

MACHON PUAH

Support Groups

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I recently returned from the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine that was held this year in Denver. Almost ten thousand people gathered from all over the world for several days to learn about new research and to discuss fertility from a scientific, medical and psychological angle.

I have attended these meetings for several years and it is fascinating to go from being one of the only people wearing a kippah to today where there are many. Some are counselors and Rabbis, some are physicians and medical professionals and some work in drug companies and other connected industries. The Jewish community is showing a greater interest in fertility and is interested in learning more about the available technologies and to meet the experts in the field.

In the next few weeks we will discuss some of the interesting lectures and papers that were presented. One paper presented by a group from Connecticut compared professionally lead support groups to those run by lay people. The former seems to be more attractive since the attendees gain from the knowledge and expertise of the professional. The lay-run group can lack professional guidance but does offer peer support by other people undergoing fertility treatment.

The paper looked at an in-house internet based group run by two women who are not medical professionals. Unlike professionally run groups that find it difficult to recruit participants, their group was constantly well attended for over ten years.

They asked 82 women about their preference for the lay-lead or the professionally run group. 82% of the women were more comfortable attending the lay group, 74% liked having somewhere to go to in the evenings and 82% liked the free dinners at the meetings. Almost half of the women felt that there is a stigma associated with psychotherapy and so the lay-lead group presented less of a problem for them.

These findings are important for professionals dealing with couples undergoing fertility treatment but also contain a message for other communal forum such as synagogues. Each community contains couples that are undergoing fertility treatment and they may well be looking for a forum to share their concerns, fears and feelings. This does not have to be run by a professional and, in fact, it may be preferable that it be lay-run. Women may just be looking for a place to come and talk and eat together with other people who are non-judgmental and just offer a friendly word and camaraderie.

I know of some such groups in various communities world-wide and they are very successful. Maybe other synagogues can consider setting up similar programs to provide a much needed forum for these couples. You do not need to be an expert you just have to do it.