

Two Medically Themed Books: The Donor and The Miracle Next Door

The Donor: A Novel Based on a True Story

Written by Nechama Charach

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Translated by Rabbi Boruch Kalinsky, Feldheim Publishers, 2005

The Donor:

This story of family secrets and stolen heritage revolves around two Israeli families. Na'ama and Gedalya Yechezkel and their children live in a small, tight-knit Yemenite community in Bnei Brak. Dafna Lahav, a successful interior designer, and her daughter, Keshet, live in style in secular Tel Aviv. The families' paths cross when Keshet is discovered to be a match for a bone marrow transplant for Kobi, the Yechezkel's sixteen year old son. Keshet and Kobi's sister Miriam become friendly and both are left wondering how the two families with such divergent heritages could be so closely related genetically. In addition, one of the other Yechezkel boys is the spitting image of Keshet's brother. The girls decide to research their lineages, traveling to speak to their elderly grandmothers in the hope of shedding some light on this mystery. Miriam discovers that her grandmother, as a new arrival from Yemen in 1950, 'lost' her first child after checking her into the hospital for treatment. The hospital tells her that the baby girl is contagious and does not permit her to see or hold her 'dead' child. She gives birth to many other children but can never forget this unresolved wound in her heart. Keshet's grandmother, on the other hand, reveals that her adopted daughter, Dafna, arrived under some unusual circumstances. Keshet talks to one of the kibbutz old-timers and finds evidence in the kibbutz archive that her mother's identity was changed at the time she was adopted. The truth of their discoveries brings their families together. In the process, Keshet becomes more observant and her mother, after some initial resistance, becomes more accepting of religious people and their lifestyle. Kobi survives for another year after his transplant but succumbs to tissue rejection, leaving both families bereft of their beloved son and cousin.

The subtitle, 'based on a true story,' is a bit of a mystery, too. The historical background of the story is based on the bitter and long-held belief that the babies of some Yemenite families had their children taken from them. After arriving in Israel in the late 1940's and 1950's, many Yemenite families lived in the '*ma'abarot*' (transit camps). Conditions in the transit camps were primitive and unsanitary, the Yemenite women were often young mothers with numerous children, and they spoke little or no Hebrew. The government (and much of the populace) looked down on them as hopelessly backward, uneducated, and steeped in outmoded religious superstitions. They may have been easily fooled or manipulated into believing their children had died. They may even have been coerced into giving up some of their babies 'for their children's own good.'

I have seen wildly varying estimates of the numbers of babies 'lost' ranging anywhere from 60-5000! In 1996, the Israeli government formed a commission to investigate these claims and stories surfaced in the press about possible collusion on the part of doctors and the government. In a famous case reported in the international media in 1997, DNA tests appeared to prove that a woman in Sacramento California was actually the 'lost' daughter of a Yemenite woman in Israel. Later, the forensic institute which tested them reported that the first set of tests was in error and

that the two were actually not related. However, the two women, Tsila Levine and Margalit Omessi, continue to believe they are mother and daughter based on their family resemblance and histories.

At this time, the evidence seems inconclusive regarding whether the Israeli government was officially involved in these alleged kidnappings/adoptions or whether they were the initiative of private doctors and hospital personnel. It appears unlikely that in a small country like Israel these schemes would go completely unnoticed. It does seem clear that at least some babies were separated from their unwilling and unwitting families and placed with other families, probably with money changing hands. The condescending attitude of the Israeli government towards the recent Yemenite immigrants, is, unfortunately, well documented. The children of these immigrants were often lured (and sometimes forced) away from their parents, sent to schools to teach them Hebrew and to assimilate them into secular Israeli society. The transit camps were eventually closed and the families were relocated to permanent housing. In some instances, permanent housing was build on the site of the camps without providing any real means of employment for the families, leading to long-term poverty, crime, broken homes, and a sense of alienation among the population. It wasn't until the time of the SHAS party that the Sephardic population in Israel regained some of their self-respect and began pressing the government on these issues.

The subtitle of this book may also have a more personal resonance for the author. The book is dedicated to her late brother, Ze'ev. She describes how hard it was for her to complete the book after his death; harder still to write about "the sick Kobi, and to imagine you in his image." One can infer that her late brother had succumbed to leukemia and had served as a model for her character Kobi, and perhaps speculate further that their story involved finding some long lost relatives through their search for a bone marrow match for him. It would certainly lend some added poignancy to this already touching tale of paths diverging and reconnecting.

The Miracle Next Door

By Malka Adler and Yona T. Yacobowicz, Targum Press, 2004

Non-fiction

(Includes a CD of the women's group Tofa'ah)

Talk about needing a village to raise a child!

In December of 1994, after 6 years of longing for a child of their own, Yona and Chaim Yacobowicz gave birth to a baby boy with so many medical problems that he was not expected to survive his first few months, much less his first year. Yisroel Meir (named after the Chafetz Chaim) has a double diagnosis – that of Stickler's Syndrome and Pierre Robin Syndrome -which causes him to be born with life-threatening heart, lung, and airway problems as well as physical deformities such as club feet and cleft palate. He is kept alive in the pediatric ICU of Sha'are Tzedek Hospital where the parents take up residence around the clock. Little 'Yissie' is finally discharged to the Yacobowicz's home in Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem, at the age of 5 ½ months, but not before his bedroom is made into a miniature ICU and his parents are taught how to care for him and his equipment and learn how to revive him if he stops breathing. Yona and Chaim are

warned that they will need a lot of help from ‘volunteers’ as well as professional staff in order to ensure their baby’s survival. Yona approaches her neighbor, Malka, who lives across the hallway in her building, to ask her to be one of Yissie’s extra helpers. After only brief consideration, Malka, now already a grandmother, agrees to be trained in managing Yissie’s care and soon becomes a steadfast helper to Yona and companion to Yisroel Meir. The other mainstays of young Yissie are his grandmother, Margie, and the members of Yona’s women’s band, Tofa’ah, most especially Lois who accompanies Yissie on nearly every doctor’s visit, surgery, emergency, and hospitalization that he undergoes. And then there are the volunteers. It seems all of Bayit Vegan, if not all of Jerusalem, helps the family to manage this challenging child and his physical, financial, and spiritual needs. Yissie’s dedicated doctors, nurses, and therapists are there at all times of the day and night as well, pitching in to help this miracle baby survive and thrive.

Malka and Yona have collaborated to tell the story of Yissie’s survival by ‘reliving’ their experiences through their collective memories as well as both of their diaries, poems, and correspondence. I lost count of the number of times they describe rushing him to the hospital after he becomes ill with fever, infection, or cessation of breathing. The sickly baby can hardly be seen among his tubes, dressings, and machines. Transporting him anywhere is a major activity. Even holding him and giving him a bath takes planning and extra hands. Not an easy situation for anyone, especially for Yona, who suffers from painful and debilitating rheumatoid arthritis. But somehow they draw on their own inner resources and faith and the help of the community so that Yissie can survive and thrive. Most importantly, perhaps, is their ability to see the baby behind the equipment, to form a strong emotional connection with him. And they sense him strongly connecting back. The emotional and spiritual reserves needed for this task are enormous and unending. Their tremendous *emunah* and positive outlook are the backbone of this tremendous enterprise.

At age 4 Yissie is enrolled in school at the Alyn Hospital for Pediatric Rehabilitation in Jerusalem where he finally has the opportunity to learn to read, fingerpaint, and socialize like other little boys his age, using specialized mobility equipment and a communication board to express his needs. The emergencies are by no means over, but he and his family are able to get into some kind of (I won’t say ‘normal’) routine. By his 6th birthday party, Yissie is free from his tracheostomy (breathing tube) and gastostomy (feeding tube), allowing for more physical mobility. The last photo in the book is of 9 year old Yissie, who appears to be thriving, looking after his little brother Eliyahu who was also born with Stickler’s Syndrome as well as Downs Syndrome.

May we all be blessed with healthy children and grandchildren who give us and Am Yisrael plenty of *nachas*! If we, however, have to face even a fraction of the circumstances of these two families, may Hashem bless us with the patience and love and community help to see us through.

Laura Paley