

Message from Rabbi Barry Silver

We are excited to announce that Jewish icon and messenger of peace to the people of the world, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, founder and leader of The Shalom Center, has joined the battle for women's autonomy, religious freedom and abortion rights.

For decades Rabbi Arthur Waskow has spoken with moral clarity and prophetic zeal on behalf of the poor and oppressed. In the aftermath of the overthrow of Roe v. Wade, Rabbi Waskow applied his eloquence and leadership to take on self-righteous whited sepulchers who seek to impose their misogynistic right-wing Christian views upon Jews, women and everyone else.

With Rabbi Waskow's clarion voice for human rights, the legal case to protect abortion rights is elevated to a whole new level.

We hope to see a groundswell of support from other Jewish organizations, as well as from people of all faiths and creeds who look to Rabbi Waskow and The Shalom Center as a source of inspiration and hope. We will move forward with renewed vigor in our fight to restore religious freedom, women's autonomy and the integrity of the family in America by challenging HB 5 in Florida and similar laws throughout the country.

HEART (Help Enforce Abortion Rights Today) stands ready to assist people in every state and of every faith, including atheists and free thinkers to oppose ant-abortion laws and restore the separation of church and state in America.

Even before Roe v. Wade was overturned, Rabbi Waskow wrote a groundbreaking critique of the misogynistic motivation of right-wing Christians to impose draconian abortion restrictions in Lilith Magazine. For writing this most illuminating article, Rabbi Waskow won the American Jewish Press Association's prestigious Rockower Award for "Excellence in Jewish Journalism" for Individual Comment. His award-winning comments are reproduced below.

It's Not Just Abortion: Do Women Have Freedom of Conscience? Or Are They Occasions of Sin?

Submitted by **Rabbi Arthur Waskow** on Thu, 2022/05/05 - 6:16pm

In Memory of Eva Cowan Waskow

Is Religion Love or Compulsion?

[On September 15, 2021, an earlier version of this article below was published by Lilith, a lively and intelligent feminist Jewish magazine. A fuller critique of the Augustinian anti-sex and misogynist strand of Christian thought and its disastrous version of the Eden story is in my book *Dancing in God's Earthquake: The Coming Transformation of Religion* (Orbis Books, 2020).]

I was taught, as an historian and again as a rabbi, always to be clear what in my own life was pointing me in one or another direction, to allow others a chance to weigh my

thoughts in light of that framework – rather than pretending I can be “neutral” about any serious issue.

My brother Howard, alav hashalom, and I were adults and Roe v. Wade had been decided before my mother’s mother told us the circumstances of my father’s mother’s death -- Eva Cowan Waskow, may her name be remembered along with the names of many thousands of women and others of unconventional sexuality or gender, whose names have been buried with them, who were victims of male supremacy and especially of an anti-woman theology that I want to address in this essay.

Having birthed five sons and begun rearing them, my grandmother Eva became pregnant again. Evidently feeling it impossible to raise a sixth child (we don’t know exactly what her thoughts and feelings were), she found someone willing to do an illegal abortion. A botched abortion. She died as a result. Her death sent my father to an orphanage for years and cast a shadow over his life.

[This photograph of Eva Cowan Waskow's grave was taken by my son, David Waskow, her great-grandson, on a pilgrimage to her grave in Washington DC]

By the time I learned this, not only had Roe v. Wade greatly lessened the stigma of abortion, but I had learned enough Jewish tradition to know that the Torah taught that an abortion, even if against the mother’s will, could result in civil damages at the discretion of a court, but was certainly not murder.

Only once the fetus had been born, its head had appeared outside the mother and it could take a breath on its own, was it deemed a human life. And if the fetus was a threat to the mother’s life (and some rule, her psychological health), it is not merely permissible but obligatory to kill the fetus to save the woman. That is exactly the opposite of official Catholic law.

And then I learned that one of my crucial rabbinic teachers, Rabbi Max Ticktin, before Roe v. Wade had been part of a secret network of “the Janes” who had arranged for illegal but safe abortions by qualified doctors. For years he could not enter the State of Michigan because of a warrant for his arrest.

And then I learned that another of my major teachers, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, knew that his mother had arranged an abortion in order to make it possible for the family to flee Vienna when Nazi Germany annexed Austria in the Anschluss in 1938. Reb Zalman said the abortion had “given new birth, new life to the whole family.”

So everything in my own family history and the history of my teachers accorded with Jewish law that understood Torah put the life and welfare of women higher than that of an unborn fetus. Yet the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Christian movement, in both of which men make the decisions, ignored the clear biblical text (Exodus 21: 22-25) to come up with their description of abortion as murder.

In fact, these two religious groupings have been able to organize enough political support from organizations that support other forms of subjugation (against Black and Latinx voters, GLBTQ communities, Muslims, immigrants, and Earth itself) that the

State of Texas has now legislated a system that turns everyone (not only Texas residents) into a potential paid informant like the Stasi network in Communist East Germany to imprison doctors and all others who assist in any way for an abortion later than about the sixth week of pregnancy? The Supreme Court, without a hearing or internal discussion, has three times refused to prevent the law from taking effect.

Why and how have these large religious bodies been able to mobilize such political power, and what should the rest of us – including many of their own members who disagree — do about it?

First of all, let's be clear: Abortion is not the only issue, though the US press often reduces the public issue to abortion. The Conference of Catholic Bishops makes clear that what is at stake is much larger: "Shortly after Mr. Biden's election in November, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, announced the unusual creation of a working group to address conflicts that could arise between his administration's policies and church teaching," the NYtimes reported.

"On Inauguration Day, Archbishop Gomez issued a statement criticizing Mr. Biden for policies "that would advance moral evils" especially "in the areas of abortion, contraception, marriage, and gender" (emphasis mine).

So what is really at stake is a theology of sex, especially impressed on Christianity by the sex-obsessed Augustine of Hippo (I will not call him a saint) who died in the year 430 CE. What is this sin?

Augustine powerfully affected many leaders of the Christianity of his time. They must have shared much of his tightened strum of sexual tension. Ever since, Christian thought –at least until the Protestant rebellion, and even in some Protestant churches — has suggested that the mistake of Eden was sexual.

According to this sexual hysteria, the sin has entered into all future humans because Adam and Eve passed it to their children through intercourse and procreation – like a permanent genetic defect carried not in the genes but by the very act of passing on the genes. Since then, most Christian dogma has seen pleasure in the sexual act as not only the bearer of Adam's sin but the nature of the sin itself.

In this theology, Augustine's "original" sin was original not only because it was the first, but because it was intimately involved in the origin of the human species and in the origin of every human being. It was and is indelibly imprinted in the human condition. It was and is the "sin of all," of the entire world. Since sex was necessary to keep the species alive, the dogma became that sex was acceptable if it led to procreation (though not as holy as "chastity" -- that is, abstention from sex.). So abortion, contraception, homosexuality, masturbation – all became sins. Hence Archbishop Gomez' warning. It is especially interesting that this malinterpretation of the Eden story names the sin was Sex. Not the adolescent mistake of growing one's own identity by disobeying the parent. Not the Greed of wishing to gobble up the whole world; not leave even one Tree unsubjected.

Through the centuries, some Christian thought – today, a great deal of Christian thought — and most Jewish thought, has refused to believe that the sin of Eden (whatever it was), made sex or sexual desire or sexual pleasure in itself sinful, or that the mistake of Adam and Eve delivered that sin into all human souls and bodies.

My own understanding of the sin of Eden comes partly from the deep imprint still on me of 1968, of seeing Pharaoh in our own generation, and of the joyful alternative if we could only cross the Red Sea into the Promised Land, the milk-and-honey Garden. I am haunted by the Bomb and the Climate Crisis, and at the same time inspired by the vision of an ecologically delightful planet. And that brings me to look at the birth of humankind, and at this powerful mythic parable of our beginning.

What should we do? We need to organize.

1. Right away, in honor and emulation of Rabbi Ticktin and the other “Janes,” we should be organizing networks for “illegal” distribution of safe chemical means of inducing abortion, led by rabbis and other spiritual leaders, and prepare to support them financially, legally, and with nonviolent civil disobedience if the State of Texas (and other states that are exploring the same system) and its informers attack them.
2. In every synagogue and every church and religious order and department of theology where spiritual leaders teach, the Augustinian theology against sex and for the subordination of women should be stripped of its legitimacy and denounced for its destructive effects.
3. We need to lift up a theology of the Song of Songs as a vision of Eden for a grown-up humankind, not allegorized as meaning only love between God and the Jewish people or between Christ and the Church, but infusing love for God into love between human beings of all genders and sexualities, and of love between human earthlings and Earth.

We are not used to mobilizing against the theology of any other tradition. Liberal and progressive religious traditions have customarily appealed to their own values and let others go their own way. But this is different. We are facing an attempt to impose a reactionary, retrogressive theology upon the whole American people. We need to name and oppose the pernicious anti-sex, anti-woman theology that distorts the Bible and perverts human society. This effort to impose an anti-woman, anti-sex theology is a national danger.

We need to say that the real dangers to the human species are not women, not sex as a joyful union of Body and Spirit, but the H-Bomb, the burning of fossil fuels, the over-population that takes over all living-space for humankind and crowds other species to extinction. The obsession with subjugating women and punishing joyful, consensual sex distracts us from facing the powerful forces -- I call them the Corporate Carbon Pharaohs -- that are threatening Earth and Humanity. Bring more than Ten Plagues upon all Earth, out of Greed for still more money. That GREED is the real sin against the Holy Spiritt, the Interbreathing of animals and vegetation, of Oxyygen and CO2, that keeps all life alive. The build-up of far too much CO2 is choking Earth, choking Humankind.

It is important to note that despite the urgency of Pope Francis to speak against the Greed so dangerous it is destroying the web of life on Earth, the obsession of the American Catholic bishops with sexual sin plays into the hands of the Corporate Carbon Pharaohs whose addiction to the sin of Greed is forcing plagues upon all life-forms. It is also important to note that this theology oppresses not only women but those of "unconventional" sexualities and genders. Even forbidding abortion may affect trans men who continue to have a uterus.

We need to look at the biblical passage that says, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill up the Earth, and subdue it," and say "DONE! Now what?"

And for me, the Song of Songs is the "now what." It is feminist, pro-sex, pro-love. pro-Earth, and ecological in its worldview, not hierarchical. It imagines Eden for a grown-up human race. It is heart and fountain of a Torah for the next epoch of Earth's history.