Organ Donation: the definition of death.

Last week we explained organ donation. We started from the situation in which the donor is alive. This type of organ donation includes bone marrow, blood transfusion and kidney transplant (see here).
The most common form of organ donation, however, and the most controversial one is the cadaveric organ donation, i.e. donating the organs after one's death. This is the organ donation which is alluded to in the driver licenses where one authorizes or not to remove his organs for donation.

As we previously explained there is a wide consensus among rabbis about the permission to donate an organ or a segment of an organ while the donor is alive, especially since in our days the risks for the donors have diminished dramatically.

But with cadaveric donation there is a crucial point, which needs to be defined. That is: the definition of "death". Let me explain: some organs, like the heart for example, cannot be transplanted after they stops functioning. The heart must be removed from the body of the donor while it is still beating.

Up to the 1970s, this operation was impossible because irreversible cardiopulmonary failure was the only standard for determining death. But, later on, scientists developed ventilators and respirators which would maintain the breathing, avoiding the heart from stoping. In a situation known as 'irreversible stem brain death', the brain might completely stop its activity, while the patient is still breathing and his heart still beating. The question is: is this patient considered dead because his brain is dead, or is he considered to be still alive, because his heart is still functioning?

The answer to this question would determine the Halakhic status of after life organ donation.
(*to be continued…*)

Shabbat Shalom!

Understanding brain death, an educational video by HODS
For a comprehensive analysis of all the Rabbinical opinions on this matter and for one of the best available resources about organ donation in Jewish Law, visit: www.hods.org