

MACHON PUAH

Who is My Patient?

Last time we saw that the argument between the Tzitz Eliezer and the Igrot Moshe can be used as a paradigm to suggest which method is preferable in fetal surgery to correct spina bifida. According to the former, the fetus is not considered an independent being and is an extension of the mother. As such we would prefer a method that causes the least damage to the mother even if this method has a worse outcome for the baby. This appears to be the laparoscopic method that causes minimal damage to the mother but has not been proven to have as good outcomes for the baby as the other method.

However if we follow Rabbi Feinstein's opinion, as recorded in Igrot Moshe, that the fetus is an independent being and should be treated accordingly then we would prefer the method that has the best outcome for the baby even though it may have adverse effect on the mother.

As I told the audience when I presented in the Zurich University Hospital, the real question is who is my patient? Is the doctor treating the unborn fetus or are they treating the mother? It is clear that she is presenting to the doctor and asking to be treated but how much do we take into account the silent voice of the unborn fetus?

There is one last consideration that I have discussed with the team in Hadassah who have chosen laparoscopy over open surgery. The question is also who is the population that is coming to be treated? Many couples

on discovering that their unborn fetus has a major defect such as spina bifida will choose to terminate the pregnancy and will not select surgery as an option. The women who will pursue such surgery in Israel often do so for religious reasons; since the halacha does not easily permit abortion, such couples will prefer to do whatever they can to save the pregnancy when such an option exists.

Generally these couples are more likely to want to have larger families and so they are also thinking about the next pregnancy. The woman will not be willing to undergo a procedure that can save this pregnancy and have a detrimental effect on future children. And so this population will prefer the laparoscopic method that will have minimal adverse effect on future pregnancies even if the outcome may be better for the fetus in open surgery. The population that come to the clinic in Zurich are different and may have different needs which will entail a different method of treatment.

These need to be part of our understanding and approach when developing an answer as to which is the preferred method of treatment.

Rabbi Gideon Weitzman