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The Final Gift

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His name was Jonathan Joseph (J.J.) Greenberg, but his Hebrew name, Natan (“God’s gift”) may have been the most prophetic of all. For not only did he work at Jewish philanthropy with a joyous flair for material and spiritual generosity, but when the 36-year-old communal leader died tragically in Israel last month, he donated his corneas, kidneys, lungs, liver, heart valves, bone marrow and even some skin for transplant to others.

In fact, he gave more than that.

Greenberg brought a new spotlight to Orthodox organ donations, which has been sanctioned by the mainstream rabbinate for more than a decade but is still often misunderstood.

Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, his cheeks still bristling with a mourner’s beard, says the media coverage of his son’s donations and the donations



of Jonathan Jesner — a 19-year-old rabbinical student from Scotland killed in a recent suicide bombing whose kidney went to a Palestinian girl — “clearly showed that there is still considerable surprise when donations occur.” “There is a gap between what is halachically possible and public sentiment, and still some level of shock that this can be done by the Orthodox,” Rabbi Greenberg said.

On Sept. 13, J.J. Greenberg, executive director of the New York-based Jewish Life Network, was riding a bike in Israel, the picture of health, when he was struck by a car. The next day, the Shabbat before Yom Kippur, in Tel Aviv’s Ichilov Hospital, five doctors — only from departments that would not benefit from J.J.’s body — determined that brain death had occurred. J.J.’s body was wheeled into surgery and his organs “harvested,” as they say.

After the funeral and shiva, Rabbi Greenberg and his wife, Blu, president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, visited four of the six recipients.

The Israeli newspaper Maariv quoted Rabbi Greenberg: “The meeting can’t bring back our son, and we can never get over what happened. But on the other hand, there is a feeling of [gratitude because J.J.] will continue to contribute to the lives of others.”

Back in New York, Blu said: “It was very moving, meeting the families and the children” whose lives were enhanced by her son’s donation. One recipient of J.J.’s cornea, she said, “was an 18-year-old boy, an artist, who had a degenerative disease that left him blind, and now he could see and read. His mother was just smiling through her tears the whole time

we were there.”

Could the Greenbergs see J.J.’s eyes through the transplanted cornea? “With a cornea you don’t see the eyes,” said Blu, “but we showed him a picture of J.J.’s beautiful eyes. He had magnificent wide, green eyes.”

The Greenbergs met the recipient of their son’s liver — a Palestinian in his 40s from Shuafat, a place that “doesn’t have a great record,” Blu acknowledged. Politics never came up as they spoke in muffled voices through surgical masks. The recipient, perhaps a week away from death before the transplant, was surrounded by a wife and seven children in tearful gratitude.

Back home, Blu admitted to thinking about this family: “Now when you go back to Shuafat, will you remember to work for peace? When someone speaks with hate against Israel in your community, will you speak up?” In the hospital, though, the thoughts were left unspoken.

Rabbi Greenberg says, “In Israel, you get a transplant by your priority on the waiting list, not based on being Jewish or Arab.”

The Greenbergs were not even told initially about the Palestinian. “It’s an amazing statement about Israeli tolerance and Israeli democracy,” said Blu.

“All human beings are in the image of God and infinitely valuable,” Rabbi Greenberg said.

“The medical system knows no politics,” he added. “J.J. was like that, too. He had this tremendously generous spirit, constantly giving of himself.”

Rabbi Greenberg attributes the Jewish reluctance to donate organs to “the magnificent ideal of kavod ha’met, honor for the deceased, which forbids exploiting the body.” The rabbi, former chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, said anti-Semitism through the centuries was often accompanied by a degradation of the dead, culminating in the Nazi “exploitation of almost every part of the body,” from hair to ashes.

By contrast, he said, the Jewish value was to avoid anything that seemed to degrade or exploit the dead, including autopsies (despite the fact that autopsies are rabbinically sanctioned in certain situations). But, Rabbi Greenberg added, few acts better reflect honor to that life than the saving of another life: In Jewish law, pikuach nefesh, the saving of life, supersedes virtually every other mitzvah and prohibition.

Rabbi Greenberg acknowledged a divide between rabbis who accept the definition of brain death — an accepted legal definition in the United States only since 1968 — and those who prefer the traditional definition of an irreversible cessation of heartbeat. The latter presents an obstacle to donations, as the organs require some blood and function to remain viable, which is possible only with a lingering heartbeat.

When Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the most widely respected Orthodox halachist, reversed an earlier decision and accepted heart transplants and later affirmed the concept of brain death, “that opened doors that weren’t opened before,” Rabbi Greenberg said.

In 1986, the highly influential Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef ruled that transplants were a mitzvah for the living — and though the dead aren’t bound by mitzvot, an organ donation was an honor for the dead.

Five years later the Rabbinical Council of America, representing almost all centrist Orthodox rabbis, approved of organ donations and the acceptability of brain-stem death, which made the donations possible.

Rabbi Moshe Tendler, chair of the RCA’s bioethics commission, wrote: “If one is in the position to donate an organ to save another’s life, it’s obligatory to do so, even if the donor never knows who the beneficiary will be.”

Orthodoxy was in step with other major religions, most of which first adopted guidelines for organ donations in the 1980s and ’90s, in conjunction with advances in medical technology. The Reform and Conservative rabbinate support organ donations as an obligatory mitzvah. Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, with a bow to haredi opposition, has not made a blanket ruling but has agreed to transplants on a case-by-case basis.

“I don’t mean to minimize serious halachic differences,” said Rabbi Greenberg, “but this is a clear case of how halachic outcome can change when the facts change.”

Earlier this year Stephen Flatow, whose daughter Alisa was murdered in a 1995 bus bombing, helped found the Halachic Organ Donor Society [hods.org], to disseminate information regarding halachic issues and rabbinic opinions on the subject. The donations of Alisa’s organs received tremendous publicity in Israel and did much to put Orthodox organ donation on the map.

Flatow says of the Greenbergs’ tragedy, “What they did was to rise above it. It doesn’t get easier.”

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