

200 Lives Saved: HODS Celebrates First 10 Years

Local News

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The Halachic Organ Donor Society (HODS) was founded 10 years ago by Robby Berman, who grew up in the Five Towns. His mother, Hannah Reich Berman, a local real-estate agent, pens a reflective column for this paper that is enjoyed by many readers, and his father, Arnie, during his lifetime, worked long hours in his smoked-fish business, awaking probably earlier than you or I for his early-morning delivery runs to the many shops he supplied. Robby Berman likes fish but chose different pursuits. He initially dabbled in stand-up comedy and other involvements, but his mission was always on the serious side and today he spends most of his time living in Israel running HODS. The advocacy organization, which has grown over the years, maintains a Midtown Manhattan office and actively campaigns to save lives—educating people about the necessity and Jewish imperative to prevent people from dying needlessly, when organ donations can provide them added years.

HODS counts 200 lives saved over the last decade. Achieving rabbinical approval has been a major part of their mission. Only two rabbis carried organ-donor cards ten years ago. Today, according to HODS, there are 230. Some of these rabbinical figures have appeared in HODS print campaigns in the Jewish media, on posters, or in video content that can be viewed at their website. Though HODS maintains there is halachic support for organ

donation, there exist prominent rabbinic positions that take an alternative viewpoint, and the topic of end of life remains one of heated halachic debate.

In Israel, the ongoing HODS campaign has been especially successful in helping change society's attitude towards organ donation. Only three percent of Israelis had organ-donor cards a decade ago, but now the figure is at 12 percent. "More than 120 Israelis died every year waiting for organs," says Berman. "Today it is 'only' about 90."

On November 6 of last year, a gathering of supporters along with individuals who've received organ transplants (or family members of recipients) celebrated the HODS milestone at the Park Avenue apartment of Eric and Miriam Feldstein.

The evening program included the screening of a number of HODS video clips, as well as remarks by guests, including Dr. Kenneth Prager and Dr. Michael Harris (himself a recipient of a liver transplant), who spoke in support of organ donation. Jackie Leifert of Teaneck also addressed the audience. This was not her first HODS appearance. Her husband, Bob, a former executive director of a prominent Upper East Side synagogue, was both an organ recipient and then later become a donor, at the time of his death.

Michael Feldstein of Stamford, Conn., who maintains an active Jewish communal life, received a surprise recognition, as Berman called him up to accept the Outstanding Board Member award, a first for HODS.

The youngest speaker of the evening program was Ally Polansky, a 12-year-old student from HAFTR. She attended the event together with her mom, Debbie Polansky, a member of the Young Israel of Woodmere—and a liver transplant recipient.

As the anniversary program transitioned away from matters of life and death, Berman introduced two comedians, but first shared some of his own humor, apologizing that it's been some years since he's performed. After a few jokes, he handed the mike to Stu Trivax, who has frequented The Tonight Show and is an observant Jew who reconnected with his Yiddishkeit a number of years ago. Stu is a character comedian, and from the Bronx, which for some, who herald from that borough, might be reason enough to listen up.

Next in line was Joel Chasnoff, day-school grad and author of a book about his IDF service, *The 188th Crybaby Brigade: A Skinny Jewish Kid from Chicago Fights Hezbollah*. He was just back from a day in DC and presented a round of Jewish material that poked fun at the Bartons Candy annual day-school Passover sales and other unique components—some mandated, some adopted—of Orthodox Jewish life as we know it. The audience acknowledged and responded with smiles, repeated laughter, and ample applause. Even the folks from the Bronx.

In recent months, Berman has been speaking almost every Shabbos in synagogues throughout the New York City area. It's tiring, he admits, as he lists some of his itinerary. But after 450 lectures over the last decade, Berman prides himself that HODS has fostered discussion and activity, saving lives and educating more than 30,000 Jews about halachic support for organ donation. To learn more, visit www.hods.org.

Judah S. Harris is a photographer, filmmaker, speaker, and writer. Sign up for his popular newsletter at www.judahsharris.com/visit.