



# AROUND NEW YORK

## SUMMER WELL SPENT - NY RABBI SAVES A LIFE

BY C. BAUMWOLSPINER

Living kidney transplants are sufficiently common these days to arouse little interest from the media. But when a 63-year-old New York rabbi, a father of nine and a grandfather of many, donated one of his kidneys to a complete stranger this summer, the story hit the national headlines and brought about a big *kid-dush Hashem*.

Ironically, when I speak to Rabbi Avrohom Hoffman of Washington Heights exactly four weeks after he gave away a kidney, news of his act of *chesed* has not reached the *heimishe* press. Rabbi Hoffman, *rov* of the Shaarei Tikvah Shul since 1996 and a veteran *rebbe* in Yeshivas Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Breuer's), has never looked for fame. He is willing to talk on record about the remarkable act of *chesed* that he performed, but only, he stresses, because he hopes it will inspire other people to do the same.

### If Not Now, When?

It may be said that 60 is the new 40, but it's also the age when most people start to worry about their aches and pains, prefer relaxation to action, and vouch that nothing beats spending down-time with their grandchildren. Why, then, did a seasoned *zeidy*, who is still a busy communal figure, elect to go under the knife in New York Presbyterian-Cornell Hospital in Manhattan in late July, when he could have been relaxing with his family in the Catskills?

Surprisingly, it wasn't all that hard for Rav Avrohom Hoffman to arrive at this decision, although it took several years in the making. He began to entertain the notion of donating a kidney about four years ago, after hearing that a colleague had successfully donated a kidney to his wife. His curiosity piqued, Reb Avrohom made cursory inquiries and learned that a person can live satisfactorily with one kidney; that the surgery carries miniscule risks; and that, in the unlikely scenario of a donor requiring a transplant, he would receive priority treatment.

Was donating a kidney something that he could also do? Reb Avrohom decided it was! He had always tried to live a wholesome lifestyle (perhaps being related to Rav Avigdor Miller *zt"l* has some connection here), and had no significant health issues. The fact that he didn't personally know of someone who needed a transplant was not a deterrent. There were plenty of kidney sufferers out there for whom his kidney would mean the chance of life. The prospect of saving a life was exhilarating!

But coming down to earth, there was reality with which to contend. Reb Avrohom is an extremely dedicated *rebbe*; the thought of taking leave from his teaching job was untenable. This meant that he could only undergo surgery during summer vacation.

Hashem had other plans, and for the next two summers, the Hoffmans merited to be busy with family *simchas*. This year, Reb Avrohom acknowledged that perhaps it was time to get a move on with his plan, even though he was still below the upper age limit that's generally thought to be safe for donors. (This varies from hospital to hospital; some hospitals will accept donors up to the age of 65, while others extend the limit to 70. There are even some hospitals that have no age restrictions, as long as the donor is sufficiently fit.)

"*Im lo achshov eimosai?*"

### Smooth Sailing

Despite the enormous complexity of a kidney transplant, Reb Avrohom's journey from preliminary blood work after *Pesach* to surgery on the second day of *Chodesh Av* can be described as a relatively smooth ride. He hastens to add that his *rov* allowed surgery during the Nine Days because it is a *dvar mitzvah*.

Exhaustive testing showed that Reb Avrohom was in good shape and was able to donate a kidney. He also had a psychological test to prove that he had the emotional stamina to do so, and passed with flying colors.



With Reb Avrohom's credentials established, the choice of a recipient could now begin in earnest. It wasn't long before he heard from Chaya Lipschutz, who runs a kidney matching organization, that there were several possible recipients on the NYP-Cornell lists that might be suitable. (Chaya, herself a donor was featured in these pages in 2015, after micromanaging a noteworthy liver transplant.)

Eventually, one of these people was selected to receive Reb Avrohom's kidney: a Bukharian woman from Queens, a mother of two adult sons, and a lifetime kidney sufferer.

### Meeting Mrs. Berta Ilzarova

Russian speaking Berta Ilzarova is one of four sisters who suffer from polycystic kidney disease, a genetic condition that causes cysts to grow on the kidneys and eventually prevents them from functioning. By the age of sixty, about half of PKD sufferers face complete renal failure. One of Berta's sisters had already been *niftar* from the disease; another was too sick for a transplant. At 62, Berta's kidneys were barely functioning. She had already been on dialysis for a year before Reb Avrohom's kidney became a possibility. Dialysis was keeping her alive (albeit severely restricting her lifestyle), but it was not a cure. A transplant was her only hope!

Reb Avrohom was pleased to learn that the Ilzarovas are *shomrei Torah umitzvos*. "I let Hashem decide if my kidney was *frum* enough for my recipient," he quips.

Given the opportunity to meet Berta and one of her two sons on the day before the transplant, Reb Avrohom accepted it. Although he knew that some donors choose not to meet their recipients until after the surgery, he felt it would be helpful to do so because it would allow the two parties to give encouragement to one another. And they did! Reb Avrohom was deeply moved to hear firsthand from Berta's son about the devastating impact that her sickness had on her life. He says of this meeting, "It brought me a lot of joy. I could finally put a face to it and see that someone would truly benefit from my kidney."

Berta and her son were deeply moved upon coming face to face with the gracious but unassuming rabbi who was willing to put his life on hold for Berta's sake.

Reb Avrohom prepared for the next day's surgery with *tefil-*

*lah* on his lips, and the firm conviction that he was doing the right thing.

### We're Behind You!

Understandably, Reb Avrohom did not expect his family to share his enthusiasm. There is no surgery that doesn't carry some risk. As the head of a large family and a flourishing congregation, he has many responsibilities, and he's no youngster!

But Reb Avrohom had intimated to his wife several times over the years that he felt a deep yearning to become a donor. Once the ball got rolling, she willingly came on board. He didn't say anything to his children until the transplant looked likely, but they followed suit, as did the members of his *shul*. While a few people expressed misgivings, most voiced their profound respect. No one tried to talk him out of it. Since the only person likely to do so was his mother, now in her nineties, Reb Avrohom deemed that in his specific case, it was wise to remain discreet.

### A Refuah Sheleimah

There is no doubt that Reb Avrohom experienced some pain and discomfort as the result of the transplant, but the only inconvenience that he mentions came from walking around the hospital floor while attached to an IV pole. You read that right: he was walking!

Not long after the surgery was over, Berta's family came to visit Reb Avrohom and showered him with their overwhelming gratitude. He had given their mother the most precious gift of all!

They told him about a non-*frum* relative of theirs who had always had a negative view of rabbis and observant Jews. When they informed this man that Berta's donor was a rabbi and that he had given away his kidney "out of the goodness of his heart," the man was stunned. Such is the power of a Torah Jew!

Reb Avrohom jokes that after only two days, he'd had enough of maneuvering the IV pole, so he went home (but of course, he had his doctor's permission). The following evening he went to *daven Kabolos Shabbos* in a shul that was closer to his home than Congregation Shaarei Tikveh; he didn't walk there for another week.

*Tisha B'Av* fell the following Tuesday, a week after the transplant. The doctors permitted Reb Avrohom to fast as long as he felt well enough; he fasted until the afternoon, when he drank some water in restricted *shuirim*.

Now, three weeks hence, he's ready to travel out-of-town to see his mother. It's time to give her *nachas*!

At the time of writing, Reb Avrohom says that he's almost completely back to himself, apart from a small amount of pain if he over-exerts himself. Otherwise, he's leading a normal life, the only difference being that while he always had a sensible diet, he now views its importance with new intensity. Certainly, with one kidney he has all the kidney functions that his body needs (after a transplant, the donor's remaining kidney enlarges to compensate for the loss of the other). Still, his experience as a donor has taken his appreciation for the magnificent workings of the human body to the next level. There's no question that Reb Avrohom is going to do all he can to give his body the care it deserves.

**POSTSCRIPT:** Reb Avrohom went as planned to visit his mother, where he showed her an article about his kidney donation. The visit was a big success! Mrs. Hoffman expressed the *nachas* that her son had hoped for, and is fiercely proud of the sacrifice Reb Avrohom has made. She even told him that she knows of a person who currently needs a kidney. Does Reb Avrohom know of someone else with a kidney to spare?

Reb Avrohom is hoping that more people will be inspired to give the gift of life. Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser, who endorsed Chaya Lipschutz's *mitzvah* projects, has said about kidney donation, "Of the greatest gifts humanly possible... the reward is immeasurable."