

- [MoyenOrient](#)
- [Politique](#)
- [SocialEco](#)

- Blogs
 - [Blogs](#)
 - [StudentLife](#)
- [J-Spot](#)

- Green Israel
 - [Green Israel](#)
 - [Community](#)
 - [InnovativeResearch](#)
 - [InternationalCooperation](#)
 - [KklJnfWorldWide](#)
 - [PeopleAndTheEnvironment](#)
 - [Tours And Events In Nature](#)
 - [Water ForIsrael](#)
- [International](#)

[Arab Israeli Conflict](#) [Israel News Opinion Middle East Diaspora Green Israel Premium Christian News](#)

[JERUSALEM](#) [Business & Innovation](#) [Israeli Politics Culture Health & Science](#) [Judaica Store](#) [BDS THREAT](#) [EDITION FRANÇAISE](#) [Blogs](#)

Like 910K

- [Jerusalem Post](#)
- [In Jerusalem](#)

People and Places: Changing minds, saving lives

By [Carl Hoffman](#)

October 22, 2017 12:54

Organ donation is one way everyone can become a superhero.

Share on facebook

Share on twitter



Robbie Berman. (photo credit:PR)

American anthropologist, naturalist and essayist par excellence Loren Eiseley used to tell a story about waking before sunrise one morning to walk along the ocean's edge to greet the new day. Moving through the cold misty dawn, Eiseley began to focus upon a faint, far-away motion on the beach ahead.

As he got closer, he could see a young man, bent over near the water, sifting through the debris left by the night's tide. As Eiseley approached, he saw the youth pick up a starfish and heave it into the ocean. Then another starfish, and another, and another. Eiseley asked the boy why he was doing this.

"The tide has washed the starfish onto the beach and they cannot return to the sea by themselves," the youth replied. "When the sun rises, they will die, unless I throw them back to the sea."

As the youth bent over to pick up another starfish, Eiseley surveyed the vast expanse of beach, stretching in both directions. Starfish littered the shore in numbers beyond calculation as far as the eye could see. The hopelessness of the youth's plan became painfully apparent. Eiseley said, "But there are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun is up. Surely you cannot expect to make a difference." The youth paused briefly to consider Eiseley's words, and then threw another starfish as far as possible into the ocean. Turning to Eiseley he replied simply, "Well, I made a difference to that one."

Eiseley left the young man and headed home, deep in thought. He returned to the beach moments later and spent the rest of the early morning helping the boy throw starfish into the sea.

Decades later and half a world away, Robby Berman has made "making a difference" his *raison d'être* and life's work. In 2001 he founded an organization and began a relentless campaign that has saved hundreds of lives by changing the minds of Jewish people in Israel and throughout the world.

Born 51 years ago in New York, Berman grew up in Woodmere, Long Island, graduated from Yeshiva University, earned a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University, made aliya in 1989, served in the IDF and then settled down in Israel, working as a journalist.

It was in that latter capacity that Berman discovered a shocking fact while gathering information for an article on human organ donation here in Israel. "Israel at that time had the worst organ donor registration rate in the Western world," he recalls. "A mere 3% of the population had organ donor cards; Spain had around 70%."

The situation was so bad, Berman says, that Israel was actually prevented from participating in the European Union's organ sharing program.

"The way it works is that a country will have an organ and they don't have anyone in their country that needs that particular organ with that particular blood type with those particular antigens. So Germany will have a liver with no appropriate recipients. So they'll call Holland and Holland will take it and vice versa. Israel was not allowed to join because they were not able to get their numbers up, and the European Union realized that we would just be a parasite, receiving organs and never donating them."

As he was working on the article, Berman was told that religion was a major source of the problem. It seemed to be the conventional wisdom that

according to Halacha (Jewish religious law), the human body is sacred, that it has to be buried whole, and that the donation of organs after death is forbidden.

“It didn’t really ring true to me,” says Berman. “I couldn’t imagine that this was the cause, because the majority of Israelis are not observant and do not consider themselves ‘religious.’ I live on Emek Refaim [Street in the German Colony] and I went to the one non-kosher restaurant there, a McDonald’s. A guy came out with a tattoo of a snake on his left shoulder, and he was eating a cheeseburger.

I told him I was doing an article and asked him if he had an organ donor card. He said, ‘God forbid. It’s against Halacha.’” The man went on to tell Berman that he didn’t mind getting God angry at him in this world, but didn’t want him to be angry at him in the World to Come.

Berman was to discover that this attitude was widely held. Non-observant people with little or no connection to organized Jewish worship or talmudic law were nonetheless convinced that donating organs was simply forbidden.

He decided that the problem was bigger than just a newspaper or magazine article and that something concrete needed to be done.

“So I looked around and I contacted the Israeli Transplant Center. Its name is ADI, after a man who died waiting for a kidney transplant. I called them and they said they hardly had any rabbis that had their organ donor card. I looked around and found only two rabbis in Israel that had an organ donor card, out of tens of thousands of rabbis around the country.”

Somewhat of a Renaissance man, Berman had invented an educational game designed to teach world geography.

Called Globali, the game became popular in Israel and financially successful. Berman sold the game to a German conglomerate and used the money to start The Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS). Berman then went on a relentless campaign and proceeded to sign up rabbis for the Israeli organ donor card. He signed up no fewer than 300 rabbis. That initial push filtered down into the religious community.

“So instead of having just two rabbis we ended up with 300. And instead of 3% of the population that has an organ donor card, our work, together with ADI’s work, has brought it to 15%.”

According to Berman, that is still far from enough.

Because of low donor card registration rates, Israelis needing organ transplants often find themselves having to either purchase them on the black market or die waiting for them to become available.

“Last summer, National Public Radio and *The New York Times* reported that Israelis were involved in buying and selling organs for transplant. I met a man in Jerusalem who went to China to buy a heart. The Chinese killed a Falun Gong political prisoner – not a criminal, not a person on death row. They went into his prison cell and killed him to get his heart. I asked this man how he could do something like that. He said to me, ‘Robby, you know better than anyone else in Israel that if you need a transplant in Israel, you’re in serious trouble. I didn’t want to die, so I did what I had to do.’” The problem is not restricted to Israel. Since starting HODS, Berman has had his eyes on broader goals.

“You want to take a look at how this impacts the world, the problem that Jews do not donate organs. Let me ask you a question,” he says to me. “Which state in America has the highest population of Jews? It’s New York. Out of the five and a half million Jews in the US, three million of them live in New York State. That’s the largest concentration of Jews. The national average in America for having organ donor cards is 45%; New York State is the second lowest number, at 25%.”

Thus, HODS has branched out to the US, where it is a registered non-profit organization. It has also broadened its scope to include education. Upwards of 40,000 people dispersed in Jewish communities in Israel, Europe, North and South America, Asia and Australia have learned through more than 600 lectures, classes, discussion groups and “parlor meetings” how organ donation is permitted under Jewish law.

Many people through the years have lamented the low rate of organ donation in Jewish communities and have mourned the men, women, and children who have died waiting for organ transplants. Almost no one, however, has started a non-profit organization to address the problem.

Why did Robby Berman? He thinks about the question for a moment and says, “I suffer from a Superman complex. I want to be Superman.

I want to save lives. My problem is that I’m not a fireman or a doctor. I don’t have the power to fly. I’m not bullet proof. So how can I save lives without being a fireman, or a doctor, or Superman?” He decided he could do it by getting people to become organ donors.

Berman says it’s easy to get people to sign up to be blood donors.

“No one disagrees with that. It’s an easy slam dunk. But when I started HODS there was little rabbinic support and virtually no movement among the Orthodox for organ donations. Not to mention the fact that since everyone was claiming that donating organs was religiously prohibited, my background after graduating from Yeshiva University and later studying at several yeshivot gave me the knowledge to learn the talmudic sources and go out and convince people that organ donation is in fact allowed by Jewish law.”

The battle is far from won, however. Even a cursory look at the websites of organizations like Aish HaTorah and the Orthodox Union will reveal the complexity of the situation, the often intricate twists and turns of talmudic argumentation on the subject, and what some rabbis say is permitted and others insist is not. If anyone is equal to the task of increasing organ donations in Israel and around the world, however, it is Robby Berman.

“Thank God that this has already become an international phenomenon,” he says, “a sea change in the Jewish community about attitudes toward organ donation.”

There are already a few hundred fewer starfish left stranded on the beach.

To learn more about the Halachic Organ Donor Society and its activities, visit www.hods.org