Halachic Organ Donation Seminar

It is said that the world is sustained by hidden righteous people, *tzaddikim*, those who quietly give of themselves, those who do good deeds without fanfare or even recognition.

In a recent event sponsored by Congregation Magen David of West Deal, N.J., the audience who attended the medical seminar on halachic organ donation heard firsthand from three such *tzaddikim* – three people who donated their kidneys to sustain the lives of three human beings. In doing so, each "saved" an entire world. Each in his selfless, determined way gave life to strangers.

Rabbi Labaton stated that he was in awe of David Koster, Nancy Barker, Chaya Lipschutz, the kidney donors, and Dr. Stuart Greenstein, a *Shomer Shabbos* kidney transplant surgeon, professor of surgery at Montefiore Medical Center. He explained that halachic authorities have debated the issue of whether or not someone should put himself in possible danger in order to save another person's life. After thorough halachic analysis, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, *posek hador* of the Sephardic community, concluded that live kidney donation is not only permissible but also a *mitzva*. This ruling clears one of the many obstacles to kidney donation for the Orthodox Jew.

The awesomeness of kidney donation became even more real, even palpable, as each kidney donor told his story. David Koster stated at the outset that he was no rabbi, no doctor, no saint, only a regular person who wanted to help. The purpose of his testimony was that the deed that emanated from his heart, and his wish to do the right thing would enter into someone else's heart and perhaps lead to more kidney donations and more saved lives. David maintained that donating a kidney was the most "exhilarating" experience in his life, a reaction echoed by the other kidney donors as well.

(L-R) Nancy Barker, kidney donor; Joe Shamah, her recipient.

Nancy Barker, the next kidney donor who spoke, related how she arrived at the decision to help Joe Shamah, a member of the Sephardic community in Deal. Nancy was only acquainted with Joe through business and explained how she felt for Joe, who rarely complained about the grueling experience of dialysis. What shined through Nancy's articulate narrative was her pure altruism – there was no family relation, no social or religious motivation, only the genuine desire to end the pain and suffering of another human being.

Chaya Lipschutz, too, humbly rejected any idea that kidney donors were extraordinary. She also insisted her motivation for donating was purely to do the right thing, to perform an act of *chesed* (loving kindness) and to save a life without sacrificing anything but an afternoon of a little inconvenience. Chaya overcame her mother's objections and persisted. Later, after the donation, her mother supported her and was proud of her for the great deed she did. Chaya has taken on the task of promoting kidney donation, communicating to others how easy and rewarding it can be to save someone else's life.

Dr. Greenstein spoke about the numbers – some 90,000 people in America are waiting for an organ transplant. Of these, 6,000 die while waiting for a transplant. The total number of people waiting for a kidney transplant is 65,000 and growing. He then detailed the process of kidney donation, the various tests for compatibility and acceptability.

After Dr. Greenstein's presentation, the rabbi introduced two members of the Sephardic community in Deal – Joe Shamah, one who received a transplant and Irwin Shaab, who is currently on dialysis and awaiting a transplant. While dialysis offers a way of extending life for those who experience kidney failure, it can only extend life a few years.

During this period, the dialysis patient spends three to four hours a day, three days a week, hooked up to a kidney machine while his blood is completely filtered of toxins that would otherwise be emitted by healthy kidneys. While one is chained to this ball of dialysis, one has to be extremely careful not to drink a lot of liquids because that would further complicate the process. Often, while on dialysis, one cannot urinate at all. Joe Shamah spoke about the new life that Nancy Barker's kidney has infused into him and expressed gratitude to Nancy and Dr. Greenstein for providing him with this new life. In a most touching and moving way, Irwin Shaab described his approach to dialysis and could not contain his anticipation when talking about his imminent transplant. Both Joe and Irwin gave the audience a glimpse into the life of those who suffered or suffer from kidney disease and how transplants either changed or will change their lives.

For more information about kidney donation call Chaya Lipshutz at 917-627-8336 or e-mail her at KidneyMitzvah@aol.com ■

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