

Testimony against SB 23 (Six-Week Abortion Bill)

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Ohio Statehouse

Rabbi Sharon Mars

Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair Manning, and Ranking Member Boyd,

My name is Rabbi Sharon Mars, and I live in Bexley, Ohio.

Behind every pregnancy there is a story.

My own story goes like this: In 1996, my first pregnancy was deemed medically untenable due to a rare and fatal kidney disorder of my fetus.

As heartbroken as my husband and I were to be told by our medical team that our baby could not live at 24 weeks in utero, we made the unimaginable but critical decision in conjunction with our doctor and many other medical and legal resources to end our pregnancy.

That CHOICE was impossible, but what made our situation one iota easier was that we had the emotional and physical support of a medical system that took us and our totally unique situation and our child seriously.

There was a team of gynecologists, obstetricians, neonatologists, nephrologists, and medical ethicists who determined the facts of our case, based on the presenting evidence of my health as well as my baby's, which determined that the baby would not live.

As crushing as that pregnancy loss was (as well as my next miscarriage a year later), I came through it because of the love of my family and the care of a medical system and a legal system which took me as a woman, as a mother, as a human being with a unique and difficult circumstance — as well as that potential life inside me — seriously.

Had I not been supported by those entities, I don't know whether I would have been able to pursue pregnancy again and gone on to have my three healthy young adult children I am blessed with today.

Over 20 years later, I am blessed to be a parent, and I feel grateful beyond measure for the blessing of having been born in this country where I know that my rights as a woman are constitutionally inviolable.

As a rabbi, I strive to lead and live in covenantal relationship with the Divine. Jewish law does not leave the potential taking of a life to an individual's discretion in the case of pregnancy, but, significantly, neither does it compromise the life and liberties of the mother.

The medieval Jewish legal thinker Maimonides, who also happened to be a physician, determined based on legal case study, that abortion was prohibited except to save a mother's life.

Over time and with the advance of modern medical technology, Jewish law has evolved to make exceptions for the pregnant mother who faces serious health concerns which may impact the health of her child.

In these cases, the woman's health was and is considered tantamount in Jewish law, even as the well-being of the child in utero is of extreme concern.

Jewish law insists that the viability of a fetus is somewhere around 24 weeks of gestation — NOT 6 weeks when a beating heart may be first detected.

No child of God in this chamber or anywhere would ever advocate for murder; we are ALL in favor of life.

The Holy One calls to us today from the book of Deuteronomy: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse — Now **choose life**, so that you and your children may live and that you may love...your God, **listen** to God's voice, and **hold fast** to God!"

We are commanded to choose life and to listen to God's voice and to hold fast to God.

To choose life means to listen to the voice of the young black woman who is three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes than white women because of racism and lack of access to high-quality health care in this country.

To choose life means to listen to and protect the middle school girl whose step-father sexually abused her, resulting in an unintended pregnancy.

To choose life means to listen to and to protect the white college student who was raped walking through campus, thus altering her body and her psyche and her future.

To choose life means to listen to the voices of all of these women and to establish protections for all young girls and women so that they may live without fear in their homes and schools and communities, so that they may live out the true and infinite potential of their lives — to not be limited in their choices by having fewer clinics to visit for their healthcare needs, and to not be limited to determine their pregnancy's existence or even their desire to have a child within the first six weeks.

Let these women instead LIVE in self-determination, and let us together cultivate a society in which children come into the world under the very best of circumstances, each child a beloved and wanted child, growing up in a community that cares about the full potential of their lives as responsible, educated, hard-working citizens.

Let us choose to remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. today that, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Therefore, I ask you, our elected officials, to choose life by listening deeply to the voices of those girls and women and couples and parents, by holding fast to protect the reproductive rights of women throughout our state, by embracing our “inescapable network of mutuality.”

I ask you not to support SB 23, which is neither constitutional nor compassionate but is actually contradictory to the divine word and to our noble and inextricable existence on earth.

I would be happy to answer any questions the committee members may have.

Thank you very much for hearing my testimony today.