halacha are working on the second volume of Halachic Responsa by Yoatzot, to be published in the near future.

The Yoatzot have fielded more than 350,000 questions in health and halacha.

“We believe women should study all areas of Torah and halacha. However, the truly crying need for a compassionate, expert female halachic address is in Taharat Hamishpacha and women's health including fertility; and that's where we're allocating the lion's share of our resources,” said Rabbanit Henkin. ■