



## Comment

### Donate Organs

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*Special to the Jewish Times*

AUGUST 13, 2004

Until a couple of years ago, I gave organ transplantation little thought. As an Orthodox Jew, I just assumed it was against Jewish law. After all, my father the rabbi often spoke about autopsies being forbidden because you can't mutilate bodies. So I wrote off transplantation as a form of mutilation.

But now transplantation is a thriving specialty, and has meant a second chance at life for thousands. As outreach coordinator for the Comprehensive Transplant Center at Johns Hopkins, I saw the faces of those numbers. I witnessed jubilation when an organ became available (bittersweet, because someone had to die first).

Many recipients not only recovered well, but went on to run marathons or returned to active careers. Unfortunately, I also heard about liver, kidney and heart patients who didn't get that chance. They were among the 17 people who die every day awaiting an organ; 86,000 Americans are currently on organ waitlists.

Yet, I was troubled religiously. I'd become an instant advocate for organ transplantation without really knowing the *halachic* view. Surely, I thought, Jews can be recipients if it prolongs their lives, but are we allowed to be donors? An Internet search led me to Robby Berman's Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS).

While a journalist in Israel, Mr. Berman noted how many Israelis died waiting for organs (1,000 are currently listed). A Yeshiva University graduate, Mr. Berman studied halachic organ donation in depth and learned that saving a life in Judaism is not only permitted, it's mandated. And organ donation - from a living or deceased donor - saves lives. Lacking those organs, more than 100 Israelis and 5,000 Americans die needlessly every year, he says.

The trouble: Most rabbis allow living kidney donations, but can't

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reach consensus about donation from deceased and brain-dead donors. Some halachic authorities argue brainstem death (irreversible cessation of brainstem function but with heartbeat intact) ends a person's life; others say it doesn't. HODS does not take an official position on brainstem death. Their Web site elucidates different opinions on the halachic definition of death and allows card-carrying members to check off their preference(s) on the back of the card - one for irreversible cessation of brainstem function, the other for heartbeat cessation. Many rabbis pictured on the HODS site - including mainstream Orthodox leaders - champion Berman's efforts and proudly display their HODS donor cards.

Unfortunately, the Orthodox Union, which came out strongly in favor of stem cell research, has remained silent about organ donation. While the Rabbinical Council of America endorsed it 15 years ago, they have never initiated any educational initiatives to change Jewish perceptions.

"People are dying and rabbis are playing politics," Mr. Berman told me. Indeed, some rabbis don't endorse organ donation, but plenty do. These include more than 50 prominent Orthodox rabbis, including chief rabbis in Israel. What bothers Mr. Berman most is that certain rabbis feel they can't touch this issue unless there's a unified opinion. But rarely is there unanimity on halachic issues, he observes.

I urge rabbis of all denominations, particularly Orthodoxy, to announce their positions on organ donation. Once upon a time we didn't know enough to make an informed halachic decision. I've since learned (from leading halachic authorities) that organ transplantation from deceased donors is not considered mutilation, if it prolongs others' lives.

If you're not convinced it does, talk to the Flatows. Their 20-year-old daughter Alisa, an American Orthodox seminary student, died in a Jerusalem suicide bombing. She didn't die in vain. Four people are alive today because she and her family made the decision to donate all of her organs. Many other Orthodox families have done the same.

It's time to extend the work of our Creator, who granted us the wisdom to perform successful transplants. Visit [www.hods.org](http://www.hods.org) and draw your own conclusions.

*Judy Fruchter Minkove, assistant director of publications for Johns Hopkins Medicine's Office of Corporate Communications, writes a transplant newsletter for physicians.*

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