

Bilhah speaks:

I never wanted to have children. It was forced on me. I know Rachel was desperate to have a child, so desperate to have one that she said, 'Give me children or else I die?' (Gen. 30:1). Tragically, her words were fulfilled when she died giving birth to Benjamin. But why should I have had to risk my life through pregnancy? I have seen women die in childbirth, screaming in agony after days of labour. I did not want to risk my life but I had no choice. Because Rachel had no children, I was forced to lie with Jacob, then go through pregnancy, seeing my body swell with a baby I had not wanted and suffer the indignity of given birth on Rachel's knees. And then Rachel, not me, was credited as the mother of the child.

If I could have ended the pregnancy I would have. It was not my choice to become pregnant. I loved and respected my body and I felt violated when I had to lie with Jacob. And then I had to do it a second time. My life was at risk through no choice of mine. The sons I gave birth to, Dan and Naftali, never really found their place amongst Jacob's children either. They were never fully mine or fully Rachel's. They were mocked by Joseph. It's true that they are fine young men and in many ways I am proud of them, but they don't fit in.

I do ask myself what it would have meant to have brought the pregnancy to an end, to have had an abortion. Would I have regretted it? Maybe. I know it is no small matter. After all, it would have ended a life before it began. But when they were in the womb, my babies were not yet people, they were more like part of me*. I would rather have lived with the regret than the danger and agony I faced during childbirth, only to have to hand my child over to another mother.

So if you were to ask me, 'Should I have an abortion?' I could not answer for you. I could only say this: 'The heart knows its own bitterness'*. No one else can know what you are going through. It is a grave thing to end a life before it has begun, it is not to be undertaken lightly. But it is your body and you have a right to own it and determine whether or not it should go through a pregnancy and give birth. Our great teachers determined that the life of a mother should take precedence over that of the unborn child*. It is your life and your pain and so it must be your choice.

Rabbi Dr. Margaret Jacobi

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Drawing on:

Talmud Chullin 58a

Talmud Yoma 83a

Mishnah Oholot 7:6