

## JCRC

### Stem cell research consistent with Jewish law, Orthodox rabbi tells capacity crowd at Federation

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Renowned medical bioethics expert Rabbi Dr. Moshe Tendler of Yeshiva University in New York City told a standing-room-only crowd of more than 500 at the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County on Jan. 8 that Judaism permits embryonic stem cell research and that there exists a mandate to seek cures of diseases that cause great human suffering.

Citing Torah sources, the 80-year-old biology professor and Rosh Yeshiva of the university's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) explained that harvesting stem cells from an early-stage embryo on day five or day six does not violate Jewish law concerning when an embryo achieves legal status as a human being. That only occurs after 40 days when the embryo has already reached human form and developed all of its organ systems, including having a heartbeat, Tendler said.

In addition, he said, embryos in a laboratory in a Petri dish have no chance of becoming children without being implanted in a womb. Some Christian groups equate embryonic stem cell research with abortion, but that is not Judaism's position, Tendler said. The groups oppose the culling of stem cells, which by necessity results in the destruction of embryos.

President George Bush, in 2001, announced that the federal government would only fund research for existing stem cell lines, believing that opening new stem cell lines would encourage the destruction of human embryos.

"One of the great tragedies of the Bush administration has been the weakening of the wall between church and state, between the religious and the medical," said Tendler, adding that many of America's leading stem cell scientists are now working in other countries where they have more freedom in research.

Because of their regenerative properties, scientists believe that stem cells can be used to treat a variety of degenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, macular degeneration, multiple sclerosis, osteoporosis and spinal cord injury.

"My stance can't change the controversy," said Tendler, rabbi of the Community Synagogue in Monsey, N.Y. "I can only resolve the controversy by saying that if the instruction of the Torah was followed, there would be no controversy. But people don't follow the Torah."

The audience that packed Zinman Hall on the Federation's west Boca Raton campus included many of Tendler's friends and former students and colleagues at Yeshiva University. Rabbis representing the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform branches of Judaism also attended the program presented by the Federation's Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC).

"With Florida being a retirement community, when you start talking about some of these diseases you're obviously dealing with issues that people are very concerned about," said Tendler, whose father-in law, the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, was regarded as his generation's leading expert on halacha (religious law).

The program also included remarks from attorney Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute in Wellington. Considered one of the world's foremost stem cell research advocates and policy experts, Siegel has appeared on numerous TV news programs and has been quoted extensively in major newspapers. He predicated that it is only a matter of time before funding restrictions are lifted.

"I am proud that so many came out to discuss this revolutionary topic," said JCRC Chair Steve Mendelsohn. "There appears to be a consensus that Jewish law and ethics supports stem cell research including embryonic cells. Hopefully, our voices can be heard in this national debate."

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