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“Toward a New Vision of Partnership: Transforming a Rape Culture”

In January 2015, two Stanford University graduate students biking across campus spotted a freshman sexually assaulting an unconscious woman behind a dumpster on the school’s campus. When they approached, the freshman ran away, but the cyclists, refusing to turn a blind eye, chased after him and apprehended the young man before turning him over to the police. More than a year later, that freshman, Brock Turner, stood trial for three charges of felony sexual assault.

As has become standard practice, Turner’s lawyers focused heavily on discrediting the survivor, pummeling her with narrow, pointed questions that dissected her personal life, love life, daily life, and family life in an attempt to prove that she was either lying or “asking for it.”

“...What did you eat that day? Well, what did you have for dinner? Who made dinner? Did you drink with dinner? No, not even water? When did you drink? How much did you drink? What container did you drink out of? Who gave you the drink? How much do you usually drink? What were you wearing?”

“...Did you drink in college? You said you were a party animal? How many times did you black out? Did you party at frats? Are you serious with your boyfriend? Are you sexually active with him? When did you start dating? Would you ever cheat? Do you have a history of cheating?”

And that is but a sample of the invasive questions asked by Turner’s defense team to discredit his accuser. But the quest to disgrace “Emily Doe” began long before Turner’s lawyers took up the task. In the initial news coverage of the assault – the same coverage that Emily read in order to learn exactly what had happened to her that night – her assailant’s impressive swim times were listed, as if his athletic abilities were somehow relevant in a story about him committing assault. As you can imagine, these times only proved relevant to those endeavoring to portray the young man as the victim, including his father, who wrote a letter decrying how his son’s life was destroyed because of “twenty minutes of action.”

As news of the case spread, the media and the country began to chime in. Many were outraged and lent their support to “Emily Doe,” but others took up the cause of Turner’s family and defense team, seeking to prove her culpability... and bemoaning the damage she created for a bright, young athlete’s future. In the end, Turner

was sentenced to only six months in jail by a judge who claimed that a harsher sentence would have “a severe impact” on the swim star, leaving Emily to wonder who would notice the “severe impact” the assault had left on her.

Like countless other survivors, “Emily” discovered that true justice rarely comes for those who experience sexual assault, because a society that ought to be focused upon deterring violence against women and bringing its perpetrators to justice remains too inclined to place the survivors, rather than the assailants, on trial.

In fact, five years ago, in Liberty County, Texas, a defense lawyer called an 11-year old gang rape victim a “spider” luring men into her web.¹ Meanwhile a Department of Justice investigation into the Baltimore Police Department last year revealed that police officers routinely interrogated survivors with dismissive questions, such as “Could you be imagining that?” or “Why are you messing up that guy’s life?” The report notes that one sex crimes detective was overheard complaining that, “In homicide, there are real victims; all our cases are nonsense.”²

This is the reality that survivors of sexual assault face in our country, and yet, time and again, we wonder how rape happens and why survivors fail to come forward and report their attack.³ When we report a break-in, no one asks us why we left our homes unguarded. When we file a malpractice suit, no one laments the promising future of the young doctor in jeopardy. But when a sexual assault survivor dares to report the crimes against her, the very people charged with protecting her safety question her integrity, while people with little to no knowledge of the case publicly mourn the fate of the perpetrator. All of the sudden, what you wore, what you drank, when you smiled, and who you’ve dated become matters for public debate, and all this occurs only in the rare instance that there is enough evidence to even try the case.

And, so, many women learn at an early age that it is our responsibility to remain vigilant in a world we have accepted is not safe for women. I remember becoming fully aware of this reality during one of my freshman seminars in college, when a teacher asked the men in the classroom:

“What steps do you take, on a daily basis, to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?” At first, there was an awkward silence. Some of the guys looked around, confused, as if the teacher had just asked a trick question. Finally, someone said: “Nothing. I don’t think I have ever thought about it.”

The teacher then asked the women in the classroom the same question: “What steps do you take on a daily basis, to prevent yourselves from being sexually assaulted?”

¹ Cindy Horswell, “[Lawyer likens gang-rape victim to a spider luring men to web](#),” *Houston Chronicle*, November 28, 2012.

² Tyler Kingkade, “[And People Ask Why Rape Victims Don’t Report to Police](#),” *HuffPost*, Aug 12, 2016.

³ According to the Federal Bureau of Justice between 2006-2010, 65 percent of sexual assaults went unreported: <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/vnrp0610pr.cfm>

Immediately, a sea of hands shot up in the air: “I don’t park between two large trucks or SUVs. I always carry a cell phone in my hand. I don’t go running at night. I take self-defense classes. I close all the windows when I go to sleep. I never rent an apartment on the first floor. I carry pepper spray. I watch what I wear. I only go out in groups. I meet men on first dates in public places. I don’t drink too much. I don’t make eye contact with men on the street. I try not to smile at men at the gym or coffee shops because I don’t want to send them the wrong message.”⁴

Later, many of the women in the class realized that our precautions were instinctual. We had become so used to living in a culture in which violence against women is commonplace that we learned to incorporate these behaviors in an attempt to protect ourselves.

We had internalized that this is just how the world is – the possibility of sexual assault is our accepted reality – and it was our responsibility to ward off potential threats.

And in a country in which one out of five women will be sexually assaulted during her lifetime,⁵ that is about 155 people in this sanctuary tonight, it makes sense that defending against such violence is constantly on women’s minds. And in a world in which our collective response to sexual assault is to judge and blame the survivor, it makes sense that women take this responsibility upon themselves, no matter how futile that often proves to be. What makes less sense is why we, as a society, have allowed violence against women to become a “woman’s problem.”

We know that the epidemic of sexual assault reaches far outside the confines of a single gender. Straight and homosexual men, as well as transgender individuals have all survived sexual assault, even though the number of male victims is much smaller than that of their female counterparts. But one need not be a survivor to be affected by this issue.

When the men in my seminar heard the responses of the women in the room, they were deeply saddened and shocked. They had no idea the level of fear that their friends, girlfriends, sisters, and mothers dealt with on a daily basis. They felt dismayed listening to their female classmates tell them about the objectifying comments they receive about their bodies or the unwanted touching that was simply a part of their lives. Whether these young men had known it or not, sexual assault was an accepted reality in their lives as well.

For violence against women transcends social, religious, and economic boundaries – rich or poor, black or white, Asian or Hispanic, Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. And though we often like to profess otherwise, our Jewish communities are not exempt from this epidemic either. Our day schools, religious schools, youth groups, Hillels, young adult programs, synagogues and institutions are not immune.

⁴ Jackson Katz, *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2006). A similar rendition of this exercise was performed routinely by noted gender violence prevention expert Dr. Jackson Katz, who has lectured at more than 2700 colleges, universities, prep schools, and high schools.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control, “[The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey](#),” (2010), 1.

In fact, violence against women is as old as the Bible itself. In the Book of Samuel, we find the horrific story of Tamar, daughter of King David. Obsessed with her beauty, Tamar's half-brother, Amnon, devises a plan to get her alone and forces himself upon her. Now that he has taken what he wants, his obsession turns to hatred. No longer a virgin, Tamar's "value" diminishes in Biblical society, and the crime against her turns into a lifelong shame that she must bear.

When the celebrated King David discovers the crime, he grows angry but refuses to intercede. Some versions of the Bible, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, suggest that David, "refused to punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, since he was his firstborn." Thus, no rebuke comes for Amnon, and no justice comes for Tamar. Later, Tamar's brother, Absalom, murders Amnon and rebels against the crown, inciting further violence, but that is of little consolation to Tamar, whose story, like too many today, ends only in silence and despair.

As the famous playwright and feminist activist Eve Ensler reminds us: "The epidemic of violence toward women is shocking; it's global; it's so profound and it is so devastating; and it is so in every little pocket of every little crater, of every little society, that we don't even recognize it because it's become so ordinary."⁶

In *this* community, men and women alike understand that violence against women is unacceptable and that we should do our best to stop it. And we also know that masculinity is not the enemy of civilization and that many men are appalled by the violation of their female counterparts. I live and work with some of the kindest, most loving men I know.

The problem is that it's very difficult to see how *our* regular and seemingly acceptable behaviors and words can sometimes perpetuate a culture that promotes violence against women without us even realizing it. From the television and movies we watch, to the photos and videos we consume and share, to the words we speak, each of us makes a series of seemingly innocuous, daily decisions that determine what the accepted culture is.

And, given the sheer pervasiveness of violence against women in America, it seems clear, that collectively, at least, we've been making too many of the wrong choices.

Some of us may still wonder whether little decisions, such as the images we consume or the words we speak, can truly affect us or the civilization that surrounds us, but scientific research harbors no such reservations. In a contribution to the blog "Gray Matters," three *New York Times* columnists discussed the repercussions of media violence on actual behavior: "There is now consensus that exposure to media violence is linked to actual violent behavior – a link found by many scholars to be on par with the correlation of exposure to secondhand smoke and the risk of lung cancer..."⁷ a correlation that has led to a ban on smoking in all restaurants in California.

⁶ Eve Ensler, "Happiness in Body and Soul," Ted Talk, May 27, 2009.

⁷ Vasilis K. Pozios, Praveen R. Kambam and H. Eric Bender, "Does Media Violence Lead To The Real Thing?" *The New York Times*, August 23, 2013.

While watching or reading gratuitous depictions of sexual assault does not directly cause someone to violate another person, repeated exposure to imagery and words of violence toward women, especially when the medium suggests that such behavior may be desirable or sexy, slowly reinforces the idea that such violence may be acceptable in a relationship, either to us or to someone else. If we reiterate a message over and over again, that message sinks in. If it didn't, advertising wouldn't be a multi-billion dollar industry.

I remember walking into a 9th grade religious school classroom several years ago to discover students discussing an episode of *Gossip Girl*, in which a high school student grabs his love interest, throws her against a wall, and proceeds to call her degrading names, telling her that, "she wants it," before initiating sex without asking for consent. My students, both male and female, raved about how sexy, hot, and passionate the scene was. They did not talk about this character as the guy who previously tried to date rape another classmate in an earlier episode; they talked about him as a brooding bad boy. His aggression was depicted as irresistible on screen, and so it felt to the teens watching at home.

In fact, teens consistently post on Facebook and Instagram, or text to their friends pictures of girls' bodies, some they know and some they don't, and then proceed to comment on how ugly or pretty they are and what they would like to do to them, as if they have a claim on them. In the recent Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, we witness the heartbreaking consequences of such a seemingly harmless act when a high school student posts an inappropriate picture of a female classmate, without her knowledge or consent. Fellow classmates take the photo out of context, responding with a slew of crude jokes and unwanted advances that send a young woman into a deep state of isolation and depression. If this sort of thing were happening in just one school, that would be one school too many. But I think we know that we're not just talking about one school. We're literally talking about every school.

And it's really no wonder. After all, our kids are only learning what we are teaching them. Stop to think for a moment about what our kids learned from the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape last fall. "When you're a star, they let you do it," said our President. "When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything." This, a description of how the President of the United States would kiss and grope women without their consent.

Perhaps even more disconcerting, however, was the explanation he offered for his comments. "This was locker-room banter..." as if the debasing language we use among men to discuss women is okay and less damaging when it happens in the privacy of a locker room... as if this kind of language doesn't impact how we *actually* treat women.

Rather, our words send powerful messages about how sexual violence is viewed in our world. And our words are, all too often, right at home in a society in which all genders have learned to objectify and degrade women in casual conversation, even unwittingly.

Three weeks ago, while in the midst of working on this sermon, I drove past a car in Beverly Hills with the bumper sticker: "Four Doors for More Whores." Unfortunately, I wasn't surprised. We've all heard language towards women that makes us cringe, but it's what doesn't make us cringe that can prove the most damaging:

The student who leaves the classroom, declaring, “That test just raped me.” The office mate who encourages a coworker to take charge in a situation, saying, “Come on, show some balls.” The friend who calls someone cowardly by referring to a woman’s body, “Don’t be a pussy.” The parents who responds to their young son pulling a girl’s hair by saying, “He just likes her” or by remarking that “boys will be boys” when their aggressive play hurts someone on the playground instead of teaching our children about the importance of respecting physical boundaries and always asking for consent.

None of these people mean even a bit of harm with their words. But the very fact that none of these phrases catch us by surprise is telling. As a society, we speak the language of sexual assault...and we all know how to translate it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book *Man’s Quest for God*, emphasizes the significance of our language: He says, “We shall never be able to understand that the spirit is revealed in the form of words unless we discover the vital truth that speech has power, that words are commitments.”⁸ One might think that demeaning language used by Donald Trump or on bumper stickers or in an office can be said innocently. But Heschel offers us a theological imperative: our words express the commitments of our souls. What will we demonstrate – by what we choose to say... or watch... or emulate – about the commitment of our souls?

Blessedly, our biblical tradition offers something more than the model of what happened to King David’s daughter Tamar to guide the commitment of our souls.

We have a book aptly named *The Song of Songs*, the love poetry of the Bible, in which we meet two lovers on equal footing. These lovers do not seek to dominate one another...they do not need to demonstrate their power or seize control...to take or violate. Instead, they share words of true mutuality and partnership— words not simply of love or lust, but of genuine respect and friendship. Their words are safeguarded as loving expressions, never degrading epithets. Their kinship enhances both of them by nourishing and developing one another with affection and care, consent, and collaboration.

*Arise, my friend, my beautiful one and go forth!
For now winter is past, the rains are over and gone.
The blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of pruning has come;
The song of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The green figs form on the fig tree, the vines in blossom give off fragrance.
Arise, my friend, my beautiful one and go forth!*⁹

These young lovers offer a picture of how we are supposed to interact with one another as co-humans born to this world – partners who empower and inspire one another, or as biblical scholar and fellow Leo Baecker,

⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*, 25.

⁹ Song of Songs 2:10-13

Dr. Tamara Eskenazi explains, “as two equals who awaken one another to their possibilities.”¹⁰ We don’t often see images like this on our TV screens or Facebook feeds, but *this* is the model we need to teach our children and grandchildren – one in which we are bound to each other in sacred partnership regardless of gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or race. One in which violence against women is understood as violence against us all.

Hayom harat haolam. Rosh Hashanah marks the creation of the world, but it also presents us with an opportunity to recreate the world. And that gives us a choice: we can continue to live in the world of King David and his daughter Tamar, in which violence against women remains a women’s issue, in which we fail to acknowledge our responsibility for a culture that perpetuates sexual assault, sexual harassment and domestic violence. Or, we can live in the world so lovingly described within the Song of Songs, a world in which men and women stand side by side on equal footing, in which our choices of what to say, to watch, or to share consistently reflect our grandest values and aspirations, a world in which rape and its culture are no longer tolerated.

As many of you know, in a few short months, my husband and I are planning to bring a daughter into this world. We hope to teach her to be loving and brave. We hope to inspire her to be resilient and outspoken against injustice. We hope to watch her grow and contribute to the world in ways we cannot even imagine. But we have other hopes, as well.

We hope that we will never have to teach her that her womanhood makes her more vulnerable than her male counterparts. We hope that we will be able to tell her that men and women alike are invested in her safety. And we hope that one day, when her college professor asks the question: “What do you do on a daily basis to prevent yourself from being sexually assaulted?” she’ll be able to respond: “I don’t know; it’s not something I really have to think about.”

¹⁰ Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “With the Song of Songs in Our Hearts” in *Chapters of the Heart*, Sue Levi Elwell and Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, eds. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p.180.