



## Panelists urge Jews to donate their organs

by Debra Rubin  
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Despite some debate in traditional circles, many Jewish religious authorities have endorsed organ donation as a mitzva because it can help to save the life of another person.

Yet rabbinic debate over the concept of “brain death” has caused enough confusion that Israel was kicked off an international organ donation registry several years ago because so few Israelis were registered as potential donors.

“The list depends on reciprocity,” said Robby Berman, founder and executive director of the Manhattan-based Halachic Organ Donor Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing organ donation among Jews.

Berman was one of three panelists at the Nov. 14 Orthodox Forum of Edison/Highland Park held at Congregation Ahavas Achim in Highland Park.

Joining him were Dr. Michael Eleff, medical director of the Cancer Institute of New Jersey in Hamilton and assistant professor of medicine at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick, and Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser, an author and leader of Congregation Bais Yitzchok in Brooklyn.

Goldwasser cited “the preciousness of human life” in endorsing organ donation. “We learn in the Talmud that every mitzva can be suspended to save a human life,” he added.

While there is strong support for Goldwasser’s position within the Orthodox rabbinate, it is not uniform. Berman said despite all efforts, only 9 percent of Israelis are listed as organ donors compared to between 35-40 percent of Americans. Fifty-eight percent of Israelis refuse to donate the organs of a brain-dead loved one, citing religious assertions that an individual remains alive so long as his or heart is beating.

Berman is optimistic, however, that the tide may be turning. The Israeli chief rabbinate ended a 23-year stalemate with medical authorities and gave their blessing to transplants this year — reaffirming a 1986 ruling that a beating heart does not constitute life. In exchange, medical personnel involved in transplants agreed to undergo a three-day training course in the halachic issues surrounding transplants.

The Knesset passed a law, which has not yet taken effect, that would automatically move Israelis with organ donor cards to the top of the list should they need a transplant.

Berman said while he respected those whose religious beliefs would preclude their giving organs while their heart is beating,



Robby Berman

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these people “should give up their right” to receive transplants. He also questioned the hypocrisy of such people going on transplant lists — ostensibly accepting organs from people they believe were “murdered.”

The HODS has created its own donor card; [visit hods.org](http://hods.org).

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## ‘The chance to give life’

Only three months ago, Yannai Segal was critically ill from chronic liver disease.

Today, thanks to a liver transplant, the expectant father is looking forward to watching his children grow up.

“I had horrible symptoms and was yellow across my whole body,” said the former Highland Park resident. “Your mind begins to slip you’re so weak. You don’t even feel alive.”

Segal, 24, formerly a teacher at Rabbi Pesach Raymon Yeshiva in Edison, moved to the Riverdale section of the Bronx, to be near New York-Presbyterian Hospital, where the transplant was performed Sept. 16.

He came to the Nov. 14 Orthodox Forum of Edison/Highland Park for its panel discussion on organ donation.

Since the age of 12, Segal had suffered from primary sclerosing cholangitis, a disease that damages and blocks bile ducts inside and outside the liver. He had been on the transplant list for years, but wasn’t prioritized until last winter, when the disease worsened.

Segal said he doesn’t know much about the donor except that she was a female. “I hope I get the chance to meet her some day,” he said.

Segal has returned to work at a children’s media company. His wife, Aviva, is expecting twins in January.

“Honestly, there’s no greater gift,” he said of those who carry an organ donor card.

— DEBRA RUBIN

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## Reader Discussion

Robby Berman

December 02, 2009

Just to clarify: The HOD Society encourages Jews to donate organs to the general population - including to non-Jews. Also, the new kneset law gives preference to people who need an organ and who had previously had registered for an organ donor card. But it does not bump them to the top of the list.

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