

Key concepts



The principle of pikuach nefesh raises questions such as, what is the status of spare embryos that are not implanted in the practice of IVF? Eisenberg argues that prior to forty days gestation the foetus lacks 'humanity' and that it is therefore reasonable to sacrifice a very early embryo for stem-cell research. However, is it permissible to fertilise ova specifically to create an embryo for stem cells? Eisenberg is not favourable towards this but Dorff claims it is permissible although less morally justifiable.

Somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) has the potential to find new and effective treatments for many life-limiting conditions, and Dorff links it to the concept of responsible dominion over nature. Most Jewish ethicists approve of therapeutic cloning as such actions also allow us to act on the principle of Tikkun Olam.

Pre-implantation embryo research allows for screening of embryos during IVF so that only healthy ones are placed back in the womb. Silber does not perceive there to be a moral or ethical risk surrounding this approach and many Jews already support pre-implantation for Tay-Sachs disease. However, most Jews are against this technology being used for the selection of gender, or for a child who would have a particular trait such as hair colour or height. As long as the main purpose of gene therapy is to cure disease, restore health, prolong life then nearly all rabbis consider it to be permissible.

Rabbi Bleich is generally opposed to the destruction of pre-embryos and their use in stem-cell research due to his belief that such a course of action is tantamount to killing the embryo. However, he does not rule out the use of embryos created via parthenogenesis. Rabbi Tendler makes a strong case for stem-cell research based upon the moral obligation to save life wherever possible.

For Professor Clare Blackburn stem-cell research has been fundamental in the search for a way in which to replace a lost or damaged thymus, with the goal of using the procedure to provide replacement organs for people with weakened immune systems.

Key quotes

'Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life.' (Leviticus 19:16)

'Should we ban stem-cell research on embryonic cells as a dangerous encroachment on the sanctity of life?' (Eisenberg)

'... we are God's partners in the ongoing act of creation when we improve the human lot in life.' (Dorff)

'Using genetic technology for therapeutic purposes is acceptable, but many related issues have yet to be addressed.' (Rosner)

'One must weigh the Jewish imperative to pursue good health against a number of harms that may follow from the expanded use of PGS technology ...' (Popovsky)

'Mastery of nature for the benefit of those suffering from vital organ failure is an obligation. Human embryonic stem-cell research holds that promise ...' (Tendler)

Key words

pikuach nefesh

Halakhic

Tikkun Olam

parthenogenesis

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

The effectiveness of Jewish ethical teachings as a guide for living for Jews today.

Halakhic tradition provides a firm basis through which sound ethical guidelines can be formulated. Advances in medical science have brought about issues and situations which would never have been thought possible at the time of the giving of the law to the Jewish people. The very fact that Jewish ethical teaching is being applied in so many new, contemporary situations indicates its effectiveness in the modern world.

The extent to which pikuach nefesh is compatible with embryo research.

What evidence is there to indicate that there is a degree of compatibility between pikuach nefesh and embryo research? To what extent does pikuach nefesh cover all aspects of current embryo research? Not all aspects of embryo research are without question in relation to pikuach nefesh. As new genetic techniques emerge, it is conceivable that the debate will continue.

