

Blood Relatives

In Tzfas, where I live, we have an e-mail bulletin called “Tzfatline” where people can post information, requests, or offers for assistance. Typical posts include things like “Need ride to Jerusalem on Tuesday morning,” or “Used washing machine for sale, good condition.”



"Seeking B+ blood-type kidney donor" was one of the more unusual Tzfatline posts. But when I saw it, I knew immediately that this was addressed to me.

I had been introduced to the possibility of donating a kidney several years earlier by my friend Sheva, who had considered it but later bowed out for medical reasons. Following her example, I had decided to go through some preliminary testing to see whether I was even a candidate to donate.

Testing for kidney donors is exhaustive. To qualify as a donor, you have to be in perfect health, and before giving you the go-ahead to donate, they put you through every test in the book, including blood and urine tests, ultrasound and CT scans, an angiogram, a radioactive iodine test, and a psychological evaluation. In Israel, you also have to appear before a seven-member panel and prove that your intentions are altruistic and that you are not being coerced to donate or compensated financially for your donation. But the medical costs are covered by insurance (*kupat cholim*), travel and other expenses are covered by the Matnat Chaim organization, and the government compensates for lost time from work.

Before putting myself through this battery of tests, my husband Yosef urged me to ask a *rav* whether it was permitted and advisable for me to donate a kidney.

"I'd rather do it in the opposite order," I said. "Let me first see if I qualify as a donor, and then, if and when it becomes a real possibility, I'll ask a *sh'eilah*."

After passing the preliminary tests and getting a *psak* from a *rav* that donating a kidney was not only permitted, but also praiseworthy, I began to mentally prepare myself for the day when I'd have the opportunity to do this mitzvah. My only stipulation was that my recipient not be a smoker.

When I mentioned to people that I was strongly considering donating a kidney, their responses ranged from skepticism to outright horror. "Why would you put yourself through surgery unnecessarily?" they asked me.

"People go through surgery all the time," I said. "It's not such a big deal." I had heard that the surgery involved in kidney donation was comparable to that of a cesarean section, and having acted as a doula for many women, the prospect of going through that kind of procedure didn't faze me.

A few people in our community called up Yosef and demanded, "How can you let your wife do such a dumb thing?" (The adjective they used was actually a lot stronger than "dumb.")

"I really don't think I can stop her," Yosef replied. "She's very determined."

My own twin brother was furious with me for even considering the possibility of kidney donation, and for a time I avoided speaking to him because I was afraid he'd talk me out of the mitzvah. In general, I stopped talking about my dream



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life between the lines

CLOSE TO TWO YEARS AGO, a very dear friend of my family was hospitalized for dehydration, and it was discovered that her kidneys were inexplicably malfunctioning. This friend is the mother of a large family, beginning to marry off her children, and until her hospitalization she was a vibrant, busy, and unusually energetic person.

I watched this bundle of energy rapidly deteriorate to the point where she had to spend most of her day in bed, venturing out of the house only for frequent medical appointments and treatments. She was placed on a draconian diet — no salt, no sugar, no fruit, nothing with any taste — and also placed on a waiting list for kidney donation.

Then came the tests. It's not only kidney donors who go through months and months of testing — potential recipients have to demonstrate their suitability for a transplant and subsequent anti-rejection drugs by presenting a clean bill of health for every last tooth and toenail.

A family member offered to donate a kidney to her, but after exhaustive testing, this relative was rejected as a donor. For months after that, my friend dragged herself to dialysis appointments every other day, all the while anxiously awaiting the phone call that would herald her salvation. Finally, Rav Yeshayahu Haber of the Matnat Chaim organization — himself a kidney recipient — informed her that a suitable donor had been found.

When I saw my friend a few weeks after the transplant, it was like witnessing *techiyas hameisim*.

And then, I got a LifeLines submission from a woman who had donated a kidney, also through the Matnat Chaim organization. When I wrote up her story, I felt as though I was giving personal thanks to Hashem for having granted my friend a new lease on life.

Does art imitate life, or does life imitate art?

—C. Saphir

of donating a kidney, because almost anyone I mentioned it to strongly discouraged me from going through with it.

“You’re a mother of ten children,” people told me. “How can you even think of this? What if you yourself need a kidney one day?”

“If I or someone in my family needed a kidney,” I replied, “I’d want someone to step up to the plate and donate one. But if I weren’t willing to donate my kidney to someone else, how could I expect another person to do that for me or my child?”

To me, willingness to give away a part of myself was the ultimate challenge in *Ve’ahavta lere’acha kamocho*. From the time I began to seriously consider becoming a kidney donor, I

davened to Hashem to give me the opportunity to perform this mitzvah, and to give me the strength to go through with it when the opportunity arose.

So when I saw the Tzfatline post for the B+ kidney donor, I jumped. This was my blood type, and this post was clearly calling out to me. With my husband’s consent — albeit not ecstatic consent — I called the number on the post, and an appointment was set up for me at Petach Tikvah’s Beilinson Hospital to be tested as a possible match for this anonymous recipient.

When the hospital telephoned me at home to inform me that I was indeed a match for Eitan, a 63-year-old Yom Kippur War veteran, I was absolutely thrilled. I agreed to speak with Eitan on the phone, and he called me that Friday to wish me *Shabbat Shalom*.

Upon returning to Beilinson to meet with a social worker and a psychiatrist, I actually bumped into Eitan and his wife Cheini in the hall. I could see that they were kind, upstanding people, and that they enjoyed an unusually warm, close relationship. *I want to do this for her*, I thought to myself, imagining how tragic it would be for Cheini to lose her husband.

There were still numerous tests to undergo, though. When one of these tests came back with a questionable result, I was devastated. Had I come all the way to this point only to be turned back? Did Hashem not consider me worthy of this great mitzvah?

With tears streaming down my face, I cried out, “Hashem, please don’t take this mitzvah away from me!” Meeting my prospective recipient had only strengthened my resolve to go through with the donation, because I understood that to him, this little kidney spelled the difference between health and misery, or even life and death.

For the previous year and a half, Eitan had received dialysis treatments three times a week, for five hours each time. Besides having to spend 15 hours a week hooked up to a machine, he had suffered the typical side effects of dialysis: fatigue, dizziness, and weakness, as well as blood pressure fluctuations that caused him to lose consciousness on several occasions. Like other dialysis patients, Eitan also had to be on a strict diet; in addition to restricting salt and sugar intake, he was limited to two or three cups of liquid a day, even in the heat of the Israeli summer, because his body was unable to flush out excess fluids.

To a person suffering from kidney failure, the gift of a kidney is the gift of being able to relieve oneself normally — and a great gift that is indeed. I never fully appreciated that ability myself.

until I saw how big a difference it would make in the life of my would-be recipient. Witnessing Eitan's anguish reminded me of the time Katyusha rockets fell on Tzfas. Before that, when I heard about Katyushas falling in Kiryat Shemoneh or Sderot, I clucked my tongue and mustered some sympathy for the children who couldn't go to school and the parents who braced themselves each time the siren began to wail. But when I heard the deafening rise-and-fall of the air-raid siren, knowing that a missile was seconds away from me and my family, I wasn't tsk-tsking anymore.

Now that I had gotten to know Eitan and Cheini and had seen firsthand the Gehinnom of dialysis, I was even more determined to go out on the front lines of the battle against kidney failure.

To my delight, further testing results were all satisfactory, and I was approved as a donor. On August 8, 2010, one of my kidneys was removed and immediately implanted in Eitan's body. I suffered no pain after the surgery, only some nausea for 24 hours as a result of the anesthesia.

"It was like having a C-section without having to get up at 2 a.m. to feed the baby," I joked.

Since the surgery, I've never had a moment's regret. I don't feel any different from before, and I don't consider myself to have lost anything. On the contrary — I've gained a child, in the sense that I helped give life to another human being. I love life, and the opportunity to share the priceless gift of life was one that I continue to relish.

I believe that in a live kidney donation, the donor actually gains more than the recipient. It's hard to explain it, but after donating a kidney, you're a different person. Having stretched your *chesed* muscle to another dimension, you feel an entirely new connection to Hashem and Klal Yisrael.

The impact of my donation carried further than I would have imagined. *Yedioth Ahronoth* — hardly a bastion of glowing coverage for the chareidi sector — ran a piece on its website entitled "Chareidi Woman Donated Kidney to Unknown Person; His Life Was Saved." The piece quoted Eitan as saying that my donation proves that the Jewish People are indeed "*areivim zeh lazeh*." It also debunked the myth that chareidim are categorically opposed to organ donation.

In the years since my donation, I've kept up a relationship with Eitan, Cheini, and their family. I attended the wedding of their youngest daughter, and they joined us at my son's wedding.

During the wedding, one of the other guests turned to Cheini and asked, "What's your connection to the family?"

Cheini smiled. "We're blood relatives," she answered. And indeed we are. ●

The narrator of this story may be contacted through LifeLines or the Mishpacha office.

To have your story retold by C. Saphir, e-mail a brief synopsis to lifelines@mishpacha.com or call +1.718.686.9339 extension 87204 and leave a message. Details will be changed to assure confidentiality.

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