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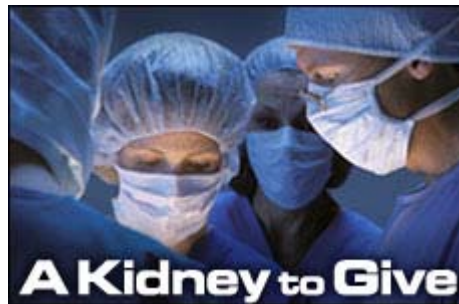
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Spirituality

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by [Lori Palatnik](#)

Why I donated my kidney to someone I didn't know.

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If you really want a conversation stopper, tell someone you are planning to donate a kidney and you don't even know who you're giving it to.

That's what's been going on in my life.

It all started three years ago in Denver when my husband's good friend needed a kidney. None of his family matched or was able to donate for various reasons. If you have any history of kidney disease, have had certain illnesses like cancer, or possess the wrong blood type, you're out.

One night I was up late and asked "Rabbi Google" some questions about kidney donations. I just wanted to see what he was going through. There was a lot of information out there, and I began to see that based on the requirements and restrictions, I was actually a very good candidate to donate a kidney.

My blood type is O Positive, which in the world of kidney donations makes me a universal donor. I can only receive from an O, but I can give to anyone. Many blood types can only give to their own type. Some, like AB, are universal receivers. They can only give to their own type, but can receive from anyone. I



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was a universal donor, and I liked the sound of it. Now I had to see if I could live up to the title.

The idea of donations on the medical front always appealed to me. There are many restrictions in Torah law regarding this, and one needs to consult a competent authority in Jewish law to find out what exactly is permitted and what is forbidden.

Years ago in Toronto I ran bone marrow drives for a young man from New Jersey who was looking for a match in order to cure his leukemia. I learned a lot about that type of donation/transplant, and became a strong advocate for people to register in the bone marrow bank. (Go to www.giftoflife.org.)

A couple of years later, I was called in as a possible match for someone. I was disappointed to be disqualified after further testing.

So the idea of donating my kidney crossed my mind. After speaking to my husband and our rabbi, I decided to offer our friend my kidney. He was extremely grateful and touched, and we began the process of medical testing. Immediately into the process his medical team felt that since he was so much bigger than I was, my kidney would never be able to sustain his body. I was rejected and so disappointed.

A few months later we relocated to the Washington D.C. area to work for Aish. I saw an email that had gone out through the internal Aish system about a very sick five-year-old boy who needed a kidney. I replied, explaining to them that I had already done the research and felt I was a good candidate to give a kidney.

How could I say no to someone else just because I didn't know them? A few days later I received a reply that said it turned out that the boy was too sick for the transplant, but would I be willing to be tested for some other people?

The person who wrote me back was Chaya Lipschutz, an observant Jewish woman from New York. She gave her kidney to someone years ago, and her brother, Yosef, did the same. Now she was devoting her life to help others.

That was my first moral dilemma. For our friend, yes. For a little boy, yes. How could I say no to someone else just because I didn't know them?

I filled out the forms and began the process of testing again. There were three women from New York that I was being tested

for, in their 30s and 40s, and each with several children. All three were very sick and in desperate need of a kidney.

I passed the first stage, and they accepted me as a candidate to be an "altruistic donor" (someone who has no connection to the recipient). Now I had to discuss it with my husband.

I told him that I did not really know why I wanted to do it, but I did. I explained that the tests could rule me out at any time. He was not enthusiastic and wanted to speak to our rabbi about it, but we agreed to go forward.

Very few people at this stage knew what I was thinking of doing. Their reactions were, by and large, uniformly negative. How could I put my life at risk? I had children and a husband and responsibilities. What was I thinking? What if I needed a kidney one day? What if one of my kids needed one and I couldn't give it?

I tried to explain to them that for the donor the risks are very low, about the same as any surgery where there is general anesthetic. The recovery time is about the same as a c-section (without a newborn baby to take care of 24/7). Yes, I was thinking, and had done extensive research. And if you donate a kidney, and for some reason down the road you need one yourself, instead of waiting on a first come, first served list (which in New York State is an average of eight years), you are bumped to the very top of the list. Now *that's* insurance. (The Kidney Donor Clinic at the Montefiore Medical Center had only one such case in the 20 years they had been doing transplants.)

I did ask Pat, the wonderful woman who runs the clinic, what if one of my kids or one of my parents needs one down the road? She told me that six months after taking the job running the transplant clinic, her own brother got sick and needed a kidney. She was able to give him hers and save his life. Years later she developed cancer which she beat. She explained to me that if she had hesitated and waited to give him her kidney now, she would have been disqualified as a donor because of the cancer. In other words, God runs the world, and when presented with a mitzvah, an opportunity to save someone's life, grab it. It may not come again. To hold back and live in a world of "What if...?" could cost lives.

I also explained to people that I felt so much more comfortable giving my kidney to someone I didn't know, as opposed to someone I knew. Imagine if I gave a friend a kidney and months later I ask my friend to do me a favor and cover my carpool. She says she is too busy to do it. And what will I be thinking? *I gave you my kidney, you can't cover my carpool??*

Testing, 1-2-3

Through emails and phone calls, the kidney clinic gave me a long list of medical tests I had to pass in order to make this all happen -- mammogram, CAT scans, renal scans... They told me I could be eliminated at any time. I still had not told my extended family. I did not want them to worry, and what if it didn't pan out?

Some of the tests I had done locally, but some had to be performed at Montefiore, which was located in the Bronx. On a trip home from Israel I had a connection there, so I arranged to stay on for two days and get as many tests done as possible.

My friend, Rebecca, who had travelled with me to Israel on my annual women's mission, stayed with me in New York. She had been very apprehensive about this whole "kidney thing" as she called it, but is such a good friend that she agreed to tag along for moral support.



Lori with her good friend Rebecca

In the end it was more than just moral. One of the procedures was a 24-hour test that restricted me to the couch, lest any movement impact the test results. So Rebecca had to go out searching for kosher food and wait on me for 24 hours.

But the most intense part of the two days was when we arrived. We had just traveled across the world from Israel after finishing a whirlwind tour and we needed a good shower. We landed at JFK early in the morning on a day a freak tornado had touched down in Brooklyn.

The city was in chaos and traffic was a nightmare. It took us *five hours* to get from JFK to the Bronx in stop and go traffic. On the trip we tried to encourage our driver who seemed more exhausted and nauseous than us. He clearly did not want to be on the road that day, and I was afraid he was just going to pull over and say forget it, so I played the "kidney card" in hopes of gaining his sympathy.

"Why would God give us two He was quite fascinated and asked me, "Why would God give us two kidneys if we only needed one?" I replied, quoting Dr.

kidneys if we only needed one?" I replied, "He gave us one to keep and one to give away."

Greenstein, an observant doctor from the clinic, "He gave us one to keep and one to give away."

When we finally arrived, disheveled, exhausted and weak with our mass of luggage, the transplant coordinators came to the hospital lobby to greet us. They took one look at Rebecca and asked her, "Are you the recipient?"

I spent the afternoon giving blood and taking tests, while Rebecca settled us into our apartment-hotel room they provided for us around the corner from the hospital. Later that night we laughed about how they mistook her for the recipient of my kidney.

"You know, Rebecca," I said, suddenly serious, "if you did need a kidney, I would give you mine."

"Yes," she said. "I know."

"Then how can I not give away my kidney, just because it's for someone I don't know? *Somebody* knows them. They are someone's wife, sister, friend and daughter."

"Okay," she said. "I get it."

From Tests to Transplant

I continued to pass through the myriad of tests and thankful to get to the next stage. It was also comforting to know that I was, thank God, healthy from head to toe. They told me that there had been many times that a potential donor's life was saved, as they had discovered things wrong that had gone undetected.

My husband was still not fully on board. He was doing his own research, had spoken to a nephrologist and our rabbi. The doctor told him that people can live a perfectly normal and healthy life with one kidney. Our rabbi told him that saving a life was a very big mitzvah and he should support me in every way. My husband travelled to the clinic, met the transplant team, and gave me 100% support.

The transplant clinic called to let me know that the recipient had been told that she indeed had a kidney donor and the transplant was to be in two weeks. They wait until the last minute to tell the recipient -- it can be devastating to think you have a donor and, for whatever reason, it falls through.

What are the reasons? Number one is that people back out, due

to their own doubts and fears and the negative pressure they sometimes feel from family and friends. On two separate occasions I had well meaning people sit down with me and try to convince me not to do this "kidney thing". If I hadn't done so much research to refute their fears, and if I didn't feel completely committed to what I was doing, I would have caved as well.

The clinic wanted to know if I wanted to speak to the woman who would be my recipient. "Yes....no... yes!"

Clearly I had mixed feelings. What if I didn't like her? What if she was judgmental? Or, as one friend cautioned, what if she was taking drags on cigarettes in between sentences? I was more concerned about it being just incredibly awkward.

In the end I decided that I did want to speak to her, but only if she felt comfortable to speak to me. I told them to give her my number, but she shouldn't feel obliged to call.

For the next two days I kept my cell phone on, even when I was teaching. My heart literally leapt each time it rang. But it was never her. Finally, on the third night, as I was walking into a class, my phone rang and it was her.

We made up to speak in an hour after my class. Completely distracted, I taught, and then went into my office and received her call. We talked for four hours.

"There are no words." she began.

At one point she asked me, "Who *are* you?"

"Are you at your computer?" I asked. "Go on to Aish.com."

I guided her to "[Lori Almost Live](#)," a weekly video blog I do for Aish.com. "That's me."

We wanted to know everything about each other's lives -- our kids, our work, everything. It was one of the most significant conversations of my life.

She was an extremely brave woman with seven kids. She was one year older than me, and a year and a half ago during routine blood tests to correct a hernia she found out she had a deadly kidney disease, KPD.

**Approximately
70,000 people in
the United States** A kidney transplant is the only cure. Dialysis, which can only sustain a person for five to seven years, destroys a person's immune system and chains them to a

are currently waiting for a kidney. Only 6,700 kidneys become available each year.

grueling life. Approximately 70,000 people in the United States are currently waiting for a kidney. And the list grows each year. Only 6,700 kidneys become available each year through cadaver (after death) and live donations. Live donation kidneys give a person twice the chance of recovery, since it is healthy and fresh. And if a person receives a kidney before going on dialysis, their chance at recovery also doubles. Thousands each year die waiting.

I traveled to New York for the transplant with Rebecca who volunteered to come with me so my husband could take care of our kids on the home front. Our community of students and friends rallied and organized meals and carpools so I would not have to worry. So many people were now on board and being so supportive.

The surgery was scheduled for a Thursday. They needed me there three days before for more tests. On the Monday that we arrived the recipient of the kidney called and invited us to her home for dinner that night. I was excited and nervous at the same time. I felt like I was about to meet a twin sister separated from me at birth. We had the most incredible evening with her and her husband.

We were so alike in so many ways, and her husband even reminded me of my husband! Clearly this was a match made in heaven. She made us the most incredible, healthy gourmet dinner, and of course she could not eat a morsel. The only way she was able to stay off dialysis was to be vigilant in her diet. Since the day she was diagnosed, she had not had a gram of protein, dairy, citrus, potassium, and so many other foods. She told me lunch for her was a rice cake with lettuce. For a treat, she would put a bit of mayonnaise on it.

The meeting was awkward in some ways, but it was also very inspiring. In the year and a half she had been sick, she married off three children. She showed me the wedding albums, and later I asked her what she was thinking at the weddings, knowing that time was running out. "With each wedding I knew that this child would be alright. They had married a good person. If I was to die, it would be difficult for them, but they could go on. I just wanted to live long enough to marry off my last two children. Then I could go."

I couldn't even imagine being so strong. In the face of her dire situation, she always had a smile on her face. Her faith in God never wavered; in fact, it only strengthened. She continued to work full time, and was clearly the energy force of her family.

The night before the surgery she called me to tell me that I didn't have to do this. "Lori, you are taking a risk and I want you to know that you can absolutely change your mind. I will completely understand."

I was so moved, but reassured her that I will be there the next morning at 6am at the hospital as planned.

I called my parents and siblings that night to tell them for the first time what I was doing. They were surprised but incredibly supportive. I apologized for springing this on them at the last moment, but I did not want them to worry.

My Kidney Sister also told her children at the last moment. Months before they thought they had a donor, but two days before the surgery it was called off. They had found protein in the urine of the donor which eliminated the possibility of the transplant. The family was devastated.

The Big Day

Many people have asked me if I ever had any doubts. There was only one moment where I hesitated. It was when I was walking with the nurse to the operating room. There was a semi-sterile vestibule that we entered before entering the actual O.R. "Here we go," she said.

"Hold on," I said. "I need to say a prayer."

So I stood there and said the Shema, and asked God to let me live and that the operation should be a great success, and she should live.

"Okay," I said, "I'm ready."

I saw the lights, the long operating table with straps, and I froze. "What am I doing?" And then she opened the doors to the O.R. and I was shocked to see so many people there, everyone running around doing all kinds of things with equipment and machines. I saw the lights, the long operating table with straps, and I froze. "What am I doing?" And then I closed my eyes and said to myself, "Just do it. Just do it."

I laid down on the table, and the next thing I knew I was in recovery and they were telling me it was a success and everything was alright.

It was over. But really it had just begun.

The Life It Gave Me

The surgery was laparoscopic and I was in the hospital for just a few days recovering. During that time, the grown children of my Kidney Sister and her extended family streamed into my room, crying and thanking me for saving her life. When I was feeling better, I would walk down the hall to visit her. She was doing great, and she told me again, that there are no words. The only way she could describe her feelings was that she felt that a truck was hurtling towards her full force, and I stepped in front of her from out of no where and put my arms out, stopping the truck.

God gave me the opportunity to give her life, and the gratitude she and her family feel towards me is immense. I realized that I should have that same gratitude to my parents, who gave me life. It was humbling to realize how casually we accept that we are here, and how little regard we have for the people who made it possible.

I am still processing the whole experience and feel very small in the face of the enormity and fragility of life and death.

Giving away your kidney is not for everyone. Some people literally cannot do it because of personal or family medical history. But as one person told me just before I left for New York, "Lori, I may not give away my kidney, but because of what you are doing, I will now be more of a giver."

Thank God I am back on my feet and planning to drive carpool tomorrow, easing back into my life. I speak to my Kidney Sister almost every day, and she is doing great. The marker for kidney patients is their creatinine level. If you are a 10, you must be on dialysis. Going into the surgery she was a nine. 24 hours after the transplant, she was a two. The day she left the hospital she was a 1.6. God made our bodies wondrous. It is difficult for me, and for her, to see people eating garbage or smoking. How could we possibly abuse a body that is so miraculous and precious?

Human beings made a huge dialysis machine to filter out the impurities that our kidneys cannot. Yet it can only do 15% of what a four-ounce kidney that God made can do.

Take pleasure in your life. But take care of the life that you have. And please do what you can to help others do the same.

If you're interested in becoming a kidney donor, you can contact Chaya Lipschutz who matched me at kidneymitzvah@aol.com. Or contact Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz, who runs "[Renewal](#)." He matches people all over the world, and helps facilitate the

transplant in every way -- providing funds to fly people, housing, support in the home of the donor and the recipient. He currently has 40 Jewish people on his list, both children and adults, desperately waiting for a match.

Please go to www.life-renewal.org and help support this lifesaving work. Even if you cannot donate a kidney, your generosity can help save lives.

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VISITORS COMMENTS: 74

(1) Lori's Kidney Recipient 2/7/2008 7:55:00 PM

To: Lori From: Your Kidney Sister!

Dear Kidney Sister,

I went from being an end stage kidney failure patient to being a healthy, active wife and mother I can barely remember the terrifying feeling of not knowing what the near future would bring. Lori, you traveled away from home and underwent this procedure without even knowing who I am! To say that you were getting more out of being a donor than I was as a recipient is just testament to who you are! Not only did I receive a new life but I received a soul sister in the process!

May you and your family share only the best of health and abundant simchot!

I love you!

Me

(2) Sheila 2/11/2008 7:01:00 AM

Yosher Koach

Dear Lori,

About 8 years ago, you and your family kindly welcomed my children and I at your home in Toronto for Shabbes when we attended the bar mitzvah of my cousin's son. We were very impressed by your warmth and hospitality. I just wanted to let you know that I think you are truly a remarkable and inspirational woman and I am proud to have met you.

Sheila

(3) Chaya Lipschutz, Lori's Kidney Matchmaker 2/9/2008 10:52:00 PM

My heartfelt thanks to Montefiore Medical Center, where Lori & I donated our kidney!

Lori & I both donated our kidney at Montefiore Medical Center. I am in touch with several other kidney donors who donated a kidney at Montefiore as well

All of us were very happy with hospital and staff on the kidney transplant team. They were really wonderful, particularly Dr. Stuart Greenstein, Kidney Transplant Coordinator & Pat McDonough, kidney transplant coordinator. I wish to publicly thank them both and they deserve a round of applause. Let's hear it!

Everyone I know of who had a kidney transplant done by Montefiore were also very happy with the results.

I recently referred someone in need of a kidney to Montefiore Medical Center. He called Dr. Greenstein and couldn't get over that Dr. Greenstein called him back twice in one day. He told me that he has tried getting in touch with other doctors and he usually doesn't get a call back for days. He was so extremely impressed



with Dr. Greenstein, his caring, warmth, kindness and other great middos (character traits) that is his trademark!

I also want to take this opportunity to congratulate Barbara Lindower, on her new job as kidney transplant coordinator at Montefiore. What a great addition to the kidney transplant team! I knew Barbara from her previous job as kidney transplant coordinator at another hospital and she was a pleasure to deal with. She is a great asset to the team. Thanks Montefiore for hiring her!

My thanks in general to the staff at Montefiore for taking great care of me, Lori and other kidney donors, who were privileged to have their kidney donation done at Montefiore - one of the top hospitals in this field!

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About the author:

Lori Palatnik

Lori Palatnik is an author and Jewish educator who has appeared on television and radio and has lectured in North America, the U.K., South Africa and Israel, illuminating traditional practices and life-styles for our contemporary world. She recently relocated with her husband, Rabbi Yaakov Palatnik, to Washington, DC, where she is the *Executive Director of The Jewish Women's Renaissance Project* of Aish DC.

Lori is the author of "[Friday Night and Beyond—The Shabbat Experience Step-by-Step](#)", published by Jason Aronson; "[Remember My Soul](#)", Leviathan Press, which explains the Jewish concepts of soul and the afterlife and a guide to anyone who has ever lost a loved one; and "[Gossip—Ten Pathways to Eliminate It From Your Life and Transform Your Soul](#)", Simcha Press, featured on "Dr. Laura" and FoxNews.com.

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