(Sent to the CCAR by Rabbi Jordan Helfman, who references this sermon in his own, also sent to us)

Sermon: Chayyei Sar #MeToo – Speaking Out Against the Silence

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Today I am not speaking about something nice, a sermon that will leave us with a warm glow and a fluffy feeling. Today I am breaking my silence, inspired by the brave women around me. Today I am talking about sexual harassment. Every time I found an article on this topic it was preaced with – this article contains a sensitive subject, reader discretion advised. The same goes for this sermon.

When countless allegations were brought against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein we did not realise that they would trigger a significant movement in our social history. But when American actor Alyssa Milano called women to action on social media, writing ‘If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem’ we realized that this was a larger conversation than one about a single man.

The hashtag ‘me too’ was used more than one million times in its first 24 hours of circulation, drawing to light that Weinstein is not the first, but rather one of many people in power who abused their position. More than ten allegations against a leading actor, has caused Netflix to stop filming a certain series. Eight MPs for the conservative party, and four from the Labour party, have had allegations being brought against them, many of which are being taken to the police. Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney spoke of sexual harassment she has faced in the sporting world. Journalists from the BBC are now currently under investigation. The conversation has changed from one about a bad guy, to one about the imbalance of power and the silencing of people’s experiences.

And it is not just those in the media spotlight who have been affected. Within days millions of women, and some men, used Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to disclose the harassment and abuse they have faced in their own lives. People from all walks of life have been coming forward to speak up, posting the hashtag ‘me too’, not in solidarity with their friends, but in a chorus of pain and reliving a series of traumatic incidents. And it is not just those in positions of power who have engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior. Sexual harassment is broad, covering any unwelcome sexual advance or requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. This is something that happens every day, in every country, to the majority of women, and some men. It may be done by friends, maybe by colleagues, maybe by people who care, maybe even the ‘good guys’.

Sexual harassment is a problem in every industry, even in the places we least expect it. Many female rabbis I know have come forward to share their stories of harassment and sexual abuse, some of which was conducted in the work place. One very close colleague of mine relived the
moment that she found out that she was known by her congregants as ‘the rabbi with the nice legs’. She said that after that she took to wearing trousers.

Even our Tanakh is not immune to stories of sexual violence and objectification of women. This week we heard ‘chayei Sarah’, translated as the life of Sarah. But in this life story the main character is noticeably silent. Dead as the parasha begins, the life story of Sarah is one that she is considerably absent from. The reader is left wondering, who really was Sarah?

What we see through the narrative of Sarah is a woman who is silenced. Her own story is suppressed, she is not listened to. This is especially the case in the sister-wife narrative, that Sarah is forced into twice by her husband. Both in Egypt and in Gerar, Abraham convinces his wife to pretend to be his sister for his own protection and benefit. In the first instance Pharaoh takes Sarah as his own wife and she remains silent as Pharaoh is given access to her body. Not once do we consider how Sarah might feel about this or what it could do to a woman to be passed so easily on to another man. We are only aware that out of the deal Abraham acquires sheep, oxen, slaves, donkeys and camels. We can infer that out of this deal, what Sarah acquires is an insecurity in her own body, which comes out to play in her later interactions with Hagar, the mother of Abraham’s first son Ishmael, whom she treats cruelly.

And Sarah is not the only account of a silent woman in our text. We hear nothing of Dinah’s thoughts as she is raped by Shechem. The captive woman, described in the rules of war in Deuteronomy, who is taken into the home of the Israelite against her will and doesn’t say a word. Bathsheba is sent for by David, we do not hear her consent when he takes her into his bed. Woman after woman in our narrative is objectified, harassed and even raped by men, and woman after woman remains silent.

I believe that this is still the case for women, and men, who suffer sexual harassment and abuse today, they remain noticeably silent. Most people who have suffered sexual harassment suppress their stories for fear of not being heard and believed. When we face horrible experiences in our lives so often we wish to sweep it under the carpet by attempting to normalize the behavior and professing that it is not a big deal. Those who have suffered try to justify the actions of other people and rationalize them. Naming something as sexual harassment can seem so violent and by speaking about it we have to admit our stories to others, and to ourselves.

What the ‘me too’ campaign has done is encourage people to speak out today. It has given people a language to use to talk about what has happened to them. The provision of a vocabulary and the chorus of others using it, has given women a comfortable and easy environment in which to talk and stopped the silencing of women in their own stories.

But it has been met with resistance. We have a desire to trivialize the issue, perhaps because it is so wrought with emotion. When sexual harassment and abuse does not come in the forms we are used to seeing portrayed by our media, when it is not physically violent or inappropriate touching, people tend not to see its detrimental effect on a person and their self-worth. When people share their stories of lewd remarks, wolf whistling, or other things that have made them feel uncomfortable, many respond with remarks of, ‘so what’ and ‘that happens all the time’.
What the ‘me too’ campaign has shown us, is that sexual harassment comes in many different forms, from comments of a sexual nature either to or about a person, to touching that feels inappropriate, to in extreme circumstances, sexual violence and rape. It is highly subjective, but this does not minimize the effect that sexual harassment of any form can have on a person’s emotional wellbeing.

But we have the ability to reduce the occurrences and the impact of the sexual harassment that goes on around us, to make this something that our children do not have to face, if we get this right. We are all able to monitor the way we talk to and interact with other people. We should all be aware that we do not know what emotional baggage a person is walking into a room with. Therefore, when we interact with a person, we should get to know them, care about their wellbeing and form relationships with them, before we compliment their appearance. Not forming this relationship can cause a person to feel reduced to an aesthetic when we talk about how they look. It can make what we feel is a compliment, feel to them like a lewd remark.

We should also all be prepared to listen without casting our own opinions so that those of us who have suffered sexual harassment no longer need to be silenced by the fear of judgement from others. Further we need to not silence ourselves.

If we are prepared to listen without judgement, then those who need our help will be able to come forward. If we are prepared to be brave and speak up, then others who are scared may also find their voice. And ultimately if we are prepared to act with thought and consideration for the emotions of others, then we will look out for the welfare of our peers, and help people to feel safe and comfortable, and not silenced.

As a synagogue Alyth tries its best to engage with the problems in the world around us, and to provide support for one another when it is needed. We are working on doing this for the ‘me too’ campaign in two ways. Firstly we are offering individual support to anyone affected by the issues raised in today’s sermon, so please speak to me, Lynette Sunderland, our director of welfare, or Rabbi Mark for support. Secondly we are going to work together to respond to the problem as a community. The first step of responding to a problem is creating space to listen to each other. On Wednesday night here at Alyth there will be an unjudgmental listening and sharing space. We will begin together and then split into separate spaces for men and women, before coming back together to consider a Jewish response. We will see that our tradition has asked the question of how to respond to sexual harassment many times before. It is time for us to continue this work.

May silence no longer be the answer.