This sermon was written in 1991 when Clarence Thomas was being considered for the Supreme Court.

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you."

When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say 'she is my sister,' so I took her as my wife? Now here is your wife; take her and be gone!" And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed (Gen. 12:10-20).

Where was Sarai's voice and reaction in all of this?

One might say Abram used Sarai because she was a woman. And because we do not know what she said or felt at the time, we look for a late 20th century explanation. Is this a case of sexual harassment circa 2000 BCE? Probably not. But it is a fortuitous connection for the coming together of Torah and the events of the past week.

Sarai is said to be quite beautiful, and so because of this she is asked to subject herself to a lie. And for this behavior, Abram gains great wealth according to the standards of his day. But the scheme has a downside. When Pharaoh learns the truth, he repudiates Abram's actions and banishes him from Egypt. Neither Abram nor Sarai is physically hurt, and Abram gets to keep his newly acquired riches.

Recently, one man was asked by another very powerful man to leave what was familiar to him; to subject himself to notoriety and fame; and even to accept a name change: from "Judge" to "Justice." Along the way, it is said that he also put pressure on at least
one woman, if not more, not to acquire riches, but because he was simply in a position to exercise great power over her.

Throughout the ages, men have gone forth from tribe, from home, from family — and because of their actions and position, founded cultures and societies. And thus the human norm and paradigm is male. Women, who stayed behind, were left behind, had no role in the making of society. Therefore, it is hard to find women's voice in history. They have lost their voice because they did not even have a chance to use it. There is a feeling of women's invisibility in Jewish tradition as well as in our country, judging by current events.

Judaism gives us an explanation. It says women are exempt from certain mitzvot because of their exalted role in the home and with family. But our actions and our language are such that if you make women exempt, there is a danger that you make them unnecessary. From exempt, it is an easy step to exclude. When you exclude, you debar. When you debar, you demote. When you demote, you demean! (Cythia Ozick) Sarai is demeaned by the obvious use of her sexuality in return for Abram's safety.

Anita Hill is demeaned by the reaction of the males of the Judiciary Committee, who either didn't think she acted feminine enough in her testimony, or conversely, demeaned by those who thought she played the silent victim too long by not coming forward sooner with her charge of sexual harassment against Thomas. Yet these males now claim a heightened awareness and sensitivity to this subject that was not demonstrated by their actions either during the hearings or recent vote. Many still do not understand what sexual harassment is or what it took for Anita Hill to come forward.

A big part of Reform tradition in this century is participation in social action causes. Reform Jews have been in the vanguard of social justice for all people. They have been in the forefront of change. But women and men cannot change everything they do not like about tradition. Women cannot change what is written in Torah. But they can add women's voices to our heritage. This is what modern midrash is all about. It is a process of education and recognition. It is about finding women's voices. Women do not want to reject Torah outright simply because it does not include them, but they do want to explore the text to develop their voices and feelings and roles within the context of what is written there.

However, reaction to current events is another matter. In the last few days, some women in this country have recognized that they are truly other and strangers and invisible in our form of government. And now there are cries for education and demonstration. A certain group of men has said that through the events of the past few days, they have been educated and sensitized to the issue of sexual harassment. But others say nothing has changed. And so there has been a call for women to take a more active role in the political process — to work to unseat those politicians who did not respond in a caring way to this most human of predicaments.

Pharaoh was visited by plagues and quickly reacted to turn Abram out of the country. No such ill befell the Senate to influence their action. However, Anita Hill's lk lk her going forth, has encouraged more women to come forward about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in our society.
I hope that there will come a time when the hurt and anger of the moment subsides — when more men and women will sense the importance of this issue.

If we look to Torah for guidance, we hear the words lk lk, go forth: From what is safe and comfortable to find your own voice and conscience on this matter. Our tradition tells us: Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.

Sexual harassment is bleeding into the psyche of our society. Examine your own conscience and lk lk

Go forth!