

KOLEINU Storytelling Guide



National Council of Jewish Women

Holding Space for Members of Your Community to Tell Their Abortion Stories: A Guide

Repro Shabbat gives us the chance to gather and learn about what Judaism says about abortion; it is also an opportunity to make space for, and to listen to, those most impacted by abortion bans.

In a post-Dobbs world, we are more aware than ever of the importance of individual narratives in building the movement for reproductive liberation. By hearing personal stories, we actively destigmatize abortion and affirm the humanity of those who have them.

That is why we have developed this guide to planning and facilitating a storytelling program in your community. This resource was created with the help of the clergy team at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, NY, as well as the organizations We Testify and Jewish Women's Archive. We have included a basic script and best practices for facilitators, tips for those who want to share, and sample language to use for publicity and outreach. As with everything in our #ReproShabbat toolkit, we encourage you to use what works for you and your community. Please feel free to tweak, edit, or adapt this resource to best suit your needs, and as always, please reach out to us at action@ncjw.org if you need help.

Best Practices

As you begin to plan your program, we hope that you keep the following guiding principles in mind: a safe place to be vulnerable, various modes of connection, and the weight of ritual.

A Safe Place to be Vulnerable

People with abortion stories often do not share their experiences because of social stigma and culturally-imposed shame. It is the role of spiritual leaders to break down the walls that stigma builds by setting the tone and expectations and by creating an environment conducive to emotional sharing. It's important to speak about abortion as a healthcare procedure in a straightforward and matter-of-fact way (including saying the word!); exhibiting discomfort or going out of the way to find euphemisms continues to perpetuate stigma. Please also review our [Language Best Practices](#) before getting started in order to steer clear of other possible pitfalls and to find other ways to be as accepting and inclusive as possible.

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People get abortions for a lot of reasons, in a lot of contexts. They do not need to justify their reasons to anyone. The value of *kavod habriot*, human dignity, involves honoring people's autonomous agency and ability to determine their own destiny. Sometimes abortions are difficult decisions, but sometimes they aren't. And there is no one way to feel about one's abortion. For some, their abortion may be a joyful or liberating experience; for others it may be confusing or sad or evoke a mix of feelings. Be sure to avoid presumptions and to include a range of narratives in your program for the sake of sensitivity and inclusivity.

Various Modes of Engagement

Just as there is no universal emotional experience after an abortion, you will likely encounter a range of comfort levels with regards to story sharing. Some people may feel comfortable sharing their story publicly, while others may prefer to share anonymously. Be sure to create a space that encourages people to connect on their own terms.

The Weight of Ritual

While it may seem tempting to plan an event that stands on its own, we encourage you to consider how Jewish rituals can add meaning or ground your program in our tradition. You may consider including abortion storytelling in place of the sermon during services, or performing *Havdalah* before telling stories. By incorporating ritual into your storytelling program, the act of sharing takes on religious and spiritual significance that can provide comfort to the storytellers and heightened religious context for those listening.

Tips for Storytellers

The team at WeTestify has created [a wonderful guide](#) for those preparing to share an abortion story. You may choose to send the guide in its entirety to your congregation or just to those who have offered to share their stories.

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Facilitator Script

This script is intended to be a springboard for the facilitator's remarks during the event. It is likely that it will not all be relevant to your community, so let it serve as inspiration instead of something to memorize.

Our storytellers are, by their presence and voices today, showing that they will not be silenced by stigma or shame. And those listening are here to bear compassionate witness to their experiences, to learn from them and to let them matter. We are showing up for ourselves and for each other, to hold each other up and be together in community. Let today's gathering serve as a communal response to end the stigma surrounding abortion. And may it help fuel us as we work toward a world where everyone has the access that they need.

As we listen, let us commit to providing a safe environment for the storytellers and sharers. While not all of the stories will be shared with attribution, we know that each story belongs to someone in our community. Let us respond with generosity and love.

[Offer words of welcome specific to your community. Thank co-organizers and storytellers, by name if relevant.]

Before I introduce the first speaker, I want to make it clear that there may be some upsetting or graphic details shared. I encourage you to sit with discomfort that may arise as we bear testimony. However, if you feel distressed and need to step out for a moment, please do so.

[You may choose to introduce speakers or let them introduce themselves. Consider allowing for a moment of reflection between stories. After the final story, thank the audience and storytellers once again for their presence. You may feel it necessary to recap some of the stories and the emotions that arose from them before you provide concluding remarks and next steps.]

Before we conclude, perhaps we can all take a deep breath together: Everybody, [deep breath]. Now let's take a few moments to sit in silence, to honor all of the stories that we have heard and the people who have told them. *[a few minutes of silence — whatever feels right]*

Thank you to everyone who has shared their story this evening.
Thank you to everyone who listened.

I'd like to close with a blessing — for everyone who shared their story tonight, and for everyone who has had — or is having — an abortion, and for everyone who has been — or is, right now, today, being denied abortion care. I want to bless you, that the Holy One encounters you, as yourself, full of agency and dignity, and you receive blessing.

May the Holy One spread upon all of you a canopy of peace, of safety, of care, of empowerment.

Suggested liturgical text:

וּפְרֹשׁ עָלֵינוּ סִכַּת שְׁלוֹמֶךָ

U'fros aleinu sukat shlomecha

Spread over us the shelter of Your peace.

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Sample Language

With gratitude to the clergy team of Congregation Beth Elohim for their assistance.

Sample Email

Dear [congregation] friends,

On [February 9-10], we are joining the national Jewish community in #ReproShabbat. #ReproShabbat takes place annually on the Shabbat when we read *Parshat Mishpatim*, which includes [the verses that undergird Judaism's approach](#) to reproductive health, rights, and justice.

We want to begin this sensitive conversation with you. We want to talk together, as a Jewish community, about abortion. And we want to make space for people of all genders to tell their stories and to be heard, held, and supported at [congregation].

We are inviting you now to share your story with us. You can include your name or share anonymously. It can be about you or about an experience that impacted you. In telling our stories, we hope to erase invisibility, shame, and stigma, and instead remember that abortion is about real people in our midst. It's about us.

The vast majority of us in this congregation have been affected by abortion and reproductive rights in some way; 1 in 4 people who can get pregnant will have an abortion by the age of 45. Judaism makes space for the experience of abortion; it is permitted and even required when the life of the pregnant person is at stake. We want [our community] to be a space where all people can tell their stories about why they or a partner or family member had an abortion and what it meant to them.

This is a devastating time in our country, as our Constitutional right to abortion access has been undermined; 56% of women, trans men and nonbinary people of reproductive age (40 million people) currently live in states hostile to abortion rights. There is much work ahead. But we must start in our own sacred home.

[Possible supplementary language:]

We also want to acknowledge that we are not a monolithic community and that there are members of [congregation] who are uncomfortable with or opposed to abortion. We want to be a place where we can hear one another, where we can learn more from and with each other, and where our members can enter into the conversation from wherever they are and feel respected and cared for. And we want every person with a story to be able to share it and be elevated for their courage, their experience, and their humanity.

If you feel moved to share your story, please do that here [insert link to form]. Join us for #ReproShabbat on [February 9-10] to be together for this important conversation. If you'd also like to have your story archived through the Jewish Women's Archive, you can do so [here](#).

[L'shalom/all the best/with love]

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Sample Form

We encourage the use of a Google form or other online survey to collect responses.

Do You Have a Story about Reproductive Rights?

We are inviting you to share your stories about abortion with us. You can include your name or share anonymously. It can be about your own experience or an experience that impacted your life. In telling our stories, we hope to erase invisibility, shame, and stigma, while recognizing that this issue affects real people in our midst. It's about us.

We may share some of the submitted stories during our #ReproShabbat event on [day, date, and time]. If you are open to a clergy or lay member reading your story, please let us know the best way to do that:

- I am comfortable with you sharing my story, using my name.
- I am comfortable with you sharing my story anonymously.
- I am not comfortable with you sharing my story.
- I would like to share my story myself.

Would you like to speak to a clergy member about your story?

- Yes
- No

Please use this space to share your story:

Name and email (optional)



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