

## Break All Our Yolks Parashat Bechukotai and Women's Rights, 5779

I want to start today with a small disclaimer. In the course of my teaching today I will be talking about bodies and about some facets of both gender and reproduction that may be uncomfortable for some, and some parents may deem inappropriate for their younger children. If there is information you are not prepared to speak about with young children, or you are afraid may trigger a painful experience for you personally, I want to give you space, without any judgment whatsoever, to excuse yourself for a few minutes.

Recently, I encountered an incredible midrash in a book called *Dirshuni*, a collection of modern midrashim by female, Israeli scholars. This one was written by Irit Koren and is an explanation of how mankind is supposed to walk in the world by starting with our exit from the Garden of Eden:

**וַיִּשְׁכֹּן מִקְדָּם לְגִן־עֵדֶן אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִּים**

**"[So God chased out the man] and placed the angels at the east of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24)**

*The wise women in the Beit Midrash of Bruriah (Rabbi Meir's wife) asked:  
"What caused The Holy Blessed One to impose the cherubim there (in the*

*Garden of Eden)? In case the animals might say ‘Is there a man who understands God without understanding a woman?’”*

*Rather, The Holy Blessed One put the cherubim there to remind the men that the one depends on the other; first, he must fully embrace women, as it says in Genesis 2:24: “And he will embrace and cling to his woman and they will be like one body,” and only after that can he cling to God.*

*And we have already shared that Rav Katina said: In the times that Israel went up on a holiday to roll back the parokhet and noticed the cherubim [on top of the Holy Ark] that were enveloping one another, and they said to them ‘See their embrace before God is just as a man and woman embrace,’*

*Don’t read it as “their embrace,” but rather as “their obligation.” From here we learn that one is required to embrace [the totality] of a woman if they are to embrace The Holy Blessed One, and by doing so, they will discover that they have returned and placed themselves in The Garden of Eden.*

From time immemorial, people have held up the Garden of Eden as a perfect place, a place of safety from danger, of life without struggle, a place in which all could be free and at ease. In Parashat Bechukotai, we read just a few minutes ago

how walking in God's ways and working in connection with the Creator of All

Things can help us create precisely such a place of safety and peace for all people:

וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וּשְׁכַבְתֶּם וְאֵין מַחְרִיד וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי חַיָּה רָעָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְחָרֵב לֹא־תַעֲבֹר  
בְּאֶרְצְכֶם:

*I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone;  
I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross  
your land. [Leviticus 26:6-8]*

What a fantastic image, a picture of a world at complete rest, where we can be untroubled by the worries of everyday life as well as the tragedies and horrors we see throughout so much our world. Even more than this, the Torah spells out how this is possible. One part of the equation is the work we must do in the world, living ethically, devoted to “walking in God’s laws,” (Leviticus 26:3). And hand in hand with that path, insists the parashah, is God’s role in every generation as the One who breaks our yokes:

אֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵהֵיטֵל לָהֶם עֲבָדִים וְאֲשַׁפֵּר מִטַּת עֲלֵיכֶם  
וְאֹלֶךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמְמִיּוֹת:

*I the LORD am your God who brought you out from the land of the  
Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and  
made you walk erect. [Leviticus 26:13]*

When we look around our world, however, there are too many yolks, too many burdens placed on others against their will and without their permission that make their lives difficult. Here in Missouri, we have spent these last few weeks, and indeed the few years before them, watching as an increasing number of heinous, undue burdens have been placed on the women in our communities. Specifically, I am speaking of the ban, passed by the state legislature and signed by Gov. Parsons, on any abortions after 8 weeks of pregnancy as well as the Governor's attempt to block Planned Parenthood in St. Louis, the only abortion provider in the entire state, to renew its operating license.

The facts of these actions speak to a direct and coordinated attack on the rights of women in our state. And to be clear, while these restrictions on health care access will cause incalculable harm to women, transgendered individuals and communities, low-income families, and communities of color most egregiously, make no mistake, they are problematic for all of our rights, freedoms, and choices. These are OUR communities, we are a part of ALL of these communities, and these restrictive and counterproductive actions will hurt all of us. When I speak about this assault on women, it is an assault targeting all people who may get

pregnant, regardless of their gender identity, as well as all the people and communities that support and love them.

This new legislation has no prior legal or medical basis. Eight weeks of pregnancy is a time when many women do not even know they are pregnant. The ban also criminalizes health care providers with a possible 15 years in prison for health care providers who perform abortions, which is about two and a half times longer than the average criminal convicted of rape or sexual assault will serve. And pregnancies resulting from these types of unconscionable sexual assaults would not be exempt from these bans. How can that be justified?! This latest attempt to use trickery, misinformation, and outright lies to delegitimize Planned Parenthood and to try to use legal loopholes to ban abortions in Missouri is simply horrific.

But today, I don't want to talk about the Jewish views of abortion, though they are certainly powerful and compelling, and if you want to learn more about them, the Rabbinical Assembly has put together an entire review of Jewish sources that deal with this issue. I can summarize and say that the Torah, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the vast preponderance of rabbinic commentary agree that while loss of life at any stage is difficult and tragic, a person becomes a full human being

when they are actually born into the world.<sup>1</sup> I think it is entirely possible to be opposed to the idea of abortion and still support a woman's right to make private decisions about her healthcare and her right. These actions don't just criminalize certain actions, they take away basic healthcare choices from millions of our sisters, mothers, daughters, aunts, friends, leaders, and fellow human beings.

What I really want to talk about is the ways in which we support and care for one another, specifically, how we value, validate, support, and assist the women in our world. The main argument put forth in the midrash of the cherubim is that if we want to walk in God's laws, if we want to lead a life on a sacred path, if we want to come close to what is most Divine in our world, we must first care for the women in our lives. We should cherish them, accept them for who they are, value them as equals, hear and believe their stories and lived experiences and never, ever seek to limit, cover, or disempower what is Divine within each of them.

Women in this country, and around the world, still are de facto second class citizens. We know that women still, on average, earn only 80% of what a man would earn for the same work. We have observed that professions that are historically (and incorrectly) associated with women or predominately staffed by

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 24:17, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 72b, 107b, 84b

women, such as nursing and teaching, are drastically underfunded and disrespected. And we have seen, just this last week, that our leaders think it is completely justified to take medical options away from women, to have them forced to carry children they cannot care for into this world, without any plan on how to help those families and children when they arrive,

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed suit against a similar law in Alabama, explaining that these laws would inflict immediate and irreparable harm on patients “by violating their constitutional rights, threatening their health and well-being, and forcing them to continue their pregnancies to term against their will.” Such a treat is terrifying, and I saw that first hand this week the horror and anger felt by so many in the wake of these restrictive measures. Those of you who have followed me on social media might have seen that this past Thursday, and the Tuesday before that, I was standing with thousands of others in the shadow of the Gateway Arch protesting these antiquated and oppressive measures. I heard from activists, medical professionals, legislators, and individuals who simply shared their own stories, and I walked away convinced that there is absolutely no reason to put laws in place that stand between a person and their health care providers

other than to take away their rights, to restrict their choices, and to assert control over their lives.

What happened to a world where we could lie down and not be troubled, as our parashah describes? What happened to our image of The Holy Blessed One as the breaker of yokes? Why to we seek to limit and inhibit others when at the core of our Tradition and so many others is the inalienable rights of free

At about 1:30 pm yesterday, when I was putting the final touches on this sermon, I received a Google news update on my phone that Circuit Court Judge Michael Stelzer had put a temporary injunction in place so that Planned Parenthood would not lose its license, which was set to expire Friday at midnight. When I read the article, it felt like I could let go of a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding. I cried, and felt like at least there was some sanity, some rational process for looking at valid arguments that might take place before we just eliminate choice and rights without fully considering the consequences.

Because the truth is that these lawmakers are not stupid, or completely uninformed. They all know, or assume, that despite the law, they could have access to any health services and procedures they might need, as demonstrated by



Congressman Tim Murphy of Pennsylvania, a staunch anti-abortion advocate who resigned from Congress in 2017 after it came out that he had pressured his mistress to get an abortion. They create these laws because they don't care about the outcomes, only what is politically safe and expedient for them.

But what I want us as a community to realize is the message of our midrash coupled with our Torah portion. If we want to seek lives in closer connection with the Divine, it is way past time we listen to one another's stories and use our arms, our time, our voices, and our resources to support one another. I promise you that each one of you has known someone who has wrestled with the idea of having an abortion. Every person in here knows someone who has had a miscarriage or complications with pregnancy. Every single person in this room and in every other room throughout this country and around the world has someone in their life, who they love, who has had to make difficult and emotionally complicated health care decisions with their doctor. These laws affect all of them and they should enrage all of us.

No one should be able to tell another person what to do with their bodies. Period. End of thought. I do not our state to be the one that leads the charge in destroying the rights of women. I need your help. Every woman, transgendered

person, queer identifying individual need you to take action now, this week, as soon as possible. Call the Department of Health and Senior Services at (573) 751-6001, and tell Director Randall Williams to get out of Planned Parenthood's way. Call Governor Parsons at (573) 751-3222 and tell him to cease this assault on women. Sign the ACLU and Planned Parenthood's petition to make a referendum on this issue in the 2020 election so that the people of Missouri can actually fight for their rights democratically. And most importantly, turn up to vote so that your voice, your freedoms, your body, and your values can be protected.

If we want to live in a world of safety, we no longer have the luxury to sit back and wait for it to arrive. Don't let another day go by without letting the people who are attempting to make our decisions for us, who have their hands on the levers of power, know that we will not give up our rights, nor the rights of those we love, without a fight.

Shabbat Shalom.