

Becoming an Organ Donor: Giving the “Gift of Life”



In January, our AJWA Sisterhood focused our congregation on the importance of organ and tissue donation with wonderful presentations at Sisterhood *Shabbat* from individuals affiliated with the Gift of Life Donor Program. The talks by two individuals whose family members have been the recipients of organ donations were touching and inspiring. And I am so grateful that our Sisterhood, ably led by **Naomi Atkins** and **Amy Blum**, devoted its *Shabbat* programming to this important societal issue.

Since my arrival at AJ, almost thirty-two years ago, I have taught in many settings about the importance of organ and tissue donation. To be able to give life and hope to an individual who is dying or suffering from a debilitating or crippling affliction is the highest form of service and love. I have written many times in this column, urging you to become an organ donor.

Nevertheless, there continues to be resistance among us to embrace this message. Just hours after the Sisterhood program, several sessions of our *Mitzvah* Initiative dealt with ways of showing honor to those who have died. And many people in this very highly educated and motivated group were still under the impression that Jewish law does not permit organ donation.

So, once again, let me be clear about this vital issue.

Jewish law permits, even requires, organ donation. When an individual dies, our prime goal is known as “*k’vod ha-mayt*,” honoring the dead. We are taught to care for the body with dignity and reverence, as a holy vessel. Even though it is but a remnant of the full human being, as the repository of the soul while we live, our bodies retain their holiness, even after the soul has departed and they are once again inanimate.

At the same time, we are also taught that we must embrace the *mitzvah* of “*pikuah nefesh*,” saving the life of an individual. This *mitzvah* is paramount.

Rabbi David Golinkin, chair of the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel, has summarized how these two values work together when he wrote “It is not merely permissible for a Jew to bequeath his organs for transplantation following death, it is a *mitzvah* to do so, in order to save one life, or several lives.”

And Rabbi Elliot Dorff, vice chair of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, has written similarly that “The overriding principles of honoring the dead and saving lives work in tandem. That is, saving a person’s life is so sacred a value in Judaism that if a person’s organ can be used to save someone else’s life, it is an honor to the deceased.”

We honor ourselves and our loved ones, and do a great *mitzvah* when we elect to be an organ donor.

Two years ago, my friend **Lowell Fishman**, an AJ congregant, passed away after a long illness. Several years before his death, Lowell received a kidney transplant from an unknown donor who had died in an accident. This gift of life added so much quality to Lowell’s last years. All of us who loved him thank God for the generosity of spirit of the donor’s family. The gift of life did not diminish the tragedy of the loss, but it created a blessing that lived on and alleviated the suffering of another human being.

Remember, too, that a kidney can be donated in one’s lifetime. Several years ago a school principal in New Jersey donated a kidney to one of his students. When asked why, he simply answered that he wanted to be involved in making someone else’s life better!

Isn’t that what we are here for? To make the lives of others better. We do that with acts of kindness and generosity, heroism and sacrifice while we are alive. The Gift of Life Donor Program enables us to continue to do that after we die.

The easiest way to enroll in the organ donor program is by electing to have it listed on your driver’s license. It is that simple. If your license is not yet up for renewal, you can carry an official enrollment card that lists your intention to be a donor. Beyond that, do not be afraid to discuss the issue with your family. Let your wishes be known. And if loved ones do not raise the issue, raise it with them.

What can be a better or more lasting gift than giving life to someone else? To do it after we die is truly to live on.

If you would like more information on the Jewish approach to organ donation, send me an email and I will send you the Rabbinical Assembly’s official statement on organ donation along with a form you can sign and carry with you indicating your desire to be a donor.

Do it for Lowell. Do it for fellow human beings you do not know. Do it for yourself and your family. No one ever knows which one of us will be a potential recipient, and which will be a potential donor. That is why each of us must resolve to act with courage and conviction.

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