

## Building the Future: Alumni at the Forefront of Fertility

It's a biblical story and a lesson we know well: Eve's transgressions in the Garden of Eden earned her the punishment of pain during childbirth. More painful than the aches of labor, however, is the anguish of people who wish to have children but find it difficult to achieve. The science of fertility—encompassing many different roles and specializations—has made astounding progress in recent decades.

Four YU alumni on the forefront of the fertility field are helping many people realize their dreams of building a family.

### RABBI DR. ZALMAN LEVINE: THE REPRODUCTIVE ENDOCRINOLOGIST

Rabbi Dr. Zalman Levine '84YUHS, '88YC, '94R, '95E, a native of Englewood, NJ, believes that "YU is an integral part of who I am." Prior to entering medical school, he received *semicha* [rabbinic ordination] from YU-affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. "I knew that a strong foundation in learning and a greater knowledge of *Halacha* [Jewish law] would make me a better doctor," he said.

Levine was a third-year student at YU's Albert Einstein College of Medicine when he was first exposed to the field of reproductive endocrinology. "I was fascinated by the interplay of science and art, technology and theology, and embryology and ethics, and by all the *halachic* and *hashkafic* [Jewish thought] issues that arise," he said.

Levine eventually went on to Harvard University for a three-year fellowship in reproductive medicine. "Even after leaving my YU cocoon, if only for a temporary period, I didn't shy away from wearing a yarmulka on my head or YU's Torah Umadda ideals on my sleeve," he said. "I believe that my colleagues and mentors in Boston developed a respect for these ideals and the richness of perspective they bring to the practice of medicine."

Levine studied and taught reproductive medicine and surgery at Harvard Medical School and its affiliated

Brigham and Women's Hospital, and later at the New York Medical College. In 2002, he joined the Fertility Institute of New Jersey and New York in Westwood, NJ.

A typical day for Levine—now a board-certified reproductive endocrinologist and fertility specialist—includes consultations with couples who are having difficulty conceiving or maintaining a pregnancy and couples who carry genetic risks for potential children. While Levine works to identify a reason for their fertility struggles and designs and explains a treatment plan, he also establishes a personal rapport with the couple and offers emotional support.

"The desire for children is such a basic human drive that a failure to conceive wreaks emotional havoc with a couple in a way that other medical problems may not," he said. "As a fertility specialist, I feel I'm responsible for attending to the couple's emotional needs in addition to their medical diagnosis."

Because human reproduction is fraught with weighty *halachic* issues, nearly every form of treatment Levine considers for observant couples involves consequential *halachic* decisions. "While I do not *pasken* [decide Jewish law] for my patients, I help guide their thinking about treatment options in a way that is sensitive to *Halacha*, and I help couples communicate effectively with their *poskim* [deciders of Jewish law] while also explaining my medical recommendations," he said. "Beyond the *halachic* aspects, I also feel responsible for helping couples put their suffering into a *hashkafic* perspective and for giving them spiritual strength."

Levine's dual role as a doctor and rabbi serves him well. He speaks frequently with YU rabbis and *roshei yeshiva*, and many of them refer their students and congregants to him for medical help with fertility issues.

Levine observed that his rabbinic education and spiritual outlook also enhance his treatment of non-observant couples. "They say there are no atheists in the foxhole, and there are few atheists in a fertility office," he said. "For couples suffering from infertility, the desperate yearning to have a child does

not comport with a dry analysis of diagnoses and probabilities. Even a completely nonreligious couple will often drift toward the spiritual realm as they grapple with why they are having trouble. I find that such couples find a sense of security in knowing their doctor is also an ordained rabbi."

Other daily responsibilities include performing reproductive surgery; providing treatment to correct or overcome certain problems that may inhibit a successful conception; and removing eggs from women's ovaries and working with embryos in his laboratory as part of the in vitro fertilization (IVF) process.

For Levine, the best part of the job is changing people's lives by helping them become parents.

"Every time I see tears well up in the eyes of future parents when we hear a brand-new fetal heartbeat on the ultrasound in a long-yearned-for pregnancy, I cannot imagine accomplishing anything greater," he said. "When a couple comes back to visit me in my office with their newborn baby, I feel overwhelmed by the seismic change wrought by successful fertility treatment: a man and woman are now parents, a brand-new human being now exists who will impact humanity and an entirely new branch of the world's family tree has been created."

Levine, who lives in Teaneck, NJ, credits Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Daniel Feldman, leader of his shul, Congregation Ohr Saadya, as a tremendous resource for his *halachic* questions. Levine gives back to YU in various ways: he writes for YU publications such as the "To-Go" series, helped edit Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky's book on *hilchot nidda* [laws of family purity], spoke at YU's Student Medical Ethics Society conference and spent Shabbat as a scholar-in-residence at Stern College.

Levine and his wife, Gila '88S, have five children: Zeeva '12S, Doron '12YUHS, Moreet, Dafna and Leeby. Zeeva, who was part of the S. Daniel Abraham Honors Program at Stern, is also the college's newest calculus instructor, a job she balances with her graduate engineering studies at Columbia University. Doron is currently a student at Yeshiva College.

### ESTIE (BURNS) ROSE: THE GENETIC COUNSELOR

Estie (née Burns) Rose '07S knew the odds were not in her favor when she applied to graduate programs in genetic counseling.

"There was another Stern College student who applied to genetics programs at the same time, and we knew that the chances of both of us getting in were slim," recalled Rose, who cited the competitiveness of the programs, most of which accept fewer than 10 students each year.

To Rose's great relief, both students were accepted.

"I had always planned to be a physician and was taking premed courses, but during my junior year, I made a list of priorities I really wanted out of my career in health care," said Rose, who majored in biology. "Like most people, I wanted to have patient contact, but it had to be in a specialty that was exciting and evolving. I realized that genetic counseling, which I observed at Montefiore as a high school student during a six-week work study program, was actually the perfect combination of both."

Rose shadowed a genetic counselor at NYU Cancer Institute to confirm her passion. "I'm so happy I made that decision, because I absolutely love what I do now," she said. "I deal with patients every day and genetic counseling is one of the fastest-growing, most exciting fields around."

Rose studied at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in an intensive two-year program, with many clinical rotations and a curriculum divided among science, medicine, genetics courses and psychosocial and counseling classes. She was hired to work at Montefiore Medical Center's Reproductive Genetics Clinic in 2009. When YU launched its Program for Jewish Genetic Health (PJGH) the following year, she was recruited to work there, too. She now splits her week between Montefiore and PJGH.

PJGH was created to serve the Jewish community

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Rabbi Dr. Zalman Levine



Estie (Burns) Rose

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and its unique genetic concerns. One of its main objectives is to provide accessible and affordable options for carrier testing for Jewish genetic diseases that could affect offspring, so that couples can ensure the health of their children as much as possible before getting pregnant.

Rose, who championed the cause of genetic screenings as an active member of the Student Medical Ethics Society while she was at Stern, says that based on her experience, approximately one in three Ashkenazi Jewish individuals who undergoes screening is identified as a carrier for at least one Jewish genetic disease. One in 100 couples will be a carrier couple.

“For those couples who are carriers, it’s much better to know prior to conception so that they may take proactive steps, like undergoing preimplantation genetic diagnosis,” said Rose. “When a couple finds out that they are both carriers when they are already pregnant, very difficult decisions, many of which run counter to one’s own ethical and religious beliefs, need to be made in a short time. I hate to think of all the times this heartache could have been avoided.”

As evidence of the program’s commitment to serving the Jewish population’s specific needs as they arise, Rose pointed to the increase in Sephardic patients who have come in for preconception screening. Because they have different genetic concerns than those of Ashkenazi Jews, PJGH is working on a pilot program geared specifically toward screening and educating Sephardic Jews.

But Rose said she is not the first stop for a couple who is experiencing trouble conceiving. “Instead, the first professional that a couple facing infertility should see is a reproductive endocrinologist, who will most likely send the couple to a genetic counselor like me as part of a comprehensive workup,” she said. “I can then look for, and hopefully rule out, potential genetic issues that can affect fertility.”

In addition to her busy work schedule, Rose mentors YU students who are becoming more aware of the unique professional opportunity that genetic counseling provides. She tells students that internships shadowing genetic counselors and volunteering at support groups or crisis hotlines are part of the trifecta of preparing to apply to graduate programs; the other two are good grades and stellar interviewing skills. “I assume that more graduate programs will open, or that the graduate programs in existence will expand their programs, because I see such a huge interest and need in the field now,” said Rose.

Rose is married to Srulie Rose ’07YC, ’10C, an immigration lawyer. They live in North Woodmere with their two sons, Daniel and Rafi.

#### DR. GILA LEITER: THE OB-GYN

Dr. Gila Leiter ’78S, ’83E, is the daughter of Holocaust survivors who settled in Brooklyn. Leiter, a devoted student

with a relentlessly inquisitive mind, hungered for greater intellectual Jewish and secular learning. At age 15, she packed some belongings in a couple of garbage bags and took the train to Midtown, where she would attend Stern College for Women for the next three-and-a-half years.



Dr. Gila Leiter

Leiter knew no one when she first arrived at Stern but her assigned big sister, an upperclassman, helped make the transition easy. She introduced her to a large circle of wonderful friends and to the teachings of Rabbi Saul Berman, who quickly became her mentor and cherished professor.

“Rabbi Berman and I come from similar backgrounds and I was immediately taken with his expertise in *Halacha*,” said Leiter. “I took every class that he taught, and they helped reinforce my passion for Jewish learning.”

Leiter’s deep interest in science was also nurtured at Stern, where Dr. Nathaniel Remes and Dr. Betty Rosoff taught courses in organic chemistry and biochemistry. Leiter majored in biology and also took graduate courses at Einstein and YU’s Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies.

Following graduation, Leiter deferred admission to Einstein and traveled to Israel to study at Midreshet Lindenbaum and the Hadassah Medical Center. When she returned, she was pleased to find many courses and

*shiurim* [lectures] at Einstein on medical ethics, especially those given by Rabbi Dr. Avraham Steinberg, who was taking part in a fellowship there at the time. “It was a wonderful continuity of my learning at Stern,” she recalled.

Leiter fulfilled her residency in obstetrics and gynecology at Mount Sinai Hospital and then started in private practice at Park Avenue Women’s Center, where she has been ever since. Her focus is on delivering babies to a varied clientele and treating women’s health issues such as pelvic pain, dysfunctional uterine bleeding, menopause and osteoporosis.

Leiter has delivered thousands of babies, but for her, the experience never gets old.

“Each pregnancy and each couple experiencing a birth have different dynamics, so the pleasure I get from delivering their babies is really unique each time,” she said. “I enjoy seeing a wide variety of patients—I can be treating a 45-year-old CEO from the Upper East Side and a 20-year-old Hasidic couple at the same time, each with their own fears and concerns. And when the couple has experienced difficult fertility histories or difficult pregnancies, the joy of delivering a healthy baby is indescribable.”

Many of Leiter’s patients are from Hasidic communities. Even with her awareness of the many religious and *halachic* guidelines involved, Leiter said it’s “both a challenge and a lesson” to find solutions for ultra-Orthodox women. “It is a constant learning experience to find a balance between the desires of my patients to obey strict *Halacha* and the recommended care I feel is best for them,” said Leiter, who lectures medical students at Mt. Sinai on cultural and religious sensitivities.

Thanks to Leiter’s long-standing, family-based practice, she often sees multiple generations of patients. “It’s especially gratifying to treat everyone from the grandmother to the mother to the daughter in a given day,” she said. “I’ve delivered many babies of women who I delivered as babies themselves.”

Interestingly, the two largest groups of patients that Leiter treats—Hasidic and urban professional women—have fertile tracks that are almost completely opposite. “Just a few weeks ago, I saw one young Hasidic woman who had her first baby at 18 and then, in the next room, I saw a 45-year-old woman who had just given birth to her first baby after a couple of IVF treatment cycles,” said Leiter, who often counsels those professional women who tend to put off childbearing by freezing their eggs.

Leiter also holds other roles at Mount Sinai, including serving on the faculty of the medical school as an associate clinical professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive science, supervising third-year medical students on their ob-gyn rotations and helping with the admissions process for aspiring students. She is also president of the Attending Association at Mount Sinai, which represents the 3,000 doctors affiliated with Mt. Sinai, and serves as secretary of its medical board.

Even in her spare time, Leiter is active; she is a competitive cyclist, runner and swimmer and frequently competes in triathlons. “I know it’s gotten boring because everyone’s read [Sheryl Sandberg’s] *Lean In* 42 times by now, but you also just have to do the best you can,” she said. “I give it my all when I’m at work and I give it my all when I’m at home.”

A supportive spouse, like her husband, James Lavin, is also helpful.

“Women ask me about the work-life balance all the time, especially after they’ve just had their first baby and are worrying about going back to work,” said Leiter. “I always encourage them to try and do so because I think it’s tremendously beneficial for children to see their mothers working to contribute to the world with something they are passionate about.”

Leiter regularly lectures on gynecological and reproductive health. She also counsels at-risk teens through the

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Ohr Naava organization in Brooklyn and serves on the medical board of Sharsheret, a nonprofit organization that supports Jewish women with breast cancer.

Leiter and her husband live in Manhattan and Teaneck, NJ. They have four daughters: Yonit, an MD/PhD immunology student at Mount Sinai married to Kobi Luria; twins Talia, an intern at the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and recent Fulbright Scholar and Sarah, an associate at Finn Partners in Israel; and Leore, a freshman at Harvard University.

### RABBI ADIR POSY: THE RABBINIC COUNSELOR

Yeshiva University was always in his blood, said Rabbi Adir Posy '04YC, '06R, citing his mother, Faye (née Butler) Posy '69S, a proud alumna and former editor of the *Observer*, Stern College's newspaper. "YU was consistent with what I was looking for: a quality secular education in an environment where I could grow in Torah," said Rabbi Posy.



Rabbi Posy majored in psychology and minored in sociology, planning to pursue a "helping" profession. He threw himself into learning at YU, where he was "most touched by the knowledge that you get back exactly what you put in," he said. He continued pursuing his passion to help others and connect to high-level Jewish learning at

RIETS, and saw the deep and enduring impact rabbis can have through powerful classes and internship experiences, including a stint as a summer rabbi in Botswana. "I was hooked," said Rabbi Posy.

After RIETS, he spent four years in Baltimore, where he taught at Yeshivat Rambam and served at Congregation Shomrei Emunah. At the same time, he commuted for weekends to Los Angeles, where he was hired to work with the young professionals demographic at Congregation Beth Jacob, a 700-family Modern Orthodox shul. He and his family moved to Los Angeles two years later so that Rabbi Posy could work at Beth Jacob full-time. He was soon promoted to associate rabbi, assisting Senior Rabbi Kalman Topp '96SB, '97R, '97A on all aspects of shul leadership, from life cycle events to pastoral counseling and everything in between, while maintaining his original role working with young professionals.

In 2011, Rabbi Posy eagerly signed up for Reproductive Health & Halacha, a 40-hour course launched that year by Rabbi Kenneth Brander, vice president for University and Community Life and the David Mitzner Dean of YU's Center for the Jewish Future, and Machon Puah (an Israel-based organization offering resources to couples experiencing infertility), to counsel rabbis on issues of fertility from both a medical and *halachic* perspective. Over 40 rabbis from three countries came together in person and online to discuss contemporary topics like egg and sperm donation, fertility treatments and the latest methods in contraception.

"I never see myself as a finished product when it comes to my development as a rabbi," said Rabbi Posy. "There is always more to learn and new prisms in which to view my work. This course was especially interesting to me because of my niche in my community and because it was an opportunity to stay connected to YU."

Drawing a distinction between his training at RIETS and the course, he said, "I was able to filter the classes and anecdotes that are covered in the sessions through the lens of the experiences that I have had as a practicing rabbi in the field."

Rabbi Posy regularly uses what he learned from the course. "I'm always referring back to my notes or contacting the course's presenters to apply the information to practical situations in both counseling and *shiurim*," he said. "As in many areas of *Halacha*, the rabbi's unique challenge is to present the *halachic* facts when the emotions and the stakes are very high. The course did a great job preparing me to translate sometimes challenging *halachic* restrictions in a way that displays empathy and loyalty to the *Halacha*."

Rabbi Posy was unaware of the extent to which he would be a couple's advocate, but quickly realized his significant role in the process. "Fertility and other treatments often require the couple to interface with a wide variety of medical and rabbinic resources, and I can help the couple navigate that maze—and sometimes speak on their behalf either to medical professionals or *poskim* and *batei din* [Jewish courts] as appropriate," he said. "The course also allowed me to solidify an 'in' with many world-class professionals and offer access that a congregant might not have had on his or her own."

Another world-class professional and source of support and information for Rabbi Posy is his wife, Dr. Hindi Posy, a practicing high-risk obstetrician on the faculty at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.

"My wife and I have frequent conversations where I benefit from her expertise and in-depth knowledge of women's and reproductive health to better understand something I'm researching," he said. "She also has an added depth of understanding in her role as *rebbeztin*, and we work as a team to be a resource for our community."

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Rabbi Posy is also assistant director of the Orthodox Union's West Coast office, where he serves on the programming and consulting staff of the Department of Synagogue Services. He and Hindi have four sons: Yitzy, Eitan, Ami and Ariel. ■

### CORRECTION

A profile of Gary Rosenblatt printed in the fall '13 issue of *Alumni Today* incorrectly identified several of his family members. His father, Rabbi Morris D. Rosenblatt, z"l, was a 1938 graduate of RIETS, and his son, Avi, and daughter, Tali, did not attend YU high schools.

### Legend for school abbreviations:

**A:** Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration • **BR:** Bernard Revel Graduate School • **BS:** Belfer Graduate School of Science • **BZ:** Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music • **C:** Cardozo School of Law • **E:** Albert Einstein College of Medicine • **F:** Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology • **R:** Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • **S:** Stern College for Women • **SB:** Sy Syms School of Business • **TI:** Teacher's Institute • **W:** Wurzweiler School of Social Work • **YC:** Yeshiva College • **YUHS:** Yeshiva University High Schools

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