

*Under the Radar - Where we talk to and learn about Mitzvah heroes, those amazing people who are changing the world, doing their part in Tikkun Olam and making the world a better place to be.*

## Under the Radar: Judy Singer – Matnat Chaim (Israel's Kidney Donation Organization)

By Arnie Draiman

Matnat Chaim is an organization in Israel that is dedicated to encouraging individuals found suitable for making a life-saving kidney donation, and focuses exclusively on altruistic, i.e. voluntary, donations. The sole motive that drives the volunteers of the organization is the desire and willingness to help others and save lives.

Judy Singer is the Vice President of Matnat Chaim, and the story of how she began working for them is the story of a journey. Judy and her family currently live in the dati (religious) community of Merav, situated on top of the Gilboa Mountains, not far from Beit She'an in the northern end of the Jordan Valley in Israel.

She grew up in Kansas City, part of a family active in the small Jewish community there – her parents ran the local Jewish newspaper, and they were very involved in their Conservative synagogue as well. Judy herself was active in the movement's youth program (USY) during high school and she spent summers at Camp Ramah. While at Washington University she chose to go to Israel for the Junior Year Abroad program, spending her year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her experience there inspired her to make Aliyah.

Back in the US, she joined a 'garin', a group of people who were making Aliyah together – they came in the 1980s to help found Kibbutz Hanaton, in the lower Galilee. After a few years on kibbutz, Judy moved to Jerusalem, worked in the blossoming field of hi-tech, and met her husband Hanan. They decided to move north, to the new community of Merav, where they have been for almost 30 years.

Wanting employment that was more meaningful, Judy left the hi-tech industry. She started working in the non-profit field and felt this was a step in the right direction. About eight years ago, she read an article about someone who had donated a kidney – and not because they were related to the recipient (the majority of kidney donations are from

a family member.) Her research showed her that many people in need of a kidney transplant were on dialysis to keep them alive until a kidney could be found. Dialysis wreaks havoc on their lives since they need to be in the hospital 2-3 times a week, and then spend a day recuperating from the very exhausting experience. And people on dialysis were not only desperate to get back to their normal lives, but just to live, since kidney disease can be fatal. And so, Judy's decision was made – she would become a kidney donor.

In order to qualify, one goes through a series of medical and psychological tests to be sure that you are in excellent health, and are doing this for altruistic reasons. This process takes about six months. Judy was able to meet her recipient, Rina, and they have stayed in frequent contact these past seven years. And while Rina is forever grateful to Judy, Judy tells us that the donor's life changes as well – that being able to save someone else is a very powerful and empowering act, echoing the words of our Sages from a thousand years ago: "Rabbi Yehoshua taught that the person in need does more for the donor than the donor does for the person in need." (Leviticus Rabbah 34:8)

Matnat Chaim was founded by Rabbi Yeshayahu Heber, who was a kidney recipient himself and felt that more people needed to become aware of the importance of this great mitzvah. In his first year of operations, he managed to find four people to donate, then seven, then 11 and with continual growth every year, he was encouraged by the success of the organization. Rabbi Heber, sadly, contracted Covid last year and passed away, since most kidney recipients have very poor immune systems. His wife Rachel serves as the Chair of Matnat Chaim.

Matnat Chaim is responsible for helping 1150 people donate kidneys in Israel, and currently at a rate of over 200 donations a year. The Israeli health care funds (HMOs) pay for all of the medical expenses involved. There are currently about 900 people on dialysis in Israel who are on the waiting list for a new kidney, so despite the incredible growth and awareness that Matnat Chaim has created, many people in Israel still need help.

Judy and Matnat Chaim live the credo that "anyone who saves one life from among the Jewish people, it is as if an entire world was saved." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

For more information about kidney donation, you can contact Matnat Chaim on their website at <https://kilya.org.il/en/>

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