

Responsa For Our Times

> [Praying for a Brain-Dead Person](#) / Rabbi Re'eim Hacoheh

Rosh Yeshiva and Chief Rabbi, Otniel

Question: Is a prayer for a person who has been declared brain-dead a prayer in vain?

Answer: We quote the definition of brain death from an article by Prof. Avraham Steinberg (in the book, *Establishing the Moment of Death*): "Brain death is a way to establish a person's moment of death based on a criterion of a lack of activity of the brain and the respiratory system, and using a series of tests... Setting the moment of death based on brain activity is defined as complete, full, and irreversible loss of all brain activity, including the brainstem." We should add that brain death is of course very different from a state of a coma, where even though the person does not perform any action and often cannot breathe without support, the brain is still active and there is hope that under certain circumstances the person will wake up.

Rabbis do not agree whether brain death can be considered death or not. The majority of recent rabbis accept the definition of brain death as being full death in a halachic sense. This means that it is permitted – and it is in fact a great mitzva – to donate the organs of the dead person to save other lives. The rabbis who accept this ruling include: Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, and Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, along with many other prominent rabbis.

However, with respect to the question asked above, we will see below that very clearly even the rabbis who do not accept brain death as halachic death will agree that praying for the recovery of such a patient is indeed a prayer in vain. This stems directly from the definition of a prayer in vain. As is written in the Mishna, "If one cries out about the past, this is a prayer in vain. What is an example? If a man's wife is pregnant and he prays that she should have a son, this is a prayer in vain. If somebody who is coming back from a trip hears a cry and says that he hopes it was not his household, this is a prayer in vain." [Berachot 54a]. The Talmud quotes sources that declare that "nothing will be blessed unless it is hidden from sight" [Taanit 8b]. That is, a prayer for Divine help is only effective with respect to events that have not yet taken place. This can also be seen from the following example: "We have been taught by the sages: One who goes to measure his granary, says, 'Let it be Your will, our G-d, that You will send a blessing to our works.' If he has started to measure the grain, he should say, 'Blessed is He who sends a blessing to this produce.' If he finished the measurement and then prayed, this is a vain prayer." [Bava Netzia 42a]. This was accepted as halacha by the Rambam (Hilchot Berachot 10:22) and the Shulchan Aruch (230).

The Talmud has a discussion of when one should pray for rain (Berachot 19a), and Rabbi Nachman says that if the seeds began to germinate and then dried out no fast day should be declared. Rashi explains that this would be a prayer in vain. This is also quoted by the Rambam (Hilchot Taanit 2:16) and the Shulchan Aruch (575:8).

It is written in Shaarei Teshuva on Shulchan Aruch 187: "One must be careful not to pray asking for a miracle, something that is against nature." Clearly this stems from an understanding of the definition of a vain prayer, as presented above.

Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (the GRIZ) uses this principle to explain the words of Rashi, that Avraham prayed only for himself and not for Sarah (Torah Novelties 11). He did not pray that Sarah would have a child, because she was infertile and did not have a womb. For her to give birth would require a new creation, and it is not proper to pray for such a thing. On the other hand, the only factor preventing Avraham from having a child was his age. "For this reason, Avraham prayed for himself and not for Sarah, because to pray for her would have been a prayer in vain."

In view of this reasoning, it is clear that a prayer for somebody who has reached a stage of brain death is forbidden, since there is no possibility that the brain will begin to function, just as there is no natural way that a new organ will appear in somebody's body.

Based on the above considerations, we conclude as follows: Since brain death is irreversible and there is no natural way to recover from such a status, anybody who prays for a cure for a brain dead patient is within the definition of a prayer in vain. This is true for all opinions about the subject of brain death.