

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.

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

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 whose 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.

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