

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Bereisheet  
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*Look for the silver lining  
When'ere a cloud appears in the blue  
Remember somewhere the sun is shining  
And so the right thing to do is make it shine for you.*

*A heart full of joy and gladness  
Will always banish sadness and strife  
So always look for the silver lining  
And try to find the sunny side of life*

A beautiful song! Written by Jerome Kern, and sung by Judy Garland, this is an upbeat American standard, covered by so many great artists.

And yet. I recoil at the idea of silver linings. There is no redeeming the truly bad things that happen in our world, and in our lives. A silver lining implies that on the inside of something bad is really something good—and better than the bad on the outside.

There is no silver lining to the tragedies and injustices of our world and our lives. But there are things we can learn from these events. This learning doesn't make the trauma worthwhile, but perhaps it makes it slightly less likely happen again.

I have nothing but sympathy for the women who have accused Donald Trump of sexually assaulting them. And I am disgusted by the way Trump has spoken about women. I truly wish he had not done these things, and I wish he had never thought nor uttered these words.

But thanks to these words, millions of women have shared their stories of being sexually assaulted. We are in the midst of a revolution in America when it comes to talking about the way men talk about women, and the way men make unwanted sexual advances to women. We are talking about this more than ever—exponentially more than ever.

I've been thinking about how to bring this revolution into conversation with Torah and Jewish life, we and have the opportunity here in this week's portion, the first in the Torah. In Genesis 3:16, God tells Eve the punishment she and all women will bear for the sin of eating the forbidden fruit:

And to the woman God said,  
"I will make most severe  
Your pangs in childbearing;  
In pain shall you bear children.  
Yet your urge shall be for your husband,  
And he shall rule over you." (NJPS)

I'm most interested in this last line, והוא ימשל בך, "and he shall rule over you." Some see this as the origin and justification for male dominance over women, or at least, of

husbands' dominance over their wives. I'm more inclined to see it as describing and codifying an already-known reality of patriarchy, of men ruling over women.

The medieval commentators on the Torah don't sugarcoat this.

"And he shall rule over you," means "To command upon you what he wants, like a master to a servant," says Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi, a 12<sup>th</sup> century French commentator.

Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor, another 12<sup>th</sup> century French commentator says it means, "And he will take you against your will."

And Rashi, just a little older than Radak and Bechor Shor, says it means, "all [the initiative] will come from him and not from you."

"Like a master to a servant." "He will take you against your will." "All will come from him and not from you."

They offer no apologetics, but merely explain the text, which is the way they may have understood their world. Their understanding is, I think, consistent with the way many men have understood this text, and the way men (and women sometimes too) have understood relationship between husbands and wives, and men and women to this day.

But that's not the only way to read this text. Berel Dov Lerner, in an article about this episode, reads this verse very differently from Rashi, Radak, and Bechor Shor, among others. Thanks to Ittay Flescher for sharing this article.

Lerner says, "Firstly, the verse *and he shall rule over thee* describes a punishment, a state of affairs which is, by definition, undesirable. Secondly, the ideal man/woman relationship, as fully explicated earlier in the text, is a condition of shared privileges and responsibilities between equals. Thirdly, there is no indication given that any human being is called upon to enforce God's punishments."<sup>1</sup>

Let's unpack this a little. First, this is a punishment—not the way it should be. So men ruling over women is not fundamentally good or desirable. As the commentary in our very own Etz Hayim chumash puts it, "Male dominance is viewed as deterioration in the human condition, resulting from the defiance of God's will."

Second, the ideal man/woman relationship is one of partnership. Eve is supposed to be an עזר כנגדו, a helpmate to or equal to Adam. That's the ideal.

And third, it's not our job to enforce God's punishments, so we are under no obligation to sustain or perpetuate male dominance of women.

Rather, our job is to try to restore male-female relationships to their original, proverbial, Edenic balance—as they literally were in the Garden of Eden.

How do we do that?

The first and most important way is by acknowledging the ways in which things are not currently how they should be. Until we acknowledge the problem and its scope, we'll be unable to begin to address it.

We do that by hearing the voices of the millions of women who have shared their stories of being sexually assaulted, and not discounting them, and not blaming them as victims. We listen and we hear women's voices.

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<sup>1</sup> Berel Dov Lerner in a slightly corrected version of his "And He Shall Rule Over Thee," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* Vol. 37, No. 4, Fall Issue 1988 pp. 446-9, available at <http://jewishbible.blogspot.com.au/2006/01/and-he-shall-rule-over-thee-rereading.html#113701686241486885>, accessed on 10/28/16.

Even paying attention to this verse from Genesis is doing that—is, perhaps, listening to women’s voices and taking them at their word. Ellen Frankel, in her insightful and often biting Torah commentary, The Five Books of Miriam, writes from a woman’s perspective, “How astutely the text understands what life was like for us back then! Instead of maligning woman’s nature (as the Rabbis later do), characterizing us empty-headed, weak-willed, untrustworthy, and frivolous, the biblical author here accurately describes our social reality: controlled in marriage and endangered in childbirth. A woman must have written these lines.”

The unfortunate reality is that the biblical author here can also be describing perceptions of women today too.

The news of the last two days in the Jewish community has been summarized neatly by my friend and colleague, Rabbi Joshua Cahan. He writes:

*To sum up a dizzying news cycle:*

- 1) *A Jewish reporter writes a totally gross description of being sexually harassed by a famous journalist and says he feels she cannot identify him because doing so is more likely to damage her reputation than his.<sup>2</sup>*
- 2) *Ari Shavit then self-identifies as the journalist in question, though it's unclear if he does so out of genuine remorse or just because he assumes it will come out soon enough anyway.*
- 3) *He issues an "apology" which is hard to square with the events described - could someone truly "not realize" that those actions and statements are gross and violating?*
- 4) *Hillel treats this as an admission of sexual misconduct and cancels a scheduled series of campus events.<sup>3</sup>*

Rabbi Cahan concludes by saying, *I guess there are 2 things I'm taking away from this:*

- a) *Even if Shavit is being truthful, sexual harassment does seem to be clearly an area where "ignorance of the law is no excuse."*
- b) *It feels so important that women are telling these stories, and that men read these descriptions, so that it becomes impossible for someone to even plausibly claim that he did not realize such actions are harassment.*

As we embark on a new year, a new year of studying Torah, and of learning about ourselves, of seeing how the Torah can illuminate our lives and our world, and how our experiences can illuminate the Torah, may we lift up the voices of women, may we hear their experiences of assault, and see not silver linings, but opportunities for improvement, for regaining the partnership we glimpsed at Eden, so that no woman will ever again be assaulted. Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.jewishjournal.com/cover\\_story/article/my\\_sexual\\_assault\\_and\\_yours\\_every\\_womans\\_story](http://www.jewishjournal.com/cover_story/article/my_sexual_assault_and_yours_every_womans_story)

<sup>3</sup> <http://forward.com/news/352871/ari-shavit-says-hes-famed-writer-accused-of-donald-trump-like-sexual-assault/>