



Shabbat Shalom.

It's so nice to be here with you all. A huge thank you to the Rabbi, both for asking me to speak today, and for being such an incredible source of support over the last ten months, as I made sense of the events I'm going to reference today.

[trigger warning- I will be speaking about abortion.]

I'm the first to admit: it's been a long time since I've given a d'var torah. In fact, I think the last time I gave one was my bat mitzvah about 30 years ago. So I'm a little out of practice. When I sat down and thought about what to say today, I did what all bar and bat mitzvahs do: I went to the Torah portion for this week and hoped desperately that something would resonate. Lucky for me: it did.

This Shabbat, we turn our attention to Parshat Nitzavim–Vayeilech. Nitzavim begins with Moses addressing the entire Israelite community, reminding them of their covenant with God. He emphasizes that this covenant applies not only to those present but to all future generations as well. Then Moses presents the people with a choice between following God's ways and turning away from them, urging them to "choose life."

I bet you can imagine what part of this Torah portion jumped out at me. At first glance, this feels straightforward. Of course, we should choose life! But as we delve deeper, because we always do, we find that this simple phrase carries complex implications, especially when we consider it in the context of reproductive health and abortion rights.

Some of you may know that earlier this year, I founded the Red Tent Fund. Our organization is dedicated to supporting abortion rights and access, and it's through this lens that I'd like to explore the concept of "choosing life" with you today.

When we hear "choose life" in today's political climate, for me it immediately brings to mind the "pro-life" movement, which has become synonymous with anti-abortion stance. This feels really problematic when giving a d'var Torah about abortion and reproductive health and the tagline is "choose life." How do we reconcile the Torah's directive to "choose life" with the complex realities of reproductive health, including abortion?

Here's where our Jewish tradition of interpretation and nuanced understanding comes into play. What if we approach this phrase from a different angle? What if "choosing life" means empowering the person who is pregnant to choose their own life path? What if it means centering the life and well-being of the individual rather than centering the potential for life?

This interpretation aligns more closely with our Jewish values, which center the mother's life and well-being. In Jewish law, the life of the mother takes precedence over that of the fetus until the moment of birth. In Jewish law, abortion is permissible, and in some instances when the pregnant person's life is at stake, it's required.

As I thought about this idea of choice, I found myself focusing on a question: What choices do we have when it comes to reproductive health, and specifically abortion? And perhaps more importantly, who gets to make these choices?



I want to share a story that has deeply affected me and many others across the nation. It's the story of Amber Thurman, a 28-year-old Black mother from Georgia. Amber was a young woman, a mother to a young son, with dreams of becoming a nurse. In 2022 she discovered she was pregnant with twins. Because Amber's pregnancy had progressed past the gestational limit of Georgia's abortion laws -where abortion is illegal after six weeks (many people don't even know they are pregnant by six weeks), Amber traveled to North Carolina to get abortion pills.

Abortion pills are VERY safe with low rates of complications, but rare problems can occur. I want to say that again: they are VERY safe and complications are RARE. Unfortunately, Amber was one of those rare exceptions, and she arrived at a Georgia emergency room with bleeding, pain, and falling blood pressure – clear signs of infection.

The treatment Amber needed was simple: a D&C – an abortion. This brief, routine procedure could have saved her life. However, Georgia's ban considers a D&C a felony if it's performed outside of specific circumstances and the health care providers who performed the D&C could go to jail for up to 10 years.

Instead, Amber suffered in a hospital bed for 20 hours. She developed sepsis and began experiencing organ failure. By the time the doctors were finally willing to treat her, it was too late. Her heart had stopped on the table. Amber Thurman became the first woman whose death was directly linked to an abortion ban since the Dobbs decision overturned Roe v. Wade. The maternal mortality review committee deemed Amber's death "preventable."

This story is heartbreaking on every level. It is especially heartbreaking that Amber's choices were taken away at every turn – first by laws that forced her to seek care out of state, and then by laws that prevented doctors from providing the care she desperately needed. The tragedy is that Amber, the person most affected by this situation, was denied any choice at all.

This brings us to another question: Who do we become when our choices are taken away? When we are denied agency over our own bodies and lives, how does that change us as individuals and as a society?

Some of you may know my personal story, and how it led me to found the Red Tent Fund. Briefly, I began my journey in reproductive rights more than 20 years ago, and most recently working with the DC Abortion Fund (DCAF), helping individuals access abortion care. It was challenging, often heartbreaking work, but it was also deeply meaningful.

However, when I faced antisemitism within the organization after October 7th – like many people in progressive spaces did – I found myself at a crossroads. I made the difficult decision to resign from DCAF and in April of this year, I shared my experience in an article for Tablet Magazine.

The response to that article was overwhelming. I heard from so many people who, after October 7th, felt they were being forced to choose between their Jewish identity and their support for abortion access. It became clear to me that there was a need for a new kind of organization, one that bridges the Jewish community's deep



and longstanding commitment to religious and reproductive rights and freedoms with the direct service work that is needed by so many today and every day. And so, the Red Tent Fund was created.

These were difficult choices for me. Leaving a job I cared about, sharing my personal story publicly, starting a new organization – none of these decisions were easy. But the crucial difference between my experience and Amber's is that I had the privilege of choice. I got to decide how to respond to the challenges I faced, how to shape my own path forward.

This, I believe, is at the heart of what it means to "choose life." It's about having the freedom to make decisions about our own bodies, our own futures, our own lives. It's about recognizing that life is complex, that situations are rarely black and white, and that the person best equipped to make these deeply personal decisions is the individual themselves, guided by their own conscience, values, and circumstances.

As a community, I believe we have a responsibility to support everyone in making those choices for themselves. That is why the work we do at the Red Tent Fund is critical. We provide financial assistance to those seeking abortion care, recognizing that legal rights – where they still exist – mean little if economic barriers mean you can't access those rights. We're working to create a culture of compassion and understanding around reproductive health. We're fighting against the stigma and shame that too often surrounds conversations about abortion.

As we reflect on this week's Torah portion and its call to "choose life," I urge each of you to consider what that means in the context of reproductive rights. How can we, as a community, support the right of individuals to make their own choices about their bodies and their futures? How can we ensure that no one faces the situation Amber did, where crucial life decisions are taken out of their hands?

I believe that choosing life means choosing a world where everyone has the right to make informed decisions about their own bodies and futures. It means choosing a world where reproductive healthcare is accessible to all, regardless of their economic situation. It means choosing a world where we trust women and pregnant people to know what's best for themselves and their families.

As we move forward from this Shabbat, I encourage each of you to consider how you can support reproductive rights in your own way. Whether it's through donations to the Red Tent Fund, sharing the news about us with a friend or family member who is deeply invested in Jewish values, reproductive health, or both; or advocating for leaders and policies who support abortion access, every action makes a difference. Let us work together to ensure that the right to choose is not just a legal concept, but a lived reality for all.

Remember, the choice to support reproductive rights is a choice to support life in its fullest sense – life with dignity, life with autonomy, life with the freedom to determine one's own path.

May we all have the wisdom to make choices that bring more light, more compassion, and more justice into our world. Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tovah.