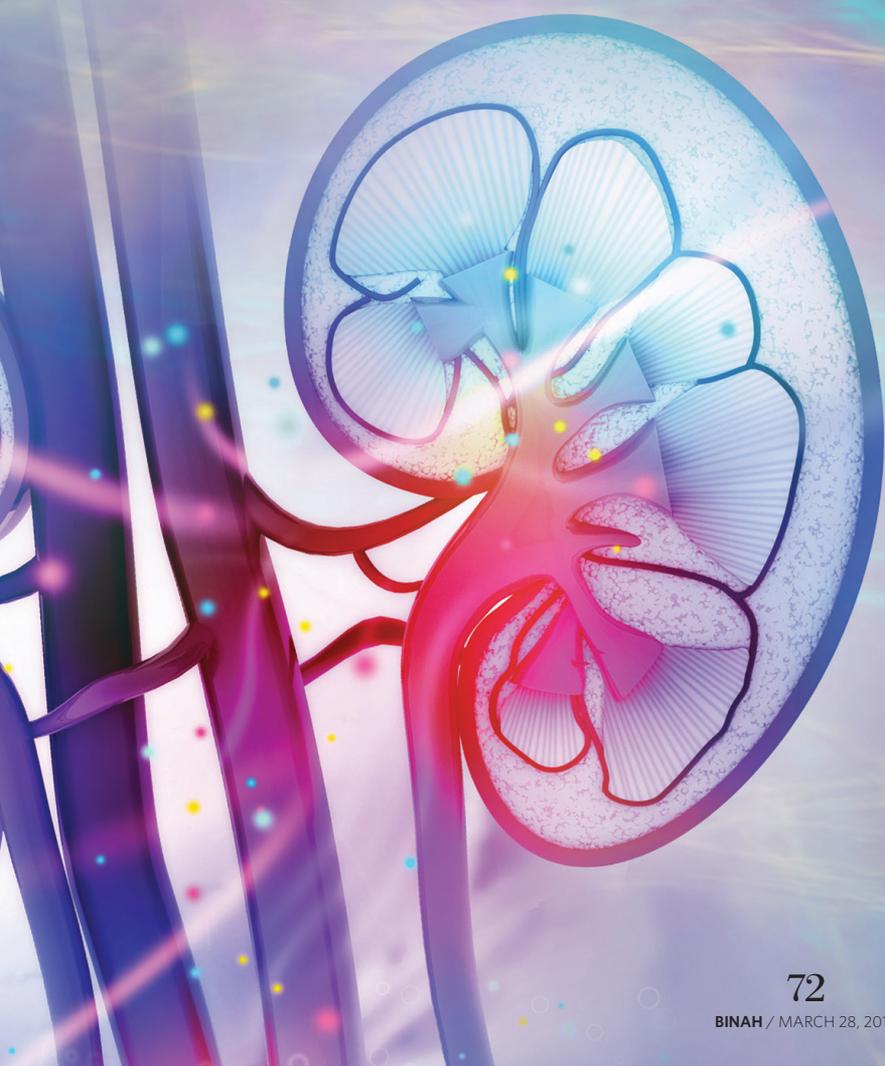


NONFICTION

TO Give A Gift
OF Life



JOURNAL OF A KIDNEY DONOR

November 12, 2013

I can't get the story out of my head. There was a woman dying of kidney disease — a mother of a large family. She was getting weaker and weaker. Then, finally, a matching kidney donor was found.

The woman was back to her high-energy self within months, almost as if nothing had ever happened. Her children had their mother back because someone was altruistic enough to give her one of his kidneys.

As soon as I read the article, I felt strongly that this was something that I wanted to do too, but when I brought it up with my husband Shalom, he was pretty reluctant about the idea. The kids are still little and he was nervous that someone in the family might need my kidney one day. Why should I give it to a complete stranger? I hear him but —
I still can't get the picture of that woman out of my head.

Sept. 6, 2014

Everyone has different things they'd love to do one day, right? My kids tell me that they remember me speaking about the amazing concept of donating a kidney for years. What strikes me about kidney donation is how a person can save a life, recover, and then go on to live a normal life. It's astounding!

Penina is seven now, and she's my baby, so I thought I could bring it up with Shalom again. He was a lot less resistant, so I called our Rav right away to see what he thought of the idea. He was really positive about the whole thing. He even gave us a *brachah* that in the *zechus* of my donating a kidney nobody in our family should ever need one.

I also did a bit of medical research. Did you know that a relative of a kidney donor goes to the top of the organ waiting list if he needs a kidney?

I know it's not a good time right now, though. I'm still in the thick of tax season at my job. I'm working hard, trying to build up my own accounting practice, so I can create my own hours, as well as pursuing my dream of working in the travel industry. I need to be smart about this. If I'm going to pursue kidney donation, the time has to be right.

I really want to find a time in my life to make this happen.

Jan. 3, 2015

I get a *mazel tov!* After two years of trying to leave my demanding job, I've finally done it! I'm starting my own accounting service, *and* my travel business, *koshervacationexperts*, is being launched! I can't believe I'm going to be living out my vision of helping people plan their dream vacations and, even more close to my heart, organizing group trips and retreats. The locations are beautiful places in the world with proceeds going to benefit worthy organizations.

The first thing I did after leaving my job was to send in an application to Matnat Chaim. This amazing organization was

started by Rabbi Yeshaya Heber, a man whose life was saved by a kidney donor. Tragically, his *chavrusa* in the hospital, who had been on dialysis alongside him, died — they simply couldn't find a donor in time to save him. Rabbi Heber decided that he was going to devote his life to helping others find the kidneys they so desperately needed. He started Matnat Chaim to guide donors through the entire process of kidney donation, which can take up to a year or more.

I'm really eager to hear back from Matnat Chaim!

April 17, 2015

What's that popular saying — "Man plans and G-d laughs"? Well, the last three months would have been perfect timing for my kidney donation but I didn't hear from Matnat Chaim during all that time. In the interim, as excited as I was about growing my new businesses, I received an unexpected job offer in the accounting field, with terms I couldn't turn down. I decided to take the job while continuing to work on my businesses in the evenings. And when do you think Matnat Chaim called me that things were moving ahead? Right after I took the job!

April 29, 2015

I'm starting the process... I can't believe it! I went for a blood test today in my local clinic. I'm trying not to get my hopes up. Just because I want to donate a kidney doesn't mean I'll be approved. There are so many hoops I still need to jump through; the health standards I'll need to meet are quite rigorous. But at least I passed through the first round without any medical issues arising.

May 29, 2015

I've taken a lot of blood tests! First, I took a whole series in my local clinic, and then I went to the hospital for more complicated tests. But today was really the clincher. I had a full day appointment at Ichilov, a hospital with a transplant department, in Tel Aviv. I had to meet with the nephrologist, the surgeon, the social worker, the transplant coordinator and the hospital psychiatrist. And, of course, there were nurses who took care of specialized blood work.

The social worker and the psychiatrist asked me pages

and pages of intricate questions — things like, how does my family feel about me doing this, how will we manage financially during the recovery process, and whether I've ever taken medication for any sort of mental condition. But the question I got asked the most throughout the day was:

"Mah pit'om? Did you suddenly wake up one morning and decide that you want to donate one of your organs to a stranger?"

Apparently, the transplant team needs to gain a clear understanding of my motives for donating. First of all, selling organs is illegal in Israel, and they need to ascertain that you're not getting paid for donating your kidney.

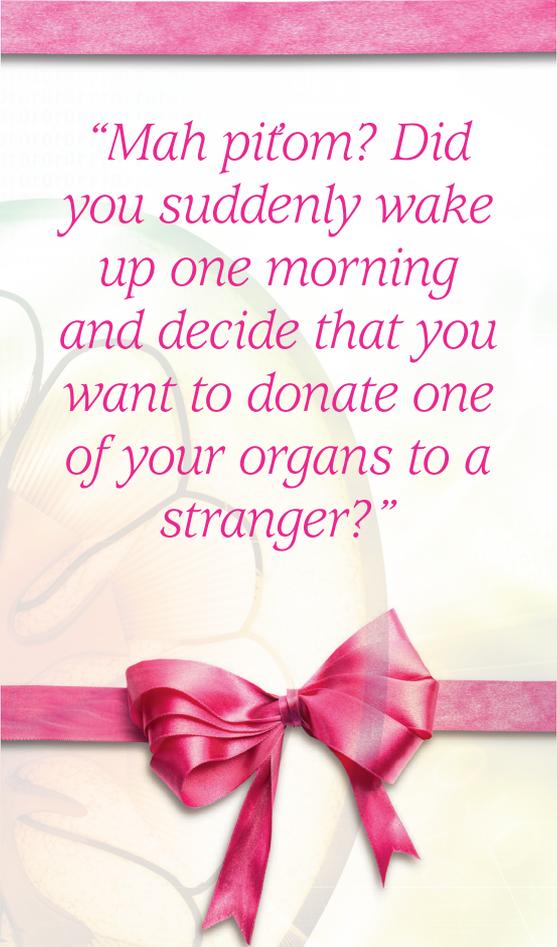
Second, they need to make sure that you're mentally capable of making this potentially life-altering decision. Otherwise, a person might wake up after the surgery and experience real shock that he's just given away a part of himself. If a person goes into kidney donation with the express purpose of receiving a lot of *kavod* for the good deed he's doing, the reality of how he feels in the immediate days after surgery can be very depressing once the initial excitement fades. The transplant staff wants to make sure that they're not setting a person up for emotional difficulties later on.

I told the doctors that I want to do this because I want to share the excellent health with which Hashem blessed me. I can save a life in exchange for a number of days of discomfort. That's the simple truth of what I feel.

May 30, 2015

I don't know how I forgot to write about this. I had a pretty traumatic experience during that long day in the hospital yesterday. I had to have a CT scan and they inserted a fat needle into my vein. I mean a *really* fat needle. Then the doctor told me to wait outside in the waiting room. Suddenly, my arm started to spasm. I showed the receptionist how my arm was doing this jig and she called the doctor. He looked at my arm and said, "Oh, you spoiled American. Just relax, it's no big deal."

Spoiled American? All I was asking for was a bit of reas-



"Mah pit'om? Did you suddenly wake up one morning and decide that you want to donate one of your organs to a stranger?"

urance. Kidney donors in general are a very healthy lot, and most of them, myself included, have never had surgery or tests and have no experience at all with hospitals.

I can tell you that the doctor's words did not have their intended relaxing effect. By the time I was lying in the scanner, I was working really hard on putting mind over matter. I *davened* that nobody in my family should ever need to experience medical issues. I *davened* intensely for my friend's husband who is seriously ill. I thanked Hashem for the gift of health.

I have to say, though, I'm feeling a little scared about how I'm going to be treated by my doctors in the hospital. I'm even wondering if I could make my kidney donation conditional on being treated with sensitivity and consideration by the medical staff.

June 1, 2015

All of those vials of blood that they took were checking to make sure that I was healthy enough to do this. But they were also trying to match me up with the person who would be the recipient of my kidney. There's a real person on the other end of this journey, someone waiting to receive the new lease on life that my kidney can provide him or her with!

When I filled out the forms for Matnat Chaim months ago, Judith asked if I had any conditions as to whom I was willing to give my kidney. I told them that I wanted the

recipient to be a Jew and a non-smoker. I just didn't feel comfortable sacrificing a part of my body for someone who didn't take care of his own health.

Well, just a few days ago they informed me that they found a recipient for my kidney! All they told me about him was that he is a medical doctor in a hospital. I'm really looking forward to meeting him.

June 15, 2015

You can't imagine what's going on at work. Basically, the company gathered their entire backlog of difficult clients that nobody else was able to resolve, and they handed it all to me. It requires a tremendous amount of time, focus and persistence. But I have so many other balls in the air right now: my two businesses — which are growing really nicely — and a custom kosher tour to Italy I'm planning for July. I'm usually very good at multi-tasking but even for me, my plate is pretty full.

I'm uneasy about how much time I've had to take off from work due to testing for my donation. I still have a few more specific tests before I can receive final approval, and I'm dreading having to miss more time at work. I'm not willing to give up on my travel business aspirations and I really want to continue pursuing my kidney donation. I feel like I'm at a crossroads and I'm not sure what to do.

I know what my heart is telling me, but my heart and my pocketbook aren't always on the same page.



MATNAT CHAIM
VOLUNTEERS FOR KIDNEY TRANSPLANTATION

Kidney Donations Save Lives. So Do Monetary Donations.

Matnat Chaim has recruited more than 270 volunteers who donated their kidneys and saved over 270 lives. But even if you can't donate a kidney, you can partner with Matnat Chaim to save the lives of kidney patients. Your donation will support programs aimed at eliminating the waiting list for kidney transplants, including:

- Programs to empower family members of kidney patients and encourage them to volunteer as donors.
- Targeted publicity campaigns to recruit additional altruistic kidney donors.
- Mentoring of kidney patients and kidney donors throughout the donation process.
- Close cooperation with hospitals and transplant centers to ensure timely surgical procedures and personal attention.
- Educational programs to heighten awareness of the need for living donation.

You can't donate a kidney? Help us get to someone who can

Every donation, in any amount, works to bring us closer to the next successful kidney transplant.

For secure online donations by credit card:
<https://secured.israelgives.org/donate/matnat/>

By mail:
Send checks to Matnat Chaim, Kanfei Nesharim 15,
Post Box 90, Jerusalem 9546427, Israel

By phone:
From Israel: 0543213911 From UK: 0800-0488276

Bank Transfer:
Bank Mercantile, Kanfei Nesharim branch,
Account 17/661/62951787

All shekel, dollar and pound sterling donations are tax-deductible

For more information please contact 02-5000755 or matnatc@gmail.com or see www.kilya.org.il/en

June 20, 2015

I thought about it long and hard. The combination of my growing businesses and this new demanding job... I had to make a decision. I couldn't be successful at this job while continuing to pursue my kidney donation. There were just too many distractions. Well, I made a big decision. I'm leaving my job! I can't believe it. I gave them a month's notice. I trust that Hashem will help me while I'm engaged in the endeavor of saving the life of another Jew.

June 25, 2015

You never know how a phone call can turn your day around. I answered the phone this morning and I heard the chirpy voice of Marina, the transplant coordinator.

"Hello, *mammele*," she said. "I just wanted to be in touch about scheduling your transplant surgery. How does August 23 work for you?"

I was pretty shocked, as I still hadn't attended my transplant committee review (the *vaadat diyun*) in order to receive final approval for the transplant! In any event, I told her that I needed to wait until my kids were back in school and my mother-in-law could fly in to help me, so we scheduled the surgery for August 30.

I hung up the phone and reality hit me hard. I'm going to be cut open. One of my organs is going to be removed. I remembered my CT experience and suddenly felt very scared.

It's okay, I told myself. *You can still change your mind. Nothing drastic has to happen right now.*

Throughout the process, the medical team has emphasized that I can change my mind at any point. Today, that feels like a very comforting thought.

July 18, 2015

I had another day of psychiatric testing in Raanana, which went fine. Today I went through the final step before receiving final approval for my kidney donation — the *vaadat diyun*. I get why this meeting has the word *diyun* attached to it, as it totally felt like a court case. I entered the room and there were eight women, plus a secretary, sitting around a long table, taking notes. They each asked me a number of questions to try to understand both my motivations and my

coping skills. I wanted so much to share my Torah *hashkafah* with all of them, as not one of them was *frum*, but I also didn't want to come across like some strange religious fanatic. Here's a sample of how things went:

Them: What does your husband do? And what do you do?

Me: He studies Torah, and I'm an accountant and travel agent.

Them: So you're the breadwinner?

Me: Yes.

Them: Well, how do you expect to manage financially?

Me: We don't live month to month, and I've actually planned ahead for this. I'm leading a trip to Italy this summer and my earnings from that trip should cover the bulk of my absence from my other pursuits.

Them: How old are your children?

Me: 14, 12, 11 and 8.

Them: Who will manage the house while you're recuperating?

Me: My husband has a great relationship with the kids and he's very capable in the house. Last summer I traveled abroad and he managed the house seamlessly. For many years I worked tax seasons and he learned to prepare the whole Shabbos. My husband and I help each other with our life goals and aspirations. I support his Torah learning and he encourages my dreams too.

Them: You still have young kids at home, though. What if something goes wrong? They need their mommy. And even if things go well, what if something goes wrong with your other kidney somewhere down the line?

Me: Something can happen to me — or to anyone — at any time. I can change my mind and not donate a kidney, walk out

this door, and get hit by a car. We've all lived long enough to know that we don't have control over many things in our lives. I've been blessed with the gift of amazing health and I want to share it. I also know that if something goes wrong with my remaining kidney, I go to the top of the transplant list.

Them: Not all kidney donations are successful. How will you feel if the recipient's body rejects your kidney?



We've all lived long enough to know that we don't have control over many things in our lives. I've been blessed with the gift of amazing health and I want to share it.

Me: We can't control the outcome of all events, but we do have the choice to try. That is the one thing that I can control.

Them: How will you feel if we don't give you final approval for your kidney donation?

Me: I'll be disappointed. But in life, we have to accept disappointments, and I will move on.

Can you see why I felt like I was on trial? At the end of the meeting, though, those eight women, heads of departments in the Israeli health ministry, were all smiles. I think I was able to convey a glimpse of the way that people live from a Torah perspective. One of them even said she thought I was an *eishes chayil* — ☺ *Halevay!*

When I left the room, I looked around at the people in the waiting room. I knew that my potential recipient was also in for his *vaadah* today. I wondered which one he might be. I'd asked Marina numerous times already if I could meet him and she'd told me that it wasn't wise to do that before the *vaadah*. I approached the *vaad* coordinator now and asked her if I could please meet the recipient.

"Let me introduce you to his wife," she said.

She introduced me to Rachel, a lovely woman in her early sixties.

"*Eizeh atzilut*," she said to me when she met me.

"What does that mean?" I asked her.

"It means 'what nobility of spirit,'" she said.

We talked for a bit and I liked her right away. She was down to earth and warm, with a lot of depth to her.

"Tell me about your husband," I asked her.

She paused for a moment. "He's a very great man," she said. "And he's very *tzanua* about it."

Finally, I asked her if I could meet her husband.

"Yes," she said. "He's coming out of the *vaadah* right now."

I looked up to see a man with a yellow pallor walking slowly out of the *vaadah*. His gait appeared labored. When he reached us, Rachel told him who I was. He looked at me then, just looked at me, and his eyes expressed the unimaginable depths of his gratitude. He didn't say any words, because words would have only taken away from what he would have wanted to convey. It was a moment of such profundity, I will never forget it.

Finally, he spoke, and he said, "The most important thing in all of this is that you should not be harmed."

I told him how hard I've been *davening* for him and how much I was hoping this kidney would give him back amazing health and joy.

July 23, 2015

I've been approved! I can't say it comes as a surprise; I

was given that feeling by the transplant coordinator and team, especially as they've already scheduled my surgery. Still, I'm really excited that it's official. This is really happening! From now until the surgery, I really want to spend time enjoying my healthy body while spending quality time with my kids. I'm going to take my kids on a road trip and we plan to do some great hikes and whitewater rafting up north. I don't know if my post-surgery body will be the same as the one I've enjoyed for the first 46 years of my life. Certainly, I'm going to be incapacitated for a while. But that's okay. Hashem has brought me until this point and He will continue to guide me.

August 23, 2015

It's been such an amazing month. I enjoyed my family and just relished the simple feat of daily living. Today I had pre-op for the surgery. I saw Rachel and Uri at pre-op; Uri came over to me and in the most gentle and sincere way he said:

"I want you to know that you have the right to change your mind at any point and we won't think *any* less of you."

I met with the anesthesiologist, who gave me a waiver that I needed to sign. When I read the words on that waiver, my head began to swim. "Although kidney donation is very low-risk and safe, here are some possible complications that may occur in rare circumstances." Then it listed about ten different possibilities, including internal bleeding and death.

I was more than a little scared when I read that. I had come to pre-op on my own as I hadn't wanted Shalom to miss a day of *kollel* for it. I started to think about my children. Was I putting their futures at risk?

I thought of what Uri had told me only a few minutes ago. I could change my mind at any point.

I signed.

I still have ten days until the surgery. I have time to get myself to a point of *shleimus* with what I'm about to do.

September 2, 2015

I desperately wanted to go to Kever Rochel today to *daven* for strength before the surgery. I was shopping with my daughter yesterday and unfortunately, when I pulled out of my parking spot, my car mirror smashed into a pole. Shalom said there's no way I can drive legally with my mirror like that, so I had to take it in to the garage this morning instead. I told the mechanic how heartbroken I was that I couldn't *daven* at Kever Rochel before my surgery, and he told me, "*Al tid'agi*. Don't worry. We'll get you there." Then, with a little bit of glue and a drill he had my mirror up and functional until the proper replacement he ordered would arrive later that day. I was so grateful!

I picked up my friends Dina and Esther, and we went to Kever Rochel. It was a very quiet day there and everyone was *davening* with tremendous intensity. Usually there are people there with their cellphones, talking and taking pictures. As someone who frequents this holy site, I've never seen it this still. My *davening* felt sublime. As tears gushed down my face, a feeling of peace descended upon me. I felt like my *neshamah* was saying, "Hashem, I trust You completely. I'm in Your Hands and I know that You're going to carry me through this."

I walked out of Kever Rochel and I realized I had achieved what I had been reaching for. I was in an entirely different place, one of indescribable peace and presence of mind. This is exactly how I want to go into doing this *mitzvah*.

September 5, 2015

I had such an incredible Shabbos. It amazes me that it takes something as drastic as an organ donation to bring me to a place of such serenity — realizing with crystal clarity that everything is in Hashem's Hands. After Shabbos I kissed my kids goodbye and Shalom drove me to the hospital in Tel Aviv. I had butterflies in my stomach the whole way there, but as soon as we arrived I returned to the relaxed space I'd been in since Kever Rochel.

The transplant unit is beautiful. There are attractive hardwood floors and the walls are painted a relaxing ocean-blue. I feel like I am in a spa. My nurse is a lovely American from Indiana, and her Midwestern charm really puts me at ease. I even received a bed by the window, a real boon for a nature lover like myself.

I felt like Hashem was right with me, holding my hand.

September 8, 2015

Hodu laShem ki tov. It's over. I'm leaving the hospital. All those months of buildup — and now — I've done it. It's astounding.

Where should I begin? I suppose I'll start with the operating room. One of the things I was very nervous about was whether or not the surgeon and the anesthesiologist would be competent. I had no idea whom the hospital would give me. When I arrived in the operating room, a lovely woman came over to me and introduced herself.

"I'm your assistant anesthesiologist," she said warmly, in

perfect English. "I have to tell you that you've received the top anesthesiologist in the hospital. He's amazing. I'm so happy for you."

Meanwhile, another friendly woman with a competent demeanor came over to me. "Hi, I'm Dr. Solomon," she said. "I'll be your assistant surgeon."

Everyone in the room was smiling and there was a palpable feeling of excitement, teamwork and harmony. The last thing I remember as I drifted off was thinking that I was in a really great place and in excellent hands.

When I woke up from the surgery, I felt great! *That was a piece of cake*, I thought. I even called my kids to tell them the surgery was over. I couldn't believe I'd done such a huge *mitzvah* and it had been so easy. I felt like I'd gotten a free deal.

Well, that was a morphine-induced farce! The morning after the surgery, I woke up feeling like my body was in a state of shock. I was astounded at how incapacitated I was. I couldn't even reach over to the table right next to me to grab my water bottle. But since my only task in life right then was to rest and heal, that's exactly what I did for the next two days.

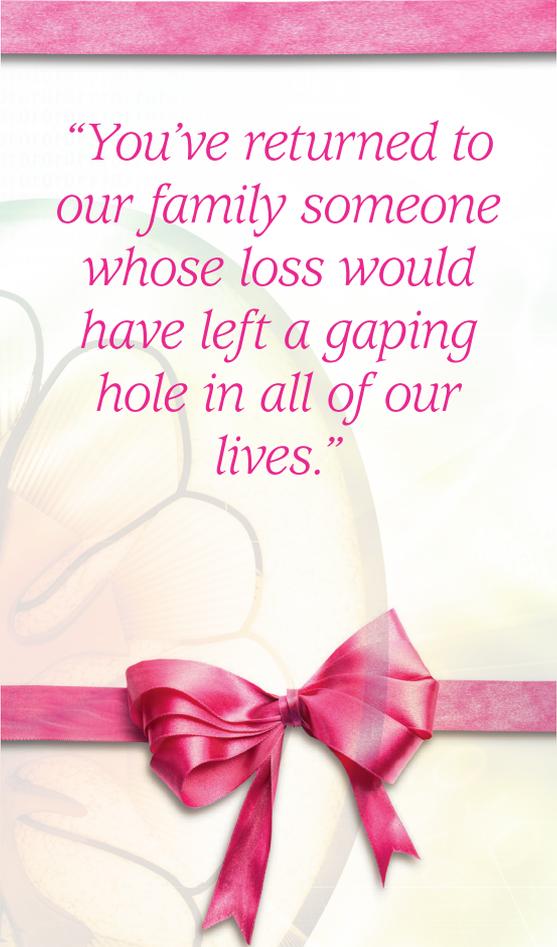
The first night, after Shalom left, my wonderful friend who is a nurse spent the night with me so I had the support I needed. My mother-in-law arrived the next morning, and she was by my side all day, there for me in every way I could possibly think of.

The day after the surgery, Judith Abrahams, my angel from Matnat Chaim who had accompanied me throughout the process, came to visit me. Then Rabbi Haber's nephew, a volunteer for Matnat Chaim who was a kidney donor in the past, came to visit as well.

"I know that it feels like you couldn't possibly get out of bed and walk right now," he said. "But

it's actually the most important thing you could possibly do. It will help you to heal much faster."

I can't begin to tell you how counterintuitive that felt. I literally had to drag myself out of bed to take a few tortured steps. His advice was really pivotal, though. I had felt like all of my organs were bunched up inside me, and walking released everything and allowed my body to begin the healing process.



"You've returned to our family someone whose loss would have left a gaping hole in all of our lives."

But how was I feeling emotionally?

Absolutely incredible.

The morning after surgery, Rachel came to visit me.

Uri was in a room just a few doors down from mine. I was anxious to hear how he was doing and whether my kidney was responding in his body yet. It often takes 24 to 48 hours before the kidney takes in the recipient's body.

"Your kidney already began to work for Uri in the operating room!" Rachel told me. She took my hand. "I've been married to Uri for more than 30 years. I haven't seem him looking this well in years."

Later that day, Uri and Rachel's daughter Anat came to visit me. She stood at the door and she looked at me, tears pouring down her face. Finally, she said, "You saved my father."

Later, Uri's niece came to visit me.

"You have no idea whose life you saved," she told me.

"He's the head of our entire family. When I have something I need to talk about, I go to him. He's so incredibly beloved but he's such a humble and great man that he doesn't even realize it. You've returned to our family someone whose loss would have left a gaping hole in all of our lives."

Besides my mother-in-law, who took care of me with incredible devotion, Rachel was a constant, caring presence these last few days in the hospital. When I wouldn't eat the hospital food, she went searching high and low in Tel Aviv to find me *mehadrin* food to eat. That's just the kind of person she is — a devoted and giving human being. I feel very grateful to have this new friend in my life.

Today, I finally felt well enough to go visit Uri. When I saw his face, I knew exactly what Rachel had been talking about. When I'd met him, his face had been tinged with yellow and his eyes had been droopy. Now his skin tone looked healthy. It was wonderful to see.

The numbers in Uri's blood work reflect his newfound health. The kidney is in charge of cleansing the body of impurities. The measure of toxicity in the body is called creatinine. Normal creatinine levels are between zero and one. Uri's creatinine levels had been at seven for years. Doing dialysis for ten hours a day over the course of years of sleepless nights had brought his creatinine down to six. The day after Uri's transplant, his creatinine went down to two, and the very next day it went down to 1.09. In two days, my kidney worked incessantly to rid his body of years and years of accumulated toxins in his body. Man's machine simply can't match what Hashem does so effortlessly.

When Rachel came to say goodbye to me before I left the hospital, she presented Shalom with a beautiful gift — a *Kiddush* fountain. Then she gave me a small box. Inside was a beautiful necklace, inscribed with the *passuk*, "*Hashem yishmor tzeischa u'vo'echa.*"

"And I'll finish that *passuk* as my *brachah* to you," Rachel said. "*Me'atah v'ad olam.*"

October 2, 2015

It's been an amazing month. A month of resting and

healing, a month of joy and satisfaction. The first few weeks were physically difficult, but the fact that Uri was doing well and improving daily was a constant source of strength. There were setbacks in the healing process, but overall, everything went fairly smoothly. I think I can finally say that I'm back to myself now, though I have certainly changed.

Before the surgery, I was advised not to share what I was going to do with anyone. I think it's very important so that one doesn't feel pressured into or out of the decision. It's really something that needs to come from within.

Once the surgery was over, word trickled out and people began to give me feedback about my kidney donation. People get very excited and moved when they hear about it. So many people know someone whose life was saved upon receiving a kidney. It reinforces their faith in humanity.

Some people begin to analyze themselves, wondering if they could donate a kidney. Some people feel guilty when they realize they're not cut out for it. There should be no room for guilt. There is no *chiyuv* to donate a kidney! I felt a personal connection with this *mitzvah*; it doesn't have to be that way for everyone.

On Rosh Hashanah, just a week after the surgery, I had a sudden burst of energy and I was able to walk across the street to *daven Maariv* in shul. Sitting in shul and saying those words — *mechayei meisim b'rachamim rabbim* — I burst into tears. Uri had literally been dying and now he was journeying toward vitality and health. I felt very grateful to Hashem for being able to be a part of it.

As I was *davening*, I had this strange feeling, as if my *davening* in shul was sending a flood of *ruchniyus* over to my kidney in Uri's body in Yerushalayim. I dismissed it as a fantasy, but when I heard from Rachel after Rosh Hashanah, she mentioned to me that something funny had happened on Rosh Hashanah night.

"Uri always said the words of the *Kiddush* but for some reason, this year, when he opened his mouth, a beautiful *niggun* for *Kiddush* came out. He had no idea where it came from. I told him, 'It's coming from your new kidney!' and we both laughed."

My friend Talia told me that every part of our body is used in the performance of *mitzvos*. We don't really know the effect that our actions have on the organs of our body — we don't understand how they get absorbed. Who is to know what kind of an effect a kidney that's been used to serve Hashem can have on another person?

This whole experience had been precious on many levels. I'm grateful to have Rachel and Uri in my life now; they are truly special people. But the most amazing part of this process was going through this journey together with Hashem. ●

Yael's newest book, Petals, a collection of her original and previously published writings, will be released before Pesach.