

THE LIFESAVER

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



Every now and then I like to do exciting things," reflects Chaya Lipschutz. "And what more exciting thing can you do than save somebody's life?"

Lipschutz did indeed save the life of Marcelle Bale-Krieger, a mother-of-two (pictured, top), by donating a kidney to her. There is nothing new in this of course. People have been carrying kidney donor cards for decades, and the principle of living organ donation is now well established.

What makes Lipschutz's case special is the fact that she decided to donate a kidney before ever meeting Mrs Bale-Krieger. In stark counterpoint to the British man who was recently convicted of illegally attempting to sell a kidney for £24,000, Lipschutz, a religious New Yorker, went to extreme lengths to give hers away to a total stranger.

Her interest was first aroused while reading an advertisement in *The Jewish Press* from a man appealing for a kidney. Speaking from the apartment she shares with her elderly mother, Lipschutz says: "I thought this could be a once-in-a-lifetime mitzvah. After all, it says in the Talmud: 'He who saves one life, it's as if he saved the entire world.' It didn't sound like the procedure was such a big deal — in fact, I believe that it's less risky than childbirth. So I got in touch the man who had advertised."

However, being allowed donate a kidney turned out to be fraught with difficulties. Indeed, Lipschutz claims that the operation itself was the easiest part of the process. First she had a meeting with a social worker sent by the hospital whom she told of her plans to donate her organ to Joe Shamah, the man in the advert. Things did not go well. She was told that it was "not in her best interests" to donate a kidney to him. Lipschutz was outraged. "That was the biggest joke — but I wasn't laughing, and neither was Joe. Who were they to tell me it wasn't in my best interests to donate a kidney when this was something I wanted to do so badly?"

Lipschutz was in no mood to give up. She went for tests at another hospital where she discovered she was not in fact a match for Shamah. So she decided to seek out another donor. Soon, she found a woman for whom she was a match, but found there were two other possible donors, both

By Simon Round

of whom had matching kidneys. "I decided it would not be such a special act to give my kidney if either of those two people could give theirs."

Ultimately, again through the pages of *The Jewish Press*, she found an advertisement from Mrs Bale-Krieger, of New Jersey. This time, there were no impediments, the donation was duly made and the pair now have a close friendship.

Lipschutz sailed through the surgery. "I felt fine the next day. When I came home from hospital I cooked and took out the garbage. The following Shabbat I was able to take my normal walk of two miles or so."

However, having recovered from the operation, she was not satisfied that she had done

enough. "Almost every week I saw heart-breaking ads in *The Jewish Press*, and one week there were four. That was the last straw for me. I felt like I wanted to donate again, but of course I couldn't. There was a Jewish expo in New York coming up and I decided I wanted to have a booth there to appeal for people to give a kidney like I did."

That was in 2005. So began a campaign during which Lipschutz has spoken to hundreds of people about making a donation, has received local press coverage and has gone on national radio. The process has not been easy. "I have had people who wanted to donate, but then they spoke to their husbands or wives or children who talked them out of it," she says. "I sometimes speak to the husband or wife myself, and when they understand how little risk is involved they are happier about allowing it."

So is the process as safe as Lipschutz claims?

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 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 for 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 1 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 Yehudah 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."

NHS UK Transplant Organ Donor Line: 0845 60 60 400; UK National Kidney Federation: 0845 601 02 09

CHAYA'S MISSION

Chaya Lipschutz (who can be reached at KidneyMitzvah@aol.com) posts requests on the internet for kidney donors. Here is one of her appeals:

"Save a life. Kidney donor desperately needed for a father of seven children. Emergency. Type O or B needed. He is suffering terribly on dialysis three times a week, for almost four hours a day. Please help!!!"