

October 24, 2011 Monday 26 Tishri 5772 15:56 IST



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Rabbis urge religious public to volunteer as organ donors

By JEREMY SHARON
26/09/2011

40 rabbis from Tzohar religious organization vote to approve new organ donor card, assuring donors that procedures are in accordance with Jewish law.

A new initiative designed to raise the number of people signing up for organ donation cards has been formally approved by Tzohar, the religious- Zionist rabbinical group.

In a meeting last week at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem, 40 rabbis from the organization voted to approve a new organ donor card and framework which seeks to reduce any concerns potential religious organ donors may have that their organs will be harvested in a manner in keeping with Jewish law.

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"We want to encourage Israeli society to acknowledge and embrace the importance of saving someone else's life," Tzohar chairman Rabbi David Stav told *The Jerusalem Post* on Sunday. "We also believe that it is immoral to be willing to accept organs from others while at the same time not be willing to donate your own organs if such circumstances should arise."

Currently, the "Edi" organ donor card is the only such system in use in the country and is issued by the National Center for Transplants and authorized by the Ministry of Health. According to Tzohar however, only 10 percent of the adult population have signed up for the card.

The new "Bilvavi" framework seeks to assuage the doubts of potential donors, thereby increasing the number of people volunteering for organ donation, by guaranteeing to them and their families that transplants will be carried out according to Jewish law, specifically that brain death will be firmly established by a doctor with knowledge of the pertinent laws, before organs are removed.

Brain death was established by the most respected arbiter of Jewish law of recent times, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, to be the relevant criterion for declaring death, although he stipulated that tests be conducted to confirm.

For this purpose, an organization called Arevim, comprising more than 30 doctors around the country competent in the Jewish laws regarding the issue, was set up.

Director of the Bilvavi system, Haim Falk, told the Post that being a signatory to the new system will mean that a doctor from Arevim will be present when the time of death is pronounced to provide an extra guarantee that any transplants will be in accordance with Jewish law.

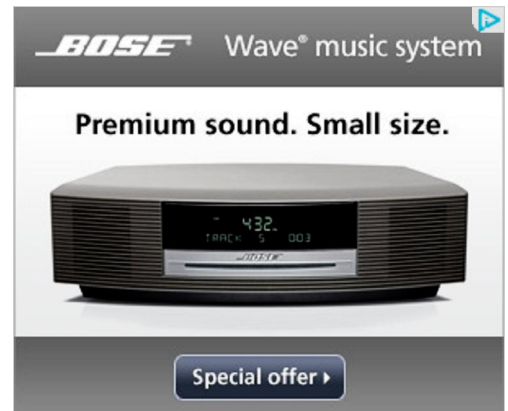
Rabbi Stav said that one of the main reasons for Israel's low rate of organ donation was because of religious concerns, most often completely unfounded.

"Many people are not willing to become organ donors because of religious sentiments, although these are not people that are necessarily observant," he said. "It's just that regarding the matter of death, people become more religious than the religion requires."

Opposition has been expressed to the new Bilvavi card by members of the National Center for Transplants, specifically that the establishment of an alternative framework may deter secular people from signing up even for the current system.

Stav states that it is for this reason that Tzohar and Bilvavi are recommending the new card specifically for people who have not signed up for the "Edi card, and that the most important thing is not which system to register with, but simply to register as an organ donor."

There are three halachic concerns regarding organ donation: a prohibition against desecrating a corpse; delaying burial; and deriving any kind of benefit from a corpse. Most rabbis today accept that the life-saving possibilities made possible by organ donation outweigh these concerns.

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