

#MeToo

Parashat Lech-L'cha

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When I was five, my classmates and I were playing in the schoolyard as part of the afterschool program. We were running around and the boys decided that it would be fun to chase the girls around and kiss them. One boy started chasing me and, although it's very possible that I was also giggling out of nervousness or as excess energy from running, I was clear that I did not want him to kiss me. Finally, he managed to grab my hand and kissed the back of it. I promptly burst into tears and ran and told the teacher. She took a couple moments to placate me, telling me that I wasn't really hurt and that it just meant that he liked me. Then she went to the boy, yelled at him, and put him in time out.

The typical response to this story is to laugh at what little boys thought was fun and to tease me for overreacting to an innocent kiss---clearly I was at the age when girls think boys are gross and vice versa. Sometimes people feel bad for the boy who got in trouble because I was upset by something so minor. I often imagine the teacher struggling to hold in her laughter at the ridiculousness of the situation and thinking to herself that it wouldn't be too long before I'd react very differently.

But this was also the first time I remember being kissed against my will. At five years old, someone else decided that my body was for his use. I can already hear the defense claiming that he didn't know what he was doing, that I shouldn't have giggled and run away, that he clearly liked me and was just trying to show it, that a kiss on the hand isn't a big deal, etc. And to some extent, that's true. After all, five-year-olds are notoriously bad at keeping their hands to themselves and recognizing that not everyone feels the way they do. But it's the messages that we heard then and thereafter in response to that and similar incidents that let us know what was appropriate behavior.

Think for a moment about the toddler who trips and falls then looks to the nearest adult to see how to react. If a trusted adult laughs gently and says, "whoops!" the child is more likely to get up and go on. As this response is reinforced, the child learns that falling isn't a big deal and that you brush yourself off and move on. On the other hand, if the adult rushes over and makes a big deal about whether or not the child is okay, the child is more likely to start crying. As this response is reinforced, the child starts to have difficulty rebounding after a fall and may be inconsolable for a few minutes before being able to continue. Children take cues from the adults around them about how to respond to situations.

So when my teacher told me that I wasn't really hurt by the boy who kissed me, I was taught that boys might grab you and kiss you to show they like you and that being touched against your will is not a big deal as long as it doesn't cause pain. That message was then confounded by the fact that she punished the boy---were his actions okay as she said, or were they actually problematic? Thus began my entry into the wonderful world of mixed messages, micro-aggressions, and difficult-to-define sexual harassment. #metoo. I was five.

Fast forward about six or seven years. I'm in middle school and girls are starting to wear bras as they head toward puberty. As boys pass us in the hallways, they grab through the back of girls' shirts in an attempt to snap their bras. Sometimes they're disappointed to find out that a girl isn't wearing one; they're excited when they manage to snap one. They're even more excited when they manage to snap the bra hard enough that it unhooks, sending the girl rushing into the bathroom to fix it.

I can't imagine that this behavior was sanctioned, and I don't know what happened when boys got caught, but it certainly was prevalent throughout my middle school years. I saw it happening and heard about it many times. At best, it was painful and annoying, but it was also a mark of attractiveness and maturity. If a girl got her bra snapped, it meant that a boy liked her. There were numerous conversations among girls trying to figure out who snapped their bras and if the boy who snapped it had a crush on her or if he was doing it for someone else. There were discussions about which bras hurt less when snapped and which were less likely to unhook when snapped. And then there were the laments of girls whose bras didn't get snapped; they were upset that no one liked them.

Can we pause for a moment and notice how messed up this is? Girls were being harassed daily but we treated it as a sign of interest and affection. This sort of twisted thinking is the natural outgrowth of being told that the boy pulling your hair, pushing you, or kissing your hand liked you but didn't know how to say it. By seeing how the adults around us responded to these incidents, boys learned that minor acts of violence toward girls were normal and indicated attraction, and girls learned to welcome harassment and that it was better to be hurt by a boy than ignored.

As adults, this gets even more complicated. We're able to see future consequences of today's actions. We're sensitive to the reactions of the people around us and how our response to situations impacts others' perceptions of us. Sometimes we choose not to speak out against inappropriate, immoral, or illegal behaviors to avoid being labeled trouble-makers. I personally have suffered the consequences of speaking out against someone else's well-known sexual harassment and I have, at times, chosen to protect my job or future career by not formally complaining about it. Because speaking out against bad behavior causes trouble, not the people who behave badly.

I wish we could find support in our sacred texts for speaking out against sexual harassment, sexual assault, or other gender-based violence. Unfortunately, they don't help. If anything, women in the Torah are subservient to men, treated like property, and often lack agency. Rarely are women in the Torah actors; rather they are acted upon. As enlightened as the Torah might have been for its time---and I truly believe that our ancestors instituted a number of radical protections for women given their historical context---women's silence is deafening and women typically act for the benefit of the men around them.

Take our parashah, for instance. Sarah, or Sarai as she's known at this point, is taken by her husband Avram on a journey away from their homeland. She doesn't get a say, she's just packed up along with Avram's other belongings and taken out. Literally. The Torah says, ויקח וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם אֶת שָׂרָי אִשְׁתּוֹ---Avram took Sarai his wife. Anyway, they journey to the Land of Canaan, start to get settled, and then a famine forces them to go down to Egypt.

Avram is concerned that Sarai's beauty will affect *his* well-being, that the Pharaoh will kill him in order to take her for a wife. So he asks Sarai to pretend to be his sister. The Torah doesn't record her response, but the next thing we know, they're in Egypt, the Pharaoh's courtiers see how beautiful Sarai is, and they take her to Pharaoh's palace. Who knows what Sarai experiences in the Pharaoh's palace, if she's just being prepared to be a concubine or if Pharaoh has made some moves on her that she's managed to avoid. The Torah doesn't say. Instead, what's important is that Avram acquires lots of wealth because of Sarai. And because we would never forgive Avram if his deception led to Sarai's rape or, worse, consensual adultery, God intervenes and sends plagues to keep Sarai out of Pharaoh's bed. The deception is uncovered and Pharaoh kicks Avram and Sarai out of Egypt.

Not once do we hear Sarai's voice. Not once do we hear what happens to her as a person herself. She is transferred from one man's domain into another and back again as it suits their interests, not hers. She is a pawn, a tool to further Avram's story, rather than a character in her own. The great and righteous Avram uses her, violates her trust, and risks her well-being for his.

This is our sacred text, a text that teaches us that women should subsume their interests for the benefit of their men and that even the most righteous of men put women in terrible positions in order to get what they want. After all, God will protect the wives of righteous men. #Saraitoo. She was in her 80s.

Truth be told, it's not just men or boys who support or engage in this appalling behavior. It's not just our patriarchal, paternalistic sacred texts and history. All of us are complicit in upholding a culture in which women and our bodies are objectified and sexualized without our consent. All of us brush aside, blatantly reject, or turn blind eyes to instances and reports of sexual harassment---even when we are the victims of it. All of us excuse inappropriate behavior with platitudes of "he didn't mean it" or "he just likes you" or "you're overreacting" and the like. All of us have allowed things to get to the point where we're shocked and surprised and saddened that so many people have said, "Me too." All of us...me too.

But all of us can have a role in changing the status quo. We are the ones who can call out inappropriate behavior, who can reject even the tiniest of offenses. We are the ones who can challenge rules and laws that unfairly sexualize and objectify girls. We are the ones who teach the people around us what they can get away with and what crosses the line. It is up to each and every one of us to wake up, to put our feet down, and to refuse to excuse the words and behaviors that have caused the situation we're in. It is up to us to change the status quo so that future generations will never hear stories of harassment, assault, and violation and have cause to say, "me too."