

Rabbi Rachael Pass
Repro Shabbat 5785 at Temple Micah

I conceived the night of Rosh Hashanah during my second year of graduate school. I had moved to New York from Jerusalem six weeks prior. I was living in a tiny Manhattan apartment with two other Jewish young professionals, and was working three part time jobs in addition to my full time studies. Mine would have been a pretty cliché abortion situation — a 20-something has an unwanted pregnancy and chooses her career over mostly-single parenting — had I not been studying to be a rabbi.

I fell pregnant while working at my first ever High Holy Day pulpit. I had my first bout of morning sickness in our introductory Talmud class, and my first pregnancy craving during Hebrew Literature and Grammar (I still swear that pickles on pizza is a million dollar idea). I took my pregnancy test on Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, and whispered the blessing “*asher yatzar et ha’adam b’chochmah*, who created human beings with wisdom” when it read positive.¹ That night, I attended a required class Shabbat program at Romemu, where I discovered that morning sickness could indeed happen at night in a shul bathroom. I prayed. And I prayed.

I read every *halakhic* (Jewish legal) and non-*halakhic* writing on abortion I could get my hands on, and found myself focusing on the one published ritual for someone having an abortion that I could find at the time. I consulted the would-be father, and my rabbinic “friend-tor” (friend and mentor). I cried on the phone to my mom. Ultimately, I made the choice using the instinctual wisdom inside myself, heeding nobody’s opinion but my own. And perhaps God’s.

I left our Literary Artistry of the Bible class early on a Thursday afternoon to walk the few short blocks from HUC’s New York campus to the Margaret Sanger Planned Parenthood on Bleecker Street. I took the first Mifepristone pill in a quiet office, sitting across from a doctor who looked a lot like me. The next morning, my Medieval Jewish History class took a field trip to the Met Cloisters. Our professor was late because she

¹ Traditional morning liturgy.

had to prepare her brisket for Shabbat dinner. My morning sickness was still so bad that I could hardly stand. That night, I checked into a hotel because my roommates had friends staying with them, and I wanted to bleed in peace. I live streamed Shabbat services while holding the four Misoprostol pills in my mouth, waiting for them to disintegrate. I bled all night.

A week after the bleeding stopped I went to the *mikveh* (Jewish ritual bath) with ImmerseNYC, a liberal *mikveh* project. I did an adapted version of the ritual written by Rabbi Tamar Duvdevani and published in an Israeli book of modern *mikveh* rituals called *Parashat HaMayim*. I listened to Debbie Friedman's "Those who Sow" on repeat the entire way there and the entire way home. I looked at my naked body in the giant mirror in the *mikveh*'s preparation room and saw every change that that short pregnancy had wrought. I felt weak and I felt strong. I sang to myself because I was still scared. Under the water and above. Under the water and above. Under the water and above. "*Elohai n'shamah shenatata bi t'hora hi*, my God, the soul you have given me is pure."²

The next morning, our class took a field trip to the *mikveh* to learn about ImmerseNYC and liberal *mikva'ot*, because *of course* we did. I asked five of my classmates, now rabbis, to come early, including Micah's own Rabbis Emily Aronson and Vanessa Harper. They were pretty much my only friends in New York and some of the only people that I had told about my abortion. We stood on the corner of 74th and West End on a windy morning with a challah that I had baked and a little bit of honey and finished the ritual together. We dipped the challah in the honey, a symbol of sweeter times ahead. I cried. We stood in a circle with our arms around each other for comfort and for warmth. "*Hazorim b'dimah b'rinah yiktzoru*," I repeated, "those who sow in tears will reap in joy."³

² Traditional morning liturgy.

³ Psalm 126:5.

As you can tell, my experience of having an abortion was *deeply* Jewish, but it was questionably *halachic*. It did not necessarily conform to Jewish law. One could argue that my mental health was negatively impacted by this pregnancy - and using Rabbi Mordechai Winkler's 1913 responsa⁴ on the subject, could *halachically* justify my choice. One could also argue that any pregnancy is a health risk to the host's body, and use Mishnah Ohalot 7:6 to justify terminating. But my abortion was a Jewish experience not because of its compliance with Jewish law; it was a Jewish experience because I am a Jew who lives my life by Jewish values and in a Jewish way.

The life I was leading - and continue to lead - was imbued with Jewish practice, living, and learning. I marked the experience of the abortion using Jewish ritual. The people in my life that I consulted in making the decision were all progressive Jews. And I came to this question of terminating my pregnancy with the inheritance of a pro-choice stance from my mother and her mother before her, inherited wisdom from my Jewish ancestors. It is important that we talk about the permissiveness of Jewish law when we are talking about abortion in America, but I want to remind us, progressive Jews, that we don't rely on Jewish law to dictate our lives. Abortion access can be a Jewish value not only because men rabbis of the past said so, but also because we Jews today believe that it should be. Judaism is inherently multivocal - we have laws, ideologies, theologies, values and practices that span different beliefs and come from different times and places. And that's a good thing! That means that there's space in Judaism for abortions like mine - that were probably not medically necessary, but still aligned with a Jewish way of living.

We don't like to talk about abortions like mine in America, because the Christian Right believes that abortion is murder, and is only palatable in the most dire of circumstances. But we Jews don't believe that. We Jews believe in bodily autonomy and in human dignity. We believe that we are each created in God's divine image, with the capacity both to create and the capacity to *cease from creating*. Rabbi Emily

⁴ Mordechai Winkler, Levushei Mordekhai, Hoshen Mishpat #39

Langowitz notes in her groundbreaking rabbinic dissertation “In our bodies to do it: a Jewish feminist theology of reproductive choice” that God, according to the Midrash (Breishit Rabbah), destroyed many worlds before creating our own, evaluating the creation of *only this* world as “good.” If God could decide that Her previous creations were not fit to thrive, Rabbi Langowitz teaches, we can make that same decision, too, about our own creations. Not because Jewish law dictates it, but because Jewish values support it.

My experience of having an abortion was deeply Jewish, and it was also *incredibly* privileged. I had no hurdles to accessing an abortion except my own qualms and a busy schedule. I walked into Planned Parenthood safely and without harassment. I spoke the same language as all the nurses and the doctor. My health insurance covered the cost of the procedure. My family, friends, and the would-be father were supportive and kind and loving. I didn’t have to travel out of state or break the law. I didn’t have to lie to my workplace about what I was doing. I didn’t have to do *anything*, except make a decision and book an appointment. Just as it should be.

For millions of people with uteruses in our country that is, of course, no longer the case. The overturning of Roe v. Wade did not end abortion; it ended the simplicity, the care, and, in certain cases, the safety of access to medical professionals when ending a pregnancy.

According to the National Council of Jewish Women, “[Maternal death rates](#) are [currently] 62% higher in states that ban or restrict abortion, and babies born in banned states [are] [30% more likely](#) to die in their first month of life. Black and...Native women are about [three times as likely to die](#) in pregnancy, childbirth, or right after giving birth than white women—even though 84% of pregnancy-related deaths are preventable. [Abortion b]ans disproportionately impact BIPOC women and others, those struggling to make ends meet, young people, im/migrants, and trans men and nonbinary people [with uteruses].”⁵

⁵ <https://www.jewsforabortionaccess.org/rabbis-for-repro>

This is not the inherent dignity that our tradition demands every human being be treated with. And we know that our president and his Project 2025 agenda intends to make this landscape even more dire. There is so much work to be done to protect reproductive healthcare that it can be overwhelming. So I will give you three manageable actions to take with you for the coming weeks:

1. The first is to lobby your representative/s to demand the CDC to restore sexual and reproductive healthcare resources to their website, including resources for LGBTQIA+ persons, people living with HIV and other STIs, and contraception resources. This information saves lives.
2. Second, be on the lookout for HR 722, which intends to create a national abortion ban by guaranteeing a “right to life” for “preborn persons.” The text of this bill, by Eric Burlison of Missouri, has yet to be released, but when it is, we must not allow it to pass.
3. And finally, if you are able, donate to the Jewish Fund for Abortion Access or to Keep Our Clinics - both organizations support abortion access across the country, by providing funding and healthcare for those who need it most.

Our Jewish tradition requires that we have access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare, and requires that we have access to abortion when it is necessary or when it is desired. Our tradition promotes bodily autonomy and celebrates the sacred wisdom given to each individual to make choices about our own bodies and our own lives. And we have to do everything we can to protect that autonomy.

In Deuteronomy 30:19, we are taught to “choose life,” over and over again, choose life. In having an abortion, I chose *my* life, to live it the way that I want, to live it in a way that maximizes my personal capacity to do good in the world, and that maximizes my personal capacity to live Judaism and share Judaism in this world.

My abortion was a blessing. And my Judaism embraces blessing.

Shabbat shalom.