

FEATURES > GIVING > MOVIE

## The new tzedaka: giving a piece of yourself

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TORONTO – The plight of people needing kidney donations is sobering but the atmosphere at a gala event recently organized by Chabad Lubavitch of Greater Toronto to raise awareness of the issue was uplifting and inspiring. A slate of the Jewish community's unflinchingly generous sponsors provided prizes and a constant flow of food and drink, helping to attract a crowd of more than 400 people.

Rabbi Avraham Plotkin spoke of a new charitable concept – *tzedaka be'guf* (giving of the body) – and emphasized that it is halachically acceptable and “a mitzvah of the highest order.”

Guest speaker Rabbi Ephraim Simon of Teaneck, NJ, related how he had sometimes seen requests for kidney donors on an emailed list of services required or rendered in his area but it really hit home the day he read that the person in need was a desperately ill 12-year-old girl.

Being the father of nine children, including a daughter the same age, he could relate to her parents' anguish and for the first time began to wonder if he could qualify as a donor.

His wife Nechamy was supportive and suggested they do further research. The Simons were sur-

prised to discover that the risks for the donor were minimal and the operation was laparoscopic, entailing only a short stay in hospital. If one develops kidney disease it will manifest in both kidneys anyway and thus some of the only drawbacks to being left with one kidney are if it is damaged in an accident or becomes cancerous.

“We take risks every day by being in cars or planes,” Rabbi Simon pointed out. “If the payoff for that is greater than the risk, how much more so would it be to donate a kidney and save a life? I also wanted to inspire my children by demonstrating what sacrifice and love for one's fellow means and exemplifying the values I speak of to them.”

Unlike with bone marrow donation, it is fairly easy to find a match for a kidney; nevertheless, the search for a suitable recipient took time as the young girl and several other prospects had found other donors (“I couldn't give the kidney away,” the rabbi joked).

Eventually a recipient was found – a 51-year-old father of 10. The identities of donors and recipients are kept confidential but both were in hospital at the same time for a blood mixing test and the man approached the rabbi to ask if he was the donor. “I was able to reassure him: if I match I will be there [for you].” The match was con-

firmed one hour before Passover and the rabbi hastily contacted him through an intermediary “so he and his family could go into Yomtov with tranquility and joy.”

Rabbi Simon then told his older children.

“Tatteh, I'm so proud to be your daughter,” his 10-year-old exclaimed. He modestly planned to keep the donation under wraps but his wife pointed out that as a *shaliach* [emissary] he could not deprive his community of the example of love and sacrifice. His congregation was edified and the story was recounted worldwide.

As the result of each physical test proved positive, the rabbi ensured that the recipient (who was not notified by the hospital) was informed. He was also questioned about his motives for donating by the transplant team and received psychological support. “I was never nervous. The only thing I feared was that I wouldn't qualify as a donor.”

The rabbi was anxious that the family of the 12-year-old who had touched his heart be aware of the positive ripple effect she had unwittingly caused. He received a call from her father the night before his own surgery to say she was thriving after her transplant. Her family was elated and moved to hear that her story had inspired 15 to 20 people to become

donors.

Rabbi Simon's operation took place last August. He was home after Shabbat and back at work a week later following an easy recovery.

“It was the greatest experience of my life and I would do it again tomorrow if it were possible,” he said. “As Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Jacobson once said, ‘A rabbi's greatest sermon is the way he lives his life.’”

Shlomo Anhang recounted how he had established a branch of Renewal in Toronto in 2009 ([www.renewal.org](http://www.renewal.org)) after a chance encounter in a rabbi's waiting room with a man in need of a kidney.

Renewal assists with finding potential donors, providing halachic and medical information, facilitating communication with previous donors, giving moral support and funding lost income and any other expenses incurred as a result of the donation.

Last November “we had six people in need,” Anhang said. “Our goal is to ensure that any Jew receives a new kidney within six months of the request and that no donor experiences hardship. If you cannot donate a kidney, please consider helping us financially.”

Only one day later, 17 people had been so inspired by the event that they had already contacted Renewal Toronto to become potential donors.