

Card that could save a life

Simon Rocker meets the founder of a campaign to persuade observant Jews to carry organ-donor cards

Yoni Jesner, the 19-year-old prospective medical student from Glasgow who was murdered in a terrorist attack in Israel in 2002, was denied the chance to save life in his own lifetime. But he was able to do so after death, when his family donated organs from his body so that others might live.

His example is cited in a campaign to persuade Orthodox Jews to carry organ-donor cards which has been brought to Britain this month by its founder, New Yorker Robert Berman. "Most Jews are under the impression that Jewish law prohibits organ-donation," he said in an interview.

"But if you ask any rabbi, no matter how black the hat or long the white beard, they will tell you that organ donation from a dead body to save a life is a mitzvah."

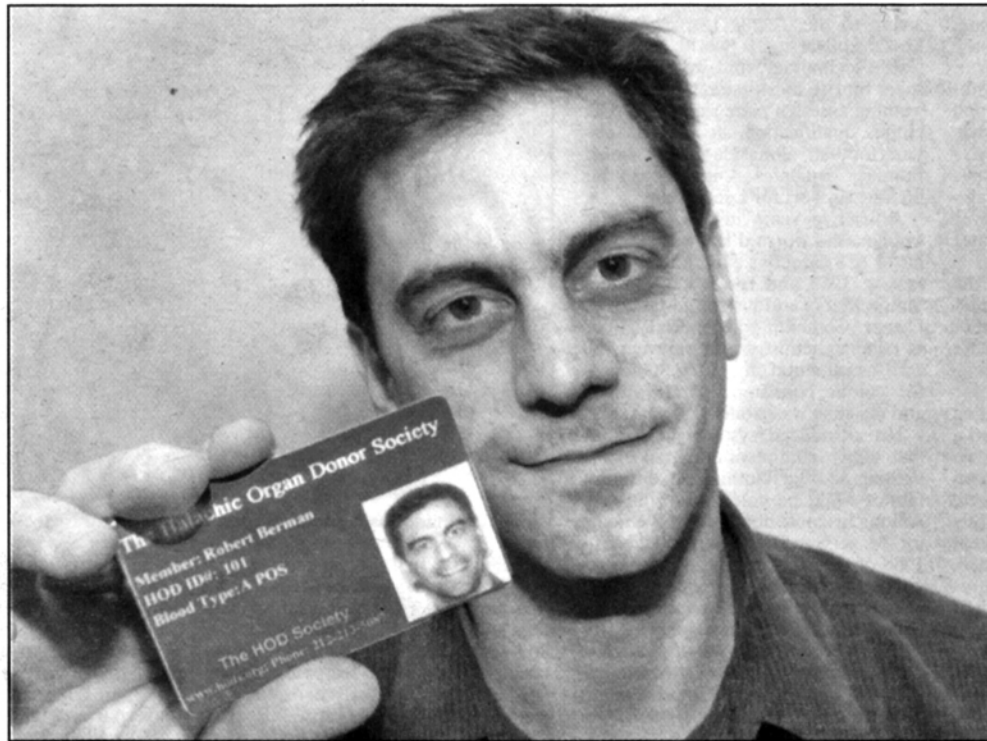
A thousand people, including a number of influential rabbis, now carry one of the cards of his Halachic Organ Donor (HOD) Society. And he hopes there will be a few more following his appearance at the Limmud conference in Nottingham and a series of talks in London.

Holders of the HOD Society card give their consent for their organs to be posthumously used for transplant — but not for research. The card also differs from secular equivalents in allowing donors to choose whether their organs can be used after brain-stem death, or only after their heart stops beating.

This is significant because of the dispute among halachic authorities over the definition of death. Some permit donation only after heart death, which restricts the type of organs that can be recovered.

"Once the heart has stopped beating, the organs suffer oxygen-deprivation," Mr Berman explained. "Still, you have a window of opportunity for 40 minutes with kidneys and livers." So for those whose rabbis who allow the removal of organs only after the cessation of heartbeats, that option is available on the card.

Brain-stem death has nevertheless been recognised as halachically valid by the Chief



Willing to give: Halachic Organ Donor Society founder Robert Berman, who speaks in Edgware tomorrow

Rabbinat of Israel and one of the most influential 20th-century authorities, the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

Mr Berman, a freelance journalist and Yeshiva University graduate, launched his mission two years ago following research for an article on organ-donation.

"I found out that in a 12-month period in Israel there were 200 victims of car accidents and terrorist attacks who were brain-stem dead," he said. "But when the hospitals approached their families for organs, only 70 fam-

ilies agreed — the lowest consent rate in the Western world.

"I called the Israeli organ-donation network and asked how many people died in that same period waiting for organs and the answer was 114. The 130 could have saved the 114."

While there is a prohibition in Jewish law against cutting up a dead body, like almost all commandments, this can be overridden in order to save a life, he pointed out.

He has also had to contend with the mistaken belief held by many Jews that organs cannot

be removed from the body because they will be needed at the time of the physical resurrection of the dead. But this is a fallacy, he said, since there was no biblical or talmudic precedent for the idea and, in any case, organs in an interred body soon disintegrated in the ground.

While donated lungs or skin can clearly be life-saving, some rabbis will also permit the transplant of a cornea, he added. "The Talmud equates blindness with death and therefore some rabbis allow cornea transplants because it is saving a person from a life-threatening affliction."

The society's president is Stephen Flatow, father of another terrorist victim in Israel. His daughter Alisa died in Gaza in 1996 and her family, too, donated her organs, after consulting a leading American rabbi. The HOD campaign was initially funded out of the compensation Mr Flatow obtained for her death through the American courts.

Mr Berman says that he wouldn't mind if a rabbi, having investigated the Jewish sources, ruled that members of his congregation should not donate organs. "What bothers me is when rabbis don't take any stand on the issue."

He is also troubled by the idea that some people who wouldn't donate organs would be ready to take them if their own life were at risk. "One transplant surgeon in Pennsylvania told me on the phone that Jews are a nation of takers, not givers. In a way, I agree with him. Jews take organs freely. When it comes to giving, they don't."

It's a situation he is determined to reverse.

Robert Berman speaks this Shabbat at Edgware United Synagogue. A Halachic Organ Donor card is obtainable through website www.hods.org