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Lamorindans Learn about Tough Cancer Problem

By Laurie Snyder

"Cancer is still a word that strikes fear into people's hearts, producing a deep sense of powerlessness. But today it is possible to find out through a blood test whether you are highly susceptible to breast and ovarian cancer, and then take action." - Angelina Jolie

The ever beautiful and oft-controversial humanitarian and Oscar winner, Angelina Jolie, recently lit a fire with those words in a May 14 New York Times op-ed piece, "My Medical Choice." Receiving news from physicians that she was at 50 and 87 percent risk, respectively, for ovarian and breast cancer from a genetic mutation, she elected to undergo a preventive double mastectomy.

But while the spotlight on Jolie raised awareness, says Rabbi Dovber Berkowitz, it also caused confusion and intensified debate about what's best for women. For example, 1 in 40 women of Ashkenazi Jewish descent carry a BRCA gene mutation similar to Jolie's - compared to about 1 in 400 in general, says the Jewish Learning Institute (JLI) rabbi from Contra Costa County. Potentially, these women have a 50 to 80 percent risk for breast cancer as early as their 20s and a 20 to 40 percent risk for ovarian by their 30s. Ovarian cancer is often deadlier though, he notes, because medical tests rarely diagnose before the disease reaches stage three or four.

Dr. Wendy Rubinstein, director of the National Institute of Health's genetic testing registry, believes genetic testing for all women of Ashkenazi Jewish descent could save 2,800 lives each year. Yet other healthcare providers view such testing and resulting prophylactic procedures as going too far too fast.

To help clear this fog and celebrate National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, JLI presented a program Oct. 22 at the Lafayette Library, "An Ounce of Prevention: BRCA, Genetic Testing, and Preventive Measures." Speakers reviewed the biblical requirement to safeguard one's health, whether it requires Jews of Ashkenazi descent to test for mutations, and what Jewish law says about radical procedures for those testing positive for BCRA-1 or 2.

"Some 1,500 years ago when rabbinic scholars wrote the Talmud, they didn't have questions about screening for cancer genes like we have today," observes Berkowitz. "However, there are guiding principles found in the Talmud that can help us determine how to respond to these very perplexing and life-altering medical quandaries. One of the Talmud's most important lessons that must guide our response is that saving one life is like saving an entire world." The class was the first of a new JLI series, "Life in the Balance."

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