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Jewish Center of the Upper West Side Holds Conversation on 'The Art of Dying Well'

By Judith Falk(<https://jewishlink.news/author/judith-falk/>) | June 15, 2023(<https://jewishlink.news/2023/06/15/>)



On June 11, The Jewish Center Hanno Mott Lecture on Jewish Ethics presented an armchair conversation on "The Art of Dying Well: Choices to Make at the End of Life."

"It was Hanno's vision to put Jewish ethics into conversation with general ethics. Every year, hundreds of people are the beneficiaries of that vision," said Rabbi Dr. Yosie Levine, senior rabbi of The Jewish Center, of the Hanno Mott lectures.

Rabbi Kalman Laufer, assistant rabbi of The Jewish Center, introduced the program by acknowledging that considering our own mortality is an intense subject, but something we must think about. In stark contrast to this, Laufer emphasized that it is essential to save lives and that, in this vein, both JScreen (genetic screening) and Gift of Life (marrow registry) provided screening services before the lecture.

The conversation was led by Dr. Lydia Dugdale, director of the Columbia Medical Center for Clinical Medical Ethics, and Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody, executive director of Ematai and a columnist for The Jerusalem Post.

From the outset of the program, the attendees understood the strong message that was being conveyed: It is essential to appoint a health care agent to whom you explain your end-of-life wishes, and your agent must have appropriate guidance should complicated issues concerning your health arise.

But the question, as Dugdale stated, is how does one start the conversation about end-of-life issues, particularly when many do not want to have it? Echoing the sentiment, Brody cited certain Jewish rituals that give this exact impression. For example, during Yizkor, many have the tradition of walking out of the sanctuary if they are not reciting the prayer, as it is considered an "evil eye" to talk about death.

Dugdale stated that, as a physician, she starts the discussion with patients reluctant to talk about end-of-life issues as follows: She will remind the patient that, for example, it is flu season and that she needs to know who can make medical decisions on the patient's behalf if he or she becomes too sick to do so. She will then ask: "Have you talked with that person about your wishes?"


Of course, decision-making issues can become nuanced and complicated. As an example, Brody said that perhaps you want your agent to ask your rabbi questions that may arise concerning medical treatment. However, many times the patient will outlive the rabbi. And if your child is your proxy, your child's rabbi might not share your views.

As to concrete steps to take concerning end-of-life issues, both Brody and Dugdale agreed that the focus should not solely be on necessary steps such as living wills and what intervention you might want, but on the legacy you want to leave, the lifestyle you want to live and, most importantly, on living meaningfully until your last breath.

By Judith Falk

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