On Yom Kippur, over and over again, we recite...

*Al Chet Shechatalu Lefanecha*...

For the sin we have committed against You....

And then we rattle off a list of sins, some of which we may have committed,

Some we know someone else did,

And some of which we have no idea what they even mean.

Like: for the sin we have committed by “casting off the yoke of Heaven.”

What does that even mean?

What do we *really need* to be atoning for this year?

This year, with the advent of the #MeToo movement, with so many people being publicly outed for their sins, it’s time we look at our sins through a new lens and address how to atone for them.

*Al chet Shechatalu lefanecha*, for the sin we have committed against You ..... 

By not believing victims

By blaming victims

By using others for our own gain

By claiming equality exists for all

By living in a world where harassment is tolerated

By not providing safe work environments
By not holding perpetrators accountable

By silencing victims

......For all of these transgressions, God, help us rectify the evil we have brought about, help us restore justice through the hard work of repentance, and only then, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

(adapted from Rabbi Mary L. Zamore’s writing on #MeToo; The Atonement Prayers We Should All Say, In The #MeToo Era, September 7, 2018, The Forward, by Danya Ruttenberg, S. Bear Bergman, Leah Greenblum, Emily Becker, Abby Citrin)

Al chet Shechatanu lefanecha, for the sin we have committed against You by not believing victims.

Countless victims walk around everyday having tried to tell their story and they’ve been ignored or vilified. Emma Sulkowicz, a senior at Columbia in 2014 was raped in a dorm room. Emma complained and nothing happened. But Emma was relentless. This 4th year student needed to be heard and believed. Each day, Emma carried a 50 lb mattress through the campus. Emma wanted to show the entire community that this was an unbearable weight. And still nothing happened. He was never charged.

Al chet Shechatanu lefanecha, for the sin we have committed against You .....by blaming the victims

Monica Lewinsky, Anita Hill, Joyce Maynard, Selma Heyek.....

In the Talmud we learn that Rabbi Yosei from Yokrat saw a familiar man spying on his daughter. He knew him because this student had previously asked to marry his
daughter, but the father had refused. Why? The Talmud doesn’t tell us, but clearly he felt the guy wasn’t her beshert.

Like any father would do, he walked right up to the Peeping-Tom and said, “What are you looking at?”

“Your daughter sir. You won’t let me marry her, so I’ll just gaze at her.”

Rabbi Yosei, feeling insulted and blamed by the onlooker, immediately turned around, walked up to his daughter and said, “Why are you causing men to stare at you? Why are you provoking his bad behavior? It’s your fault.” (Taanit 24a)

Al chet Shechatanu lefanecha, for the sin we have committed against You .....by using others for our own gain.

In the Second century, rabbis traveled from town to town teaching their Torah to different communities. Away from their wives and craving intimacy and attention they would solicit women to be their lover during their visit. They’d walk into a town and announce, “Who will be my bride for the night?” (Yoma 18b) Basically they were asking these women for sex with no strings attached. As was the custom, either fathers would bring forth their daughters for a quickie marriage and a fee, or a vulnerable widow might step forward. The next day, divorce papers were served, the marriage was over and the rabbi presumably went back home to his wife. Except what happened to the woman who was his “bride for the night”? Was she tarnished forever, now not a virgin, or was she permanently forced into a world of rabbinic prostitution?

Al chet Shechutanu lefanecha, for the sin we have committed against You .....by claiming equality exists for all.
When I was in rabbinical school, I truly believed I was an equal to men. My professors, my classmates all treated me as one of them. And I believed it. It wasn’t until I was interviewing for my first job that I was told, I was not right for the job. The senior rabbi was a woman, thus for balance they needed a man to be the assistant. Turns out they weren’t looking for the best candidate; rather they needed different genitalia for the job.

*Al chet Shechatanu lefanecha*, for the sin we have committed against You ..... by living in a world where harassment is tolerated.

In the Talmud there’s a story about a man on his deathbed; yet even facing death, all he talked about was being with a particular woman.

His *doctors* said, “*We’ll cure you. Sleep with the woman.*” (Between you and me, I never knew that sex could cure terminal illness?!)

The Sages, knowing this was absurd said: “Let him die.”

The *doctors* rebutted them, “At least let her *stand naked* before him.”

The *Sages* said: “Let him die.”

The doctors in a last desperate attempt *suggested* she just talk to him gently *from behind a fence.*

Perhaps the doctors were just trying to give this sick old man (and I mean *sick*) some comfort before he died. Or they were serious. Either way, the fact that the rabbis engaged in this crazy dialogue with the doctors (and then recorded it!) gives us a window into how the rabbis struggled with the cultural norm. (Sanhedrin 71a)
Al chet Shechatanu lefanecha, for the sin we have committed against You ..... by not providing safe work environments.

When I was in my mid-20s I volunteered to visit an older man at his retirement home in the Fairfax area. One day in the elevator, he tried to kiss me. On the one hand, I could have just written it off. He was senile and lonely. What’s the big deal? But in that moment, trapped in the elevator, I felt scared and violated. I never went back.

A friend of mine was about to appear on a national morning show. Moments before the taping, one of the co-hosts asked to meet with her privately in his office to go over notes. There, seconds before their segment, he propositioned her – which she rebuffed. She was never invited back.

Al Chet Shechatanu Lefanecha... for the sin of not holding perpetrators accountable.

As far back as Talmudic times, even though people knew that sexual misconduct was wrong, they still did it because there were no consequences. Nothing.

The rabbis had all kinds of punishments for bad behavior.

- They could have put sexual perpetrators in cherem – which was a type of excommunication - but they didn’t. (Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, Talmud Torah, Ch 6, 13-14)

- They could have fined the offenders – but they didn’t.

- The rabbis could have withheld prestigious honors or positions of leadership from them– but they didn’t.
The rabbis did nada, nothing, zilch.

Al Chet Shechatanu Lefanecha... for the sin of silencing victims.

The Equal Opportunity Employment Commission reports receiving 12,000 allegations of sex-based harassment every year, but this is probably the tip of the iceberg, given that when victims try to speak up they’re often

● silenced with financial settlements

● or forced into nondisclosure agreements,

leaving society clueless as to how prevalent sexual harassment really is. (Do We Believe Women? Nation Takes Fresh Look At Sexual Harassment, Clyde Haberman, NYT, Oct 17, 2017)

When Richard O’Connor, was 10 years old he was sexually abused by his priests. He didn’t dare tell his mom because he was taught that priests were like “Jesus Christ himself.” His mom only found out when she saw blood on his laundry. Though his parents wrote to the senior pastor, and though he discovered later that 10 other kids were in his situation, they never went public. A code of silence followed that priest from church to church. (Decades of Damage: Trail of Pain in Church Crisis Leads to Nearly Every Diocese, NY, Laurie Goodstein)

We - have - sinned.

We can’t keep living like this.

It’s chilul ha’shem, it’s truly a desecration of God’s name.

As you’ve heard our Jewish tradition isn’t pretty.

How we’ve treated women is far from stellar.
But thank goodness that’s not our entire story....

Once a year, today, Yom Kippur - the holiest day of the year, in traditional communities Leviticus 18 is read as the afternoon Torah reading. Leviticus 18 is a fierce admonishment to the entire community that sexual abuse is unacceptable and must stop. It’s also a warning of rebuke to the perpetrators that such acts are violations of power. (Megillah 31a)

Wow. Centuries before the #MeToo movement, the rabbis were woke.

This is curious and gutsy.

Curious because we’re almost at the end of this 25-hour ritual of purification, why remind everyone of all our sexual misconduct just as we’re about to turn a new page?

And gutsy, because the rabbis are telling us that sexual abuse is wrong. We are broken. We should be embarrassed. We must acknowledge that we’re a community in which sexual violence happens every day and we can’t ignore it. We can’t say it doesn’t happen in our community.

I pray that the countless victims, from centuries past until today, upon hearing these words, feel a measure of comfort and peace knowing that what was done to them was a crime. That we may not have listened as we should have, or taken action to punish the perpetrators. We know we’ve fallen short. But today on the most important day of the year, we confess that we have a problem, and we won’t turn a blind eye.

I hope you’ll have a chance to read these words of Torah on your own, and pass them on to friends who may find strength in knowing that the Jewish community
stands behind them. And that reading Leviticus 18 gives you some measure of peace knowing that we are part of a tradition that knows and acknowledges that sexual misconduct is unacceptable and wrong.

Except..... I’m concerned about the other 364 days of the year. What about tomorrow?

This year I’m hopeful, because times are really changing.

The MeToo movement started in 2007. Tarana Burke, a 44 year old black woman created the campaign as a grass-roots movement for sexual assault survivors in underprivileged communities. Except it didn’t take hold until actress Alyssa Milano asked her followers to share their stories of sexual harassment using the phrase “#Me Too” that the message went viral and became an international conversation.

Now, fueled by crude comments from the person who holds our highest office in the U.S. of America, energized by the anger and courage of victims of all genders and ages who speak out by name, and informed by the courageous reporting of journalists like Ronen Farrow – we’re at the cusp of what could be a sea change.

I’m hopeful that this year, more than ever, real action is taking place, and the world is listening:

● Millions of people marched in Women’s Marches across the world protesting the atrocities of the past

● Courts of law that are beginning to convict perpetrators

● Brave men and women, intersex, non-binary, and LGBTQ people are speaking out and sharing their painful stories – and we’re listening.
Many men are now questioning what it means to be male, how their feelings manifest in their bodies, and how emotions of toxic shame and emasculation can lead to rationalizing awful behavior. (Me, #MeToo and Therapy, Avi Klein, NYT, July 1, 2018).

The Notorious R.B.G. continues to fight tirelessly for women’s rights on the Supreme Court and Gloria Alred always believes her clients.

Parents of this new generation are teaching their boys and girls a culture of consent and care around other people’s bodies and souls (He Asked Permission to Touch, but Not to Ghost, NYT, Courtney Sender, Sept. 7, 2018)

This year we’re saying in word and deed that sexual misconduct is no longer acceptable as we’ve watched some of the most powerful people in Hollywood, politics, sports, medicine, corporate America and clergy of all faiths - accused, outed and fall from grace – as we finally say enough is enough.

And we’re just getting started. Right after Rosh HaShannah, the Jewish Week reported that one of America’s Jewish mega-philanthropists who has enabled thousands of kids to go on Birthright, has been accused of multiple counts of sexual misconduct and Netanyahu’s top aide has stepped down due to similar accusations. These Jewish men and many others who were once seen as “untouchables” and “beloved” because of their power, and our desire to protect the Jewish values of community, lashon ha’ra, and shalom bait, are beginning to be seen for who they really are. (#metoo in the Jewish Community, Dr. Elana Maryles Sztokman, ejewishphilanthropy.com , Sept 18, 2018)

But this isn’t enough. As we begin the New Year, it’s time for us at Temple Israel of Hollywood to discuss what our response needs to be to this epidemic. What will we do as a community to continue to eradicate this behavior?
How will we create safe work environments?

How will we invite people to feel safe to share their stories?

How will we protect our victims?

How will we hold the perpetrators accountable?

I have some ideas:

First, write Education Secretary Betsy DeVos in protest. She’s preparing an unprecedented roll-back of Title IX guidelines that have (in the past) helped create the framework colleges have used to combat sexual violence for over 20 years. Her proposed policy would change the definition of sexual harassment on college campuses by:

● narrowing sexual assault to repeat offenders and the most egregious allegations;

● holding colleges accountable for formal complaints only when they are filed through “proper authorities”;

● allowing victims to be cross examined by their perpetrators;

● and requiring that the assault take place ON campus, even though the majority of college students don’t live on campus. (New US Sexual Misconduct Rules Bolster Rights of Accused and Protect Colleges, NYT, Aug 29, 2019)

We need to speak up and protest these proposed changes that will put undue burden on victims. Title IX can’t be watered down. Make your voice heard.

Second, let’s take this momentum to tell our stories and encourage others to do so. Come in and tell me your story. I’m listening. I’m prepared to take action with you if necessary.
And tell your close friends your stories. And best friends: when you hear people’s truths, go beyond listening and giving comfort, take action too.
And tell your teens and adult children your stories. We need to hear how prevalent these abuses are, in order to make a change.
And when you hear a new story, don’t think to yourself – “Here we go again. It’s the new normal” and not blink an eye. It’s not the new normal. We can’t stop being outraged, that would be even more dangerous.

Third, stop tolerating locker-room sexist or misogynist remarks. Speak up. Don’t be a bystander by pretending to ignore that lewd comment thinking, “it’s just talk.” The rabbis taught us that treating any person as a sexual object infects our entire society, even those who don’t hear what’s said.

The 20th century leader Rabbi Soloveitchik taught, “Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out, or cast into the depths of the sea.... sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin... that can be used to bring one to new heights.” (Peli, Soloveitchik on Repentance, p. 254-55)

Today’s our time to climb to new heights.

To hold the memory of sin and never forget

And to let that be a motivation to change our society’s ills.

Only then can we fulfill the dream of the rabbis: that upon hearing the words of Leviticus 18, one day we will turn to each other and say, “Those sins are from a bygone era. They’re not our sins, because we’ve done the work”

and then we’ll live in a world where respect, honor and love prevail.