A lot of things are Torah texts.

Often, of course, words are texts — in the sense of being conduits of divine holiness.

Sometimes music, experiences, and even other people can be texts.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously noted: “What we need… is not textbooks, but textpeople.”

Today, we are going to look to Jewish art as our primary texts. We encourage you to engage with the art included on the following pages as sources of Jewish wisdom and learning — much like you would with traditional texts.

All of the information that you need can be found in the images themselves, and in your reaction to them, but we have also included some of the traditional texts that they reference to enrich your thinking.
1: Emily K
emilyk.art

Click here to view this artwork at high quality.
Exodus 1:15-22

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.” And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. And God established households for the midwives, because they feared God. Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

Discussion Questions

1. What feelings come up for you as you view this piece? What is your initial reaction?
2. The texts included in this work of art are traditional Jewish texts that form the legal basis for Judaism’s emphasis on abortion rights. Take a moment to read some of the texts included in the drawing (copied below). Do they change your understanding of the piece? If so, how?
3. What do you notice about the composition of this piece? How does the artist use Jewish text to make a point? What role does the white and black space play?
4. The three women in this piece are the biblical characters of Shifra and Puah, the midwives who delivered Israelite babies against Pharaoh’s wishes; and Miriam, the prophet who led the Israelite women in celebration after the splitting of the Red Sea. Why do you think the artist included these characters here?
5. The plant depicted in the border of the piece is common rue, a plant that Jews are known to have used in amulets, and that was used widely as abortifacient across the Mediterranean. Why might the artist have included this? Does the inclusion of rue change how you view the piece? If so, how?
**Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 69b**

If she is found pregnant, until the fortieth day it is mere fluid.

**Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 23b**

What is the reason for Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s position in a conversation too involved to cite here? He holds that a fetus is considered as its mother’s thigh [that is, as part of its mother’s body].

**Mishnah Oholot 7:6**

If a woman is having trouble giving birth, they cut up the child in her womb and bring it forth limb by limb, because her life comes before the life of [the child]. But if the greater part has come out, one may not touch it, for one may not set aside one person’s life for that of another.

**Midrash Tanchuma, Mishpatim 2**

If a person acts as though they were a terumah (the portion separated for the priests) by secluding themself in the corner of their home and declaring: “What concern are the problems of the world to me? What does their judgment mean to me? Why should I listen to them? I will do well (without them),” they help to destroy the world. Hence: *the person of separation overthrow the world.*
The Art of Reproductive Freedom

2: Ayeola Omolara Kaplan
https://www.ayeola.org/

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The Art of Reproductive Freedom

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Discussion Questions

1. What feelings come up for you as you view this piece? What is your initial reaction?
2. Of the three pieces we have seen, this is the only one where the artist uses color in the art itself. Why do you think Kaplan chose to use color? What effect does it have on you?
3. What do you notice about the people in the center of the painting? How are they similar or different to the women in Section 2 or the person in Section 1?
4. Notice the five Hebrew phrases included in the piece: kavod habriot/dignity, briyot/health, tzedek/justice, pikuach nefesh/saving lives, and tzaar/avoiding suffering. Why did Kaplan include these in her work? How might they connect to the values featured in the corners of the piece: diversity centered reproductive education, safe and healthy communities, resources and healthcare, and affordable and accessible abortions?
3: Maimonides Nutz (Sophia Zohar)

instagram.com/maimonides_nutz

Be careful in your dealings with the ruling authorities for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs; they seem like friends when it is to their own interest, but they do not stand by a person in the hour of their distress.

Pirkei Avot 2:3
Pirkei Avot 2:3

Be careful [in your dealings] with the ruling authorities, for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs; they seem like friends when it is to their own interest, but they do not stand by a person in the hour of their distress.

Discussion Questions

1. What feelings come up for you as you view this piece? What is your initial reaction?
2. Take a moment to observe the style of Zohar’s work. What do you notice about its subject?
3. Zohar purposefully did not portray her subject with gendered physical traits, but, rather, as a neutral body with a uterus. What can you learn from this artistic choice?
4. The person in the center of the drawing is surrounded by hands and yet does not have fingers of their own. What does that evoke for you?
5. Take a moment to read the text included in the drawing. Does that change your understanding of the piece? How?