

## An abiding faith: Son's transplant tests family

JANE LEFKO  
 Freelance writer

**W**e have a bag at the door, always packed to grab when David needs to be hospitalized," Katriela Isaacson says matter-of-factly. "Every fever can be a cold, a bacterial infection, or a sign of rejection. He can go from a normal temperature to 106 degrees very quickly."

David, the 4-year-old son of Katriela and Dr. Jonathan Isaacson, is the recipient of a liver transplant. On average, he is hospitalized every three months.

David's mom says she "knew something was wrong" almost as soon as her son was born. When he was 10 days old, he was jaundiced and bleeding from his umbilical cord. By the time he was correctly diagnosed at age four months with biliary atresia, a condition where the ducts that drain bile from the liver are blocked or missing, David's only treatment option was a liver transplant.

A good candidate because he was young and otherwise healthy, David was placed on a transplant list.

"Only 25% of those needing liver transplants get them, Katriela points out. "Seventy-five percent die while waiting for organs. But a single cadaveric donor can potentially impact 50 people."

Fortunately, Katriela was a perfect match, able to donate one-third of her liver to her son. "We are very lucky that no one needed to die to give David a liver," she says softly.

For three months, as she underwent her own difficult recovery, Katriela and her husband, a clinical psychologist, made the two-hour-each-way commute from their home in Irvine, Calif., to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. When baby David was finally able to leave



David Isaacson, above, with Dr. Vera Hupertz of The Cleveland Clinic's pediatric liver transplant program. The Isaacson family, clockwise from top right, Katriela, Yishai, Eliezer, David, Jonathan and Avigdor.



the hospital, he was attached to machines and required tube feedings every two hours and medications every four hours around

the clock.

Then in August 2003, the Isaacsons received word that the Cedars-Sinai

pediatric transplant center would close. Their physician suggested they check out The Cleveland Clinic transplant center. By November of that year, the family had relocated to Northeast Ohio, eventually buying a house in South Euclid.

"We live on an emotional roller coaster. These episodes stop you in your tracks," says Jonathan, who explains that David's immune system is "deranged," continuously attacking his own body. He cannot fight viruses. There is the constant tension between preventing rejection of the transplant and opening the door to PTLD, a disease where cells become cancerous.

Sometimes David's throat is so inflamed he cannot swallow. Once, he stopped breathing.

When David's case was presented recently to 5,000 professionals at a conference, none had seen a case like it, and no one had any novel treatments to suggest.

Nevertheless, the Isaacsons are grateful for the care David has received and are anxious to give credit to all the doctors who have treated him. When their eldest son Avigdor became a bar mitzvah recently at Chabad on Green Road, many of these doctors attended.

"They are our friends," Katriela says.

The couple's lengthy list of heartfelt thank-yous also includes Bikur Cholim of Cleveland and The Friendship Circle, whose teens regularly visit the close-knit Isaacson boys, Avigdor, Eliezer, 5, who is "more like a twin than an older sibling to David," and six-month-old Yishai.

The rabbis and rebbetzins of Chabad are a constant source of sup-

port, says Philippine-born Katriela, who grew up in California, where she met her husband "on a traditional *shidduch* date" (a meeting arranged by an intermediary for the purpose of marriage).

The Isaacsons cope by simplifying. "We cook in bulk and freeze food for when a crisis hits. We no longer have 15 people over for a Shabbat meal. We share one car, and it's paid for," says Katriela, who explains that the couple each works half-time and home schools the children.

Everything, they realize, is a trade-off. When they took their kids to an "Uncle Moishy" concert, they worried that David might be exposed to colds in the crowd.

"We gave him a transplant so he could live, not live in a bubble," says Katriela.

#### **Katriela Isaacson**

David's condition has necessitated certain choices. Vacations are almost out of the question because they must always be near a transplant center. At one point, Katriela became a medical transcriber "to understand medical lingo." Currently, she serves as assistant to her husband, who has recently opened The Marriage Clinic, a practice dedicated to saving troubled marriages.

"We spend lots of time together. We focus on giving each other what we need," says Jonathan, who notes that they are practicing what he preaches.

The Isaacsons are happy with their move to Cleveland, especially with the Jewish community here. While they may have traded mild winters for snowy ones, they find the lack of traffic a plus.

"We always try to see the good in everything. If we had stayed in Cali-

ornia, we wouldn't have been able to afford a house like this on a doctor's salary," says Katriela, smiling.

Religion is central to the Isaacson family. David, his parents say, prays before procedures and takes his sid-dur, wrapped in a plastic bag, into

surgeries with him.

"We accept every day as a gift. We know *Hashem* (G-d) is watching over us," says Jonathan. "We see David, and he is so spiritual. He lets these things roll off his shoulders. Why shouldn't we?"

