

SHALOM TODAY

B R O W N A R D



Technion's Medical Ethics Maven

*also inside:
Exclusive Interview:
Israel's New U.N.
Ambassador*

January 27, 2003

A Marketing Publication of the Sun-Sentinel Company

Sun-Sentinel

Eileen Jacobson writes name tags for Ellen and Harold Jaffa, as Edith Mullin checks them in for the luncheon program.



Staff photo by Rick Uhlman

Medical Ethics Maven at Technion's "Tech Talk"

BY RIVKA SPIRO

The basic question of medical ethics is: just because something is possible, does that make it permissible? That was the fascinating issue raised by Dr. Rosalie Ber, head of the Medical Education Department in the Faculty of Medicine at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. She was speaking, earlier this month, to the American Technion Society's (ATS) Boca Raton chapter, as part of its Tech Talk luncheon series. South Florida was one of about 20 stops she was making on a coast-to-coast speaking tour on behalf of the school, which is located in Haifa.

"I think the medical ethics dilemmas are the same in the U.S. and Israel, because we are both western, and multi-cultural," said Ber, who, in addition to being an M.D., also has a Ph. D. in tumor biology. "There are many similarities."

How does Halacha, Jewish law, enter into the search for solutions to these problems?

Using a Hebrew phrase, Ber said, "*Kedushat hachayim* — the sanctity of life — is a very strong motive all along the way in Israel."

One striking example of how Jewish religious law can help to solve a medical ethical dilemma is in regard to making the decision to remove a person from life support.

The issue of "the terminal stages of life," Ber said, and "whether or not to unplug a respirator," has to do with, "Are you prolonging life, or are you prolonging a *gossess* — a person in the process of dying?"

According to Jewish law, she explained, "it's o.k. not to attach [a person to a respirator] but it's not o.k. to disconnect [the person.]" To deal with this dilemma, she said, "They built a respirator with a timer, so you have to [continually] reset it, which is like reconnecting it."

Ber's listeners smiled and nodded at this ingenious idea, born out of the attempt to resolve medical ethics with Halacha.

In her presentation, Ber told her audience

that she would raise more questions than she had answers to, and "that is the purpose of our talk."

The questions included: when does life begin, what is the definition of death, and what are the problems associated with organ transplantation, genetic screening and cloning?

According to Catholics, Ber related, life begins at the moment of fertility, and other Christian groups have different ideas. From "the Jewish Orthodox perspective, life begins when a child takes a breath of air outside the mother's womb."

In answer to the original question she posed, Ber said, "I don't think that everything that's possible is permissible. We have to be very careful of the slippery slope. We have to put brakes on what might slide down. I'm afraid of technology getting into the hands of people who are not morally inclined."

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