

A Perfect Match

Donating a kidney to a stranger | By Martha Gershun

IFIRST READ ABOUT DEBRA PORTER Gill's need for a kidney in a December 2017 article in the *Kansas City Jewish Chronicle*. The headline on the front page blared, "Giving of oneself: Member of the Kansas City Jewish community in search of a new kidney."

At the time, Gill was a stranger, but I felt drawn to her. She was 56, just five years younger than I was. She lives in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., but had grown up in a suburb of Kansas City, Mo., where I make my home.

Later, I learned of even more connections: Deb once belonged to Congregation Beth Torah in Overland Park, Kan., my Reform synagogue. She had sent two daughters to the same Hebrew school that my children had attended. She was a former family law attorney who had prosecuted child sex crimes in the same county where I had led a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) organization helping abused and neglected children.

Deb had been diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes when she was a first-year law student. At the age of 27, she learned that she had chronic kidney disease. In 1999, Deb was one of six people to receive organs from a 42-year-old woman who died in a car accident. The transplant of a kidney and pancreas cured Deb's diabetes and gave her full kidney function again.

But eventually, the donated kidney started to fail, and her doctors told Deb that waiting for another cadaveric kidney would take too long. She needed a living donor.

The article and the accompanying photo of Deb pulled me in. With her short blond hair and broad smile, Deb bore a striking resemblance to my cousin Ann, of blessed memory.

Ann had been one of my favorite people in the whole world. Smart, openhearted and always eager for a good story and a laugh, she was determined to stay positive despite the health issues caused by her polycystic kidney disease. In 2002, Ann received a kidney donation from a family friend—and she lived another nine years, long enough to see her daughters marry and the birth of four grandchildren. She was also able to celebrate the bar and bat mitzvahs of my son and daughter and to comfort me at my mother's memorial service. When I read about Deb's plight—and saw her smile—I knew I had to try to repay that gift.

LAST YEAR, 18,318 PEOPLE donated organs in the United States. Two-thirds of those donors were deceased, and 5,730 donors were living. Most living donors are relatives, co-workers or friends of the patient. Fewer than 10 percent are "altruistic donors," with no prior relationship to the recipient.

According to the National Kidney Foundation, kidneys from living donors have many advantages over those from cadaveric donors. They may be a better immunological match; reduce the time a patient is on the waiting list, so they embark on the rigorous surgery in better health; and reduce the time a kidney must be without blood prior to trans-



Bashert Martha Gershun (left) was drawn to Debra Porter Gill after reading about her need for a living donor in a local Jewish newspaper in Kansas City.

plantation, thereby preserving more function in the organ.

Many "stranger donors," another term for altruistic donors, are recruited through the media, as I was. Some find out about a patient in need from social media, a flyer or through a friend.

Community or faith-based organizations have stepped in to help locate altruistic donors. A model for those organizations within the Jewish community is Renewal, based in Brooklyn, N.Y. Since its founding in 2006, the nonprofit has matched hundreds of kidney patients with altruistic donors. Renewal helps Jewish patients work with community centers and synagogues to publicize the search and facilitates testing for potential donors.

"My family and I have been very grateful for everything Renewal has done to help in our search for a living donor," said Dalia Harel, a Romanian-born retired medical

researcher and grandmother who lives in Barrington, R.I. Harel, who has kidney failure, has been working with the organization since spring. “They are now organizing a large Zoom event to help me find a donor. They have already tested several potential donors on my behalf.”

Award-winning Jewish journalist Stewart Ain approached Renewal for help after he learned that a genetic condition had impacted the functioning of his kidneys. “Key to getting a kidney from a living donor is spreading the word that you need one,” said Ain, who lives in Commack, N.Y., and had written about Renewal in Jewish publications before discovering his own need. Renewal helped set up a Zoom event for him in September, where “we had more than 250 people tuned in from throughout the United States and Canada. Thanks to a Boca Raton synagogue, B’nai Torah Congregation, the local NBC television station in Palm Beach ran news stories about the Zoom program.

“I’m told a number of people on the Zoom call have indicated a willingness to be tested to see if they are eligible to become my living donor,” Ain reported. “In the meantime, I am still trying to spread the word.”

PRIOR TO MAKING THE DECISION to donate my kidney, I spoke to my good friend Dr. John D. Lantos, a pediatrician and bioethicist who is the director of the Bioethics Center at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City. In medical ethics and health law, he said, there is a long-running debate about living donation since it calls for doctors to intentionally cause harm to one person—the donor—in order to benefit another. It would seem to violate one of the most fundamental precepts in medical ethics: “First, do no harm.”

Living organ donation has evolved since the first successful living kidney transplant between identical twins in Boston in 1954, he explained. At that time, the American medical establishment concluded that since a twin had an interest in the well-being of a sibling, the physical risk of donation was balanced by the psychological benefit of saving a loved one.

The development of tissue typing and matching, and drugs that could safely suppress the immune system to prevent the rejection of transplanted organs, allowed the pool of potential donors to widen from relatives to



A Miracle and a Mitzvah Gershun has experienced no adverse effects from donating her kidney and walks five miles a day to stay in shape.

LEADING RESOURCES FOR KIDNEY DONATION AND TRANSPLANTATION

National Kidney Foundation (kidney.org) is among the oldest patient-focused non-profits dealing with all aspects of kidney health. Its website features a primer on transplantation basics, including information on the United States’ national transplant list, the United Network for Organ Sharing; finding local transplant centers, which can have different criteria and costs; and whether patients should place themselves on waitlists at several centers.

National Kidney Registry (kidneyregistry.org) facilitates the matching of living kidney donors with transplant patients nationwide. Its website includes information on donation “chains,” also called paired exchange or swapped donations, linking living donors incompatible with their intended recipients with other donors and recipients to find matches for all transplant patients in the chain.

Donate Life America (donatelife.net) is dedicated to public education about organ and tissue donations and the importance of registering to become a deceased organ donor. It also provides information on becoming a living donor.

Renewal (renewal.org) provides financial and moral support to Jewish kidney patients and donors and their families throughout the transplantation process. It also works with local communities and Jewish organizations to help those in need of a transplant.

friends and colleagues, even strangers. But questions persisted about the ethics of living organ donation. Close relatives might benefit psychologically from saving a loved one, but does that apply to friends? Or to strangers like me?

The medical community has worked hard to define that line, Dr. Lantos explained, allowing people who find great meaning in becoming organ donors to consent to transplantation, while implementing psychological screening to weed out others who might feel coerced or be motivated by self-destructive tendencies.

The more I learned about living organ donation, the more it felt like it was my turn to fulfill the Jewish mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh*—to save a life.

The timing seemed propitious. I had retired in April 2017 after a long

career in corporate and nonprofit management. My husband was well established as the executive director and CEO of Jewish Family Services of Greater Kansas City, the agency he had been running for more than a decade. Both of our children were living their own lives far from home. Everyone I loved was settled and stable. My time was my own.

At the end of the *Jewish Chronicle* article, there was a phone number for the Transplant Center at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., where

Deb was enrolled. One of more than 250 transplant centers in the United States, the Mayo Clinic performs more living kidney transplants than any other hospital in the country.

I called, and the receptionist directed me to fill out an online questionnaire. Two weeks later, I received a call from Lisa, one of the clinic's Nurse Transplant Coordinators. My blood type, B positive, was the same as Deb's, she told me, elevating the odds I might match as a potential donor. Subsequent blood tests revealed that despite the 1 in 100,000 odds that two biologically unrelated people will be compatible

'BE LIKE KATIE'

The "Hadassah kidney" is doing just fine.

And so are Katie Edelstein, who donated the kidney 17 years ago, and Belle Simon, then a fellow national board member, who was the grateful recipient.

Edelstein and Simon were just acquaintances when, during a Hadassah National Board meeting, Edelstein learned that Simon, who had kidney disease, was in desperate need of a new kidney. In the years since, filled with memories that Edelstein made possible, they have become close friends.

"To tell you the truth, I wouldn't have lived without it," said Simon, who was 66 at the time of the transplant and was told by doctors that she had an estimated five-year wait before an organ would be available. "It's just been a very meaningful gift," the Boynton Beach, Fla., resident added. "I praise Katie every day."

During a recent Zoom conver-



Inspiring Others Belle Simon (right) and Katie Edelstein tell the story of the 'Hadassah kidney' at the 2019 national convention.

sation about the "Hadassah kidney," as it is now known, they joked about how that long-ago decision continues to fascinate others. But the two turned serious when they shared that they have been privileged to inspire others.

They recently coached another Hadassah leader, who prefers not to disclose her name, through the process. A few acquaintances have donated kidneys. Readers were inspired to become live

donors after *Hadassah Magazine* published their story in 2004. Edelstein's local newspaper in Bellingham, Wash., *The Bellingham Herald*, once wrote about a bone marrow registration drive encouraging people to "Be like Katie."

When you have two kidneys, Edelstein, 72, explained, neither function at 100 percent, but when you have one, it grows larger and works at full capacity.

Thanks to Edelstein, Simon has been to many bar and bat mitzvahs, seen children and grandchildren graduate from elementary school, high school and college and has traveled around the world. And just this year, she became a great-grandmother.

She has also had her share of heartache. Simon, now 83, lost her husband, Arthur, in August 2020 to Covid-19. But she mostly focuses on the positive—the 17 years she wouldn't have had without Edelstein's generosity.

Edelstein says her life has been enriched as well.

"I'm not sure I would have made that offer had I not been involved with Hadassah for so many years," she said. Meeting the many volunteers, doctors, nurses and researchers who made a difference in so many lives rubbed off on her. After all, Edelstein noted, the opportunity to save someone's life doesn't come around very often.

—Donna Gordon Blankinship

for organ transplantation, Deb and I were a perfect match.

Lisa explained that HIPAA privacy rules precluded the clinic from revealing to a patient the identity of a potential donor or sharing a patient's contact information. I could decide to tell Deb that we were a match or remain anonymous.

Keeping this a secret was not in my nature. I found Deb on Facebook, sent a message and held my breath. Would she think I was some stalker? Would she be an emotional mess?

Deb answered the next day: "I read your message and it literally took my breath away. I had to take a little time before responding because I couldn't find the words to express my gratitude.... Your incredible offer to donate one of your kidneys to me, or to anyone you don't know, is beyond generous."

Her reaction reassured me, and in a fortuitous coincidence, Deb was en route to spend a week with her family in Kansas City just as I was reaching out. I still didn't know if I would be cleared to donate, but this seemed like our best chance to meet in person. We agreed to have lunch.

Before our lunch, I was as nervous as I would be for a first date. What are the protocols for meeting the woman whose life you are trying to save?

I needn't have worried. Deb and I connected right away. I loved that she wasn't maudlin about her health and that she was appropriately grateful, but never over the top with her thanks. Deb and I had many things in common: We both liked to write, were active in progressive politics and had spent our careers helping children facing adversity. As we stumbled on new bits of synchronicity, we became increasingly convinced that our match was bashert.



Spread the Word Stewart Ain, here with a grandchild, approached Renewal for help finding a donor.

Two months of rigorous medical and psychological testing followed, all paid for by Deb's insurance. Finally, I got the call we were waiting for: The transplant team agreed I was healthy and sane enough to donate my kidney.

THE NEXT PHASE OF THE JOURNEY involved some hiccups. Our first direct transplant attempt was cancelled the night before our scheduled surgery, when the doctors became concerned that Deb was too sick for the procedure.

After intensive treatment, she recovered. On September 28, 2018, nine months after I first read about her in the *Jewish Chronicle*, Deb and I found ourselves in adjoining beds at the Mayo Clinic, being prepped for surgery. Before the morning was over, my left kidney was surgically removed and transplanted into Deb.

It has now been more than three

years since our surgeries, and both Deb, now 60, and I, at 65, continue to do well. She has taken my kidney on amazing adventures—including ziplining in Honduras. I have returned to my life as a nonprofit consultant and writer. I have had no adverse health effects from donating a kidney. Through the pandemic, I've been walking five miles a day and am in better shape than I was before the transplant.

Deb and I stay in touch by text, phone calls and Zoom. And we try to get together whenever she travels to Kansas City to see her family.

Every day in America, 13 people die waiting for a kidney. Often their best hope—their only hope—is to find a living donor. I will always be grateful I was able to perform this deeply meaningful, scientifically miraculous mitzvah. If I could, I'd do it again. **H**

Martha Gershun is a nonprofit consultant, writer and community volunteer and the co-author of *Kidney to Share* (Cornell Press) with Dr. John D. Lantos, director of the Bioethics Center at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Mo.

LEARN ABOUT ORGAN DONATION WITH HADASSAH

Join Hadassah Greater Kansas City on Zoom on Saturday, November 20, from 7 to 9 p.m. CT for their fourth annual Touch of Red Gala. This year's theme is Celebrate Life!, focusing on the importance of organ donation. Martha Gershun and Debra Porter Gill as well as Katie Edelstein and Belle Simon will share their experiences as living donor-transplant recipient pairs. Other speakers will discuss transplantation at the Hadassah Medical Organization in Israel. The event is free and open to all. Register at hadassahmidwest.org/GKCRRedGala.

Transplantation and Rebirth

Israel ranks near the top in live organ donations | By Wendy Elliman

THE KIDNEY THAT IS CLEANSING the blood of Tomer Tarfa Darja and controlling his water balance, vitamins, hormones, glucose, amino acids and more, feels like his own. About three years ago, this 5-ounce, reddish-brown, fist-sized organ was performing the same master chemist job in the body of Esti Lerer, then 28, a counselor for at-risk youth and a Hasidic mother of three children under eight.

“What do you say to someone who saves your life?” asked Darja, 26, who came to Israel from Ethiopia as a toddler with his widowed mother and now lives in Jerusalem. “No words are enough.”

Six years ago, he was in a preparatory school for the army, hoping to enlist in an elite Israel Defense Forces unit, when an upset stomach took him to a doctor. He was diagnosed with a genetic kidney disease, and he deteriorated rapidly. By 2018, Darja needed dialysis three times a week.

That was the year that Lerer, who also lives in Jerusalem but grew up in a large family in Ofakim in the Negev, won a long, hard-fought battle to become a living, or altruistic, kidney donor. “It was something I’d decided when I was 16, when my best friend’s father died because there was no kidney for him,” she said. She had even told her future husband, Hanan, on their first date that she was going to register to become an organ donor at age 23, the youngest it is legally permissible to become an organ donor in Israel.

Israel’s doctors and screening boards prefer that female donors are



past childbearing age. “But Esti was unstoppable,” recalled Hadassah nurse Neta Malka, coordinator of live kidney donations and transplants at the Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem. “And Darja was her perfect medical match.”

“It’s rare to have so young a donor, and particularly fortunate for such a young recipient,” said Dr. Abed Khalaileh, director of HMO’s solid organ transplantation unit, located on the Ein Kerem campus, who performed the surgeries on both Darja and Lerer.

One of seven sons born to a Palestinian Israeli family in Jerusalem, Dr. Khalaileh typically performs two scheduled liver or kidney transplants each week as well as an emergency transplant or two. “It’s a journey,” he said of his decision to become a trans-



Then and Now Tomer Tarfa Darja at Hadassah Hospital Ein Kerem with his kidney donor Esti Lerer and her husband, Hanan, looking on (top); Darja, a new father, holds his infant daughter.

plantation specialist. “Just as anyone can learn to draw but only a handful become artists, transplantation needs not only technical competence but imagination, 3-D vision and something inborn. In that sense, it chose me more than me choosing it.”

LERER IS AMONG APPROXIMATELY 250 Israelis who choose to donate their kidneys each year, quadruple the number a decade ago, according to Israel’s National Transplant Center. Established by the Health Ministry in 1994, the center manages organ donation and transplantation in Israel, coordinating with hospitals countrywide.

With 90 to 95 percent of the country’s kidney transplant recipients surviving their first year, Israel has one of the world’s highest success rates.

Organ donation at HMO begins with transplant coordinators. Like every other transplantation center in Israel, the medical center has two coordinators, one to recruit organs from deceased, also known as cadaveric, donors, and the other to facilitate live donations—tasks that the Health Ministry requires to be separate because of the very different circumstances under which the organ is obtained. Hadassah Ein Kerem nurse Kyrill Grozovsky, who emigrated from Moscow 30 years ago, handles the former, guiding and supporting the families of brain-dead patients through the difficult decision-making process.

“We have around 50 potential donors in Hadassah each year,” he said. “I take a deep breath, then go meet the family. I tell them of the options and try to understand who they are. It’s usually a long and emotional process, driven by the incentive of saving lives. And it often brings great comfort to the donor family.”

“DONATING ORGANS SHOULD BE AS MUCH A SOCIAL NORM AS STOPPING AT A RED LIGHT.”

—KYRILL GROZOVSKY
HADASSAH TRANSPLANT
COORDINATOR

He recalls discussing donation with the distraught wife and two children of a 42-year-old man suddenly felled by a brain hemorrhage. “The family was secular, Jewish and couldn’t decide what to do,” he said. “I asked the wife about her husband. ‘He was friendly,’ she said. ‘Everyone loved him. He was always ready to help.’ And I said: ‘Then let him help them in death as in life.’ And she did.”

Grozovsky also recalls his interaction with a young Muslim couple mourning their 3-year-old daughter, who died after being hit by a car. “In Muslim society, it’s the extended family, particularly the older men, who decide,” he said. “I spoke as much with the grandfather and imam as with the child’s parents. The imam’s approval tipped the balance in favor of donation.”

Over 60 percent of families facing this decision choose to donate, up from 40 percent two decades ago. The rise in numbers is due to several factors, including an ongoing public-awareness campaign around the National Transplant Center’s ADI organ-donor registration cards—the millionth ADI card was signed last April. Numbers have been further boosted by Israel’s 2008 Brain-Respiratory Death Act. It determines death by neurologic criteria rather than

HELLO GORGEOUS

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cessation of heartbeat—when organs begin to deteriorate and therefore are less viable for transplant. The newer criteria are accepted by many Jewish and Muslim religious authorities in Israel.

The numbers, however, still do not meet the need. “Donation is up from when I began this job 19 years ago, but it’s not enough,” said Grozovsky. “Donating organs should be as much a social norm as stopping at a red light.”

Over 700 people in Israel are waiting for kidneys, and more than 150 for livers. Each year, about 300 people are added to waiting lists and some 100 die while waiting. Altruistic donors are thus a vital resource. Israel is ranked relatively low compared with other countries in deceased donations. It is, however, third worldwide in live donation, after South Korea and Turkey, according to a 2020 report from the International Registry on Organ Donation and Transplantation.

Malka, who guided Lerer through her donation process, has been Hadassah’s living donor nurse coordinator for seven years, helping potential donors navigate the required rigorous medical, psychological and ethics testing before donation. “Live-organ donation is wonderful, but only when it’s right for donors and their families,” she stressed. “I suggest, for example, that a man waits until after his son’s bar mitzvah. I urge that partners, parents and grown children are involved in the decision. And I introduce willing donors, who don’t match their relative or friend, to organ donor chains of giving—their kidney going to a matched stranger, in return for one needed at home.”

Three years ago, Hadassah clinical psychologist Benny Kashany participated in a donor chain, realizing that with one act he could save the lives of several people. “The husband of the woman who received my kidney has continued the chain of giving,

donating his kidney to a stranger,” he said. “And the stranger’s father gave a kidney to a young girl.”

Central to the high rate of altruistic donors in Israel is Matnat Chaim (Gift of Life), an organization that has helped make Israel one of a few countries with more living than deceased donors—63 percent of all organs donated in the country are from living donors, compared with 28 percent in the United States. The organization was founded in 2009 by Rabbi Yeshayahu Heber of Jerusalem. He developed kidney disease at 42 and survived on dialysis until transplantation. During his dialysis sessions, Heber befriended a young kidney patient, Pinchas Turgeman, and tried to help him find a donor. Sadly, Turgeman passed away before an organ was available. Heber became a full-time kidney donation advocate and founded Matnat Chaim, which works with Israeli hospitals and even a few in the United States, facilitating over 1,000 live-donor kidney transplants. He succumbed to Covid-19 in April 2020, aged 55, and his widow, Rachel, now directs the organization.

HADASSAH ON CALL

Go behind the scenes at Hadassah Medical Organization with the *Hadassah On Call: New Frontiers in Medicine* podcast. The November episode features Hadassah neurologist Dr. Max Bauer discussing headaches and pain management. Catch up on recent episodes, including an interview with Dr. Dror Mevorach, director of the rheumatology research center and head of a Covid unit at the Hadassah Medical Organization, who is researching new treatments to combat the virus. Sign up for new episode alerts at hadassah.org/hadassahoncall.



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