The Stories We Tell

Stop me if you’ve heard this one: A boss propositions a subordinate. The subordinate says no. The boss tries again and again, but is rebuffed each time. Finally, the boss spreads lies about the subordinate and has the subordinate fired, ruining the subordinate’s reputation and career. You may have read this story in the New York Times, but you can also find it in this week’s Torah portion, Vayeshev. Joseph, Jacob’s favorite son, is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and is eventually brought to serve Potiphar, one of pharaoh’s officers. Potiphar’s wife sees that Joseph is handsome and decides she has to have him. She doesn’t beat around the bush, but simply says to Joseph, “Lie with me!” Joseph refuses, saying, “Look, my master gives no thought to what is in this house; all that he owns he has put into my hands…. He has withheld nothing from me, other than you, since you are his wife; how then could I do this great evil, and thus sin against God?” (Gen. 39:8-9). But Potiphar’s wife doesn’t take no for an answer, and tries to seduce Joseph day after day. One day, Joseph finds himself alone with her in the house, and she seizes the opportunity to grab ahold of Joseph by his clothing and demand, “Lie with me!” He runs away, leaving the garment in her hand. Potiphar’s wife then takes his garment and uses it as evidence to accuse him of attempted rape. Potiphar hears the story and, enraged, sends Joseph to prison.

The story has a happy ending, though. Right after he is imprisoned, the Torah says, “Yet the Eternal was with Joseph, and extended kindness to him” (Gen. 39:21). God protects Joseph while he is in prison, and God’s kindness will eventually lead Joseph to become Pharaoh’s right-hand man. The incident with Potiphar’s wife is just one of many trials that Joseph endures on his journey from favorite son to Pharaoh’s vizier. It makes a good story.

Our biblical narrative has many of the same elements as the recent news stories about sexual misconduct, with one glaring difference: in our parashah, it is a man who is the victim and a woman who is the offender. This is a crucial piece of the story. The tale of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife is really only interesting to the biblical narrator because although Potiphar’s wife has a higher status than Joseph and holds some power over his life and liberty, she does not have the social or physical strength to dominate him completely. Joseph still has agency and the plot therefore has
suspense. Will he give in to Potiphar’s wife or won’t he? What will be the consequences if he does sleep with her? In later Jewish tradition, the moral of the story seems to be that because Joseph is righteous, he withstands the temptation of committing adultery and proves himself worthy of God’s favor. Joseph is a hero.

Imagine, for a moment, that the genders were reversed, and the Torah told the story of a female slave who refused to sleep with her male master. It is hard to envision such a story, and, indeed, no such story exists in the Bible, because it simply was not possible. A master would not have to say, “Lie with me” as Potiphar’s wife did; he would just take the woman and use her as he liked. In this scenario, there is no conversation, no drama, no story worth telling.

We may think we have come a long way from those days of ancient patriarchal society, but, as Faulkner put it, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” The recent exposure of the sexual misconduct of politicians, actors, journalists, and executives shows just how widespread misogynistic and sexist attitudes and behavior still are. And until just a couple of months ago, these were, like our imaginary biblical scenario, non-stories. Everyone knew Harvey Weinstein was a predator, but no one did anything about it.¹ Unlike our hero Joseph, the victims of Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Al Franken, and all the others were not rewarded for refusing their bosses’ sexual advances; in some cases, they were not given the chance to refuse in the first place. And for those who did get to refuse, they were met not with praise or promotions, but with suspicion, intimidation, and retaliation. It is no wonder that most women never report incidents of sexual harassment or sexual assault.²

There is cause for some cautious optimism, though. Many people are talking about a “sea change” in the reaction to sexual harassment and assault in light of recent events. More women are willing to tell their stories, more journalists are willing to publish their stories, and more people in positions of power are willing to listen to their stories and take action against the perpetrators. It is becoming obvious to more and more people that sexual harassment and violence against women should not be

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/05/us/harvey-weinstein-complicity.html?_r=0
tolerated in our society. And as sexual harassment lawyer Lynne Bernabei points out, “I think what makes this point in history so important is part of healing from sexual harassment or sexual assault is women… being able to tell their stories and have somebody listen.”3 Instead of being nameless, faceless, secret victims, women like Ashley Judd, Susan Fowler, Isabel Pascual, and Adama Iwu are speaking. They’re speaking, and we’re listening.

It just so happens that this Shabbat has been designated Human Rights Shabbat by T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. On December 10, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this declaration, representatives from around the world agreed that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” These rights include “life, liberty and security of person” and “the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.”4 Nearly 70 years ago, the world declared that all people, regardless of sex, have the same rights to freedom, security, and dignity. And over 3000 years ago, the Torah, in spite of its patriarchal worldview, declared that “God created the human being in God’s image… male and female, God created them” (Gen. 1:27). We haven’t yet made these words a reality. But through the stories we tell and the stories we are willing to hear, we come closer and closer to that divine promise.

3 https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/women-are-speaking-up-about-sexual-harassment-is-a-sea-change-coming