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Organs



Yaniv Rahamim (center) with brother and sister

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A mitzvah called organ donation

Did you know that Israeli Jews have the lowest rates of organ donation of any ethnic group in the country? In a state that arose from the ashes of the millions who perished, the saving of life at any price could be expected to be the highest item on the national agenda. So why do we recoil from organ donation “for religious reasons”?

Efrat Shapira-Rosenberg

A couple of months ago Yaniv Rahamim, the first Israeli to receive a lung lobe transplant from live donors, died. Yaniv, who was 36, was married and the father of small children.

Two of his siblings donated lung lobes to him. I know the story of this fighting, noble family personally, because I am related to Yaniv, of blessed memory, and to his wife, and it's almost superfluous to try to describe the courage and the pain they needed to fight, and ultimately to cope with the loss of Yaniv at such a young age.

But if there is any small glimmer of hope, if you can say such a thing after a person dies, then it is the fact that the painful issue of organ transplants was once again in the headlines. However, the hope is only in the fact that the issue was in the headlines, since dealing with this issue does not raise one's hopes at all.

“Did you know that the percentage of organs donated among Jews is the lowest of all the ethnic groups?” This could be an unimportant trivia question included with Bazooka bubble gum, except that we live in the only country in the world where there's a Jewish majority.

In western countries, some 30 percent of the population have organ donor cards. In Israel, in contrast, four percent of the population holds such cards. Maybe Israelis are so healthy that there's no need for more than that? Actually, no, that isn't the case. More than 1,000 Israelis in Israel are awaiting transplants that could save their lives.

According to statistics from the Health Ministry's website, in 2001, 88 Israelis died waiting for a transplant because of a lack of donor organs. In the same year, 180 Israelis were brain dead, and their organs could have been used for transplant, but only 80 of their relatives agreed to donate their organs.

A quick calculation shows that the 100 brain-dead people whose organs were not donated because the family did not agree, could have saved the lives of the people who were waiting for a donor organ.

The explanation for the families' refusal to donate is, of course, the involvement of religion, or to be more precise, of prejudices and mistaken opinions about Judaism's approach to organ donation.

I have no desire to get into in-depth discussions of Jewish law on this issue, and of course I am not qualified to do so even if I wanted to.

But it's enough for me to note that a large number of important rabbis have given sweeping approval for organ transplants, and sometimes, even rabbis who don't give sweeping approval for the entire public, do give approval when a concrete question arises. Furthermore, a large number

Organ donation incident

Orthodox in uproar / Neta Sela

Jerusalem's Orthodox infuriated that Shaare Zedek Medical Center, which is known for its halachic compliance, carried out operation to remove organs for donation from patient declared brain dead – in violation of Jewish law

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of these rabbis are holders of donor cards, and some have had their names published in pamphlets promoting awareness of the issue.

Even so, there is still hesitation “for religious reasons,” and not just among the religious, to get involved in this enormous mitzvah of saving a life. When it comes to the issue of death, such completely esoteric reasons as provoking the evil eye, interfering with the resurrection of the dead, and so forth, take the place of common sense, human conscience, Jewish morality, and even of Jewish law itself, preventing many people from giving their agreement to donate organs.

In a country that arose on the ashes of the millions who perished, whose very existence, even today, is still in doubt, and whose fundamental values are based on principles of Jewish morality, one might have expected that the value of life and of saving a life at any price would be the highest item on the national agenda. But even so, “in his death he bequeathed us life” is said in other contexts, and it still isn’t sufficient in the context of organ donation, where it is no less applicable, and perhaps even more so.

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