

# JCRC Guidelines on Reproductive Rights

**Approved by the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin, Sonoma, Alameda, and Contra Costa Counties, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013**

## **Background**

The Jewish Community Relations Council has a strong interest in the subject of family planning and reproductive choice. Our sacred Jewish texts, millennia of rabbinic interpretations, and rich Jewish teachings and practice provide textured and useful guidance on this issue. Judaism affirms the value of procreation as essential to life and the continuation of our people. The Mishnah, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century codification of Jewish law, reminds us of Judaism's deep reverence of the promise of future life. The Mishnah also affirms the value and importance of preserving a mother's life in matters of reproductive health. The revered commentator, Rashi, explained:

As long as the child has not entered into the world, it is not called a living being, and it is therefore permissible to take its life in order to save the life of its mother. Once the head of the child has come out, the child may not be harmed because it is considered fully born, and one life may not be taken to save another.

Contemporary Jewish scholarship affirms traditional Jewish ethics in voicing the importance of protecting the life and well-being of a woman. A broad interpretation of the safety of the mother is offered by all Jewish denominations, which examine the mental as well as the physical safety of the mother in evaluating if a therapeutic abortion may be warranted. And rabbis in our community offer private and compassionate pastoral care to women who seek out their spiritual guidance on a range of matters related to family planning, including abortion, so that they may rely upon the rich and wise teachings of the Jewish tradition as they make difficult moral decisions.

Our Jewish community is also informed by the unique experience we have had living in the United States, where constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom has afforded unparalleled Jewish security. Our community has thrived and prospered in this country, while freely practicing our religion. Equal protection under the law, freedom of religious expression, and the separation of church and state have provided a modern cultural overlay to our Jewish community's unique understanding of family planning and reproductive choice.

The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) is very concerned about the human impact of continued legal challenges to women's reproductive health care access and choices in the United States. The Jewish values that undergird these

issues, such as privacy, respect, dignity, and honor, are fundamental to our deep interest in matters of reproductive choice.

In light of our strong interest, JCRC formed a task force charged with developing this consensus statement on reproductive rights. The task force was comprised of a diverse group of Jewish community members who heard presentations from numerous and diverse policy, medical, and rabbinic experts. It surveyed the family planning and reproductive rights policy landscape today, in recognition that it has changed in the nearly 40 years since the landmark 1973 passage of Roe v. Wade, which granted a woman's right to choose an abortion as a basic privacy right in this country. The task force explored the dramatic evolution of access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare, which is a result of the political battle after Roe v. Wade. The task force also reviewed the multitude of position statements by other national Jewish organizations which have been directly involved in reproductive rights advocacy.

As a membership organization representing approximately 70 synagogues and Jewish organizations, JCRC seeks to develop consensus positions that reflect and affirm the views of the broad spectrum of the organized Jewish community, and that enable our community to speak with a united voice in advancing our interests. Essential to this process is the voicing of varying viewpoints, valuing civility in our discourse, and designing a consensus statement that reflects the common values and interests of our organized Jewish community.

### **JCRC Policy**

JCRC respects and affirms Jewish teaching and tradition on reproductive matters. We believe that efforts aimed at protecting our vital American experience which is grounded in religious freedom, individual choice, equality, and privacy, are complimentary to maintaining support for core Jewish views on this matter. JCRC therefore endorses the following positions:

1. Human life is to be valued and protected.
2. A woman has a legal right to reproductive choice and access to reproductive healthcare.
3. Acknowledging that the decision to elect an abortion is difficult and should only be made on an individual case-by-case basis, JCRC opposes any court decision or legislative efforts (Federal, State or local) which would:
  - a. Deny or delay women their right to reproductive choice; or
  - b. Restrict a woman's ability to access reproductive health services at any age; or
  - c. Restrict religious liberty.

4. To assist in making difficult reproductive health decisions JCRC encourages contemplative and private decision making with full and unfettered access to spiritual, religious, mental health, and medical guidance.
5. JCRC supports efforts to strengthen and safeguard the spirit and impact of Roe v. Wade, including private choices by women of all ages and their equal access to high quality, safe, private, and comprehensive reproductive health services.
6. Unbiased, scientifically based family planning education should be expanded so that women know their reproductive choice options and decide upon the best option for themselves in consultation with their health care provider.
7. JCRC supports adequately funded and geographically diverse family planning programs that provide birth control, comprehensive and scientifically based reproductive health education and health care services, including abortion services.
8. JCRC encourages increased Jewish community discussion about the impact of difficult life circumstances and choices Jewish women and men face regarding fertility, infertility, family planning, and abortion so we may foster in our own Jewish community greater support, prayer, understanding, and ritual for those who are grappling with moral dilemmas and painful circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

The JCRC supports this policy statement as a means to assure that the issue of reproductive choice and abortion is treated with the utmost sensitivity and dignity. Therefore we strongly affirm the right of every woman to be able to make that decision without the imposition of the government or any other party.

This policy statement will be utilized as a means to advocate on matters of family planning, and reproductive choice. JCRC's education and advocacy work related to this policy statement will reflect our respect for reproductive rights, privacy, and freedom as we work independently and in coalition with other communities and organizations that share our perspective.