

## On Second Thought

Reflecting on the people and the moral,  
behind the stories **By Joel Rebibo**

For 16 years, Hamodia's Israel News editor Joel Rebibo has presented readers with balanced coverage of the events of the day. In this column he looks beyond the facts and reflects on the people, and the moral, behind the stories

# Gift of Life

"*Ein milim*" ("There are no words").

That's how Lior's parents introduced themselves to us. "Ilan and Yaffa," followed by "*ein milim*," repeated throughout the morning by them and their family members.

The meeting took place last Tuesday in the family waiting area outside an operating room at Rambam Hospital in Haifa. Our son, Gavi, was inside having one of his kidneys removed, to be transplanted later that afternoon in their son.

*Ein milim*. There were no words to express their gratitude, no words to explain why a young man, a father of six children, would voluntarily submit to surgery for a perfect stranger. "By you it's *mekubal*; by us it's unheard of," said the mother, who is traditional, but not religious.

Gavi is a giver by nature. He's active on his *yishuv*, Peduel, where he volunteers as chairman of the administrative committee, is a *baal tefillah* for the Yamim Nora'im, gives bar mitzvah lessons to often tone-deaf kids. But giving of his time is one thing, giving of himself, literally, is another.

Why go through surgery, with its risks and pain? Why give up a kidney at the age of 35 — what if the other one fails? And why do it for a perfect stranger?

Those were some of the questions he was asked by a committee of doctors and ethicists who wanted to be sure he was of sound mind and wasn't doing it for financial gain.

"I have a wife, six children and a home," he explained. "*Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has given me only good. Here's a father of three children who doesn't have all this. If it's possible to help him, it's my *zechut*."

At first they didn't believe him. They peppered him with more



BEFORE: Lior (L) and Gavi: A perfect match.

questions, trying to poke a hole in his story, to get him to admit to an under-the-table payoff. Finally, one of the professors threw in the towel, muttering something like, "That's the religious for you."

My wife and I felt an instant connection with Lior's parents, despite our differences. His mother is an eighth-generation Israeli, his father comes from Iraqi stock. They live in Kiryat Ata, in the north. We're American immigrants with roots in Morocco and Europe who live in Yerushalayim. But as different as we are, we were drawn together by a common concern for our sons: that Gavi should emerge unharmed and that his kidney should be a good match for Lior, enabling him to get off of dialysis and lead a normal life.

The room was filled with relatives of both sides making small talk,

eating some of the baked goods my daughter had brought from Label's Bakery, a landmark for anyone who knows the Hadar neighborhood in Haifa. We learned that kidney failure runs in Lior's family: His mother and older brother had transplants, but his brother's kidney came from an accident victim, and there was trauma that left the kidney less than fully functional. That's not a problem with a live donor; Gavi's blood and tissue typing proved to be a perfect match for Lior.

The polite banter was soon replaced by *Tehillim*; not just my wife, daughter-in-law and daughter, but Lior's mother, sister and relatives — you know, the ones who are supposedly not religious.

At one point, the guest of honor showed up. Lior, dressed in hospital pajamas, a big *kippah* and *tzizis* walked in with his wife. He was fasting, getting

ready to be brought into surgery as soon as Gavi was done, but wanted to come and thank us, as if we had anything to do with it.

In fact, I'm ashamed to say, if Gavi had asked for my advice, I would have counseled against. Who needs to take the risk? He has a wife and six children. But seeing Lior and his wife, and realizing what was at stake for them and their three young children, I realized how right Gavi was and how wrong I would have been.

Lior is 34. His kidney began failing three years ago, and for the past two years he's been going for dialysis three times a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. He'd be hooked up at 8 a.m. and for the next four hours his blood would be drained from a tube in his arm, cleansed of waste by membranes in the machine, and returned through another tube. The process would last some four hours, leaving him exhausted, headachy and in need of a nap.

He showed me his arm, puffy where the tubes were inserted. "I would put on several kilos in liquid in between treatments," he told me. "This drained in the dialysis, and I'd regain my normal weight."

Obviously, he couldn't hold down a full-time job, had no energy for his children and couldn't be there for his wife and parents. And the longer he was on dialysis, the greater was the risk of permanent damage and possible death (20 percent die while waiting for a transplant).

At one point, Lior called a leading organization that signs people up to donate their organs upon their death. He wanted to know how long he'd have to wait to get a kidney. "You're only



AFTER: "I have another brother. Part of you is inside of me."

## What Kidneys Do

The kidneys maintain the body's internal equilibrium of water and minerals (sodium, potassium, chloride, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium and sulfate). The acidic metabolism end-products that the body cannot get rid of via respiration are also excreted through the kidneys.

The kidneys also function as part of the endocrine system, producing erythropoietin and calcitriol. Erythropoietin is

involved in the production of red blood cells, and calcitriol plays a role in bone formation.

Dialysis is an imperfect treatment to replace kidney function because it does not correct the compromised endocrine functions of the kidney. Dialysis treatments replace some of these functions through diffusion (waste removal) and ultrafiltration (fluid removal).

— Wikipedia



Dialysis. Three times a week for four hours.

on dialysis two years? That's nothing. You'll be waiting at least another three, four years," he was told.

Lior was shattered. He couldn't talk to anyone for two weeks. His wife, an *eishes chayil* of the highest order, lifted his spirits. She'd been taking challah every Friday for three years in his merit; surely something would come up.

Lior became *frum* through his wife, who became *frum* through her religious grandmother. There is an innocence, a purity about them; their faith that things will work out is so matter-of-fact that you want to do everything to help, to make sure that they're not disappointed.

Sitting in the waiting room, watching Lior's wife and parents saying *Tehillim*, it became so clear. My son was taking a limited risk, subjecting himself to pain and discomfort and a month of sick leave, to give Lior a chance at a normal life. A chance to be a father to his children, a husband to his wife, a son to his parents.

It's that simple.

Gavi met Lior through an organization called Matnat Chaim, founded by Rav Yeshayahu Heber, which has arranged more than 155 transplants. Rav Heber started the organization almost six years ago to encourage voluntary kidney donation

and to make contact with potential matching recipients.

Rav Heber was a *rebbe* in *yeshiva ketanah* in the morning and the principal of a large *cheder* in the afternoon when, at 43, he suffered renal failure and began dialysis. He found himself lying next to Pinchas Turgeman, a yeshiva student from Kiryat Arba, whose older brother had been killed in the Second Lebanon War.

"We became friends and began learning during dialysis," Rav Heber recalls. "It was a yeshiva of one Rav and one *talmid*."

Rav Heber was liberated from dialysis when a friend donated a kidney, but he didn't forget about Pinchas. He succeeded in finding him a donor, but by the time the donor got through all the red tape Pinchas had died.

"His parents said they lost one son in the Lebanon war and one in a bureaucratic war," Rav Heber recalled.

He decided there and then to dedicate himself to finding altruistic donors, streamlining the process and getting patients off dialysis. In talking to people about why they wouldn't donate, he heard objections on *halachic* grounds.

*chessed*." (The problem is taking organs from those who are "brain dead.")

When Gavi called Rav Heber to offer a kidney he was originally given the name of a young child to be the recipient. But when a different solution was found for the child, Lior's name came up. Though Gavi never specified any preference regarding the recipient — that he be religious, for instance — it was an added bonus to give his kidney to someone a year younger, with whom he so closely identified and had such an easy rapport.

Lior jokes that Gavi had been watching over "his" kidney for the past 35 years. Gavi said he made sure to drink some good wine for *Kiddush* the Shabbos before the surgery so that Lior would enjoy it after receiving his kidney.

Gavi was admitted last Monday and visited Lior in the dialysis unit, for what would be his last treatment. The next morning he was brought into surgery. (It's interesting that the doctor warned Lior not to get his hopes up even at the last minute, as some live donors have been known to get cold feet. Gavi sounded stressed to me as the surgery approached — normal enough — but never expressed any reservations.)

Gavi spent more time in surgery than expected. What was supposed to be a laparoscopic procedure, three small incisions in the abdomen, turned into open abdominal surgery because of excessive bleeding.

Tuesday night was painful and uncomfortable. By Wednesday morning the feeding tube was removed, the morphine was replaced by Optalgin and he was starting to walk, under the watchful eye of my wife, who was at his side for many long hours.

On Thursday, he was strong

dropped from 9.2 to 1.2 in two days (just under 1 is normal.)

When we got to the room, we were asked to don masks and gowns, as Lior is in isolation. He is taking antirejection medicine, which means that his immunity is low. He'll need a few months for a full recovery.

He was sitting up in a chair, his face covered by a mask. "Now you have another son," he told me and my wife, honoring us more than he'll ever know. "I have another brother. Part of you is inside of me."

"I still don't believe the situation I'm in. It's a dream. Yesterday was Wednesday, a dialysis day. It doesn't register in my mind that it's over."

"People have to hear about this and learn. This has to be passed on. What happened is a gift of life."

"Everyone has an angel watching out for him. I have my *malach* Gavriel who came to save me. I don't believe it."

Gavi was released from the hospital on Friday, and was able to walk to shul Shabbos morning to *bentch gomeil*. His full recovery is expected to take a month.

A final thought. Lior wants this story publicized in the hope that others will be encouraged to join the list of altruistic donors. Rav Heber agrees that the publicity is important because it raises awareness. Indeed, two people on Gavi's *yishuv* have already approached him and said they are watching to see the outcome of his case and are seriously considering donating.

One of the concerns about donating a kidney is what happens if the other is later damaged? In 98 percent of the cases, if one kidney fails due to disease, *chas v'shalom*, so does the second. And donors are automatically placed at the top of the list to receive kidneys, so they are actually better off.

Moreover, doctors agree that one kidney is more than enough to do the job for a lifetime. The second, it could be argued, was given to us so that we could emulate Hashem and give life.

It's also important to note that the success rates of these transplants is more than 98 percent.

Despite these arguments, it's doubtful that many people reading this will decide to do this ultimate *chessed*.

However, there is one thing all of us can, and must, do, at least once, after reading this article. We can stop taking for granted healthy kidneys and start appreciating what a blessing it is to be able to remove waste from our bodies in a natural way. The next time we say "*asher yatzar*," we should stop, read the words, appreciate the wonders of Hashem and feel, really feel, gratitude.

Please daven for a *refuah sheleimah* for Gavriel Meir ben Miriam Rut and Lior ben Yaffa among the sick of Klal Yisrael.

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It's that simple.

"It's a mistake to think there's any *halachic* problem," he says, brandishing letters from Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, *zt"l*, Harav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *zt"l*, Harav Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*, and others. "There is no problem with a live donor giving a kidney. To the contrary, it's a huge

enough to shower and walk to Lior's room. My wife and I were privileged to witness their first encounter since the surgery. We had been told that the kidney was a "perfect fit" and began working right away. The level of creatinine in his blood, an indicator of kidney function,