Finally, Sarah had had enough. After all the years of humiliation, after decades of isolation from her friends and her family – this was more than she could bear. Abraham had taken from her, her dignity, her sense of identity. But now he had taken her only son, her beloved Isaac. And that was more than she could bear.

Their marriage had, in the beginning, been one of love, companionship, trust and respect. Unlike so many women of her time, Sarah never felt in those days that she was merely an appendage, a piece of the household. Abraham had appreciated her talents, her warmth and kindness, and her home reflected her personality. Through their early travels together, when their work on behalf of their God was meaningful for both of them, she had great influence throughout the community. While Abraham brought many men to the worship of Adonai, Sarah had converted scores of women. Their household grew and was filled with love of one another that reflected their love of God.

But over the years, Abraham had changed – and so had his treatment of Sarah. As he became more obsessed with being the perfect servant of God, he began to treat Sarah as his servant. When famine in Canaan forced them to move to Egypt for a time, Abraham felt threatened by Sarah’s beauty and grace. “If the Egyptians see you, they’ll kill me to have you,” he had said to her. “So say you’re my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you.”

Just as Abraham predicted, Pharaoh’s servants were mesmerized by Sarah, and word of her beauty quickly reached the palace. Pretending to be Sarah’s brother, Abraham negotiated a bride price and sold his own wife into Pharaoh’s harem, in exchange for gold, silver, sheep and camels. Forced into sexual slavery, Sarah went about in a daze, trying to distance her mind from what her body was being forced to do. Abraham’s God finally took pity on her and revealed to Pharaoh that she was, in fact, Abraham’s wife, not his sister. Pharaoh sent for Abraham and said, “What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Here, take your wife and leave!” And Pharaoh sent along an escort to make sure they left his country as soon as possible.

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1 This midrash was originally written for a Jewish Women International program in Chicago on domestic abuse in the Jewish community, “Peace in the Homes: The Voice of Sarah,” delivered February 9, 2003.


3 Genesis 12:18-19.
But when they returned to Canaan, it happened again. King Avimelech, who should have been an ally and friend, was suddenly seen as a threat by Abraham. “She’s my sister!” he insisted to the king’s servants – this time without consulting Sarah and without warning her. As before, Abraham got the goods while Sarah was taken to the king’s bed. This time, though, God put a stop to the charade before any more harm could be done.

Seeing that Sarah had not consented this time, God came to Avimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman.” And God said to him in the dream, “I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against Me. That was why I did not let you touch her. Therefore, restore the man’s wife—since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you—to save your life.”

The next morning, Avimelech had gone immediately to Abraham and confronted him: “What have you done to us? What wrong have I done that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” Sarah, of course, had thought much the same thing. Avimelech paid Abraham off with sheep and oxen, male and female slaves, and a thousand pieces of silver, as he returned Sarah to him.

All of this Sarah bore with dignity – especially when she discovered soon after that she, at age ninety, was going to be blessed with the child she’d always hoped for. God had answered her prayers, and she bore her beloved Isaac, the light of her life. She kept Isaac close to her, and over the years taught him kindness, gentleness, and respect for men and women alike. She taught him that being a servant of God did not excuse neglect or abuse of the human beings around him – but that, in fact, the way he treated others reflected the way he felt about God.

And then he was gone. Sarah had noticed Abraham even more distant and distracted than usual. He refused to talk to her, ignored her pleas to share whatever distressed him. She arose one morning to discover he’d gotten up especially early, saddled his donkey, sent for a couple of his young lads, and taken Isaac away. For three days, she sat weeping in her tent, wandering around the household, praying for her son’s safe return.

4 Genesis 20:2.
7 Genesis 20:14.
That night, in a dream, an old man came to her\(^8\) and said to her: “Do you not know what your husband has done to your only son this day? He took Isaac, built an altar, slaughtered him, and brought him up as a sacrifice. Isaac cried out to his father, who refused to look at him and acted without compassion.” Sarah thought she would die, there and then. She fainted and felt the life force flowing out of her. Little did she know that, at that very instant, her beloved Isaac felt the same – as he looked up from the altar to see his father raising his hand against him, slaughtering knife in his grip, and beyond him – the angels in heaven openly weeping.

Sarah came to. She refused to believe Isaac could be gone – it must be Satan, she thought, playing on her mind. Not even Abraham would do such a thing. Would he? Another three days, she searched the countryside around their home, making inquiries, but nobody had seen the father and son. That night, the same old man appeared in her dream. “I was wrong the first time,” he said. “Abraham did not kill your son after all. He’s alive, and he’s returning to you.”

Isaac returned alone, without his father, shaken, exhausted and traumatized by the events of the past few days. After a weepy reunion, during which Isaac told his mother every detail of what had happened on the mountain, Sarah knew what she had to do. She packed her things, loaded her camels, took her son and her most trusted servants, and left her husband’s house. She went to Hebron and there lived by herself – something no married woman ever did in that time. But the community knew her, accepted her and respected her. She never saw Abraham again. And neither did Isaac. When word reached Abraham of Sarah’s death, he came and he wept over her and he mourned for her – and for all he had done to drive her away. He bought a suitable burial ground and gave her a proper funeral.

I created this modern midrash on the Torah portions we read this week and next in 2003, as part of a Jewish Women International program on domestic violence in the Jewish community. The events and dialogue are taken directly from Scripture. Sarah’s dream comes from rabbinic lore that attempted to more fully explain what happened while Abraham went to sacrifice his son. The only thing I added, really, was the overlay of Sarah’s own voice, of her own feelings. That’s something that Scripture doesn’t give us, and neither do the rabbis.

As I read it, you could hear a pin drop. Everyone was startled into silence by the words and deeds they had read so many times in the Torah but perhaps never before actually seen. Afterward, I was accosted by an Orthodox Jewish woman: “How dare you say such things about Avraham Avinu!” she chastised me. “How dare you do such a thing.” She could not

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\(^8\) Versions of this midrash appear in Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer and Sefer HaYashar. Another variant has Satan appearing as Isaac himself to tell Sarah what is transpiring. See Tanhuma, *Va-ayera*, 23; Ecclesiastes Rabbah. 9:7, 1.

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comprehend the fact that these events are in Scripture, and that these words do come from the Midrash, where the rabbis—in their own way—acknowledged that Sarah deserved to be heard. Certainly, from their perspective, they would not—and did not—think of her as an abused woman. But from a 21st-century perspective, that’s just what I was suggesting.

Over the past couple of weeks, we have been inundated by news and accusations of sexual impropriety, sexual assault, and even rape, by prominent and important men in American culture. It started with the stories about Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein and his abuse of many young actresses who worked, or wanted to work, for his production company.

After he was fired, Jenni Konner, the executive producer of the HBO series “Girls” said: “I see this as a tipping point. This is the moment we look back on and say, ‘That’s when it all started to change.’”

And she was right. Once the wall was breached, it came tumbling down quickly. Among those finally getting the ax: Bill O’Reilly of Fox News, which last January renewed his contract knowing full well he had just settled a sexual harassment lawsuit for $32 million—the sixth such lawsuit against him. The Murdoch family, which owns Fox, made the calculated decision to hang onto O’Reilly even though the head of Fox News, Roger Ailes, already had been fired for alleged sexual harassment himself—activity that had gone unchecked for years.

Also recently fired after multiple sexual harassment complaints: Chris Savino of the Nickelodeon network; Vox Media Editorial Director Lockhart Steele; and Hollywood agent Tyler Grasham. Roy Price, the head of Amazon Studios, resigned after similar allegations were made against him. Prominent political journalist Mark Halperin was pulled from his current gig as a commentator at NBC and MSNBC, after five anonymous women from his time at ABC came forward. Women are also now coming forward to make accusations of harassment and inappropriate touching against President George H.W. Bush.

And perhaps most sadly for the Jewish community: Leon Wieselthier, long-time literary editor of The New Republic and an important voice in modern Jewish literature….and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, who allegedly copped a feel at a public event.

All of these men are powerful leaders in their fields, opinion shapers, and trend setters. All allegedly felt that their power and positions gave them the right to inflict themselves on women who depended on them or looked up to them. I’ve mentioned the word power twice here, and for good reason. Sexual harassment and sexual assault are not, at base, about sex. They are about power—about men using sex as a tool to control women.

Some of these men deny the allegations, some have not answered them. Of those who have acknowledged at least some of the damage they caused, their excuses are pathetic. Harvey Weinstein said, in essence, well, that’s the way things were when I was growing up in the ’70s and nobody thought anything of it. He’s headed for some kind of private therapy – as though that will make him no longer a brute and a bully.

As for Mark Halperin, he actually told CNN: “I did pursue relationships with women that I worked with, including some junior to me. I now understand from these accounts that my behavior was inappropriate and caused others pain.”

Now? From these accounts? That’s how and why and when he gets that what he did was disgusting and disturbing? As Monica Hesse and Dan Zak, asked in their Washington Post article this week:

“Does the ‘now’ merely arise from the fact that his actions are now public? Does ‘now’ mean we’re watching an epoch of entitled masculinity finally end? Or is there something else going on ‘now’?”

Maybe there is. When I was growing up, we called these guys dirty old men and tried to ignore the patterns of behavior around us – the men who would wink at us at public events, eye us up and down, comment on our legs or hair, brush up against our backsides in the aisles the music store.

When I was a young reporter and the owner of a prominent sports team – obviously intoxicated – found me alone in the tunnel underneath the stadium and pinned me against the wall, I slipped out of his drunken grasp and sprinted out and never told anybody. I guarantee you that many, many of the women who are now coming forward did the same. Nobody would believe us. Or our young careers would be imperiled. Or our reputations would have been tarnished. Our reputations, not theirs. Because in a patriarchal society – whether in 21st – century America or in ancient Mesopotamia – that’s what happens.

In Sarah’s day, wives belonged to their husbands. They were part of the household, like a chair or a goat. Do you think ownership of women does not exist today? Why else do you think girls throughout Africa are married off so young, or Saudi women are forbidden from driving, or Haredi women in Israel are ordered to cover up and move to the other side of the road?

Oh, but don’t think that America is going to get off that easy. That we are still debating whether women should have access to birth control – much less abortion – shows the lengths to
which men will go to control our bodies, make our decisions, and limit our opportunities for education and financial independence.

Sexual assault does not just occur in Silicon Valley or New York media or Washington power circles. It is not found just in the lurid front-page stories of our newspapers and magazines. It is part and parcel of life – here and around the world. The use of sex as a control device may be more subtle or more overt, illegal or just gross – but it is a constant. At least it has been. Maybe the halls of power are finally closing in on the offenders. Maybe the walls of shame are finally cracking around their victims.

Dozens and dozens of women I know have come out of the shadows to post their #MeToo notes on social media. Amazingly, it has been eye-opening even for forward-thinking male colleagues and friends. They are having their own #YouToo moments. And that can only be for the good.

But it will take more than individual epiphanies, in a nation that knowingly elected a Groper-in-Chief. The New York Times’ Jodi Kator, who broke the Weinstein story, notes: “Ailes, O’Relly, Weinstein, Halperin were some of our culture’s key storytellers, shaping our ideas of gender authority, power, and much more.” And there’s the real challenge. Because unless and until women achieve equality as shapers of our ideas and voices of our culture – and political leaders of our nation – very little is likely to change.

But making everything public that we have kept so private for so long, is a start. As Hesse and Zak wrote,

“It used to be in private, between women alone, or behind closed doors between and woman and the man who was making her life miserable. Now it’s in public. Which might be what Halperin meant in his use of ‘now’: The discussion has gotten really loud. It’s pretty hard to ignore.”

The story of Sarah, as told by Sarah, teaches us that sexual control of women by men is as old as the Bible itself. The #MeToo stories of dozens and hundreds and thousands of women today, as told by them, teaches us that naming it, and sharing it without shame or self-blame, are the first steps to fixing it. We are all created in God’s image. We are all equal in God’s eyes. We are all equally worthy of respect in the eyes of others. We must demand no less.

Ken yehi ratson. Be this God’s will and our own. As we say together: Amen.

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