#MeToo for Far Too Long
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Tomorrow we will read Parsha Noah, the second portion in the book of Genesis, my Bar Mitzvah Portion and perhaps the most universally adored in all the Torah. It has every animal and they come in pairs. So beloved and recognizable is this Torah portion that we tend to overlook the reason why Noah had to build the ark in the first place.

The Torah explains, "And the world had become corrupt before G-d; and the Earth was filled with חָמָס." (Bereshit 6:11). Two words are pivotal in the justification for God bringing the waters of destruction. Corruption and Hamas.

Of the first, Corruption, Rashi quotes the Talmud in Mesechte Sanhedrin, and explains that the corruption God speaks of was “immorality and idolatry”.

He argues that because people were acting immorally and worshiping false gods the world was destroyed. But we have these things even today, and life continues. Even if, like me, you don’t read the torah as a history book but rather great literature with a moral message this doesn’t make sense.

Corruption, immorality, the fetishism of things and people these are literally as old as time itself.

So we turn to the second word, Hamas. The Torah uses this word twice in the space of three sentences. God declares "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the Earth is filled with חָמָס through them and behold; I am about to destroy them from the Earth." (Bereshit 6:13).

It is not corruption alone, defined by Rashi as immorality and idolatry that brings about the destructive waters of the flood, but a particular type of corruption, חָמָס (hamas).

Hamas has a few definitions in the Torah and when you hear it you might mistakenly think of the Palestinian Terrorist Organization based in Gaza, but that use of the term Hamas is really an acronym and not the Hebrew word upon which God decides to destroy the whole world.

In this context the word חָמָס means cruelty. It was not enough that human beings were immoral, or had fetishized people and things making them into false gods. No, what brought down God’s divine wrath was how cruel we were to each other. Cruelty is indifference to suffering and pleasure in inflicting suffering. Because of hamas, because of human cruelty to each other the whole world was destroyed and everything in it.

Novelist, George Eliot wrote that "cruelty requires no motive outside of itself; it only requires opportunity.”

This past week we experienced another flood brought about by the cruelty of human beings towards each other. This flood was not rising waters but rising consciousness of the scourge of sexual harassment and abuse that flooded the internet under the hashtag #MeToo. Through blog posts, tweets, interviews and courageous testimonials our collective consciousness was flooded with an awareness of just how prevalent and incessant sexual harassment and sexual abuse are in our society.

In a movement started 10 years ago by sexual survivor and community organizer Tarana Burke , women from around the world began using #MeToo on social media to share their own experiences with sexual harassment and sexual assault, brought to light most recently by revelations about Harvey Weinstein's cruelty toward women, but he is of course only the most recently revealed in a series of celebrity abusers that strings from the Red Carpet to the White House.

The two-word hashtag was mentioned more than 1.7 million times on Facebook, and more than 1.5 million times on Twitter. The company said that in less than 24 hours, 4.7 million people around the world have engaged in the "Me too" conversation, with more than 12 million posts, comments and reactions. According to Facebook, more than 45% of people in the United States are friends with someone who's posted a message with the words 'Me too.' If we assume the vast majority of those answering 'me too' are women for have suffered sexual abuse and harassment and we use the basic formula that 50% of the population is female then very quickly we arrive at the conclusion that nearly every woman in the United States has encountered sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances or sexual abuse at least once in their lifetimes.

There is no reason on earth to think those numbers are any different in other parts of the Western World, including here in Canada.

Anecdotally, based on my own Facebook Feed, nearly every single woman I know has a story of unwanted sexual attention or advances – nearly every single one.

When we see numbers like that, when there is a flood, before we build an ark, we need to really question why is it raining? Why is sexual harassment and abuse so prevalent in our society and what can we do about it, before we all drown.

Belle sang in Beauty and the Beast, "it's a tale as old as time." Like the stories of Noah, sexual harassment and abuse have been part of our human interactions since the times of the bible.

It is no secret that many struggle with reconciling the laws in the Torah and halachic literature which regulate sexual relationships with the modern world. Some see them as overly prudish and outdated in a world in which sexual liberty appears to be a most basic, elementary value. Since the time of Noah, the Torah has taught a very clearly defined description as to which relationships are allowed, and which are forbidden.

For example, amongst other prohibitions, the Torah teaches that a man cannot marry certain close blood relatives, the ex-wives of certain close blood relatives, a woman who has not been validly divorced from her previous husband, the daughter or granddaughter of his ex-wife, or the sister of his ex-wife during the ex-wife's life time.

These relationships are not forbidden because they are deemed unnatural. In today's society, many like to argue that if something is natural, if it is an innate desire, then it should be allowed. The Torah never denies that one may have a tendency or desire towards something that is forbidden. If anything, the very opposite is the case: the reason there is a prohibition is because Torah acknowledges that some people may have a natural desire for such an action, but because it is wrong and destructive, there is a law prohibiting it.

The Torah is extremely sensitive to all contact and interaction between the sexes. There are numerous laws forbidding situations where a man and woman would be alone together, and this also applies to adults with children, when it is not of a parent and child. Furthermore, there is no allowance for touch of any kind between an unmarried man and woman or man and girl, woman and boy.

To many, these laws appear extreme, over-reactive and unnecessary. How can it be that a little first grader can't hug her father's best friend, or that two adult co-workers of the opposite sex can't work alone in the office to finish an important project?

And yet, when we read the news these days, how many of the terrible tragedies would not have been able to occur if someone else had been around? How many little girls and boys have been terrorized by abusing adults who were trusted by others? How often do we hear of "date-rape" and other such attacks where a woman was alone with someone she knew and didn't fear?

Sara Esther Crispe, an advocate for sufferers of sexual abuse in the orthodox community writes, “[That], these laws are two-fold. They exist to protect us from others and to protect us from ourselves. They exist because Torah knows touch, physicality and closeness to be arousing. Torah knows sexuality to be incredibly powerful. Torah does not see these truths as negative, but as intrinsically positive forces. Torah wants us to want to bond and connect with another intimately. But Torah wants to ensure that there is both an active giver and an active receiver.

Torah wants to ensure that both partners are committed in a loving relationship where their physical intimacy is paralleling their spiritual and emotional bond, and that through their love they will create an everlasting embodiment of their love and their relationship.

Our first commandment in the Torah is to be fruitful and multiply. Our very first mitzvah is about having physical relations. And yet, because of its capability to be so holy, it has the ability to be the most unholy act as well. Procreation is a human being's closest way of emulating our

Creator. Just as God created the world, so too, when we have children, on a microcosmic level, we too create." We are expressions of Godliness.

We are taught that one of the unique characteristics which differentiate a human from an animal is our ability to have *deah v'dibur*, knowledge and speech. And Torah refers to marital relations as "knowledge" ("And Adam knew his wife Eve"--Genesis 4:1). Relations is understood as the ability to take the deepest and most essential aspect of oneself, and convey it to another in order to create a new reality and physical representation of the love of the couple. We are taught that every time a man and woman have relations in the context of a divinely-sanctioned marriage, and I would add to that same gendered couples in a mutually loving relationship; in every time souls are created through their intimacy. Sometimes those souls come into physical bodies, other times they remain spiritual, but every intimate union creates souls.

Because of the power of sexuality, even within the context of a marriage there are circumstances where the couple is forbidden from being together physically. In addition to the times where a couple is separated because of the laws of family purity, there are three other times when Torah law says that a couple may not be together: 1) if either partner is drunk, 2) if the couple have decided to divorce, 3) if either person is thinking about someone else. These three restrictions show us that in order for a couple to have relations, mind, heart, body and soul must be united and connected to one another.

Physicality is forbidden in these cases because in order to create, both people must be fully conscious and desiring of sharing their love of the other. If the desire to be physical is stemming from anything other than this goal, if it is one sided as it was time and again with Mr. Weinstein and those like him, then it is the animal within that is seeking gratification, not the human being, not the extension of God in the world.

This duality can be seen in the Hebrew word, *chayah*.

Chayah means both "life" and "animal". The way we live and the way we create life is through the love and bonding with another human being. But when we use our physicality not to create but to destroy, then we are no longer human, we are no longer living. It is then that we are merely an animal, something that does not think, does not speak, but merely acts, for its own gratification, pleasure and desire. It is then that we are trafficking in *hamas*, I cruelty, you could say, 'Animal Cruelty'.

When physicality is misused or abused, the results are unbelievably powerful in the most negative of ways. To take advantage of another human being, to force oneself when unwanted, is the greatest and most intrusive violation The abuser gives, but does so for his own satisfaction and enjoyment, therefore he is the only receiver as well. The person being taken advantage of is not a receptacle, is not part of this relationship, but has been turned into merely an object. Martin Buber would say, rather than I-Thou, this other human being, the object of our sexual cruelty become an IT.

Any time that both people are not consciously choosing and desiring this intimacy, and any time this intimacy is not an expression of love within the context of a mutually loving relationship, the Torah is teaching us that the motivations are wrong and destructive. It is a debasement, rather than a fulfillment, of our most G-dly power.

The intricate Torah laws regarding sexuality, marriage and relations are intended to teach us how powerful and holy our bodies can be. These laws are intended to remind us that we are human, and because we are human, in everything we do we have a choice. And that choice is to reduce ourselves to an animal in the jungle, or to elevate ourselves to the Creator that gave us life. When we act G-dly, we are a *nefesh chayah*, a "living soul"; and when we do not, so we are only a chayah, a beast.

In the times of Noah, all human beings were destroyed and the animals were saved. In our own day, we must destroy the animal instincts inside many of us, and here I am speaking predominantly of and to men, men who use power, authority, money and trickery to take sexual advantage of women, these animal instincts must be destroyed and our humanity, our sense of decency, compassion, empathy, and… love must be saved from the rising waters of hamas, that are spreading across the earth.