

Parashat K'doshim and Reproductive Rights

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This past week has certainly been a week. Needless to say, May came around and spring really launched into full effect for me. It began with dressing up with my friends for prom, electing a new NFTY Southern regional board, and starting and finishing all of my AP exams. In between, I was studying the MET Gala looks, shopping for college in the fall, and oh yeah, hearing about the fatal outlook for basically anyone with a uterus in the US.

To catch everyone up, a leaked draft opinion from the Supreme Court showed that our justices were largely in favor of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. This landmark case most basically grants pregnant people the right to a safe abortion without government interference. However, Justice Alito wrote: “it is time to heed the Constitution and return the issue of abortion to the people’s elected representatives.” Basically, the argument was that abortion was never discussed explicitly in the Constitution and therefore the previous court’s decision was wrong and that the legislature should be in charge of allowing it or not.

Now, Arkansas is one of 13 trigger states, meaning that once this decision is solidified into effect, state laws are bound to be passed almost immediately restricting this crucial human right. A few days ago, state Attorney General Leslie Rutledge said in an interview with PBS that she was fully in support of the plan to pass a total ban on safe abortions, except to save the life of a mother in a medical emergency. The interviewer brought up a great question, about 1 in 5 kids in Arkansas live in poverty, so how is the state anywhere near prepared to support children of unwanted pregnancies? Rutledge’s answer was basically a campaign speech with a loose promise that the foster care system will be strong enough when she’s elected as lieutenant governor alongside the infamous Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

Needless to say, I don't doubt that this law will be passed if the state government is given the chance. However, Rutledge's promise about the security of those children is incredibly doubtful and it's a shame that this Supreme Court decision could have such a drastic effect, even regardless of the fact that it could hurt the communities so close to us.

So, one of the main arguments for the pro-life movement is on the grounds of religious freedom. Some groups of Christians argue that life begins with conception and that abortion is equivalent to murder, which is, of course, a sin. However, what about *our* religious freedom as Jews?

Well, Jews and Christians share the same commandment under God that one shouldn't murder. However, in our case, Jewish law states that personhood begins when a baby is fully birthed and takes its first breath. So, terminating a pregnancy doesn't fall under breaking that commandment, and is in fact even prioritized in certain cases. If the mother's physical or mental health is endangered by the continuation of a pregnancy, Jewish law states that abortion is the next step. So, as Jews, we are to view abortion as both a moral and necessary decision in many cases. Also, fun statistical fact: a study by the Pew Research Center found that 83 percent of American Jews say that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Specifically looking into this week's Torah portion, Kedoshim, it's basically God giving the Jews more commandments. Among these are keeping the Sabbath, loving your neighbor as yourself, respecting your elders, not insulting the deaf or placing a stumbling block before the blind, and also to not make biased judgements- which sounds very on the subject matter, doesn't it?

Before we get into that one, though, let's take a look at a few of the others. Loving your neighbor as yourself is a pretty standard principle. When we debate whether or not abortions

should be legal, many refuse that despite what the law says, abortions will simply continue to happen. Those that want an abortion and are wealthy enough will go to the next state over and be taken care of. But what about our neighbors who don't have the resources to do so? In Arkansas, there is currently only one procedural abortion clinic. People who don't live central to this area can't always afford to commute and withstand waiting periods. If our trigger law is passed, there will be an even slimmer chance for these people to exercise their right, other than to take matters into their own hands and perform a dangerous, even fatal abortion for themselves. In this sense, reproductive rights is an issue central to the lower, impoverished class, especially including communities of color. We simply cannot exercise the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves if we ignore the issues they are facing and be complicit in letting the legislature control them.

Going back into Kedoshim, God also commanded that "You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind." By restricting the right to a safe abortion, it is placing that stumbling block in front of an already disadvantaged community so that we stray further away from relieving the issues they face.

Kedoshim also says: "You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich: judge your neighbor fairly." The Supreme Court should take notes, right? Their decision will ultimately allow states to create restrictions based on religious ideals that do not apply to all of their citizens, crossing the line separating church and state. These Conservative judges are okay with demolishing reproductive freedom in the US because they are biased and okay with it themselves, not just because it's not explicitly stated in the Constitution. If one is to argue on those same grounds, there's plenty not mentioned there that we have rights to that are at risk, like same-sex marriage, decided under *Obergefell v. Hodges*. This could also

be used as a tactic to harm transgender youth by passing laws that ban medical transitioning because it allows for the overstepping of one's bodily autonomy. So, the biased judgement to not allow a pregnant person the right to choose whether to keep or terminate a pregnancy goes against Jewish teachings. It also allows for a giant butterfly effect, causing a great deal of secondhand issues in its wake.

As part of my solution, I urge our Jewish community to continue paying attention to the severity of this issue. Tzedakah is also one of our foundational principles, so if you can, donating to organizations like interest groups that influence our legislators have a great effect as well as investing directly in our community. Planned Parenthood provides incredible resources, beyond just safe abortions. The Arkansas Abortion Support Network also raises funds to pay for safe abortions and provides clinic escorting to give patients privacy and safety among protestors with nasty signs and nasty words. I've had the honor of volunteering with them before and they do great hands-on work for our community. If you're above 18, I encourage you to look into clinic escorting because not only do you get to do a wonderful mitzvah, you also get to wear a cute rainbow vest.

I remember that when my confirmation class went to L'Takein in Washington, DC a few years back, Tillie and Sydney were lobbying our Congressmen about reproductive rights. When meeting with Tom Cotton's speech writer, he completely disregarded Tillie and Sydney's brilliant speech, and went on to make rash arguments that Jews did not believe what we expressed and that senator Cotton had no business supporting what they asked of him. Rabbi Block stepped in to help out and was completely spoken over about some other Rabbi the speech writer had heard of that said differently. When we got out of the office, I remember David saying that he could see the anger growing on my face as we were told what our religion said by

someone of another religion. In that fight, we were simply not going to get what we wanted, but it was worth it to even try and express that as Jews, we will make our voices heard. So, the main takeaway is look into this issue if you're not already and see what you can do to serve your duty as a Jew. Shabbat shalom.