



KIDNEY DONATION: SPREADING LIGHT THROUGH ACTS OF KINDNESS

Ever since childhood, Chanukah was always among my favorite holidays. The tastes, smells, and sights created a fusion of experiences and memories that I long to recreate every year. The exception was 2011. It was the first time in my life that I opted to skip lighting the menorah, exchanging gifts, or playing dreidel with my children, in lieu of something far greater.

Instead, I spent the first night of Chanukah in a hospital bed, an IV in my arm, and an iPad in my hands as I watched my children miles away lighting the menorah without me. It was a bittersweet, but very proud moment that had been years in the making. I was recovering comfortably that evening from donating my left kidney to a stranger, a single mother of three from Israel, whose life was slipping away with each passing day that she did not receive this life-sustaining transplant. My incredible recipient, Ronit, later joked

that this was the best Chanukah present given in all of Jewish history.

In the months following, people would stop and ask what compelled me to give my kidney away, knowing there was no benefit to me, only risk. I honestly wished that I had a better answer, but the simple truth was that I felt blessed with this (extra) organ that I did not need to live, and Ronit could not live without. Let us not pretend that the decision to undergo unnecessary surgery is an easy one; I spent the better part of a year agonizing over this difficult decision. In fact, as a professor of values and ethics at Wurzweiler's School of Social Work, I often challenge my students to weigh ethical decisions, not only through the lens of morality, but by scrutinizing them through an ethical justification process, weighing the benefits against greater costs of our actions. In this case, nobody will argue the benefits of saving the life of

another. In fact, the Sages compared saving a single life to saving an entire world (*Sanhedrin* 37a)! The challenge, however, was justifying the cost.

As a father and husband, was this a risk I wanted to take? Does saving a life justify putting myself in harm's way? Yet, what kept inspiring me to move forward was thinking of the vast tapestry of kindness that weaves all of us together. Much like the *shamash* that we use to light the other candles in the menorah — it only spreads light, without diminishing its own — so too, an act of selfless kindness — even one that comes with risk — will certainly bring more light to the world. I, therefore, opted to risk my life to create a world where we extend ourselves to help others, rather than live in a world where we each protect our own resources, while others around us suffer.

Was I scared? Of course, who wouldn't

be? Where, then, did I draw the strength to proceed? I looked deep into my childhood and realized that I already had the answer. No, I am not brave, nor a hero; rather, I was raised seeing the Torah values of how it is better to give of our own light, rather than to keep it for ourselves as others sit in darkness. Just as I knew that if I saw someone drowning, I would be simply unable to look away, so too, I could not ignore the fact that within my abdomen, I held a five-ounce life-saving key to another person's salvation.

Throughout my early Jewish education, robotically placing a penny in the *pushka*, I was endowed with the basic Jewish values of *tzedakah* and *chesed*. As the years went on those seeds blossomed and I was able to appreciate that the Torah's mandate of helping others starts, not with action, but with emotion, as instructed in the foundational verse *V'ahavta lera'acha kamocho*, to love others as ourselves (Vayikra 19:18). Only upon feeling genuine empathy within, stirred by seeing the plight of another, can we feel and identify with their pain. It is that feeling of empathy that propels us toward action. In fact, countless research studies have found that those in pain report lesser degrees of suffering when they simply perceive the presence and caring of another person who is with them in their ordeal. Such is the power of empathy. It does not start with giving a vital organ, but to help alleviate the pain of another by just seeing their angst and lovingly staying with them. Chazal describe this trait as something woven into the very DNA of Bnei Avraham Avinu (*Yevamos* 79a).

I am often asked regarding my kidney donation, if I could, would I do it again? My answer is a definite yes. In fact, in the months and years following my kidney donation, I found myself saddened by the fact that I could not

donate another kidney. Having seen the impact of saving a life, I wanted to do more. Without another kidney to give, I published a book, sharing my story and my struggles: *The Kidney Donor's Journey: 100 Questions I Asked Before Donating My Kidney*. It was my hope that, although I could not give another kidney, my story would inspire others to look within and explore their capacity to give. I have been deeply humbled by the letters I receive from people around the world who have read the book and since donated their kidneys. I feel honored to be a part of a very special growing community of amazing donors and their families, who continue to share their experiences in the hopes of helping others, including the work of organizations like Renewal, who are facilitating transplants and saving lives on a daily basis. The point is that *chesed* does not happen in a vacuum, it is nurtured by the inspirational people who live and breathe it.

Please allow me to paint a picture of several seemingly unrelated vignettes from throughout my life, which I believe ultimately inspired me to donate my kidney. Beginning as a young child, I remember countless times where my grandfather, OB" M, would stand up in the middle of a Shabbos meal and leave. No, he was not going to nap, read, or focus on himself, but to walk several miles to the local nursing home to visit with the elderly residents and sing for them with his beautiful voice. I foolishly assumed all grandfathers did this, only to later learn that I was being taught a unique lesson about *chesed* from a very generous man who looked for ways to bring joy to others. Later, in my junior high and high school years, I followed his example by visiting nursing homes and bringing my friends along to spread joy. Although it was never asked or expected of me, my grandfather left a beautiful trail of breadcrumbs that inspired me to follow.

I smile when I think back to these early life experiences, which likely primed my heart to see myself as a vehicle for kindness.

Another powerful example took place at Yeshiva University. One of the rights of passage of working at YU is interacting with the high school and undergraduate students while braving the lines at the many kosher dining options on campus. One afternoon, while standing in Golan restaurant, the young man ahead of me had finished ordering his lunch, when the cashier said, "that will be twelve dollars." The teenager counted a crumpled pile of single dollar bills, and then proceeded to slowly count the change piled high in his hand. He quickly looked up with an embarrassed look on his face, as he noticed the long line of people behind him, and admitted that he was a few dollars short. Without a moment's hesitation, I leaned over and told the cashier to put the difference on my bill. The young man turned around and smiled at me as if he just won the lottery, and was so taken by my gesture. As he thanked me and asked how he could repay me, I was instantly transported back to a forgotten memory from decades earlier in my own young life; a memory that may have explained my actions.

As a boy of eight years old, I remember the hot August day in sleepaway camp. I had been saving the nickels and dimes I found throughout the summer so I could buy myself a soda from the camp's new soda machine. When the day arrived that I finally had enough money, I ran as fast as I could to the machine and excitedly inserted coin after coin. As I reached up to enthusiastically insert the final dime, it slipped from my hand and rolled beneath the soda machine. I, too, quickly dropped to the ground to retrieve it, but as hard as I tried, my small fingers were unable to reach it. Disappointed, I knew I

would have to wait for another day and another dime to come my way. I then stood up and pressed the coin return button with all my might, but, sadly, to no avail.

It was at that moment of defeat that I turned around and saw a man standing over me — someone I had never seen before or since. He was a large man who quickly noticed the tears in my eyes and asked what was wrong. I explained that I dropped my dime under the soda machine and then it ate the rest of my money. Without a moment's hesitation he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. He placed two nickels into my small hand with a gentle smile on his face. I must have looked as if I just won the lottery, and I asked him how I could pay him back. I will never forget how he leaned forward and said, "One day in the future, when you see another boy who doesn't have enough money in his pocket, you can pay me back by giving that boy the money he needs."

Although at the time I did not fully understand what he meant, and the memory quickly faded, evading my consciousness for decades, standing in line that afternoon, it struck me like lightning. I did not hesitate to help another, because I knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end, helped by the kindness of a stranger, whose only wish was to make the world better by paying it forward to another. It is amusing when I think about what a minor interaction it was, but I am filled with great awe when I consider the impact it had upon me so

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many years later while standing in the restaurant and witnessing that familiar look of disappointment on a young man's face. How many such memories and interactions do we each hold, consciously or unconsciously, from those in our lives who have modeled chessed and empathy, planting seeds for us to act upon in the future?

The final story, unlike the previous ones, is not about the elders who motivated me toward chessed, rather, and quite surprisingly, how my own children inspired me to donate my kidney. During the year leading up to my donation, my wife and I agreed to keep the process quiet while undergoing the testing and evaluations. Only once I was cleared would we have more practical conversations with our family. One such discussion was with our children, whom we agreed needed to be on board with this major life decision. Therefore, one night over dinner, I explained to our children that Hashem blessed us with two kidneys, even though we only needed one to live, and I was thinking about giving my extra kidney away to someone else who needed it, but I wanted their thoughts and input before making the decision. My two older sons both nervously looked across the table with many questions about the dangers of surgery and the risks to their father. With tears in their eyes, they asked me not to donate my kidney. My wife and I locked eyes, as if we both knew that this would be the end of the journey. The silence was then broken when my oldest son, Reuven, who was about 10 years old asked, "Totty, who would you be

giving your kidney to?"

I explained that I was matched with a woman named Ronit, who lives in Israel and is a single mother of three children. After a brief pause, my two older children wiped the tears from their eyes and both nodded their heads and said, "Yes, we think you should do it."

I remember feeling confused, wondering if it was a mistake to ask for children to help make this important decision. I then asked why they changed their minds. It was in the words that my son spoke next that gave me the clarity and inspiration that I needed to proceed. He said, "If you donate your kidney and something bad happens to you, we will be very sad, but at least we will still have Mommy to take care of us. However, if Ronit doesn't get a kidney and she dies, her children will be orphaned. Therefore, you should give her your kidney."

I was so moved by the selflessness of my children, willing to risk losing a beloved parent, just so that another child is not left an orphan. It was in that precious moment that I realized that the proverbial torch had been passed. The world of kindness introduced by Abraham and modeled to me by my grandfather and so many others had been passed along to my children's generation.

Although the definition of being human is to be flawed and imperfect, it is this quality of empathically caring for others that brings us closer to the Divine. Anytime we can spread that flame of kindness, even at personal cost, it never diminishes, but only adds light to the world. Every year now when I light the Chanukah candles, I think of Ronit. I recall that one year I skipped candle lighting, and how that turned out to be the brightest Chanukah I ever experienced.