

Hooked Up And Waiting For My Angel

By A JEW IN NEED

(Editor's Note: Due to the sensitive and highly personal nature of this article, we've set aside our usual requirement that op-ed articles carry the writer's byline.)

I'm hooked. Truly hooked. Not on drugs, thank goodness, or cigarettes or alcohol. But hooked I most definitely am, and that makes me dependent after a wonderful life of carefree indifference. Fate's ultimate payback.

So what am I hooked on? What addiction is this?

It's called peritoneal dialysis and it becomes necessary when kidney function has ceased to exist. That's what happened to me. And so here I lie confined in movement, curtailed in speech, my eternal optimism challenged as I sense the clock of my existence winding down to a midnight no one can predict.

There are thousands like me. All patiently waiting for a donor to offer a kidney. But most potential donors (i.e., almost every healthy person) resist such a move. Maybe it's because of the perceived risk and the unpleasant thought of losing an organ despite the ability to live without it. I can understand that. Who am I to judge? I certainly never considered donating.

Now I know better. Now I understand that the risk to a donor is miniscule – like having your appendix out in terms of surgery and recuperation. But no one voluntarily has his appendix or spleen taken out even though he could function perfectly well without either. Only when one comes face to face with an expectant recipient does one identify and recognize the desperate need.

Truthfully, donating an organ just seems like such a hassle. Why bother?

Here's why: There are approximately 90,000 people waiting for a kidney – usually from someone who's been in a fatal accident. And every day 17 people, on average, die while awaiting their transplant. True, there is greater awareness about organ donation these days, but most people are still ignorant of the process and of how easily they can give the ultimate gift: life itself.

So what is involved?

A potential donor has to be the same blood type (but not exclusively) as the recipient. Mine is "O." Then the antigens are tested. The procedure has become so advanced and successful nowadays that even if there are no common antigens, the doctors will still do the operation. All it means is that more rejection medica-

tion will be necessary for the recipient.

There are even three-way donations: If I am "O" and have a donor who is "A," the team will "trade" my donor with someone else's "O"-type donor who may be incompatible with his intended recipient. Thus two donors get to fulfill a mitzvah and both operations go forward when otherwise neither would have.

Today's surgery is like a C-section with minimal invasion of the body. The procedure is relatively quick. The donor spends a little time in recovery and then gets on with his life.

As for the recipient, within just a few weeks he embarks on a new life with a functioning kidney.

It takes a sense of *kol Yisrael arevim* – a brotherly instinct, a sense of belonging – to step up and be counted. Such sacrifices are usually reserved for wartime, but this war is different. It involves you and me. Ordinary people out of uniform.

Not so long ago, *poskim* (halachic decisors) were not sure how to regard organ transplant. Was it meddling with Heaven's decree? Did it serve to interfere with the natural order of things? Was it inflicting punishment on one's body?

But as spiritual leaders became informed about the process and realized the implications of its beneficial impact on the community, they wholeheartedly endorsed it.

The daily routine of a dialysis patient presents a choice – either hemodialysis (through blood recycling) or peritoneal (flushing out creatinine waste from the peritoneal sac). I chose the latter since hemodialysis requires three visits during the week to a center where you are hooked up to a machine four hours at a time. That pretty much seals any hope of a regular work schedule.

Peritoneal, on the other hand, offers the benefit of being hooked to a machine overnight. The downside is that you have to stay that way for nine hours. Add the preparation and you are looking at a procedure one must endure for 10 hours – every single night. The necessary accessories – three large supply bags, drainage bag, cassette, disinfectant, surgical masks, mini caps – provide the best reasons for not leaving home.

A story is told about the Skverer Rebbe, a *tzaddik* who has dedicated his life to facilitating the application of modern medicine. A young woman came to see the rebbe for a blessing after she'd donated a kidney to a Jewish person on dialysis. The operation, as is true of 97 percent of such procedures, was a success.

As she entered the chamber where the rebbe sat to receive guests, he stood up to welcome her.

She was somewhat taken aback and expressed to the rebbe her embarrassment at his outward display of respect to her.

"Dear lady," he declared with tears in his eyes. "If it were permitted, I would embrace you for your wonderful and unselfish act of kindness. You have saved a life. Your power has exceeded anything I have ever done! I am standing before an angel."

So here I lie, waiting and hoping – together with my wife, our seven children, and my extended family – for the miracle of my own angel coming forward, either as a match for me to preempt my demise or as a match to one of thousands of others in line and hoping beyond hope.

Dialysis steals 10 hours each and every day. Just imagine being tied up for 10 hours. *Every single day.* Of course, it sure beats the alternative.

Saturday, November 11 will be a *Shabbos* dedicated to organ donation. The Torah portion that week is *Vayerah*, where we learn how Avraham *Avinu* practiced *chesed* and hospitality – to strangers, no less, and even before he'd fully recovered from his *bris milah*.

It is Avraham's example of concern for others that sets the standard for our nation. He epitomizes the sense of satisfaction and self-fulfillment one feels when giving to others. It's a feeling that's hard to explain. You just experience it from within.

Please – decide if you're up to answering the call. Each month 4,000 new patients are added to the list. Contact the renal (kidney) transplant department at any hospital. Learn more about what is involved. No commitment. Education is just the first – albeit the most important – step in making an intelligent, balanced decision. A decision that may possibly change your world and will definitely improve mine.

Like the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, this is a wake-up call. It is this type of selfless charity that hopefully will push off the evil decree – and it's in your hands. Your life will be changed and another Jew's life will be spared.

If you hear that small still whisper inside your head, respond now and answer the call. There's even a newly formed organization called Renewal that helps observant Jews who wish to become organ donors. Please make the connection now.

Useful Numbers and contact information:

- Renewal – tel: 718-431-9831; e-mail: Csteinmetz@life-renewal.org
- Skverer Refuah – tel: 973-580-0450; cmmsil@hotmail.com (to donate to this writer)
- Ezer M'zion – tel: 718-853-8400
- Halachic Organ Donor Society – website: hods.org or contact Chaya at KidneyMitzvah@aol.com
- National Kidney Foundation – tel: 1-800-622-9010
- Matching Donors – website: matchingdonors.com
- Donor Sabbath – tel: 1-888-234-4440