Time to Mensch Up

The letter was dated March 31, 1776. It was written by Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams. In the letter, the future First Lady urged her husband and the other members of the Continental Congress not to forget about the nation’s women when fighting for America’s independence from Great Britain.

“I long to hear that you have declared an independency,” she wrote. “And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would
remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

Her letter, written nearly 150 years before the House of Representatives voted to pass the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was an important first step in the fight for equal rights for women.
Fast forward another eight-six years later, when Tarana Burke, a civil rights activist, started using the phrase “Me Too” to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and assault in our society, especially in the workplace.

And it was almost one year ago, in October, that #MeToo became an international movement as a hashtag used on social media, following the allegations of rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

When actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women to tweet #MeToo to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem,” a culture of silence
began to crack and the impact has been enormous. Since 1776 women have achieved equality in voting but not in many other, important ways. Perhaps #MeToo is the long-promised rebellion of Abigail Adams.

For men in particular, the movement might feel distant or academic. We might think to ourselves, I would never in a million years commit sexual assault or harassment. But that is way too low a bar. And it’s not enough to simply treat our partners with respect. It’s time for men in particular to be leaders, to be makers of change in a positive way. And all of us, no matter who we are or how we were raised, have subconscious biases, blind spots, and patterns of
behavior that we have to grow out of. I was raised in a feminist home, am married to a feminist, have three feminist daughters, and consider myself to be a feminist – by that I mean one who views men and women as equals – so this is a personal issue for me and I am constantly learning from the special women in my life.

I will never forget a mistake I made as a middle schooler, and I will never forget my mother’s words to me. I was talking at the dinner table about another boy in my class who was rather meek. I repeated a phrase that a new friend of mine had used, saying, “so and so acts like a woman.” My mother looked at me sternly and with great power in her voice said,
“Don’t ever use the word ‘woman’ as an insult.”
Lesson learned. Now I have a sign in my study that reads: “Of course I’m a feminist.”

And as a male feminist, the #MeToo movement has significance for me, for our culture in general and for the Jewish community specifically. While it should come as no surprise that Jews can be perpetrators as well as victims of abuse, historically there has been a communal disbelief that these types of problems exist in the Jewish community. But they do.

And as Reform Jews, we must wrestle with our patriarchal traditions, some of which have been interpreted to the detriment of women. And I can’t
think of a better time to do that than on Kol Nidre night, when we’re taking an accounting of our souls, not just as individuals but also as a community. The Day of Atonement was never intended to be a time focused solely on the individual and his or her personal accounting of the soul. It was originally a day of communal soul searching and a time for collective acts of purification.

This year, let us use the lessons of the #MeToo movement as a place to begin that communal soul searching. There is a lack of true equality when it comes to power, norms, pay, among other considerations, that illustrate how as a culture and as a community, we have much to atone for and
much to change. And although tonight I am talking about the gender imbalance in terms of male and female, I firmly believe that change also needs to include equal rights for those who identify neither as male or female.

As we begin this communal teshuvah, we must first wrestle with the Jewish tradition that we have inherited, one, I must admit, that is not egalitarian in its origins. One story in particular from the Torah seems to normalize both male supremacy and male domination: the second creation story, from the Book of Genesis, chapters two and three. In this story God creates the first man out of dust, breathes into his nostrils the breath of life, and then decides to
create the first woman because it is not good for Adam to be alone.

From the beginning, the status of the woman is described in terms of what she means to the man. God takes a rib from the man, builds it up into a woman and brings her to the man as a help-mate. What’s more, after the first transgression in the Garden, we get what is one of the most difficult biblical verses for modern readers: “And to the woman, (God) said, “I am doubling and redoubling your toil and your pregnancies; with anguish you shall bear children, yet your desire shall be for your man, and he shall rule over you.”
As biblical interpreter Carol Meyers writes, “The translation as “rule” – though accurate in a limited way – remains inadequate because it implies general male dominance over women – and has usually been interpreted that way for millennia. Unfortunately, no single word in English precisely conveys the meaning of the Hebrew in this context.”¹ But modern scholars agree that it was most likely not intended to imply a general domination of male over female.

The consequences of passages like that one is a legacy of teachings over centuries that place women in subordinate positions to men leading to

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¹ Carol Meyers, The Torah: A Women’s Commentary, page 27
unequal and even harmful relationships. There is a psalm that is interpreted by many to be one of our earliest depictions of spousal abuse. In the 55th psalm, we read: “My heart is convulsed within me; terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling come upon me. I said, O that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and find rest. . . . I would hasten to a shelter from the stormy wind and tempest. . . . It is not an enemy who reviles me. I could bear that; it is not my foe who vaunts himself against me. I could hide from him. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. . . . Smoother than cream were the speeches of his mouth, but his heart
was at war; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords.”

The Rabbis (of the Talmudic era) “adapted the Bible to their world – a society oriented toward men,”² scholar Judith Baskin writes. “Rabbinic texts do not grant women a significant role in any aspect of rabbinic Judaism’s communal life of leadership, study and worship.”³ So it is to be expected then, that Jewish culture developed in ways that normalized patriarchy and left women without a strong voice in the tradition.

And there are rabbinic perspectives by towering figures such as Maimonides that perpetuated male

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² Judith Baskin, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, page xlix
³ Ibid, page li
dominance over women. The twelfth century Sephardic sage of philosophy and Jewish law wrote, “A wife who refuses to perform any kind of work she is obligated to do may be compelled to perform it, even by scourging her with a rod.”\(^4\) Scholars debate whether the intention is that the scourging is done by the husband or the rabbinic court, but the message either way is a disturbing one.

As modern Jews, we no longer adhere to certain teachings. For example, we no longer condone the institution of slavery. So why is it that the messages that feed the egos and desires of men are harder for some to definitively declare as being just plain

\(^4\) Maimonides, Isshut 21:10
wrong? Especially when our tradition gives us beautiful and much more egalitarian alternative examples we can choose to follow instead. And in fact, we often do have competing narratives from which to choose.

Many people do not realize that there are actually two creation stories in our Torah. The one that is quoted the most, is the second creation story, the one about the rib and the man ruling over the woman. However, it’s the first version, in chapter one of Genesis, that we can learn the most from.

In this story, the focus is the creation of humanity, *adam*, a collective word referring to humankind as a whole. In verse twenty-seven of
chapter one, God creates humankind, creating them both, male and female. The implicit message is that our humanity comes first, and then our gender. Next, God blesses them, giving them the same blessings, and charging them to be fruitful and multiply. In this story of creation, they are equal partners who are treated equally by God.

Genesis 1:27 contains perhaps the most compelling case for egalitarianism in all of the Torah. It is here we learn that all of humanity is created in the image of God, both man and woman. To strike out against another person, by word or deed, to demean another, to exert one’s sexuality over another, is to strike out against the image of God
and therefore to cause harm to another is to sin against God.

As a society and as a Jewish community, we are beginning to share the stories of pain that come from a gender relationship that is out of balance. In many different areas of our society we are seeing perpetrators being held accountable, and many of them have been told they cannot remain in their positions because of their actions. We are also seeing girls thinking about what kind of behavior they deserve and expect of boys.

All of these are important steps, but it is not until the community as a whole confronts a problem and agrees that a change is needed that real change
takes place. As such, this is not a problem that women alone can fix. Men need to change.

Deep social change will only occur when men learn new and better ways of expressing their masculinity and their sexuality. For many the phrase “man up” has meant that to be a man means to be tough and not show weakness. To “take it like a man” means to be stoic and not express emotion. But are these really the best models of masculinity for our time, or do they in fact feed into bias and inequality?

Shalom Bayit, which means Peace in the Home and which is an organization that supports victims of domestic abuse, has coined a new phrase for a new
era. Instead of “Man Up” they’re asking all Jewish men to “Mensch Up.”

Their declaration is as follows: “We call on fathers, uncles, coaches, teachers, rabbis and community members to help us shift the communal dialogue to model a healthy Jewish masculinity. We must raise boys who cry openly, share willingly, and love empathetically. We must teach them to respect women, to ask for consent, to honor boundaries, to use their power responsibly, and to resolve conflicts peacefully.”

I acknowledge, as does Shalom Bayit, that this reimagining of masculinity may feel uncomfortable and challenging at times. But what Mensching Up
really means, and what Yom Kippur requires of us, is to sit with our own discomfort, to work our way out of our communal bad patterns, to really dig deep to unearth our own, even subtle biases, rather than passing on unhealthy ideas about gender relationships to the next generation.

For some, all this may be difficult to hear. It may feel as though they’re losing something. But I see it one hundred eighty degrees differently. I believe that men gain when women gain. We gain in wisdom, wholeness, and soul. Shalom Bayit reports that couples who have more gender equity in their relationship were less likely to see a therapist, be diagnosed with depression, take prescription
medications, and were more likely to report marital satisfaction. Gender equality helps not just women. It helps all of us.

I have had the good fortune to learn from the Shalom Bayit organization, because I serve as a co-chair of its rabbinic advisory committee. In the coming year, in January, all of us will have an opportunity to learn from Shalom Bayit, when we host a workshop for parents and grandparents of not-yet-adult children that will be called Parenting to Prevent Another #MeToo Generation.

Earlier this year, more than twenty local rabbis, including all of Peninsula Temple Sholom’s rabbis, gathered to discuss the depth of the problem in our
community and how Shalom Bayit’s professional staff can partner with congregational rabbis to promote peaceful homes and families, teach skills for healthy relationships, and work to build a safe, vibrant Jewish community.

Another important place to start changing the communal dialogue around this issue is with our youth. PTS youth have participated in Moving Traditions, a program for boys and girls that seeks to embolden teens by fostering self-discovery, challenging sexism, and inspiring a commitment to Jewish life and Judaism. This coming year, six different groups of eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh-grade boys and girls will learn about themselves and
their faith in this context. And for a number of years, we have brought a workshop about healthy relationships to our eighth and ninth-graders.

I want my daughters to not only feel that they can achieve any goal they set but that they are safe, heard, and equal. I want all the women of this congregation to feel that way, too. And I call on all of the men, young and old, to help us begin to create a new, fully egalitarian community, starting today.

As Rabbi Rachel Adler writes in the Women’s Torah Commentary, a work of female scholarship and reflection:

“The world of patriarchy cries out for mending. A mending world would commit itself to equality and
power-sharing, to working cooperatively in order to fill needs and solve problems. At one again with the rest of Creation . . . men and women could learn again to be (as the traditional wedding blessing portrays them) loving friends.”

I think that would make Abigail Adams proud.

Kein yehi ratzon. So may this be God’s will.

Amen.

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5 Rachel Adler, The Torah: A Women’s Torah Commentary, page 31