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Surgery Prompts Examination of Jewish Concept of Soul

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Surgery is wrong. This was what I convinced myself over a two-year stint of excessive holistic health care. Thanks to an imbalanced reliance on acupuncture, I neglected a herniated disc until it ruptured somewhere between Washington, D.C., and Salvador, Brazil. When I found out I needed surgery, I was forced to evaluate what, exactly, I saw wrong with cutting a human open and realigning her interior.

In my case, I was sliced open near the jugular, a clear 1-inch incision along the front of my neck. The doctor slid my muscles and esophagus to one side, sucked out the ruptured disc with a vacuum, and inserted a dead man's hip bone, molded to the size of my previous disc. To finish the job, two titanium screws were attached; I was stuck back together and sent on my way.

What was wrong with surgery, I decided, were the negative effects it might have on my Jewish soul. If the body is a temple, what happens when you slice it up and insert foreign particles into its infrastructure? And what about the new disc I was given: Whose bone was it? Most likely, based on statistics, I was convinced I housed a Christian man's hip bone between my C5 and C6 vertebrae.

I chose my neurosurgeon based on a number of factors — his capability, his reputation, whether his hands looked trustworthy. I also noted how, when I worried out loud about this dead person's body part taking over my spirit, he did not laugh; rather, he entertained my ideas. The neurosurgeon explained that the energetic body of the bone he would use was negligible, thanks to serious reshaping and a year, at least, sitting in formaldehyde.

This sufficed to keep me on the operating table, but I was not convinced. Images of Whoopi Goldberg in the movie "Ghost" flashed through my head. I imagined myself being overtaken by the spirit of the bone donor, just like a medium channeling the dead. For answers to this conundrum, I contacted rabbis far and near. I wrote the following in an e-mail:

Dear Temple Israel of Hollywood,

I am looking for a rabbi who might be able to help me answer the following questions:

What is the Reform Jewish perspective on using cadaver bones in surgery?

Often when people get spinal surgery they need a cadaver bone placed in their body. What is the rabbinical take on the spiritual entity of skeletal matter? What happens to a Jew when a Christian bone is placed in their body? Is there a piece of someone else's soul in the new bone? Or is the bone just bone, the body just body, the spirit left intact?

The synagogue was very helpful and sent me on to a professor, who they insisted was an expert on "this topic." This topic, I am guessing, would be the spiritual entity of bones and their handling. I wrote the suggested professor a letter. It read:

While I am aware of the importance, in lieu of Jewish law, of the preservation of the cadaver and the burial laws therein, I am most curious about the so-called "spiritual entity" of the bones themselves.

What happens when a Jewish woman has a Christian man's bone surgically placed in her neck to keep her from paralysis? Is there a spiritual shift in the individual? What does a bone hold, energetically, religiously, that may alter the system of the living individual? Is she still a Jew, even with a Christian bone and, in some cases, titanium in her neck?

I received a near immediate response from the professor. The initial answer was glib:

Dear Ms. Gerson:

The subject you raise is of no interest to me and I have never explored it.

But this was followed with the insightful: I believe that when a bone or other organ is transplanted, it becomes part of the host's body and thus thoroughly and completely part of that person.

This left me to believe that I was, in fact, channeling the dead Christian man I imagined to have donated my neck bone. Only according to this, he did not visit my body like in "Ghost," or take it over; he sort of wed my spirit, in the biblical sense. I am no longer alone, or he isn't; we exist together from my C5-C6 vertebrae on.

What the rabbi I encountered revealed was really the issue not of my soul, but that of the dead person whose hip graft was living in my neck. Reb Nadya Gross of Pardes Levavot, a Jewish Renewal congregation in Boulder, Colo., politely suggested I burn a yahrzeit candle for this person, hoping to unite the soul with the now-dismembered body. This dismemberment of human form was the fundamental issue: Jewish burial law insists a body be buried intact. This means, sans hip-bone chunk, my bone donor was in some sort of Judeo-Christian limbo purgatory.

According to a Central Conference of American Rabbis responsa regarding liver transplants: "The harvesting of organs from deceased persons might well conflict with another central Judaic value, that of *kevod hamet*, the obligation to respect the dignity of the dead."

The Halachic Organ Donor Society (hods.org) writes, "There are three biblical prohibitions concerning a cadaver that would, at first blush, seem to indicate that organ donation should be forbidden." These include *nivul hamet*, a biblical prohibition that forbids the needless mutilation of the cadaver. HODS goes on to say that "most all rabbis agree that saving lives, *pikuach nefesh*, is more important than the prohibition of *nivul hamet*."

As Reb Nadya explains in her e-mail response to me:

The principle of "*pikuach nefesh*" (saving a life) takes precedence over all other laws. Even Shabbat can be violated, etc. So, organs and body parts can be donated for that intention — even the most Orthodox courts in Israel allow it.

Reb Nadya goes on:

There are levels of interpretation, of course. ... But, you have received the gift of a pain-free and fully functional (God willing) body as a result of someone else's gift of bone, yes?

To honor the dead donor, I would suggest lighting a yahrzeit candle and giving *tzedakah* in gratitude for the gift of life, and to assist the *neshama* [soul] of the donor in transitioning into the light. You can do this once, with that intention, or continue it as a practice each year on the anniversary of your surgery.

When we save a life, do we desecrate a soul? Which is paramount?

One reason for preserving a corpse, as mentioned on the HODS Web site, is "Resurrection of the Dead." The page reads, "Indeed, even if one were to believe that resurrection is dependent on the bodily state of the cadaver, the only Jewish source which mentions such a thing refers to *luz* bone, a vertebra of the spine, as the point from where resurrection stems from."

Where in the body does the distress of your own soul show? Surely in a C5-C6 vertebral herniation, the *luz* bone is crying out. The bones of resurrection, located around the coccyx near the sacrum, link directly to the neck, the C5-C6. Is my *luz* bone resurrecting lives? Am I the resurrected? Is this why they sucked out part of my neck with a tube and inserted the hip bone of a dead man?

Soon after my surgery I took a job teaching at a Catholic school in Washington, D.C. For graduation rites we were asked to wear cloaks and meet in the crypt shrine of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception: America's Catholic church. There I saw all the candles burning. In the basement of this giant Catholic church I decided it was time to honor the dead.

The school nun walked me through the basement shrines. She showed me the African American shrine, the crypt, and when we returned she asked if I wanted to light a candle.

"I don't have \$4," I replied, worried about shirking this holy cost. She handed me a match and said she was sure we would not go to hell for this. I listened to the nun, lit my Catholic yahrzeit candle, recited the Mourner's Kaddish in my head and hoped for my dead man's soul's return to his broken body.

Desperate to somehow link my surgery to the earth, to strip away the scientific and restore the spiritual, I wanted to bury my sucked-out disc. This was against hospital policy. I fantasized about receiving holy powers from the dead via my cervical discectomy. What I was left with, though, was a terribly sore chest and neck, a tiny scar and a lot of new knowledge about burial rituals in Jewish tradition.

Merissa Nathan Gerson blogs at AskYourYenta.com and jewishjournal.com.

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