

JEWISH LINK

Linking Northern and Central NJ, Bronx, Manhattan, Westchester and CT

Issue #534

June 6, 2024 | 29 Iyar, 5784

Ematai: Navigating Some of Life's Most Important Decisions

By Jewish Link Staff

As a preeminent health and wellness consultant, Beth (Bassie) Taubes of Wellness Motivations spends her days teaching clients how to live their best lives, through diet, exercise and mindful living. So it makes sense that she was just appointed the director of outreach for Ematai, an organization founded by Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody, to help families, medical professionals and rebbeim work together to navigate major life and health care choices, as well as end-of-life decisions.

With its tagline, "Navigating healthcare choices with Jewish wisdom," Ematai's goal is to not only to assist in helping families make these major decisions, but to encourage them to initiate conversations about those decisions well before a health crisis strikes. As Taubes explained, the worst times to make major decisions is when people are in the throes of a health crisis.

"Our name, Ematai, which translates to 'If not now, when?' is a call to action," Taubes said. "We seek to upstream the necessary conversations that will facilitate meaningful choices later, and Ematai helps individuals and their families anticipate the questions they'll need to answer as they continue on their health care journey."

Ematai "explores the big moral questions that society needs to face as technological revolutions change the human experience," explained Taubes. "We are here to demonstrate how Jewish wisdom responds to the ethical dilemmas often found in health care innovation. To this highly relevant moral frontier, Ematai brings together rabbis, health care professionals, ethicists and communal leaders to represent Judaism with a wise and nuanced voice."

Some questions that can invariably arise include truth-telling and full disclosure to patients about terminal illness, as well as when to opt for pal-

liative care or when hospice care is appropriate. Issues surrounding Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders and nutrition and kashrut for terminal patients can arise as well. "These questions are complicated, and Ematai's job is to try and assist rebbeim as well as families and health care providers navigate this," said Taubes.

Taubes, who practiced oncology nursing for 30 years, regularly witnessed patients and families grappling with these types of questions and dilemmas, whether with a patient's medical team, or with family members, or both. Many of these disagreements and issues might have been avoided had something been planned beforehand when the patient was still well and had conversations with their designated health care proxy. "If people have lived and loved, then chances are good that they have lost somebody. But in that process of losing someone dear to them, oftentimes people lament how they wish they would have known more or in advance of that moment, which might have made that process go smoother for loved ones and families.

"Making a plan does not mean one is dying," Taubes continued. "Making a plan is part of one's well-being. We want to feel good and we want to live well. But we are also mortal so while we are living we can make a plan and one is not in contrast to the other."

Through its Netivot program, which can be found on the Ematai website, individuals and families can find resources for drafting advanced health care directives and blank forms to write up legal and halachically acceptable documents which they can even store in the Ematai. There are also sections that deal with palliative care, pain relief in Jewish law, and mental health and emotional support for both patients and families.

"Judaism values life. But we also value that individuals should have comfort at the end of their lives too.

But there are ways to navigate that while also adhering to halacha," Taubes said. For this reason Ematai has created a coalition of rabbinical and medical experts to help navigate health care choices. "Some people are uncomfortable discussing their mortality, so one of the goals is to make this a conversation in which we can find a little more comfort."

Explaining how Judaism and medicine work well together, Taubes said that "Judaism recognizes the wonders of modern medicine and the expertise of health care professionals while affirming that the Torah's ethical teachings can wisely guide Jews and non-Jews alike in the complex dilemmas posed by 21st-century science.

"Modern medicine offers many powerful interventions and therapies. Their implementation must be guided by an ethic that respects the dignity found in all creatures created in the Divine image."

Rabbi Brody, who regularly consults with rebbeim and also health care providers, runs continuing education programs on this topic for rabbis. The Ematai website also features a 24/7 hotline for people who have questions, or if health care providers need to speak with a rabbinic consultant.

Because there can sometimes be a lack of understanding surrounding these issues, Ematai conducts sensitivity training for palliative care teams and specialists who might not recognize why a rabbinic authority would need to be consulted, and thus find themselves in conflict with Jewish families.

Another project Taubes is helping to cultivate at Ematai is Legacy letters, which are also sometimes called ethical wills. Legacy letters can come in many forms and are not necessarily meant to be given posthumously.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, zt"l, wrote, "The most important legacy we can leave our children is not mon-

ey or possessions but spiritual ideals." Legacy letters can come in any form and are, essentially, messages that one would want one's children or loved ones to know, or they could be about a project or mission that an individual sees as important and wants loved ones to continue.

"Think about how Yaakov Avinu addressed his children before he died," Taubes advised. Whether written or recorded, formal or informal, Taubes says that when writing a Legacy letter, the writer should think deeply about who the intended audience or recipient is and why he or she is writing it. Another point to consider is where it will be placed for safekeeping.

This is an incredible opportunity for people to tell stories about their own life, their children, their childhood and about what was important. You could take the opportunity to ask forgiveness for something that you have been holding on to, or to let others know what you'd like them to do once you are gone.

Taubes recalls the story about a father who started writing letters to his daughter when she was born and at every major milestone thereafter. He described his feelings at the time and what those milestones meant to him, and eventually presented them to her when she was an adult raising her own children.

Writing these letters can often be difficult, but the recipients usually find them extremely meaningful. "You are sharing some of the most important things in your life and what is meaningful to you, which gives the intended audience a sense about your identity and what you value," Taubes said.

To learn more about how Ematai can help you make some of the most important decisions in your life, visit www.ematai.org. To have Beth Taubes speak at your next event contact betaubes@ematai.org or call 917-748-2956