By Rabbi Jordan Helfman.

When my colleague, Rabbi Hannah Kingston, finished leading services at Aylth Gardens, Rabbi Marmur’s former pulpit, a congregant she had never met before walked up to her and said, ‘You don’t know me, I like what you say, but mostly I like how you look’. To which, she smiled and walked away.[1]

We all know a hundred stories like this, when women that we respect and care for were subject to overly-flattering (or non-flattering) comments. When attentions move from friendly to overly friendly. In another synagogue, when one of my colleagues became known colloquially as “the rabbi with the nice legs.”

And you know a hundred stories like this as well. Our own stories – where we have seen or heard or experienced something which crossed the line – to the stories of celebrities and politicians. In some stories, everyone knew, except the young intern. In others, no one knew, because no one spoke up.

In our parasha this week, we also have a repeating story – one that has been problematic for the Jewish people for at least 1,000 years – the sister-wife story.

What is the Sister-Wife story?

It appears three times – in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, and it goes something like this:

There was a famine, which caused our patriarch to go south.

As they were walking south, the patriarch turns to his wife and says, “Wow, I am noticing suddenly, that you are quite good looking! If any of these uncouth, barbaric southerners sees you, they will kill me and take you. I’m concerned about my life, so please lie, and tell them that you are my sister, and then I’ll survive.”

When they arrive, the people in the south take the wife, and then God steps in. Realizing their mistake, they give Abraham or Isaac lots of money, and tell him to leave.

According to scholars, including my and Rabbi Satz’s professor, Rabbi David Aaron, this is a case of re-written scripture – where an original story had gaps, which the imagination could fill in in a way which would challenge God’s power, Abraham and Isaac’s love for their spouses, or even could imply that our matriarchs had suffered unwanted sexual advances while their husbands stood by, worried about their skin.

We see this story not only three times in the Torah told in different ways- but we also find in the Deas Sea Scrolls, at least two retellings – in the book of Jubilees, and in the Genesis Apocryphon – books written to plug these gaps in imagination.
I’ve spent some time on the Genesis Apocryphon text, which is the longest of these re-writes. And it provides lots of cover for Abraham – that he went south only after much meditation and praying… and only because they wanted to hire him for his great scribal knowledge and wisdom and truth… And so as he heads south with is Sister (who is really his wife), knowledge of her reaches the ears of the king. Here is the description that the king’s advisors give him.

How irresistible and beautiful is the image of her face, how lovely her forehead, soft the hair of her head! How graceful are her eyes and how precious her nose- every feature of her face is radiating beauty! How lovely is her breast, and how beautiful her white complexion! As for her arms, how beautiful they are! And her hands, how perfect they are! Every view of her hands is stimulating! How graceful are her palms, and how long and thin are all the fingers of her hands! Her legs are of such beatify and her thighs are so perfectly apportioned! There is not a virgin or bride who enters the bridal chamber more beautiful than she. Her beauty surpasses that of all women, since the height of her beauty sores above them al! And alongside her beauty she possesses great wisdom. Everything about her is lovely.

And so the king, desires her, and takes her. They try to kill Abraham, but she says, “No, he is my brother!” so instead they make him rich.” -Daniel A. Machiela’s translation, slightly edited.

High praises for her wisdom. It gets a lot of verses here.

There are two themes I want to focus on in this story. The first is the culture of the place, and the second is the passivity of the woman.

Why do Abraham and Isaac turn to their wives and say “Say you are my sister?” Because, the rabbis tell us, they are entering a new culture.

That beauty is cultural – and that rules of civility are also cultural. We know this from shifts in our own culture, as mores moved from the Edwardian era into the roaring 20s, the long sixties and to where we are today.

Here is an excerpt from a sermon by a prominent Reform Rabbi in NYC,

“The universe is based upon two elements, the masculine and the feminine. This is the dual nature of all creation… Man and woman, each has his particular place in the world, and each must abide in it… Woman’s natural sphere is the home. Her domain is spiritual more than material – religion and morals rather than business and speculation – purity and simplicity above the dross and ostentation of social victories. The home of man must be the world – the world of woman must be the home. – Joseph Silverman March 18, 1907.
This has nothing to do with Rabbi Silverman – who was a progressive, concerned with preserving Judaism through strong women, and looking to empower and create a Sisterhood chapter at his synagogue. For his culture is his excuse.

Just like for Pharaoh and Abimelech – their culture is their excuse. Abraham knew the culture when he went south, Isaac was prepared, and they prepared their wives to endure the abuse they would likely encounter. To smile and walk away – if possible. Or, really in this case, to grin and bear it, because with the famine in this story’s setup, it was suffer under another man or likely die.

And that is the second part that I want to focus on in this parasha- the passivity of the women. The Divine drama is unfolding about them. In the first Abraham drama, Sara goes, lives in Pharaoh’s house, does what is needed of her, and only when God intervenes does Sara get returned to Abraham. In the Isaac story, Rebecca is there following along, a man is about to go out to lay with her, and Abimelech sees Isaac fondling her, and calls the whole thing off.

The women here, are passive. Are silent in the face of the culture around them – Their husbands aren’t directly their harassers – but the husbands are happy to let the culture continue if it means not sticking their necks out- and the women follow their lead.

And this – This is the shift that we are witnessing around us at this moment in history.

The culture has once again shifted. Known harassers are being named. Things that were just ‘creepy’ are being raised as criminal. The bar has lifted.

The hashtag #metoo in recent weeks has been a way for women to speak. Abuses and harassment that was once silent is now getting voice. Inappropriate touching, hands on knees when hands have no business of being on knees. Comments that were once tactless, yet we could once smile through, are now inappropriate.

Men are doing mental inventories – when might I have crossed the line – when might I have made someone uncomfortable – put someone in a situation they felt they couldn’t speak up in or say ‘no’ in. When was the power with me, and not with my intern, my student, my mentee? What did I say that I should not have?

And thus, as we censor a bit more – our actions and our words – we retract ourselves – do tzimtzum – so that others who once felt oppressed can rise up out of a place of fear and live with physical and emotional safety.

Rabbi Kingston, at Alyth, knows that by speaking out it will inspire others to do the same.

“When you have a chorus of voices it is easier to join in.”
Today we add Sara and Rebecca’s name to the chorus. Them too. When we have a chorus of voices, it is easier to join in.