Navigating organ donation in Judaism

There is no shortage of people in Canada who need the ultimate gift to save their lives

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It is the most monumental thing to ask for; first from family members, and then in a widening circle to friends, acquaintances and finally strangers. But for people suffering from kidney or liver disease, it is their best – and often only – chance at survival. And so they go on Facebook, ask their rabbis to spread the word and write letters to The CJN, pleading for someone to donate a healthy organ.

“It’s not easy,” says Debbie Richmond, 57, who needs a kidney and says looking for an organ has become a full-time job. “I’ve never been one to ask people for anything, but in this case you have to reach out for help.”

For a long time, organ donation was seen as taboo in the Jewish community, according to Rabbi Reuven Bulka, chair for 12 years of the Trillium Gift of Life Network, an Ontario agency that promoted and co-ordinated organ donation, until it was disbanded by the provincial government three months ago.

But as medical science has advanced and the halakhic problems posed by organ donation have been “more or less resolved,” it is much more widely accepted, said Rabbi Bulka, an Orthodox rabbi and rabbi emeritus at Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa. And because living donation does not need to grapple with the thorny issue of when death occurs, it is even less problematic, he said.

“The general consensus is that it’s a wonderful thing to do but no one can impose that obligation on someone because it does involve a certain amount of risk,” he said. “Halakhically, we can not impose it on someone, but we can certainly propose it as a possibility.”

While Jewish law does not allow someone to jeopardize their own life, organ donors are so thoroughly vetted that the risks are minimized, he said.

“If one can do it, that’s as big a mitzvah as there is. To save someone else’s life, to have that on your resume, that’s phenomenal.”

There is no shortage of people who need the ultimate gift. In 2017, (the most recent year statistics were available) 3,197 adult Canadians were waiting for a kidney transplant and another 418 needed a new liver, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). That list does not reflect the depth of the true need. Kidney patients only go on the transplant list when they are on dialysis, but the life-prolonging process carries its own risks and side effects. The best time to get a kidney, is before dialysis is even needed.

The sad truth is that some of those on the waiting list will die before they receive a transplant. In 2017, 295 people either withdrew or died while waiting for a kidney and 182 either withdrew or died while waiting for a liver. (People can leave the waiting list if their health improves, or if they become too ill to become eligible for a transplant, according to CIHI statistics).

Given these statistics, the pressure to find a donor is intense.

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Susan Radun, 63, is in desperate need of a new liver. Hers is scarred by disease, and a dozen years after being diagnosed, her life has become one of waiting. She finally went on the transplant list in December, 2018.

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