

**Temple Beth David Sisterhood Shabbat**  
**January 26, 2018**  
**“Dina, Vashti and #MeToo”**  
**Rabbi Karen S. Citrin**

I can remember the first funeral I officiated at fifteen years ago. I was a newly minted rabbi. Bernice<sup>1</sup> had lived a long and full life. I had not met her, but in the days leading up to and following the funeral, I got to know her devoted husband, Ron, and her children who lived in the area. Ron is a kind and considerate man, who was deeply appreciative of the support that I was able to offer the family during their time of mourning.

In the midst of much kindness and love, I was not prepared for the comment I received from a male relative at the *shiva* service that night. I walked into the home, he looked me up and down and said, “You’re the rabbi? You’re too pretty to be a rabbi. I didn’t know rabbis could look like that.” There were other comments after the service from this man, including the seemingly genuine surprise that I knew all the prayers. And the parting comment, one that I would hear repeatedly over the years, “If my rabbi looked like you, I would come to services more often.”

I know, sometimes it helps to find the humor in it. But it has been a tough year. This year we have witnessed countless women who came forth giving voice to sexual harassment and abuse, along with all the micro-aggressions that permeate the workplace. I dare say there probably isn’t a woman here tonight who hasn’t been on the receiving end of some kind of discrimination or demeaning remark.

It is been a year of women’s marches, among the largest protests in U.S. history. This year Time Magazine made the bold choice of awarding Person of the Year to the “Silence Breakers,” the voices that launched a movement. The female faces pictured included movie stars, domestic workers, a former Uber engineer, a corporate lobbyist, a young hospital worker, faces that reflect different races and ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, and sexual orientations. (Time, Dec. 2017)

It has been a year of woman after woman saying #MeToo. The phrase was first used more than a decade ago by social activist Tarana Burke as part of her work building solidarity among young survivors of harassment and assault. Tweeted by friend and actress Alyssa Milano, more than 30,000 people responded overnight. When explaining Time Magazine’s choice, the Editor-in-Chief wrote, “To imagine Rosa Parks with a Twitter account is to wonder how much faster civil rights might have progressed.”

It has been a tough year. Women have journeyed far, but we have not yet reached the promised land. This reality is not new for Jewish women. We know the burden of oppression as Jews and as women. Tonight, indeed as we celebrate the voices of women on our *bima* and in leadership positions in our Jewish communities, we also know that it was not always this way. We are the inheritors of thousands of years of tradition that was

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed.

written by and for men. We are the inheritors of terrifying texts, voices that were silenced, experiences left unrecorded.

Judith Hauptman writes in the introduction to her book, *Rereading the Rabbis, A Woman's Voice*, "Until recently, it was almost exclusively men who pored over Jewish text [the Talmud] and wrote commentaries on it. Women neither studied nor played any role in interpreting it. This difference is not surprising: Judaism, like most ancient religions, placed key religious tasks in the hands of men only. Today, with women's growing interest in our past and desire to use the past to reshape the present, these texts need to be looked at afresh."

I would like to take a few moments this evening to look closer at the experiences of a few of our biblical women. Jewish tradition from its very beginning has shown awareness of the perceived dangers and challenges that gender and sexuality pose to families and communities. Me Too say Eve, Sarah and Dina. Me Too say Tamar, Vashti, Esther and Batsheva. (*Me Too says the Bible: Some thoughts in the Wake of Harvey Weinstein*, Nechama Goldman Barash, Pardes)

The Torah recounts how Dina, the first woman to venture out on her own, was raped. Dina, Jacob's only daughter, went out to see her fellow women. In the span of just one verse, Shechem spots Dinah, takes her by force, and wants to marry her. (Genesis 34:1-2) Her brothers react violently and destroy Shechem and his city. What happens to Dinah in the aftermath of her ordeal? We do not know. We never hear from her again. No one in the Torah, or in the commentaries that follow, ask her. Her silence reverberates through the generations.

The male authors of our texts go on to often blame the victim for not crying out, or to downplay the gravity of crimes against women, since in some instances women are not even considered full human beings with their own identity. In one momentary glimpse of male empathy, the Talmud describes a group of rabbis who try to understand women's pain in this arena in terms that speak to men's experiences. One said, "It is like scalding hot water on a bald head." (Ketubot 39b)

Dinah's story challenges us to speak up and be the voices for our sisters, named and unnamed, who were silenced. These are not the stories we learned in religious school. Yet, we should study and learn from them when we are older. Their lives mirror the reality that we still see today.

We can also learn from courageous women like Queen Vashti who was the first objectified woman to say no. One of the heroines of our Purim story, when asked by the king to display her beauties before the people wearing only a royal crown, she refused. Fearing that her behavior would make all the wives in the land disobey their husbands, the king banished her from the palace. And Vashti's actions paved the way for Queen Esther to step up and lean in in a different way. Esther stood up to the royal male leaders in her capacity as queen and as a Jew. She persisted, and saved her people. (Megillat Esther)

We are the inheritors of a tradition that is both broken and bold. We are *Yisrael*, men and women who struggle. The struggle continues today.

I will share with you that on the heels of the #MeToo movement, comments went viral on the Facebook page of the Women's Rabbinic Network, the organization of Reform women rabbis that is part of the CCAR, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, of which I belong to both. The #MeToo movement has been a sobering reminder that sexual misconduct is rampant in every profession, not only in Hollywood, gymnastics, or politics. Comments revealed how women rabbis still experience substantial obstacles: gender-bias, inappropriate comments, sexual harassment, lack of institutional support, pay inequity, and underrepresentation in senior level positions. The CCAR, of which I am a board member, established a new Task Force on Women in the Rabbinate this year. Over forty years since the first woman rabbi was ordained in 1972, there is a need for this task force to examine the continued challenges.

Rabbi Hara Person, the chief strategy officer for the CCAR, wrote an article entitled, *When women rabbis say '#MeToo,' communities must pay attention*. She recounted how Michelle Obama in a recent talk at Temple Emanuel in New York City spoke about, "how women live with tiny cuts that build up over time, cuts that we endure without noticing, even as we bleed. That is what it is to be a girl and a woman in this world," and she urged women "to own our scars, and to find power and healing in doing so." Rabbi Person went on to say that the movement "is a reminder, as if we needed a reminder, that to grow up a girl is to expect, if not accept, unwanted comments, remarks, touching and assault. As women, in our personal lives and professional careers, we all have our stories, our workarounds and our scars." (JTA, Dec. 2017)

*What are your stories?* I believe that I am the first rabbi here at Beth David to be prefaced by my gender, you know, the woman rabbi. I don't think Rabbi Zoob or Rabbi Micah have been referred to as the male rabbi. I also find it interesting that Rabbi Micah has never been asked a question about the kitchen or *oneg* set up, whereas I am asked such a question nearly weekly. I remember Micah's raised eyebrows as we were standing in the foyer this past Rosh Hashanah, greeting people in our robes, minutes away from the start of Erev Rosh Hashanah services. As we wished everyone "*Shanah Tovah*," a man wished Micah "*gut yontif*," and remarked to me about the shade of my lipstick. In previous congregations, I have fielded inappropriate comments surrounding pregnancy, related weight gain and loss, and questions regarding my capacity to care for both children and the congregation.

And yet, looking back I know that I also have much to be grateful for. I am so grateful to be able to serve as co-rabbi alongside my husband here among this wonderful community of men and women at Beth David. We are all blessed to be alive during the first generation in our five thousand year history of women clergy.

And it is certainly not rabbis alone. Jewish women have opened the doorway to new blessings, prayers and rituals, new styles of leadership, new images of God and new

faces of community, new voices and commentaries. As my mentor Rabbi Laura Geller teaches, “There is the Torah that was written down, and there is the Torah of our lives.” (*All Theology is Autobiography: Reflections on 40 Years in the Rabbinate*)

Dina dared to go out. And we will, too. We will continue to raise our voices and march forward. The broken and bold voices in our Torah urge us to be better. We are all better when we see each other as created in God’s image. On this *Shabbat Shira*, the Shabbat of Song that takes its name from the song of the sea in this week’s Torah portion, *Beshalach*, let us walk in the footsteps of the women who gave birth to our people’s freedom and redemption: the midwives, Shifra and Puah, Yocheved and Miriam the prophet, and Pharaoh’s daughter.

It is time to tell our stories. It is time to open up honest conversations regarding the systemic and ongoing challenges that women face in our country and throughout the world. It is time for us all to do even more to create safe and sacred communities, especially for our young people who look to us to guide them. It is time to create change and bring healing and hope. It is time to sing the song of Moses and the song of Miriam. It is time to cross the sea together.