



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 20, 2009.

I Believe in Giving Back
Shirley Ranz

In 1971, in my third year of college, I discovered I was two months pregnant. This came as a shock to me, not because I was ignorant of how babies are conceived, but because a year before I had taken the precaution of having an IUD implanted. I was willing to tolerate the painful cramping it caused, because it was considered the safest and most effective form of birth control. I turned out to be part of the 2 percent failure rate.

For two reasons it never occurred to me to carry the pregnancy to term. First, I had plans for several more years of full-time higher education, without which I couldn't hope to earn a decent living. Second, I had never experienced a desire to have children and the decision to remain child-free continued throughout my life. I was sorry to disappoint my parents, Holocaust survivors who had lost their entire families, but having children for their sake would have been a mistake.

Roe v Wade, which legalized abortion in the U.S., was not to happen for another two years. Visions of bloody back-alley abortions, or burdening my parents with the expense of sending me abroad where it was safe and legal, danced before my eyes.

Fortunately for me these fears were short-lived because I learned that in 1970 New York had become the first state to legalize abortion for any reason.

I later learned that the fight to repeal the state's abortion ban had been building for three years, and would have probably continued on to a fourth if not for one Assemblyman's change of heart. George Michaels, a Jewish Assemblyman from a heavily Catholic district, who knew it would end his political career, cast the deciding vote. Generations of woman and some men preceded him in the struggle to gain this right and I had been the beneficiary of their sacrifice. I felt like a freeloader. I had to pay them back, so I became active in the women's movement.

With the advent of Roe v Wade we believed that legal abortion had been secured. The relief was short-lived and we now know that the fight to ensure this right and others will probably be eternal. My debt to those who preceded me is eternal as well. I believe in giving back.