



RABBI GIDEON

Machon Puah for Fertility and Gynecology in Accordance with Halacha

WEITZMAN

Is a Fertilized Egg Life?

Last time we saw that there are some million or so frozen fertilized eggs worldwide, left over from fertility treatments. In most cases, the couple will keep them in order to use them at a later stage. In some cases, the couple no longer wants to use them, for a variety of reasons, and the question is what can be done with these eggs?

It will have been noted that, throughout our discussion, we have not used the term frozen embryos but, rather, we employed the phrase fertilized eggs. This was on purpose and is more than just semantics.

It is grammatically and scientifically correct to call the fertilized egg an embryo, since an embryo is the early stage of development

of a multicellular organism. Embryonic development is the part of the life cycle that begins just after fertilization and continues through the formation of body structures, such as tissues and organs. Yet the word embryo can give the false impression that an embryo, any and all embryos, have a human form. And are life.

In the first stages of embryonic development, a single-celled zygote undergoes many rapid cell divisions, called cleavage, to form a blastula, which looks similar to a ball of cells. Next, the cells in a blastula-stage embryo start rearranging themselves into layers in a process called gastrulation. These layers will each give rise to different parts of the developing multicellular organism, such as the nervous system, connective tissue, and organs.

In fertility treatment eggs are fertilized in the laboratory, and either transplanted back into the body or frozen. They are

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frozen at a very early stage of development, before the cells have started to differentiate. That is why I chose to call them fertilized eggs.

This information has impact on the halachic decision as what can be done with such fertilized eggs. While other religions, such as Catholicism, view fertilized eggs as life, Judaism has a different approach. The Talmud (Yevamot 69b) says that for the first forty days after fertilization the egg is considered as fluid, and life has not started. While we can debate the implications of this statement regarding a pregnancy, it seems clear that the fertilized egg in the lab is not considered alive.

This is one solution for the surplus of frozen fertilized eggs; if they are no longer needed

by the parents they can be destroyed.

But what if another couple wants to use those eggs? Are they allowed to? Can the first couple give them their eggs? Can they sell them? More on this next week. ■

The Puah Institute is based in Jerusalem and helps couples from all over the world who are experiencing fertility problems. Offices in Jerusalem, New York, Los Angeles & Paris. Contact (Isr) 02-651-5050 (US) 718-336-0603 www.puahonline.org

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