

Cleveland Jewish News

Redefining death and Jewish views of organ donation

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Jerusalem family who donated organs of their son and sibling Tani Goodman.
Courtesy Robert Berman

Described as “charming” and “affable,” the octogenarian doctor Guy Alexandre re-defined death. In 1963 – after years of training in the United States and Europe – Alexandre encountered a patient whose brain had ceased to function, but who was attached to a ventilator, which allowed his heart to continue working. Although the patient’s body remained warm to the touch, and appeared to still be “alive,” Alexandre declared the patient dead, and proceeded to remove his kidneys without permission of the family.

This account of the first successful organ transplant from a brain-dead donor appeared in a [riveting article published in Tablet magazine last week](#). I was fascinated by the story because of the provocative ethical questions it raises about the line between the living

and the dead, about where the spirit of our humanity resides, and about ownership of a patient's organs once that person is no longer among the living.

I was also intrigued by the account because I knew a bit of the back-story. Written by journalist and activist Robert Berman, the Tablet article is just one small piece in Robert Berman's larger project of educating the public – particularly the Jewish public – about organ donation. About eighteen years ago, Berman founded HODS (which stands for Halachic Organ Donor Society) a non-profit organization that works to save lives by increasing organ donations from Jews to the general population (Jews and non-Jews alike).

I had the opportunity to ask Berman, about his work, and about what brought him to write, "The Man Who Remade Death."

AC: Why did you found HODS?

RB: In 2001, I noticed that Israel had one of the lowest organ donor registration rates in the Western world. It was not allowed to join the EU organ donor network because it always had a deficit of organs. I started asking around to try to understand why this was the case.

AC: And what did you learn?

RB: A lot of people told me that Israel's Jewish citizens do not donate organs because it is not permitted according to Jewish law. This makes no sense for a few reasons. First, because it's simply not true that religious law prohibits organ donation. Second, because most Israelis are not even religiously observant.

AC: So, you found that Israelis would not sign-on to become potential organ donors, because they believed it was not a "Jewish thing" even if they, themselves were not religious?

RB: Yes. Once I met a man who sported a tattoo, and was eating a cheeseburger (both not permitted according to Jewish law). When I asked if he had an organ donor card, he told me that he did not because “it is forbidden by halacha [Jewish law].” That brief conversation made me realize that there are some very powerful cultural perceptions that organ donation is not “Jewish,”

AC: So what sort of steps has HODS taken to change Jewish understandings about organ donation?

RB: For one, it’s important for religious leaders to publicly state their support of organ donation. HODS has worked closely with rabbis who have agreed to get organ donor cards and to make a public statement about doing so. I signed up more than 350 rabbis to get organ donor cards either from ADI (Israeli Transplant) or from the Halachic Organ Donor Society. (which offers its organ donor card only outside of Israel). Many of their cards are displayed publicly on our website. You can see them [here](#).

AC: What about for Jews who are not looking to Orthodox rabbis for guidance?

RB: HODS works hard to change misperceptions that are widely held in so many segments of the Jewish community. To date, I have presented at over 850 venues in 12 countries at schools, Jewish community centers, hospitals, synagogues, radio-shows, and various adult education programs. We’ve raised awareness about ethical, religious and medical issues surrounding organ donation among more than 50,000 individuals.

AC: Let’s get back to the story of Dr. Guy Alexandre. What brought you to write your article about him in Tablet Magazine?

RB: I had read about Alexandre in journals, and always admired his courageousness. In re-defining death, he went against the whole medical establishment of the time. But by doing so, he personally saved thousands of lives, and every other transplant is a result of his daring decision.



Robert Berman and Guy Alexandre

Courtesy Robert Berman

AC: Was his new definition of death eventually accepted by the medical establishment?

RB: Yes, five years later by a Harvard ad hoc committee. The group even adopted Alexandre's five criteria for establishing brain death. But they never even mentioned Alexandre's name.

AC: Where can readers learn more about Alexandre's work and his approach to understanding the moment of death?

RB: Funny you should ask! I traveled to Belgium a few months ago to meet with Dr. Alexandre and video-recorded our fascinating conversation. You can watch an edited twenty-minute segment of it [here](#).

AC: Why did you go to such lengths to track down Dr. Alexandre and interview him? And what do you hope people will learn from the conversation?

RB: Guy Alexandre acted upon his conviction, even though the law and his medical colleagues lagged behind. I hope his story and his bravery will spur conversation about brain death and organ donation. It's important for people to learn about and discuss

these issues when they are able. Later – when they might be confronted with potential to save others' lives – can often be too late.

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