

Good Morning Chairman Merrin and Ranking Member Boyd.

I am Rabbi Jessica Shimberg. I serve as the spiritual leader of The Little Minyan Kehilah in Columbus, Ohio, and work extensively in interfaith spaces and conversations designed to strengthen our communities. A central Ohio resident for nearly all my life, I come before you today as an engaged citizen and faith leader to implore that you consider the ways in which H.B. 90 is yet another attempt to impose a very narrowly constructed sense of Christian morality and messaging on all Ohioans in violation of our religious liberties.

As a congregational rabbi and pastoral counselor, a former attorney, mediator and facilitator of conflict resolution, a mother of two college-age sons, I beseech you to oppose H.B. 90. This new bill is another in a serial onslaught of proposed legislation clearly designed to push the message of the far-right, and supported only by some Christian institutions that at conception, a fertilized egg magically becomes a “baby” and a human life deserving the same legal protection as the woman whose womb holds those cells.

As the mother of two boys, now 19 and nearly 21, I am well aware of the limited time in each school day for quality instruction for students. H.B. 90 would impose numerous resource-intensive obligations on the Ohio Department of Education that are likely to be costly, time-consuming, and difficult to implement. And yet, this bill does nothing to address the current shortcoming in the current sex education offered in Ohio. Instead, it instructs the Board of Education to develop instructional materials for students that pushes a specific agenda to restrict information about ALL safe healthcare options, while requiring teachers to “preach” to students about prenatal care and adoption. H.B. 90 also requires teachers to stress that students should abstain for all sexual activity until after marriage, a message we know to be ineffective.

H.B. 90 would require the Department of Health to develop and presumably fund materials for a public service campaign that “clearly and consistently states that abortion kills a living human being” — including “public service announcements” and “print and broadcast media.”

Further, The Department of Health would also be required to provide technical assistance to any community organizations planning and implementing programs to prevent abortion, without regard for religious affiliations and potential constitutional concerns. There are no limits provided for how expansive this assistance must be to comply with the law, nor is any funding provided to the Department to actually implement this wide-reaching requirement.

The chief biblical source referring to abortion is Exodus 21:22–25 concerning the man who inadvertently strikes a pregnant woman, causing her to lose the pregnancy. The attacker is not liable for homicide for the death of the fetus. However, if the woman dies, the man is liable for her homicide. In translating the Hebrew text into Greek, the Septuagint ascribed a word referencing the mother as referring to the fetus and its stage of development. (That is, if the fetus had reached a certain stage of development of identifiable human formation, the attacker was liable for its death.) The Septuagint translation was the beginning of the separate approaches on the topic of abortion within Judaism and Christianity (which later set quickening, i.e. fetal movement, as the criterion for sufficient formation and still later equated conception with formation).

However, full human status in Judaism, is still considered to manifest at the birth. The Hellenistic position and that of the early church stand in opposition to the position which became normative Jewish law. Jewish values prioritize the life of a woman over that of an unborn fetus, and although we treat decisions about a fetus with great care and weight, the woman's health is paramount.

We have come a long way in how we treat girls and women in America. We must not return to policies that restrict our agency over our bodies and force us into situations that threaten our wellbeing - physically, psychologically, or spiritually. Decisions about women's health and wellbeing must remain with women in consultation with doctors, unfettered by restrictive state intrusion on Constitutional rights.

It is dark and dangerous to substitute the moral posture of certain legislators (based on those lawmakers' religious beliefs vs. medical or public health concerns) for a woman's own judgment, spiritual and theological discernment, and deliberation about her own physical and mental health and how her reproductive choices impact her future.

As a mother, I am deeply troubled by the impact H.B. 90 would have on the education of all of Ohio's students. As a rabbi, I am further concerned by the way that this proposed legislation violates Jewish values, law, and practices.

Thank you for your careful discernment and your attention to the bedrock religious liberties your proposed legislation threatens.