

## What's in Your Wallet?

# That Ominous Organ-Donation Card

by Melanie Weiss

Sitting at my parents' kitchen table right after I got back from a year of study in England, my mother handed me a health care proxy form to fill out. (She's a social worker, in the middle of a state-wide campaign to raise awareness about instructing others how you want to be treated should you be incapacitated.) Page two required me to sign on the dotted line to donate my organs, and I stopped short. Although I've called myself a Conservative Jew my whole life, it's only been a year that I've started to pay closer attention to how Jewish law views what I classify as "The Important Stuff." Matters pertaining to the end of life—especially when the life in question is mine—certainly qualify as "important." "Hey. What's the official halakhic deal with organ donation?" I asked, only to be reminded that, especially with a year in a British Jewish Studies department under my belt, *I* was the resident expert on issues of halakha. If I didn't know, it was up to me to find out.

I started my search for halakhic organ donation information the way I start my search for a good feminist bookstore: I googled. And I discovered that there are serious reasons—for a Jew and for a woman—to consider becoming an organ donor.

Don't we have to get over our ghoulish anxieties about our own mortality? Aren't Jewish women obligated to consider being donors both because of moral imperative and because of Jewish law about saving a life? The Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Women of Reform Judaism have co-sponsored a pamphlet, available online and in Reform congregations, called "Matan Chaim: The Gift of Life," urging organ donation. The pamphlet speaks of the Jewish obligations to saving a life at almost any cost. "Matan Chaim" doesn't, however, speak to the real nuts and bolts of halakha. Neither does the "National Sabbath Kit" provided by Transplant Awareness, Inc., a national nonprofit organization [www.transplantawareness.org], although the kit does address Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews.

The first result to pop up on Google was HODS, the Halachic Organ Donors Society, which both spreads the good word and makes actual connections between potential donors and recipients. There are important reasons (for Jews, for women) to arrange to donate our organs after we die, yet the misconceptions about issues of organ donations are both widespread and, oddly, entrenched. (One rabbi has described the idea of a so-called Jewish prohibition on donation as "the most successful *bubbemeise* propaganda campaign of all time.") These misconceptions turn out to account for a large part of Jews' resistance to Jewish organ donation; on top of this, we—just like other people—resist facing the thought of our own mortality.

The HODS website (www.hods.org) goes into specific areas of Jewish law that might have stopped religiously observant Jews from considering organ donation, including *nivul hamet* (the prohibition against needless mutilation of a cadaver) and *halanat hamet* (the prohibition against delaying a burial) and weighs them against *pikuach nefesh* (the commandment to save lives). Orthodox rabbis and those of other denominations find that the commandment to save a life outweighs other laws—or doesn't even come into conflict with them in the first place.

Womanshealth.gov, run by a subsidiary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, notes that the number of people waiting to receive organ transplants rises each year, even though, according to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN), there has been an increase in organ donation from 4,080 in 1988 to nearly 25 times that today. The number of people who die every year in the U.S. while waiting for a healthy liver, lung, heart or kidney reaches well over 5,000—a number especially horrifying given that these desperately ill people know exactly what could save them; there is no mystery diagnosis in these cases, just a clearcut need, but insufficient resources to meet that need.

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**Why it matters—as a Jew, as a woman—that your **body parts** live on after you.**



# Jewish Moms, Chinese Daughters

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children to be well-grounded, and in a Caucasian family where they do not look like us, I needed and wanted to find a way. So I decided that through our religion they would hopefully feel more of a connection," she explains in an e-mail message. "They will both have a bat mitzvah."

Rosenkrantz is making an effort to ensure that her daughters

are linked to their Chinese heritage as well. "We stay connected to other families who have adopted from China," she says. "We have Asian influences in our home, especially artwork. I have a book collection myself that the kids will share as they get older, that have to do with China and/or Chinese adoption. I bought books for the kids on China that were age appropriate. We celebrate Chinese New Year."

With her husband, Lisa Gibbs is raising two daughters, 10 and five, both adopted from China. Uncomfortable with the egalitarian Conservative synagogue they initially belonged to in Brooklyn, Gibbs—who attended yeshiva until eighth grade—switched her daughters to a Jewish cultural program. Gibbs reports in an e-mail, "While I am somewhat sad that [her daughter Basya] will have a less traditional Jewish upbringing, I like the program there far more in terms of Jewish

ethics, and I notice that they are doing far more in the area of Jewish identity.... She has even decided that she likes learning Yiddish—and this is after refusing to learn Chinese, and hating Hebrew at Hebrew school and Spanish in public school! Somehow this school has made learning Yiddish a positive to her!"

Gibbs adds, "I want them to feel REALLY Jewish and REALLY Chinese, not some watered-down version." Her five-year-old, Mira, takes Chinese dance class and watches Chinese language and song tapes.


For other parents whose adopted Chinese daughters are still quite young, there is an almost touching faith that by the time their girls are older there will be no doubt about their place in the Jewish community.

Debbie Halperin, living in Suffern, New York, has a three-year-old daughter from China, and an 11-year-old daughter from her first marriage. "The little one goes to synagogue for nursery school," she says. "Laci loves being Jewish. She loves Hanukkah, she knows the prayers for Shabbat. She's a Jewish girl through and through. She's part of the Jewish family. She'll have a bat mitzvah and be married under a huppah." Halperin, 42, is a founding member of a Jewish/Asian adoption group that recently celebrated its third Hanukkah party.

Ultimately, of course, little matters other than the bonds that have formed between mother and daughter.

"She's been enriched by the Jewish element, and I've been enriched by the Chinese element," notes Hipsh. "It's all good."

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*The Chinese adoption community frowns on Jewish day schools. "They felt she wouldn't be around a lot of other Asians."*

## That Organ-Donation Card...

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Women donors are far outnumbered by men. According to OPTN, there have been 39,218 organ donations by women since 1988—less than half of the 97,679 total donations. In fact, in almost every year for which data exists, the number of men donating exceeds the number of women by over a thousand. Womenshealth.gov makes clear that "finding organ donors can be challenging for minority women," specifically because an organ match is much more likely to work if both donor and recipient are of similar ancestry. Furthermore, size does matter, so it's more likely that a woman in need of a donated organ will find a match from another woman. The simple facts that govern organ transplants mean that Jewish women will most likely match with Jewish women. So: Want to save a Jewish woman's life? Sign the forms—in some

states they come with your driver's license—to become an organ donor.

It's clear to me now that all Jews should feel obligated (in fact, *are* obligated) to donate organs at death. Feminist Jews have been revolutionary in advocating women's control over our own bodies. Now, in ways most of us have probably never considered before, we have a chance to use our bodies for the good of someone else after we have no more use for them.

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For more information, go to: [organdonor.gov](http://organdonor.gov), [optn.org](http://optn.org) and [womenshealth.gov](http://womenshealth.gov).