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Askanim And Machers: The Jewish Press Community Profile

By: Tova Stulman
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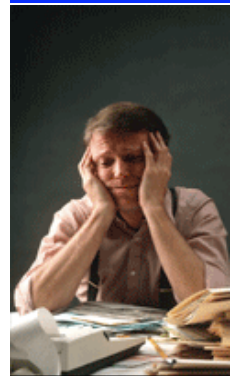
No Greater Honor A Profile Of Robby Berman And Halachic Organ Donations

In December 2001, an American journalist living in Israel quit his writing job and started an organization called the Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS). Although Robby Berman had essentially no experience running a not-for-profit, today HODS is gaining international recognition for its important message and mission, dispelling Jewish presuppositions about the halachic validity of organ donation.

A graduate of Yeshivat HaKotel, Gruss Kollel, and Yeshiva University, Berman made aliyah in 1989, temporarily returning to America to earn an MBA from Baruch College and Master's of Public Administration from Harvard University. Drawn to social activism, he had been planning a campaign to decrease the rate of Israeli smokers. But when he learned about the dire need for organ donation in Israel, he decided to devote his time to raising awareness about the *halachot* and facts involved in this crucial yet much-ignored issue. "Every year, 100 Israelis die needlessly because people misunderstand the *halachot* involved in organ donation," says Berman, lending urgency to educating Jews about this great misconception.

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Before HODS, few in the Orthodox community campaigned in favor of organ donation, even though many had received organ donations, and some of them even lectured about the topic. Nevertheless, these attempts were too sporadic to really make an impact. “You can’t begin a movement to change a deeply-rooted taboo by delivering a lecture once a year,” says Berman. “It needs to be a full-time job.” And a full-time job it became. As the director of HODS, and one of only two full-time employees, Berman does everything from giving lectures to licking stamps. Volunteers are always needed.

“Family members of potential organ recipients often volunteer their time, but once they get an organ they usually stop volunteering,” Berman says. Besides the need for volunteers, HODS also has a constant need for funding. Berman admits that it is hard to raise funds from local federations. “They [the organizations] hear the name of the organization,” says Berman, “and are immediately turned off by the word ‘Halachah’ in it. They think we only care about Orthodox Jews. This is not true.” The society did receive financial support from a not-for-profit organization called Bikkurim, an organization based in New York that is dedicated to aiding Jewish social entrepreneurs. Also, generous contributors have donated office space, but funding remains sparse.

Berman travels tirelessly throughout North America and Israel speaking to congregations and communities. Families of organ donors often invite him to speak at their loved one’s *shloshim*, sponsoring his trip. “I’ve given more than 150 lectures, and I’ve been met with an overwhelmingly positive response,” Berman notes, but “it is difficult to change such a deep-rooted taboo.” He adds that it may take years to reverse widely-held negative feelings about organ donation in the Orthodox community.

Most commonly, Jews hold fast to the belief that they cannot be considered for Jewish burial if their bodies are not intact, from the biblical prohibition against desecrating a dead body. Additionally, the Torah commands 1) that the burial cannot be delayed once death occurs, and 2) that receiving benefit from a dead body is not permitted. All of these considerations have deterred many Jews from considering the option of organ donation.

However, many rabbis hold that the mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh* supercedes these prohibitions, and the multitudes of rabbinic authorities who have officially stated their support for organ donation reads like a who’s who list of eminent rabbis. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Rabbi Norman Lamm, and Rabbi Moshe Tendler have all spoken out about the obligation of organ donation if it provides the opportunity to save a life, with Rav Tendler having publicly stated that “there is no greater honor” than to be an organ donor. Most of these rabbis have proudly displayed their support for the cause by registering for HODS cards – the official cards issued by the society that announce its owner’s wishes to donate his or her organs after death – and appearing in ads featuring their faces on the cards.

To the many Orthodox Jews who are fearful of the possibility that their organs could go to medical research rather than to urgent, life-saving operations, Berman points to the first line of the card which clearly states that donated organs are for transplant only, and not research. “Additionally, the donor card allows people to choose between two options,” he says. “Organ donation in the event of



either brainstem death or the cessation of heartbeat. The latter is the more widely held belief by rabbis, of when death takes place.” Berman is very clear about the mission of the organization. “We explain what the halachic issues are, as well as consult with rabbinic authorities,” explains Berman, “but the organization itself does not issue *p’sak halachah*.”

This movement is definitely picking up steam. Currently, thousands of members carry the HODS card. In 2001, there were three rabbis who possessed HODS cards; today, there are 140 and counting. On September 10, Yeshiva University’s Undergraduate Medical Ethics Society held a conference concerning organ donation, with a variety of rabbinic speakers, many of whom are members of HODS. In addition, on November 15 and 16, at Einstein Medical School, HODS is hosting a two-day seminar for rabbis and physicians only, which Berman calls “the first of its kind.” Listed among the speakers are Rabbi Dr. Moshe Halperin, the director of the Schlesinger Institute for Medical-Halachic Research, and Rabbi Shabtai Rappaport, who was an assistant of Rav Moshe Feinstein. The lecture will take place over two days. The first is devoted to educating rabbis about the medical aspects involved in organ donations, giving them hands-on experience with a ventilator and transcranial Doppler. The second day will allow the rabbis and doctors to hear from experts in the field how Halachah interprets these medical realities.

Despite the successful attempts at educating many Jews about the permissibility of organ donation, many remain uninformed or unyielding, clinging to superstitions and fallacies about the subject. “People have a right not to be organ donors so long as their decision is based on knowledge and not a knee-jerk reaction relying upon superstitions. It’s too late to learn about it in the hospital. You don’t have the mind for it when you are told your loved one has just died.” Berman is less forgiving when it comes to taking organs. “When Jews accept organs when they are in need of them, but the family refuses to donate when asked...where is the justice; where is the sense of social responsibility and fairness in that?” Berman emphatically questions.



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