



Facing
Breast Cancer
as an Orthodox
Jewish Woman



Sharsheret[®]

Linking Young Jewish Women In Their Fight Against Breast Cancer

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About Sharsheret

Women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer can benefit from a strong support network. Support might come from family members and friends, Rabbis, and community members. For Jewish women concerned about privacy, support can also come from breast cancer organizations and Jewish organizations that offer confidential counseling and services.

Sharsheret is a national organization of Jewish breast cancer survivors. Hebrew for “chain,” Sharsheret pairs those facing breast cancer with volunteers who can share their experiences. Since the organization’s founding in 2001, Sharsheret has received thousands of phone calls from those affected by breast cancer, health care professionals, women’s organizations, Jewish organizations, and others interested in learning more about the important services we provide nationwide.

Sharsheret’s programs respond to the needs of the women we serve and include:

The Link Program, a peer support network connecting young Jewish women newly diagnosed or at high risk of developing breast cancer with others who share similar diagnoses and experiences.

Education and Outreach Programs, including health care symposia addressing the concerns of young women and Jewish women facing breast cancer. Recent events addressed the subjects of breast cancer and fertility, and parenting through cancer treatment. Transcripts of all symposia are available on Sharsheret’s website, www.sharsheret.org.

Quality of Life Programs, including the Busy Box for young parents facing breast cancer and Best Face Forward to address the cosmetic side effects of treatment.

Many women find valuable support and Chizuk in speaking to other women who share their religious background and have experienced breast cancer. Women who participate in Sharsheret’s Link Program can discuss a wide range of feelings and concerns that they may not feel as comfortable addressing with friends and family members.

If you would like more information about participating in Sharsheret’s programs, please call toll-free (866) 474-2774. All phone calls are confidential.

Introduction

A diagnosis of breast cancer can be overwhelming for any woman. For Jewish women, its grip may extend to family, community, dating, fertility, marriage, parenting, and religious life. Though you may confront many of the same issues as other Jewish women facing breast cancer, the concern for privacy in Orthodox communities – particularly surrounding illness – can leave you feeling alone in your journey.

You are not alone. Thousands of Jewish women are living with breast cancer today – juggling medical appointments as they prepare for Shabbos or help their children with homework. Their experiences are reflected in these pages.

This booklet is designed to raise awareness about the issues many Jewish women face in their fight against breast cancer and the resources available to help address those concerns. The booklet will highlight some of the difficulties shared by women who have called **Sharsheret** for information and support. You may identify with some of the issues addressed in this guide, while others may not seem relevant to you.

Whatever your concerns, the Resource Directory at the end of this booklet will help you identify many Jewish organizations and cancer organizations that are available to you as well as to your friends and family members. This booklet is not intended to provide comprehensive medical information. Many of the breast cancer organizations in the Directory can help you locate the information you may need over time. The Directory is organized by subject so that you can easily access the organizations that will be most useful in addressing your particular needs.

Privacy and Confidentiality

“My instincts told me to ‘stay private.’ Cancer can be scary, and I worried that I would be labeled as someone who was untouchable. I would peek through the window of the doctor’s office to see if I knew anyone before I went in. I didn’t want to be pitied and I didn’t want people talking about me. The stress of keeping private was almost worse than being sick. I was so focused on the anxiety of being discovered, that I honestly believe it affected my functioning. I never appreciated people and the power of connecting to others. It is tremendously healing, just having people around you.”

Living in a close-knit community can be a wonderful source of support for those facing illness. For some women, though, breast cancer is an experience they would prefer to approach privately. Others are concerned about the impact of a cancer diagnosis on their place in the community – their own marriage prospects or those of their children. For you, privacy and confidentiality may be a critical component of support. At the same time, you may recognize the benefits of connecting with family members, friends, and others who have shared a similar experience.

There are breast cancer organizations and Jewish organizations that can offer resources and support with the degree of confidentiality you require. If you are concerned about confidentiality, consider asking the organizations you contact to specify the ways in which they can accommodate your privacy needs. Some organizations will offer to mail materials to you in plain white envelopes. Others will allow you to use your first name only or a name of your choice, and will not identify your phone number through Caller ID. A list of support organizations can be found on pages 12-13 of the Resource Directory at the end of this booklet.

Sharsheret is sensitive to the concerns of those who phone in for support or to offer their support, and we are committed to accommodating requests for confidentiality. For those who would prefer not to receive Sharsheret envelopes in the mail, we will arrange to ship materials in plain white envelopes. We will also accommodate requests from those who would prefer not to share their names or to speak with other women in their own community.

Community Support

“It was very difficult to accept help from friends and family. It was very uncomfortable, but ultimately very important. I had the opportunity to feel the love and support that comes from the community. And I knew that no matter how I was feeling, there would always be someone to take care of me and my family. I was not alone, and knowing that was a very powerful feeling.”

As part of a community that values Chesed and outreach, asking for help or accepting assistance can often be difficult for the Jewish woman facing breast cancer. Some women who call Sharsheret describe how uncomfortable it can feel to be on the receiving end of another person's good deeds. Other Jewish women take comfort in being part of a close-knit community that will offer to prepare meals, tend to children, and help with shopping and housekeeping. Understanding that friends and family members feel empowered when they are useful to you can often make their offers of assistance easier to accept.

If you are in need of community support during breast cancer treatment, you can contact the Bikur Cholim and other Jewish organizations in your area. Many of these organizations offer assistance with meals, transportation, hospital visits, child care, counseling, and home care. A list of Bikur Cholim organizations can be found in the Resource Directory on page 17 of this booklet.

Single Jewish Women

“When I was first diagnosed, I panicked: Who will marry me? Will I ever be able to have children? I felt overwhelmed having to manage the breast cancer ordeal without a partner. When you have a spouse, you have a sounding board: someone to discuss treatment decisions and surgery options, someone to care for you when you cannot care for yourself. The diagnosis was extremely difficult for my parents and my family, and I felt I needed to shelter them as well. It made all the difference when I realized that there were other young women out there living with breast cancer, people I could speak with over the telephone, who could help me understand what to expect.”

Breast cancer can be overwhelming for a woman at any stage of life. Facing cancer as a single Jewish woman can raise a series of unique challenges. Some of the single women who have called Sharsheret have done so to discuss:

- Establishing a consistent support system of friends and family members.
- The difficulty of possibly moving back home to be cared for by loved ones.
- When and how to tell a Shadchan or prospective partner that you have or have had cancer.
- Concerns about the impact of breast cancer treatment on their fertility and ability to biologically parent a child (see also page 7).
- Wearing a Shaitel or hat during chemotherapy, generally a sign of marriage in Orthodox communities.
- Support groups sensitive to the unique needs of single women.
- Educational outreach programs in Orthodox communities that focus on the needs of single women.

Sharsheret can connect you with other single Jewish women who have experienced breast cancer or who are concerned about a family history that may increase their risk of developing breast cancer. If you feel you would benefit from speaking with others who have addressed similar concerns, please consider joining Sharsheret's Link Program.

Marriage

“Surgery had a serious impact on my body image. I felt a sense of loss, and it was painful and embarrassing for me. My husband and I both needed to adjust to this significant change in our relationship. Cancer treatment also disrupted the Niddah cycle and entailed yet another adjustment in our marriage. I found it very helpful when we were both able to discuss our feelings openly.”

For Jewish women who are married, a diagnosis of breast cancer can impact relationships at home. Busy with medical appointments and often fatigued as a result of treatment, many women find that they do not have the time or energy that they are accustomed to spending in their relationships with their spouses. Spouses may need to assume additional household or child care responsibilities. Other women express the concern that their husbands require support, but do not have others with whom they feel comfortable discussing breast cancer. Using the Mikvah after surgery or during chemotherapy can be an emotional experience, and changes in your physical appearance at this time can be difficult to discuss.

There are breast cancer organizations and Jewish organizations that can address your concerns about the impact of breast cancer on life with your spouse. Many organizations can provide direct support to your spouse, or provide you with resources that may be helpful to share. Others can provide household help or child care assistance. You can find a list of these organizations on page 17 of the Resource Directory at the end of this booklet. Additionally, Sharsheret can connect you with other Jewish women who experienced the impact of breast cancer on their relationships at home.

Mikvah

“Using the Mikvah for the first time after surgery was an emotional experience. Standing alone in the mirrored and brightly-lit preparation room, I was anxious about the attendant’s reaction upon seeing my scars. I carefully warned her, even though at the time it was difficult for me to discuss my diagnosis. How much more whole I felt after each Mikvah visit, when the gentle attendants treated me just like they always had before.”

The prospect of going to the Mikvah for the first time after surgery or during chemotherapy treatment can be accompanied by anxiety and fear. Some women feel embarrassed and concerned about the Mikvah attendant’s reaction upon seeing their surgical scars or noticing that they have lost their hair during chemotherapy. For other women, using the Mikvah for the first time after diagnosis can mark the beginning of healing.

Many find it helpful to call the Mikvah in advance to speak with the attendant, or to make arrangements for a private appointment. It can also be comforting to recognize that Mikvah attendants are generally sensitive to the needs of all women living with illness. Sharsheret’s Link Program can connect you with other women who shared similar experiences.

Fertility and Pregnancy

“When I was first diagnosed, I was afraid I was going to become infertile. On top of all else, I was worried I would be childless. Before chemotherapy, I visited doctors and asked important questions about the impact of breast cancer treatment on my fertility. I made decisions that I feel good about. It was an extremely stressful time, but I know I did the best research I could. I wasn’t paralyzed.”

The impact of breast cancer on fertility is a critical concern for Jewish women who are single as well as for those who are married. Many women begin treatment with questions about their ability to have children after cancer, particularly after they learn that chemotherapy can induce premature menopause. Others are concerned about the effects of chemotherapy agents on subsequent pregnancies. Finally, women are concerned about the effects of breast cancer treatment during pregnancy or while nursing, and about the effects of pregnancy on the recurrence of breast cancer.

There are cancer organizations and Jewish organizations that can help you understand the impact of breast cancer treatment on fertility and your fertility options beyond breast cancer. For a list of these organizations, please refer to page 14 of the Resource Directory in the back of this booklet. Additionally, Sharsheret’s Link Program can connect you with other Jewish women who faced similar concerns about fertility and pregnancy beyond breast cancer. Questions of Halacha during breast cancer treatment are best addressed by your Rav or Rabbi, who will answer these questions with sensitivity to your unique medical situation.

Parenting

“I had five young daughters when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had images of myself in the hospital, pushing an IV, a sickly person. My big concern was continuing my energetic lifestyle, being there for homework, eating dinner together, giving them their baths. I didn’t know what to tell my children, and I worried about how my illness and treatment would affect their lives. Ultimately, I put a lot of effort into keeping their lives normal. Although there were days I felt very tired, I made it my focus to save my energy for the Mommy moments.”

Women with children often seek information about parenting during breast cancer. Some women seek guidance about discussing breast cancer with children of all ages, particularly those with large families. Other Jewish women who are eager to keep their diagnosis private seek guidance in addressing the needs of their children through cancer treatment and beyond.

There are cancer organizations that can help you determine the best ways to approach cancer with your family, and Jewish organizations that can provide family counseling and guidance. For a list of these organizations, please refer to page 15 of the Resource Directory in the back of this booklet.

Additionally, Sharsheret’s Busy Box Program is a unique resource designed to meet the needs of parents with young children facing breast cancer. Each Busy Box includes educational resources for parents as well as a starter kit of games and activities to keep your children occupied while you are resting or attending an appointment. You can also request a transcript of Sharsheret’s symposium, “How Do We Care for Our Children?,” available online at www.sharsheret.org or by telephone.

Family History

“My grandmother and aunt were both diagnosed with breast cancer. When I was diagnosed, I wanted to understand more about hereditary breast cancer so that I could determine the best treatment plan for me. Then I began to worry about my sisters and my daughters. With the information I have gathered, I can begin to make important decisions for my family.”

Many Jewish women contact Sharsheret with concerns about a history of breast cancer or ovarian cancer in their family. No study to date has shown that breast cancer is more common in Jewish women than in the population at large. However, more Jewish women carry genetic alterations that may increase the likelihood that they will develop breast cancer or ovarian cancer in their lifetime. Specifically, 1 in 40 Jewish women of Ashkenazi descent carry an alteration in what are referred to as the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, compared to 1 in 345 women in the general population who carry an alteration in those genes. These alterations can be passed from generation to generation, from both mothers and fathers. And researchers are beginning to study the hereditary nature of breast cancer in families of Sephardi descent as well. While not all women who carry an altered gene will develop breast cancer, recent studies suggest that there may be as high as an 82% chance that someone who carries an altered gene will develop breast cancer by the age of 70.

Genetic counselors, who are specialized health care professionals, can help you understand your family history and its impact, if any, on your surgery and treatment decisions. They can also help you determine if you are a good candidate for genetic testing, which is administered using a quick blood test. You can find a list of resources on this subject in the Resource Directory on page 15 of this booklet.

Sharsheret's Link Program can connect you with other Jewish women who have a family history of breast cancer. You can also request a copy of the Sharsheret booklet, "Breast Cancer Genetics and the Jewish Woman," online at www.sharsheret.org or by telephone. Questions of Halacha related to surgery and treatment decisions are best addressed by your Rav or Rabbi, who will answer these questions with sensitivity to your unique medical situation.

Jewish Law

“I had many questions of Halacha when preparing for surgery and reconstruction, and the impact of breast cancer on my ability to have children. The Rav was very sensitive to all of my concerns.”

As a Jewish woman living with breast cancer, you may face a number of questions of Halacha, or Jewish law, during the course of your treatment. These questions may include:

- How do I arrange a hospital stay or treatment appointment that is to take place on Shabbos or Yom Tov?
- What are the Halachic implications of tattooing, when done as part of breast reconstruction?
- How can I ensure the appropriate degree of Tznius as relates to head-covering and hospital gowns during a hospital stay?
- How do I prepare to return to the Mikvah after surgery or during chemotherapy?
- When should I have my name placed on or removed from a list of those for whom Tehillim is recited?

Sharsheret’s Link Program can connect you with other women who experienced some of the same concerns during breast cancer treatment. Questions of Halacha during or beyond breast cancer treatment are best addressed by your Rav or Rabbi, who will answer these questions with sensitivity to your unique medical situation.

Glossary of Terms

Bikur Cholim	An organization providing care for the ill and infirm
Chesed	Acts of kindness and compassion
Chizuk	Emotional and spiritual support
Halacha/ic	Jewish law
Mikvah	Ritual bath
Niddah	Jewish laws of family purity
Rav	Rabbi
Shabbos	The Sabbath, a day of rest
Shadchan	One who is responsible for arranging dates; a matchmaker
Shaitel	Wig
Sharsheret	Chain
Tehillim	Psalms
Tznius	Modesty
Yom Tov	Jewish holiday

Resource Directory

Jewish Organizations Addressing Breast Cancer

Sharsheret

PO Box 3245

Teaneck, NJ 07666

www.sharsheret.org

E-mail: info@sharsheret.org

Toll-Free: (866) 474-2774

Chai Lifeline

(800) 343-2527

www.chailifeline.org

Partners in Health/Bikur Cholim

(845) 425-0887

www.bikurcholim.org

Reach: A Support Group for Orthodox Women in New York

(718) 435-5700

Cancer Organizations

American Cancer Society

(800) ACS-2345

www.cancer.org

CancerCare

(800) 813-HOPE

www.cancercare.org

Cancer Hope Network

(877) HOPE-NET

www.cancerhopenetwork.org

National Cancer Institute

(800) 4-CANCER

www.nci.nih.gov

The Wellness Community

(888) 793-WELL

www.thewellnesscommunity.org

Breast Cancer Organizations

Living Beyond Breast Cancer

(888) 753-5222

www.lbbc.org

National Breast Cancer Coalition

(800) 622-2838

www.natlbcc.org

The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation

1.800 I'M AWARE®

www.komen.org

Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization

(800) 221-2141

www.y-me.org

For Young Women Facing Breast Cancer

Sharsheret

(866) 474-2774

www.sharsheret.org

The Big Bam

(212) 595-6525

www.bigbam.com

Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults

(888) 393-FUND

www.ulmanfund.org

Young Survival Coalition

(212) 206-6610

www.youngsurvival.org

Young Survivors in Action (Program of the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition)

(302) 778-1102

www.debreastcancer.org

Managing Cosmetic Side Effects

Best Face Forward (A Sharsheret Program)

(866) 474-2774

www.sharsheret.org

Lashes for Life

(800) 452-9802

Look Good Feel Better

(800) 395-LOOK

www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org

Shop Well with You

(212) 226-0466

www.shopwellwithyou.org

“TLC” (American Cancer Society Catalog)

(800) 850-9445

www.tlccatalog.org

Facing the Mirror with Cancer

(312) 214-3545

www.facingthemirror.org

Fertility and Pregnancy

A T.I.M.E (Torah Infertility Medium of Exchange)

(718) 437-7110

www.atime.org

Fertile Hope

(888) 994-HOPE

www.fertilehope.org

Pregnant with Cancer Support Network

(800) 743-4471

www.pregnantwithcancer.org

For Family and Friends

Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies

(800) 634-7346

www.ajfca.org

Busy Box (A Sharsheret Program)

(866) 474-2774

www.sharsheret.org

Gilda's Club

(888) GILDA-4-U

www.gildasclub.org

Kids Konnected

(800) 899-2866

www.kidskonnected.org

Men Against Breast Cancer

(866) 547-6222

www.menagainstbreastcancer.org

Mothers Supporting Daughters with Breast Cancer

(410) 778-1982

www.mothersdaughters.org

Physician Referral Services

ECHO Institute for Health

(845) 425-9750

(718) 859-9800

Ezra LeMarpeh

(718) 435-9788

Organizations Addressing Family History

FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered

(866) 824-7475

www.facingourrisk.org

National Society of Genetic Counselors

(610) 872-7608

www.nsgc.org

Financial Assistance

CancerCare

(800) 813-HOPE

www.cancercares.org

Corporate Angel Network (travel)

(866) 328-1313

www.corpangelnetwork.org

Zichron Shlome Refuah Fund

(718) 438-9355

www.zsrf.org

Insurance Assistance

Patient Advocate Foundation

(800) 532-5274

www.patientadvocate.org

Rofeh Cholim Cancer Society

(718) 792-2002

www.rccscancersociety.org

New York Resources

Bikur Cholim Organizations

Bobov Pasha Elias Bikur Cholim

(718) 871-8606

Bikur Cholim of Boro Park

(718) 438-2020

Chesed of New Square and Greater Rockland

(845) 354-2627

Crown Heights - Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Bikur Cholim

(718) 756-0451

Flatbush Bikur Cholim

Pupa Bikur Cholim

(718) 387-1916

Rivka Laufer Bikur Cholim

(718) 851-6920

Sephardic Bikur Cholim

(718) 787-1100

Satmar Bikur Cholim

(718) 851-9329 - Boro Park

(845) 783-8469 - Monroe

(718) 387-7749 - Williamsburg

(718) 387-0546 - Williamsburg (Bus to NYC hospitals)

(718) 252-4878 - Flatbush

(718) 253-3119 - Flatbush (Bus to NYC hospitals)

Viener Bikur Cholim

(718) 387-8729

Rockland County Bikur Cholim

(845) 425-7877

Washington Heights Bikur Cholim

(212) 927-0110

Local Breast Cancer Organizations

(For a complete national listing, please see pages 12-13 of the Resource Directory)

Adelphi NY Statewide Breast Cancer Hotline and Support Program

(800) 877-8077

www.adelphi.edu/nysbreastcancer

The Greater NYC Affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation

(212) 560-9590

www.komennyc.org

SHARE (Self-Help for Women with Breast or Ovarian Cancer)

(866) 891-2392

www.sharecancersupport.org

Screening and Mammography

American Cancer Society

Breast Health Partnership

(718) 237-7851

Women's Health Partnership

(845) 368-1252

Nachas Healthnet

(718) 436-7373

Partners In Health/Bikur Cholim

(845) 425-7877

www.bikurcholim.org

The information contained in this booklet is intended to provide broad knowledge of available breast cancer resources and should not be construed as an endorsement of any health care professional, organization, or program mentioned in the Resource Directory. All medical information should be discussed with a health care professional.

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