

A Statement on the Permissibility of Abortion

RABBIS BEN ZION BOKSER AND KASSEL ABELSON

This statement was adopted on November 21, 1983 by a vote of 16-1-1 as a summary of papers adopted by the Committee at its meeting on August 23, 1983. Members voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Jacob B. Agus, Ben Zion Bokser, Salamon Faber, David M. Feldman, Morris Feldman, Edward M. Gershfield, David H. Lincoln, George Pollak, Mayer E. Rabinowitz, Barry S. Rosen, Morris M. Shapiro, Harry Z. Sky, Henry A. Sosland, Gordon Tucker and Alan J. Yuter. Voting in opposition: Rabbi Phillip Sigal. Abstaining: Rabbi Joel Roth.

Jewish tradition is sensitive to the sanctity of life, and does not permit abortion on demand. However, it sanctions abortion under some circumstances because it does not regard the fetus as an autonomous person. This is based partly on the Bible (Exodus 21:22-23), which prescribes monetary damages where a person injures a pregnant woman, causing a miscarriage. The Mishnah (*Ohalot* 7:6) explicitly indicates that one is to abort a fetus if the continuation of pregnancy might imperil the life of the mother. Later authorities have differed as to how far we might go in defining the peril to the mother in order to justify an abortion. The Rabbinical Assembly Committee on Jewish Law and Standards takes the view that an abortion is justifiable if a continuation of pregnancy might cause the mother severe physical or psychological harm, or when the fetus is judged by competent medical opinion as severely defective. The fetus is a life in the process of development, and the decision to abort it should never be taken lightly. Before reaching her final decision, the mother should consult with the father, other members of her family, her physician, her spiritual leader and any other person who can help her in assessing the many grave legal and moral issues involved.

II.

BAR/BAT MITZVAH

