

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 *bubbemise* propagandist 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.**

