

#MeToo: Justice for All

Shanah Tovah. It's great to see everyone. Welcome back.

Rabbi Eliezer once taught that it is better to burn the words of Torah than to turn them over to a woman. Well, sorry Rabbi Eliezer, tonight is really not your night.

Six months ago I preached about the #MeToo movement – about the hashtag that sparked a global conversation about women and justice. Since that sermon, almost every week another woman from our community comes to me to share her story. Much older women, shockingly young women, and many women in between have a story to tell.

You know what I mean, it's a story about that time you were having fun at college and things got out of hand, that time your teacher leaned in a little too closely, that time you were running in the park and you just had a feeling you had to run away a little faster. Or that time something happened to you and for decades, you told no one.

I've heard your stories and tonight I want to give voice to women's experiences. To bring them out of the darkness and into our public, religious space.

It's 5779 tonight, a new year, my hope, and more than my hope, my belief, is that if we can have this conversation as a community, by 5780, your daughters, your spouses, and you, will have far fewer stories to tell.

So tonight I wonder what does it mean for all of us to be Jews in a #MeToo world? What is our responsibility as Jews to fight for justice for women?

Before I launch into this thing, a few caveats. To be honest, I have a lot of ambivalence about preaching this sermon. Let's be real, I always got the sense that a female rabbi talking about being a woman leads to a lot of eye rolls. I am told that talking about gender at all can be alienating, divisive, political, and even polarizing. It's a very emotional, personal topic rife for quick categorization and misinterpretation.

Merely describing the state of women's lives, and acknowledging they are different than men's lives, can feel like an attack on an entire generation or an attack on an entire gender or even an attack on a particular political perspective.

And I think that's because gender is profoundly personal, everyone has a stake in the game, myself included. I'll give you a little example of how gender affects me. As you know several weeks of the year I stand here on this very bima at the focal point of this room. I wear a tallis and I give a sermon for about 15 minutes on a Jewish topic. Every single time I do that, there is always at least one person, often a visitor to our congregation, who asks after the service, after I've preached and after I led prayers, after all of that, they ask what my job here is.

"Who is she?" I hear them asking Cantor Singer. Am I an intern? Or perhaps I'm a student of some sort? For years now, this keeps happening to me over and over again.

Let me ask you something, if you walked into a doctor's office, had a person in a white coat come in the room, perform some medical tests, leave the room, and then after all of that would you wonder to yourself what job might that person have? Because that is exactly what happens to me every week of my life. There's always at least one person who is surprised and confused to learn that I am a rabbi.

Why?

I don't even have to say it, you know why – it's because I'm a woman and only because I'm a woman. Being a rabbi and a woman at the very same time, is like wearing a veil that can never be lifted.

So, yes, I am in no way beyond this issue. I'm right in it, it's personal to me, like it is to all of us.

All that is to say you probably won't agree with everything I say, you might not even agree with anything I say, and that's okay. I honor your perspective and I would like to hear about it. In the tradition of Judaism, I welcome serious disagreement. It's a good thing. Maybe, if I could just trouble you, just don't tell me you disagree in the middle of the sermon. Tell me later.

So it's a hard sermon to give, but this year, after six months of listening to #MeToo stories, and frankly a lifetime of living them myself, I have to.

And not just that. I have to, because it's the right thing to do. Ignoring women's lives, hiding our truths, closeting our stories, is wrong. If we really care about justice, it has to start here because we in this room have the power to influence the world for good.

I know firsthand that the people in this congregation are filled with positivity, with decency, and with self awareness. I know that the people in this room are eager to do good for the world and good for the Jews. I know that the people in this room believe in justice for all.

Remember justice is not a secular value; it comes from us. After all, it's Judaism that teaches, "*Tzedek Tzedek tirdof*" – Justice, justice you shall pursue.

It's Judaism that preaches empathy: "Remember the widow the orphan, and the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Judaism coined the phrase: "*V'ahavta l'reicha camocha*" – love your neighbor as yourself, the rest is commentary.

It's the Hebrew prophet Micah that taught us that God requires that we do justly, perform acts of loving kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

It's our tradition that birthed the phrase: "Let justice well up like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

So, to Rabbi Eliezer, who thought it would be better to burn the Torah than to have a woman interpret it, and to all of the Rabbi Eliezers out there, you're done.

This year I say, it's time for a reckoning. I want 5779 to be the year when we get some justice for Jewish women, and justice for all women. Will you be my partner in that effort?

Tonight, I dedicate my words to all those women who have been silent for far too long some of you who are here tonight. I think about all of your untold stories and I believe you and I honor you. These words are for you. I can't fix it, but we can move it forward.

Okay here we go – point one about what it means to be a Jew in a #MeToo world. Liberal Jewish individuals are doing well, but we could do much better. It's been beaten into our Jewish consciousness that every time we see anti-Semitism, we must address it, we must fight it.

Standing up to hatred against Jews is part of being Jewish. Someone spray paints a Swastika on a synagogue and the Jews of Manhattan go running. There's a press conference, a vigil, a series of published articles condemning the act.

Even sometimes when something only marginally anti-Jewish happens, we still flock to oppose it. It's because anti-Semitism inspires collective moral outrage and a public communal response from us. What if we applied the same vitriol to fighting against sexism?

But interestingly, we don't. When it comes to how we treat women, we basically feel good about ourselves. We're liberal, we're inclusive, we're egalitarian. We don't have gendered prayer books, we do have female rabbis. We don't encourage women to remain mostly in the private sphere, we do have amazing female lay leaders. We do have a tremendous amount to be proud of. We're on the right side of the issue. But, we can do a lot better. And that's actually a pretty uncomfortable thing to say.

Now that so many of the #MeToo stories have been told, we can no longer give ourselves a pass. Anti-Semitism is, of course, not equivalent to sexism. They are obviously very different. But our response to anti-Semitism shows two things. First, that we believe in justice, fairness, and equality. Second, that we can fight for those things.

We can mobilize and rally together in that name of fairness and in the name of human dignity. When you see sexism, respond to it like you would anti-Semitism. Act, call it out, organize, don't tolerate it even a little. It's not okay. That is our individual Jewish obligation if we want justice.

Point two: It's not just about the individual, it's about the collective. Specifically, the Jewish institutional world has a lot of growing to do. How? I'm glad you asked, allow me to expand. The

editorial pages of even Jewish publications are often overwhelmingly male, especially when it comes to talking about Israel. Why is that?

In Jewish institutions, female professionals earn only a percentage of our male counterparts. Why is that?

An actual organized effort had to be made to convince Jewish liberal institutions to stop hosting panel discussions with only men on the panels. We call them manels. Why is that? The paid head of nearly every major liberal Jewish institution in the country is a man. By the way often a brilliant mensch-y, moral man. But why one gender only? A coincidence maybe? I don't think it's because of a shortage of brilliant, mensch-y, moral women out there.

Or maybe it's not really a problem because somehow the natural flow of time and evolution will correct it with little intentional effort on our part? Would we apply that same "wait and see" strategy to anything else in the world we really care about? I don't think so.

There is a discrepancy here between our professed values and our demonstrated behavior. The liberal Jewish domain is not as morally cleansed of sexism as we tell ourselves we are.

And it pains me to say it, but more than a few of the "me toos" from Jewish women happened in Jewish settings.

What would it be like if liberal Jewish spaces were the places where women knew without a doubt they could come forward without being shamed? What if girls felt confident that a Jewish summer camp would never look the other way? What if women were in more positions of authority and decision making?

I'm afraid that right now, it's not always the case. The Jewish professional world can do better. And we need to do it now and quickly. Precisely because our values are Jewishly rooted, progressive, and just, liberal Jewish institutions need to be at the vanguard of this issue.

If we continue to give ourselves an institutional pat on the back, change will not happen. Change will only happen if we apply pressure over time and if we hold ourselves accountable to the highest moral standards.

Third and final point: Jewish ideas are powerful. For thousands of years, they've persisted. Not just among Jews, but our ideas have permeated the world. Every day our ideas fill the minds and fuel the actions of millions and that's more than remarkable, it's divine. Our ideas matter.

So lastly, "*Da lifnei mi atah omed*" – know before whom you stand. Know about your Jewish past, so you can speak with authority and from a place of integrity about building an equitable future for Jewish women.

And Judaism, I love you. I wake up every day for you. Torah is more than a mere book, it is a life force. We compare it to water because it nourishes us, it sustains us and it brings us to this day.

But if we take our tradition seriously, we need to acknowledge our long history of sexism. You could even say that we, the Jews, actually codified the idea that men are more important than women.

Think about Pharaoh's daughter who is responsible for no less than the survival of Moses and, by extension, the existence of the Jewish people. She never even gets the simple dignity of a name. Defined only by her father even though it was her act of compassion, despite him, that allowed us to be here on this very day.

What about Noah's wife? No name. What about Lot's wife, or Jephthah's daughters, or Job's wife, or Potiphar's wife, or the ten concubines of David? What about these women, who are only defined by their relationship to men?

Always the object, never the subject. It is painful. These examples aren't just about names, they're symbolic of the overall approach of Torah. Men have more rights and more power and more import than women in Torah. We take all of these things for granted. We shrug them off. We tell ourselves that we were like that then, but now, we're not. Now, we're enlightened, we're progressive. All true.

But can you really look me in the face after knowing that there has been a line of fellow congregants coming to tell me their #MeToo stories and claim the intellectual progress we have made is enough? Are we satisfied with where we are Jewishly on this issue?

Jewish ideas matter. They shape us whether we know it or not. But here is the good news, we are the Jews, we can shape those ideas. If we contributed to creating the patriarchy than we have a unique power to contribute to its undoing. And we can.

We can highlight women's roles in our sacred literature. We can bring fresh eyes with new assumptions, that are different from the classical rabbis. We can aggressively, collectively refresh our perspective to welcome women's voices and women's stories into our cannon.

We can't undo our past but we can build a more just future together. Justice is not a given, it's something you fight for. It's never simply been handed to us as Jews. When Pharaoh refused to grant our freedom, we didn't give up and say, ok we'll be slaves. We fought for justice.

When Soviet Jews were persecuted, our movement fought for justice, bringing Jews away from danger and into safety.

When African Americans fought for civil rights, we, liberal Jews, were on the front lines marching for justice along their side.

Chasing justice is in our wheelhouse, it's one of the prime expressions of progressive Judaism, it's what we are uniquely good at.

Now it is our turn to fight. We must focus our immense power to pursue what is right for ourselves. Think about it, what do you want for your young daughters? Your granddaughters? What do you want for yourself, for your spouse, or for the world? Let's get to work. Let's work on the individual level, the collective level, and the religious level.

I, for one, am beginning 5779 filled with hope. I see men and women working together to make it better. I see young men who describe themselves as feminists. I see men who want to do the right thing, to be allies, to be listeners, to be part of the solution. I see people who understand that equality and justice for women are just as important as equality and justice for all minority groups.

I see women who are just over it – who will not be silent, compliant, or complicit any longer. I also see that Rabbi Eliezer is not here with us on the bima tonight. I see that the words of Torah have in fact been turned over to women and to the men who cheer us on and raise us up. And we are all teaching them together to your children throw a new lens. I see a conversation that is just beginning and will only get better from here.

I see that 5779 will be the year where we fulfill our sacred obligation to pursue *tzedeck*, where, together, we will work towards a true justice for all. Let's start now. *Kan Yihi Ratzon* – may it be God's will. Shana Tovah.