

## It's All in the Cards

WITH HIS NONPROFIT, BERMAN RECRUITS JEWISH ORGAN DONORS

DURING ORIENTATION LAST SUMMER, most students mingled and nibbled snacks. Not Robby Berman MPA 2005. He spent the time talking on his cell phone trying to raise money and make matches for his organ donation program.

Berman is always on call to fulfill his mission. An Orthodox Jew, he is determined to correct what he believes are misconceptions about Jewish law that have given the community one of the lowest organ donation rates in the world. He notes that in Israel only 4 percent of the population has organ donor cards compared with about 30 percent in the United States and Western Europe.

To change that, Berman created the Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS) in December 2001. Its goal is to educate Jews that organ donation is not forbidden by Jewish law, as many people believe. In fact, he argues, it's actually required if it can save someone's life. So far, Berman's efforts through HODS have already saved two lives when he found organ donations for a 10-year old Israeli boy and a mother from Lawrence, New York. He's also educated thousands of people by lecturing in synagogues, yeshivas, Jewish community centers, and day schools in the United States, Canada, England, Israel, Greece, and Italy.

"The truth is that [the lack of] organ donations is really a growing plague," he says, in his donated office on Manhattan's West Side. "Ten years ago there were 25,000 people waiting for organs; today there are 85,000 people waiting for organs. Every year 6,500 Americans die — that's 17 Americans every day who die waiting for an organ."

Born and raised in New York, Berman graduated in 1988 from Yeshiva University. He then moved to Israel, became a

citizen, and joined the army. After he finished his service, he became a stand-up comic, a seemingly unlikely venture for this tall, intensely earnest man in jeans and a yarmulke. That's at least until you catch his dry understated wit.

"I can't really say I wanted to be a comic. I kind of had to be," he says. "It was a need, a need to make people laugh, a need to be the center of attention."

But Berman soon found he wanted much more than a laugh out of life. He got involved in some business ventures and then became a freelance journalist. But restlessness continued to grip him. In his spare time and with the help of his nephew he invented a geography game called "Globali." Sales took off in



Israel and then in this country. Eventually, an international publisher bought the license from him. That left him with enough money to do what he really wanted.

"After being a journalist for a couple of years, I wanted to stop writing about people doing good deeds and wanted to do a good deed, to participate in it instead of observing," he says.



He had no personal experience with organ donation, and neither did any of his friends or family. He just read an article one day about people who die from organ failure and thought, "That's pretty pathetic. When people die from cancer, they die because there's no cure for that specific type of cancer. But when they die from organ failure, that's a real tragedy, because there happens to be a cure for organ failure: It's called organ transplantation."

With enough money to get started and promise of a \$50,000 donation by an anonymous donor, Berman started HODS. Halachic refers to Jewish law, which prioritizes saving life, he says.

"In Jewish law we have 613 commandments. Three of those commandments have to do with a corpse: You can't get a benefit from a dead body, you can't cut into a dead body, and you can't delay burial of a dead body," he says. "These three commandments would clearly contraindicate organ donation. But when you have an opportunity to save someone else's life, not only are you allowed to violate these commandments, you are commanded to violate them."

So far, almost 2,000 people have HODS organ donor cards, including 77 Orthodox rabbis. That's more than three times the

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number from just a year ago. More than 60 articles have been written about HODS and its work, and now a major Jewish organization is considering taking over the work. Indeed, Berman believes that critical mass has now been reached so that a Jewish organ donation movement can take hold nationally.

"But one of the biggest problems is that families don't discuss this issue until it's too late, until they get to the hospital and find out a loved one was in a car accident," he says. "Then they're too emotional, they're not thinking straight. The time to have the conversation is now."

Berman hopes that conversation ends with action. You can reach him to get an organ donation card at [hods.org](http://hods.org). — AM