#MeToo: What’s Next?

A young girl comes home from school nearly in tears. She runs straight to her room, slamming the door. After giving her a few minutes to cool off, her mom slowly opens the door and sits next to her daughter on her bed. “Sweetie, what’s wrong,” she asks. Silence. Finally, the young girl whispers, “He told me I had a silly voice. That I sound like a cartoon character when I talk. I said no way but…” Her mom chuckles. “It’s not funny!” the young girl protests. “Oh sweetie,” her mom answers, “He’s only doing that because he likes you. That’s all. He probably thinks your voice is cute and he doesn’t know how to say it!”

And so it begins.

A lifetime of hearing: you’re reading it wrong.
Of making excuses.
Of being told, and then believing, that flattery is ok, even when it comes in the form of jeers or catcalls, even an unwanted touch. Of believing that we should feel privileged to receive the attention, that something must be wrong with us if we feel uncomfortable or demeaned: that we just don’t understand. We’re too sensitive. It’s on us, not them. Not the perpetrators.

Well I am done internalizing excuses.
I am done accepting the misogynistic comments because they stem from good intentions.
It’s time we take a good hard look at the intersections of power, violence, gender, and sexuality.
It’s time, it’s really past time, for a change.

Amidst the news coverage of the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse scandal, the #metoo campaign took over social media. Posts emerged everywhere - from Senator Elizabeth Warren to a college student sitting alone in her room, to our own friends and families.
#MeToo, it was everywhere.

Yet, friend after friend shared with me their struggles to post “Me Too.”
“Does my experience count?”
“It wasn’t that bad.”
“I haven’t told anyone before.”

My hand trembled before I posted.
It seemed so simple.
Two words. Me Too.
Already hundreds of thousands of posts.
But, but something still held me back.

Why? What was I worried about?
That someone would ask me a question I didn’t want to answer?
That no one would believe me?
“It couldn’t have happened to her, she knows better.”
But, despite these fears, I and so many others took the risk and posted. 2 million of us publicly declared Me Too within the first 48 hours of the original tweet’s posting.
It opened a floodgate of storytelling, awareness, and conversation.
We learned it is not just me too… It’s all of us too.

Yet… even with this overwhelming number of stories, even with celebrity after celebrity being called out, many of us still feel alone.
We live in a culture that constantly moves on to the next thing,
Leaving us behind, abandoning us, alone with our pain, silent once again.

The same loneliness that silenced Dinah thousands of years ago.

We meet our biblical ancestor Dinah when she leaves home. She encounters Shechem, the prince of the land. Vayikach otah – he took her, vayishkav otah – he lay her, va-y’a’ne’ha – he raped, violated, debased her. Shechem commits barbaric violence towards Dinah.

Yet, in the next moment – Shechem tries to change the story.
“Dinah – I did it because I love you. I want to marry you.”
Dinah’s brothers, Levi and Shimon, do not accept love under such conditions. They carry out a deceitful, bloody massacre of Shechem and his men.
They act without ever speaking to their sister.
Dinah’s father Jacob also never speaks about the tragic events to his daughter. His only words in this episode are in reaction to his sons’ violent actions.

Through all of this, Dinah herself is silent.
She neither speaks nor is she spoken to.

According to Genesis, her only act is her “going out” from the camp.
She is acted upon.
Others react around her.
What silenced Dinah? Shechem’s assault? Her brothers’ actions? Her father’s silence?
We never know.
She is at the center of the story, but invisible.

Dinah is not the only woman in our sacred texts who is violated sexually.
In II Samuel we read another story – the horrific rape of Tamar by Amnon, her half-brother and son of King David. Tamar’s brother tells her to keep quiet and deal with the aftermath alone.
In Judges 19, an unnamed Levite concubine is brutalized by a mob, raped, and left for dead on a doorstep.

Just as in Dinah’s narrative, horrendous violence follows each assault. Amnon is murdered by Tamar’s brother Absolom. Hundreds of women and men are slaughtered or kidnapped as sex slaves in the wars following the death of the Levite’s concubine.

We discern a pattern here - horrific violence accompanies the debasement of women. Instead of throwing out these stories from the canon or moving past these events quickly, the text lingers in these episodes. We do not get to look away and move on to the next story. We experience the bloody aftermath. I would never condone this violence, but I wonder if the pattern is here to teach us something. Perhaps the presence of extreme violence after sexual violence implies an understanding that sexually abusing women to exert one’s power is disgraceful. It’s wrong.
Sexual abuse does not showcase strength or virility; it is an injustice. The mistreatment of women highlights a society’s moral failings and the perpetrators must be dealt with handily.

Our ancient texts understand this reality, it is time contemporary society does so as well.

We need to expand the conversation about why these acts happen in the first place. The news may focus on the high-profile cases, but many different kinds of people commit sexual violence and many different kinds of people are victims of this violence.

These events happen every single day.
Now what?

Let us acknowledge that we live in what is termed a rape culture, defined by sociologists as a society that holds sexual intimidation and gender-based violence to a different standard than other forms of violence.

Rape Culture encourages male sexual aggression, sees violence as sexy, and assumes sexual violence is just a fact of life.1

Rape culture suggests Dinah should be flattered by Shechem's attention. That she was “asking for it” by going out from her home.

Rape culture allowed Harvey Weinstein and men like him to get away with raping and intimidating women for decades because “a million girls would kill for this job.”

Rape culture dismisses sexualized and suggestive language as locker-room talk.

Rape culture is so entrenched in our societal language, landscape, and experiences that even those accused of sexual abuse and sexual harassment still rise to political and cultural power.

We cannot abdicate our implicated responsibility.
All of us are culpable when voices are silenced and bodies are seen as objects not identities.

We are not “cute,” “beautiful,” or “adorable”
We are capable, resilient, creative.
Focusing on physical characteristics of a female colleague values external qualities above internal capabilities and strengths. It leans into old beliefs about a woman’s worth being centered on her appearance.

Ask, do not assume about someone’s desire for physical touch.
Ask before offering a “kiss hello” or a “hug goodbye.”

But it starts early on:
“Oh, give him hug!” we instruct our children when they meet someone new.
But then our kids are forced to open their arms and embrace others...without us asking the simple question..."Do you want to?"

Yes, even for a hug.
Long before a child is making decisions about sexual behavior, we can empower young people to own the choices about their bodies – to consent, or to say no.

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Dinah. Tamar. The unnamed concubine.  
Stories too often silenced. Stories witnessed in silence. 

These biblical examples are powerful.  
They are hard to read, but they teach us a poignant lesson –there is no place for sexual violence in a moral society.  
However, they do not provide a road map for next steps. 
They illustrate the problem, but do not offer a solution. 
That is on us. 
It is on us, all of us, to write the next chapter. 
We must raise up these stories and keep teaching them to remind us all – no more. No more silencing. 
Not of these women or intimidated survivors everywhere. 
As one survivor shared, “I am living your breaking news story every day.” 

How can we be the teachers and leaders who take this story from the headlines and into our daily work to bend this arc of human behavior toward justice? 

We begin… as always… by listening; 
Believe people when they share their stories. 
Say, “I hear you,” “I’m sorry,” and “How can I support you?” 

When this happened to me, I could not shake the guilt and embarrassment for a long time. 
It took a significant time and work to rebuild my sense of self, safety, courage, and trust. It is still an ongoing process of growth. 
But when someone close to me listened, truly listened, and sat in the discomfort with me, that helped me to move from surviving to healing. 

“Mom, he told me I had a silly voice!” 
“Well, what did you say to him?” 
“I said I like my voice. My voice is unique - just like me.” 
“I’m proud of you sweetie. That’s exactly what we talked about.”