

#MeToo — Realigning Roles, Power and Respect

First it was Harvey Weinstein. Then a series of respected network news anchors who were part of our daily culture and experience. Then numerous famous actors and performers. Writers, politicians, business executives, and more. Then respected scholars and religious leaders. It seems that no corner of the professional world was untouched in the flood of scandals that arose once the abuses of Harvey Weinstein spawned the #MeToo movement. It was about time – the fall of Cosby and Bill O’Reilly came before this, priming the way for the snowballing effect victims coming forward.

One night, watching the news with my husband Bob, as another high-profile public personality was outed by a woman accusing him sexual harassment, I turned to Bob with chagrin and said, “Are you the only man in America who hasn’t done this?” No offense, men. It was hyperbole out of exasperation.

As women came forward one after another, the veil of secrecy and shame was being lifted. In these months I have thought about my experiences as a professional woman and leader in the Jewish community, and how many times I’d experienced an inappropriate touch or comment by a man. I can’t begin to document all of it, partly because I have not wanted to focus on it, preferring to just do my best. But I am also aware that I did not experience the egregious insults like the ones we heard from many women.

Let’s be clear, this isn’t really about sex. It is about power. Along with that, it is about respect and equality. Sexual harassment happens as an abuse of power when there is a clear imbalance in the roles between two individuals, or more.

That imbalance is experienced in many ways, and most often not even involving sexual harassment. I believe that most professional women in my generation have experienced an imbalance of expectations; that is, because we are women, we have had to prove ourselves to be capable and worthy of our role. In the rabbinate, this is especially pronounced. The respect that was once afforded to rabbis when rabbis were exclusively male has been less automatically available for the first generation of women in the rabbinate.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of Rabbi Regina Jonas, the first woman known to have been ordained, who perished in Auschwitz. In the early 1930’s Jonas studied to be a rabbi in the Higher Institute for Jewish Studies in Berlin. Writing her thesis for qualification for ordination, "Can a Woman Be a Rabbi According to Halachic Sources?" Jonas concluded that based on Biblical, Talmudic, and rabbinical sources, ordination should be permitted. However, the Talmud professor responsible for approving ordination would not agree to ordain a woman. She turned to her teacher, Rabbi Leo Baeck, a noted “spiritual leader of German Jewry, who had taught her at the seminary. He also refused because the ordination of a female rabbi would have caused massive intra-Jewish communal problems with the Orthodox rabbinate in Germany.”¹ Fortunately, Jonas then sought help

¹ “Regina Jonas,” as found in Wikipedia

RHAM 2

from liberal Rabbi Max Dienemann, who conferred ordination upon her in 1935. The prominent Rabbi Leo Baeck survived the Holocaust and post-war held influential posts in his new home in England. But he failed one big test of courage in the struggle for equality – he did not talk about Rabbi Jonas after the war, and so her remarkable story was hidden for decades until her papers were found, along with two formal photos. My personal story is linked to hers because a man who escaped Berlin before it was too late had known her and had taken her picture in front of her house in Berlin. He saved it from 1939 until 1987 when I met him, and he gave me the photo as a gift. Who was caring for Jews of Berlin and then Theresienstadt before being sent to her death? Who was teaching them Torah? Rabbi Jonas. So why couldn't the male rabbis who knew her honor her memory? They are not here to tell us... but we can imagine that patriarchy was the backdrop.

This year, as I thought about Rabbi Jonas while discussing her story and the photograph of her with historians, I was struck by how she was so amazingly accomplished, and also a victim in more ways than one.

Much as I had avoided focusing on gender and power issues in my rabbinate, it was now right in my face. As the charges of harassment and abuse continued to flood in, more and more men whom I had respected were called out for their abuses of power. It grew very close to my heart when in one week this summer, two men I know, have counted as friends, and have held in very high esteem were outed in the press for their abuses of power, accused of repeated sexual harassment. One was a priest. One was a Jewish professional. It was a painful and confusing time for me.

So, this year as I have thought about the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I was drawn to the narrative's treatment of Sarah. Her voice is absent, and her experience of the night Abraham heard the divine call to ascend the mountain with Isaac, of the morning when they wordlessly left with servants, is not shared. "Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." (Gen 22:1) Where was Sarah? It evidently didn't matter to the framers of the text. The next time Sarah appears is right after narrative of the Akedah ends. Then we learn only that Sarah died. Well, *no wonder!!*

These issues of respect, power and equality have a very long history. Patriarchal culture has a very long arc. Even as I have cringed and at times been sickened by what was revealed by the victims of this abuse, I have felt sympathy for some of the men who have been accused of harassment. They were acculturated, from the time they grew up as boys, in a culture still very much influenced and shaped by patriarchy and imbalances of power. That doesn't excuse unwanted sexual advances – but if we are to fix this problem and stop these abuses, context is important.

Among the responses to #MeToo in the Jewish world, there was an event in New York entitled, "*Revealing #MeToo as #WeToo in Jewish Communal Life*," organized by The Jewish Women's Foundation of New York. It featured women sharing their stories, some agonizing to share and painful to hear. Among the stories shared were a host of power imbalance issues that women have experienced; it wasn't just gender-based harassment, but also inequitable hiring policies, unequal pay for equal work, and power structures that were cited by participants as part of the problem and demanding attention.

“We have a real problem with icons in our community,” said Elizabeth Mandel, Founder and Executive Director of *jGirls Magazine*, a co-sponsor of the event. “This is immensely detrimental to all the vulnerable voices among us. They feel they don’t have the right to speak up, so the more we let them know they can, and that they will be believed, and that there is a community of caring, the better we will be.”

We need to change the narrative and shift the entire dynamic of community. “Let’s not forget that protecting and caring for our most vulnerable is a Jewish value,”² Elizabeth Mandel said.

How can we honestly share our personal experiences without shame or embarrassment? How can we all share in the solution?

Another column earlier this year in *eJewishPhilanthropy* addressed this issue.³ It was written by Loribeth Weinstein, *CEO of Jewish Women International*, entitled “Responding to #MeToo goes Deeper than Policy Changes.”

Weinstein outlined how many professionals in the Jewish community have responded to the raised awareness brought on the #MeToo movement with a commitment to determine the best response.

Weinstein wonders, “How can we use this movement to take an honest look within, recognize the deep seeded and long-standing inequalities and take the necessary steps to initiate change?” Many organizations are working toward a behavioral shift with a new articulation of values and policies that flow from those values.” Some are actively trying to hire more women. But it is clear that it is far from enough. The Jewish community needs “a seismic cultural shift.”

This shift must be “multi-generational and prevention focused, catalyzed by education, training and constant conversation.” It begins with how we raise and educate boys. Weinstein goes right to the core, saying, “Frankly, when our teen boys compete over what they can “get” from girls, or when our college men join fraternities that demean women, they graduate to be heirs to a workplace culture that thinks of women as less than.”

“Sexual harassment, dating violence, sexual assault, rape and domestic violence” are all connected and “part of a continuum of violence against women.” Children growing up in a culture where power imbalances and violence are present in their homes, exaggerated in movies, video games, etc., are the first victims. Boys learning this model are more likely to act with violence toward women when they grow up.

² H. Glenn Rosenkrantz, “A Communal Response to Gender Harassment Begins,” *eJewishPhilanthropy*, 1/30/18

³ Loribeth Weinstein, “Responding to #MeToo goes Deeper than Policy Changes” *eJewishPhilanthropy*, 1/29/18 (CEO of Jewish Women International)

Girls who are left vulnerable by an upbringing that teaches them to be dependent on a man are more likely to find themselves in dangerous situations.

Our communities need to look honestly at our “patriarchal ethos.” Many of our “traditions” need urgent change.

How can we create real change? Loribeth Weinstein prescribes, “We need homes that are filled with loving, supportive relationships. We need our boys to grow to be men who value women as true equals – worthy of the same respect, pay, and opportunities as would another man. We need girls to access the power of their voices. And we must model to women, from home to the C-suite, that there is unobstructed access to the top of the ladder.”

This is an important way to steer our culture in a new direction. And still, *we need to do more*. What do we say when we talk about our sacred texts and sages, filled with patriarchal stories, sometimes highly insulting toward women? I was reminded of troubling the myth of **Lilith**, told by the rabbis in the early Talmudic period.⁴

“When God created the first man Adam alone, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” [So] God created a woman for him, ... and called her Lilith. [Adam and Lilith] promptly began to argue with each other (about sex.) She said to him, “The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth.” And they would not listen to each other. Since Lilith saw [how it was], she uttered God's ineffable name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Maker and said, “Master of the Universe, the woman you gave me fled from me!”

The Holy Blessed One immediately dispatched the three angels after her...to bring her back. God said, “If she wants to return, well and good. And if not, she must accept that a hundred of her children will die every day.” The angels pursued her and overtook her in the sea ... and told her God's orders. ... she did not want to return. They told her they would drown her in the sea, and she replied. “*Leave me alone! I was only created in order to sicken babies: if they are boys, from birth to day eight I will have power over them; if they are girls, from birth to day twenty.*” When they heard her reply, they pleaded with her to come back. She swore to them... that whenever she would see them or their names or their images on an *amulet*, she would not overpower that baby, and she accepted that a hundred...children would die every day. Therefore, a hundred babies die every day, and therefore, we write the names [of the three angels] on amulets of young children. When Lilith sees them, she remembers her oath and the child is [protected] healed.”

Writer Kate Manne⁵ observes, “Part of being...human involves the potential to be cast in social scripts in specific roles and relationships, ... of one's group memberships or identities...But a *failure* to play

⁴ The Alef Bet of Ben Sirah, Alternate Version

⁵ Kate Manne, Excerpt from *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, 2018, p.169

one's assigned part in the script, or to attempt some kind of role *reversal*, is prone to give rise to *startled* reactions ...The person may be perceived as "off" viewed with the kind of *suspicion* and even disgust She is not playing her part in the script. And so we have grave doubts about her character-- or even doubt she has one."

The myth of the first woman, Lilith, becoming a demon killing newborn babies, was frightening for women. That, along with social pressure to accept narratives justifying subservience, kept women "in their place" for untold generations. Fits and starts of feminist awakening and strides toward equality have challenged that narrative. It is no surprise that women's empowerment created backlash and counterreactions, once again silencing too many women while harassment and abuse persisted.

We must continue to *rewrite the scripts* of men and women's roles, with shared power. A 1972 feminist version of the Lilith myth by Judith Plaskow⁶ reconsidered what happened after Lilith was banished.

"...God, after more careful consideration, caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and out of one of his ribs created for him a second companion, *Eve*. ... After a while...God... started going over in [God's] mind whether he may not have made a mistake letting Adam talk him into banishing Lilith and creating Eve, seeing the *power* that gave Adam."

"Meanwhile Lilith, all alone, attempted from time to time to rejoin the human community in the garden. Adam worked to build tall walls around the garden. He told Eve fearsome stories of the demon Lilith who threatens women in childbirth and steals children from their cradles in the middle of the night. Then one day, Eve got a glimpse of Lilith and saw she was a woman like herself. ... seeds of curiosity and doubt began to grow in Eve's mind. Was Lilith indeed just another woman? Adam had said she was a demon. Another woman! ...how ...strong Lilith looked! Eve began to think about the limits of her own life within the garden."

"One day... Eve...saw that the branches of an apple tree ...stretched over the garden wall....she climbed it, and struggling to the top, swung herself over the wall. She didn't wander long on the other side before she met the one she had come to find, for Lilith was waiting. Lilith ...greeted her kindly. "Who are you?" they asked each other, "What is your story?" And they... laughed together, and cried ... till the bond of sisterhood grew between them."

"Meanwhile, Adam was puzzled by Eve's ... new attitude toward him. He talked to God about it, and God, ...[who] was confused, too. Something had failed to go according to plan.... God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together. "

⁶ Edited from -- Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith", 1972

Back to Sarah, on the eve of the Akedah. Poor Sarah – terrified and very angry. I came across a poem reflecting those emotions, a demonstration of early feminist rage. It is quite jarring, but just like the painful #MeToo stories of abuse, it expresses what had been suppressed and now should be heard:

Sarah's Wrath⁷

Miserable toad!
Pious old jackass!
You would have done it!
I've stuck it out for ninety arid years,
strangled the doubting rat in my heart,
submitted me to you and your God,
that same God who closed my womb,
withheld life from me when I was ripe
and gave it to me when I was rotten—
What was the point?
I never understood—
all this I endured for love of you.
God saw fit to end my suffering
as arbitrarily as he sustained it,
for all I can see.
When my pleasure came at last,
I nursed my Isaac from dragging old dugs
from which he grew, strong straight
white lamb of me old ewe years.
And you would have sacrificed this lamb of mine
to our indecent God whose wisdom is caprice.
You would have done it!
Would have raised your vagrant hand
against the fleshing of my soul!
My blood would have drained out my eyes
with your first lopping stab.
Don't you know you would have killed me, too?
But not before I would kill you,
and will yet, old man, if ever again
you raise your bloody bones against my son
God himself could not stop my hand
slicing your squatty old throat.
You would have done it!

⁷ Diana Hume George , "A Genesis"

RHAM 2

It is time to open the curtains to air the extent of suffering endured by the vulnerable and disempowered. In the case of priests, power differentials in the private worlds they inhabit ensured that mostly boys and men were victims. The volume of stories of abuse are absolutely sickening. Here was a religious system constructed to justify the abuse of power, where the fear of reprisal kept victims quiet for far too long. In this system, the men who abused were educated, acculturated and empowered by a culture that *enabled* this behavior – in their minds, they were holy men and these sins somehow were not sins. I pray for the victims to find justice and healing. Even in my anger for the harm and pain caused by the men in power toward vulnerable victims, still, I pray for their souls. May they find *teshuvah* and help their victims and our world to heal.

What is the Jewish response to #MeToo? *Teshuvah* – a turning. We can't go back to where we have been. Enough backlash. Now it is time to for the *pursuit of justice* and *insistence on truth*. No more secrets or hiding, no more protecting the powerful who abuse the vulnerable. We should insist on honest critique of sacred texts that must be reinterpreted, rewritten or rejected altogether in some cases. We need a new narrative that honors women and men as equals and empowers young boys and girls to grow up to see each other as possessing the potential to become who they are meant to be.

As I think about my role as among the first generation of women in the rabbinate, as my family knows well, it wasn't easy. But it is so worth it – that girls may aspire to follow their dreams and passions. Religious leadership shall not justify nor be defined by abuse of power. May this New Year's *teshuvah* find its way toward our mutual commitment to healing and change, from #MeToo to #WeToo.

Leshanah Tovah tikateivu!