

Rabbi Jessica Spitalnic Mates
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For Shira

Imagine this scenario and see if you can solve the riddle. A father and son are at an amusement park and there's an accident on the roller coaster and they are both injured. The father is sent to one hospital and the son is rushed to a different hospital because he needs surgery. As he's wheeled into the operating room the surgeon looks down and says, "Stop, I can't operate on this boy. He is my son." How can this be?

The surgeon was his mother.

What is interesting is if you got this riddle right you a very, very tiny few. About 15% of people get it right. I got it wrong and imagined the father was in a same sex marriage, because I, like so many others imagined the surgeon was male. Our mind goes to a male image when we say surgeon or doctor. Even children whose mother's are physicians get the riddle wrong. (Adapted from The Science of Women's Leadership | Alexis Kanda-Olmstead | TEDxCSU)

As a female rabbi, I am well aware of people imagining a male in my position and the surprise, astonishment and sometimes even disappointment when they see me, a female rabbi. I share this awareness from my vantage point of a female rabbi at Temple Beth El in the age of vocabulary words that include #metoo, #ally, mansplaining, glass ceiling, workplace culture. I share this awareness in 5780, my 18th year at Temple Beth El. And I share this with you on this Yom Kippur because of a sexist incident I experienced with a funeral home during the summer.

Here's what happened. After a "Hi, hon" from a funeral director I had never, ever met before to which I answered, "I'm not hon, I'm the rabbi", we needed to walk to the place where the funeral service would happen and he needed to follow me. As he turned to follow me, he said, "I'll follow a pretty woman anywhere."

The funeral taking place was for a survivor of the Holocaust. I have devoted my life as a rabbi to making sure Holocaust education is intrinsic in so much of what I do that it also influences my vantage point. I have spent my career telling again and again stories of injustice, unfairness and persecution. I have spent my rabbinate telling the stories of those who spoke up to the Nazis and those who were killed trying. That was one train of thought running through my head in the split second I had to respond to him.

At the same time, a different, but parallel thought entered my subconscious. "Enough."

And so I said, "You need to stop now." And I walked away.

That response did not come out of nowhere. Short and firm, clear and direct, it normally would have been the thing I would have thought of to say on the car ride home or in

processing the incident with a colleague or friend. But for some reason I had the words to articulate what needed to be said.

Why I had the response that was just right for that moment and how I got to that place has been a journey that is reflected in the very same idea that permeates this holy day, Yom Kippur.

“Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day,” the liturgy declares. But what is sacred is the process of us as a community coming together to reflect on eternal ideas of individual sin and communal responsibility. It is that very same process that put in my mouth words that have become holy to me, “You need to stop now.”

What is the sacred power of this day?

The sacredness begins with the shofar. The command to hear the shofar is a huge neon sign telling us that attention needs to be paid to what is going on in our world. The shofar blast wakes up the sleeping, tired part of ourselves that refuses to see what is out there. The shofar is the alarm clock to say it is time to examine our deeds and return in repentance so that your path in the year ahead will be guided by Gd and by good.

The sacredness continues with what we are doing right here right now – simply being together. Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik reminds us of the extremely public nature of the Day of Atonement and the necessity of us being together as Gd has directed us to be. He says, “The act of becoming one with the public community gives the individual a part in the atonement that is promised to the community...The Day of Atonement is not intended solely for certain sectors of the people, and certainly not for the righteous alone.”

And the day is sacred because of what we do here. If you listen carefully and really, really read the words that lie in your high holiday prayerbook, there is incredible baseness of sin that is detailed. We are literally brought to our knees with the heaviness of the weight of the sins of the community. As Dr. Meir Seidler teaches “Precisely [in]an entire day of standing in prayer, without food or drink ... a person is asked to look into the depths of the wildest and most unrestrained desires dwelling within him [or her]... How sordid can a person become? To what depths can he fall? By comprehending the depths of sin, a person attains elevation of spirit on the Day of Atonement, since the very fact of being able to view oneself thus attests to the divine spark in a person.”

The forces that created a world where people are made to feel bad for who they are and what they do can be the same forces that can create a world that does the opposite. The revealing of the worst puts us in touch with the best and allows us to find a path to a better future from where we are now. In coming near to Gd on this sacred day with honesty in regards to all that is wrong, in that closeness, is released the potential to go forward in strength. This day can as a reckoning, not a reprimand to take what has gone wrong and instead embrace all the good that is abundant in this world. By visiting that

base, hard, difficult place, all barriers to Gd are swept away. And after being brought to our knees, the final sacredness lies in getting up and saying things have got to change. #timesup.

The world has started a similar process in regards to gender and society. And it hasn't been easy. It has taken a lot of time and pain. And it is only the beginning. We are on a complicated journey to repair that will bring us to our knees but ultimately bring us forward to a better world, the world that Gd envisions for all of us.

With practice and reflection and repentance will we learn how to navigate the subtleties. How we know to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong and blessing from curse just comes with experience and learning and growing. In the same way Torah was not equipped to handle everything that came an ancient Jew's way. Subsequent texts developed over hundreds and hundreds of years like Mishneh and Talmud, created to guide a new generations conundrums and societal changes over time.

Remember it was only 100 years ago that women won the right to vote. And I don't need to tell you that the entrance of women into the workplace has not been always smooth or easy or fair. Alongside that are nuances of how women act and are perceived in the workplace and in the world at large. As bossy or pushy if they come on too strong and girlish and incompetent if too weak. Needing to calibrate our voices to sound steady and kind, perhaps betraying different feelings below. It often falls on women in the workplace to bring the cupcakes to the meetings. Women, if and when asked to speak, are often asked to speak on issues of work life balance which is seen as a woman's issue rather than substantive issues of meaning like the content of their work. I am complicit in all this myself. I, like so many others, remark on the external characteristics of girls and women and admire the leadership, strength and smarts of the men. And shame on me for sitting on those panels and instead of saying, can I speak about the beauty of what I do instead of the marvel of how I do it.

It is a difficult time to navigate what is right and what is wrong because we have finally been given the permission to articulate what is right and what is wrong but each of us has different red lines and boundaries and perspectives. Just as the Talmud of Judaism is full of complexities and contradictions this new Talmud, these new understandings of women in society are imbued with powerful change and potent meaning that continue to unfold with the passage of time. And being honest about this topic means having to have difficult conversations with people we care about and reliving difficult memories that were brushed under the carpet once upon a time.

Rebecca Traister, author of Good and Mad about women's anger, reminds us that even engaging in these conversations is so tough and hard and weird because we have men AND women in our lives. People who are so dear to us and we don't want to hurt them. Traister says, "Something that's very particular about gendered inequality in this country is a structural reality which is that every woman has men in her life and every

man has women in his life. What that means is that if you acknowledge inequalities on the table, it is disturbing some of most intimate relationships in our lives.”

If we really truly deeply understand what Yom Kippur is about then today becomes the best day to engage in this conversation. On this day, all come before Gd together in community and Gd shows us that the wrongs we have done become the very vehicle that bring us closer to Gd. To acknowledge what is wrong in society is the pathway to start to fix it. And when all victims, perpetrators and bystanders, all of us, can go through that process and understand that these hardest, ugliest moments do not have to be obstacles to healing, we can have the honest conversations about what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man in the year 5780.

Our own tradition has contributed to the imbalance. There are plenty of Jewish names on the lists of perpetrators, victims and bystanders. Figuring out who we are following #metoo takes time and patience. I truly believe the processes and prayers of this day can propel us to understand that I want my husband and my family and my friends to tell me I look pretty but that it has no place graveside.

We can look at this time in our society and these incidences minor and major, subtle and blatant. We can rejoice that we have the ability to question. We can celebrate that it is OK to have these conversations. If we don't address the difficult on the holiest day of the year we have missed the point of the holiday. Wrestling affirms we are thinking living beings. As my teacher at the Hartman Institute Micah Goodman says, “Many times we think being religious means sacrifice.” Look at today – you are deprived of food and you are not at work or school or at beach or where you might otherwise want to be. Lots of sacrifices. But one thing that is absolutely not sacrificed is our “intellectual honesty”. As Goodman teaches, “Not only do we not have to sacrifice our intellectual honesty when we walk into synagogue, it's the other way around. We sin if we sacrifice our honesty. It is not something we need to overcome to get close to Gd. It's something we need to express to get close to Gd.”

I believe it is truly what Gd wants of us. Gd does not want us to avoid the bad, complicated and difficulty in society. Gd brings us together, puts in front of us so much to wrestle with and brings us to our knees in order to rise up. In repeating this process annually of hearing the shofar's call, coming together, being brought to our knees and then rising up and demanding better, we are given the toolkit to leave the synagogue after Yom Kippur and face the year ahead. Doing this year after year after year, ultimately, Gd willing we internalize these sacred ideals and they become intrinsic in our very being. This sacred process we go through on this day and the vocabulary created in the wake of #metoo I believe is what combined to shape my response on that hot July day, “You need to stop now.”

Upon receiving the Pulitzer Prize for their writing on #metoo in the New York Times, Jodi Kantor and Megan Tovey shared, “When [our daughters] are much older, and mature

enough to understand terrible violations, and humiliation, and pain, we are going to sit them down and tell them the story of our investigation...The easiest part will be telling them about the women who came forward, because those women will already be inscribed in the history books... names synonymous not with humiliation or victimhood, but with courage, truth, and optimism that things can change...[we] did so with the hope that girls your age will know nothing but dignity and decency in the workplace and beyond. So that's the way we'll tell most of the story to [our daughters] But we're still not sure what we – or they – will say about the most important part, which is the ending. Years in the future, when we describe to our daughters the abuses we wrote about, they may say: Oh yeah, that still happens all the time. It happens at my summer job. It happens on my campus. Or will they be shocked at what will seem like a bygone era, and say: Did people really think that used to be O.K. back then? Mom, how could that have been allowed to go on? And really, you were there when things changed? The answer to that question is not up to us. It belongs to the rest of the world now.”

High holy days don't resolve our issues societal or otherwise. They don't take away the pain of our past experiences. What they do is leave no room for shying away from the painful and difficult of the ancient times and the modern times. They ask us to examine a society that gives me to freedom to articulate, “You need to stop, now.” But more importantly, they become an opportunity for each individual, however we see fit, to change things for ever. Some, like me, will find that way because an accumulation of memories of icky or uncomfortable situations we have tolerated over the years propel us to create a society where we will never want to go through again. Others will find the way to change through hiring practices that they will reflect on and change if necessary. Others will find change through raisings sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters to be unfazed by someone's gender and instead focus on their personhood.

Several years ago in trying to process all this in the media, and not yet having the tools and the vocabulary to articulate the familiarity these stories held for me and knowing in my heart of hearts I never wanted by daughter or my stepdaughters or anyone I cared about to ever have to tolerate what was once tolerate I told them “I have your back” – I put it on hairbands and bracelets to wear on their wrists and I wrote it in letters and I said it out loud. Because I want to do everything in my power to avoid the first future these reporters speak of. The world of, “Oh yeah, it happens all the time.” I, like these reporters, am not sure what the ending will look like either. I want the promised land of the second future where our kid's ask, “Did people really think that used to be O.K. back then?” Imagine THAT scenario. That's my dream on the Yom Kippur of my 18TH year here. And that dream, if it can become a reality, is really the prettiest, prettiest thing of all.

Shana tova and Tsom Kal.