

LIVING and GIVING

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF HOW ISRAEL HAS BECOME A WORLD LEADER IN KIDNEY TRANSPLANTS

At age 27, Bentzi Fuchs was thrilled to find Meitav, his partner in life. But his bride – a young widow with four children under 11 – had a traumatic past: she'd lost her first husband, Ariel, to kidney failure.

Ariel had received a transplant, but that kidney failed. "He died waiting for a kidney," says Bentzi.

Learning about Meitav's loss touched Bentzi deeply. Yet he couldn't imagine donating a kidney of his own... at least not yet.

Bentzi and Meitav settled into their lives in the Shomron, but the idea of donating a kidney had taken root in his heart. Always down-to-earth and practical, he couldn't let go of this passionate desire for connection, for *chessed*. This sense of communal responsibility is actually a Fuchs family legacy. Bentzi's father, Pinchas, was a founder of Elon Moreh in the Shomron; he worked tirelessly to build the community.

Since childhood, Bentzi had hoped to find his own path – to emulate his father, whilst using his own strengths to contribute to society in a meaningful way. "People give back in so many ways," Bentzi explains. "Some open hearts with Torah outreach, others inspire minds through education, still others are pillars of *chessed*. Each person finds a purpose that appeals to him."

Ten years into marriage, he felt he'd discovered that path. "As I got older and really started to consider what my

contribution to society would be – I realized that donating a kidney could be my *chessed*," he says.

Bentzi – a construction worker – was active and in good health, a prerequisite for donation. But what made up his mind was its concrete, defined nature. "Kidney donation doesn't stretch on for long periods of time, it doesn't require living in a faraway place or switching jobs. It suited me perfectly."

A full nine months passed as Bentzi underwent the required tests with the help of Matnat Chaim, the Israeli non-profit that recruits and supports living kidney donors. In the decade since Matnat Chaim was founded, over 700 healthy volunteers have donated their kidneys, most to strangers, and saved a life. Thanks to Matnat Chaim's ground-breaking work, Israel is today the world leader in altruistic (non-related) kidney donation.

When most of Bentzi's tests were completed, he shared his plans with his family. "They were excited and supported me completely," Bentzi says. He was a little surprised by his children's reaction. "When we told them I was doing it, they were thrilled."

There was one more set of people Bentzi had to inform: Ariel's family. "They were moved and full of admiration," Bentzi says. Bentzi recovered from the surgery easily. "Three days after, I was going to shul. My recovery went very smoothly."

Ever humble, Bentzi doesn't feel he did anything extraordinary. "I don't make too much of it," he says. "I just get on with my life."

But Meitav disagrees. With the understanding of someone who has been on both sides, she says, "I'm so proud of Bentzi. He made two families whole again – ours and his recipient's."

Bentzi's story is just one out of the hundreds of stories of altruistic donors who have voluntarily donated a kidney through Matnat Chaim.

THE MATNAT CHAIM STORY

In 2007 Rabbi Yeshayahu Heber, a school principal and a teacher at a prominent Jerusalem yeshiva, suffered sudden kidney failure and was forced to undergo difficult dialysis treatments. A year later, a friend donated a kidney to the rabbi and he regained his health. However, during treatments, Rabbi Heber met a 19-year-old named Pinchas Turgeman, the son of parents who had lost their older son in a terrorist attack in the IDF. Pinchas, the younger brother, urgently needed a kidney transplant, but no suitable donor could be found.

With Rabbi Heber's help, a donor was located who was a match for young Pinchas. Unfortunately, due to bureaucratic complications, the transplant was delayed and Pinchas' body could no longer cope. After a long period of physical and emotional suffering for him and his family, he passed away, leaving his parents bereaved of both their sons.

This tragic story, and many others like it, illustrated the vital need for an organization to which patients could turn in such times of trouble, and that is how Matnat Chaim came into being.

A day after Turgeman's funeral, after some 24 hours of isolation and reflection, Rabbi Heber set up Matnat Chaim to sign up suitable individuals for voluntary kidney

donations. Matnat Chaim is Hebrew for both *gift of life* and *a living gift* – a play on words which aptly describes a living kidney donation.

Over the course of the first year, the rabbi found four donors; during the second year, eight; ten years later, Matnat Chaim has helped facilitate over 700 transplants. Rabbi Heber and his wife devote themselves tirelessly to the task of finding one kidney donor after another. They are concentrating on just one thing: finding the next kidney donor and saving another life.

Rabbi Heber likes to begin meetings by saying, "I suggest you sit with me for less than half an hour. If the meeting goes any longer you may find that you're left with only one kidney because you donated the other one!"

It's hard to argue with him because it's quite clear that Israel's dramatically high rate of altruistic kidney donation is largely due to Rabbi Heber's charismatic personality and the organization he created.

Doctors and medical experts from all over the world have expressed amazement at the huge change in the statistics regarding live kidney donation in Israel over the past few years – the rate has more than tripled since Matnat Chaim was established. Hundreds of kidney recipients owe Rabbi Heber their lives.

"When I first began to speak to people about donating a kidney, I realized that the main roadblock was the total lack of awareness. Kidney donation sounded terrifying, bizarre, divorced from reality. Even today I get many questions from people who have never thought about such a thing in their lives. Today, the public is much more aware and the numbers speak for themselves – over 700 people have donated.

"As time passes, increasing numbers of people have their names added to the waiting list for kidneys. The dialysis department is a dreadful place. It is a terrifying experience that has a devastating effect on people, body and soul, but it is the only way to keep an end-stage kidney patient alive



LIFE-SAVERS: Over 120 kidney donors gathered for a special Shabbat in Jerusalem in 2018 and (right) the founder of Matnat Chaim, Rabbi Yeshayahu Heber (Credit: Chaim Meiersdorf)



without a transplant. Sometimes I feel like crying when I think of the plight of the friends I left behind in the dialysis clinic. My dream is that we will find sufficient numbers of donors and that there will be no more dialysis patients in Israel waiting for a transplant – and I’m certain that we can achieve it!

“We are dealing with human life. There are so many people who could donate but are simply unaware of the possibility or lack awareness concerning the vital importance of the procedure. I’m sure that within a few years, with G-d’s help, there will be far fewer people on the waiting list and that we’ll win this battle. The rate of altruistic donation in Israel is the highest in the world. But the most meaningful outcome is in the home of each recipient with the return to the family of a healthy father, mother or child.”

Rabbi Heber notes that nearly all of today’s leading halachic authorities whole-heartedly support kidney donation by a living donor. The prohibition of organ donation by some rabbis concerns the harvesting of organs from deceased donors, an issue that Matnat Chaim does not deal with at all. Jewish law regarding living donation is fully in line with current medical opinion that living kidney donation is permitted; indeed it is a tremendous mitzvah.

Matnat Chaim has caused a sea change in the way Israelis see organ transplants, with truly revolutionary results. Along with saving lives, kidney donations create new families, break down stereotypes between groups, and contribute to solidarity within Israeli society. By eliminating costly dialysis treatments, Matnat Chaim has saved hundreds of millions of dollars for the Israeli public health system.

Matnat Chaim operates on a very modest budget with a small staff of dedicated workers and volunteers. With your help, Matnat Chaim can turn Israel into the first western country without a waiting list for kidney donation – a true light unto the nations!

This Yom Kippur as we are praying for our lives in the coming year, take a moment to remember the many potential recipients, some of whom are married with families, parents with small children to care for, others with a long history of suffering who are all waiting for their turn to receive a kidney donation.

Top Ten Facts about Kidney Donation in Israel

1. Over **700** volunteer kidney donors have met their match through Matnat Chaim
2. **95%** of Matnat Chaim donors are religious, Torah observant Jews
3. In 2018, **58%** of living kidney donors in Israel were referred by Matnat Chaim
4. More than **800** people are still on the transplant list, suffering on dialysis
5. The average wait for a kidney from a deceased donor is **7** years
6. **1 in 7** patients on dialysis dies each year
7. Over **95%** of living donor transplants are successful
8. A kidney from a live donor will on average last **20** years
9. Transplants facilitated by Matnat Chaim have saved over **2 billion** shekels for the Israeli public health system
10. Matnat Chaim’s kidney transplants are performed in **5** different Israeli hospitals

To learn more about Matnat Chaim and help eliminate the waiting list: Visit the website: www.kilya.org.il/en/ Email: judy@kilya.org.il Call: 1-888-970-4608 (USA), 08000-488276 (UK), 054-3213911 (Israel)