

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun  
Temple Beth-El  
Northbrook, Illinois

Yom Kippur Day 5779  
Me Too

Almost a year ago, back in November, Comedian Larry David hosted Saturday Night Live and delivered an opening monologue that created quite a stir. It ended bizarrely, as he wondered what it might have been like if he, a nebbishy Polish Jew, had been interred in a Concentration Camp and tried to ask a female prisoner out on a date. This comedic offering was so offensive that I couldn't help thinking that it wasn't meant to be funny, but rather, that he used this absurd concept to deflect attention from his previous topic, which involved Jewish men and sexual harassment.

"I couldn't help notice a disturbing pattern emerging," he said, in a Woody Allen-esque manner, "that many of the predators, not all, but many of them are Jews. And I have three words to say to that: Oy Vey Z'meer. I don't like it when Jews are in the headlines for notorious reasons. I want: Einstein discovers the theory of relativity. Salk cures polio. ... What I don't want [to hear about] is Weinstein..."

As he delivered his lines, the properly primed SNL audience obligingly laughed at all of his facial gestures and assorted signs of discomfort. But sitting on my couch in the privacy of my home, I couldn't stop myself from cringing.

It's been nine months since I heard that monologue, enough time for me to move on to other matters, of which there are plenty. Yet I continue to think about it because sexual harassment is a story that isn't going away. And as the list of accused men grows longer, Jewish men, an ethnic group which comprises approximately 1% of the men in this country, we continue to be over-represented.

I'm sure if we tried we could come up with a number of reasons why this is just an aberration. But I'm not interested in rationalizations. For while Jewish men may be smart, handsome, thoughtful and good providers, there's clearly something wrong with how we've been treating women, and instead of looking for excuses, I think the times call for us to do some soul searching and see if there's a common thread. Because if there is, we need to recognize it, so that we can take responsibility for our errors, ask for forgiveness, and begin a process of change.

I'd like for us to look at two areas of Jewish law – not because we Reform Jews, or the vast majority of American Jews apply them in our lives, but because they form the foundation for the norms of behavior, the culture that has come to exist within our community for hundreds and hundreds of years, helping to shape our attitude and outlook.

The first area to consider is our approach to women. In all honesty, there are so many laws that fall into this category that I couldn't begin to give an overview, which in itself is quite interesting. Why would the rabbis, all men, have spent so much time and attention on women

if not to control their behavior? In any case, let's look at a couple of examples of the place of women in Jewish tradition.

According to the Tanakh – the Bible, when a man took a woman as his wife, she left her father's house and ancestral tribe (her extended family) and moved to her husband's community. If she had children, they were immediately accepted into her husband's family. If her husband then died, she would remain with the family to raise his children. But if they had no children when he died, she could only remain if one of his relatives agreed to marry her. If not, this woman was expected to return to her family of origin. Her status in his family was entirely dependent on either her husband or her offspring. She had no independent status of her own.

To be fair, this was the custom throughout the ancient Near East. And given that the Israelites lived in this world, we should not be surprised that they adopted a similar practice. However, this cannot excuse the fact that thousands of years later, Jewish tradition has done little to modify this attitude.

Let me give you one more example from the Torah. If a woman made a vow (a promise) while she was living in her father's house, when her father learned of this vow, he had the right to annul it. If the woman was married and living in her husband's house when she made the vow, when her husband learned of it, he had the right to annul it. Regardless of the reason for the oath – whether it was related to her family, her household, or even if it pertained only to her, this woman did not have the right to independently accept any obligation upon herself; for she

was already obligated to either her father or her husband. And to take on an additional obligation without their consent would deprive her father or husband of *their* right to her complete attention.

Unfortunately, these two examples are not outliers; they are the norm. And despite how reprehensible this may sound, a tradition which treats women in this manner is a tradition that considers women to be nothing more than possessions; first, of their father, and then of their husband.

Now to our credit, as Judaism developed it tried to reshape this reality by teaching that, rather than being seen as subservient, women hold “different roles” in society than men do. Men represent the family to the outside world, while women control the internal world – they’re in charge of the home. Yet, if we’re honest, while the concept of “different roles” is a lovely thought, it does nothing to level the playing field or alter a woman’s place in society. Men were in control. Women were subservient. And this is easy to see.

Consider the rituals of traditional Jewish life where the length of a woman’s skirt and style of her clothing are proscribed; where once she is married, only her husband is allowed to see her hair; where men are not permitted to sit next to a woman, see her, or even hear her when they are praying, lest they become distracted from their obligations.

Rather than recognizing that women might have the same need or desire to pray as men, women were seen as distractions, treated as objects. And what do you do with an object that's causing a distraction? Move it out of sight. Put it in a closet. This is how traditional Jewish practice treated women, not as soulful beings, cleaving to be in relationship with other people and God, but as objects that distract men from their tasks, and are best kept out of sight.

Can there be any doubt that this attitude has left a lasting mark, not only on Jewish attitudes towards women, but on our society as a whole, where women are still treated as "less than." How much do women earn? Less than men. What right do women have to medical treatment? Less than men. What right do women have to make decisions about their own bodies? Less than the courts or the legislatures, which are still controlled by men. We may preach equal rights, but it remains more theoretical than reality.

The second area for us to consider is the concept of Chosen-ness. We Jews are the "chosen people." We were chosen by God. The way Reform Judaism looks at this concept is a little different than others. We believe that "chosen-ness" means that *we* chose God, and in so doing, we accepted additional obligations and responsibilities upon ourselves. It is for this reason, because of our deeper commitments, that God sees us as special. In other words, we earned it.

Other streams of Judaism, however, have no qualms about accepting the idea of "chosen-ness" on its face value. God chose Abraham, God chose us – and therefore we are special; we are

better than the other nations of the world; better than the other goyim.

Truthfully, there's nothing unusual about feeling proud of yourself, of seeing yourself as special. In fact, we preach this to our kids all the time. We want them to have good self-esteem, to see themselves as worthy, to achieve. The issue with chosen-ness has less to do with how an individual or member of a group sees themselves, and much more to do with how they view or treat others.

There's a story from the Talmud that helps explain this issue. It concerns Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah who spent his life working in the flax trade. His students said to him: "Retire, and we'll buy you a donkey, so you won't have to work so hard." They bought him a donkey from a non-Jewish trader, and while they were bringing it to him, they realized that there was a precious gem hanging from its neck. When they came to him, they were overjoyed and said: "From now on you [really] won't have to work anymore!" He asked them "Why?" They explained, "We bought you a donkey from a non-Jewish trader, and then we found this precious gem hanging from its neck." (In other words, since we bought it from a non-Jew, we are not obligated to return the gem, even though it was clearly not a part of the sale. Back to the story...) Shimon said, "Did its master know?" They replied, "No." He said, "Then go and return it... Do you think I am a barbarian?! I want to hear the non-Jew say: 'Blessed be the God of the Jews', more than I want all the material rewards of this world!"

Rabbi Shimon is a righteous man who expected his students to go "beyond the letter of the

law.” But if it had been up to them, the students would have been quite content in following “the letter of the law,” and acting in a way that resembles thievery. All this is to say, that Rabbi Shimon is the exception. When it comes to applying the letter of the law, our Jewish tradition held that there was one standard for dealing with our own people, and a different standard for dealing with others.

Once again, in a different time and place, in a world where Jews were discriminated against and persecuted, we could understand where this attitude might have come from. But in our day and age, the idea of treating another human being in this manner must be condemned. The Torah itself teaches that we are to have one law for both the citizen and stranger alike. This is how a just, fair and righteous society behaves; it is how a just, fair and righteous individual acts. But it is not how we Jews have always behaved.

Friends, elements from our traditional teachings about women and the non-Jew have long been a part of our culture. Today they continue to subtly exert influence in quiet ways, in locker room language, in conversations in frat houses, in ingrained biases that we might not always be aware of, but are present, and clearly exert a pull on our attitudes and behaviors. Just look at the list of names. They’re not all Jewish. We’re not the only ones who disrespect women. But we certainly have not provided an alternative point of view. And that’s the least of what we should demand from ourselves.

There are sins of commission; and those who have acted in unethical ways must be held

accountable for their actions. There are also sins of omission. And I believe, as a Jewish community, we all must take responsibility for allowing an immoral culture, which degrades and disrespects others to persist. We must act to reshape this culture.

We must teach our sons and our daughters the dignity of all life – regardless of gender, race, religion or nationality; that each of us was created b'tzelem Elohim – in the image of God. That each of us was formed with a spark of holiness; that none of us were made to serve another, but rather all of us were made to serve God – by striving to be holy.

We must teach our daughters and our sons the lesson that God taught to Cain – that yes, we are our sibling's keeper; that we cannot turn a blind eye to the wrongs that are committed against others; that we will not remain silent or indifferent.

We must teach our children the words that Moses spoke to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the promised land: Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof – Justice, justice shall you pursue! As Rabbi Harold Kushner explains: “more than merely respecting or following justice; we must actively pursue it.”

On this Yom Kippur, this day of acknowledging shortcomings and failures, we, as a community, are called on to acknowledge the mistakes of our past, and to remove the cultural undercurrents, which for generations have wounded, demeaned and belittled our mothers,

sisters, daughters and wives, disrespected our neighbors and friends, and given permission for Jewish men to act in ways that desecrate the name of God.

Repeat after me:

Let us sin no longer.

We ask for forgiveness.

We will be silent no longer.

We have work to do.

Let it begin now. Amen.