

## **Judaism In The Era of #Metoo**

Our oldest daughter has beautiful hair. How she got such beautiful red/strawberry blonde hair is a wonder and a good example of the power of recessive genes. But the truth is that ever since she was a toddler, whenever people see her -- in school, in the grocery store, on the streets of New York City, and of course even in shul -- people comment on her hair. It is always very complementary, people love it, and will often wonder aloud whether she knows just how much people would pay for that color hair in the salon, etc.

You may wonder, what's the big deal? People are just being nice, and saying wonderful and positive things. And I know this. And I know she has beautiful hair. And I'm happy that she too loves her hair. But lately, I have decided that I find these interactions strange, and actually somewhat troubling. I know that she doesn't like them very much either.

Why? Because my daughter -- like all of our children, like all of your children, and like all human beings -- is so much more than her hair and the other aspects of her physical appearance. And I worry.

I worry about the years of messages she has received regarding the significance, the importance of the way she looks. Interestingly, questions or comments about her hair far outnumber the other types of conversations she has with strangers or new people she meets. Rarely, if ever, do people comment on or ask her about her interests or her ideas.

Of course we have taught all of our children that we should not judge people by their physical appearances. She, like all of our children, have been taught the warning of our sages: *al tistakel b'kan kan, eleh b'mah she yesh bo* -- that we are to take care not to judge people by their outside, but rather by who they are as individuals on the inside.

And yet.

How can she not have internalized the years of attention she has been given due to her appearance? How can she not interpret this in a way that ultimately impacts her self esteem, her understanding of her own worth, her feelings about the way she is seen in the world?

I worry about this as a parent, of course. But I also worry on a much larger scale. I worry about the implicit and explicit messages all of our community's children grow up with about their appearances and their related worth. I worry about the double standards applied to the ways girls and women dress and look compared to the ways boys and men look. I worry about the impact that these messages, these standards, these norms have on all of us, and the ways they shape the mental and physical health and wellness of members of our community.

Over the past year, the rise of the "Me Too" movement has brought conversations and questions and worries like these to the forefront of global and national conversations. While issues ranging from conversations about the ways girls and women dress and look, to sexual harassment and misconduct in the workplace, to dramatic abuses by men in power are obviously not new, the Harvey Weinstein revelations last October seemed to be a tipping point, setting off a wave of heightened awareness, a seeming avalanche of revelations, and an urgent need for all of us, as individuals and as communities, to take a step back and a hard look at our own behaviors, our own complicity, our own culpability. And what better time of year to do

so, than this season of *teshuvah*, repentance, and *cheshbon hanefesh*, personal reflection and soul searching.

Let me say at the outset that I am well aware that I am speaking from a particular position of privilege, as a man, and I know that from my experience and my position I can only understand, and speak to, these issues so much. But as a Jewish leader, as a father, a husband, and a feminist, I feel a responsibility to focus on this conversation this Rosh Hashana. I understand that I am going to say some things this morning that not everyone will agree with, or that might make you uncomfortable. I understand that this issue is complicated and multi-faceted and I can only speak to so much in a sermon. So before I go any further, I would kindly ask you to keep an open mind and approach me directly if you want to share any thoughts or concerns with me about this topic.

While I want us to use this moment to reflect on our own roles in a culture of sexism, misogyny, and harassment that is all too prevalent today, I also want to spend some time framing this reflection through the lense of our tradition, by taking a close look at the ways Judaism has evolved in its

thinking about women, and the roles of women in society and in religious communities.

Despite the progressive community and era we all live in today, we are all aware that Judaism is fundamentally and historically a patriarchal religion. In Biblical times, men were considered dominant, and women were considered to be subservient and even possessions. Men had control over women's sexuality and largely had control over their property. This dynamic jumps out at us from the very beginning of the Book of Genesis, when the first woman, Eve, is punished for eating the forbidden fruit, the consequence that she, and all women after her, will suffer pain during childbirth, and will be destined to subservience to their husbands who shall "rule over" them.

Throughout the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, there are numerous examples of texts that are simply horrific in their approach to women. For example, in Judges 19, a group of violent men from Gibeah knock on an old man's door to try to sleep with the men that have entered into his house. The man refuses, instead offering up his virgin daughters and his concubine, saying "Have your pleasure of them, do what you like with them; but don't do that outrageous thing to this man!" Eventually, the men take his concubine, gang

rape her, and leave her for dead. When her husband finds her, he takes her home on his donkey, cuts her up into twelve pieces, and using twisted logic, sends them around to different parts of Israel to show the people how violent *they* had become and demand action.

Another -- the famous story of King David (2 Samuel 11)- who is taking a walk on his roof when he spots the lovely Batsheva, sunbathing. He decides that he wants her, so he sends his men to get her so that he can sleep with her. After she becomes pregnant with their child, David arranges for her husband Uriah to be killed. And although God later punishes King David for his behavior, the damage has been done.

Things get better by the rabbinic period, but only incrementally. The rabbis did not believe that women had the same religious requirements and responsibilities that Jewish men had. In her important study on the subject, "Rereading the Rabbis, A Woman's Voice," Rabbi Judith Hauptman debunks the traditional explanation that women were exempt from specific mitzvot because of their household responsibilities. She writes:

*A woman's exemption from these acts has nothing to do with her household and child-rearing chores. She is simply a lesser person (for the rabbis of the Talmud) in the grand scheme of things, subordinate*

*to her husband, and ready to take orders from him. In a patriarchal society, key religious acts are turned over to the patriarchs, the men, and not the subordinates, the women and children (237).*

And yet, she admits that by the time of the rabbis, things are slowly starting to evolve. She concludes:

*During the Talmudic times, this hierarchical distinction was in the process of becoming blurred. The rabbis began to increase women's obligations... They recognized that women, like men, needed to express themselves religiously... and also that women were significant members of Jewish society- not as significant as men, but significant nonetheless (237).*

So -- while things did begin to improve, Hauptman's qualifier that women were, "not as significant as men" is something that we have to recognize as a real part of our communal and religious history.

While I am guessing this is not a total surprise to most of you, I do know, based on my experiences in the classroom over the past decades, that the extent of women's second-class citizenship and negative portrayal in Jewish tradition and history may not be that familiar to everyone. Dr. Judith Baskin, a professor of religious studies at the University of Oregon, sums it up nicely<sup>1</sup>. She writes:

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<sup>1</sup> "Women in Rabbinic Literature," [www.MyJewishLearning.com](http://www.MyJewishLearning.com)

*Woman's otherness and less desirable status are assumed throughout the rabbinic literature. While women are credited with more compassion and concern for the unfortunate than men, perhaps as a result of their nurturing roles, they also are linked with witchcraft<sup>2</sup>, foolishness<sup>3</sup>, dishonesty<sup>4</sup>, and licentiousness<sup>5</sup>, among a number of other inherent negative qualities<sup>6</sup>.*

*Women constitute an additional source of danger in rabbinic thinking, because their sexual appeal to men can lead to social disruption.*

*A significant argument for excluding women from synagogue participation rests on the talmudic statement, "The voice of a woman is indecent"<sup>7</sup>. This idea emerges from a ruling that a man may not recite the Shema while he hears a woman singing, since her voice might divert his concentration from the prayer. Extrapolating from hearing to seeing, rabbinic prohibitions on male/female contact in worship eventually led to a physical barrier (mehitzah) between men and women in the synagogue, to preserve men from sexual distraction during prayer...*

Women were viewed through the sexual lens of the male authors of the text.

They were not viewed, as they should be -- as individuals who, like all human beings, were made *betzelem elohim*, in God's image, as sacred beings in their own right, and equal, in all respects, to men.

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<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Avot 2:7; Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 4, 66b

<sup>3</sup> BT Shabbat 33b

<sup>4</sup> Genesis Rabbah 18:2

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah Sotah 3:4, and BT Ketubot 65a

<sup>6</sup> Genesis Rabbah 45:5

<sup>7</sup> BT Berakhot 24a



Has Judaism come a long way since the times of the Bible and the Talmud? Thankfully -- yes. And while women and men are certainly not fully equal across all corners of the Jewish world today, we are lucky to find ourselves in 2018 in the United States, with robust liberal Jewish communities that allows women to participate fully, and to be seen as equal to men in terms of rights and opportunities. Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Judaism have been ordaining women as rabbis for decades, and now even the modern orthodox community is moving in this direction, preparing and positioning women in leadership roles like never before. And yet -- advances of the past 40 or 50 years are a drop in the bucket when it comes to the history of our people. For millennia our religion marginalized and oppressed women.

So what do we do with this history? What do we do when we read the troubling stories from the bible, or learn about the upsetting views of women that our rabbinic tradition reinforced time and again? How do we confront the ways that we, even today, have internalized and perpetuated these messages and perspectives, despite our contemporary sensibilities?

**What we do is this:** we name it, we own it, and we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Yes, Judaism has disturbing and offensive historical perspectives on women, sexuality, and gender relationships. But it also has much beauty, wisdom, and guidance when it comes to the ways in which we are to approach our lives, and our world. Alongside the problematic texts and traditions, we also find texts that emphasize the inherent value *of all human beings*, the idea that we are to judge people by their actions and their character, and even some Biblical and Rabbinic texts that portray women in a strong and positive light.

Judaism has always been a religion that, to varying degrees, has been influenced by its surrounding society. The modern feminist movement in this country in the sixties and seventies certainly influenced our communities to grow and to evolve for the better. And thankfully the positive values of Judaism enabled us to merge contemporary sensibilities with tradition to grow and nurture a strong Egalitarian Jewish community and practice in the 20th century.

But we must also recognize that, for as far as we have come as Jews, we still have a long way to go. We must call out the problematic views of women that have been espoused in the name of Judaism. And we must not be afraid to stand up for a Judaism that is Egalitarian without apology. I respect my colleagues to the right and I know that many, while they hold different views of gender roles than I do, are not sexist. But I also know that plenty in the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox world hold views that I cannot accept. Views that are simply sexism and misogyny, masked behind religious language and immoral and unjust traditions.

But there's no need to focus exclusively on pointing fingers at others in the Jewish world when we, as Jews who profess a commitment to egalitarianism, can and must do better ourselves. Are we doing all we can to support and promote gender equality in our community? How seriously are we committed to building a Jewish world where our sons and daughters feel equally valued? What messages are we as a Torat El community implicitly and explicitly sending our daughters and granddaughters with our own ritual policies? On the one hand, we include the names of the matriarchs in our prayers alongside the names of the patriarchs. On the other hand, we have

ritual policies that obligate boys and men to wear talitot but only encourages women to do so. I understand that this issue, for example, often has more to do with personal comfort, than any type of grand statement about gender equality, and of course I and the leadership of our synagogue work very hard to help our members feel comfortable. At the same time, we should consider what we are saying as a community with our ritual expectations and exceptions.

We also need to think about other social aspects of our Jewish communal life, beyond the ritual realm. There is still a great disparity between the numbers of men and women in both professional and lay leadership roles across the Jewish community. And while I think our synagogue leadership does a good job in this regard, we must always work to ensure that we are a community in which women's voices are valued, and listened to, as much as men's. And we must continue to be open and transparent about the policies that we do have in place to protect the physical and emotional well being of all members of our community.

Speaking more generally, as a congregation that is responsible for bringing values of gender equality and sacred wellbeing to all of our members, I would like to see us do more to give voice to these issues in general. What outside groups should we learn more about, support, or bring in as speakers? How can we partner with national organizations who are dedicated to women's equality and leadership, both within and beyond the Jewish community?

Beyond the specific happenings under our own roof, it is also critical that our synagogue community be a safe place, a place where all of our members feel they can be protected from discrimination, sexism, and harassment, and a place where all members can seek support and comfort when they have encountered these painful experiences outside of our community. I know that, since the "Me Too" movement took off a year ago, I have been pained to realize that every woman I know has experienced some type of harassment -- ranging from something as basic as catcalling or as deep as persistent sexual abuse. I challenge members of this community to find one woman in your life who has not endured uncomfortable comments about her

looks, unwanted sexual advances, or some other type of harassment or abuse in her lifetime.

When it comes to *shemirat ha-lashon*, the Jewish value of guarding our tongues, many of us have much work to do. And yes, sorry men, but I am largely talking to us with this example. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said: "*Some are guilty, but all are responsible.*" The "innocent" comments objectifying women that we have all heard since we were in 7th grade are not appropriate. The "jokes" sent around on email, or posted on social media, are not appropriate. There is no such thing as an innocent "joke" or "comment" or "post" that objectifies women. We must stop making comments about a woman's age, her body, her dress, her weight, her clothes, or yes, *even her hair*. We must stand up when someone else engages in inappropriate behavior instead of simply excuse things as "locker room talk" or "dirty old men" talking. We must call each other out. We must educate ourselves. We must listen more. We must be more respectful, and we must teach our sons, our nephews, our grandsons, our co-workers and colleagues to do the same. Anything that directly, or indirectly makes women into a sexual object contributes to the culture of sexual misconduct and abuse that exist in this world.

I understand that this issue is complex. I understand that there are norms that have shifted in recent decades, and comments and behaviors that were once socially acceptable and are no longer. I also understand that it is not only women who experience harassment and abuse, and many men have also endured objectification and abuse. I understand that there are even times where individuals are falsely accused of committing various types of sexual abuse or misconduct. But, in an era of "Me Too", when we are finally opening our ears and our hearts to the stories of harassment, mistreatment, and marginalization of 50% of our community, it is time for us to stop making excuses. It's time for us to stop accepting what has for too long been acceptable. It's time for us to provide more spaces for the women of our community to share their stories. And it is time for us to do the work necessary to ensure that these cycles end now, so that we do not raise one more generation of girls who feel more valued for their looks than for their minds, who feel unsafe even in places that should be the safest such as schools and synagogues, and who face discrimination and unbalanced struggles in every step of their education and careers.

I know that there are some of you who will say that I am exaggerating, and of course I know I am generalizing. Of course every woman and man has their own stories and their own experiences, and their own his and her own stories, and I would be delighted to discover that these issues are less pervasive and less problematic in our community than in others. If you think that I am blowing all of this out of proportion, try this exercise later today. Find one woman who you are close to, ask her if she has ever been affected by sexism, harassment, or sexual abuse of any type, and then just listen. I guarantee you that almost everyone will have a story. And that is exactly the problem.

And so, I offer simply this prayer. Adonai our God, we have much work to do. It is sacred work. It takes courage, determination, and an ability to sit with our discomfort. Help us, Adonai, to see one another as who we were truly meant to be. Remind us, that we have a responsibility towards one another, boys and girls, men and women, to treat one another as the sacred beings, made in your image. Help us in our efforts to do teshuvah, to turn towards You, and towards one another, in order to put an end to this culture of objectification, abuse, and sexism. As we hear the blast of the shofar this



season, let it wake us up from our complacency. Let it remind us that when it comes to issues of dignity, respect, and gender equality- we can do better. We must do better. In small ways, and in larger ones- -it is time to hold one another responsible, and accountable. Shanah Tovah.