

'I gave life to someone'

Nick Rosen took a dramatic step donating a kidney to a stranger. His experience is documented in a video film, which he hopes will help change attitudes toward organ donations.

By Gittit Ginat Sep.29, 2005 | 12:00 AM

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The present chapter in the life of Nick Rosen begins around the time of his 35th birthday, in December 2004. A childhood friend of his died from a drug overdose, and a short time later came the attack at the Stage nightclub in Tel Aviv, which is located almost beneath his house. "These two events caused me to think about life differently from the way I had in the past," he says. During that same period, he translated "Liza, Liza," a play by Tal Moskowitz that deals with a kidney patient who collapses, is hospitalized, and undergoes painful dialysis treatments. Then, in an Israeli newspaper, he came across an ad with a request for a kidney donation. The result was his decision to donate a kidney to a stranger. At a certain point, he began to document the experience with his video camera.

The filmed journey began with a confrontation with his family, who were opposed to his decision, and the separation from his religious girlfriend, continued with his trip to the United States, where the operation was performed, and ended safely with his return to Israel about a month ago, with 13 hours of film that he intends to edit into a full-length documentary. A short time after his return from the U.S., a kidney donor died in Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikva. Rosen's testimony about his donation offers a different story, one of a strengthened return to life.

It began with a phone call "I called the number in the ad, and I made contact with a guy named Moti, I don't even know his last name," recalls Rosen. "Moti asked me what blood type I had, and said that the patient for whom he was acting as intermediary was a U.S. citizen living in the United States. I have U.S. citizenship, family and friends in the United States, and I knew that I had someone to rely on. The mission definitely seemed logical to me."

The intermediary sent Rosen for a long series of tests, and together with the paperwork, the process took a long time. "In December, I made contact with the intermediary for the first time, and only in May did I arrive in the United States, where I stayed for three and a half months in all. In the states, a new series of tests began. Aside from the physical tests, I also had meetings with a social worker and a psychologist. The purpose was to check whether I was emotionally fit to be a donor, whether I knew what I was doing and wasn't doing it because of financial problems."

Speaking of financial problems, Rosen conditioned the interview with him on not being asked whether he received money for his donation. Commerce in body organs is illegal in the United States, and a donation is accepted only if the motive is altruistic. However, a short search on the Internet reveals a productive market of intermediaries and kidney donors the world over, who receive varying sums of money for their mediation and their donations.

Rosen says that at first he didn't even think about the possibility of filming his actions. "Only a few months after beginning the process did I think about making a film that would document the experience. I have been working in video directing for several years, and suddenly I realized that my action would be of additional value if I documented it. I decided to record the reactions of my parents, of my friends, of my girlfriend, the trip to the United States and the tests, the operation and the convalescence. In the United States, it is forbidden to bring cameras into the hospital, and I had to smuggle the camera in.

At some point I understood that this was part of the issue, to make people aware of the subject, and I decided that no hospital would stand in my way. This is the story of my donation, and if I want to document myself, nobody can prevent me from doing so. That was how I filmed the tests and the convalescence, as well as my surgeon, who was very embarrassed in front of the camera, and actually refused to be filmed."

The first tapes of his odyssey record the reactions of friends and family. "Very few people around me bothered to understand what I was doing, and why," he says. "My friends and my parents reacted with anger and frustration, and my father even offered me quite a large sum of money not to donate the kidney."

Rosen is used to such reactions and to conflict with his surroundings. His path in life has not been typical. At a time when most people his age have children, a dog, a car and a mortgage, Rosen lives with two female roommates in a rented apartment on Hayarkon Street in Tel Aviv, with cross-ventilation and no air conditioner. "From an early age I was a big rebel against the consensus," he says. "From about the age of 13, I knew that I didn't want to enlist in the army, although at the time this was very unusual. I fled abroad with a foreign passport, and I was arefusenik for five years. It's taken for granted that a person enlists and risks his life for an unknown, even destructive, goal, while someone else, who donates an organ in order to save the life of another person, is considered controversial. What's the logic here?"

Rosen was born in Manhattan, and when he was 18 months old, his family immigrated to Israel. He grew up in Tel Aviv, and after returning from his stay abroad during his five years of refusal, he studied philosophy and English at university. While he was studying, he was arrested by the police and drafted into the army, but after a short period he was released from service. Since then he has engaged in various translation jobs, in the courts among other places, and has also directed video films. The clip that he directed for Yuval Gurevich, "Hageonim shel ha'2000" (The geniuses of 2000) is occasionally aired on Channel 24.

Life as a bench On April 23, a few days before his trip for the operation in the United States, Rosen filmed his family gathering for a modest Pesach Seder, which he calls "The Last Supper." In one scene, Rosen's mother refuses to answer his questions about the donation, and flees the camera. In another, his father says to him angrily: "You have to stand on your own two feet, and not ask others for anything." Rosen tries to explain to his father that he is not asking for anything from others, but giving, but his father angrily asks him to stop filming.

In the love nest, questions began to arise, too. "In the months before the flight, I had a religious partner, a newly religious girl, who had great difficulty accepting the idea," says Rosen. "Shortly after I arrived in the United States, she presented me with an ultimatum: If I parted from my kidney, I would have to part from her. In her opinion, my body belongs to God, and it is forbidden to remove anything from it. I decided to go ahead. The relationship with her was important to me, but it was more important to me to do what I felt I had to do." On July 25, after undergoing an MRI, Rosen tells the camera that his girlfriend has informed him that she is leaving him.

While undergoing the tests in Israel, Rosen began to investigate thoroughly the meaning of a kidney donation. "I discovered how much ignorance there is about the subject," he says. "People are afraid of post-operative complications, but these are far less concrete than other dangers, which surround us every day. One doctor, for example, compared the risk of donating a kidney to the risk of traveling at a speed of 25 kph. It's absurd, when compared to the hell suffered by kidney patients. In the United States, there are 80,000 people waiting for organ donations. Over 6,000 people die there every year because of a shortage of organs, twice as many as died in the Twin Towers disaster."

In Israel, according to the latest statistics cited three months ago by Dr. Shmuel Yellinek of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, at the beginning

of the year there were 792 patients on the waiting list for organ transplants, 487 of them waiting for a kidney transplant. Every year, only about 70 kidney transplants are done from living donors, and Yellinek claims that about 100 patients on the waiting list die every year.

In May, Rosen landed in the United States and met Brad, the kidney patient who was about to receive the donation. Moti, Rosen's intermediary, had met Brad when he served as intermediary for a kidney donation for his father. Brad turned out to be 47, married with three children, and the owner of a textile business. His sister, Leslie, donated a kidney to him two years ago, but it was rejected.

"After meeting Brad, I was no longer having doubts. I felt obligated," says Rosen. "We went to the Mount Sinai Hospital, and there I told the doctors that I was a friend of Brad's. That was enough."

Prior to the operation, Rosen began to feel increasingly isolated. He filmed himself visiting his grandfather's grave, looking at the place where the Twin Towers once stood, and beginning to notice the small details of life. He filmed pigeons, trees and benches, and in a touching moment he says to the camera that "life is as long and grooved as a bench."

The belly of a pregnant woman The day before the operation was especially dramatic. Rosen needed someone to hold the camera during the surgery. "A friend who hosted me warmly and generously decided that it was too hard for him," says Rosen. "On the night before the operation, he wanted to take me to a bar, to sit with friends, and he probably was planning to get me drunk, so that I wouldn't get to the hospital the next day. In the end, the friend's partner agreed to film the operation. Although she came with me to the hospital, later it apparently was too much for her, and she simply left. That's why I don't have any filmed material from the operation itself."

How did the operation go? "The operation took five hours. I entered in the afternoon, and I awoke from the anesthetic at 7 P.M. During the operation, air entered my stomach, and after it I had the belly of a pregnant woman. That struck me as very symbolic: As in birth, I had given life to someone. But when I woke up, I understood that I was alone. That was a hard night. Aside from a nurse assigned to me, there was nobody around me. My mother had fallen a short time earlier and broken her elbow, and I didn't want to tell her when the operation was taking place. My father was on vacation in Turkey. At first he was very concerned about the operation not taking place during the trip, but in the end that's how it worked out."

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