

Like most ancient cultures, our ancestors believed bodily affliction to be the result of sin. Pharaoh and the Egyptians suffer from painful boils for their oppression of the Israelites; Miriam contracts a leprous skin condition because she maligns Moshe's character. A plague breaks out among the Israelites for their sin of the Golden Calf, even as they are repeatedly punished with various affliction for their rebelliousness elsewhere in the Torah. In fact, Scripture is quite explicit in defining a theological source of pathology. As we read in *Exodus*, אַם שְׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָע, כל המחלה אשר שמתני במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני ה' רפאך -- לקול ה' אלקיך . . . then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the Lord am your healer" (*Exodus* 15:26-27).

One might logically presume from the evidence that Judaism advocates passivity and resignation in the face of human suffering; if God is the source of health or the lack thereof, it is not for us to question Divine will. Yet our religious tradition most certainly permits us to heal others -- indeed, it is none other than God Himself who authorizes us to do so. That we are God's partners in an ongoing campaign to preserve life is best glimpsed in a story told about Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva, sages who lived in the 2nd century of the Common Era. According to *Midrash Temurah*, the rabbis once advised a sick man how to cure himself with a particular treatment, to which the latter replied, "God has afflicted, and you seek to cure! Are you not transgressing his will?" Replied Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, "Foolish man! Just as the earth will not produce fruit if one neglects to weed, fertilize and plow, so with regard to the body. Medications are the fertilizer, the physician a tiller of the soil."

Yet therapeutic intervention is about more than Divine permission to treat illness; for Jews it is nothing less than a spiritual imperative, implied through biblical verses such as "Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow" (*Leviticus* 19:16) and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (*Leviticus* 19:18).

There's a beautiful passage in the Mishnah that helps us understand why Judaism places such a premium on the sanctity of life. As our sages taught in the tractate *Sanhedrin*: the Bible relates God created Adam, a single human being, as the common ancestor of all humankind to

teach that to destroy a single life is to destroy a whole world, even as to save a single life is to save a whole world. That humanity began with a single human being also proclaims forever the greatness of the Holy One. For a sovereign of flesh-and-blood may issue many coins with one die and they all look alike, but the Sovereign of all sovereigns, the Holy One, stamped every human being with the stamp of Adam, yet no person is like any other. לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חיב -- לומר 'בשבילי נברא העולם' (M. *Sanhedrin* 4:5).

Each of is a universe in miniature, a micro-world of infinite possibility, a unique cosmos that will exist but once for all eternity. Unlike all the other forms of life created in the plural, God begins humanity with a single individual created in the Divine Image to emphasize the priceless sanctity of all human life.

It is particularly appropriate to talk about the creation of Adam on a day that is being observed across the country as National Organ Donor Shabbat -- not only because the Scriptural narrative so powerfully bears witness to the value of life, but because the first human being on earth was also the first organ donor. “מצלעתיו ויפל ה' אלקים תרדמה על האדם וישן ויקח אחת -- ויסגר בשר תחתנה -- So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot” (*Genesis* 2:21). We all know what happened next . . .

There are many jokes about this passage, of course, some intended as jabs at men, others targeting the character of women. But setting aside the gender implications of who was created from whom, the story carries with it a profound message. No other animal served as God's partner in fashioning life as Adam did in the creation of Eve. An imperfect and incomplete being, Adam became something more by giving up a part of himself. At the very start of the human race, God seeks to teach us that we are only worthy of receiving to the extent we are willing to give.

In this country, every twenty minutes another person's name is added to a transplant list. At present there are more than 100,000 men, women and children currently awaiting organs. Sadly, each day an average of 17 people die while waiting for a transplant. Why do more than 6,000 people die annually while waiting for an organ? Why have so many Americans chosen to shrug their shoulders? Is it indifference or ignorance of procedure? Unadulterated selfishness or a squeamishness about post-mortem surgery?

In some cases reluctance stems from an inaccurate understanding of religious teaching. More than once I've heard Jews say with great certitude, "Organ donation? No, no, Judaism prohibits violation of the body after death. We are not allowed to donate our bodies to science or undergo autopsies, so of course we're not permitted to donate organs."

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, indeed. It is true that Judaism does not treat the desecration of a person's body lightly. *Halakhah* frowns upon autopsies, even for the sake of furthering the knowledge of medical students. We neither embalm nor cremate. Yet for the sake of *pikuah nefesh*, the preservation of another person's life, we are not only permitted, but commanded, to violate virtually every commandment of the Torah. If we know that Judaism would order us to transgress Shabbat to avert a potential loss of life, why would anyone presume that *halakhah* would prefer the death of the living in order for the dead to take their organs to the grave?

Conservative Judaism has taken a rather strong stand on this issue. While the vast majority of the Orthodox rabbinate strongly urges donation, but still views it as a voluntary act, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative movement more than ten years ago voted in favor of a responsum that maintains it's transgression of Jewish Law to refuse consent for post-mortem organ donation. On behalf of the Law Committee in Israel, Rabbi David Golinkin came to a similar conclusion. He wrote: "It is not merely permissible for a Jew to bequeath his organs for transplantation following his death, it is a Mitzvah, a commandment, for him to do so, in order to save one life, or several."

Given the clarity of Jewish values and *halakhic* teaching, it is difficult to fathom any legitimate religious reason for not registering as an organ donor. As for anyone who is fearful that come the day of resurrection, he or she won't be able to rise with the other dead because of missing organs, I can only offer the same answer given by the great philosopher Saadia Gaon more than a thousand years ago. When asked whether those who had lost limbs or had experienced disfigurement would be able to participate in the resurrection of the dead, he responded that a God who could bring the dead back to life would surely be able to replace any missing parts as well. A thousand years later it still seems a reasonable answer . . .

In a world where so much is beyond our control, there are small things we can do that can potentially have enormous impact on the lives of others. After Shabbat is over take 5 minutes to register on-line with Florida's Agency for Health Care Administration (ahca.myflorida.gov); in addition, the next time you renew your driver's licences, check off a simple box on the application and your status as an organ donor will be listed on the face of your license. Bear in mind that even if you are in less than perfect health, there is no one ineligible to register as a potential organ donor. Since a single person can assist up to fifty different individuals through a variety of organ and tissue donations, there is every likelihood in the world that your gift will help someone somehow.

For those of us who know Andy Marks, Michael Howard or other members of our community, we understand that organ donation is not ultimately about some abstract principle. It's about fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, children, relatives, friends and neighbors. It's about individuals, each one a priceless and precious world created in God's Image. It's about people we all know, even as one day it might be about any of us. What would we feel if we were aware that our life might have been saved by someone who simply chose not to?

In my own rabbinate, I do encounter grieving individuals who have discovered a measure of solace in knowing that some good, some healing, some life came out of their loss. At other times, I meet those who regret not having thought of organ donation at the moment of loss. As one anguished mother put it, "If only I could look at other human beings and know that my son lives on in them, and that they have had another chance at life because of my child." If only . . .

The call is ours to make -- we can be emotionally deadened to the sanctity of human life while we are living, or we can choose to embrace the cause of life even after we are dead. Said Rabbi Isaac Klein *z"l*, "There is no greater honor to the deceased than to bring healing to the living." Indeed, to preserve life in the face of death is nothing less than the stuff of immortality. The Torah teaches, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life for so you and your offspring shall have life and long endure . . ." (*Deuteronomy* 30:19). The choice is ours. I say choose life!