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Panel asks if GMOs are safe, ethical

Cara Stern, Staff Reporter, Friday, February 7, 2014

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Panelists on the issues involved with the use of GMOs include, from left, Rabbi Jordan Helfman, Shari Golberg (moderator) and Ziyaad Mia. [Cara Stern photo]

TORONTO — As humans, we can alter genetic codes, but does that mean we should do it? That question was at the heart of the topic addressed by the panel on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) at a recent conference in Toronto.

The panel on “Canola, Corn, Soy... OY! A Multi-Faith and Multi-Sector Response to Genetically Modified Foods” took place at the Shoresh Food Conference Feb. 2 at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre. It brought together a representative from Judaism, Islam and Christianity, who spoke of how each group approaches the question of GMOs.

“Do we have the right to go into genetic code and play around and create whatever we want to create?” Rabbi Jordan Helfman asked, setting up what turned out to be a central component in determining the

religious arguments for and against the procedure. Many of the arguments against GMOs are in opposition to the actions of agricultural biotechnology corporation Monsanto. The company has created RoundUp, a herbicide used to kill weeds. It has also genetically modified crops to be resistant to this herbicide.

While several major science organizations have concluded that GMOs aren't any riskier than other forms of plant-breeding technologies, many people are not convinced. Opponents of GMOs are sometimes concerned about how the herbicides could affect those who eat GMOs, or how the technology affects independent farmers. Others focus specifically on the moral argument presented by Rabbi Helfman.

One of the major objections to the use of GMOs is that they do not need to be labelled in Canada, said panellist Lucy Sharratt from the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network, which describes itself as a group that provides information to governments for policy development.

She argued that there isn't enough scientific evidence to show that GMOs are safe for consumption. She said the public was not consulted when GMOs were brought into Canada.

“Many scientists... would argue this is an immature technology that we're applying in our food,” she said, explaining that it is particularly prevalent in corn, canola, soy and sugar beets. “The risk evaluation for this technology excludes farmers and religious communities.”

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There is no consensus among the religious communities in determining where GMOs fit into religious laws.

Rabbi Helfman outlined numerous issues with GMOs in Jewish law, and described why one of the key components in determining the Jewish viewpoint has to do with kashrut.

“Whenever we talk about genetically modified foods, pigs always come up in Judaism,” he said, explaining that the jury is out on whether pigs could become kosher if it were possible to find the genetic code that causes split hooves, for example.

He said one concern is that if a pig gene is used to alter the genetic code of produce or another animal, “does that pig gene make this item treif?” He then explained that Jewish law might allow it if the code comprises only a miniscule portion of a full pig’s genetic code.

Ziyaad Mia, a lawyer who spoke on the Muslim philosophy on GMOs, said Muslims struggle with the debate in much the same way as Jews in terms of whether they could be considered halal.

He said the Qur’an prohibits disruption of the fundamental balance of the world. Unlike in Judaism, human beings are not given dominion over the earth in Islam, he explained, adding that his concern is primarily with animal welfare.

“We need to look at them as subjects, not objects,” he said. “I’m a little uncomfortable with GMOs because we’re looking at everything as an instrument.”

Catherine Wright, a PhD candidate in Christian ethics at the University of Toronto, shared the Christian thoughts on GMOs, and was the most decisive of the religious representatives on the issue.

“Genetic engineering messes with life, it messes with truth, it messes with our common inheritance, it messes with justice, it messes with health... and relationships,” she said.

All three discussed whether GMOs are harmful or beneficial to the world. Proponents of the technology often argue that it would help eradicate hunger by increasing the yield of food. However, the panellists questioned the validity of this theory.

“Instead of feeding the world, it will exacerbate hunger and malnutrition,” Wright said. “It’s about power and profit.”

Rabbi Helfman said he, as well as many other rabbis, do not feel qualified to determine the impact of GMOs on the world. He questioned the way corporations have patented GMO crops, leading to the question of whether it’s right to patent a living organism. However, he said it would be bad to say it is categorically wrong, and each seed must be examined on its own.

But Mia said it’s a little clearer in Islam, though Muslim experts have not come to a definitive conclusion.

“Islam would say we shouldn’t allow ownership of things that are essential to life,” he said, though he added that if GMOs can fight hunger, they might be sanctioned in Islam.

However, he said that what’s most important in his mind is examining the reasons why companies produce GMOs.

“Whenever there is money to be made, I get suspicious and dig a little deeper,” he said.

Given that companies don’t need to label GMOs, Sharratt said those who are concerned with the technology and how it fits into religious ethics can only definitively avoid it by buying organic.

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