

TOM SHERMAN, 1ST PLACE, JUNIOR AT BLOOMFIELD HILLS HIGH SCHOOL

Man to Man

A "Defenses Down" Solution to Sexual Assault

It was second semester of my sophomore year when I found myself in a drawing class, with Britney, a freshman with a deep passion for art (all names are pseudonyms). Britney and I found ourselves talking a lot about Britney's boyfriend Ashton. Britney beamed about Ashton, gloating that they did everything together. They were the ideal couple. Yet, a relationship that once seemed like a dream swiftly turned into a nightmare. One class, Britney told me how Ashton would secretly see other women to get back at her. A few days later, Britney told me how Ashton would threaten her. Finally, Britney told me how Ashton touched her without her permission. What was I supposed to do now?

There was no doubt in my mind that what Britney described to me was sexual assault. I had endured years of education in school about sexual assault, but nevertheless I did not know what action to take. Was Britney telling me about her assault as a sign she wanted me to intervene or did she just need someone to talk to about it? If I wanted to intervene, what would I even do?

My past education seemed to offer no answers. In school and religious school we had discussions on the evolution of women's rights, sexual assault, and the continuing struggle for gender equality. However, during these conversations, I and many of the other men in the room felt cutoff. We did not contribute to the conversation for the fear of coming off misogynistic or "mansplaining" the issue. We were tongue tied. Everyone in the room was in favor of gender equality, but only half of us felt comfortable talking about it.

With the rise of the #metoo movement, the issue of male isolation has only gotten worse. The #metoo movement has brought the issue of domestic abuse to the forefront of our societal conversation, bringing transgressors from Harvey Weinstein to Bill Cosby to justice. However, the movement has swelled the mentality that all men are threatening; all men could be perpetrators of sexual assault. Many men who are sympathetic to women facing sexual abuse now feel attacked by the very people they still try to support. What should we do now?

In response to large problems, Judaism offers answers. The Jewish value of *B'tzelem Elohim* requires us to find dignity in every human being, as all humans were made in the image of G-d. This demands women's equality throughout all walks of life and proclaims an attack on women is an attack on G-d and all humanity. Additionally, the Jewish value of *Al Tifrosh Min Hatzibur* commands us to find unity. To best address sexual assault, men and women need to work together, not be put against each other. Finally, all of these values fit under the larger umbrella of *Tzedakah*, justice, and *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, both of which demand indomitable action against sexual assault ("Mission, Vision, and Strategic Plan," jfsdetroit.org).

With these Jewish values in mind, I began to think about how I could help end sexual violence. From personal experience, I know men feel uncomfortable talking directly to women about sexual assault. I figured something needed to be done to bridge the gap of understanding between women and sympathetic men. However, when thinking about what I could do, I quickly realized I couldn't do anything alone.

My temple youth director Scott Lowen introduced me to 100 Mensches, an organization that helps bring men into the conversation about sexual assault. Their philosophy is that we can only

stop sexual assault if we all work together. 100 Mensches also works closely with the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse and frequently helps offer community education programs and participates in the community wide purple ribbon campaign against sexual assault. 100 Mensches brings the possibility of a man to man conversation about domestic abuse to life.

With a strong ally in the Jewish community, I found the only sensible solution is to work together. Taboo in high school halls and receiving little to no attention in health classes, domestic abuse and its consequences need to be taught to the young men of today. As men prefer to talk to men and young people prefer to talk to young people, I propose the creation of a young people's divisions of 100 Mensches called *Koof Shalichim* (קוף שלחים) or "100 Messengers" to educate young men on the topics of domestic abuse and sexual harassment. Holding meetings and seminars at schools and synagogues, *Koof Shalichim* would provide much needed education on the problems surrounding domestic abuse and how our generation can best prevent sexual assault. In addition to partnering with 100 Mensches, *Koof Shalichim* would also partner with BBYO and temple youth groups to have speakers and hold programs to increase the community's understanding of the issue of sexual assault. Only together can we stop domestic abuse.

As the leaders of tomorrow, it is indisputable my peers and I are the future for a better world. We have a strong passion for *Tikkun Olam* and will work tirelessly until our world is a better place. We are the dawn of an age free of sexual assault, if only you give us a chance.

Citation:

"Mission, Vision, and Strategic Plan." *Jewish Family Service of Metro Detroit*, 2019, www.jfsdetroit.org/about-us/philosophy/.

ELENA HIRSCH, 2ND PLACE, JUNIOR AT BLOOMFIELD HILLS HIGH SCHOOL

As story after story of sexual harassment and assault hit the internet with the growth of the recent Me Too movement, many were surprised by the ubiquity of these occurrences. Or, more accurately, many **men** were surprised, as most women were already fully cognizant and had more likely than not experienced their own #metoo moments. How is it that so many men had failed to notice these atrocities that were occurring all around them? Perhaps they were desensitized by a culture that has historically likened women to property—property that the tenth commandment ranks after your neighbor's house but ahead of his servants and animals when advising against coveting others' belongings. We learn in the Bible that in exchange for fourteen years of labor, Jacob was given a payment of Laban's daughters as his wives, without mention of Leah's or Rachel's feelings on the matter.

Fortunately, we have become more enlightened in modern times, and women are no longer regarded as property, but relics of these ancient beliefs persist. Sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse remain far too prevalent in our society. The Me Too movement has brought to light just how widespread these transgressions are, extending far beyond the movement's origin in Hollywood with the despicable Harvey Weinstein into every profession and every demographic, even the Jewish community, where #GamAni has become a correlated hashtag. In either language, these two simple words have created a sense of empowerment and community among countless women over the past few years, giving them the courage to speak up about their encounters with sexual assault, harassment and domestic abuse. Hopefully the outrage contained in this volume of stories will help make it universally understood that women are not voiceless objects to which you can do whatever you want.

I am enrolled in a Women's Studies course at school and we discuss issues like the Me Too and Time's Up movements. Learning about these issues has made me realize the amount of change that our world still needs. Even with the #metoo movement inspiring greater numbers of women to speak up, only 230 of every 1,000 rapes and 310 of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to the police. One of the reasons for this is the backlash many women face when coming forward with their cases. Women fear that they will be shamed for their actions and told that their attire or behaviors meant they were "asking for it," or that reporting these crimes will not make a significant difference, as 995 of every 1,000 rape perpetrators walk free. ("The Criminal Justice System: Statistics")

The Me Too movement could help alter the victim-blaming mindset by demonstrating that assault and harassment occur to the full spectrum of women, regardless of the woman's actions. We need to change society's tendency to blame the woman and hold males accountable for their behaviors beginning at an early age in school. For example, our school dress code restricts girls from wearing revealing clothing in order to avoid being a distraction for the boys, but I propose that we instead teach

boys that controlling their focus and behavior is their personal responsibility. Also, it has unfortunately become commonplace for teenage boys to sexually harass their female counterparts by asking them to send nude pictures over text or Snapchat, reducing girls to nothing more than a sexual object created for man's pleasure. Girls are often told in cyber-safety presentations, "don't send nude photos!" While that is good advice, boys should be told more often by people other than their victims, "don't ask for nude photos!"

This increase in individual responsibility, or *Achrayut*, among boys and men is the first of a number of Jewish values that, if all followed faithfully by every Jewish person, could eliminate sexual harassment and assault and domestic violence within the Jewish community. Practicing *Rodef Shalom*, the pursuit of understanding, empathy, and mutual respect, is also crucial to the prevention of these sexual offenses. Men who honor women and have empathy towards them will not consider them as property or objects who can be mistreated. *Rodef Shalom*, and *Chessed*, or compassion, will help men view women as the wonderful human beings they are, who should be respected and protected. The Jewish principle of *Tikkun Olam*, which is a communal responsibility to help heal the world, can also assist in eliminating sexual crimes against women. Men should be vocal and intervene when they see other men treating women improperly. They must heed the words *al ta'amod al dam re'echa* which means do not stand idly by while others are in danger. It will take full participation from the entire community to change the prevailing attitude that "boys will be boys" and their inappropriate behavior can be overlooked. With cooperation from the community, we can become further enlightened and realize that men and women deserve equal treatment and equal respect. After all, *Bereshit* tells us that **both** male and female are created in the image of G-d. Though our Jewish history is not without disheartening examples of the mistreatment of women, with vigilance we can ensure that we do not repeat past wrongs in our future.

Change never comes easily, but the Me Too movement is a great catalyst for change because bringing awareness to an issue through open dialogue and discussion is a powerful tool to begin making a difference. As we educate boys to be responsible for their actions and teach them within our community to follow the principles of *Rodef Shalom*, *Chessed* and *Tikkun Olam*, we can hopefully prevent sexual harassment, sexual assault and domestic abuse in the future. Perhaps one day we will instead see a string of posts with the hashtag #notme.

SAMUEL GAWEL, 3RD PLACE, SENIOR AT FRANKEL JEWISH ACADEMY

Planet Earth is currently hurtling through space at about 67,000 miles per hour. As our planet zooms through the vacuum of our solar system, it spins around its axis at a speed of roughly one thousand miles per hour. Just as the world is constantly spinning and moving forwards, so too do we, its tiny inhabitants, marching with its movement as we evolve.

Without question, society has advanced in many ways. Notably, sexual assault has gone from a taboo -- a silenced issue -- to the forefront of our minds. This battle has been raging for years, but in recent times, stigmas have been broken as worldwide, victims of sexual assault have displayed their bravery and reclaimed their voices through the "Me Too" movement. Started by Tarana Burke in 2006, the phrase took flight in 2017 as a hashtag in response to the multiple charges of sexual exploitation and assault against Harvey Weinstein. This movement has effectively resulted in the empowerment of victims, raised awareness of sexual misconduct, and revealed numerous perpetrators of sex crimes. With a united base, the "Me Too" movement unmasked the often hidden face of sexual assault in our world.

Personally, on a surface level, the "Me Too" movement has largely not affected me. I was raised in a way that I feel was *right* by my family, and have always treated women with respect and kindness, just like I would any other human. I have never taken advantage of anybody, nor would I ever intend to. Also, thanks to the awareness of the age in which I grew up, constant reinforcement of the concept of consent has been ingrained into me. Furthermore, I have not been a victim of sexual assault or domestic violence. My life at home has been one of peace, or *shalom bayit*. However, this is not to say that the movement has not affected me on a deeper level. Rather, this wave of sexual assault charges and courageous victims has further instilled in me a need to do my part in the movement, and to go beyond simply doing the right thing.

I know to ask for consent, but also to teach to others what consent means and looks like. I would never think of engaging in sexual crimes; however I do now know that I need to have a greater consciousness of how to approach those who have been affected by sexual assault and harassment, as I better understand how they have affected those around me. We cannot quietly do the right thing while others suffer; we must teach the ignorant and make our voices heard. A way in which people go about this is beyond physical action, but over social media: the birthplace of “#MeToo.” Social media sites have given people access to the world, and thus we are now capable of spreading global messages far faster than before. I have used this tool to help spread the message of consent, as have many others, as we work to end sexual assault. This movement did not simply bring the nastier parts of our world into the light; it reminded the “lucky” ones like myself of what we can do to help.

In Judaism, we have many *kehillot*, or communities. Within these communities, we look out for one another. The purpose of a *kehillah* is essentially to raise each other up, and to forge a sense of togetherness. As humans, we often forget that humankind is its own *kehillah*, and that as a species we must do our parts to raise each other up. The “Me Too” movement has taken another step in the direction of building ourselves a stronger *kehillah*. However, there are those who still wish ill upon this forward progress. Rifts are torn in our community by skeptics who claim that the “Me Too” movement magnifies a minute issue and is full of falsehoods. They push down and discourage victims for fear of being called liars. What these people lack is a deeper understanding of *Rodef Shalom*, or the pursuit of understanding and respect for others. With this principle, we learn to listen before we make accusations, and to seek to understand where others are coming from. We must approach victims of sexual assault and domestic violence with

respect and compassion in order to create a healthy environment. I feel that it is my duty to contribute to *rodef shalom* in our world by pushing others to show compassion and to lead by example.

The world is not only always moving, but it is also changing at all times. Tectonic plates move beneath us, slowly changing the face of our planet; life comes and goes; new land is created and destroyed. The world will be starkly different many years from now, and so too will we, ever moving with the tides of self betterment. The “Me Too” movement is an example of such self actualization of humankind. While “Me Too” may only be two words, they have served to create a new generation of people focused on raising one another up and acting with morals and thought through leadership, courage, and kindness.