

**George Washington University Hospital, Washington, DC
"Tree of Life" Dedication Ceremony
September 27, 2015
Rabbi Richard Agler**

Good afternoon. I wish I could say I'm happy to be here but I'm not. I never am when I speak on organ donation. For what I'm sure are obvious reasons. This is my first time back in Washington since Talia died, which was 3 years and eight months ago today.

Tali lived 26 years but it was long enough for her to leave several legacies. In addition to the love, light and joy that she spread just by living, those who knew and loved her funded two year's worth of scholarships for college students at the Religious Action Center here in Washington. A shelter for abused and trafficked girls in Nairobi, Kenya was named the Talia Agler Girls Shelter in her honor. Also here in Washington Tali worked in the field of International Development at Chemonics and taught at Temple Sinai. She was a graduate of American University. She just loved being in the capital.

She accomplished all this at age 26. We can only imagine what she would have accomplished by 36, 46...Our sorrow is unspeakable.

The sorrow is somewhat diminished by Martha, who carries Tali's heart and Brandy, who lives with Tali's lung, and their families who are here today. The families of the recipients of her other organs whom we have not yet met also help to console us. So too the families of everyone here today whose loved ones are still with them because of donors who had the foresight to say yes, of course I'll do that.

It is one of the things about organ donation that it is both the easiest and the hardest thing in the world to do. It's easy because it is painless, at least physically, it doesn't cost anything, at least financially, and it is the most priceless gift of all, the gift of saving a life. What could be easier?

Of course that is only half of the equation. To make the gift, most of the time, you have to give up your own life first. No one agrees to do that. No one should. But after the fact, after the end, whether the end was normal or tragic, prolonged or sudden, if you can, how can you not?

Mindy and I, our other children Jesse, his wife Tovah and Sarah, as well as all of our extended family and everyone who knew Tali, are proud that she made that decision. And she did make it. The accident that took her life was sudden and left her unable to communicate. But when the staff here at GWU Hospital asked us if we consented to have her organs donated we knew what her answer was. Not only was it on her drivers license, we had

discussed it as a family. I had given sermons on the subject. There was no question this was what she would have wanted. It was the proverbial no-brainer.

It was a good thing that it was. Giving that response to the hospital staff was brutal in its own way, but we knew we were doing the right thing--by her, by us and by the people we didn't know who would be receiving.

When we have spoken to groups, and we've done it at schools, hospitals, churches, synagogues, professional associations, civic groups and others, we always ask how many are organ donors. Many are. We're glad to see that. Because we are there to encourage people to register to become donors. Then we ask how many of your families know it? Many fewer. It is important to let your family know. So you have the answer to that question from the hospital staff, should it ever come.

No one should have to lose a Tali. But no one should have to lose a Martha or a Brandy either, especially if we don't have to. If we can't have them all, let's have all of them we possibly can.

We are in awe of the medical technology. Organ transplants have gone from science fiction to everyday reality in our lifetimes. Special thanks are due to the staff here at GWU Hospital. Their professionalism was off the charts. No one should have to go through this but if you do, you want people like them to do it with you.

About a year after Talia died, I was on a shuttle bus sitting behind two people who were talking about organ donation in highly technical terms. I couldn't help eavesdropping and it turned out they were a doctor and nurse attending a conference on that very subject. I introduced myself as the father of a donor and expressed my thanks for all that they did for other families. I bid them to remember the humanity of those families. They were kind enough to respond respectfully. Have to be technical to do the job. But these are real lives and real families whose lives are at stake. To those involved it is more than just a good cause--it is everything.

The Talmud teaches: if you save one life you've saved an entire world. The plain meaning is both simple and profound. Each human life is of infinite and incalculable worth. Through this experience I've come to uncover an additional meaning. Each of us is at the center of many worlds. Family, friends, co-workers, and more. When we save a life, we save those worlds too.

All of us here are doing what we can to save lives, save worlds. Medically, technically, with education, information, with generosity, with love, with dedication. There are also the people we don't even see. The surgeons, the

nurses, the administrators, the ones who manage the data bases, the staff of the Washington Regional Transplant Community--it is all holy work. As painful as it is to be here, would be unspeakably more so without the knowledge that in some not small ways at all, Talia lives on. Today in this very room, her heart still beats. Her lung still breathes. Her name is still a blessing.

Thank you very much.