

**Note from Rabbi Alfi:**

*I want to apologize for something I did NOT say in this sermon that I should have, and I feel ashamed that I didn't realize I did this until after I gave this sermon. I'm ashamed that the examples of great women I listed were all white women. Right afterwards I thought "Why didn't I add Katherine Johnson's name? Or Sojourner Truth? Or Shirley Chisholm?" So before Yom Kippur I want to say "Chatati - I have sinned. Forgive me for the sin of not seeing, not including, not uplifting the stories of all women. And may I do better in the future."*

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**What Is Hateful To You, Do Not Do To Another, Part 2:  
#MeToo**

Rabbi Mona Alfi  
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I want to talk with you this morning about something that I haven't really talked about in a sermon in the 25 years that I've been giving sermons. I want to talk about gender, about gender inequality and about respect. I want to talk about what it means to truly live with a belief in *B'tzelem Elohim* – the idea that every person is created in the image of God.

I haven't really spoken about gender because in large part I didn't want to cause waves, I felt like for many people, my simply being a woman on the bimah was a big enough statement, or a big enough challenge. After all, when I moved to Sacramento 20 years ago, it actually made the Sacramento Bee that B'nai Israel had hired a female rabbi.

Before I continue, I should say, I know that this conversation is going to make some people uncomfortable. I know that because my own husband, who I love and adore, and who loves and adores me, and who respects women tremendously, felt uncomfortable the first several hundred times I brought up this topic.

The very discussion of gender inequality can be upsetting.

Women are reliving lifetimes worth of hurts and slights and missed opportunities, suffering from years of feeling silenced. And men, men are questioning a lifetime of comments and actions, wondering if they had crossed lines without even knowing it, feeling bewildered as rules and expectations are ever changing. And while emotions can run hot on both sides, I think it is a discussion we need to have, and will continue to need to have for quite some time.

And further complicating this discussion is that there is inevitably a blurring of the lines when we talk about issues of gender inequality, it spans the horrific from sexual assault and harassment, to wage inequity, and the lack of equal representation in spaces where decisions are being made, or curriculum is being written or taught, to gender stereotypes in the media, as well as the fact that there are often differences in gender communication styles and expectations, as well as the fact that the very issue of gender is personal to everyone, and no person fits neatly into a preset description that is supposed to describe half the population.

So what made me want to talk about this topic today?

Last July when I was at Camp Newman, after I had already written the sermon that I had intended to give this morning, I read an article in the Jewish Forward. It was an article about yet another man who had gotten caught in yet another sexual misconduct scandal in the work place.

But this story was different for me, because the man in that article worked for, and taught at, my alma mater, the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform Movement's school that trains rabbis, cantors, educators and Jewish communal professionals. It is a self-proclaimed bastion of gender equality.

Reading that article I felt flooded by memories. Memories from when I was a student at HUC and I was sent to the head of the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education to look for a job and the Director sat me down and told me that women were destroying the rabbinate, and that it would be better for the Jewish community if I switched out of the rabbinic program and became a Jewish educator instead.

I remembered being told by a classmate, as well as the Professor in charge of student placement, that I wouldn't get an internship I wanted with Rabbi Laura Geller because I was a woman, and no synagogue would ever want two women on the bimah. One was ok, I was told, but two at the same time! That would be unthinkable!

I remembered sitting in the college lounge filling out student loan forms and feeling humiliated when a professor came up to me and said with a lascivious tone that there were other ways that young women got money to pay for grad school. This was the same professor who used to read the Massage Parlor ads out loud at the beginning of each class.

I remembered being warned by female rabbinical students about which professors to avoid because of the way they treated female students.

And I remembered sitting angry and confused in a closed door meeting with my male supervisor in a synagogue office and being told that all any man ever wanted from any women was to be fed, to be serviced, and to be left alone.

All those memories, and so many more, is what that article brought up for me. Flooding to the surface like each of these events had happened yesterday and not years ago.

It's hard enough to deal with sexism in the world at large, but to see and experience blatant sexism in a community that prides itself not only on its egalitarian values, but values that are supposed to be rooted in a theology that teaches us that there is inherent dignity, value and holiness in every person, that to me is unbearable.

So that morning as I read the article about the Hebrew Union College Professor, I was angry. I was frustrated. And I was tired of being silent. So I went down to have breakfast with my colleagues in the dining hall at Camp Newman, and I told them that I was so upset by this newest

revelation that I had decided to scrap one of my sermons and talk about gender issues in the Jewish community instead.

I thought this was a simple enough statement. I expected a conversation about the article I had read, or about the professor who was charged with misconduct, or even a question about why this article had so gotten under my skin. But that was not the conversation that followed.

Three of the people at breakfast are wonderful men, people I consider allies, men who are advocates for women's equality, two of whom are married to strong, smart women, and they are all raising their sons and daughters to treat everyone with respect.

But their response took me by surprise. One flippantly told me that the MeToo movement was "old news" not worthy of talking about at the High Holidays. I pushed back, enlisting one of the other women sitting at the table, to try to explain to him that it's not "old news" if it's still happening, if a professor at a Reform seminary was currently under public scrutiny, it wasn't "old" news.

Then the three men proceeded to tell me, with great authority, what my sermon about gender inequality in the Jewish community should be about, what I should say, and how I should say it.

They explained to me what they thought was the proper way for me to speak to men so I wouldn't alienate them or upset them, or hurt them, or make them uncomfortable in *any* way. When they were done telling me what I should do, and how I should do it, they stood up and left.

And I sat there, hurt, confused and once again, feeling dismissed.

Here I am, a strong woman, not exactly known for being a wall flower, and yet I felt silenced and dismissed by that conversation, so completely unheard about something that was deeply personal to me. And I was left wondering why they thought they were qualified to tell me how I should talk about what I had experienced?

I realized that they were telling me what they wanted to hear, but they were not at all curious about what I felt that I needed to say. And that is part of the problem.

A real dialogue, and real change, can only occur when people are willing to listen as much as they talk. Real societal change can only occur when we are willing to say that someone else's suffering is as important, if not more, than our own discomfort.

The conversation I had in the dining hall is an example of how to unintentionally disempower someone. It was not at all conscious, not at all malicious. And yet, I sat there, hurt and confused by what had happened.

In fact, I was more upset about *that* conversation than I had been about the article that had prompted the whole discussion in the first place. I was more upset because I don't believe these men did anything to intentionally hurt me. On the contrary, they thought they were being helpful.

Amongst the multiple pieces of advice my friends gave to me about what I should say in this sermon was “you have to tell the men how to fix it, they’ll want something practical.” They also said, “you should make an ask. If you want gender equality in the religious school, just ask 10 men to stand up right there in the Sanctuary to volunteer to teach in the religious school, *that* will solve it.”

What they did not understand, or wait around to discuss, is something that most women already know, that there is no quick fix, there is no easy ask that is going to make the way our society works change overnight. Because the problem is so entrenched and widespread in our society, and baked into how we see ourselves and each other.

And more importantly, I didn’t want this sermon to be one where I simply gave an answer to a problem. Because I don’t think there is a simple answer. What I believe we need, or at least, where we need to start, is with a conversation, or a series of conversations.

Real discussions, where we open up our hearts and share our confusions, our disappointments and our pain. Not just women, men and women, together, really talking about what it means to be in a society that gives us conflicting messages about gender, about power, and about identity.

And I don’t mean just the larger society, the same problems exist within the Jewish community, and even within our synagogue.

My friend was wrong in thinking this is old news. The MeToo movement is simply a long overdue reminder of the work that still needs to be done.

One of the women who had been sitting at the table during breakfast, an attorney, and the wife of a rabbi, came up to me later that day and said that she had been thinking about what had happened all day long. And she said, we are like the generation of Israel that wandered for 40 years in the Wilderness.

She went on to say, that right now, we are in the *midbar* – we are in the wilderness, not sure when we will actually reach the Promised Land. Gender inequality she said is like the air we breathe, we don’t notice it until it reaches toxic levels.

She and I talked about how we are like the generation raised in slavery, not even knowing sometimes how to think differently. But just as the generation that left Egypt couldn’t be the ones who entered the Promised Land, it was our responsibility to raise a generation that “knows not slavery” so perhaps *they* can be the ones to build a society that is more just and equitable.

This is a conversation that women have been having with each other for, well forever. But many men are new to the conversation, and can often be scared or intimidated by the intense emotions that come to the surface when we talk about gender.

I wish there was a quick fix, but the only way real and lasting change will happen is if we are willing to have these uncomfortable conversations with each other, and listen, really listen, to what others are saying to us.

Because the stories I shared today, these are only the tip of the iceberg. Every woman here has their own stories to share about gender discrimination, harassment and general inequality, at home, in the work place, social settings, or even just walking down the street.

But gender inequality is not a woman's issue. It is an issue that affects all of us.

Men have also benefited from feminism. Things like parental leave, trying to create a work-life balance, spending time with one's children, caring for sick loved ones, and being able to find meaning in a person's professional choices that transcend being assigned the role of "primary bread winner" improves the quality of men's lives as well as women's.

Furthermore, gender inequality is not only *unfair* to women, it is bad for society. How many Madame Curie's, how many Heddy LaMar's, or Sandra Day O'Connor's or Ruth Bader Ginsberg's, or Golda Meirs were silenced by history? What was lost because we did not bother to listen to their voices?

The Feminist movement encouraged women to dream and not to be afraid to express the fullness of who we are. Just as we strive to teach our daughters that they can be strong and vulnerable, and not to be afraid to express the different sides of who they are, we must actively raise our boys to do that as well.

We must teach *all* of our children that pushing someone else down is not an acceptable way to raise themselves up.

We need to stop looking at the world in such a way where we think that allowing someone else a seat at the table, or treating someone else with equality and respect, somehow diminishes what we have, or who we are.

It all goes back to Hillel's belief about what the Torah is really about, and what is our Mission Statement as Jews: What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else.<sup>1</sup>

It really is that simple.

For those who are not sure about the changing rules about what is ok to say to one another, or how to treat one another, simply start by applying this principal. Don't do or say to someone else something that would make you feel diminished if they did or said that to you.

And if you're still not sure, just do a simple check in with them, and inquire, with an open heart and open mind, if what you're saying, or doing, is making them uncomfortable. And if it is, just apologize. You'd be amazed at how much that would be appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> Shabbat 31a

And we need to start talking with each other, really talking AND listening, without defensiveness, about how we can do things differently, how we can create an environment that is not toxic, use language that is not silencing, and engage in behavior that honors the sanctity and value of every person we engage with.

At Rosh HaShanah we celebrate the Creation of our World reminding ourselves that the world is a work in progress, just like each of us, it is in constant need of tweaking, retooling, and improvement.

Our *machzor*, our prayerbook, reminds us that no person is irredeemable or incapable of change and growth.

But before we can go forward into the new year, we are reminded that we must first look at the path that we have been going on and ask ourselves, is this the road we want to continue to go down? Or is there a different way, a better way?

And we do this, not each of us by ourselves, but surrounded by our community, reminding us that the way forward is always easier if we're not going it alone.

We don't need to look far for inspiration on how things can be. Our own sacred text is filled with stories of men and women working together for the greater good.

The Torah begins with the creation of Adam, the first human being, not the first man, the first human being. A person created as the Torah says "BOTH male AND female, in the Image of God." Just like each of us.

And God reminds us throughout the Bible that the defining story of redemption came not through the sole leadership of Moses, but from him working side by side, as partners with his brother *and* sister, Aaron *and* Miriam. The three of them *together* leading the Israelites out of the wilderness towards the Promised Land, even as they knew that they themselves wouldn't make it there, but ensuring that the next generation would.

And in between those two tales, and since, are countless stories of the courage of men and women, each in their own way, as prophets and sages, patriarchs and matriarchs who have propelled the story of the Jewish people forward, by working together.

Let's have the courage to add all of our names to that list. Let us be the ones who lead by example, helping the next generation to do better than we have.

Almost twenty five years ago, my professor, of blessed memory, could not imagine a world where there could be a vibrant, active, thriving synagogue where two female clergy could serve together on the bimah. But luckily, I could imagine it. And this congregation could too.

I knew then, just as I know now, that a congregation that could see beyond gender, and see the value within each person, would be a congregation that is capable of doing extraordinary things.

I could dream such things because I knew that there were people, both men and women, who had made it possible for me to even be a rabbinical student. Something that had been unimaginable to most Jews a quarter century before that conversation with my professor ever took place.

When I get discouraged about where we are now, I try to remember to look back and see how far we have actually come.

We are like Moses, standing at the mountain top, and even if our generation doesn't make it to the Promised Land, every now and then we at least get a glimpse of it.

*Mi sheberach imoteinu v'avoteinu, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah, Avraham, Yitzchak v'Ya'akov* - May the One who blessed our ancestors, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, bless us with the strength to be in partnership with the Holy One in recreating the world as God envisioned it, a world where all of God's children are valued for the many blessings they bring, people who are seen for what we are, children of God, created both male and female, each and every one of us, created in the Divine Image.

*Ken yehi ratzon* – may this be God's will.