

REFORM JUDAISM

Rabbi Howard Kaplensky

United Hebrew Temple, St. Louis, Missouri

Reprinted with permission from the UNOS/SEOPF Reference Guide for Clergy

There is a story told that God was observed in deep thought by the angels in Heaven. They guessed that He was planning something very important, but could not guess what it was. Then, it happened! It was miraculous. Out of nothing, God created a world, the Heaven and the Earth. And, over the course of six days, or a split second in angel-time, He filled the earth with all sorts of trees and bushes and animals and birds. There were beautiful mountains, majestic oceans, jungles and winding rivers.

After watching all of this, the angels busily talked among themselves. They thought that what they had seen was very grand. Obviously, God was pleased because he repeatedly evaluated it as being "very good." But, somehow it seemed incomplete. And they said so! God, of course, heard their comments. He laughed and told them that He was not yet finished. He turned away from the angels, looked at the Earth and created man. God then said, "I am finished."

The angels stood in wonder. Again, they spoke among themselves. But who would ask the question that was on their minds? They drew lots. Gabriel would ask. "Lord of Creation, what is this creature and what shall it be called? What is its purpose?" God answered, "He is called man. His purposed is to take care of the world I have created."

This little story is instructive. God created the world and all that is in it. But, man is to watch over it, to care for it, as our Scripture states, "to have dominion over it." From the moment he breathed life, man has carried this responsibility and privilege. He has been the guardian of God's creation. God saw immediately that man, knowing that he had limitations, would need a partner because the responsibility was so immense. And God took a rib from the man and with that rib, performed the first transplant and created woman. A part of man's body made life possible for another. The first transplant!

One may conclude that man and woman are even more than guardians of the earth. They possess the ability to preserve the lives of others, to give the precious gift of survival. All religious traditions value life. The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament exhort us to love one another and to be good stewards of all we are and all we possess. We are not free to place the responsibility for the condition of our world or the quality of life on God's shoulders. "I have placed before you the blessing and the curse, good and evil. Therefore choose life," scripture tells us. The key word is "choose." The condition of life in this world is our God-given responsibility. Its quality is our choice.

Through the ages, since that miraculous creative act, we have worked with the tools, which the Creator provided us to tend His garden and bring forth the grateful bud and brilliant flower of the quality of Life. The Garden of Life lies untended and the beauty of Life remains only a possibility when we do not take the hoe and rake in hand. Man and Woman have done well in tending the garden. We, through our ingenuity and our own creative instincts, have gone far beyond those earlier gardeners. We have developed the tools to make the Harvest of Life more abundant. We call those tools "Technology." And technology has provided us with the ability to preserve a life, which had withered.

In the world of horticulture, a portion of a hearty plant might be cut away and attached to a weaker plant to enrich the second plant and to enhance its life. Such a process is called grafting. Our creativity extends this remarkable process to human beings. We have the ability to transplant organs of the human body to sustain life in another human being. Replacing parts of the human body is an interest that dates back to the ancient Egyptians. History records that a leg of a deceased Moor was transplanted to a Christian who had lost his leg. A medical journal in 1881 discussed the first skin transplant.

But great success in transplant surgery has been rather recent. Edward Zirm, an Austrian ophthalmologist, in 1905, restored sight through a corneal transplant to a workman who had been blinded by lime. Now tens of thousand of corneal transplants are performed annually across the United States. Add to this number the tens of thousands of organ transplants and the hundreds of thousands of tissue transplants that have occurred. These are impressive numbers because of the lives that have been saved and the improved quality of life they have given to the suffering.

But, lest we be complacent, we should note that many more people desperately need transplants. Organ donation is a process misunderstood by many. There is concern with the possible mutilation of the body of the deceased donor or that it might cost the donor's family a great deal of money. The facts are the donated organs are surgically removed as in an operation, and the donor is "closed." Normal funerals can be held. There is absolutely no cost to the donor's family.

Some have expressed the concern that the hospital staff might not try everything possible to save the life of a potential donor. The truth is that the transplant team is not involved at all until all life saving efforts have failed and death has been established after the brain has ceased to function. There are compelling reasons to become an organ and tissue donor. There can be no higher response to the scriptural commands to love our neighbor and to care for each other. There is great satisfaction, perhaps a sense of peace, even in the face of sorrow, in knowing that something of yourself or someone you love will make life possible for someone else and live on in another.

I recently heard of the story of the death of a young boy and his gift of life to another. A 15-year-old young man was struck on his bicycle by a car. He sustained severe head injuries and extensive brain damage. His doctor determined that there was no hope for the boy. He was declared clinically "brain dead." Naturally, the boy's parents were in shock. The doctor approached the parents and gently told them that they could donate their son's organs for transplant with the potential of their son helping others to live. The family chose to donate. Their decision was a difficult one. Both parents told the hospital chaplain that this is what their son would have wanted because he was "that kind of boy." They found comfort in knowing that their son's eternity was of the spirit **and** of the body.

When one reflects on it, it seems remarkable that this tender of the Garden of Life has fulfilled so well the charge that God gave him that he has advanced to the point where, thought his technology and his own body, he is able to extend human life. From the ability to save a life accrues the responsibility to do so. Having the technology to save a life and not use it is to destroy life. In the metaphor of the garden: to allow the menacing weeds to choke the life from the flower, the ability to save a life with the donation of an organ of our own body in a God-given ability; with the miraculous act of creation, God planted the potential to do within us. Man, the gardener, has simply realized the potential.

Back to Heaven, the angels were still talking about God's act of creation, and evaluating it. A few dissident angels felt that it was an unnecessary act. Things had been fine in Heaven without the Earth. But, after they

looked down on the earth from their heavenly station and noted the progress that man had made and how well he was tending the Garden of Life, the vast array of angels joined in a chorus with God and sang, "It is good." AMEN