

# **Jewish Text Study and Discussion Guide on Power Dynamics, Harassment, and Assault**

**By Cantor Alane Katzew and Rabbi Iah Pillsbury**

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### **Introduction**

Most of us can reflect upon times in our lives when we endured harassment. At Hebrew Union College in the 1970s, when studying to become a cantor, an older professor translated the phrase, “*Kol Isha Erva*” – “A woman’s voice is like a genital.” This phrase has long been used as the rationale for separating men and women during prayer services and prompts the prohibition against women leading worship among “Traditional” Jews; women were perceived as a distraction from pure devotion to prayer. Excluding women from sight and sound was said to avoid potential sexual arousal. We were a class of five women, and our professors’ choice of the English translation was offensive. What did we do with the offense? [NOTHING](#).

Today, I imagine we might have reacted differently. However, we were pioneering the field for women cantors, and this moment of collective sexual harassment did not seem to be worth the price of calling out the event. Decades later, we still have a lot of work to do. HUC-JIR, CCAR,

and the URJ still have problems with sexual assault, sexual harassment, and abuses of power, as illustrated in the independent investigations of 5782. As a Movement, we are engaging in important and difficult work to shed light on these past offenses and move forward so that these kinds of things will not happen again. And should they occur, they will be acknowledged, perpetrators will be held accountable, and survivors will be protected and supported.

This resource is intended for individuals and institutions to engage in conversations with an eye toward Jewish wisdom and text in order to better name and address hurt and healing. It is in this spirit of inquiry, in this day and age, that we will attempt to explore the stories and texts of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, and two of our heroines from Tanach, Esther and Dinah, considering their challenges and offenses through different lenses. We hope to reveal a variety of layers of harassment, abuse, and assault.

It is important to remember that our norms change, and so does our language. They have changed over time and will continue to change. As Jews and people who care about Judaism, we are all lifelong learners. Our perspective changes, and so do societal norms. Just because we learned something once doesn't mean that perspective will remain true forever. May we all continue to engage in this lifelong process of learning and becoming, of seeing ourselves and our communities with new eyes, seeking justice, and pursuing the better world we are all building together. Thank you for being on this journey with us!

- **Cantor Alane S. Katzew(she/her) and Rabbi Iah Pillsbury (she/they)**

### **How have things changed, and how have they stayed the same?**

The story of women in Judaism and women in Reform Judaism is a global one and a personal one. We each have our own stories to share, and yet too often, our heroines of old have been overlooked and gone unnamed to future generations. We have witnessed the evolution and de-evolution of women's rights in our lifetimes. Every change impacts all of our personal and professional lives and experiences. Recent events with the overturn of Roe v. Wade have reminded us just how important it is to preserve and tell our stories, sharing our power, strength, and vulnerability.

Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) has long been at the forefront of championing women's rights and human rights within the Reform Movement. The first gathering of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) was held in Cincinnati in 1913. It has evolved over the last 110 years along with Reform Judaism as a mighty advocate for social justice and change. Beginning in 1933, Dr. Jane Evans was its Executive Vice President. She was responsible for moving the offices of NFTS in 1951 to the "House for Living Judaism" (UAHC) on Fifth Avenue in NYC and continued as director for many more years. Cantor Katzew was fortunate to know Jane personally for twenty years at the end of Jane's life. Together, they served on the Commission for Social Action at the Religious Action Center (RAC). Dr. Evans was a repository for the history

of the inner workings of social justice in the Reform Movement. During the years Cantor Katzew served at the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) as Director of Worship and Music (2002-2012), came to know Jane as a congregant as well and had the privilege of ushering her through her life transition and ultimately death in 2004. It was during this same time that Rabbi Marla J. Feldman was serving at the URJ as the Director of Development and Director of the Commission on Social Action. In 2012, Rabbi Feldman took on the mantle of Executive leadership for WRJ; her prior work with the RAC and URJ and her training as an attorney allow her to deepen and strengthen the continued advocacy of WRJ.

We've come a long way since the birth of American Reform Judaism, even though we still have a long way to go. In 1972, fifty years ago, Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. In 1975, a group of female rabbinic students founded the Women's Rabbinic Network (WRN). Rabbi Janet Marder served as the first female president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 2003, followed by Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus in 2009 and Rabbi Denise Eger in 2015. Rabbi Hara Person was named Executive Vice President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 2019 and became the first female executive director of the CCAR.

Cantor Barbara Ostfeld was ordained in 1975 at the New York Campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Since Cantor Ostfeld was ordained, the face of the American Reform Cantorate has changed rapidly. Currently, more than fifty percent of the American Conference of Cantors (ACC) members are women. Cantor Vicki Axe was the first woman to serve as president of the American Conference of Cantors in 1991, followed by Cantor Judi Rowland in 1995, Cantor Kay Greenwald in 2007, Cantor Susan Caro in 2010, and Cantor Claire Franco in 2019. Rachel Turry Roth is the Chief Operating Officer of the American Conference of Cantors. Her work as a member of NATA, among the professionals who seamlessly runs synagogues and Jewish organizations in the Executive Director role is also an important rise to ranks of leadership. Interestingly, in addition to her work as a professional, Rachel Turry Roth is also an elected volunteer member of the board of WRJ.

When Gates of Prayer was published in 1975, the Matriarchs were not represented in the Amidah prayers. Gender-sensitive language was not yet integrated into normative worship. Pasted inserts with a gender-sensitive version of the *Avot* prayer were common first efforts to initiate the shift toward inclusivity. An interim prayerbook, Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays gender-sensitive edition, entered Reform Prayer circles in 1996. The Matriarchs were represented as *Avot v'Imahot*. The Reform Movement replaced the male pronouns for God with You and other male language for God with gender-neutral language like changing King and Lord to Eternal. It is important to note that we also changed Lord to Adonai, even though Adonai is still a male-gendered word in Hebrew. In 2007, the aforementioned interim changes were codified with the publication of Mishkan T'filah. This sea change of influence was moved by the first female editor-in-chief for any Siddur in the history of Judaism, Rabbi Elyse D. Frishman.

The concept of a Women's Feminist Torah Commentary was first proposed by Cantor Sarah Sager at the WRJ General Assembly in 1993, greatly adding to women's formal contribution to Jewish learning and scholarship. The publication of "The Torah: A Women's Commentary" (commissioned by WRJ) took place in 2007 and contains the writings of over 100 women rabbis, cantors, theologians, academics, and educators. It was edited by Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskanazi, with Rabbi Andrea Weiss as assistant editor. Rabbi Andrea Weiss currently serves as the Provost at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Faculty at HUC-JIR has evolved to include women professors, deans, and program directors throughout all four campuses. Both HUC-JIR and URJ have also welcomed women lay chairs of these organizations in recent years. Despite all our progress as a Movement, to date, a woman has not held the post of President of HUC-JIR, nor has the Union for Reform Judaism yet appointed a woman to its presidency. We still have our work to do, and we need your voices and wisdom to make our Movement and the world as just, equitable, and fabulous as possible!

## **What is Harassment?**

In some marriages, both biblical and today, there may be expectations that a woman is subjugated to her spouse's demands. These harassments may be present in the form of simple household chores to sexual obligations, control of all financial accounts—resulting in a form of abuse that reduces or limits a wife's ability to access family assets. Manipulation and harassment may not even be obvious to the one who is being abused.

In the Biblical narrative, we see the precedent for such controlling behavior. It is found between husbands and wives, in the relationships of wives and their servants and slaves, between parents and children, and between employers and employees. The deception and manipulation runs deep in the text.

A famine in the land of Canaan prompts Abram and Sarai to travel to Egypt. Perhaps Abram worries that he will be killed by the Egyptians on account of Sarai's beauty, or perhaps he wants to make his fortune by effectively selling his wife Sarai to Pharaoh. Abram compels Sarai to lie and say she is his sister rather than his wife (they are actually half-siblings ([Genesis 20:12](#))). In [Genesis 12:11-13](#), as Abram is about to enter Egypt, he says to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are," using her beauty against her. This is a classic abuser tactic—blaming the victim. By complementing the person being victimized and harassed, the victim is encouraged to accept the complement and buy into the harassment. In this instance, there is no consent, only the assumption (force) that such behavior is expected. Harassment is defined as aggressive pressure or intimidation. It can take the form of verbal, visual, or physical abuse. We might ask why Sarai would have consented to such a deception. And yet, we need only read a few more chapters in the text to see that Sarai too was capable of controlling behavior. In this case, it was against her maidservant, Hagar.

A few chapters later, in [Genesis 16:1-3](#) Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children and is desperate to help Abram fulfill God's promise of having many children. Sarai has an Egyptian

maidservant whose name is Hagar. Sarai tells Abram, “Look, יהוה has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a child through her.” Abram heeds Sarai’s request. Sarai then gives Abram her maidservant Hagar as a concubine.

The Biblical wife has no status in her own right. Initially, her marriage and subsequent male progeny are the means by which she gains both status and inheritance. When unable to bear her own children, Sarai uses the only agency she has available. First, she suggests to Abram that Hagar be their surrogate - without even a discussion of consent. Hagar is never asked to agree to the plan, nor do we ever hear her perspective. Upon Abram’s consent to the plan, Sarai abuses her power over Hagar and forces her to conceive a child on their behalf, and Ishmael, the progenitor of the people of Islam, is born. After Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarai becomes outrageously jealous and believes her “esteem lowered.” In turn, Sarai harasses Hagar and her child and deals harshly with them by banishing them from their camp. Ultimately, Hagar is kicked out of her home twice; the first time she returns and then she is expelled forever and almost dies in the process.

Reproductive violence and forced pregnancy are tools of harassment, abuse, and subjugation today. As recently as June 24, 2022, we find the United States’ highest court engaged in the overturning of Roe v. Wade. This landmark law, passed in 1973, made clear that a woman’s right to choose whether or not to bear a child was a decision to be made privately and without governmental intervention. Roe v. Wade’s recent repeal in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization now refers the legal decision back to the state government, many of which have acted quickly to force women to give birth as mandated by law.

“Sarai dealt harshly with her” – this is harassment. In their complicity and harassment of Hagar, Abram and Sarai will be tormented and afflicted. The son Hagar bears, Ishmael, also bears the brunt of harassment. Hagar and Ishmael are banished from the camp multiple times, ultimately coming near death in the middle of the desert. Harassment doesn’t just affect the people being harassed and the people doing the harassment, but also the entire system in which harassment takes place. Harassment often leaves deep scars which can be intergenerational and linger long after the initial harassment occurs. Anyone can be a harasser, and anyone can be harassed. Harassers come in all genders, all sexual orientations, and all races, as do all victims and survivors of harassment. The more power disparities there are between people and groups of people, however, the more likely harassment is to take place and run unchecked.

Harassment of those who fall on the LGBTQIA2S (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, two spirit), spectrum is rampant in our culture and society. Jewishly, we are called to honor the truth of a person’s identity, which means calling them by the name they wish to be called and referring to them by the pronouns they prefer, no matter how frequently or infrequently they may change. It can be challenging to shift pronouns and names for someone you have known for a long time, but it is incredibly important and ultimately rewarding. When a child who has grown up in our synagogue community leaves for college as Jacob and returns after graduation as Alana, a simple way to show a person that you care about who they are and honor their identity is to embrace their chosen name. Practicing when you

are thinking about the individual or talking about them when they aren't around can be helpful in making the shift. Failing to make the change is simply unacceptable, and a form of harassment called deadnaming.

Deadnaming may be an accidental, or an intentional attempt to deny, mock, or invalidate a person's gender identity. Calling a person by a name they no longer associate with is harassment, even in Torah, though that is not the word the Torah uses. After Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah in Torah, they are only referred to as Abraham and Sarah. Jacob, however, becomes Israel and continues to go by both names—everyone is different and gets to have a different relationship to names! Think about any time you have added a name or title to your identity (e.g., doctor, Rabbi, Cantor, Ph.D.). Frequently, it can take others time to learn how best to address you, and yet it feels so good when people use your correct title. It is even more important for trans and nonbinary folks. For every core place in a trans child's life (synagogue, school, home, sports, etc.) that correctly genders them, their chance of attempting suicide goes down by fifty percent (Inside Out Youth Services). You are literally helping to save a life by using the correct names and pronouns of those in your community. To honor the identities of individuals requires our attention and diligence. If you don't know how to address someone in your community, just ask them. Pronouns are not necessarily obvious by looking at someone. Asking what pronouns or names a person uses is a way to show them that you care. And if you see or hear someone in your community misgendering someone, say something. It can be exhausting to always correct others about your own identity and challenging for those wishing to use language that is new to them to always get it right. By correcting mistakes in language when you hear them, you are helping everyone! A simple reminder can go a long way.

## Questions

- **Where have you seen harassment in your community?**
- **In what ways have you, or anyone you know, experienced harassment?**
- **How do you and others define harassment?**
- **Do you have concerns about harassment in your community?**
- **How can we, as a community, be proactive in preventing these behaviors?**
- **How can we, as a community, help promote healing and justice when these traumas happen in our communities?**

To read the entire story of Sarai, Hagar, and Avram, [click here](#).

To read the Rambam's commentary on this story, [click here](#).

To get more about communal context, [click here](#).

To learn more about words and power, [click here](#).

To learn more about gender identity and queerness in Jewish text, [click here](#).

## **What is An Abusive Relationship?**

“My ex-boyfriend was abusive, controlling, and had a violent temper. I was afraid of him—and what he might do to me.” Jewish Women’s International published this article on June 15, 2022. By filling out a “[danger assessment](#)” (developed by Jacquelyn Campbell in 1986), the author left the relationship after answering the following three questions.

1. Are they violently and constantly jealous of you?
2. Do you believe that they are capable of killing you?
3. Do they own a gun (lethal weapon)?

Abusive relationships are found everywhere—inside marriage, dating, friendships, at work, at school, and in volunteer positions. Abuse is most likely to occur when there are large power differences, but abuse can also create power differences. Abuse exists in all types of relationships across the gender spectrum and all sexual orientations and races. Our Biblical forbears experienced these same challenges. It is challenging to find an example of a biblical marriage that is not abusive in some respects. All of our Matriarchs, as described in Torah, are in abusive marriages. One of the most egregious examples of abusive relationships in Torah is Bilhah and Zilpah.

When Rachel and Leah marry Jacob, they each give their maid servants “as wives” to Jacob. Neither is given the opportunity to consent. They are never asked nor given a choice. In fact, rabbinic literature takes it a step further, saying that Zilpah is so young that she doesn’t know what pregnancy is, which is why the text simply says she gives birth rather than she became pregnant and then gave birth. Bilhah and Zilpah were not given the opportunity to give consent to sexual activity with Jacob. And Rachel and Leah were complicit. They not only gave their servants as concubines or wives to their husband, but also never saw it as wrong or tried to help them, though there is a midrash that Leah actually freed Zilpah.

Women can be abusers and men can be abusers and people of all genders can be abusers. Statistically, it is true that men tend to abuse women the most, but we also don’t have great data on other relationship dynamics, and we know that all genders can be abusers or survivors of abuse. Abuse is underreported and happens in gay relationships, straight relationships, friendships, work relationships, volunteer relationships, and every kind of relationship there is. It can even happen in congregations and other Jewish communal settings. It is important to ask yourself, is someone accepting my no, or are they trying to guilt me into doing something? Am I accepting other people’s no’s or am I trying to convince them after they have said no in any way whatsoever? No is no, whatever form it takes. It is a full sentence and requires no explanation. We must honor our own no’s, and the no’s of others.

- **Where have you seen abuse in your community?**
- **In what ways have you, or anyone you know, experienced abuse?**
- **How do you and others define abuse?**
- **Do you have concerns about abusive relationships in your community?**

- **How can we, as a community, be proactive in preventing these behaviors?**
- **How can we, as a community, help promote healing and justice when these traumas happen in our communities?**

To read the full story of Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah in Genesis, click [here](#).

To learn more about [Bilhah](#) and [Zilpah](#) in rabbinic literature, click the links provided.

## **What is consent?**

Consent means both parties are enthusiastically agreeing to whatever is happening and whatever comes next. Consent is ongoing; it doesn't just happen once. We all get to change our minds as our feelings change! It is challenging to find examples of explicit enthusiastic consent given by women in Torah. Much of the time, we hear what the men in their lives think about them, but don't hear explicitly what women think about the men. At the beginning of her story, Rebecca is a great example of explicit enthusiastic consent. We first meet Rebecca as a young woman, a generous, strong, and beautiful virgin who brings jar after jar of water to Abraham's servant, Eliezer, and all of his camels so they can drink their fill. Abraham's servant is on a mission to find just such a woman to bring back to marry Isaac, and one of the critical qualities this woman must have is that she must explicitly תאָבָה (toeva); she must consent to marry Isaac and return with the servant. After Rebecca fulfills the terms from Abraham and God, she is explicitly asked if she "will go with this man." To which she replies, "I will" (Gen 24:58). It is only then, after her explicit and enthusiastic consent is given that she leaves with Abraham's servant to marry Isaac. When Rebecca sees Isaac, she falls off her camel and soon after he marries her and falls in love with her. We don't hear how she feels after her initial consent. And consent isn't just a one-time yes. It requires saying yes over and over again as the moment changes and feelings transform. Just because we consent once does not mean that consent remains in perpetuity.

Later in Rebecca's story, she becomes someone who is coercive and manipulative as the sage of her family unfolds. She pressures her son Jacob into stealing his brother's birthright and blessing. She uses her son to coerce her husband into blessing Jacob instead of Esau, a different child than Isaac intends to bless. Just because someone was once a champion of consent, does not mean they always will remain a champion of consent. Everyone of all genders and ages, can be champions of consent and everyone of all genders and ages is capable of coercive behavior. It is important to ask ourselves if we are being pushed into doing something we don't want to do or are pushing others to do something they are not enthusiastic about doing.

- **Where have you seen consent in your community?**
- **In what ways have you, or anyone you know, experienced a violation or affirmation of consent? How do you and others define consent?**
- **Do you have concerns about consent in your community?**
- **How can we, as a community, be proactive in preventing these behaviors?**



- **How can we, as a community, help promote healing and justice when these traumas happen in our communities?**

To read the full story of Rebecca meeting Eliezer and marrying Isaac in Torah, [click here](#).

To read the story of Isaac selling Rebecca to a foreign king, [click here](#).

To read the full story of Rebecca instructing Jacob to steal his brother's birthright, [click here](#).

To see a great modern comic about consent, [click here](#).

## **What is coercion?**

There is a messy and thin line between consent and coercion and between coercion and rape. And that line isn't always straight forward in the moment. It can be easy to think we wanted something and consented to it, only to realize later that we were pushed into it and didn't really want to say yes—that we never felt that yes. The desire to please others, even at our own expense, can be a really hard thing to let go of. Our heroines from Tanach (Torah, Prophets, and Writings also known as the Jewish Bible) also struggled with this desire to please at their own expense. "Esther too was taken" (וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר וְאֲחֵרוֹתָיִךְ וְיָצְאָה אִתָּךְ אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ) (Esther 2:8) to the Palace with the other virgins she pleases Hagai, the guardian of the women, and wins special favors in return. Afterwards, when she is taken to the King, she pleases him and wins his favor, becoming Queen. But this is no 'Disney' fairy tale. As a woman in the palace, queen, or concubine, she cannot say no to the King under any circumstance. He has absolute power and authority. Just look at what happened to [Vashti!](#) Even though Esther becomes Queen, she cannot consent. In the best-case scenario, she is coerced into a sexual relationship with the King. And in the worst, she is raped, over and over again. Megillah 13a even goes so far as to say that Esther loses her entire identity in order to please everyone around her, including Mordecai, the male attendants in the Palace, and the King.

Esther 2:15 says, "**Esther obtained favor** in the sight of all those who looked upon her." In the [Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 13a](#), "**Rabbi Elazar said: This teaches that she appeared to each and every one as if she were a member of his own nation**, and therefore she obtained favor in the eyes of all." Not only is she a kidnapped and trafficked orphan, all alone in a foreign palace, but she also loses her entire self. Her whole external identity. Which makes it all the more impressive that she never loses track of her internal Jewish identity. The Talmud takes Esther's loss of self even further, teaching that the verse "**And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins**" (Esther 2:17). Really means, "**Rav said: that if he wanted to taste in her the taste of a virgin during intercourse, he tasted it, and if he wanted to experience the taste of a non-virgin, he tasted it, and therefore he loved her more than all the other women**" ([Megillah 13a](#)). Not even her body, her most private sexual self is really hers. She doesn't have a choice but becomes everything others want her to be.

When we please those in power in order to not be hurt, or in fear of retribution, or because it felt like we had no other options at the time, there is no consent, even if we said yes or our bodies appeared to say yes. Both emotionally/psychologically coerced experiences of a sexual

nature and physically coerced experiences are sexual assault and can be equally traumatizing. The short- and long-term effects can be deeply painful and soul wrenching. Our rabbinic texts see Esther as a victim of rape to begin with, and then have different opinions about her choice to approach the King. Unfortunately, we never get Esther's opinion about what happened to her, and truthfully, only her opinion really matters. Whether there is a line between coercive sex and rape is in the eyes and heart of the person who lives through that violence. Coercion is another kind of violence, even if we don't always like to name it as such. Was Esther coerced or was she a survivor of [rape](#)? Our rabbinic texts see her as a victim of rape to begin with, and then have different opinions about her choice to approach the King ([click here](#) for more information about Esther as a rape victim). Unfortunately, we never get Esther's opinion about what happened to her, and truthfully, only her opinion really matters. The line between coercive sex and rape is in the eyes and the heart of the person who lives through that violence. Coercion is another kind of violence, even if we don't always like to name it as such.

- **Where have you seen coercion in your community? In what ways have you, or anyone you know, experienced coercion? How do you and others define coercion?**
- **Do you have concerns about coercion in your community?**
- **How can we, as a community, be proactive in preventing these behaviors?**
- **How can we, as a community, help promote healing and justice when these traumas happen in our communities?**

For more on Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai in the Talmud, [click here](#).

For more on Esther in Tanach, [click here](#).

To learn more about Esther as rape victim in the Talmud, [click here](#).

To learn about Esther as a victim and survivor of incest in the Talmud, [click here](#).

### **What is Sexual Assault?**

The rape of Dinah is one of the more famous examples of sexual assault in the Jewish Bible. In the story of Dinah, a non-Israelite man desires her and takes her by force. Rape is not about sex; it is about power, even when it is depicted about sexual desire. There is nothing a person can wear to make them more or less deserving of rape. Rape is about power, not about sex. After Dinah is taken by force, her father Jacob engages in negotiation with Hamor, the father of Dinah's rapist, Shechem, that Dinah's brothers could not abide by. Jacob gets Hamor, Shechem, and all their men will be circumcised and then Shechem will be allowed to marry Dinah. After the mass circumcision, on the third day when the men are in the most pain, Dinah's brothers avenge the rape of Dinah, killing all the men, plundering their settlement, and justify it stating, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (Genesis 34:31).

Consent is important in every situation, no matter who is involved. There is never any justification for rape. Rabbinic literature takes a very hard line with rape, considering it a form of murder because the hurt and the harm goes so deep, touching the very soul of the survivor. Sexual assault is one of three sins a person can commit that fundamentally changes the world, and can never be fully repented for: murder, rape, and idolatry ([B. Talmud Sanhedrin 74a](#)). Even

though it is very possible to heal from sexual assault, it is not possible to go back to being the person you were before the assault took place. Our rabbinic literature acknowledges this and takes that pain very seriously.

In the story of Dinah, we hear absolute silence from Dinah. We hear nothing about her voice, her agency, or her choices. So too in modern society, the survivors of rape, harassment, and abuse often do not report these crimes or seek justice. The penalty for speaking out often leads to victim blaming and disastrous consequences for the survivor of sexual assault, rather than for the perpetrator. To understand the depth of wariness by victims to come forward, one only need look at the Supreme Court nomination hearings for Clarence Thomas (1991) and Brett M. Kavanaugh (2018) to see how Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford were vilified, rather than validated, by coming forward. Even though statistically, people do not lie about sexual assault, our society often treats those who come forward as if that is incredibly common. It is our responsibility as Jewish communal leaders to make sure that when allegations of sexual assault come forward, we listen and give primacy to survivor's voices and needs, always remaining on the side of justice and believing those who survived assault and had the courage to come forward. We must also remember that anyone, of any gender can be a survivor of sexual assault. As well, anyone of any gender can be a perpetrator of sexual assault. This is not just a problem between males and females, but occurs in queer relationships, with non-binary folks, and with transgender folks, who are notably at the greatest risk for assault. Rape happens in every community with all genders and is statistically under reported. We must ask ourselves; how can we make it easier for survivors to come forward and ensure that sexual assault does not take place in Jewish spaces to begin with?

- **Where have you seen sexual assault in your community? In what ways have you, or anyone you know, experienced sexual assault? How do you and others define sexual assault?**
- **Do you have concerns about sexual assault in your community?**
- **How can we, as a community, be proactive in preventing these behaviors?**
- **How can we, as a community, help promote healing and justice when these traumas happen in our communities?**

To read the full story of the rape of Dinah Genesis 34:1-31, [click here](#).

To read more about rape in rabbinic literature (B. Talmud Sanhedrin 74a), [click here](#).

### **What is the cultural underlay of self worth and how does it contribute to harassment and assault?**

Rachel and Leah are the only women in all of Genesis to have a conversation with one another. And yet the Book of Genesis still does not pass the Bechdel test because the conversation they have is about a man, their shared husband Jacob. The Bechdel test is a test for literature created by Alison Bechdel, an American feminist cartoonist, to highlight how infrequently

women speak to one another in creative works. It first appears in her 1985 cartoon, [Dykes to Watch Out For](#). The first part of the test is to note if there is more than one female character, the second is to identify if those female characters ever speak to one another, and lastly, does that conversation involve content about anything other than a man.

Too often women are pitted against each other by society, especially in heteronormative spaces, women are encouraged to compete for the affection of men. A woman's worth is often defined societally by her body and her desirability to the male gaze. Even when we try to push against this definition and advocate our worth by different standards, it can be easy to fall into the trap of equating self-worth with physical attractiveness as defined by Western conventions. It can be easy to fall into the ancient trap of believing a woman's value has to do with her fertility, even though we know our worth should not be measured that way. Many women don't have uteruses and many women cannot or choose not to become pregnant for a variety of reasons, and yet, it is still easy to fall into the trap of feeling "less than" because of infertility, reproductive choices, or struggles with fertility.

Women are especially vulnerable to abuse and harassment when we already feel "less than" or worthless. People with disabilities or marginalized identities are even more likely to end up with difficult feelings of self-worth that can lead to abusive dynamics and relationships. With feelings of worthlessness, any treatment, no matter how terrible, can be justified and feel like we "deserve it" even when intellectually we know that is not the case. These feelings of worthlessness can be easily exploited and create situations where we blame the victims of abuse, even when we know we should not. How can each of us help ourselves and others, hold ourselves in higher regard, and expect to be treated with dignity and respect? How can we say something and correct the course when we notice unhealthy patterns repeating themselves? How can we create a culture of dignity and respect in our communities and in our institutions?

Jewish texts call out individuals who use slanderous words and actions to embarrass others. Deliberately shaming a person in public is understood as a grievous sin. The Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 97 teaches, "better for a person to jump in a fiery furnace, than embarrass their friend in public." This means Judaism advocates for creating a culture of respect and dignity. We are not meant to use our power to degrade others or create an environment of shame and degradation. This does not mean, however, that we should be silent when wrongdoing and abuse occurs ([Leviticus 19:16](#)).

- **What kinds of cultural norms and values exist in your community? In what ways have you, or anyone you know, experienced these cultural norms in a negative way? How do you and others define these cultural norms and values?**
- **Do you have concerns about what qualities are most valued (implicitly or explicitly) in your community?**
- **How can we as a community be proactive in preventing these issues of self-worth and communal reinforcement of toxic ideas?**
- **How can we as a community help promote healing and justice when these traumas happen in our communities?**

To read the full story of Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah in Genesis, [click here](#).

## **Resources**

### **Liturgical Resources**

#### **Al Chet**

When we prepare for the Days of Awe, Rabbi Mary Zamore (at the hyperlink, below) frames the central liturgical confessional prayer, *Al Cheit*, as a series of concerns surrounding issues of sexual assault and harassment. <https://ravblog.ccarnet.org/tag/gamani/>

#### **Birkat HaGomel for survivors of Harassment, Abuse, and Sexual Assault** by Rabbi Iah Pillsbury

The one who survived recites:

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-gomel l'chayavim tovot she-g'malani kol tov.*

Blessed are You, our God, source of all, who rewards us with goodness, no matter how challenging the experience or how close to death we have come. Thank you for bestowing goodness upon me and bringing me to this place of survival, strength, and hope. Thank you for reminding me that what I experienced was not my fault, nor was there anything I could have done to prevent it. Thank you for giving me strength and a renewed commitment to Life and to Healing.

The congregation responds:

*Mi she-g'malcha kol tov, hu yi-g'malcha kol tov selah.*

May the One who rewarded you with all goodness reward you with all goodness for ever. May you always remember how grateful we are for your life and your presence in our community.

And let us say, Amen.

#### **Mi Shebeirach for survivors of Harassment, Abuse, Sexual Assault** by Rabbi Iah Pillsbury

*Mi Shebeirach imoteinu v'avoteinu*, May the one who blessed our ancestors with healing, help me find healing too. Help me to find the wholeness of my body and my spirit. Help me to remember how sacred and beautiful I am, no matter what has happened to me or how I may feel about myself and my body. The soul you have given me oh God is pure, even if I may

not be able to feel that yet. Help me feel it one day. Help me embrace myself and all that I am and all that I have survived. Oh, source of strength, who blessed Dinah and Esther, Bilhah and Zilpah, Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, bless me too with the courage to love myself and to respect myself, to embrace my power and my strength. Help me reach out to my community for support and help my community support me in return. Oh, source of all life, help me to find healing, wholeness, and renewal.

### **Prayers and Meditations for Survivors of Harassment, Abuse, and Sexual Assault**

Compiled by Women's Rabbinic Network

<https://www.wrnresources.org/spiritual-resources>

#### **For Further Reading, we suggest:**

Bach, Alice. *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*. Routledge, 1999.

Baskin, Judith Reesa. *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature*. Brandeis University Press, 2002.

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Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn, and Andrea L. Weiss. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Women of Reform Judaism, 2008.

Frankel, Ellen. *The Five Books of Miriam a Woman's Commentary on the Torah*. Harper, 2000.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. Schocken Books, 2013.

Goldstein, Elyse. *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*. Jewish Lights Pub., 2008.

Lipsett, B. D. (2014). Female Voice by Phyllis Trible. In *Faith and feminism: Ecumenical essays*. essay, Westminster John Knox Press.

Meyers, Carol L. *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Sienna, Noam, and Judith Plaskow. *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*. Print-O-Craft Press, 2020.

Solomon, A. (2021). *The book of v.: A novel*. Picador.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *The Women's Bible: A Classic Feminist Perspective* (1895)  
Jewish Women's Archive, [jwa.org](http://jwa.org)