This woman needed a kidney.
This total stranger gave up her own ‘as a mitzvah’. Could you?

By Simon Round

John Oliver, of the charity Transplant UK, which supports and enables organ donations in this country, agrees that giving a kidney is low risk, but adds: “There is a one in 3,000 risk of life-threatening complications when donating an organ. You have to understand that this is a major surgery under general anaesthetic and will involve at least a few days in hospital. Most donors are back at work within a month, but patients are advised that they may need to be off work up to nine months if there are complications.”

Once the donor has been discharged, there are very rarely any ongoing problems. “Living with one kidney presents no difficulty to the body as long as you are healthy,” Oliver says. He adds that there are extensive tests carried out prior to the operation and that, for example, people with a family history of kidney problems may be told their risk is unacceptable.

Giving an organ altruistically, as Lipschutz has done, would have been illegal in the UK before September 1st last year, when new legislation was brought in. Two or three volunteers are now being screened, but the first UK altruistic transplant has yet to take place.

So is Lipschutz performing a mitzvah by giving her kidney and by urging others to do the same? Rabbi Chaim Rapoport, who holds the medical-ethics portfolio in the Chief Rabbi’s cabinet, says that her actions are commendable. “The prevailing view is that rabbis are favourably disposed towards organ donation because, providing the donor is in good health, it can be life-saving. This is something Jews might consider, not as an obligation but as a personal choice.”

His view is echoed by Rabbi Yehuda Pink of the Solihull and District Hebrew Congregation, an expert in medical ethics. But he adds that Lipschutz should be careful not to pressure people into donating a kidney. “Campaigns like this are one of the reasons why most secular authorities are opposed to payment for organs. Halachically, there is no problem with being paid for doing a good deed. But there is a problem when people who are in need of money might feel they have no choice but to sell organs. Similarly, if there is a large public campaign to donate a kidney, people may feel under moral pressure to do something they are not comfortable with.”

How far would one be able to risk one’s health to perform a mitzvah such as this? Rabbi Pink says the more the risk to your own life, the less favourably the act is looked upon. “There is a sliding scale of risk. Unfortunately, the acceptable level has never been quantified.”

Chaya Lipschutz says she is careful not to pressure people into donating. Indeed, she asks people to examine their reasons for wanting to give a kidney.

“You have to be doing it for the right reasons. Some people may want to give a kidney to boost their self-esteem. Well, if that’s the case, they should know that the kidney might be rejected or the recipient might die a year later.”

Indeed, although kidney donations might save lives, the kidneys do not normally last a lifetime — typically they will function well for around 10 years — so a child will certainly need more than one transplant.

However, Lipschutz’s imperative is to help the sick. And in doing so it is not just her kidney she has lost. Her personal life has been severely affected. Her mother was very upset about her plan to become an altruistic donor, although she has now come to terms with the decision and “is proud of me.” These days she is either looking after her mother or working on the campaign.

“Three-quarters of my time is devoted to this. I used to exercise two or three times a week — I don’t have time for that any more. I also very rarely go out recreationally these days.”