

## Jewish Voices on Reproductive Freedom

As you know, my wife, Jessica, is a translator of Yiddish literature. Her first major translation was a novel by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century writer Miriam Karpilove. It's called *Diary of a Lonely Girl, Or the Battle Against Free Love*. The saga first appeared serially in the pages of the Yiddish daily newspaper *Di Varhayt* in 1916-1918 and follows the witty protagonist as she navigates the complex realities of a single girl living in New York City. Clever and biting, the novel is something of a century-old *Sex and the City*, giving voice to many social issues with special attention to the concerns of single women at that time.

The diarist is courted by a number of suitors, each in his own way attempting to persuade her of the virtues of "free love." She deftly resists them all. And in the midst of her sophisticated verbal sparring comes one telling exchange with a self-styled philosopher called simply by the initial "C."

"Does the modern woman have children?" I asked hurriedly, seeing that he'd paused to catch his breath.

"Children?"

"Yes, children. You know, regular old children."

"What do they need children for?"

"So they can take pride and pleasure from them, for instance."

"They have no use for children! Leave childbearing to women who don't know how to avoid having children. Women who know how to get out of it can be happy without children. And if a woman decides that she wants to have a child, then let her have one! Who cares? I'm all for a matriarchy: let her have the kid if she wants it, and let it be her choice. His responsibility goes no farther than whatever he agrees to. If he wants to have a child, then he can care for it. Right?"

"Sure, sure... I hardly know how it could be any other way. If a man wants a child, he should care for it. That's only right -"

C. didn't notice my sarcasm, or at least he pretended not to. He just squeezed and kissed my hand as though to thank me for agreeing with him at least on one point, when it comes to children.

After speaking about many other things, he returned to the topic. "So, when it comes to children we agree. But about love -"

"We're at odds."

"But why?"

I could easily have told him that it's because I hate him. But I kept my mouth shut about that and instead I said, "Because I believe in marriage."<sup>1</sup>

With this brief scene – along with many others – Karpilove illustrates the precarity of young women without much of a safety net. The oblivious suitor can't see the oppression suffusing his declaration, "Women who know how to get out of it can be happy without children." Faced with suitors like these, modern men who eschew the duties of marriage but not the fleeting benefits of companionship, the immigrant protagonist has to make some difficult choices.

Miriam Karpilove, of course, wasn't the only Jewish woman giving voice to these issues a hundred years ago. Lena Brown, a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century immigrant to New York, wrote what Professor Alyssa Quint has called, "one of the most powerful Yiddish plays of the 20th century."<sup>2</sup> *Sonia Itelson: Or, a Child, a Child* brings to life the challenges of another young woman facing a similar set of circumstances as Karpilove's diarist. The protagonist, Sonia, watches helplessly as her 22-year-old sister gives birth to a child and develops a painful depression. Sonia's sister, we come to learn, relies on multiple abortions over the next seven years in order to preserve what she calls her "freedom." Sonia herself, unable to have children, faces the prospect of a risky and painful surgery that might change her life forever.

These examples – and there are more besides<sup>3</sup> – demonstrate that Jews have always participated in American conversations about reproductive freedom. This isn't a topic we have ever swept under the rug. Indeed, all the way back to the Torah, we've lifted up these difficult and important concerns.

To set the stage, *Parashat Mishpatim* contains an influential series of legalistic situations. The Torah portion addresses a host of thorny moral issues, and from these cases emerge many Jewish principles of legal justice. For instance, "When two men quarrel, and one strikes his fellow with a stone or fist, and he does not die but takes to bed, if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, the one who struck him shall be cleared; only for his idleness shall he be paid and the substance of his being healed" (Ex. 21:18-19). In other words, if I hurt you in a fight we both participated in, I have to compensate you for medical expenses and time lost from your work.

A few verses later, we read, "If men fight, and one pushes against a pregnant woman, and she miscarries but there is no other damage, he shall be fined a fine according as the woman's husband may exact; he shall pay according to a reckoning" (Ex. 21:22). In line with the earlier principle, injury caused during a fight deserves to be compensated. A miscarriage is a grave injury but also a complicated one. A "reckoning," presumably adjudicated by a court, must be undertaken to determine the fine. But crucially, the assailant is not guilty of *killing* someone, demonstrating that the

---

<sup>1</sup> p. 182-183.

<sup>2</sup> "A Lost Great Yiddish Abortion Play," Oct. 13, 2022. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history/articles/lost-great-yiddish-abortion-play>

<sup>3</sup> See Blume Lempel's "The Debt," for instance (<https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/the-debt>) or Kate Simon's "Birthing" (in *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood*, 1982).

serious issue of causing a miscarriage is different from the even more serious issue of accidental or intentional killing.

This foundational text expresses key Jewish principles that are still relevant today. We see concern for the health and awareness of the vulnerability of pregnant people. We see a distinction made between a miscarriage and other bodily harm, as we also see a distinction made between a miscarriage and death. And we see the central role that assessment, perspective, evaluation, and judgment play in determining how each case should be handled. Though we have only one example in the Torah, it alludes to the reality that these issues are complicated and personal. One size can never fit all.

Today's landscape is ripe for this kind of thoughtful reflection about reproductive rights. The disruptive, unjust, and oppressive outcome of the *Dobbs* Supreme Court case has laid a right-wing Christian religious view over women's autonomy from coast to coast. But there's still work to be done, not only politically but also legally. Just across the border, in Indiana, a judge is due any day to rule on a three-year-old lawsuit.<sup>4</sup> There, the ACLU has argued that Indiana's ban on abortion violates the religious freedom of women who would not be able to terminate a pregnancy even if their religions required them to. There are certainly cases in Judaism where an abortion is not only permitted but also necessary; and Indiana's law, in line with the national fight against reproductive rights, violates not only Jewish women's autonomy but also their right to free exercise of their religion. Jewish values are now – as they have ever been – relevant to the American discourse on abortion. And we can turn to Jewish values in support of our sincere advocacy for integrity and freedom.

Organizations like the National Council for Jewish Women, which sponsors the annual "Repro Shabbat" we observe this weekend, are champions for free choice, motivated by Jewish views of justice. NCJW was founded in 1893, five years before Miriam Karpilove was born, and has always served as a reliable champion of moral clarity. Their voice adds to generations of Jewish writers, leaders, and spiritual guides, and their words of prayer resonate with us today:

God of our ancestors,  
We affirm that You have created each of us in Your sacred image, endowed  
with the inherent right to dignity and autonomy.  
We ask that You guide us towards a caring and loving community and  
nation that reveres this dignity in each of us. ...  
May our country become a place of liberty and justice for all ... [including]  
the right to live safely and securely as we each follow our own path of  
conscience and the God we each do or do not believe in.  
[And let us say,] Amen.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://indianacapitalchronicle.com/2025/12/03/three-years-after-injunction-religious-freedom-lawsuit-against-indiana-abortion-ban-nears-decision/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jewsforabortionaccess.org/s/Repro-Shabbat-Liturgy-Readings-2025.pdf>