#MeToo: The Language and the Flood
Parashat Noach
Isaac M. Wise Temple - October 20, 2017

Did you know that in Israel, hamantashen are usually not called hamantashen? I was pretty surprised to learn this when I was a rabbinical student in Jerusalem. I walked into my favorite bakery and tried to order some. They were confused. I was confused. Turns out, they call them “oznei Haman,” which means ears of Haman. Makes sense. I mean, as we all know, Haman's ears were notorious for being clogged up with delicious killings!

Who'd have thought that such a basic item of a Jewish holiday would cause me a communication problem… in Israel?!? Servatii (local bakery) knows what they are!

We have part of this week's Torah portion - Noach - to thank, if we look for a Biblical answer for the discrepancy. All the people, following the flood, gather and build a great city. There they begin construction on a great tower that will reach the heavens. God, leery of the power of humanity - and their power to do evil - decided to disperse the people and confuse their language. That would limit their ability to plot and collaborate to come too close to the heavens, which were not their realm. The story serves both to warn that there are places we should not go and powers that we should not seek, and as an origin story for how there came to be people all over the world speaking different languages.

It’s really the lesser known of this portion's two major stories - the flood and Noah's ark is the other. The Torah calls Noah righteous in his generation, and that is the reason that God taps him to build an ark and save all of Earth’s species. Righteous in his generation. We don’t really know what that means. Was he actually righteous, and everyone else wasn’t? Or was he relatively righteous for such an otherwise hideous generation of humanity?

What was wrong with the generation? Why were they so worthy of punishment? Commentators have suggested many possibilities, but it seems they were generally given over to evil inclinations. They cheated each other in the marketplace, they ignored God because they had all they needed so what did they need to pray for, they were sexually immoral, swapping wives and the like. They lost the will, or the ability, to see the divine in others, to care about dignity for others. That was their generation.

Ours is not devoid of holiness, as the report suggests theirs almost was. But neither is ours devoid of inability to care for the dignity of others. Harvey Weinstein is our generation. Presidents, current and past, with checkered histories of sexual harassment and assault are ours. Entertainers… and office managers, party-goers, subway riders,
cashiers, clergy, friends, family, teachers, laws, traditions, customs, police, judges, human resources offices, media... are all ours, and all have contributed to a world whose workings have, for too long, allowed for the objectification, subjugation, and harming of women and girls.

So pervasive was the immorality in Noah’s generation that God saw fit to destroy nearly all the earth’s inhabitants with flood waters. So pervasive, since then, has been the normalization of treating women as somehow “less than,” that the women in our lives, in our communities, in our country, and around the world are able to flood the communications platforms of the world this week with #MeToo stories.

What are #MeToo stories? For those unfamiliar, in recent days, women on social media networks have been posting the words “me too,” sometimes along with specific stories of harassment or abuse or rape or inappropriateness, and sometimes without specifics. The call they are answering was an invitation to any women who have experienced any of these things to share the words, ‘me too,’ in the hopes that they could shine a light on just how widespread certain behaviors and attitudes toward women, and certain experiences of women are.

The hope was that it could make evident the pervasiveness of a wide range of behaviors that mistreat women. Behaviors that are either accepted or not dependably recognized or punished, and that none of us would want for our daughters, mothers, sisters, wives, or friends. Toward the goal of showing how widespread the problem is #MeToo has been, in my view, wildly successful. It has really helped to show the extent to which women are subjected to violence, fear, discomfort, and more, in ways that are baked deeply into our society, our culture, our organizations, our schools, and our streets. It has shed more light on the problem.

So what to do? If we’re not okay with it – and we shouldn’t be – and I’ve seen so many responses proclaiming as much, what do we do?

I hope we’ll all take extra care to notice when a woman is being leered at, talked over, followed, joked with inappropriately. When her appearance is being commented on in a situation where a man in the same position would never draw such comments. When a woman or girl – or any person, but this is about women – when a woman tells us something has happened to her, I hope we’ll all take extra care to listen, to believe, to help. I hope we men will not be defensive about whether we are complicit, but that we’ll go on the offensive to make sure we aren’t like Noah’s generation – accepting things that we know are, but should not be.

There’s no need to be defensive. There’s a need to listen and be aware. As my good friend from camp and NFTY wrote this week:
“Being a man does not mean you are a rapist or someone who commits sexual harassment. Being Christian does not make you anti-Semitic or an Islamophobe. Being white does not make you a racist, and being straight does not make you homophobic. But it does put you in the mainstream majority of that particular dynamic. And no matter what you may think, it does mean that you do not know what it is like to walk in the shoes of someone on the other side.”

He writes much more, but concludes by asking that when someone from the other side tells us they’re being made to feel a certain way, we listen, rather than argue.

“Anyone complaining about things like #MeToo,” he writes “should really take a long hard look at why they find it so upsetting. And if they're being honest with themselves, they really might not like the answer.” He closes, “Be tolerant. Be more willing to understand. Be less defensive. Be better.”

Good advice all around.

When stories of harassment, abuse, inappropriateness, rape, inequality, and objectification are shared, we know there are lots more that someone is not willing to share. And when those stories are shared, we know now, if we didn’t before, that way too many of us are able to say, “me too.”

God scattered the people and confused their language, but this week, people have found words they can share, two words we can all understand, and which call us all to listen and act.

May the day come soon that all women can say of feeling safe and respected, “me too.” And may the day come soon when people are sharing stories of how they’ve become more committed to protecting the safety and honoring the dignity of every other person. And may each of us be able to chime in and say, “me, too.” Amen.