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# The Canadian Jewish news

Thursday, November 28, 2013

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## Shabbat times for Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Chanukah: 2 Candles occurs on Thursday, 28 Nov 2013

Chanukah: 3 Candles occurs on Friday, 29 Nov 2013

Candle lighting: 4:26pm on Friday, 29 Nov 2013

This week's Torah portion is Parashat Miketz

Chanukah: 4 Candles occurs on Saturday, 30 Nov 2013

Havdalah (45 min): 5:28pm on Saturday, 30 Nov 2013

[Shabbat times for Montreal](#)

25th of Kislev, 5774

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## Anonymous kidney donor is anything but

Sheri Shefa, Staff Reporter, Thursday, December 15, 2011

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Sarah Konsker and Aaron Cohen, below [Alex-photo.com photos]

**TORONTO** — We live in a what's-in-it-for-me-kind-of-world, but hearing a story about a woman who donated her kidney to a stranger would leave even the most jaded cynic feeling inspired.

Earlier this year, 59-year-old Sarah Konsker parted with one of her kidneys to save the life of an anonymous Torontonian who suffered from kidney failure.

At least he started out as an anonymous recipient. Apparently, it isn't easy keeping a secret in Thornhill's tight-knit Jewish community.

The story began seven years ago, when Aaron Cohen, now 25, was a 17-year-old kid.



After visiting his doctor for a check-up and providing blood and urine samples, Cohen was diagnosed with membranous nephropathy, a disorder that prevents the kidneys from properly filtering wastes and fluids.

As his condition progressed, Cohen would retain so much water that parts of his body would swell.

"When I would wake up, my face would be all distorted because of water that would gravitate to my face while I was sleeping. And after a full day of walking around, all the water would go down to my legs and my feet would be swollen," Cohen recalled.

In addition to the immediate discomfort, his doctor predicted that his kidneys would fail within 20 to 25 years.

Despite taking medication to prevent the disease from progressing, his kidneys deteriorated much faster than anticipated, and by the time he was 21, his kidneys were only functioning at 25 per cent capacity.

Then, during a vacation to Israel, he caught a bug that helped wipe out what was left of his kidney function.

"Just like that, I went from 25 per cent to zero," said Cohen, who shared his story last week at an event organized by Chabad of Markham synagogue to honour both Cohen and his donor.

After a two-week hospital stay, his doctors put him on dialysis, a "hellish" process that filters waste and fluid

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in a person's body through a machine.

Cohen, who was placed on a seven-year waiting list for a new kidney, had to put his life on hold.

Enter Konsker, a mother of five and a long-time member of Chabad of Markham who learned about the need for kidney donors through an event her daughter co-organized in April 2010.

Konsker said when she and her husband came forward as potential donors, they never anticipated that either of them would come up as a match.

"I was so excited when I got the call... I felt my heart palpating. I felt this rush of heat through me... I was so excited and overwhelmed with emotion. I felt like I had just won a jackpot."

She said she was never nervous about her own health.

"I was surprised at myself that I was never afraid. I think I just had such emunah [faith] that this was the right thing and it was going to work."

After getting her family's blessing, Konsker went ahead with the surgery.

At some point during the screening phase, she learned that Cohen was the recipient. She knew him, as he was a good friend of her son-in-law.

But Konsker was adamant that she remain anonymous, because she realized that she would "see him from time to time, and I didn't want him in any way, shape or form to feel indebted to me or my family."

In addition to the personal connection, Konsker realized that throughout the six-month process of tests and check-ups, at any point she could have been disqualified for health reasons, and she didn't want to get Cohen's hopes up if it wasn't going to work out.

Last year, when Cohen learned that a match had been found for him, he had mixed feelings.

"When I found out the news, it was during my mother's shivah. My mother passed away, and I found out three days later," Cohen said.

"I had mixed feelings because... I was going through hell with that, but I also knew that this was one thing she wanted to see."

Meanwhile, Konsker was doing her best to keep her identity hidden from Cohen. With the help of John Anhang, founder of Renewal Toronto – an organization started in New York that works within the Jewish community to handle the logistics of arranging kidney transplants – she arranged for her and Cohen to be assigned to recovery rooms on different floors of the hospital.

But, Konsker said, people plan and God laughs.

Following the surgery, while her daughter Shira, her son Rafi and her husband Michael were visiting her, they stepped out into the hallway to have a conversation.

Shira noticed a man in a wheel chair rolling toward them. It was Cohen.

Konsker said her son and husband were so engrossed in conversation that they didn't notice him coming, nor did they notice Shira's subtle hints that he was approaching.

Cohen said he came down to Konsker's floor because he wanted to watch a basketball game in the patient lounge nearby.

"As I'm wheeling down the hallway, I saw them in the distance... I already had suspicions, but when I saw all of them, I knew what was up right away," Cohen recalled.

Konsker said her son tried to distract him by casually asking about his recovery and helping him into the patient lounge before making a quick exit.

"It was extremely awkward, because I knew that the donor wanted to keep it private," Cohen said.

But today, six months after the surgery, it's all a distant memory. Both Konsker and Cohen have recovered well.

Konsker, who was "up and about, running around" far sooner than expected, said, "The only regret I have is that I can't do this again."

And Cohen said he's back to his old self. "It's seems like those five years were just like a nightmare, like it

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A group of Toronto teenagers travelled to Detroit where they learned that you don't have to be homeless to be happy.

wasn't real. I feel 100 per cent.

"There is nothing that I can ever say or do that will ever convey my gratitude to her. Even though she doesn't want me to be, I will always be indebted to her and her family. I really look at her as a second mother. My mother gave me life, and she gave me a second chance at life."

There are currently seven other people in Toronto's Jewish community that are in need of a kidney. For information on how to help, visit [www.renewal.org](http://www.renewal.org), or call 416-638-7633.

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