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Eliyahu Federman

Community activist and writer

Organ Donation: Jews Can Learn Something From Atheists

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Recently while renewing my driver's license, the DMV attendant looked surprised when I requested organ donor designation. She remarked how she thought being an organ donor is against the Jewish religion. I suppose my *yarmulke* (head covering) gave away the fact that I was Jewish, but this encounter did not surprise me given conversations I've had with many of my religious friends who will not become posthumous organ donors because they believe it would interfere with a religious duty to be buried intact.

Last week the [NY Times reported](#) that in response to a growing resistance by Haredi Jewish patients unwilling to consider donating organs but perfectly willing to accept organs from others, Israel has become the first country to implement a priority system:

[I]f two patients have identical medical needs for an organ transplant, priority will be given to the patient who has signed a donor card, or whose family member has donated an organ in the past.

According to [OrganDonor.gov](#), in the U.S. alone, there are currently 112,674 people waiting for an organ, 18 people die each day waiting for an organ and one organ donor can save up to eight lives. Why wouldn't everyone want to be an organ donor? More specifically, why are many of my Jewish religious friends so wary of becoming posthumously dismembered? Why did Israel need to implement a priority system to encourage organ donation by Orthodox Jews? Orthodox Jews should be lining up to become organ donors, especially considering that under Jewish law saving a life supersedes concerns around desecration of the dead.

The [Halachic Organ Donor Society](#) (HOD) is an organization that encourages Jews to become organ donors in accordance with Jewish law. Rabbi [Adin Steinsaltz](#), hailed by *Time Magazine* as a "once-in-a-millennium scholar," arguably the foremost Talmudic scholar in the world today, supports the mission of the organization. Many other [leading rabbis support HOD](#).

According to Robby Berman, the director of HOD, the reason for the low rate of posthumous organ donation among religious Jews [is that](#) "[m]ost Jews are under the mistaken impression that traditional Jewish law requires a body be buried whole at all costs."

In reality, except for the prohibitions against illicit sexual relations, idol worship and murder, saving a life (*pikuach nefesh*) overrides every other commandment and prohibition in Jewish law. Saving a life is like saving an entire universe.

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.

A student once asked a religious sage what lesson he could learn from an atheist. The sage answered: "If someone comes to you for help, you should never assume God will help him. Rather become an atheist for a moment by recognizing only you can help him."

On the issue of posthumous organ donation my religious friends could learn a lesson from my atheist friends. They should recognize that only they can help those in need of organ transplants.

The obsession with preserving a dead body by keeping it intact is historically based on Egyptian culture of mummifying. Judaism was a rejection of that culture. The ancient Egyptian's philosophical basis for mummifying and preserving the body was to insure proper passage into the afterlife, which ironically is the same concern my religious friends raise when refusing to become organ donors. Judaism was a rejection of Egypt's glorification of the body but rather a recognition that the body is just a vessel that houses the soul.

Atheists believe that when you are dead your lifeless body is just a cadaver. The notions of afterlife and proper burial are nothing more than delusions and rites that help us cope with death. The atheist has no basis to object to organ donation. If you can help someone in your death, then why not? The religious person on the other hand is sometimes fraught with questions about the afterlife and preserving the body for proper burial. Question that may unfortunately lead one to hesitate from becoming an organ donor.

I think all religions can and should agree that in this matter, a lesson can be learned from the atheists. Atheists ideology posits that our dead bodies will ultimately decay anyway, so why not use them for something positive? At the end of the day, there should be nothing more life affirming and religious than being able to save someone in your death.