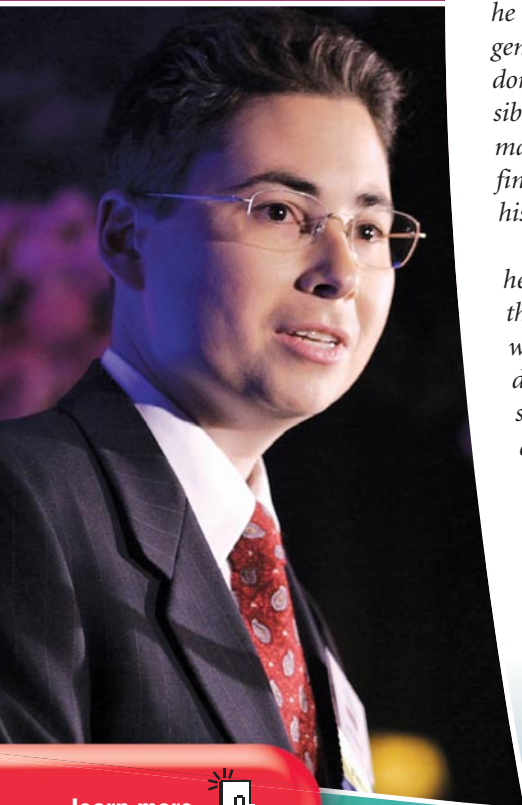


Diagnosed with leukemia at age 22, Jay embarked on a mission to save his life. Today, he saves the lives of others.



Jay Feinberg: Healing

BY YAFFA KLUGERMAN

The shock was so great that Jay Feinberg, 22, felt himself slipping into a dreamlike state as the hematologist related the devastating news: Jay, who had made a doctor’s appointment to investigate some flu-like symptoms, had leukemia, a life-threatening disease. His only chance for survival was a bone marrow transplant, for which he required a genetically compatible donor. Since his two siblings were not matches, he needed to find a stranger to save his life.

“I could hear the hematologist telling me this,” Jay remembers, “but I wasn’t exactly grasping all of the detail. I just shut down. But the next day, it seemed pretty clear what needed to be done.”

Jay learned that Jewish patients face a special challenge when searching for bone marrow donors: Because of the Holocaust, many Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of European descent) had their bloodlines severed, making suitable donors scarce. After being diagnosed, Jay, together with family and friends, founded the Gift of Life Jewish Bone Marrow Foundation,

and encouraged the Jewish community to be tested for bone marrow compatibility. Thousands of Jews gathered for massive screenings to try to save Jay’s life.

Four years later, with his condition deteriorating, Jay proceeded to arrange for a transplant using bone marrow from someone who was only a partial match. Yet one last drive was organized in Milwaukee, where the last person tested, a teen by the name of Becky Faibisoff, turned out to be a perfect match.



Jay with his bone marrow donor, Becky Faibisoff

Today, Jay is alive and well, and is the director of Gift of Life, which has saved over 1,500 lives and maintains a registry of over 120,000. We think Jay’s accomplishments are matchless, which is why we were eager to speak with him.

BABA: Hi, Jay. After you were diagnosed with leukemia, what was your reaction?

JAY: I was pretty shocked. Like most college kids, I felt like I was invincible and out to make my mark on the world. I never would have imagined in a million years that I would be diagnosed with what had the potential to be a fatal disease.

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With Hope

BABA: How did you maintain your sense of hope?

JAY: It came from a source that I would never have imagined. I found that thousands of people throughout the United States and the world who were complete strangers came out to help save my life. I discovered that I had friends in places I would never have imagined. That's what gave me hope. I realized I couldn't feel down about my situation when there were so many people willing to help a complete stranger.

BABA: How do you counsel people who are looking for donors through Gift of Life?

JAY: I reinforce to them that it's important that they see the light at the end of the tunnel. It's an extremely rough process to search for a donor, have a transplant, and then recover, but I feel strongly that you have to have hope. I believe that hope is most definitely a healing force, and that it plays a very important role in transplant success.

BABA: What are your hopes for the future?

JAY: My hope is that no patient should ever die for lack of a donor. When I was diagnosed in 1991, I was given less than a 5 percent chance that I would find a match, because there were very few Jewish donors in the registry. Today, we are capable of finding matches for a little over 70 percent of Jewish patients who need donors for transplants. It's dramatic, and it makes me feel good to know that we've come such a long way. What started as a grass-roots effort to save the life of one person has really turned into a tremendous mission to save everybody who needs transplants.

BABA: Do you have a favorite Jewish quote?

JAY: Yes, "To save one life is like saving the entire world." We hear this from every single donor who donates. It really is like saving the world.

BABA: Thanks, Jay, and happy Purim! 🍩



Jay swabs cheeks at a bone marrow drive.

ZOOM IN

How to Help

You must be at least 18 years old to have your bone marrow screened, but here are some other creative ways kids can help Gift of Life:

1) Coordinate a fundraiser. One teen raised funds for Gift of Life by holding a basketball lay-up contest. Twins Brooke and Emily marked their *b'not mitzvah* by holding a "Bring or Bake Sale," giving people the option of donating home-baked or store-bought goods for a sale. Use your imagination to create an original way to help raise funds.

2) Make information available. At your bar or bat mitzvah, include a description of Gift of Life at each place setting and centerpiece.

3) Plan on celebrating your 18th birthday with a cheek swab—the way to check bone marrow compatibility.