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I delivered a version of this sermon on a sparsely attended Friday night service a few months back. Some of you who were here that night asked that I offer these words again to a larger group.

While hesitant at first, I ultimately decided that, yes, these words need to be spoken again and again. Because they are still relevant. And while strides have been taken, there is still so much left undone. Until this crisis is resolved, we cannot speak about it enough.

There was a commercial that aired sometime around 1993, when I was about 10 years old. It has been forever engrained in my memory...and perhaps some of yours as well.

The setting was an office and there were two people in the workspace, presumably an employee and her boss.

The boss turns toward his employee and says, “You know, you’re doing a great job, but you’re not using all your assets. With a body like that, you could go places...”

The woman shrinks in size and the man continues to speak as a voiceover announces, “Sexual harassment makes you feel like less of a person. For help and hotline numbers ask for the Sexual Harassment booklet at your public library.”

The camera refocuses on the employee and her boss.

“Be a little more sexy. Hey, talking about your job here.”

She replies, “No. We’re talking about sexual harassment here. And I don’t have to take it.”

Voiceover: “Sexual harassment violates you and it violates the law.”

Twenty-five years ago there were commercials on television offering guidance on addressing sexual harassment. “That’s sexual harassment and I don’t have to take it,” became a mantra. The public service announcement generated parodies on late night shows. Kids, and adults, I’m sure, mocked the ad, perhaps a little bit because it seemed too unrealistic, and perhaps more so because we were uncomfortable with its truth.

I don’t know how many people went to their local library to find the Sexual Harassment booklet or how many called the hotline numbers.

I do know, as do all of you, that the problem started long before 1993, and the problem persists.

Almost a year ago #MeToo went viral. Mostly women, but people of all genders, have acknowledged that they have been victims of sexual assault and harassment. #MeToo has given people the freedom to say, “That’s sexual harassment and I DON’T have to take it!” Or, even more to the point, “I’ve been harassed or assaulted, and you assaulters, and you enablers, YOUR time is up!”

Social media, working in the best way it can, has given us a platform to speak out en masse, to anxiously and with knots in our stomachs publicly declare the ways we have been harmed. It has given us strength in numbers, empowering us to share our experiences in detail or simply with six characters: #MeToo.

#MeToo has changed the dialogue, and in many ways, started it. We can no longer claim that we aren’t aware of the prevalence of harassment and assault, that it doesn’t affect our acquaintances and loved ones.

What may have seemed so uncomfortably funny about the 1993 ad was that most women, and others as well, could identify with what it feels like to be the woman shrinking. But so few of us could identify with the woman saying, “We’re talking about sexual harassment here and I don’t have to take it.”

Because all too often we feel powerless, vulnerable, and unable to stand up for ourselves when we’re spoken to in a degrading way...and if we feel *that powerless* in the face of words, all the more so when there is nonconsensual physical contact.

Our tradition, our Torah, is wrought with horrific encounters where the most vulnerable were preyed upon—in moments that were often not seen as violent violations, rather just a scene in a larger story to further a plot—or, worse, to teach us that it's the victim's fault.

Avram and Sarai (who would later become known as Abraham and Sarah) traveled to Egypt in hopes that God would fulfill the promise made to Avram to make him a great nation.

He said to his Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, so that it may go well for *me* because of *you*, and so that I will remain alive thanks to *you*.'

[Sound familiar? "You know, Sarai, you're doing a great job here, but you're not using all your assets. With a body like that, you could go places."]

Go places, Sarai does, as she is taken by Pharaoh as a wife. Because of what Pharaoh does to Sarai, what the text doesn't state, but what we can imagine, God afflicts Pharaoh.

Because of what happened to Sarai, all went well with Avram; as he acquired livestock and slaves.<sup>i</sup>

Sarai never speaks. Not once in this story do we hear her voice.

If we go ahead just a few chapters, with slightly different players, we will see Abraham do nearly the exact same thing to Sarah again.

And just a few more chapters after that, Abraham's son Isaac traveled to King Abimelech of Gerar. He was asked about his wife, Rebekah.

“Isaac answered, ‘She is my sister,’ because he was afraid to say: ‘My wife,’ [thinking,] ‘lest the local people kill me on account of Rebekah, since *she is so good-looking.*’”

Isaac, like Abraham, will be safe because of his unmarried status, whereas Rebekah, like Sarai, is put in an extremely vulnerable position.

A little further in Genesis:

Dinah, went out to visit the daughters of the land.

Shechem...saw her, and took her and lay with her by force.

Being strongly drawn to Dinah, daughter of Jacob, and *in love* with the maiden, he spoke to her *tenderly*.

...Shechem [then] said to his father Hamor, "Get me this girl as a wife."

Jacob heard that [Shechem] had defiled Dinah; but since his sons were in the field with his cattle, Jacob kept silent until they came home...

Dinah's *brothers* took revenge on Hamor and Shechem, murdering them along with others in the town.

Jacob, remained silent about the rape, yet admonished his sons, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land..."<sup>ii</sup>

What do our commentators say about this?

Yalkut Shimoni wrote, "When one has a pound of meat and he exposes it, that is when the birds snatch it from you. In this way did Dinah...go out and Shechem saw her."

Rabbeinu Bahya commented that, "...she was trying to attract attention to herself...by leaving the modest environment of her tent unnecessarily."<sup>iii</sup>

And that's just *a few of the examples* from Genesis.

But Deuteronomy, do you know what that teaches?

If a man comes to a city and rapes a woman, they should both be put to death—the *man* because he violated another man's wife and the *woman* because she didn't *cry out*.

If this incident happens in the country, only the man is put to death because no one would be able to hear her cries for help [if there were any].

And, what if this happens to an unmarried or unengaged woman? The rapist pays her father 50 shekels and he must marry her, without the right to divorce her (presumably because she is now undesirable goods).<sup>iv</sup>

No commentary needed.

No apologetic explanations can erase these words.

*This* is our tradition.

*These* are our stories.

*This* is the terror that women faced.

Utilized as objects to further their husbands' gain.

*Make yourself beautiful and seduce that man so I will be safe.*

Blamed for their victimization.

*If only you hadn't gone out of the tent.*

*If only you dressed differently.*

*If only you had screamed.*

This is our history.

This is our present.

In the ad, the woman speaks up, “This is sexual harassment, and I don’t have to take it.”

Sarai is silent.

Rebekah is silent.

Dinah is silent.

The woman in the city is silent.

While we’d like to be the woman in the ad, confronting her harasser, we more often identify with Sarai, Rebekah, Dinah, the woman in the city.

Often victims are unable to speak up or yell out.

But what about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, *God*? Why didn’t they speak up on behalf of the women? Speak to them about what happened? And where *they were* bystanders or enablers, why didn’t they prevent the incidents from occurring in the first place?

*L’dor va’dor*, from generation to generation, this exploitation of women was passed down.



This is not *only* a problem in the Jewish community, but it is *a massive* problem in the Jewish community.

A problem about which, until recent years, the Jewish community was unwilling to speak. We ignored the stories of victims and we swept under the rug inexcusable acts of clergy, professionals, and family members in an attempt to not blemish the Jewish community's image.

*This doesn't happen to nice Jewish girls.*

*This doesn't happen in Jewish families.*

*This isn't a problem in the Jewish community.*

We know this *is* a problem in *our* community.

We know this from the news about Hollywood producers.

We know this because of a rabbi who filmed women in the *mikvah* a few miles from here.

We know this because of the reports of sexual assault against a Jewish composer whose melodies we sing this *Yom Kippur*.

We know this because of our own synagogue's decades-ago sordid history.

We know this because just last week we learned that Hillel International is investigating allegations made against a philanthropist, one of Birthright's founders.

In the *New York Jewish Week*, Shifra Bronznick shared a story about calling out this particular philanthropist for his behavior *14 years ago*.

At a Jewish leadership conference the philanthropist humiliated a conference leader, by putting intimate decisions about her life up for a vote through participants clapping their hands.<sup>v</sup>

Upset that this happened to the conference leader, Bronznick left the room. In an act of courage, she returned. She took the mic, and said to the participants that the philanthropist's comment, "did not reflect the value that every person is created in the image of God, and that every person should be treated with respect and dignity."

The room went silent. After the conference, Bronznick was greeted by a number of Jewish organizations *calling her out* for reprimanding the philanthropist because, "we do not criticize donors".<sup>vi</sup>

*Yeah, everyone knows he's kind of sleezy. Just smile and nod. Your job is to keep him happy.*

Since I saw that ad when I was 10 years old, I have had experiences like most women and girls.

Since I was a teenager I've been regularly catcalled by people in cars and trucks when out running.

At a party, as I was engrossed in conversation with a friend, someone behind me reached under my dress and grabbed my thigh.

A colleague at a Jewish institution approached me on a Friday afternoon and told me vulgar things he'd like to do to my body at Shabbat *oneg*.

I can list more incidents.

Most of the women in this room can.

Many of these things were done to me by people I know, some by people I care deeply about.

And, what has happened to me is far milder than what happens to most.

I share this not to garner sympathy, and not because I feel comfortable doing so, but because I am one of many, if not all, of the women (and others) in this room who can share similar experiences.

In response to most of these incidents, I stood there feeling powerless, small, vulnerable, like my sisters before me.

Maybe I laughed it off.

I didn't declare, "This is sexual harassment and I don't have to take it."

While I wish I spoke up, I wish even more that those standing around me did.

In line with the witnesses in our Torah texts, most of the time no witnesses spoke up for me. (In fact, one peer actually said about one incident, "He's just sad and lonely. Why don't you give him what he wants?")

And, without a doubt, I stood aghast, *yet speechless*, when my peers faced the same trauma...but did little more than that.

I imagine if we saw an even wider shot in that sexual harassment ad, we'd see other employees sitting at their desks, uncomfortably trying to ignore what was going on behind them.

I imagine if we had a more detailed description of the scenes with Sarah and Rebekah, we would see servants, attendants, or other family members of Abraham and Isaac standing nearby as their husbands exploited them.

And Dinah.

The rabbis suggest she asked for it.

Her rapist wants to marry her.

Her father remained silent—aside from reprimand his *sons* for blemishing *his* status.

No one, NO ONE, reached out to Dinah.

Not even her brothers who sought violent and reprehensible revenge on her behalf.

So many people involved. None spoke to her.

If we could look through the memories of those in this room who experienced sexual harassment and assault, we'd see it wasn't always in a vacuum. There were others nearby who turned away in discomfort.

Even though it shouldn't need stating, let me be clear.

What happened was not Sarah's fault.

It was not Rebekah's fault.

It was not Dinah's fault.

It was not the fault of the woman, married or not, in the city or in the country.

It was not *my* fault.

It was not the *mikvah*-goers fault, the woman whose intimate life details were voted on, Shira Bronznick's fault for standing up.

It was not the fault of any woman, or person of any gender, in this room who experienced sexual harassment or assault.

There was no fault when the victims remained silent, when they were rendered helpless and unable to move or speak.

We victims need to forgive ourselves for every thought that we *could* have, *should* have, *wish* we had done something, said something, wore something, or been somewhere different than we had been to prevent what happened.

May this be a year that victims of sexual assault and violence are able to let go of blaming themselves.

It's NEVER their fault.

The fault lies with the harassers and assaulters, the enablers and the bystanders, with Abraham, with Isaac, with Abimelech, the Pharaoh, Shechem, Jacob, those who penned the text to justify blaming the victims, those commentators who made excuses, those who looked on and never tried to make it stop, those who covered up the misdeeds of others to protect the *reputation* of the Jewish family and the Jewish community, those who made excuses for the perpetrators.

As much as we all wish we could be stronger when these things happen to us, we wish even more so that someone else could have been our strength and our help.

Most of us are not blame-free as individuals, and we certainly aren't blame-free as a community. Most of us have stood idly by, at best. And at worst, well, it's so much worse.

Yom Kippur *demands* that we read our sins aloud as a community. Always noting that WE committed the sins—even if we haven't as *individuals*. We do this because we need to take responsibility as a Jewish community for the offenses that OUR OWN commit. There are Jews who harass and assault and *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh*, All of Israel is responsible for one another.

In that vein, we must acknowledge our alphabet of woes. The ways we have, in our own communities, nurtured a breeding ground for sexual harassment and assault.

God, we stand before you and acknowledge we have done wrong.

We have Assaulted

We have Blamed the victim

We have Catcalled

We have Done nothing to protect the most vulnerable

We have Exploited

We have Forced ourselves onto others

We have Groped

We have Harassed

We have Intimidated

We have Joked that “boys will be boys”

We have Kissed without consent

We have Leered

We have Made excuses

We have Not listened to “No”

We have Ogled

We have Protected the identities of abusers

We have Quit listening

We have Raped

We have Stigmatized



We have Threatened

We have Undone confidence

We have Violated

We have Wounded

We have eXonerated ourselves from wrongdoing

We have Yet to take a stand

We have Zoned out instead of spoken up

For all these sins O God, you can't pardon us, forgive us, or grant us atonement. You can't, because we know that for transgressions between God and ourselves, *Yom Kippur* atones, but for transgressions between one person and another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until we have made peace with one another.

Until we have this crisis under control, until women and girls are respected...until *everyone* is respected, we need to keep talking about this. Particularly on Yom Kippur, when we are brought to reckon with ourselves and our actions, our explicit sins and *our sins of complicity*. We need to come to terms with who we are. What we have done. Who we've hurt. And the healing that needs to happen.

This is *not* a sermon about forgiving perpetrators—of which, undoubtedly, some of us are.

Forgiveness is a *deeply personal process*. And forgiveness, even if requested, even if asked for sincerely, *may not* always, *cannot* always, *will not* always, *should not* always, be awarded.

This is a sermon about taking responsibility for *our* history and our *present*.

It is about our own personal and communal *teshuvah* and *tikkun*, return and repair. For those of us who were perpetrators of harassment and assault. And for those of us who were bystanders.

This is a sermon about understanding how we need to do better—because the lives of our sisters, mothers, daughters, lovers, and friends depend on it.

Because all of our lives depend on it.

Because when we turned the other way, when we didn't speak up, we became part of the problem.

Because when we assaulted and harassed, we stole a part of someone that can never be returned.

There are so many things you can do to help.

Apologize to someone whose cries for help, audible or not, you ignored. Let her know you understand that you can't take that back. But you are here now if she wants to talk about or cry about or scream about what happened.

Apologize to someone you harmed—only if you are sincere. *And don't expect to be forgiven.*

Give *tzedakah* to organizations that run educational workshops on preventing assault and harassment and those that help victims. Could there be more righteous giving than that? Support JCADA, the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse.

When we run programs for our teens on issues related to abuse, harassment, or any other sensitive issue for that matter, don't ask, "Why does my child need to attend if they would never be a part of something like that?" Or, "This is addressed in schools, why do we have to do it at the Temple?"

Your child *needs* to attend. Your child needs to attend because your child may one day *be a victim*. Your child may gain the skills needed speak out against a perpetrator. Your child may have their eyes opened that what they perceive to be appropriate behavior is truly not. Your child needs to attend because you don't know everything going on in their lives. Your child needs to attend because they can become part of the solution.

When you are involved in an organization, Jewish or otherwise, make sure that there is a sexual harassment and assault policy in place. If there's not one, be a part of creating one.

Don't harass or assault people. Sounds simple enough.

And be a part of the conversation.

A few months ago I hesitantly brought an article called “Jewish Men Need to Talk About #MeToo” to a Brotherhood meeting.

I prepared for silence and discomfort.

The article posed many questions including:

What messages do we as Jewish men give one another about what is “right” and “wrong” in terms of sexual activity?

What is our responsibility when we suspect that another man is behaving inappropriately or abusing his power?

What can we do to help create a more equitable and safe environment for everyone?<sup>vii</sup>

And, of course, it was uncomfortable. This subject is *really* uncomfortable. But our Brotherhood welcomed the conversation with open arms. They talked about problems of masculinity. They talked about their part in the perpetuation of the status quo. They committed themselves to being part of the change.

Be a part of the conversation.

We've inherited a troubling tradition. One that justified attaining and maintaining power at the expense of women through sexual violence, abuse, and harassment. One that said, if something happens to you, you must have *asked* for it.

And down through the generations, *l'dor va'dor*, was that message passed on.

Let's decide together that it stops here.

That's sexual harassment and WE don't have to take it.

It's 5779, you harassers, assaulters, and enablers. Your time is up.

*Kein y'hi ratzon,*

May it be God's will.

And, more importantly, may it be our will.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 12:10-13:1

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 34:1-31

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbeinu Bahya, Bereshit 34:1:5

<sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 23:23-28

<sup>v</sup> CORRECTION NOTE: The original version of this sermon had a mistake that noted that Shifra Bronznick was the conference leader whose intimate life details were voted on. She was not the conference leader. Bronznick spoke out against the philanthropist for what was done to the conference leader.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/hillel-investigating-allegations-against-major-philanthropist/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.jta.org/2018/01/22/news-opinion/opinion/jewish-men-need-to-talk-about-metoo>