

WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT'S NOT RAPE?

By Jeanette Friedman

Thirty-seven years ago, this very week, there was a snowstorm swirling outside my kitchen window, but my sixth floor apartment was so hot and dry I cracked the window facing the fire escape before I went to bed. It was about 3 a.m., and I had just fallen asleep when I woke up to find a man cutting the wires to the phone on my bedside table. Next thing I knew, I was blindfolded with my bathrobe, and could feel the point of a knife pushing into the top of my scalp. I kept thinking that what was happening couldn't be happening, and remembered what my cop friends had taught me. "Don't fight back, give them what they want or they won't think twice about hurting or killing you."

So I did as I was told, and about half-an-hour later, wrapped in a blanket, I went pounding on my neighbors' doors, begging them to call the cops. One of my big kitchen knives was laying on the third step of the staircase.

I was not bruised or battered physically, but I demanded to be taken to a hospital for a rape kit. (I was the editor of my college paper and had access to information most women didn't have. It was 1973 and women were starting to learn how to take care of themselves because, generally, men proved unequal to the task. Mostly I wanted a massive dose of penicillin, just in case I'd caught something disgusting.)

The first question these police officers asked me was what I had done to encourage my attacker. I thought that only happened in movies! I was so furious, I shot back that at 3 a.m., as the snowstorm raged across the city, I had climbed out on the fire escape, and while swinging my panties in the air, had yelled "Here 'tis, come and get it."

They finally believed me when they heard the names of my cop friends and saw the evidence: the broken screen in the kitchen window, the knife on the stairs in the hall and the cut phone wires. A few weeks later the rapist got his just desserts. His face was plastered all over the NY Daily News, and more women came forward to identify him. He was a serial rapist who didn't have to beat his victims black and blue because he carried a weapon.

I wasn't battered because I had done what the cops taught me to do. And now, thirty-seven years later, Chris Smith, a Republican congressman in my home state of New Jersey, is pushing the "No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act" that invalidates the terrible experiences of millions of American women who were raped. His law basically says that only bruises prove rape and that it isn't incest if the victim is over 18. By his lights, because we weren't beaten to a pulp, we weren't raped. And that means victims of date rapes or designer drug rapes haven't been raped either. Never mind marital rape. It doesn't exist. He is saying it's no longer rape even if

there is a knife to the victim's head—and it isn't incest because she's over 18, and she's not bleeding.

So far there are 173 Congressmen rallying behind this bill—one Smith claims will cut the deficit dramatically by eliminating abortions. What this law really does is pull the rug out from beneath women's bitterly won rights to do what they want with their own bodies. And that's precisely the point. They are creating a ruse to stop legal abortions.

I never went back to my apartment after that terrible night, except to move out. I stayed with a friend when I was released from the hospital and spent the rest of the night trying to scrub myself clean. For weeks afterward I held my breath until I got my period. Thank God, Roe V. Wade was passed just two weeks before I was raped. Had I gotten pregnant, I have no doubt I would have gotten an abortion—by hook or by crook. Such a pregnancy would have been life-threatening to me, since I wanted to marry and have children with someone I loved—and not have to commit suicide in despair. (A victim of rape is four times more likely to commit suicide.)

Maybe I believe that women have the right to choose because I am a Jew, and in Judaism, abortion is permitted even during full-term delivery if the life of the mother is at stake. The differences of opinion among the Jews lay not in the act of abortion, which is clearly permitted; they lay in the definition of the word "life." There are those rabbis who say that a woman's emotional and mental state matters—especially when it comes to raising children. For some women forced to give birth to a child of rape or a severely damaged child with no hope of recovery, the situation becomes life-threatening—not only to the mother, but to the mental and emotional health of her other children. On the other hand, there are rabbis who say a mother's life needs to be literally physically threatened by conditions of pregnancy and birth before an abortion can take place. In all cases, the final decision is between a woman, her rabbi and her doctor—and together they face God, come what may.

What is happening right now is that Smith and his cronies have wrapped their religious beliefs in the deficit and are attempting to coerce the rest of us to adhere to those beliefs by abusing the separation of Church and State. True, the separation of Church and State is not explicit in the Constitution. Neither is the right to privacy. Yet both of these principles are considered basic American human rights. They reinforce democratic ideals and allow American women to choose what they want to do, without having someone else's religious beliefs jammed down their throats.

Smith's bill is designed to demolish these long-established American principles as he and fellow Republican Mike Pence—whose companion bill aims to prohibit private insurance companies from covering *legal* abortions—attempt to bring the full force of their religious beliefs disguised as Federal legislation to bear down on poor and middle class women. They are forcing American women to abide by the rules of Christian beliefs that differ even from those of other Christians. They use doublespeak to redefine rape and incest, words that have accepted meanings, legally and literally, that go back to biblical times. They manipulate the Constitution and lie about the costs of the havoc their bills will create.

If Smith's bill passes, you will have to suffer contusions, blunt force trauma or open wounds to prove rape, and if you are an incest victim over 18, it won't be incest. Any resulting pregnancies of these non-rapes will have to be carried to term because Chris Smith will make abortion impossible unless you are wealthy and pay for it "out of network." It's already awful to know that if you are a poor woman in America who relies on federal funds for health care, you can't get an abortion if your fetus was damaged by prescription drugs, a disease you contracted, or a genetic disorder. The government doesn't allow it.

If these Republican have their way, women will be forced to go back to pre-1973 kitchen table abortions. These back-alley homemade procedures force women to risk their lives by using Betadyne and knitting needles or coat hangers to accomplish what the United States government will not allow them to do safely. The only women who will escape this desperate trap are the rich.

The rest of us will wonder what we can do for the women who develop complications from butchered abortions and how we will care for the damaged and unwanted children that will be the issue of this insane policy. Will the greater costs lie in our souls or our pocket books?

Call your congressman and tell him or her that you won't stand for this abuse of legislative power. This is still America —and we are still Americans—of different faiths and belief systems, and no one's religious agenda speaks for us all.

(America has more reported rapes, by a huge number, than any other country that gathers such statistics, and researchers note that as many as 60% of all rapes are never reported. Here are the facts: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_statistics#United_States and here: <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>)