

A pure home in accordance with halachah is the timeless goal of every Jewish couple.

But the plethora of modern scientific advances brings new possibilities and pitfalls that blur once-unambiguous guidelines. Who can navigate these new frontiers and their halachic ramifications?

Rav Yitzchak Melber didn't imagine he'd be at the cutting edge of halachah and medicine when he began his rabbinic studies, but today he's an expert who's earned the trust of *poskim*, physicians, and couples around the world

# HOTLINE

to  
Health, Halachah, and Harmony

BY *Debbie Safrir*  
PHOTOS *Ohad Zweigenberg*



**At 4 a.m., while most of Israel was asleep, Rav Yitzchok Melber**

**was on the phone with a couple from Monsey, New York. In their struggle to have a child, they were considering a medical procedure with complex halachic ramifications.**

**“It turns out that not only was this intervention halachically problematic, it was also medically controversial,” says Rav Melber, a Skverer chassid who has the most advanced developments in women’s health at his fingertips. “In the end, I suggested a newly developed, less invasive technique that was also halachically preferred.”**

A day later, Leah called again. Her physician had never heard of the medication and refused to comply. What now? Undeterred, Rav Dovid Bartfeld — the unknown responder at the other end of the line — took down the doctor’s number. After he called and presented the doctor with new, advanced information, the physician acquiesced. The Dershowitzes were not acquainted with Rav Bartfeld, and they had never even heard of Rav Yitzchok Melber or the Toras Hamishpacha hotline before placing their call. But this is one phone number they are going to keep.

\*Names and identifying details have been changed.

The fast pace of technological advancement in women’s health and fertility has kept modern physicians on their toes. For the Torah-observant public, every new discovery or procedure also holds halachic promise — or danger. Who can help navigate the quickly changing interface between this sensitive medical specialty and the dictates of halachah? People around the globe have discovered that Rav Yitzchok Melber is the address.

Sitting in the small, yet neatly furnished Torat Hamishpacha office in Jerusalem’s Har Hotzvim high-tech industrial park, I flip curiously through a brochure that sits on the table. Story after story leaps from those pages — couples who have scaled seemingly insurmountable barriers in their quest for halachic resolutions to problems of *taharas hamishpachah*, fertility, and related issues pen words of heartfelt gratitude to Rav Yitzchok Melber and his staff for providing a way out.

It seems incongruous. How could a soft-spoken chassidic rabbi, however enthusiastic and driven he may be, possess the keys to the trickiest *taharas hamishpachah* issues, *shalom bayis*, and optimal health, where top medical professors have been stymied? I ask Rav Melber outright.

“There’s no mystery,” he answers. “These things are often not afforded the right kind of attention in medical school. Whereas for a *frum* couple the issue may be one of paramount importance, for a gentile doctor — or even a secular Jewish one — it is frequently dismissed as a minor issue. The couple may get the runaround for months, even years, before finding an effective solution.”

Ze’ev and Leah Dershowitz\* were distraught. A seemingly trivial medical issue — yet one bearing serious halachic ramifications — was plaguing Leah and threatening the foundations of their marriage. Leah fingered the pamphlet her husband had been given by his *rosh kollel*, wondering if she could find the courage to share her personal dilemma over a hotline. She took a deep breath, dialed the number, and posed her question to an anonymous yet sympathetic voice at the other end of the line. A straightforward prescription, according to the voice, would put things right. End of story. Or so it seemed...



Rav Melber is happy that the hotline rings non-stop – not because they’re calling him, but because they’re calling, period

Yehuda Klein and his wife, a couple from Queens,\* suffered three consecutive miscarriages before reaching Rav Melber through a friend. “We had visited a slew of doctors, and had reached a dead end,” relates Yehuda. Yet Rav Melber’s brief review of their medical history revealed that they had been consulting with the wrong kind of specialist. “Rav Melber personally connected us with other specialists and offered us assistance on every level — emotionally, and psychologically as well — areas other professionals couldn’t begin to address.”

**Up to Date** If you’d asked Rav Yitzchok Melber ten years ago where his life was headed, he would have told you he was pursuing rabbinic ordination in order to become a community rabbi in a *kehillah* where he’d make a difference. Although the Skverer chassid from Monsey had never learned in Eretz Yisrael as a *bochur*, a month after his wedding, Yitzchok Melber and his wife Chaya looked like a typical Jerusalem *kollel* couple. Reb Yitzchok was driven — and focused — entering an intensive halachah track and receiving *semichah* from Rav Mordechai Eliyahu *ztz”l* and Rav Meir Bransdorfer *ztz”l*. He even picked up an academic degree in public administration from an American university following the suggestion of Young Israel’s Rabbi Pesach Lerner, who told him it would improve his chances of landing a position in a US community.

That was the plan, but it got derailed somewhere along the path Rav Melber began to pursue. It was while doing *shimush* (halachic apprenticeship) with Rav Meir Bransdorfer and Rav Aaron Dovid Neustadt *shlita*, that he first realized how complicated the medical aspect of halachic queries could be. Rav Neustadt, a Jerusalem *posek* as well as a *madrich* for *chassanim*, is a steady address for *sh’eilos* related to *taharas hamishpachah*, and Rav Melber’s initial job was to gather updated medical information that would help Rav Neustadt come to halachic decisions. But in the ever-changing world of medicine, Rav Melber discovered that rabbinic knowledge was not keeping pace with the development of new techniques and technologies. Very often a couple’s *sh’eilah* would lead to a complicated, drawn-out back-and-forth among the couple, the health professional, and the *rav*; certain *sh’eilos* were either left unresolved or ruled *bedieved*, due to incomplete information.

And so, at the behest of his mentors — and with the encouragement of Rabbi Menachem Bornstein of Machon Puah, a halachic fertility organization — Rav Melber embarked on a program of self-study, enrolled in courses, and frequented medical conferences. Medical professionals began to take notice

of the chassidic *yungerman* fully conversant in the latest developments in their field, and research physicians such as Dr. Daniel Zeidman of Tel Hashomer often invited him as an official guest to professional seminars.

By attending conferences, cultivating medical contacts, and intensively following the latest developments, Rav Melber made it his business to have the most relevant information in the fields of obstetrics, gynecology, and fertility constantly at his fingertips. It didn't take long for him to develop a reputation as the go-to guy for both couples and other *poskim* when complicated *sh'eilos* arose.

"I participate in dozens of conferences every year, sometimes even two a week," says Rav Melber, who explains that there's no better way to stay on top of the most updated medical developments. "Ongoing developments in medicine and health technology can open new options for people, but we can only give proper halachic guidance if we're knowledgeable and in the loop. In halachic decisions, a small detail can change the entire picture and the outcome of the *psak*. Rav Elyashiv *ztz"l* once told me that in the very sensitive interface of medicine and halachah, there is no concept of 'the general *psak*.' Every case is judged and resolved according to a very individual and particular set of data."

Rav Melber says that particularly in the area of women's health, the field changes so quickly that Professor Chaim Yaffe of Shaare Zedek Medical Center recently told him, "The information I have today is good for three months." At this breakneck rate, says Rav Melber, if a *rav* isn't updated, how can he *pasken* regarding equipment or methods that might no longer be relevant?

Evolving from a one-man mission, Rav Melber made his assistance official in 2009, when, together with his wife, he set up Toras Hamishpacha, a service that deals with halachic issues regarding questions of *taharas hamishpachah*, pregnancy, menopause, as well as infertility. "Our goal is to help couples achieve physical and emotional health by offering a combination of medical and halachic advice together with emotional support," Rav Melber explains.

On trips back to the US, Rav Melber's first target for rabbinic seminars was his hometown of Monsey. But word spread, and soon he was being asked to create seminars in other communities. Today, nearly every *beis hora'ah* in Eretz Yisrael — and many throughout the US — have participated in Rav Melber's *shiurim*, seminars, or conferences to keep all *poskim* updated on the most advanced methods and technologies.

**The Stress Factor** Our interview is interrupted by the buzzing of a cell phone.

"It's like this all the time nowadays," Rav Melber says, gesturing to the row of desks lining the circumference of the office. "When I couldn't deal with the volume on my own, we set up the hotline."

Queries flood in from around the globe, with calls from overseas numbers being forwarded directly to the Israel office. In 2012 Rav Dovid Bartfeld came on board to help handle the sheer volume of work. Eight trained staffers now man the lines, handling together over 1,000 phone contacts a month. People with *sh'eilos* can call 24/6, and on the rare occasions when there is no one available to answer — such as when overseas calls overlap with the wee hours of the night in Israel — messages may be left and questions are answered punctiliously within a few hours at



**Professor Simcha Yagel appreciates the symbiotic relationship. "I'm a doctor, not a posek. I spell out the medical issues and tell them to ask their rav"**

most. Complex *sh'eilos* are passed on to qualified *poskim* for a final say. And Mrs. Melber is often on hand when there is an emotional woman-to-woman need.

A slightly embarrassed *yungerman* knocks hesitantly at the plain white door. Married for over two years, he reveals, his wife had been battling health issues the entire time, and they were ready to give up on any hopes of a happy, stable marriage. After patiently hearing him out, Rav Yitzchok Melber looked at him squarely and asserted that there was still plenty of hope. The young man's eyes brightened as he bashfully excused himself in order to place a call.

"My wife is waiting down in the lobby," he says. "I want to call her up." When asked why they didn't arrive together to begin with, the young man admits, "My wife's *kallah* teacher told us our problem is so serious we should start saying Tehillim. I was sure you would be telling us that we needed a *get* — I wanted to spare her the pain."

Chaya Melber is the warm, serene backdrop to the center, when another woman's compassion and understanding can be a balm to a broken soul. "There is often an emotional component involved," she remarks. "What's more, a woman will frequently prefer to discuss her troubles with another woman. I do my best to offer sympathy and understanding, while helping her find answers."

**MEDICAL** developments may often make a critical difference to the final *psak*, while modern inventions can provide merciful solutions to couples who, otherwise, would have had to suffer in silence

The realization of how profoundly stress can negatively impact a person's health eventually led her to pursue a professional degree in psychology, vastly enhancing the assistance she can offer as a result. Chaya says there is a symbiotic relationship between stress and women's health: The suffering that ensues when a family's health is disrupted can cause untold stress, which itself may interrupt the healing process.

**In It Together** Rav Melber and his team offer assistance to *rabbanim* and individuals from around the globe, but he says none of that would be as effective if not for the smooth relationship he's cultivated with top medical professionals. "The more the doctors understand the specific halachic concerns of the religious world, the more enthusiastic they are about working with us to find solutions," says Rav Melber.

He's well connected with the who's who of women's health, initiating meetings with specialists in Israel and in his travels abroad. One of those is Dr. Raanan Tal, a specialist in Beilinson Hospital and a lecturer at Tel Aviv University's medical school. "We talked a lot about the interface of cutting-edge medicine and halachah, and this was very helpful to him in dealing with *frum* patients. Last summer I brought him to a rabbinical conference in Ashdod, which was an eye-opener for both him and the participating *rabbanim*."

Professor Simcha Yagel, director of gynecology at Hadassah Ein Kerem and head of Torat Hamishpacha's medical advisory board, told *Mishpacha* that his relationship with *rabbanim* is not only about advising

them, but about learning at the same time.

"I've had several cases where the issue was new for me, while the *poskim* I'm in touch with have already dealt with such a case. I'm helped by them all the time," says the professor, although he concedes that there can be times where halachic principles and medical protocol might clash.

"As head of gynecology, I confront *sh'eilos* all the time. I'm not a *rav* or *posek*, and of course I never offer a halachic opinion or force anyone into a decision," Dr. Yagel continues. "I spell out the medical issues, and tell them to ask their *rav* before deciding what course to take. I will admit that sometimes there's a battle of wills regarding who decides, but I too seek rabbinic advice." Last year Professor Yagel invited Rav Melber to speak at an international conference held in Jerusalem, attended by hundreds of top physicians who came together to discuss developments of the future — which, at the rate the field is changing, will be a lot sooner than many expect.

**What's Changed?** A childless South African couple reached Rav Melber in desperation after 16 years of marriage. Upon medical consultation, the husband required a surgical procedure, but four painstaking operations had not improved his condition. Now, they sought Rav Melber's opinion on the advisability of going through surgery yet again. Combing their medical records, Rav Melber posited that they had been following a misguided course of action all along. He suggested they try out a gentle new procedure that didn't involve surgery at all — just medication — and after following his advice

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the couple is now expecting their first child.

“Besides their medical issue,” explains Rav Melber, “this couple needed intense emotional support. They were in such distress.”

That the hotline rings nonstop makes Rav Melber happy — not because people are calling *him*, but because they’re calling, period. “I can’t stress how important it is to ask, even if a question seems simple or straightforward. Furthermore, so many people have kept so much pain to themselves whereas, had they just asked, they might have found *mehadrin* solutions to what they thought were insurmountable issues.”

But as much as he admires and accesses the cutting-edge medical world, he warns never to rely on a doctor for a *psak*, even one who is G-d-fearing and Torah-oriented.

“Get as much detailed information as you can from your physician,” says Rav Melber, “but in the end, that information has to be presented to a *rav* or *posek* — especially with these sensitive issues, *daas Torah* is paramount.”

I take a keen look at the cleanly designed program Chaya Melber hands me. It was distributed at the landmark conference Torat Hamishpacha held last month in Jerusalem. The lineup of speakers was impressive: Rav Yitzchok Berkowitz and Rav Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg alongside some of the biggest names in the medical field, including Professor Yagel and Professor Amnon Bezinsky, director of the Women’s Wellness Center at Hadassah, to name but a few. Over 500 *rabbanim* from around the country attended the conference, in an attempt to gain vital knowledge in this sensitive but crucial area.

Information garnered at a seminar like this is invaluable for *rabbanim*. A similar conference took place last spring in Monsey, and since then not a day has passed that calls have not come in from the New York area. “This contact number should be readily available to every *frum* couple,” declared one rabbi, who passes out Rav Melber’s hotline number to people who approach him with *sh’eilos*, stating that there is no such thing as

a couple immune to the intricate dilemmas that *taharas hamishpacha* will often pose.

These days, Rav Melber spends more time keeping abreast of information and teaching other *rabbanim* than he does at the Jerusalem headquarters.

“The speed of medical progress is astonishing,” he says, “yet, while new research is constantly being published, many physicians are too busy attending to their ongoing practice to avail themselves of the latest advances.”

Last year alone, according to Rav Melber, over 50 couples avoided carrying out a certain major surgical procedure their doctors had recommended because of their concern that halachah frowns upon such a step.

“The sad thing,” he says, “is that new technologies already in existence can bypass this surgery altogether, while providing effective relief to the couple’s situation. Too many doctors neglect to offer this vital piece of information — either because of lack of knowledge or, in the worst case, because they may have an interest in pushing for an operation that brings in extra funding.”

But Rav Melber qualifies that most doctors are dedicated to serving their patients’ interests in good faith. And as the top names in the medical field are becoming increasingly aware of the particular needs religious patients have, they are more sensitive to nuances of treatment. Dr. Shlomi Cohen, head of maternity at Tel Hashomer Hospital, says that Rav Melber has managed to open channels of communication between leading doctors and *rabbanim* in an unprecedented way, noting that the Health Ministry is examining his groundbreaking work and that the *rav* has been nominated for an award in recognition of it.

Recognition is something that reaches a person where he least looks for it. Rav Yitzchok and Chaya Melber were never out to change the world or get accolades for their accomplishments. Their manner is as modest as the surroundings we are sitting in, yet with the fast-paced advances in women’s health, together with futuristic technologies, people can feel secure knowing that Rav Melber is manning the phones. ●