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# Abortion as a Jewish Dilemma in Norma Rosen's At the Center

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

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# Abortion as a Jewish Dilemma in Norma Rosen's *At the Center*

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## Abstract

This article reads Norma Rosen's 1982 novel *At the Center*, a novel set in an abortion clinic, as articulating the ethical complexity of abortion for American Jews in the years following abortion legalization. It argues that the novel presents legal abortion as morally complex. Given the harm of dangerous illegal abortion, providing legal abortion makes the world safer. But the fear of abortion becoming illegal again is ever-present. The increased availability of abortion can lead to it being conducted without grappling with the morality of ending a potential life. Jews must also negotiate the probable comparisons of abortion to Nazism. The article first shows how abortion is presented in Rosen's journalism from the late-1970s before explicating how *At the Center* presents the central moral issues of abortion through analyzing the novel's central characters.

Keywords: Abortion, Norma Rosen, *At the Center*, Jewish Literature, Medical Ethics

## 1. Introduction

The religious, moral, and legal acceptability of abortion is one of the preeminent issues of the past fifty years, with staunch critics and defenders on both sides. Attitudes toward abortion are informed by broader cultural mores and shaped by its legal permissibility as well as the technological efficacy of abortion methods. With the 2022 *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health* Supreme Court decision overturning the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision, the right to an abortion is no longer guaranteed in America. The significance of the loss of the right to an abortion, even as abortion access has been restricted in recent years, cannot be overstated. The Dobbs decision raised the ethical and religious concerns related to abortion anew.

For Jewish communities, the permissibility of abortion has tended to be adjudicated within a *halakhic* or Jewish legal framework. David Kraemer, writing in 1993, explains that when Jewish commentators on abortion purport to discuss the ethical implications of abortion, "their discourse shows that they have really meant Jewish law (halacha)."[1]

However, many American Jews remain deeply committed to their Jewish identity even as they reject *halakhah* as a normatively binding framework.[2] Thus, *halakhic* treatments of abortion by no



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

means exhaust Jewish engagement with the subject. More significantly, settling the binary issues of whether abortion is, in principle, acceptable only leads to other questions such as: under what conditions can one perform or receive an abortion? Is abortion always justified? Is permitting abortion in tension with other aspects of Jewish ethics? What psychological effects can abortion inflict upon doctors or patients? Due to the varied attitudes towards *halakhah* among American Jews, one should explore non-*halakhic* perspectives on abortion to have a more complete perspective on Jewish attitudes towards abortion.

One example of a Jewish engagement with abortion from the early post-*Roe* years is Norma Rosen (1924-2021)'s 1982 novel *At The Center*. The novel is set in a New York City abortion clinic in the early years after the legalization of abortion. It centers on a cast of doctors, nurses, patients, and protesters who navigate the new world of legalized, medically safe abortion. *At the Center* is instructive for it presents the moral complexity associated with legalized abortions. As a practical and ethical matter, the permissibility of abortion is unquestioned. But, as suggested above, legalized abortion raises additional questions about abortion that the novel explores including: how do doctors navigate the conflict between law (religious or secular) and morality; how is one's attitude toward abortion shaped by their broader life circumstances; how ought one to address comparisons between abortion providers and genocide perpetrators, especially when abortion providers are Jewish; and lastly, can abortion improve the lives of the living?

This article reads the novel's central characters as each contributing to moral entanglements arising from performing abortions. Dr. Edgar Bianky founded the clinic after his sister died following an illegal abortion. For Bianky, providing safe abortion is an obligation to prevent unnecessary suffering and (a possibly futile and misguided) means of redeeming the death of his sister. In contrast, Dr. Charles "Charlie" Brodaw is zealously committed to the absolute permissibility of abortion, with disastrous consequences. The younger Dr. Paul Sunshine views Bianky and Brodaw as heroes of the pre-*Roe* period. The nurse Hannah Selig, a formerly Hasidic daughter of Holocaust survivors, attempts to reconcile her rejection of normative Judaism and the legacy of the Holocaust with the needs of her coworkers and patients. For these Jewish characters, whether or not to perform abortions isn't a simple medical decision — it is a path to creating a



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

better world that emerges out of the tense and dangerous pre-*Roe* era. The characters grapple with these large-scale historical changes as well as the specific personal issues that shaped their own path to the Center. Moreover**,** the dramatic decline in Jewish population during the Holocaust has led some to argue that aborting the fetuses of Jewish woman is carrying out Hitler's will. Additionally, the medicalized and efficient performance of abortion is likened by some to the Nazi use of concentration camps. These analogies add additional complexity to the issue of abortion when the physicians performing abortions are Jewish.

The Center is also under threat from anti-abortion protesters who, in the end, successfully destroy the center. Rather than arguing for the permissibility of abortion, *At the Center*, articulates the central moral and practical hazards involved with Jewish people facilitating abortions. This reading develops Ann Shapiro's reading of the novel in which Rosen "probes the moral implications of abortion for Jews and non-Jews alike."[3]

There is some risk in reading literature as reflecting historical reality. Novelists create works of art that ought not be uncritically assimilated with the author's views. Nonetheless, literature is, undeniably, informed by the historical context in which it is produced. In the case of *At the Center*, it is well-documented that the author's experience directly informed the novel. Thus, the article explores how *At the Center* constructs the issues associated with abortion. First, this article examines how Rosen frames abortion as in her reporting on abortion from 1977. Some of the themes, ideas, and (notably) characters from her journalism recur in the novel. Next, it shows how the novel's three central characters contribute to articulation of abortion as a distinct ethical and legal problem and how that is received by Jewish people. The conclusion crystalizes the specific issues raised by the novel to facilitate comparison with Jewish discussions about abortion in the post-*Dobbs* era.

One might ask why Judaism is relevant to the issues raised by *At The Center*. As a novel involving many Jewish characters, written by a Jewish author, and dealing with issues important to Jewish communities such as the perception of Jewish doctors in America, the *halakhic* permissibility of abortion, and the legacy of the Holocaust, it is germane to Jewish discussion of



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

abortion. Even though abortion is not an exclusively Jewish issue, it raises specific concerns for Jews.

In a recent review of scholarship on American Jewish sexuality, Rachel Kranson laments the "meager" historical work on Jews and abortion. She observes that "studies by *halachic* experts, bioethicists, and sociologists have addressed the controversy over abortion from a Jewish perspective, historians are only just beginning to explore this facet of American Jewish politics."[4] Worse, Kranson continues, "most of the historical work on American Jews and abortion explored the ideas of the minority of Jewish leaders who aimed to restrict or deny women's reproductive autonomy."[5] This article contributes to the effort to redress the neglect of Jewish treatments of abortion by reading *At The Center* in its historical context. Rather than arguing for a view, the novel articulates the positions, issues, and entanglements Jewish people contend with in navigating legalized abortion in the early post-*Roe* years.

## 2. Norma Rosen and Jewish Identity

During her long life, Rosen produced works in several genres.[6] Her novels and stories engage with American-Jewish life, touching on themes of immigration, family, and the impact of the Holocaust. Although several of her novels have been reprinted by Syracuse University Press in its *Library of Modern Jewish Literature*, Rosen was a notable writer during her productive years with books published by leading publishers such as Knopf and Penguin. Her debut novel *Joy To Levine!* (1961) and the collection *Green: A Novella and Eight Stories* (1967) explore the role of Jews in a multi-ethic, multi-religious America.[7] The legacy of the Holocaust is central to her 1969 novel *Touching Evil*, a novel written from the perspective of non-Jews. Her final novel, *John and Anzia: An American Romance* (1989) novelizes the romantic relationship of the Jewish writer Anzia Yezierska and the philosopher John Dewey.[8]

Despite the prevalence of Jewish people in her work, Rosen did not receive a strong Jewish education. Rosen explains that her parents, in contrast to her Yiddish-speaking grandparents, were not observant. Her mother refused to enter a synagogue even on Yom Kippur, ostensibly due to the physical exclusion of women from the center of prayer. This resulted in idle chatter that was,



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

she suggests, unfairly led to brash calls for silence and corporal punishment.[9] She humorously recalls that she was not punished for vandalizing a Jewish text in her grandparents' small library.[10] Even though he retained the bookshelf, Rosen's grandfather had "given up religious observance and devoted himself to being an American," suggesting that Jewishness and Americanness were opposed.[11] Adolescent interest in Jewishness was, in Rosen's telling, prompted by "a hunger for some kind of idea framework against which to place my questions about life."[12] Her father reluctantly agreed to bring her to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. Unfortunately, they arrived right as services were concluding and worshippers were streaming out of the synagogue.[13]

Rosen's "Jewish journey" (to follow Ann Shapiro's phrasing) was intertwined with the Holocaust. Despite her nominal connection to Judaism and the Yiddish culture of her grandparents, it was her husband's Holocaust-survivor parents who spurred her mature interest in Judaism. Although she is not forthcoming with the details, Rosen intimates that her familiarity with Jews who embraced their Jewishness and the fact that these Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust spurred her to explore Judaism as an adult through its traditional texts. Interested both in Jews and Jewish texts, she explains that they "inform my writing with deeper knowledge of Jews not only in the accidents of their sociology but in their enduring attachments to the search for belief and meaning."[14]

Reflecting her engagement with the Jewish textual tradition, Rosen, in her 70s, published a collection of feminist *Midrashim* titled *Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-Tales* (1996).[15] In the introductory personal note, Rosen expresses an enduring love for the Hebrew Bible despite the patriarchal Orthodox culture that venerates it and so alienated her mother. *Biblical Women Unbound* centers the agency of female biblical figures.

### 3. The Journalistic Prehistory of *At the Center*

*At The Center* was conceived as a novel after Rosen's reporting on abortion clinics. In April 1977, she published "Between Guilt and Gratification" in the *New York Times*, an article that focuses on abortion doctors.[16] The article is marked by an uneasy tone. In the opening paragraph, Rosen describes a "typical New York[17] abortion clinic…filled with hundreds of young women" as



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

"a wretched time of waiting, when even the woman who is absolutely certain she does not want her child is emotionally torn."[18] This perceived emotional ambivalence is asserted rather than based on interviews with women waiting on their procedures. Although Rosen undoubtedly talked to women who have had or will have abortions in preparing her article, their absence from the piece suggests that the framing of the waiting as "wretched" for everyone suggests Rosen's own perspective on abortion.[19]

"Between Guilt and Gratification" explores the "new abortion-trauma" found in the "psyche of the doctor who performs this legal and much-desired operation." Doctors generally fall into one of two polarized categories. At one extreme are those who "felt guilt and despair" over performing so many abortions, with some engaging in heavy drinking to deal with the trauma or displaying psychological effect in nightmare. At the other end are those who are gratified by being able to perform abortions legally in light of the legal and medical risks of the pre-*Roe* era. Rosen hedges, writing that they "apparently" feel guiltless. Ironically, the "idealism" they used to associate with delivering babies has morphed into a pride in the ability to perform abortions.[20] In Rosen's telling, these polarized responses (trauma and uncritical idealism) are common among abortion doctors. These differentiated approaches are found in *At the Center*.

One doctor interviewed for the *Times* article (Dr. Howard I. Diamond) reports that abortion legalization coincided with a turning point in his previously unhappy life. Prior to abortion legalization, he dealt with a cavalcade of profound personal issues. From a mother who died when he was a child and an unloving father, to a cancer diagnosis and chronic overwork, Diamond found both work-life balance and happiness in the latest phase of his career. Cancer-free and having buried his father, he has become "obsessed with the idea of human happiness." For Dr. Bernard Nathanson, another interviewee, the access to abortion is much more important than "the life of a child that doesn't exist." He contends that considering a fetus to be a person also reflects a chauvinist "commitment to a human seed" that is narcissistically committed to biological reproduction. Preventing the creation of unwanted children is the way to increase happiness in the world – not biological productivity *tout court*. Here a theme emerges that is anticipated in *At The Center*: the entanglement of a doctor's own life story and their views on abortion. Abortion doctors



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

are shaped by both their own broader historical context and the personal aspects of their lives. It is impossible to isolate a person's views from their life experiences. Rather, the reminder that doctors are humans with complicated inner lives and personal histories that shape both their attitude towards abortion and their treatment of patients.

Diamond's enthusiasm for abortion is balanced in Rosen's article by other doctors with strong moral misgivings. Dr. Bernard Nathanson is an obstetrician and gynecologist in New York who had previously worked as an administrator at a "mass abortion" clinic. He reports that during his tenure as an administrator, doctors regularly described the psychological trauma of performing so many abortions, evidenced by blood-filled nightmares.

Although Nathanson performed abortions for his patients, he refused to work at a clinic as he came to feel that he had presided over, in his words, "60,000 deaths." Nathanson explains that he is fearful about "what will happen to the moral tension of life —to people—as a result of all this utilitarianism. A species of human life is being taken, and almost no one except the extremists, the ones opposed to abortion, are paying attention." For Nathanson, both the mother and the fetus have rights. Consequently, he argues that the optimal way of balancing the rights of the mother with the rights of the fetus would be the development of something like an artificial womb[21] that would allow the fetus to develop outside a body. Stunned, Rosen wonders why improved contraceptive methods wouldn't be preferable to this futuristic solution, even as she acknowledges that couples are wont to "'forget'" to use them.[22]

The article concludes: "The moral dilemma about abortion may be with us always—and, with it the traumas and guilt. But these responses must always be weighed against the great victory of legalized abortion that saves women from septicemia and death."[23] Rosen presents abortion in her 1977 *New York Times* article as a medical procedure that, due to its medical mechanics as well as the perception that it terminates the life of a potential human being, causes negative psychological effects on those who perform it. Nonetheless, a world with safe and legal abortions is preferable to one without them.

In a subsequent essay titled "Baby-Making," Rosen confirms that she is working on a novel about abortion.[24] Although Rosen describes herself as strongly pro-choice in this essay, she



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

acknowledges that she occasionally sympathizes with abortion's opponents.[25] In another essay, "Writing as a Woman and a Jew in America," she explains that she felt "haunted" by her experiences with abortion doctors even after her *Times* piece was complete. Her musings on abortion "came together as a novel" when she "began to see it from a Jewish aspect."[26] Rosen does not clarify what she means by the "Jewish aspect" of doctors' attitudes towards abortion. Many of the doctors named in her *Times* article carry surnames that are common among Jewish people (e.g., Nathanson, Diamond, and Rashbaum), but they are not identified as Jewish in the article. Additionally, Rosen explored the *halakhic* dimensions of abortion only after the article appeared.[27] If it isn't normative practice that makes *At The Center* a novel with "a Jewish aspect," then it must be the *Jewishness* of the figures from Rosen's narrative.

The people she interviewed for the 1977 article become, in Rosen's telling, a "chorus of voices" in *At The Center*. The novel's poly-vocal narrative regularly shifts between the perspectives of different characters, requiring the reader to track the primary figure of any given paragraph to understand the narrative voice. The novel's cast is complicated by messy personal entanglements. Several characters engage in romantic or marital infidelity, often to disastrous ends. They are occasionally rude to each other. Some characters have larger bodies, physical features Rosen describes repetitively to an almost troubling degree.[28] In short, *At The Center* is not an argument for abortion in the guise of a novel, but a work of literature with a complicated cast of characters that presents the issue of abortion as it was understood in the early post-*Roe* years

Contemporary reviews lauded the novel as providing a nuanced approach to abortion. In his review published in the *New York Times*, Robert Miner lauds *At the Center* for how it "skillfully" brought the "personal and professional lives" of abortion doctors into view for the reader. However, Miner gripes that he felt "railroaded by the author's own sense of urgency. She has so much to say — and is so determined that the reader should understand here — that she becomes impatient at times, telling instead of showing."[29] The effect, Miner explains, is that the characters feel "*managed* like toddlers in a too-efficient nursery."[30] Nonetheless, Miner praises Rosen's "moral strength" for confronting "hard questions about abortion, going so far as to call it "required



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

reading" for anyone who cares about abortion. Miner recognizes that Rosen confronts the perspective of the "right to life" movement diminishing the complexity of abortion.

In another review, Barbara Gittenstein highlights the role that freedom of choice afforded to doctors and patients with new abortion technology and legalization. Although she criticizes the "ironic 'perfect' ending," she lauds the novel as a "most sensitive and thoughtful, thought-provoking treatment of a difficult subject."[31] Both Miner and Gittenstein emphasize how *At the Center* frames the issue of abortion.

Many aspects of the *Times* piece are also found in the novel although no character can be directly identified with any of the doctors profiled. What emerges from this analysis of the central characters in *At the Center* is a messy but unified understanding of the ethical issues surrounding abortion for American Jews in the decade after abortion legalization. Abortion is a lifesaving and life-affirming practice, but the discomfort that a potential life is being destroyed is ever present. Abortion legalization does not entail the social acceptance of abortion. It is difficult, if not impossible, to assuage the uneasiness many feel regarding the procedure, both in its biological mechanics and with the idea that, at a minimum, a potential life has been ended. The mass-deaths of the Holocaust further complicates the issues, being invoked both in support of and against abortion.[32]

### 4. Abortion as Redemption: Dr. Edgar Bianky

The eponymous Center (the Bianky Family Panning Center) was founded by Dr. Edgar Bianky. The Center is, transparently, redemption for the gruesome death of Edgar's sister Miriam who died at age 20 from an improperly administered abortion before the procedure was legalized. During his freshman year of college Edgar was summoned by Mimi to the site of the clandestine abortion operation and forced to dress her and bring her to the hospital where she subsequently succumbed the sepsis.[33] The sights, smells, and sounds of the ordeal of the traumatic experience continue to affect him years later.

In the opening chapter, his wife Ellen muses on the impossible redemption Edgar seeks in the clinic, observing that "Each day at the Center is an act that robs him again of a world he came too



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

late to inherit."[34] Bianky does not hide that the Center is motivated by his sister's death. From the outset, the Center was "for poor Mimi and all like her,"[35] establishing a clinic so that the victims of illegal abortion have not been harmed in vain. Paralleling Rosen's own position, Bianky acknowledges the moral complexity of abortion, but is categorically committed to the availability of the procedure.

Edgar is notoriously haunted[36] by an imagined patient he names Genevieve X. Echoing Dr. Nathanson from "Between Guilt and Guilt Feelings," *At the Center* mentions that there are other doctors at the Center in addition to Edgar who have bad dreams and horrible fantasies related to their work.[37] Although not spoken about openly, it seems that the entire clinic staff knows about Genevieve X. The article will first analyze what Edgar's Genevieve X nightmare suggests about Edgar's fears as the director of an abortion clinic before considering how the Jewishness of the Center's doctors is relevant to this.

It is important to Edgar's Genevieve X nightmare that another of the Center's doctors performed the operation. Despite being its founder, Edgar cannot ensure that no harm befalls the center. The lack of control terrifies him, leading to fantasies of surgery gone awry. In the first description, he imagines a distracted doctor on his staff harming a patient towards the end of her procedure. The doctor compounds this error by not calling Edgar. He was either oblivious to the lethal injury or he hastily tried to fix it instead of calling Edgar.[38] In another iteration, a panicked aide enters the waiting room and announces to the patients that the day's appointments are canceled (so that the doctors can deal with Genevieve X). A mass of patients, upwards of one hundred women, many of whom have waited weeks for an appointment and thus are risking exceeding the stage of pregnancy when an abortion is feasible. Enraged, the women begin flinging glass flowerpots at windows that crash down on the ambulance attendants who are rushing into the building to provide additional assistance to Genevieve X. An intern is wounded by the falling glass and the ambulance attendants, ironically, end up assisting the intern rather than Genevieve X.[39]

Certainly, Genevieve X is a comically[40] exaggerated caricature of what could go wrong at an abortion clinic, and the Center's relative financial and legal stability does not assuage Edgar's anxiety about a mishap spelling its end. But the concern that a surgical accident could doom the



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

center is not unfounded. Moreover, abortion is a surgical procedure with genuine risks. In fleshing out the nightmare of a surgical error and its aftermath, the novel displays the risks associated with abortion. Genevieve X *could* have happened even though Edgar's paranoid preoccupation with it is excessive. Thus, despite Edgar Bianky's (and, in her personal writings, Rosen's) pro-abortion view, they are astutely aware of the risks. In having the Center's founder preoccupied with the risk of abortion, *At the Center* shows that supporting abortion does not necessitate that its risks are disregarded. It is those who ignore the emotional and physical costs of abortion (i.e., Charlie Brodaw) who do not truly understand abortion and all that it entails.

Towards the end of the novel, the Center is bombed by anti-abortion activists although nobody is harmed.[41] Thus, Genevieve X occurred, but not in the way Edgar feared. Charlie's violation of the nurse Amy Netboy (discussed below) notwithstanding, the bombing was the work of antiabortion protesters, rather than an accident caused by a negligent doctor.[42] However, the bombing did not spell the end of the Center. Instead, the Center was being rebuilt by Edgar and others including Amy. Although she was violated at the clinic, Amy remains committed to her pro-choice principles.[43]

Additionally, Edgar worries about how a Genevieve X scenario would affect the Jewish doctors at the Center. This is one example of how *At the Center* explores how Jewish abortion providers face additional pressures and risks in doing their job. Similar concerns apply to Jewish abortion seekers. Early in the novel, Edgar ruminates: "Can you imagine if Genevieve X really happened? What would the world say? The Whole right-to-choice effort would be tainted. And the Jews there! Brodaw, Sunshine. People would say: Jews! What do you expect? They'd say, A Jewish doctors' plot to do away with babies."[44] Brodaw's reference to the antisemitic myth of the Blood Libel is an acknowledgement of the antisemitism of his environment.[45] Were Genevieve X to transpire, it would reinforce the stereotype of Jewish barbarism regarding children. Not only would this harm the Center and its ability to function after an incident, but it would also further harm the careers of the Jewish doctors.

Edgar expressly disavows the notion that abortion doctors are murderers or that abortion clinics should be likened to concentration camps. However, the comparison adds to his anxiety about a



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

situation like Genevieve X transpiring.[46] Worse, the Jewish doctors would be doubly harmed. The latent antisemitism is exacerbated by the living memory of the Holocaust. Directly addressing the comparison between abortion providers and the Holocaust, Edgar muses: "He has no sentimental notions about being a murderer; he doesn't compare an abortion clinic to Auschwitz or Birkenau. He is too intelligent and too honest for that. He and his Center fill a human need. But there are implications, reverberations."[47] In response to the comparison between abortion clinics and concentration camps, Edgar claims that abortion improves the life of those who undergo the procedure fulfilling a "human need." Moreover, he fully acknowledges that abortion raises moral, practical, and emotional issues.

For Edgar, the Holocaust and antisemitism are the salient aspects of the Jewish tradition that are relevant to his role at the Center. For pregnant Jewish patients, *halakhah* is central to their abortion concerns. Although he is descended from Italian Catholics, Edgar is attuned to the religious strictures regarding abortion. The incorrigibly strict opposition to abortion led Edgar's own father to react harshly towards his own daughter's fate.[48] His father's "shame and disgust" over his daughter seeking an abortion and suffering the consequences for it left an indelible impact on Edgar. His father's Catholic opposition to abortion causes him to feel embarrassed by his daughter, in stark contrast with Edgar's trauma-infused love. Consequently, the Center's work on behalf of "poor Mimi and all like her" requires them to negotiate secular and religious legal issues.

Edgar's understanding of the ethical and emotional challenges the Center imposes on its employees and informs his hiring practices. When he interviews Amy for the nursing job, Edgar presses the 22-year-old on her personal commitments. Skeptical of hiring a woman, he tests her emotional resilience and personal ideology: "You're in favor of what we do here, but what about seeing hundreds of procedures each month? Will you think there's something immoral about ending so much potential life? What do you think about…the sanctity of the seed?"[49] Edgar's question is informed by the experience of abortion doctors, including those Rosen interviewed for her *Times* article. Even if one is principally committed to abortion, the emotional toll of performing abortion cannot be underestimated.



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

As the interview continues, Edgar gets more animated. In a dramatic moment, Edgar presses Amy on her religious commitments: "Religious scruples" — Edgar growls at her — "give problems."[50] Amy flatly responds that she doesn't have any. Her grandmother abandoned her Jewish upbringing in favor of secular humanism and became a social reformer. Amy's mother had a stronger religious sensibility and even married a Roman Catholic before both died in a car accident. Amy avers that her decision to work at the clinic is her own choice "freely arrived at" and is born of a desire to create a better world.[51]

Concerns about freedom of choice permeate the novel in other ways as well. Reflecting on the Center, both the lives of those who staff it and the circumstances that led to its creation, Edgar says: "We insist on freedom. It's the glory and curse of modern life."[52] The notion that opportunities granted by modern life create additional problems is shared by others at the Center. As discussed below, nurse Hannah Selig is also troubled by the freedom the modern world affords people. Abortion technology creates the decision whether to carry a pregnancy to term, complications notwithstanding.

By foreground Bianky in the *At the Center*, Rosen emphasizes the victims of the pre-*Roe* days and the risk of a return to abortion being illegal. Moreover, abortion legalization hasn't provided security. There is enough anti-abortion opposition to threaten the Center that one incident could spell disaster. Finally, Edgar confronts moral, legal, and psychological issues surrounding abortion. Several of these issues, principally the conflict between law and morality, as well as the emotional and practical externalities related to abortion, recur in the figure of the co-founder of the Center, Dr. Charlie Brodaw, discussed in the next section.

## 5. With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: The Pitfalls of Abortion for Dr. Charlie Brodaw

Before Charles (often called Charlie) Brodaw enters the novel's action, Ellen introduces his unsentimental approach to abortion. For Charles, "Life is nothing but dust and ashes. Best never to be born. If birth does take place, it had better be under optimum conditions or not at all."



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

Consequently, for Charlie "every procedure they do is an act of affirmation that contributes to the void he imagines is better than the life he sees."[53]

If Edgar seeks redemption for his sister's death at the Center, Charlie is motivated by a paradoxical commitment to optimal life. The son of a Jewish doctor, Charlie's "abortion at all costs" posture is, in part, a rebuke of his father. Although he is sympathetic to women who seek to terminate their pregnancies, Charlie's father refuses to perform illegal abortions. The elder and younger Brodaws worked together as physicians until the former's retirement. Even in retirement, Charlie's father sits in an oak armchair near the nurses' station in Charlie office, a physical reminder that the son has not freed himself his father's presence.[54]

Their opposing views came to a head in Charles's infamous "noble act" from 1969, before abortion was legalized in New York.[55] A fifteen-year-old girl referred to as Maria[56] came to the clinic. After meeting Charlie to confirm she is pregnant, he offers her an abortion.[57]

Charlie and his father quarrel over the propriety of illegally terminating the pregnancy of a teenaged girl. Charlie's father's objection to performing Maria's abortion isn't based on moral or religious grounds. Rather, it stems from the great practical and legal risk to Charlie and his medical practice. Even as abortion legalization seems to be on the horizon, it is still risky to perform them, and he fears that Charles will jeopardize his medical practice.

The elder Brodaw, with a disdain for life unbecoming of a physician, exhorts his son to "Let this one do what the others do. She can put a pillow on its face. Or give it up for adoption." He hypothesizes that the "tramp" Maria will tell others that abortions are available at the clinic and, should Charlie refuse to perform additional procedures, they will blackmail him by threatening to alert the police of his illegal surgical activities.[58] When it inevitably becomes known that Charlie performed an illegal abortion, rather than viewing him as a hero, his patients would lose faith in him; if he were willing to break one law, he might as well break others. Dismissing the idea that patients would support a doctor who performs abortions for the "poor and underage," his father adamantly concludes his rant stating: "a doctor obeys the law."[59] Charlie's father privileges the practical risks of performing abortion over the benefit it would provide.



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

Charlie meets Maria late in the evening after he dismisses the other staff. Speaking broken English and wearing clothes that emphasize that she is still a child, Maria confirms Charlie's suspicions about her situation.[60] Maria admits that she hasn't told her parents about her pregnancy because when her sister became pregnant and sought an abortion, her father physically assaulted her and forced a marriage between her and the father. Fearful of the same fate, Maria hid from her parents the fact that she planned to go to the clinic, telling them that she was staying with her sister's family for the night. Maria's manner of speaking emphasizes her unpreparedness for motherhood. When Charlie asks if she wants to remain single for a while longer, Maria doesn't enunciate fully, responding "why shou-int I?"[61] Despite her concerns that it will be painful, she follows Charlie's directions to sit on the operating table "like a baby."[62]

A lengthy description of the procedure follows with graphic details that are absent from the *New York Times* article. While the *New York Times* article describes the abortion procedure in a tidy, clinical paragraph,[63] *At the Center* devotes a page to describing the procedure. Words like "penetrate," "dilator," "stretching," "and the phrase "brutally scrapes" appear in the explanation in addition to the names of reproductive organs. The youthfulness of Maria's body is emphasized, reinforcing the notion that she is unprepared for motherhood.[64]

It is noteworthy that Charlie is the performing doctor in some of the lengthier descriptions of abortion. The surgical descriptions reinforce for the reader that abortion is a messy medical procedure with legitimate risks.[65] The fact that they are described in stark, vivid terms that may be off-putting to some readers *and* are most thoroughly described when performed by Charlie subtly critiques his abortion fervor. This procedure, one involving the scraping of fetal tissue, is what Charlie has devoted his life to. His "heroic act" that prevented the child Maria from becoming a mother required Charlie to scrape tissue out of Maria's body. Charlie unwillingness to consider the complications of the abortion procedure, the text suggests, leads to disaster.

As Edgar is haunted by Genevieve X, Charles regularly feels the judgment of his father as shown by imagined arguments with his father that appear in the novel. Thus, Charlie's abortion stance isn't entirely his own as it is shaped by external factors – specifically, an intergenerational conflict between father and son. If Bianky's fervor for abortion access is redemption for his sister's



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

death, then Charles's is informed by his morbid, death-preoccupied personality. It understandable that characters are swayed not by cold reason alone, but by their individual life circumstances, a dynamic explored at length in "Between Guilt and Guilt Feelings." But whatever the causes, Charles's commitment to abortion becomes his undoing.

There are several unmistakable parallels between Charlie and Dr. Diamond from "Between Guilty and Guilt Feelings." More than their shared perspectives, a strikingly similar scene ensues but the novel's version is more theologically inflected and concludes with a different outcome. Diamond acknowledges only rare occasions when he mollified his absolute abortion stance and did not perform a procedure. One instance involved an Orthodox Jewish woman who had given birth to ten children and was once again pregnant. She sought a medical reason that she could present to her rabbi that would allow him to grant her an abortion. Diamond refused because she was healthy even though he thought "she'd be crazy to have another child." He was willing to perform the procedure but he "wanted to do it honestly, for the right reason." The woman ended up giving birth to the child.[66] Rosen provides no editorial comment on this anecdote, letting Diamond speak for himself. It is far from clear whether Diamond acted appropriately from either a medical or moral perspective. The story nonetheless shows that he has a conception of the "right reason" for an abortion. Based on the portrait the articles paints of him, the "right reason" might require an acknowledgment that abortion, even when not medically necessary, leads to a better world.

In *At The Center*, an Orthodox Jewish woman named Tovah Melnick, derisively known to the staff as "Mother Tovah," informs Charlie that she has missed two menstrual cycles. He rudely exclaims "Good work! Now your ten children can have a brother or sister!" Tovah looks at him pleadingly as the novel describes her weary appearance: a body softened by the latest burgeoning pregnancy, a "shabby black dress" and a heavy wig. Coyly, Tovah reminds him of the leg swelling she experienced late in her last pregnancy and asks if he would speak with her rabbi. Feigning ignorance, Charlie remarks that he'd be honored to speak with Rabbi Tarn but asks for Tovah to explain why he should speak with her rabbi. Tovah stares at Charlie briefly before bursting into tears, understanding that he has put her in an almost impossible situation. The scene continues:



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

> "Say it!" Charlie commands.
> Her expression is flat and dull. She shakes her head, wiping her eyes.
> "You want me to speak to your rabbi. You want me to tell him it's a medical necessity — you'll also quote me to your husband, or maybe your husband will want me to come himself and hear me say it. And all of that you want without ever yourself pronouncing the word abortion?"[67]

Tovah pleads with him, but Charlie insists that she explicitly request an abortion. Remaining firm he says:

> "Your varicose veins, your aches and pains, are normal for a woman who's had ten babies. It won't kill you to have another. It will help to ruin your life though. Acknowledge it. Admit you need help for the sake of your own life, that your own life is worth something too."[68]

Begging, Tovah reminds him that she's a religious woman and that having an abortion would only be acceptable to her community if it were an absolute medical necessity. As she sways in her chair, physically manifesting her emotional distress, Charlie insincerely suggests that she could ask another doctor even though Tovah reminds him that he delivered seven of her children and Charlie's father delivered her first three.[69]

Unmoved, Charlie impractically instructs her to tell her husband that her "body and spirit are tired of giving birth" and that the "law says I can have a safe abortion." Understandably, Tovah retorts that Jewish law forbids the practice as the Jewish doctor certainly knows. Even though it won't change Tovah's situation, Charlie makes a historical argument about the dynamic nature of *halakhah* arguing: "One hundred years from now they will say, 'It was never done that when a woman had ten children and wanted more, she was forced to have another!' Teach the law to the Law!"[70] As Tovah rushes out of the room, Charlie yells that he'll speak to her rabbi. Turning back, she asks why he "made her suffer." He doesn't answer but, when pressed by a nurse, he enigmatically explains that he knows what it means to be a "dead soul," and he spoke to her "because of my life."[71]

The final remark holds the key to understanding Brodaw's bald cruelty. Charlie explains his actions as stemming from his acquaintance with what it meant to be a "dead soul." His moribund "soul" taught him the importance of affirming life. He pushed Tovah to reconcile the mores of her community with what is best for her life (and the life of her children). In pushing Tovah to acknowledge that abortion would make her life better, he calls attention to the hypocrisy in her



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

unwillingness to ask for it outright. Charles didn't expect Tovah to acquiesce to his view; he had every reason to think she would not. But in pushing her, he compelled her to acknowledge the value of her own quality of life (even flippantly stating that an eleventh child would "ruin" it even though she could physically endure another pregnancy). He does not want her to become a "dead soul like him." Abortion, in Tovah's case, would improve her life. Charlie's harsh rhetoric suggests that it was not Tovah with whom he was quarreling; it was the legalism of his father who tried to dissuade him from performing an abortion on fifteen-year-old Maria all those years ago. Charlie's view that the quality of life of the living is infinitely more valuable than the life of a potential being, leads him to ignore the mental and emotional turmoil the experience engendered in Tovah, his patient.

The unmistakable similarities between Diamond and Brodaw brings into focus several moral issues associated with performing abortions. First, doctors must choose how to operate within legal and religious frameworks that do not permit abortions. Both were faced with the same dilemma – a religious system that both were born into but rejected requires them to prevaricate to perform a medically salutary but not strictly necessary procedure. Both objected to the hypocricy in the patient asking indirectly for the doctor to claim the procedure was medically necessary despite not meeting that high standard. However, Diamond did not agree to vouch for the necessity of the procedure, thereby satisfying the conditions of the Orthodox Jewish community, whereas Brodaw does. The latter's readiness to ignore American and Jewish law presages his violation of the moral laws relating to life and death.

Second and relatedly, doctors can overlook the emotional complexities of abortion for patients to the detrimental of all. The unwavering commitment to abortion by male doctors who cannot become pregnant leads doctors to elevate principle over the best interests of their patients. Diamond chose a world in which the hypocricy of his Orthodox Jewish patient indirectly asking for an abortion to satisfy her rabbi's *halakhic* requirements for allowing the procedure superseded him acting in the best interest of his patient *tout court*. Charlie caused his patient (Tovah) to confront her hypocrisy, but ultimately performed the procedure.



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

Charlie's brusque nature results in an insensitive bedside manner. In another scene, a patient is in tears over the prospect of aborting the fetus growing inside her. She is far along in her pregnancy, making the abortion more difficult. Displaying the same hardheadedness, he did with Tovah, he berates another patient who is reticent to undergo an abortion. The distressed patient asks Charlie through tears if he thinks that the soul enters a fetus in the womb, or if it waits until the child has been born into the world. Annoyed, Brodaw stutters through his consultation:

> "S-s-soul!" Charlie spits out with contempt. "I don't begin to think soul for a long t-t-time!"
> "When do you?
> "When it s-s-smiles at its m-m-mother."
> "I can't bear this anymore!"
> "You bore it s-s-six months. Where were your b-b-brains?"[72]

The patient continues, explaining that she thought that if she gave birth, others would care for them.[73] Now the patient worries if the soul of her rightful child would be born into the body of the child that she was considering giving birth to and putting up for adoption. Emphasizing the categorical distinction between fetuses and people, he hectors the patient for worrying about the soul of a child. Charlie tells the patient not to "talk nonsense."[74] As with Tovah, Charlie agrees to perform the abortion. Charlie leaves the room and tells the doctor Paul Sunshine that it was his chance to watch a third trimester abortion. Charlie's stuttering continues through his final pronouncement about the late-term abortion: "It s-s-stinks but it works!"[75] Even if he lacks the religious sensibility to entertain concerns about the soul, Charlie was wholly dismissive of the emotional toll on the patient of the decision to have an abortion. It is hardly proper bedside manner to ask a patient rhetorically "where are your brains?" Rather than counseling the patient, he rudely leaves his consultation: "All right, talk nonsense if you must. So long as you *do* the right thing!"[76]

Charlie's rudeness to his patients pales in comparison to his final monstrous act. At the beginning of the novel, Charlie and his wife Sylvia have become estranged. Midway through the novel, he begins an affair with Amy Netboy, a new nurse at the clinic. Only twenty-two, young enough to be his daughter, Amy is keen to publicize her ancestral feminist *bona fides*. Her grandmother worked with Margaret Sanger to provide women access to contraception. Despite this, she is so opposed to abortion that Amy tells her grandmother that she distributes contraceptive devices.[77] It is later revealed that Amy became pregnant at the age of thirteen by one of her older



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

brother's friends and her grandmother arranged an abortion for Amy. Due to the procedure, Amy is told that she will be unable to become pregnant.[78] Against expectations, Amy becomes pregnant. Ambivalent, Charlie initially encourages Amy to undergo an abortion after an emotional conversation with Sylvia.[79] However, after Sylvia confronts the nurse Hannah to ask for more information about Amy, she goes back on her desire to reconcile with her estranged husband, especially as it seems that Amy intends to keep her child.[80]

The history of contraception and abortion access informs Amy's emotional confession to her grandmother that she is pregnant and intends to keep the child. Amy intones: "'I'm afraid you'll be disappointed in me. It's not that Margaret Sanger failed me. I failed her.'"[81] Rather than shame Amy for becoming pregnant, her grandmother exclaims that "all Margaret ever cared about" was for a pregnant person to have "a *wanted* child."[82] This exchange helps to clarify the feminist priorities of Amy's grandmother's age with Amy's views — children should be born into an environment that welcomes them. Despite her ostensible anti-abortion posture, Amy's grandmother facilitated Amy's abortion. Now that Amy is pregnant in her early 20s, her decision to keep the child is a feminist expression of agency that coheres with her grandmother's values. In time, Charlie tells Amy that he has changed his mind and is willing to raise the child with her. Amy gleefully plans her future with Charlie's child, showing off her pregnant body despite its scandalous nature.[83] Amy and Charlie even agree on names for their child. However, Charlie's ostensible willingness to raise a child with Amy was a ruse.

In his final act as a doctor, Charlie terminates Amy's pregnancy. Beforehand, Amy, Paul, and Charlie go out to dinner during which Charlie drugs Amy's drink.[84] Afterwards, they return to the clinic to make love on a surgical table, the place where their affair began.[85] Paul's presence at the dinner is significant. He deeply admires Edgar, obsessed with the days when abortion doctors were law-breaking heroes, rather than mere medical professionals.[86] He even flatly admits to Hannah (with whom he becomes romantically entangled) "I admit once — I might have thought — I was jealous of Charlie, my old affliction."[87] Paul is a divorced father of two[88] who works closely with Charlie and shares some of his pro-abortion fervor. But Paul's idolization of Charles leads him to overlook Charles's failings. Paul bemoans that Charlie is unfaithful to his wife but does not attempt



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

to get him to change his behavior. As Amy and Charlie head toward the clinic, Paul stands on his balcony with a premotion of Charlie's act. He considers whether he has any agency in this situation and concludes that it is not his place to intervene although he suspects that Charlie has planned something as he characterizes himself as a "Charlie-watcher." As if trying to persuade himself that Charlie would not do anything to harm Amy, Paul thinks: "What Charlie might or might not have planned is not my business…How do I know that Charlie has anything in mind?" Even as he admits to himself that Charlie is likely to harm Amy, Paul persuades himself that he could not change the situation by posting the rhetorical question: "And even if I did know, what could I do about it?" There would be professional consequences for Paul if his speculation were wrong. He continues: "How could I warn without making monstrous accusations against Charlie?" Paul excuses his decision not to intervene by claiming moral fallibility: "Altruism is for the noblest souls only! At lower levels, always tainted with self-interest."[89] If he were noble, like the abortion heroes of the pre-*Roe* days, he may have intervened despite the professional cost.

Paul's self-imposed helplessness contrasts with his mentor Charlie's heroic abortion performed on Maria. In this instance, Paul had the opportunity to intervene as he clearly suspected that Charlie might do something harmful to Amy and to the fetus growing inside of her. Blinded by his lionization of Charlie, he disavows any responsibility and squanders his opportunity for heroism regarding abortion as Charlie did with Maria; in this case, not to perform an abortion, but to prevent one.

The chapter cuts back to Amy and Charlie entering the Center. Amy asks for Charlie's reassurance that she'll be a good mother as she claims that she has "the gift of making people happy." Charlie dismisses this as a "common delusion" before Amy initiates sex with him.[90] After Amy falls asleep, Charlie imagines the future he is foreclosing, one in which they raise a blue-eyed daughter, perhaps named Sarah, together. He then rises, naked, from the bed and gives Amy an abortifacient injection.[91] At the end of the novel, Charles dies by suicide after performing the nonconsensual abortion on Amy.[92]

What ought one to make of the relationship Charlie's attitude toward and his performance of abortion? He is responsible for both the heroic abortion of Maria and the monstrous non-



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

consensual abortion of Amy, as well as the dismissal of the emotional and religious entanglements of the procedure. Charlie's unceasing commitment to the permissibility of abortion and the belief that it will improve the world at all costs, leads him to ignore the state, moral, and religious laws. The courage to perform the illegal abortion is, in part, engendered by his unwavering commitment to the notion that abortion improves the life of the living. Every aspect of his character — from his lack of empathy for patients coping with their abortion dilemmas to his disregard of moral, religious, and secular law — stems from this view, an attitude shaped by many factors including rebellion against his father. Edgar, more balanced, acknowledges the emotional and legal risks of abortion and grapples with the new range of choices abortion technology creates. Hannah, likewise, understands the freedom afforded by modern life including the freedom to break from the community in which one was raised.

### 6. Abortion in a Post-Holocaust World: Hannah Selig

The nurse Hannah Selig[93] has the strongest connection to traditional Judaism and to the Holocaust. Hannah's parents were Hungarian Jews who survived the Holocaust, although their son and their local rabbi were murdered. Tragically, they were murdered in their home after coming to America. In America they joined the community of a Rabbi Pinhas and had a daughter, Hannah. Hannah tells Paul Sunshine that she stubbornly refused their matchmaking efforts and, at the relatively late age of 22, left the community to attend college. Thereafter, her parents were murdered. Hannah had been taught that every punishment is due to sin and, consequently, that innocent parents are even punished for the sins of their children. This logic has also even been applied to the Holocaust, perhaps most prominently by the Hungarian Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), known as the Satmar Rebbe.[94] Teitelbaum claimed that the Holocaust was a punishment for the sin of Zionism.[95]

Even though Hannah professes that she rejects the cruel logic of punishment for sin, she cannot rid herself of her guilt. Hannah pursues a job at the Center as part of her rebellion against the insular culture in which she was raised. But it is also motivated by a desire to create a better world. The advertisement for Hannah's job read: "Individual sought with feelings of sympathy for other



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

people's sorrows. Personal acquaintance with grief preferred."[96] Edgar had sought someone who had undergone an abortion but Hannah's experience as the child of Holocaust survivors who were subsequently murdered in America, and her complicated grief in its aftermath (which includes being blamed for their deaths) met the qualifications. Upon taking the position, she informed Rabbi Pinchas about her job at the "abortion clinic." His rebuking answers remain unanswered although Hannah responds to him in her diary (discussed below).

Shortly after assuming her job at the Center, Hannah begins a fling with Paul Sunshine, having pre-marital sex and eating non-Kosher food as part of their courtship. Nonetheless, she continues to observe some normative practices such as lighting Shabbat candles.[97] Although she has moved outside of her Orthodox community, Hannah remains preoccupied by theological questions.[98] Her personal ethical and religious struggles, including unsent letters to Rabbi Pinchas, are chronicled in the diary she keeps of the clinic, alongside her observations of the doctors. Hannah leaves the diary out in the open so it can be read by others. Paul reads Hannah's thoughts often as their relationship progresses. Marilyn Goldberg characterizes the diary as a "book of commentary upon life-as-suffering-relieved-by-hope."[99]

> Like Charlie, Hannah reflects at length about life and death. One passage in her diary reads:
> Those who are practical psychologists say: Because we died in great numbers – in millions – we ought to oppose any view that makes death easy. If *they* become accustomed to killing the fruits of their own bodies, how much more easily will we be killed? But when we were killed they *treasured* the fruits of their own bodies.[100]

Hannah's religious meditations continue, pondering the significance of Jewish abortion providers after the Holocaust.[101]

Working as a nurse puts Hannah in contact with patients, some of whom she becomes close to. One day when she is not working at the Center, Hannah attends an anti-abortion meeting with Sorita, one of the center's patients.[102] In a dramatic moment, Hannah loses her composure when one of the speakers compares abortion to the Holocaust. Hannah feels personally offended by the remark given the fact that her parents were Holocaust survivors and because of her work as a nurse. Clearly comparing abortion to the Holocaust, one of the speakers claims that the current state of affairs with legalized abortion is akin to "what happened when people thought everything was



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

permitted."[103] The evident reference to the evils of godless Nazism engenders images of Nazi soldiers posing near piles of corpses of their victims.

Unable to restrain herself, Hannah cries that the speaker "mustn't use them like that," referring to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust including members of Hannah's extended family and community. Causing stirs among the audience, Hannah continues: "Their poor bodies…you mustn't *use* them. Don't you know they were killed for being Jews."[104]

Hannah senses that the audience isn't receptive to her passionate outburst. Some boo, while others call for quiet. Once things are settled, Hannah overhears someone murmur: "Why do Jews only think [of] themselves? Can't they see the implications for humanity?"[105] The speaker argues that the memory of the Holocaust is not the exclusive property of Jewish people.[106] It is thus not improper for the non-Jewish speaker to invoke the memory of the Holocaust to criticize abortion as immoral.

The speaker continues and claims that the Holocaust perpetrators did not kill their own. Rather, "they *cherished* their own. [They] [k]illed other people's children, fathers, and mothers while they cherished their own."[107] The speaker implies that abortion doctors are worse than Nazis insofar as they kill the people they should value most — children whom they recognize as part of their own cultural group. Because these doctors are willing to murder through abortion, they won't be receptive to claims about the humanity or personhood of a fetus.[108]

After concluding her speech, the woman rushes to find Hannah. Panting, she announces that she must speak to Hannah. The woman asks: "Because you're a Jew. Can you guess about me? German descent. My parents born there…I give my life to this. You Jew — I don't understand you. Indifferent to your own seed — you carry out Hitler's will — don't you see!"[109] The woman invokes a version of Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim's (1916-2003) dictum that there is now a 614th commandment not to grant Hitler posthumous victories.[110] In supporting abortion, the speaker claims, Jewish people contribute to their destruction — exactly what Hitler had hoped. Hannah counters, arguing that "if Jewish women do or don't do something because of what Hitler wanted, they give up their freedom." If Jewish people feel compelled to produce children regardless of their individual feeling and circumstances, they remain "victims of Hitler."[111] Thus,



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

*contra* Fackenheim, opposing Jewish abortions when they will improve the lives of Jewish people grants Hitler a posthumous victory. Rather than pursuing Jewish biological fecundity at all costs, a proper way of showing Jewish resistance to Hitler's goals is to grant them as much freedom as possible, including the freedom to pursue family planning as they see fit.

At the end of the novel, Hannah has fled from the Center without telling anyone, in stark contrast with Amy who continues to work at the center despite her victimization. Rosen explains this cryptic ending through Hannah's role as a "recoding Angel."[112] With the Center's first destruction, her work is complete, and she is off to continue her journey to another place where she is needed.

Like Charlie, working at the Center is a rebellion, for Hannah, against her Jewish elders. Like Edgar, it is also a redemptive project. For Hannah, honoring the personal legacy of the Holocaust and the murder of her parents does not require populating the world at all costs, even for Jews who are personally impacted by the Shoah. Rather, Hannah's example suggests, abortion can be a part of a life-affirming project. Her ethical compass, undeniably shaped by the Holocaust, Jewish law, her experiences as a woman, and a streak of rebellion, lead her to support abortion access as she rejects the tradition Jewish expectation that she marry, have children, and follow *halakhah*.[113] Not bound by the legalism of her Jewish ancestry, Hannah honors the memory of the Holocaust through her life-affirming work at the Center.

## 7. Conclusion

Several themes emerge from examining the central characters of *At the Center* which builds upon Rosen's *New York Times* article. First, and most clearly, abortion is depicted as a life-affirming, rather than a life-depriving procedure. Even as one's individual life circumstances shape one's approach to abortion (as they did for Edgar, Charlie, Hannah, and Amy), a world with legalized abortion is preferable to one without it.

A striking feature of the novel, if not a difference between its historical context and our own, is the lived memory of the time when abortion was illegal. Although abortion access is under threat in America, the memory of a time of unsafe and risky abortion has faded from memory when



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

compared to the 1970s and 1980s, even as activists stress the urgency of maintaining abortion access. As the protagonists of *At the Center* grapple with the practicalities of newly legalized abortion, the interplay between broader ethical and religious issues emerges. *At the Center* shows how laws, both the laws of the state and the strictures of normative religion, directly dictate abortion access.

Several states recently passed *de facto* abortion bans and the election of an anti-choice president raises the specter of increased restriction. Recent examples of pregnant people dying due to anti-abortion legislation have garnered media attention. In 2021, Joselli Barnica, a 28-year-old mother in Texas died after waiting for medical clearance to have surgery as she was miscarrying, due to the state's ban on abortions after six weeks of pregnancy. Doctors were legally barred from removing the fetus from her body until they were unable to detect a heartbeat. It took 40 hours for doctors to perform surgery. Barnica died three days after her procedure from an infection contracted during her ordeal.[114] Although Barnica's horrible and entirely preventable death was not due to an unsafely performed abortion as was Mimi's, it is nonetheless the result of legal impediments to abortion.

As a Jewish novel, *At the Center* confronts the legacy of the Holocaust and the latent antisemitism. As noted, the comparison of abortion to the Holocaust continues to this day. However, a salient difference between the early post-*Roe* years and today lies in the significantly decreased living memory of the Holocaust, its victims, and its survivors. That may license the use of the Holocaust by anti-abortion groups.

However, as *At The Center* demonstrates, pro-life groups have compared abortions to the Holocaust even in the early post-*Roe* years. While Hannah, the child of survivors, can protest about the comparison, increasingly few living relatives of survivors can do so today. As Jennifer Gerson notes in a 2019 *Jewish Currents* article, abortion opponents continue to compare abortion to the Holocaust. In their introduction to a proposed six-week abortion ban, Alabama lawmakers catalogued the twentieth-century's crimes against humanity, including the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust as well as "Chinese purges, Stalin's gulags, Cambodian killing fields, and the Rwandan genocide."[115] The proposal claims that, since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, more



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

than fifty million babies have been aborted, a number that is more than triple the death toll of these 20th century atrocities. Although it does not explicitly call abortion murder, the implication is clear – abortion is as big an atrocity, if not a bigger one, than these paradigmatic massacres.[116]

After the Holocaust, concerns about the continued existence of the Jewish people were heightened, now understood in racial or biological terms. This is exemplified by Emil Fackenhiem's idea of the 614th commandment. Jewish groups even invoke the notion of Holocaust to oppose family planning that limits biological fecundity.[117] Intermarriage has been provocatively referred to as a "silent" or "second" Holocaust by the likes of former Israeli Minister of Education Rafi Peretz.[118] Antisemitic myths like the blood libel from the practice of abortion (which, in Rosen's novel, includes the stereotype of the disproportionateness of Jewish doctors in the medical field) and the concern that legalized abortion is a threat to Jewish continuity demonstrate that abortion access is a distinctive problem when considered, to parrot Rosen, "from its Jewish aspect."

A return to a pre-*Roe* state of abortion-access compels one to revisit the harms of the era of illegal abortion. The major characters of *At the Center* reject secular and religious legal strictures against abortion. A mature commitment to abortion requires one not to dismiss the ethical, religious, and emotional issues it raises. As the Dobbs decision shows, abortion legalization cannot be taken for granted. Without clinics like the fictional Bianky Center, the risk of pregnant people meeting a similar fate to Mimi. Although the cultural memory of the pre-*Roe* days of dangerous, illegal abortions has faded from cultural consciousness, the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) makes possible a return to a world of illegal abortion, raising anew the issues explored in *At The Center*.

**Editor's note**: Often present-day abortions can be carried out by taking medications [medical abortion] and are considered low risk. Because Norma Rosen's novel and the NYT article were written in the 1970s and early 1980s, they did not take that into consideration. Here are a couple of current links that promote safe abortion:

https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/sexual-health/abortion-canada.html



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/abortion/considering-abortion/what-facts-about-abortion-do-i-need-know

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*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

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[1] David Kraemer, "Jewish Ethics and Abortion," *Tikkun* 8, no. 1 (1993): 55-58, 77-78, 55.
[2] The secondary literature on how Jewish Americans engage with their Jewishness through practices that are unrelated to *halakhah* is extensive. As this is a well-established phenomenon and reinforced in media coverage with each subsequent Pew Survey.
[3] Ann Shapiro, "Norma Rosen's Jewish Journey," in *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America*, ed. Evelyn Avery (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 111-127, 119.
[4] Rachel Kranson, "Sexuality in American Jewish History: The State of an Emerging Sub-Field," *American Jewish History* 104, no. 4 (2020): 493-513, 506.
[5] Kranson, "Sexuality in American Jewish History," 507.
[6] For a longer biography of Rosen see Sara R. Horowitz, "Norma Rosen," *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (27 February 2009). https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rosen-norma.
[7] On these early works see Joshua N. Lambert, *American Jewish Fiction: A JPS Guide* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 86-87.
[8] Yezierska's novel *All I Could Never Be* (1932) was based on her relationship with Dewey. On Yezierska and Dewey see Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).
[9] Norma Rosen, *Accidents of Influence: Writing As a Woman and a Jew In America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 135.
[10] The book is "Volume 1 of *The Book of Knowledge* that stood in splender [sic] along with thirteen other volumes in a bookcase of its own" (Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*,133). Presumably, this is the first book of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*.
[11] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 134.
[12] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 135.
[13] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 135-136.
[14] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 136.
[15] On modern feminist Midrash see Adam N. Chalom, ""Modern *Midrash*:" Jewish Identity and Literary Creativity" (Ph.D. Thesis University of Michigan, 2005).
[16] It was published in the *New York Times Magazine*, part of the Sunday edition of the newspaper.
[17] New York state legalized abortion in 1970, several years before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision which ruled that there was a constitutional right to an abortion.
[18] Norma Rosen, "Between Guilt and Gratification," *The New York Times* April 17, 1977.
[19] It cannot be taken for granted that the decision to have an abortion is emotionally challenging for the patient. To give one example, writer Lindy West, in her introduction to a series of personal abortion narratives, explains that her procedure was felt as "an unqualified relief" (Lindy West, "Forward," in *Shout Your Abortion*, ed. Amelia Bonow and Emily Nokes (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), ix-x, ix). For West, the decision to have an abortion was



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

uncomplicated. Therefore, Rosen's repeated misgivings or universal statements reflect her own perspective rather than the "natural state" of things.
[20] Rosen, "Between Guilt and Gratification,".
[21] Nathanson does not use the term 'artificial womb' but in hoping for a "technology that will allow us to abort the fetus without killing it" this is what he is describing.
[22] Rosen, "Between Guilt and Gratification,".
[23] Rosen, "Between Guilt and Gratification,".
[24] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 173. The mere fact that rumors of Rosen writing a novel about abortion could circulate attests both to the influence of her New York Times article and her literary reputation.
[25] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 173.
[26] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 137.
[27] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 137-138.
[28] In introducing Edgar, Rosen describes him as "[w]orried, becoming fat, made nervous by the responsibility and guilty" (Norma Rosen, *At the Center* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 15). Edgar describes his late father, who opposed abortion, as "very paunchy, short of breath. Heavy-cheeked." (Rosen, *At the Center*, 71). A woman, Roberta, with whom Paul sleeps is described a "cheerful and attractive, if a little on the hefty side" (Rosen, *At the Center*, 263). These three examples are representative of Rosen's preoccupation with fatness. Body size is often used to qualify or limit a character's moral rectitude or value. The idea that body size is a character flaw is, plainly, fatphobia. The latent fatphobia of *At the Center* is not an outlier in Rosen's oeuvre. Marilyn Goldberg notes that in *Joy To Levine!* Rosen studiously avoids the word 'fat' while making a central character not thin (Marilyn Goldberg, "The Soul-Searching of Norma Rosen," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 3 (1983): 202-211, 205). Even in Rosen's *Times* piece she describes Dr. Diamond before abortion legalization as having a successful obstetrics practice that put "deep rings under his eyes and a no-time-to-eat-coffee cake-chubbiness in his frame." On the perceived immorality of fatness, see Kathleen Lebesco, "Fat Panic and the New Morality," in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, ed. Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 72-82 and Megan M. Ringel and Peter H. Ditto, "The Moralization of Obesity," *Social Science & Medicine* 237 (2019): 1-10.
[29] Robert Miner, "Aborted Ideals," *New York Times*, 21 February 1982.
[30] Miner, "Aborted Ideals." This criticism supports this article's structure as emphasizing how each character individually contributes to shaping the issue of abortion.
[31] Barbara Gittenstein, "*Norma Rosen*: At the Center," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2 (1982): 217-219, 219. Gittelstein takes issue with the "perfect" ending in which, as described below, nurse Amy Netboy gives birth to a healthy baby "at exactly the right moment, to typically joyous parents" (Gittenstein, "*Norma Rosen*: At the Center," ,219).
[32] On the comparison between the Holocaust and abortion see Jennifer Holland, "'Survivors of the Abortion Holocaust': Children and Young Adults in the AntiAbortion Movement," *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 74-102, esp. 76n2. See also John Hunt, "Abortion and Nazism: Is There Really a Connection?" *Linacre Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (1996): 53-63.
[33] Rosen, *At the Center*, 12-14. Mimi is described as the victim of a "septic fishhook."
[34] Rosen, *At the Center*, 9
[35] Rosen, *At the Center*, 13.
[36] He describes the fantasy at length only to his wife Ellen (despite his suspicions about her infidelity) but the clinic staff learn about the specifics of his preoccupation by "leakage and rumor" (Rosen, *At the Center*, 118).
[37] Rosen, *At the Center*, 11.
[38] Specifically, "puncturing a uterine wall," Rosen, *At the Center*, 10.
[39] Rosen, *At the Center*, 16-17.
[40] Edgar acknowledges the humorous absurdity of his own fantasy but remain preoccupied, "getting fat over it," Rosen, *At the Center*, 16.
[41] Rosen, *At the Center*, 308-311.



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

[42] At Charlie's funeral, Edgar's wife Ellen muses that Charlie's abortion of his and Amy's child was the real Genevieve X. The catalyst wasn't negligence or an accident – it was, instead, a viciously executed plan by a doctor. The funeral occurs just prior to the bombing of the Center which might be a better analogue for Genevieve X (Rosen, *At the Center*, 284).
[43] As a kind of consolation, Amy gives birth to a healthy baby she names Charles (after Brodaw) in the final pages of the novel (Rosen, *At the Center*, 323).
[44] Rosen, *At the Center*, 19.
[45] For a recent, extensive treatment of the history of the Blood Libel from the Middle Ages to the present see Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).
[46] Rosen, *At the Center*, 142. Edgar does not dismiss the comparison as he reflects on what it means that he is "the instrument through which a large part of the population of the world (in potential) is destroyed?"
[47] Rosen, *At the Center*, 142.
[48] This parallels Charlie Brodaw's fraught relationship with his own father.
[49] Rosen, *At the Center*, 117.
[50] Rosen, *At the Center*, 118. The legality of asking an applicant about their religious views is not explored in the novel.
[51] Rosen, *At the Center*, 119. The phrasing of a choice "freely arrived at" is reminiscent of the agency invoked by people determined to have an abortion to combat concerns that their decisions is pressured or coerced.
[52] Rosen, *At the Center*, 27.
[53] Rosen, *At the Center*, 9
[54] Rosen, with an air of fatphobia, describes the chair as having a black leather cushion that "is depressed at midcenter from his bulky weight" (Rosen, *At the Center* , 37). Several pages prior, he is described as "Obese, short of breath —and why else but because of all those years of running, running, in [sic] behalf of his patients? Never eating or sleeping right, he has proved devotion… (Rosen, *At the Center*, 35). Describing Charlie's father as fat seems intended to give the reader a negative impression of him.
[55] Rosen, *At the Center*, 33, 37. In both cases, the narrative voice seems to be inhabiting Paul's perspective in emphasizing the heroism of the act. Moreover, it is unclear if the entire scene is Paul's imaginative reconstruction of the act or if it should be taken as a proper recounting of events. The scene returns to Paul's voice ending with "Was this how it had been with Charlie? Had he imagined right?" (Rosen, *At the Center*, 39). Either way, the
[56] Perhaps not her real name but carrying the implication that she is Latina.
[57] The text reads: "'How could she ask?' Charlie says. 'She doesn't know enough to. She just came by to see if it was so.' (Rosen, *At the Center*, 36)." On my reading, this implies that Charlie suggested to Maria that she have an abortion.
[58] Later, Charlie acknowledges that his father's premonition that word of the availability of abortion would spread, inevitably resulting in women flocking to his office. His father's other concerns, however, did not come to pass (Rosen, *At the Center*, 75).
[59] Rosen, *At the Center*, 36.
[60] Maria is wearing tight jeans with the bottoms rolled up and a shirt depicting a tropical scene including a flamingo (contrasting with the seriousness of receiving an illegal abortion. Rosen, *At the Center*, 36-37.
[61] Rosen writes that the "Extra elision in the contraction…deepen[s] Charlie's sense of the deprivation of her life. No luck or leisure even for a syllable" (Rosen, *At the Center*, 38). The racial, if not racist, undertones of having Maria speak in broken English are evident. Maria, whose Latino/a ethnicity is emphasized, is the only character who speaks in broken English. She is one of the characters whose ethnicity is evident. This kind of linguistic racism is characteristic of minstrel shows.
[62] Rosen, *At the Center*, 38-39.
[63] It cannot be assumed that a majority readers would be familiar with the mechanics of medical abortion. Rosen is thus informing many readers about how the procedure is performed and, thereby, anchoring them to a particular understanding.



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

[64] Maria's "public area looks childish — small, pale pink within — not the deep womanly scarlet" (Rosen, *At the Center*, 39).
[65] Marilyn Goldberg observes that Rosen "does not spare the reader from image of the fetal mess resulting from the procedures that scrape and suck the unborn out of the wombs of thousands of women" Goldberg, "The Soul-Searching of Norma Rosen,", 209.
[66] Rosen, "Between Guilt and Gratification,".
[67] Rosen, *At the Center*, 87-88.
[68] Rosen, *At the Center*, 88.
[69] Rosen, *At the Center*, 88.
[70] Rosen, *At the Center*, 89.
[71] Rosen, *At the Center*, 89.
[72] Rosen, *At the Center*, 237.
[73] The patient references a common technique of anti-abortion activists claim they will take care of a pregnant person's child to prevent them from undergoing an abortion.
[74] Rosen, *At the Center*, 237.
[75] Rosen, *At the Center*, 238.
[76] Rosen, *At the Center*, 238, italics in text.
[77] Rosen, *At the Center*, 126. Amy's grandmother represents a difference between early twentieth century feminists who supported increased access to contraception and postwar feminists who fought for abortion access. Support for contraception access does not entail support for abortion access.
[78] Rosen, *At the Center*, 133.
[79] Rosen, *At the Center*, 197-201. When Amy confesses to Paul that she's pregnant, she says that Edgar is going to perform an abortion, that he will extract the fetus from her body "like a tooth" (Rosen, *At the Center*, p.202).
[80] Rosen, *At the Center*, 224-225.
[81] Rosen, *At the Center*, 218.
[82] Rosen, *At the Center*, 218.
[83] Rosen, *At the Center*, 266-267.
[84] Charlie drops a potassium capsule into Amy's wine. A pregnant woman drinking alcohol is not remarked upon (Rosen, *At the Center*, 267-268).
[85] Amy explains that they chose that location to have sex for "nostalgia" to "return to the scene of the beginning"
[86] Early in the novel, Edgar's wife Ellen reflects on the changing landscape of abortion access: 'In the early days you were all heroes, in spite of the chaos,' she says. 'For three years before the rest of the country came around, New York was a haven for the continent. Now you're settling into a routine – all of you. Women's Clinic, Parkmed, Planned parenthood – it's the story of every movement. Naturally it makes you nervous! (Rosen, *At the Center*, 8.)
[87] Rosen, *At the Center*, 184.
[88] Rosen, *At the Center*, 43-44.
[89] Rosen, *At the Center*, 268.
[90] Rosen, *At the Center*, 268-269.
[91] Rosen, *At the Center*, 269-270.
[92] Rosen, *At the Center*, 279-285.
[93] 'Selig' means "blessed" in German. The notion that Hannah is blessed is tinged with irony given what befell her parents.
[94] C.f. Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, "Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 2 (2004): 165-178
[95] Teitelbaum isn't mentioned in this section of *At The Center* but including the detail that their Rabbi perished in Hungary suggests some cultural confluence.
[96] Rosen, *At the Center*, 98.
[97] Susan Shapiro emphasizes Hannah's ambivalence about Jewish practice as she rejects Orthodox doctrine (Shapiro, "Norma Rosen's Jewish Journey," 117).



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392

[98] Demonstrating her ambivalent relationship to normative Jewish practice, in one scene Hannah both lights Shabbat candles and subsequently transgresses the prohibition against working on the Sabbath by writing in her notebook.
[99] Goldberg, "The Soul-Searching of Norma Rosen," 210.
[100] Rosen, *At the Center*, 56.
[101] She writes that "those who are political will say: When the walls of morality collapse, it is always the Jew who is buried under them. In Law is out defense. But the Laws of Nürnburg? [sic]" Rosen, *At the Center*, 56-57.
[102] The possible impropriety of a nurse befriending a patient in this way is not examined in the novel.
[103] The full phrase is "if God is dead, everything is permitted." Walter Sinnott-Armstrong explains that the idea, variously attributed to the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky and the German philosopher, beloved by the Nazism, Friedrich Nietzsche, has been understood to explain immoral actions as stemming from atheism. (Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God?*, Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 2009), xii).In this instance, the speaker implies the disregard for human life characteristic of the Holocaust is shared by those who seek abortion and those who perform them.
[104] Rosen, *At the Center*, 191 (italics in text).
[105] Rosen, *At the Center*, 191.
[106] Whether the Holocaust was *primarily* about Jewish people and whether it was an incomparable tragedy has been vigorously debated.
[107] Rosen, *At the Center*, 192 (italics in text).
[108] Rosen, *At the Center*, 192.
[109] Rosen, *At the Center*, 192.
[110] Fackenheim developed this idea in multiple publications. On the notion of the 614th commandment and its reception see Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[111] Rosen, *At the Center*, 192-193.
[112] Rosen, *Accidents of Influence*, 138. Shapiro characterizes the ending as "cryptic" (Shapiro, "Norma Rosen's Jewish Journey," 118).
[113] Hannah dismisses the expectation that she bear children (Rosen, *At the Center*, 98). Ann Shapiro notes that another of Rosen's characters, Jean from *Touching Evil* decides not to bring children into a "evil world" (Shapiro, "Norma Rosen's Jewish Journey,", 117).
[114] Cassandra Jaramillo and Kavitha Surana, "A Woman Died After Being Told It Would Be a "Crime" to Intervene in Her Miscarriage at a Texas Hospital," *ProPublica* (30 October, 2024). https://www.propublica.org/article/josseli-barnica-death-miscarriage-texas-abortion-ban.
[115] Jennifer Gerson, "Anti-Choice Activists Have Invented an "Abortion Holocaust,"" *Jewish Currents* (10 June 2019). https://jewishcurrents.org/anti-choice-activists-have-invented-an-abortion-holocaust.
[116] The non-Jewish Alabama lawmakers would agree with the person discussed in the previous section who asked why Jews don't consider the Holocaust's implications for "for humanity."
[117] Conservative rabbi and ethicist Elliot N. Dorff espoused this view in his 2003 book *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics*. Dorff bemoans that the Jewish people are in "deep demographic trouble" as their population decreased from 18 million to 12 million during the Holocaust. Worse, the Jewish birthrate has fallen below replacement level. Dorff provocatively claims that propagation is "arguably the most important mitzvah in our time" (Elliot N. Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 124). For a critique of this view, see Rebecca J. Epstein-Levi, "Person-Shaped Holes: Childfree Jews, Jewish Ethics, and Communal Continuity," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 49, no. 2 (2021): 226-244, 226-227.
[118] Zack Beauchamp, "Israeli Minister Says US Jews Marrying Non-Jews is "Like a Second Holocaust"," *Vox* (10 July, 2019). https://www.vox.com/2019/7/10/20687946/israel-minister-second-holocaust-intermarriage. Orthodox rabbis have also used the rhetoric of the Holocaust to castigate American intermarriage. Rabbi Elliot Dorff also laments that the Jewish population problem has been "exacerbated" by intermarriage (Dorff, *Matters of Life and Death*, 124).



*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal Volume 20 Number 2 (2023)*
ISSN 1209-9392