Opening Message: It All Came Down to the Bibas Boys
Rabbi A. Brian Stoller
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This morning at minyan, I lost my place when I was chanting the nissim b'chol yom, the blessings for our daily miracles. I have said those words countless times, but the flow of my prayer was stopped abruptly by thoughts of the Bibas family.

What got me was the blessing, "Baruch atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, ha-notein la-ya'ef koach—Blessed are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who gives strength to the weary."

The Jewish people are so weary of this. This week's news that the Bibas children—Ariel (age 4) and K'fir (age 9 months)—and their mother, Shiri (age 33), were dead felt like the final straw in more than a year of extreme pain.

The footage of Gazans celebrating to the happy beat of Arabic music while Hamas freaks paraded coffins carrying the boys' dead bodies—along with the body of peace activist Oded Lifshitz and the remains of some unknown person that was supposed to have been the Bibas boys' mother. ... It was too much to bear. In case we'd become desensitized to the crimes against humanity that Hamas committed against the Jewish people—and in more than a year's time, let's face it, many people had—this moment brought it all back.

We have been grateful to see some of the hostages return home over the last month. Every life is sacred, and each hostage who came home restored the soul of their family and repaired some of the brokenness in the Jewish people.

At the same time, we had this unspoken sense that it all came down to the Bibas boys. Now that we know they are dead—that, according to the IDF's forensic analysis, Hamas monsters murdered them with their bare hands, and that they knew this since November 2023 and let Israel and the Jewish world pray and hope that the boys would survive—well…what can we say?

Seth Mandel, a writer for Commentary magazine, captured what many of us are feeling, so I'd like to share his words:

"Kfir's face became a symbol of the conflict because it represented a line that had been crossed and cannot be uncrossed. … It is impossible for…us to pretend that we didn't see a chunk of society, whether in person or online, rush to cross that line and cheer the people who kidnapped a baby.

"Kfir became a symbol," Mandel writes, "because he is the answer to every relevant question about this conflict. His case is the war boiled down to its essence. Kfir is the dividing line. In a better world, there would be no one standing on the wrong side of it."

Kfir and his brother, Ariel, who looked just like Arlene's great-grandson with his red hair and sweet smile, are dead. Now, all we can do is stare into the abyss.

Shortly after October 7, I said that the Hamas terrorists and the residents of Gaza "are not animals"; they are human beings who have been utterly corrupted against their will by a perverse ideology.

I want to believe that no one is irredeemable; but what hope is there for a society that is so depraved and evil that it celebrates the murder of babies as a positive good? Have we reached the point where aspiration for peaceful coexistence must give way to grim reality?

I agree with Seth Mandel that the line cannot be uncrossed. I don't know what comes next, but I do know that we will need strength for it. So, I'll conclude by picking up where I lost my place this morning: Baruch atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-loam, ha-notein la-ya'ef koach—Blessed are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who gives strength to the weary.

Please rise as Stephanie chants "El Malei Rachamim," the traditional prayer for the dead.

My Body, My Choice
Repro Shabbat 2025 – Parashat Mishpatim
Rabbi Megan Brumer

Before I begin, as you all most likely know, I will be speaking about abortion and reproductive rights. If this is a difficult topic for you, feel free to take a break by stepping out of the room or muting your computer.

I'm going to start by sharing a young woman's story from We Testify, an organization "dedicated to the leadership and representation of people who've had abortions, increasing the spectrum of abortion storytellers in the public sphere, and shifting the way the media understands the context and complexity of accessing abortion care."[1]

Stephanie Loraine from Florida describes her experience: "When I was 17, I needed an abortion and was unable to tell my parents. Due to parental involvement laws in the state of Florida, I was not able to get an abortion without the notification and presence of my parents. I was forced to seek out a judicial bypass, which is the process of having a judge decide the fate of your abortion. …

"[After finding out I was pregnant,] I searched the Internet for ways to end my own pregnancy. I read I could take 5,000 mg of vitamin C over five days. I considered throwing myself down the stairs. I even considered ending my life, knowing a pregnancy would be the end of my future. That is how desperate I was. After days of calling, I finally got through to a hotline worker who connected me with an attorney who agreed to take my case pro bono. I finally felt some relief.

"I spent the next two weeks working at my waitressing job, saving up my tips for my abortion, attending my college classes and gathering all the documentation the attorney requested. I had an ultrasound, and I was forced to see it even though I didn't want to. I had to gather police records from the times my father was charged with child abuse after beating me and leaving me with bruises. I provided my school transcripts reflecting my dual enrollment course load. I even wrote an essay talking about why I desperately needed an abortion. I turned in all those papers to a judge in Duval County, Florida, who presided over my fate.

"Young people face a double-edged sword of stigma with their reproductive health care: If they continue their pregnancies, they are unsupported and deemed irresponsible; and if they pursue an abortion, we are stigmatized, forced to deal with laws that present barriers, denying us our constitutional right to an abortion.

"Although I worked and studied since I was 13 years old to support my family, when it came to decisions about my body or my life I was told I was not capable of making my own decisions. My abortion was a means of survival and self-preservation for a future I wanted to live on my own terms."

This is just one of many stories shared by this organization, written by people from all walks of life and backgrounds. Abortion access affects everyone.

One in four people who can become pregnant will have an abortion before age 45. This includes Jews, and likely people in our own community. Abortion and reproductive rights are not a theoretical issue or an issue that affects "others," it affects people in your everyday life, even if you don't know it.

In this week's Torah portion, Mishpatim, we find a story about a pregnant woman accidentally hit by two men who are fighting. The text offers two different punishments for two different scenarios: If she loses the pregnancy, her husband is owed a monetary fine; however, if she herself is killed, then it is *nefesh tachat nefesh*, a life for life. This is where the Jewish tradition's stance on abortion originates. Judaism understands the difference between a person's status and a fetus's status.[2]

In Mishneh Torah, a Jewish law code written by Maimonides, it says that a fetus is considered a *rodef*, a pursuer who seeks to kill the mother. Therefore, he wrote, "When complications arise and a pregnant woman cannot give birth, it is permitted to abort the fetus in her womb, whether with a knife or with drugs. For the fetus is considered a *rodef* of its mother. If the head of the fetus emerges, it should not be touched, because one life should not be sacrificed for another. Although the mother may die, this is the nature of the world."[3]

This directive pertains to *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life. During pregnancy, the mother's life comes first—no questions asked. This not only entails physically saving a life, but also psychologically. Mental health is equally as important as physical health. Having an abortion because it is not the right time in your life, or because you are unwilling to have the baby of your abuser, is 100 percent acceptable in Jewish tradition. In fact, it is not only accepted; it is required when a mother's life is at risk.

The Reform Responsum on abortion written in January 1985 states, "The Reform Movement has had a long history of liberalism on many social and family matters. We feel that the pattern of tradition, until the most recent generation, has demonstrated a liberal approach to abortion and has definitely permitted it in case of any danger to the life of the mother. That danger may be physical or psychological. When this occurs at any time during the pregnancy, we would not hesitate to permit an abortion. This would also include cases of incest and rape if the mother wishes to have an abortion."[4]

Focusing on the passage about the pregnant woman I previously mentioned from this week's Torah portion, the National Council of Jewish Women created the Repro Shabbat tradition four years ago. This weekend, congregations throughout the country are coming together, studying and learning about the importance of reproductive rights and access to reproductive health services.

Now that two-and-a-half years have passed since Roe v. Wade was overturned, more than 25 states have created restrictions regarding abortion—with 17 banning it entirely, making it harder for women in need to receive lifesaving medical care. These restrictions and bans negatively impact those in marginalized communities the most, particularly those without the resources to travel to states that have abortion access.

As the National Council of Jewish Women writes, "Today, those (of us) with some amount of social power, or those (of us) who hold privileged identities, must use their power (our power) and privilege to lift up the voices and stories of those most impacted by harm—by abortion bans, by horrific immigration policies, by systemic racism. We must listen to the leaders of marginalized groups and follow their lead.

"The Talmud (Yevamot 87b) teaches that silence is consent. 'Not oppressing' is no longer enough in a society that is already set up to oppress, that already does oppress. In order to create a world in which those who are marginalized in our society are not wronged, we must take active steps to fight for a more just world, alongside them."

Doctors are being arrested and threatened with jail for performing an abortion. People are forced to travel hundreds, if not thousands, of miles to receive the reproductive health care they need. Imagine if your daughter, wife, sister, coworker or friend needed a lifesaving abortion but they couldn't find a clinic two, three, even four hours away, because the doctors were scared that they would be sent to jail for performing an abortion or prescribing Mifepristone, the safe FDA-approved abortion pill that antiabortion groups are trying to ban. This has resulted in countless unnecessary deaths of women who were unable to receive the care they needed.[5]

This past election season, New York State passed Prop 1, adding the right to have an abortion to the NY Constitution. This is an important success in reproductive rights for New Yorkers, a step toward securing our rights to abortion access.

I am thankful to have grown up in Washington State and now live here in New York, where we know that our state's elected representatives are fighting to uphold our reproductive rights. But not everyone is as lucky; just because we might not be immediately affected, does not mean we can stand idly by. We must continue to fight for reproductive health, rights and justice for everyone. People deserve the right to make their own choices regarding what is best for their bodies, their physical health and their mental health.

I will conclude with a statement that the Women's Rabbinic Network made after Roe v. Wade was overturned. "People who have the physical power to create, nurture and give life also have the power to decide when and if it is the right time to do so. Today's decision denies pregnant people agency over their own bodies and some of the most important decisions they will make in their lives. Our bodies and our spirits are reflections of the Divine, and no one should be treated as less than that. Every person should have the right to protect their Divine reflection by accessing quality health care in a timely manner without judgment or harassment. Abortion is health care. Abortion access is a Jewish value."[6]

As Reform Jews, we will keep fighting for reproductive health, rights and justice for everyone. Our communities should be places where anyone who has or may ever need to have an abortion feels loved and welcome. We will keep marching on, working toward a better future—a future where everyone can decide what is best for their physical and mental health.

To help make a difference, visit Take Action for Abortion Access | Jews for Abortion Access.

[1] https://wetestify.org/#about
[2] *Exodus* 22:21–23
[3] Mishneh Torah, Murderer and the Preservation of Life 1:9
[4] https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/carr-23-27/
[5] https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/01/us/louisiana-abortion-ny-doctor-arrest-warrant/index.html
https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/13/us/texas-judge-fines-ny-doctor-abortion-pills/index.html
https://www.nbcnews.com/health/womens-health/texas-abortion-ban-deaths-pregnant-women-sb8-analysis-rcna171631
https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/investigation-links-georgias-abortion-ban-to-preventable-deaths-of-2-women

[6] https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AAL7hAgy5/