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Teaneck, NJ - Rabbi's Kidney Donation Inspires Community

Published on: August 20th, 2009 at 12:24 PM

News Source: [Chabad.org](#) By [Yonit Tanenbaum](#)



Rabbi Ephraim Simon told his nine children that his kidney donation would be their gift to a critically ill man.

Teaneck, NJ - When the opportunity arose for Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Ephraim Simon to potentially risk his life in the preservation of another's, he paused. He wanted to give one of his kidneys to a suffering man; the problem was that he had to think about how he would communicate that decision to his nine children.

So in July, Simon, co-director of Friends of Lubavitch of Bergen County in Teaneck, N.J., gathered his family around him.

“As emissaries of the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” he told them, referring to Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory, “we

dedicate our lives to helping other people.”

He went on to describe the terminally-ill man he had met earlier, a father of a large family just like theirs.

“By tatte giving him a new kidney, he will live, G-d willing. This is our gift to him and you are all a part of it.”

Waiting for News

Simon's journey from community leader to organ donor – the operation took place exactly one week ago – began last year when the 41-year-old rabbi opened a mass e-mail from a woman trying to arrange a kidney donation for a potential recipient. A 12-year-old Jewish girl with the same blood type as Simon's was succumbing to a terrible disease, and desperately needed a new kidney. The rabbi decided to respond.

“I have a 12-year-old daughter, too,” explains Simon from his home, where he's in the midst of a two-week recovery period. Having never considered donating an organ in the past, “I was moved to consider testing for her.”

“Let's see what it entails, and then make a decision,” came the reply from his wife, Nechamy Simon, when he brought it up.

After a few days of intense research, and a careful risk-benefit analysis together, the Simons reached out to the sender of the e-mail, a Jewish woman by the name of Chaya Lipschutz, offering one of the rabbi's kidneys if he matched as a candidate.

“I cannot let a young girl die, and not do anything,” Simon told Lipschutz.

But the woman informed him that “a donor has already been found.”

Many people would have understandably felt relief at the realization that they wouldn't be called upon to undergo major surgery. Simon, however, saw things differently.

“I felt like I didn't act fast enough,” he recalls. “I knew right then and there that if somebody else was in need, I was going to be the one to save their life.”



Rabbi Ephraim Simon prays in the hospital.

According to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, more than 80,000 people nationwide are waiting for a healthy kidney. But last year, more than 4,500 lost their fight for life while waiting.

Simon told Lipschutz, a former kidney donor herself, to keep his name on file and to contact him if another person was in need.

Two months later, the woman called back with news that a 35-year-old mother of two needed a kidney. Simon immediately agreed to undergo tests at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, N.Y., where the woman was being treated. He wasn't a match.

Then in February, Lipschutz called yet again to ask Simon if he would give his kidney to a single Israeli man in his 30s.

"It wasn't for a young girl, or for a mother of two," says Simon, "but one cannot weigh one life over another."

The rabbi underwent his third series of tests at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan. In the weeks that followed, Lipschutz informed him that should he not be a match for the Israeli man, another person on her list was in dire need of a kidney.

As it turned out, Simon was not a match, but he immediately went to another hospital to undergo tests for the other man, a Satmar Chasid from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and a father of 10.

A Meeting of Two Souls

At the kidney clinic of Cornell University, as the rabbi was on his way to have his blood tested, the critically ill man came down the hallway, heading in the opposite direction.

"Excuse me," said the man, who had heard that a Chabad-Lubavitch emissary had volunteered to donate his kidney. "Are you the one testing for me?"

The two chatted briefly. The man showed Simon pictures of his family and told him a little about the genetic disease that had killed several of his relatives and was destroying his kidneys. Simon assured him that if he were a match, he would go through with the procedure.

A few hours before Passover, both men received the news they had been waiting for. Simon was busy preparing for the communal Seder at his Chabad House when the hospital called.

"Rabbi," a voice on the other line began, "you are a match."

Although he and his wife kept it between themselves, their Seder for more than 100 people took on new meaning for them both.

Immediately following the holiday, Simon called the transplant coordinator at the hospital to set up a series of examinations to assess his fitness physically, emotionally, and mentally as an organ donor.

On May 18, he received the go-ahead. In consultation with the recipient, Simon opted to schedule the surgery immediately following the conclusion of his Camp Gan Israel preschool summer camp.

At Shabbat services that week, he broke the news to his congregation. Seeing his community members as his own family, he wanted to explain to them why he was taking the risk.

Every single person is important, he told them. If an individual is lacking, it is everyone's job to help him or her. So "in a few weeks, a critically ill Jew in need of a healthy kidney in order to survive will receive one of mine."

Tears welled up in some of the worshippers' eyes. One man rushed to the front of the synagogue to embrace his rabbi.

One woman says that because of the rabbi's sacrifice, she doesn't feel uneasy anymore when surprise Shabbat guests show up. She now

happily prepares extra food.

“I initially had a mother’s natural reaction,” reveals Judy Simon, 61, who at first was very concerned about her son’s long-term health. “But after doing research, I realized that there is no reason to be.”

After a “heart-warming” meeting with the recipient’s family at the hospital during the procedure, the mother says that it’s “incredible to have a child do this altruistic thing. I feel so honored and blessed to be part of it and to say he is my son!”

Simon went to Cornell University Medical Center the day of the surgery carrying letters and pictures from his nine children. When the anesthesia wore off and he awoke in the recovery room, his wife read the letters to him.

In another room, the recipient was doing so well, that a doctor remarked that if he didn’t know better, he “would have said this kidney came from a brother.”

“I told my children that G-d could have easily made me ill, and I would have been the recipient,” he says. “Thank G-d, I was blessed with a healthy family. What better way to thank Him than to use my own health to help somebody else?”

Simon’s eldest daughter, 14-year-old Chaya, says her father’s deed reminds her of a parable she once learned.

“Saving one life is like saving a starfish,” she says. “Even though you cannot save every single starfish, each one that you pick up from the sand and throw back into the sea is a life saved.”

Looking back at the ordeal, Simon – who is quick to emphasize that his wife had as much a hand in donating “their” kidney as he did – hopes that more people will step up and give the gift of life.

“My sacrifice is just a few days of discomfort,” he says. “The reward of saving a man’s life, giving a father his life back, giving a family their father and husband back, outweighs all the risks.

“Not everyone can donate a kidney,” continues the rabbi. “But everyone can reach out to help another person.”

For more information about kidney donation in the Jewish community, please visit Chaya Lipschutz’s Web site, kidneymitzvah.com.

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