

Kidneys Advising

My Journey Through the Windy and Bumpy Roads of Kidney Donation

Chapter 1: The Awakening

September 2024

I didn't really know much about kidney donation. I knew my younger brother, Benzion Shlomo, had donated a kidney two years prior, and we were all proud of him. We watched him go through this tremendous decision and sacrifice, witnessed his recovery, and saw the beautiful relationship he developed with the entire Leiber family. It was heartwarming and wonderful all around. But that was the extent of my knowledge or thought about kidneys, donation, or the Renewal organization.

Then one night, Menachem Friedman, who davens by us and works for Renewal, approached me. He asked if I'd agree to be the guest speaker at their upcoming midwinter Shabbaton in 2025.

I called Benzion Shlomo to ask what to expect—what is this Shabbos, who attends, and so on. He explained that it is basically for kidney donors who also raise money for the organization, and he gave me background on the entire operation. I was awe-inspired. I agreed to the job.

Immediately, though, I started having thoughts along the lines of: How do you have the audacity to stand and lecture a crowd like this while you still have two kidneys?

I was reminded of a conversation I had one Friday night fifteen years ago in the dimly lit streets of Yerushalayim—on the corner of Yonah and Yechezkel, to be precise. I was with Yossi Meyerson. He was drunk, I was tipsy, and it was after a good long meal. He was shrieking at the top of his lungs that whoever is buried with two kidneys is just feeding them to the worms, while he could've brought life to a Jewish home. It resonated with me then, just as it did now. (As a sidenote: while I donated first, Yossi has donated since. Never underestimate a drunk conversation in Yerushalayim.)

The Decision to Act

My thought process was dry and simple. There is extensive research from the past fifty years regarding kidney transplants—peer-reviewed papers and hard data—which all show that complication rates are extremely low. Of course, there is some discomfort for a short period after the surgery. From then on, you need to be careful not to gain too much weight and to keep an eye on your blood pressure as you age. These are not trivial concerns. Yet, the certainty of the recipient’s suffering far outweighs these doubts.

Moreover, statistically, when one suffers kidney failure, both fail. It’s not like I have a spare tire. To the contrary, a donor and his family go to the top of the national list for available organs, so in a way, it is safer to donate than not to. Regarding my own case, my understanding was that the medical establishment is concerned more than anything with lawsuits. Therefore, they are extremely careful and will not proceed with a transplant unless the donor is in top physical, mental, and emotional condition; every hospital wants to maintain the highest ratings.

When I shared some of these thoughts with Ari Klein—he and his wife both donated—he agreed, obviously, but added that the surgery is a joke. He said it in such a tone that I believed him. That was the push I needed to ask Menachem for a testing kit.

October 8, 2024

Menachem brought a small kit, just an envelope with a few swabs. I went to a quiet corner, swabbed four times, and returned it to him. Now that I had done my part, I completely forgot about the whole thing.

Chapter 2: The Match and The Mistake

October 30, 2024

Several weeks later, I received a call. The man on the other line introduced himself as Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz from Renewal. He informed me that I was a match for someone. Not just any match, but what they call a “perfect match.”

A note on that term: While it isn’t a “perfect” DNA match in the pure sense—that would only be an identical twin—this is the best possible match otherwise. This is significant because the more the DNA matches, the more natural the organ feels to the recipient’s system. It

works better and healthier for longer, perhaps even for life. Also, the recipient's body is less likely to reject it as a threat, meaning they often won't have to be on so many immunosuppressors. That medication is a danger on its own, as it makes the patient vulnerable to the flu and other diseases going around.

Rabbi Steinmetz made it clear there was no pressure. They didn't want an answer until I had thought things over thoroughly. I asked for basic information about the recipient. He told me it was for a frum fifty-three-year-old man, a father and grandfather. I thanked him for the call, told him I'd discuss it with my wife, and hung up.

I truly didn't know what to think. True, I had all the logical reasons why I thought it was a given. But now that it was real, everything felt more real. I hadn't actually planned to donate; I was just a big fan who could make good arguments for it. But my wife encouraged me strongly, provided the Rebbe would agree.

I wrote a letter to the Amshinover Rebbe:

"It is now a year since I moved to Lakewood, and I wish to give the Rebbe an update on all that has happened. But first, I have an urgent question that is a matter of pikuach nefesh. My younger brother, Benzion Shlomo, donated a kidney two years ago, and that, along with two people from our shul who also donated, made me consider at least checking if I might be a match for someone in need. So I took the test, and the organization informed me I am a match for a religious Jew, age 53.

However, I had not seriously considered donation until now. I am not in doubt as to whether the act itself is virtuous, for it is clearly saving a life, and I accept the general medical data that suggests one can live with one kidney for life—but still:

(A) There is some risk in the surgery and the recovery.

(B) I have perhaps childish thoughts: what will people say? Perhaps I did it for the wrong reasons, or perhaps it's just a way for people to say I'm a tzaddik and baal chessed.

(C) I don't think my mother would object, but I'm unsure about my in-laws—should I take their opinion into consideration?"

The Rebbe replied that while I am not obligated to donate, it is a very great and important mitzvah, the greatest chessed in the world. Regarding my questions: (A) Yes, the risk is a real factor, but if I am considering it thus far, I should continue with the process. (B) He did not wish to address thoughts about my motivations at all. (C) I should speak with my in-

laws, find out what concerns them, and report back with their thoughts.

In the end, my in-laws did not object once they heard the Rebbe supported the donation. Also, my father-in-law has a woman who worked for him for many years whom he trusts and respects; she donated a kidney and had a speedy recovery and a very positive attitude toward the whole process. That gave them the green light.

Renewal informed the hospital they had a match. (They are the “matchmakers” in this process.)

November 14, 2024

The hospital sent me an email with a link to a thirty-minute educational video covering the basic facts of kidney donation. I don’t think I learned anything new from it, but you can only officially enroll as a potential donor after watching it. Once I confirmed my willingness to proceed, they promptly mailed several vials to my house via express mail intended for blood collection. I was instructed to send them back as soon as possible, ensuring they were shipped before 11:00 AM so they would arrive the following day while the blood was still viable. I’m not sure exactly what they test for—presumably, they check compatibility with the recipient’s blood and conduct other baseline screenings.

I contacted Renewal to send a phlebotomist. They reached out to Bikur Cholim, and a volunteer came to my house to draw the blood. I mailed the samples back immediately.

A short comment on why I called Renewal for this when I could have just gone to a lab: Benzion Shlomo advised me to make use of every service offered. A person has a lot on his mind during this process. If I felt like I had to spend money on a taxi, drive two hours each way to the hospital, or stand in line at a lab, I might just get frustrated. That frustration could hinder the entire process for me or my family. It is better to take advantage of these organizations; they raise money for this very purpose. I don’t regret the decision. It smoothed the entire donation journey tremendously.

The hospital received the blood, tested it, and once satisfied with the results, they scheduled an entire day of tests and interviews. They mailed a large container for a 24-hour urine collection, which had to be kept refrigerated. This had to be collected the day before the scheduled testing and brought to the hospital for further analysis.

A Day of Testing

November 25, 2024

I called Aaron Feder from Renewal, and he arranged a ride for me to the hospital. The driver was a kidney donor himself, a young man who grew up in Skver. He wasn't part of that community anymore, but he was still frum, nice, and a chassid of the Rebbe nonetheless. (By the way, Skver is remarkable for its charity, especially regarding kidney donations—that small town may have over a hundred kidney donors, including the aforementioned Aaron Feder himself.)

At the hospital, Rabbi Steinmetz was waiting for me. He brought along a nice bag with some danishes, snacks, and water. Since you aren't allowed to eat or drink before the bloodwork, it's good to have something to eat right after the test, as there is still a long day ahead. I stuck to my diet, though, and didn't eat the snacks—just some vegetables.

The physical tests were extensive. They drew a lot of blood, probably about a liter in total. I told the phlebotomist at one point that there was enough there for a lot of matzah; I don't think she got the joke. They also took more urine samples. I had an EKG, a chest X-ray, and an MRI. For the MRI, they give you a special drink beforehand which makes your veins feel like they're burning for about twenty seconds. The machine is very claustrophobic. It was not fun, and I was glad when it was over.

I met with a nephrologist, a surgeon, a general physician, a psychologist, a social worker, and above all, the case manager. Each one asked me the same questions, over and over and nauseam, shared similar information, and examined me physically, mentally, and emotionally, each in their own area of expertise.

Here, I made a very serious mistake.

The social worker asked if I was taking any medications, and I spoke too freely. I told her that when I was fifteen, just a few years after my father's passing, I went through a difficult period and took certain medications to stabilize my mood. I also admitted that, on occasion, I would take some Adderall from a friend to help me prepare lessons. I didn't think much of this and didn't realize I was sharing too much.

The protocol is that a week later, once all the labs and scans are back, the entire team

meets for a conference. They review all the reports, and everyone gives their expert opinion about the suitability of the potential donor—physically, emotionally, and mentally. It has to be a unanimous vote; otherwise, the hospital risks a potential lawsuit.

In my case, they all agreed that everything was fine. They saw no blemish on my record or well-being that would stand in the way of donating. However, the social worker objected absolutely. Her reasoning was that I admitted to taking medications without a prescription and had a history of taking mood stabilizers. She insisted, for my own good, that I should not be allowed to donate.

The case manager called me later and said she didn't understand what the fuss was about and that everyone was surprised by the decision—but the hospital's hands were tied. There was nothing to be done.

I was very upset, mostly with myself. Because of my foolish, reckless attitude—blabbing away to an unknown social worker, an elementary mistake anyone with minimal foresight could have avoided—a Jewish person might be denied the chance at life.

I wrote to the Rebbe afterward, saying that I believed one must be worthy to do a great mitzvah, and apparently “merit is brought about through the meritorious”—perhaps I wasn't worthy enough. In general, it seemed to reflect my life: everything goes well until I open my big mouth.

Chapter 3: The Fight for Redemption

December 11, 2024

I decided not to give up without a fight, so I wrote a letter to the social worker.

Dear Dr. Teh,

Shalom and peace to you,

First, I would like to say that I truly appreciate the efforts of every person on this team, including those at Renewal. I especially value the way you look out for the protection and safety of the donor at every step of the process—physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Second, I want to clarify that my intention is not to convince anyone of anything. I simply want to present my case. I feel that I may have been misunderstood. This is understandable given that our meeting was brief. I am writing now in the hopes of providing more context so we can all better understand each other. I apologize in advance if I come across as forceful. I am a bit frustrated and am pouring out my heart on paper.

To be completely honest, I never viewed being a kidney donor as my life's mission. If, God forbid, something in my physical or emotional health disqualified me from donating, I would be disappointed, but I don't think I would be heartbroken. After all, if it's not meant to be, it's not meant to be, and I can accept that. However, in this case, I feel differently because I made an effort to be open and honest about everything, and I believe I was penalized for it.

My understanding is that the main concerns were: first, my occasional use of Adderall without a prescription, and second, my history of being prescribed medication typically used for bipolar disorder when I was sixteen years old.

Let me address the Adderall issue first. According to a quick Google search, about a third of Americans have taken Adderall at some point in their lives, and a significant percentage of that is unprescribed. Yet, I clearly shared that I had only taken Adderall a handful of times—no more than five—and I want to emphasize that. In truth, my brother told me it helped him concentrate, so I decided to try it. It was never about becoming addicted or engaging in compulsive drug use.

Would we disqualify someone for having tried weed five times in their life? Would we question which state they were in at the time and assess that against the legality of weed locally? It is very normal for someone to try something if they are struggling with concentration, especially when someone they trust recommends it. I am not a regular user of Adderall, nor did I take it to cope with anything serious. I didn't take heavy medications like chemotherapy drugs or Prozac. It was a limited experiment to solve a small problem, and I don't think that should disqualify me as a donor.

In addition, I lead a very stable life. I have been married to the same woman for eleven years, and I have six beautiful children. I have no debt and am financially stable. For the past fifteen years, I have lived a responsible, structured life, serving my community as a teacher, mentor, and counselor while providing for my family.

This brings me to the second concern: the medication I was prescribed when I was fifteen. Yes, I was on medication. But I don't believe I was ever diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I

was simply a teenager who lost his father at age eleven. I was lonely and had some mood swings, which is a normal part of adolescence. That was over thirteen years ago. Since then, I have built a family and led a stable life, as I've described.

What I am asking is that, just as I was open and honest with you, you treat my words in the context in which they were shared. It seems unfair to generalize this as an issue of potential instability.

Finally, I want to say the following: Hypothetically, had the team called and told me that I have a physical issue that disqualifies me, but with some training I might eventually qualify, I would have refused. If I wasn't meant to be a donor, I would accept that. But in this case, I feel that I absolutely do qualify. It was my own words that became the stumbling block in the path of saving a life.

Therefore, I am willing to do whatever is necessary to make the team comfortable with me donating, without needing to wait for a prolonged period. If that means additional evaluations, either in person or via Zoom, or weekly consultations for the next several weeks, I am open to it. I will do whatever is needed to move forward.

Thank you for considering my perspective. I truly hope we can come to a resolution that allows me to move forward with my desire to donate.

Sincerely,

Chaim Ozer Geldzahler

After sending this letter, I had a forty-five-minute phone conversation with her. I told my children to recite Tehillim the entire time, davening for a good outcome, but it didn't help. It was like talking to a wall. The case was closed.

The only concession I got from her was that if I saw a therapist from the hospital—which is in the Bronx—twice a week for four months, and if they agreed afterward that I was suitable, they would reassess then. That was ridiculous.

I felt a tremendous amount of disappointment, truly feeling that I had prevented a fellow Jew from receiving the gift of life. I was plagued with feelings of guilt for the poor patient at Montefiore. I asked Renewal if it might be possible to transfer his case to a different hospital and start the process again. They said that, in theory, it could be done, but in this

case there would be insurance issues which would make it smoother just to look for a new donor.

Chapter 4: New Matches and New Hurdles

January 2, 2025

Less than a month later, Renewal contacted me again. They told me I was a “perfect match” for a different Yid. This is extremely rare, since there are thousands of people on their waiting list and most never receive such a call even once. Yet here I was, getting another chance. I felt forgiven, in a sense.

The recipient was a seventy-eight-year-old man, a respectable grandfather, a talmid chacham, and a professional. Inside, I was torn.

My thoughts were as follows: On one hand, elderly people deserve life, obviously. Who am I to decide who is worthy of a kidney, as if I were a judge ruling on matters of life and death? On the other hand, maybe there is a concept that once someone has reached a certain age, there are things that simply aren’t done anymore. Granted, this man is seventy-eight, but what would you say if he were ninety-eight? Where is the line? And who makes that decision? Is it my prerogative, given that this isn’t something I am obligated to do anyway?

I worried that if I passed on all these desperate Yidden begging for life just because I wanted to get the most “bang for my buck,” it would sound cruel and selfish—the opposite of what I was trying to do.

I felt very conflicted, so I wrote a letter to the Rebbe expressing my raw feelings. One has to be bluntly honest with himself, his Rebbe, and his Creator.

I wrote:

“I am writing today because about two months ago, I received the Rebbe’s blessing to donate a kidney to a frum man, age 53. I completed all the tests, and B”H everything was clear, but for various reasons, it did not work out. Now, Renewal has called to say I’m a full match for another frum man, age 78, a father of ten children, with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, etc.

I don't know how to think about this. Is it obvious that someone who is 78 should be treated the same as someone who is 53? Since I'm willing to donate to save a life, perhaps it would be better to wait for a younger recipient who could potentially live many more years because of my kidney. I admit there is a personal motivation here—I want to do the greatest possible deed, even if this is not the best way to think about it. I'd be dishonest not to admit this desire to give to someone who could have many years ahead.

On the other hand, who am I to judge such matters? And besides, who says I'll ever be a match for someone else? Furthermore, this elderly man could live another ten or twenty years with my kidney, and I would be saving his life—a tremendous mitzvah. And if we're talking about personal motivations, if the recipient were a great Torah leader like Rabbi Elyashiv zt"l or another tzaddik, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment. So perhaps I should not differentiate between people. I seek the Rebbe's guidance, and will do as he says."

The Rebbe replied that I should tell them I am willing to donate in the case that they don't have another suitable match. I told the Rebbe that I didn't want to have to nudge him every time there was a potential match, so I asked for a clear guideline regarding the recipient's age—at what point is it no longer appropriate?

The Rebbe hesitated and said something to the effect that close to age ninety is irrelevant. So I summarized: "Up to age seventy, there is no question. Over eighty, also not. For those between seventy and eighty, they should first search for another donor, but if none is found, I should do it." The Rebbe agreed to this summary and blessed me.

January 13, 2025

I called Renewal and told them to look for another donor if they could. So, they removed me from that case.

While I was still on the phone with Moshe Gewirtz, I heard him laughing. "Unbelievable, unbelievable!" he said. "I have a new match for you. A perfect match. There's something about your DNA, I don't know how to explain it."

He was excited because this was a person they'd been trying to find a match for. Many people in Lakewood knew him and had tested for him, but seemingly he wasn't easy to pair up.

This man was forty-nine, divorced, had no family, and lived alone. But he had a lot of friends

who looked out for him, and they said he was an upstanding, respectable person. I said I needed to think about it; I had many thoughts. I really wanted to donate to someone with a family—it feels like a much bigger thing. But I recognized that this was the wrong way to think: does someone without a spouse and children not deserve to live? It became clear to me that all these thoughts about what my "dream transplant" would look like were rooted in a wrong attitude that I wasn't proud of.

I decided to move forward. Based on how I had just summarized things for the Rebbe, this wasn't even a question.

In my next letter to the Rebbe, I mentioned that the recipient lived alone, but I didn't say that it bothered me—I just brought up some other minor issues. The Rebbe advised me to proceed and gave me a very warm bracha, saying that even if it meant bitul Torah and tefillah, and even if it came at the expense of family time, this had priority. For this is a mitzvah that cannot be performed by anyone else besides me.

This patient was in Hackensack, so that was where all the testing would be done henceforth. I contacted the coordinator at Montefiore who had always wanted to help me. I asked her to send all my lab results to Hackensack so I wouldn't have to start over from scratch, but I emphasized to her that she should be extremely careful not to include the social worker's report. She assured me repeatedly that she would only send lab results—only data, no notes.

January 24, 2025

I went to Hackensack in good spirits. It is much closer to Lakewood than Montefiore and in a much nicer area. I went through a full day of interviews, but no physical tests.

One thing was a little strange: everyone asked me if I'd ever taken medication. By now, I had learned the lesson about oversharing, so I denied everything.

The surgeon was a Jewish man with a yarmulke. The donor coordinator was also an Orthodox woman from Teaneck. That itself was truly an amazing feeling. Being in a big, scary, foreign society—cold, professional, and sometimes detached—yet my surgeon, nephrologist, and coordinator were all Torah-observant Jews. You really feel you're in good hands with people who truly understand you. I thanked Hashem for this.

The nephrologist (not the frum one, but a different one, a super nice Asian guy) kept asking

me about medications. I denied everything, as before.

He turned to me and asked, “Weren’t you disqualified at Montefiore because you took your friend’s medication?”

I genuinely didn’t know what to say. I was shocked. I had been bluffing all along on the premise that they didn’t have the notes—what a fool I was. Thankfully, I had a small branch to hold onto because he said I had been disqualified, which was technically not true; I had just been deferred.

I replied firmly, “That’s not correct. I wasn’t disqualified, just deferred. I simply didn’t want to undergo six months of therapy to convince the hospital that I’m normal.”

I vented all my frustration from the previous experience to the doctor. Then Dalia, the coordinator, came in. Both agreed with me and approved me as a donor. A weight was lifted from my heart. I davened for the poor man at Montefiore.

The surgery was scheduled for Monday of Parshas Yisro, February 17, 2025. I went for pre-op on February 10, 2025.

Chapter 5: Shabbaton and Aftermath

February 15, 2025

The Shabbos before, Parshas Beshalach, I was the guest speaker at the Renewal Shabbaton, just two days before the scheduled surgery. Hardly anyone knew except the coordinators, my brother, and a few others.

It was a magnificent Shabbos, truly uplifting, and an emotional rollercoaster. Here I was, standing before hundreds of kidney donors, listening to their stories, asking how things went for them. I probed for details, making mental notes, taking tips, and just listening to them speak about the pleasure they felt from all the pain they experienced for another Yid. Some of it sounded borderline masochistic, but their words were genuine and pure. I felt proud to soon be introduced as a member of this community, not merely a guest. (As a bonus, my wife’s great-uncle Yossi Green was there. He sang, farbrenged, and shared stories of his compositions and life. That was very nice for my wife, too.)

Motzei Shabbos there was a beautiful banquet at which my brother was acknowledged because of the amazing story of his donation. That was nice. But the highlight of the event was a speech by Gershy Moskowitz. He is an event planner acquainted with Renewal for many years who, unfortunately, suffered kidney failure and needed to receive a kidney himself.

He cried openly about the suffering of dialysis and kidney disease—how it kills a person slowly. There wasn't a dry eye in the room. He explained to all these donors that they should understand it is not only what they do for the patient, but also for his wife, his children, and his extended family. A disease like this—and I'm sure any major life-threatening disease—takes a family off the rails. The amount of pain and anguish is unbearable to comprehend. For me, it was exactly what I needed—the final push.

February 16, 2025

Less than twenty-four hours before the surgery, on Sunday morning as I was leaving the hotel in Connecticut, I got a call from the hospital. They informed me that the recipient was not fit for surgery due to a heart problem. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the sick to get even sicker. For me, at this point, it meant the transplant was postponed indefinitely.

The guys at Renewal thought I'd be crushed; they called to encourage me. But I honestly didn't feel that way. I told them that the reason I fought so hard last time wasn't because I needed to donate a kidney—it was because of guilt. In principle, I was happy to keep both my kidneys. I told them, "I've given my DNA to Hashem's bank; if He wants it, He'll contact me through you."

And with that, I hung up the phone and forgot about it.

For two days.

The Fourth Match

Two days went by (maybe it was two weeks—I can't remember exactly, but it was a relatively short period) when the phone rang. It was Moshe Gewirtz from Renewal again.

He told me, "You won't believe it. I honestly can't believe my own eyes. I'm looking here at the computer, and a new name has just come up in the system. He entered the database

today! The computer selected the best match from thousands of names. Once again, your name came up on top. The cherry on the pie is that it's at the same hospital in Hackensack, so there's no need for any new tests or interviews—you've met everyone. Now, it's just moving the data from one file to the next."

He continued, "He's a forty-five-year-old man from Lakewood, a father of five children. I know him; he's a wonderful person. What could be better than this? However, he entered the system today, so he hasn't done any of his required tests yet. And if you think the donor has a lot of tests, it's nothing compared to what the recipient goes through. It'll be a few weeks minimum before we know anything."

We waited a few weeks for him to complete all his tests and expected surgery right before Pesach. But when that date came, they said it looked like they would need to remove his diseased kidney before transplanting the new one. Usually, both surgeries are done at the same time, but here there was an infection which complicated matters. He needed at least six weeks to recover from his nephrectomy before the transplant could happen.

Meanwhile, my wife was expecting to give birth at the beginning of July. We made the hospital aware of this. They called to confirm with her that she was supportive and prepared for everything, especially if the surgery happened right before she gave birth. She was very reassuring to them, and they felt comfortable moving forward.

We decided that if I could do the transplant by the beginning of June, we would proceed. But anything between then and the end of August wouldn't be fair to my wife and kids due to the awaited simcha.

In the end, it didn't work out; they didn't have an available date before June, and the recipient was only ready in early June. So, we scheduled the surgery for the end of August. Yehuda Leib was born healthy and beautiful on June 29. My wife had a month to recover, and we made sure to go somewhere nice with the kids and give them a good summer vacation—some nice family time prior to surgery.

August 12, 2025

The surgery was set for Monday, Rosh Chodesh Elul, August 25. Two weeks before the scheduled surgery, I went back for my second pre-op.

The instructions were as follows: The day before surgery, at midday, I had to stop eating any

solids. Only clear liquids—water, tea, chicken broth, things like that—were allowed. By midnight, I couldn't have any food or drink at all. The surgery was scheduled for 7:30 AM, and I had to be there no later than 5:30 AM for prep. They told me that the operation would take three to four hours if there were no complications, and I'd be in the hospital for forty-eight to seventy-two hours.

The Shabbos prior to the surgery, I was at my father's yeshiva's camp. I led the meal for the younger grades Friday night until 2:15 AM; the singing and thoughts we shared were really beautiful. The Shabbos day meal I spent with the older grades for three hours—again, a great experience. In all, it was an uplifting Shabbos.

No one knew of the surgery, since last time I had been disqualified just twenty-four hours before, right when we had made all these arrangements and people had asked questions and offered opinions. After Shabbos, we left the camp and stopped on the way to tell my mother, who was by her sister in the Alexander Yeshiva camp. She was excited and nervous. We arrived home at 4:00 AM. I wanted to be home Sunday morning to teach the last daf before the surgery.

Chapter 6: The Procedure

The Final Sunday

Mrs. Feder from Renewal (Aaron Feder's wife, filling in for him due to his illness) called my wife to say they would pay for a cleaning lady and food, and take care of everything she needed—any kind of support. They arranged for our own Menachem Friedman, one of the veteran coordinators at Renewal, to drive us to the hospital and stay with us until I came out of surgery.

Sunday was a whirlwind. We had to organize arrangements for the kids, who were a bit anxious and worried. We took them out for ice cream and explained that everything would be fine—that this was their mitzvah, too. Just as they love their father, there are other children who love their father as much, and we, as a family, are sharing the gift of life that Hashem gave us so that they, too, can be a happy family.

While I was at The Ice Cream House—which was a zoo, because it was the middle of summer break and Rosh Chodesh eve—I got a call from Amshinov. Because it was Sunday, the gabbai was mediating, giving me over the Rebbe's bracha. I could vaguely hear the

Rebbe's voice in the background.

I was very upset at myself because the Rebbe himself had actually tried calling me on Thursday, but I missed three calls. But at least at the end, I got a bracha for a full recovery, and that in the merit of this mitzvah, my family and I should have a healthy year and many more brachos that I couldn't really hear. But the main thing isn't that I heard; rather, that all the angels should answer Amen. So my wife and I were satisfied and were able to go into this knowing that the Rebbe had us in mind. I also asked the Rosh Yeshiva, R' Eli Weber, to have me in mind in the holiest yeshiva in the world.

I went back into The Ice Cream House, continuing the conversation with the kids. They were very moved. One said that he also wants to donate when he grows up; I told him to wait until he's at least twenty-one. Another said he was scared to donate but told me I was a tzaddik for doing so.

One daughter, blushing, said she had a question she was afraid to ask. I reassured her that there's no such thing as being afraid to ask. She was worried: what would happen if, God forbid, there was a problem with my one remaining kidney and I didn't have another? I told her it was a great question, that I was proud she asked, and I'd answer her.

In truth, the day was so hectic that I didn't get a chance to answer her.

The hospital informed us that under no circumstances could our month-old infant, Yehuda Leib, enter the hospital premises. This put us under a lot of pressure. We needed to find a babysitter nearby who was willing to open the door for us at 5:00 AM and be flexible in general, as it is a sensitive situation. There were two options: Passaic and Teaneck. Both are approximately a fifteen-minute drive from the hospital. I have a cousin in Passaic, but neither he nor his wife picked up the phone.

All day we dealt with this, until Renewal found a woman—a kidney donor living in Teaneck—who was willing to watch the baby. I was truly moved by this. It indicates that some of these donors don't just give one time; rather, it's a phenomenon we saw throughout: givers are givers. It's truly inspiring. After we finalized these arrangements, my cousin's daughter called and insisted we come to her. With gratitude, we relieved the Teaneck woman of her duty.

That night, the house was in absolute chaos. The kids were jumping on the beds and climbing the walls. Kids sense when their parents are not at ease, and they react

accordingly.

I didn't pack much for the hospital stay: my laptop, a small Gemara and Chumash, a book called *The Mixed Multitudes* about the Frankists, and my tallis and tefillin, obviously. The kids only went to sleep at 1:00 AM. My wife and I got no more than an hour or two of sleep, since we had to get up at 3:30 AM to leave at 4:00 AM, drop the baby off in Passaic, and get to the hospital before 5:30 AM.

Menachem picked us up in time. We dropped off the baby in Passaic, drove another fifteen minutes, and arrived at the hospital safely on time. Only then did I start to feel it in my gut; the uneasiness slowly crept in.

They gave me a room to change into a hospital gown and put my fresh clothing away for when I would be released. They took a blood sample and made an IV port (later, in surgery, they made another one on the other hand). The anesthesiologist came to introduce himself, then the surgeon—everyone smiling and wishing me well. They told me I had half an hour.

The surgeon explained that the surgery doesn't involve opening up the whole abdomen. Instead, they do laparoscopic surgery, meaning they make two or three small incisions under the navel and on the side through which they insert instruments. In order to operate like that, they inflate the whole abdomen with gas, like a helium balloon.

Usually, they remove the left kidney because the right one is more complicated to operate around due to its proximity to the liver. But in my case, they took the right one because it had a small benign cyst on it. The rule is always to leave the healthier—or in this case, merely unblemished—kidney with the donor. The surgeon made a mark with a sharpie on my right thigh so they wouldn't remove the wrong one by mistake.

I davened Shacharis and Hallel. I had in mind my own recovery, that the transplant should be successful, and that the patient should recover fully and speedily. I truly thanked Hashem for the opportunity. I was emotional.

I called my grandfather from Milwaukee, who gave his bracha in the merit of our holy ancestors. My grandmother's bracha was in the merit of the great mitzvah. My mother gave me her well wishes and love. My father-in-law recited *Birchas Kohanim*. My mother-in-law said how proud everyone was of me.

Then, Menachem asked if I'd make a short video. He said it would surely encourage many people, even subconsciously—especially because people would see it and gradually become aware of the importance of kidney donation.

My wife doesn't like publicity. I wasn't so enthusiastic either—partly because of what people might say, that I did it for attention. But part of me did want the attention. Besides, I figured that if I could inspire others, it was worth it, regardless of what people—or I myself—might sneer at. I agreed and recorded a short message.

I said as follows:

"Imy" H we're going in now for the surgery to donate a kidney. Hashem should help everything go smoothly. I appreciate if the oil em daven for me.

The way I think about it now, at this moment... and I don't have so much clarity. There are people who are natural volunteers, who do things for others, who volunteer in many organizations. Good people. Kind people. You know, my younger brother, Benzion Shlomo, he's a kidney donor. He's that type of person—a special person, an inspiration to me in general. And especially in this, seeing him donate a kidney was really inspiring.

But I'm not that kind of guy. I'm not such a nice guy. I never saw myself as a kidney donor at all. I think I just swabbed because swabbing isn't a big deal. So I swabbed, figuring that if I get the call, then I get the call. And I got the call.

So for me, it's not so much about being a kidney donor. It's more about answering the call. There's a Yid that needs life. And I think many, many people—even people who aren't naturally donors, who aren't naturally volunteers, who don't usually do everything for other people... if you get the call that someone else's life, their family, and their children depend on you... you have the ticket, you have the key.

It's not, 'How could I say no?' It's that I can't be happier to do it.

Eleven years ago today, Hashem gave me the gift of life—my oldest daughter was born eleven years ago today. And for me, on this day, to be able to give someone the gift of children again... because someone who has children, someone who has a family... it's the minimum you could do for another person.

What I think is that even people who are not donors should just swab! You might not get the

call, and then nothing happens. But if you do get the call, you'll be the happiest person in the world to do it. I don't think it's such a big deal. Maybe there's a little pain, and Hashem should help everything go smoothly. But the reward—the reward of being able to give life... Now we're going to Elul, and it's about 'Zochreinu b'sefer ha'chayim.' If you can write someone else into the Book of Life, I don't think there's anything more rewarding than that.

That's it."

Into the Cold Room

With that, I said bye to my wife, and they rolled me into surgery.

This is when it got real. I lay there with my eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling—just fluorescent lights and bare walls. There was a lot of light, and they all just flew by, just like in the movies. Once they got to the right OR, they moved the bed near the table and told me to shift over. I was very aware that I was going from a bed to a table. It's a creepy feeling. This is an operating table where they cut people open.

The room was buzzing with people. I don't know how many—maybe twenty. Different teams. Many tools, big machines, lights, and instruments. Everything sterile, clean, disinfected, and cold. And literally cold, too, like being in a fridge. All the people were covered from head to toe. There was an undertone of horror in my perception of it all.

I was very nervous. I said a kapitel Tehillim and then another. The anesthesia team arrived. I warned them to do a good job; I didn't want to be half asleep—just enough that I couldn't scream in pain but could feel everything. They laughed. One took my right arm and tied it to a post on my right; another did the same on my left. The doctor bent down in front of me and said he was about to put me to sleep and I wouldn't feel a thing.

From my laying-tied-down position, I told him I have a joke about a certain crucifixion, but I wouldn't say it. They all burst out laughing. One said to another, "He kind of looks like Jesus, doesn't he?" It was all in good spirits.

I didn't feel good in my heart that my last words before surgery would be about the cross. So I said to myself, "Shivisi Hashem l'negdi samid ki myemini bal emot." Then I heard the anesthesiologist yell, "Push!" and everything went blank.

Chapter 7: Recovery and Reflection

The First Day

I don't remember what happened when I first woke up, but my wife told me that the very first thing I said—still half asleep and half under the influence of anesthesia and morphine—was that the Sages say “the kidneys give advice.” I joked about how unfortunate, nebech, the recipient would be, since he'd now have to contend with my thoughts and worries.

Menachem handed me letters from the recipient and his eleven-year-old. I did not have the capacity to read them at that moment, but I told my wife that I was eleven when my father passed away. Now I have the chance to give life to the father of an eleven-year-old girl—a gift that when I was her age, I would have given anything to receive myself. (And all of this happened on the eleventh birthday of my eldest daughter—the very day I became a father.)

The morphine, or whatever drugs I was on, gave me a cozy, warm feeling in which it was natural to fall into a sweet sleep. There was something inviting and blissful about the sleep then. I realize now that it's this very bliss that is so addictive and destroys people's lives, because it's nearly impossible to resist the urge to let go and fall into a sweet slumber where all is good.

When I woke up, I think around 3:00 PM, my mother was there, which was very nice. Now I realized that I was in a new, beautiful room with a panoramic view of the entire skyline of Manhattan. This hospital, they say, is one of the most up-to-date and modern in the entire United States, built just three years ago right in the middle of the COVID pandemic, with all the latest technology. It certainly looks and feels new, beautiful, and clean. The staff were amazing—truly devoted and caring in every way.

When one of them took my blood pressure and it was 180, my mother got very worried because that is extremely high and dangerous. When the nephrologist came in, my mother demanded an explanation. He said it's not a big deal. She challenged him, saying that blood pressure is regulated by the kidneys, and that this is a very worrisome sign. He assured her that as a veteran nephrologist, he is aware of that fact, yet these are normal numbers due to the body's stress from the surgery and the pain. He said it would gradually lower, which, B"H, it did.

Initially, I didn't feel sick, probably because I was still under the effects of the good drugs and anesthesia. But gradually, as it wore off, I started to feel pain and discomfort.

The video I made before the surgery made its rounds. When I heard back from a few people that day and the next, I realized that indeed it was the right thing to do. The doctor, nurse, and several volunteers told me they'd seen it on social media. The nurse shared good news that the recipient—whose identity I don't know, but who was on my floor—had already produced a liter of urine. I gave thanks to Hashem for my part in this miracle.

Aaron Feder told me that as soon as I felt somewhat up to it, I should walk around. The quicker you get up and walk, even just a few steps, the smoother, less painful, and speedier the recovery.

So I told my mother that I wanted to walk. She brought my Zeidy's silver cane, and with the other hand holding the IV stand, I walked a little. I was very uncomfortable due to the catheter, which they usually keep in until the next morning so the patient doesn't have to get out of bed at night. But I couldn't handle it. My mother asked the nurse to remove it; she refused, citing standard protocol. My mother requested they ask the doctor, who agreed that if it bothered me, it could be removed, but I would have to use a special collection container so they could measure the quantity and quality of the kidney output.

Stool movement is more complicated. You can't put pressure on your abdomen due to the pain and stitches, and some medications cause constipation. For that, they provide laxatives; if those don't work, they provide suppositories.

Ari Klein, a friend and a kidney donor, sent me a picture of himself and his wife—also a donor—sitting with my children, eating ice cream in front of my house. He sent a message saying they had just spoken to my kids, made them feel comfortable and safe, and told them they could ask questions—which they did. I truly thanked Hashem for the wonderful people in our community who are so thoughtful and caring.

Throughout the day and night, I was in a constant state of discomfort due to the gas they had inflated me with, which was now trapped in pockets all over my stomach and shoulders. There were spasms of really strong, excruciating pain and pressure, like I've never felt in my life.

My mother-in-law and company came to visit me. I felt pretty okay at that time and showed off my fancy room. Then my sisters came to pick up my mother. I had an attack then; they

couldn't handle seeing me like that, so they ran off.

Benzion Shlomo came to sleep with me the first night, requesting repeatedly that I wake him for the smallest thing. Obviously, I didn't. I barely slept, dozing off only twice, only to be woken up right thereafter for vitals checks. I didn't get more than three hours of sleep in total. Every time I needed to use the restroom, I switched positions, so the gas bubbles moved around, bringing spasms of sharp pain. It could take two hours for the pain to subside, but since I was connected to fluids, every two hours I needed to go again.

The Second Day

I got up and took a shower, which wasn't a simple feat, but I'm grateful I did. I felt like a new person. I had some visitors—previous donors brought some light food and coffee, shared their experiences, and gave me good advice. I checked my phone and email and saw so many messages of well-wishing and comfort, hugs and kisses.

Late in the afternoon, my nephew Leizer came to stay with me for the night. He is pleasant company. Now I was doing more rounds, trying to walk as much as possible. In the suitcase Renewal provided, they included a nice bathrobe to wear over the hospital gown so you feel slightly dignified. And so, leaning on my silver cane, I walked around the floor in circles. Leizer assisted me with the walking and stopping.

While we were walking, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone with a yarmulke walking toward us. I understood that it must be the recipient, so I quickly turned around so as not to make him uncomfortable. I asked Leizer to take a sneak peek and get a profile of what he looked like. About forty-five, not yeshivish but not modern—somewhere in the middle.

We went to the kosher pantry that's on that floor. I didn't eat, but it was good to get a change of scenery. As I was walking, I couldn't help but notice the other patients on this urology floor. It was frightening and miserable—the suffering, pain, and emaciation. It was a pity to see human beings in such dire conditions.

Here I am, praising Hashem with every step. Perhaps I'm the only one on this floor—and almost the entire hospital—who is here by choice, not desperation. Even though breathing is a bit difficult and the gas pain is strong, with every breath I praise, thank, and glorify Hashem for my health and portion.

I had asked the staff not to wake me for vitals because it's so hard to fall asleep again, and thankfully, they agreed. I woke up once in the middle of the night, at which point they did all the necessary tests and gave me pain relief. I didn't have to wake Leizer, which was good—it felt good to manage on my own, but also to not be in an empty room by myself.

Thoughts on Giving

One of the practitioners doing vitals commented that she truly couldn't grasp this phenomenon—she simply couldn't fathom how every few weeks, another person from our community comes in as a donor. She said, “There's nothing like this anywhere else in the world. It's absolutely mind-blowing.”

I'm always a bit uncomfortable with these conversations. But I told her that this isn't something people do lightly. Who in their right mind gives a kidney to someone they don't even know? For a sibling, yes, sometimes—but for a stranger?

And therein lies the key, because at the core, our community feels like a family. Why it is so is a good question. Perhaps this comes from thousands of years of exile, being persecuted together, learning that we have to look out for each other. Perhaps there's a deeper reason. But it's not just about kidneys; this is how we function—as a family, for better and for worse. She stood there in amazement and said, “I envy you. I wish our church had that kind of feeling.”

There's another thought that was sitting on my mind.

There are two very distinct aspects in this transplant—and in every great, one-time act of sacrifice: the perspective of the giver and the perspective of the recipient.

From the recipient's side, this is the greatest mitzvah in the world. There is no greater act of kindness than cutting away a piece of you to save a life, saving a family, and future generations. Truly the highest values of the Torah. Every breath the recipient takes, every smile, every tefillin, matzah, and hug he gives his daughter—you are a partner in that.

Perhaps that's why, when I mixed my feelings into the equation when I first asked the Rebbe, he didn't respond to that part at all. His tone implied to me that it's egotistical to mix your petty feelings into someone else's life-or-death situation. That's regarding the recipient's side.

From the giver's side, however, while it is certainly a great mitzvah, there is more to the picture. Just like all other forms of charity, there are eight levels depending on one's intention and the way it's done, as the Rambam articulates. Everyone knows that a single great deed doesn't make you righteous, kind, or pure. True righteousness is found in a life filled with goodness: not getting angry at your spouse, not yelling at your children, being modest, kind to others, following the Torah, clinging to Hashem, and following His ways—every day, every hour, every moment. No matter how great the sacrifice, it doesn't change your essence overnight.

It's not that I don't like compliments, especially from friends and peers, but it's important to keep things in perspective and not get confused. Yes, this was an extraordinary act, and so is every transplant. Therefore, anyone who is able to should consider swabbing at least, and not think about themselves at all.

Still, in a way, learning a page of Talmud in depth might do even more for your character. (That last line is half a joke, but the rest should be taken seriously.)

The Third Day

I slept six hours, B"H—the first time since surgery that I really got rest. I showered and was full of energy and felt ready to go home. My numbers were average too, B"H.

Yiddy Klein and Moshe Hercel, two friends from our shul who work not too far from the hospital, came to visit. Both had big smiles; Yiddy brought coffee, Moshe brought fruit. We sat together and schmoozed. It was very nice to see them. I still haven't eaten much—yesterday, just a few pieces of fruit and some dry, plain crackers. I have no appetite, and I'm also a bit afraid of eating because of all the issues with digestion and gas after surgery.

A woman volunteer from Bikur Cholim stopped by to visit Jewish patients, checking on their needs and wants. She asked me for a bracha, saying that every kidney donor is a malach Elokim (an angel of God). I gave her a blessing, placing my hands over her head.

The truth is, she comes to the hospital every day to visit the elderly and sick, day in and day out, quietly and without any recognition or fanfare. Based on the logic I articulated above, her hospital visits do for her soul the equivalent of a thousand kidney transplants; she is a truly righteous woman. I didn't tell her that because I wanted her to genuinely feel she

received a blessing from a malach Elokim. If I had shown her my silver cane, she would have been twice as happy.

The gas pains are almost gone by now, and B”H, I was able to use the bathroom. That helps a lot—relieving pressure in the abdomen and releasing gas. However, the coffee I drank caused some discomfort in my stomach. Now that the gas has passed, the post-surgical pain is more discernible, but it’s not too bad. I’m taking Tylenol and similar medications every few hours. I didn’t have to take any blood pressure medication, and managed just fine without any strong painkillers.

The doctors made their rounds around noon. They gave me instructions on what to look out for and told me not to lift anything for some time—specifically no heavy lifting for six weeks. Otherwise, I had no restrictions on walking or going up steps, but in general, I was told to take it easy.

I was officially discharged.

The Renewal Infrastructure

While waiting for my brother-in-law, Nuchem Twerski, to pick me up, I had some time to reflect on this wonderful journey. I realized this entire enterprise couldn’t have ever happened without Renewal. Starting from infrastructure to support and guidance, they are very involved and super helpful all around. It would not have been possible without them.

Throughout the years, Renewal has been collecting thousands of DNA samples, creating a bank that is larger than any other organ transplant bank. Getting so many people to swab to donate an organ isn’t simple in the first place. People have a hard time donating blood, which replenishes with no risk or real sacrifice involved. How do you get thousands to swab to donate an organ?

Well, that takes many years of hasbara—creating awareness, one community at a time. People see speeches on the subject, bumper stickers, and videos. It normalizes the concept and brings it closer to home, at least subconsciously.

Besides the quantity of DNA, they developed advanced technological infrastructure to cross-match to the closest match possible.

Menachem told me that a few years ago, a doctor from Columbia published an investigative report on a fascinating phenomenon regarding recipients who didn't take immunosuppressants. The reason they are supposed to take medicine to shut off the body's natural immunity is that otherwise, the immune system would identify the new kidney as a foreign entity and reject it. Thus, most times, if the recipient isn't careful about immunosuppressants, it amounts to suicide.

Yet, astonishingly, many do survive and live with this foreign kidney as if nothing happened. Genetic testing revealed that this was due to the percentage of DNA compatibility: the closer the match, the less foreign it appears, the longer and healthier it can last, and the fewer suppressors are needed. This was breakthrough data.

Renewal brought this doctor to their office for consultation. When Renewal opened their DNA bank to him, the doctor was utterly stunned at the sheer quantity of samples. He said that Renewal's DNA bank is several times larger than the entire national kidney DNA registry. For a geneticist like him, it is truly a gold mine. He was very excited to work with Renewal and helped them develop software to identify new matches.

This software was a game-changer. There was a woman who desperately needed a kidney, but they couldn't find her a match. No matter how many drives they made, they could not match her up. She was nicknamed "Patient Zero." The first match this new software brought up was for none other than Patient Zero, and her match was my very own brother, Benzion Shlomo. A perfect match.

There's a beautiful story about this match, too. In brief, Patient Zero's name is Mrs. Leiber. Her grandmother-in-law, a young teenager in the ghetto, saved our great-great-grandmother from the Holocaust by forging papers claiming her to be her mother. Hashem never forgets. Eighty years later, it was payback time. The situation was quite similar: a grandmother on the brink of death was saved, this time by a young man returning the gift of life to the descendants of the one who saved his own.

Besides the technological infrastructure—which is critical, since without it, none of these transplants would happen—Renewal helps with practical guidance and physical help. Whether it's rides to various tests, going to the hospital, counseling, guidance, or moral support, they are there. They also help you get reimbursed financially for the period you are out of work due to the surgery. They are liaisons between the donor and the hospital to make sure the patient gets the best care, serving as the best patient advocate one can ask for.

They provide a suitcase full of items suggested by previous donors, such as belly bands, heating pads, teas that help with digestion, a robe, a towel, and more. When you get home, they send you a wedge pillow so that you don't lie flat.

However, they have to be careful with all the items they provide because it is absolutely forbidden for a kidney donor to be rewarded for his donation. This is a legal measure to prevent a black market for organs. If one were allowed to receive a gift in exchange for an organ, every walking, living body would have a market value of a few million dollars—two kidneys, liver, heart, stem cells, bone marrow, etc. That is all too dangerous for a society. Therefore, all these gifts are strictly in the context of assisting the donor's recovery.

For the family, Renewal provides support and guidance. I find this is mainly not by the organization itself, but mostly by the community of Renewal. My wife met a woman at the Shabbaton whose husband donated within a week of her giving birth. She gave my wife the confidence and assured her that she'd send her daughters to help. As mentioned above, we had the Kleins come over, and mainly Rabbi Aaron Feder, who was a donor himself and gave advice every step of the way—technical, emotional, and medical. He was involved and really cared.

He was niftar since my donation, and I'm grateful that I had him guide me and my family through this period. He was a true malach of chessed, and I'm sure that all the malachim of chessed he created are paving the way for him in Olam Haba. He also arranged for suppers—not fast food, but high-quality food—for a week or two, weekdays and Shabbat. They cover the cost of housekeepers, babysitters, whatever is needed, and generously. And they paid for car service for my mother and my wife so they could come visit the hospital. Rabbi Feder's wife should be mentioned too, as she was her husband's right hand; especially towards the end of his life when he was overcome with illness, she took over his position.

In summary, Renewal is an organization that allows someone to donate a kidney without having to worry about anything else. All the little things add up to give you peace of mind. Their people—Moshe Gewirtz, Menachem Friedman, the Feders, Rabbi Steinmetz, and others—are truly a team of caring malachim, and professional ones, too.

Chapter 8: Full Circle

Homecoming

Nuchem showed up and helped get my things together. We had food we didn't finish, so we packed it along for his son, Leizer, who was waiting in the car. We waved goodbye to the staff and left. The ride home felt smooth; we had a good conversation about Frankism, because that's what I had been reading about in the hospital.

When we got home, the kids were all eagerly awaiting my arrival, just as I was waiting to see them. The front door was completely covered from top to bottom with colorful papers, each with another message from one of the kids welcoming me home and wishing me well. There were balloons and streamers. It was heartwarming.

They proudly showed me that Renewal had sent a recliner (not as a gift, but as a loaner). I sat down and hugged all the kids lightly. Miri burst out crying. Something about the way I looked must have freaked her out—whether it was the bent-over position I walked in, the cane, or just a sixth-sense feeling that something was off.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Leah'la, Leizer's sister, preparing supper for the kids. She really was the one who made all the difference for my family's experience. I didn't write about her until now because I wasn't home to witness it, and I was pretty preoccupied with my own situation. But here, I really came to appreciate how she swept in and took control.

The timing of the transplant wasn't the easiest for the family. It was the week between camp and school, when people were coming home from the Catskills. The kids were home all day. Family members who would usually pitch in were packing and unpacking from the mountains, trying to squeeze in a last-minute vacation, or shopping before school. In this unrest, Leah'la stepped in. She made sure the kids were fed, bathed, and in bed on time. She entertained them and really took care of them. She deserves her own paragraph.

Wednesday night I slept more than ten hours. I can hardly remember sleeping that much in recent memory. It's not that bad after all. I woke up twice to take painkillers. The gas pains are gone; now it's the abdomen pain from the surgery and stitches. It's difficult to walk with a straight back, and very painful to sneeze, cough, or laugh.

Thursday night, a bunch of guys from the shul came over. They brought food and drink, and we farbrenge. It was very nice to see everyone again. We had a conversation about kidney donation. Sruli Zilberstein challenged me: "If we only need one kidney, why does Hashem

give us two?”

I agreed that it's a good question, and I don't really have a good answer. But I have two thoughts. One is that maybe Hashem gave you one to give away. But even if you don't accept that line of reasoning—and I'm not sure I do myself—I challenged him back: If it was his loved one who was in need, would he philosophize on this very interesting question, or would he look at the medical data and statistics we have at hand, save his brother's life, and ask theoretical questions later?

Friday, Menachem forwarded me a message from the recipient. He was starting to feel better—so good, in fact, that they released him before Shabbos. He also said he was grateful that he would be spending Shabbos with his family and not on dialysis. It was very nice going into Shabbos with that message.

I went to shul Friday night and Shabbos day. The walk wasn't too difficult. Everyone liked the silver cane idea, but they were slightly afraid that I'd enjoy it too much. I gave a shiur on the Noam Elimelech before davening. However, Shabbos afternoon I wasn't feeling so well and didn't go for shalosh seudos. The meals were provided by Renewal. Leah'la was a lifesaver, as usual.

During the Shabbos day meal, an older man showed up at the door. My wife told me it was the third time he had stopped by to check if I was home. He is an askan from Boro Park visiting his daughter who lives nearby. She told him that I donated a kidney. His own wife had just received a kidney, so he came with tears in his eyes to tell me that I should understand what a great mitzvah I did.

He went on to talk about his wife's condition and her constant deterioration over the past decade until she needed dialysis. He elaborated on the pain and illness of kidney failure and the hell that is dialysis. Yet, once she got the kidney, within a week she was transformed into the younger, healthier self she used to be. Tears rolled down his cheeks. It was very moving.

Every day that goes by, I gradually feel better. My sleeping isn't that great—it's difficult to find a comfortable position—but otherwise, I'm doing much better.

There is only one thought that crosses my mind—not lingering, but I occasionally think about it: I find myself curious about the person who received my kidney. I sometimes wish, and even pray, that he is someone I would feel comfortable keeping in touch with. On an

emotional level, I wonder about the possibility of forming a connection, although I recognize that this desire may not have real significance, or may even be misguided on my part. After all, such a relationship might not be balanced or appropriate, and perhaps it's best not to dwell on it.

Still, I hope there might be an opportunity to establish some kind of general connection with the recipient, as many other donors have done. In that case, the focus wouldn't just be on what he received and what I gave; rather, it would be about whether two people can walk together in life if it's meant to be. In fact, I believe it is healthy and good for the recipient to have the chance to express his gratitude and perhaps remove a burden from his heart, allowing us both to move forward with our lives. He can return to his studies or pursuits, and I can continue on my path. Ultimately, it is up to him. And I don't really think about it much.

September 8, 2025

Thank God, today marks two weeks since the surgery, and I had a follow-up appointment with my doctor. Everything is perfectly fine, Baruch Hashem. I am officially considered recovered. I have been cleared to return to my normal routine in every respect, except for engaging in truly strenuous physical labor, which I'll need to avoid for a few more weeks.

October 10, 2025

During one of the days of Chol Hamoed Sukkos, I met the recipient. Out of respect for his privacy, I won't go into too much detail here. The meeting took place in Ari Klein's house.

At the meeting were myself and my family, and he and his family. His wife seems like a very nice woman. They have five children—ages seventeen, fifteen, thirteen, eleven, and seven—each of them charming and cute in their own way.

I have to admit, I wasn't especially emotional at the time, and neither did he appear to be. But his wife was deeply moved. She sat there, overwhelmed with emotion, and cried throughout the entire encounter. From her reaction, and from what they all shared, I came to understand that they had truly been through a tremendously challenging period. Although the ordeal wasn't as long as other people who suffer kidney failure, it was certainly intense.

Their kids told mine what life was like before the transplant, especially after he would

return from dialysis. For two full days, he would lie in bed, unable to get up, vomiting and completely unable to function. And because his dialysis sessions were usually on Fridays, Shabbos was transformed from a day of rest, calm, and joy into a day of sorrow, pain, and illness. He couldn't join the family at the Shabbos meals and would spend the entire day groaning in bed. It is superfluous to elaborate on what effect that has on a home.

His medical history was that he had been suffering from kidney problems for ten years, but it was the type of condition people can live with. However, unbeknownst to him, he contracted COVID and fasted on Tisha B'Av (in the year 5784). The combination of the virus and the fast shut down his kidneys completely. From that point on, his condition deteriorated rapidly until he needed dialysis.

Everything happens according to a Divine plan.

As I was on my way to the meeting, my brother Benzion Shlomo told me he was sure there would be some kind of connection between us, whether close or far. I was skeptical about that.

The Connection

Here's the story.

The recipient's maternal grandmother was a young girl from Germany, from a very modern home. She was fourteen years old when she fled Europe aboard the last ship bound for Australia. The year is 1940. On the ship, she met another Jewish girl her age, modest and quiet. Her name was Henny Dessler, from Kelm in Lithuania.

They became very close friends. The Kelm girl would speak to her about the importance of Torah, of Jewish life, and of a Jewish home. Henny shared with her that her greatest wish in the world was to marry a ben Torah. Their friendship remained strong throughout their time in Australia. They had only each other, and they became like sisters.

After the war, his grandmother moved to the United States, where she sought out a Rosh Yeshiva—which turned out to be R' Chaim Zimmerman—and told him she wished to marry a talmid chacham. He arranged a shidduch for her, and in fact, her husband was a renowned talmid chacham, a Rosh Yeshiva, and an author of seforim. Needless to say, her home was one of Torah and avodas Hashem.

When my own grandmother, Henny Dessler, moved to the United States, the two women were together again. Now both married to true, towering talmidei chachamim, they always remained sisters.

Later, my grandfather opened his Yeshiva, 'Ohr Yisrael,' in Queens. Her sister-friend sent her sons to learn there, and these sons sent their sons—including my recipient—to Rabbi Geldzahler's Yeshiva Ohr Yisroel. Moreover, my recipient wasn't just a regular student; he had protektzia by my grandparents, and my Bubby was like an aunt to him.

That's pretty close, I must say. It's truly remarkable how these connections come full circle. The feelings I experienced were quiet and deep.