



#WETOO: DISCOMPOSING OUR CULTURE OF TOXIC MASCULINITY

The epidemic of sexual assault and harassment thrives on many layers of cowardice and indifference, all too abundant in our culture of complicity. Now we must attune our ears to the stories told not by those with external power, but those with inner strength.

Yom Kippur, 5779

One thing I learned in rabbinical school that they did not teach in the classroom: when you look at a page of text, what matters is not only what's written in the black ink, but what emerges from the white space around the letters.

In Seminary, I would study Talmud all day every day and most of the night too, reveling in the intellectual and spiritual odysseys of our Rabbis. I must admit that I felt that the very fact of women learning Talmud was some kind of cosmic tikkun, an act of healing, as my female colleagues and I lent our voices, our questions, our tears to the chorus of Rabbis who came before us but didn't get to hear from anyone like us. I learned to look for wisdom not only in the received traditions, but also in the silence, the space that held the voices unrecorded through history.

It's Yom Kippur today, and as we move through this liturgy, relentless in its assumption that yes, under scrutiny, we can all do better, as the hours pass and this fast starts to soften our hardened hearts, I want to talk about the massive cultural awakening around sexual harassment and assault this past year. What wisdom does our Jewish tradition offer to help us hold pain, humiliation and trauma, to honor the immeasurable strength, persistence, and beauty of truth-tellers, and to build new cultural norms that actually reflect who we want to be?

Listen to the story of Dina, from the book of Genesis:

Dina is a strong girl. She has to be, the only daughter among twelve rowdy sons, who eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel. She's living in a man's world, which is probably why she ventures out one day to meet some of the girls in the neighborhood. Our tradition, so wedded to patriarchy, only engages Dina for the first time that day—the Book of Genesis only off-handedly mentions her birth, despite its extensive attention to the birth and naming of each of her brothers. And even then, she's only mentioned because Shekhem, the leader of the neighboring tribe, violently takes her body and her dignity. *He sees her. He takes her. He rapes her. He humiliates her*, says Genesis 34:2. And then, he thinks he falls in love with her. He decides he'd like to keep her.

Jacob, Dina's father, somehow learns that his daughter has been abducted and assaulted. Inexplicably, he—the lover, the dreamer, the great deceiver, the one who wrestled with God and man—remains completely silent.

Later that day, Jacob's sons, Dina's brothers, return home from their work in the field and hear the news. Unlike their father, they are livid. Fired up with righteous anger about the indignity visited not

upon their sister, but upon *their family*. The honor of their tribe has been challenged. Two of them, Shimon and Levi, take their swords and decimate Shekhem. They slaughter every man in the town, retrieve their sister, and bring her home. They also take all of Shekhem's flocks, cattle and wealth, in addition to the women and children, who become their captives. That is a warped sense of justice.

It's only then that Jacob, our patriarch, finally finds his words. He is outraged. Not necessarily by the rape, or even by his sons' brutality, but by the precarious position that their war on Shekhem has put him in. **עֲכָרְתֶּם אֹתִי**—*You have discomposed me*, he says. Listen to that word: discomposed. You have unsettled things for me! *You have upset the political order for me! Now I will be hated among all the inhabitants of the land, who may band together to annihilate me.*

Our story closes as Shimon and Levi are given the last word: *Should we have let our sister be treated like a whore?* (Genesis 34).

This is Dina's story, but where is her voice?

Instead, we see her father, the moral compass of the family, the model of spiritual mobility, fail to protect his own child, before, during and after her assault. And we see her brothers, with their righteous fury, only wreak more trauma on more victims, including a whole population of women captives.

Silence and violence—twin responses to the most explicit sexual assault in the Torah.

And Dina? Denied agency not only by her attacker, and by those entrusted to protect and support her, but also by our tradition, which fails altogether to record her voice or chronicle her experience.

If only Dina's story ended there, there would be endless lessons for us on how *not* to respond to sexual violence.

But the cruelty to Dina persists for many generations.

Our beloved Rabbis got so much right. Rabbinic literature reveals not only an intellectual rigor but a profound sensitivity to and understanding of the complexities of the human experience. This is what made me fall in love with Talmud the first time I sat down to learn. But they who wrote so often with astonishing sensitivity and compassion really missed the mark on Dina. It's Rashi who points to the language of the narrative:

וַיֵּצֵא דִינָה בַת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּבָנוֹת הָאֶרֶץ:—*And Dina, the daughter of Leah whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to meet some girls in her neighborhood* (Gen 34:1).

Why is she called, first and foremost, daughter of Leah rather than daughter of Jacob? And what is meant by *she went out*? When Dina went out that day, the day of her assault, she was just like her mother, Leah, who also *went out* years before, hoping to have sex with Jacob (30:16). You know: **כְּבִתָּהּ**, says Rashi: like mother, like daughter. This interpretation, of course, is a choice. When the very same verb is used to describe that Jacob *went out* years before-- **וַיֵּצֵא יַעֲקֹב מִבְּאֵר שֶׁבַע** (Gen 28:10), Rashi conveniently reads it not as a sign of sexual assertiveness, but as a sign of righteousness.

And it's not only ancient and medieval commentaries that attack Dina's credibility, or blame her outright for the assault. Even contemporary scholars find evidence of her "unconventional behavior" in the fact that "girls of marriageable age would not normally leave a rural encampment to go unchaperoned into

an alien city,”¹ as one modern commentator puts it. “Dina went out in contradiction to the code of modesty befitting a daughter of Jacob,” explains another.

In other words, this whole mess never would have happened had she not worn such a short skirt.

The assumption of the bearers of our tradition, confronting the story of the abduction and rape of one of our girls, is that it’s her fault. She is promiscuous. Immodest. She asked for it. Just like her mama did years before. Even when the rapist is an enemy of Israel, our Rabbis cannot comprehend a scenario in which Dina is not to blame.

How much has changed in our world over the past two thousand years! And yet how much has stayed the same.

For many years I have wondered what it was like for Dina, when she finally escapes Shekhem, to return home to her violent, rageful brothers, and her silent, impotent father, all completely ill-equipped to deal with her trauma. I wonder what it has been like for every girl and woman who learned this story for the past two thousand years, to hear our commentators focus on what Dina was wearing and where she was playing, rather than reflect on Shekhem’s toxic assumption that he had rightful ownership of her body.

It is clear to me that when Dina gets her reckoning, it’s not only Shekhem who will be held responsible for this travesty. It’s also her brothers. It’s also her father. And it’s also our Rabbis. Our tradition. All complicit in her shaming.

Dina’s story reveals the reality of a society so rooted in patriarchal assumptions that not only assault and abuse, but also shaming, blaming and invisibilizing of girls and women are more the norm than the exception.

But these are not, obviously, norms unique to the ancient world. Sexual assault, abuse and harassment transcend geography and generation. In some ways, misogyny is the great cultural unifier. After Jodi Kantor, Meghan Twohey and Ronan Farrow broke the Weinstein story last fall, we got a sense of the sheer enormity of the reach of assault and harassment when 12 million people posted #MeToo stories within the first 48 hours of the campaign. And the collective impact was striking, but many women were not at all surprised. These were stories we had been telling one another quietly for years, which were only now beginning to be heard.

To be clear, while the majority of victims of sexual assault and harassment are girls and women, we know that trans and non-binary people are disproportionately targeted, and boys and sometimes men are victimized as well. Sexual assault and harassment are so prevalent that it’s not an exaggeration to say that there are few women and trans folks who have not been confronted by it in their lifetimes. This is an epidemic.

We know all of this, we knew all of this, but we as a society did not really begin to confront it openly and honestly until this past year. Which is precisely why we need to talk about it today.

Two years ago, when the Access Hollywood video came out, women started quietly making appointments to see me, some of whom I had never before met. One woman, a lifelong Jewish

¹ JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis 34:1.

professional, trembled and wept as she said to me, “That woman, waiting outside the bus—I feel like she’s me, for the last ten years. And that man with the tic tacs, he’s my boss. I know that story too well. I just needed to tell someone.” Unfortunately, by the way, that boss—like the guy with the tic tacs in the video—still has his job and remains both well-paid and highly respected in the Jewish community.

It was around that time that a foundation head invited me in for a conversation about sexual harassment in Jewish communal life. He asked me to share with him if, while working in the Jewish community, I had ever been sexually harassed by a boss, a rabbinic colleague or teacher, a board member or funder. At the end of our conversation, he told me that he had been conducting these interviews with Jewish women professionals for several months, and he had not come across a single person who said she had no experience of harassment. Literally not one.

In the spring of my first year in college, I went to Take Back the Night. I marched and shouted, then I stayed up till the break of dawn listening and weeping as hundreds of women lined up on the grassy quad waiting for a chance to share their stories of torment and survival into the open mic.

One woman spoke that night about suffering many years of sexual abuse from her father and her brother, from the time she was a small girl. She spoke about how, after many years, she gathered up all her courage to tell her mother, who didn’t believe her, called her a whore, and kicked her out of the house as a 12-year-old. It was the worst story I had ever heard. And yet, here she was—so brave. So beautiful. She made it to Columbia. She was a survivor.

It was dark out, but as she spoke, I noticed that many of the women waiting to speak stepped off the line and sat down. After a few minutes, she noticed it too, and she cried out words that I will never forget: “Please! Do not let my story diminish yours. Your pain is real. Your nightmares are real. You do me no good by discounting your own suffering for the sake of mine. We all need healing; every one of us.”

This moment is surfacing everything from violent assaults and childhood abuse to everyday sexist and demeaning assumptions and behavior. All of it is evidence of how deep the misogyny runs in our society. We have to be careful when we hear the voices of Dina both to be discerning and keep perspective, and also not to diminish one another’s experiences.

And what about Shekhem? In our story, he’s killed by the vengeful brothers who are driven first and foremost to protect the honor of their family. But his brutal act of rape is essentially a side-bar to our family drama. There simply isn’t a lot of traditional Rabbinic commentary probing the question of what drives Shekhem and other men like him to exert control over women’s bodies?

Shekhem’s attack was so brazen and violent that it awakens us to the toxic reality of male power and female vulnerability, a dynamic that has not dimmed through the many years of human civilization. So let’s talk about the men (and sometimes women, but usually men) who, inspired by jealousy, rage or passion, use their power to diminish others.

Remember how Mel Brooks lampoons the patriarchy in *History of the World* when he kisses a woman’s breasts and then, as she giggles, says: “*It’s good to be the king?*”² It’s not only kings and some presidents who feel a sense of entitlement to women’s bodies, who believe they have a right to grab, smack, rub

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z8SpgmF0sA>

up against, or even just comment on our breasts, legs, hips, bellies. Every institution, every workplace, every school has its kings. Politely squirm away when he seductively leans against you at the end of a meeting, his hot breath on your neck, or push back against a casual butt-grab at the office, or in the classroom, or in the Target storage room, or at the academic conference, and suddenly you're a problem. You can't take a joke. You're hysterical. Maybe you'll get a bad grade. Maybe you won't be published again. Maybe you'll be passed over for a promotion or get fired. Who can blame you for smiling and keeping quiet? It's good to be the king.

And at the same time, it's important for us, on this day of self-scrutiny, to recognize that culpability doesn't end with the offenders. The sheer prevalence of the abuse and harassment now out in the open evidences a much larger circle of responsibility.

Who is Jacob today—the one who remains silent in the face of harassment or abuse, trying instead to wish it away? To dull its impact and maybe absolve himself of responsibility? It's the Congressional Office of Compliance, which hears claims of abuse by members of Congress and quietly issues fines, paid for by taxpayers. It's the lawyers who use complex legal loopholes to help the richest and most powerful perpetrators to cover up their crimes and protect their reputations. It is the agents and managers who continue to secure private meetings for their clients, even knowing that the boss has a proclivity for young women. It is the university administrators who ignore claims of abuse from students about their coach, as long as the team keeps winning.

It is the church hierarchy, which passes abusive priests from one parish to the next, without public acknowledgment, without accountability. Just last month, after a Grand Jury in Pennsylvania named 301 priests in its report on church sexual abuse in their state, we learned that many of the diocese under investigation tried to prevent the report from ever being made public. They wanted "to cover up the cover up."³ There were over 1000 children listed as victims in this investigation—1000 kids with lifelong trauma inflicted by their clergy and sanctioned by their church, just in this one state. And investigators are certain the actual number is far greater. This is both *systemic* and *systematic*.

And even as we focus on rampant sex abuse in the church, let us remember: it's also sometimes rabbis, day school heads, camp directors, and Federation execs who will bend over backward not to alienate funders who behave inappropriately or abusively. And how often in the Jewish community have we heard open secrets about boards and executive leadership ignoring or dismissing allegations against educators, scholars, clergy in order to protect their reputations, letting them move on to their next position and next round of potential victims? We are just now beginning to hear painful public revelations of this sort, and for every story told we know there are many survivors who remain reluctant to share their stories because they're afraid not only of damaging their own reputations, but also of potentially, God forbid, fueling antisemitism.

And what about the rest us? The witnesses and observers. The fans who don't want to hear about our players, or the musicians we love, who happen to be known for brutalizing their girlfriends and wives. Those who would themselves never harm another person, but actively support, sustain and benefit from our toxic, patriarchal culture.

³ <https://www.ydr.com/story/news/2018/08/14/pa-grand-jury-report-catholic-clergy-sexual-abuse-names-details-catholic-dioceses/948937002/>

Sure, when the accused is a political foe, bafoonishly evil, we're all outraged. But when have we stayed silent, or quietly questioned the credibility of those who accuse *our* guys? The ones who call themselves feminists and fight for causes we believe in, the friends of friends? I know I've done this, and I know I'm not the only one. This could never have become the epidemic it is without many layers of cowardice and indifference adding up to nothing short of complicity.

This is not easy stuff, I realize that. We don't really want to hear this. Especially not on Yom Kippur. But, as Anita Hill wrote in the New York Times just this morning, "With the heightened awareness of sexual violence comes heightened accountability..."⁴ And is this not precisely the time to confront the most challenging and painful breaches in our relationships and in our society?

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בגלוי עריות - For the offense we committed against You when we sexually demeaned another person.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בפריקת על – For the offense we committed against You when we pretended that the toxic environment at our work, in our schools, in our community wasn't our responsibility.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בחזק יד – For the offense we committed against You when we justified and ignored the violence around us.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בתמהון לבב – For the offense we committed against You when we were confused in times that called for moral clarity.

Are we not being asked to engage in exactly this self-scrutiny, to admit our failings and determine how we, too, could have behaved differently?

I know this conversation might be particularly challenging for some of the men in the room. The people who are truly decent, sometimes even in decidedly indecent environments. You're the ones who treat everyone fairly, who speak out when you see something that's not right. And you're as disgusted by this culture of sexism and violence as I am. And yet maybe you've felt, over the past year, like you've been put on the defensive just by virtue of your manhood. Thank you for not disengaging from this conversation. We desperately need you. We need your open hearts, your support, your goodness. We need you to keep bringing compassion and integrity to this conversation. We're raising our sons to be like you. I am raising my son to be like you.

Rambam, who was both a Torah scholar and a medical doctor, teaches that when the body ails, before prescribing a treatment, we must carefully identify the nature of the illness. Some illnesses require nothing more than a few days of rest, while others require invasive and dangerous surgeries. So too with spiritual sickness. We first must determine the seriousness of the illness. Maybe all that's required is regret and a commitment not to repeat the behavior. Or, we might need to undergo major surgery in order to uproot the evil within.⁵

Last week a well-known comedian inelegantly expressed his hope that the #MeToo movement would go away already, expressing his concern that offenders were losing more than the victims ever did. He was

⁴ NYT, 9.19.18, "Get These Hearings Right."

⁵ Netivot Shalom, Teshuva: 1:4 on Rambam Hilkhos De-ot.

pretty roundly condemned, and he did try to walk it back afterward, but he's not alone in thinking this way. There are many people who would just like to move on already. But when it comes to sexual assault and harassment and the toxic culture that perpetuates them, we need much more than two Tylenol and a few days of rest. This is no surface injury. Surely the past year has revealed that assault and harassment in our culture are so prevalent, so deeply rooted that we as a society need to undergo a full-fledged, collective reckoning to rout out, as Rambam would say, the greater evil within.

It starts with seeing survivors like Dina. Hearing the stories that—even when we really are ok now—still surface with a stubborn resilience and with little warning. Like this past week, when public allegations against a Supreme Court nominee of a teenage sexual assault left many of us reeling with the resurfacing of our own high school experiences, some of which had been safely put away for decades. We need to hold space for these stories: not disputing, questioning, minimizing. Not blaming survivors for the shame, confusion and self-doubt that are so often born of assault and harassment. Just hearing, holding and loving.

But holding space is not enough. We need to deal with Shekhem. We need to get offenders out of positions of power in which they can continue to do harm. This means creating zero tolerance work environments, with reporting standards that ensure real accountability. It also ultimately means developing a restorative justice model for offenders to reenter society with a full awareness of what they've done, who they've hurt and the debt they now owe to their victims and to everyone. Some of my colleagues, including Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg and Guila Benchimol, are already taking the lead on this.

And perhaps most significantly, we need to contend with Jacob, the brothers, the Rabbis and everyone else who perpetuates, generation after generation a culture that is so profoundly unhealthy toward girls and women. We, too—all of us—are responsible for building a culture of radical accountability, for establishing a new set of cultural norms that will allow us *all* to flourish.

עֲכָרְתֶּם אֶתִּי said Jacob to his sons, *You have discomposed me*. His sons' violent revenge had upset the order for him. Shook his foundation. Unsettled him.

We need to discompose our culture of toxic masculinity. We need to unsettle the generations-old assumptions of sex and power that have created fertile ground for the indignities we're now seeing in the light of day.

At some point this past winter, I took out a pen and started to list my #MeToo moments. I tried to focus strictly on incidents related to my rabbinate (meaning, I didn't go back to my very first job at the ice cream store, when I was 14, and my boss used to pull back my t-shirt every afternoon to check if my breasts had grown yet). In ten minutes, I listed 27 incidents. 27, some of which could or even should have driven me from the rabbinate altogether. These incidents ranged from gross and insulting to downright terrifying. (And I'm not even counting the vile, misogynistic, Nazi-rape threat notes I've gotten in just the past couple of weeks since my LA Times op-ed on Hebron, and which I've received pretty much every time I've published anything for the past decade.) I put my pen away.

But here's the thing: I'm still here.

And you're still here. And I know some of you really well: I know that you've had to fight like hell to make it through the darkness that threatened to steal your dignity. And here you are, after all of that. You are the living proof of what Hannah Gadsby taught us all, "There is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself."

We all have to be part of the *tikkun*, the course-correct, for Dina, and for so many of our sisters and brothers who came before us, and for so many who are here today, whose voices weren't heard. Who were blamed, ignored, silenced. Here, in this place, you are seen. You are believed. And you are loved.

Our inheritance, our shared story, speaks not only to our great achievements, but also to our collective failures. The difference between this year and last is that now we're talking about it. That's an important first step toward radical discomposition: shattering the code of silence and smashing the culture of complicity.

Our Rabbis warn that once things get stirred up in this societal *teshuvah*, this healing process, we might become overwhelmed by the enormity of the disorder afflicting our systems. And they were right: this moment feels overwhelming and destabilizing. And yet, as Rav Kook teaches, that discomfort, that inner anguish, is the best indicator that we are doing the work we must do to heal.⁶

I recently learned of a Japanese art form called Kintsugi, in which broken pottery is repaired with dusts made of powdered gold or silver. The philosophy is that we ought not erase or try to hide evidence of brokenness. Instead, breakage and repair become part of the history of an object, part of its story and part of its beauty.

Our job, these coming months and years, is to keep listening with tender hearts. To attune our ears to the voices that emerge from the white space between the black letters, the space that holds the stories told not by those with external power, but those with inner strength. And together to make dusts of powdered gold and silver, and use them to fill the cracks in our hearts, in our tradition, and in our society, with new beauty.

G'mar hatimah tovah—May this be a year of healing for all of us.

⁶ Rav Kook, *Orot HaTeshuvah* chapter 8: 16 (p. 65)