



THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

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The heart of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the *vidui*, confession of sin. In the traditional *machzor* there are 44 *al chets* to which the congregation confesses. We Reform Jews have shortened the traditional list, but have added many modern *al chets* in English – many of them emotional failures, failures of *tikkum olam*. NO WHERE TO BE FOUND is there an *al chet*, a confession of the sin that we have committed against half the population of our planet. NO WHERE is there a confession of sin for the oppression of women – denying women their God-given rights. God created male *and* female in God's image. And God blessed them – male and female. But throughout the millennia, beginning with the vilification of Eve – (the first intellectual) – women have been unnamed, invisible, silenced or treated as property. You all know about the prayer that Orthodox Jewish men pray every morning: Blessed are You, Eternal our God who has not made me a woman!!! The code of dress for Orthodox women, their segregation from the community, the prohibition from performing *mitzvot*, and those divorce laws – all contribute to denying women their equal rights (in Judaism). Yes, liberal Judaism has made substantial leaps in treating women as equals. But we are not quite there yet. I know this very well on a personal basis. Just examine clergy salary tables, the ratio of Jewish women scholars to men in seminaries and universities, the number of large, liberal congregations that have both women rabbis and cantors as seniors. (You, my friends, are to be commended.)

I leave the Jewish world now and venture out into the wider world where women are not only denied certain rights, but live a life of fear for that very God-given life. Pulitzer Prize winning journalists Nicholas Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, recently wrote a book called "Half the Sky: (from a Chinese saying: 'Women hold up half the sky.')

Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women". The book's major thesis is that women's rights are human rights and a key to the world's progress. If only rave reviews and high profile could effect the way we will treat women from now on!

Do the startling facts of the way women are treated move us? Or do we just say "Oh, my!" and go about our everyday lives? How can we! Listen to these statistics: 100 million women and girls are missing around the world because of gender discrimination or gendercide, as the authors call it. That is more than all the men killed on the battlefield in all the wars of the 20th century! In China last year there were 1.73 million births and a million missing girls! Of 100,000 live births in Ireland only one woman dies in childbirth; 2,100 women die in Sierra Leone! Seventy percent of people living in poverty around the world are women and children! Unsafe abortion needlessly kills tens of

thousands of women world-wide every year. The U.N. estimates that there are 5,000 honor killings a year, the majority in the Muslim world. Twenty-one percent of the young women surveyed in Ghana reported that their sexual initiation was by rape. And many rapes are not reported because of the culture of shame that breeds silence. One hundred thirty million women around the world have been subjected to genital cutting. These statistics are startling. And so are the stories from this summer's headlines. Listen carefully to the atrocities women endure.

The U.N. calls Congo the rape capital of the world. Doctors and advocates who specialize in treating victims of sexual violence feel abandoned; one anti-rape activist vented about all the empty promises from the stream of high-ranking visitors who have come. She said: "In the end, all we get is a pile of business cards." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, at the close of her visit to Congo, went to a refugee camp where she met with a woman who had been gang-raped while she was 8 months pregnant. The fetus died. The woman was gravely injured and since there was no hospital nearby, the villagers stuffed the woman's wound with grass to keep her from bleeding to death. The Secretary was visibly shaken by her story. About her Congo visit, Clinton said, "It was an incredibly emotional experience."

In recent elections in Afghanistan, observers reported widespread fraud and intimidation. A particular concern was the notably low turnout of women. Hundreds of polling stations for women (Stations are segregated to keep men and women from publicly mingling.) did not even open in some areas. Women voters suffered widespread discrimination and intimidation. The women's insecurity led to greater proxy voting. Male family members voting for the women further robbed them of their rights. Female candidates received threats and were largely ignored in men's coverage of the elections. Assassinations of women working in government positions have undoubtedly deterred others from running for office.

In Israel, *haredi* women filed a petition with the High Court to end segregation on buses. For many years, female passengers have been required to sit in a segregated section at the back of the so-called "kosher" buses. The petitioners were verbally abused when they refused to move to the back. Some were even threatened with physical harm. According to the petitioners, the separation becomes even more enraging when the male section of the bus is almost empty, while the female section is overcrowded. At such times the men still prevent women from crossing over to "their side." Why should a woman with children and a stroller be forced to stand when there are plenty of empty seats on the bus? The petition states that the law sends a message of inferiority to women. (An aside: This law of segregation on the buses addresses in extreme the traditional call for "modesty" in Jewish law. The way a woman dresses – literally covered from head to toe – although her face does not have to be covered as the Muslim women's – also comes under this law. Women must not be tempting to men. I wonder . . . what does this tell us about *haredi* men!)

Another one of this summer's headlines was: "On Railways, Women Find New Peace in Their Commute". As millions of Indian women have poured into the work force, they have met with different obstacles in a patriarchal culture. One of them is the basic task of getting to work. On the commuter trains they were pinched and groped, heard insults and catcalls. The problems of taunting and harassment, known as Eve-teasing, have been so

persistent that in recent months the government has decided to simply remove men altogether. In a pilot program, 8 new commuter trains, exclusively for female passengers, have been introduced in India's 4 largest cities: New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta. They are known as Ladies Specials. While these trains are only a fraction of the commuter trains, they do send the message that women's safety and sensibilities must be protected.

While the rest of us are aware of the degree of misogyny in the so-called developing world, most of us do not admit to a high degree in our country – or other so-called democratic countries. How wrong we are! According to the National Violence Against Women Survey, 18 percent of women in the United States have experienced rape or attempted rape!

Some of the women prisoners I work with tell harrowing tales. Their pain is palpable. One woman's husband, who began abusing her on their honeymoon, beat her so badly during her pregnancy that she lost her baby. He continued beating her mercilessly for years. She had many miscarriages. After one beating, she broke free of him and locked herself in a closet, where she found his gun. She shot him, only wounding him. The husband went to the police. She received a 2-year sentence; her husband went free.

Another woman, abused by her father, then her husband, went to the aid of her daughter, who was being beaten by a boyfriend. She had called the police many times to help but they would tell her: "We're not getting involved," or "Take a walk around the block," "Go to a shelter." The mother, enraged at the daughter's boyfriend, helped the daughter beat him. Mother and daughter were sentenced to many years in prison.

Other prisoners tell similar stories about themselves and about their mothers being abused, about families having to be broken up. They also tell of their wanting to please their boyfriends and winding up in the streets when their boyfriends tired of them. How I pray that what they have learned in prison will keep them strong outside!

We believe that prisons should be places that protect women inmates. An article in last month's newspaper described sexual abuse in a Kentucky women's prison – sexual abuse by their guards!

When will our laws stop coddling men who beat up women? Chris Brown received a 5-year suspended sentence for beating up his girlfriend, Rihanna. He told the judge he couldn't remember what he did! A girl or woman somewhere in the U.S. is sexually assaulted every couple of minutes. The number of battered wives and girlfriends is beyond the ability of any agency to count.

In the middle of August the Times had a feature article on women serving as soldiers and commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan. One said: "Every small mistake you make becomes amplified. I try my hardest not to make any mistakes. You just have to work harder. You have to work twice as hard." The article prompted many letters to the editor: One reminded us of the serious threats military women face from hostile comrades who harass, sexually assault, or rape them. Many female soldiers said they feared the men on their own side more than the enemy. So-called military justice does not act kindly to women's grievances. Its inclination is to sweep the complaints under the nearest ground-

cover. And, thanks to a Congressional ban, service women who become pregnant and seek an abortion have few options. Abortions are available on military bases only in cases of rape, incest or risk of death! And rape and incest victims must pay for abortions out of their own pockets. All other women seeking abortions face two unpalatable choices: Fly elsewhere for a safe and legal abortion, or seek a risky one off-base in the country where they are stationed. Women who are prepared to give their lives for our country deserve better treatment than this.

The following is a directive from the FBI to abortion providers in order to help them stay out of harm's way: "Wear a disguise and a bulletproof vest. Remove your license plates. Arrive at work long before dawn. Take a different route home each day. Check if you are being followed. Avoid being seen or photographed." And you have heard many sad tales about women who seek an abortion in this country even though they are protected by law. What will happen to their reproductive freedom in the future?

Did you know that misogyny is alive and well around the table where Bible translators meet? I heard a clip on NPR last week that, beginning this fall, an English translation of the Bible, called The New International Version, would be revised again. The earlier version had been criticized for many reasons, one of which was the change in the book of Genesis from "God created man" to "God created human." The critics claim the change was the result of a feminist conspiracy!

As an avid tennis fan, I cannot let the matter of the Serena Williams tirade at the U.S. Open go without comment. What she did was wrong and she deserved the criticism and fine. But sexism reared its ugly head when so many commentators and so-called fans denounced her behavior as worse than the past outbursts of John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors or Ilie Nastase. It was worse, they said, because she's a woman. Serena's behavior was not worse because she's a woman. Male athletes have had their fights dismissed or minimized as competitive fire, raging testosterone and machismo. I agree with the commentator who said: "It is unfair to expect tough, competitive women athletes to behave like ballerinas."

My friends, the situation of women around the world is so dire and the oceans of problems confronting them are so deep. But if this country cannot redeem itself, it cannot be a force for redemption for other women around the world. Our recent track record is pretty dim: We pulled our financing from the UN Population Fund, imposed a global gag rule barring women's health organizations that merely talked about abortion from receiving U.S. funds, and we never ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, a pretty base-level human rights treaty. We will never be able to help the women of the world if we can't help the women at home. Helpers need credibility.

Human rights for women must not be trivialized in this country. There are too many missing girls and young women, too many rapes and acts of violence against women, too many rap songs and movies, magazines, TV shows and internet sites that depict women as weak, less important and objectified as sexual objects and objects of beauty. When women are portrayed as any kind of object they become less than human and their worth is undervalued. It's bad enough that they are undervalued in the market place, earning

only 79 cents for every dollar a man earns. And have you checked out the glass ceilings lately? They are as thick as ever.

Yes, our mainstream culture is filled with the most gruesome forms of misogyny, and pornography is now a multibillion dollar industry, much of it controlled by mainstream corporations!

We must examine our drug laws and our laws against prostitution. Why aren't the "customers" punished? And laws that are supposed to protect domestic workers, immigrant workers, single mothers. We must hold doctors, lawyers and other professionals to account in their relationships with female patients and clients. And each one of us – women included - needs to sensitize ourselves to our own prejudices against women. None of us is free of them. We have become so accustomed to living in a society saturated with misogyny that the barbaric treatment of women and girls has come to be more or less expected. We profess to being shocked at the murder of young schoolgirls, women in a dance-aerobics class, a Yale graduate student. But the shock wears off quickly in an environment in which the rape, murder, kidnapping and humiliation of females is not only a staple of the news, but an important cornerstone of the nation's entertainment.

The Obama Administration seems sensitive to the plight of women. It frames women's issues in terms of realpolitik: believing that U.S. security depends on women's empowerment, and that global economic growth depends on women's participation. Now, while the end result may be a positive one for women, I believe we need to eliminate misogyny – to work for the improvement of women's lives, to give back their God-given rights - not only because it is good for our security and for global economic growth, but because it is the just and moral and right thing to do.

Judaism, especially today, teaches us that we can change; that we must pursue justice, that we are partners with God to effect *tikkun olam*. No excuses allowed – not today, not any day. We must let go of our unwillingness, our stubbornness, our inertia, our indifference, our silence – to participate in the great challenge to join a movement that can change our world. Believe in yourself. Live with urgency. I adjure this congregation – no, I expect this congregation - to begin a process to end the cruel oppression of women, wherever they may live.

Now is a challenge. Don't postpone the potential of the now. Don't just dream about what can be. Don't just hope. Dreams and hopes must be catalysts to action. And we must never give up!!!

I heard the following parable in Israel this summer. It was told by a Labor minister, Ishai Braverman, when he spoke about the difficult problems facing Israel today:

Two frogs fell into a barrel of cream.
One gave up and drowned.
The other kept moving furiously, determined to get out.
The cream turned to butter and he was free!

We must work furiously! We must NEVER GIVE UP until all the women of the world are free from oppression.

Avinu Malkeinu, we have sinned against You.

Oh, God of forgiveness, for the sin we have committed against you by oppressing women, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

And when will God forgive us? Only when the oppression of women has vanished from the earth.