

ROSH HA-SHANAH

Gender Equality must be a priority

In just three months, we have already heard stories – stories of women forced to carry non-viable fetuses to term, stories of ten-year-old pregnant children forced to cross two state lines, stories of doctors and providers being threatened with jail time.

In June, the Supreme Court of the United States voted to overturn Roe v. Wade – the landmark 1973 court case that gave women the constitutional right to have an abortion.

Roe gave this right to women under the pretext of protecting their privacy. According to Roe, abortion is a private issue that the government has no business getting involved in.

The problem with this emphasis on privacy is that Roe v. Wade said nothing about women, nothing about women's rights, and nothing about women's equality.

As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg later noted, “[L]egal challenges to undue restrictions on abortion procedures do not seek to vindicate some generalized notion of privacy; rather, they center on a woman's autonomy to determine her life's course, and thus to enjoy equal citizenship stature.”

That's right, abortion rights are not just about privacy, they are about the equality of women in our world today.

Denying a woman the opportunity to make decisions about her body is to deny her the right to make choices about her life and, ultimately, to deny her due equality as a human being.

Today is Rosh Ha-Shanah – a day in which we celebrate the birth of the entire world.

We read in the Torah “God made man *zachar* **AND** woman *n’keivah* in the divine image.”

All of us – no matter our gender identity – all were made in God’s image. All deserving of the same dignity.

And yet...five thousand, eight hundred and eighty-three years later, gender inequality remains one of the most pervasive – and divisive issues of our times.

From the loss of reproductive rights to sexual assault, harassment and intimate partner violence, from wage inequality to a lack of representation on school boards, town councils and in the halls of Congress, from harmful gender stereotypes in the media to strict gender norms that disregard fluidity—gender inequality is embedded into the very framework of our society.

The origins of this inequality go as far back as our own biblical text. Think of the second creation account told in the book of *Genesis*, the story of Adam and Eve.

God places the first man and woman in the garden of Eden and forbids them from eating from the tree of life.

Unlike Adam, Eve is portrayed as vulnerable to temptation. She eats from the tree, and then she has her husband do the same. According to the plain meaning of the text, Eve—the very first woman—is responsible for man’s downfall.

Even with later rabbinic commentaries that soften this characterization, Eve stands as an example of women being untrustworthy and unreliable.

Is it any surprise that a tradition with such a founding story would eventually include a prayer in its own morning liturgy – one that is still recited by many Jewish men every morning – that states out loud “*Thank you God for not making me a woman.*”?

You see, gender inequality is a part of the very scaffolding of our society. It is a part of our stories, our languages, and our laws.

The Dobbs decision that took away abortion rights in June has everything to do with this problem.

This is a season not simply of despair; but rather one of hope. Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur have at their heart a belief that we are all capable of change.

And you know what, the last two hundred years in this nation alone should remind us that such change is possible.

It was in 1848 when a group of women—including such Jewish trailblazers as Ernestine Rose, Hannah Greenbaum and Maud

Nathan—came together in Seneca Falls, NY to organize the first American women's rights conference.

Together, they created the first wave of an American women's movement and by 1920 helped to deliver women the right to vote, something denied to them for our nation's first one hundred and forty-four years.

In 1963, the work continued when a Jewish journalist named Betty Friedan released a book entitled *The Feminist Mystique* that inspired a second wave of the women's movement and led to the creation of the National Organization for Women.

The second wave of the sixties and the seventies resulted in so many important changes including of course, the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973.

The second wave brought women's issues to the forefront of our own Reform movement. Fifty years ago, this year, in 1972, the first female Rabbi in America—Rabbi Sally Priesand—was ordained, forever changing the landscape of women's place in rabbinic leadership.

Although the second women's wave accomplished so much, a backlash against it in the eighties was deep and unrelenting.

A so-called family values coalition was born in the wake of that second wave, and its leaders called for women to return to their traditional roles. This coalition effectively made the very word feminist somehow pejorative, as if standing up for women was anti-American.

A third feminist wave took place in the nineties, after the Anita Hill hearings, and ended up bringing a number of female politicians to the halls of Congress.

But by the end of the nineties, so many problems remained –

But now, there is a stirring within our nation once again – a budding feeling amongst so many that the work of others remains unfinished – that women, who represent 51% of the entire world, that women deserve equality in every area of life.

Today, we seem to be on the very cusp of another women’s awakening –

- We’ve felt this awakening in hearing the voices of the many women who stated out loud “MeToo” and created a campaign against sexual assault and harassment.
- We’ve seen this awakening in the state of Kansas where a fairly conservative populace voted against a constitutional amendment that would have completely outlawed abortion
- We have witnessed this awakening in the rising participation of women in the last election – which was more than any other previous election before.

Known as the fourth wave, this new women’s awakening is intersecting with other forms of identities and power structures. It is challenging gender stereotypes, challenging the gender gap

in pay and the gap in who are victims of violence and it is utilizing technology to spread its message and to build support.

Our own Reform movement is playing a crucial role in this fourth wave. Women of Reform Judaism or WRJ is an organization founded in 1913 that has long been at the forefront of social action and change.

We are so lucky to have a member of our own community, Liz Rosenblum, who serves on the leadership team at WRJ.

I encourage us to get involved this year in WRJ's many campaigns on many issues including domestic violence prevention, advocacy for pay equity and for reproductive choice which means much more than just abortion.

(Pause)

I want to take a moment to pause and to acknowledge the dilemma inherent in the fact that a man is delivering a sermon about women's rights.

If you haven't noticed, I am a man and I am giving this sermon.

Perhaps some of you are questioning my right to deliver such a sermon; others might be wondering why I did not invite a woman to the bimah to deliver this message.

Am I part of the problem, further stifling women's voices by speaking *for* women?

Listen, to think that men do not have a role in the fight for gender equality in our nation is to miss the entire point.

I am here this morning as a man – I have two sons who are growing up, like me, in a world with women. I hope that I can teach them and the other young men all around them, I hope we can teach them how to be an ally; I hope we can inspire them to recognize that women’s rights are human rights.

Specifically, when it comes to the abortion issue, I hope we can turn their attention to these emerging stories – stories of women who are being forced to give birth – in some states, with absolutely no exceptions, in others, only where the mother’s life is directly threatened.

I recognize that in this room, and online, there are a diverse array of opinions on the abortion issue. I respect this diversity of opinions.

Judaism is clear – a fetus is not a life until it has left a mother’s body, but *that does not mean that a fetus is not a sacred entity.*

I understand and I respect that good people struggle with this issue. Abortion is not an issue that should be treated lightly – it deals with serious matters surrounding the very notion of when life begins.

But, so much of how we deal with this issue is wrapped up not in the rights of fetuses, but rather, with this issue of gender inequality.

U.S. News and World Report ran a study this past August that demonstrated this. It found that those states with protective or restrictive abortion policies were the very same states with low ratings in gender equality. Whether it was women's education; women's roles in the economy; women's health; family planning and care; or women's representation and power.

The results were clear: States with more abortion protections fared better in how they treated women

You see, the abortion issue in our nation has to do with a longstanding problem – the place of women in our society.

Last year, I took a group of teenagers to Washington D.C. to learn about issues of social justice and to lobby their members of Congress.

We're going back this year in March to speak on the issues of our times; and to express our Jewish values.

I was particularly blown away last year by the powerful voices of the young women on our trip—Olivia Leahy, Paige Blotner, Rachel Sobel, Maggie Slany and Rebecca Friedland, who spoke on a variety of issues to Senator Schumer's staff and then to Congressman Mondaire Jones.

As I listened to these young women, I realized how lucky we are. For we have right here in our congregation the voices of a new generation – voices that will help to ensure that issues like gender equality will be a priority in our future. They are some

of our rising stars and we should all feel incredibly blessed to have them.

Friends, the purpose of *teshuvah* – of repentance – is not simply to apologize out loud and then to go home.

The purpose of *teshuvah* is to inspire us, to move us to reflect – to think about the way we live our lives and then, to change, to transform and to deal with the grievous mistakes of our past and our present.

My friends, we are at a dawn of a fourth women’s movement in this nation – one in which the voices of women are and will be heard – louder than ever. This movement can change the world – a world where we see women continually treated in horrific conditions and belittled my men.

The Dobbs decision to overturn Roe v Wade was shocking to all of us, but it is nothing more than a call forward to this movement –it is a spark that will push forward a new generation to care more about the place of women in our nation and in our world.

As the year ahead moves forward, let us honor those who came before us and join this movement and in doing so, let us raise our voices together...

Shanah Tovah