

Interfaith: Organ donations not only saves lives, it keeps commandments

Staff Reports

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A few weeks ago, we who live in Israel read about Jewish Israelis Sarit and Avi Naor, who donated a kidney from their son Noam to a 10-year-old Muslim boy, Yakoub Ibhisad, who has been on dialysis for seven years. Noam suffered irreversible lower-brain death after falling from a fourth-story window in his home to the second floor below. The Naor family who are religiously observant consulted with their rabbi who agreed with their decision to donate their son's kidney. Only one of their son's kidneys was fit to be donated.

In recent years, Jewish law has come to find ways to incorporate medical advances without compromising Jewish values. Though it is critically important to have a medically knowledgeable rabbi determine whether death has occurred which would then allow organ transplantation, it is now a positive precept to donate a person's organ upon death of the donor, when it can immediately benefit a living person in need of that organ.

There are still too many people who believe that it is a desecration of our God-created human body to donate organs to another. Yet the overwhelming majority of knowledgeable rabbis agree that Jewish law supports organ donation under the circumstances discussed above and that it is only positive when a patient can live his or her life more fully as a consequence of such a donation. The Halachic Organ Donor Society is an organization that encourages Jews to become organ donors in accordance with Jewish law.

This discussion is critically important in light of the fact that there are so many patients in need of organs, cornea and skin and tissue transplants who never receive these life enhancers because of deep misunderstandings and fear by families of those who could be donors.

According to OrganDonor.gov in the U.S. alone, there are currently close to 120,000 people waiting for an organ, 18 people die each day waiting for an organ and one organ donor can save up to eight lives.

Saving a life — in Hebrew *pikuach nefesh* — is a pre-eminent commandment that overrides almost all prohibitions in Jewish law. Saving a life is like saving an entire world, since according to the torah we are all descended from the first person, Adam. Therefore, it is understood that saving a life overrides any concerns regarding the proper treatment of a cadaver and therefore organ donation is a *mitzvah*, positive commandment, in Jewish law.

The message though, of course, is not only for Jews, but for all of us. When we fill out the California driver's license organ donor card or advance directive, we are making a positive move that in a God-forbid situation we will enable a living person to benefit from an organ we can no longer use.

We honor Avi and Sarit Naor whose son Noam's kidney helped the quality of life of Yakoub Ibhissad. May we be blessed with life and health, however if we are faced with a life-altering situation may we too be able to bless another with life and health.

Gershon Weissman is rabbi emeritus of The New Shul of the Conejo. He now resides in Jerusalem, Israel with his wife Sheva, where they met, fell in love and married 41 years ago. They joined two of their three children and six of their seven grandchildren who also live in Israel. Weissman can be reached at rabbiweissman@thenewshulconejo.org. The Conejo Valley Interfaith Association meets monthly and welcomes clergy and representatives of all religious faiths.



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