

JEWISHLINK

Linking Northern and Central NJ, Bronx, Manhattan, Westchester and CT

Issue #607

November 27, 2025 | 7 Kislev, 5786

The Ripple Effect of One Swab: A Teaneck Family's Journey to Saving Lives

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In February 2024, Renewal, a non-profit organization dedicated to facilitating kidney donations, hosted a swabbing event in Teaneck in hopes of finding a kidney donor for longtime Teaneck resident — and now Boynton Beach resident — Howard (Howie) Sterman, as well as another local community member in need. While no direct matches were found that day, 17 people were swabbed. From that one event, eight people were identified as viable donors for strangers in need, with several more still being tested.

One of the participants that day was Teaneck native Riki Stopnicki, who grew up attending Moriah and Frisch and now lives in Toronto with her husband Mikey. Riki is also Howie Sterman's daughter. She hoped to be a match for her father, but it was her younger brother, Koby, who ultimately donated a kidney and saved their father's life. (<https://jewishlink.news/koby-sterman-donates-a-kidney-to-his-father-howard-sterman>)

Riki flew to Florida to spend the week with her father and brother during their recovery. "I got a firsthand glimpse of what the process really looks like by being there with my brother," she said.

After learning she wasn't a match for her father, Riki called Renewal Canada and changed her status to be available for anyone in need. Almost immediately, she matched with a recipient.

"When you see what dialysis is like, you don't want anyone else to go through that," she shared. "Once I wasn't a match for my father, it was an easy decision to open it up."

At the Teaneck event, kidney donor Aviva Breda spoke about her own donation experience. Stopnicki had known Breda since high school, and hearing her story gave Stopnicki another meaningful push toward donation.

Her match was exceptionally strong. "There's a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 being a perfect match," Stopnicki explained. "My number was very low. At that point, I had already come to terms with donating. I was full steam ahead."



Riki Stopnicki ready to donate her kidney to a stranger in need.

But on the day of the transplant, something unexpected happened. Stopnicki was prepped for surgery and noticed that unlike the other patients, no nurse had placed an IV. Eventually her surgeon explained that her recipient had developed a fever and the surgery needed to be postponed. It turned out to be a blessing. Stopnicki's father-in-law passed away that week and her husband was sitting shiva.

In Canada, once a donor and recipient are paired, the match is not reassigned. The transplant is simply rescheduled once both parties are well. This year, however, scheduling was complicated by the chagim falling on weekdays. The date that worked best for the medical team happened to be Tzom Gedaliah.

Stopnicki's rabbi had concerns. He wanted to ensure she would be physically able to fast on Yom Kippur. After extensive discussions with her surgeon, they agreed she could proceed if she received IV fluids on Yom Kippur. On Erev Yom Kippur, Hatzalah of Toronto came to her home and inserted the IV line.

"I wasn't feeling great Erev Yom Kippur," Stopnicki said. "A friend dropped off a challah and told me I should come to shul to inspire other people to donate. So less than 10 days after surgery, I was in shul with my IV. I came for Kol

Nidrei and Neilah and spent the rest of the day at home. It was a meaningful way to start the year. I literally gave of myself and it has been such a great feeling. I was the first in my shul to donate, but hopefully not the last."

Before the transplant, the hospital required a meeting between donor and recipient to confirm that no financial incentive was involved and that both understood the process. The recipient, a 71-year-old man, and his wife came to meet Stopnicki and her husband. The gentleman had been on dialysis but now, thanks to her donation, is living a full life again.

"Renewal Canada was amazing," Stopnicki shared. "They were with me the morning of the transplant. They answered all my questions. They facilitated our meeting with the recipient. They even helped address the rabbi's halachic questions."



Riki Stopnicki in recovery following her kidney donation.

According to Penny Kravetsky, executive director of Renewal Canada, "Dialysis helps many kidney patients survive, but a transplant often offers the best long-term quality of life. Even when a live donor is tested, the evaluation and matching process can take many months. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, more than 49,000 Canadians are living with end-stage kidney disease and as of December 2024, there were 2,922 people waiting for a kidney transplant."

She described one particularly painful case from September. "We were working with an 84-year-old man whose adult children were determining who might be the most suitable donor, though none had yet undergone testing. He never received the referral to the transplant center and he passed away while waiting. It's heartbreaking when someone is ready to move forward with a transplant but the system fails them."

Renewal Canada also runs a program called Shabbos Renewal. The program aims to increase kidney donation awareness within the community. They invite rabbis to speak about Renewal Canada over Shabbat and to share that Renewal Canada will host a swab drive on Sunday morning for anyone interested in exploring kidney donation. This program is citywide in over 30 shuls and is growing each year.

Some rabbis have themselves been swabbed. One powerful example is Rabbi Yossi Swued, a Chabad shaliach in London, Ontario, who donated a kidney after watching six cousins donate. True to his mission, when he discovered his transplant surgeon was Jewish, he helped him put on tefillin in the hospital.

Renewal Canada opened in 2009. In the early years, only a handful of transplants were facilitated annually. As 2025 draws to a close they have assisted 76 transplants across Canada.

With Thanksgiving approaching in the United States, the moment takes on added meaning for Stopnicki. Though she now lives in Canada, she still feels connected to the American holidays. This year she is especially aware of how much there is to be grateful for. Her father received the lifesaving transplant he needed and she was able to give that same gift to someone else. What began as a swabbing event in her hometown became a chance to help another family entirely — an impact that stretches far beyond one address, one community or one holiday.

To learn more about kidney donation or upcoming swabbing events, visit renewal.org or renewalcanada.org.