

#Metoo - Sarai's Story  
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About two weeks ago, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted, "If all the people who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote "Me too" as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Milano didn't start a new movement, she reignited a movement started over 10 years ago by black activist Tarana Burke. In just 48 hours, #metoo was tweeted over a million times, and there were more than 12 millions posts, comments, and reactions on Facebook in less than 24 hours.

As CBS news reported, the #metoo movement was Milano's attempt to elevate the conversation surrounding Harvey Weinstein, the film mogul, who has been accused by three dozen women of sexual harassment or abuse. Milano said in a phone interview with the associated press, "My hope is people will get the idea of the magnitude, of just how many people have been affected by this in the world, in our lifetimes, in this country... the most important thing that it did was to shift the conversation away from the predator and to the victim."<sup>1</sup>

The #metoo movement has done just that. Across the United States and the world, women shared stories of harassment and abuse at work, at home, in public, from people they knew and strangers. It has inspired women, and some men, too, to share their stories of sexual harassment and abuse. It has opened our eyes to the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse in our country. Some people merely posted the hashtag, while others shared their harrowing stories of harassment and abuse. For some, this movement unearthed experiences that were painful and traumatizing. I too, can say "me too." If magnitude was the goal of the #metoo campaign, I think it has done the job.

The many women and men, who have come forward to share their "me too" stories is just the beginning of a much needed conversation. Our tradition stems from a deep seated patriarchy. Which means our Torah is full of stories of women who are abused, and not treated as equals. In Ancient

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<sup>1</sup> CBS/AP. "More than 12M "Me Too" Facebook posts, comments, reactions in 24 hours." CBS News, CBS Interactive, 17 Oct. 2017, [www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-more-than-12-million-facebook-posts-comments-reactions-24-hours/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-more-than-12-million-facebook-posts-comments-reactions-24-hours/).

Israel, men owned all the land, served as judges and religious leaders. Women were relegated to their work in the home, and were financially dependent on their fathers or husbands.<sup>2</sup> In the Bible women are often unnamed, have very little dialogue, and exist in stories that often revolve around their bodies being used for sex, childbearing, and even rape. Although the Torah contains many disturbing counts of women being abused, I think there is a lot to learn from retelling these stories, and examining them from a modern perspective.

In this week's Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*, Sarai's beauty and body are used by Abram, Pharaoh, and his courtiers. In the story, God sends Abram forth from the land of his birth into the Land of Canaan. In Canaan there is a famine so Abram and Sarai go to Egypt to find food and resources. In Chapter 12 of Genesis, Sarai's beauty is something that is desired by other men, in this case the Egyptians. If Abram is known as Sarai's husband, the Egyptians would just kill him, and it is implied that they would take her forcefully. As it says, "they will kill me and let you live" (Gen. 12:12). Abram then pleads with the silent Sarai, "Please say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you..." the text continues, "...When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram..." (Genesis 12:13-15). Abram is kept alive by Sarai. We do not know whether or not Sarai was a willing partner in this plot, but the text implies that she agrees to Abram's plan, and is then taken as one of Pharaoh's wives. It's Sarai's beauty and body that is forcefully taken by the Pharaoh, and allows Abram and Sarai to collect riches and survive the famine.

In the 16th century Torah Commentary by Rabbi Ovadiah S'forno, he comments on the verse, "And they took her" (Gen. 12: 15) saying, "The members of Pharaoh's household did not even waste time to seduce Sarai but abducted her forcefully. They thought that seeing that it was a compliment for Sarai to be desired by the king himself, she would automatically consent to such an elevation of her status." For the men in Pharaoh's household it was not even a question whether or not Sarai would want to be Pharaoh's wife, of course she would want the perceived power

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<sup>2</sup> Frymer-Kensky, Tikva Simone. Reading the women of the Bible. Schocken Books, 2004, p. xiv

and benefit that would come with marrying a king. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th Century rabbi, questions this same verse, saying, “Even were Sarah merely the unmarried sister of Avraham, must every unmarried woman who enters the territory of a foreign king be prepared to gratify the king’s lust? And if that is the local custom and way of behavior, is it proper behavior? Is it not the king’s duty to set a good example for his people, to show and teach them upright and moral ways of behavior?” In his comment on the verse, Hirsch calls out this abusive and immoral behavior within this story.

If Sarai were alive today, she too could say “me too,” along with many of the other woman characters of the Bible. Women’s bodies belong to one person, that woman and that woman only. The many “me too” stories show that many men still believe that women's bodies are there for the taking, commenting, touching, etc. We no longer live in a world controlled by the patriarchy, but many of these sexist ideas and beliefs still have a hold on our world. It is my hope that together we can change this.

It is also my hope that all of the seventh grade students here tonight, no matter how you identify young man, young woman, or anywhere in between, know that we, your rabbis and clergy, are here for you if you are ever put in a situation where you are made to feel uncomfortable.

And I hope that each of us will think about our own behaviors, however ingrained, and consider how we can prevent more “me too” stories from happening. So the next generation of women and non-gender conforming people do not face the horrifying experiences of sexual harassment and abuse no matter how big or small. In an article on *The Guardian*, Nicole Silverberg, TV writer and editor, wrote a list of suggestions on how men can treat women better. So here are a few of her ideas, some modified, of how we can change, and although these are written about women, these rules also apply to non-gender binary or non-gender conforming people too:<sup>3</sup>

- Be aware of your inherent power in situations and use it to protect women, especially when talking to other men.
- Don’t talk over women.
- Pay women as much as you pay men.

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<sup>3</sup> Silverberg, Nicole. “Men, you want to treat women better? Here’s a list to start with.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 16 Oct. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/16/a-simple-list-of-things-men-can-do-to-change-our-work-and-life-culture](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/16/a-simple-list-of-things-men-can-do-to-change-our-work-and-life-culture).

- If you are asked to be on a panel/team and see that it's all men, say something. Maybe even refuse the spot!
- When you see another guy talk over a woman, say: "Hey, she was saying something."
- Don't call women "crazy" in a professional setting.
- Don't use your "feminism" as a way to get women to trust you. Show us in your day-to-day life, not in your self-congratulatory social media.
- Don't touch women you don't know, and honestly, ask yourself why you feel the need to touch women in general.
- If a woman says no to a date, don't ask her again.
- If a woman has not given enthusiastic consent to your physical advances, back off.
- Involve women in your creative projects, then let them have equal part in them.
- Don't make misogynistic jokes.
- Don't expect women to be "nice" or "cute" and don't get upset when they aren't those things.
- Don't make assumptions about a woman's intelligence, capabilities or desires based on how she dresses.
- Don't punish women for witnessing your vulnerability.
- Don't get defensive when you get called out.
- Don't need to literally witness a man being horrible in order to believe that he's horrible. Trust and believe women.
- Stop thinking that because you're also marginalized or a survivor that you cannot inflict pain or oppress women.
- If women's pain makes you feel pain, don't prize your pain above hers, or make that pain her problem.
- Don't listen to a list like this and think that most of these don't apply to you.