

Giving a Kidney: A Different Way to be a Major Donor

One day, Toronto's own Shlomo Anhang decided to donate one of his kidneys in order to save a life. He says that it was one of the most satisfying things he has done. Since then, he has been on a mission to save many more lives by connecting donors to those in dire need. Let's Talk Tachlis asked him to come answer the endless questions our YYH students had for him. Here are the highlights of that interview.

We understand that your involvement in kidney donation began with a halacha shiur you heard. Can you tell us about that and what happened from there?

I was attending a weekly *halacha shiur* given by Rabbi Yosef Weitman. One week, he spoke about the *halachic* status of living kidney donation. Living kidney donation means that a person donates one of their kidneys while they are still alive. The kidney is removed from the living person (under general anesthetic during surgery) and transplanted to a person who needs a new kidney because their kidneys are no longer working properly or at all. Medically speaking, a person can also donate a kidney after they pass away, but this is *assur al pi halacha* for reasons that we don't have time to discuss here. I had heard about kidney donation before the *halacha shiur*, and I was interested in learning more about it, but I assumed (wrongly) that it is dangerous and that it was not *halachically* permitted. Once I found out otherwise, I started my journey of becoming a living kidney donor.

I would like your readers to know that, in fact, kidney donation is very safe. Kidney transplant operations have been done since the 1950s, and many, many thousands of such transplants

are done every year in hospitals around the world. Medically speaking, it is a simple operation, and is not any riskier than hernia surgery, for example. And by donating a kidney one truly does save the recipient's life. There is no cure for terminal kidney disease. Kidney dialysis is a stop-gap measure that has many negative side effects, and patients rarely survive for more than five to ten years on dialysis. The only solution is to obtain a kidney transplant. But there are many people waiting on the hospitals' waiting lists, and every year some of the people on the waiting list pass away because they did not get a kidney donation in time. There are nowhere near enough kidney donors to save all the people with kidney disease. Maybe someday medical researchers will invent an artificial kidney, but until then kidney donation is the only way to save a patient's life. Although this kind of life saving is not as dramatic as jumping into a lake to save a drowning person, it is still saving a person's life, which is really an entire world, and it is a fulfillment of many *mitzvos*.

How did you decide that you would be a donor yourself, and was it a tough decision?

I did a lot of research and asked *shailos*. I discussed it with my wife (who was very supportive), my Rav, and my doctor. Everything fell into place, and then all I needed was the opportunity to donate. Then I saw an ad from Renewal in *Hamodia* looking for a donor for a man in Yerushalayim. To make a long story very short, I contacted Renewal and ended up donating a kidney to the man, which happened at a hospital in New York City. The man and I are still in touch, and his new kidney is still working well and keeping him alive thirteen years later.

Have you suffered any ill effects from the surgery?

Absolutely none, *B"H*.

What happens if a kidney donor later needs a kidney himself?

In the Province of Ontario, if a living kidney donor ever needs a kidney transplant, the government puts that person at the top of the provincial waiting list to receive a kidney transplant.

Renewal also puts that person at the top of Renewal's list.

What is the age range for donors and what other eligibility criteria are there?

The minimum age is eighteen, and there is no maximum age. Renewal Toronto's oldest kidney donor so far was a 69-year-old woman. As long as a person is healthy enough to be a donor, there is no maximum age. The person just has to pass the medical tests that the hospital does on people who want to be living kidney donors.

How closely matched do the donor and recipient need to be?

They only need to have compatible blood types, and the recipient needs to not have antibodies to the donor. In reality, almost everyone who is healthy enough to be a donor will be easily and quickly matched with a recipient. Kidney donors are much easier to match than bone marrow donors, for example.

How did Renewal Canada get started?

When I was travelling to New York for the medical testing and for the surgery, I realized that it is a big *tircha* for potential donors to donate in the USA instead of at home in Toronto. I also realized that it must be even worse for the recipients. As well, unless a Canadian resident has excellent medical insurance in the USA, which almost no Canadian resident has, they will have to pay between \$250,000 and \$300,000 US for the transplant operation in the USA. Obviously,

very few kidney patients can afford this. So I thought, "We should have a Renewal organization right here in Toronto. There must be *Yidden* here who need kidney transplants, and there must be *Yidden* here who would be willing to donate a kidney to save a life, so Renewal could be a good idea here." Rather than start a new organization from scratch, I thought the best thing would be to start a branch of Renewal here in Toronto. I asked the directors of Renewal in New York if they would be interested in having a branch in Toronto, and they were enthusiastic about it. As they say, the rest is history. For the first number of years, I ran the Toronto branch on my own in my spare time. Then it became too busy for me to handle, so we hired a part-time coordinator to work with all the potential donors and recipients. Then it became too busy for the two of us to handle, so last year we hired an executive director. We continue to get busier, and several months ago we started to be active in Montreal as well as in Toronto. We incorporated ourselves as a non-profit organization under the name "Renewal of Life Canada," and obtained charity status from the CRA (Canada Revenue Agency) so that we could issue tax receipts for donations. We put the word Canada in our name because not only are we active in Toronto and Montreal, but we are also contacted regularly by *Yidden* across Canada who need kidney transplants, and who don't know how to even start looking for a donor.

How many people has Renewal Canada helped by now?

We have been involved in 45 kidney donations so far. And incredibly, we currently have potential donors testing or about to start testing for 19 more patients. This large backlog is due

to the effect of Covid-19 on the hospitals. So, *IY"H* we will have many more transplants happening in the next six months.

What are some of the differences between kidney donation in Canada vs. the U.S.?

As most people know, the medical systems in Canada and the USA are very different. Medically, the surgery for kidney donation is the same in both countries. And we are very fortunate to have Toronto General Hospital here, which is an outstanding hospital. But the different medical systems in the two countries means that the process for testing potential donors is different in the two countries. The actual medical tests are pretty much the same in both countries, but the way that the hospitals interact with the potential donors is somewhat different. But that doesn't stop Renewal and our wonderful kidney donors from doing what we need to do to save Jewish lives.

Of all the things you've learned in your involvement in kidney donation, what has been the most surprising?

It's hard to say what's the most surprising, but here are several surprising things:

A woman can donate a kidney and then go on to have children afterwards. We have at least one such case here in Toronto, and New York has had such cases also. This means that women don't have to wait until later in life to donate a kidney if they want to donate before that. Wanting to save another person's life can sometimes help save one's own life. We have a woman here in Toronto who wanted to be a kidney donor. During the testing at the hospital, a small growth was found on one of her kidneys. It was promptly removed, and *B'H* she is fine. But if she had not been tested to be a kidney donor, the growth probably would have gone undetected until maybe it would have been too late to save her from becoming very sick.

There is no "profile" of a typical kidney donor. We have had donors donate in their 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's. Men and women donate roughly equally. And they come from all walks of life. The only thing they have in common is their desire to help a fellow Jew escape from the terrible situation of terminal kidney disease and dialysis.

What is the biggest obstacle facing Renewal Canada, and how can we help?

The biggest obstacle is a short-

reaching out to Renewal at (416) 628-7633 or by e-mail to toronto@renewal.org. We never pressure or persuade or convince people to become donors. We provide impartial, objective information to people to help them decide on their own whether they want to be a kidney donor. For example, we introduce them to previous kidney donors so that they can ask all their questions to someone who has already gone through the decision-making, the testing,

ble *chessed* of donating a kidney. We also help donors in many other ways as they progress through testing, surgery, and recovery.

Second of all, at Renewal everything is done *al pi halacha*, according to well-known *poskim*. For example, the way that we prioritize patients and the way that we match donors with patients is done *al pi halacha*. Third of all, everything that Renewal does is highly confidential.

Also, I would like to express great *hakaras hatov* to the *Rabbonim* of our community, who have been very supportive of Renewal and of kidney donors in our community.

What else do you want our readers to know about living kidney donation?

I could say many things, but we are running out of time, so I will just say one thing. Almost every single kidney donor here at Renewal Canada, and the same is true at Renewal New York, says that donating a kidney and saving the life of a fellow *Yid* was one of the best experiences of their life, and that if they had another kidney that they could donate, they would absolutely do it again.

Donating a kidney is not a *mitzva* that every person can do. But if any of your readers think that it might be a *mitzva* they can do, I encourage them to contact Renewal to learn more about it.

Also, I would like to say that anyone who is suffering from kidney disease, even if they are not yet on dialysis, should contact Renewal as soon as possible if their doctor has told them that they will need a kidney transplant in the future. The sooner that we start looking for a donor for them, the sooner we will find one *IY"H*.

Avraham Berkowitz, Grade 7, helped with the production of this article

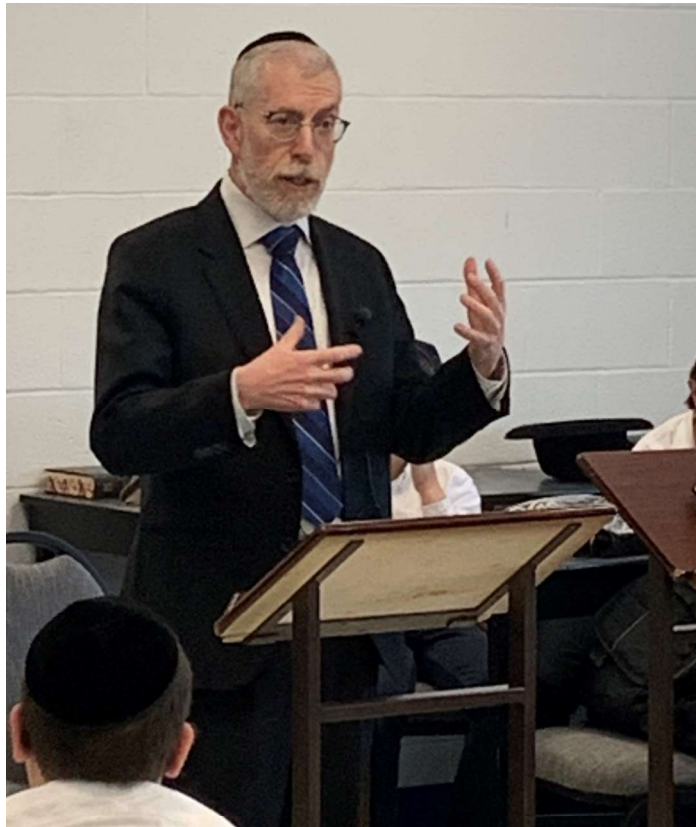


Photo by Rabbi A. Ribacoff

age of living kidney donors. I don't think that this shortage is due to people thinking seriously about and investigating donating a kidney and then deciding not to donate. I think that it is due to people not even being aware of the great need for kidney donors in the Jewish community, and/or not being aware that *halachically* and medically they are capable of being a kidney donor, and/or not knowing where to get information about donating a kidney and not knowing how to start the process of donating a kidney to a fellow *Yid*. Your readers can help by

the surgery, and the recovery.

What else should our readers know about Renewal?

First of all, the government of Ontario has a program whereby kidney donors are reimbursed for any expenses they might incur during the process of testing, surgery, and recovery. And then Renewal itself reimburses donors for any expenses that the government did not reimburse for. This includes any lost wages or salary. Renewal's policy and practice is that no kidney donor should have to suffer financially for the incredi-