

We Testify Abortion Stories

A loving reminder to review the Toolkit's language best practices before leading this session.

During Repro Shabbat, you may wish to teach a text study using abortion stories to honor the lived experiences of those who have had abortions, to dismantle the stigma surrounding abortion, and to highlight the real-life impact of abortion bans and restrictions.

These stories can be used as a set induction to a d'var Torah, paired with the Jewish sources in a more traditional text study above, or as a stand-alone program. They are designed to be used either in a large group conversation, in smaller breakout groups, or as a combination. You can use some or all of them, whatever works for your plans.



The stories in this guide are paired with questions to guide your discussion; the stories come from **We Testify**, an organization dedicated to the leadership and representation of people who've had abortions, increasing the spectrum of abortion storytellers in the public sphere, and shifting the way the media understands the context and complexity of accessing abortion care. We Testify invests in abortion storytellers to elevate their voices and expertise, particularly those of color, those from rural and conservative communities, those who are queer-identified, those with varying abilities and citizenship statuses, and those who needed support when navigating barriers while accessing abortion care. **To learn more about We Testify, to find more abortion stories, or to learn how to become an abortion storyteller, visit wetestify.org.**

Note: Those undertaking this text study will necessary engage with stories about abortion and topics such as rape and sexual violence, racism, immigration detention, and other potentially triggering content. Those leading discussions should endeavor to create a space where all can engage empathetically and thoughtfully with difficult content and feel safe and supported. We strongly suggest that you offer the content warning below as you begin this session.

This session engages with stories about abortion and topics such as rape and sexual violence, racism, immigration detention, and other potentially triggering content. Please take care of yourself and know that you can exit this conversation at any time, whether now or at any other time in this session.

We Testify: Abortion Stories

STORYTELLER: STEPHANIE LORAINE

Location: Florida

When I was 17, I needed an abortion and was unable to tell my parents. Due to parental involvement laws in the state of Florida I was not able to get an abortion without the notification and presence of my parents. I was forced to seek out a judicial bypass, which is the process of having a judge decide the fate of your abortion . . .

[After finding out I was pregnant,] I searched the internet for ways to end my own pregnancy. I read I could take 5000mg of vitamin C over 5 days. I considered throwing myself down the stairs. I even considered ending my life knowing a pregnancy would be the end of my future. That is how desperate I was. After days of calling, I finally got through to a hotline worker who connected me with an attorney who agreed to take my case pro-bono. I finally felt some relief. I spent the next 2 weeks working at my waitressing job, saving up my tips for my abortion, attending my college classes, and gathering all the documentation the attorney requested. I had an ultrasound, and I was forced to see it even though I didn't want to. I had to gather police records from the times my father was charged with child abuse after beating me and leaving me with bruises. I provided my school transcripts reflecting my dual enrollment course load. I even wrote an essay talking about why I desperately needed an abortion. I turned in all those papers to a judge in Duval County Florida who presided over my fate.

Young people face a double-edged sword of stigma with their reproductive health care; if they continue their pregnancies they are unsupported and deemed irresponsible, and if they pursue an abortion we are stigmatized, forced to deal with laws that present barriers denying us our constitutional right to an abortion.

Although I worked and studied since I was 13 years old to support my family, when it came to decisions about my body or my life I was told I was not capable of making my own decisions. My abortion was a means of survival and self-preservation for a future I wanted to live on my own terms.

Read more from Stephanie [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the reasons that a minor might not feel comfortable or safe approaching their parents about the need for an abortion?
2. How do you imagine Stephanie might have felt during the process of having to ask a judge for permission to obtain an abortion? What challenges do you imagine she might have faced in the process?
3. What do you make of Stephanie's statement that, though she has worked since she was 13, she was not empowered to make decisions about her own body? How do you think about her understanding of her abortion as an act of self-preservation?
4. Young people face extreme barriers to accessing abortion care, including, in many cases, forced parental involvement; greater challenges with finding transportation to care; waiting periods; limitations on their ability to obtain confidential care using family health insurance; and the inability to pay because of federal and state restrictions on abortion insurance coverage. How can we empower young people as moral decision makers with the rights to full bodily autonomy and avoid paternalism when discussing youth abortion access?
5. Jews hold that the preservation of life, *pikuach nefesh*, is a central principle, one that overrides many other commandments. How is this principle reflected in Stephanie's story, particularly in the description of her abortion as a "means of survival and self-preservation"? Does this inform your view of abortion and the myriad reasons why one would need access to this care?

STORYTELLER: DR. VALERIE PETERSON

Location: Dallas, TX

Note: This story takes place before Texas banned abortion.

At 16 weeks [pregnant], I had an abortion. My son was diagnosed with a fetal anomaly that was 100% incompatible with life. I lived in Texas where the laws (Texas House Bill 2) at the time prevented me from getting the abortion care that I needed at the time that I wanted it. There was a 3-4 week waiting list as well as a 3-4 day process. The laws had such a profound impact on my mental and emotional health that I ended up traveling to Florida, where I was able to get the abortion done within 48 hours of the diagnosis and was at the clinic for no more than 6 hours.

I share my story so that people can know that there are a myriad of reasons people seek abortion care. I speak to share my truth in hopes that it will inspire others to share, to act, or to rethink their position or understanding of abortion and what abortion care really means. I also speak for those that are afraid to speak out due to the stigma that surrounds abortion, especially those later in pregnancy.

Read more from Valerie here.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Dr. Peters felt in the time between receiving the diagnosis and deciding to terminate the pregnancy and the termination itself? In what ways do you think the Texas laws impacted her mental and emotional health?
2. How do you think she felt during various points on her trip to FL--the trip to the airport, the flight, checking in to the hotel, the trip to get care, the return trip home? How do you imagine her emotional experience would have been different if she had been able to get reasonably-timed care at home?
3. How do you imagine a story like Dr. Peters' goes if someone doesn't have the money or other kinds of capacity to fly out of state?

4. Many factors influence the decision to have an abortion after the first trimester, including difficulties in accessing care, delays in arranging travel and funds, changes in life circumstances, and/or serious health challenges for the pregnant person or fetus. Abortion restrictions based on the gestational age of the fetus (commonly six-, eight-, twelve-, or twenty-week bans), make assumptions that we do not see in classical Jewish texts--which permit abortion even into early labor in some circumstances. What are some of the assumptions underlying bans based on gestational age? How do you feel about these assumptions driving legislation that impacts a wide array of people facing a wide array of complex personal situations?

STORYTELLER: ASHLEY CHANEL

Location: Cleveland, OH

I had my abortion on April 15, 2016. It was an unplanned pregnancy with someone I didn't see myself with for a long-term relationship. At the time, I had begun working on a pro-choice coalition project and felt lucky to use my degree in a work environment that was both exciting and supportive. I had accomplished a few significant milestones (obtaining my masters, traveling out of the country, moving into my own place) however, getting an abortion felt like my first adult decision, and my first parenting decision. The unplanned pregnancy gave me the opportunity to really think about the path I wanted my life to take, and the life I want to give my future children. I am grateful for my abortion because it was my moment of clarity.

My faith played a major role in choosing abortion and being able to feel firm in my decision. I want those who don't identify as Christian--but are subjected to protesters who use Biblical language on their signs and pamphlets--to know that hate, bigotry, judgement, intimidation, and lies are not the traits of authentic Christians. I want people to know that you don't have to choose between your faith and your decision to have an abortion. For me, having an abortion actually strengthened my spiritual relationship.

Read more from Ashley [here](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Ashley describe feeling about her decision to terminate her pregnancy? Does this surprise you, or not at all? Why or why not?
2. What about Ashley's story feels familiar, like a story you've heard before? What about it feels less like the narrative that is commonly shared in the wider culture?
3. Ashley's faith was a critical aspect of how she considered her reproductive choices. Judaism and Jewish values, too, point us towards support for abortion rights and access. What role do you think people in religious communities have in the work for reproductive rights, health and justice have? Why?

STORYTELLER: ALEJANDRA PABLOS

Location: Washington, DC and Arizona

When I became pregnant, I knew the current political situation would devastate the family I would create. The same people who would force me to continue my pregnancy are the same people who would rip my baby from my arms and deport me because of my immigration status. I can't ignore the irony of lawmakers whose only mission is to control a woman's body, and refuse to support us in accessing childcare and livable wages for our families.

I chose an abortion because comprehensive sex education wasn't a thing. I made this choice because I did not want to be a parent. The decisions we make are supported by our very own lived experiences. Trust us. I know that when a mom is separated from her daughter, whether it is a country that separates them or an immigration prison, you might as well rip her heart out. I know this because my mother had to suffer through our separation once. I was detained in an immigration prison for two years, and my mom and my family visited every weekend.

The difficult part for me really was the fear I feel every day. I am afraid that the broken, cruel immigration system in the U.S will tear me away from family, from my child if I had one. I see it every day, everywhere, families ripped apart by ICE, parents displaced in prisons, daughters in jails, sons in deportation proceedings. Fear. I cannot begin to think of planning a family when I know I am facing a racist system that is here to oppress brown and immigrant people.

Read more from Alejandra [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What issues factored into Alejandra's decision to terminate her pregnancy? In what ways were those connected to larger systems and structures rather than the specific details of her particular situation? What impact have those systems had on her life so far?
2. One complexity around the language of "pro-choice," is that not everyone has the same kinds of choices. In what ways might Alejandra's story speak to this claim?
3. Immigrants are forced to navigate a complicated patchwork of care that often requires them to delay, forego, or pay out of pocket for basic health services like abortion. How does Alejandra's story illuminate the intersection of abortion access and harmful immigration policies and rhetoric? In what other ways might you imagine these two issues intersect?
4. Reproductive justice, which is a Black-led movement that brings racial and economic framework to the work of reproductive freedom. This framework highlights how multiple identities or factors — such as immigration status, race, income, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, and geography — affect a person's ability to shape their reproductive life. Does Alejandra's story illuminate the idea of reproductive justice? If so, how?

(Note: For more information on Reproductive Justice, please visit our partners at [Sister Song](#) and [In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda](#).)

STORYTELLER: CAZEMBE JACKSON

Location: Atlanta, GA

I was 21 years old and a junior in college when I had my abortion. After surviving a rape that ended in an unwanted pregnancy, I went to a Planned Parenthood in my hometown to get an abortion. My family was supportive of my decision because of the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy. I'm committed to making sure all people can have a good experience having an abortion, regardless of their reason.

I am excited to lift up the voices of [other] Black trans men who have had abortions and want to give birth . . . Often when we think of abortion access or even pregnancy and childbirth we call these 'women's issues'. This erases the experience of trans and gender nonconforming folks who also have abortions and give birth to children . . . I wish that folks understood that men have abortions too. That gender is separate from the ability to reproduce children. That every person who has the ability to create children is capable of determining when if ever is the right time to do it.

Read Cazembe's full story [here](#).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What feels familiar about Cazembe's story? What feels unexpected, or surprising?
2. In what ways does Cazembe's story challenge your ideas about who might need abortion access?
3. How can we ensure that trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming people are included in the movement for reproductive freedom and are able to access safe, comprehensive care without stigma or discrimination?