HALACHIC CORNER

Halachic Support for Heart Transplants

More and more rabbinic leaders in Israel are taking a stand on organ donation. Recently, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, publicly announced that he accepts brain-stem death as halachic death and supports organ donation, including heart transplants.

While Rav Amar’s demonstration of leadership on a life-saving issue is commendable, he is not the first Chief Rabbi of Israel to endorse organ donation and accept brain-stem death, otherwise known as neurological death, as halachic death. Former Chief Rabbits Ovadiah Yosef, Mordechai Eliyahu, and Avraham Shapiro, all accept brain-stem death as halachic death and support organ donation. Rabbis Eliyahu and Shapiro were the Chief Rabbis in 1986 when the Halachic Committee of the Chief Rabbinate’s office investigated the medical reality of brain-stem death; the committee publicized their halachic analysis which concluded that once the brain is dead, the person is dead even though heart may continue beating for another few days with the help of a ventilator. Brain-stem death is always followed by cessation of heartbeat. The question is not if the heart will stop, but when. “But not all rabbis accept brain-stem death as halachic death, such as Rav Eliashiv,” says Robby Berman, founder and director of the Halachic Organ Donor (HOD) Society. As a result, the organ donor card of the HOD Society offers a unique organ donor card that allows its holder to define death as he or she sees fit, either brain-stem death or cessation of heart beat.

However, all rabbis do agree that once a person is dead, however one defines it, the mitzvah of pikuach nefesh (saving a life) overrides other commandments, such as the prohibitions to destroy, benefit from, or delay burial of, a cadaver. Since it’s possible to donate organs both at brain-stem death and even some organs after the heart has stopped beating, everyone should be encouraged to donate organs. One may register for an organ donor card from the HOD Society on-line at www.hods.org. The HOD Society has more than 200 rabbis that carry its organ donor card.

HEALTH BITES

Compiled by Tova Stulman

Heart Transplant Complete

Kelly Perkins, 46, completed a 2-and-a-half day, 2,000 foot face of Half Dome granite monolith in Yosemite Park. Just another in the long list of impressive mountaineering feats is newsworthy because of her status as a heart transplant recipient, as reported in a story originally by the AP. No doubt many believe that those who receive new hearts remain frail and ill-equipped for daring athletics after their transplant operations, but Perkins is proof of the heights – literally – one can achieve after a heart transplant operation. Perkins, who received a new heart a little over a decade ago, made the trek up the giant, 8,842-foot-high monument with her husband Craig and their tour guide, Scott Stowe. The group started on Thursday and finished that Saturday afternoon. “I feel great. Physically, I feel I’m stronger than I’ve ever been,” Perkins stated from the top of Half Dome, a great full circle for me to climb. I was a very interesting and beautiful day. Since 1996, Perkins has been the first person with another heart to summit some of the world’s most famous and daring peaks, which have included Switzerland’s Matterhorn, Japan’s Mount Fuji, Tanzania’s Mount Kilimanjaro and the face of Yosemite’s El Capitan. She has also climbed a remote peak in the Andes, near Argentina’s border with Bolivia, and New Zealand’s Mount Ruapehu.

Perkins says she chose the climb for her latest climb despite the fact that it is broken in half. “It still stands,” she says. There’s a spirit-building message.