



Global Gender

#UsToo

**HOW JEWISH, MUSLIM, AND CHRISTIAN
WOMEN CHANGED OUR COMMUNITIES**

Keren R. McGinity



“#UsToo is about the struggle for women’s human rights in faith communities that are too ready to ignore them. McGinity shines a light on what’s possible when those communities do the right thing. Her book will leave you motivated to join this life-changing movement. A tour de force!”

—**Robert Bank**, *President and CEO, American Jewish World Service*

“Muslims, in the attempt to sidetrack anything remotely connected to “feminism” or “progressive,” don’t examine what goes on behind closed doors to avoid scrutiny of Islam from the law and other religions. #UsToo exposes this phenomenon to remove the blockages in our minds and hearts. Community leaders should absorb this education and make the much-needed changes.”

—**Rabi’a Keeble**, *Qal’bu Maryam Women’s Mosque and Justice Center*

“#UsToo is good news; a must read for all who believe that God is still speaking, with an imperative Word for such a time as this. Scholar-activist McGinity helps us hear and interpret that Word with keen insight and bold courage.”

—**Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis**, *Middle Collegiate Church*

“As a man confronting sexual abuse within the Christian faith for nearly thirty years, I attest that women’s bold and tireless efforts provide the foundation for institutional and communal transformation. I pray that McGinity’s #UsToo inspires people of all faiths to work together to protect the vulnerable and embrace the wounded.”

—**Boz Tchividjian**, *Victim Rights Attorney and Founder of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment)*

“Dr. McGinity powerfully documents and analyzes her personal #metoo experience. A feminist scholar, she expands our understanding of *teshuva* and *tikkun* (accountability and repair) through the lens of sexual harassment in three religious communities. This book is essential to ensure that Jews, and people of all faiths, create communities aligned with our values.”

—**Rabbi Mary L. Zamore**, *Executive Director, Women’s Rabbinic Network*



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#UsToo

#UsToo: How Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Women Changed Our Communities examines the relationship between sexual harassment, gender, and multiple religions, highlighting the voices of women of different faiths who found their voices and used them for the betterment of their communities.

Through personal interviews and other research, this book explores the actions of American Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women who broke the silence about sexual misconduct and abuse of power by male co-religionists. Using a three-dimensional, ethnoreligious approach that examines gender, ethnicity, and religion, it addresses the relationship between religion and women's experiences and examines both historical contexts and present-day experiences of sexual misconduct within faith communities.

This book will be of key interest to students within Gender Studies, History, Religion, and Sociology, clergies, laities, institutional staff, communal leaders, and human rights activists.

Keren R. McGinity is the first interfaith specialist at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. She is also a research associate at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and taught American Studies at Brandeis University. Prior to her appointment at USCJ, Dr. McGinity was the director of the Interfaith Families Jewish Engagement graduate program at Hebrew College. Dr. McGinity earned her PhD in History from Brown University and was the inaugural Mandell L. Berman Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Contemporary American Jewish Life at the University of Michigan's Frankel Center for Judaic Studies.

Her pioneering books, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (NYU Press 2009), a National Jewish Book Award Finalist, and *Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage, and Fatherhood* (Indiana University Press 2014), provided groundbreaking analyses about Jewish continuity by focusing on gender and change over time. She authored "The Unfinished Business of the Sexual Revolution," a response essay to "Continuity Crisis: The History and Sexual Politics of an American Jewish Communal Project" in a special issue on women and gender in the journal *American Jewish History*. Dr. McGinity's advice and opinions have appeared in the *Forward*, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, *Lilith* and *Moment* magazines, the *New York Jewish Week*, *RitualWell*, the *Times of Israel*, and *eJewishPhilanthropy*. She has been a guest on numerous podcasts, including *Adventures in Jewish Studies*, *Can We Talk?*, *For the Love of Judaism*, *The Good Edit*, *Judaism Unbound*, *Remix Judaism*, *Unorthodox*, and *The Vibe of the Tribe*.

McGinity is a 2018 *Forward* 50 honoree for her clarion call for a Jewish response to the #MeToo movement, named on *Lilith* magazine's "7 Jewish Feminist Highlights of 2018" list and was a JewishBoston "Top Pick." She lives in Brookline, Massachusetts and the deep woods of Maine.

Global Gender

The *Global Gender* series provides original research from across the humanities and social sciences, casting light on a range of topics from international authors examining the diverse and shifting issues of gender and sexuality on the world stage. Utilizing a range of approaches and interventions, these texts are a lively and accessible resource for both scholars and upper-level students from a wide array of fields including Gender and Women's Studies, History, Sociology, Politics, Communication, Cultural Studies, and Literature.

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#UsToo

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Keren R. McGinity

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Women Changed Our Communities

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2024
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa
business*

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-43035-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-43040-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-36545-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003365457

Typeset in Sabon
by MPS Limited, Dehradun

In memory of two notorious RBGs:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg,
whose pursuit of gender equality must continue,
and

Robert Bernard Goodman,
a truly good man.



Frontispiece Author's photo from the Boston Women's March, January 19, 2019. The banner is based on the "We the People" series by artist Shepard Fairey for Amplifier.org. The sign "Jewish Women March for JUSTICE" was created by the National Council of Jewish Women in support of Jewish women of color and the Women's March.

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Acknowledgments

Committing gratitude to print is risky due to the potential of inadvertent omission. If you shared a kind smile, whispered “thank you” in my ear, or offered compassion but are not named here, please know that you helped me bring this project to fruition.

Six people must be singled out for their unique roles in my journey. I owe the deepest well of gratitude to Susannah Heschel, Shulamit Magnus, and Rafael Medoff, the Committee on Ethics in Jewish Leadership steering members, for believing me and their unwavering support. Debbie Findling taught me that even if I was the only one, what happened was still wrong. I’ve been paying that wisdom forward ever since. My eternal gratitude to Hannah Dreyfus for her journalistic integrity and, once the news cycle ended, friendship. Laura Levitt suggested I write a book, which became this one.

I could not have written it without the 36 women who shared their stories about sexual misconduct and abuse of power. Whether directly quoted, named, or not in the following pages, these spiritual sisters illuminated similarities and differences across religions and communities, strengthening my resolve to get this multifaith narrative out in the world. I hope allies of all genders, some of whom considerably improved this project, will hear our collective voices as progress.

Tobin Belzer, Tara Bogнар, Peggy Brill, Beth Cousens, Lisa Goldman, Jill Jacobs, Tasha Kaminsky, Arielle Levites, Deborah Dash Moore, Joshua Shanes, Emily Sigalow, Gila Silverman, Helen Simone, David Slucki, Mordy Walfish, and Laura Yares, I am beyond grateful to know you.

Bountiful appreciation to my colleagues and mentors in the world of academia. Joyce Antler and Judith Tick read the proposal and were convinced this book should exist. Shelly Tenenbaum read early drafts and offered superb constructive criticism during our walks. Mira Wasserman and Flora Cassen, fellow ombuds in the Association for Jewish Studies Office on Sexual Misconduct, it was an honor to serve with you. Christine Hayes, Jeffrey Shoulson, and Robin Judd, past, interim, and current AJS presidents, made it safer to attend the annual conference. The AJS Women’s Caucus, especially Rachel Harris, Laura Limonic, Helene Sinnreich, and Melissa Weininger righteously demanded to be heard. Warren Hoffman kept the AJS ship afloat

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through turbulent waters. Gratitude to Chaya Halberstam and Mira Sucharov for including my voice in the patriarchy issue of *AJS Perspectives*. Helen Kim and Randal Schnoor: mealtime conversations with you were priceless. The bright minds and big hearts of Matt Boxer, Marc Dollinger, Jodi Eichler-Levine, Karla Goldman, Ari Y. Kelman, Ariela Keysar, Jonathan Klawans, Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, Laura Arnold Leibman, Judit Liwerant, Shaul Magid, Helene Meyers, Bruce Phillips, David Schoem, Sam Shuman, and Riv-Ellen Prell stirred my soul.

At Brandeis University, where I've lingered for more than a dozen years, the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute's FZA (Feminism, Zionism, Antisemitism) discussion group members were terrific comrades. Heartfelt thanks Marla Brettschneider, Janet Freedman, Debra Kaufman, Lori Lefkowitz, Annette Miller, and Ruth Nemzoff (and others mentioned elsewhere in these acknowledgments). HBI director Lisa Fishbayn Joffe and my fellow research associates were sources of encouragement, while staff Nancy Leonard, Debby Olins, Amy Powell, and Terri Brown Preuss kept me in the loop. Many thanks for the timely compassion of Schusterman Institute for Israel Studies staff (former and present) Rachel Fish, Keren Goodblatt, and Rise Singer, and all summer 2018 fellows, especially Adriana Brodsky, Andrea Hendler, and Sophia Salguero-McGee. Rachel Greenblatt and Laura Hibbler, librarians extraordinaire, came to my aid.

Although I initially tried to keep my research and my activism separate, I quickly learned that was an exercise in foolishness. Muchísimas gracias a M. Cristina Alcalde and Paula-Irene Villa, for inviting me to add my Jewish American experience to the global #MeToo symposium at the University of Kentucky. Thanks to my fellow historians Lila Corwin Berman, Kate Rosenblatt, and Ronit Stahl for historicizing the socially constructed "continuity crisis" and Kirsten Fermaglich for inviting me to respond to their essay in the journal *American Jewish History*. I am also thankful to the following hosts for speaking invitations that forced me to publicly articulate the intersection between my scholarship on intermarriage and my #MeToo work: Chicago Sinai Congregation; Hadassah-Brandeis Institute; Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies, University of Pennsylvania; Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA; International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism; Jewish Community Day School, Waltham MA; Jewish Women's Archive; Queens College, CUNY; Religious News Association; Rukin Rabbinic Fellowship, 18Doors; San Francisco State University; School of Social Work, University of Michigan; Sisterhood Shabbat, Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA; Temple Oheb Shalom, South Orange, NJ; and Temple Rodef Shalom, Falls Church, VA.

My former Hebrew College graduate students Rabbi Steven Abraham, Becca Weiner Green, Alachua Haskins, Cookie Mandell, Rabbi Lex Rofeberg, and Tema Smith challenged me to think in new ways and gave me the best coffee mug ever. Rabbis Sharon Cohen Anisfeld and Dan Judson, the president and dean, respectively, listened at a critical moment in time. I am also grateful to the Gann Academy community, especially Nicole Lieberman Gann and the Lion family.

The journey from academic to scholar-activist was facilitated by multiple organizations and individuals. Jewish Women’s Archive staff, thank you Judith Rosenbaum and Nahanni Rous for the *Can We Talk?* podcast, and Jenny Sartori for your patience. *Lilith* staff, especially Susan Weidman Schneider, Sarah Seltzer, and Rebecca Katz, thank you for being frankly feminist and questions that matter. Rebecca Davis found a way to make me sound decent despite all the grittiness on *The Good Edit* podcast. Attorneys Rahel Bayar and Israela Brill-Cass provided stellar training about sexual harassment and generously gave me time when I sought their wise counsel. Naomi Tucker of Shalom Bayit included me in the “speaking truth, creates change” chorus, despite my feeling ill equipped. I was fortunate to be able to lean on the shoulders of visionaries, including Shifra Bronznick, Barbara Dobkin, and Gail Reimer. Bernadette Brooten took interest in my project and pointed me toward The Feminist Sexual Ethics Project. Anita Hill thanked me for writing this book, which was uniquely validating.

In the Jewish community, many people deserve abundant thanks for their safety, respect, and equity work: Robert Bank, Guila Benchimol, Shira Melody Berkovitz, Jamie Allen Black, Sarah Chandler, Gali Cooks, Lisa Eisen, Naomi Eisenberger, Martin Kaminer, Idit Klein, Sharon Masling, Charlene Seidle, Shaina Wasserman, and Elana Wien. I cite specific organizations and institutions in the Muslim and Christian communities in Chapters 2 and 3; however, I would like to highlight here the generosity of Nadya Ali, Priya Chandra, James S. Evinger, Khalid Latif, and Basyle (“Boz”) Tchividjian.

Rabbis Caryn Aviv, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, Aliza Berger, Eddie Bernstein, Jacob Blumenthal, Angela Buchdahl, Adam Chalom, Robert Dobrusin, David Ellenson, Jen Gubitz, Jeffrey Goldwasser, Lauren Henderson, Margaret Frisch Klein, Seth Limmer, Bob Levy, Paul Kipnes, Jessica Spitalnic Mates, Carl Perkins, Josh Rabin, Karen Medwed Reiss, Thalia Halpert Rodis, Danya Ruttenberg, Rebecca Einstein Schorr, Amy Schwartzman, Jeremy Sher, Katja Vehlo, Eric Woodward, Mary Zamore, Naomi Zazlow, and Elaine Zecher held my spiritual hand whether they realized it or not. What’s more, Zamore read chapters and gave helpful suggestions that added clarity. Reiss and Ruttenberg also deserve special credit for writing the spring 2021 statement I discuss in the Conclusion that quite literally pulled me out from a very dark place. Rabbinical students created their own letter of solidarity, inspired by Avigayil Halpern and Talia Kaplan of Yeshivat Hadar and the Jewish Theological Seminary, respectively, brightening the future. An ocean of thanks is insufficient for the many hundreds of multid denominational signatories.

Journalists are sometimes maligned for headlines beyond their control or quotes out of context due to word count limitations; however, they are among the most committed truth seekers whom one should work *with* rather than against. In addition to the rock-star reporter Hannah Dreyfus, mentioned above, I thank these professionals: Heather Alterisio, Jalal Baig,

Dan Brown, Nylah Burton, Debra Nussbaum Cohen, Philissa Cramer, Chanel Dubofsky, Asaf Elia-Shalev, Judy Bolton Fasman, Ari Feldman, Alyssa Fisher, Dan Friedman, Jackie Hajdenberg, Shira Hanau, Uriel Heilman, Aymann Ismail, Rokhl Kaffrisen, Liz Kineke, Esther Kustanowitz, Shannon Levitt, Lara Moehlman, Rahel Musleah, Gary Rosenblatt, Arno Rosenfeld, Ben Sales, Helen Ubiñas, David A.M. Wilensky, and Dina Zingaro. You do your industry proud.

I am grateful to everyone who noticed my vulnerable social media posts or messaged me their private support, especially Rhonda Abrams, Alissa Ackerman, Tom Alpert, Andrew Apostolou, Del Atwood, Susan Piskiel Blackburn, Jodi Bromberg, Sarah Bronzite, Mari Jo Buhle, Neshama Carlebach, David and Julie Chivo, Rachel Gildiner, Paul Golin, Rachel Gordon, Rachel Gross, David Gottlieb, Denise Handlarski, Clare Hedwat, Mike Herman, Ellen Jawitz, David Kaplan, Sheila Katz, Dorron Katzin, Shawn Landres, Noah Leavitt, Mark Leuchter, Nina Boug Lichtenstein, Steven Lipsitt, Yerachmiel Lopin, Asher Lovy, Jordan Namerow, Hannah Pressman, Hila Ratzabi, Rebecca Redner, Pam Rockland, Todd Rockoff, Tilly Shemer, Carol Toby Rodenstein, Peter Rofes, Shoshanna Schechter, Sara Shapiro-Plevan, Devon Spier, Eva Stern, Jennifer Stofman, Leah Strigler, Elana Sztokman, Sivan Rotholz Teitelman, Rebecca Weisman, Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, Shayna Weiss, and Jill Berkson Zimmerman. #GamAni Facebook group administrator Miriam Isserow, z”l, was taken from this world prematurely and although we never met in person, her virtual presence meant a lot.

Thank you to everyone at Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, especially Charlotte Taylor and Manmohan Negi, for bringing my project to life. And to Balchan Gajadhar and Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg at United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, who graciously agreed to USCJ serving as the fiscal sponsor for the anonymous grant to make this book Open Access.

My closest friends, Jake and Julie, Barth, Cynthia Bell, Oren and Orit Gutfeld, and Barb Walter, accepted me “as is” and made life seem bearable even when it wasn’t. Leor Brenman dished out much-needed humor. Ken Kupchik’s cynacism kept things real. My family loved me anyway.

I am eternally grateful to all those named above (as well as folks I’ve missed, apologies!) and to HaShem. Any errors between the covers of this book are mine alone.

Introduction

“Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing; I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.”

—Offred, *The Handmaid’s Tale*¹

I wrote this book twice. The first time I wrote it as an academic, someone trained as a professional scholar who painstakingly followed the rules of oral history I had learned in graduate school. The second time, I wrote it as an activist. Although I long believed the second-wave feminist slogan that “the personal is political,” I had to do a lot of soul searching before I was able to give myself permission to use my voice as the driver, the main vehicle for this book. I originally thought of it as a collective biography bringing together the experiences and voices of some of the first women to say #MeToo in the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities in America. Slowly though, over the course of a year, two moves, and a new job, I realized that the bonds of womanhood and victimhood did not provide the framework for this project. Rather, I had to come to terms with what these women’s stories taught me about myself, about predators, and about the challenge of creating real, lasting change in America.

This book begins with an early childhood memory; however, the bulk of it focuses on a four-and-a-half-year period of my life from June 2018 to December 2022. During this time, I questioned everything I thought I knew about myself, everything I had been taught, and everything I had believed about living a life as a professional academic. When I first said #MeToo, which I discuss in detail in the first chapter, I thought of it as a blip in my life that would soon recede into the past. I had no idea how vast the ripple effects would become, nor how far nor how long they would ripple. I didn’t realize, then, that my voice was a piece in a much larger puzzle that would eventually claim more of my time, my mental space, and my physical energy than I ever could have imagined. Post-traumatic stress disorder was something I associated only with war veterans, not people who had never experienced military combat, and certainly not myself. Mental illness continues to be stigmatized in

DOI: 10.4324/9781003365457-1

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our society and even after learning that I was not alone, I did not know how to tell my family and close friends that I suffer from PTSD.

I had always thought of my research and public speaking about interfaith marriage to be a kind of “calling.” But the real calling became visible to me only when I had to make a choice between prioritizing what would have been easier and what required me to prioritize a social movement over my own career in academia. If I initially resisted the calling, it was because I did not envision myself as a change agent. I certainly did not see myself as a “hero” or a “shero” as some people later called me. As I would say again and again; “I only did what was right.” People think one has a choice; but when it comes to a calling, there is no choice. One is compelled to speak, to act. When I had felt like I was at a crossroads, it was part of the transformation process from academic to activist. I asked myself: “Do I keep saying #MeToo and helping women find their voices, speak their truths, call out bad behavior, or do I slip back into my quiet life?” I erroneously thought that I had a choice. But the sexual misconduct and abuse of power I experienced irrevocably changed my life long before I spoke out about it. We like to think that more is within our control when most of what happens in life is well beyond it. This awareness hits home especially hard when I think about my college-age daughter, my sunshine, who is aware of so much and yet still vulnerable. I saw myself as her “rock” in an ever-changing world of divorce, relocation, teenage angst, and the uncertainty that COVID-19 brought. How I wish I could protect her!

My daughter Shira became a woman during this book project, which spanned her last two years of high school life and the first two and a half of college. We had always been super close, a team of sorts after her father moved out when she was just four. She and I went everywhere together and did everything together. I volunteered to chaperone every school field trip and she fell asleep in my lap during board meetings. I overcompensated with an abundance of books, doll houses, and assorted pets, emphasizing the value of rescuing animals desperate for loving homes over designer creatures. When I was offered a two-year research fellowship at the University of Michigan’s Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, we moved to, and both fell in love with, Ann Arbor. I prioritized her Jewish day school education and scheduled my life around hers, especially when we returned to Boston and I found work at Brandeis University. At one point, I was the cool single mom who provided a safe space for teenage girls to talk in my kitchen—“what’s said in the kitchen, stays in the kitchen!”—and Shira overheard many phone conversations I had with women who needed support. She even expressed being proud of me, attended a local #MeToo talk I gave, and joined in the Q and A afterward. There is no greater blessing than to have such an offspring.

We often function in our own little social and cultural bubbles, thinking that they comprise the whole world when in fact they are but a small fragment of it. Meeting and speaking to adult women of other faith backgrounds who experienced sexual misconduct and abuse of power made me realize

how much we have in common. Writing about their experiences is intended to be descriptive rather than proscriptive, although I do offer some concluding thoughts about where minority faith communities and American society at large can go from here. I focus on women who suffered at the hands of men. I am fully aware and want to acknowledge that women, too, can be the ones who hurt men, as well as other women as the primary abusers, gatekeepers, and enablers.² While I focus on heterosexual interactions, it is also imperative to acknowledge that the LGBTQ+ community suffers more sexual misconduct, abuse of power, and gender discrimination than the straight community.³

This book is a comparative collage of my experience with sexual misconduct and abuse of power and the experiences of other Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women. I focus on women of these religious traditions for several reasons that readers may want to know. First, because Jews and Muslims are both minorities in America and both experience prejudices, from mild to fatal. It is oftentimes harder for victims to speak out because we do not want to disparage our own faith communities just as black women do not want to bring white wrath on black men, even—or perhaps especially—the abusers. Criticizing the Jewish and Muslim communities could fuel the fires of those who already hate us or turn others against us. The second reason is that minority religious communities are more insular than mainstream religious communities. People depend on each other far more than they do on “outsiders” and this interdependence in turn creates a familial environment that is conducive to abuses of power by sexual predators. Both Jewish and Muslim communities are, to greater and lesser extents, closed sub-societies. As such, they are more inclined to obfuscate the offenders in our midst. The problem is not exclusive to Jewish or Muslim communities, rather it is a general problem for all closed cultures.⁴ Accordingly, the rate of sexual assault in Jewish and Muslim communities is no higher than it is in the general American population. Although insular Christian faith communities exist, such as the Quiverful Movement and Mennonites, I focus on Jewish women because I am one and on Muslim women because a chance meeting between myself and a Muslim woman led me to many other Muslim women who said #MeToo. I include a #ChurchToo chapter because there are valiant Christian women about whom the world knows too little—either about their agency or the role that faith plays in their activism, and how activism plays in their faith. That said, I hope that readers will forgive me for not covering every Christian denomination. Fortunately, there are multiple #MeToo books by Christian women already—see my selected bibliography at the back of this book—and some Christian religious organizations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, need a book of their own to do justice to the victims and survivors.

I use what I call a gendered ethnoreligious approach. This three-dimensional approach provides an alternative framework that uses the intersection of gender with ethnicity and religion as an analytical category for discourse about sexual misconduct and abuse of power. Gender is defined as the socially constructed

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attributes, roles, and behaviors of biological sex. Ethnicity pertains to nation of origin, language, history, and cultural distinctiveness. Religion is a set of customs, beliefs, and practices associated with certain organizations and leaders. Although religion and faith are sometimes used interchangeably especially regarding communities, religion is external while faith is internal, an inner trust, and confidence. Feminist literature has yet to fully address the relationship between religion and the experiences of ethnic women in addressing the problem of sexual harassment and assault. To understand Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women's encounters with sexual misconduct and abuse or power, we must also fully comprehend ethnoreligious womanhood. One aspect of ethnoreligious womanhood for Jewish and Muslim women is our shared history; we are historical neighbors in the Middle East and in North America today. Christian women who identify strongly with their immigrant ancestors are likewise connected to culture. We are each influenced, to varying degrees, by the cultural manifestations of our religious backgrounds. However, Jews are also unique in the sense that some Jewish women are secular, while women who identify as Muslim and Christian are not. Ethnicity and religion are inextricably braided together for women born or raised Jewish.

There are many ways of being related. Some people are blood relatives or relatives by marriage. Another kind of relation is by place; when different families own the same cabin in Maine during different years, for example, the place ties us to each other in loose but still meaningful ways. How I am related to Muslim and Christian women is different than all these ways. We are related by having experienced verbal and physical assaults on our personhood that impacted our relationships with our faiths. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian women are spiritual sisters. And yet because of the political unrest in the Middle East, the dispute over Israel's right to defend herself let alone exist, and the humanitarian suffering of Palestinians, Jews and Muslims do not usually hold the same space for each other as we do for ourselves. Meeting and interviewing Muslim women made me realize that we have much more in common than not. I hope that these pages will contribute not only to mutual understanding and respect but also perhaps even contribute to future collaborations that improve relationships between our tribes around the globe. If this is too grand of a goal, at least let my words lead Jewish and Muslim women to hold space for each other in our efforts to change American society so that our children and grandchildren never have to say #MeToo.

This book is by no means a comprehensive list of all offenders of any faith background, and it is certainly not a representative history of all Jewish, Muslim, or Christian women who have been sexually harassed and assaulted. I combined the methodologies of snowball sampling, asking women I interviewed to refer me to other women, contemporary ethnography or interviews, and interweaved these oral testimonies with published sources to provide context. It is not a book about child sex abuse. As such, the cases of Jeffrey Epstein and R. Kelly are noticeably absent, as is any substantive

discussion of pedophile priests and the Catholic Church's cover up depicted in the movie *Spotlight*.⁵ Although I make references to some celebrities when relevant, I have consciously chosen to write about "ordinary people" and leave the big stories to Pulitzer prize-winning journalists like Jodi Kantor, Megan Twohey, and Ronan Farrow.⁶ The many women who came forward about former Michigan State faculty member and USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar have received much-deserved attention elsewhere.⁷ Writing a contemporary history about an ongoing movement comes with inherent challenges because some cases are still unfolding, litigation is pending, organizations and institutions are evolving, and there remain untold stories, some of which may eventually be told. Hence, I ask for the reader's understanding that while this book attempts to capture what transpired, it is not intended, nor could it be the definitive history; that will be written by someone else in the future with the luxury of hindsight.

I hope that my journey contributes to the field of American women's religious history and gender studies by illuminating the ways in which Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women reinterpreted our faith traditions in the face of sexual violence. In the Abrahamic traditions and their communities, patriarchal systems and structures reinforced the idea that women were the "second sex," gave more power to men, and created cultural environments in which women were vulnerable to sexual misconduct and abuse of power. In addition, misinterpretations of religious mores about communal familiarity and not speaking ill of one's co-religionists, isolated women, and strengthened a code of silence around sexual improprieties. Women who dared to speak out, both before the American #MeToo movement began in October 2017 and especially since then, called into question the status quo. Through our words and actions, women alerted our communities to the fault lines in misperceptions about the meaning of our religions that had preserved men's power and disenfranchised women for centuries. I use my story as a lens through which to see many women's stories, lending yet another meaning to #UsToo.

Our stories showcase the myriad ways that as minorities we faced double, and in some cases triple, marginality in American society. We are marginalized as females. We are marginalized as Jews and Muslims in a Christian country. And we are marginalized as brown and black women in a country built on slavery and racism. Taken together, biological sex, religion, and race are a perfect trifecta of marginality that continue to make us less visible, less valued, and less powerful than our white male Christian counterparts—including those deeply wounded by sexual harassment and assault. I could not agree more with Muslim activist Mona Eltahawy who writes, "We must make sure that MeToo breaks the race, class, gender, abilities and faith lines that make it so hard for marginalized people to be heard."⁸ I do not mean to in any way take away from the pain that white Christian women have experienced at the hands of men. I spoke with many Christian women and their #MeToo stories contributed to my journey from academic to activist. We are all the "second

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sex” as Simone de Beauvoir wrote, and “One is not born but rather becomes a woman.”⁹ However, everything in life is relative and #MeToo is no exception. I hope that those white Christian women who shared their stories with me will know how grateful I am for their trust and solidarity. I also hope that they will recognize their privilege and use it to uplift all women. Christian women’s wisdom adds light to the darkness, and we can truly all learn from each other. Indeed, I might not be writing these words at all were it not for the black Christian woman, Tarana Burke, who started it all a decade before most white women of any faith had even heard of “me too.”¹⁰

Women of all faiths have in common the lessons we learned from our parents. The specific lessons we learned may be different; however, their impact on our actions when we were sexually harassed and assaulted, and what we did or didn’t do later, unite us. In my case, two things my mother taught me that are indelible on my mind influenced my thought process whether to share something negative and how to get back at someone who wronged me. “She who throws shit, hands smell,” my mother told me. The first time I heard it, I took it literally. Well, obviously, if someone touches feces, their hands will smell like feces! But that wasn’t what she meant at all. At some point, I realized the lesson she was imparting was comparable to: “If you don’t have anything nice to say, then don’t say anything at all.” My mother is the child of Eastern European parents, who grew up in the Bronx and whose first language was Yiddish, so it made sense that her version was a bit rougher around the edges. What I internalized from her statement was that saying something negative could have a negative consequence. Hence, to my mind, it was safer to avoid negative comments even if truthful. My mother also opined that “the best revenge is to be nicer than them.” She would share this idea when I felt bad about the way someone had treated me or if I experienced some slight. Again, my understanding of her message evolved. Initially, I thought she meant to “take the high road” if a person did something that was low or callous. It was a Jewish parent’s version of the Christian parent’s teaching to turn the other cheek (Mathew 5:39). Over time, I internalized this message as part of my social education as a female in America. If girls are “sugar and spice, and everything nice” then I, too, must be nice at all costs. When I became a woman, being nice was part of my womanhood. I do not fault my mother for either of these lessons or how I interpreted them. She, too, is a victim of patriarchy and, on one occasion, domestic violence.

We all inherit our parents’ legacies, at least to some degree; however, we also can reconstruct our own so that our children and future grandchildren inherit legacies that lift them up to heights we haven’t yet experienced in our lifetimes. Some of the women I interviewed or whose books I read spoke their truths at much younger ages than I did and perhaps than you, the reader will speak yours. Every individual has their own journey and timing. In my case, turning the ripe age of 50 was liberating. Acknowledging that I have now lived half a century, and more than half my lifetime, I joined a club

of women who have likewise reached an age of maturity in which we found power through our voices. As author-survivor, Mary DeMuth, told me: “Being in my 50s now, and just not caring anymore what people think. ... Speaking out against injustice, outweighs my concerns about what people will say.”¹¹ I am a late-blooming feminist. I’m too young to be a second-wave feminist and as the third child born to a mother who wed at age 17 in 1955, I did not have the benefit of being raised by one either. But those facts do not need to stop me now, just as the reader’s past need not dictate your future.

My goal in writing this book is to highlight the voices of women with different faiths who broke the silence, how our communities changed or didn’t change, and to reclassify safety from sexual misconduct and abuse of power as a human right. The journey from academic to scholar-activist that accompanied me throughout the stages of this project served as my North Star. This journey has moved at various speeds, with starts and stops, ultimately bringing me to a familiar point. The Jewish sage Hillel is credited with a famous quote: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” While I have always loved this quote, it is incomplete by itself. A long debate in Judaism is whether it is more important to study or to act. The question is explicitly about studying Torah, Judaism’s holiest book that contains 613 commandments meant to govern daily life and people’s actions. Perhaps the same question could be asked regarding studying Islam’s holiest book, the Qur’an, and acting. One answer is that it is more important to study because studying leads to action. Another answer is that it is more important to study because by studying we can deepen our understanding of the divine mindset, which will better enable us to act accordingly. After many years of studying, earning graduate degrees, and learning many lessons from my mentors as well as from my students, I now have my answer. Once someone discovers the truth, we are compelled to share it and inspire others to share theirs. May the book you are holding aid your own discovery, action, and ultimately: healing.

Each of the main chapters of *#UsToo* highlights one woman and incorporates experiences, commentary, and testimonies of same-faith women to illustrate the larger context. Chapter 1, “*#GamAni*” begins in the 1970s with my discovering my father’s relationship with a student, lays the foundation for understanding the term sexual harassment and details the *#MeToo* experience that altered the course of my life. In this chapter, I also describe the Jewish community’s reaction, sexual abuse of other Jewish women, including female clergy and communal efforts thus far to create positive change. The second chapter, “*#MosqueToo*,” introduces Haleema Bharoocha and other Muslim women who struggled to call out Muslim men’s bad behavior despite their manipulations of Islam to blame women for what befalls them. I discuss the legacy of September 11th and Islamophobia. Chapter 3, “*In Christ, We Pray, Amen*,” features Ruth Everhart, a white Christian woman who changed her faith community, details Evangelical Christian women’s experiences and discusses how race impacts the ways Christian women of

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color experience sexual misconduct and abuse of power. The concluding chapter addresses my re-traumatization, engages with the idea of forgiveness, and discusses the abundant work remaining to achieve truly safe communities where everyone's human rights are ensured.

We are stronger together. I hope these pages inspire action, but at the very least may they reassure each reader that they are not alone. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (don't let the bastards grind you down).¹²

Notes

- 1 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (McClelland and Stewart Houghton: Canada, 1985) 295; Hulu, season 1 ep. 10.
- 2 See, for example, Zoe Greenberg, "What happens to #MeToo When a Feminist Is the Accused?" *New York Times*, August 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/nyregion/sexual-harassment-nyu-female-professor.html>; and Anna North, "When the accused in a woman: a #MeToo story's lessons on gender and power," *Vox* August 14, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/14/17688144/nyu-me-too-movement-sexual-harassment-avital-ronell>.
- 3 *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, Center for Disease Control, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_victimization_final-a.pdf.
- 4 Laina Farhat-Holzman, "Closed societies conceal abuse of power," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 13, 2008, https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2008/11_12/2008_12_13_FarhatHolzman_LainaFarhat.htm, and Roni Singer-Heruti, Highest Rate of Sexual Offenses, *Haaretz*, March 31, 2008, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5012711>, cited by Michael J. Salamon in *Abuse in the Jewish Community: Religious and Communal Factors that Undermine the Apprehension of Offenders and the Treatment of Victims*.
- 5 *Spotlight 2015; Surviving R. Kelly* (Netflix Sept. 2019-Jan. 2020); *Filthy Rich* (Netflix May 2020).
- 6 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement* (New York: Penguin, 2019); Ronan Farrow, *Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).
- 7 See, for example, Aly Raisman, "Rachael Denhollander" in *TIME* magazine's "Person of the Year: The Silence Breakers," December 18, 2017; Rachael Denhollander, *What Is A Girl Worth? My story breaking the silence and exposing the truth about Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics* (New York: Tyndale, 2019); Bonnie Cohen and Jon Shenk, directors, *Athlete A*, Netflix 2020 documentary, June 2020.
- 8 Mona Eltahawy, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 7.
- 9 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301. Cited by Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," (*Yale French Studies*, vol. 72, 1986) 35.
- 10 Tarana Burke, *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2021).
- 11 Mary DeMuth, interview by author, August 12, 2020.
- 12 Laura Bradley, "Handmaid's Tale: The Strange History of 'nolite te bastardes carborundorum,'" *Vanity Fair*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/handmaids-tale-nolite-te-bastardes-carborundorum-origin-margaret-atwood>.

1 #GamAni

Jewish Women Find Their Voices

שכל ישראל ערבים זה בזה

Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh (All of Israel is Responsible for One Another)¹

I was confused when I saw my father, a professor and chairman of his department, holding hands with a woman who wasn't my mother. We were at a state folk festival on a university campus. It was the spring of 1977, and I was ten years old. A short time later, my mother and I were moving to another state nearly 300 miles away. My father's affair with a student was not the cause of my parents' divorce—they had been at each other's throats for a while—but it certainly put the nail in the marital coffin. One could argue that since the student and her professor married and raised two children together, nothing untowardly occurred. However, I wonder how many other students had caught my father's eye that had not been as interested in engaging in a sexual relationship with him as did his second wife? Had my father, even inadvertently, ever made a student feel uncomfortable by gazing at them just a little too long or putting his arm around them? And did they tell anyone if he made inappropriate overtures, or did they just bury it inside themselves as something that most women endure during their life?

Today, I clearly see the power dynamics at play that place students in vulnerable positions with their professors, just as they do a person of any gender who is subordinate to another person with more power. But those were different times ... or were they? In 1975, journalist Lin Farley had named the phenomenon of women quitting jobs or being fired because they did not accept the sexual overtures of their bosses as "sexual harassment." Testifying before the Commission on Human Rights of New York City Farley described that women experienced widespread sexual harassment at work, "It is literally epidemic" she said.² A white child growing up in the 1970s, however, I did not read the *New York Times* nor had I ever heard of Farley or the legal scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon who linked harassment with discrimination, making it a violation of civil rights. I was years away from knowing what a landmark case was, let alone analyzing *Williams v. Saxbe* (1976) and *Barnes v. Costle*

DOI: 10.4324/9781003365457-2

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(1977), the two cases that made *quid pro quo* harassment a form of gender-based discrimination under the 1964 Civil Rights Act.³

Before those cases, in 1967, Marilyn Webb left a PhD program at the University of Chicago after a professor told her he would only be on her dissertation committee if he could go to Marilyn's apartment to bath her. Another male professor, an expert in moral development, pinned her against the wall, kissed her, and told her "it was quid pro quo." A half-century later in 2017, inspired by the #MeToo movement, Marilyn wrote to the president of the University, submitted a book she had written with a new theoretical framework, and received her degree in May of 2019. The men could not be held accountable because they had died, but at least the academic injustice



Figure 1.1 Illustration by Steve Mendelson (1958–1995) for the *Washington Post* editorial by Noel Epstein, “When Professors Swap Good Grades for Sex,” September 6, 1981.

was ameliorated.⁴ Time has a way of telescoping, from the past to the present and back to the past again.

My own experience with sexual misconduct and abuse of power in 2011 caused me to reflect back on the childhood memory of my father's behavior along with many men I've known personally and those men I've only read about in the media. I search for clues to help me understand the difference between what I witnessed and what I experienced firsthand, what passed as acceptable in the 1970s unless tried in court for wrongful termination of employment, and what compelled droves of women to heed the call of actor Alyssa Milano who wrote "If you've ever been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet" on October 15, 2017 and received 55,000 replies the next day. Forty-five days later, #MeToo went from trending #1 on Twitter to a global viral movement with over 85 million Facebook posts.⁵ The more I thought about the relationship between that decades-old memory of my father's mistress and my struggle to come forward, the more I realized that my socialization about how women were trained to put up with men treating them as sex objects, to dress modestly lest we attract unwanted attention (or worse), was compounded by the idea that Jews are responsible for each other. I thought I was safe as a Jewish woman in the company of my co-religionists when, in fact, I was no safer than a battered wife in the home of her abusive husband.

I thought "me too" from the moment I first read the words. But I did not say them, write them, or post them on social media. Why was it so hard to say #MeToo? I thought about the times in my life when I was touched without my consent; all were evidence of the patriarchy that convinced some men they had an inalienable right to girls' and women's bodies. When I was in elementary school, a man rubbed his naked penis against me at the Bronx Zoo. In high school, the father of the children I was babysitting came up behind me and slipped his hands down the front of my blouse. A promising summer job earning great tips as a waitress at an upscale Italian restaurant lasted only one night because I would not tolerate customers touching me. As a 20-year-old woman in downtown Boston, a group of young men walking in the opposite direction passed by, and one of them grabbed my breasts. Teaching a night section of Ivy League athletes in Providence, a student draped his arm over my shoulder and suggested that he deserved a better grade. During my postdoctoral training in Ann Arbor, a married neighbor stroked my face over lunch and an attorney squeezed my butt when I thanked him for helping with a negligent landlord. Then I got to the most recent incident and stopped in my mental tracks.

Steven M. Cohen, a well-known sociologist of American Jewry, used the pretense of professional advice to lure me to a candle-lit dinner far from the Association for Jewish Studies conference we were attending in Washington, DC, and the prying eyes of our colleagues. He probed about my personal life, asking me one inappropriate question after another. He took my hand in his and held it across the table until I carefully withdrew it from his grasp. After

I rebuffed his suggestion of walking me to my hotel room and firmly said “good night,” he suddenly pressed his body against mine and kissed me in a manner only suitable for lovers. I was repulsed and ran back to my room, locking the door quickly behind me, my mind racing to understand what my brain could not process. I knew what he did was not kosher, that I had been mistreated, but women are socialized to not make waves and I was a product of that patriarchal brainwashing. The fact that Cohen was married made his action all the more difficult for me; how many women had my father pursued physically without anyone deeming it “wrong” before he divorced and remarried? When another social scientist asked how my meeting with Cohen went, all I could bring myself to recount was that it was “disturbing.” That email would come in handy later when the Title IX officer was looking for contemporaneous corroboration.

Multiple factors contributed to my initial silence. Cohen was older, tenured, and significantly more powerful. The interconnectivity of Jewish academia and community combined with the perpetrator’s status meant that saying #MeToo would draw attention to something very wrong in the Jewish community in general and Jewish studies in particular. If I spoke out, I thought I would bring shame to the community I loved and worked in about something repulsive. The ideas that the Jewish people are one big family, that we are responsible for one another, and that we should not speak ill of each other kept a muzzle on me. I was not conscious, yet, of the religious and communal factors that contributed to my apprehension. Ironically, a book about abuse in the Jewish community was published the same year that Cohen assaulted me, but it did not cross my radar then.⁶ The mere thought of speaking out paralyzed me with fear and questions. What would people think? How would he react? Would I be judged for blowing the whistle? Would my well-reviewed scholarship be tossed aside, my reputation reduced to a mere scribbling woman? I have a PhD from an Ivy League institution. I studied feminist scholarship and understood that gender is about the power dynamics between the sexes. I had read Naomi Wolf’s 1991 bestseller *The Beauty Myth* and her 2001 book *Misconceptions* but had not seen her 2004 article about a professor putting his hand on her inner thigh while she was an undergraduate student at Yale.⁷ If I had, perhaps I would have realized sooner that I had an obligation to do *something* to protect other women. Alternatively, I might have stayed silent indefinitely simply to self-preserve as other women had done before me.

As I read more #MeToo articles, a sense of urgency began to well up inside me, compelling me to do go beyond volunteering on a sexual misconduct taskforce. In December 2017, six years after the incident with Cohen, I read an article in the Jerusalem Post that opened a door I had not known existed. It was as if the question in the title, “When Will US Jews Confront Sexual Harassment and Other Abuses of Power?,” was directed to me. Author Rafael Medoff argued that Jews should strongly encourage people to step forward about their experiences and contact his Committee

on Ethics in Jewish Leadership “to discuss what can be done.” It felt like a clarion call to end my silence and to disallow someone who had acted so unethically from continuing to lead Jewish studies and the community. When Olympian Aly Raisman confronted the sexual predator who assaulted her and more than a hundred other girls and young women for decades, I was inspired yet also wondered: How could I, just one woman without a gold medal, speak out against a man (Cohen) as well-known in the Jewish community as Nassar was in the Olympic one? It took six more months and many baby steps before my words became public.

The question “What if I’m the only one?” kept rattling around in my head. It was doubtful, but I would be considerably less scared if someone came forward with me. It would be a Thelma-and-Louis moment when two women, inadvertently brought together by the same predator, would hold hands and take the figurative leap that could quite possibly lead to their professional suicides. But at least they wouldn’t be alone. I reached out to a small handful of trusted mentors and colleagues to ask if they knew someone who had a similar experience with Cohen as I did. People described their discomfort around him, his boorish behavior, his inappropriate questions, and his verbal bullying, but no one I connected with initially had been physically assaulted. Women on the east coast asked women on the west coast; they each knew of one person and planned to connect us. The only problem was that the person each was thinking of was the same woman: me. While I was clinging to my anonymity, someone put me in touch with Debbie Findling. Debbie had published her opinion editorial “Is the Jewish Community Perpetuating Sexual Harassment?” (March 20, 2018), describing being sexually harassed three decades prior. The perpetrator was Leonard “Len” Robinson, the former executive director of the largest Jewish camp network in North America.⁸ She was 23 and he was in his 40s when he tried to hold her hand, to kiss her, and then asked her to have sex with him and his wife. At that time, the summer of 1988, Debbie believed that pursuing legal action against him would end her career that was just beginning in the Jewish community.⁹ Finally making her story public inspired other women who Robinson had harassed over the years to come forward.¹⁰ Debbie suggested that the same was likely to happen if I spoke out. “But what if it doesn’t?” I asked. “What if I really am alone?” I will never forget what Debbie said next. She used the example of someone robbing a bank. Even if the criminal only robbed one bank, it was still wrong. A light switch got flipped on in my head. Her example cut through a half-century during which I had been socialized to accept men’s behavior, however degrading or inappropriate, because that’s what good girls did. And I was a good Jewish girl. The internal #MeToo work began in earnest after that conversation with Debbie; I needed to redefine for myself that a good Jewish girl is someone who blows the whistle when someone does something wrong to her.

What I learned when I finally spoke truth to power fills me with amazement and hope for all who have suffered, for Jewish studies, and for the

Jewish community. Rabbis David Ellenson of Brandeis University and Sharon Cohen Anisfeld of Hebrew College, then the academic leaders at my institutions in whom I confided that I had written a soon-to-be-published #MeToo piece, took immediate action to protect other women by disinviting Cohen from speaking on campus and writing a #WeToo blog expressing solidarity. Within hours after my story went live, I was inundated with communications from people I knew and many strangers. The deluge of kindness and support was overwhelming. What surprised me the most, however, was the abundance of gratitude. People of all genders from every sector of the global Jewish community thanked me for being something that I did not feel: brave. But the attention was frustrating, too; didn't people know that the problem was way bigger than just me, or just Cohen, that there was a system in place that protected abusers and kept the abused silent? Shouldn't we be talking about what to do next?



Figure 1.2 Keren R. McGinity (author). Photo credit: Sharon Marie Grazioso-Katz.

The op-ed was shared online nearly 500 times, significantly more than most I learned, and an investigative reporter contacted me soon thereafter. I responded from a hotel room in Israel while on a fellowship program sponsored by the Schusterman Center's Summer Institute for Israel Studies. Interestingly, when the editor of the *Jewish Week* had agreed to publish my op-ed article, he initially declined to commit to investigating; perhaps the apparently keen interest helped journalist Hannah Dreyfus to convince him that the story warranted her time and energy. Whatever transpired in that particular news office, Hannah earned my trust, which in turn enabled me to help other women trust her to tell our collective story in "Harassment Allegations Mount Against Leading Jewish Sociologist," published July 19, 2018 and shared online more than 2000 times. Once the full truth was out about Steven M. Cohen, people who knew him, worked with him, or hired him had to determine for themselves how to navigate those relationships. Eric S. Goldstein, CEO of the United Jewish Appeal Federation, the Jewish philanthropic organization in New York and the world's largest local philanthropy, issued a public statement eight days later. Acknowledging that the UJA Federation had contracted Cohen on multiple projects over time, Goldstein stated: "We will do so no longer." He went on to express hope that those of us who came forward would inspire "all others who have been reluctant and fearful to speak out." To his and his organization's credit, the statement declared: "Sexual harassment will never be tolerated at the UJA, nor is there any place for it in our community."¹¹ Taking responsibility for and confronting issues of sexual harassment, power and gender inequality laid the foundation for progress to truly begin. The heightened public awareness also brought unanticipated attention to me personally and I lost the prerogative to be a private person.

My desire to help other people helped me regain some equilibrium, reclaiming a modicum of power—however illusionary—by "paying it forward" as I promised Debbie Findling I would. I received emails and texts from individuals who had been harassed by Cohen and also by other people. I heard from men who had been harassed by people of their gender and by women. Their experiences ranged from recent to decades old, triggered by learning about my story. In some cases, they had not told anyone before. I became a keeper of dark secrets, a human vault. It was a lot to carry and I experienced what psychology experts describe as secondary trauma from listening to other people's stories; their humiliation, frustration, anger, and fear ricocheted around my nervous system like pinballs. I ate too little, drank too much, and yet somehow managed to function. After all, wasn't that what I had always done as a woman in a male-dominated society? While the communal support was reassuring to me, I wanted to see real and lasting change. Judaism teaches that deeds are more important than words; this, I needed to see to believe. I also thought Jews need to adjust the lessons from our fathers, *Pirkei Avot*, that include "speak little, but do much" to be: say something and do more!

Although the Jewish community took its time to experience an awakening and take action, I found comfort in my Jewish faith and culture. People who

knew Cohen far longer than I did and my Jewish identity taught me that solace comes in many forms. Traveling in Israel over the summer of 2018 gave me the opportunity to meet Shulamit Magnus, a professor emerita of Jewish history who serves on the Ethics in Jewish Leadership Committee from Jerusalem. She shared her shock and anger; Cohen had been a long-time friend. But there was zero hesitation on her part to condemn his behavior and support me for coming forward. We walked through the Old City. I had never visited the Kotel, the remaining wall of the Second Temple that was destroyed by the Romans in the second century B.C.E., at night; it was well-lit and full of people. Shulamit spotted an opening in the crowd and generously steered me into it. I placed my hands and forehead on the ancient stones, welcoming their coolness. I surprised myself and wept for what seemed like a long time. Exhaustion, fear, and relief flowed out of my eyes and down my cheeks, joining the chorus of female worshippers, and comforting me. I was not alone—not in Israel, in academia, nor in the American Jewish community, where some men in positions of power targeted women like fish in a barrel.

Clergy Abuse of Adult Jewish Women

Although not for a minute did I think that sexual harassment was limited to academia in general or Jewish studies in particular, the scope of this social scourge was far greater than I had ever imagined. It also existed in sacred spaces where predatory rabbis preyed on congregants and obnoxious congregants said things to female rabbis that they never would have said to their own family members. Like my experience with a more senior academic who abused his power, the power differential between clergy and congregant fueled the sexual misconduct of some rabbis who used their positions of authority to groom and ultimately take advantage of women who trusted them. Jewish women's experiences in this regard are not unique. In American congregations with 400 members, on average, 32 people have experienced clergy sexual misconduct and experts estimate that over 95 percent of the sexually exploited are adult women.¹² Diana Garland, Dean of the Baylor University School of Social Work, explains, "Many people, including the victims themselves, often label incidences of clergy sexual misconduct with adults as 'affairs.' In reality, they are an abuse of the spiritual power by the religious leader."¹³ The courageous stories of several women highlight both the depravity of the men who manipulated them and the social reckoning of the Jewish religious infrastructure that began to crumble once the women broke the silence.

Contemporary rabbinic abuses of power are, unfortunately, nothing new. In the mid-1990s, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (JTA) published a rather prophetic five-part series "When rabbis go astray" by reporter Debra Nussbaum Cohen. In part one, Nussbaum details instances of when spiritual leaders exploited female congregants to assault and sometimes to ensnare women in sexual relationships. The stories range across movements, Reform,

Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Modern Orthodox. The article is clear that most rabbis were not sexually harassing their congregants, but also that the problem was bigger than people realized at the time. When Rabbi Mark Winer, senior rabbi at the Jewish Community Center of White Plains, NY, and a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis' (CCAR) executive committee, informally studied 60 of the largest Reform congregations in the mid-1980s, Nussbaum Cohen reported: "... he found that during a 20-year span, allegations of rabbinic sexual misconduct resulted in nearly as many pulpit changes as deaths and retirements combined." In addition to the size of the problem, the tendency for congregations was to handle allegations "quietly in-house," according to the late Rabbi Julie Spitzer, past director of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations resident expert on rabbinic sexual misconduct. According to the article, women rarely went beyond their congregations and few knew that ethics committees or rabbinical organizations even existed.¹⁴ Hence, unless one read the *JTA*, and it's unlikely that most people who attended services at a Jewish house of worship did, Jewish women were vulnerable and it would take decades until the #MeToo movement brought their voices and experiences out in the open.

Rachel Cohen went to her rabbi when she needed guidance in 2001. Over a year and a half, she had become very involved in the life of a synagogue in rural New England and everyone in the community raved about the rabbi. "I was thirsty for someone to trust, and I found no reason not to trust him. He was my clergy person" Rachel wrote about the betrayal of spiritual trust she eventually experienced and recognized as clergy abuse. When their relationship turned sexual and became known to the board of directors of the rabbi's synagogue, she became the scapegoat for leading their rabbi astray and was shunned by the community. "I became isolated and underwent a complete social death," Rachel recalled. She stayed with the rabbi for nearly 15 years, believing that God would fix everything. Clergy abuse, like domestic violence, has a huge psychological effect on women that makes it very difficult to extricate without complete internal destruction; "For all those years, I could not separate my love for the rabbi from my love for God. To leave one would be to leave the other and that, I could not do."¹⁵ Rachel's tormented existence after being shunned by community members was complicated by the fact that it was easier to blame a woman than to believe that their rabbi, a beloved charismatic figure, had done anything wrong.

Rather than face the cognitive dissonance that goes hand in hand with a beloved spiritual leader acting inappropriately, or worse, fellow congregants were more likely to stand by their rabbis than to believe and support women who spoke out about them. Psychologist Michael J. Salamon describes how some people view religious leaders "not simply as extremely intelligent, educated and replete with insight but also as 'superhuman' in many ways"¹⁶ The same can be said of how some people view sports heroes, Hollywood celebrities and politicians. Whether people were unwilling or unable to

consider that their rabbi was capable of offensive behavior, they had no trouble accusing the women of ruining his career and calling them names such as “harlots,” “Jezebels,” “liars,” and “whores.” The tendency to literally blame the person who was abused rather than our abuser has a historical precedent; during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a sexual double standard existed that, according to early American historian Sharon Block, “foisted the responsibility for and consequences of sexual acts onto women”¹⁷ Anticipating this reaction, targets of rabbinic sexual misconduct rarely came forward in the 1990s and early 2000s. Without communal support, women who were sexually exploited by rabbis often chose to stay silent to avoid losing their social standing in the congregation and to safeguard their professional success. They watched as the few women who did speak out were discredited and their rabbi’s misbehavior explained away with the expression “Boys will be boys.” While the rabbinical perpetrators stayed in their pulpits or moved to other congregations, women were often the ones who left the Jewish communities.¹⁸ How many left Judaism altogether due to clergy sexual misconduct is unknown.

Prior to the #MeToo movement, concerns about sexual misconduct by clergy were slow to translate into actions or preventions. In the 1980s, the CCAR convened a taskforce to look at inappropriate behavior and boundary violations by rabbis. In the early 1990s, they developed a Code of Ethics that named sexual boundary violations; since that time, there have been continuous updates.¹⁹ However, the taskforce was referred to jokingly as the “well-oiled zipper committee” by several sources in 1996.²⁰ Also, because of the decentralization of Jewish movements, it was left up to individual congregations to create their own sexual misconduct guidelines and apply them. That a professional organization of the Reform movement developed and adopted a Code of Ethics was certainly progress and many well-intentioned clergies brought that into being. However, in the absence of a structure requiring all Reform Jewish clergy and professional leaders to adhere to a code of ethics or face consequences, its success was limited. In many ways, this approach mirrors that of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; SCOTUS declared “separate but equal” to be unconstitutional and simultaneously allowed individual states to determine when and how to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.” The ambiguity enabled segregationists to drag their feet and maintain racial inequality.²¹ Jewish congregations likewise could shuffle rabbis around when they were accused of sexual impropriety and keep the reasons for their departure quiet.

The Reform and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism appear to have taken the lead in terms of adopting policies and taking action against wayward rabbis, while the Conservative and Orthodox arms dragged behind. That the more progressive of the Jewish movements were the first to address clergy abuse in any serious form is not surprising; they had also adopted the patrilineal descent decision, making Jewish legal status egalitarian and allowed

rabbis to officiate interfaith marriages, which neither the Conservative nor the Orthodox did. In 1995, the ethics committee of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) formulated an initial policy and refined it the following year. The RRA was the first rabbinical organization to expel someone for sexual misconduct involving a minor and notified all of the movement's congregations, plus the other Jewish movements, to prevent the offending rabbi from working as a religious leader in the future. The Conservative Rabbinical Assembly was much slower to react; after two years of discussing the issue, there was still no written ethics code or formal policy.²² The executive vice president of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America did not believe sexual misconduct was a problem among its rabbis, perhaps in part because women did not contact the organization about its members. Orthodox women who had studied with a prominent Orthodox rabbi knew otherwise; they claimed that the married rabbi and member of the Rabbinical Council of America had sex with them while one was seeking to convert and the other to become more observant. When they consulted Orthodox authorities and sought guidance about taking the rabbi to a religious court, they were told that Jewish law does not recognize clergy sexual misconduct. Nussbaum Cohen quoted one woman saying: "My soul has been raped."²³ The disconnection between unethical behavior by rabbis and accountability was an abhorrent religious loophole.

The early progress by the liberal branches of Judaism was far too late to save Anita Green in 1990. The president of her new Reform congregation Shir Chadash (a new song) in Encino, California, Anita filed for divorce from her husband and was sleeping with the rabbi, Steven B. Jacobs. It was a relationship he was closed lipped about, but she was excited to tell her friends and to plan for their eventual marriage. Temple staff was well aware of the relationship, as was Mel Green, Anita's husband. In *No Sanctuary: The True Story of A Rabbi's Deadly Affair*, journalist and fellow congregant Michele Samit writes: "The rabbi and Mel may have differed on the issue of morality, but the rabbi must have known his relationship with Anita was hardly innocent. At the very least, a clergyman who sleeps with his congregant could appear predatory and manipulative to many. That's probably why Steven B. Jacobs so desperately wanted to keep what was going on a secret."²⁴ In the end, a sole gunman shot Anita in the head execution style in a parking lot, killing her, and Mel was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life behind bars for planning her murder. The rabbi's speech at Anita's funeral confirmed what temple gossips had long suspected was another of his romantic dalliances; it was not the eulogy one would expect, rather intimate in tone and word. He described gazing "at her, her makeup put on fastidiously, with baggy shorts and a sweatshirt. Or elegant, in one of her many outfits with her jewelry and her rings. Admiring or just staring at her beautiful nails and her gentle hands; holding those hands, her skin so very soft, so reassuring, those beautiful hands."²⁵ The reporting in Samit's book is meticulous; however, the subtitle undermines the rabbi's responsibility for

his sexual misconduct. The word “affair” suggests a relationship between social and religious equals. Steven B. Jacobs was the religious leader, Anita Green an overly supportive congregant in an unhappy marriage. He may not have pulled the trigger but her blood is on his hands.

Nearly 20 years later, a Reform temple on the other side of the country would be thrust into the limelight when a brave young woman realized that the rabbi had taken advantage of her. The Jewish daily *Forward's* headline rang out: “Rabbi Accused of Sexual Misconduct Is Suspended By Reform Rabbinical Association” on August 22, 2018.²⁶ Sarah Ruth Hoffman was pursuing her doctorate at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, when she met Rabbi Larry Bach. She wrote, “I was hungry for new knowledge and to deepen my sense of observance and belonging in the Jewish community. He had all the knowledge, connections and power to make that happen.” Due to the power imbalance, the 29-year-old was vulnerable to exploitation by the 48-year-old Bach of Judea Reform Congregation in Durham. The relationship that developed between them was not one between equals. She reported him for sexual, spiritual, psychological and emotional abuse, domestic violence, and other violations in February 2018. Six months later, Bach was suspended by the CCAR and subsequently resigned from his Durham congregation. Apparently, it was not the first time that this rabbi had acted inappropriately. Prior to Judea Reform, Bach had served as the rabbi for a congregation in El Paso, Texas and had been reprimanded by the CCAR for behavior there. Since reprimands are confidential, his next congregation was not aware of it when they hired him. What’s striking about this case is the lack of transparency that prioritized the clergy’s privacy over congregants’ safety and even the Reform movement’s reputation. According to Thane Rosenbaum, director of the NYU School of Law’s Forum on Law, Culture, and Society, “Misconduct that involves inappropriate sexual behavior for the leading moral voice of a community is devastating. But what’s more devastating is the cover-up . . .”²⁷ While the movement of pedophile priests from one Catholic parish to another is widely known, thanks to the *Boston Globe's* Spotlight Team’s investigative reporting beginning in July 2001, the ability of some rabbis with dark histories to move from one Jewish congregation to another was not common knowledge before the #MeToo movement began.²⁸

Twenty years after the Spotlight articles, the Reform movement launched three independent investigations of misconduct at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the CCAR, and the Union for Reform Judaism. The public release of the final reports, and the long history of abuse and mistreatment they describe, was a move toward transparency; the reports are “significant signs of hope,” in the words of Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow.²⁹ Findings by the law firms hired to describe behaviors dated back fifty years. The CCAR had convened a taskforce to look at sexual misconduct as early as the 1980s but proved ineffective; investigations into complaints took years and consequences for perpetrators were mostly

symbolic. As the *JTA* reported, “Those who complained were ostracized while offenders remained welcome as their violations were often kept confidential.”³⁰ The public outing in the spring of 2021 of Sheldon Zimmerman, a former senior rabbi at Central Synagogue in Manhattan and past president of the Reform seminary and of the CCAR, for spiritually manipulating and sexually abusing young women in the 1970s and 1980s sent shock waves through a movement that reverberate still.³¹ The Women’s Rabbinic Network was instrumental in ensuring that the three Reform organizations began a thorough process of accountability and repair, which is ongoing as of this writing. According to Rabbi Mary Zamore, executive director of the WRN, victim-survivors have mixed responses to the reports about the URJ, CCAR, and HUC-JIR; those whose experiences are documented feel seen, which is the majority, however, others remain unrecognized despite having participated in the investigations.³² The leadership of the Conservative movement made a bold step forward in 2021 by publishing on the Rabbinical Assembly’s website a list of rabbis expelled or suspended for ethical violations, including sexual misconduct. Rabbi Daniel Pressman, chair of the Va’ad HaKavod (the RA’s ethics committee), stated: “The publication of the names of those who are in violation of our Code of Conduct is one more step in our ongoing commitment to transparency.”³³ Of the nine rabbis listed, four were expelled for sexual misconduct and one was suspended for “verbal sexual misconduct.”³⁴ However, like the Reform organizations, neither the Rabbinical Assembly nor the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the network organization of more than 500 synagogues in North America, control how individual congregations operate. This decentralization meant that a congregation could still employ a rabbi that was sanctioned by their professional organization. Rabbi Jeremy Gerber was suspended by the Conservative movement’s RA, yet Congregation Ohev Shalom outside of Philadelphia decided to keep him.³⁵ Published in June 2022, it remains to be seen what impact sociologist Elana Sztokman’s book *When Rabbis Abuse*, which analyzes the dynamics of gender, power, and status that enabled many sexual predators and silenced victims, will have.³⁶

Although women have been rabbis for five decades, also previously unknown was the extent to which women clergy experience sexual misconduct. Reform was the first movement to ordain a white female rabbi in 1972, with the Reconstructionist and Conservative movements following suit in 1974 and 1985, respectively. Angela Buchdahl became the first Asian-American cantor in 1999 and a rabbi in 2001, followed by the first female African-American rabbi in 2009.³⁷ While female Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative female rabbinical students had the same status as their male counterparts upon graduation, the same was not the case for Orthodox women. It took until 2009 for the first Orthodox woman to be ordained as clergy, but there continued to be a debate for some years about what title they would use and what functions they would perform.³⁸ It is both shocking and paradoxical that female clergy have experienced sexual harassment and assault. On the one hand, female clergy are in positions of power;



Figure 1.3 Penny S. Myers. Permission to publish courtesy of Penny S. Myers. Photo credit: Krysty Tasca Photography.

theoretically, they would not be vulnerable to sexual misconduct. Despite their roles as religious authorities, female rabbis have been on the receiving end of unwelcome and inappropriate comments, flirtations, and touching—from their bosses, subordinates, and congregants.

The #MeToo movement opened the floodgates of female clergy’s experience with sexual harassment and assault. Journalist Chanel Dubovsky interviewed dozens of women, both those serving as rabbis and those still in rabbinical school, for a *Lilith* magazine article published in the spring of 2018. Female rabbis recounted being called a “sexy rabbi” for wearing heels to lead services, people touching their legs, and congregants asking them out on dates.³⁹ Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, the senior rabbi at Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, VA, recalled a male congregant’s question on one of the Jewish high holy days when they were discussing the hot fall weather: “What *do* you wear under your robe?” he asked.⁴⁰ “When Rabbis Say #MeToo,” the summer 2019 *Hadassah* magazine article by Uriel Heilman, details one account after another of female clergy being verbally harassed and propositioned. In one case, a man put his arm around a woman’s shoulder, touched her breast, and said: “Wow, I didn’t know rabbis could be so sexy.” Comments about their physical appearance and inappropriate physical contact wrongly came with the territory of serving as spiritual leaders. Parading the Torah through the sanctuary during services was a “common workplace hazard.” Whether the workplace abuse and harassment came from fellow clergy or congregants, women at the beginning of

their careers were in “a particularly vulnerable position,” Heilman wrote, because they’re subordinate to senior rabbis and congregants control their contracts.⁴¹

Sexual harassment flourishes in some synagogue cultures that are, in Cantor Penny S. Myers words, “hyper-masculine” and where “gender bias, inequity and inequality” dominate.⁴² Although the first woman appointed as cantor was in 1955, and women had served congregations as music teachers and choral leaders, formal ordination of female cantors follows a similar timeline as for rabbis; the first woman ordained as a cantor was in 1975, three years after the first female rabbi.⁴³ Myers, who is a member of the Cantors Assembly, served at Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo, NY, where she was referred to as the “beautiful blond cantor” by the then-incoming male rabbi, and suffered gender discrimination. Myers followed the synagogue’s policy to report incidents and tried resolving issues with the board, which were not taken seriously enough as no timely change occurred, before filing an ethics complaint with the CCAR.⁴⁴ Perspectives varied and the situation was likely more complicated; however, the extensive damage Myers experienced was compounded by disagreements with the synagogue president about how the whole situation should be handled is illustrative of a pattern: navigating what comes after abuse is sometimes worse than the abuse itself. Whatever the details, the Buffalo community lost her musical liturgical gifts when Cantor Myers resigned at the end of 2020, ending an over 14-year pulpit when she was only 46 years old and far from retirement.⁴⁵ Since then, Myers experienced post-employment retaliation and, as of this writing, has an open complaint against the synagogue with the New York State Division of Human Rights.⁴⁶

The lack of respect for female clergy is an inherent sign of the systemic inequality between sexes in the larger American culture. Theoretically, putting women up on the *bima* (the raised platform at the front of a Jewish sanctuary) should end their experiences of sexual harassment; practically, however, it may have exacerbated them. According to Dubovsky, “Where male rabbis command immediate respect from those they serve, too often women in these roles are made to feel unworthy—for no other reason than their being female.”⁴⁷ In 2003, Rabbi Schwartzman attended a meeting held at the White House; she was the only woman among fifteen rabbis invited by then-President George W. Bush to talk about what was important to the Jewish community. “The whole way that Bush handled that meeting is indicative of how women are treated,” she told me. He called each of the men “rabbi” but referred to her as “Amy,” then corrected himself: “Oh, I should call you rabbi.” While the male rabbis’ religious status was a given, hers was contested, an afterthought. At the end of the meeting, Bush went around the room and shook each rabbi’s hand. When he got to Rabbi Schwartzman, she remembers with disappointment, “... he asked how many children I have.”⁴⁸ None of her male rabbinic colleagues even reacted. Even when women earn the same degrees, have equal experience, and hold the same religious power, we are reduced to our pro-creative abilities and roles as mothers.

Gender inequality may help explain why sexual misconduct toward female clergy is so pervasive. Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu, former director of member services at Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, stated: “I speak with rabbis across the country and every single female rabbi I know has a story—if not several—of being sexually harassed.”⁴⁹ Perhaps women who pursue and achieve positions of power in the Jewish community, once dominated purely by men, are targeted because they directly challenge the patriarchal notion that only men can be rabbis in the first place. Compounding women’s vulnerability to sexual misconduct in the pulpit is the fact that they have fewer options for recourse than women who are not clergy due to the ministerial exemption. The ministerial exemption is the United States legal doctrine that protects freedom of religion by making religious institutions exempt from anti-discrimination laws.⁵⁰ While something meant to protect religious freedom bound women clergy and made it difficult for them to speak out, Orthodox Jewish women were bound by their own communities.

Orthodox Judaism and Its Discontents

The reluctance to speak out that I, a pluralist Jew, and other women from liberal branches of Judaism experienced pale in comparison to what women from modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities face. The reasons are complicated, in part because they involve Jews’ history of oppression and persecution, *halakha* (Jewish law), and misinterpretations of religious rules. The communal self-governance in the *shtetl* or ghetto, a limited geographic area in which Jews lived, whether intended to protect the Jewish minority from tyranny or to segregate Jews from the rest of the population continues to influence some Jewish communities that remain defensive. Jewish codes of behavior were established to keep Jewish life and identity distinctive. According to Dr. Michael J. Salamon, “Most of the regulations provide a guide for an ethical existence with a desire for a righteous lifestyle. It is in the interpretations where confusion may arise.”⁵¹ Salamon identified three Jewish laws whose misapplication leads to abuse in the Jewish community not being reported or being handled quietly: *chillul Hashem* (bringing shame to God or desecrating God’s name); *Mesirah* (the act of turning another Jew or a Jew’s property over to the secular authorities; the *Moser*, the person who does it, has no place in the world to come and may be executed); and *lashon hora* (“evil tongue,” gossip, anything that could “cause the subject physical or monetary harm if publicized”).⁵² Reluctance to report and concern about communal shame could explain why the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in the city of Bnei Brak in Israel had the highest number of sex offenses than any other city by “tens of percentage points” according to the Tel Aviv police in 2008. Offenders knew that they could assault women with impunity until rabbis encouraged families to speak up.⁵³ As an Orthodox Jew as well as a clinician who treats victims of

abuse, Salamon explains that other Orthodox Jews may attack his position that professionalism has a role in his personal and professional life. He contends, “Being a ‘frummer’ comes in many different forms and those forms are not unique to any specific religion. ... Those who would deny, ignore or rationalize their transgressions are pious fools regardless of their spiritual orientation.”⁵⁴ Salamon’s position has been slow to take hold.

It is difficult for a religious community whose very existence depends on remaining separate and different to know how exactly the very laws that are meant to sustain it are actually doing more damage than good in the twenty-first century. However, Orthodox Rabbinic authorities, including the Rabbinical Council of America and the Modern Orthodox Rabbinical Association, reaffirmed in 2010 that going to the police is mandated by Jewish law and that fear of breaking Jewish rules should not inhibit someone from reporting firsthand knowledge about an evildoer.⁵⁵ Protecting others from future harm is clearly more central to the spirit of Jewish law than using legal precepts to restrain oneself or other community members from speaking out about sexual misconduct and abuse of power. This clarity marks an important distinction from the position of turning a naïve blind eye in 1995, discussed above. That the Keshet Israel Congregation and National Capital Mikvah (ritual bath) reported to Washington, DC law enforcement Rabbi Barry Freundel’s illegal use of a hidden video camera to spy on naked women and fired him in 2014 is evidence of putting the protection of human rights before communal tribalism.⁵⁶ Freundel’s crimes also directly violated Jewish women’s religious observance of *tzniut* (modesty) and *niddah* (family purity law).

Still, there remain members of Orthodox communities that continue to cite *halakha* for why one should not come forward, or that ostracize women who do. When Orthodox writer Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt tweeted a message of solidarity with fellow journalist Danielle Berrin and that she, too, had been sexually harassed by an Israeli media personality (a different one than Berrin had), her Orthodox community reacted harshly. Chizhik-Goldschmidt recounted in *Moment* magazine: “Instead of getting support, I received a lot of hate.” Her motives were questioned, she was accused of seeking publicity, and some even suggested her husband, an Orthodox rabbi in New York City, divorce her.⁵⁷ Beyond misinterpretations of Jewish law, there is another dimension that increases single Orthodox women’s reluctance to tell anyone if they have been sexually abused, far more than women of other Jewish streams and even more than married Orthodox women. While premarital sex is less than ideal according to Conservative and Reform Judaism, it is strictly forbidden in the Orthodox Jewish community. Unmarried Orthodox men and women do not even hold or shake hands. Therefore, if a man makes unwanted physical contact with a single woman, and she speaks about it publicly, it could reduce her cultural currency in terms of marriage. In this

way, single Orthodox women face double repercussions of coming forward: communal backlash and loss of dating capital.⁵⁸

Although Orthodox communities may restrain women from naming their abusers directly, the Internet is at least allowing Orthodox women to share their stories. In an anonymous blog, “Me, Too,” a woman details her experience of being assaulted by a fellow Birthright participant on their last night in Israel. She reflects on how she does not know how many of her friends have had similar experiences and, similarly, cannot identify themselves publicly online. “Today as I scroll through social media I am filled with sadness, anger, confusion, and, somehow, relief. Relief that I am not the only one. I am not the only woman that has come from a Modern Orthodox community that has experienced sexual assault. Sexual harassment. Abuse.”⁵⁹ Reflecting back on my conversations with Hannah Dreyfus, an Orthodox community member and the reporter who researched and wrote all of the big Jewish #MeToo stories published in the *New York Jewish Week*, I am that much more in awe of her courage and commitment to justice through the Jewish media.⁶⁰ “Esther 4:14” was our working motto as we discussed sources and steeled ourselves for whatever consequences we might endure, referring to the verse in the Purim story when Queen Esther does not remain silent, rather she uses her voice to prevent the destruction of the Jewish people at the hands of the evildoer. Dreyfus is a modern-day Esther.

A Million Dollars

Celebrity status and wealth further complicate Jewish women’s #MeToo experiences and how they navigated coming forward. Journalist Danielle Berrin wrote a spellbinding account of her sexual assault two years earlier at the hands of a famous Israeli author an entire year before the movement started. “Don’t out the perpetrator,” a close friend advised her; “It will probably damage him, but it will definitely damage you.” Without naming her abuser, Berrin retraced his menacing attempts to manipulate and seduce her. First, it was asking her to meet him late at night at his hotel, claiming that he was booked during the day on his short trip to the United States. Then it was asking her personal questions about her Jewishness, family, and romantic life, after which came the unwanted physical contact, efforts to kiss and hug her, the invitation to his room, and walking her to her car despite her polite protest that it was not necessary. Berrin connects with female readers around the globe: “My story is not unique. Every woman—probably every single woman in this world—knows the feeling I felt walking to my car at night with a man who couldn’t keep his hands to himself.” She notes that being “demeaned, objectified and infantilized more times” than she can count is because she is a woman. The fact that her abuser was married, with children, and an international public figure made Berrin think that she was safe.⁶¹ Only now as I’m writing these words do I clearly see the close resemblance between her experience, and the initial assumptions she made about the fellow journalist,

later identified as Ari Shavit, as being harmless and my experience with Steven M. Cohen.⁶² It's as if the two men had the same playbook on how to dupe unsuspecting junior co-religionist colleagues.

Institutions and organizations, Jewish or otherwise, need money to function; and money is what fueled some of the egregious behavior of privileged men. The headline of an article by Clare Hedwat in *eJewishPhilanthropy* encapsulates what Berrin and I communicated in our articles that left out the perpetrators' names: "The Jewish World's #MeToo Crisis is Much Deeper than Ari Shavit and Steven Cohen." Pointing to the Jewish institutions, Hedwat named the malady as a "sickness of ingrained, unethical gender and power relations."⁶³ While there are many reasons women do not come forward, such as fear of losing social status, friends, or a job, a perpetrator's vast wealth or connection to the wealthy sometimes played a particularly insidious role in their sexual misconduct. It also made speaking out a legal tightrope walk for women who dared. In Berrin's op-ed, she details the experience of a Jewish communal professional who was told by an advisor to a major philanthropist that her nonprofit would not receive the million dollars it was anticipating if she didn't sleep with him.⁶⁴ This abhorrent example of *quid pro quo* has all of the earmarks of what we now know was behind Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein's casting couch.

Women who had to meet with philanthropists directly, such as donor-relations managers or other high-level executives working for Jewish nonprofit organizations, were in vulnerable positions similar to female fundraisers across the United States. Sheila Katz was a vice president of Hillel International, the umbrella Jewish campus organization with operating local chapters around the world supporting students' Jewish life on college campuses. She was thirty-something when she went to meet with the seventy-something billionaire Michael Steinhardt, one of the Jewish community's most generous benefactors. While her goal was to persuade him to up his financial support of Hillel, he was interested in knowing why she wasn't married and having children yet. Journalists Sharon Otterman and Hannah Dreyfus broke the story in the *New York Times* that Katz, and multiple other women, were asked by this mega philanthropist to participate in sexual encounters with himself and other parties. When Katz rejected the self-described "king of Israel's" request to have sex with him, Steinhardt invited two male employees into his office and offered her a million dollars if she married one of them. Becoming a rabbi did not spare a woman from his gross behavior. Steinhardt suggested that Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi be his concubine during the mid-1990s when he was funding her first rabbinical post.⁶⁵ Sexual harassment of women who fundraise is not unique to the Jewish community; rather, it is a reflection of the widespread problem of what females encounter in the larger American fundraising context. The Association of Fundraising Professionals and the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* found that about 25 percent of female fundraisers experienced sexual harassment compared to only seven percent of male fundraisers. The

fact that 70 percent of fundraisers are women while the CEO and board positions are often held by men points to the relationship between lack of gender equity, power disparity, sexual misconduct, and abuse of power.⁶⁶

White women's fears about what they might personally lose if they spoke out about sexual harassment by a high-profile funder were compounded by the fact that the men, like Steinhardt, supported communal priorities intended to strengthen the Jewish community around the globe. Knowing that outing someone whose philanthropy was doing considerable good, such as co-founding the Birthright Israel program that enabled hundreds of thousands of young people to go to Israel for free, must have weighed mightily on women's shoulders. Early research about the impact of Birthright found that traveling to Israel enhanced participants' "feelings of Jewish connection and increased levels of participation in the North American Jewish community."⁶⁷ What made it even harder for these white women to speak the truth is that members of their own organizations had been turning a blind eye to Steinhardt's sexual misconduct and abuse of power for years. Programs that tangibly built Jewish identity, and related research by Steven M. Cohen and Sylvia Barack Fishman that encouraged younger marriages and "filling more Jewish baby carriages," fed Jewish communal policies that prior to the #MeToo movement encouraged bystanders and supervisors to chalk up inappropriate behavior as being generational or quirks of personality.⁶⁸ The Manhattan district attorney's office did no such thing in December 2021 after a multi-year investigation found Steinhardt possessed 180 stolen artifacts valued at \$70 million. Although not charged with a crime, Steinhardt had to surrender the items and is banned from acquiring antiquities.⁶⁹ It is unsurprising that a billionaire who wantonly purchased looted and smuggled relics illegally trafficked around the globe would also use his wealth to control people, programs, and policies.

For too long, the goal of ensuring Jewish continuity through a singularly focused agenda comprised of Jews marrying each other and producing Jewish offspring obscured the fact that two of the charging forces behind this agenda were sexual predators. Cohen's oft-quoted anti-intermarriage rhetoric, "Intermarriage is the greatest threat to Jewish continuity" and Steinhardt's inappropriately handing out \$100 dollar bills to get young Jewish singles to talk for 15 minutes, promising them a free honeymoon, were two peas in the same pod.⁷⁰ The social scientist and mega philanthropist powerfully influenced the American Jewish community through their words and actions by suggesting that Jewish in-marriage was required for the Jewish people, religion, and culture to survive. Not only did this model ignore that young Jews were increasingly proving them wrong, by marrying outside their religion and raising Jewish children and self-identifying as Jewish despite having one Jewish parent, but it also ignored the fact that they provided the scaffolding for many more Jewish women to feel pressured to engage in sexual acts and to be abused. Journalist Sarah Seltzer writing for *Jewish Currents* uncovered a sexualized environment that existed on Birthright trips that led to outright rape. In "Birthright Israel and #MeToo," Seltzer writes, "Founded in 1999

after a decade of panic within the organized Jewish community about rising intermarriage rates and young Jews' declining communal involvement, Birthright is the *ne plus ultra* of organizations devoted to 'Jewish continuity.'" The panic was the result of a 1990 national Jewish population survey that found 52 percent of Jews intermarried, a panic that Cohen and other social scientists seized upon as *the* crisis facing American Jewry. Interviews with Birthright participants, staff, and trip leaders found numerous accounts of white women's experiences of unwanted sexual attention and encounters with fellow participants and Israeli soldiers.⁷¹ Writing for the *Nation* in 2011, Kiera Feldman explained: "The common denominator of the Birthright experience is the promotion—by turns winking and overt—of flings among participants, or between participants and soldiers."⁷² Birthright's positive impact—enabling young American Jews to experience the Holy Land, its history, culture, and people, and to return home with a stronger Jewish identity and connection to Israel—has sorely underestimated the ugly underbelly fostered by a patriarchal American society and a narrowly defined Jewish community.

Prioritizing community over personhood enabled serial offenders like Steinhardt and Cohen to abuse Jewish women under the guise of "doing good." In reality, however, their sexual misconduct and those who chose to overlook the "open secrets," did the Jewish community more harm than any dollar amount, research, or program did good. Reducing women to their bodies and abilities to procreate undermined half of the Jewish population's ability to fulfill its potential by telling women that their intellectual worth and social contributions were not equal to men's. It took Sheila Katz a long time to navigate the legal, hierarchical, and communal labyrinth to speak her truth and to get the Jewish community to finally listen rather than shrug off someone's behavior because of his status or wealth. In her op-ed, Katz wrote, "Words matter—under the law and the values of Judaism—and pretending otherwise is a tactic to shame victims into silence. Sexual harassment is extraordinarily stressful, impacting victims' professional development, emotional well-being, physical health, personal relationships and sometimes their entire career path."⁷³ How many Jewish women left jobs in their faith community due to sexual harassment, seeking other employment rather than continue subjecting themselves to the hypocrisy of a Jewish communal "family" that sent its own daughters into the lion's den? We may never know, but we can advocate for changes that protect all women going forward.

Protecting all women must include Jewish women of color who have received far too little attention due to American racism and a predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish community that is just beginning to do the deep work around racial constructs necessary to acknowledge that Jews of color make up 12–15 percent or more of the American Jewish population.⁷⁴ Nylah Burton, a black Jew, wrote about sexual violence against women of color for a number of years before we met at a Jewish feminisms conference held at the University of Michigan in the spring of 2019. There, Burton spoke about sexual harassment in the Jewish context for the first time. Burton was raped

while a student at Howard University, but at the conference she focused her remarks on the intersecting marginalization and systems of oppression in the Jewish community. She elaborated that black Jewish women have less social currency because they are not seen as being ideal wives or mothers, so white men utilize the “Nice Jewish Boy” trope to increase their power over Jewish women of color, dangling the prospect of a partnership together and making “nice Jewish babies.” Burton’s date with an older, self-identified “nice Jewish boy” included creepy sexual overtures and groping.⁷⁵ Ironically, the “nice Jewish boy” concept is a product of the Jewish communal pre-occupation with mating that glorifies Jewish men as “good husbands” and exacerbates the concept of the Jewish people as one big family that implies safety and security when sometimes neither exist. Burton detailed in an interview how black Jewish women are fetishized by men, increasing their vulnerability.

Racial justice activist April Baskin, a fellow conference speaker in Michigan and a featured speaker at the national 2019 Women’s March on Washington in DC, confirmed the fetishization of Jewish women of color by white Jewish men when I interviewed her. Baskin is a black and Cherokee Jewish woman.⁷⁶



Figure 1.4 April Baskin. Permission to publish courtesy of April Baskin. Photo credit: Jill Peltzman.

This fetishization is related to how in scholar and clergywoman Traci C. West words: “Demeaning racial and gender ideologies work together in the creation and maintenance of the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous black woman who will ‘spread her legs’ for anyone.”⁷⁷ Compounding the exotification of black Jewish women by white Jewish men is their erasure by the Jewish community by not discussing their sexual harassment and assault experiences. Noting that the Birthright and #MeToo media coverage neglected race, Burton pitched an investigative article about black Jewish women and sexual assault but was told there was no budget for it.⁷⁸ Just as we must address sexual violence against all genders, so too must we address sexual violence against people of all colors.

Awakening

The expression “timing is everything” has great resonance regarding Jewish women speaking their truths and the Jewish community holding perpetrators accountable. The response to my experience made me realize how significantly the #MeToo movement was changing attitudes that could influence multiple sectors of the Jewish community, while also exposing areas resistant to change. I heard from a wide cross-section of leaders of the Jewish community from fellow academics and lay leaders, to philanthropic foundations and clergy. The volume of support and thanks I received meant that the time when people brushed off inappropriate behavior as “Steve just being Steve”—the Jewish version of “boys will be boys”—was coming to an end. Still, a few friends and colleagues were concerned. Was I getting a lot of blowback? Did people believe me? How was I fairing? I was surprised by the questions—until I heard from women who had privately complained years earlier about Cohen. They were told: he has a family, and dragging his name through the proverbial mud would ruin his career. Fortunately, in June 2018 not a single person indicated anything similar, at least not to me directly. It was as if the Jewish community had finally gotten the wake-up call it needed to openly discuss and address a serious problem.

The academic field of Jewish studies was the first to react, as I described at the beginning of this chapter, but the ripple effects went far beyond it. Once I used my voice, Cohen promptly ceased his near-daily postings on the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry listserv to which we both belonged. He apparently identified himself as the person in the op-ed I wrote, even before being contacted by either investigative reporter Hannah Dreyfus or Marviette Johnson, at the time the Title IX officer at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion where he had a tenured position. Although a reliable source informed me that Cohen had lawyered up, likely hoping that I would be the only woman to come forward and he would outgun me in a he-said-she-said fight, it quickly became clear that the many women he had abused over decades had something to say. He resigned from

his honorary position as director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive, a research database housed by Stanford University; he was also removed as a board member of *New Voices*, a magazine written and edited by Jewish college students.

Two months after I went public and four weeks after Dreyfus's comprehensive exposé, bringing to light that Cohen's sexual misconduct and abuse of power were a pattern of behavior spanning decades, the Title IX investigation ended with his resignation from HUC-JIR. As soon as the college issued a statement announcing this news, my phone blew up.⁷⁹ It was my half birthday and the relief of knowing that Cohen had been effectively knocked off his communal pedestal was the best present. The night before I'd had a horrible nightmare and woke my parents who were visiting with my screams to: "Help me!" As the news that Cohen effectively lost his academic position by his own hand sunk into my consciousness, I cried. I was never interested in monetary compensation or for him to face criminal charges. I wanted people who thought they knew Cohen, who socialized and prayed with him, who hired him and paid him, to see his true colors and for women to be out of harm's way. That, to my mind, was justice, or at least the beginning of it.

While the profession of Jewish Studies had begun to look inward at the issue of sexual harassment the fall prior to my speaking out, and a somewhat clandestine group of community activists had already been operating for two years, 2018 was a turning point. Responding to the larger #MeToo movement, the Association for Jewish Studies crafted a sexual harassment policy in the fall of 2017 and required conference attendees to sign it upon registration. Under the inspiring leadership of Christine Hayes, an esteemed Yale professor and then president of the AJS, the AJS organized a Sexual Misconduct Taskforce and conducted a survey of its membership's experiences. Cohen's AJS membership was revoked, and he was banned from attending the annual conference in December 2018 until further notice. In 2019, the AJS convened legal and organizational experts to train members of the new Committee on Sexual Misconduct on how to manage both informal and formal complaints. I participated in those trainings, held at the Center for Jewish History in New York City, and carry with me the lessons learned there.

Grassroots efforts were underway as early as 2016 when Naomi Eisenberger of the Good People Fund and Jamie Allen Black of the Jewish Women's Foundation of New York partnered to convene pilot programs (an in-person seminar, a webinar, and later a workshop attended by dozens of Jewish organizations) that recognized the communal responsibility to move beyond talk about sexual harassment to change the cultural structures and systems that enabled gender discrimination of all kinds. In an aptly titled article published in November of 2017 "Sexual Harassment is Not a Jewish Value," Eisenberger and Black wrote, "We in the professional Jewish community cite our deeply held values as driving our work. But we must embrace

the notion that these values, such as social justice, begin at home.” It was, as these authors described, “a perfect storm” that encouraged people to begin publicly sharing stories about gender power dynamics and sexual harassment on the #GamAni Facebook group, raising awareness and requesting change.⁸⁰ At an event on January 25, 2018 called “Revealing #MeToo as #WeToo in Jewish Communal Life,” held at the UJA Federation of New York’s headquarters in midtown Manhattan, approximately 250 leaders heard dramatic readings about sexual harassment illuminating the pressing need for the Jewish community to finally take action; the mission was clear: find ways to dismantle the patriarchal structures that enabled sexual misconduct and abuses of power.⁸¹ Eisenberger’s and Black’s organizations were instrumental in providing the initial funding for the project Ta’amod: Stand Up!, which uses Jewish ethics to inform trainings, consultations, and resources to address harassment, inequity, and harm in Jewish workplaces.⁸²

Jewish clergy stepped up in solidarity and to learn. More than 100 rabbis joined a webinar on “#MeToo from the Pulpit: A Rabbi’s Role in Creating Safe, Respectful Synagogue Communities.” Human resources consultant and sexual harassment trainer Fran Sepler told the audience: “It’s time that we begin consciously tearing down the misogynist culture that has been left untouched for far too long—and build a new, feminist culture instead.”⁸³ With the goal of changing culture within the Reform movement, the CCAR launched the Taskforce on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate. Acknowledging that to some it was surprising that, 45 years after the first woman became a Reform rabbi, women rabbis were still subjected to “gender-based bias, inappropriate comments, sexual harassment, sexual assault, lack of proper institutional support, undermining behavior and issues related to contracts, pay equity and parental leave,” and to others, it was an obvious part of daily life. Partnering with HUC-JIR, the Union for Reform Judaism, and members of the Women’s Rabbinic Network leadership, the Reform Rabbinate declared: “... it is our ethical and professional mandate to address these deeply troubling challenges.” This newly created taskforce studied the realities women face to identify their root causes and potential solutions. It began providing a slew of resources, including sermons and text study, articles and professional tools, rituals, a bibliography, and research papers, and developed a program called “Excuse me, what did you say?” The program was intended to better enable women rabbis to professionally handle situations in which people make inappropriate comments to them. The three-year taskforce completed its agenda, yet much more remains to be done, as the WRN’s Zamore knows only too well.⁸⁴

The importance of women’s stories to make visible experiences of inequality and abuse became paramount. No better example exists than the Archiving #MeToo project launched by the Jewish Women’s Archive in January 2018 in partnership with several other organizations. As chief executive officer Judith Rosenbaum explained, “Taken together, these

stories illustrate the systems and structures that shape women's experiences, as well as women's collective power to make change. In other words, they contain within them both the problem and the seeds of its solution."⁸⁵ The #MeToo collection, which Rosenbaum and others have begun to analyze, includes mountains of evidence about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment of Jewish women, of Jewish women's awareness of the ways cultural expectations have shaped them, and how their effort to minimize unwanted sexual behavior indicated, as one woman realized, "the enormity of the problem."⁸⁶ Looking inward and recording stories was a necessary beginning; fortunately, Jewish #MeToo activists were just getting started.

Once a major player in the world of Jewish academia and communal policymaking was unmasked as a serial sexual abuser, professors and journalists shook the community fully awake with a slew of hard-hitting articles. Jewish studies scholars Kate Rosenblatt, Lila Corwin Berman, and Ronit Stahl pounced on the male-dominated Jewish communal leadership, who hired other men including Cohen, and participated in "aggressive boundary policing:" "Most troubling about the data-driven mode of Jewish continuity conversations are its patriarchal, misogynistic, and anachronistic assumptions about what is good for the Jews." They minced no words: "It is time to acknowledge that a communal obsession with sex and statistics has created pernicious and damaging norms."⁸⁷ Susan Weidman Schneider, editor-in-chief of *Lilith* magazine, wrote that "when a flawed male with a lot of power shapes Jewish priorities" the community lost out; the policies were built on Cohen's flawed findings based on questions and hypotheses that precluded realities of other social scientists who studied the community through a gender lens.⁸⁸ English professor Helene Meyers described Cohen weaponizing his professional prestige and power against women and questioned: "Which of my male colleagues listened to an academic gatekeeper brag about 'sleeping with all of the smart Jewish women' and said or did nothing?"⁸⁹ Philanthropist Barbara Dobkin, who supported advancing women in the Jewish community for many decades, articulated surprise when some leaders in the Jewish community resisted "... examining the links between the personal behavior of Cohen and Steinhardt and their shared investment in Jewish continuity." She asked pointedly: "How can we, as a Jewish community, fail to interrogate the relationship between actions that degrade women and a worldview in which Jewish women are valued most for their ability to give birth to Jewish babies?" Dobkin's question resonated widely in many circles, although not all who claimed to be Jewish feminists could immediately understand her wisdom (see notes).⁹⁰

During the remainder of 2018 and 2019, the initiatives around #MeToo in the Jewish community grew exponentially. Gone were the days when Jewish women told other people about Jewish men sexually harassing and assaulting them, only to have nothing happen other than to avoid one-

on-one meetings with a particular donor or to be told to “grow thicker skin.”⁹¹ Once the organized Jewish community, that is people who work as professionals in the Jewish community, understood that it was not immune from what was occurring around the #MeToo movement in the secular world, an army of women and a small-but-growing cadre of male allies began to respond. One of the next steps was to create a third-party organization that was dedicated to this effort. The SafetyRespectEquity (SRE) Coalition was founded in March of 2018 and initially brought together 25 Jewish organizations and institutions under one umbrella. It became the SRE Network and, as of this writing, is over 160 strong. The leaders announced: “The purpose of the partnership is to ensure that safe, respectful and equitable workplaces and communal spaces become universal in Jewish life and that sexual harassment and misconduct, as well as gender and sexual orientation discrimination, and their related abuses of power, are no longer tolerated in the Jewish community.” The SRE Network focused its efforts on making a commitment to address ethical workplace and communal space behavior; to awareness and education that supports culture change; to policies and procedures to prevent and respond effectively; and to training and support. This ambitious endeavor brought together leaders working in nearly every nonprofit arena, acknowledging: “We must live up to the values within Jewish tradition that call upon us to raise our voices and lead where our community and society have fallen short.”⁹²

A wellspring of new efforts sprung up in the Jewish community in a relatively short amount of time, some independently started by women who experienced sexual misconduct and abuse of power firsthand, or had family members who did, and some at least partially funded by the SRE Network. Attorney and behavioral psychologist Shira Berkovitz founded Sacred Spaces, partnering with Jewish leaders “to build healthy and accountable institutions whose very culture and daily operations prevent opportunities for harassment for assault” across five continents.⁹³ Rabbi and scholar Mira Wasserman, director of the Center for Jewish Ethics at Reconstructing Judaism, launched a new initiative called the Torah of #MeToo.⁹⁴ The Jewish Community Centers Association of North America began piloting to provide training, information, and tools to help local JCCs become harassment- and discrimination-free spaces. Numerous other Jewish organizations focused on creating safe environments on college campuses, at summer camps, and within congregations. The Shalom Hartman Institute started a research and education project called “Created Equal: Gender and the Ethics of Shared Leadership” to help educational leaders. Slingshot, an organization that mobilizes young philanthropists, published a new guide to funding with a gender lens. The Rabbinical Assembly established the Gender and Power Committee to support its leaders and members “in the creation of safe, empowered, equitable spaces.”⁹⁵ Organizations and individuals with a wide range of expertise—from rabbinic to legal and

everything in between—were enlisted to do a ground-breaking series of webinars for the SRE Network on topics that are critical to creating cultural change: preventing and addressing harm; setting expectations for interpersonal conduct; pay equity; reporting and responding; education and training.⁹⁶

Yet challenges remained for the Jewish community and likely will for years to come. While all of the communal efforts are historical firsts, actually changing behaviors that were engrained for generations takes considerably more time and energy. Shifra Bronznick, founding president of Advancing Women Professionals in the Jewish Community and who has literally been fighting for gender equality for decades, observed, “It’s not like nothing’s happened, but it’s not like we’re so woke.”⁹⁷ Bronznick describes it as living in “parallel universes.” One universe is where women are leading and in power, which is extensive in the social movements (the Women’s movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the LGBTQ movement), some in business, in academia, and there are now women donors. The other powerful universe, however, is “the real fight to take away women’s rights to their bodily autonomy, even in the case of rape and incest” that is, the right to choose abortion. In 2019, we still had in Bronznick’s words “... the sexual harasser-in-chief in the White House.”⁹⁸ President Joe Biden took over the Oval Office in January 2020; however, the effects of Trump’s presidency and the loss of progressive Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, *zichrona livracha* (may her memory be a blessing), continue to decrease women’s bodily autonomy. The SCOTUS decision reversing 1974 ruling *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022 rolled back abortion rights in many states, restricting it in many others. Three of the five justices who declared that the constitutional right to abortion no longer existed, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Cohen Barrett, were Trump appointees.⁹⁹ The two others, Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito, were appointed by former Republican presidents George Bush, senior, and George W. Bush. The country’s conservative turn does not bode well for a national reckoning just as a community can only make as much progress as its schools, synagogues, nonprofits, and agencies are willing and able to do. As states began requiring private employers to distribute written anti-harassment policies in workplaces, to require anti-harassment training for employees, and to extend the statute of limitation for filing harassment complaints, the Jewish community continues struggling with how to regulate interpersonal behavior.¹⁰⁰

Progress made around conference tables toward ending sexual harassment takes considerable time to trickle down to more personal interactions. On the one hand, telling women that sexual harassment was “part of the job” is, at long last, unacceptable.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, genders interact in spaces outside of the office and fear of legal reprisal or other forms of retaliation keeps some women from reporting. My personal experience going to an independent minyan (quorum of ten Jews) on a Shabbat morning illustrates that even team efforts by the most powerful organizations within a community cannot dismantle the patriarchy built since the beginning of time

or infiltrate every work, cultural, or religious space. A friend invited me to go with her to the Saturday prayer group, which met at a member's home. The man hosting greeted me warmly, too warmly, and then repeatedly put his arm around my shoulder and drew me into close contact with his body. Gathering strength and resolve, I asked him to please remove his arm and told him that I'm active in the #MeToo movement. "The what?" he asked. "The #MeToo movement!" I repeated a bit louder. He did not seem to get the connection between my words and that his behavior was making me extremely uncomfortable. Instead, he continued to mock me about preferring to shake hands for the remainder of the time I was there.

Apparently, Jewish white male privilege, including the inclination to touch women's bodies without our consent, isn't over yet—not even close. Our only reprieve is a global pandemic that encourages social distancing and elbow bumps in sacred spaces and secular ones. The temporary reduction in physical harassment and assault does not, however, eliminate the virtual harassment in private direct messages and online meeting spaces. While the isolation, fear, sickness, and death wrought by COVID-19 cannot end soon enough, I wonder whether men will act any differently than they did before it spread across the globe. The fact that there has been a worldwide increase in domestic and intimate partner violence during the pandemic suggests that women, regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof, continue to be in danger of having our most basic human right to safety violated whether we are inside our homes or outside them.¹⁰²

In the next chapter, I will introduce some of my Muslim sisters whose experiences both resemble and are different than those of Jewish women. Collectively, they contributed to my realization that activism entails continually stepping outside one's comfort zone and advocating for people from religious communities beyond our own.

Notes

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- 10 Hannah Dreyfus, "More Women Come Forward Against Camp Exec Alleging Sexual Harassment," *New York Jewish Week*, April 18, 2018.
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2 #MosqueToo

Muslim Women Moving Mountains

قل للمؤمنين يغضوا من ابصارهم ويحفظوا فروجهم ذلك ازكى لهم ان الله خبير بما يصنعون

(Say to the believers they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts, that is purer for them. Allah is aware of the things they do.)¹

Meeting Muslim women who were among the first in their faith community to say #MeToo convinced me that the bonds of womanhood could unite us in a common struggle to be treated as human beings equal to men. I had never had any Muslim friends or colleagues before and my only cultural association with Islam was one of fear; I had unwittingly internalized the idea that all Muslims hated Jews and would want to kill me. Yet I believed that there was more to be gained by reaching out to women of different faith backgrounds than by remaining in my insular Jewish community. If listening to one's intuition is the first step to knowing when someone else's behavior crosses boundaries or propriety, then certainly I had to listen to mine telling me to connect with Muslim women who, like me, refused to be silent any longer. What I learned from them, from their struggles and their successes, convinced me that just as #MeToo is a global movement so, too, must we fight together across faith communities to keep it moving. Moreover, the Muslim women I spoke with know that their religion encourages peace, not violence. They are my spiritual sisters; we are in this fight for human rights together.

Haleema Bharoocha spoke out about sexual harassment on Vimeo, the professional video platform, on May 10, 2018—just before graduating from Seattle University at the age of 19. “Along with countless Muslim women, I am breaking the silence in my community,” Bharoocha declared. “For too long, Muslims, especially Muslim women, have remained silent, torn between calling out toxic masculinity in the Muslim community and being wary of Islamophobia.”² Her story, and that of other Muslim American women of color, complicates the #MeToo narrative that has too-often focused on white women and neglected the twin roles of race and national ancestry. She is the firstborn of three siblings and was raised in California, the daughter of immigrant parents; her mother is from India and her father is

Pakistani-Myanmar. Bharoocha's family went to the Muslim Community Association in the Bay Area, which offered a range of services including fitness classes, youth sports, a cafeteria, and a legal center in addition to a mosque. She attended the Sunday school program, where her mother also taught. In addition, Bharoocha was tutored to learn Arabic and memorize the Qur'an. Because she was homeschooled through sixth grade, Bharoocha had very little exposure to American culture and when she socialized with other children, nearly all were Muslim.

Bharoocha's introduction to sexual harassment began when she attended the Magnolia Science Academy, a private Turkish charter school with roughly 50 percent Muslim students. "Slap-ass Fridays" was a school tradition and boys taunted girls wearing the traditional Muslim head covering, calling them "hojabi" (i.e., combining "hoe," slang for whore, and "hijabi") and ranked them by breast size. There Bharoocha, who began menstruating at a young age and had larger breasts than other girls, first experienced policing of her body and clothing. The disconnect between what her mother taught her—"Don't talk to boys"—and what she experienced—"Boys are touching me"—was stark. Although the school had a formal dress code, the male students' behavior went unchecked by adults and was normalized. Bharoocha saw through the sexism and hypocrisy behind school authorities criticizing what she was wearing rather than disciplining boys for their misbehavior. These early experiences informed her thinking about how toxic masculinity



Figure 2.1 Haleema Bharoocha. Permission to publish courtesy of Haleema Bharoocha. Credit: Seattle University.

contributes to Islam being coopted by Muslim men and non-Muslim Islamophobes to control Muslim women.

When Bharoocha attended college, she became active in social justice work against gender-based violence and Islamophobia that continues to inform her graduate studies and career ambitions. She was vice president of the Muslim Student Association and founded the Gender Justice Center at her university.³ Living outside of her insular faith community for the first time, she began exploring what it means to be a Muslim woman in a broader context and saw that her voice was sorely needed. She described how non-Muslim men fetishize Muslim women asking her: “Do you have sex with your hijab on?” And made racist-Islamophobic comments, including “You’re so pretty for someone who wears hijab.”⁴ The first question became the title for Bharoocha’s honors thesis in sociology about the triple minority status, what she called “emotional and sexual burdens,” of American Muslim women of color in public spaces: sexism, racism, and Islamophobia.⁵ Bharoocha was determined to lift up Muslim women and their voices, contending: “Everyone speaks for Muslim women except Muslim women. Times up and Muslim women are talking back.”⁶ Bharoocha also researched how Muslim women are represented on pornography websites. She identified a new genre centering on female presenting porn actors wearing only the hijab, a product of the influence of geopolitics on the production of sexual fantasies that both dehumanized and empowered the Muslim woman figure.⁷ When we spoke, Bharoocha was in her early 20s, pursuing a master’s degree in public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, yet she was already deep into the work to change her faith community from within.

The Lighthouse Mosque in Oakland, California, invited Bharoocha to speak, drawing Muslims of varied ages. Bharoocha was scared: not knowing who would attend, what the Muslim men would say, and think when they heard her talk about sexual harassment in the Muslim community. Publicly expressing criticism about one’s faith community is not a popular thing to do but Bharoocha knew it was necessary to create positive change. Her talk, titled “Stand Firm for Gender Justice,” was held in December 2019, combined with *salaat* (prayer) and *iftar* (the breaking of the fast, an optional tradition on Mondays that some Muslims observe). She astutely used religion to explain why sexual harassment is against Islamic principles citing verses in the Qur’an and quoting various imams. Being in conversation with Rasheed Shabazz, the male volunteer who invited her and organized the event, was strategic and helpful. Many of the Muslim men who attended were unaware of the experiences of Muslim women. When one man became very upset about what Bharoocha said about Muslim men’s misbehavior, Shabazz and some of the younger Muslim men stepped in and spoke with him. Bharoocha’s use of theology included Islamic wisdom from a ninth-century Persian imam named Muhammad Al-Bukhari. According to the prophet, peace and blessings upon him, marriage provided a solution for effectively lowering the gaze and guarding chastity.⁸ Like many of the Muslim American women I interviewed,

Bharoocha lived on a tightrope; she called out the patriarchy and sexual misconduct she experienced in the Muslim community, and she defended her community against anti-Muslim stereotypes.

The dual challenges of patriarchy and American racism complicate Muslim women's #MeToo journeys. Feminist writer Mona Eltahawy describes the position of Muslim women as being between a rock and a hard place: "On one side are Islamophobes and the racists who are all too willing to demonize Muslim men by weaponizing my testimony of sexual assault. On the other side is the 'community' of fellow Muslims who are all too willing to defend all Muslim men—they would rather I shut up about being sexually assaulted during the *hajj* than make Muslims look bad. Neither side cares about the well-being of Muslim women."⁹ *Hajj* is the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city, in Saudi Arabia that must be done at least once in one's lifetime. Eltahawy was one of countless girls and women sexually assaulted by supposedly observant Muslim men. Bharoocha observed a man rubbing his genital area against her younger sister when her family was at the Saudi Arabian airport waiting in line among people dressed in white on their way to Mecca.¹⁰ In many ways, Muslim women who changed their community like Bharoocha had a steeper hill to climb than either Jewish or Christian women because of their geopolitical circumstances in the United States, especially since 9/11 when brown people became the latest group to be targeted by xenophobic racist ideology that labeled non-white Americans as "suspicious" or "terrorists."

Many Muslim American women are triple minorities. They are female, the second sex in a society in which brawn and male earning power still reign supreme. They are a religious minority in a predominantly Christian country. And those who are people of color are judged by their race. Being a triple minority exacerbates the challenges of speaking out about sexual harassment and assault. In addition, some Muslim women immigrated to the United States as children or young adults, forever having to "prove" their right to even live here, especially during uprisings of anti-immigrant sentiment. The history and propaganda of American nativism are long and sordid, the legacy of which is evident today. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Know-Nothing political movement was both anti-Catholic and anti-foreigners, warning of an "invasion" by people allegedly influenced by the Pope.¹¹ The sentiments against certain groups were targeted against Irish people escaping the potato famine and Germans the economic instability, then Eastern European Jews, Southern European Italians, and Chinese immigrants, Japanese Americans in the twentieth century, and more recently against immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, especially Mexico and Central America. The echoes of nativism reverberated in the words used by President Trump in 2019 when he told four junior Congresswomen, all women of color and three of whom were born in the United States, to just "go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came." This ugly rhetoric from the commander-in-chief fuels twenty-first century nativism by suggesting that unless someone is

white, they do not belong, that they are not American. Harassment and violence against Asian Americans increased dramatically after the onset of COVID-19; eight people, including six women of Asian descent, were killed during a 2021 shooting rampage by a white man in the Atlanta area.¹²

Muslim women simultaneously must prove themselves as Americans to non-Muslims and confront the misinterpretation of their religion by their co-religionists. Sexual violence is about power and some men misuse Islam to defend their victimization of women. One woman explained, “Islam does not give permission for this kind of behavior [marital rape]. There is no place for such behavior in our religion We have to understand that patriarchy and misogyny go hand in hand. As long as our faith and religion are being interpreted with a patriarchal lens, women will continue to be the object of physical gratification and satisfaction.”¹³ The struggle for Muslim women, therefore, is how to stop sexual violence and advance gender equality, while at the same time not widen the door to attacks on their community. Every Muslim woman (and man) I interviewed was aware of these tensions, and there were different approaches to confronting the dual challenges of patriarchy and xenophobia. While some believe that protecting the Muslim community from criticism is the priority, others argue that addressing sexual harassment and assault must come first. Eltahawy contends: “I will never ally with Islamophobes and racists. But in the choice between ‘community’ and Muslim women, I will always choose my sisters.”¹⁴ The geopolitical status of Muslims in the western context influences both how Muslim women impact their community and how the Muslim community navigates sexual misconduct and abuse of power.

Muslim American women who changed their faith communities are blazing new cultural paths while facing backlash from both Muslim and American groups. On the one hand, they are perceived as “too Muslim” by white mainstream America who does not understand the heterogeneity within the Muslim community and either suspects them as being potential terrorists or pities them for being oppressed women. On the other hand, they are perceived as not “true Muslims” by traditional Muslim standards that see Islam through a traditional patriarchal lens that ignores women’s agency, blames them for men’s misbehavior, and treats religious leaders as beyond reproach. Muslim men who ignore the Qur’an’s guidance to “lower the gaze” to avoid ogling women but who chastise women for not wearing headscarves reinforce a double standard.¹⁵ Calling out sexual misconduct and abuse of power is stressful at best and downright dangerous at worst. Artist, poet, rapper, and chaplain Mona Haydar, whose music is intended to raise up people who have been historically disenfranchised and oppressed, needed additional security at an event after threats appeared on social media. “To the alt-right Americans, I’m bringing Islam and Shariah law to America, and to the other side, I am only a liberal puppet and not even a real Muslim destroying their communities” Haydar explained in a media interview: “They both want to kill me.”¹⁶ Bilateral fear of physical violence is something unique to Muslim women, something neither Jewish nor Christian

women expressed concern about as they navigated their #MeToo journeys. Although women of all religious communities can and do experience violence, it is especially acute for Muslim women; threats they face come from multiple directions: from community members as a form of retaliation, from their intimate partners and family members, and from Islamophobes.

From Domestic Violence to Terrorism

Sakhi for South Asian Women was founded in 1989. Sakhi means “woman friend” in Sanskrit. According to its website, “Sakhi serves survivors from the South Asian diaspora who trace their backgrounds to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the West Indies, and Africa. Members of our community come from diverse backgrounds including age range, religion, ethnic origin, economic and educational background, language spoken, and immigration status. We work to represent, inform, actively engage, and mobilize the South Asian community in an intersectional, intergenerational survivor-led movement for gender justice.”¹⁷ However, for women such as Robina Niaz, learning that sexual misconduct was not limited to strangers but could occur in the marital bed was a steep curve because they grew up hearing “satisfy the guy.” She described the injustice of teaching girls and women to abstain from anything sexual until marriage and then suddenly to be expected to perform: “Half our lives we’re taught to hate sex, that it’s dirty and not right. Then, in one night, we’re supposed to change ourselves and be the best partners that have ever been.”¹⁸ Niaz’s testimony speaks to the combination of purity culture that is socially engrained in girls and young women, combined with the Muslim norm of not discussing anything related to sexual relations. Sociologist Margaret Abraham found that the effort of South Asian women’s organizations (SAWOs) to protect and empower South Asian women, “while simultaneously demarginalizing them from the larger movement to end violence against women” created a cultural shift.¹⁹ What Sakhi and other SAWOs did (and do) is transform domestic violence from being a private family issue within a singular ethnic community into a public social issue that permeates many ethnic communities.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 irrevocably changed the cultural landscape for Muslim women and those trying to help them. Niaz moved to the United States from Pakistan in 1990. She already had her master’s degree in clinical psychology and had worked for several years before deciding to get married because she wanted to have children. Based on her upbringing, becoming a single mother by choice was not something she would have done. During Niaz’s three-year marriage, her husband forced her to have sex with him when she did not desire it and was physically unwell. “I knew the literal definition of rape, but we grew up in cultures that we were conditioned to believe that if you’re married to a man that it’s okay for him to demand sex.”²⁰ It took time and working as a domestic violence counselor supporting other women who were being sexually abused for her to begin to understand what was happening to her. Robina earned a second master’s,



Figure 2.2 Robina Niaz. Permission to publish courtesy of Robina Niaz. New York Commission on Gender Equity.

this one in social work, and had already been working in the field of domestic violence in the Muslim community for over a decade on that fateful day. Islamic fundamentalists belonging to the Al Qaeda group led by Osama Bin Laden, turned four hijacked planes into weapons, and killed nearly three thousand people, the deadliest terror attack on US soil, surpassing the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941.²¹ She was one of only a handful of activists in New York City who, after September 11, 2001, defended Muslim Americans who were being targeted and told to go back to where they came from as the country reeled from death and destruction.

Helping Muslim women confront sexual abuse meant combating American Islamophobia and Muslim cultural norms that fostered a code of silence around anything sexual in nature. In 2004—two years before black activist Tarana Burke coined the phrase “me, too” to empathize with girls

and women of color—Niaz started Turning Point for Women and Girls, located in Queens, NY. At that time, no one else in her faith community was directly addressing gender-based violence against women and girls. Given its unprecedented work, a faith-oriented focus was necessary to protect Muslim women because the legal authorities whose responsibility it was to prosecute domestic violence were the same agencies that criminalized the Muslim community in the name of national security.²² Niaz received a lot of flak for her work. She shared, “I was often told by men from my own generation in my own community that I was doing a disservice to the community by shining light on a negative issue.” She told naysayers over and over that it would be a matter of great shame if they knew what was happening and did nothing. Niaz explains that Muslim women are socialized not to talk about sex and recalls how she felt about her marital rape experience: “The shame was huge because I was taught to believe that everything that happened to me was my fault.” Like activists of all faith backgrounds, Niaz and other Muslim women work hard to deprogram themselves from years of socialized silence and misplaced blame. After being one of few in the beginning, she is grateful for the many activists currently working in the American Muslim community to respond to sexual misconduct. Turning Point directly helped women and girls to understand that sexual abuse and violence is *not* their fault, it is not how they dress or the way they talk, it has nothing to do with them; “it is the perpetrator that is committing a crime.”²³ Her effort to redirect blame toward the abuser, and away from the abused, was an early effort now mirrored by the larger effort in the American women’s movement to point out how women are blamed for what happens to their bodies, illustrated by a women’s march protester’s sign that read: “Society teaches ‘Don’t get raped, rather than don’t rape.’” That message still has not been fully inverted in any religious community as far as I know.

Blaming Muslim women for whatever befalls them simultaneously obfuscates the issue of rape within marriage, making it difficult for women to even recognize what is happening to them as something wrong. Speaking at the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding (CERRU) at Queens College, City University of New York, Niaz explained how Muslim cultural norms around marriage disempower women by prioritizing the marriage over the health and well-being of the woman. She shared the story of a fellow Pakistani woman who she counseled in Brooklyn. Niaz asked her if she had ever been raped by her husband, to which the woman responded: “No! How can that be? He’s my husband.” Robina rephrased the question: “How often does he force you to have sex?” This time, the woman paused and said: “oh, that happens every night.”²⁴ This story illustrated the confusion about sexual assault being something that could only occur outside of marriage. Marital rape is a crime in the United States and has been for decades, however, that is not common knowledge.

The legal history of sexual abuse by spouses and the eventual passing of legislation making intimate partner violence a criminal act is a history that

even someone trained in the law did not know, as attorney Michael Cohen made clear in 2015. When allegations surfaced that Donald Trump had raped his former wife Ivana Trump, his legal counsel stated that then-presidential candidate Trump had “never raped anybody” and further declared: “... understand that by the very definition, you can’t rape your spouse.” He later apologized for this inaccurate statement.²⁵ Although US legal codes originally excluded spouses when it came to rape, that began changing in 1979. By 1983, 17 states had eliminated rules that made rape by a spouse impossible and eventually all states passed legislation that spousal rape is illegal. The incident Ivana described to CNN when she felt “violated” occurred in 1989, five years after spousal rape was outlawed in New York state.²⁶ However, just as the myth that stranger rape is more common than acquaintance rape has a tenacious hold on American consciousness, so, too, does the outdated and erroneous idea that spousal rape is an oxymoron.

Hijabis

The issue of *hijab* (an Arabic word meaning “to cover”) plays a significant role in the sexual harassment and assault of Muslim women. Wearing the hijab, which covers the head and hair as well as sometimes the chest, is an article of clothing Muslim women wear or do not wear for a variety of personal, political, religious, and spiritual reasons. Women who do wear it are *hijabis*; however, the meaning of being *hijabi* is not one size fits all. Moreover, women may don the hijab during part of their lives and not during others for reasons related or unrelated to Islam. Hence it is important for Muslim women’s own voices to explain their rationale and experiences with hijab. “Modesty is such a big thing,” explained filmmaker and University of Chicago PhD student Nadya Ali. “Growing up I had to be very aware of my body, especially my chest,” when she was with her father or other Pakistani men. “I wore hijab in high school, but in college I took it off. I’m still very conscious of my body. Walking by a bunch of guys, I always feel like covering myself. It’s ingrained in our culture, the idea that if you’re covered, you’re safe, which we know is not true.”²⁷ Bharoocha reinforces that covering their bodies does not protect Muslim women: “Even though I wear the hijab and am fully covered, sexual harassment in *all* its forms still impacts me.”²⁸ Her experience dismantles the false assumption that, if only women dressed modestly, they would not be targeted by sexual predators. Combined with her hijab, Bharoocha wears a shirt printed with the words: “MY OUTFIT IS NOT AN INVITATION” warding off harassers and making a political statement about female bodily autonomy.

In addition to dressing modestly, many people—including Muslims—erroneously assume that Muslim women must abstain from attracting public attention altogether to truly be hijabis. In the music video for her 2017 song “Hijabi,” Mona Haydar is fully covered while she rubs her eight-month pregnant belly, prompting backlash from the Muslim community for being

“too sexual.” She responded to this criticism in a video with the quip: “Dude, how do you think I got pregnant?” *Elle* magazine declared it an “intersectional feminist anthem.” One detractor commented: “If you are Muslim and following the rules of Islam, then why are you wearing makeup and why do you want to grab attention? Hypocrites! Either you wear hijab or you don’t. This is just B.S.!”²⁹ But it is Muslim women who decide for themselves the meaning of hijab in America. It can be physical, about a woman’s ownership of her own body, and it can be something a Muslim woman does to raise her spiritual senses. Haydar pushes back against conservative Muslims who consider her changing her hijab style according to her fashion whims as a cry for help, “Hijab is a practice I use to open my third eye: My crown chakra. It’s a practice that I engage in order to elevate my consciousness.”³⁰ Haydar also raises public consciousness about Muslim women’s diversity; her “Hijabi (Wrap My Hijab)” video was produced in Detroit, Michigan and included women from different ethnic groups wearing different styles of headscarves. Digital media scholar Kristin Peterson argues that Haydar’s video demonstrates Muslim women’s pride in their intersectional identities and their unity similar to how Queen Latifah’s video “Ladies First” cultivated pride and unity among black women thirty years earlier.³¹ Whether they cover for modesty or consciousness raising, hijabis have experienced a unique form of sexual violence as a result of wearing this particular article of clothing that has nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with misogyny. Context is extremely important.

Muslim women have also been killed for not wearing the hijab. Mahsa Amini was 22 years old when she died in police custody from being beaten for not wearing the hijab “properly” according to Iranian officials in Tehran in September 2022. Photographs show Amini with her head loosely covered and some hair showing. Her murder led to public protests in which women cut their hair and burned their hijabs. Canadian activist Yasmine Mohammed explained how religious extremists created a false “choice:” women who choose to wear the hijab are celebrated and those who do not are murdered. Muslim girls are taught from a very young age: “If you want to be a good, clean girl, wear it. If you want to be a filthy whore, then don’t wear it.”³² When female purity is enforced by morality police, the hijab is a political tool of the Muslim patriarchy and in such contexts, there is no real choice for women. Iran’s president, Ebrahim Raisi, signed a decree the month after the national “Hijab and Chastity Day” and the month before Amini was arrested to crackdown on women’s dress. Iran’s Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice announced it would be using facial recognition technology to identify women in public places whose appearance does not conform. Since 1979, the hijab has been mandatory for women, however, over the decades some women’s dress has changed from longer, looser, and black to shorter, tighter, and more colorful. A British-Iranian described the public backlash against over policing that erupted after the young woman’s death as “Iran’s George Floyd moment,” drawing a parallel

between demonstrators who want real change.³³ CNN reported that the Iranian president made wearing the hijab a requirement for Christiane Amanpour, the chief international news anchor, to interview Raisi while he is in the United States. Amanpour, whose father is Iranian and lived in Tehran during her childhood, declined adding: “We are in New York, where there is no law or tradition regarding headscarves.”³⁴ The different contexts are striking; however, controlling women’s bodies and behaviors is the common denominator.

Hijab snatching is Islamophobic violence in the form of sexual harassment, according to philosophy professor Saba Fatima. While American Muslim men may experience racism because of the color of their skin or the language they speak, Muslim American women who are hijabis experience sexual assault because of their racialized gender. Fatima claims that hijab snatching illustrates how Muslim women are perceived by non-Muslims as cultural threats to American values, whereas Muslim men are seen as security threats. The perception of Muslim women as oppressed, passive, and weak translates into being “acceptable” targets of sexual violence. The form of gender-based violence shifts over Muslim females’ lives; the infantile practice of boys snapping girls’ bra straps stops when girls become women, but hijab snatching persists with adult Muslim women who are sexually assaulted by white American men.³⁵ The hijab is a physical marker for Muslim women, much like the wearing of a *kippah* (skull cap) is for Jewish men. Whereas removing a man’s head cover is certainly an antisemitic act, the sexual assault against hijabis is an affront to their female modesty, their piety, and their spirituality, in addition to an attack on their Muslim identity. For some, argues Fatima, forcibly removing a woman’s head covering is akin to removing one’s shirt or pants.³⁶ Hence, hijab snatching is sexual violence.

Decentering the narrative from its focus on white women and questioning why people do not speak about sexual misconduct in her faith community inspired Fatima to speak publicly about #MeToo in the Muslim community; the response to her findings has been mixed. She expected older women, of her grandmother’s generation, to ask her: “Why are you doing this?” But that did not occur. And women of her own generation and younger expressed their happiness that she was directing light at something that most Muslims avoided discussing. Most telling, perhaps, were the reactions from Muslim men. They claimed not to know any women that had been sexually harassed or assaulted. Offhand remarks from men included, “We don’t *really* have a problem. This is not something that Muslim people face.” Or, obviously, “Muslim men don’t do this” And “I’ve never heard of a Muslim woman that this happened to” Fatima laughed and thought to herself, “Yeah, because you’re a man!”³⁷ She readily identifies that the inclination to dismiss the topic by Muslim men is attributable to their male privilege and their desire not to incite Islamophobia.

Regardless of how modestly they dress, hijabis are sexually harassed by Muslim men on social media and in person. They messaged Haleema

Bharoocha on Instagram and Facebook, remarking on her beauty, wanting to get to know her, telling her to trust they are a “good guy” and worse. She equated posting photos on Instagram with walking outside and longed for a world in which women and people with marginalized identities could do that “without receiving disgusting messages afterwards.”³⁸ The fact that she posts on Instagram about her weight training and boxing, demonstrating physical strength, may be threatening to some Muslim men who send critical direct messages telling her to cover her body. Bharoocha notes that most of the men who harass her online are older than her and their use of the English language suggests they do not live in the United States or immigrated recently.³⁹

Muslim men target Muslim women who are in the public eye, simultaneously criticizing their appearance while sexually harassing them. Mona Haydar described the sexual harassment she experienced when Muslim men message her. “I love being a woman on the Internet,” she says sarcastically, “because dudes are always willing to let me know when I’m being reverse toxic patriarchal misogynist. I especially love it when dudes send me messages asking me if I’m married, and then if I don’t respond start threatening my life. And then when I *do* respond, they ask me if I’m happy in my marriage and let me know how *they* can make me happy.”⁴⁰ Haydar was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, the daughter of immigrant parents from Syria.⁴¹ Her hip-hop music critiques xenophobia, white supremacy, sexism, Islamophobia, western beauty monopolization, body shaming, and Muslim men’s sexual harassment of Muslim women. The lyrics of “Dog,” her second single released in 2017, call out men claiming to be observant Muslims while they abuse power and act inappropriately; “Spiritually violent/deviant but hiding it” she sings. They make lewd propositions, cheat on their wives; Haydar blasts, “Sheikhs in my DM/Begging me to shake it on my cam in the PM.” She also captures the common practice in the Muslim community of blaming women for men’s piggish behavior: “Say my voice is haram/Cuz you getting turned on/Boy you might need Qur’an/Boy you need to turn down/Got my full hood on.”⁴² Haydar was inspired to use her voice to bring attention to violence against women and to break the silence that allows cycles of abuse to continue. She was not surprised by the pushback she received from men because she knew the topic was taboo. “Misogyny and patriarchy are global problems,” she said in an interview about *Dog*, “but we like to pretend, especially as people of color, that they’re not really going on or they aren’t real issues.”⁴³ Her observation suggests that Muslim men who are abusive operate under the social radar, in part, due to racism. Racism and politics go hand in hand.

The hijab can also be a political statement. Rose Hamid sparked international attention when the media caught sight of her hijab at a Trump rally in January 2016. She was with a group of activists who snuck in to silently protest the then-candidate. People around them seemed happy at first that a Muslim had come to “support” Trump. Hamid and one other protester were

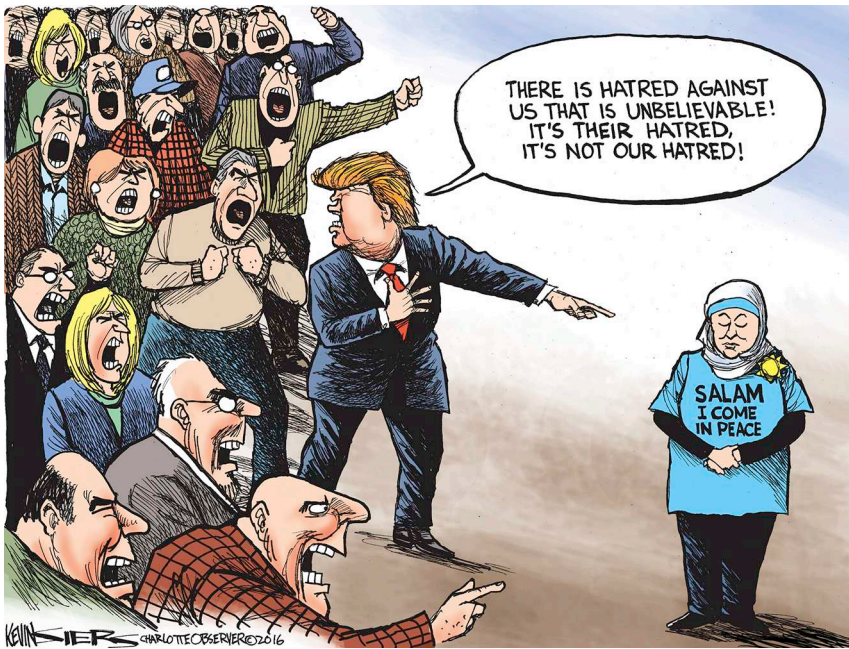


Figure 2.3 Cartoon by Kevin Siers of Trump rally and Rose Hamid. Permission to publish granted by Cagle Cartoons, Inc.

positioned behind the podium and at one point, Trump turned around, pointed directly at her, and waved. The man standing next to Hamid, a fellow protester, left before she did so by the time she was photographed, it appeared as if she was all alone. “It looked like I was a victim. I’m not a victim. The media keeps portraying me as a victim. I want to be known as a badass!”⁴⁴ Hamid was wearing a bright blue t-shirt that read “Salam I come in peace” that her son had printed for her. She was also wearing an eight-pointed yellow star that Martin Rosenbluth, a Jewish immigration attorney, had given her; Rosenbluth created the pins, reminiscent of the yellow “Jude” stars that European Jews were forced to wear during the Holocaust, when he heard that Trump was going to create a database of all Muslims in the United States. Hamid wore the pin to make a statement that Muslims, like Jews, belong in America. Making a list of any group based solely on their religious or ethnic heritage is a chilling reminder of the mass murders of Jews and other people that Hitler deemed “unfit.”⁴⁵

While hijabis, such as Rose Hamid and Priyah Chandra, may visually epitomize what people of other faiths think Muslim women must look like, they actually represent the diversity and heterogeneity in the American Muslim community. Hamid, the daughter of a Colombian mother and Palestinian father, was raised Catholic but left Christianity behind as a

young tween, began practicing Islam in her 20s, and eventually married a Muslim man. Priyah Chandra was born in India and raised Hindu. She immigrated after high school to Grand Rapids, Michigan, and now lives in New York City where she is a clinical social worker. Chandra became a Muslim when she was 18 during a search for faith in something because there was no justice for a close friend who had been raped and murdered in India. This friend, who was slightly older and from the same ethnic community as Chandra, was engaged to be married and sleeping in her fiancé's family's home, when his cousin sexually assaulted and asphyxiated her in the middle of the night. Chandra laments about her lost friend: "She wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was not dressed inappropriately. Not that that justifies anything. But it shattered everything in my mind."⁴⁶ Islam appealed to Chandra because the ideas of an afterlife and a just god appealed to her. It gave her a way to reconcile the senseless killing, to cope in the face of death and a murderer who was not penalized because of the family's prominence. "There will be something for this beautiful soul. So, I became Muslim."⁴⁷ It is no coincidence that Chandra is committed to trauma work with women survivors. Both Chandra and Hamid exemplify that there are varied paths to Islam and that Muslim American women's life stories are diverse, yet they also "look the part" in that they are hijabis so they visually present as traditional.

Conversely, author-activist Mona Eltahawy intentionally defies looking and acting the part of a traditional Muslim woman. In addition to not covering herself by wearing the hijab, Eltahawy dyes her hair shockingly bright colors and uses a plethora of expletives, especially f-bombs, during interviews. After wearing the hijab for nine years, Eltahawy now adamantly rejects social mores that seek to control her body and her voice.⁴⁸ In 1982, she was 15 when she was performing *hajj*. One man touched her buttock and another, a Saudi policeman, her breast.⁴⁹ "I was ashamed and traumatized, and, most crucially, I was silent." Eltahawy, who was born in Egypt, lived in Jerusalem in her 30s, and moved to the United States in 2000, first wrote about her sexual assault at Islam's holiest site in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in her 2015 book *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. Two years later, as Muslims around the world were about to make the same pilgrimage, which is the fifth pillar of Islam, Eltahawy tweeted about her experience to warn her co-religionist women. Girls and women performing the *tawaf*, the circling of the Kaaba, which is a sacred cube structure in the center of a large open space that is extremely crowded, are vulnerable to men grabbing and pressing up against them from behind.⁵⁰ In 2018, she noticed that a Pakistani woman had posted on Facebook about being sexually assaulted in Mecca. Eltahawy responded in solidarity, adding the hashtag #MosqueMeToo and asking fellow Muslim women to share their experiences of sexual harassment or assault in sacred places. Her Twitter thread was retweeted thousands of times and in many different languages.⁵¹ Not only was the magnitude of the problem overwhelming, but also the insidiousness of men stealing women's opportunities for

spiritual experiences and manipulating the sanctity of the sacred spaces to ensure women's silence, for who would believe that such a thing would occur *there* of all places? Eltahawy describes her second book, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*, as "a manifesto to dismantle patriarchy and to end its crimes."⁵² She writes about global inequities between men and women, arguing that just as patriarchy is universal, so must be feminism.

The influence of the #MeToo movement and activist Muslim women is illustrated by how women respond to being sexually harassed and assaulted, which occurs regardless of their age, where they are, or what they are wearing. In the first instance, Eltahawy was a teenager who was sexually assaulted while practicing her religion in a sacred space; in the second, she was an adult woman who was sexually assaulted while dancing with her husband at a secular club. In the first instance, Eltahawy had been covered from head to toe, only her hands and face visible. In the second, she was wearing a sleeveless top and jeans. She writes, "It did not matter—hijab or tank top—a man's hands still found me." But whereas at age 15 she was traumatized and silent, at 52 she was angry. "You've got to be fucking kidding me." Eltahawy thought, "This is still happening?" She spun around, spotted the perpetrator walking away, pulled the back of his shirt so hard that he fell, sat on top of him, punched him in the face repeatedly, and yelled: "Don't you ever touch a woman like that again!" Her husband stood nearby, preventing other men from pulling her off the shocked assailant, explaining that he had sexually assaulted her.⁵³ Eltahawy's strident nonconformity makes room for more moderate Muslim women to make headway in their community because they are seen as mild in comparison. Ali Salem, discussed more below, explained this juxtaposition well: "There has to be a Malcolm for there to be a Martin."⁵⁴ The reference, of course, is to the civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.; the former advocated freedom, justice, and equality "by any means necessary,"⁵⁵ while the latter was committed to non-violence. Their different political approaches did not prevent either man from being assassinated, just as how women are clothed does not protect them from being sexually assaulted. Hijabis like Salem and Bharoocha present as traditional Muslim women and can therefore help the more conservative Muslims in their community confront sexual misconduct because they are more likely to listen to them than they are to women who present in more western or extreme ways. Both approaches make headway in the Muslim community. Wrapping the hijab has significance for Muslim women, whether they choose to do it or not and why at different times in their lives; however, it needs to be understood as an ethno-religious practice that they embody rather than one that embodies them.

When Muslim social activists address gender inequities and gender discrimination as part of their work, the backlash is even stronger than personal protests. Heart, a nonprofit based in Chicago has as its mission "To ensure that all Muslims have the resources, language, and choice to nurture sexual health and confront sexual violence."⁵⁶ The organization offers education,

referrals, and advocacy. Since 2009, when it was co-founded by Nadiah Mohajir and Ayesha Ahkter, Heart has been publicly vocal about the taboo topics of sexual relationships and sexual violence in the Muslim community, providing culturally sensitive information and resources, and creating space for non-traditional Muslims to come together and support each other. For example, a handout titled “Responding with Rahma (compassion)” is a guide for how to respond to disclosures about sexual assault. Using the Arabic word as an acronym, RAHMA, Heart spells out as follows: R, respond by listening; A, affirm and believe; H, honor cultural and religious contexts and values; M, maintain privacy; and A, always provide resources and information.⁵⁷ These principles are intended to displace judgment and disbelief and to replace them with compassion, support, and healing. In her acceptance speech for a 2018 community building award given to Heart by the El-Hibri Foundation, Mohajir acknowledged: “There’s no denying that this work is controversial and uncomfortable because it challenges people to reconsider how we think of gender, sexuality, and sexual violence. Trust me, we have a lot of critics.”⁵⁸ Mohajir further explained to me how their work pushes the buttons of more traditional, conservative Muslims:

Not simply because we are challenging those who do harm about the harm that they’re doing and asking for accountability, but also because of the boldness with which we’ve chosen to do it with especially around marginalized Muslims, including LGBT folks, which really gets people riled up, and folks who are in pre-marital relationships, ... because we focus on the abuse and the violence that is occurring. Anytime someone tries to deflect—well, she was drinking, or how she was dressed? or they’re gay—we focus on the violence. ... Who has power, who doesn’t. Whose voices are heard, whose aren’t. Our work has raised eyebrows. It has resulted in Muslim males, cis-males in particular, to generate a lot of fear mongering.⁵⁹

Heart’s work is critically important, but because it calls attention to problems in the Muslim community, supporting women and people without a voice or power, it is vulnerable to criticism from many directions, including from social media trolls.

Gender discrimination appears to be the third rail of the Muslim women’s movement against sexual misconduct and abuse of power in their community, inciting the wrath of more traditional Muslims. Daniel Haqiqatjou, whose website is called “The Muslim Skeptic,” has nearly 30,000 followers on social media. He criticizes Heart for being, in his words, “... deeply committed to spreading reformist, progressive values that are antithetical to Islam.” He also accuses them of promoting premarital sex, aligning ideologically with Planned Parenthood, being Trump supporters, and “shaking down” Muslim Student Associations.⁶⁰ Haqiqatjou’s misogynistic, homophobic attacks seek to delegitimize Heart’s work because it threatens

traditional Muslims' anti-gay, anti-sex outside of marriage position. Moreover, his criticism about Heart's fundraising efforts as "sleazy" and accusing them of "scamming students" are unsupported. Heart charges a meager \$500–\$1,000 to give a workshop for college students, which is very little compared to the \$35,000 a Muslim Student Association paid to a comedian for a two-hour performance.⁶¹ With limited resources, Heart must stay focused on the good work it does rather than get dragged down into the mud by those whose goals are to destroy it and preserve patriarchy in the Muslim community. Unlike the progress made in the Jewish community by the organization Keshet, fighting for gender equity and LGBTQ inclusion in the Muslim community results in threats to Heart's reputation and to the safety of its staff.

He Said/She Said

The public posturing by Muslim men accused of sexual misconduct and abuse of power perpetuates the imbalance between the social value or weight of men's voices compared to women's voices. Perhaps the most well-known case is the one against American comedian Aziz Ansari. The creator and star of Netflix's *Master of None* was accused of sexual assault by an anonymous woman in January 2018 for repeatedly pressuring her to engage in sexual activities beyond her comfort level during a first date that concluded at his apartment in September 2017. The imbalance of power between an international celebrity in his mid-30s and a Brooklyn-based photographer in her early 20s sparked heated debate, with some commentators arguing that it was another example of a man ignoring a woman's discomfort and disinterest, non-verbal cues of physically moving away and verbally stating she was not ready, and others that the Ansari story distracted from the #MeToo movement because it was a date. What could have been an opportunity for a complicated discussion about what constituted consensual sex on a date devolved into an examination of what the woman, "Grace" (a pseudonym) meant by: "It turned into the worst night of my life." Some commentators ignored her, some criticized her, but many more focused on what the allegation would do to Ansari's career. He later shared how he felt about "that whole situation" in his new Netflix series, without publicly apologizing. Aside from the initial exposé by *Babe*, in which the woman is quoted extensively about her interaction with Ansari, including his private apology via text the morning after, her voice is absent from public discourse.

While maintaining her privacy by remaining anonymous, what motivated "Grace" to come forward is noteworthy. As NPR reported, she decided to speak out after seeing Ansari wearing a pin to support the movement against sexual harassment and assault at the Golden Globes award ceremony. The "Time's Up" pin was commissioned by actor Reese Witherspoon and designed by Arianne Phillips, who made 500 pins for the event. The pin coincided with stars wearing black to underscore the importance of confronting abuse of

power and promoting racial and gender parity in their industry. Black director Ava DuVernay tweeted: “I am wearing black today because balance and inclusion and diversity is not some kind of allowance to be made to accommodate people. No, sir. It is a correction of an error. It is a righting of a wrong. And it is going to be done. Now. #TimesUp.” One can imagine the triggering effect of seeing Ansari wearing the pin a few months after the fateful date. Sharing her truth may have been a way for “Grace” to navigate the cognitive dissonance between what she experienced and Ansari’s public posturing.⁶²

Acquaintance sexual assault by a Muslim man who manipulates a woman’s inebriated condition, as the “Grace”-Ansari incident illustrated, also occurred outside the Muslim community. Navila Rashid grew up in Northern Virginia in a family of what she called “seasonal Muslims.” Their heritage was Bangladeshi, they celebrated Eid and Ramadan, and she attended Sunday school, but her father drank alcohol, which is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. Her parents were strict; she was not allowed to go to a dance camp, movie theaters, sleepovers, or be in mixed-gender settings. She was president of the Muslim Student Association at college and was harassed by conservative Muslim men on campus for not being Muslim “enough,” although she was a hijabi. She wore it not because of its religious meaning but as an attempt to gain control and autonomy at a time when her student Muslim community discouraged her leadership. After graduating, she realized “I love Islam, but I don’t want to wear the headscarf.” Rashid was 23 when she met a man she described as a “typical Brooklyn hipster” on the train during her commute to graduate school at Long Island University where she was pursuing a degree in social work. He seemed cool and self-identified as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, which sadly resonated with Navila’s own childhood. In October 2013, Rashid and another female friend hung out with her new male friend at his place. She was romantically involved with someone else at the time and had no interest in a sexual relationship with him. “We were all liquored up. He started touching me inappropriately,” she recalled. “I went to the bathroom and he followed me and pushed me into his roommate’s room, who wasn’t there, and that’s where the assault happened.” A few months later, Rashid decided to press charges against him and went to the NYPD.

The fact that she was raped outside of her faith community may have initially helped Rashid pursue justice. The detectives told her to call the man who assaulted her from the precinct, that it would be a way to trick him into making a confession, which failed. Calling an alleged rapist was not unusual. During the investigations of several rape cases in Missoula, Montana, for example, a detective asked a woman to call the man who raped her on her cell phone from the police station where the conversation could be surreptitiously recorded, including a confession that can be used by the prosecution.⁶³ The detectives next compared Rashid to other rape victims who were bruised and bloodied, which she was not. Ultimately, she left in frustration; “I felt so powerless.”⁶⁴ While Rashid was not able to hold her perpetrator

accountable, and suffered from anxiety and PTSD, she was able to use her voice to help wake up the Muslim community and support other Muslim women.

Muslim women who speak out eventually find each other through concentric circles, networks of family members, and friends, generating opportunities to impact their faith community. Nadya Ali heard about her cousin's experience with sexual abuse by a relative. She watched the groundbreaking investigative documentary about sexual assault in the US military, *Invisible War*. Ali wondered about the extent of sexual assault in her faith community and searched for answers.⁶⁵ She discovered that there was nothing in the public eye about sexual misconduct in the Muslim community. Ali created the film *Breaking Silence: Starting the Conversation*



Figure 2.4 *Breaking Silence*, Women Make Movies. Permission to publish courtesy of Nadya Ali, director and producer.

about *Sexual Assault in the Muslim Community* (2017), which highlights the stories of three Muslim women.

“Stories and visuals are powerful; they make people empathetic and show there’s a pattern going on in our community and wake people up to the reality....”⁶⁶ Rashid was working for an organization that supported victims of gender-based violence, now called WomanKind, when she participated in Ali’s project. Ali and Rashid are confident that the film has helped other women know that they are not alone. Voted best short documentary winner at the Los Angeles Women’s International Film Festival, *Breaking Silence* loosened the Muslim community’s iron grip on the taboo topic of sex by exposing the reality that lack of communication about sex by parents and communal leaders did not prevent abuse; instead, it protected sexual predators and silenced the Muslim women who they abused. This pattern of silence and predation also reinforced generational trauma.

Muslim mothers who may have been assaulted themselves did not discuss sex, consensual, or otherwise, with their daughters who then were sexually assaulted, perpetuating the cycle of abuse. Rashid explained in the film: “We don’t talk about sex in a Muslim, Desi household. If we do, it’s always ‘Oh, don’t have sex, wait until you’re married. This is haram.”⁶⁷ The stigma and shame associated with coming forward, in some cases about someone in one’s own family, meant that victims in Muslim communities rarely reported abuse. Zahra Bhalwala, another woman featured in the film, opined about the topic of sexual abuse: “The more people talk about it the more people will feel okay talking about it. And I hope that changes our culture.”⁶⁸ It is one thing for Muslim Americans to make progress toward openly discussing sexual abuse in their community; however, no matter how comfortable individuals become, the racial strife in this country makes battling xenophobic attitudes against Muslims of color a priority that undermines the communal ability to assess and solve its own problems. Simultaneously, the constant negotiation over what is true Islam and unofficial morality guardians keep momentum at bay.

The lack of discussion about sex in families influenced how women navigated their lives after being sexually assaulted. Mira Abou Elezz was born in Pittsburgh but went to high school in Saudi Arabia, where her family moved with the goal of being more comfortable as strict Muslims than they were in post-9/11 America. When Elezz moved back to the United States to attend an all-women’s college, her Saudi experiences and the proximity she had had to religious sites, going to *haji* and Mecca, gave her clout with the Muslim friends she made through the Muslim Student Association. Elezz described, “Here I was in New Jersey, and I was surrounded by all these women I shared religion and culture with. The girls I met are still my core friends. I really felt my prayers were answered.”⁶⁹ And yet, when she was raped by an acquaintance (who was not Muslim, just a “good looking Puerto Rican kid”) during her junior year, Elezz did not tell her Muslim friends about it because their Muslimness was what united them, and part of

Muslim identity was sexual abstinence. The significance of purity was similar for young Muslim women as it was for Orthodox Jewish women; sharing that she had been sexually violated would make her impure in the eyes of traditional Muslims and perhaps less desirable as a marriage partner. Elezz was traumatized:

It kind of shook me to my core because of this value that I had because of my religious identity about celibacy until marriage and that was kind of taken away from me. And that obviously influenced my personal and spiritual identity a lot, but I had to come to terms with still being like a “good Muslim” and not having that part of me anymore, right?⁷⁰

Despite Elezz’s effort to explain her cultural baggage to the women at the university clinic and counseling center, they did not understand what it meant to a Muslim woman of color to be forcibly sexually assaulted, how it impacted Elezz’s self-image; one told her it was “okay,” which it most certainly was not. She reflected on not telling her parents and that someday she might tell her mother, but it would just hurt her so perhaps it was better not to. Although the traumatic experience occurred while she was in college, it was during those formative years that Elezz developed her spirituality, informed by understanding Islam in more multifaceted ways. The one place she felt like she could have shared her story, although she did not, was at the Women’s Mosque of America in California. There, Elezz experienced a different kind of Muslim sisterhood, where “we were leading the prayers. It was by us and for us.”⁷¹ In that environment, Muslim women appreciated each other’s diversity, and no one would stigmatize her about non-consensual sex (i.e., rape) as they would in the male-led Muslim community where patriarchy ruled. It is not surprising that the Women’s Mosque of America would be the one place where Elezz felt safe and seen. Women speakers gave sermons such as “Sexual Violence and the Necessity of Compassion” and “Aisha’s Lesson in Standing for Truth” both of which offered female empathy and empowerment, reinterpreting Islam with a feminist lens.⁷² Today, Elezz works as a staff chaplain at Memorial Sloan Kettering hospital in New York City and in Princeton, New Jersey, where she is helping other people in ways that she was not. Since leaders in the Muslim community did not automatically support women when they were confronted with examples of sexual misconduct and abuse of power, indeed quite the contrary, women found support elsewhere.

Spiritual Abuse as Communal Strategy

Islam is manipulated by some religious leaders to be what they want rather than what the religion is truly about, which intensifies the #MeToo problem in the Muslim community by making it harder for women to come forward, and then chastising them when they do. According to Imam Khalid Latif,

university chaplain and executive director of the Islamic Center at NYU, “What Islam tells us is that Allah does not take people into account for things that they are coerced into, things that are beyond their ability to control.” However, religious leaders who are not trained in sexual violence respond to abused women by identifying the ways that they are not adhering to Islam, essentially blaming them for not being good Muslims. Latif shared the story of a woman who was raped and went to the local mosque to talk to the imam. His response was: “You deserve it. You go to school where genders are not separated, and you don’t wear a head scarf, you know, this is something that is your own fault.”⁷³ Muslim religious leaders place blame for unwanted attention on the women themselves rather than on the perpetrators of sexual violence, distorting Islam in the process.

The vast majority of male, Muslim clerics are not prepared to respond with the compassion and support needed, and female imams are few and far between. An imam is someone who can lead prayers but most are not ordained; they are not trained in seminaries the same ways as Christian pastors or Jewish rabbis. “We work with imams,” said the Turning Point founder, to address the lack of preparedness to support abused women; “it’s taken us years to get them to understand the value of speaking up about domestic and sexual violence, not waiting until a woman is murdered.”⁷⁴ Islamic feminism has begun to bear fruit, but the journey began only a quarter of a century ago, decades after the American women’s rights movement of the 1960s and 70s. Whereas the first female rabbi was ordained in 1972, the first American woman imam, Dr. Amina Wadud, gave her first public sermon 22 years later in 1994. It took another ten years before there was a mixed-gender congregational prayer in 2005. Wadud’s explanation echoes the words of feminist historian Joan W. Scott: “Using gender as an analytical lens, we re-examine the underlying assumptions in patriarchal interpretations of the sacred texts and devise more egalitarian conclusions.”⁷⁵ Reexamining religious texts enables women to redefine what it means to be a Muslim woman in America.

The women’s mosque movement is a direct result. M. Hasna Maznavi founded the Women’s Mosque of America in Los Angeles in 2015 because, after reading the Qur’an and visiting many mosques, she knew what was occurring in them—including women being confined to much smaller spaces than men or excluded altogether—did not reflect the *actual* teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.⁷⁶ Neither the Qur’an nor any of the statements by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) restrict the role of imam to men. Rather, all sources speak to women’s full spiritual agency in Islam.⁷⁷ Rabi’a Keeble, a convert to Islam, founded a mosque in Berkeley, California in 2017, which transitioned to be a women’s justice center called Qal’bu Maryam that combines worship with “fighting racial oppression, misogyny, homophobia, Islamophobia, and all injustices.” It is different from other Islamic sacred spaces in three ways: everyone is welcome, women lead prayers, and genders are not segregated.⁷⁸ Although women imams exist in

the United States and in some other countries, they are twenty-first-century additions to the Islamic religious landscape and face many challenges, including securing real estate, criticism that they are changing the “real Islam,” and finding other Muslim women who want to become their congregants.⁷⁹

One might think that there would be countless Muslim women yearning for female imams; however, according to Islamic and gender studies professor Ayesha Chaudry, in patriarchal societies, people are more inclined to follow men than women.⁸⁰ In the most extreme cases, supporting the liberalization of Islam to include women and homosexuals runs the risk of facing not only wariness and cynicism about the content of their sermons but also death threats, as one of the founders of Berlin’s Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque did.⁸¹ Given the overwhelming number of male Islamic leaders and the paucity of women imams, educating current and future Muslim religious leaders how to support people who have experienced sexual abuse is critical. University of North Carolina Chapel Hill professor Juliane Hammer opines that calling something “spiritual abuse” can be an effective strategy for getting the Muslim community to talk about a difficult topic. If someone says, “I want to talk about sexual abuse by religious authority figures,” people want to shut down the conversation” Hammer notes.⁸² But what if the person responsible for the abuse *is* the Muslim religious leader?

Like in every faith community, spiritual abuse by religious leaders of congregants or followers exists in the Muslim American community. Although spiritual abuse can include making someone believe they imagined something or convincing them to break their Ramadan fast, I focus here on spiritual abuse by religious leaders of women in their faith community. The cases of Nouman Ali Khan and Mohammed Abdullah Saleem offer insights into how, despite women’s efforts to unveil the sexual misconduct and abuse of power in the American Muslim community, they face mountains of obstacles and pressure to not “cause trouble.” In December 2017, *BuzzFeed* reported on a pattern of grooming, sexting including shirtless selfies, secret sham marriage proposals, extramarital sex, and payoffs by Muslim preacher Nouman Ali Khan whose Dallas-based for-profit Islamic learning center Bayyinah is one of the most financially successful in the United States. At the time, Khan was married with seven children.⁸³ When Robina Niaz complained about Khan, a celebrity Muslim preacher with millions of followers on social media who posted nude pictures of himself online and was accused of abusing his power by manipulating women into secret marriages, people in the Muslim community got angry at *her* for complaining. “Why?” she asked rhetorically, “He’s an imam.”⁸⁴ Celebrity preachers, such as Khan, pose a serious challenge for the Muslim community because they have so many fans and followers ready to defend them.

If they are not celebrities, predator preachers may be elderly imams whose sexual abuse goes unnoticed for years. Imam Mohammed Abdullah Saleem had a long white beard and was wheeled into the Chicago courtroom in a wheelchair. The 77 year old who founded the Institute for Islamic Education

in Elgin, Illinois, was found guilty in 2016 of fondling a woman who worked for him and forcing female students to sit on his lap. The *Chicago Tribune* reported: “The arrest of a conservative scholar on sex abuse charges was especially shocking given Saleem’s stature in his community He is said to espouse a code of separation between genders and discourages even handshaking.”⁸⁵ *Atlantic* writer Jalal Baig describes this phenomenon as “cult-like personality worship,” when people are attracted to a leader offering something transcendent: “In the process of elevating that leader, they often dismiss his moral failings, deeming him near-infallible and allowing him to live with impunity.”⁸⁶ The personality worship of religious leaders like Khan and Saleem in the United States, and Swiss-born Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan in France, contributed to the backlash against women who spoke out about their abuses. A Muslim man held in high esteem who is also a sexual deviant abusing his power causes the community to experience a kind of cognitive dissonance, making it extremely hard for women to navigate how to come forward about their abuse.

Two organizations are easing the challenge for Muslim women willing to speak out: FACE, which stands for Facing Abuse in Community Environments, and In Shaykh’s Clothing. FACE, founded by Alia Salem in 2017, is actively involved in investigating sexual, physical, financial, and spiritual abuses. Previously, nothing existed to get to the bottom of the abuse, to break the silence that allowed perpetrators to move from one segment of the Muslim community to another. The highest number of complaints they receive are about sexual abuse. The victim-centered organization is comprised of attorneys, mental health professionals, and people with theological expertise.⁸⁷ Their foci on holding religious and communal leaders accountable and on justice are revolutionary. In August 2019, FACE released a statement about a \$2.5 million settlement for an unnamed Muslim plaintiff, a former congregant, against Zia Sheikh for mental anguish, grooming, clergy malpractice, and sexual exploitation. Leading up to this outcome, FACE conducted a year-long investigation, substantiated the allegations, and uncovered a 22-year history of the Sheikh’s termination from three mosques “as a direct result of his illicit conduct with female congregants” according to the report.⁸⁸ In Shaykh’s Clothing was founded by Danish Qasim and Danya Shakfeh, Esq. in 2017 to work with those affected by abuse, to work with institutions to prevent abuse, to hold abusers accountable, and to educate Muslims to stand up and recognize abuse. Like FACE, In Shaykh’s Clothing incorporates structural solutions for sexual abuse. Qasim and Shakfeh document spiritual abuse and attempt to root out the problem. They noticed a problem of Muslims being mistreated and abused by religious leaders. In May 2019, they released the Code of Conduct for Islamic Leadership, a truly pioneering effort that was ten years in the making. In Shaykh’s Clothing provided an essential service to the Muslim community by identifying the main areas where spiritual abuse can be addressed at the organizational level. “Our code clearly sets the minimum

standard of ethical conduct for Muslim organizations” they state on their website, “and creates a legal mechanism of enforcement through contract law.”⁸⁹ The founders spearheaded the initiative, but they did not operate in a vacuum; rather they consulted with health, religious, cultural, and legal experts.

Muslim women clamor for strong condemnation of sexual misconduct and abuse of power by imams who have the platforms to change the culture in their community—if only they would use their voices. Unfortunately, some imams have instead used Islam to question the veracity of a woman’s truth, which makes it harder for women to speak out. When the prominent Muslim cleric, Imam Zaid Shakir weighed in on Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s accusation against Brett Kavanaugh after he won the Senate’s majority vote, it sorely undermined believing women of all faith backgrounds. Shakir, co-founder of a Muslim college in Berkeley, California, posted on Facebook that Ford lacked a corroborating witness and questioned the authenticity of her claim. “Since she had not,” he wrote, “we silently avoid voicing any opinion on the issue and if we do speak we do so with a skeptical voice.”⁹⁰ He used a religious framing of Ford’s testimony that relied on a verse from the Qur’an that requires four witnesses. Since that verse refers to adultery and was not relevant to the Ford-Kavanaugh case, other Muslims denounced Shakir’s post. However, the damage had already been done. A Muslim woman who preferred to remain anonymous explained the impact: “Religious leaders in our communities who plant the seeds of doubt when it comes to these types of allegations are what keep people like me from coming forward.”⁹¹ Arnesa Buljusic-Kustura, who works as a Muslim women’s advocate and counselor, decried that religious leaders did not use their voices and platforms “to educate about consent, to educate about rape and sexual abuse... they chose to either stay quiet or continue being part of the patriarchal paradigm and push those same, outdated narratives that contribute to rape culture and the mass violence women have faced and continue to face at the hands of men”⁹² Imam Khalid Latif, an exception who speaks openly about the need for more imams to publicly condemn sexual misconduct and abuse of power, offers a candid reason why more do not: “Religion tends to be a boys’ club, at the end of the day.”⁹³ Latif’s explanation speaks volumes about the patriarchal hold that Islam has on American Muslims. The publicly known cases may be few, but that is due to the difficulty women face exposing sexual predators, fear of not being believed or being stigmatized by their community for talking about a verboten topic, and the social prestige and unchecked power wielded by men who lead prayers.

Muslim women also face the very real concern that their words will be weaponized by people on the political right and Islamophobes who seek to demonize Muslim men. Whether a radical feminist like Eltahawy, hijabis like Bharoocha and Salem, or both, #MeToo activists across the spectrum of religious observance are constantly in the position of educating to dismantle this pattern of thinking that prevents women from coming forward in the

Muslim community. Eltahawy likens this pressure not to report sexual harassment and assault to the legal Miranda warning used when someone is arrested: "... everything a Muslim woman says can and will be used against her and the entire community."⁹⁴ Salem explains that if the Muslim community does not hold itself accountable, people outside the community will do it and control the narrative. She asks, "Do you want the headline to be 'imam gets arrested for child pornography and has ties to Isis' or 'Muslim community boots out terrorist, pedophile imam?'"⁹⁵ While the argument that it is the abuser who should be ashamed, not the woman he abused, is rational, it is the political argument that simultaneously convinces Muslims of all genders that it is in their community's best interest to call out the perpetrators of sexual misconduct and abuse of power. It illustrates to the larger American public that the Muslim community does not tolerate such egregious behavior, which is a far better strategy than trying to hide it.

Like in the Jewish community, where calling out bad behavior is wrongly equated with *lashon hora* (idle gossip), Muslim women struggle to defy the cultural taboo against reporting sexual misconduct and abuse of power. Text in the Qur'an referring to talking about someone else's actions as backbiting in a literal sense, "eating the flesh off your brother," is inaccurately extended to speaking out about sexual abuse. Islamic law forbids speaking poorly of other people, however, holding back harmful information is not the same thing; according to Latif, Islam supports Muslims coming forward about misbehavior.⁹⁶ The cultural entanglement of following Islam with silence makes it harder for women who are abused to say anything. Salem elaborated "People think it is their Islamic obligation to cover all sin, when they conflate abuse with sin, that is a *huge* problem." They think they should cover it up, she explains, even when instinctually "they know it's wrong and shouldn't be covered up."⁹⁷ Hence encouraging Muslim women to call out their abusers requires helping them unlearn something that is culturally engrained in the social fabric of their faith community.

While women are at the forefront of addressing sexual abuse in their faith community, there are male Muslim allies who are noticeably amplifying their voices and joining Muslim women in demanding change. Ibrahim Bharoocha partnered with his older sister Haleema to develop a workshop titled "A Call to Muslim Men: Allyship for Gender Justice" in 2020. Their workshop was for the Muslim Masculinity Project of Malikah that has as its goals cultivating safe space for any Muslim-identifying men, cultivating healthy Muslim masculinity, and active allyship with brown and black women in preventing gender-based violence.⁹⁸ In addition to Latif and In Shaykh's Clothing organization founder Danish Qasim, Aymann Ismail is active in the movement. Readers may know the *Slate* journalist from the Facebook video series, "Who's Afraid of Aymann Ismail?" in which he traveled around the United States interviewing people about why they feared Islam and Muslims. Ismail interviewed the "#MosqueMeToo" creator; her testimony illustrates how acknowledging the sexual abuse problem can be misused by

Islamophobes to condemn all Muslim men, but defending all Muslim men risks ignoring that there is a communal problem. He further writes:

We cannot ignore this as a ‘women’s issue’ when the perpetrators are so often men. We cannot shy away from acknowledging it because bad actors will try to use it to justify their toxic views. It’s up to us to eliminate the notion that these kinds of assaults will go on without retribution. Only with accountability can a problem of this scale be fought, and I’m well aware that as a Muslim man myself, that accountability lies with me. I commend my brave sisters for voicing their concerns and want them to know that they are not alone.⁹⁹

Ismail’s solidarity is immensely heartwarming, but it will take many more Muslim brothers joining their voices with their sisters’ voices before they are in the majority in the American Muslim community.¹⁰⁰ Another male ally, Shaykh Dr. Yasir Qadhi stated in a sermon, “First and foremost, we need to be very clear: such harassment, such intimidation, such sexual crimes are indeed a crime in the eyes of Allah.” The sermon has more than 18,000 views on YouTube four years since it was posted, but there would be millions of views had it truly gone viral. The global Muslim population worldwide is over 1.8 billion. Even if more of the estimated 3.45 million (as of 2015) Muslims of all ages in the United States tuned in, there would be more views.¹⁰¹ #MeToo activism in the Muslim community is scratching the surface, albeit in profound ways.

There is scant literature specifically about sexual abuse in the Muslim community, very few research reports or book chapters.¹⁰² Muslim scholars have begun to address the lacuna, which goes hand in hand with studies on Islamophobia, but it will take time before researchers have a complete picture. *The Muslim American Poll 2019: Predicting and Preventing Islamophobia* by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding surveyed Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Researchers found that although unwanted sexual advances from faith leaders were no more prevalent among Muslims than other faith groups, they were slightly more likely (54 percent compared to 44 percent) to have reported the incident to law enforcement. “However, in every group except Muslims, victims are more likely to have reported the incident internally to their faith leadership than to law enforcement,” according to the report’s authors. Conversely, Jews were the group second least likely to report incidents to law enforcement at just 12 percent; the nonaffiliated group reported to police only 2 percent.¹⁰³ These findings suggest two things. First, as the researchers note, the Muslim community is less insular than purported and more inclined to seek law enforcement’s involvement in its internal affairs. The inclination to involve external legal authorities may also be related to a change over time since 9/11. Second, I surmise that Muslim women are more comfortable telling strangers about being sexually abused than they are telling their own community leaders. Given the stigma attached to premarital sexual

relations of any kind and the history of Islamic clerics blaming women's lack of observance for men's misconduct, their disinclination to report to Muslim leaders is understandable. It also makes the work of organizations like Turning Point, Heart, FACE, In Shaykh's Clothing, and the Hurma Project that much more imperative.

On January 11, 2020, a first of its kind conference was held at the American Islamic College in Chicago, Illinois. With approximately 100 people in attendance, the gathering focused entirely on the Muslim community. One attendee, who was reeling after just the first panel, tweeted: "We are actually having conversations about spiritual abuse and sexual abuse in our community."¹⁰⁴ This was a bold step by the Hurma Project, the nascent organization responsible for the convening, toward normalizing the conversation about #MeToo in the Muslim community—one that was unimaginable just three years prior. Much like Sacred Spaces, the Jewish organization mentioned in the previous chapter, the Hurma Project is committed to "upholding the sacred inviolability of all who enter Muslim spaces from the exploitation and abuse by those holding religious power and authority."¹⁰⁵ In addition, some Muslim women are using their newfound confidence to check Muslim men who disparage them. Although not yet a widespread practice to invoke "lower the gaze," it is something Muslim women can do. When a man told Riffat Hassan, an Islamic scholar, she was not a real Muslim because she did not cover her head, she told him: "Neither are you. Not only are you staring at me, but I can see your chest." The man was so surprised and ashamed, Hassan described, he shrunk in his seat.¹⁰⁶ Clearly, Muslim women have made inroads changing their faith community. Yet, there remains so much more to do before they are fully heard and safe from sexual misconduct and abuse of power.

In Chapter 3, I share the voices of Christian women who illuminate some striking similarities, and differences, from our Muslim and Jewish sisters.

Notes

- 1 Qur'an 24:30. This verse is often used against Muslim women, blaming them for their own abuse, but it applies equally to men and women in the sacred text.
- 2 Haleema Bharoocha, interview by author August 28, 2020; and <https://vimeo.com/269083142>.
- 3 Tyrone Beason, "Seattle-area women reflect on the cultural risks and benefits of sharing their #MeToo stories," *Seattle Times*, April 6, 2018.
- 4 Bharoocha, interview.
- 5 Haleema Bharoocha, "Do You Have Sex with Your Hijab? The Multiple Emotional and Sexual Burdens of Muslim American Women in Public Spaces," Seattle University, unpublished honors thesis, June 2018, shared with author.
- 6 Haleema Bharoocha, "Do You Have Sex with Your Hijab? The Multiple Emotional and Sexual Burdens of Muslim American Women in Public Spaces," presentation shared with author.
- 7 Haleema Bharoocha, "Sexual Fantasies of the Hijab/Harem in a Neo-Colonial World: Veiling in Pornography," unpublished paper, Seattle University, June 10, 2017, shared with author.

- 8 Bharoocha, interview; Haleema Bharoocha, “Theology” notes shared with author.
- 9 Mona Eltahawy, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 7. Regarding her choice of title, Eltahawy explains: “Christianity preaches the Seven Deadly Sins. The Gospel of Mona presents instead the seven necessary sins women and girls need to employ to defy, disobey, and disrupt the patriarchy: anger, attention, profanity, ambition, power, violence, and lust” 10.
- 10 Bharoocha, interview.
- 11 Lorraine Boissoneault “How the 19th-Century Know Nothing Party Reshaped American Politics: From xenophobia to conspiracy theories, the Know Nothing Party launched a nativist movement whose effects are still felt today,” *Smithsonian magazine*, January 26, 2017.
- 12 Colin Dwyer and Andrew Limbong, “‘Go Back Where You Came From’: The Long Rhetorical Roots of Trump’s Racist Tweets,” *National Public Radio, Morning Edition*, July 15, 2019; “8 Dead in Atlanta Spa Shootings, With Fears of Anti-Asian Bias,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2021, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/17/us/shooting-atlanta-acworth#six-of-the-eight-victims-were-women-of-asian-descent>.
- 13 Robina Niaz, Innovation Exchange, CEERU, Queens College, New York, November 17, 2018.
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3 In Christ, We Pray, Amen

“Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger and Courage.

Anger at the way things are and Courage to see they don’t remain as they are.”
—St. Augustine

Growing up Jewish in America, I always knew I was an outsider. My Christian neighbors made sure of it; they threw a brick through our living room window in Princeton, NJ, with a note attached: “GET OUT KIKE!” My brother had been told to make a wreath in his public middle school with red berries signifying Christ’s blood. He was upset and told my parents, who complained to the school board. A few days later, a cross was burned in front of Town Hall. When I was only three years old, I picked up the ringing telephone and heard an angry voice say, “We’re going to kill your father!” I was terrified. We belonged to the Princeton Jewish Center, where both of my brothers became *b’nai mitzvah*, my talented mother was a respected local artist while my father commuted to New Brunswick to teach at the university. We were a model minority family, educated, hard-working, and giving back to our community. Yet the fact that we were Jewish meant we were targets of antisemitism. Secure in our Judaism, my parents even let me sleep over at my friend’s house on Christmas Eve so I could experience the wonders of waking up to presents. I couldn’t sleep and when I peeked out of the bedroom, I saw her parents putting items under the tree. My sleuthing confirmed what I had always suspected: Christians lied to make each other happy. It seemed innocent enough when everyone participated in the Santa-is-real game, children enjoyed a deluge of presents, and no one got hurt.

As I got older, I detected the insidiousness of Christian group think that prioritized the hierarchy of the Church, men wielding power over women, and above all the demand for women to keep silent. Talking to Christian women about #MeToo opened my eyes to the fact that being part of the majority did not protect them from the patriarchal world we all live in and the abuse that patriarchy and misogyny dole out upon women regardless of religious affiliation or how much faith one has in the son of God, the Prophet

Muhammad, or the *Moshiach* (Hebrew for Messiah, who will come and save the Jewish people). They are no safer inside their faith communities than Jewish and Muslim women are in ours. Indeed, when they are believers or servants of God, they are sometimes in even more precarious positions, giving ill-intentioned strangers and downtrodden neighborhoods the benefit of the doubt.

Researching #MeToo in the Christian community led me to interviews with and stories about women of many different religious identities, including Southern Baptist, Independent Baptist, Fundamentalist Baptist, Reformed Baptist, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed Christian, nondenominational Christian, and several evangelical denominations. They are white women, women of color, and black women. Their experiences ranged from unobtrusive, verbal sexual harassment to unwanted kissing and groping, and acquaintance- and stranger-rape. They are religious seekers, strong believers, and clergy. They were among the first women who called pastors, church elders, coaches, and doctors into account. Although not every experience occurred in sacred spaces, their voices launched the #ChurchToo movement and changed the meaning of the relationship between women, Christianity, and faith forever. One woman's comment illustrates the change and a religion-faith distinction, "I wouldn't die for Southern Baptist but I would die for Christ."¹ Before introducing more of these change makers, I must recognize the Christian woman who started it all.

Tarana Burke is now widely known as the MeToo founder in 2006, but there has been scarce attention paid to the fact that her Christian faith gave her the hope necessary to believe in the possibility of activism to help women of color. She is the daughter of interfaith parents, with a Catholic mother and a Muslim stepfather, who identified as Catholic until she learned about the church's slave-holding history. However, her Christianity is still the backbone of her own activism. "I'm the kind of Christian that recognizes who Jesus was—and Jesus was the first activist that I knew, and the first organizer that I knew, and the first example of how to be in service to people," she said in a September 2018 interview.² Burke was *TIME* magazine's Person of the Year in 2017 along with other women including musical artist Taylor Swift and actor Ashley Judd nicknamed "The Silence Breakers" for their respective roles in the #MeToo movement.³ The organization she founded was inspired by Burke's experience of not having the courage or words to support a young girl of color named Heaven who shared the unspeakable with her about being sexually abused by an older man, her mother's boyfriend. Unaccustomed to responding to such an intimate confession, Burke directed the girl to another youth counselor, a decision she says: "I will never forget, because it haunts me still."⁴ The words "me too" did not escape her lips at the time, but they inspired her vision for social change so that girls and women in the future would not have to say those two words. That vision includes providing resources, support, and avenues to healing while disrupting the systems that enable sexual violence and

insisting that perpetrators be held responsible. When the hashtag “metoo” went viral in October 2017, Burke’s grassroots efforts became a global movement as the world awoke to a problem that knew no geographic, racial, class, ethnic, or religious boundaries. For Burke, however, years of sweat equity were reduced to a hashtag without any recognition, initially, that it was her labor or her two words! She wept for the volume of Tweets by women who hoped that, through sharing their secrets of sexual violence, they would feel less alone. And that night, Burke’s faith spoke to her in clear terms. “I was overcome with a new emotion, and I could not have ignored it even if I wanted to. In the Christian church, they call what I was grappling with *being convicted*. I knew better than to run from this or agonize about whose movement it was. God had shown up and checked me on that. I had spent the whole day wringing my hands and pulling my hair out trying to figure out how to save ‘my work.’ It took a story from a stranger for me to realize that my work was happening right in front of me.”⁵ Burke mentions God 19 times in her memoir *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*.

While Jewish and Muslim women faced challenges due to being minorities in a Christian country, Christian women who spoke out about sexual harassment and assault confronted powerful church hierarchies, entrenched systems that supported predators’ reputations, and massive cover ups. Their fears were unrelated to bringing shame to their faith community or people. Instead, they were directly tied to the devastation coming forward wrought on their professional careers, families, and religious lives. Although one might think it would be easier for women who are members of the majority religion in America, for whom neither antisemitism nor Islamophobia was a factor, sexism plagued them as it did all women and religious zeal for female purity exacerbated their shame. For black Christian women and Christian women of color, racism compounded sexism by adding another prejudice. In addition, being members of the Christian majority meant that when they spoke out, it disrupted the status quo of much larger faith communities and caused widespread consternation among their co-religionists. Christian women who fueled the #ChurchToo movement defied a world order predicated on submission to church leaders and in so doing reordered Christianity by putting Christ before church. I salute them.

Pastor Ruth Everhart

Ruth Everhart grew up one of five siblings in a white ethnic enclave of Dutch descendants who left Holland, “to escape the religious tolerance of the Netherlands,” she deadpanned to me in an interview. Adherents of the Christian Reformed Church, estimated to be around 200,000, follow the teachings of the Reformation leader John Calvin, interpret the bible literally, and in Everhart’s words “had no idea what to do with women.” School days began with bible class, she and her family attended both



Figure 3.1 Ruth Everhart. Permission to publish courtesy of Ruth Everhart. Photo credit: Dan Davis Photography.

morning and evening church services on Sundays, and Ruth participated in a club for girls called the Calvinettes on Wednesdays. They stayed within their ethnoreligious circle, set apart from larger Protestant denominations by their ethnicity, belief in Calvinism, and a righteous sense of divine covenant.⁶ The family initially lived in Illinois and moved to New Jersey where her father became the principal of Eastern Christian Junior High School, which was in the same Christian school system where her mother taught, and she attended.⁷ During high school, her father taught her about race; or, more specifically, that people who did not have the privilege of being white and Dutch deserved compassion and love. She internalized the song she learned in Sunday school, including this anachronistic lyric: “Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God’s sight.”⁸ Everhart went on to attend Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan as did all of her siblings. During her college years, she began to reckon with the implicit misogyny of the theology she learned as a child and to want more from her career than to be a man’s secretary. She also experienced what no woman ever should, but so many do.

Decades before Everhart became a pioneering religious leader, she was raped twice, leaving her feeling ruined, the title of her memoir. The first rape was committed by a white hiker in Yellowstone Park the summer between her junior and senior years of college. The second rapist was a young black man in Michigan. Were these males—men who wouldn’t take no for an answer, who terrorized and physically violated women—“precious in God’s

sight?” Thankfully, all the women survived the home invasion, during which Everhart acted out a good-girl theology: “God loves good girls, so be good. Even now. Especially now. Be good and you will be rewarded.” Later, she and her housemates navigated steeper theological terrain: Why did this happen to them? Where was God? Who can they tell and what to do with the shame?⁹ Unlike the first rape that Everhart buried in her consciousness, this ordeal became public. Police were called to the scene and college authorities and family members were notified. This public knowledge contributed to a shift in how Everhart socially located herself in relationship to Christianity. Everhart interpreted that people glanced away from her because her purity had been stripped away and could not be restored. Years later, she questioned the internalized sanctification of the sexual-shame paradigm and came to realize that the only thing she was guilty of was “being born female in a man’s world.”¹⁰ The first time we spoke, Everhart shared how much she loved the biblical story of Tamar because it speaks to silence and shame and how women bear blame for what men do to them. The real travesty, according to Everhart, is that “Christian communities do not alleviate shame; they tend to increase women’s sense of shame.”¹¹ Everhart knew God loved her, regardless of how her faith community responded.

While Everhart remained a devout Christian woman, the sexual assault by a black man, along with her belief that God’s will could include women being involved in church leadership, contributed to her spiritual meandering from the Christian Reformed Church to a small Lutheran congregation and ultimately to the much larger and more inclusive Presbyterian Church. Her family of origin’s denomination, which governed their daily lives, had solved the “woman problem” by relegating them to men’s helpmates rather than God’s servants. The words of a female lecturer at Calvin College, who was denied ordination by their shared denomination, became important in Everhart’s life: “Christianity is a liberating force” and “Christianity has been used as a tool for patriarchal domination.”¹² Initially, the thought of leaving the Christian Reformed world, which was a bubble of whiteness—cars in the church parking lots sported bumper stickers that read “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much”—was daunting. Everhart wondered: “[W]here would I go? Who would I be? I was Dutch and Calvinist in the same way I was female—to the bone.”¹³ When she moved to Minneapolis after graduation, Everhart sought out and joined the Prince of Glory church, where people of different races worshiped together. She had been triggered while working as a waitress when a table of customers consisted of young black men eating breakfast; she found healing in a multiracial church when teenage boys arrived. “They were young and black and male,” she writes in *Ruined*, “But they were just people, singing. They weren’t potential rapists. And I wasn’t a potential rape victim. We were just children of God, singing. ... Elbow to elbow, week after week, our songs sanded away the jagged edge between us.”¹⁴ Later, she and her future husband sought out other multiracial congregations and made Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church in St. Paul their

spiritual home. Everhart saw, for the first time, vestments on a woman who was a candidate for the position of interim pastor. She learned that after the service there would be a vote about whether to hire her and was incredulous: “This church is going to hire a woman pastor. Today?”¹⁵ Everhart saw a path forward that before had been blocked by men-only religious leadership. Male-led Christian denominations concentrate the locus of power in men, some of whom use it to victimize women, including their own followers. Ordination, however, would not protect Everhart from sexual misconduct and abuse of power in her professional life.

Vonda Dyer, like Everhart and some of the other Christian women I interviewed, was shaken to the core by a man in whom she had put her trust, a trust that would ultimately be broken and betrayed. When we met at the Religious News Association conference for the “#MeToo in Sacred Spaces” panel in September 2018, we had both talked to communal leaders and journalists, but it was our first time speaking publicly to a large audience, and that created a bond that bridged our religious differences. “Would I have the courage to stand up to this man?” Vonda Dyer asked, fighting back tears, “And reveal his abusive patterns that maligned the very gospel that he preached to thousands for decades?”¹⁶ Fortunately, Dyer had not only the courage but also a strong faith in Christ that enabled her to bring down Bill Hybels, leader of Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest Evangelical Christian denominations in the world. The Willow Creek Global Network is streamed to six continents and 120 countries, in more than 60 languages.¹⁷ Whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, women who have been manipulated and sexually exploited by more powerful men, reevaluate our faiths to heal, and find paths forward on ground that is still reverberating from the aftershocks of our speaking out. When we call out the bad actors and share our stories, we gain power. It’s an unexpected but most welcome outcome.

Fighting for Justice

Christian women who called out men for sexual misconduct and abuse of power came up against the church’s long history of turning a blind eye to the mistreatment of women. Unlike in the criminal court system where women can be heard by a jury of their peers and look their abuser in the face, the church’s judicial systems provide no such basic provisions. The American legal system is far from perfect.¹⁸ Theoretically, at least, jurisprudence in the United States is intended to seek truth in pursuit of justice. Although certainly influenced by the construction of gender norms, lawmakers and practicing attorneys do not purport any moral or theological superiority as does the church. While the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spent much of her career overturning gender inequality, and legal scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon defined sexual harassment as sex discrimination, a human rights violation, in the 1970s, the church remained basically untouched.¹⁹ Hence, Christian women

who sought accountability from church leaders, let alone support and healing, were often sorely disappointed.

A woman with experience in both realms, the American legal and the ecclesiastic systems, illuminates how Christian women faced unimaginable challenges from their faith communities. Everhart was in her last year at Calvin College (which became Calvin University in 2019) when she was brutally raped. She was living off campus with housemates when two men broke in, held the women who had been sleeping hostage at gunpoint, and robbed and raped them for hours. In the immediate aftermath of the assault, she found neither help nor healing on her Christian campus; when she approached pastors and professors, she was told to “move on.”²⁰ It would take many years for Everhart to overcome the church’s emphases on virginity that idolized sexual purity and for her to heed the call to ministry.²¹ In 1980, the perpetrators were caught, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to life in prison, a legal anomaly.²² She received a thank-you letter from the state of Michigan for her willingness to testify and restitution for the stolen goods, including the nightgown she was wearing when attacked. “The amount of the check was relatively small,” Everhart wrote years later, “but what it signified was enormous: a just society recognizes when harm has been done and makes an effort to compensate victims.”²³ While she found justice through the legal system, Everhart’s disappointment in her religious community increased exponentially when she fought for ecclesiastical justice after being assaulted by a pastor twice her age in her place of work.

Buoyed by her earlier therapeutic experience of an effective justice system, Everhart navigated more treacherous terrain after her immediate superior first groomed and then forcibly kissed her in the winter of 1992, less than two years after her ordination. Everhart had felt God called her to ministry and attended the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, an ecumenical graduate school formerly located in New Brighton, Minnesota.²⁴ Little did she or those who had recognized her pastoral gifts know that ministry was no safe haven for women clergy. She was working at the Penfield Presbyterian Church in a wealthy suburb of Rochester, NY, her family of four’s sole provider. Reverend Zane Bolinger initiated frequent lunches, proposed possibly becoming co-pastors (which would increase Everhart’s salary and position her to take over as senior pastor when he retired), brought her small gifts (e.g., jewelry belonging to his late wife and strawberries he hand-dipped in chocolate), and asked intrusive personal questions.²⁵ Everhart describes the power imbalance, which is painful to read and sadly familiar:

I felt like a hostage. Bolinger held power over me in every way. He was seasoned in ministry while I was inexperienced. He was financially secure while I was impoverished. He was well-connected in the denomination’s regional networks while I was unknown. He was established at the church while I was brand new. He was the boss while I was the subordinate. He was male, and I was not.²⁶

Although Bolinger did not point an actual gun at her, the paralyzing effect was similar. Countless Christian women have had similar experiences that rape their souls if not their bodies in their places of employment, their churches, and their faith communities.

Despite her precarious professional position, Everhart was emboldened by her hard work on behalf of her faith community and determined to bring the sexual assault to the attention of church leaders. Everhart was encouraged by colleagues to stay silent, yet she persisted. She had become a religious leader, in defiance of historical feminine ideals that valued women's submissiveness and our silence over our voices and rights to protect our own bodies and spirits. Everhart had already come to terms with the Virgin Mary's story, seeing in it the seeds of oppression for women who did not measure up on the purity scale; Everhart effectively redefined what it meant to be a "good girl," one who could inhabit a sexual body *and* be in service of the gospel rather than in defiance of it. She knew that the church culture subjugating women was not in keeping with her Christian faith that valued all bodies as gifts from God.²⁷ Everhart faced her abuser in front of the church's personnel committee that thought her abuser had a right to be there regardless of how uncomfortable it made her. One committee member insisted she had misunderstood that Bolinger felt only "pure Christian love" for her, and another opined that her previous trauma of rape, which Everhart had shared in confidence, made her "uniquely vulnerable."²⁸ It was a classic case of being treated as a "hysterical" woman, with no real accountability for the predator, who remarried shortly thereafter and was given a trip to the Holy Land as a wedding gift by the church. While Bolinger was nearing the end of his career and did not suffer any ill consequences resulting from Everhart's actions, her career took a downward turn as she moved to a much smaller, more conservative congregation where she became geographically bound for several years before serving multiple communities, six in total between 2000 and 2022, for various lengths of time in multiple states. She never got to serve a big church or have a prominent, permanent pulpit.²⁹ Yet, unlike some women who turn away from religion altogether, her faith remained strong as she redefined Christian leadership through her ministry work.

Christian women who experience sexual abuse from co-religionists could also experience what experts call "religious trauma" that leads to deconversion, or annexation from church and God; however, Ruth Everhart and the other women I interviewed transformed their faiths instead. Trauma therapist Teresa Pasquale casts a broad net in her definition of church pain, "As it relates to the experience of emotional, psychological, and spiritual injury, trauma in a religious context can be seen as any painful experience perpetrated by family, friends, community members, or institutions inside of religion."³⁰ Philosopher Michelle Panchuk seeks more specificity by defining religious trauma as having three common characteristics: (1) it is caused by something closely associated with the religion or by someone who represents the divine; (2) religion is perceived to have played a causal role by motivating

the perpetrator, justifying their behavior, or failing to forbid or protect against it; and (3) the survivor believes either that God is untrustworthy or that their religious community is unsafe. Panchuk argues that religious trauma can be religiously incapacitating, resulting in (non-culpable) failure to worship God, and suggests the survivor ought to deconvert.³¹ While there are certainly women who gave up on Christianity after being abused, which is perhaps a topic for another book, Vonda Dyer and Ruth Everhart sought healing through religion and their relationship with God.

Twenty years after Rev. Bolinger forcibly kissed her, Everhart realized that she had a festering wound that would not heal unless she called out his sexual misconduct. “I think God wants us to heal ourselves,” Everhart says, “And I switched from being a victim to being my own advocate.”³² In 2012, she brought a suit for adjudication by filing charges against the Presbytery of Genesee Valley and the Presbytery of Geneva, both in upstate New York, where the misconduct occurred and where the defendant lived. Bolinger lawyered up and tried to force her to sign a document that she would not pursue civil action. The statute of limitations had run out, so it was a moot point; besides, Everhart sought vindication through the Presbyterian Church-USA, not the state. A committee was formed to address what became a lengthy process with many written documents exchanging hands via mail. Everhart was asked to drop the suit on the basis that she was wasting church resources. “I prayed about that,” she remembers, “and said I wasn’t the one who hired an attorney. He’s the one who is wasting the church’s resources.”³³ Eventually, Bolinger pled guilty and received an admonishment that was read aloud, although neither defendant nor plaintiff was present. Everhart recounts the decision as being anticlimactic and proforma, however, she achieved her goal of preventing him from controlling the narrative and more. In December 2017, following on the heels of writing an award-winning 2016 memoir about her earlier rape experience and spiritual journey, Everhart penned “A Pastor’s #MeToo Story,” which was published in the *Christian Century*.³⁴ And in 2018 the Book of Order, the PC-USA’s guide for governance that includes Rules of Discipline, incorporated new language related to sexual misconduct and abuse of power. Everhart may not take any credit for this change—as women we are socialized not to seek recognition—but I am certain she deserves it.

Christian Feminism

In addition to healing themselves and finding love based on equality, women are redefining Christianity. Ashley Easter grew up in the Independent Fundamental Baptist denomination. Her father is a deacon and her grandfather was a pastor. She was home schooled, as was customary, and did not know many people outside of the church. Easter describes her experience as “cult-like” with similarities to the Quiverfull Movement and Stay-at-Home Daughter Movement. The culture was focused around keeping unmarried

women at home to learn homemaking skills, submitting to their fathers until they got married, and then submitting to their husbands. Michelle and Bob Duggar, who have twenty children, identify as Independent Baptist, but their lifestyle resembles that of “Quiverfull Christians” who believe that God will only give them as many children as they can handle. Based on Psalm 127 that states, “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him” and “Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them,” Quiverfull leaders preach “biblical patriarchy.”³⁵ Biblical patriarchy strikes me as the original source for gender discrimination that contributes to gender-based violence.

The theological underpinning of Fundamentalist Baptist Christianity is complementarianism, basically the view that God assigned different but complementary roles to men and women. Christian complementarianism makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up because, while it portends to value men and women equally, it supports only men having power in church leadership and in the family. Complementarianism includes the view that “a man should love his wife as Christ loved the church, and a woman should submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ.”³⁶ Although those who adhere to complementarianism, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, may claim that the different gender roles are of equal value, gender distinction creates a hierarchical relationship with disproportionate power. Moreover, as communications scholar Kristin Peterson writes, religion (mostly Christianity) is used “to make claims about who has inherent value based on immutable characteristics, like gender, sexuality, or skin color.”³⁷

It is nothing short of a miracle when a person raised in an environment that teaches women to be subordinate to men realizes her own worth and breaks free. Easter’s family and church condoned a courtship with an abusive and controlling man; they told her her “You must submit!” because it fit their ideals. Fortunately, instead, she ended the relationship. When she was 21, a friend introduced her to a man who loved religion as much as she did and believed women should have equal opportunities as men, not be submissive to them as she had been raised. That such men existed was a revelation to Easter. Easter began reading about Christian feminism and realized: “Whoa! I’ve been lied to my whole life.”³⁸ From that moment on, she developed her own understanding of, and relationship with, Christianity. Easter used her babysitting money to buy a car, escaping from her family and community.

The more Easter learned about Christian egalitarianism, also called Christian feminism, the more she realized that mainstream evangelicalism’s patriarchy is abuse. As she tore down the walls of the cult in which she had grown up, Easter looked for a new form of Christianity based on equality between sexes. She found it in the Progressive Christian Alliance, eventually becoming an ordained minister. While Easter does not have a brick-and-mortar church, she teaches and ministers to people far and wide who are victims of abuse and patriarchal oppression through her publications and speaking engagements. Her identity as a Christian still includes Jesus but her beliefs are more expansive, including science, and her spiritual practice is



Figure 3.2 Ashley Easter. Permission to publish courtesy of Ashley Easter. Photo credit: Kendra Knight Photography.

intuition. She knew, even as a young girl, that something was wrong when her inner voice was being squashed by religion; girls and women are not encouraged to listen to their intuitions, rather to listen to men. “Intuition is the enemy of patriarchy,” Easter quips. The friend of intuition? Justice. Easter explains: “My path to justice is sharing my story, therapy, deconstructing my faith and reconstructing it in a healthy way.”³⁹ Her persistence is inspiring.

Easter became a vocal activist, calling out the Southern Baptist Convention for years of abuse, both sexist and racist. Beginning on February 10, 2019, the *Houston Chronicle* began publishing a six-part series detailing decades of abuse by pastors and other church leaders, and cover ups, that left more than 700 victims in its wake.⁴⁰ Apparently, it took making sexual abuse public in a very big way to get the SBC to finally act. In June 2019, a

resolution was passed at the annual meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, titled “On the Evil of Sexual Abuse” in response to the “new revelations,” deploring abuse, apologizing for not cultivating a culture of protection from it, condemning leaders who protected perpetrators, and defining sexual abuse as not only a sin punishable by church but also by the civil government. Repentance and forgiveness were also detailed illustrating the SBC’s apparent preoccupation with how to recover from the revelations.⁴¹ Yet the very definition of a resolution limits its power: “A resolution has traditionally been defined as an expression of opinion or concern, as compared to a motion, which calls for action. A resolution is not used to direct an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention to specific action other than to communicate the opinion or concern expressed.”⁴² Like the Reform rabbis’ Code of Ethics discussed in Chapter 1, SBC’s resolution reminds me of the 1954 SCOTUS decision *Brown v. Board of Education* to desegregate public schools that declared segregated education as unconstitutional, inherently unequal. Southern Baptists value autonomy such that the only course of action the SBC has is to remove churches that are not in compliance with the resolutions. In February 2021, the SBC expelled two churches for hiring registered sex offenders as pastors. However, it also expelled two churches for affirming homosexuality.⁴³ The irony of condemning sexual misconduct while also discriminating against gender identity and sexual orientation makes me very glad to be Jewish. I can imagine though, that for devout Christians who believe homosexuality is a “sin,” there is no contradiction. The gender binary of male and female maintains its stranglehold.

While I didn’t ask Ashley Easter about her thoughts on LGBTQ rights, her focus is on how female-identified people are treated. “Women should be respected and honored at the SBC, which is not happening,” explains Easter.⁴⁴ The SBC refuses to keep a database of the abusers; and it has not implemented mandatory training for pastors, leaders, and seminary students for the prevention of sexual abuse. On the *Faith and Feminism* podcast episode “Confronting Abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention,” Easter talks about the hundreds of abuse victims in the Southern Baptist Church and the predators that are in the pulpits still. “Unfortunately, I think that while we’ve seen some small, maybe baby steps in the right direction, overall, there still just been a lot of words without action,” Easter observed, “Survivors, women, I don’t think they are any safer today than they were a couple years back.”⁴⁵ The published bulletin contains some strong language. Resolution 5 on abuse and pastoral qualifications states: “WHEREAS, Sexual abuse is an action repugnant to the teachings of Scripture and reprehensible even to those who are not believers; now, therefore, be it RESOLVED, That the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Nashville, TN, June 15–16, 2021, believe that any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office

of pastor; and be it finally RESOLVED, That we recommend that all of our affiliated churches apply this standard to all positions of church leadership.”⁴⁶ The permanent sanction looks, on the surface, to be progress. However, it remains to be seen whether SBC churches enforce the recommendation or ignore it. Often-times, religious organizations and institutions only do what they are required to do, not what their governing body merely recommends. It makes me wonder how much Christianity, or any religion that operates within a rigid hierarchical system, will truly change as a result of the #MeToo movement ... and how utterly exhausting it must be for change agents swimming against the status-quo current.

The efforts of women like Ashley Easter and Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi tell a different, proactive story. Easter launched the Courage Conference in 2016, convening survivors to describe their experiences, gain strength in knowing they are not alone, and heal together. That effort evolved into Courage 365, an organization created by survivors and for survivors that provides an online community of “understanding, inspiration, and empowerment.”⁴⁷ The weekly livestream show has two goals: end abuse and empower lives. Easter is an “unruly soul” who uses creative strategies to inspire positive change.⁴⁸ While the content is different, Easter’s use of digital media to advance her activism and the Muslim women’s use of digital media discussed in the previous chapter are similar. While Easter’s #MeToo work is primarily outside of organized Christianity, Bishop Moore-Koikoi is working to change the United Methodist Church from within. Like Vonda Dyer, we met at the Religious News Conference where she shared her “#MeToo in Sacred Spaces” experiences, as a lay leader and as an ordained clergyperson. When she attended her denomination’s annual conference as a young adult, Methodist clergymen including bishops created a culture of harassment, made comments about her body, and pulled her close for a hug and “holy kiss.” She learned to extend her hand and protect her chest; “It was as if I was walking a gauntlet at times,” Bishop Moore-Koikoi shared with the roomful of religion reporters.⁴⁹ The discrimination she faced, from being baptized at a time when the church was segregated (the all-black Central Conference was part of the Methodist Episcopal Church that later became the United Methodist Church in 1968) to heeding God’s call to serve as a religious leader only to be told “I don’t want to have a woman minister” by a beloved church elder.⁵⁰

Although her ordination did not prevent her from being sexually harassed, now by parishioners, it did change Moore-Koikoi’s perspective on her role as a Methodist leader. She recounts the hugs she avoided from parishioners that were “always too intimate” and “one particular parishioner who could not bring himself to call me reverend or pastor or even Cynthia. To him, I was ‘the little lady.’” Like Jewish clergy who experienced sexual harassment from synagogue members whose inappropriate comments illustrated their inability to accept female rabbis as *real* spiritual leaders, female Methodist bishops were victims of gender discrimination that manifested in misogynist comments and patriarchal behaviors. Author and retired pastor Josephine

Whitely-Fields explains in her book *Pioneer Black Clergywomen*, “There are people who identify with the pastor as a representative of Christ, and because Christ was male then they feel that a female cannot adequately be the spiritual representative.” Her response to those people? “Our call didn’t come from man. Our call came from God. Therefore, you or nobody else can tell me that I cannot answer the call to ministry.”⁵¹ Reading her words makes me feel like shouting “Amen, sister!” from rooftops all around the world. In 2018, Moore-Koikoi had been a Bishop for over two years and continued to be harassed. She observed, “No level of power or authority in the Church can insulate persons from sexual harassment.”⁵² The sexism Methodist women clergy experienced was compounded by racism from their earliest experiences.

Bishop Moore-Koikoi embraced the responsibility to, in her words “... keep boys and girls, women and men, safe from the sexual harassment that I experienced.” The need to protect people in one’s faith community is a heavy weight on her shoulders, a responsibility that should be distributed across all our collective shoulders. Although Moore-Koikoi identifies as an optimist by nature, she lamented: “I confess on behalf of the Church that for women we are still in a space that it is not a question of *if* but *when* they will be harassed.”⁵³ When I interviewed her a year and a half after our “#MeToo in Sacred Spaces” conference panel, we discussed the power dynamics that are inherent in any faith community. Organized religion reinforces tradition, what is familiar is comforting. But the reinforcement of tradition simultaneously perpetuates a power structure that lets some “in” and keeps some “out.” Bishop Moore-Koikoi explained how, as humans, we struggle to decipher between what we need to hold onto about tradition that helps us in our faith and that which people hold onto because it keeps them comfortable in their own power. The latter leads to the misappropriation of our faith to the oppression of people deemed to be “out.” She uses the example of keeping women from having leadership positions in the church. They were demonized and the oppressive behaviors were labeled as “God;” hence, speaking or going against any of the oppressive behaviors was considered speaking and going against God. Biblical texts were used to justify the objectification of women like they were to limit black people and their roles in the church.⁵⁴ White women began holding leadership positions and preaching back in the eighteenth century but it took a long time for them to ascend to the top rank; the first white woman appointed as a bishop was in 1980, followed by the first Chinese American woman (1982), and the first Korean American woman (1983).⁵⁵ In 1920, two men became the first black Methodist bishops in the United States; however, they were limited to preside over black churches.⁵⁶ While the first black woman was ordained in 1958, it wasn’t until 1984 that the first black woman was appointed to the role of bishop in the United Methodist Church.⁵⁷ Bishop Moore-Koikoi identifies the intersectionality that existed—and still exists in some sectors—of a woman being in power, a black person in power, as antithetical to our faith traditions. The oppression of black

women was equated with the Methodist faith and when people viewed as “good“ oppressed black people, that, too, was seen as part of the faith. “We know better now how to treat women. How to treat people of color,” Bishop Moore-Koikoi concludes. Learning how involves extricating the oppression from the faith, something that is easier for many people to do intellectually than to do spiritually.⁵⁸ Her observation rings true to my ears; it also helps explain why moving the needle on sexual misconduct and abuse of power is so hard in every faith community.

White Privilege

Interviewing Christian women of color forced me to think more deeply about my own white privilege, white Christian women’s privilege, as well as the relationship between the Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movements. Emphasizing rising consciousness about police brutality after the murders of unarmed black men and women by police, historian Marc Dollinger wrote in a new preface to his 2018 book *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* that Jews benefitted from white supremacy. Brandeis University Press refused to publish the book with the preface, reprinting it without one and returning the copyright to the author instead. Dollinger had made a very public *mea culpa* when Jews of color pointed out that his book erased the history of Jews of color by using the ashkenormative lens, a form of Eurocentrism that sees Jews as white people, and his new preface sought to further correct the historical record. The backlash against his association of a religious minority targeted by antisemites with the same ideology that fuels advocates of antisemitism caused an uproar in the academy and the Jewish community. One of the Brandeis book series editors claimed that implicating Jews in white supremacy disproportionately weighted racism in their social and economic mobility.⁵⁹ However, the historical record is more complex than this simple binary; it illustrates that racism and antisemitism are not mutually exclusive. For example, the fact that Jews owned slaves does mean that Jews were not also refused jobs, prevented from studying at universities, or living in certain neighborhoods due to their being Jewish. Crediting what he learned from Ilana Kaufman, the founder and executive director of the Jews of Color Initiative, Dollinger asks: “To what extent did the privileged racial status of most American Jews inform their historical experience, even as antisemitism sometimes played a limiting role?”⁶⁰ Excellent question.

Trained as a gender historian, I acknowledge that I addressed other categories of analysis such as race and class to a limited degree in my scholarship to date. This realization, specifically that my books on Jewish intermarriage focused on white Jews, some of whom married brown and black people, made me eager to better understand the experiences of women whose intersectional identities combined multiple systems of oppression: sexism and racism. It also heightened my awareness that my co-religionists



Figure 3.3 Sophia Nelson. Permission to publish is granted courtesy of Andrew Sample Photography.

of color suffered a triple oppression: sexism, racism, and antisemitism. Yet while black Christian women and Jewish women of color faced the dual systems of oppression of sexism and racism, it seems that in every case race is the strongest factor in a woman's #MeToo experience.

Black Christian women have faced a similar yet different kind of social erasure in the #MeToo movement as have Jews of color in American history and the Jewish community. Sophia Nelson started the #UsToo hashtag in November 2017 to make black women and racial discrimination visible in the #MeToo conversation; she argued that when Americans hear “black,” they think men, and when they hear “women,” they think white women.⁶¹ The

#UsToo hashtag, which I've adopted as the title of this book, serves as a critically important reminder that white women's experiences should not be seen as the norm for understanding sexual violence against all women.⁶² Nelson is educated as an attorney, a successful journalist, frequent television commentator on CNN, and author. She is also a member of the Community Church movement, which according to Wikipedia is a community of churches that consider themselves post-Protestantism, post-denominational, and "demonstrate Christian unity through diversity."⁶³ I asked her about sexism and racism; her response illuminates the extra mental burden black women face working in predominantly white environments. "As a woman of color, you learn to navigate these things differently than white women because of a double whammy: race and gender. The problem of being a black woman is that you never know what's what. Are they coming at you because you're a woman or because I'm black?" While I could predict that men approached me in Jewish spaces because I am a woman, it never had occurred to me to think that they were approaching me because of the color of my skin. Nelson's first book, *Black Women Redefined: Dispelling Myths and Discovering Fulfillment in the Age of Michelle Obama*, sought to overturn the negative stereotypes about black women. She tells me how, unlike white women, black women do not have the luxury of being seen by white men as sisters, daughters, nieces, and wives; they are the "other." They are seen as "angry, too strident, mouthy, too mouthy," in Nelson's words. And yet they are also caught in the American construction of gender that limits women's primary roles to wife and mother. Nelson tried to show an alternative role, that of a successful black woman. Although she is disappointed never to have had children, Nelson emphasizes: "I wanted people to know that black women have a unique history in this country. Successful black women—I wanted people to see beyond the stereotypes and myths, we're human beings, we want the same things as our white sisters."⁶⁴ College-educated, ambitious black women can choose different paths and have, all the way to the White House.

Interviewing conservative black Christian women was a new experience for me and I was surprised that they seemed more interested in my Jewishness than either my whiteness or my politics. When I first spoke with Sophia Nelson, she opened with "I'm intrigued about your speaking about this as a Jewish woman." I explained how I believed that we could make more progress by working together, across religious and color lines, to help our communities heal from sexual abuse and protect women moving forward. Nelson strongly agreed, which meant a lot to me given that she wrote a best-selling book that encourages women to support each other the way that men are trained to do rather than tear each other down, as women have been socialized to do. Although we agreed on that point, we were diametrically opposed politically. She described, however, reaching a tipping point because of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony and calling for Brett Kavanaugh to withdraw his nomination for Supreme Court Justice. "Speaking as a lifelong

moderate, Republican woman, this is over. ... Many of us supported Kavanaugh, because of his reputation and character as a family man, great husband, and devoted mentor of his female law clerks. But Kavanaugh cannot serve on the high court with credibility now. This is not 1991, this is 2018 and a whole lot has changed on how we see sexual assault, and how we treat victims of such assault.”⁶⁵ If only Nelson’s words had had the desired result. Kavanaugh’s confirmation felt like a huge slap in the face to the #MeToo movement and those of us who had come forward. It demonstrated that Republican political power was far louder than our emerging voices.

Initially, the #MeToo movement did not win many points with Nelson, and she admitted to not being a big fan. She admired what Tarana Burke did more than a decade earlier, but she was frustrated by the fact that it wasn’t until a white woman, actress Alyssa Milano, put it on social media that people really paid attention. Nelson’s #UsToo differentiated between the new uproar over the sexual harassment and assault of famous white women from the long history of sexual abuse and discrimination against women of color in the workplace. As a twenty-something law school student working as an intern at the Republican National Convention, she had to rebuff the advances of an older, married, and very powerful man. His obvious interest, physical presence wherever she happened to be, and invitations to dinner were inappropriate, to say the least. He blackballed her but, to this day, Nelson will not say his name publicly. #UsToo did not go viral in the same way that #MeToo did, raising questions about whether the movement is as inclusive as some contend or as it certainly should be. In May of 2018, Nelson told Bonnie Chiu of *Forbe’s* magazine that #UsToo was a response to the lack of attention to race in the #MeToo movement, and Chiu described it as a “wakeup call.” Millions tweeted #MeToo and thousands tweeted #UsToo but Chiu’s most salient point is that the 4.4 billion people without internet access and the digital gender gap of 12% fewer women than men among those who do have access would need to be addressed.⁶⁶ Until then, true gender equality remains a distant goal. Likewise, racial equality has yet to be achieved in America. The interconnecting systems of oppression make deeply entrenched gender discrimination and racism that much harder to uproot.

I thought I was “woke,” but I was wrong. I studied slavery, the Civil War, and the many failures of Reconstruction while pursuing my master’s at Harvard and later my PhD at Brown University. I read *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* by historian Jacqueline Jones and wrote a paper titled “Jumping the Broom: Marriage Before and After Emancipation.” And yet, I had never thought deeply about how the “double whammy,” as Sophia Nelson described it, impacted black women’s lives and what that meant for them professionally. Unless I wore a Star of David necklace or a *kippah* (skull cap), no one knew I was Jewish. Nelson, the granddaughter of a black man and a white

woman, did not have the privilege of “deciding” whether to show her skin color. Nelson’s point about the invisibility of black women in America hit home when I learned—long after participating in a Black Lives Matter rally and Juneteenth celebration—that the BLM movement was started by three black women. In 2013, the phrase “black lives matter” was first used by Alicia Garza in a Facebook post in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman who shot an unarmed black teenager named Trayvon Martin; Garza, along with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, launched the #BlackLivesMatter campaign that same year. Protests around the globe followed, as did numerous deaths of innocent black men and women.⁶⁷ The invisibility of black women and my own racial reckoning are compounded by the American obsession with heroes of all kinds.

A Woman’s Worth

In the winter of 2018, I was mesmerized by the victim impact statement by Olympian Aly Raisman during the legal proceedings of Larry Nassar. Raisman’s family had belonged to the same synagogue that my daughter and I belonged to for many years; Shira had her autograph from a chance encounter at a Japanese steakhouse in the Boston area. As I watched Raisman cut Nassar down to size, and listened to her fierce words, I thought to myself: if this young white Jewish woman can take down a pedophile physician and USA Gymnastics coach in a packed courtroom televised for all to see, I have to be able to speak my truth about the sexual misconduct and abuse of power by a sociologist of American Jewry! In my mind, the gymnasts who made it to the Olympics were the star players in the legal battle against Nassar; it was they who must have started the wheels of justice rolling. Yet just as I did not know that black women started the #BLM, it was not actually an Olympian who called out USA Gymnastics and Michigan State for failing to protect young gymnasts but a woman most people had never heard of who brought the world’s attention to Nassar and his enablers.

The day I wrote these words, my Apple news updates informed me that the FBI had seriously botched the case against Nassar, enabling him to abuse dozens more young women before standing trial.⁶⁸ The words of Rachael Denhollander came flooding back to me. “*It’s never a choice. Not really. When it’s the only way to make things stop, it’s not really a choice.*”⁶⁹ How many times have I felt exactly that way when people thanked me for calling on the Jewish community to address its #MeToo problem? Or when someone told me how brave I was for blowing the whistle on Steven M. Cohen and all I could think was that it was not courage that compelled me but the knowledge that his serial predation would not stop unless I said something? Denhollander’s name may not be familiar, as are the Olympians’ names who won medals such as Aly Raisman, Jordyn Wieber, and Simone Biles. However, it is to Denhollander that society owes a debt of gratitude for



Figure 3.4 Rachael Denhollander. Permission to publish courtesy of Rachael and Jacob Denhollander.

sacrificing the privacy of her personal life and family for the sake of finally making sure that Nassar can cause no more harm. A gymnast named Larissa spoke out about Nassar to her Michigan State coach as early as 1997; however, she was not taken seriously. It was not until Denhollander heeded the call for truth and justice in 2016 by speaking to members of the media, making other gymnasts feel safe speaking their truths about being assaulted by Nassar because they would not be alone, that people finally listened.⁷⁰ When we spoke, I felt a tremendous spiritual kinship with Denhollander—despite our different religious beliefs—and was super curious to learn about how

she viewed the relationship between her deep Christian faith and her journey coming forward.

Denhollander was still in litigation with USA Gymnastics at the time of our interview, and my focus was on adult women not the minors who Nassar abused, so we focused our conversation on the Christian community. She was raised in a nondenominational church, close to Independent Baptist, and describes her current faith as a conservative, evangelical form of Christianity. “When it comes to the Christian community,” Denhollander tells me regarding sexual misconduct and abuse of power, “it starts with our theology because by and large that’s what drives the problems in the church.”⁷¹ At first, I was surprised to hear a devout Christian woman tell me that the root of evil in the church is religious beliefs. But the more I listened to her, the more I saw the similarity between faith communities. It isn’t the actual religious tenets that create trouble; rather it’s the misinterpretation and manipulation of them that causes pastors to overlook abuse in their churches, deters women from calling out abusers, and creates environments that are neither safe nor, quite frankly, Christian. Denhollander describes the outsized power that elevates male Christian leaders: “In the Christian faith, we see pastors to have a degree of authority over their congregants,” she says. “In evangelical circles often-times we don’t recognize the limits of that authority.” When women try to speak out about abuse by pastors they are viewed as “bringing down a godly man.” Bringing down a godly man is seen as a direct affront to the teachings of Christ. Fortunately, Denhollander sees straight through the hypocrisy; “It defies the gospel of Christ when we do not call out abuse and enable abuse in our own church.”⁷² The fact that only men can be pastors in her denomination compounds the power dynamics; the man always has more communal power than the woman.

Despite that the man is more often the victimizer and the woman the victim, because of the disproportionate value placed on men’s words, men’s lives, and men’s careers, the court of public opinion is skewed in their favor. Even in the case of a serial pedophile like Larry Nassar, what Denhollander calls “Community protectionism” has a strong influence. “... I wasn’t surprised to frequently see Larry portrayed on social media and in news reports by his friends as the real victim,” Denhollander shared in her book *What’s a Girl Worth*, “while my parents and I received no mercy ...”⁷³ Before the #MeToo movement, when women tried to speak out about Steven M. Cohen, they were told: “It would ruin *his* life, *his* career!” Sylvia Barack Fishman, one of Cohen’s enablers, made this outrageous comment to the journalist investigating the allegations against him: “In the current hypersensitive environment, it is easy to pathologize what might be construed as ordinary behavior,” she said referring to the #MeToo movement. “This ironically may serve to valorize victimhood.”⁷⁴ Philosopher Kate Mann explains the disposition to sympathize with men’s pain over women’s: “The tendency to forgive privileged men their sins—on the ostensible grounds of either his vulnerability to us, or ours to

him, putting him in a no-lose position—is connected to our hostility to female victims.”⁷⁵ Coupled with what Manne calls himpathy, “the excessive sympathy shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence,” is the lack of understanding about how women who are abused respond to trauma.⁷⁶ Men benefit from gender favoritism while women suffer from gender discrimination.

There is a social misconception that a traumatized person would report what happened to them immediately and that if they were *really* abused the story would easily spill from their lips. The lack of immediate reporting has been used against plaintiffs by defense attorneys. But telling anyone right away is, in fact, rarely the case. Someone who is betrayed by someone they trusted, whether a member of the clergy, a coach, or a senior academic, questions themselves, questions what happened, questions whether anyone will believe them, and knows that once they tell other people, their experience becomes engraved in stone. I have no doubt that one of the reasons many women never report being sexually harassed or assaulted is because they do not want what happened to them to define them. Trauma is not merely something that can be written down or purged through spoken words. It is imprinted on our bodies, engrained into every fiber of our being. Coincidentally, Denhollander and I had both read the book *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk. We discussed how the body remembers and the inadequacy of clergy who think that forgiving and forgetting will heal a wounded soul. “In reality,” Denhollander says, “trauma is not just a mind wound. It affects our biology, neurology, everything.”⁷⁷ I agree. And as deeply traumatized as I’ve felt and been, as many nightmares I’ve had and countless times I’ve jumped because someone came up unexpectedly behind me, I can only imagine the trauma of having one’s first sexual experience at age 15 be at the hands of a monster. And I cannot even imagine how women more religiously observant than I, whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, come to terms with the fact that their right to their own physical purity was stolen from them. Everhart explained it this way: “Because my conservative religious upbringing taught that women should guard their sexual purity above all else, I believed that being raped had damaged me beyond repair. I struggled with feelings of shame and worthlessness. It took a decade to recover my sense of self and rebuild a new sort of faith, one that took evil into account.”⁷⁸ I am deeply indebted to women like Ruth Everhart and Rachael Denhollander who prove that, despite going through hell, they cannot only heal themselves and reclaim their relationships with their faiths; they also teach others how to, thereby changing their extended communities. Thank you, my spiritual sisters!

I realize that the most important thing that I share with my sisters of other faith backgrounds is an unwavering commitment to truth, *even* when it comes at great personal expense and despite that it means holding up a mirror to our communities so that they cannot avoid seeing it any longer. In her presentation

at the Valued Conference in March of 2019, Denhollander told the audience that reports of sexual assaults were more numerous on church property or by church leaders in Protestant churches than there are in Catholic churches, “we just don’t do a good job tracking them.”⁷⁹ Her sobering words made the Protestant audience visibly wince. Part of what makes the comparison between different churches so distressing is that the global population of Protestants is significantly smaller than Catholics, 37 percent compared to 50 percent. In the United States, there are more Protestants than Catholics, 65 percent compared to 43 percent in 2018–2019; however, both populations have declined as Americans identifying as religious “nones” have increased.⁸⁰ The Presbyterian Church-USA does not track any cases; no mechanism exists at the national level to collect or analyze data, which inhibits learning from the past or any improvements at the local Presbytery level.⁸¹ Marie Fortune, founder, and director of the Seattle-based Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence reported that a 1992 analysis of surveys of Protestant ministers from five mainline denominations revealed that 39 percent had had sexual relationships of some type with congregants, 12 percent of which included sexual intercourse. When journalist Debra Nussbaum Cohen reported in 1996 that experts on clergy sexual misconduct estimated that the incidence of sexual exploitation was the same among rabbis as Protestant ministers, many leaders across the Jewish denominations disagreed.⁸² However, the independent investigations launched by the Reform and Conservative movements’ religious leaderships in 2021 eventually found that the problem of sexual misconduct and abuse of power was more widespread than the communities originally thought or wanted to believe.⁸³ Christian women like Ruth Everhart, Vonda Dyer, Ashley Easter, Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, Sophia Nelson, and Rachael Denhollander force faith communities to face the truth, even when that truth is ugly. While women lead the charge, some Christian men understand that fighting these systemic and structural problems is not a “women’s issue” and are working alongside us.

There are male allies who have been fighting for and alongside women to right the wrongs of Christian leaders and the church, and yet the wrongs continue. Boz Tchividjian, the grandson of televangelist Billy Graham is one such man. Just two months after the #MeToo movement began, Tchividjian wrote in *Soujourners* magazine about his 20-year experience confronting sexual misconduct in churches and faith-based organizations. He became convinced that, “abuse within the church will only end when professing Christians stop distorting Jesus for the purposes of excusing abusive behavior and silencing the abused.”⁸⁴ The distortions included: empowering and idolizing abusing Christian leaders because of all the “great” things they do; celebrating institutions that silence and sacrifice the individual; silencing individuals by calling their cries for help as sinful “gossip;” covering up abuse within churches to allegedly “protect the reputation of Jesus;” and exhorting victims to “forgive and move on.” Tchividjian is also a law

professor and was the founding executive director of the nonprofit GRACE, the Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment, until he stepped down to focus on his private law practice representing survivors of sexual abuse.⁸⁵ He lamented: “For too many precious souls, inside the church is always winter, but never Christmas. God gives me great hope that one day light will indeed overcome darkness and there will be no more sexual abuse.”⁸⁶ I certainly share his hope; however, I do not yet see how sexual abuse by clergy will be eliminated entirely unless Christian religious bodies centralize reports of sexual abuse from the local level to the national one. The tireless work of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), founded in 1988 by Barbara Blaine and the largest self-help organization for clergy sex abuse victims with 25,000 members, has helped many people heal and it continues advocating for change and justice; yet the need to protect the vulnerable is ongoing.⁸⁷

What strikes me about the Christian women who were among the first to speak out is that their impact is on the cultures within their faith communities, which then can impact religious systems and structures. Speaking with Reverend James S. Evinger helped me to understand why. Evinger has been involved in sexual misconduct cases in religious communities since 1995, including Everhart’s, and has been an expert witness in five civil suits. He explains the lack of structure and formal process in the Presbyterian Church faith communities. There is no hierarchy and no procedural law; without them, it is difficult to apportion responsibility. The national church does not track the number of cases every year or anything regarding disciplinary cases, hence what plays out at the local presbytery level is different from one to the next. As a result, those pursuing change and justice must initiate the same conversation repeatedly. Evident in his voice is frustration caused by the loss of institutional memory: “How do we pass along the lessons that we’ve learned? How do we convey best practices?” In seminary, ministers-to-be are tested on their knowledge of the Presbyterian Book of Order, but until recently it didn’t contain anything about clergy misbehavior. When women say #ChurchToo and share their truths, they draw attention to the patriarchy, misogyny, and status of women in their faith communities. Reflecting on these issues causes cultural shifts such that previously ignored behavior is now more easily recognized and identified as injurious. That increase in awareness enables church leaders to bring about some much needed albeit incremental change. Evinger says, “In terms of the institutional stuff, the church law stuff, that baseline has shifted; it’s nowhere near where it needs to be but every time we start, we start a little bit farther down the road.”⁸⁸ Progress is slow in Evinger’s denomination yet definitely ahead of some other Christian denominations.

Neither the Greek Orthodox nor Mormon communities seem to have changed, at least not noticeably. Although one might think it would be easier for white Christian women who are members of the majority religion, for whom neither antisemitism, Islamophobia, nor racism were factors, sexism

and state-level jurisprudence plagued them as it did all women. Greek Orthodox women are part of the 200 million Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide, 1.8 million of whom reside in the United States and nearly half identify as Greek Orthodox.⁸⁹ White nuns who took to social media claiming #ChurchToo and sued the Greek Orthodox church after complaining about sexual harassment by a priest were disenfranchised by the ministerial exception that prevents claims against a religious institution by its employees. Elizabeth Brandenburg and Maria Kallis, Greek Orthodox nuns who went by Mother Foteini and Sister Theonymphi, were sexually harassed by Father Gerasimos Makris and retaliated against by other religious leadership, including another nun. Their case went to trial in June 2021 and the claim of gender discrimination was dismissed because of the ministerial exception clause. Although other claims stood, it is unclear as of this writing what, if any, justice will eventually be served.⁹⁰ Likewise, the few Mormon women who dared to call out sexual abuse by religious leaders and to distinguish purity from personal worth did not make nearly the impact of some of their Christian siblings. As members of the Church of Latter-day Saints, Mormon men and women are instructed to obey their leaders, not to question them; women are not decision-makers in the LDS Church without male approval. Hence, male church leaders are more inclined to believe male perpetrators than female victims.⁹¹ The 2019 refusal by the LDS Church to rebaptize a devout Mormon woman who attends church religiously shows its resistance to change that would grant women any control or power. Lavina Fielding Anderson was ex-communicated in 1993 for writing an article describing episodes she called “ecclesiastical abuse” of LDS intellectuals. Before the term “intersectionality” was widely used Anderson wrote, “I consider myself simultaneously a loyal Latter-day Saint, an intellectual, and a feminist. My identity involves all three elements. I cannot truncate my life by excising one or more elements in a misguided search for simplicity.” Her commitment to equality, illustrated by expressions of concern about barring LGBTQ couples from participation and women from the male-only priesthood, likely undermined the support she had to be reinstated. Anderson’s faith is strong, even in the face of a religious body that rejects her: “... the Lord wanted all of me, even the parts that the church did not want and could not use,” she wrote.⁹²

The struggles of ordinary, non-celebrity white Christian women from these faith communities (and no doubt many others) may not bear the scars of racism or nativism, but their efforts to break the silence in their faith communities only to be met with resistance, gaslighting, or church discipline for reporting gender discrimination, sexual violence, or other forms of ecclesiastical abuses illustrate how their #MeToo experiences are no less harrowing, their voices no less necessary, than Muslim, Jewish, and women of colors’ voices of all religious identities. Their only solace is that the #MeToo movement gives them the language to identify what was done to

them as wrong, unethical, and morally reprehensible, if not illegal, and distinguishable from their own dignity as human beings created in the divine image.

Although our religious beliefs are stridently different—Jesus plays no role in my Judaism as it does in Ruth Everhart’s Christianity, for example—it was interesting to discover how much we had in common. We pushed past our individual and private traumas to take part in the collective trauma of our respective communities to change them in ways that would be more in keeping with religious values. Both Everhart and I had reached the milestone age of a half-century by the time we each called out the abuse. When she was 51, Everhart attended CREDO, an in-person conference focused on pastors’ well-being and renewal.⁹³ While there, she realized how much of her life had been spent reacting to the times when she had been physically and, in the case of Bolinger, spiritually violated. She brought action against him the following year. Likewise, I was 51 when I realized I could stay silent about Cohen no longer. We had also become mothers who wanted better for our daughters. Whether it was Everhart’s “pure Dutch stubbornness” that fueled her dogged pursuit of ecclesiastical justice or my own *chutzpahdik* (audacious) effort to bring attention to something rotten in Jewish circles, we are who we are today and changed our faith communities in part because of what we did. One should not need to be alive five decades before realizing that being free from sexual misconduct and abuse of power is a human right. It should be the birth-right of every child of every gender of every faith. Largescale cultural change remains our universal mission.

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Conclusion

“Justice, justice, you shall pursue”
(Deuteronomy 16:18)

“Your silence will not protect you.”
—Audre Lord

I have a love-hate relationship with all things technical. There are many days when I wish the internet had never been invented. Its existence and the technology that allows for multiple people located in disparate places to gather virtually created an occasion for me to be retraumatized in a bizarre way. However, it also has enabled me to become aware of something I might not have otherwise, or at least not in real time. One may think that sexual harassment and assault occur at a particular moment and then become history. But that couldn't be further from the truth. The truth is that whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, once someone has been victimized, the presence of the perpetrator or even merely their name can send a person into a tailspin.

In March 2020, I was registered to attend a webinar hosted by the Mordechai Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood. I was looking forward to it because the speaker was someone whose mind and writing I admired. These were the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had just moved my spring semester teaching online, and I was not yet fully accustomed to what safety measures might be in place or the lack thereof. “Zoom bombing” was not yet well known. A few minutes into the program, it happened: I noticed Steven M. Cohen was attending the same webinar. I was instantly nauseous. I sent a private message in the chat to the host, telling them I was very uncomfortable and asking that they please remove Cohen from the virtual space we were all sharing. No response. Then it got worse. He was eating his lunch for all to see. This was not a private brown bag meeting; it was a public program hosted by an esteemed center and attended by scholars and many others. Then it got even worse. Cohen made a verbal comment and the Zoom settings highlighted him so that a live, close-up image of him filled my computer screen that was less than two feet from my face. I slammed my

laptop shut. I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to erase him from my mind's eye but failed. Then I got mad. Why should I be the one to have to miss the rest of the program? Why was he—an admitted, serial sexual abuser our community had done the academic equivalent of defrocking—allowed to register, let alone comment?!

That was one of a series of moments when I became an activist. Rather than curl up and cry and shout angrily at the walls, I got in the words of Rebecca Traister, “good and mad.” I took a screenshot of him and posted it to my Facebook page, describing the experience, and raising the question of safety from serial sexual predators in virtual spaces. The host of the program apologized privately. The speaker reached out via private message expressing his concern for my well-being. These communications were after the fact and offered little solace because the damage had already been done. I understand that it is challenging to host a webinar, managing the technology, and simultaneously asking the speaker questions while monitoring the participants who want to engage. But that was not the point. More importantly, Cohen had brazenly illustrated that he did not care one iota that his presence might have a negative impact on his victims whose lives he had changed forever by his grooming, sexual misconduct, and abuse of power. And as a society, as a Jewish community, we had not yet learned how to ensure the psychological safety of survivors any more than we had the physical or the professional.

The following month, someone tagged me in a comment on a Facebook post about a soon-to-be-released anthology. One of the editors had excitedly posted the table of contents, claiming: “It is an amazing collection of scholars tackling a wide array of contemporary texts, and it will be both a textbook of contemporary Jewish thought and a statement about Jewish ideas in its own right. Check it out!”¹ Facebook users quickly noted that among the entries were three by known sexual harassers: Steven M. Cohen, Ari Shavit, and Leon Wieseltier. What in the world were the editors thinking? What was the director at Academic Studies Press thinking? The backlash on social media was swift with many people decrying the inclusion of known perpetrators of sexual violence against women. Among the most thoughtful comments were numerous posts by Avigayil Halpern, a young rabbinical student at the time, who seemed to read my mind. “This book has the power to create a reality as much as it describes it, and I don’t want to live in the reality where men who forcibly kiss their interns are given *kavod* (honor), which, like it or not, is one of the effects this book will have.”² I replied to the co-editors, Yehuda Kurtzer and Claire Sufrin: “I am joining the chorus congratulating you and the chorus questioning whether you, or the essay authors, explicitly discuss in your book the inclusion of sexual predators? If so, might you excerpt that here, now? Along with your right to give it advance publicity comes a communal responsibility; to celebrate your intellectual project without any nod to the #GamAni movement risks setting us back years.” Kurtzer’s response focused on his admiration for my bravery and courage, obviously trying to

placate me and others with the idea that their “book will help people understand, in retrospect, why certain ideas and individuals were viewed as hegemonic, and thus what it takes to challenge them in public and/or to stand up to their behavior.”³ More comments from concerned upstanders followed, including some by contributors to the volume who submitted their essays before the news about Cohen broke (or did not even realize his work would be included). Alan Brill, a professor at Seton Hall University and the contributor tasked with writing the essay about Cohen’s co-authored book, shared the project’s timeline and opined that there was still time to address this prickly issue in a yet-to-be-published book in the digital age and that “[i]t should definitely be addressed in the introduction.”⁴ Brill then messaged me privately, communicating that he had been sent the essay for revisions and could include three sentences about Cohen’s long history of misbehavior. He asked me for some succinct language and I provided it.⁵

Is a book, any book, really worth more than protecting people from harm? Social entrepreneur Shawn Landres, co-founder of the nonprofit Jumpstart that builds community and another contributor, underscored the lacuna in Kurtzer and Sufrin’s project: “Beyond commentaries directly naming and taking on patriarchal and ethno-racial tendencies in ‘canonized’ texts, how powerful might it have been to include essays challenging the very notion of canon and directly taking on the issue of what to do when the canonized texts—however intellectually compelling—were written by people whose behavior is the very opposite of saintly.”⁶ I was simultaneously appalled that scholars, like Kurtzer, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, and Sufrin who teaches Jewish studies at Northwestern University, would prioritize their anthology over a safer Jewish community and reassured that many other voices than mine objected to their choice. The revised introduction in the published volume included the co-editors’ nod to perpetuating harm—“We recognize and regret that the continued publication of the works of these individuals risks rehabilitating their reputations and also risks re-traumatizing the victims of their bad behaviors”—along with the rationalization that the Jewish communal conversation 1980–2015 could not be understood without “reckoning with this material.”⁷ While I can appreciate the additional contextualization, their insistence that no other authors’ works that addressed similar topics would suffice makes their argument fall flat and their regret empty of authenticity. No one gets to knowingly hurt people and claim that ideas warrant doing it, at least not in my ideal world.

When the phone rang on a Friday afternoon and I saw the name “Ellenson” on caller ID, I thought: this must be important. Rabbi David Ellenson was the person I turned to the day my op-ed article about Cohen was published; he was responsible for disinviting him from speaking on the Brandeis campus and opening the Title IX case that ultimately brought Cohen down. In addition, Ellenson had invited me to guest lecture in his

class on Jewish identity, served on the advisory board of a nonprofit I founded, and recommended me for jobs. He was, in short, one of my favorite people. The conversation started off with us exchanging pleasantries and then Ellenson shared the actual reason for the call. His wife had clued him in to the pushback thread about the anthology on Kurtzer's Facebook page. Ellenson wanted to let me know, before I saw it, that he also had a soon-to-be-released co-edited anthology that included Cohen. At first, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. How could the person I unreservedly trusted that day nearly two years earlier, who was, at the time, at the helm of the Jewish institution from which Cohen resigned in disgrace, include his words in a *new* publication?! He was focused on making sure the sections about feminism and gender were robust, Ellenson said, and it hadn't occurred to him that the article co-authored by Cohen would be problematic. I was stunned and could only express my gratitude for the heads up. We agreed to speak at greater length the following Wednesday.

During our next conversation, I expressed the harm I felt, the risk of restabilizing the pedestal from which Cohen had been rightfully knocked, that his work was not handed down from Sinai (a reference to the divinely gifted commandments), and my strong opinion that his inclusion was a mistake. Ellenson expressed regret and something akin to remorse. I couldn't help but feel that he, a very well-respected rabbi and scholar, was seeking absolution. It was an odd sensation given the difference in our ages and professional statuses. I asked if Ellenson would be willing to write an article expressing *mea culpa* as the historian Marc Dollinger had recently done (discussed in previous chapter). Dollinger wrote, "We need to open ourselves up to the possibility that our otherwise solid academic work plays out differently in the real world than we initially imagine. ... And when our writing causes even unintended harm, we need to rethink our assumptions."⁸ Ellenson declined; he wasn't sure including Cohen was a mistake. Would he consider writing an op-ed together? No. How about a program, a panel including both of us, and a moderator to discuss the matter publicly? Maybe. He suggested I craft the title for such a program and send it to him, which I did but nothing of the sort ever materialized. Ellenson kindly sent me an advance copy. When I opened *American Jewish Thought Since 1934* and read the biographical paragraph about Cohen and his co-author including the words "two of the most prominent analysts of the contemporary American Jewish scene," I felt physically unwell.⁹ Eugene Sheppard, the editor of the series, a peer, and my Brandeis colleague, reached out and asked to talk. He shared the debate that had ensued at the press about including Cohen, that a future printing would contain the missing contextualization regarding his sexual misconduct and abuse of power, and expressed feeling very uncomfortable. Again, I was put in the position of listening to someone's confession about actions that directly contributed to my being retraumatized. Muslim activist Mona Eltahawy wrote, "if you are not actively dismantling the patriarchy, you are

factually benefitting from it. Are you uncomfortable? Good. You should be. Discomfort is a reminder that privilege is being questioned, and this revolutionary moment is one in which we must defy, disobey, and disrupt the patriarchy, everywhere.”¹⁰ May the discomfort Ellenson, Sheppard, and maybe even Kurtzer felt on some subconscious level guide their future editorial decisions.

The year 2020 might have ended with my feeling a sense of despair were it not for the brilliance of speakers at the “#MeToo and the American Jewish Community” panel I was honored to moderate at the virtual AJS conference in December and the rapt audience attention. Organized by Holocaust historian Rafael Medoff, he and co-panelists Deborah Dash Moore and Susannah Heschel, the Frederick G. H. Huetwell Professor of History and Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan and the Eli M. Black Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, respectively, the session was an intellectual salve to my mental malaise. Heschel described the experiences of women in the field of Jewish studies. She focused on how men exclude women; the way that women are silenced, excluded, demeaned, and patronized as the exercise of power by men, as well as how sexuality (teasing, flirting, and complimenting) was linked to and an expression of power by men, even without physical touching or acts of criminality. For example, “looking a woman up and down as if she were naked, making a woman feel stupid by not calling on her, by telling sexist jokes” Heschel described these power plays as threats to women’s professional abilities and our exclusion. “They are,” she said, “an attack on the mind.” Cohen had attacked my mind, yes, that is exactly how it felt! “If the vagina represents sex, the mouth represents gender. The woman’s mouth as the portal of her mind remains the constant problem,” she explained. “The logic of misogyny, why does it persist?” Heschel asked. “Patriarchy, we can understand, is a kind of property that needs to be guarded, which means a jealous hoarding of privileges, which means in that context, that women are viewed as illicitly trying to gain power that we’re not entitled to, as if we are taking something away, stealing something, and as such women become morally untrustworthy in that kind of patriarchal logic. Misogyny—manifested through sexual assault, sexual objectification, gendered slurs, sexism, and oppression—seeks to uphold the patriarchal order. ... it is one of several strands of domination. Racism, homophobia, classism, ageism. Sexism justifies and rationalizes the patriarchal social order, while misogyny polices its norms.”¹¹ At long last, I understood the ramifications of my actions speaking out. I had challenged the patriarchal, misogynistic, social order in Jewish studies and the community.

Whether a Jewish, Muslim, or Christian woman speaks up about her abuse immediately, six years later, or decades after it happened, we must wonder: how might their lives have been different if they had not been sexually harassed, sexually assaulted, excluded from a conversation, or

passed over for a promotion because of their gender? How many women left jobs, exited fields or industries, moved from one side of the country to another, left their faith communities altogether, or gave up their religious beliefs entirely?

Jewish Activism

On January 6, 2021, a pro-Trump mob stormed the Capitol building in Washington, DC, violently protesting the election results that declared Joseph R. Biden the winner.¹² A few days later, that insurrection and Cohen's name would become linked. It was Sunday evening, January 10th, and I was trying to log off for the night when I received a direct message via Facebook from a concerned graduate student I had met once. They informed me that the private group, Jewish Studies Activist Network (JSAN), was circulating a statement calling for the immediate removal of Trump from office and Cohen was one of the signatories. The student objected and was told that including Cohen's signature was "markedly different" from having him on a panel, a Zoom, or in an anthology. The student tried to reason with the tenured female academic and asked if any survivors had been consulted? When that failed, they reached out to me with tremendous care.¹³ I immediately posted a long comment to the JSAN group, explaining yet again why including Cohen would be an affront to all of us who had come forward to alert the Jewish community that he had, effectively, acted similarly toward women as had the sitting American president they were seeking to oust. I also wrote that I would gladly sign the statement once admins confirmed that his name was removed.¹⁴ I did not receive a response but the next day, when the statement appeared in the press, my signature was on the list; Cohen's was not.¹⁵ That experience taught me that Jewish political activists, even highly intelligent ones who could spot antisemitism miles away, could have a blind spot regarding sexual misconduct and abuse of power they had not personally experienced. It was the fourth but not the last time I had to get involved in holding the #MeToo movement's line against allowing admitted offenders to participate in society as if they had done nothing egregious. How long would we have to remain vigilant? Two months later, I had an answer.

Through trusted colleagues, I learned that Steven M. Cohen, Brandeis professor emeritus Sylvia Barack Fishman, former director of contemporary Jewish life at the American Jewish Committee Steve Bayme, and the Jewish Theological Seminary's professor Jack Wertheimer were convening "off-the-record" Zoom gatherings to which they invited select scholars and communal leaders. Their stated goal was to "better understand a younger generation's way of understanding and articulating concerns about a host of issues, including but not limited to Jewish endogamy, fertility, connections to Israel, and Jewish institutional robustness."¹⁶ The senior foursome's

circulated document titled “The Emerging Critique of Jewish Community, Collectivity, and Vitality” decried what they called “the rise of identitarian politics and culture;” “the weaponization of victimhood;” and “inter-sectionality” as comprising an intellectual arsenal against their “case for Collective Jewish Vitality.”¹⁷ The full manifesto against all scholars who ever questioned Cohen et al.’s scholarship is disturbing to read, lists the names of those who had already attended meetings (without their permission, I later learned) in January and February to entice others to attend, and stokes the fire of fear about Jewish continuity—Cohen’s favorite drum to beat. Although my scholarship on intermarriage is not cited specifically, the reference to victimhood and one paragraph in particular reads as a response to my longstanding argument in favor of greater inclusion of interfaith couples and families in Jewish life and community: “Many of those critics who take issue with the Jewish survivalist agenda argue that the lack of Jewish engagement among large numbers of young people has much to do with a culture of exclusion on the part of the more highly engaged, traditional Jewish community, rather than a lack of parental commitment to Jewish life, minimal Jewish educational experiences and/or a whole range of personal experiences that have driven many Jews to find little value in Jewish public life.”¹⁸ I am not just a sideline critic of the survivalist agenda; my professional role as the interfaith specialist at United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the network umbrella organization for hundreds of congregations across North America, entails advocating for greater inclusivity in traditional Jewish spaces. Contesting the Jewish survivalist agenda at the expense of intermarried Jews and their families was, and is, my daily *modus operandi*. My sacred work is not contrary to Jewish survival; it is opposed to Jewish essentialism and exceptionalism. I celebrate the full diversity of Jewish identity and observance, which Cohen and his enablers certainly knew.

The public revelation on March 18, 2021 that members in good standing of the Association for Jewish Studies were participating in invitation-only meetings with Cohen sent virtual gasps throughout the Jewish community. Drs. Tobin Belzer, Arielle Levites, and Emily Sigalow shared the information first in a post to 5779: Year of the Jewish Woman (and Allies), a private Facebook group, and then on Belzer’s public Facebook page; Sigalow was invited to participate by Fishman, her former Brandeis mentor, and had declined. Interviewed about it, she explained: “For me, participating in these conversations did not feel benign—it felt like an act of forgiveness, of normalizing Steven’s voice and presence at the table.”¹⁹ The startling news called for immediate action by the top leadership of the AJS and by the AJS Women’s Caucus. Statements were swiftly drafted and published. The Women’s Caucus issued their statement first, explaining the historical context surrounding Cohen’s professional sanctioning and raising concerns about the gatherings: “This attempt to re-center and rehabilitate a disgraced and ostracized scholar has real consequences,”

wrote co-chairs Laura Limonic and Melissa Weininger. “The Women’s Caucus views these efforts as unacceptable and deeply troubling, because they jeopardize the position of junior and contingent scholars as well as re-victimizing women targeted by Cohen.”²⁰ The Women’s Caucus ably noted the unequal balance of power in relationships between senior and less secure scholars, encouraged scholars to consider the consequences of their actions, and stood with Cohen’s victims. The following day, the AJS Executive Committee issued its statement, acknowledging that it did not seek to regulate academic speech or academic freedom to engage in scholarly discussion and debate, while also noting that such meetings “are not without harms and risks,” citing the statement by the Women’s Caucus. Something about the Executive Committee’s statement felt off to me and I read it several times before realizing that it was signed by five out of six of AJS’s top brass; Noam Pianko, the president’s name, was noticeably absent.²¹ I queried in confidence and was told he had recused himself. Recused himself? Why would he do that? “Good question. Ask him” was the response. I could not imagine the reason and thought if I did not ask, perhaps no one would. On the morning of March 25, I wrote a simple email, copied my fellow AJS Sexual Misconduct Ombuds, asking Pianko why he recused himself from the statement. He replied that night, thanked me for reaching out, and explained: “I decided to recuse myself from the executive committee’s deliberations because I have a long-standing personal and professional relationship with Steven Cohen.”²² The words hit my consciousness like icicles falling off a roof and shattered on the ground around me. Six days later, on April 1, Pianko would admit that he not only had a relationship with Cohen, but he also had met with him, Bayme, Fishman, and Wertheimer for an hour over Zoom on March 11. Pianko wrote, in a letter to the AJS Board and forwarded to us ombuds: “In my leadership capacity, I should have realized the power dynamics at play and the ways that my involvement as AJS President, regardless of my own intention, would have an impact on members of our organization, especially vulnerable scholars. ... As President of AJS, I should have declined this invitation and will decline any other meetings with Cohen of any sort for the rest of my tenure. I apologize for my misstep in judgment.”²³ I could not believe my eyes. If only it was some strange April Fool’s Day prank. The shock was augmented by disgust, betrayal, and pain that shred my innards. Pianko requested, via another ombud, to reach out to me directly. I barely had enough mental energy to resist the gendered brainwashing urging me to accommodate his wish. Why should I listen to another man’s self-serving confession of guilt? I used the only power I had to decline.

The second half of March and the first half of April 2021 marked a period of historical significance for the American Jewish community, my professional organization, and for me personally. On the eve of its publication, I received a heads up from Rabbi Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, assistant dean at

Northeastern University's graduate school of education, that she and Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, scholar-in-residence at the National Council of Jewish Women, had written a Jewish clergy statement on the Cohen gatherings that they were circulating among their colleagues. I had never met either author of the statement in person, only virtually, and I had spoken with Rabbi Ruttenberg once by phone. Provided they got at least two hundred signatures, they would submit it to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the Jewish version of the Associated Press. The statement read:

We have become aware that conversations have been convened across the field of Jewish organizational life and sociology with Steven M Cohen—who is an admitted and unrepentant* perpetrator of sexual abuse—and his associates.

As Jewish clergy, we know that actively participating in the rehabilitation of unrepentant abusers is not value neutral, and we know that lifting up the work of unrepentant abusers is not value neutral.

We know that working to restore an unrepentant abuser to good standing without demanding of him the work of *tshuvah*, repair and repentance, hurts his victims, and hurts all victims of sexual abuse. Their pain is more important than his ideas.

Valorizing Cohen's work may be actively traumatizing to those who have been hurt. It forces some junior colleagues to decide between their integrity—and/or emotional well-being—and their professional standing. And doing so has significant impacts for communal thinking, priorities, and even programming and funding. We, as Jewish clergy, are obligated to push back on his attempts to reclaim this place in communal discourse.

Our community has taught, for decades, about the importance of being an upstander, about how neutrality is complicity.

This is an important moment for us to say, *hineinu*, we are here. We condemn the attempts to try to rehabilitate unrepentant abusers and we ask that all those who have participated in this attempt to cease doing so—and to take responsibility for their actions.

We stand with the victims of sexual abuse, harassment and assault.

We stand together to ensure that our sacred religious community is grounded in safety, respect and equity.

Today and every day.

*Until Cohen confesses, offers amends and apologizes to those he harmed, and does work towards transformation, he is considered unrepentant in the eyes of Jewish law and tradition.²⁴

I stared at my computer screen, blinking back tears. I felt seen. I felt heard. And I was deeply moved. The words “Their pain is more important than his ideas” lifted me up out of a very dark place and continue to sustain me today. With the shared Google document open, I wrote a reply of gratitude, simultaneously watching in awe as name after name was added to the

statement, the list growing steadily. By the morning of March 25th, there were more than 500 clergy signatures. The Jewish media headlines reported the moment: “Rabbis blast Jewish studies scholars for attempts to rehabilitate Steven M. Cohen.”²⁵ Among the signatures were Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism; Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly; and Rabbi Deborah Waxman, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rabbi Blumenthal, my boss at the time, also texted me a message of support that buoyed my spirits. After the articles were published, the Google document continued to grow to over 30 pages long with more than 730 signatures. Rabbinical and cantorial students also crafted a joint statement in solidarity.

While Jewish clergy made very clear where they stood and with whom, the Board of the AJS was divided between members who thought Noam Pianko could weather the storm he had created while continuing to be the President of the organization, and those who thought he should step down. Scholars who supported Pianko included past presidents of the AJS, who made noise about “academic freedom” and “cancel culture.” Scholars who thought Pianko had made an egregious error unbecoming to a leader of Jewish studies questioned his judgment, apparent deception of at least the Women’s Caucus if not the Executive Committee about his participation in the clandestine convenings, and sought to preserve the integrity of our learned society. My fellow ombuds and I were invited to participate in a meeting to be held on April 11th with the AJS Executive Committee including the President, the Women’s Caucus co-chairs, and an external facilitator. Of the three ombuds, one had a family conflict, and one opted out because she thought it would negatively influence her neutrality, hence I attended alone. When my turn came to speak, I explained that I had dual roles, as an ombud and as a human being, and would share my thoughts accordingly in two parts. I began by contextualizing my service on the Sexual Misconduct Taskforce, which became the Committee on Sexual Misconduct and my having been reassured when Pianko attended part of the sexual harassment training in NYC in September 2019. I continued that while he certainly had the freedom to be friends with whomever he wished and to do whatever he wanted, it’s a free country, that he made a choice that undermined our work on behalf of the AJS to change the culture that enabled misconduct and abuse of power by keeping company with someone sanctioned for both behaviors. I then switched to my role as a persister. Although my words were spoken to everyone present, they were directed at the sitting AJS President.

I came forward to stop the cycle of sexual misconduct and abuse of power, to protect other people as I had not been protected, and to tell the truth. I hoped that I would be the last person that Cohen manipulated,

harassed, and assaulted—or that anyone did. I’ve paid the price, personally, physically, and professionally.

I don’t know if you (Noam) realize what it’s like for victims of sexual assault. How being objectified, sexualized, impacts one’s sense of self, one’s understanding of our own intelligence, what some of us experience. I have recurring nightmares and difficulty concentrating on work I love. I’m known as a whistleblower, I *am* whistleblower, which is apparently too hot or tricky for some academic departments and Jewish organizations to handle. Our CVs (Noam’s and mine) are similar. We both graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Earned PhDs from Ivies a year apart. Have many well received, well reviewed publications. But at some point, our professional trajectories diverged.

Your actions, maintaining a relationship with Cohen, your participation in one of the secret meetings, and your initial lack of transparency blow my mind. I am beyond disheartened. I am insulted. I am angry. And I am deeply demoralized. I don’t know if there is anything that will help you understand what you did, which was to exert your white cis-male privilege without any regard for anyone else.

I concluded by referring to the Jewish clergy statement on the Cohen gatherings, their point that working with an unrepentant abuser was not value neutral, that it hurt his victims and all victims of sexual abuse, and lastly that our pain was more important than his ideas. Neither before nor since have I made a victim impact statement, but after speaking my mind I felt what I imagine some people feel when they do. Two days later, on April 13th, Pianko resigned as AJS President.²⁶ Had he not stepped down voluntarily, I do not know whether the Board would have had sufficient votes to force him to resign. The lack of consensus illustrates that many people have not yet realized the grip of patriarchy on their consciousness—or the privilege they enjoy as enforcers of it. There is a clear pattern of men acting badly and making poor decisions, only resigning under duress rather than being fired. Had a woman been AJS president and consorted with an admitted serial abuser, she would have been ousted post haste to avoid tarnishing the reputation of her colleagues and the organization.

Forgiveness or Justice?

In 2018, 2019, and 2020, people asked whether Steven M. Cohen had contacted me, or any of the women who spoke with me about his sexual misconduct and abuse of power, to apologize. Each time the question arose, I responded the same way: “No, and I’m not holding my breath.” The idea of Cohen genuinely apologizing directly to me and other people for the harm he caused us over many decades was not realistic given his self-aggrandizement. His statement in the press in July 2018, no doubt carefully crafted with the aid of his legal team, recognized a pattern of “inappropriate behavior” for

which he took full responsibility. “I am deeply apologetic to the women whom I have hurt by my words or my actions ... I am committed to making the changes that are necessary to avoid recurrences in the future and, when the time is right, seek to apologize directly to, and ask forgiveness from, those I have unintentionally hurt.”²⁷ Cohen referred to the Jewish value called *teshuva*, which literally means repentance and refers to the act of returning to the ways of behaving that sees each human as being created in God’s image, the divine dignity. As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg observed in the *Washington Post*, “his public statement hit all the right notes, also clearly informed by Jewish text.”²⁸ Articles by Ruttenberg, Shulamit Magnus, and Rafael Medoff appeared in the mainstream and Jewish press explaining the required steps: publicly take full responsibility for the harm; do the internal work to change as a person who will not harm; apologize sincerely and unconditionally directly to the victim; make restitution for the harm done; and make a different choice when faced with the opportunity to misbehave.²⁹ Journalist Danielle Berrin wrote in the *New York Times* about how restitution by men such as Ari Shavit, Matt Lauer, Mark Halperin, and countless others would marry *tefillah* (prayer) with moral action in the form of *tzedakah* (translated as charity but meaning righteousness). Berrin’s astute idea that 20 percent of book proceeds and speaking fees be given to organizations that support women would certainly connect men’s words with deeds.³⁰ When Ruttenberg published her book *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, she donated to The National Survivor Network, an advocacy organization focused on human sex trafficking, a sum 20 percent more than the equivalent support she had received as a Wexner Field Fellow. Ruttenberg took this action because Les Wexner had ties to Jeffrey Epstein and reportedly ignored a culture of harassment when he led the Victoria’s Secret empire.³¹ While women have acknowledged their privilege of receiving support, to my knowledge none of the actual perpetrators of sexual misconduct or abuse of power have made restitution yet, certainly not Cohen. Our society has signs warning of the fines imposed for littering and not picking up dog feces, tickets for parking one’s car beyond a metered time, and for speeding, yet people who commit gender discrimination and sexual violence are not required to pay restitution without costly and time-consuming litigation forcing them to pay for their crimes against humanity.

The month after the revelations about Cohen and his enablers’ secret meetings, and less than two weeks after Pianko’s resignation for associating with Cohen, I received an email from him on April 24, 2021. The subject: “Apology from Steven.”³² The timing was not lost on me. That he reached out only after his attempt to reenter Jewish social science and attract funding from philanthropists who support his survivalism agenda had failed, after hundreds of Jewish clergy had denounced this rehabilitation effort, and publicized his lack of direct apology and restitution, rendered his communication meaningless to me. His words “From the time I read the 2018 article, I recognized,

owned up to, and publicly apologized for my wrongful actions, and felt deeply ashamed” rang utterly hollow, especially given his original maneuverings around the Title IX case to gaslight me in a he said/she said attempt to save his own skin. I ignored the email and went about my life. In September 2021, nearly five months later, he wrote again. Cohen used Yom Kippur, the Jewish holy day of atonement, to tell me he was “feeling especially reflective” and apologized “for the hurt I caused.”³³ The self-serving timing and tone, compounded my sense of disgust and cemented my wish to never hear from him ever again. While Cohen’s words expressed remorse, his actions to fight the allegations against him in 2018 until they became too numerous and his efforts to make a professional comeback through the back door of Jewish studies January–March of 2021, described above, spoke volumes to the contrary.

Initially, the question of a single individual’s apology grated on my nerves because it focused on the perpetrator of harm rather than on who had been harmed and the larger communal issues the harm brought to light. It also illustrated a communal rush to “forgive and forget” when there was far too much work to do as individuals, as Jewish, American, and global communities, before any words of remorse for predatory behavior would carry genuine weight. Rabbi Rachael Bregman wrote, “When it comes to #MeToo, or Black Lives Matter, or Islamophobia, or the Poor People’s Campaign, or any other movement attempting to rectify a failed system which has resulted in the repeated degradation and harm of others, we have all played a part. Real forgiveness is not only between perpetrator and victim, but on all of us to create a new system where none of what has occurred may ever ever ever occur again.”³⁴ Bregman identified the crux of the apology and forgiveness matter in ways that a purely religious approach—whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian—could not.

While all three religions offer paths toward repentance and forgiveness, none of them account for the lasting harm to victims or identify a way for our communities to heal through social action funded by perpetrators. *Teshuva* in Judaism, the ideas behind grace and reconciliation in Christianity, and the encouragement to forgive so as not to be vengeful in Islam speak to the communal needs of restoring peace. However, none address the persistent power imbalances that created the opportunities for predation from occurring in the first place or since. To forgive without reconstructing our understanding of how patriarchy and misogyny are imbedded in our social and cultural norms would be an affront to all silence breakers and a sign that our communities do not truly value and respect the integrity of all human beings equally regardless of gender, as some purport. The case of Nathan Lam serves as an example. Lam led the cantorial program at the Academy for Jewish Religion in California beginning in 2001 and was employed as the cantor at the Stephen S. Wise Temple in Los Angeles since 1976 until he stepped down in 2020 “under pressure.” An investigation found he had violated the professional ethics

codes for Reform and Conservative cantors by engaging in an inappropriate sexual relationship with a former rabbinical-cantorial student and had made unwanted advances toward congregants.³⁵ Yet just two years later, Lam was installed as the new cantor at the Temple of the Arts in Los Angeles, an independent Jewish house of worship unaffiliated with any denomination, and in the Fall of 2022, he was one of the clergy members featured in advertisements leading High Holiday services.³⁶ The woman who filed the original complaint against him told the *Forward*: “I thought it was over and there he is getting another job.”³⁷ Apparently, his status as a celebrity cantor was prioritized over her well-being and that of other women who did not come forward for fear of retaliation. I have no doubt that Christian and Muslim women have likewise witnessed men who have been professionally rehabilitated while the harm these men caused women continues to plague them, their families, and their lives.

There is a common denominator across all faith communities that allows “productive perpetrators” to operate under the radar, to victimize women and girls for years if not decades without being called into account. Rabbi Mary Zamore accurately describes:

The common thread is a lack of accountability for the productive perpetrator. This is the professional or lay leader in a congregation or institution who is successful in their work, yet has substantiated accusations of sexual assault, harassment, or abusive/bullying behavior against them. They are trusted and beloved, generous with their time and/or money, they excel in their field. And because of their success, their community will never hold them accountable for their bad behavior—even though it endangers the community’s safety and respect—leaving a wake of damage in their path. Often working to keep the behavior and its negative impact unknown to the wider world, community leaders acts as if the bad behavior is an unavoidable tax for the benefits the community reaps from the productive perpetrator’s presence and work.³⁸

In the Christian and Muslim communities, families and parishioners alike automatically convey trust to adults who they believe have earned their trust or been vetted in some manner but haven’t. In the Jewish community, I believe it also stems from the cultural stereotype that Jewish men make good husbands and therefore Jewish men, by extension, are “safe.” There are certainly many Jewish men who are safe and those who are also excellent husbands, but the cultural conflation of the two lures women into a sense of safety and security that does not automatically exist. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin explains the low standard of prizing Jewish husbands with this piece of ancient text: “because it is not the way of Jews to strike their wives” (*Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer, 154:3*). Folk wisdom developed from this

snippet of legalese contending that Jewish men do not commit domestic violence.³⁹

Were that the case, my mother's nose would never have been broken by my father and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence would not have inspired the founding of Shalom Bayit in 1992.⁴⁰ While based in and primarily serving the Bay Area in Northern California, Shalom Bayit continues to serve as hub for organizing around domestic violence in the American Jewish community. In April 2021, the Executive Director Naomi Tucker invited me and other women to briefly share our experiences and to tell the virtual audience: "Speaking truth creates change!" I agreed because I believe it does; the #MeToo movement and ending domestic violence both involve fighting patriarchy. One of the honorees was Letty Cottin Pogrebin, an author I had long respected after reading her book *Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America*. When she visited the Brandeis campus in 2015, I brought my copy and Pogrebin signed it "In sisterhood!" My respect for Pogrebin suffered when I read her 2018 *Moment* article in which she asked, "How much *teshuva* is enough to wipe the slate clean?" and expressed that she didn't want Cohen or his family, who she knew personally, "to starve." What she did not do, at least not in this piece, was to consider any of his victims.⁴¹ When I heard her speak at the Shalom Bayit event, I realized that Pogrebin was like other people (of all genders) who struggled to see past their own privilege to embrace the truth. "I grew up believing Jewish men make the best husbands, they don't drink, they don't batter. But of course, they do. Behind every door there is a reality we don't necessarily see and I'm including those doors with *mezuzot* on the doorposts," Pogrebin said before turning to sexual misconduct. "... I'm thinking of the *shanda* of the men in our community. We know all the stories now. We know Michael Steinhardt. We know Rabbi Carlebach. We know Steven Cohen. We know Ari Shavit. The names have shocked us because they are nice Jewish boys. These are our stars, and yet they got away with it all these years."⁴² Her comments focused far too much on perpetrators of violence for my liking. Yet they also provide a glimpse into why it's hard for some people to mentally integrate the wrongdoing of some men they previously liked, leading them to overlook the harm they perpetuate when they include abusers without regard for the abused. Bishop Moore-Koikoi explains the phenomenon as, "It's like you're changing your mind about God!"⁴³ Most people are not so inclined.

I am just beginning to fully understand how being objectified and sexualized in 2011 affected me then and continues to affect me now. Jewish professional Debbie Findling, who helped me find my #MeToo voice, describes: "Anyone who has experienced sexual harassment knows that it has a deep and lasting impact on the psyche."⁴⁴ The Christian author Mary DeMuth writes, "A perpetrator may have hurt someone for a

few minutes of his/her life and may even regret it, but a survivor lives with the pain, triggers, shame, and fear for a lifetime. For the perpetrator, it's a passing incidence. But for the survivor, it's a life-long battle."⁴⁵ Those of us who made our experience known publicly pay social and professional costs, even if we manage to still be successful. The path to coming forward in 2018, and everything that transpired since, marked me in indelible ways. I cannot set foot in Jewish spaces, whether academic or religious, without someone making the connection between my name and Cohen's downfall. I can see it on people's faces when they read my name tag, and when I am introduced as a Forward 50 awardee of most influential Jews for my clarion call to the Jewish community to address our #MeToo problem. I am othered because our communities still have not normalized calling out bad behavior and the laws of our land still struggle to protect our human right to safety, respect, and equity. But I would much rather be othered than be silent.

Nearly three years after my my op-ed article was published, I found myself confronted with a decision that I had to make. Did I want to continue to serve the AJS as an ombud in the newly named Office of Sexual Misconduct, pledging my fealty to the organization's process and procedures that claimed to protect complainants but were engineered to protect the organization more than the individual? I had worked long and hard as a volunteer, first on the Taskforce and then on the Committee to launch deep systemic and cultural changes. I had spent countless hours meeting and speaking on the phone with women who had experiences they wished they'd never had. My vault was stuffed with stories. And yet when I voiced an opinion on social media, I was encouraged to remove my comment. Next, I was asked if I would avoid commenting publicly during the "sensitive moment" when the AJS turmoil was at its height. I realized that the decision I needed to make was much bigger than simply whether I wanted to keep taking time away from my work and family to try to fix what was broken and help people navigate forward. It was about my identity. I realized then that I cared far more about speaking my truth and helping other people to speak theirs, much more about calling out himpathy, "the often overlooked mirror image of misogyny," in the words of philosopher Kate Manne,⁴⁶ identifying the hypocrisy of those who claimed cancel culture was to blame or people's academic freedom was at stake, and significantly more about the human beings who would continue to suffer at the hands of the more powerful if I did not stand up for what I believe to be ethical decision-making and behavior. I realized then that there was no turning back. I was no longer an academic in the sense that I put the academy and academic institutions ahead of individuals, including myself. Not even a "recovering academic" as I sometimes joked. I was a scholar-activist. I am a scholar-activist. I completed my service as an ombud to the AJS at the annual conference held in Chicago in December

The AJS Office on Sexual Misconduct

OSM Reporting Members may be contacted to learn more about the AJS's resolution procedures and the process for reporting an incident. Please feel free to reach out to any ombudsperson with a concern or see Executive Director Warren Hoffman for assistance.



Figure 4.1 Association for Jewish Studies 54th Annual conference 2022 program book. Permission to publish courtesy of the Association for Jewish Studies.

2021 on the tenth anniversary of my #MeToo experience. I am glad to be free to work for justice and inclusion. I also applaud and appreciate my AJS colleagues who have stepped up to continue the work and serve the Office of Sexual Misconduct. This page in the 2022 conference program (Figure 4.1) illustrates solid progress by publicizing the names and photos of who attendees can turn to if another member or participant violates the sexual misconduct policy one must now sign when registering.⁴⁷ May the AJS go from strength to even greater strength.

Reader, please understand that we must be wrapped in this struggle together, together with people of all genders in our own communities and with people in other faith communities, to win this battle for human rights. Neither I nor any of the women in this book possess unique fortitude or qualities that enabled us to speak out. As one woman shared, “I feel like I’ve been painted as superwoman and I don’t feel like superwoman. It’s still hard. It’s still traumatic.”⁴⁸ Any suggestion to the contrary about anyone who blew the whistle on sexual misconduct and abuse of power shifts responsibility from the multitudes to the few, which is exactly the opposite direction we should go if we ever want to fulfill our potential as a civilized society that truly protects the human rights of all its citizens, if we are ever to stop the global pandemic of gender-based discrimination and violence. There is a huge range of emotions that people feel about their experience, and no one experience speaks for all of us.⁴⁹ There are those of us who feel like victims, others become survivors, and I self-identify as a persister. In other words, there is no single narrative and that is a *good* thing because we can pool our respective strengths, encourage self-care, and take collective action within, across, and beyond faith communities.

All hands must be on deck to create positive, lasting change. Op-ed articles, investigations, and reports are just the beginning; they recognize and name misbehaviors and bad actors. Once truths are unearthed, they must be followed by broader reckonings and reconciliations, changes in opaque systems and authority structures, new reporting and evaluation processes, and ideally an equitable redistribution of power to transform the very ethos of American culture and society.⁵⁰ If being safe from sexual misconduct and abuse of power were considered a human right, a civil right, our federal government could find a way to help faith communities to pool resources and intelligence to systematically change how sexual abuse in sacred spaces is reported, and work across faith communities to create checks and balances that ensure greater safety for all people. Isn’t that what it means to be a world leader? A civilized nation? A first-world country? This revolution, for that is indeed what it needs to be to finally overturn the patriarchal social order that allows misogynistic behavior, needs everyone to do their part. Until no one is harassed and assaulted, we are all harassed and assaulted. #UsToo.

Notes

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- 2 Avigayil Halpern, comment on Yehuda Kurtzer's original post, *Facebook*, April 16, 2020.
- 3 Yehuda Kurtzer, *Facebook* reply to author, April 16, 2020.
- 4 Alan Brill, comment to editors on Yehuda Kurtzer's original post, *Facebook*, April 16, 2020.
- 5 Alan Brill direct message to author, April 19, 2020. I confirmed permission from Dr. Brill to cite our exchange. Brill's revised conclusion explains that he no longer uses Cohen's co-authored book *The Jew Within* to teach and calls for a reframing of our understanding of contemporary Judaism. "In the time since I first wrote this essay, women have come forward to reveal Cohen's long history of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and abuse of power spanning several decades. In addition, in Cohen's later work, when he has attempted to address these social changes, he has ignored examples of cultural renewal and creativity and instead obsesses over the age at which Jewish women marry and how many children they have as the key to communal survival." Brill in *The New Jewish Canon: Ideas and Debates 1980–2015* (Brookline: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 396–397.
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- 14 The first time I posted my comment, it "disappeared." I reposted thinking that I had accidentally deleted it only to later learn that it had been hidden, by whom I never did learn.



Keren R. McGinity

Inadvertently deleted my own comment so here goes again.... **Lila Corwin Berman Mara Benjamin David Biale Rachel Deblinger Aaron Hahn Tapper Ari Y Kelman Jason Lustig David Myers Jessica Marglin Joshua Shanes Laura Levitt Mira Wasserman Flora Cassen Susannah Heschel Deborah Dash Moore** and all other signers, I was deeply disturbed to learn that Steven Cohen's name was allowed on this list, even after JSAN members objected. Although including him may be perceived as different than inviting him to speak, be on a panel, give a lecture, including his work in an anthology, or allowing his participation in a Zoom it is still wrong to validate him as a present-day Jewish studies scholar and activist. Cohen harassed, assaulted, and betrayed many people of all genders over decades. Insisting that it's OK for his name to be associated with this Statement on the Capitol Assault is hurtful to all **#MeToo** survivors and inhibits our participation. As the Statement authors wrote, "...it is impossible not to be reminded of the grave dangers of complicity, both active and passive, with an unhinged and egomaniacal autocrat." While I do not mean to directly compare Cohen and Trump, the moral ineptitude of the former that allowed his sexual misconduct and abuse of power to go on for so long, without any accountability--until he was caught--is similar to the narcissism of the latter. Please remove Cohen's name post haste. Once I have confirmation of said removal, I will gladly add mine.

...

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- 50 This sentence is inspired, in part, by the words of Judith Plaskow, “Changing the ‘We’ of the Jewish Community,” *Lilith* vol. 47, no. 2 (summer 2022): 11.

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