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Q & A With Robby Berman

By [Julie G Fax](#)

http://www.jewishjournal.com/community_briefs/article/q_a_with_robbie_berman_20040319/

Robby Berman was a journalist living in Israel writing about organ donation when he came across some alarming facts: Out of 200 people who were declared brain-stem dead in a given year, only 70 families agreed to organ donation -- giving Israel the lowest percentage of organ donors in the Western world. So while 130 Israelis in that year were buried with viable organs, 114 died waiting to receive organs. The No. 1 reason that both religious and secular Israelis gave for not donating organs was that halacha (Jewish law) forbids it -- a common misconception rooted in superstitions and a misconstruing of halacha. That information was enough to make Berman, 37, quit his writing job to found and direct the Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS). Created in December 2001, the organization has reached more than 8,000 people worldwide.

The Jewish Journal: This issue has been in the news since 20-year-old Alisa Flatow was killed in a terrorist attack in Gaza in 1995 and her family donated her organs. Have you seen a turnaround in the superstitions or a change in the numbers?

Robby Berman: Alisa Flatow was the first blip on the radar of Orthodox Jewish consciousness that perhaps organ donation was supported by halacha. But that blip went off the screen as fast as it went on. J.J. Greenberg's donation last year was also noted by the public [Greenberg was killed in Israel after his bicycle was struck by a truck that ran a red light], but there has been no long-term change in our educational programming about this critical issue. I will lecture and spend an hour explaining how the Torah supports organ donation and they say, "Yes, yes, yes," and then they walk out and say, "....Still, I think Jews don't do that."

JJ: Have you been successful in turning that around?

RB: We've had some incredible successes and also some failures. We have recruited dozens of Orthodox rabbis and over 1,000 laypeople who have registered for the HODS organ donor card. We have distributed 10,000 educational brochures in English and 5,000 in Hebrew. Overall awareness of this issue is growing. There also has been an increase over the past two years in organ donation from Orthodox Jews.

Where I haven't been successful is in cultivating the necessary resources to take this project to the next level. Major funds are needed to embark on an educational advertising campaign in the major Jewish population centers -- New York, L.A., Chicago, Florida -- but that costs hundreds of thousands of dollars and I have not been able to raise that.

JJ: The difficulty in raising funds may be related to what holds people back from dealing with organ donation -- the unwillingness to confront issues of death and dying.

RB: Right. Who wants to talk about dying? There are all those emotional issues attached. I think to a large extent people hide behind the skirt of halacha and use it as an excuse. We try to educate those who are truly concerned about halacha and for those that use it as an excuse, HODS hopefully takes away their excuse.

JJ: What are the halachic issues involved?

RB: Most rabbis will agree that to donate organs from a dead person is a mitzvah. The Torah has three prohibitions concerning a cadaver: You can't mutilate, get benefit from or delay burial of a body, but all rabbis agree that to save a life you can do those things.

The legitimate halachic issue is defining when a person is considered dead. There are rabbis, such as Reb Elyashiv in Jerusalem, who believe that as long as a person's heart is still beating -- such as someone who is brain-stem dead on a respirator -- the person is alive. He does not allow donation from a brain-stem dead person because he believes the person is alive and you would be killing him. Others, such as the chief rabbinate of Israel and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, hold that brain-stem death is halachically death and therefore not only could you donate organs, but you should.

JJ: Do HODS donor cards reflect those halachic issues?

RB: Ours is the only donor card in the world that allows people to choose between these two options. One can indicate the willingness to donate either after brain-stem death or, alternatively, after irreversible cessation of heartbeat. [From a medical perspective the latter option is not optimal because once the heart stops beating certain organs become less viable for transplant.]

JJ: What strategies have you found effective in breaking down the emotional obstacles?

RB: When we stop talking in abstract numbers and start showing faces and real people. Our Web site shows 22-year-old L.A. resident Ariel Avrech, who died this year waiting for a lung transplant. We show a number of Orthodox Jews who died in accidents and had their organs donated.... And, more importantly, we have pictures of people whose lives were saved by receiving organs. These people would be dead if not for organ donation. That has a powerful pull on people.

Robby Berman will speak Saturday, March 20, 10:30 a.m. at Kehillat Yavneh, 5353 W. Third Street, and 11:15 a.m. at Shaarei Tefila, 7269 Beverly Blvd. To register for a HODS organ donor card or to access more information, go to www.hods.org or call (212) 213-5087.

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