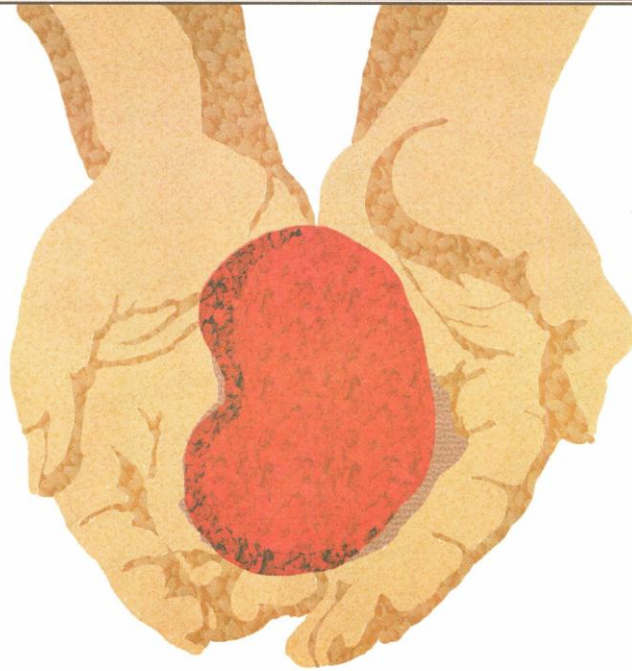


COVER

Here, take my kidney



'Metro' talks to ordinary people who did the extraordinary



Fatmah donated a kidney to her husband, Jamal.

• Text and photos: MIRIAM KRESH

It turns out that they're ordinary people. They dress like everyone else, talk like anyone you're used to sitting next to at the bus stop. They don't act like heroes; you would never guess they've done something courageous and extraordinary.

Who are the people who donate a kidney? Most donors seek to save a loved one. A few donate altruistically – that is, they donate from a sense of mission, with no conditions attached.

Metro recently talked to some of these donors and recipients at Rabin Medical Center-Beilinson Campus in Petah Tikva, where kidney donors gathered for an honorary dinner and ceremony. The auditorium was crammed; people from every stratum of the social spectrum sat together and applauded the doctors and nurses, department managers and entertainers. They rose to applaud a rabbi whose NGO connects kidney patients and potential donors, supporting both through the medical and bureaucratic processes.

Some of the audience looked comfortably well-off, some didn't. Some wore kippot, their wives' hair modestly hidden under hats; oth-



Kidney donor Chaya Ben-Baruch with her certificate of appreciation.

What motivated me? It was really a test of my capacity to prove I could 'love my neighbor as myself' – Chaya Ben-Baruch

ers were secular, their wives wearing slacks. There were men and women speaking Hebrew, Russian, Amharic, Yiddish and English. There was a man in a wheelchair, dressed in hospital pajamas and with an IV in his arm; he had donated a kidney only the day before.

A wife donates to her husband

Jamal and Fatmah sat close together outside the buffet tent, quietly observing the cheerful crowd streaming around with their plates in their hands. Fatmah donated a kidney to Jamal a month ago. It was the second time he'd received a kidney; the first was donated by his mother. He'd been prescribed diabetes medication after the first transplant, but the medication was a mistake, because he didn't have diabetes. Over time, it damaged the first kidney, obliging him to start dialysis. Fatmah tried to tell the rest of their story in a matter-of-fact way, but her voice became thick as she spoke.

"I couldn't bear seeing him tired and irritable, coming home from dialy-

sis exhausted," she related. "I started checking out what it would take for me to donate a kidney at Hillel Yaffe Medical Center in Hadera. At first they refused me, because we had two sick children at the time. But I persisted.

"At Bellinson, they put us on the list for surgery. And we did it, and *Allhamdulillah* [thanks be to God], it went well."

How are they both feeling? Jamal said, chuckling, "We feel great." Fatmah nodded in agreement. Jamal continued, "On the second day after surgery, we both got up and walked around."

Sibling donation

A young haredi man who wishes to be anonymous told his story. "I wanted to donate blood once, when there was a national call for donations. When they checked, it turned out that my creatinine levels were abnormally high. I went for extensive tests, three days in the hospital; they told me that my condition was bordering on dangerous. It was a total surprise because

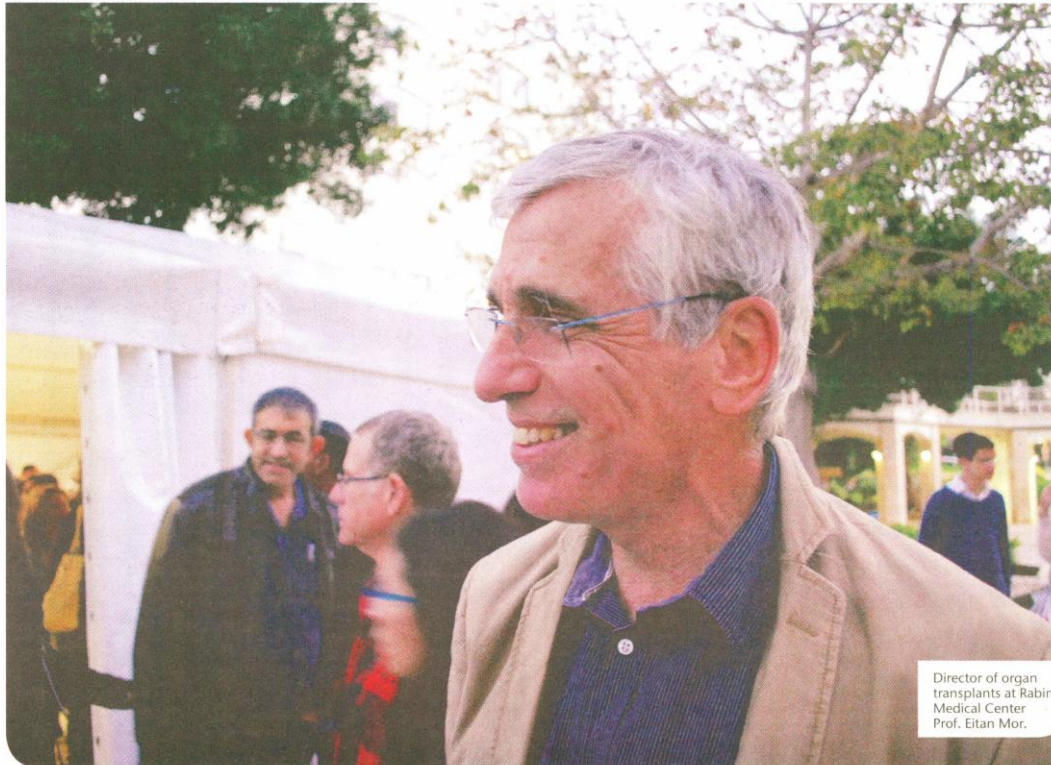


Chairman of the Matnat Chaim volunteer organization Rabbi Yeshayahu Heber, himself a kidney recipient.

I felt well, nothing different.

"I returned home and kept going like that for another two years, having my blood levels monitored regularly. At some point, it became obvious my

kidneys were failing. We had a family meeting; all of my brothers and my sister wanted to give me a kidney, but you have to be at least 25 to donate, so my older brother volunteered. He went in



Director of organ transplants at Rabin Medical Center
Prof. Eitan Mor.

with me to the hospital and we had our surgeries the same day. That was two years ago."

I looked at the donor brother, seated a few rows away. He sat with his wife, playing with their four-month-old baby and looking as if all the honors and celebration had nothing to do with him. But his recipient brother filled out the story. "It went hard for him after surgery; it took him a couple of weeks to recover. As for myself, I felt well at first, but suffered pain later. Still, we're both fine now."

How does he feel about the future? "I look forward to an entirely normal future," the young man said. "Work, marriage, everything." His voice dropped. "It's miraculous."

Giving a kidney to a stranger

Chaya Ben-Baruch, 60 and from Safed, is married and the mother of 10. "I was 54 when I donated my kidney. There wasn't as much support for donors then as there is now. It was frustrating; here I was, trying to do a good deed, and I had to jump through all these hoops at doctors' and social

workers' committees.

"They want to make sure you really want to donate, true. And they have to be sure you're not doing it for money. But once I knew for sure, I worried that someone on the other end might not get what I wanted to give them – and might lose their life, waiting."

When did Ben-Baruch meet her kidney match?

"I came down from Safed for a meeting with a social worker and psychologist. Sitting next to me in the office was this man who needed a kidney; he was also there to talk to the social worker and psychologist." She smiles. "It turned out that we were going to be each other's match."

Ben-Baruch and her recipient, and his entire family, have become close since the surgeries, sharing one another's ups and downs and attending each other's family events.

"What motivated me? It was really a test of my capacity to prove I could 'love my neighbor as myself.' I remember feeling exhilarated the day after surgery, even though I was vomiting every few minutes. I thought, I did it!

I felt like Jacob after he wrestled with the angel. I'd been wrestling with the questions of: Can I do this? Could I really give up a part of myself to someone who isn't at least family? What is courage?"

"I concluded that courage is being willing to go through something, even if you don't know what the outcome will be. It was a test I overcame; I feel very enriched."

PROF. EITAN Mor, director of the organ transplants unit at Beilinson, says, "We transplant about 100 kidneys a year from live donors. Live kidney donations are close to 100-percent successful, and are a much better option than transplants from corpses. The waiting list for a new kidney is very long; at present there are 800 patients on dialysis awaiting transplantation, and several hundred others pre-dialysis."

"We want, with this event, not only to honor donors – who have done a noble act – but also to publicize the importance of live donation."

Present at the ceremony was Rab-

bi Yeshayahu Heber, chairman of the Matnat Chaim volunteer organization. Heber received a donated kidney himself nine years ago, and has since dedicated his life to matching patients with donors and organizing support for them. Awarded the 2014 Presidential Volunteer Medal for his exceptional work, he is the rabbi for whom the audience rose to their feet in prolonged applause.

The beaming Heber told several stories about the people who have passed through his office. The one that stands out most in this reporter's mind is this one: "A woman came to my office with her husband. She showed me a photograph of her family, six beautiful children. She said, 'Rabbi, God has given me everything. We have healthy children, a good livelihood, a working marriage. I feel that I should return something to God now. And this is the way I want to do it; I want to donate one of my kidneys.'"

"My wife and I choked up," continued Heber. "Every donor that comes in, it's like the first for us. It's just a little story. But it's about great, big people."