

When Ayelet (full name withheld) married at 29, she and her husband decided to wait until she completed her second degree before trying to have children. After several attempts and two miscarriages, at age 33, she was referred by doctors for a fertility evaluation. It was difficult for her to accept the situation. At the clinic, she was diagnosed with low ovarian reserve, and she began treatments.

"I didn't share what I was going through," she recalls. "This subject isn't discussed openly, and I felt like I needed some kind of support. I sought psychological therapy, but it felt cold and disconnected. There was no sensitivity to the halachic (Jewish legal) aspects, even though we are religious."

She then turned to Yoetzet Halacha - Fertility Counselor Ora Deroval, who opened her eyes to the many halachic challenges associated with fertility issues. "We met with her, and she gave us a good feeling. She was able to connect us to the issue using her personal experience. I saved her contact info, and now I reach out to her from time to time.

After a partially successful egg retrieval procedure, she switched hospitals and was preparing to start another treatment cycle when she conceived naturally. Subsequently, she experienced two more natural pregnancies and is now a mother of three.

"Ora always gets emotional when I tell her about another child," Ayelet says with a smile. "She's someone I can talk to, someone who speaks the professional, halachic, and emotional language. Although people talk about these issues more today than they used to, the topic is still sensitive, and I imagine that for many women, it's hard to reach out to advisors. After I mustered the courage, I felt so grateful. Talking to her is like talking to a friend.

Halachic infertility or questions related to sperm donation and surrogacy often leave many women feeling embarrassed when approaching rabbis. Fertility Yoatzot Halacha successfully provide both halachic and emotional support to women navigating the challenges of bringing life into the world.

"No matter how empathetic a rabbi may be, it's most natural for a woman to turn to another woman, not a man," she continues. "That way, you're more open to receiving guidance. Turning to a rabbi can sometimes create antagonism, or you may avoid it altogether and send your husband to ask for you. That distances you from the process. With a Halachic Advisor, you have more control over your life and someone walking hand-in-hand with you through the process."

Ora Deroval is one of dozens of women trained through Nishmat's , Yoatzot Halacha - Fertility Counselors in Conjunction with Gefen Fertility led by Rabbanit Chana Henkin. Deroval herself faced difficulties conceiving during the first ten years of her marriage. "I chose not to share it with others at the time, partly to avoid worrying them, and partly because I didn't feel there was anyone to turn to."

"When I heard about women going through this process, it was clear to me how important it was to hold their hands," Diruven explains. "I could deeply understand the experience, as I'd been in their shoes. I could relate to the halachic complexities alongside the medical and emotional aspects."

Is it always possible? Ultimately, halacha (Jewish law) has a perspective.

"Absolutely. We present the women who approach us with the halachic options, and they must make their choice. But the halachic aspect is not the dominant part of our guidance. The first meeting usually lasts about an hour, and the halachic discussion often takes no more than 10–15 minutes. The rest of the meeting focuses on emotional support, guidance, advice, and practical tips from experience. Our role is not to act as halachic decisors (poskot halacha) but simply to accompany and support. I know personally how important this is, and I hear feedback confirming it. One woman who underwent treatments years ago told me, 'I'm angry that this kind of support didn't exist in my time.'"

Training and Expanding Halachic Support

Last month, the first and second cohorts of Nishmat's Yoetzet Halacha Fertility Counselors celebrated graduation, although the first cohort had already finished their studies about five years ago. Graduates specialize in halachic, medical, and psychological aspects of fertility, offering free support to women and couples across the country. Many of them had already been serving as Yoatzot Halacha for years and recently completed the fertility-focused component of their training.

Dr. Karen Friedman- Stern, founder and director of the Gefen Fertility Organization, explains that the program was established to address a gap in halachic guidance that considers the psychological factors impacting fertility. "I felt that sometimes there was a lack of emotional support and some rabbis don't take into account women's emotions and the stress they face, which in many cases impacts fertility," she notes.

She cites a Harvard study involving 4,000 women, which found that reducing stress increased fertility rates by 30%. "Halacha needs to take this aspect into consideration," she says.

What makes this program different from others, such as the Puah Institute?

"The innovation of Nishmat's program lies in training Halachic Advisors who have studied halacha in-depth for years, know how to study Talmud, and are well-versed in the laws of niddah (family purity)," says Friedman. "This equips women with the expertise to address halachic issues related to women. Women no longer need to go to rabbis with sensitive questions; they can turn to female advisors. Participants in other training programs do not receive this level of halachic training."

The curriculum for fertility advisors spans four years, focusing on halachic, psychological, and medical aspects of fertility treatments.

The perspective of Yoatzot Halacha is holistic. They don't just look at a halachic problem; they consider the woman or couple as individuals, their personalities, and the dynamics of their relationship (shalom bayit). This broader perspective is taken into account when formulating halachic rulings."



Dr. Karen Friedman- Stern:
The involvement of women with women on intimate and sensitive topics is critical. One of the Yoatzot Halacha said at the beginning of the program: "I sat in a room with three men discussing my uterus, and they all had beards."

Examples of Halachic Challenges:

- **Donor Sperm:** Halachically, it is preferable for the sperm to come from a non-Jew to avoid lineage issues. However, some women feel uncomfortable with the idea of carrying a child conceived from non-Jewish sperm. The halachic perspective needs to also consider emotional and practical implications. For example, what if an American teenager conceived this way grows up, researches his origins, and identifies as 'half-Jewish, half-Sioux Indian?' Friedman explains.
- **Surrogacy:** Initially, Friedman believed that single surrogates were the better psychological choice. Over time, her perspective shifted. "After a surrogate completes her journey, the married surrogate returns to a loving home and has the possibility of conceiving again if she wishes. In contrast, a single surrogate might exclude herself from the dating scene for years and risk the stigma of having been a surrogate." She adds, "Some married religious women want to become surrogates. This raises halachic questions that need to be addressed."
- **Egg Donation:** Historically, the halachic ruling by Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu stated that the woman carrying the child is the halachic mother, even if the egg came from a non-Jewish donor. In recent years, this ruling has shifted, recommending that children conceived this way undergo a conversion out of caution. This creates halachic complexities: a family could have two children with identical genetic material but differing halachic statuses due to changes in rulings over time.

Gender Sensitivity in the Program

Friedman emphasizes the importance of women guiding other women in intimate and sensitive matters. "One of the advisors shared during the program, 'I was sitting in a room with three men discussing my uterus, and all of them had beards.' Yoetzet Halacha Fertility Counselors are trained to support women in ways that address their emotional and physical needs."

The program includes extensive medical training, with lectures from leading experts, and psychological training, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), led by Dr. Rhonda Adessky the chief psychologist of the Gefen Fertility. "We teach Yoetzet to use CBT tools to identify negative thought patterns in the women they assist," Friedman explains. "They learn when to refer cases to psychiatric or other professional consultations, especially when the issue is psychological, like cases of OCD."

Do advisors serve as halachic mediators?

"No. The Yoatzot themselves provide halachic guidance following training from Nishmat Rabbis. There's no need to turn to Puah or another organization. They've learned the material thoroughly. In exceptional or complex cases, they can refer to others, but this is rarely necessary."

Is there resistance to the program?

"Do you think the world has adjusted to women in such roles? I don't think so. While society is becoming more open, it's a slow process. Not everyone will turn to a Yoetzet Halacha. Among the national-religious community, it's becoming more accepted, but in the ultra-Orthodox sector, I don't see much demand."

What is your vision for the program?

"My vision, not just in this program, is that women should know that things can be different. You will leave with full hands because you didn't just receive a ruling; you received empathy and support. I want more and more women to come, and then we will train more and more advisors, because the demand will grow."

According to Rabbanit Michal Roness from Beit Shemesh, an experienced Yoetzet Halacha and the director of the Fertility Counselors program, the need to join the program stemmed from the desire to improve the support provided to fertility patients who had approached her previously.

"We provided support for women on issues of family purity, women's health during stages of marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and contraception in menopause," she details.

"When we encountered more complex fertility issues, we realized that we did not have the tools and knowledge to provide an adequate response. We felt the need for halachic guidance, with a deep understanding of the medical and psychological background. We studied halacha in depth to provide halachic answers, while also understanding what the woman is going through, what the emotional processes and challenges are, in order to provide a holistic answer. Yoetzet Halacha come from a wide range of populations and fields. There are doctors, teachers, occupational therapists, pharmacists, speech therapists, so we can help as many women as possible," says Roness "In addition to the fact that the counseling is provided for free, it can be conducted via Zoom or phone, for the woman alone or for both partners, according to the woman's choice."



Rabbanit Michal Roness: We explain to couples that sometimes doctors don't refer men for tests when religious couples approach them. Then, the woman might not even know that she should request a sperm test. We have a broad perspective that includes not only the halachic aspect.

How do you see a difference between your program and what other institutes offer?

"We acknowledge the professionalism and experience of the other institutes and organizations that are engaged in this. Our rabbis' rulings are greatly influenced by what they hear on the ground, from us, who speak with the women, and from the psychologists and doctors. One example of a matter where we differ in our approach from other institutes is our stance on sperm testing. According to certain rabbinic approaches, when there are fertility issues, it's better to first examine the woman before testing the man," she says, recalling a meeting of halachic advisors in the presence of Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin and Rabbi Chana Henkin, along with doctors. One of the doctors said that when couples come to her for fertility evaluation, she sends both partners to be tested, regardless of the results of the woman's tests, because statistics show that 30% of fertility problems stem from the woman, 30% from the man, 30% from both partners, and 10% of problems have no explanation. In response to her remarks, Rabbi Henkin ruled that if the doctor recommends a sperm test, it can be done, and it is not a halachic issue.

"We explain to couples that doctors sometimes don't refer men for tests when religious couples approach them. I hope this doesn't happen often, but we've encountered such situations in the field," she says. "And then the woman doesn't even know that she should ask for a sperm test. When we meet with the couple and go over the details, we sometimes advise them to ask the doctor about it. We have a broad perspective that includes not only the halachic aspect."

Fertility treatments can be accompanied by a lot of helplessness and lack of control. The couple does everything as instructed by the doctors, and when halacha also dictates what is allowed or not, the sense of lack of control intensifies. The Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselors at Nishmat aim to provide reassurance and empower the couple going through this emotionally charged and challenging process. They believe that anyone who turns to them deserves to receive all the information, so they outline the halachic issues, enabling them to understand the halachic question. If the couple has a rabbi, the Yoatzot will refer them to him, and if they have no connection to a rabbi, they refer them to Nishmat's rabbis and present the issue as the couple experiences it. "Thanks to this approach, I don't encounter objections to the program," she claims. "We don't change halacha. We don't replace the rabbi. When couples sit with us, we help them clarify what the halachic question is and what they are facing, and then they can turn to their rabbi. We are here for women who want to speak with a woman who understands halacha. It's a different niche."

What kinds of questions do you encounter?

"Some women, when considering pregnancy, are torn between surrogacy and egg donation. In the case of egg donation, they want to know what the best source is," she says. "We don't decide for them, but we outline the various options and the halachic implications of each, leaving the decision in their hands. I also receive inquiries about immersion during fertility treatments, disagreements between couples about continuing treatments, choosing the gender of the baby, and questions about fertility treatments on Shabbat. For example," Roness details, "a woman undergoing hormone treatment who needs to have egg retrieval on Shabbat. She can be told to skip this month and retrieve the eggs next month, but she has taken hormones, and there are implications. In the past, this question came from women abroad, but now there are also hospitals in Israel that perform the procedure on Shabbat."

Do you see empathetic counseling as a factor in motivating couples to seek emotional counseling, which often helps couples conceive naturally?

"We are not psychologists, but we are the first point of contact for identifying whether any treatment is needed, and if necessary, we will refer them to treatment professionals, sometimes for couples counseling. People ask us how many children have been born through our program, and that's a question I don't like. The question should be how the couple felt when they went through the journey. When you listen to them, see them, and connect to their experience, the journey becomes a little easier."

I had three children at the time, and after I finished breastfeeding the youngest, I experienced three consecutive miscarriages," says Orit (full name withheld), 35, from the northern region. "It was very unexpected; until then, I had been going through pregnancy and breastfeeding cycles, and everything was fine. The doctors sent me for tests but said, 'You have three children, that's a lot.' I didn't feel there was emotional support for the situation I was in. I underwent a D&C, and at another point, they aspirated the pregnancy sac. It was a huge shock. Every time I got pregnant, I didn't know what would happen." A friend referred her to Rachel Weinstein, a Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselor from Nishmat. "Rachel provided me with emotional, even medical support. Throughout the period of investigating the cause of the miscarriages, she was very available to me, even in the evenings, whenever I felt the need or urgency. When there were disagreements between doctors about the tests that should be done, she would reach out to their doctor and get back to me with an answer quickly."

"Rachel's support was an emotional answer that strengthened my faith and gave me motivation not to give up. She also connected me with women in a similar situation, which gave me strength. Today, I'm in an advanced pregnancy, and I still consult with her; she's a place to unload and share."

Ariel (full name withheld), from southern Israel, also met with Weinstein. "When my husband and I realized we would need fertility treatments, I had a huge faith crisis," says Ariel. "I knew this would be a complex process medically, requiring halachic guidance. I was clear that I wouldn't discuss it with any rabbi, with a man who wouldn't understand what I was going through and would give an answer based solely on the halacha. At this point, we chose not to share what we were going through with anyone; only the doctors knew, but we were looking for halachic guidance. When I heard about the program of Yoatzot Halacha Fertility Counselors, I reached out to them, and that's how I met Rachel, who immediately understood that our story was emotionally, not just halachically, driven. Rachel's support even addressed aspects of shalom bayit.

"The treatments can cause distance between spouses, as during the cycles themselves, the intimacy can sometimes be technical, which results in a lot of pressure and tension. The woman undergoes all the medical procedures, and it was important to understand how to go through this together.

"We approached her with specific halachic issues. For example, I couldn't inject myself, but since we hadn't shared the process with our surroundings, my husband had to inject me at times when we were forbidden, and Rachel found a halachic solution for that. Beyond that, we trusted her halachically, and we really felt the personal attention, understanding, and sensitivity. We didn't have any difficult halachic issues, but the very support and knowing I had someone to turn to was very meaningful."

Rachel Weinstein from Tekoa, a Yoetzet Halacha for over 17 years, also emphasizes the importance of direct contact with the woman to accurately determine the halachic ruling.

"Sometimes, a woman doesn't share personal details with the rabbi, and critical details get lost, which impairs the full understanding of the situation."

What inquiries do you receive?

"Early ovulation, which many tend to call 'halachic infertility.' We try not to call it that, because in many cases it's simply not true," she says. "Today, it's much less common. Women who do reach this situation are those undergoing fertility treatments without considering early ovulation because they are being too stringent with themselves or because someone suggested they check fertility processes, which leads to great distress. We really try to avoid this. Today, it's extremely rare for someone to go through fertility treatments for this reason, and then we proceed to find a simple halachic solution without violating halachic boundaries. Many cases that come to me are resolved quite easily with some advice and guidance."



Rachel Weinstein: It was very meaningful for me to understand that not every problem has a solution. And I think it's really important in our generation to remember this. I feel like we live under the illusion that, thank God, there are solutions to many situations, but not to all of them.

Are there limitations to the advice you give?

"We're not doctors, so we are very careful not to give medical advice. We had an ethics course, and we try to adhere to ethical guidelines and avoid answering medical questions," she says. "Sometimes a woman consults with a doctor, and something doesn't sit well with her, and then she asks for my opinion. If something sounds off to me, I gently send her back to ask the doctor about it. But I would never say, 'Take a different pill,' 'Do something else.'"

What challenges have you encountered in advising?

"At the first meeting in the program, we met one of the team members who shared her story, and I kept waiting for the happy ending, for how she gave birth to a healthy child. But that ending never came," she says with sadness. "It was very significant for me to understand that not every problem has a solution. I think it's really important in our generation to remember this. I feel like we live in an illusion that, thank God, there are solutions for many situations, but not for all of them. Recently, a woman came to me who married young and only started to check her fertility at 44. When she turned 45, her doctor told her it was no longer treatable at her age," she recalls. "The doctor recommended looking into egg donation, and the woman came to me for help finding another doctor who would tell her something different. It was a conversation that required a lot of strength and honesty from me because I knew I couldn't tell her that we would solve it and everything would be fine."

What is the relationship between the halachic advisors and the conservative world around them?

"I'm sure there is opposition, because that's how it is in the world, but I don't encounter it much," says Weinstein. "I tend not to get involved in these places. When I studied to be an advisor, I had a neighbor who was Chabad who asked me what I do for a living. I told her I was a Yoatzot Halacha, and she said, 'How nice, which halachot are you studying?' I told her 'family purity,' and she asked if I guide brides. I chose not to get into an uncomfortable discussion, so I answered 'yes,'" she smiles. "I don't know if I avoid confrontation, but it doesn't always seem necessary to me, and maybe that's why I encounter less opposition. Once I had a conversation with Rabbi Burstein about cooperation. I'm always for cooperation, that's how I like it," she says. "Although I didn't feel strong opposition, theoretically, it could have happened, but I also understood that it's not so simple because the approaches are different."



Ora Dirovan: The first meeting usually lasts an hour, and the halachic reasoning typically takes no more than fifteen minutes. The rest of the conversation focuses on strengthening intention, offering advice, and sharing practical tips from the field.