

## Rabbi Yeshaya Heber, Z"l From the Notebook of Kidney Recipient #132

BY MOSHE GUTTMAN

"Hello, is that Reb Nosson?"  
"Who wants him?"  
"Can I speak to Reb Nosson? Is your father there?"  
"He can't come to the phone right now. How can I help you?"  
"It's urgent. Can I speak to your mother, please?"  
"Daddy's in surgery now. Mommy's in the hospital with him."

"This is Yeshaya Heber speaking. Tell your parents, please, to call the liaison secretary at the hospital's transplant center. She's waiting to hear from them. We can't waste a moment. Perhaps they don't realize that they have to contact her. It's important. Please, they should do this as soon as possible."

As this phone call was taking place, Reb Nosson was in the operating room, with his anaesthetized body undergoing another attempt — the third — by the best doctors to insert a long-term central catheter necessary for arduous dialysis treatments. The catheter is meant to become an inseparable part of his body. Without it, Reb Nosson's life is in immediate danger. The first two attempts to insert the catheter had failed. The doctors were forced to remove the previous catheter after a life-threatening infection set in.

The tension is increasing. Reb Nosson, the head of his family, is lying in the operating room. Worried family members are at home, saying *Tehillim* while shedding tears and begging the Al-mighty to have mercy on their father and on them. They are waiting for a phone call from their mother, who is in the waiting room next to the operating room. And in the middle of all this, the phone rings, and this man asks them to phone some number or other.

Who has time for a reminder slip? At any moment the crucial phone call should come telling them whether the third surgery was successful. The dialysis treatments depending on this procedure are extremely urgent. Their father's blood would soon be rendered useless. Every moment is precious.

"Okay, fine," the son replies into the mouthpiece, quietly waiting for this man to get off the line, leaving it free for an update from their mother. He gives the caller his mother's cell phone number.

The voice at the other end wishes a speedy *refuah sheleimah* and, without wasting any time, immediately calls the mother's cellphone: "The transplant center is waiting for a phone call from you. It's very important. Please write down the number and get in contact with them now. Every minute is crucial."

"But ... what does it involve? I mean ... we don't have the money. We can't afford to pay for a kidney or for a transplant surgery. How much money are you speaking about?"

Rabbi Yeshaya Heber, in a calm and soothing tone, begs and persuades as though he is talking about his own life, as though he is talking about his own kidneys: "Please, it won't cost you a single shekel. Just make the phone call. Every minute counts. The secretary is waiting to hear from you. Please contact her as soon as possible for a tissue compatibility test."

It was then that my family and I were *zocheh* to become acquainted with the human angel who walked among us, distributing life to those struggling for life.

And ever since last Thursday night tears are flowing nonstop. Silent weeping gives way to sobs. Has Reb Yeshaya really been taken from us by Divine decree? Has he really passed on to the next world? Will we really never again meet this bright, wonderful person who treated every kidney patient as if it were he himself who was suffering, who treated every transplant with sacred anxiety as if it were the first transplant ever; who answered the ten thousandth question with the same inexhaustible patience as he answered the tenth?

Ever since that fateful conversation which my family had while I was lying in the operating room, with the doctors desperately attempting to insert the dialysis catheter into my body, Reb Yeshaya became a family friend, a wise consultant, a kind supporter, a knowledgeable doctor who would bring joy and relief to our countenances and eliminate doubts. He was a pillar of light that did not stop illu-

minating even in dark moments of despair, and there were such moments — innumerable ones.

Parallel to the start of the preparations for transplant, Rabbi Heber gave advice concerning the delayed dialysis, which was becoming critical. He heaped encouragement on us in conversations describing life after the transplant, while on the other line he confidently managed the compatibility tests which are vital before taking the first step on the complex road to a kidney transplant.

His support and his presence were unceasing: at the exhausting battery of physical examinations; in the never-ending bureaucracy divided between different official offices; in giving clear and calming answers as well as compassion to the thousands of questions, fears, and tears.

And Reb Yeshaya's presence was unique in that it was both devoted and professional, both noble and uncompromising, both gentle and assertive. He embraced empa-



thetically while also giving people their own space. He knew how to get along with the recipients as well as with the donors. Both saw in him someone who would really hear them.

Why does a person have two ears? If we were to ask Reb Yeshaya, he might give a gentle smile and say, "One ear is for listening to the recipients and the other is for listening to the donors." With regard to kidneys his answer was clear: We received two so that we could donate one.

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If he were my father, I would say he made me feel like an only child.

But then I discovered that each one of the recipients had the same feeling.

I was among the second hundred of the 800 recipients who went through his *Matnat Chaim* organization. And each one of the donors had the same feeling.

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In the days since Reb Yeshaya's *petirah*, I have been thrown back in my mind to those difficult days before the transplant: to those months of uncertainty, of wavering between life and death, to the worry, the fear, the suffering, the weakness, and the times when I just collapsed. And in the midst of all that darkness, Reb Yeshaya was there to illuminate the path both in *ruchniyus* and in *gashmiyus* with pragmatism to get the process moving and with words of *emunah* to reassure us.

I have been reliving what I went through then, remembering with what good cheer Reb Yeshaya instilled in me hope for life. How he convinced me that with the help of Hashem, our supreme Doctor, *Rofeh kol basar uMafli la'asos*, I would be released from these dire straits.

I experienced suffering that I don't wish on any Jew. From a happy *avreich* at the peak of his strength, I became a dialysis patient, needing to endure three weekly dialysis treatments, each lasting four hours.

In my fresh reflections, the head of the department is sitting opposite me in his white gown, clearly explaining the procedures leading up to my first dialysis treatment. He emphasizes, in a tone of generosity mixed with determination, that "from today this ward will be your second home," so that *chas v'chalah* I wouldn't think that I can choose whether to come to the ward or when. You have no other choice, he made clear, but to keep your appointments no matter what. He ended his welcome by saying, "You'll get to know the place and you'll get used to it."

Of course I tried to get used to the situation. I wanted to live. He was right; the ward became my second home. I got to know the place, but I did not get used to it. My world darkened. My daily routine turned upside down. There was no day and no night; there was hardly life. Wherever I went, I was accompanied by weakness and fear. I could forget about going to *shiurei Torah* or participating in family events. I was completely taken up with the struggle to live.

Yes, I had heard about the possibility of a transplant. When I was diagnosed with kidney failure, I was immediately told to start looking for a kidney. They even gave me some ideas of where to look. But I didn't have an ounce of strength for that. Finding a kidney seemed like a hallucination, completely detached from reality. Kidneys are not for sale at the nearest greengrocer. I did not even have the strength to go and buy what the greengrocer did have for sale, let alone go and locate a kidney.

And then the big news arrived.

During that third surgery, Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Heber, the *malach hago'el*, phoned to tell us that he had found the other side of the coin. What Hashem does up On High — making matches — Reb Yeshaya did from the heights of Har Nof in Yerushalayim, matching kidney donors with recipients.

After I recovered from surgery, I phoned him. He told me, "I hope I found a good match for you." I couldn't reply. I was choking on my tears at his simple humility. In his calming voice, he continued to explain that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* created man with limbs, which we mention in *Nishmas* as *eivarim shepilagta banu*. "Have you ever thought about the word *pilagta*?" he asks. And immediately he answers. "There are limbs that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* created that can be separated [*lefaleg*] — one for the man himself and the other to donate, and thus to merit upholding a whole world."

While still in the darkness, I was *zocheh* to enjoy the light of this *tzaddik*. The waiting period was long. The dialysis period was long. Very long! But throughout that time Reb Yeshaya remembered us as though we were the only people he had to worry about in the world. He did not forget us for one day. Even when we were not aware of his involvement behind the scenes, and when we ourselves were not busy with the process, he was! As far as he was concerned, we were people and friends, not a case nor a number.

At the same time, he was in close contact with my benefactor — the kidney donor who saved my life. It took a long time because of the many tests, procedures and investigations to ensure compatibility. He did not rest. Whenever there was an update, Reb Yeshaya hastened to pass it on, to encourage, to convey good news: "There's progress. Keep strong." He looked after us, both me and the donor, right up to that exciting, fateful day of the two operations — mine and the donor's.

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Who will take your place, Reb Yeshaya, who?

The loss is so great. It will be impossible to fill your shoes. If only we would learn from your awe-inspiring deeds, from your devotion, from your pure *emunah*, your nobility, your smile and your overflowing goodness. May all of this happen immediately, for the benefit of your pure soul, the soul of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu, z"l. May the *neshamah* be a *meilitz yosher* for your *almanah*, your true partner, who stood by you in total devotion and commitment, as well as for your distinguished parents, may they be well.

Signed,

One who writes with deep pain and a broken heart but b'chasdei Shamayim, with healthy kidneys.