

For The Sin of Standing Idly While Our Neighbors Cry Kol Nidrei 5779

Well, the Lunch and Learn session got interesting really quickly when I informed them that the topic of the day was “Sexual Violence, Abuse, and Intimidation.” Every Thursday at noon, anywhere from 10 to 30 or more adults attend Lunch and Learn. Each week’s topic is different. We have a solid group of regulars and many others who attend occasionally. The design of the class emphasizes both study and discussion. So, as you can imagine, our discussion that afternoon was quite interesting.

During the introduction, I said that the issue of sexual abuse is one that affects all of us. As is natural in the give and take discussions that we have, someone challenged that assertion: “In what way are all affected?” The implication was that we are not all guilty of the sin of sexual violence. Nor have we all suffered as victims. But as we explored the issue, it became obvious that incidents of sexual abuse and intimidation are more widespread than we anticipated. In addition, the problem is in great part a result of the cultural attitudes we have allowed to fester and the stigmas we have allowed to perpetuate that silence the victims and empower the predators. In short, establishing a safe environment so that no one is victimized is our collective responsibility.

It seems as if every day we learn about yet another incident of sexual abuse and intimidation. But that is only because we finally are getting to the stage where people are more likely to report these acts. And as we are becoming increasingly aware of the nightmarish experiences that so many people have suffered, we pause and consider and then shudder with the realization that we may have turned a blind eye to their plight. We may have been deaf to their pleas. We may have unwittingly contributed to the abusive culture that we must now admit to, confess to and, God-willing, respond to.

I confess: until recently I was not fully aware of the problem of sexual abuse and intimidation. Like most of you, I was aware of the terrible crimes of rape that have victimized so many. I just wasn't aware how many victims there are and how prevalent rape is. And yes, we may have heard some stories about the sordid Hollywood casting couches and the professional offices where subordinates were subjected to the leering approaches of their bosses and clients. But over the past year our awareness has increased exponentially as we've learned the names of some of the worst predators and the horrifying details of their acts of abuse.

It was just last October, right after the High Holy Days, that The New York Times and the national magazine The New Yorker reported on

dozens of cases of accusation of rape, sexual abuse and sexual intimidation by Harvey Weinstein, one of Hollywood's most successful producers. The actresses who came forward to tell their stories displayed extraordinary courage and, in turn, created a cultural sea-change that is ironically called the "Weinstein Effect," whereby predators in all walks of life are being identified.

Still, that was Hollywood. They were already infamous for their carryings on. What did that have to do with us? And accusations of abuse in the offices of the high and mighty? Well, that's awful, but that's them. And then we heard more and more about incidents in schools, in locker rooms, in doctors' offices, in the corridors of the government, and . . . soon, the sheer number of these abusive crimes kept growing and keeps growing and extending into the lives of people that we all know. It's not someone else's problem. It's our problem!

From 1995 to 2005, I served Temple David, a Reform congregation in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. The population in the Pittsburgh area is one-third Catholic. Accordingly, synagogues and Jewish organizations did their best to create positive relations with the Catholic community. In those days, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) initiated a fabulous program that I was a part of from the ground floor. It was called CJEEP (Catholic/Jewish

Educational Enrichment Program). For several years, I visited Catholic high schools to teach students and staff. We collaborated on programs and I even took part in the graduation program of the Catholic seminarians. And throughout those ten years of interfaith programs, Bishop Donald Wuerl was a central figure. In fact, he was twice a guest speaker at my congregation. For many years that was a great source of pride. We did some very good work together. And then, shortly after I came to Denver, he was made a Cardinal. There are only 203 Cardinals in the world for the 1.2 billion Catholics. Wuerl ultimately was selected to be one of the 115 Elector Cardinals and was among those who elected the current Pope Francis in 2013. Of course, I followed his career with interest and enthusiasm. Sure, we all knew about the stories of abuse in the Catholic Church. Books were written. Horrendous stories appeared in the papers. Movies were made detailing the sordid details of abuse and cover-up. But confessions were made. Lawsuits were settled. Some predator priests were jailed, not many, but some. And we were all made to believe that the culture of abuse was a thing of the past.

And then, just three weeks ago, a Grand Jury report ordered by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court was released. It lists more than 300 of those whom the grand jury described as "predator priests." It reported how

bishops handled or mishandled cases of abusive priests, including alleged obstruction of justice. And most damning, the report concludes that victims' pleas for help "were brushed aside, in every part of the state, by church leaders who preferred to protect the abusers and their institution above all." The Bishop of Pittsburgh during much of that time was Donald Wuerl. Mind you, no one has accused him of being an abuser. Rather, he is accused of playing a complicit role in trying to cover-up the abuse. Wuerl helped to obscure the crimes of predator priests in Pennsylvania and is said to have done the same to hide the crimes of his predecessor, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. The Grand Jury report identifies some 1,000 victims but acknowledges that the real number is far greater. Of those thousands of cases, most of them involved the abuse of children. Young children! One is not innocent when he stands idly by as children cry in anguish. To collaborate in the cover-up of such crimes makes one a co-conspirer.

Lest we think that this issue is covered by pointing out the shame and shouting out "*shandah*" to the perpetrators and predators and enablers in the Catholic Church, in Hollywood and in the rarified halls of power and fame, it's not. These crimes affect all of us and they have been plaguing our families and communities forever. Even the Bible contains passages that touch on sexual violence and inappropriate behavior. There is the rape

of Dinah. Joseph was falsely accused of rape by Potiphar's wife. King David lusted after Batsheva and maneuvered to have her heroic husband, Uriah, killed in battle. David's crimes came back to haunt him as his daughter Tamar was raped by his son Amnon. In turn, one of David's other sons, Absalom, Tamar's full brother, killed Amnon. There are many other cases in the Hebrew Bible and Talmud, embarrassing passages that show our ancestors and sages in a very bad light. But there is a reason these stories were preserved in our sacred texts. There is a reason why we still study and learn how some of our ancestors behaved so terribly. Our ancestors chose not to hide the crimes committed in our own family because they wanted to shock us, warn us, and to teach us the terrible consequences. They wanted us to confront the grotesque and soul crushing shame of abusing another human being for one's own twisted gratification and desires.

That's what it comes down to, isn't it? Sexual predators look upon their victims not as human beings, not as thinking, feeling, caring, and vulnerable people, but as mere objects, things to use, abuse, and discard. Their actions are a brutal assault at the very underpinning of our belief in the sacredness of life: that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of and in connection to God. And here's the real stain against all of us: it is

that these outrages have been going on for so long and have hurt so many people but it's taken until now that we're finally waking up and saying, "stop!" Stop the abuses. Stop the rapes. Stop treating people in demeaning, sexist, and disrespectful ways that deny them their dignity and self-worth.

It has happened only a few times, but I have had congregants confide to me that they experienced inappropriate sexual comments and encounters. These were not rapes or acts of brutal physical abuse. These were lewd comments and gestures or exposure that made the victim feel threatened. I confess that my reaction was not correct. I insensitively asked the victims about the circumstances. I asked if they were sure that the words they heard and the gestures they saw were intended in a sexually threatening way. The questions I asked only conveyed a message that I did not believe the victim. Of course, that is not what I intended, but that didn't matter. What matters is that a person who feels victimized is already feeling insecure and hurt.

So, what is the appropriate response when someone confides to you that they have been victimized? Here is what I have learned. First, know that it is quite significant that they came to you with this very personal and emotional disclosure. Even if the event they are telling you about happened

long ago, you might still be the first person they are disclosing to. Listen to their disclosure with the utmost seriousness. Second, the experts advise that when someone confides to you that they have been victimized, that you should not call the police. The exception is, of course, if the victim is a child. In that case, we are legally obligated to notify the authorities immediately. But we are told that in the case of an adult we should strongly urge the victim to contact the police but leave it to the victim to make the ultimate decision. As one expert expressed it, rape or sexual abuse takes away power and control from a victim. Our role is to help the victims regain a sense of power and control; calling the police against their wishes is the opposite of this. One of the achievements of the MeToo movement is that it has empowered those who were felt forced or pressured or bribed into silence to finally come forward to point out the perpetrators. That's why it is so important for the victims to call the police. A crime has been committed. Now it should be reported.

But it also needs to be emphasized that merely spreading rumors and unsubstantiated accusations against another person is a sin. False claims of abuse can ruin another person's life. If a crime has been committed, report it. If someone is acting in a sexually aggressive and intimidating manner toward you, inform whomever is in charge: a supervisor, teacher,

principal, parent, boss, etc. And then follow that complaint up with written and documented information.

The culture of abuse affects and plagues every corner of our society and we cannot sit here at the beginning of Yom Kippur and ignore it. On this Kol Nidrei evening, the beginning of Yom Kippur and the Day of Atonement, it is time for us to confront the predators and condemn acts of cover-up.

The first step is *vidui*, acts of confession in which we admit that we have not done enough to end the culture of abuse. That others have suffered and are still suffering sexual abuse while we pretend not to see, hear or know, is moral failure of the highest magnitude. Simply put, we have not done enough to ensure the safety and security of others. The second step is the determination to begin creating an environment in the schools, in the work place, at home and in every other place in our community where people not only will be safe and secure, but they can count on being treated with respect and dignity.

The Union for Reform Judaism has excellent resources on this topic. Another is a Jewish group called *Kenmeansyes*. This organization provides challenging essays, liturgy and other materials that express an important message: "Consent is a Jewish Value." The message cuts right

to the chase when it forces us to admit that these issues of sexual abuse have not been adequately spoken about on the pulpit and have not been taught in our religious schools. For that matter, the task of nurturing a positive, respectful and sensitive awareness about sexual violence, abuse and intimidation is a topic we need to address with our children and grandchildren.

To that end, and in keeping with collective confession we share on Yom Kippur, let us conclude with a responsive reading. You were handed copies of this prayer as you came in tonight. This reading is based on one from *Kenmeansyes*. Note that on the back of the prayer is contact information for some of Denver's rape crisis centers and other resources. Please read with me. Please confess with me. Together let us begin to put an end to the culture of sexual abuse.

Rabbi: Reflecting on this past year we realize the need to shine a light on physical safety when it comes to intimacy in our community, something the ancient Rabbis also considered.

Congregation: When one person strays, when one person misses the mark, we all miss the mark. We are only as high as our lowest rung. Together we speak to raise awareness of these vital community standards.

Rabbi: We stand today to set a standard together for the future, not to absolve the past.

Together we say:

- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for the times we did not ask permission before touching another person's body.
- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for the times we sensed someone's fear and persisted with our own desires anyway.
- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for the times we heard a "no" and ignored it seeking only our own pleasure.
- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for the times we reached to touch another when we were filled with hatred.
- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for the times we were so inebriated we could not decipher whether the person we touched was saying "yes" or "no."
- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for the times we turned a blind eye when we knew boundaries and bodies were being violated.
- We know that it is wrong, and we seek forgiveness for not teaching these boundaries to our children sooner.
- We know that it is wrong, and seek forgiveness for not believing those who spoke up, their stories echoing ancient tales of transgression.

(Derived from "Mishneh Torah, Forbidden Intercourse [Issurei Biah], Chapter 21")

Congregation: For all the times we missed the mark, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, give us atonement.

V'al kulam, Eloha Selichot, selach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu.

Rabbi: This is not an act of pardon. It is a call to highlight our communal expectations of one.

[From kenmeansyes.org]

RAPE CRISIS SERVICES

(Provided by CCASA, The Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

DENVER: The Blue Bench (Formerly RAAP)*

Hotline: 303-322-7273

Spanish: 303-329-0031

TTY: 303-329-0023

Toll Free for Lincoln and Elbert Counties: 1-888-394-8044

www.thebluebench.org

Located in Denver. Counties served include: Denver, Jefferson, Douglas, Adams, Arapahoe, Elbert, Broomfield, Gilpin and Lincoln.

Moving to End Sexual Assault (MESA)*

303-443-7300

www.movingtoendsexualassault.org

Located in Boulder. Counties served include: Boulder and Broomfield.

Pueblo Rape Crisis Services, Inc.*

Hotline: 719-549-0549 www.rapecrisisservices.org/

Located in Pueblo and serves Pueblo County.

Sexual Assault Response Advocates (SARA) Inc.*

Fort Morgan (serves Morgan, Logan, Washington, Yuma, Phillips, Sedgwick, and Kit Carson Counties)

Hotline: 970-867-2121 Toll Free: 1-855-440-SARA (7272)

www.sarainc.org

*Rape crisis center and child advocacy center

Sexual Assault Services Organization (SASO)*

Hotline: 970-247-5400

www.durangosaso.org/

Located in Durango. Counties served include: La Plata, San Juan and Archuleta.

Sexual Assault Victim Advocate (SAVA) Center*

Phone: 970-472-4204

Hotline: 1-877-352-7273

savacenter.org/

The SAVA center is located in Fort Collins & Greeley. Counties served include Larimer, Weld ; 8th and 19th Judicial Districts

Restoration Foundation for Victims

Denver/Metro Area

Mission is to enhance public awareness about rape and sexual assault in our communities.

www.restoration-foundation.org

*CCASA member agency