

JEWISH LINK



Linking Northern and Central NJ, Bronx, Manhattan, Westchester and CT

Issue #529

April 18, 2024 | 10 Nisan, 5784

LifeSpark: Helping People Live Their Best Lives With Parkinson's Disease

By Jewish Link Staff

When you ask Rabbi Gruskin how he's doing, he will answer, "Amazing! Baruch Hashem! Fantastic!" It is a remarkable response, considering Rabbi Gruskin has been battling Parkinson's disease for the last 18 years. But, he always says, "I'm living! Thank God!"

Back in 2009, Rabbi Gruskin started to exhibit signs of the disease. After a visit to a specialist, he was prescribed medication but refused to take it, a response that is not unusual after receiving such a diagnosis. Gruskin had witnessed the trauma the disease had inflicted on his father and, after watching his rapid decline, decided not to pursue treatment nor even accept such a diagnosis.

But three years later, it was clear that something had to be done. The Parkinson's disease that Rabbi Gruskin refused to acknowledge was taking its toll on him, rendering him unable to walk even the shortest distances. So, his family intervened and took him to see a neurologist who, once again, immediately diagnosed Rabbi Gruskin with Parkinson's disease.

While in the waiting room of a doctor's office seeking a second opinion, he spotted a brochure for the World Parkinson Congress being held in Montreal in 2013 and decided to travel there with his son to learn more.

According to its website, the World Parkinson Congress, held every three years in different locations around the world, "is an international forum for dialogue on the latest scientific discoveries, medical practices and care partner initiatives related to Parkinson's disease."

The conference was eye-opening and a game-changer for Rabbi Gruskin regarding how he now viewed his disease. He felt hopeful and educated and realized that he could live a meaningful and fulfilling life despite the ravages of the disease.

While Parkinson's is a chronic disease with no cure, Gruskin learned that a person diagnosed with it must exercise regularly. Thus, he embarked on an intense exercise regimen, closely monitored by his family, for one hour a day, six days a week. "My kids were my cheering squad," he said, appreciating how imperative that support system was to his daily life.

The conference played an instrumental role in pulling Rabbi Gruskin out of a dark place and showed him that he was not alone. It helped him regress some of his symptoms and inspired him to establish LifeSpark, which he founded in 2016 and which has since helped thousands of people like himself. He brought 28 people with him to the next World Parkinson Congress, held in Portland, Oregon, because he wanted them to experience that same profound sense of hope and positivity that he had felt. "Thank God I have one thing that I really feel very proud of: Whenever someone is diagnosed, the first thing they do is call LifeSpark."

With its Wellness Center based in Lakewood, LifeSpark supports patients, families and caregivers, sometimes in person and sometimes virtually, from the first phone call. LifeSpark Patient Liaison Paulette Laniado said, "We pride ourselves on the fact that every person who calls receives a phone call back within 24 business hours. People are suffering, and sometimes it takes tremendous courage to make that first phone call." Laniado called LifeSpark "a camaraderie and people know they are not alone."

Parkinson's, explained Rabbi Gruskin, affects so much of the body and mind, causing many symptoms that affect all body areas, from movement and balance to gastrointestinal functioning. Because of decreasing dopamine levels, people with Parkinson's can often experience severe anxiety and depression as well.

LifeSpark has a comprehensive roster of specialists to help carefully guide those suffering from ailments related to their disease. LifeSpark ensures that all its patients are paired up with a neurologist who specializes in movement disorders and who creates appropriate treatment plans for individuals with the disease.



All LifeSpark's referrals specialize in Parkinson's, including GIs, urologists, dermatologists, nutritionists, therapists, speech therapists, OTs, PTs, etc. "All our referrals are hand-picked, and every doctor, therapist or other medical professional has been researched extensively," said Laniado. "Once we feel 100% confident that we would feel comfortable sending our own family members to a professional we have researched and vetted, then we place them on our list to refer them out."

"We also like to have a wide variety of medical professionals at our disposal because we realize everyone has a different personality and needs a different type of practitioner. So, we tailor our referrals to our patients," she added. "We form and maintain re-

lationships with these professionals to the point where, if we have a patient who needs to be expedited to an appointment, we can facilitate that."

LifeSpark sends out a newsletter bi-monthly that contains a wealth of information, including the latest drug trials, research and other information and guidance from medical professionals.

LifeSpark also holds a monthly virtual event featuring professionals and topics relevant to its members. During these events, members can ask questions to these experts without having to wait months to see them. The next event, "A Golden Opportunity," will be held on May 5, where three renowned doctors will give a short presentation followed by a question-and-answer session. Dr. Gregory Alfred, MD, FAAEM will address Parkinson's and hypotension; Dr. Hanna Bresler, DMD will cover dental issues and Parkinson's disease; and Dr. Howard Tornopsky, PD will discuss how to improve stiffness and gait for people with Parkinson's disease.

The LifeSpark Wellness Center offers patients separate men's and women's group exercise classes that complement their regular physical therapy and are specifically geared toward people with Parkinson's. Exercise classes at the center can be attended in person or via Zoom, and caregivers are encouraged to join in as well.

In addition to the many resources and events LifeSpark provides for its patients, it also has many resources and support for caregivers since Parkinson's is a disease that affects the whole family. The center even holds special events for caregivers a few times a year, as well as a yearly shabbaton packed with education and plenty of opportunities for relaxation.

To learn more about LifeSpark's upcoming events or how they can help you or your loved ones, visit www.lifesparkpd.com