

Harvey Weinstein's Hebrew School Education

A Letter from Rabbi Cooper

Dear Friends,

I know very little about Harvey Weinstein beyond what I have learned from the endless stream of newspaper articles and Facebook posts recently published about him. Over the past several weeks, dozens of women have come forward with their personal horror tales of sexual harassment and abuse. They recount, with a frightening and sickening degree of similarity, how Weinstein cornered them at a party, how he had invited them to accompany him to a private place, how they resisted but their "nos" were ignored.

As I said, I know very little about Harvey Weinstein. Nevertheless, I can surmise a few things about him as a human being and about him as a Jew. As a human being, he has the reputation of being a brilliant and ruthless Hollywood mogul. He has produced any number of Oscar Awarded movies to secure his place in "The Industry" as a successful producer, a shrewd businessman and a man who would not take no for an answer. Mr. Weinstein is a man used to getting his way.

The women he molested, mostly aspiring young actresses, described how they were threatened with the kinds of repercussions on which a powerful man in Hollywood could certainly follow through. One best not refuse to accommodate his requests. And who would believe them anyways?

The kind of power that Mr. Weinstein wielded in Hollywood gave him unsurpassed popularity, unequalled influence and nearly unlimited power. And he embraced all of those attributes for his own profit and his own gratification, often to the detriment of others. The way his actions impacted on the lives of others rendered him, at best, indifferent toward others and, at worst, joyfully vengeful in his ability to exact retribution wherever and whenever he chose.

I also don't know very much about his Jewish identity. In an interview, he once referred to his Bar Mitzvah, but who knows? One can say with assurance, however, that if he did go to Hebrew School, he missed some crucial lessons about the kind of moral character toward which one should aspire and about the responsibility to act in ways which bring honor to the Jewish People. Specifically, I mention three of the lessons he missed when he went to Hebrew School.

First, Mr. Weinstein missed the class discussion about the value of each human being. Every Hebrew School must teach its students that each person has been created in the image of God, **B'tzelem Elohim**. This value is our reminder that all human life is sacred and must be respected. This value reminds us that each person carries within him/her a divine spark, a connection to God. Each of us has the ability and the mandate to live lives that are exemplified by the highest moral standards, lives that are infused with holiness and lives that reflect an appreciation for the holiness of every person's life. Mr. Weinstein skipped class the day that lesson was taught.

He also missed the class about **Sh'mirat HaGuf**, caring for one's body. A person's body does not belong to that person or to anyone else, for that matter. A person's body is on loan from God. We utilize the

October 26, 2017 / 6 Heshvan 5778

bodies we possess while we are alive. The body is returned to God, through burial, when we die. And while we are alive, we are responsible to care for our bodies. We eat healthy foods. We exercise. We refrain from potentially harmful drugs or activities in order to care for ourselves. We treat our bodies with care, as we would a precious object given to us to hold. The Jewish prohibition against tattooing stems from this notion. Since our bodies are not ours in perpetuity, we are to avoid making unnecessary changes, permanent marks or colored images on our skin.

Children must be taught that everyone and every body, is sacred, must be cared for and must be protected. Our bodies must not be touched against our wills, violated or attacked by another person. We, no one else, are in charge of our bodies. Children, even young children, must know that no one can touch the body of another person, not even a parent or a doctor, without permission. Someone should have told Mr. Weinstein.

And third, the following statement is made in the Talmud: Let your no be no and your yes be yes. If someone wants to be touched, they may grant permission. But when one says no, no means no. A person of integrity answers unequivocally. A person of integrity heeds that instruction.

With power also comes the potential for exploitation. Exploitation is the use of power over another without regard or concern for the effect on the other. Whenever there is a disparity of power, the one with more power must know not to utilize their power to force the other to comply against their will. Teachers, coaches, employers and clergy, whose power is implicit in the positions they hold, must be particularly careful about the requests they make. A request made by someone in a position of power can be misconstrued as a demand. With power, therefore, comes responsibility. The one with greater power is responsible to assure the propriety of the relationship.

There is a passage in *Pirke Avot* attributed to Ben-Zoma. It seems that Ben-Zoma knew something about exploitation and coercion. He asked and answered his own question:

Eizeh hu gibor? HaKovesh et yitzro / Who is mighty? One who is able to control his passion. (Avot 4:1).

The greatest strength is found in self-restraint. True strength is found in one who can, yet doesn't. Mr. Weinstein missed that lesson from *Pirke Avot* in his Religious School training as well.

Of course, I don't know if Mr. Weinstein went to Hebrew School nor do I know the extent of his Jewish background. But this much I know: Our tradition is unwavering and articulate regarding our treatment of others. Although we cannot take responsibility for the ways some people act, we must take responsibility for our own actions. In addition, those of us who work in the field of Jewish Education must assume the responsibility to teach certain indispensable lessons. And here I can assure the following: in our Religious School and in our synagogue, no values are held in higher regard, more clearly stated or taught with greater emphasis and a greater sense of urgency than those which instruct us to act toward each other with humility, compassion, respect, kindness and restraint.

B'Shalom,

Rabbi Neil S. Cooper