

# Ambivalence

## *When the Abortion on the Table Is Your Own*

by DEBORAH EISENBACH-BUDNER *with* RABBI SUSAN SCHNUR

At the age of 40, partnered and with two small sons, I discovered that I was unintentionally pregnant. We had recently moved cross-country, bought and renovated a house that turned out to be much more derelict than we'd thought, and learned—the hard, lawsuit way—that not everyone is a good human being when they owe you money. My career had been primary in our marriage, but now it was Steven's turn; he was on the cusp of starting a non-profit, a much delayed dream. He had no interest in a third child.

I, on the other hand, always wanted my kids to have a little tribe; I wanted Steven and me to be outnumbered. I also wanted a daughter. But I knew that the timing was very rough. Besides the clarity of Steven's vote, our family life was chronically harried, our marriage compromised by stress, and the two children we already had (only 18 months apart) sorely needed *more* parental attention. On the third hand, none of this was truly life or death; we knew that.

Politically speaking, Steven and I were both staunchly pro-choice. In college, I had minored in Women's Studies and worked for the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, and when I was pregnant with my sons, I used the word "fetus"—never "baby"—in part because I'd experienced the vulnerability of attachment and loss through a miscarriage of my own, but more expressly as a statement of solidarity with women who'd had abortions.

**Hearing the prayer while I was having the abortion gave me the strength to bear the inescapable: we needed to end life in order to choose life.**

And then, well, this sounds ridiculous, but there was gardening, and the issue I always confronted when I needed to weed. I could never pull up unwanted plants without a knot in my stomach and a feeling of moral dread. Who am I to decide what should live and what should die? I thought. *It's in the wrong place. There's too much of it.* Being Jewish, my thoughts turn to Mengele, "selections," genocides. There are too many of those people. Those people don't belong here. I have a deep ambivalence about human beings' power to determine life or death. As a Jewish educator, I often teach the first two chapters of Genesis, highlighting their polarized standpoints on human beings' purpose on our Earth. In the first chapter, we're here to dominate and control God's creations. But in the second, we are *shomrei adamah*, guardians of all life on this planet.

It was still very early, I was in the first month of my pregnancy, when Steven and I drove downtown to the clinic. We got off the elevator at the ninth floor and were struck by the panoramic

view: vast, majestic mountains, a startling river, rain falling from an otherwise clear-blue sky. Mountains that had been there and will be there forever. We're just piddling specks of dust, I thought, in this giant universe. Suddenly, our worries about having another kid seemed trifling.

"We can do this," Steven said, to my total surprise. "We can have this child. In a few short years, we'll be fine."

The nurse called us in and we discussed the procedure in detail, then asked for a few moments to think. We went back out to the windows, then I pushed the button and the elevator came. We got on. We just couldn't do it.

Classical Jewish texts tell us that it's permissible to abort before 40 days, as the fetus is "mere fluid". I had probably been pregnant around 20 days. But as a woman who had already birthed two children, who had done everything possible to nourish life growing within me, who had facilitated miracles, I felt clear that life had taken hold. To abort was to kill potential life. Spiritually speaking, I had become a person who was pro-life. How complicating.

Six days passed. Steven and I drove back to the clinic. But this time, instead of gazing out the windows, I focused ungenerously on the doctor. He seemed all wrong. He looked to be in his seventies—*old*—he wore a thick gold chain and a diamond pinky ring—*rich*—and he was gruff, taciturn and inarticulate.

"Why do you do this?" I asked challengingly. If his motives were suspect, I'd have cause to walk out again.

Instead, the doctor opened up and got emotional, describing experiences he'd had as a medical resident, seeing women dying from illegal, often self-performed, abortions. He was retired, he said; he didn't do this for the money. I was moved. We had a shared sense of humanity.

I opted for local, rather than general, anesthesia, and it hurt like hell. But I wanted to stay present to my choice, both physically and emotionally. I asked the medical team to describe everything they did. When they sucked out the fluid that the embryo was in and prepared to dispose of it, I asked if I could take it home.

## A Ritual For Abortion

ברוכה אַתְּ רַחֲמַאִימָא שְׁעוֹזֶרֶת לָנוּ לְבַחֲרוֹר חַיִּים.

*Brucha Aht Rachamaima, sheh'ozeret lanu, livchor chayyim. Amen.*

Bless You, Rachamaima, Compassionate Nurturer of Life, who helps us choose life. Amen.

I was on the abortion table when this prayer just came to me, addressed in the feminine—"Brucha Aht"—to "Rachamaima," a name for God that first birthed itself, 30 years ago, among a small group of women, including me, who were writing one of the first feminist *Haggadot*. Rachamaima combines three Hebrew words: *rechem* (womb); *rachamim* (compassion; related etymologically to "womb"); and *ima* (mother). Divinity here is a compassionate, female gestator of life. Imagining God in this way came out of a process I called "spiritual activism."

"Sheh-ozeret lanu" ["who helps us"] reflects my theological stance: that there is something "out there" besides us sentient humans. "It" doesn't have a plan, "it" doesn't choose life, but it "helps us"—partners and enables us—to see our job, our role, where we need to go. We know about this "something" beyond us that contributes to the world because it happens *through* us.

The words "You" and "us": During the abortion, my partner kept whispering the prayer in my ear, over and over, the syllables incantatory. "You" and "us" eradicated my feelings of being, somehow, the only one. They connected me to Divinity, to my partner, and to every woman who ever chose to have an abortion or will one day do so.

The prayer's message is radically different from the Kaddish or from the words Jews say in response to a death—"Dayan ha-emet!" ["God is the righteous judge!"]—which don't engage relationally with us, which don't join us in our sorrow. The Kaddish resolves the unresolvable problem of mortality and anguishing loss by simply trumping it ("Let the glory of God be extolled, let His great name be hallowed, let His great name be blessed."). My female prayer, on the contrary, is an embrace.

"Livchor"—"to choose." The first time I went to the abortion clinic, I couldn't go through with it and left with my pregnancy still intact. During the six days that followed, I came to terms with the awesome charter of my choice. Okay, this is inescapable, I told myself. I can't pretend I'm not doing it. "Pro-choice," "pro-life"—I was taking responsibility for my power.

—D.E.-B. WITH S.S.

"It's against the law," the nurse said, but then set it aside for me.

"This is such a big choice," I had told the team. "So sad."

As I cried in pain, Steven cried, too. So did the doctor I had wanted to hate.

Before our first trip to the clinic, I had looked for Jewish prayers or rituals that sanctified abortion, but the little I found addressed only losses that followed “medically necessary” procedures. I knew I needed to bring a sense of *kedusha*, of blessing and wholeness, to the abortion while I was experiencing it, but even as I lay on the operating table squeezing Steven’s hand so hard that his knuckles turned white, I was unable to access that *kedusha*. Then something happened.

My presentness to the physical pain, my acknowledgment of the power I was assuming through my decision to end potential life, and my understanding that I was not alone in this journey ... coalesced, without my help, into words:

*Brucha Abt Rachamaima, sheh’ozeret lanu, livchor chayyim. Amen.*

[Bless You, Rachamaima, Compassionate Nurturer of Life, who helps us choose life. Amen.]

I said the words to Steven and asked him to whisper them over and over in my ear. To me, a *bracha*—a prayer—represents the pinnacle of presentness. Then I asked for the gas (I was so “present” that I gave my body permission to have an easier ride), and the pain became bearable.

**Only later did I think more about this**, about how the prayer had self-birthered. To resolve my ambivalence, I had needed to radically accept the moral gravity and imperfection of my choice, and I would now live a little bit injured—like Jacob who perennially limped after wrestling the angel.

Did the language of the *bracha* come to me once I’d really taken in the responsibility for my choice, did it simply name and confirm it, or did the *bracha*, itself gestating, spur my process of

## Making this decision can empower you elsewhere, too.

accepting its burden? Maybe hearing the *bracha* whispered, over and over, gave me strength to bear the weight of the inescapable: we needed to end life in order to choose life.

I felt grateful for those few quiet words that breathed soothing sense into what I was enacting—I was, after all, integrating the stories of Genesis 1 and 2 with this abortion; at the same time, dominating and safeguarding Creation. In my experience, prayers are usually prods, shepherds’ crooks that aim to gather up a moment. But this *bracha* was what *was*; there was no need to gather.

Steven and I were choosing life: shoring up our precarious marriage, our tattered family, committing to what was most holy in our relationships. We were acting as pro-life as we knew how.

There’s been such a silencing around the life-and-death power that a woman wields when she chooses to abort a fetus. Laying on the operating table, the doctor and nurse still at work, I felt the liberation that comes from making that power sacred.

I thought about Deuteronomy 30, the verses that describe the crazy accessibility of Torah, the idea that the mitzvah of living according to Torah “is not in the heavens or across the seas, that someone *else* must go and get it for you.” No, it resides in our bodies—“in our own mouths and in our own hearts to observe it.” Judaism needs to be embodied *in us* to be actionable and lasting, and each of us must filter her ethical choices through the uniqueness of her own beating heart and bleating mouth.

“And so I place before you life and death, blessing and curse,” the Deuteronomic text continues: “Choose life that you may stay alive—you and your seed.” I was blown away. I was acting from a place where all my parts were present, not from a theoretical place across oceans and seas. I am acting wholly, I thought; I have never been more intimate with a mitzvah.

We took the container home, dug a small hole under a camellia shrub, in bloom in January, and poured the embryonic fluid into the soil. The camellia sits against a fence behind the swing set that we built for our kids, and it’s sometimes obscured by other plants.

“*Brucha abt Rachamaima...*,” we said. “Bless you...who helps us choose life.”

**All of this happened nine years ago**, and since then I have observed an informal *yahrzeit*, just by myself, beside the camellia that sits over against the fence behind the swing set that we built for our children.

“This is the time of year we did it”—I say something like that. “There was a potential for life that we stopped. I kind of wonder a little who this person could have been...” I don’t observe a particular day; I just wait until I see a flower.

In 2009, our family of four went to Kazakhstan for three months, and by the time we were ready to come home, the four of us were five. We had adopted a baby girl. Before settling on Kazakhstan for the adoption, I knew Suri was out there; we just had to figure out where *exactly* she was.

Her brothers say things like, “She’s the best thing that ever happened to us,” and, “There could not be a better person to have joined our family.”

But when I watch her swinging up into the sky bursting with joy, in just that spot, I feel a sadness borne of experience and the passing of time. I face the excruciating understanding that when we choose life, we sometimes choose loss as well.

Choosing to adopt and then finding our daughter was a long, arduous process fraught with tremendous risk, doubt and desire. But it was our way of choosing life, and it would not have happened if not for the first choice. ■

*Deborah Eisenbach-Budner has worked for two decades as a Jewish education director. She has a special commitment to ritual innovation, including the spirituality of parenting and other everyday occupations.*