

Q&A Interview |  
Rabbi Peter Stein  
Temple B'rith Kodesh

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*This interview has been edited for clarity.*

**Biandudi Hofer:** When news broke this past June that the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, how did you address that with members here of the temple? How did you prepare for that?

**Stein:** It was a heartbreaking moment. It was just so painful. Something that we had anticipated, something that we had feared, was coming to fruition. The lead within the Jewish community on these issues was the National Council of Jewish Women, and their national organization had made a plan that on the Saturday evening after the decision came down, whenever that decision was going to come, that we would hold a special worship service and gathering.

There's a special prayer service on Saturday evenings at the end of the Sabbath called Havdalah. The word means separation, so separating between the Sabbath and the new week, separating between the old and the new, and that's exactly what came to be. And because the decision came down almost at the very, very end of the week, it was put together on very short notice.

But we were honored to host that gathering here at the temple. There were people from across the Jewish community and people of different identities and different perspectives who came out for just some moments of prayer and reflection, and I think, most importantly, a sense of solidarity. Sharing in that moment a sense of reassurance that we were going to work, we were going to fight, we were going to ensure safety and protection for women in need. So it was really, a beautiful moment, a very powerful moment, and I was honored to stand with a number of other rabbis, a number of other Jewish leaders and take our lead from the National Council of Jewish Women.

**Biandudi Hofer:** When reflecting, you mentioned the word heartbreaking. Can you expand a bit on what you were feeling at that time and why.

**Stein:** You're asking questions about the emotion of this occasion, and there's certainly a whole rational element or intellectual way of thinking about these, but just purely on an emotional level, this decision causes a great deal of danger. It puts women at risk. It is very scary to think about what could happen to people who are vulnerable simply because of what is no longer available to them.

I was mentored in my pro-choice advocacy by a pastor who was active before Roe v. Wade became a decision. He was part of what's called the Clergy Consultation Service, which was clergy of different faith traditions reaching out and supporting women, helping them find services

that were safe in all sorts of different ways, and I learned all this from him of course during the many years when Roe v Wade had passed and when it was a legal process. And so the scary part for me was I spent all these years knowing the history of what once was, and now it seemed like all of a sudden, we were thrown back into all of those realities.

**Biandudi Hofer:** How did your members respond to the news of the Supreme Court ruling? What were people wrestling with when processing that news?

**Stein:** I would share two memories or two reflections. One is that I do have to acknowledge that we are a diverse congregation. There are members of the congregation with lots of different political opinions and identities, and so even in this moment which is so dramatic, it's not that we had universal or unanimous opinion among the members of the congregation, and they are honored and accepted and valued members of the congregation, so I always am very careful to remember that and to acknowledge that.

With that said, certainly, there's a very significant percentage of our members who were really hurt and disappointed by this decision, and what I heard a lot from, especially women in the congregation, people who identify as female, is the sense that they were no longer being treated equally in this country, that they had lost fundamental rights simply because of their gender identity. And that was just, I'll go back to the word heartbreaking. It was so hard to hear. I'm someone who tries to be an ally, someone who tries to be an advocate. I'm someone who has very special and important women in my life in different ways—friends, family, colleagues. I also recognize that, in some ways, this doesn't affect me directly, that my role is to help support the women who are most directly affected by this.

**Biandudi Hofer:** As a leader, what was that like for you to navigate the diverse feelings people were experiencing and the varied viewpoints people carry on abortion while dealing with the pain you were feeling?

**Stein:** To me, the most important element, without being melodramatic, is that this is a matter of life and death. This is a matter of really essential medical procedures that should be accessible, should be legal, and should be safe. And I don't shy away from that advocacy. I don't shy away from saying that. Even when I am hearing from someone who may have a different perspective, I never want the women in this congregation, the women in the community broadly, to feel that they don't have people who are helping them in different ways.

I'm a firm believer as a religious leader and as a human being that women are moral decisors. Women have the ability to make decisions for themselves. They have bodily autonomy. They have the ability to control what happens with their bodies. And so yes, there's sensitivity. Yes, there's people who very fiercely and strongly may have a different point of view. I can't let that get in the way of the fight for safety and the fight for equality.

**Biandudi Hofer:** What does Judaism teach about abortion? What does Jewish law say about abortion and reproductive rights?

**Stein:** So it's a very important question to ask, the fundamentals. Judaism is a religion that is rooted in the Hebrew Bible, what some faith traditions call the Old Testament, and Jewish law develops off of that foundation. There are generations of different texts that have been written, different teachings that have been developed, building on the foundation of the Hebrew Bible.

The next major work is the set of teachings called the Talmud, and it continues forward even into the 21st century as different Jewish legal teachings are offered. If we look at the biblical texts and we look at the rabbinic texts that follow them, it is very clear that abortion is a permitted act. None of it says that it's something that is casual, none of it says it's something that shouldn't be taken seriously, but it is very clear from the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible on through other texts that the termination of a pregnancy is something that is permitted.

What that means is it's a decision that should be made by the woman, the affected person, their loved ones, their medical professionals, and anyone else they choose to involve in the process. For some in the Jewish community who live by a strict, the Hebrew word is halachic standard, a legal standard, the way that they make decisions is they consult with a halachic expert, namely a rabbi. That would be the case in Orthodox Judaism in particular.

So it's not for me to say that a woman shouldn't consult with rabbis or other faith leaders if you're going beyond Judaism, but really, the starting point is women should be able to make decisions for themselves, they should have bodily autonomy over what happens to them, and then they go from there. So biblical texts, rabbinic texts from the Talmud on forward all of them make it clear that this is something that is permitted.

And this is the other part of this whole really tragic debate, is it becomes a matter of freedom of religion. Because Judaism does permit it, if there's a law, and of course, the Supreme Court doesn't make laws, so state by state, if there are laws that make abortion illegal, it infringes on the religious rights, the freedom of religion for those who adhere to a religious tradition like Judaism that permits it. So it becomes a matter of freedom of religion in addition to the other concerns about how decisions are made and the ability to control one's own body.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Is there anything you believe is oversimplified about the abortion debate?

**Stein:** There's so much that is either simplified or where nuance just falls away. On the one hand, there's the questions about what different religions say. Judaism is an incredibly complex religion with lots of different opinions. I could substitute the word Judaism for any other religion and say there's tremendous complexity, tremendous nuance. No religion is monolithic and has one and only one thing to say. So I think that's a piece of it, is that these are complex decisions that are made only after a great deal of thought, a great deal of sensitivity, thinking of the individual needs.

I approach this first and foremost as a pastor, as someone who takes care of women and men and people of all gender identities during times of need, any moment in the life cycle, any event

that happens. And so the simplification comes when you say, "Well, these are decisions that are made casually," or some of the very unfortunate accusations that are thrown out there, that it becomes a gateway to promiscuity or a gateway to really indifference to life. That's one part that is simplified. The other thing that I think is simplified is that whether one is Jewish or has any other religious identity, that the religion is the only thing that is making the decision. Each one of us has many different aspects to our identity, and it's the fullness of that that comes into making these sorts of decisions.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Is there something personal about this for you? Perhaps this connects to maybe the deeper question of, really, what birthed your pro-choice advocacy? Where did that come from?

**Stein:** Sure. It's an important question. The personal element of this for me comes from two different places. The first is family members and friends, cherished colleagues, who were able to access medical services because they were legal and available to them. So my thought has always been these were important moments in those lives. I want those same abilities to be available in the future. So it is personal in that sense. This is for my family, my friends, my colleagues, the loved ones that I'm blessed to have in my life.

And the other part of that is while this is an issue that crosses gender lines and gender identities in all sorts of different ways, I am blessed with some women who are incredible role models, incredibly strong, powerful, wise people, and I want to be able to follow their lead, I want to support them in their efforts. It's always been about learning from those who are the experts. It's always been about following the example of someone who offers up a charge and a challenge.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Is there someone in particular who provided that example, offered up that charge and challenge that impacted you and your beliefs?

**Stein:** I don't know if I can think of one specific person, but as I mentioned earlier, the National Council of Jewish Women has been doing really extraordinarily important work, so certainly both the lay leadership and the professional leadership of that group, along with the leadership offered through Planned Parenthood. I was blessed to serve on the National Clergy Board for Planned Parenthood under the leadership of the Planned Parenthood CEO, Cecile Richards, who has since retired from that role. And Cecile is just an extraordinary, extraordinary leader, and every time she spoke, every time she was with us in a meeting, I was really energized to double my efforts to do more.

**Biandudi Hofer:** What life experiences would you say have shaped your views on abortion?

**Stein:** First and foremost, it is my faith identity, my religious studies. I have been ordained as a rabbi for over 20 years at this point so I've had lots of different experiences, and it was first and foremost my study of the Jewish teachings, that's how I approached it. I'm a Rabbi, I'm someone who takes the Bible seriously, someone who takes the Talmud seriously, and I wanted to make sure I dug into the complexities of those texts and those traditions. Along with that is

the role of religion in American life, that I never as a faith leader, as a member of the clergy want to lead from an insular point of view. I don't want to only lead within the four walls of my synagogue, I don't want to only lead within the Jewish community.

It's something that we even see in the call from the prophets, that we are to be a light to the nations. We are to engage with those of different faiths and different identities, and that's been a very important and, honestly, a very complex part of this. For example, when I build significant and close and important relationships with colleagues within the Catholic community, that has a real challenge to it when it comes to issues such as this. But that's my starting point and my fundamental idea is I'm here to pursue a world of justice and equality, and this is one of the areas where there's urgent need in today's world.

**Biandudi Hofer:** How do you navigate conversations on this topic with those of different beliefs who feel strongly about abortion?

**Stein:** So if I start with the end, sometimes, sadly, it doesn't work. There are some people who are not interested in the dialogue. There are some people, because of their faith or because of the hierarchy of their tradition, that just simply cannot or will not engage. But if I back away from that reality, I am really inspired by the Jewish idea that conflict and dispute are not negative things. They are positive things, there are beautiful teachings. Ancient teachings in Judaism talk about the idea of dispute and conflict being a positive if we approach them in the right way for the right reasons. If we approach them not to build ourselves up but to pursue the common good if we pursue them not to tear somebody else down but for the betterment of the community. So I always approach dialogue from a point of respect and a point of curiosity.

I want to learn what the other person thinks. I want to understand how they arrived at their point of view. I would never carry an assumption that what they're saying is just blind or knee-jerk or something like that, and so oftentimes, people will take their cue from that genuine curiosity and humility. I don't claim to have all the answers, I don't claim to be right all the time, and I want to learn from others, and then hopefully, we can enter into a discussion. Sometimes, that may mean we set certain issues or questions aside, but oftentimes, we can have a really fruitful conversation.

**Biandudi Hofer:** How do you think those who disagree with your views on abortion view you?

**Stein:** It's always very hard for me to offer a thought about what somebody else thinks but I think probably there's a combination of some who have respect for my integrity, for my just coming from a different identity or a different point of view, and there are some who honestly probably think that I'm misguided.

I come from a very progressive part of the Jewish community and there are some who may say, "Is this serious or is this a legitimate point of view?" And I've done enough learning and have developed enough ways of articulating messages that I can say yes, what I am talking about is absolutely 100% serious and legitimate and a real part of Jewish teachings, from ancient times

through to modern teachings. And then, hopefully, we can have that conversation. We can understand that freedom of religion allows each of us to do in our own way and let us do what we believe and go on from there.

**Biandudi Hofer:** What would you like to understand about those with opposing beliefs?

**Stein:** Most importantly, what I would want to know is how they answer questions about women as independent-thinking people. That women are able to make choices and decisions for their bodies; they're able to be moral decisors when they are facing challenges. And that's where sometimes I get stuck for myself, that I believe this so firmly that it's hard sometimes to see past what I see as the reality, is that they are denying women those rights and those abilities and putting them at risk medically in terms of their health.

**Biandudi Hofer:** You would want to understand their response to those questions and why.

**Stein:** Exactly. How do they understand the role of women in our society? And if the answer is a negative one, then I would certainly challenge that. I think oftentimes, it's not that they have any kind of negative or discounted view. Rather, it's that they have a stumbling block when it comes to the theology behind conception and the beginning of life and things like that, which is legitimate, and I certainly understand how painful that is, but I want to push through some of that nuance because it is vitally important.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Is there anywhere on this issue of abortion where you feel torn?

**Stein:** I think I'm not at all torn when it comes to the primary questions. Should these kinds of medical decisions be legal and safe and accessible? Yes. To me, we have to start and focus really on the primary question because I sometimes find that some of it becomes a distraction. And what I mean by that is if we look at Planned Parenthood, which is a group that I've proudly supported for many years, if we look at Planned Parenthood as one example, the overwhelming majority of the work that they do is not termination of pregnancy. It's working on things like contraception and medical exams and cancer screenings, and so some of the distracting kinds of questions, I think, lose sight of that. So I always talk about women's medical care, I always talk about healthcare and so on, not just is this about abortion?

**Biandudi Hofer:** What's a question nobody's asking when it comes to abortion and religious faith and should be asking?

**Stein:** I think the question that really needs to be asked is what it means to be united as a country with 50 states, and I don't mean that in such a dramatic way, but I believe that the premise of being the United States is that all 50 states ensure certain things for every American. And that's one of the things that there is peril about right now, is one can no longer be sure that if they are in any given state in the country, whether they are traveling, whether they're relocating for work, whether they're choosing to go to school in a different state, it's deeply troubling to me that the rights that I have in New York state are not the same as they are in the

other 49 states. And I think we really need to be sure that we're asking those kinds of questions, which go far above and beyond the particulars of the Roe v. Wade decision and the particulars of abortion services. It's about what does it mean that we are the United States? And Americans should be able to be safe in all 50 states.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Rabbi Stein, is there anything you'd like to share that I didn't ask you?

**Stein:** I would share as Rabbi, as someone who offers pastoral counseling, that my door is always open to women and to families in need, to anyone who is in need, but in this moment, particularly to women, to those with LGBTQ identities, to others who are feeling particularly vulnerable right now. And I say that with great certainty that I am not alone. There are many, many of my fellow rabbis, fellow clergy in our city who are eager and prepared and ready to be of spiritual and emotional support.

So don't feel alone, don't feel that there aren't resources available. Please call on us and let us be part of the support that you need.