

#MeToo

Men's Club Shabbat

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#MeToo. We have seen this filling our news feeds on social media. We have close friends and family sharing their stories with us. People who have been silent for years are now feeling safe to speak up for the first time. #MeToo has raised awareness of the far too many accounts of women who have been sexually assaulted or harassed.

As the posts in the #MeToo campaign started coming out, I wasn't exactly sure how to respond. I read stories of women who were abused and were told to say nothing. Stories about women being labeled as "party girls" and being told that they deserved it. Colleagues who were told that they needed to wear lipstick on the *bimah* or were given permission to leave board meetings so that they could make their husbands happy. At first, I felt like my responsibility was to simply read and witness the stories shared by the women (and some men) in my life. I then began to examine my own behavior. I have tried to treat women the way every human being deserves to be treated. I try to be aware of how much space I am taking up physically and verbally. I try to be aware of how I treat people and if I change how I treat someone based on their gender.

But, as a man, at times I feel like I have fallen short. Even our tradition is infused with patriarchal narratives that reinforce these negative gender roles. The voice of women within our Torah are silent, even though it is filled with stories of sexual

violence and objectification. Sarah is forcefully taken without permission into the harems of Pharaoh and Avimelech without protest from Abraham. Bathsheba is sent for by King David, taken into his bed and returned by his messengers afterward. Tamar is brutally raped by Amnon.

I can justify that Judaism is a tradition in which we are commanded to wrestle, and I can note that stories such as those found within our Torah exist to spark conversation and to question status quo. I can lift up Jewish values that counter these stories, noting that all of us were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, or that the value of *kavod*, respect, is integral to interpersonal relationships, so that we may not cause shame or embarrassment.

Nevertheless, these affirmations do not ask anything of us. They don't ask anything of me. And that is perhaps why I feel like I have fallen short. Hearing the accounts of men attributing their behavior to how women dress and claiming that they "ask for it," or reading about how whistling and catcalls are appropriate because after all, "boys will boys," sickens my stomach. Victims are being held responsible for being victimized and harmed. This must stop. And it needs to stop now.

As a man, an educator, a rabbi, a husband, a brother, a friend, a mentor, and a human being, I refuse to stand aside watching our children—my children—grow up in world that supports gender imbalance, reinforces gender-normative roles, and fosters a new generation of individuals who still will need to say #MeToo.

I can be more aware of those moments when a woman is interrupted by a man and speak up when such instances occur. I can be more aware of my inherent power in situations and use it to protect women, especially via talking to other men. I can, as one colleague wrote, choose not to lecture or “mansplain.” I can be a role model for other men to stop, listen, truly hear, reflect, care, and be a part of the change that is needed.

Rabbi Rachel Bregman, who just yesterday morning wrote an article in the *Forward*, notes,

Sexual violence thrives when power is unevenly distributed. Ultimately, #MeToo is a call to fix a deep wound that is a symptom of a much larger systemic disease: Men have privilege and the power that comes with it. The system can only change if men give some power up and women take some for ourselves.

In her article, Rabbi Bregman reflects upon four integral steps that both men and women can follow to achieve this goal within synagogue communities. She asks us to think about who is serving food at our onegs following services and whose responsibility it is to clean up, who steps in when crisis emerges, how do we address women in the workplace, and who takes ownership of the sanctuary. We are fortunate to be part of a congregation whose clergy is predominantly female, so much so that there still are kids who say, “I didn’t know that men could be rabbis or cantors.” But what Bregman notes is that not all congregations and communities are as progressive as ours. It is our responsibility, then, to be exemplars for other communities so that power and privilege are equal.

Our Men's Club values the importance of lifting up awareness of victimization as well. Only recently did I learn that they have strong ties with supporting *Shalom Bayit*, the Bay Area's center for domestic violence prevention and response within the Jewish community. They value the importance of service and community, both within our congregation and outside of it. And trust me, they too know their way around the kitchen. Just a few weeks ago they served hot dogs and veggie burgers to nearly 400 people at our Purim Carnival. But even more importantly, they model what it means to take responsibility for all those who need help.

One of our rabbinic colleagues suggested that an appropriate response to the #MeToo hashtag is #I\_am\_listening," lifting up the importance of the *Shema*, our prayer calling for attention and listening. May our listening, though, lead to love and understanding among us. May we provide a sense of wholeness for all those who have felt broken, silenced, and shamed. May our respect to others lead to compassion, and may compassion lead us to responsibility. Only then will we rest.

Shabbat Shalom.