

A bar mitzvah for just one body part

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TORONTO – At age 64, Frank Bialystok is celebrating a bar mitzvah – even if it's for only one body part.

"My wife Ellen said a long time ago, 'When your liver turns 13, we're going to have a bar mitzvah,'" he said.

Bialystok still remembers his liver's "birth," on April 30, 1998.

It all began the night before, when he was watching the Los Angeles Lakers in the first round of the NBA playoffs. Bialystok had been suffering from hepatitis C for about 10 years, and his situation began to deteriorate in January.

"At the end it was really bad," he said, citing tremendous fatigue, jaundice, associated kidney and blood disease, blackened legs and weight loss that reduced him to about 140 pounds on his almost-six-foot frame.

Despite his physical challenges, he had taught a course that semester at York University and was still driving ("incredibly," he said).

Still, he was on the waiting list for a liver and primed for the transplant. When the hospital called at 11 p.m. to break the good news and to ask him to be there within an hour and a half, he figured that he could still catch a few more minutes of the basketball game. His family had other ideas, though, and he departed for the hospital soon after. He was being operated on by noon the next day and was the proud owner of a new liver about 10 hours later.

About a year ago, Bialystok said, he and his wife began to think about her bar mitzvah wish. They weren't certain that it actually could be done – as far as they know, this is the first such event – but both the president of their synagogue, Congregation Darchei Noam, and its Rabbi Tina Grimberg have been "unbelievably supportive."

On the Sabbath before Passover, Bialystok rose in the synagogue and read his Maftir and Haftarah like any bar mitzvah boy. Rabbi Grimberg also addressed the congregation at the celebration, which coincided with National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week.

"I want to bring attention to the understanding amongst Jews that to donate an organ does not violate Halacha [Jewish law], as many – Orthodox and otherwise – feel."

Bialystok pointed to Rabbi Reuven Bulka, the Orthodox chair of the Trillium Gift of Life Network, which is responsible for organ and tissue donation in Ontario, as a supporter of the cause.

The use of cadavers as donors for many body parts relies on a modern definition of death – often called "brain death." Some Orthodox rabbis have balked at using this guideline, claiming that traditional sources require the cessation of breathing and heartbeats. The controversy flared anew in the past year, as the Rabbinical Council of America, the leading organization of Modern Orthodox rabbis in North America, seemed to reconsider its previous position, which had endorsed brain death. Activists on both sides have argued the point ever since.

Aside from the public message that Bialystok wanted to send, he simply wanted to celebrate how far he has come in the most natural and meaningful way.

"It's my way of connecting with my people, my heritage. I'm the sole child of survivors [his father died of liver disease, probably of hepatitis C, but it went undetected]. I'm a grandfather now, and my grandfathers were murdered [in the Holocaust]."

Born in Poland just after the Holocaust, the Toronto scholar teaches at University College at the University of Toronto and is the chair of Canadian Jewish Congress (Ontario Region). He is also a member of the Hepatitis C Research and Training Program and is on the board of the Canadian Liver Foundation.

Reached in the days leading up to the event, Bialystok's emotions were all over the place.

"I'm anxious, tremendously excited, reflective – thinking about the family that I've lost; about my first granddaughter [not his first grandchild, but his first granddaughter, who was recently born and named Rebecca after his mother, who died last year. The festivities also celebrated the baby's birth]."

Like many bar mitzvah boys, Bialystok rehearsed before the big day, but the Wednesday afternoon gathering also functioned as the recording session for a short documentary about the event. As the supply for organs continues to lag behind the need, Bialystok and Trillium realize the educational value of his experience and, he said, schools might use the film.

With all of the important elements of the celebration under control, Bialystok's guests had only one concern: What present do you buy for someone celebrating his "liver bar mitzvah?"

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