

Repro Rights NOW

Florida Rabbi a champion of reproductive freedom

Barry Silver has strengthened connection between Jewish scripture and abortion rights for decades

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Rabbi Barry Silver has been a mainstay in Florida’s abortion rights movement for decades. He and his congregation filed a lawsuit against the state’s 15-week abortion ban last year.

His advocacy is driven by two things—a concern for women’s rights and a desire to separate church and state in political decision-making.

“It's outrageous that any man would tell a woman that she has to undergo that risk,” Silver said of a woman having an unwanted pregnancy. “They should be grateful to women and do everything they can to make their life easier and to make sure that if they're going to give birth, they do it because they want to, not because they're told.”

Rabbi Silver resents people twisting and manipulating Jewish scripture and distorting it to suppress women’s rights.

“They have the right to interpret it any way they want to misinterpret it,” Silver said. “What they don't have the right to do is to misinterpret Jewish law and then with it back upon Jews and say, ‘Here's what your law really means.’”

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Silver said that Jews believe strongly in reproductive freedom because they feel children should only be brought into the world when they are wanted. And historically, Jews have pegged life beginning at birth instead of conception as many antiabortion people believe. In addition to Silver, there are several other theological experts on Jewish law that have made arguments for choice. Rabbi Josh Fixler in Texas is one and Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg is another. A useful text that Ruttenberg recommended to me was *Women and Jewish Law: The Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today*, by Rachel Biale.

Rabbi Silver is fascinating because he's also created music as a form of activism supporting abortion access. "I am a Woman and I vote" and "I'm caught in a Trap Cuz' I Can't Abort"



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCMgpDc7iCI>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvphoa1f2fy>

Silver has had mostly positive and appreciative people come up to him, but he has been harassed in his decades-long abortion rights activist career. He had his life threatened several times.

In his lawsuit, Silver said they have an affidavit from a Holocaust survivor protesting the antiabortion law on the grounds that it forces theocratic rule on people and that we had seen how that played out in Germany.

"This country is going in a bad direction," Silver said. "There's people who want to impose a Christian theocracy on the rest of us. And we've seen where that goes. And it's a very ugly situation."

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Silver did have some criticisms to offer of the National Council of Jewish Women, which didn't join him in his lawsuit. The NCJW backed a separate lawsuit filed by different plaintiffs.

The NCJW is supposed to champion Jewish rights, not try to squash them," Silver said. "The NCJW should be backing a case like ours, in which it is brought by a congregation seeking to base our opposition to the abortion restrictions on Jewish law and Jewish rights. They're backing a claim that ignores the rights of Jews and ignores religious freedom altogether."

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