

The Nishmat *Taharat Hamishpacha* hotline

Women helping women

Deena R. Zimmerman

Yoatzot halacha – women halachic advisors – are women trained in the area of Jewish law known as *taharat hamishpacha* (the laws of family purity). This role was created to assist women hesitant to ask needed questions from rabbis due to embarrassment in asking questions that involve intimate details. A daily hotline staffed by *yoatzot* was recently started. It has proven that it offers a much needed service. The *yoatzot* answer questions that touch on all areas of women's health and their halachic implications. Many women report that had there not been this hotline, they would have not asked the questions. This suffering in silence has already been shown to lead to infertility, marital stress and unnecessary medical intervention. The goal of this article is to describe the *yoatzot* and their training and further elaborate on the types of questions that they handle.

Taharat hamishpacha or the laws of family purity is an area of halacha or Jewish law that surrounds the proscription for couples to have physical contact during the time that the wife has the legal status of *nidda*. A woman enters this status when she experiences uterine bleeding not due to trauma (such as childbirth, menses and hormonally caused shedding of the uterine lining such as that from oral contraceptive pills). She can also enter this status by uterine dilatation beyond a minimum size such as that caused by certain gynecologic interventions. She remains in this status until all bleeding has been shown to cease (assuming a minimum number of days, generally five, have passed), seven blood free days have passed and she immerses in a *mikva* (a special pool for ritual immersion) after a preparatory cleansing. This rather complex area of Jewish law often necessitates rabbinic consultation for clarification of the correct course of action.

Rabbanit Chana Henkin, dean and founder of Nishmat, a center for higher Jewish learning for women located in Jerusalem, Israel, and her husband, noted halachic authority Rav Yehuda Henkin, were concerned that an insufficient

number of questions were being asked in this area of Jewish law. This concern was based on their

experience during the time that Rav Henkin was a regional community rabbi for many years. This observation was seconded by one of the teachers in the school, Rav Yaakov Warhaftig, himself a practicing community rabbi in Jerusalem. They felt that this lack of questions in comparison to other areas of Jewish law such as *shabbat* and *kashrut* were due to discomfort in asking questions that involve intimate personal details. In 1997, Nishmat established the Keren Ariel Yoatzot Halacha Institute to train women to serve as a first address in answering questions of this type. Women who held this new position were named *yoatzot halacha* – women halachic advisors. Rav Warhaftig became Dean of the Institute.

The program consisted of intense study of the traditional sources of *taharat hamishpacha* – from the original sources in the Torah, the Talmud, the

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Deena R. Zimmerman MD MPH IBCLC is a physician who completed college at Yale University and medical school at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. She did a pediatric residency, chief residency and Masters in Public Health at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey where she served on the faculty as Assistant Professor. One of the first graduates of the Nishmat Keren Ariel Program as a *yoetzet halacha* (Women's Halachic Advisor), she has written a number of articles related to women's health issues and halacha. She currently lives in Israel where she practices as a pediatrician and lactation consultant.

Rishonim (medieval collections of halachic rulings) through the *Shulchan Aruch* and rabbinical authorities of our own times. The mode of study was 16 hours per week independent learning with a study partner (*shevruta*) guided by lectures given by Rav Warhaftig. This traditional course of study was supplemented by weekly lectures in areas of medical and behavioral sciences that are crucial to practical application of this area of law in modern times. These lectures, given by professionals in the field, encompassed many areas of gynecology and psychology including anatomy, physiology, fertility, sexuality, family counseling and the recognition of family violence. At the end of the program a four-hour oral exam was administered by four outside examiners to each of the graduates. To date, nine women have completed their certification with an additional ten to be ready to sit for the exam this coming summer.

Soon after the first two women completed their certification, it became clear how much such a service was needed as scores of questions were directed weekly to the graduates of the program. The daily phone calls to the graduates' homes began to overwhelm their ability to find the time to answer them. In order to increase accessibility

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to *yoatzot halacha* and 'professionalise' the encounter, a daily hotline was started in the fall of 2000. The

hotline is supervised by Rav Warhaftig and Rav Henkin, who are consulted by the *Yoatzot* for halachic rulings, as necessary. It is the calls to this hotline that this article will describe.

Materials and methods

The *taharat hamispacha* hotline is currently staffed by one of six graduates during all evenings (except Friday) and Friday mornings. Plans call for an increase in hours and staff as more women graduate the program. The calls come to one central Jerusalem phone number (972-2-642-0102) and from there they are forwarded to the home (to a separate designated phone in a private location) of the woman 'on call' that shift. The cost of the call to the caller is that of a call to Jerusalem with the cost of the call transfer paid for by Nishmat. Staffing of the *yoatzot* hotline is a paid position, funded by Nishmat.

Results

In its first three months (1/2000–1/2001 – for which statistics are available at present), the hotline received about 400 calls, a number which has since grown. We anticipate yet further increase in the volume of calls as word of the hotline spreads. Anecdotally this does seem to be happening, particularly after news coverage of this service.

There are records of 108 calls during this time period for which complete statistics are available. The vast majority of the questions are currently from Israel, with a small number from North America ($n=5$). Two thirds of the callers are Hebrew speaking and the other third English speaking.

About four per cent of the questions were purely medical. These included questions as to the optimal time of conception and the efficacy, advantages and disadvantages of various methods of contraception. Women also called due to concern about the onset of menstrual irregularities and symptoms that can be expected during the perimenopause. These questions to some degree reflect the nascent nature of patient education in Israel.

Forty per cent of the questions involved clarification of details of the *halacha*. Some examples of this type of question include:

- 1) When was sunset? – the determining time for a number of the involved procedures
- 2) What do I do if I forgot to do one of the required examinations to assure that forbidden discharge has in fact stopped?
- 3) Does a potential physical barrier discovered after using the *mikva* invalidate the immersion?
- 4) Where is the nearest *mikva*?

Almost 55 per cent of the questions involved the overlap of medicine and *halacha*. These questions primarily relate to one of four issues:

- 1) spotting associated with various methods of contraception
- 2) halachic status after gynecologic procedures
- 3) halachic issues surrounding treatment for infertility
- 4) halachic complications within *taharat hamishpacha* from women undergoing cancer treatment

Most women spontaneously expressed relief at being able to discuss their situation with another woman. Many had not asked similar questions in the past due to their lack of comfort in discussing these issues with a male rabbi. The women were also dissatisfied with alternate methods of asking questions. They did not like to ask the rabbi's wife to relay the question to the rabbi as this involved yet another person in the intimate details. They did not want to send their husband with the question as this required discussing bodily functions with their spouses which some women found distasteful. Furthermore, the use of an intermediary in these fashions often led to relevant information not being related. This discomfort was especially striking when the question arose surrounding marital relations. Most of the women who had not asked questions in the past related that they had simply waited and delayed going to the *mikva*.

Seventy-two per cent of the questions were answered directly by the *yoatzot* based on their training and the straightforward nature of the question. Three per cent of questions required further consultation with a physician. Twenty five per cent of questions required further consultation with a rabbi before giving the woman an answer to her question.

The role of the advisor in answering the question involves explanation as well. A number of women called after speaking to a rabbi, not because they wanted a different answer but because they wished to understand why a specific ruling had been given (generally this happened when the answer they were given was that they were permitted). Most conversations are 10–15 minutes long with a few taking half an hour or more.

Discussion

The growing volume of calls to the hotline show the tremendous need for this type of service. While many women are able to discuss these issues directly with a rabbi, it is clear that there are many who are not. Even those who generally feel comfortable asking routine questions sometimes hesitate to ask questions that require description of intimate details.

The lack of asking questions is not without negative consequences. *Yoatzot halacha* have been asked questions from women who have not gone to the *mikva* for months on end and even as long as

a year and a half due to their embarrassment in asking the question. These have obvious implications in stress on the marriage due to prolonged periods of physical separation.

This has also had implications on fertility. *Yoatzot* have discovered women who were unnecessarily receiving hormonal treatment to delay their ovulation past the time that they immerse in the *mikva* – when had they asked a halachic question they could have in fact immersed earlier and spared themselves the hormonal intervention.

Women have undergone multiple treatments of minor bleeding of no medical significance thinking that it was needed halachically when in fact the problem could have been managed without this intervention. One woman

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who called the hotline was about to undergo a procedure to remove the entire uterine lining and yet had not once asked a rabbi if her spotting in fact rendered her a *nidda* (and by description it sounded as if it may very well not have). Another example of this was a woman who had gone through more and more interventional methods of birth control when the reason for discontinuation was spotting that would *not* have made her a *nidda*. This stresses the need for *yoatzot halacha*, at least for part of the population.

The fact that the majority of questions included a medical component stresses the importance of the supplemental training that *yoatzot halacha* undergo and the need for this to be part of rabbinical training as well. Nishmat has, in fact, launched a lecture series on these topics for practicing rabbis. Nishmat has also participated in continuing medical education seminars to allow physicians to better care for their patients who observe this area of Jewish Law. Nishmat has also sponsored a series of lectures for the general public to increase education among women about their bodies and its changes over the life cycle.

The conversations on the phone also show that

many women are confused about this area of *halacha*. As long periods of time can go by during a woman's life such as pregnancy and nursing when these laws are often not applicable, this is not surprising. A number of questions to the hotline are from women who teach these laws to brides who themselves want the greater clarification that the *yoatzot* can offer due to their extensive training.

A surprising finding was how many questions can be answered via the telephone considering that some issues in the area of law require the visual adjudication of discharge. Less than 5 per cent of the questions addressed to the hotline required this determination. While some of this is self-selection (ie. a woman who knows that she has to show a cloth to a rabbi would not call the hotline in the first place), this also may reflect differential embarrassment. It may be that some women are

willing to take or send a garment anonymously or via an intermediary (as can be done) to a rabbi. However, they hesitate to discuss the surrounding circumstances.

The finding that most questions are from Israel rather than abroad probably reflects the greater publicity of the phone number in Israel and the greater ease of making a local call. An email address, yoatzothalacha@nishmat.net, has been established, which should facilitate international questions.

Conclusions

Yoatzot halacha are providing a needed service to women needing help in this area of Jewish law. The hotline is increasing access to their services. Further education of women in this area of Jewish law is needed.