

Abortion. It's Israel's little secret and it has been until recently, through a pact of silence between the women's organizations and the religious parties around the Don't ask, don't tell idea. Just as a reminder despite not having separation of religion and state, in contrast with the U.S., Israel has some of the most liberal abortion policies in the world. Just to name a few: There is no parental consent policy for minors, there is no age of gestation limit, and abortion services are now covered for all women up to the age of 33 pretty much. What is the catch? The catch is that the pregnant woman does not get to decide. But rather a committee of health providers does. This process was established in 1977 with a well-meaning law that was created to protect women from illegal and black market abortions by providing abortion as a medical service in a hospital setting. The committees, in turn, were established to ensure that the women or girls seeking said services qualify under the criteria set out in the corresponding law. The criteria for committee approval for an abortion is the pregnancy is a relations such as rape or incest if she is unmarried (including divorced or widowed), or in the case of a married woman, the pregnancy is not her husband's; the fetus has or is likely to be born with a physical or mental defect; continued pregnancy is life-threatening, or harmful physically or mentally to the mother or the child.

The social-economic reason, in the original law was removed in 1979 under pressure from the Orthodox religious parties. Still, the law is a very liberal one, and given the relationship between religion and state in Israel, it is surprisingly liberal. And yet, without the woman's right to choose, the law is considered in most Western countries, archaic. Because of the liberalization of abortion policies, Europe for example has a 6% "dangerous abortion" rate whereas in Latin America where abortion is not legal, there is a 30% rate. Criminalizing abortion does not prevent it, condemns it-yes but still women who need or want to abort will seek it and at all risks. And so this week, an historical union amongst the women's movement, legislators, politicians, the medical profession and academia was created to announce new legislation to be presented to this 19th Knesset. The legislation will include most importantly:

The elimination of the committee review for the first 15 weeks gestation period when over 90% of the abortions in Israel take place in the first tri-mester and allow the woman herself to decide. Free Counseling would be provided in the form of education and prevention, not finger – wagging or scare tactics. Free sex education and contraceptives would be included in the bill as well as part of the services provided to girls and women through the national health basket.

There are many reasons as to why this historical event is happening today. First, we have a window of opportunity with this Knesset. There are no religious parties in the coalition and yet in 2006 when reform of the abortion laws was introduced to a similar coalition government without religious parties, it was rejected by a wide margin. But more importantly, there has been an influx of women in the public sphere that has allowed a breach in the pact. With Minister of Health Yael Gelman insisting that 50% of the committee that determines which medical services will be state subsidized must be women. The significance of this cannot be understated. With

more women involved in decision making on a national level, the issues of women, their bodies, and their health will become part of the dialogue. Abortion, one could argue is a health issue, a moral issue, a political issue but more importantly, it is a woman's issue. The decision to end a pregnancy or not should not be decided by committee. It should be decided by the woman. Committees can counsel, committees can guide, but women must be the sole decision makers on this issue. No other medical procedure or health issue is scrutinized or determined by committee under Israeli law. More and more the concept of dignity of risk, taken from the conversations around disability rights is being introduced in to the dialogue. Dignity of Risk refers to the right of all people to undertake some tasks that have a level of risk. Abortion can be a life-threatening procedure and at the very least, it comes with some risk. Women have the right to make these decisions for themselves as they do with tonsillectomies, chemotherapy or any other medical procedure. A committee of health practitioners can counsel but should not dictate. Let's wake the sleeping tiger. Let's allow the bill to be introduced in the Knesset and let's have the conversation that needs to be had on abortion and reproductive choice in Israel.
