

The Torah of Chesed: Why I Became A Kidney Donor

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Last Sunday afternoon, I was wheeled into an operating room in Beilinson Hospital in Petach Tikva, an anesthesiologist said *laila tov*, and a surgeon removed my left kidney, which was brought to an adjoining operating room and put into the abdomen of a twenty-three year old Israeli dental student from Georgia, FSU, whom I met for the first time three months ago.

I told very few people about my impending kidney donation before Sunday, mostly close family and friends, plus a few people with whom I had had to repeatedly cancel appointments in order to pursue the extensive regimen of medical tests, psychological testing, and ethics committee interview that Israel has put in place in an attempt to ensure that donors are not offering their kidneys for personal gain, that they are not at unduly high risk for medical or psychological complications, and that they understand and have given sufficient consideration to their choice to become a living kidney donor. I have decided now to write publicly about my kidney donation in an attempt to call attention to the critical shortage of transplant organs—in Israel in particular—and to the opportunity to become a living kidney donor.

In addition, I want to explain my own choice to become a living donor and how I have come to understand my decision. This because I am all too aware that, while people openly tend to express admiration to the donor and to his or her family, there is all too often an assumption that a person who chooses to do such a thing is either a little crazy or exceptionally righteous—in either case, someone most unlike oneself and one's friends. Indeed, just last year, as I was in the process of testing for a different kidney patient (for whom I ended up not being a match), a mature and thoughtful student in my Talmud class used the example of "people who donate their kidney to a stranger" to illustrate the kind of person who is insufferably righteous—the kind of person of whom it's good to have a few in the world but whom you really don't want to be around.

The testing and interview process exacerbated this sense that I must be either crazy or a saint—"Please explain again why you want to donate a kidney." I explain why it makes sense to me. "Well, but most people don't make that decision, do they?"—Clearly I was planning to do something that most people don't do, but the alternatives of seeing myself as a little crazy or as super-righteous both felt unacceptable—if there's one thing that seemed potentially worse than going through life thinking you're pretty weird, it's going through life thinking that you must be better than everyone else. So I figured that I'd better shape a cogent way of seeing my choice that left both me and everyone around me looking both pretty sane and pretty good.

So, in line with the ethics committee's and psychologist's persistent questions, I want to explain, first, why I chose to donate a kidney to a total stranger and, second, what I make of the fact that my decision is one that most people don't make.

The idea of donating a kidney first came to me when, twice over the course of several months, two of my children's day schools sent out a notice about a parent who needed a kidney, inquiring whether anyone in the community might consider being a donor. In both cases, a different donor was found, but in the process I had begun to research the issue of organ shortages as well as the risks, short- and long-term, of being a living kidney donor. The situation seemed quite clear: there are simply not enough organs available from deceased donors to meet the needs of transplant patients, kidney donation surgery has proven to very safe, and there don't seem to be any long-term health effects of living with only one kidney.

Donating a kidney seemed like a straightforward opportunity to save someone's life—an incredible privilege and an extraordinary *mitzva*—and I decided that I would actively look for an opportunity to become a kidney donor. This meant, of course, that I would not be donating to a family member, something that most people seem to find quite reasonable, nor even most likely to someone in one of my extended communities, but rather to someone who would start out being a total stranger. I knew that, no matter how odd this act sometimes seemed even to me, if one of my children needed a kidney and no family member was a match, I would be actively searching for a potential donor, and I would be thrilled if a stranger would step forward to save my child. I couldn't see why the situation should look any different just because it was not *my* family who was in that devastating situation.

It had also come to my attention, during this learning process, that the issue of organ shortage is especially serious in Israel (for reasons that, it should be noted, go well beyond religious concerns). Until recently, a shockingly low percentage of Israelis had signed organ donation cards, ranking Israel at the very bottom of Western countries on organ donation. (Happily, this has been changing due to a number of recent initiatives, including legislation encouraging people to sign up to be organ donors and a massive public awareness campaign explaining the issue of organ donation and offering people the opportunity to fill out organ donor cards.) Based on what I learned, I decided to try to donate a kidney in Israel. I began to see postings on a couple of Israeli community e-mails lists of which I'm a member about individuals who need a kidney, and that is how, ultimately, I found myself meeting the serious young student and his parents three months ago when we came to do cross-match testing at Beilinson.

He is not a family member, he is not a member of my community, his family could hardly be more different than my own. He was simply a person in need of someone to step forward and save his life, and I was a person who had the capacity to do that. The testing proved us to be a match, I was launched into months of testing and explaining, and last Sunday I gave him one of my kidneys.

So what do I make of the fact that what seems so simple to me is something that most people would never think of doing?

Ten or so years ago in the Carlebach Shul, someone told me the following *torah* that they had just learned from a friend: When someone does *chesed* for you, you want to find a way to pay them back, to reciprocate the *chesed* that they have done, but in most cases you can't ever do that. Yet there is a way that you can pay them back, and that is by doing *chesed* for someone else. This teaching has stayed with me through some very difficult times. I have been the recipient of extraordinary *chesed*. Just around the time that I heard this *torah*, my family was dealing with a serious illness, and so many people helped us in ways that I could never have imagined and in ways that I knew I might never have done myself. And I knew that there was no way I could ever reciprocate. But what I *could* do was try to take opportunities that presented themselves to *me* to do *chesed* for others.

I am not scared by hospitals, I am not afraid of blood, I am not very sensitive to pain, I'm a bit of a risk-taker. For me, donating a kidney was a rather easy thing to decide to do and to carry out. And it's something that's pretty clear-cut: the need is obvious, the way to help is obvious, the hoped-for result is clear. There are endless ways in which other people do *chesed* that I may be less good at—noticing the less-obvious pain or need of the person sitting near you, and reaching out to help him or her in small or large ways that may change their lives in ways that you might never know.

The ways in which people helped our family might seem less dramatic or giving than the way in which I have helped the young man who now has my kidney, but I truly believe that they are equally heroic, and that just as these people might not be able to offer their kidneys, I might not be able to offer the kind of help that they did, or even notice that that kind of help is needed. I am not saying that I decided to donate a kidney in order to pay back the people who helped us. But I do believe that their acts of *chesed* enabled me to be more sensitive to the needs of others and to imagine extending myself in the way that I did to the young man who needed my help. This, I think, is the meaning of the *torah* that I heard in the Carlebach Shul.

As I was preparing to leave Beilinson, my husband and I went to say goodbye to my kidney recipient and his parents. The young student and his father are shy, but the mother is effusive. She wants to buy me things, to send me presents, to send my family on a vacation to the Dead Sea. I have told her over and over that I don't want anything, that I can't take anything, but she persists. So finally I told her the *torah* that I'd heard in the Carlebach Shul, and I blessed her son and her and her husband with many years of good health full of many opportunities to do *chesed* for others. And then something incredible happened. This woman who had been trying to shower me with boxes of chocolate and perfume told me that she and her son had discussed a plan for when he finishes school and becomes a dentist—that he would set aside one day each month, in my name, to treat people who can't afford to pay. I don't know whether he will do exactly that, but I did feel, in a most powerful way, that this young man and his parents were now recipients of the *torah* that I had learned, the *torah* of *chesed*, and that my own act, like the acts of those who have done *chesed* for me and my family, will generate more acts of *chesed* in the world.

Each of us has the capacity to do tremendous acts of *chesed*. And each of us has different ways in which we are capable of doing *chesed*. Donating a kidney is one way that made sense for me. If you think it might make sense for you, please feel free to contact me (desteinmetz@gmail.com), and I can help you find the information that you need to make your decision or put you in touch with someone who can help match you with someone whose life you can save. If this is not your path of *chesed*, then know that you have ways to help someone else that may be just as powerful and life-saving. As we approach the festival of the giving of our beautiful Torah, may we all be privileged to find our own path in the *torah* of *chesed*.

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