

Me Too says the Bible: Some thoughts in the Wake of Harvey Weinstein

The Tanakh is not immune to stories of sexual violence and sexual objectification. Many stories in Tanakh deal with the beauty (or simply the body) of a woman leading to objectification and violence. Obvious examples include:

- Sarah who is forcefully taken without permission into the harems of Pharaoh and Avimelech without protest from Abraham (God is the protestor in both cases)
- Dina who is taken without consent by Shechem
- The beautiful captive woman who is taken into the home of the Israelite
- The concubine of the Givah who is gang-raped as her indifferent husband is nearby, within the safety of a house
- Bathsheba who is sent for by David, taken into his bed and returned by his messengers afterwards
- Tamar who is brutally raped by Amnon
- Vashti who is the first objectified woman to say no
- Esther and more

The Torah also includes two stories about women who sexually harass/seduce/objectify men. The most well-known is Potiphar's wife – a powerful, immoral woman who continuously verbally assaults Joseph. Joseph has to flee leaving his shirt in her hand, ending up with him being framed and sent to jail. The second less-known story is about Lot's daughters who intoxicate and sexually take advantage of their drunk father, with the older sister coercing the younger sister in order to perpetuate the human species.

It seems to me that the Bible is very aware of what the danger of objectification of others represents. Almost all of the stories can be read as a warning to society and critique of the behavior. While written thousands of years ago, the patterns presented through these narratives sadly resonate with us today. Each one presents an

opportunity for framing discussions about abuse and objectification and the consequence for both perpetrator and victim. It is imperative that rather than skip the more violent and disturbing stories or tone them down as is sometimes done, they instead be used as they are, to encourage young and old alike to recognize that the Torah acknowledges the good and evil that lie side by side in people, and that each person is responsible for the choices that they make.

Rabbinic sources also reflect tensions that continue to confront us today. The rabbinic stories presented below express some of Judaism's attitudes towards objectification and desire.

<p>Berachot 61a</p> <p>The Sages taught: One who counts money for a woman from his hand to her hand in order to look upon her, even if he has accumulated Torah and good deeds like Moses our teacher, he will not be absolved from the punishment of Gehenna, as it is stated: "Hand to hand, the evil man shall not go unpunished"(Proverbs 11:21); one who hands money from his hand to her hand, even if he received the Torah from God's hand to his own, like Moses, he will not be absolved from the punishment of Gehenna, which is called evil.</p>	<p>ברכות סא.</p> <p>תנו רבנן: המרצה מעות לאשה מידו לידה [גבר הנותן מטבעות של כסף לתוך ידה של אשה] כדי להסתכל בה [ולהנות מיופיה הגופני] אפילו יש בידו תורה ומעשים טובים כמשה רבינו לא ינקה מדינה של גיהנם, שנאמר: "יד ליד לא ינקה רע" (משלי יא) – לא ינקה מדינה של גיהנם.</p>
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The Beraita is not forbidding business interaction between men and women, but it is forbidding business interaction for the purpose of a man staring at a woman with pleasure. This injects a sexual element – on the man's part – into the business world which should be a "safe" place free of sexuality for the woman (and the man). At this point the Talmud steps in and says NO. Was the Talmud far out in their concern? Have any of us ever experienced an uncomfortable moment in an encounter with a man/woman at a time where it was distinctly inappropriate (work, school, synagogue etc) under the guise of business as usual? How do we protect ourselves from such situations and how can we create boundaries to prevent ourselves from falling into such situations?

The following story is a good example of boundary setting.



Sanhedrin 71a

Apropos the discussion of the obligation to allow oneself to be killed rather than engage in forbidden sexual intercourse, the Gemara notes that **Rav Yehuda says that Rav says:** There was **an incident involving a certain man who set his eyes upon a certain woman and passion rose in his heart**, to the point that he became deathly ill. **And they came and asked doctors** what was to be done with him. **And the doctors said:** **He will have no cure until she engages in sexual intercourse with him. The Sages said: Let him die, and she may not engage in sexual intercourse with him.** The doctors said: **She should at least stand naked before him.** The Sages said: **Let him die, and she may not stand naked before him.** The doctors suggested: The woman **should at least converse with him behind a fence** in a secluded area, so that he should derive a small amount of pleasure from the encounter. The Sages insisted: **Let him die, and she may not converse with him behind a fence.**

The Gemara comments: **Rabbi Ya'akov bar Idi and Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani disagree about this issue. One of them says:** The woman in question **was a married woman, and the other one says: She was unmarried.** The Gemara tries to clarify the issue: **Granted, according to the one who says that she was a married woman, the matter is properly understood.** Since the case involved a severely prohibited forbidden relationship, the Sages did not allow any activity hinting at intimacy. **But according to the one who says that she was unmarried, what is the reason for all this opposition?** Why did the Sages say that the man must be allowed to die, rather than have the woman do as was requested?

Rav Pappa says: This is **due to the potential family flaw**, i.e., harm to the family name, as it is not permitted to bring disgrace to the entire family in order to save the lovesick man. **Rav Aha, son of Rav Ika, says:** This is **so that the daughters of Israel should not be promiscuous with regard to forbidden sexual relations.** Were they to listen to the doctors' recommendations, Jewish women might lose moral restraint.

סנהדרין עא.

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב:

מעשה באדם אחד שנתן עיניו באשה אחת, והעלה לבו טינא. [חלה במחלה מסוכנת בגלל תאוותו

לאשה זו]

ובאו ושאלו לרופאים

ואמרו: אין לו תקנה עד שתבעל. [האיש לא יבריא

אלא אם כן יקיים יחסי אישות עם האשה]

אמרו חכמים: ימות, ואל תבעל לו.

[הציעו הרופאים...] תעמוד לפניו ערומה?

[השיבו החכמים...] ימות ואל תעמוד לפניו ערומה.

תספר עמו מאחורי הגדר?

ימות ולא תספר עמו מאחורי הגדר. (תלמוד בבלי

מסכת סנהדרין דף עה ע"א)

בשלמא למאן דאמר אשת איש היתה - שפיר. [מובן

מדוע לא התיירו לו חכמים שהרי ביחס לאשת איש

נאמר "יהרג ואל יעבור"]

אלא למאן דאמר פנויה היתה מאי כולי האי? [מה

כל זה? מדוע החמירו חכמים וקבעו שעדיף שאיש

זה ימות ולא יהנה ממנה]

רב פפא אמר: משום פגם משפחה. [יפגע הדבר

בכבודה של המשפחה]

רב אחא בריה דרב איקא אמר: כדי שלא יהו בנות

ישראל פרוצות בעריות. [הדבר יביא לזלזול

ופגיעה מינית בנשים]

The Rabbis forbid even a simple conversation behind a fence because it involved a man using a woman for his own sexual pleasure. The end of the Talmudic discussion is particularly interesting because Rav Pappa and Rav Aha try to understand why such stringency is taken for an unmarried woman, given that no severe sexual prohibition exists (as compared to adultery or incest). Rav Pappa suggests the concern is for family honor – nothing to do with the objectification of the young girl, but Rav Aha takes the discussion in a different direction: The concern is for the moral character of the daughters of Israel. The boundaries preventing objectification in the story serve both men and women well. If we remove the boundaries, we may create licentious behavior and lose our daughters through the moral hypocrisy of allowing them to be sexualized through a halakhic loophole – something I would call *נבל ברשות התורה*. I would like to suggest another reading more in keeping with contemporary discourse, that the premise of the story – a man needing to sexually objectify a woman in order to cure some sort of life-threatening disorder – is so antithetical to the moral, social and religious fabric of a Torah-based society, that if we give in to save this individual we are essentially turning all of our daughters into sexual objects with the potential for misuse.

In the previous story in Sanhedrin, the man is given responsibility for his actions and expected to overcome his desire. Now we will see a story in which a father places the blame on the young woman.

<p>Taanit 24a</p> <p>The Gemara asks: What is the incident involving his daughter? He had a very beautiful daughter. One day Rabbi Yosei from Yokrat saw a certain man piercing a hole in the hedge surrounding his property and looking at his daughter. Rabbi Yosei said to him: What is this? The man said to him: My teacher, if I have not merited taking her in marriage, shall I not at least merit to look at her? Rabbi Yosei said to her: My daughter, you are causing people distress. Return to your dust, and let people</p>	<p>בתלמוד הבבלי מסכת תענית (כג ע"ב- כד ע"א):</p> <p>[לרב יוסי דמן יוקרת] הוויא ליה ברתא בעלת יופי [היתה לו בת יפה].</p> <p>יומא חד חזיא לההוא גברא דהוה כריא בהוצא וקא חזי לה [יום אחד ראה ר' יוסי אדם אחד שעשה חור בגדר הקנים כדי להסתכל בה].</p> <p>אמר לו: מאי האי? [שאלו מדוע הוא עושה כן]</p> <p>אמר ליה: רבי, אם ללוקחה לא זכיתי, לראותה לא אזכה? [ענה אם לא זכיתי לשאתה לאישה, לא אזכה לראותה?]</p>
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<p>no longer stumble into sin due to you.</p>	<p>אמר לה: בתי, קא מצערת להו לברייתא - שובי לעפריך, ואל יכשלו ביך בני אדם [בתי את מצערת את הבריות, עדיף שתמותי כדי שלא יכשלו בך אנשים שיסתכלו בך בגלל יופיך].</p>
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Why does Rabbi Yossi react the way he does? He blames the victim and not the perpetrator. (This line of thinking also exists when some rabbinic interpreters read the Dina and Shechem story, blaming Dina for going out to see the girls of the city. However, it is important to note that simultaneously, other interpreters reject that reading and blame Shechem or Jacob for not protecting his daughter.) In his mind, her beauty is to blame and the men cannot help themselves. Better that she die! The story does not pass quietly in Rabbi Yossi's community and he loses a prize student who goes elsewhere to learn his Torah after this incident, explaining to his new teacher that he cannot learn with a man who acts so cruelly to his own children. While this is an offensive story, it certainly can be used to engender conversation about the way in which society tries to blame women for the way they dress or act or talk in order to vindicate the perpetrators.

It is important to note that in most of the stories, Biblical or rabbinic, the women are not blamed when acts of violence or sexualization occur. That is not to say that the Talmud is not hyperaware of the seductive power of women, but much of that has to do with the "male gaze" which leads us to the next story.

<p>Bava Batra 57b</p> <p>Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Bena'a: Partners may prevent each other from using their courtyard for any purpose except for washing laundry. This is because it is not the way of Jewish women to be degraded over washing laundry by laundering their clothing in a public area. Therefore, they must be allowed to launder in the courtyard. In connection with the matter of laundry being washed in public, the Gemara quotes the homiletic interpretation of a verse: "He that walks righteously, and speaks uprightly; he that despises the gain of oppressions, that</p>	<p>בבלי בבא בתרא נז ע"ב</p> <p>"ועוצם עיניו מראות ברע" (ישעיהו לג) - א"ר חייא בר אבא: זה שאין מסתכל בנשים בשעה שעומדות על הכביסה [ורגליהן וידיהן מגולות]. היכי דמי? אי דאיכא דרכא אחריתא [באיזה מקרה מדובר? אם ישנה דרך אחרת שיכול הוא ללכת בה], רשע הוא! אי דליכא דרכא אחריתא [אם אין דרך אחרת], אנוס הוא!</p>
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<p>shakes his hands from holding of bribes, that stops his ears from hearing of blood, and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil” (Isaiah 33:15). Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says: This is referring to one who does not gaze at women while they are standing over the laundry, as it was common for them to stand in the water and raise the hems of their garments while laundering their clothing.</p> <p>The Gemara clarifies: What are the circumstances? If it is referring to a case where there is another way by which the one walking could reach his destination, then one who walks past the women, consequently placing himself in a situation where he will be tempted to gaze at them, is wicked. Alternatively, if it is referring to a case where there is no other way by which he can reach his destination, then he is a victim of circumstance, so why is he required to shut his eyes? The Gemara explains: Actually, it is referring to a case where there is no other way by which he can reach his destination, and even so, he is required to compel himself to avoid gazing at the women.</p>	<p>לעולם דליכא דרכא אחריתא, ואפילו הכי מיבעי ליה למינס נפשיה [מדובר שאין לו דרך אחרת, וכשהוא נאלץ ללכת שם עליו להתאמץ לא להסתכל בנשים].</p>
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This story emphasizes a man’s responsibility to control his “male gaze”. Women are not expected to stop their normative behavior – in this case, laundry which exposes their arms and legs – to capitulate to the male gaze. Rather the male gaze is expected to restrict itself! This is a wonderful source that recognizes the sexual tension that exists in society when men and women interact, but puts the burden on the men to behave responsibly. One might be able to use this story to talk about the mutual responsibility of men and women with regard to dress, language and interaction to create a respectful society in which sexuality is acknowledged but controlled.

In summary, Jewish tradition from its very beginning has shown a lot of awareness of the dangers and challenges that sexuality poses to families, communities and religion. Me Too say Sarah, Rebecca, Dina and Joseph. Me Too say Tamar, Vashti, Esther and Bathsheba.



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