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Reconciling Religious Tenets to Save Lives

By John Kelly

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This morning at a Rosh Hashanah service in Reston, *Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk* will pit two tenets central to Jewish religious thought against each other. In this corner: respect for the dead. In that corner: the fundamental importance of life.

Joseph Blumberg knows exactly where he comes down on the debate.

Last Rosh Hoshanah, the 49-year-old computer consultant from Herndon was in intensive care at [Minnesota's Mayo Clinic](#). His liver was failing, strangled by a particularly nasty form of cancer called cholangiocarcinoma.

"The standard treatment is basically cut, burn and poison," Joseph said. But surgery, radiation and chemotherapy had done little to halt the disease's advance. What Joseph needed was a new liver.

It's here where Joseph could have run up against a damaging misconception. And that misconception is the reason Rabbi Nosanchuk, of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation, was so intent on making Joseph part of this morning's service. There is a belief among some Jews, as well as followers of other faiths, that organ donation is against their religion.

Said Rabbi Nosanchuk: "We place a premium in Jewish tradition on how we care for a person's body after their death and before burial. That's why Judaism encourages you to bury the body as quickly as possible, within limitation, and in general seeks to protect both the dignity and the physicality of that body." It's called *kavod ha-met*: to respect or honor the deceased.

Those who follow a strict interpretation of Jewish law might see organ donation as a desecration, a disrespectful sundering of the body. It's beliefs such as these that *Cindy Speas*, director of community affairs at the Washington Regional Transplant Community, is trying to change.

"Our standard response is that it may be a personal decision [not to be an organ donor], but in point of fact every major Eastern or Western religion except for Shintoism supports donation as the ultimate act of charity or love," she said.

Cindy ticked off the dispiriting mathematics confronted by those who work in the transplant field: 100,000 people across the United States need transplants at any one time, including 2,000 in our area. Every day across the country, 18 people die awaiting the organs that might save their lives.

The problem isn't strictly one of religion. Minority communities of all sorts are underrepresented on donor rolls, but the donation rate must be improved across the board. More than 90 percent of Americans say they would donate, but only about 70 percent of the people who could donate actually do.

"That's a real gap," Cindy said.

In Joseph's case, a donor liver never became available. He hovered on the list, never rising high enough to get

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a suitable organ. But his older brother, *Kalman*, an orthopedic surgeon who lives in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., donated part of his liver.

It's a rare operation and not without risk. But both brothers are doing fine now. Joseph's is among the 480 families that are members of Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation. He was asked by Rabbi Nosanchuk to speak today. This morning, when he gives the birkat gomel, a blessing of thanksgiving that's said after surviving perilous circumstances, he'll talk about the importance of organ donation.

"It's not a fun thing to talk about to begin with," Joseph said. It's a subject that forces us to confront our own mortality and accept that there might come a time when our brain is dead while our liver, heart or kidney lives on. It makes us ponder the wishes of our loved ones at a time when we're dealing with the pain of their passing.

The point Rabbi Nosanchuk will make this morning is that it's in keeping with Jewish law. "There are a wide range of authorities in the Jewish world who not only accept but encourage people to donate an organ," he said. "The Talmud clearly states that the person who saves a single life, it is as though they saved the world. There's such a high premium value on a life-saving gesture that you can break numerous other commandments to do it."

Organ Solo

For information on organ donation and the Washington Regional Transplant Community, go to <http://www.beadonor.org>.

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