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#MeToo & Vayishlach

I have a confession to make to you – one that you may find yourself agreeing with. I fear that I’ve become desensitized to so much of what is going on in the world around us.

Another mass shooting.
Another bombing with hundreds of victims.
Another scandal.
Another tweet.
Another racist video.
Another highly visible man removed from his position in the public eye, because of his own acts of sexual assault or misconduct.

I hear these stories on the radio, read them in the newspaper. And there are actually times when I don’t even talk about them with another human being – or worse yet, when I turn off the news podcast, or change the channel to a sitcom, or shift to reading something more heartwarming.

Now of course, there is something to be said for self-preservation. We cannot be bombarded by news all day long and hold onto our sanity; we have to give ourselves a break sometime. But what about the times when we shrug our shoulders after the latest human-instigated catastrophe, after the latest revelations of terrible actions, and say – “nothing is going to change anyway.”

I really fear that I’m becoming desensitized – and not just me, but our society. And what happens next is that we stop listening, we stop hearing, even at moments and to people that call out, begging for us to notice and respond.

If we surveyed most people who know a little something about our Bible, and asked, how many children did Jacob have, most would answer, “12!” How do we know that there are 12? Well, there are 12 tribes of Israel! Turns out, they would all be wrong. Because, in fact, Jacob had at least 13 children – 12 sons, and at least 1 daughter whom we know by name, Dinah – a daughter whose story is not one we teach in Religious School. Because in this week’s Torah portion, we read,

“One day, Dinah, Leah’s daughter whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the locality, and Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, the local prince, saw her; he took her and lay her down and violated her. He was then captivated by Jacob’s daughter Dinah and, falling in love with the young woman, spoke tenderly to the young
woman. So Shechem said to his father Hamor, “Obtain this girl for me as my wife.”’” [Gen. 34:1-4]

Not once in this narrative do we hear from Dinah. She has no voice. Yes, her brothers respond in a brutal manner. But she is never given the opportunity to speak her truth. And so we continue in our narrative, returning to our previously scheduled programming, back to the more pleasant storyline of Jacob and his brother Esau, who have reunited after years apart. I imagine what Dinah might have shared, had she been given the space. And I think she might have begun something like, Me Too.

Because this is not a new story. And Dinah is not the only biblical character to be assaulted, to have her body violated. We may not feel comfortable about this – we may question why such a terrible story is part of our sacred narrative. And that is a reasonable question to ask. What is not reasonable is to ignore that this story exists. Because by doing so, we allow the behavior that has existed for millennia to get a free pass.

In the last number of weeks, I have been a part of multiple versions of the following conversation. Someone says to me: “Can you believe it? Harvey Weinstein? Did you hear? Matt Lauer? Not Garrison Keillor?! How could this all be happening now?”

And I respond: “It’s nothing new.”

I am so grateful that I have never been assaulted. But I cannot even begin to count the number of times people have said incredibly inappropriate things to me, laced with innuendo. This happens to women (and, to some men) every single day. This is nothing new.

“In the weeks since The New York Times and The New Yorker first broke stories of the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein’s decades-long abuse of women he worked with, the hashtag #MeToo has exploded on social media as a vehicle for women to share their stories. For perhaps the first time in history, powerful men are falling, like dominos, and vulnerable women are being believed. But the #MeToo moment has become something larger: a lens through which we view the world, a sense of blinders being taken off.”

-- Jessica Bennett, the gender editor of the New York Times, wrote this in a column two days ago.

And I certainly hope so. I pray that we are able to keep our blinders off, that they don’t go back on the second we feel ourselves becoming overwhelmed by too much bad in the world.

I don’t have easy answers. There are none. But that doesn’t mean I can give up asking the questions. Like – why is it that so many people, including my enlightened male friends, had no idea about the pervasiveness of this problem? Why haven’t I shared my stories with them? Why do I only share them with other women?

Our Talmud warns us, “Shtikah k’hoda’ah damya – silence is tantamount to acceptance.”
Why is it that so many people knew about these abusers, and said nothing? Why did those in the know remain silent?

How can we help create a world where victims do not feel compelled to remain silent – where victims do not feel ashamed to speak out – where we stop blaming those who are violated?

This week we read the story about Dinah. It is not Dinah’s story – because she is not the one to tell it.

How can we be better listeners, so that the Dinahs in our midst are able to share their stories?

“We cannot chant and study these stories [of our Torah] only to roll the scroll, shelve the [commentary], and walk away. These stories are not the stuff of history; they remain clarion calls for protest today, along with all the stories that begin with “me too”. Listen to them deeply. Stories are how we make change.” ii

So what can we do?
We can commit to not turning away.
We can fight against complacency, against feeling desensitized.
“We can read.
We can rise.
We can engage with the systemic issues of gender and sexual exploitation that continue to compromise not just women, but all of our physical and moral integrity.
What will we say next time we become aware?
Next time we’re asked to turn aside?
Will we speak louder?
More boldly?” iii

I really hope so.

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iv Thanks to the following articles for inspiration:
Me Too’ Through the Ages by Rabbi Joshua Franklin (http://easthamptonstar.com/Opinion/20171108/Me-Too-Through-Ages-Rabbi-Joshua-Franklin);
Dinah and the #MeToo campaign (Sharona Margolin Halickman; http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/dinah-and-the-meto-campaign/);
Is #MeToo Biblical? (Caleb A Schaaf; https://www.facebook.com/notes/caleb-a-schaaf/is-metoo-biblical/10155286705979121/)