

# Saving a life trumps dogma

The principle of saving a life is paramount in Jewish law – so why are ultra-orthodox Jews still opposed to organ donation?



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guardian.co.uk, Friday 4 June 2010 10.00 BST

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Supporters of a [new initiative](#) encouraging organ donation in the Jewish community face an uphill task convincing certain groups that the practice is compatible with religious law. Even though the ultimate *mitzvah* (commandment) in Judaism is saving another's life, there is still resistance when it comes to donating organs for just such a cause.

According to the misinterpretations of many ultra-orthodox leaders, a person must be buried intact so as to be in full working order when the Messiah comes to revive the dead. Due to the sanctity of every individual's body – which is viewed as simply a receptacle for the God-given *neshama* (soul) – it is forbidden to desecrate a body, whether living or dead, either with superficially, as with tattoos, or by more extreme actions such as cremation.

The issue of [organ donation](#) has divided the Jewish community for generations. Despite an apparent softening in the approach of many ultra-orthodox rabbis to the subject, there are still vast swaths of the Jewish public who are vehemently opposed to it – to the point that many Haredim carry [anti-organ-donor cards](#) expressly forbidding the removal of their organs under any circumstances.

Of course, those same people have no problem receiving organs from other donors, displaying the kind of hypocrisy that earns the Haredi community such opprobrium from their Jewish peers both in Israel and abroad. Their all-take, no-give approach over organ transplants is reminiscent of their [refusal to serve](#) in the IDF, despite their expectation that others put their lives on the line to defend Israel's citizens and protect their freedom.

Even those rabbis who have come round to approving organ donation in emergency cases draw the line at direct person-to-person transplants, and refuse to permit organs to be donated to organ banks or used for medical research. Such a stance, while an improvement on previous positions, still falls well short of an acceptable level of interaction with the rest of society.

In effect, future patients are being condemned to suffer for the sake of outdated

religious statutes incompatible with advanced medicine. Just as other areas of Jewish law have been updated to accommodate a rapidly changing world, so too must the legislation surrounding death and bodily purity.

The dictum that ought to supersede all other pronouncements on the subject is both simple and unequivocal: "One who saves a single life – it is as if he saved an entire world." Such a ruling ties in with the concept of *pikuach nefesh* (the saving of human life), a rule that permits all manner of "rule-bending" in its honour, including transgression of shabbat laws and the rules surrounding *kashrut*. Ambulances may be called for on the sabbath or religious holidays; non-kosher food may be consumed if there is no other option to prevent a person starving.

*Pikuach nefesh* is invoked in a wealth of "real world" situations such as the Gilad Shalit stand-off in Gaza, with Jewish law playing a large part in the decision-making process of military leaders and politicians when it comes to swapping hundreds of prisoners to secure one man's release from captivity. Given *pikuach nefesh*'s superiority over other commandments, the issue of organ donation ought to be entirely black and white, yet the signs are that the Haredi community are as intransigent as ever in their opposition to the practice.

Superstitious beliefs and dogmatic adherence to religious laws are notoriously impervious to change, but the efforts of the Halachic Organ Donor Society and other similar organisations have the potential to make valuable inroads into ultra-orthodox society. Despite all the prevarication on the part of various rabbinic leaders, Judaism cannot allow archaic thinking to overrule the holiest commandment of all.