

This is a story about a Liver Match I had made that was in the Hamodia - February 19, 2020

This story also mentions about a Mitzvah project I have in memory of my mother, a"h



ERIC'S  
FINEST  
**HOUR**

*The gift of life*

by CHAYA BAUMWOLSPINNER

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Eric Steger

***When, in 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the British people that their fight against Hitler would be their “finest hour,” he coined a term that denotes “momentum” and gave it a place in common parlance.***

***Everyone has their “finest hour.” For some it’s the day they get married, start their first job or win the lottery. For Eric Steger, a math tutor from Northern California, it was the “hour” (more likely, several hours) he spent donating an entire lobe of his liver to a man he’d never met. As he wrote in an email shortly after he awoke from surgery, “I have tubes sticking out of me all over the place and my vision is doubled, but everything is well. My finest hour — and I slept right through it!”***

***Why would a healthy 50-year-old, successful in his career and popular in his community, opt to follow this route?***

### ***Inauspicious Beginnings***

It is not surprising that Eric’s magnanimous liver donation to an unrelated recipient on January 7, 2020, has gained attention; Eric (Feivish Yankel) is a “serial donor” who has made many lifesaving donations before. But when I spoke to him in his home in Sunnyvale, a short drive from San Francisco, he laughingly relates that he had tried to donate blood as a teen and “they couldn’t get a drop of blood out of me. They said I had small veins.”

Small veins or not, a simple cheek swab in a Gift of Life booth at a local fair when in his 30s led to Eric’s donating stem-cells to a person with leukemia two and a half years later. He never met that person — as per Gift of Life policy — but he was ecstatic to have saved a life.

From that point on, Eric was hooked.

### ***Another Beginning***

In the years that followed, Eric became a “regular” at local clinics where he donated blood platelets (and also whole blood and red blood cells) totting up at least 140 visits, as often as once a month or even more.

When I asked him where he got the inspiration to continue this arduous mission, Eric replied that he always had “an altruistic streak and liked to help other people.” Even so, he’s quick to acknowledge that his meeting with the local Chabad Rabbi, Rav Yisroel Hecht, and his steady growth toward full Torah observance played an indisputable role.

“The *Gemara’s* teaching that saving a life is equivalent to saving an entire world is very meaningful to me,” Eric affirms. While he’s not clear whether his “return to his roots” was the determining factor, not long after he became an active member of Chabad

he resolved to donate a kidney to someone who needed one. As he said at the time, “I have two and I don’t need both!”

What to do next? A few months later, on his first visit to Eretz Yisroel, Eric stayed with a classmate of Rabbi Hecht who told him about a woman named Chaya Lipschutz, who had started an extensive kidney donation project *l’shem mitzvah* following her own kidney donation in 2005. Upon arriving home, Eric contacted Chaya.

### **Dashed Hopes**

Chaya Lipschutz welcomed Eric’s interest. By this time, she had single-handedly “brokered” several successful kidney matches; Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik, the esteemed writer, speaker and educator, turned heads when Chaya arranged her kidney donation to a stranger in 2007. Chaya’s project — and another *chessed* project that she runs *l’iluy nishmas* her mother, *a”h* — was endorsed by Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser. She was already known to meticulously and compassionately guide both donors and recipients through the process.

With the ongoing need for kidneys, Eric — who was then 40 years old and in good health — was a precious commodity.

After reviewing Eric’s details, Chaya asked him if he would be willing to travel to donate a kidney. He was. She then told him about a *frum* mother of nine in Eretz Yisrael on dialysis and desperately needed a transplant. Eric was anxious to save her life and quickly traveled to Eretz Yisrael, where he was tested to determine his eligibility. He was shocked to learn that due to an innocuous condition he didn’t know he had, he was disqualified from being a kidney donor.

Outwardly he remained upbeat and even found the “silver lining” in his ordeal. After all, the doctors’ discovery of a small blip in his



Eric Steger, and recipient of the living donor liver transplant, Jeff Lendner.

Photo credit: UPMC Hospital

metabolism could protect him from further complications down the road.

But Eric confesses he was “very disappointed,” and wistfully entertained the thought that one day his dashed hopes would be reversed.

### **Enter UPMC**

Let’s fast forward to more than eight years — and many blood platelet donations — later. Eric was relaxing at home when he came across an ad from the University of Pittsburgh’s Medical Center (UPMC), a leading pioneer in the realm of liver transplants, announcing that they were accepting liver donors.

For Eric it was an “aha” moment. He couldn’t donate a kidney, but he could donate part of his liver.

Eric was aware that live liver transplants are possible because the liver has the ability to regenerate and grow back to its full size — *nissim v’niflaos!* But he was still blissfully oblivious to the fact that liver donation involves greater risks and a much longer recuperation for the donor than kidney donation. In the words of Rabbi Efraim Simon of Chabad of Teaneck, who donated both a kidney and a liver under Chaya’s guidance, a kidney donation is like “a walk in the park compared to a liver donation.”

For this reason, most liver transplants occur between related donors and recipients. Altruistic donations (between strangers) are rare.

Eric also did not know that Chaya — the kidney *shadchan* — was now also dealing with liver transplants; in fact, she is the only individual known to be making liver matches at this time. But he contacted her anyway because she had always been so helpful in the past. A delighted Chaya gave Eric the rundown on the downside of liver donations but he didn’t flinch. Chaya had her donor; all she needed now was a recipient.

### **Who Needs My Liver?**

Little did they anticipate, however, that there would be more letdowns for Eric in store, spanning three potential recipients, two hospitals — Columbia Presbyterian in New York and UPMC — and a great deal of traveling. With testing complete and arrangements made, the first “recipient” was offered a last-minute donation by a sister, the second by an employee. In the third case, the sick person received a cadaver liver.

Eric was happy that his “recipients” had received other transplants, but he felt badly that his own quest to be a donor had failed. Moreover, the clock was ticking. Testing results are good for only six months — and Eric did not want to have to start the grueling testing process again.

“I literally begged Chaya to find me someone,” Eric reflects. “But she simply didn’t have a needy recipient with the same blood type at that time.”

## Finding “Mr. Right”

Even though the prospects of finding a recipient were diminishing, neither Chaya nor Eric gave up hope that there was a “Mr. Right” in the wings, and Hashem could make him appear at any moment.

Eric’s intended recipient turned out to be Jeff (Yosef Shmuel) Lendner, a 53-year-old from Iowa with NASH, a severe form of nonalcoholic fatty liver disease. While Jeff had controlled his condition with medications for years, from early 2019 the medications had stopped being effective. By the time he was forced to give up work in August, he endured extreme fatigue and memory loss, and his disease was getting worse.

Nevertheless, when Jeff tried to put his name on the wait-list for a cadaver at UPMC, he was told he did not qualify. “His numbers were not high enough,” explains Jeff’s wife, Robin Lendner. “We didn’t know what would happen next.”

But Hashem did! Anxious to find a recipient, Chaya widely publicized Eric’s offer in newspapers and among Jewish groups. A woman in New Jersey saw the posting and called her brother, Jeff Lendner.

Things moved fast. Jeff was rigorously tested for four days to ascertain that he could withstand surgery. Eric rushed to Pittsburgh. His time had finally come.

When I asked Eric if he had been nervous before he went under the knife, he replied that he wasn’t. “The only thing that made me nervous was the fear that there would be another failed attempt to donate.”

This time, however, there was no room to bungle. Jeff’s liver was found to be in a far worse state than the doctors had envisaged (in fact, he was close to death) and it had to be removed. Six and a half hours later Jeff hosted 60% of Eric’s liver in its place.

## Post-op Updates

In an email to Chaya after his surgery, Eric wrote, “Mission accomplished!” He thanked Hashem for allowing him to fulfill his dream.

Eric spent five days in the hospital and only a few more in Pittsburgh after his surgery. (Chaya notes that this is a very short time for someone who had donated such a large percentage of his liver, which was almost double the amount removed from her previous liver donors).

While in Pittsburgh, Eric enjoyed some momentous

meetings with Jeff and received outstanding hospitality from the Squirrel Hill Chabad House and the Bikur Cholim of Pittsburgh. He also spoke in two local shuls on the Shabbos prior to his departure.

Now back in California, he is feeling fit and is gradually returning to work; he also plans to continue his blood platelet donations.

The Lendners were understandably euphoric after the surgery. At their first meeting, Jeff thanked Eric effusively not only for saving his life, but for “bringing back the smiles to my children’s faces.” Robin says Eric “is an amazing person, but that, of course, is an understatement!”

Jeff looks forward to returning to his active life and to resuming his role as a devoted husband and father (and a loving grandfather to his future grandchildren).

Chaya retains the excitement of her first transplant whenever she achieves a new match, and she references the *hashgachah* that has enabled each match to succeed. She doesn’t even need to ask what would have happened had Eric not heard about Chaya or had Jeff’s sister not have read her posting — and had all the other miracles in between not occurred — because she knows that everything is *min haShamayim*; it has to be!

In addition, she is especially grateful for what she calls “the icing on the cake,” the enormous *kiddush Hashem* Eric’s donation has created. Numerous media outlets have taken up Eric’s story and continue to do so. On the night this article was written, a major news network taped *Havdalah* at his Chabad House. Together with an interview

with Eric, it will be televised across the country.

Ironically, both Chaya and Eric are shy, prefer to stay out of the spotlight and live otherwise sheltered lives isolated from the media. “But these are special times,” says Chaya. “Reports on Eric’s extraordinary donation is casting a very favorable light on Jews among non-Jews and is making people realize the *gadlus* of *Klal Yisrael*.”

Chaya hopes that Jeff’s “finest hour” will also inspire Jews to appreciate the gift of health and to make their contributions to helping their brothers and sisters in their times of need in a fitting way.

Eric’s liver has given life to Jeff and with Hashem’s help it will continue to yield many other wonderful benefits as well. ■



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