

#MeToo

Sermon, *Erev Rosh Hashanah* 2018 | Rabbi Jessica Wainer

October 15, 2017. Actor Alyssa Milano tweets the following, “Me too.” Suggested by a friend: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too.’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” Sexual harassment and assault is not a new problem. In the year 2017 alone, leading up to the launch of the viral movement, the Women’s March on Washington occurred, executives at Uber resigned over accusations of enabling toxic workplace behavior, and the New York Times printed its article detailing decades of allegations against Harvey Weinstein. Alyssa Milano, unknowingly using a phrase ‘MeToo’ that had initially been coined by Tarana Burke, unlocks centuries of pain. Within 20 minutes, over 10,000 people have responded. Within 48 hours, the hashtag has been retweeted nearly 1 million times.

“Best Thing: Finding out we are not alone and have all dealt with this. Worst Thing: Finding out we have all dealt with this #MeToo” (@therealpaulah)

“Me too, my mother too, my sister too, my grandmother too, my best friends too. #metoo” (@_LadyPatriot_)

“A well-meaning mentor told me at 25 that people couldn’t handle hearing about sexual abuse and it would sink my ministry. It didn’t. #MeToo” (@BethMooreLPM)

#MeToo, #MeToo, #Me, Too.

In a survey of 7000 tweets from October 17, 2017, some of the most common words used were “alone,” “problem,” “victims,” “want,” and “share.” All too often, victims feel alone, even when other people have witnessed the attack, or the outcry. Victims feel a sense of disbelief, “Did this really just happen to me?” And a hesitation before sharing, “Will anyone really believe me?” And a sense of hurt, “Why didn’t anyone speak up?” “Why didn’t anyone stop what was happening to me?” These questions should haunt us like witnesses to an ongoing, unspoken crime.

This is the haunting we feel every year as we read the *Akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac, just as we will tomorrow morning. Most often, when we read the story, we focus, almost exclusively, on Abraham’s test, or on Abraham as the perpetrator. Over the course of this past year, I have had conversations with many individuals, men and women; each one of us sharing our personal experiences with #metoo. Each one of us trying to come to terms with our experiences, in many cases attempting to reconcile the inappropriate actions of someone we know and trust, much in the same way that we focus on Abraham, as we try to reconcile his attempt to kill Isaac. What we fail to see is that the story is filled with witnesses. As Abraham begins his journey, he not only brings along Isaac but also two of his servants who are later commanded to stay back as Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain. On the mountain, as

Abraham readies Isaac for the sacrifice, and as he raises the knife to slaughter Isaac, the Angel of God calls “Abraham! Abraham!” at the very last minute. “*Hinei...Here I am*”¹ Abraham cries. Finally, the story contains an absent witness: Sarah. She is not mentioned at all, but the tradition imagines that when she saw they had left, Sarah knew immediately what was to happen and she died before they could return.

In America, we have a fairly narrow definition of witnessing. We focus on the narrow, legal ways a witness functions; they witnessed an event and therefore are able to testify as to their observations. Judaism, however, expects a broader responsibility for actively witnessing. The most commanding text is from Leviticus which reminds us to not stand idly by the blood of a neighbor.² From neighbor, the tradition ripples outward to include the entire nation, strangers within the nation, and even foreigners from outside the nation. This broadness stems from Cain’s misguided question, in Genesis, when he asks God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”³ The tradition answers stridently, yes, we are our brother’s and our sister’s keepers!

The scope of Jewish witnessing means we share a responsibility to speak up when we hear of an incident, to guide victims to help and justice, to support those who testify by bearing witness to the stories that our loved ones and our community members share. We each have a share in the responsibility for actively witnessing.

These traditional definitions help us see three categories of witnesses within the Akedah story. First are the servants, brought along and then commanded to stay at the foot of the mountain. The medieval and modern commentators wonder why. Chizkuni, a 13th century rabbi writes, “Abraham was afraid that if he did not leave them behind they might attempt to stop him from slaughtering his son.”⁴ While Malbim, a 19th century rabbi remarks “Abraham was reluctant that they [the youths] should see him perform the very act that he had railed against and declared irrational when performed by idolaters.”⁵ Abraham was cautious to surround himself only with people who would help to enable his behavior, much in the same way that Harvey Weinstein did for all of these years. These witnesses remind me of the joint statement issued in October 2017, by select members of the Weinstein Company Staff, who wrote that they knew they were working for a man with an infamous temper and a womanizer who had extra-marital affairs, but did not know that Weinstein “systematically assault[ed] and silence[ed] women.” People like Weinstein are expert manipulators and his staff have acknowledged that they, too, had been manipulated, like Abraham’s servants, and that they, too, perhaps out of fear for their positions, enabled the problem.⁶

¹ Genesis 22:11

² Leviticus 19:16

³ Genesis 4:9

⁴ Chizkuni on Genesis 22:5a

(https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.22.5?lang=bi&aliyot=0&p2=Chizkuni%2C_Genesis.22.5.1&lang2=bi)

⁵ Malbim on Genesis 22:5a (<https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.22.5?lang=bi&with=Malbim&lang2=en>)

⁶ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/statement-from-members-of-the-weinstein-company-staff>

The second category of witnesses is represented by the angel. On the question of timing, the *Tur HaAroch*, a medieval Torah commentary, teaches “that [the angel] was afraid that he would be too late, Abraham having already concluded the act of slaughtering Isaac.”⁷ Why not call out earlier? When Abraham left for Moriah. When he reached the mountain. When he bound his son on the altar. Why wait until the knife was lifted? This is the timid witness. So often in the #MeToo generation, we have moments when we are like the angel, watching inappropriate advances or listening to inappropriate remarks and late to speak out. We rationalize the behavior or ignore it entirely, timidity seeping into our decision making. Why don’t we speak up earlier? What is it that holds us back from speaking out?

This brings us to the third category of witnesses, represented by Sarah. Sarah, as the mother and wife, had the ultimate role of innocent bystander and did nothing to stop the potential death of her son. Absent entirely from the story, Sarah did not try to stop Abraham before he left nor did she cry out to God to save her son. Did she think that someone else would stop Abraham? There was a pervasive culture of child sacrifice during her lifetime. Didn’t she see this all around her? Didn’t she see the possibility that this is what would happen to Isaac? Maybe she mistrusted or disregarded her own feelings. Maybe she thought Abraham would rise above the common cultural norms. Whatever the reason she allowed the culture to penetrate her home and said nothing.

When it comes to #MeToo, these are the categories of witnesses—the enablers, the timid and the silent—and we are all the witnesses. We are all a part of the problem, myself included. When have I been at camp and heard the counselors making inappropriate jokes and not stopped them? When have I missed an opportunity with my students, my peers, my professors to step up and correct assumptions or gross miss-statements? When have I missed those teachable moments, *even with my congregants*? In failing to speak up, I am just as much a part of the problem.

When we turn a blind eye to the behavior of people we know are abusive and bullying, we enable that behavior. When we rationalize our failure to speak up by saying that our society is not ready to listen, we are timid. When we see the culture and do nothing, we are silent. What about all of the victims who we could have prevented from becoming victims if we had refused to enable, spoken up just a little bit sooner, or called out the culture?

What Alyssa Milano unknowingly brought to light with her #MeToo tweet was the work of Tarana Burke, an activist who had been preaching the MeToo. message since 2006. When Tarana Burke originally uttered the words ‘MeToo.’ she kicked off a movement to help survivors of sexual violence by “using the idea of ‘empowerment through empathy.’... to ensure survivors know they’re not alone in their journey.”⁸ Already, the viral nature of #metoo has helped thousands of people to overcome enabling, timidity and silence and begin the conversation.

⁷ Tur HaAroch on genesis 22:11

(<https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.22.11?lang=bi&with=Tur%20HaAroch&lang2=en>)

⁸ <https://metoomvmt.org/>

We should all be sitting here, reflecting on what role we have in this story. We are all a part of this story, even if we are not mentioned, even if we did not harass or assault someone, even if we have never made an inappropriate joke or an excuse for someone else. Me and you – we are all a part of this story. Me and you – we are just as much a part of the problem.

As witnesses we can promote change. When we stop enabling, act swiftly and find our voices, then we bear witness to the testimonies of individuals who are brave enough to share their stories of discrimination, harassment and assault and we begin the healing process, together.

Actively witnessing will change the culture. It will help people to stop and think, “If I call a woman a chick, will I be enabling a culture of insults?” “If I wait until the right moment...it will still be enough, right?” “If I remain silent and believe ‘boys will be boys’ will I be rationalizing inappropriate sexual behavior?” Only when we actively witness can we turn our actions into forces for positive change.

“Know what makes me angry? That my 1st thought about this movement was, ‘But isn’t that *all* of us? & my 2nd was “which time?’ #MeToo” (@KresyTalk)

As people began, and continue to tweet about #MeToo are we really so surprised with the magnitude of this problem? These types of words and actions have become a norm in our society, much in the same way that child sacrifice was in the time of Abraham. Can we really afford to wait any longer to act? Now is the time for us to put aside our enabling behaviors, our timidity and our silence. Now is the time for us to actively speak out as witnesses, to create a culture where our children never have the opportunity to write #MeToo not because they are ashamed, intimidated or silenced but because we have helped to create a world in which #MeToo is no longer a part of our culture.

If *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are about being honest with ourselves, and with God, then let’s be honest with ourselves that we have a problem in our society. It took centuries to get here and it is not going away overnight. But, by witnessing, we can shift the culture. When we stop enabling, waiting or remaining silent, then we acknowledge that we are all a part of this #MeToo story. *Shanah Tovah.*