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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* (קוֹף שְׁלִיחִים) 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/.