ABORTION / JEWISH PRO-LIFE FOUNDATION PROVIDES EDUCATION, RESOURCES

Local woman adds Jewish pro-life voice to abortion debate

Cecily Routman is in the minority when it comes to Jews' views on abortion. That's OK with her.

By TOBY TABACHNICK
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Cecily Routman (Photo by Tabachnick)

Cecily Routman doesn't exactly fit the part of the ardent anti-abortion advocate sometimes portrayed in media.

The soft-spoken Sewickley resident is contemplative, eloquent and frank. She exudes genuineness and honesty. If she were your neighbor, she would probably be the one you trust with your house key.

She is also Jewish.

Routman, 60, is the founder and main funder of the Pittsburgh-based Jewish Pro-Life Foundation, an educational nonprofit. Since 2006, she has taken on the mission of being a Jewish pro-life voice in the public conversation about abortion.

Being anti-abortion is a minority position among Jews. Recent Pew surveys have found that American Jews (83 percent) are much more supportive of legal abortion than the general population (57 percent).

Routman is well aware that, as a Jewish woman, her drive to speak out against abortion is counter-cultural — which is precisely the point.

“Neutral” on abortion for most of her life, Routman said it was not until 2005, while listening to a National Public Radio program about the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003, that she took a stand.

“The program featured a Jewish woman, insisting it was her right to have an abortion, that its ban infringed on her civil rights and her rights as a Jew,” recalled Routman, who grew up attending services at the Beth Samuel Jewish Center in Ambridge and now goes to Congregation Ahavath Achim in Carnegie. “I was concerned because I didn’t agree with her, and I thought that anybody listening to this program would think that all Jewish people thought like her, because there was no other voice to interview for the program. And I thought, ‘We need another Jewish voice out there.’”

Routman got busy researching abortion.

“I knew very little,” she said, “but what I learned horrified me. And I realized in my heart that it was a ghastly business and I didn’t understand how Jewish people had gotten so involved in it.”

Jews were not only outspoken in favor of the right to choose, she said, but were also “charitable donors for Planned Parenthood, and hosting fundraisers for Planned Parenthood. I did not understand that.”

Her research led her to discussions with rabbis from varied denominations, including Rabbi David Novak, president and co-founder of the Union for Traditional Judaism and a member of University College and the Joint Centre for Bioethics at the University of Toronto. Novak is now a member of the Jewish Pro-Life Foundation’s board of directors.

From her discussions with rabbis, and from reading Jewish sources, Routman “realized that despite a lot of support for abortion in the Jewish community,” traditional Judaism “emphasized the sanctity of human life,” and required that unborn life be protected.

“A secularist doesn’t have that understanding,” Routman said. “They play God rather than serve God.”

Judaism had been “corrupted from its original meaning,” she said. “And I was so happy to learn this, because I realized I could remain a Jew. Because otherwise, I was faced with quite a dilemma.”

Still, she was not sure she wanted to publicly join the abortion debate until she had a long meeting with a Reconstructionist rabbi, who kept repeating the phrase: “It’s not a life before it’s born.”

“I walked out and said, ‘OK, Lord, I’ll do it,’” Routman said. “I was called, sort of like Jonah being called to Nineveh.”

Using money she had inherited from her parents, Routman incorporated the Jewish Pro-Life Foundation as a 501(c)(3) educational foundation in 2006. Routman, who holds a master’s in social work, is president of the board, and has three other board members: Novak; her husband, Tom Kimmerle; and Mary Margaret Baxter, a nurse.

“I just decided I would start an organization to educate Jewish people like our mission statement says — about the traditional Jewish law regarding abortions before it became distorted, in my opinion, and about what is actually going on in the womb,” she said. “The other issue I really cared about was to provide post-abortion healing for Jewish men and women, because there was no access to that.”

The foundation’s website is replete with educational resources, not only on abortion, but on adoption and post-abortion healing. Each Thursday evening at 9 p.m., Routman runs a national call-in service during which women can join in a discussion on how to heal spiritually and emotionally from any post-abortion trauma.

Some weeks, no one calls in, she said, but other times, there are a handful of women on the phone.

Her goal is eventually to facilitate face-to-face peer counseling among women who have gone through abortions, and

to provide adoption referrals for women who choose not to abort a baby but cannot care for it themselves.

"It's important if you do pro-life education to have another avenue available," she said.

The foundation does not "have anything to do with the politics or the legislation," Routman stressed. "I thought when I started, the last thing I needed to do was to create some sort of opposition with people that were politically and ideologically to one side. I didn't want to set that conflict up. I really believe in my heart that if Jewish people were educated about the tragedy of abortion and the problems it causes their hearts would be changed."

The abortion industry, she opined, "has a very successful propaganda campaign that has been going on for decades now, and it is very seductive. It speaks to your emotions and your compassion for women. If you have any resentment about traditional roles for women, and problems women face, it speaks to that, so women are easily convinced that abortion is a legitimate answer to these problems."

Many of the Jewish women with whom Routman has spoken post-abortion "have no support from their families," she explained. "In fact, their mothers, brothers, their fathers, excoriated them for getting pregnant. It's a different culture. It embarrasses us.

"It's such a shame," she continued, "because so many times people think abortion is necessary because the baby is going to have terrible circumstances, so why don't we just be compassionate? Take the baby's life in the womb, so that they don't have to face this challenging life of poverty, or whatever. But in the Jewish community, we have so many resources, it's not a valid reason for a Jewish child."

Through the Jewish Pro-Life Foundation, Routman aims to provide "a wonderful safe place for Jewish people who can't speak about this in their own community," she said. "They find us. I am building this pro-life Jewish rabbinistry, where people can contact us and be consoled, supported. Because we know that Judaism in its most foundational sense is all about life." **PJC**

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