

For all intents and purposes, the first President I really remember during my lifetime is Bill Clinton. Although technically born during the Reagan administration and having my first few years during the first Bush administration, my earliest memories of politics come from the Clinton administration. And yes, I recognize this won't help the comments of "how old are you, 25?"

Nonetheless, I offer this little tidbit because Lauren and I have been engrossed recently in FX's limited series *Impeachment*, a retelling of the Clinton Impeachment trial. While I have some scant memories of the trial, I was not yet immersed or knowledgeable enough to fully comprehend what was happening at the time. It's a fascinating look back into one of the more notable events in contemporary American politics. I was struck in a recent episode by a comment President Clinton made.

As President Clinton begins preparing for his deposition and grows frustrated with the line of questioning, he loudly exclaims about how no President before him has ever had as many women as he's had in his cabinet. Arguing that no one could ever question his actions with women because of his hiring policies. "No one supports women more than me." I'm not sure if that line was explicitly uttered but none of us would be surprised for it to have actually followed his argument here. It's the "I have a ton of Black friends" argument for issues of sexual impropriety.

So it was apt then that this very week, we heard some other damning evidence about another powerful man and his inappropriate actions when it came to women, among other groups. John Gruden was most recently the head coach of the NFL's Las Vegas Raiders.

He was held in pretty high esteem for the majority of his career. Then, last week, a trove of e-mails was released in which Gruden explicitly and severely denigrated the gay community, the Black community, and yes, women. In the brouhaha that ensued, Gruden used the phrase, "I don't have a racist blade in me," which to me feels like an analog to Clinton's, look at all the women in my cabinet. Gruden too objectified, sent pictures, and made abhorrent comments about NFL cheerleaders and female officials.

We didn't need this incident nor the Clinton impeachment trial to tell us we have a problem with how we treat women in our world. How we speak and act with regard to women has been a problem for as long as we have been around, both in private and public.

Even with all the advancement toward equality that we have made, there is still so much work to be done. Of course, there are the major issues like sex trafficking and violence against women. The WHO's studies show that Across their lifetime, 1 in 3 women, around 736 million, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner – a number that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade.

These statistics are staggering.

Today though I want to talk about the smaller ways in which we (and I certainly include myself in this) are complicit in perpetuating a culture that allows for this type of behavior to remain more subtly. How does our language shift when talking with women? How do our office cultures maintain some of these behaviors? How does our physical interaction in totally platonic and normative settings further these problematic cultural mores.

As I stated before, while this is a topic of the moment, it is also a topic of forever, stretching as far back as our parshah today. Scattered across the corpus of Rabbinic and Scriptural literature, are stories of women, sometimes named and other times anonymous who are spoken about, objectified, and discarded.

They don't get the chance to stand here today. Every year, when we come across these stories, most of us read them and wonder how such a thing could be talked about with such ease?

Well, clearly it seems our society still struggles in the same way. But perhaps, as much as our tradition can disappoint us at times with inaction and misogyny, maybe there's also something it can teach us.

In Genesis chapter 12 today, we read about Abraham's prep for going to Egypt as a result of the famine. He asks Sarai, his wife, to lie about their relationship in order that they don't kill him. The Egyptians pre-empted him and took her anyway because of her beauty and it turned out good for Abraham as he got many supplies.

This story takes place in the culture in which rape seems to be an accepted event. The idea that a beautiful woman being attacked and her husband killed so that she might be possessed is considered normative and presented as simply a reflection of the world in which they lived. The woman, Sarai, does not speak and her subjectivity, her point of view, is not given voice.

The story is also confounding because it seems that Abram makes no expected attempt to try to not steer his wife into the clutches of these men. He just accepts reality. I am not pretending anachronistically that Abraham should have responded in a way that we might expect ourselves to do in 2021, but can't there be a general expectation that a women shouldn't be put into a situation where sexual assault seems like the expected outcome?!

On this verse, the Midrash Tanchuma, a collection of Rabbinic teachings, says the following. After Abram's attempts to protect Sarai from sexual exploitation fall short, he turned to prayer:

“[The Egyptians] said to him, it's not the way of someone like this (Sarai) that a commoner should be her sexual partner (“lehishtamesh ba“). The ministers of Pharaoh saw her and praised her to Pharaoh. When Abraham saw this he started to cry and pray before God and he said, Master of the Universe, this has been my security that I had faith in you now please act for the sake of your mercy and lovingkindness/loyalty, that I should not be ashamed.”

The end of Abram's prayer here shows his own self-interest rather than concern for his wife. He does not want to be shamed.

Yet again, Sarai's desire is absent.



But as the Midrash continues, Sarai is finally given a voice, and this is a key for those of who sit here now and want to know what Judaism can offer us:

“And Sarai also cried out and said, ‘Master of the Universe, I did not know anything but when you said ‘Lech Lecha’ I believed your words, now I am left alone without my father, my mother or my husband. This evil one will come and abuse me. Act of the sake of your great name and for the sake of the faith I had in your words. God said, by your life, no evil will befall you or your husband. This is what it means when it says, ‘No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of misfortune.

Sarai, who at least in this story, does not have the opportunity to speak for herself and is man-handled is given a platform by the Rabbis. Like many victims of sexual assault and potential victims, Sarai turns to God or a force outside of themselves asking that her connection of faith be vindicated by her deliverance.

Sarai's prayer also notes her loneliness – "I am left alone without my father, my mother or my husband". Her prayer reflects the isolation of those who are sexually victimized or abused. The prayer also reflects Sarai's faith in family who would protect her were they there. As Rabbi Gail Diamond, formerly of the Conservative Yeshiva argues, in the best cases, strong family relationships serve as a protective barrier against abuse and exploitation, as Sarai imagines. In the worst cases, such relationships are not protective or they are even the locus of these evils.

Also note how Sarai addresses how she felt a directive as part of the Lech Lecha demand. It wasn't just Abraham. She was going about this journey thinking it would be good for her. In so many ways, this is reflective of the package our society attempts to describe itself. We've made such strides, we say. Women are represented in the top sphere of many companies, we argue. We have sexual assault training, we laud. All of these are good things, steps in the right direction, but the power dynamics are still at play that allow for an imbalance and continue to show as more and more powerful men are revealed to have perpetrated such acts.

So what can we do? The long term goal would be to shift those power dynamics, those that are created even when our children are toddlers. We have to try to stem the tide of those awful statistics. In the short term, we must learn to be outspoken, recognize how our littlest actions, from our words to our gestures can make those around us feel vulnerable and taken advantage of.

We can teach our young men, boys, and adults differently. If you have that one friend who still catcalls women, or asks them for a smile, speak up the next time, and explain why that's reprehensible behavior. It's these types of microaggressions that are so easy to fall into because they're usually not meant with any malicious intent.

They are often thought of as friendly or inviting. But there's not really a context for such a physical encounter, whether it's a hug or a pat on the back, unless prompted. Similarly, comments about women's dress or bodily image just don't need to happen. I get it. They're deeply ingrained habits. I find it challenging too at times.

But I also know that when I talk to my female colleagues around the country, and they tell me about the daily and weekly post shul remarks about their outfit and I can count on one hand how often I receive such words, I can see the problem. Even if we offer it with the kindest intent but it's received as objectifying, sexualizing, or demeaning, then it's on all of us to try to change our habits.

Gary Barker, president and CEO of Promundo, a nonprofit organization that engages men and boys in gender equality says research indicates meaningful change happens through multiple education sessions over time, institutional messages about prevention, and comprehensive training for staff and leadership. At schools and campuses, in particular, holding one assembly or bringing in a single speaker just isn't enough to shift attitudes and behavior.

Similarly, it's essential to create an environment in which educators and parents can talk to children about sex, sexuality, and healthy relationships. "The world will teach them horrible things," says Barker. "The really big job here is to counter the messages out there."

Finally, and perhaps most topically, taking a lesson from our Midrash we can learn to listen to those voices that have been silenced and quashed. Sarai had her agency taken away, yet the Rabbis deemed it necessary to give her voice a chance later. So listen to women. Try hard not to make it about yourself and take offense if a person tells you, “hey, you doing or saying that thing was problematic.”

I also recognize that I certainly don't know everything about this topic and like I said, I still misstep, but I thought it important on a day in which we're marking the entry of another young man into our tribe that we put this out there. It should be one of our values.

When we talk about the work of bettering ourselves, it's not just from self-reflection but also from those around us who we care about. Life is a journey of learning we claim in almost every other context. This too is one of those stops on the journey. So lechu lachem. Go forth and keep trying to make this world better, safer, and more equitable.

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