

The One Where We Are Oppressors

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A word of warning before I begin: I will be talking about sexual harassment and my own MeToo story, along with other forms of personal and systemic abuse. I will not be graphic and I don't believe that it will be inappropriate for kids, but I want to give you the opportunity to make that choice for yourself or for your family.

When I was eighteen, during the summer between high school and college, I worked at a Jewish overnight camp. This was the camp where youth leaders went to learn from the leaders of the Reform Movement. Professors from HUC served as faculty there and the directors of various departments in the Union for Reform Judaism visited and taught. By that summer, I knew I wanted to go to rabbinical school, so I took any opportunity I could to spend time with these leaders, especially the professors. I connected really well with one of the few professors who spent the entire summer at camp and led some of my favorite camp activities. We also enjoyed similar pastimes, like word games, and as a result, hung out with a similar group of people.

Toward the middle of the summer, I noticed that I was spending a lot of time with this professor. At first it was wonderful to get to know someone who could be a mentor and reference as I pursued my dream. But then I started to feel uncomfortable, like something was off. Sometimes, when I was expecting others to be around, it was just the two of us. I tried to widen my circle of friends and make sure that even when it was just the two of us, we were in public and crowded areas. He got upset and claimed I was avoiding him. He was right, but I didn't want him to know that—he was my in for rabbinical school.

I talked to some of my friends about it. Most of them said that I was overreacting. They assured me that he would never do anything inappropriate, that they loved spending time with him, and that he was a great teacher and scholar. But there were a few whispers. Two of my friends said that he had a tendency to latch onto one of the young female staff. Even so, they assured me that he was harmless.

He certainly didn't seem harmless when he needled me into joining him for an evening in New York City to see a musical on Broadway. I remember begging friends to join us so I wouldn't have to be alone with him, but no one did. My heart pounded the entire way into the City and the entire way back. This was in the early days of cell phones, when roaming charges were astronomical. I gripped my cell phone with one hand like it was a life line and had the other hand ready to open the door and jump if necessary. Luckily nothing happened.

As the summer was wrapping up, he cornered me in an empty cabin to ask me if we could see each other romantically. He mentioned that he had enjoyed our date to New York.

All I could think to do was let him down gently and agree to remain friends. I avoided being alone in a cabin after that.

If I thought that leaving camp would be enough separation, I was wrong. During my first month of college, I received messages from this professor almost every day. I stopped responding. Mutual friends started to get involved when he tried to find out why I wasn't responding to him. Finally I called him to tell him in no uncertain terms that he was not to contact me anymore. Not even to send me the Rosh HaShanah greeting card he had already picked out.

The holidays came and went and I received nothing from him. I started to relax and focus on being a college student. Just before Thanksgiving, I received a letter that had a return receipt and signature confirmation. It was 8 typed pages on gold-edged stationery, and it included his picture. In addition to some updates about his life, he hoped that we could reconnect, perhaps even in person. He also reminded me that the Jewish world is tiny and we travel in some of the same circles, so shouldn't we be able to talk? And really, he would prefer that I reach out to him, although he knew he could find all of my contact information in the school directory online.

Finally I had clear evidence that I wasn't making things up or overreacting. And I used it. I went to the police and I went to the camp director. They both responded appropriately, even if they couldn't do everything I wanted in order to protect myself and others. That being said, I still wonder if I could have or should have done more. I've done quite a bit of reflecting on this episode over this last year, with the emergence of the #MeToo movement.

The way I like to remember the story is that, once the line was clearly crossed, I responded quickly and worked to prevent future predation. Yes, this professor was inappropriate, but I took swift and decisive action because no one messes with me. In this version of the story, I have power and agency, and the people around me supported me.

But through the writing process, I also had to remember the times when I felt like I had almost no power and virtually no support. I had to remember that, until the letter arrived, only a few of my peers believed that the professor might have crossed some boundaries. Some thought that I had brought it on myself for spending so much time with him. Others insisted that he was a good guy, a great educator, and an amazing scholar, as if that was enough to exonerate him. And there was a regular assertion that, since there hadn't been physical contact, I was imagining the whole thing.

It's this version of the story that truly makes it a #MeToo experience. It's not just that he was inappropriate with me, but that he used his reputation and power to get away with it. It's not just that he was inappropriate with me, but that the people around me downplayed my experience and shifted blame to me. It's not just that he was inappropriate with me, but that this turned out to be a pattern of behavior that was mostly ignored. Also, it's just that he was inappropriate with me. #MeToo.

For those of you unsure what #MeToo is, it's a movement to raise awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment, misconduct, and assault, especially in the workplace. It often involves calling out serial offenders who have been protected by status and reputation. Using social media and other public forums, survivors can finally assert the power that was otherwise taken away or suppressed to protect the offender. It's a movement that rejects the practice of considering people's physical and emotional wellbeing as collateral damage or the side effects of "greats" rising to the top. It's a recognition that this behavior is a form of oppression.

Oppression. Let's talk about oppression. We usually imagine a tyrant enslaving people or enacting unfair and unreasonable laws to keep people in their place. Maybe we think of slavery in America, the Nazi regime, or Apartheid in South Africa.

But the dictionary defines oppression as "the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner." When a person uses their position and connections to harass someone who's trying to network and find mentors, that's oppression. When the community supports an alleged offender for reasons unrelated to the accusation, that's oppression. When victims are blamed for their actions while perpetrators are excused, that's oppression. When bystanders stay silent so as not to risk the fallout of standing up, that's oppression. No, it's not the oppression of a tyrant; it's systemic oppression, which means we—we!—uphold it. With systemic oppression, we too are oppressors.

That's why speaking out about our stories is so important. Our stories remind us that oppression is not distant history or in a far away country, it's right here, right now. And we are part of it.

There is so much systemic oppression that I can only begin to name the different manifestations. #MeToo represents just one of the dozens that come to mind and that I put in earlier drafts of this sermon. There's no way to delve into them all without it all becoming painfully overwhelming. If you're looking for injustice and oppression, you don't have to look far to find it. Just look.

Just look for the ways that people assert their power when they *can*, not just when they should. Look for the ways that people joke about the putdowns and derogatory remarks they've made, as though the fault belongs to their victim for being offended. Look for the ways that people excuse behavior in themselves or the people that they value while they attack and criticize the same behavior in others. Look for ways that people turn a blind eye and stay silent when they see injustice, making the victims defend themselves and hoping to avoid getting involved.

And look inside. How often are you one of those people, asserting power, joking, excusing, or ignoring? How often am I?

I know that was a hard question, one that might be making you squirm in your seats and come up with reasons why it was okay in that situation. I know what it's, because I'm doing it too. Because it is so much easier to judge others than to judge ourselves. It's so

much easier to understand why it made sense for us and not for them. It's so much easier to sit here and say, "I would do it differently," even though we know that we haven't.

So sit for a moment and reflect. Acknowledge those times when you should have done something different. Don't make excuses for it; accept it. And feel that gnawing of guilt in the pit of your belly? It's uncomfortable, right?

That's actually the point of today. We are supposed to feel uncomfortable and guilty on Yom Kippur. That's why we fast and beat our chests and don't engage in pleasurable activities. We are told in the Torah to afflict ourselves today, not as a form of self-flagellation but to feel the pain of oppression, to remember that whether we have hurt others directly or by not getting involved, we are part of the system that keeps people down. Yes, even those of us who have suffered often perpetuate that experience for others. Perhaps feeling some of that pain ourselves today, perhaps reminding ourselves of what it was like, will encourage us to change our ways and change our society.

We were reminded that our discomfort has a purpose in this morning's Haftarah from Isaiah:

Is this the fast I desire,
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the Eternal is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own kin.

It's actually a privilege to be able to observe Yom Kippur in prayer and reflection and by abstaining from bodily pleasures. We choose to feel the effects of oppression rather than having that be our everyday experience. But our atonement today means nothing if we still uphold oppressive practices and oppressive people during the rest of the year. If we leave this sanctuary hungry and uncomfortable but essentially unchanged, we have wasted our time, our prayers, and our fast. So let's awaken to the call of our tradition, the call of those in pain and suffering, the call of the shofar that we heard on Rosh HaShanah and will hear again tonight.

So what can we do? First of all, a reminder: we can't do everything. The injustice that fills even just our community is so great that we will become overwhelmed and unable to do anything if we try to tackle everything that concerns us. And while I sometimes wish I could hit the reset button on some of our systems and the culture that supports them, we can't change whole systems all at once. But we have to start.

The best place—though perhaps the hardest place—is to start with ourselves. Remember those actions and inactions that caused the gnawing guilt earlier? Behave differently next time you have the chance.

Behaving differently might mean holding in that inappropriate comment and working on building the filter between the brain and the mouth. Behaving differently might mean calling out the person who made an inappropriate comment in the moment, showing that people are willing to stand up for what's right. Behaving differently might mean using your power and privilege to create space for someone else who has less.

Behaving differently might mean acknowledging someone's concerns and fears rather than brushing them aside. Behaving differently might mean supporting people who are uncomfortable by being present with them in difficult situations. And behaving differently might mean excluding a person whose behavior won't change—because their reputation or contributions are not worth the damage to others.

I have no illusions that I will succeed in behaving differently all the time, let alone each of you. I still wonder if I did the right thing fifteen years ago with this professor. And while that experience changed some of my behavior, I still wonder if it has been enough. Perhaps it has been enough for now, but it's not enough for the future. I keep trying—we have to keep trying—to do better to stand up against oppressive behaviors and to avoid engaging in them ourselves. So let's keep working, now and in the future, so that we can make THIS the fast that God desires.