

“Living in a World of #Metoo”

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

For those of you who may not be on Facebook, allow me to share with you what has been lighting up status messages on my screen throughout this past week. This has been a trending topic on a variety of social media platforms, and it hasn't stopped yet! Following high profile accusations of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's decades of sexual misconduct, rape, and assault, actress Alyssa Milano [who I watched throughout the 80's in her role as Samantha on *Who's the Boss*] tweeted "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." So far there have been upwards of 1.5 million tweets and 13 million Facebook posts, comments, and reactions to the message "Me too." I guess I wasn't shocked by how pervasive this issue has become, at least not in the abstract. But then I started to see people I know share that status. My friends; my relatives! Like my 35 year old cousin in Chicago, who just had her first baby; Or a young woman who's bat mitzvah I officiated a handful of years ago at my former congregation, who is now a college student; Or the Har Shalom congregant who wrote #metoo and then added "as a child, as a college student, as an adult..." Facebook has this function where you can enter a hashtag phrase and then see how many of your friends posted it in their stories. So I typed in #metoo, I clicked *My Friends*, and I couldn't believe what I saw. I saw colleagues, fellow rabbis; women who described being sexually harassed by male rabbis, by lay leaders, and congregants; I saw people who I consider my dear friends, my teachers, people I love and look up to...And, by the way, women who are both straight and gay, who shared stories of being victims of sexual harassment. Of course, I had no idea that this trauma was a part of their lives. It's not something that comes out in casual conversation, or even necessarily after many years of a very close relationship. I started to feel enraged. I wasn't so happy with myself either. When the victims were was people I didn't know, like Alyssa Milano or Gwyneth Paltrow or Lady Gaga, I was irked. But when people I know and adore reported their stories I felt shocked and horrified.

This morning's Torah reading is about the depravity of the world...a level of corruption, evil, and debauchery that is so severe that God's only recourse is to destroy the world and essentially start over. But it's impossible to understand the condition of the world before the flood without reading a bizarre prologue to the flood story in Genesis chapter 6. It sounds like a page right out of Greek mythology; like the story of Zeus and the human woman Alcmene with whom he fell in love and gave birth to Hercules. Back in the primordial world, strange beings called *b'nai ha'Elohim* cohabitated with beautiful human women, giving birth to *gibborim*, men of exceptional strength, *anshe ha'shem*, men of renown. [As an aside, I want you to know that I have never in 15+ years in the rabbinate spoken about this part of Genesis. I've always found it somewhat embarrassing; it always seemed like a foreign, external, pre-monotheistic tradition that somehow got incorporated into the Torah. In fact the rabbis are deeply uncomfortable with it and work hard to neutralize the text and demythologize it too. But I was drawn back to it this week, in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the #metoo movement.] While some sources indeed presumed that these were angels or fallen angels or heavenly creatures, other commentators repudiated that idea completely. Rather than reading *b'nai ha'Elohim* as divine beings, they understood it to mean the 'sons of judges' (as *Elohim* can also mean judges), or men of significant power and authority. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is quoted in Midrash Rabbah as saying "*Mekalel lechol man dekarei le'hon b'nai Elohim,*" meaning "Cursed be anyone who calls them 'divine beings!'" In any case, these powerful men, these nobles, these aristocrats of antiquity set their sights on *b'not ha'adam*, regular human women, and took wives *mikol asher bacharu*, from whichever women pleased them. The women in these chronicles are objects to be lusted after, taken, and done with as the men pleased. And the very next thing that God says, in the very next verse in the Torah is: "Men

will not live forever.” One hundred twenty is the limit, and no more. Methuselah who lived just before this made it to 969; Adam lived 930 years; Lamech died very young at 777 years old. But all that was over. Is it possible that God was disgusted by how men preyed on women; how these humans that God created to be *ezer k'negdo*, helpers, partners, equals, were now radically distorting the intent of creation? And then God, Who in last week's parasha looked at the creation and each day proclaimed it to be so good, now looks at that same creation and all God can see is *rabbah ra'at ha'adam*, how great man's wickedness on earth had become. The storm clouds roll in, the rain starts falling, and the flood gets underway...

But these unnamed women are not the only ones who could write #metoo if they had Facebook back then. Sarah, our first matriarch is forced, without her consent, to enter the harems of both Pharaoh and Avimelech, the King of Gerar, with Abraham's complicity. Or Jacob's daughter Dina who is raped by Shechem; Or all those unnamed captive women in the Torah who are permitted to be taken into the homes of their captors against their will; Or Bathsheva who becomes the object of King David's desire and is brought to his bed while her husband is sent to the front lines of battle to die; or Tamar who is brutally raped by Amnon; or Vashti whose body is coveted by the king but refuses to be objectified by his drunken ministers...and on and on. There is no book that warns us more acutely of the dangers of sexual abuse and harassment than the Bible! You'd think that these stories would be edited out...after all the Bible is a holy book; it should be rated for family reading! But those stories are left deliberately in its pages in order to provide a critique of this kind of behavior; as a warning for what happens to men who violate women; as deliberately disturbing stories that are meant to stick with us in our *kishkes* as unambiguous reminders of why this is so very wrong!

There is a fascinating episode in the Talmud (Berachot 61a) that might as we have taken place in 2017 rather than 2000 years ago. A simple, run of the mill business transaction is recorded between a man and a woman. But then the story takes a dark turn. The man wishes to count the money "*miyado le'yada*," from his hand to hers, so that he can *l'hestakeil bah*, so that he can gaze upon her; maybe so that he can have a little more contact with her than necessary in the course of exchanging currency. Isn't that so often how this happens? It's not always the Harvey Weinstein's of the world demanding a massage; most of us never find ourselves on a 'casting couch!' Rather, it's crossing the line with an inappropriate touch, a lustful stare, a lewd comment. The Talmud swiftly condemns this inappropriateness being disguised as business as usual stating: "*Lo yinakeh mi-dinah shel gei-hinnom*, he will not be absolved from the punishment of Gehenna!" That's what you call 'a punishment that keeps on punishing!'

As I watched, day after day, more people copying and reposting #metoo, I wanted to respond in some way. Sure you can click the sad, crying face emoji, but that seemed trite. Some men have been responding by writing #Ihearyou or #Ibelieveyou. But that also seems inadequate [why wouldn't I hear you or believe you?!]. So, first, I am speaking about this today, on Shabbat, from the bimah, to do my part in shedding more light on this issue, and getting it out in the open. We cannot ignore it; we cannot wait for another expose of a celebrity, athlete, or politician to acknowledge its pervasiveness. And we cannot pretend that it doesn't happen in less glamorous situations, or that it doesn't affect our wives, our mothers, our sisters, our daughters, and other women we love and care for. I am also speaking about it today because I am calling upon all men to take these stories seriously and to recognize what, if any part we are playing in perpetuating this in our interactions with women in our lives.

As Rex Hupke wrote in his excellent Chicago Tribune column on Wednesday (10/18/17): "We, as men, need to hear the stories of women who've been sexually harassed and sexually assaulted by men. But

we also need to examine our own thoughts and behaviors and make sure we haven't, in ways small or large, done something to allow those stories to unfold.
And if we have, we need to do everything we can to make it stop. Now."