



WRN Sermon Round-Up – Reproductive Rights

May 2019 – Iyar 5779

A Resource for CCAR & WRN Rabbis

Email/Letter to Congregation — Rabbi Jordie Gerson

Dear GRS Community,

Last Wednesday, the governor of Alabama signed a bill that would completely bar women and girls from seeking an abortion. A week prior, Georgia's governor signed a law preventing women from seeking an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, what was termed "A Heartbeat Bill" that defined life as an audible heartbeat. And on Friday, Missouri passed a similar law, restricting abortion after 8 weeks.

The language used by the Governors of Alabama and Georgia and the Speaker of the House in Missouri leaned heavily on religion. The Governor of Alabama wrote: "Today, I signed into law the Alabama Human Life Protection Act, a bill that was approved by overwhelming majorities in both chambers of the Legislature. To the bill's many supporters, this legislation stands as a powerful testament to Alabamians' deeply held belief that every life is precious and that every life is a sacred gift from God."

The Governor of Georgia wrote: "I support a 'Heartbeat Bill' that outlaws abortions after six weeks....As the father of three, I remember listening to the heartbeats of my girls. We were knitted together in our mother's womb and protecting His craftsmanship at six weeks is certainly worth the inevitable courtroom battle."

The Missouri Speaker of the House wrote: "Our children will remember the moral, not political, vote members took today to protect the voice to the unborn." And the bill itself stated: "In recognition that Almighty God is the author of life, that all men and women are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life."

This is a religious stance that Judaism does not recognize, and a definition of life, that, likewise, Judaism does not abide by. To quote my colleague Rabbi Rachel Bearman:

"The Jewish tradition has more than two thousand years of precedent to offer this conversation- the vast majority of which states clearly that the person who is pregnant is a full life and that the fetus she carries is considered to be a part of her body until it is delivered and is separate from its mother. Within Judaism, the idea that a fetus is not a nefesh, a soul, until it is born is not a contemporary innovation. In fact, it is clearly established in the Torah, Mishnah and Talmud. The idea that those who seek to deny women the right to make their own decisions would justify their machinations with the language of religion infuriates me."

The texts Rabbi Bearman refers to are as follows (her excellent sermon on the topic is [here](#)). From the Mishnah:

"If a woman is having trouble giving birth, they cut up the child in her womb and brings it forth limb by limb, because her life comes before the life of [the child]. But if the greater part has come out, one may not touch it, for one may not set aside one person's life for that of another." Mishnah Oholot 7:6

And from the Talmud:

"Rav H̄isda raised an objection to Rav Huna from a *baraita*: If a woman was giving birth and her life was being endangered by the fetus, the life of the fetus may be sacrificed in order to save the mother. But

once his head has emerged during the birthing process, he may not be harmed in order to save the mother, because one life may not be pushed aside to save another life. If one is permitted to save the pursued party by killing the minor who is pursuing him, why is this so? The fetus is a pursuer who is endangering his mother's life." BT Sanhedrin 72b

Abortion to save a mother's life is indisputably permitted. But Judaism does not stop there. The very definition of life - and the metaphor used to describe it is not the heartbeat, but the breath. Several years ago, my best friend, who was carrying a nonviable fetus and needed to have a D & C, was informed that because of how Ohio defined life (a heartbeat) her therapeutic D & C was going to be defined as an elective abortion. This, alone, was agonizing. As Tamara explains it:

"In Judaism, the dominant metaphor for life is not the heartbeat - it is the breath. In Genesis 2:7, God breathes life into man: "Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Even that final word, soul, nefesh, can be translated as breath. My own rabbi's rabbi, Dov Linzer, explained it to me in this way. The definition of life can also be understood through our definition of death. At the end of life, the Talmud speaks almost exclusively about breathing. Breath was used as an indicator for life. The Shulchan Aruch says to test for a dying person's breath to know whether or not they are alive. So, if death is the absence of breath, life is the presence of breath. Life, personhood, is marked when the baby takes its first breath..."

According to Rabbi Linzer, the presence of a heartbeat, in itself, is not an important Jewish legal marker in determining the viability of life in utero. Even in the strictest ruling, he related to me, the fetus has to be able to live for a day outside of the mother's womb to be considered a viable life. The definition of potential life, he said, "is fully dependent on it being able to be born."

(To read the rest of Tamara's excellent article, click [here](#)).

And, beyond this, there are cases where a pregnancy might yield a healthy child, and a healthy mother, and giving birth is still not in the fetus or mother's best interest. One example: my maternal side of the family carries the Tay-Sachs gene, and I have lost a cousin to Tay-Sachs because of flawed genetic testing. Had my family known the agony that would follow my cousin's birth, they may very well have opted for an abortion. But, under the heartbeat law, that wouldn't have been possible, and my aunt (and thousands of other women) would have been forced to carry fetuses that had no chance of living past childhood, who would then subsist entirely on machines.

But beyond all of this is the issue of bodily autonomy which Judaism is clear about, over and over again. Last week, the Women's Rabbinic Network, an arm of the Central Conference of American Rabbis published this statement (click [here](#) to read it in full), drafted by their writer's working group (of which I am a member). It reads, in part:

"We trust women. The ability God gave to women to carry potential life comes with power and responsibility, and we trust women to carry out the blessings and questions that come with this extraordinary capacity. While not every woman is able to or chooses to have children, it is nonetheless certain that legislation which diminishes women's right to choose thereby questions women's ability to be moral, ethical, loving, and thoughtful about life and its potential."

Though Judaism, is historically, profoundly patriarchal, it has asserted at numerous times throughout our history that human dignity is among it's very highest values -- while also emphasizing that bodily autonomy is a critical piece of what it means to be made in the image of God. To therefore use "Biblical authority" to undermine women's dignity and autonomy is itself a form of blasphemy.

Women's bodies, like men's bodies, derive their holiness from their very "self-ness" - that they are their own, imbued with a divine spark that imbues each of us with the capability for rational thought, and wise choices. Treating each other's bodies as holy means recognizing self-ness, this wisdom, and giving everyone, regardless of biology, autonomy over their bodies. Legislating each other's sacred selves, each other's holy bodies is not just a trespass of these values - it is a gross repudiation of human dignity; it is blasphemy.

B'vracha,
Rabbi Gerson

Rabbi David A. Lipper. – Parashat Emor — Sermon — May 17, 2019

Dark Days Ahead – Reproductive Rights 2019

Our tradition teaches that if you hear a fire engine passing by with sirens wailing, you should not pray, “Please God, let it not be my house burning!” Such a prayer is known as a bracha l’vatala—a fruitless blessing—for to pray that it’s not your home is to invite the fire into someone else’s home. Our Sages strongly admonish us not to offer vain prayers, for they diminish both God and our own human capacity for action. So for what should we pray? We are told to pray for health and safety for all. That no one is injured or in danger. In other words, think globally ... think community.

I’m angry. It’s hard to find peace this Shabbat. This week of news about the erosion of women’s choices and the denigration of women by a collection of men in Alabama has made my blood boil. Our nation and our rights are on fire. And I am dumfounded how a state and a woman Governor could put her signature on a document that rolls back time over 50 years.

Now you all know me, I rarely, if ever, use this public and sacred space, during sacred times, to take a political stand. But there is so much wrong in the actions of so many this week that I cannot stand idly by. The blood cries out from the ground to me this Shabbat. How can we stand while our rights are eroded and our religious choices are denied?

I have been a passionate supporter of a woman’s right to choose since my earliest days. I have stood, together with Dora, on the front lines of protests, protecting women’s access to health care. I have debated, argued, shouted and proof-texted my way through countless debates on reproductive choice. I have provided a voice for the silent, worried and wounded women who have been locked into back rooms and dark passageways. And I am angry that we are still here. No perceived progress. And the fires in our states are raging.

This year 10 states have considered bills that would protect reproductive rights. Only one, New York, passed its bill into law. A second, Vermont, completed the first of three steps to amend its constitution to protect reproductive freedom. By contrast, in the first four months of 2019, 11 other states considered bills that essentially eliminate a woman’s right to control what she can do with her body when she is faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Seven were approved and signed into law. Five of the seven have adopted the most restrictive rule called the “Fetal Heartbeat rule”. Ohio, Kentucky, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and next is Missouri. Reproductive choice is rapidly becoming a medical impossibility.

Although abortion is still technically legal in all 50 states, 43 now have laws with tighter restrictions on access to abortion than allowed under the standard set by 1973’s landmark ruling in Roe v. Wade. And we have a Supreme Court with a Conservative majority who no longer views Roe as settled law. Yes, I’m angry and you should be too.

First, we have to understand the problem. Thank you to Gina Scaramella, Executive Director of the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center who laid this out so clearly. She wrote: “We live in a culture that thinks it’s OK to control other people’s bodies and lives. You should easily recognize this problem because it’s an age-old issue, it’s systemic, and it goes by the jargony nouns of patriarchy and oppression. So who

gets control under these laws? Police and prosecutors. That is unconscionable, and particularly so for women who become pregnant as a result of rape or incest.”

The bill that has everyone talking right now is the one passed by Alabama lawmakers this week and signed into law by Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey. It is the most restrictive and outrageous of all the anti-abortion laws passed thus far. It bans virtually all abortions, does not provide exemptions for rape or incest, and would subject doctors who provide abortions to a 99-year prison sentence.

Proponents of these bills around the country claim that they protect life. What they really do is control other people’s bodies, specifically those of people who can get pregnant. Scaramella wrote: These bills exist on a spectrum that begins with dress codes in middle school, continues with endemic sexual violence, and ends with the elimination of autonomy when someone becomes pregnant and is forced to carry it to term.

The Supreme Court will have the ultimate say in whether any of these restrictive laws are ever implemented. But that doesn’t mean we are powerless in the meantime. As individuals and communities, we can use our voice and especially our vote to promote public health initiatives, to dismantle patriarchy, and to end governmental control of our bodies and personal health decisions. The saddest part of this entire story is that the intended targets of this legislation are those with no options. For the most part, they are underemployed, uninsured, and often less educated about health. They are already skirting the poverty line and have no access to real choices. And state by state, county by county, they are being chased from the health playing field and relegated to the darkness and further imbedded into poverty.

We have been witness to the greatest erosion of personal rights and freedoms in our nation’s history. Immigrants, Muslims, Jews, People of Color, the LGBTQA community and countless others have been marginalized since 2016. And now we can clearly add women to the target of those who would further limit personal freedoms.

Shame on us if we let it continue to happen. Shame on us if we fail to stand up and speak out on this tragedy. Shame on us if we do nothing.

In a world where religion is often pitted against reproductive choice, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to both. We trust individuals to make their own reproductive health care decisions, and we, as a movement, firmly believe that bodily autonomy is a necessity in a democratic society.

So, rabbi, what do I do? Together, we can act to ensure that reproductive rights become a priority today, tomorrow, and for future generations:

Speak out. Evil thrives when Good people do nothing. Don’t wait for someone else to do something. Don’t stand by watching this wave wash over our country. Contact your representatives in Olympia. Let them know that you care about this issue. Reach out to our Senators in Washington. We need pro-choice judges in our Federal courts. There is a battle for the soul of our nation and you are on the front lines. May our passion for freedom and faith guide our actions and may we be able to live our faith and be the voice for those whose voice has been denied.

AMEN

Rabbi Rachel Bearman

We Won't Go Back – Shabbat Sermon

A week and a half ago, Georgia's Governor Brian Kemp signed what was at that point the most restrictive anti-abortion law in the country. This new legislation stops women from accessing abortion after six weeks of pregnancy. On his campaign website, Governor Kemp wrote,

"I support a 'Heartbeat Bill' that outlaws abortions after six weeks. In fact, I am the only candidate for governor to signal support for the bill that was just passed in Iowa. ...it's just common sense to me. As the father of three, I remember listening to the heartbeats of my girls. We were knitted together in our mother's womb and protecting His craftsmanship at six weeks is certainly worth the inevitable courtroom battle."

Because I know that it is impossible to convey capitalization while speaking, I just want to clarify that the "H" of "His craftsmanship" is capitalized indicating that Governor Kemp is speaking about protecting divine craftsmanship.

On Wednesday, the governor of Alabama signed a bill that would completely bar girls, women, and pregnant people from accessing their constitutionally protected ability to seek an abortion. Governor Ivey released a statement that said,

"Today, I signed into law the Alabama Human Life Protection Act, a bill that was approved by overwhelming majorities in both chambers of the Legislature. To the bill's many supporters, this legislation stands as a powerful testament to Alabamians' deeply held belief that every life is precious and that every life is a sacred gift from God."

And, then today, Missouri passed a bill through the House with a huge margin that restricts access to abortion after the 8th week of pregnancy. The following excerpt from that bill makes it clear that the motivation for legislation is explicitly religious.

"In recognition that Almighty God is the author of life, that all men and women are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life... it is the intention of the general assembly of the state of Missouri to: (1) Defend the right to life of all humans, born and unborn [, and to]; (2) Declare that the state and all of its political subdivisions are a 'sanctuary of life' that protects pregnant women and their unborn children..."

In a statement issued after successfully passing the bill, Missouri's Speaker of the House, Elijah Haahr commented, "Today, the Missouri House stood for the unborn... We value the life of every Missourian and... In passing this bill, we took a powerful step forward to show this includes the unborn. Our children will remember the moral, not political, vote members took today to protect the voice to the unborn."

Let me pause here to say that I do not recognize the God that Governors Kemp and Ivey are invoking and that I am unfamiliar with the specific kind of morality that Speaker Haahr refers to. When these politicians speak of religion, they are not talking about Judaism.

The Jewish tradition has more than two thousand years of precedent to offer this conversation- the vast majority of which states clearly that the person who is pregnant is a full life and that the fetus she carries is considered to be a part of her body until it is delivered and is separate from its mother. Within Judaism, the idea that a fetus is not a nefesh, a soul, until it is born is not a contemporary innovation. In fact, it is clearly established in the Torah, the Mishnah, and the Talmud. The idea that those who seek to deny women the right to make their own decisions would justify their machinations with the language of religion infuriates me.

I am a rabbi, a Reform Jew, and a woman, and I am deeply offended by their hubris and their ignorance of our tradition's nuanced teachings and millennia of legal precedents. For more than half a century, the Reform Movement has been publishing statements in support of expanding women's access to safe abortions.

In 1975, the Central Conference of American Rabbis argued that, "...the proper locus for formulating these religious and moral criteria and for making [the] decision [to terminate a pregnancy] must be the individual family or woman and not the state or other external agency. ...[Just] as we would not impose the historic position of Jewish teaching upon individuals nor legislate it as normative for society at large, so we would not wish the position of any other group imposed upon the Jewish community or the general population."

Just this week, the Women's Rabbinic Network issued a statement that reads in part, "We trust women. The ability God gave to women to carry potential life comes with power and responsibility, and we trust women to carry out the blessings and questions that come with this extraordinary capacity. While not every woman is able to or chooses to have children, it is nonetheless certain that legislation which diminishes women's right to choose thereby questions women's ability to be moral, ethical, loving, and thoughtful about life and its potential."

The idea that to be religious one must be anti-abortion is incorrect on every level and reflects a high level of ignorance for both religious diversity and human complexity.

The laws that been recently passed were given titles like the, "Missouri Stands for the Unborn Act," the "Living Infants Fairness and Equality (LIFE) Act," and the "Alabama Human Life Protection Act." But these titles are disguises. These pieces of legislation are not high minded attempts to protect life; they are bare-knuckled attacks on the autonomy and personhood of all women.

Unfortunately, the strategy of using the language of God and morality to limit women and their choices is deeply rooted in the consciousness of Judaism and those traditions that have evolved from Judaism. One of the articles that I read this week provided a link to the website for Alabama's Pro-Life Coalition. I was curious what religious language they were using in their mission and clicked over onto their page. First, I found that instead of a mission, they have a Statement of Faith which explains their belief that the Holy Scriptures were given by God and, "are the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and content."

I personally disagree with their understanding of biblical authority, but their stated belief is one that I know many religious people share, and, in and of itself, it does not explain the work that they are doing. I scrolled down until I saw the most significant bullet point which is as follows,

“Adam and Eve's union as man and woman modeled God's design for marriage and perpetually stands as God's loving and righteous will for human sexual intimacy. Sex outside the marriage relationship as designed by God, is condemned by Him.”

I suspect that Alabama's Pro-Life Coalition is hoping that the casual reader assumes that the organization is referring to Adam and Eve's idyllic life in the Garden of Eden, a time when a man and his helpmate flitted around as they enjoyed a perfect world.

But, I am anything but a casual reader, and I believe that when the Coalition says that Adam and Eve are the model for all relationships, they are actually referring to the expulsion from Eden, when God curses Eve who, in that moment, is called simply, “the woman,” as if to signal that she is meant to represent all women. In anger, God says to her, “I shall greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies; in anguish you shall bear children. To your man is your desire, and he shall rule over you.” (Genesis 3:16)

In *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi writes that, “No biblical story has had more influence on women's lives and identity—and none has been more often reinterpreted through later cultural biases—than the creation of woman in Genesis 2 and the expulsion from the Garden in Genesis 3. The version of creation of humankind in [Genesis 1], which portrays equality between the sexes and their shared reflection of God's image, is typically overlooked in favor of the more ambiguous one in Genesis 2, which is typically read as one in which man precedes woman in time. Consequently, the first woman has been cast by later interpreters as an afterthought: second and therefore secondary in value, not essential to God's plan. She has also been held solely or at least primarily responsible for human suffering.”

When someone uses religious language to limit women's autonomy or personhood, they fall squarely within the legacy of Genesis 3's curse. Additionally, it seems clear to me that when anti-abortion statements invoke Adam and Eve, they are conflating an ancient story about curiosity, maturation, and daring with the real women who will live and die based on their ability to access health care. It is unfortunate that those who so casually reference Adam and Eve often forget the legacy of Adam's first partner, Lilith.

Early on, the rabbis who studied Genesis realized that the creation of humanity appears twice and in different ways in the early chapters of the Torah. In the first chapter, God creates a single creature, *ha-adam*, which is both male **and** female. God splits the creature down the middle, forming a male individual and a female individual.

In chapters 2 and 3, a different account of the creation of humanity is presented. In the second version, Adam is lonely, so God places him in a deep sleep, removes a rib from his body, and then creates a woman **from** Adam who will serve as a helper to him.

The rabbis imagine that these two accounts are not simply versions of the same story but are instead telling us that God created two different women. They identify the second woman as Eve and the first, the one who was created when God split *ha-adam* down the middle, as Lilith.

The rabbi's vision of Lilith is not kind, but it is powerful. In the Alphabet of Ben Sira, a full account of Lilith's story is presented beginning with the moment after she and Adam were split apart. In that text, we read,

“They quarreled immediately. [Lilith] said: ‘I will not lie below you.’ [Adam] said, ‘I will not lie below you, but above you. For you are fit to be below me and I above you.’ She responded: ‘We are both equal because we both come from the earth.’ Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized what was happening, she pronounced the [secret] Name of God and flew off into the air. Adam rose in prayer before the Creator, saying, ‘The woman you gave me has fled from me.’ Immediately the Holy One sent three angels after her. The Holy One said to Adam: ‘If she wants to return, all the better. If not, she will have to accept [a great punishment].’

The angels went after her, finally locating her in the sea, in the powerful waters in which the Egyptians were destined to perish. They told her what God had said, and she did not want to return.”

I believe that Torah is our people’s understanding of creation, and in this foundational text , the first woman tries to assert her equality and the first man tells her that he is in charge.

Dr. Rachel Adler explains, “Genesis 1 is an account of the Creation, whereas Genesis 2–3 is an account of the creation of patriarchy—a remarkably truthful account. The world brought about by Genesis 2–3 is one in which desire is no longer joyful but oppressive....in Genesis 1, they are presented as equals. Both bear the divine image, both are adjured to hold sway...over all the earth’ (1:28). Genesis 2 and 3 tell a darker tale... [In] 2:7–3:20 the term *adam* refers to the man [alone]. The woman is never called *adam* but only *ishah* (woman), ‘for this one is taken from man’ (2:23). Together they are *ha-adam v’ishto*, “the human and his woman...”

The recent push to legislate women’s choices may employ the language of protecting God’s creations, but at the heart of each of these laws is the desire to legally re-establish that idea that a man is *ha-adam*, the creation made in God’s image, while a woman is simply *ishto*, a creature that is man-adjacent and that was created from the bit of God’s image that could be spared from Adam.

As a rabbi, a Reform Jew, and a woman, I categorically reject this interpretation of both gender and religion. We do not have to return to this brokenness. We can do so much better than this.

I’ll conclude with another excerpt from the recent statement from the Women’s Rabbinic Network: "We believe that pro-choice is pro-gender-equity. At this moment in time, we must ensure the equal rights of women. Without the ability to control our own bodies, women are not free, not equal. After millennia of various forms of subjugation, this moment in time calls upon humanity to affirm the equality of all God’s creatures regardless of gender identity and its presentation. Legislation which limits a woman’s right to choose what happens to her body is a continuation of this subjugation."

Tonight, as I stand on this bimah, I call to mind not Eve but Lilith. I ask each of us to open our hearts and minds to her legacy and to reject with confidence and strength any idea that God has prioritized one gender over any other.

I also call on the spirits of generations of Reform rabbis and leaders who have been willing to renounce those parts of our tradition that keep women and people of all genders from reaching their full spiritual potential.

We are the inheritors of prophetic Judaism, I urge each of us to take this mantle onto our shoulders and walk back into the world with pride and purpose.

I call on those of us in positions of privilege to throw ourselves into the fight and to strive to protect the rights of those who are being targeted.

As people of faith, as people of responsibility, we must do everything possible to right the wrongs of our broken world.

Chazak Chazak V'nitchazek. Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another.

Sermon Parashat Emor Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz

Singling Out Women

This week is hard on women.

Parashat Emor, the Parashah we read today, is undeniably bookended by misogyny. The portion opens with a discussion of what defiles the holiness of Kohanim, the Priesthood. Apart from coming in contact with death – even the death of close relatives – a Kohen is defiled through marriage. The Torah couldn't be more explicit in its proscription:

'Ishah zonah v'challelah lo yik'chu v'ishah gerushah me'ishah lo yik'chu ki kadosh hu le'Elohav' – 'They [the Kohanim] shall not marry a woman who is a prostitute or who is desecrated, and they shall not marry a woman who is divorced from her husband for he [the kohen] is holy to his God.' – Lev. 21:7.

In other words, a Priest cannot marry a woman who is considered 'damaged goods'.

While there are surely lofty sections in the portion, we also find a troubling text towards the end. A man, after being caught up in a fight, is found blaspheming (although it is not clear what this exactly means) and is punished by the collective community. Up to this point, this text does not bode well for the freedom of religious expression, it admittedly becomes more problematic further on. 'Now his mother's name was Shelomith daughter of Dibre of the tribe of Dan', the Torah tells us, explaining to the reader (or listener) that the blasphemer was of mixed Egyptian-Israelite lineage. And not only that—the Torah seems to list the mother's precise identity and lineage to shame her publicly. Was her son's moral failing a taint upon her own dignity? The text certainly seems to suggest so as it posits not just correlation but causation between the woman's intermarriage and her son's sin.

Just to be clear: at the beginning of our portion, a woman is shamed for having sexual agency (or at least a romantic history) and so is a woman shamed towards the end of *Emor*. In both cases, a key patriarchal norm has been violated: that of moral and sexual purity. In both cases, the Israelite polity cannot condone these desecrations – they must, in some way, be prevented, punished or excised.

When we visit the commentaries, not much improves. Rashi, citing Tractate Yevamot 61b, tries to offer a redemptive perspective in the case of the *'ishah zonah'*, the 'prostitute'. He defines *'ishah zonah'* as 'a woman with whom an Israelite who is forbidden to her, has cohabited, for example, a relationship punishable by excision (a descendant of the Gibeonites who were converted at the time of Joshua and who were forbidden to marry into Israel for all generations), or a *mamzer* [a product of a forbidden union].'

Instead of explaining away the prohibition in a way that would make us moderns feel comfortable, he explains it away by asserting social hierarchy. There are classes of people, *mamzerim* or *nathinim* (Gibeonites), who are considered defective because again, they have violated some invisible code of purity. Rashi's explanation entrenches a class system and doubles down on the essentialism of the prohibition. Not only is the *'ishah zonah'* an individual who has displayed a moral failing, but she may very well belong to a class of people whose lineage is somehow existentially and irreversibly corrupted!

The commentaries dealing with Shelomith are equally troubling. According to ‘The Torah, A Woman’s Commentary’, most Rabbis shamed Shelomith for her actions, considering her intermarriage promiscuous. ‘Others said the Torah recorded her name in full because she alone behaved in a promiscuous manner, whereas the other Israelite women acted modestly and did not consort with foreign men’, our commentary explains, citing the wisdom of Rabbi Judith Hauptman who draws this from Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah.

Of course, we could flip, spin or reinterpret the text. I tend to read the Torah with forgiving eyes – something that I’ve received pushback on from more critical voices. But what if we don’t read these passages with forgiving eyes but read them with the stark clarity which reveals that the world of the Torah is a man’s world? Maybe we are weary of bending the words of Torah to our will and just see them for what they are.

Cruel words that single out women. That punish and shame women. That decry women’s sexual agency. That circumscribe women’s alleged purity.

Like I said, this week has been hard on women.

I am still processing – and I’m sure many of us are – the outcomes of the Alabama and Missouri votes curtailing women’s reproductive freedom. I do not want to use this time to discuss Judaism’s stance on abortion – I gave a sermon on that a number of weeks ago. What I want to do is to look beyond the legal mechanisms restricting reproductive healthcare and gaze into the heart of Patriarchy. Whether one considers potential embryonic or fetal life sacred or not, a person with inalienable rights or not, may very well not be the only battleground issue in what we are seeing unfold in America today. What is at play is not just the contents of a woman’s womb, but her intrinsic value as a human being, entitled to equality and dignity, made in the image of God. What is up for implicit discussion is the same concern that Leviticus articulates here: the purity of the woman, her body as a moral battleground, her sexuality reduced and bounded and bent to the wills of men.

We must contend with the questions behind the questions. Is patriarchy a natural outflow of religiosity? Who controls the interpretation of Biblical texts and the application of theological language? And by what authority can one person’s moral code impose limitations on another person’s moral agency? What are the ways in which we shame women: for their God-given physiology and their innate and normal human sexuality? These are hard and triggering questions. They often clash and mesh with our personal experiences and individual morality. As individuals, we may make different choices, engage in different behaviors, draw on different experiences. But, as the *‘ishah zonah’* and Shelomith demonstrate: behind absolutist moral pronouncements lies a world of pain.

It is not up to us to judge that pain but to offer balm to the wound.
And it is up to us to reclaim sacred language and holy narrative to this end.

In the Reform rabbinic compendium ‘Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority, Our Jewish Obligation to Social Justice’, Rabbi Emily Langowitz writes the following in her essay ‘What Reproductive Justice Might Look Like’:

“Some would argue that the solution for such an imbalance [regarding the Christian discourse on women’s reproductive rights] would be to fully excise religion from public political discourse. It is my belief, however, that the antidote to a conservative religiously driven political agenda on

reproductive rights is not a call for the removal of faith from public life, but the presentation of a platform of reproductive choice firmly rooted in a different understanding of religious values. As progressive religious leaders, then, we have both the opportunity and the moral responsibility to offer nuanced religious language in discussing abortion and all facets and stages of the reproductive life cycle.”

We can find profound sympathy and engender great respect for unborn life and the sanctity thereof, and even differ philosophically on the definitions of such life, without shaming or punishing women. We can discuss policy and regulation, strategise on how to support pregnant people and build a more just society where infants, children and vulnerable mothers are cared for with equity. We can even make private decisions on what we may choose to do ourselves when presented with such gut-wrenching dilemmas but what we must not do is commit the blasphemy of knowing, judging and condemning.

May we build a world where we celebrate and support women. Where we upend the tropes of Leviticus and the judgments of modern society and where we leverage this ancient, difficult text for compassion and dignity. I will close with Rabbi Langowitz’ words:

“As people of faith, we have a responsibility to counteract the dominant societal narrative that assumes that religion is against abortion, reproductive and sexual health access, and reproductive justice. This means that the work we do is twofold: to speak out and reclaim the public narrative around religion and reproductive justice, and to continue to take action that ensures that all people have the access to the information, health care, and services that will reflect their dignity as creative agents made in the image of God.”

May that be Your will, *ken yehi ratzon*.

God's Secret Name

Rabbi Rachel Bearman

They quarreled immediately. [Lilith] said: 'I will not lie below you.' [Adam] said, 'I will not lie below you, but above you. For you are fit to be below me and I above you.' She responded: 'We are both equal because we both come from the earth.' Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized what was happening, she pronounced the [secret] Name of God and flew off into the air.

-Alphabet Of Ben Sira

IMA*- I'm leaving. Your son, Adam, treats me with contempt and disrespect. I will fly from his reach. Perhaps my absence will remind him that when we entered this world we were one creature. Maybe when the other half of him is gone he will be able to see how much he, himself, is lacking.

IMA- His words are weapons, wounding and destroying. I had imagined a life of partnership, but he has proclaimed himself king. When I tried to explain, to make him understand, he mocked me, sneering as he told me that he does not have to listen.

I feel like my breath and my blood have been replaced with anger and fear. Who is this son of Yours to tell me what You want? Does he not see how much I resemble You? How could he think that his rightful place is between us? How dare he try to alienate me from You.

IMA- Do you know that he has begun to call you Adon**? He is trying to remake you in his image. He seeks to erase my reflection from Your face!

I have made my decision. I leave tonight. Let this brother of mine see that his words and his actions have consequences. Let him understand that if he wants a companion, he must treat me with the respect that I deserve.

IMA- I am certain my brother will twist the account of what happened in Your garden today, but You know the truth. Do not fall for his lies. He will try to make a demon, but You and I both know that I am nothing more and nothing less than Your daughter. That is enough for me, even if Your son is not satisfied.

*Ima is the Hebrew word for mother. In this midrash, Ima is the secret name that Lilith uses when she leaves the Garden of Eden.

**In Hebrew, Adon means lord. It is the root of "Adonai" which means "my Lord" and is often used in the Jewish tradition as a name of God.

Rabbi Jordana Schuster Battis Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland, MA
Kabbalat Shabbat • May 17, 2019 • 13 Iyar 5779
#Hollispalooza: Body, Soul, and Song

נְשַׁמַּת כָּל חַי תְּבָרַךְ אֶת שְׁמֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ

Nishmat kol chai t'varech et shimcha, Adonai Eloheinu

Let the soul of every living thing bless your name, Adonai our God....

כְּאָמַר, לְדָוִד, בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת ה'. וְכָל קְרִבֵי אֶת שְׁמֶךָ קִדְּשׁוּ:

Ka-amur: L'David — Barchi nafshi et Adonai, v'chol k'rovai et shem kodsho.

As it says in the book of Psalms, Let my soul bless God, and let my very innards praise that holy name.

Judaism has never particularly shied away from all sorts of things not typically discussed, or done, in polite company: talking about God, talking about bodily functions, singing in public....

Some religious traditions separate body and soul—or see the body as imprisoning or corrupting the spirit. Ours, no. Torah understands life as the animation of divine breath in our bodies, so that body and soul work in partnership; one cannot do its needed work in the world without the other. Our honoring of the body as a sacred tool for thought and action is the basis of most of our blessings.

Our ability to open our eyes? There's a blessing for that. Our ability to form words with our lips? There's a blessing for that. Our ability to eat, digest, and even (very importantly) to defecate? There's a blessing for that too. Our ability to raise the falling, care for the sick, free captives, teach our children, make bread, see a rainbow, march for justice? There are blessings for those too. Our tradition teaches that our ability to feel gratitude for the gifts of creation is housed within our amazing ability to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell those gifts.

We know that not all of us can do all of those things all of the time, but we honor the body for what it *can* do, even when we are broken. We understand that wholeness is not the same as perfection: we are all imperfect, and even yet, we praise the holy with these instruments we have.

As our Cantor, Hollis Schachner, has taught us on so many Shabbat and holiday mornings, our tradition teaches that we should find opportunities to offer blessings 100 times a day. And, our liturgy begins each morning with acknowledgment of the openings, closings, and functioning of veins, arteries, intestines, and organs that are our bodies. We know that, without them, we would not be able to offer these blessings in the first place.

The kabbalists teach that, when God created the world, God placed the first light of creation in holy vessels, which burst, scattering light among us all, and that it is our job to gather those sparks wherever they may be and to unite them in holy flame.

But, another version could be that, in the beginning, when the breath of God was hovering over the waters, there was chaos until God spoke the first word, “*Yehi*,” “Let there be,” making the first sound.

And the story could go that that sound, God's voice of creation and goodness, found its nesting place in every living thing—and that it is our role as humans—and as Jews—to help each other *give voice*, to offer blessings in music, and teaching, and poetry.

Our ability to make music comes from our bodies, and our first instruments are our bodies. Our babies cry, blow raspberries, clap, laugh, and make the extraordinarily profane sounds that make *us* laugh (and sometimes cry too) in return. We are instruments from the moment of our first breath, which is when our Jewish tradition says that the soul first fully inhabits the body. In fact, the word for soul in Hebrew, *n'shamah*, is almost identical to the word for breath, *n'shimah*, since in our tradition breath and soul inhabit each other.

As a side bar, this is why, when legislators in some states talk about “the religious point” of view about when life begins, we might point out that not *all* religions agree about when life separate from a mother's body is understood to start, nor about what “religion's” priorities are regarding potential and present life. If each of our bodies is a unique and holy vessel of our own unique and holy souls, then having someone legislate what can be done with one's body is problematic from *this* religion's point of view, indeed.

In ancient Jewish tradition, life begins with breath—and breath and music are inextricably linked. Truly, not only are our bodies able to *make* music, the workings of our bodies make each of us a holy symphony in ourselves, each part playing with and off of the other parts.

Even when we are ill and the music is in discord, it is the symphonic interplay among bones, muscles, and organs that allows us to breathe air, beat our hearts, and make music while we can.

This is true of our bodies—and is true of our communities as well. While there are those who *lead* by speaking loudest or most forcefully, I am of the belief that what we most often need from leaders, friends, and strangers alike is the support to find our own music and to lend it, and blend with, the worldwide orchestra of which we are a part. We seek the encouragement to discover and bring forth the music that our own bodies and souls are here to express through our words, thoughts, and deeds. Sometimes, we need the encouragement of someone providing a beautiful model by creating music of their own, other times we need another's caring silence into which we can speak, and, at still other times, we need the song of someone who helps us to sing along.

May this Shabbat and weekend be one of blessing of body and soul for each of us, in gratitude.

בְּרַכִּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת ה'. וְכֹל קִרְבֵי אֶת שֵׁם קִדְשׁוֹ:

Barchi nafshi et Adonai, v'chol k'rovai et shem kodsho.

Let my soul bless all that is holy, and let my very innards praise God's holy name.

Shabbat Shalom.

The Call to the Hard Places: Why I am Pro-Choice

Sermon by Rabbi Joshua Fixler,

October 19, 2018

It's only nine verses from the first calling to the first crisis. The twelfth chapter of Genesis begins. God says "lech l'cha – go forth". God promises Abraham prosperity, and progeny. God establishes a covenant between them. And in the very next verse, we read, "there was a famine in the land and it was severe." The irony! God promised Abraham's descendants this land and the first thing we learn about it is that there's a famine. So Abraham and Sarah set out for Egypt, their exile, and the crises just keep coming from there. Insecurity, infertility, infidelity. Some covenant Abraham receives – a life of trials and hardship. From the words lech l'cha, his life is a journey from hard place to hard place. From our very first moments as a people, we are called to the hard places. The mission of a Jew is to walk towards what is difficult, what is real, what is human – not to shy away from it. The other mythologies of the ancient world were about Gods and heroes – about perfection or the fall from it. But the Torah is a story about people who struggle with the messy stuff of life. The religious project calls us to the hard places. In 1957, Howard Moody got called to a hard place. He was in his first year as senior minister at Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan. A friend had referred a woman to him who was pregnant and seeking an abortion. She was a single mother of three. The only abortionist he could find for her was out in New Jersey, someone protected by the mob. When they arrived together, they were turned away because they did not know the correct password.

The experience was terrifying and shook Moody to his core. In those days, abortion was outlawed almost everywhere in America, and women who did seek the service put their lives at grave risk. Moody saw that "the thousands of women dying from unsafe abortions in the U.S.... were disproportionately poor women of color." He was particularly distressed by the trend where women with money and connections were able to get a "friendly physician or psychologist to deem a pregnancy life-threatening—the only circumstance in which abortion was legal." This was before there was a strongly articulated religious movement against abortion. In fact, in his 1973 book, Moody devotes little space to the morality of the procedure. For him it was a matter of justice, a call to the hard place where women were in real need.

Moody started to meet with other clergy – ministers, priests, and also a number of rabbis. In 1967 they took out an ad in the New York Times, announcing the Clergy Consultation Service. Initially 21 Jewish and Christian clergy offered to counsel women and help them find access to safe abortion services if it was needed. Within six years, their numbers had grown to a network of over 1,400 clergy people, an underground railroad all over the country to help women who needed illegal abortions find them. By the time Roe v. Wade was handed down, it is estimated that the Clergy Consultation Service had helped as many as a half a million women.

I am in awe of these brave clergy people. These men and women defied the law to do what they knew was right. After college, before rabbinical school, I worked for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, an advocacy organization that had grown directly out of the Clergy Consultation Service. I was so deeply proud and inspired by this lineage. In that work, I would speak often about hard truths, including the stories of the men and women of the CCS. Sometimes, people found the discussions shocking, or taboo. Sometimes, people wanted me to stop telling these stories because it made them

uncomfortable. But I tried to emulate these brave men and women – and to hear the call to the hard places.

In the last few years, I have found myself telling these stories less and less. I was recently in a meeting where an organizer noted that Jewish Organizations have not been showing up as much as they had historically in the work of reproductive rights. It made me worry that it wasn't just me who was avoiding telling these stories. Maybe it was lots of us. Even though Jews had traditionally been leaders in this movement, apparently, we are not at the table any more. Maybe we were taking this issue for granted, since 83% of Jews think abortion should be legal in at least some cases. Maybe we have been prioritizing other issues. But in the meantime, we let other people of faith hijack the narrative and claim that there is only one religious understanding of abortion.

I've noticed lately that on so many issues we talk a lot about what we believe, but that we don't talk very much about why we believe. We don't talk about where our passions are rooted in our own stories. And when we fail to do this, our passions come out as sound bites, and we continue to talk past each other.

So with that in mind, tonight I want to share with you why I identify as pro-choice. Before I do, let me offer a few caveats: First, this is not an attempt to tell you what you should believe. I want to share with you why this is important to me – why I care. Some of you may agree with me. Others of you may not. Some of you may have deeply held beliefs about the morality or immorality of abortion. I hope we will have opportunities in the coming weeks for you to share with me why you care. I am not trying to convince you of anything. Rather, I want to open up a conversation by sharing some of my truth. Second caveat, I recognize that this is a difficult subject, and it may touch on a lot of emotions for people. I want to give space for that, and even to allow people to leave if they need to. The challenges of reproductive loss and infertility are real for so many people in this room, and I cannot go any further without naming that.

But I want to talk about it BECAUSE it is hard. I want to talk about it because talking about the hard things is what we are here to do. Maybe it will make us uncomfortable, but the stories of our ancestors implore us not to walk away from the hard things in life, but rather to lean into them.

Let me define what I mean by pro-choice. I think that the choice to end a pregnancy is one of the most difficult decisions a woman could ever have to make. But I trust a woman to make it for herself, her body, and her family. I am also pro-life. I want every baby that is born into this world to be wanted and loved and cared for. I want children to be able to thrive. And I trust women to know the circumstances that will result in this kind of life.

With that said, I pro-choice for three reasons. The first is religious freedom. My understanding of Jewish law is that there are certain circumstances under which a woman would be permitted, perhaps even encouraged to seek an abortion. Jewish law is unequivocal that if a woman's life is in danger, her life takes precedence over the fetus, up until the moment of birth. What concerns me about American laws that limit access to abortion services is that they limit a Jewish woman like my wife's ability to practice her religious obligations. The debate about when life begins is theological – it is not legal or scientific. Judaism understands fetal life as a potential life, valuable but not granted full human status until birth. When people legislate their religious understanding, they impose their beliefs on us. For me, this is a first amendment issue.

But perhaps more pressingly, this is a justice issue. Just like in Rev. Moody's day, laws that limit access to reproductive health services disproportionately affect poor women and women of color. If Roe v. Wade gets overturned and states begin outlawing abortion, we would find that women of means would still be able to access these services. The poor and the marginalized would be forced to seek more dangerous, more deadly versions of what is otherwise an incredibly safe procedure. My Judaism teaches me that we are commanded to protect the vulnerable – the widow and the orphan, and my belief in reproductive justice stems from this calling.

But more than either of these reasons, I am pro-choice because my mother and my grandmother taught me to be. They taught me to be because in the early 1950's, when my grandmother was just 19 or 20 years old, she found herself with an unplanned and treacherous pregnancy. She has given me permission to share her story with you tonight. She and my grandfather were living in Connecticut while he studied at college. They had not intended to start a family until he graduated. And around the time that she accidentally got pregnant, she also contracted German Measles – a illness that is incredibly hazardous to the fetus in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Her doctor who was worried that the child would be at great risk for Congenital Rubella Syndrome which can have devastating results in newborns. He and all of his colleagues urged her to seek an abortion, even though it was illegal. My grandparents were young, scared, and far away from their families. But they also had means. They ended up in Boston. There they found a doctor who helped them find certainty. Even almost 70 years later, my grandmother can still hear him saying, "If you were my daughter, I would not let you carry this pregnancy to term." He got her into the hospital, where they wrote on her chart that she had a miscarriage to hide the illegal act. My grandmother remembers being terrified – of the procedure, of the illegality, of the thought that she might never be able to have children afterwards. But she went through with the procedure. She says looking back that while there was immense fear and sadness, she never once regretted her decision. She did what was right for her. She consulted her doctor, her husband, her God, and she made a responsible choice – even though it meant breaking the law. I am pro-choice because women like my grandmother deserve to make that choice with dignity.

"Nearly one in four women in the United States will have an abortion by age 45." For many, it is a difficult and painful decision. I wanted to share these stories with you tonight because I wanted you to know why I am so fired up these days – why the stakes of national conversations feel so personal and so terrifying. And I also share this because I want this to be something we can talk about. I want us to remove the taboo from something a quarter of women will experience. And I want us to talk about it in here, in our sacred space. But these choices are human, and because they are human they are holy. I want to tell you these stories because I want you and your daughters to know that my office is a safe space for these conversations. That I am trained by the Religious Coalition in all-options counseling. That all of our clergy's doors are open. And I tell you this because I want you to hold me to the highest possible standard. I want you to challenge me to be as brave as the women and men of the Clergy Consultation Service, to speak out publicly against injustice and oppression. I want you to know where I stand so you can stand with me for the challenges we will face. We do not have to agree, but I hope we can find faith in going to hard places together. I hope we can find courage in sharing our stories, in telling each other why we care.

Those of us who care passionately about this issue cannot afford to be silent. We cannot let others speak for us and convince the country that all people of faith are anti-choice. We cannot be afraid to speak of what is hard and painful. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are God's covenantal partners in embracing the difficulties that life will offer and giving strength and support to each other through them. We are called to go where people are in pain and suffering and to bring comfort and relief. We

are called to where there is injustice and bring a vision of a world made whole. On this shabbat I pray we all head the call of lech l'cha -- the call to the hard places.

Kelly Levy

What does it really mean to be Pro-Life?

I have been very fortunate in my life. For 33 years, I have known that women could obtain essentially any job they desire (well, with one major exception, but we're working on that). As I became an adult, I knew that anyone could marry whomever they loved, regardless of gender. And now, we are continuing to understand the broad spectrum of gender identity and gender fluidity, something that has become more apparent as the years go by.

But the one issue that remained constant throughout my life, is that women have had access to safe and all-inclusive healthcare, including access to abortion. Whether you identify as someone who is anti-abortion, anti-choice, pro-choice, pro-life, or any other label that suggests a specific feeling towards abortion, Jewish tradition teaches that medical procedures that can save a life are a necessity.

Over the past several weeks, many states have attempted with unfortunate success to block a woman's right to receive this vital medical care. With the most recent bill passed in Alabama, we are on the verge of a national crisis when it comes to healthcare. Because the fact is, when governments work to restrict specific people's access to certain kinds of healthcare, they actually restrict each and every person. Earlier this week, the Women's Rabbinic Network, an organization I am proud to serve as co-president, released a statement clearly outlining why a woman's right to choose is both a human right, and an integral part of Judaism.¹ Throughout this statement, the writers stated seven points that explain and expound upon Judaism's stance on abortion, as well as why we as women rabbis will firmly stand in support of this crucial healthcare. I want to share a few of those points tonight in the hope that we can better understand the Jewish understanding of abortion.

The Talmud teaches (BT Sanhedrin 32b) Justice, justice shalt thou follow (Deut. 6:20) Where two boats sailing on a river meet; If both attempt to pass simultaneously, both will sink, whereas, if one makes way for the other, both can pass [without mishap]. The pursuit of justice means negotiating between two competing values. By allowing for one to take precedence over the other, both values are preserved. As Jews, we recognize that not every person in this world will agree, but to work to establish a fair and equitable world, we must recognize and compromise with one another. In terms of relating this to abortion, when someone is against an abortion because it conflicts with their values, they themselves should not have an abortion, nor should they try to block others from obtaining one. By giving one person the right to make choices for themselves, it does not harm another.

Our Jewish tradition has wrestled with these questions throughout time. It teaches us that the fully actualized life of the mother is prioritized over the potential life of an unborn child until the time of birth. When, like two ships passing in a river, one must yield, the fully manifest life of the mother takes priority even when the nurturing instinct of burgeoning parenthood may be the opposite.

Judaism has always placed the value of pikuach nefesh, preserving a life as one of the most highly regarded values in our faith. In this statement, it is clear that the mother's life must take precedence because she is the one who's life has become realized. In the Reform movement, and really throughout Judaism, this often refers to not only the mother's physical well-being, but her emotional health as well. In the event that a mother would be unable to care for her child due to financial constraints, mental

health issues, or because she cannot bear the emotional burden of carrying a child, giving birth to a child, and/or then having to place that child in another person's care, her life is at stake.

As Jews, we are part of a long-standing Jewish legal tradition which parses out each individual case. We reject sweeping legislation which attempts to regulate every situation without consideration of each individual circumstance. It is the Jewish way to use the wisdom of tradition to guide decisions in individual circumstances. We trust each woman to draw on her own tradition and make the best decision for herself with the people around her, her doctors, her spiritual leaders, and her own sensibilities in each unique case. We trust every woman to make that decision.

The legislation proposed by Alabama, Georgia, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, and the other states that will inevitably follow remove the option for each case to be determined by the patient and her doctor. No matter what circumstance brings these patients to their physician, they deserve the respect and dignity given to each human being who seeks medical care. Our tradition is very clear on this point: we should always treat others with kindness and never subvert the rights of others because we once did not have that kindness and those rights bestowed upon us.

These are just a few of the points made in the WRN statement; the entire response is available to anyone who wishes to see it. This is also not the first, nor will it be the last statement from a rabbinic organization that seeks to publicly stand up for reproductive rights. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, the umbrella organization of Reform Rabbis of which both Rabbi Folberg and I are members first released a statement in support of reproductive justice in 1929. And today, they issued yet another declaration showing their dedication to upholding reproductive rights, especially those which are outlined in the famous Roe v. Wade ruling of 1973.

But why bring this up on Shabbat? What purpose is served by rehashing the details of problematic and challenging state laws? On Shabbat, we are given the gift of Torah, the foundation of our faith. One of the biggest gifts of Torah is when the portion of the week has much to teach us about the greatest struggles of our current time.

In Parashat Emor, we read about the rules surrounding priests regarding who he can or cannot marry. The text is very clear that a priest, "Shall not marry a woman defiled by harlotry, nor shall they marry one divorced from her husband" (Lev. 21:7). And later, we read about the tale of the blasphemer, a man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian. He gets into a fight with another Israelite man and pronounces God's name in blasphemy. At this point, his mother is identified as Shelomit bat Dibri, from the tribe of Dan. The point of that short narrative is that someone who blasphemes God's name shall be put to death.

More significantly, the commentators have much to say about Shelomit bat Dibri. The mere fact that we know her is astounding as women are rarely given a name in Torah.

Vayikra Rabbah explains that the meaning behind her name is of utmost importance: She was called Shelomit because, as Rabbi Levi said, she was very free with her greetings [to men], saying "Shalom to you," and "Shalom to you." [The name Divri] because she brought destruction (dever) on her son. As my teacher, Dr. Wendy Zierler explains: "She is called Shelomit because she is indiscriminate in her associations, offering greetings and prating promiscuously with every Tom, Dick, and Harry."²

Essentially, this story assumes that a woman who is flirtatious or overly friendly brings about destruction. Much like the beginning verses of the parasha, women who are accused of harlotry are

considered unacceptable wives for priests because they, too can bring about destruction. So, what does this have to do with abortion?

Over and over, women who seek out this medical procedure are stigmatized as whores, women who sleep around, women who cheat on husbands, and more. As stated earlier, no matter what reason a person has to seek an abortion, we are bound by pikuach nefesh to save this woman's life.

But, I'd like to think for a minute about Shelomit and another meaning behind her name. The root of Shelomit comes from shin, lamed, mem, which could mean wholeness or peace. And rather than dever, perhaps Dibri comes from L'daber, to speak. Perhaps this story is a reminder to us all that we have an obligation to speak words of peace. Perhaps by providing all people with an opportunity for safe healthcare of every form, we can bring peace into this world.

This issue is complicated. Emotions are at stake, as well as deeply rooted beliefs. It's not something we will solve or figure out quickly. But I do know this. As soon as we take away a person's right to choose their best course of healthcare, we open the door to take away a person's right to dignity. Let us continue to work together to build this world of love and peace, a place where people are safe, healthy, and full of kindness for all living beings.

Amen, Shabbat Shalom.

¹ This statement was written by Rabbi Rachel Bregman, a member of the Women's Rabbinic Network's Writer's Circle.

² Zeirler, Wendy Ph.D., "A Tribute to the Blasphemer's Mother: Shelomit, Daughter of Divri." Thetorah.com, May 10, 2017.

Rabbi Sara Mason-Barkin
Congregation Beth Israel
Bechukotai 5.31.19
Breath and Heartbeat

Take a breath. Now take another. Notice how your breath brings awareness to your body. Notice how when you breathe deeply, your heart rate slows, your mind clears. A breath in fills us with the particles, the smells, the nuances of our surroundings. A breath out allows us to let the outside go, bringing us back to center, to ourselves. All day, every day, we breathe in and we breathe out without thinking as we go about the mundane business of our lives.

Also involuntary: a heartbeat. Place your hand so you can feel it. The rhythmic beat. The internal, mechanical system that is beyond our reach, but responsible for pumping the life-blood that keeps us moving. The power of the heart is also a deeply reaching metaphor. Deep feelings touch the heart. Anxiety makes our hearts race. Love makes our heart go all a-flutter, while fear makes our heart skip a beat. We reach out to one another, heart to heart, and the rabbis teach that the heart is the seat of emotion.

Over the last few weeks we have watched state governments in Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia - among others - sign restrictive anti-abortion measures, criminalizing people – women -who make the decision to terminate a pregnancy after the detection of a fetal heartbeat – with very limited exceptions. They have ruled that to end a pregnancy after this very early sign of development, usually at around 6 weeks gestation, (which is typically two weeks after a positive home pregnancy test) – is not just immoral, but a crime.

These laws are sometimes called ‘heartbeat bills,’ and sometimes called ‘abortion bans,’ – the one in Georgia is called the LIFE act, standing for “Living Infants Fairness and Equality,” but regardless of how we refer to them, they always refer to setting legal limits on when a person, a woman, can seek termination of an existing pregnancy.

And before I go on... I want to say that I *know* I am wading into potentially uncomfortable territory here. I *know* that we might not all agree on the best course of action and the limits and lengths of governmental policy around reproductive rights. I am not seeking to impose **my** opinion tonight – though I recognize that I do have one. For this reason I am going to choose my words tonight, as you know I always do, with painstaking intention. I hope that we can learn together from centuries of Jewish teaching and explore a perspective on this rising tide of legislation that is solidly rooted in our Reform movement of American Judaism. I hope to carefully and respectfully open up a conversation that might be uncomfortable, but that we are morally, and Jewishly, obligated to begin.

In the story of creation, in the second chapter of Genesis, God forms Adam out of the dust of the earth. *Vayipach b'apav nishmat chayim vayhi haAdam l'nefesh chayah*, And God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and Adam became a **living soul**. It is the act of breathing, the presence of that *nefesh*, that gives him life, that makes Adam the first human.

The rabbis come back to this word *nefesh*, this 'soul-breath' when they examine the difficulties of birth and pregnancy in the Mishnah.

In a discussion of a dangerous pregnancy, they determine that if the mother is having '*makshah layleid*', trouble giving birth, and the fetus is still in the womb then the pregnancy should be terminated for the sake of the mother. However, if the head of the infant has emerged, it becomes a case of '*nefesh mipnei nefesh*,' choosing one soul over another. In other words, one may not harm the child whose head has emerged because it has become a *nefesh*, a being with the same soul-breath that gave Adam life.¹

From this point on in Jewish tradition, the rabbis are quite clear that the life of the mother is paramount until the baby is born. What is less clear, both rabbinically and in modern times is what situations qualify as a legitimate threat to the life of the mother. In other words, does '*makshah layleid*,' 'trouble giving birth' just mean physical difficulty? Does this euphemistic 'trouble' include her mental health, or her financial health, or the way that she became pregnant? Does it account for cases of trauma? Does *makshah layleid* apply to those who are too young or not ready? Does it describe a pregnancy for a wanted baby with a fatal or painful prognosis? Does *makshah layleid* account for every heartbreak, every fear, every gut-wrenching reality that informs so many stories of abortion?

These questions are too detailed, these cases too personal, these situations too enmeshed in the uniqueness of the souls and heartbeats of the living for any sort of clear cut, overarching, 'always' answer.

The rabbinic system of law leaves space for these questions. The rabbis understand that a case by case approach is necessary. Jewish law is not a definitive code but a record of sagely conversations among people who rarely agree. And even today, we offer new explanations and interpretations. Our tradition upholds the holiness of *machloket* – of argument for the sake of heaven, seeing truth in multiple opinions, and allowances for multiple answers. Jewish law knows that one ruling does not answer every question. And indeed, most questions are exceptions to the rule.

And as Reform Jews, we take Jewish tradition – this long history of question and answer and question again - and we hold it in our own hands. We call it the principle of 'informed choice.' It is the acknowledgement that each one of us gets to decide how Jewish tradition will guide our lives, both in our most mundane moments and in the sharpest, most unexpected turns of our

¹ Mishnah Oholot 7:6

individual journeys. We have rabbis and teachers to walk beside us as we each interpret the teachings of tradition for the challenges of today.

Reform Judaism upholds the importance of interpreting moral and religious questions for ourselves in all areas of our lives. And the inherent nature of the question on the table here – the question of how we define an independent life and the moment that it begins – this is a **moral** and **religious** question. It is a question as old as the Torah, a question first answered with Adam's first breath, and still open to Jewish interpretation today.

The Reform movement is unwavering in its approach to this recent wave of heartbeat bills and abortion-bans. Women should be able to make decisions about their reproductive health that is aligned with and respectful to the open-ended nature of Jewish tradition.

In a statement issued by the Women's Rabbinic network, my colleagues wrote: "The ability God gave to women to carry potential life comes with power and responsibility, and we trust women to carry out the blessings and questions that come with this extraordinary capacity. ... legislation which diminishes women's right to choose thereby questions women's ability to be moral, ethical, loving, and thoughtful about life and its potential."²

This is to say that Jewish tradition recognizes the individual circumstance of every woman, and it expects women, in consultation with their personal support systems, to make the right choices for their bodies and their lives.

Those of you who have gotten to know me over the past year may have noticed by now that I am being uncharacteristically impersonal in an effort not to push a personal agenda. I haven't told any stories yet! However. You also know me, and you know by now that every word I say, I say as a mother.

I am a mother who has felt her babies kick from the inside, and who has listened to their tiny fetal heart-buds beat in a darkened ultrasound room. I say this as a mother who has felt the difference between carrying my children in my womb and carrying them in my arms. I say this all as a mother who remembers the moments that they took their first soul-breath, cried their first tiny cries, and lived their first moments as human beings who are separate from me. And I say this as a mother who has made the choice to mold my life and my goals and - to be honest - the wholeness of my being around understanding where I end and where my children begin.

And got to choose to be their mom. My religion supported this choice. My understanding of God's role in my life supported this choice. I am grateful every day that I made this choice.

²<https://www.womensrabbinicnetwork.org/resources/Documents/WRN%20Statement%20on%20Legislation%20limiting%20and%20banning%20abortion.pdf>

I know. I made it personal. But as a mother, it *is* personal.

Though it happens in the public eye, bearing children is *intensely* personal.

Notice your breath. Notice the way the air fills your lungs. Let it out and feel the relief of that release before starting all over again.

Put your hand on your heart. Offer a small prayer of thanks for its steady, steadfast beat.

Life requires both. The pulse of our heart and the pull of our lungs. This answer is not in a lawbook but in our bodies. It's not a bill, but a beat and a breath that work to define our lives with heart **and** with soul.

I haven't yet mentioned this week's *parashah*.

The final chapter of the book of Leviticus, *Bechukotai* gives us a list of blessings, and an even longer list of curses. The curses, punishments for denying God, are gory and upsetting to read. We often refer to this *parasha* as the *Tochecha*, or the Rebuke.

Tradition teaches that rebuke, the act of expressing disapproval or calling out wrongs, can be a *mitzvah*, an obligation. And *Bechukotai* is not shy calling out the people who misinterpret God's commands.

It is time for us to fulfill the mitzvah of rebuke. Morality is not a question for legislators. 'Heartbeat bills' and 'abortion-bans' do not offer us – American Reform Jews – the religious freedom promised to us in the Constitution and reaffirmed by the supreme court. Our religion is clear in its intentional and exacting ambiguity. Until a baby takes that first breath, each situation is wholly individual and rests solely in the hands of a mother, her doctor, and her God.

Because it *is* personal, for her.

Each of us here is blessed with the gift of breath, which we can use to raise our voices.

We are blessed with the gift of heart, which seats our compassion and concern.

We define our lives by the way we use these gifts.

May we do so when it's uncomfortable.

May we do so when it's personal.

May we live our lives guided by the holy words of Torah that **we** are empowered to choose again, and again, and again.