

Shabbat shalom everyone. As we move into this Independence Day weekend, I have to admit that it's difficult for me to get into the celebratory spirit. While, in many ways, I consider myself incredibly lucky to be an American citizen, recent Supreme Court rulings—particularly the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*—have darkened my view of America. Don't get me wrong, we have made tremendous progress and reforms since our country's founding, but unfortunately, I believe that this has allowed us to become complacent.

We've let our guard down and have allowed progress to be undone. Unfortunately, our country is regressing to a time of less equality, less freedom, and less safety, particularly for women, people of color, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and religious minorities. I am especially concerned about what seems to be the rapid deterioration of separation of church and state.

While I often try to avoid being overly political in my leadership role, I feel I would be doing myself and our community a disservice by not addressing certain issues. So, I would like to share what I feel is an important distinction when it comes to talking politics on the bima.

When something is a Jewish value or is discussed at length in the Torah or Talmud, it moves out of the realm of political and moves into the realm of essential to Jewish practice. Issues pertaining to human rights—including women's rights—for example, are essential to Jewish values and should supersede any mainstream political divisions.

Abortion is the sort of topic that fits exactly this criterion. While Judaism regards human life as being valued above all else, Judaism is also very clear that life does not begin at conception. Rather, life does not begin until a baby can live and breathe, independently, outside of its mother's body. On this basis alone, abortion is permitted—as it is not viewed as taking a life. The life doesn't exist yet.

To make things all the more explicit, Judaism teaches that the life of the mother always takes precedence over the life of the fetus. If there is any risk to the mother's life—be it physical or mental harm—Judaism actually requires that the pregnancy be terminated.

For our country to tout its one-sided ruling on abortion as rooted in Judeo-Christian values is inaccurate and inconceivable. While there is inevitable overlap between Judaism and Christianity, as Christianity was derived from Jewish tradition, Christianity has since formed its own laws, views, and interpretations that are completely separate and often directly at odds with Jewish law. This could not be more apparent than it is when considering our opposing theological views on life and abortion. A woman's right to autonomy over her own body should not be controversial. Any medical decision is hers and hers alone, and I am here to say unequivocally that I am here to support any woman who has been in the difficult position of having to choose whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term. I'm here to give you love and support, free of any judgement.

As we go into this holiday weekend, I hope we can take time to reflect upon the state of our country and try to reconcile the fact that while we have come so far as a nation, we still have so much farther we need to go. Progress is not one directional, and as we've witnessed in recent weeks, it can and will be undone if we are not vigilant. To quote *Pirkei Avot*: "It is not your duty alone to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it".