#MeToo and the Jewish World
What’s Changed, What Hasn’t
Much has changed, in the Jewish world and in the United States in general, since two New York Times reporters broke the story in October 2017 of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein’s alleged sexual abuse of actresses hoping for roles in his films. And so much has not.

The flood of #MeToo allegations that emerged after the Weinstein revelations has also led to some unanticipated consequences amid the ambiguities of resulting shifts in organizational policy and behavioral expectations. There has been a major cultural transformation, with women now more comfortable naming men who have abused their power in the workplace and companies now working to put more effective anti-sexual harassment and assault policies in place.

But the change is far from complete, and while there is a consensus that sexual assault must be stamped out and addressed, questions of what defines and how to investigate and prevent workplace harassment remain: Is every coarse comment made in a workplace sexual harassment? Is a man putting his hands on the shoulders or waist of a woman or hugging her without asking consent considered sexual misconduct? Where should the line be drawn between innocuous, if insensitive, and truly unacceptable behavior?

Another new element is the anger women are now voicing after years of being harassed and physically assaulted in their work environments, and sometimes punished if they dared to complain about it.

It was that kind of anger that Lisa Goldman felt when she read the New York Jewish Week’s July 2018 expose of sexual harassment allegations against the prominent Jewish sociologist Steven M. Cohen. Seeing the claims—first made by American studies historian Keren McGinity—against Cohen “set something loose” in her, said Goldman.

Her own experience with Cohen came rushing back into her consciousness.

Goldman, now a 52-year-old freelance journalist and editor in Montreal, had asked Cohen, an acquaintance, to assist her with a fellowship application in 2016. Cohen suggested they meet at a restaurant in Manhattan’s West Village, Goldman recalled, not far from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform movement seminary where he worked as a professor.

Cohen, now 69, had directed dozens of national and local Jewish population studies, and authored innumerable articles and books. Over a 45-year career, he had become a pre-eminent expert on American Jewish behavior and beliefs.

When Goldman arrived at the restaurant, she recounted, Cohen was concluding a meeting with a male student, who sat across from him. Cohen indicated that Goldman should sit on the banquette next to him. Once the male student left, Cohen put his hand on her thigh, Goldman said in an interview with Hadassah Magazine, speaking publicly about the incident for the first time.

When she ended the meeting as quickly as possible, he asked where...
she was headed and walked with her toward the subway, according to Goldman. When they reached their subway station, he pivoted and kissed her hard on the mouth before rushing down the stairs, she said.

“I heard ringing in my ears and was really, really pissed off,” Gold-
man recalled. At the same time, she wondered: “At what point do I get to talk to a man in a professional context and not be made to feel uncomfort-
able?” She said that “as a result of a lifetime of conditioning, I said nothing” to him in the moment but “decided on the spot not to pursue that fellowship because I didn’t want to ever have to deal with him again.”

This incident was far from the worst sexual misconduct Goldman has experienced, she said. “I’ve been mauled by a colleague at an office party of a major Israeli newspaper” and verbally and physically harassed on Israeli buses and New York subways. While on assignment in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and in India, she was grabbed, touched and spat at, she said. She also contends that she lost two jobs as a direct result of complaining about sexual harassment.

Cohen resigned from his position as director of the Berman College in Newton, Mass., and serves as professor of social policy research while on assignment in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and in India, she was grabbed, touched and spat at, she said. She also contends that she lost two jobs as a direct result of complaining about sexual harassment.

‘SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS PART OF A CONTINUUM OF BEHAVIORS, AND INCIVILITY IS A PREDICTOR OF GENDER HARASSMENT:’
—FRAN SEPLER

Magazine, Cohen expressed remorse for his actions. While he declined to comment on any individual incident, he said, “I take very seriously what women have said about the pattern of my inappropriate behavior. I am deeply committed to changing that behavior, to be someone who acts totally in accord with the great respect I have for women.”

Over the past year, he contin-
ued, “with the help of my therapist, conversations with several rabbis and my wife, I’ve engaged in introspection and reflection, seeking to understand the roots of my behavior and how I hurt people, with the goal of ensuring that I never repeat such actions again.”

He added, “That is the essence of genuine teshuvah, a process that takes time.”

While the long-term work of transforming cultural norms has only recently begun, some concrete changes have already taken place in the Jewish world.

Francesca C. Sack has run Hadassah’s sexual harassment trainings for the past several years. “We’ll talk about what to do if an employee encounters inappropriate conduct, how to report it, supervisors’ responsibil-

ity for addressing harassment, the distinctions between what consti-
tutes harassment as a matter of law and behavior inconsistent with Hadassah’s own policy,” she said. In the #MeToo era, “attention to these issues of preventing and addressing harassment in the workplace has been significantly heightened,” she added, noting that both New York State and New York City recently passed legislation mandating relevant employee training.

Women’s Archive, for instance, has collected testimonies from some 100 women, said Judith Rosenbaum, the group’s executive director. The closed Facebook group #GamAni (Hebrew for #MeToo), with over 1,100 members from Israel and around the world, is a place where people share experiences and allegations.

The Jewish Women’s Archive was one of the early recipients of a grant from a coalition founded in early 2018 to formulate a long-term strategy on how to change policies and practices on a wide array of related issues. The Safety Respect Equity coalition—with an initial investment of $500,000 from heavy weight Jewish funders, including the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the Russell Berrie Foundation—recently announced a new round of grants totaling $1.3 million, with funding of $25,000 to $150,000 to 15 new and existing organizations focused on these issues.

The coalition also developed a set of principles for Jewish groups that would “adhere to high ethical and legal standards for prevention and response to sexual harassment and gender discrimination.” The coalition’s steering committee, which brings together 60 men and women who occupy mid-level to CEO posi-
tions in the Jewish communal world, has already gotten 100 organizations, from small family foundations to behemoths like Hillel International, to commit to the standards.

“Since #MeToo, the Jewish community has really stepped up,” said Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu, Hadassah’s director of the division of member and unit services, who is a founding member of the coalition’s steering committee.

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In addition to the Jewish Women’s Archive, another early coalition grantee was the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, which has partnered with the Good People Fund to create an initiative called Ta’amod: Stand Up. Ta’amod provides an array of resources, from articles and webinars to access to law firms and workplace sexual harassment and abuse training specifically for Jewish organizations and their culture—often more “huggy,” warm and family-like than corporate
environments. Ta'amod spokesman Glenn Rosenkrantz said the group has provided respectful workplace training to about 75 organizations within the last year and a half.

Fran Sepler, an expert on workplace harassment who is president of her own Minneapolis-based firm focused on this issue, is Ta’amod’s lead trainer. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission hired her years ago to create training that the federal agency now uses throughout the country.

Sexual assault and harassment begin with a workplace culture in which people are not treated with respect, Sepler said. “Sexual harassment is part of a continuum of behaviors, and incivility is a predictor of gender harassment. Bullying, too.”

Another coalition grantee that provides training is Sacred Spaces. The group was originally conceived in 2016, almost a year before #MeToo burst onto the public stage, in 2017, has provided respectful workplace environments. Ta’amod spokesman Bat Sheva Marcus, a clinical psychologist who is still reeling from her own experiences of sexual assault and harassment, the change will come both in how the abusers are treated and in how society transforms.

Goldman isn’t interested in Cohen’s remorse, she said, but wants to make sure that he doesn’t rehabilitate his image and start working again in the field in which he enjoyed great stature.

“Since the beginning of the #MeToo movement and the Harvey Weinstein story, there’s been a lot of rage about stuff we’ve been suckling up for years,” she said. Goldman also echoed what many women who have experienced harassment and abuse say is most important now: “Change the system. Just make it not so hard for women.”

Debra Nussbaum Cohen, an award-winning journalist based in New York City. She is a columnist for the Jewish Journal in Los Angeles and the Jewish-giving review at Inside Philanthropy.

IN A COMMUNITY WHERE EVERYONE HUGS AND KISSES, NOW PEOPLE ARE THINKING, ‘AM I MAKING SOMEONE UNCOMFORTABLE?’
—JAMIE ALLEN BLACK

SOME WONDER IF THERE IS ENOUGH NERVE IN THE #MeToo DISCUSSION. ARE MEN WHO SOMETIMES CROSS INTO WOMEN’S PERSONAL SPACE AND ARE TOO TOUCHY—LIKE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE AND FORMER VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN, FOR EXAMPLE—BEING LUMPED TOGETHER WITH MEN WHO SEXUALLY HARASS WOMEN AND THREATEN THEM WITH PROFESSIONAL REPERCUSSIONS?

Keren McGinty, who alleged that Steven M. Cohen had forced her against a wall and kissed her neck at a professional conference, agrees with those who think “we shouldn’t lump everyone together. It’s different for someone to do something once or twice, different for someone to say something or touch someone. Grada- tions matter.”

And questions are arising about how allegations play out even before they are investigated. For instance, then-Senator Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota, resigned from office in December 2017 after eight women—some anonymous, some not—accused him of grabbing them. All of the alleged incidents happened before he was in public office, when he was a working comedian. After 32 senators, led by now-president candidate Kirsten Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, called for his resignation, Franken stepped down before any investigation.

Some worry that women are abdicating their voices in these inter- actions. To be sure, when women are professionally dependent on the men who are demanding sex—as were the actresses allegedly threatened and/or raped by Harvey Weinstein—they are at a clear disadvantage in the power dynamic. But in other cases, where the dynamic is less lopsided, should women be expected to voice their rejection of come-ons or worse in the moment, or only complain about them later?

Bat Sheva Marcus, a clinical expert on women’s sexual health, former president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and a longtime advocate for women’s rights in Orthodox Judaism, said she fears the pendulum has swung too far. “When women complain of harassment it’s important to take them seriously,” said Marcus, dubbed “the Orthodox sex guru” by The New York Times. “It’s also important that women with experiences of sexual harassment who is still reeling from her own experiences of sexual assault and harassment, the change will come both in how the abusers are treated and in how society transforms.

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I TAKE VERY SERIOUSLY WHAT WOMEN HAVE SAID ABOUT THE PATTERN OF MY INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR.
—STEVEN M. COHEN

THERE HAS DEFINITELY BEEN A SHIFT IN SENSITIVITY TO UNWANTED TOUCH AND COMMENTS THAT CAN BE INTERPRETED AS SEXUAL IN THE ERA OF #MeToo. MOST OFTEN, SAY THE EXPERTS, THAT SENSITIVITY IS DEMONSTRATED BY THE YOUNGER GENERATION.

“Younger people may be holding themselves and everyone around them to a higher standard of behavior than perhaps had been understood previously,” said Sack, the employment attorney.

As a result, those who are not so young are learning to adapt to those standards. Jamie Allen Black, CEO and founder of the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, recently reported that firsthand when a male colleague “taught me to ask consent” before hugging a colleague. “I’d never been asked that before and think that it’s great,” Black said.

But it is a learning process. She acknowledged, noting that at a recent event, she approached someone who had never met but had worked with over videoconference. “I went to hug her and she put her hand out. Then she hugged me,” Black recalled. “It’s the Jewish community and everyone
When Rabbis Say #MeToo
A reckoning for female clergy  | By Uriel Heilman

Francine Roston was in her 20s, working as a congregational summer intern at a large Conservative synagogue in the Midwest, when she got her first taste of the kind of challenges she’d have to face as a woman in the rabbinate.

One day, when she and the congregation’s rabbi were alone in his office, the rabbi—who was married—asked if she would give him a massage. Roston recalled. She froze. “In my head, I was going, ‘No! No! No!’ But I didn’t know what to do.”

After a long pause, Roston recounted, the rabbi said, “Oh, you can say no.” Roston said no. (Reached by phone, the rabbi declined to respond to Roston’s allegations.)

A few years later, after being ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary and landing her first job as an assistant rabbi at a Conservative synagogue in suburban New Jersey, Roston said she found herself the subject of verbal harassment from the deputy cantor, a man who routinely called her a “bitch” and a “cunt” and threatened to have her fired, she said. According to Roston, when she reported the harassment to the senior rabbi, he was sympathetic but never took action.

After one particularly intense tirade, Roston said, she contacted the Rabbinical Assembly, which oversees synagogue hiring and placement for Conservative rabbis. The RA referred her to a lawyer who helped her write a letter of resignation, saying she wanted out of her contract early. She was soon fired.

“I remember the utter sense of helplessness and powerlessness,” said Roston, now 51 and a community rabbi in Whitefish, Mont. “I thought my life was over. I thought my career was over. I had to sell my home and I went to therapy.”

The cantor, in an interview, said Roston’s “arrogance” was the problem. “She was a young, new rabbi who came in with a chip on her shoulder and did not want to work with the team,” said the cantor. “All she really wanted to do was dominate me and use her power.”

He recalled one blowup in which he acknowledged he might have called Roston names, but he said he wouldn’t have used the word “cunt” and, he claimed, he didn’t routinely verbally abuse her. “Did I call her a bitch? I can’t 100 percent deny it,” he added. “But I don’t remember those words.”

The senior rabbi from the synagogue declined to comment for this story. The RA declined to respond to inquiries seeking comment on Roston’s case.

As the Jewish community reckons with the #MeToo era, a growing number of female rabbis are opening up and sharing their own stories, ranging from sexual harassment and bullying to employment discrimination and micro-aggressions. The varying stories point to common themes: inappropriate or unwanted physical contact; repeated comments about attire or body; multiple rejections for senior clergy positions; unequal treatment and pay compared to male colleagues; and termination, discrimination or retaliation related to pregnancy, maternity leave or speaking up.

“The behaviors that are assaultive and focus on sex and sexuality are just part of a larger problem,” said Rabbi Mary Zamore, executive director of the Women’s Rabbinic Network, a Reform group of over 700 members. “The structural inequalities that allow mistreatment of women also allow stymying the advancement of women in leadership, not hearing voices of victims and believing them, and not paying women equally. There are a whole host of symptoms that go along with gender harassment.”

As awareness of this problematic behavior grows—including among rabbis themselves—some Jewish institutions are taking steps to ameliorate matters by training clergy and educating synagogues and other Jewish institutions to recognize and mitigate their own biased behavior.

The first step is to hear the stories of women who have been victimized so the Jewish community can take a hard look at the institutions and behaviors that perpetuate these inequalities, Zamore said. Then the difficult work must begin to create policies, procedures and training to effect change.

Rabbi Harold Berman, chairman of the RA’s ethics committee, the Vaad Hakavod, said that based on Roston’s account, it seems the cantor hadassahmagazine.org
should have been disciplined by his synagogue or organization. “I believe that it is the role of the RA, but not the Vaad Hakavod, to be able to serve as a resource and an advocate for rabbis who are treated unfairly through any congregational issues,” Berman said through a spokesman, noting that he was speaking only for the VAH. “I don’t know why you want to go home with him,” he said, referring to her husband. “I would be much better in bed.”

It was yet another incident in a long series of inappropriate exchanges, according to Frisch Klein. When she was let go shortly after an annual review at a board meeting, she attributed her dismissal to confronting the rabbi and telling him she didn’t appreciate his sense of humor. She recalled talking about it to her husband, friends, family and other Jewish professionals as well as consulting with an employment lawyer.

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Senior rabbis, but also to congregants who control their contracts.

“Rabbis need to be complaint against a congregant, you’re automat- ically putting your job at risk because congregation leaders are their bosses,” said Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu, director of the division of member and unit services at Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, and until recently director of Rabbis Without Borders at Clal, a Jewish religious leadership organization. “I think cases of harassment are grossly underre- ported because people don’t want to put their jobs at risk. There are very few safe places for [female] rabbis.”

It’s impossible to tell whether things are improving or not for women in the rabbinate in the wake of #MeToo because so few have spoken up about such matters in the past. It’s also difficult to say whether rabbis have it worse or better than other female Jewish professionals.

What’s certain, activists say, is that the ratio of unacceptable behavior to the number of victims is grossly underre- ported. "There’s been a heightened conscious- ness of women that what they’ve experienced really falls into the cate- gory of unacceptable behavior," Sirbu said. “People are brushing it off less. I’m not sure that men are improving their behavior.”

Rabbi Mira Wasserman, director of the Center for Jewish Ethics of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, said that until the #MeToo movement, the focus was on prevent- ing abusive behavior by rabbis. The fact that rabbis can be victims, too, has been a revelation. “We were astounded by testimony from women rabbis in the field having been victim- ized,” Wasser said.

One Conservative rabbi in New Jersey in her mid-40s who asked to remain anonymous recalled harass- ment that started on her first day of work at a synagogue when she was newly ordained over a decade ago. “A congregant came in and the first thing he said was that I had a better ass than my predecessors,” she recounted.

The rabbi also described being set upon at kiddush not long afterward by a man who put his arm around her shoulder and touched her right breast. “Wow, I didn’t know rabbis could be so sexy," she recalled the man saying.

Comments about appearances are par for the course, rabbis said, along with touching that crosses the line. “Oh, you’re so pretty, I don’t know who to kiss first, you or the Torah,” Sirbu, who is in her 40s, said she has been told by congregants while parading the Torah through the sanc- tuary during services—a common workplace hazard, according to several female rabbis.

ABBI MARGARET FRISCH KLEIN was working as an educator at a small synagogue in New England years ago when the congregational rabbi approached her at the end of an evening event. “I don’t know why you want to go home with him,” he said, referring to her husband. “I would be much better in bed.”

It was yet another incident in a long series of inappropriate exchanges, according to Frisch Klein. When she was let go shortly after an annual review at a board meeting, she attributed her dismissal to confronting the rabbi and telling him she didn’t appreciate his sense of humor. She recalled talking about it to her husband, friends, family and other Jewish professionals as well as consulting with an employment lawyer.
S is the national conversation about #MeToo issues has intensified, a group of foundation funders launched the Safety Respect Equity coalition, which aims to create standards for Jewish groups and is funding an array of projects to provide training and education about gender-based discrimination.

Sirbu, one of the coalition’s leaders, is coordinating a project that helps synagogues recognize unconscious bias in hiring. She also conducts trainings around the country to help Jewish institutions identify and address these shortcomings.

For example, Sirbu said, job descriptions often use language that signals a preference for a rabbi of a certain gender, using words like “strong” and “charismatic” to signal male and “nurturing, warm and friendly” to signal female. Such language both evinces a subconscious bias by the search committees and discourages candidates of the “unwanted” gender from applying, she said. As a fix, Sirbu suggests a gender-blind rating system for rabbi candidates.

The Women’s Rabbinic Network is spearheading two initiatives related to these issues. One, which started three years ago and brings together the 17 organizations that fall under the umbrella of the Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist and Jewish movements—to create safe workplaces and identify and navigate problematic situations. The training includes role playing for female rabbis dealing with such scenarios as being told by congregants, “You don’t look like a rabbi.” Rather than respond harshly, the rabbis are encouraged to use it as a teachable moment and practice constructive responses designed to prompt deeper thinking, such as “Tell me, what do you think a rabbi looks like?” said Zamore of the Women’s Rabbinic Network.

“I’m gratified that we are finally, in the last two years, talking about these issues. But there is a great deal of work to be done,” Sirbu said. As a fix, Sirbu suggests a gender-blind rating system for rabbi candidates.

The second network project, Clergy: Safe Employees and Employers, funded by the Safety Respect Equity Coalition, is training students at nine different rabbinical seminary campuses—spanning the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and Orthodox movements—to create safe workplaces and identify and navigate problematic situations. The training includes role playing for female rabbis dealing with such scenarios as being told by congregants, “You don’t look like a rabbi.” Rather than respond harshly, the rabbis are encouraged to use it as a teachable moment and practice constructive responses designed to prompt deeper thinking, such as “Tell me, what do you think a rabbi looks like?” said Zamore of the Women’s Rabbinic Network.

“I’m gratified that we are finally, in the last two years since #MeToo hit, talking about these issues,” Zamore said. “But there is great deal of work to be done.”
In 2007, the eighth president of the State of Israel left office amid a storm of allegations of sexual abuse. Moshe Katsav had clung to his presidency, intimidating and belittling the women who accused him. In 2010, an Israeli court convicted him of rape and sexual harassment and, in 2011, imposed a seven-year jail sentence. Five years later, according to his parole board, the prisoner “denies the crimes he committed” as “though there had been no legal process,” and he had never expressed remorse. Nevertheless, parole for good behavior was granted, and he was released shortly afterward, controversially excused from serving almost a third of his sentence.

The story of Katsav, now 73, underscores two clashing mindsets toward gender-based violence and misconduct in Israel. While there is both the will and the legislation to protect the victims and pursue and punish the perpetrators, a pervasive, sexist subculture exists among men that objectifies women and discounts their experiences.

It was into this climate that the #MeToo movement burst onto Israel’s public sphere in October 2017 in the wake of startling revelations of sexual assault and harassment by high-powered individuals in the United States. As in the United States, hundreds and then thousands of Israeli women divulged stories of abuse and assault—often for the first time—on social media, many under the hashtag #GamAni, which is the Hebrew translation of #MeToo. Prominent figures were accused, including journalist Dan Margalit, radio talk show host Gabi Gazit and Keshet Media Group president Alex Gilady, all of whom denied the allegations.

Other women told of suffering at humbler hands. Rena, a Jerusalemite from a middle-class family who asked that her full name not be disclosed, was 15 when, she said, the boss at her summer job lured her into a stockroom, touched her intimately and terrified her. Her parents filed no complaint, telling her it was best for her to forget about it. She kept silent for eight years but forgot nothing. When #GamAni emerged, the anguish and outrage she poured into Facebook posts were directed as much against her parents as her abuser. “How angry I’ve been,” she wrote, “for not knowing what to do, with my body that didn’t fight, with Dad, who didn’t beat up the man who abused me, with Mom, who told me nothing had happened, better not file a complaint because it’d be ‘traumatic.’”

For all that the phenomenon in Israel resonates with what is happening in the United States, core differences exist. “One key distinction is that #MeToo was in Israel for years before the online tsunami hit,” said Orit Sulitzeanu, 55, executive director of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, which has provided a public forum for voicing stories of abuse and harassment since 1990. “Another is that sexual abuse hotbeds in Israel were institutions such as the police and army, which were already addressing the problem in legislation and programs, whereas in the United States the focus was primarily the worlds of media and politics, which were not.” Nevertheless, the new openness that the movement brought to Israel has bolstered the struggle to bring these abuses to light, reaching thousands of victims who had felt alone until #MeToo showed them that they were not, according to Elah Alkalay, chair of the Israel Women’s Network, which works to advance the status of women in Israel and is a Hadassah Foundation grantee. Israel’s assault hotlines have recorded steep upticks in calls. The Association of Rape Crisis Centers’ helpline, for example, saw an 11 percent spike over its annual 47,000 calls after #MeToo went viral.

“There’s always a surge when abuse hits the headlines—from Moshe Katsav to [now United States Supreme Court Justice] Brett Kavanaugh—but #MeToo’s impact has been especially intense,” said help-line volunteer Debbie Rosenblit. “I took a call from a deeply distressed woman whose 24-year-old daughter had confided being molested as a teen—a confession that unwittingly exploded a landmine.” The caller, too, had been sexually assaulted as a youngster, “and was finally ready to tell her story.”
A Public Call ‘Us Too’ proclaimed the headline of a special section of the ‘Yedioth Ahronoth’ daily that included allegations of sexual assault by several prominent Israeli women. 

and, a decade later, launched a global crusade for sexual abuse victims.

Abargil galvanized women in Israel. In 1998, the then-18-year-old Miss Israel #MeToo, Israeli beauty queen Linor Abargil crowned Miss World six weeks after the rape sentence. In 2007, Sherer sued him and served two years of a three-year emotional state deteriorated and, at age 13, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The police eventually investigated, and her father was convicted and served two years of a three-year sentence. In 2007, Sherer sued him in civil court, an experience she chronicled in the documentary Dirty Laundry. “What happened to me is happening to others,” she told the Haaretz daily after the documentary was shown in 2012 on Israel’s Channel 2. “As a child, it never occurred to me I wasn’t alone, wasn’t guilty and could fight and win.”

Sherer, who at 19 shocked the court at her father’s criminal hearing by taking the stand rather than submitting a written deposition, speaks directly to the camera in Dirty Laundry. “I wasn’t going to be the shadowy cliché, filmed from behind, which is how abuse victims are usually shown,” she said in an interview with Hadassah Magazine. “I’m a whole person.”

In 2013, Sherer, along with activist Shlomit Huvron and attorney and rape survivor Gal Shargill, created the Facebook page Achat Mitoch Achat (One of One), so named because “every woman has a story,” Sherer said. “It was #MeToo four years before #MeToo, a platform where workplace and Israel’s government recognizes there’s a problem.”

After the emergence of the worldwide phenomenon, Achat Mitoch Achat’s 10 to 20 weekly posts doubled. Today, the page carries over 2,500 sexual abuse testimonies, and Achat Mitoch Achat has developed into an organization that provides legal and other help to victims, promotes new legislation and lobbies for implementation of existing laws. It also maintains a database of individuals with complaints filed against them, which has helped police identify multiple offenders.

“We were pioneers,” said Sherer, today 36 and a documentary filmmaker and journalist. “We’ve brought about tangible social change. Language is more respectful of abused women, the media are less judgmental, action is underway in the workplace and Israel’s government recognizes there’s a problem.”

OFFICIALLY, ISRAELI LAW has zero tolerance for sexual harassment and abuse. Existing legislation and public opinion toppled not only a sexually abusive president, but also government ministers Silvan Shalom and Yimon Magal, who were the subject of abuse allegations in 2015. In addition, in the past two decades, senior Israel Defense Forces officers Maj. Gen. Yitzhak Mordechai and Brig. Gen. Otek Buchris were criminally accused and convicted of abuse. Punishment, however, often fails to reflect the gravity of the crime. “When the maximum penalty for rape is 16 years, and a one-year sentence is imposed, the people upstairs aren’t doing their job,” said Sherer.

As in many countries, Israel fights a fundamental inconsistency: Awareness, activism and legal redress for abuse are not always reflected in cultural norms. Many still see harassment and even assault as minimally
reprehensible, nod-and-wink offenses. Within Israel’s cultural mosaic exist sternly patriarchal societies. Added to this mix are Israel’s immigrant populations, where tensions and stress can explode in sexual abuse; and its hierarchical army, which annually conscripts some 60,000 18-year-olds—where abuse of power can translate into assault and harassment, according to experts.

Despite or perhaps because of this cultural tangle, Israel is at the forefront of social initiatives, said Sulitzeanu, the director of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers. Rape, including marital rape, has been a felony since the state’s early years. The Law Against Sexual Harassment—enacted in 1998 and still one of the world’s most progressive, according to experts—criminalized sexual assault and prohibited verbal harassment as “discriminatory practice, restriction of liberty, offense to human dignity, violation of every person’s right to elementary respect and dignity, violation of every person’s restriction of liberty, offense to human dignity, violation of every person’s right to elementary respect and dignity.”

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When it was passed, men, including some in powerful positions, were heard to grumble that feminists were “taking all the fun out of relationships,” said legal scholar and lawyer Orit Kamir, who was among those who drafted the law.

While this legislation has brought down powerful abusers, said Sulitzeanu, “its teeth are often blunted by denial, minimizing the crime and entrenched attitudes: ‘Women exaggerate! It was just a joke! Can’t I give a colleague a hug?’”

In 2017, Israel became a world leader in efforts to counter workplace harassment, when it cosponsored the United Nations Resolution for Preventing & Eliminating Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. The following year, Sulitzeanu presented to the United Nations Israel’s precedent-setting voluntary code of ethics to combat sexual harassment in the workplace, developed by the Association of Rape Crisis Centers and the Standards Institution of Israel with partial funding by the Hadassah Foundation.

“Unlawful and harmful sexual- or gender-based harassment are found in every industry, impacting economic productivity and employ- ment,” said Stephanie Blumenkrans, recently appointed director of the Hadassah Foundation, established by Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, in 1998 to invest in social change organizations that empower girls and women in Israel and the United States. “The average annual GDP loss for damage to one woman is $3,780. A fifth of women harassed reported a decline in labor productivity, and 9 percent stopped working altogether. The code helps employers establish appropriate workplace policies.”

It also gives those harassed a third avenue for redress: an employer-appointed ombudsman. “The police need evidence, and civil suits are costly,” Sulitzeanu said of the other avenues. “The code recommends appointing ombudsmen in every workplace with over 25 employees—and city councils, health insurance funds, banks and more are doing so.” It is still a work in progress, she noted. “Sexual exploitation between, say, a dentist and patient manifests differently than between a sports coach and young athlete, and must be addressed differently. Change is coming.”

The pace of change can, however, be glacial. In the IDF, an internal study in 2017 found that one in six female soldiers reported having been sexually harassed. Although reporting of sexual offenses in the military—from verbal abuse and stalking to violence and assault—has risen by 80 percent in the past 15 years, the formal complaint is only the start of a lengthy process for victims. Yael, an 18-year-old who declined to give her full name, is one of them. “I told my officer that his second-in-command assaulted me,” she recounted. “He said he’d take care of it, but they were friends so I knew nothing would happen. The girls serving with me urged me to go to the IDF’s Women’s Affairs Advisor. She said prosecution would be a hard road, but she’d be with me every step. It took a year. They demoted him, gave him two months ofgrunt work and a $400 fine—nothing compared with what he did to me. For a long time, I regretted reporting him, but, looking back, I know it was important. It helps things change.”

Change is also underway in Israel’s closed ultra-Orthodox world. The so-called “walls of sanctity”—a term used to convey the segregation by choice of Israel’s one-million-plus Haredim from mainstream society—have become a little more porous. Rabbi who once addressed problems privately are increasingly willing to cooperate with the authorities on sexual abuse and assault-related issues. Sixteen male and female investigators, familiar with the Haredi world, are employed countrywide by the Israeli police to investigate and address claims. This new openness, however, coexists with old attitudes. Allegations have recently surfaced that ultra-Orthodox Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman continues to pressure corrections officials for special privileges for at least 10 Haredi sex offenders. Litzman is currently under police investigation, though he denies any wrongdoing.

Sexual abuse is a particularly sensitive problem in the community, said Sulitzeanu, the director of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers. Rape, including marital rape, has been a felony since the state’s early years. The Law Against Sexual Harassment—enacted in 1998 and still one of the world’s most progressive, according to experts—criminalized sexual assault and prohibited verbal harassment as “discriminatory practice, restriction of liberty, offense to human dignity, violation of every person’s right to elementary respect and dignity.”

A new movement, which Sulitzeanu calls the Haredi digital media, has begun to focus on these issues. “There is a closed 17,000-member Facebook group, some Girls and What’s Between Them, that addresses these issues directly; and dedicated helplines for the ultra-Orthodox at the Association of Rape Crisis Centers as well as at the Israel Women’s Network’s Hotline for Women in the Workforce. Every voice makes a difference, according to Abargil, the former Miss Israel and Miss World who today is a lawyer and a religiously observant mother of three. The impact of hundreds of thousands of voices around the world unlocked through #MeToo is helping drive a vast cultural shift in Israel.”

Wendy Elliman is a British-born science writer who has lived in Israel for more than four decades.
A 10-year-old girl is slammed against a glowing electric heater for rejecting her father’s sexual advances. A 13-year-old shivers in terror, knowing her family will kill her if she is caught exposing what happens at home. A university student struggles with himself to change, led and symbolized by the libertarian initiates unwanted sex, and she believes it’s their fault,” said Dr. Dvora Bauman, 59, a senior obstetrician-gynecologist at the Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem and director of its Bar Ami Center for Victims of Sexual Abuse. “They think it happens because of something they did, which deepens their trauma.

Children, especially, are confused, uncertain whether it’s part of normal life. Even adults need reminding that any sexual behavior imposed without their consent constitutes abuse.”

This climate, however, is slowly changing, led and symbolized by the #MeToo phenomenon. The millions worldwide who have used the hashtag to denounce sexual harassment and violence are, according to Dr. Bauman, helping all those who have been sexually violated to internalize that they were guiltless victims and that the abuse they suffered was criminal. “By shifting guilt from the victim to its rightful place, the shame recedes and survivors are able to talk about what happened, stand up in court, go on with their lives.”

Sexual abuse, especially when repressed, can profoundly impact physical and mental health. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, sleep disturbance, eating disorders and self-harm are among its fallouts—all of which are treated at Bat Ami. One unfortunate victim is a regular in Hadassah’s emergency room, equipped for medical and multidisciplinary treatment. Its unobtrusive three-room suite is a haven for rape victims that included medical and forensic examination; pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease prevention; and psychosocial care, treatment and follow-up. It also established four national centers to treat victims of sexual abuse.

Hadassah’s Bat Ami is one of those centers. Now marking its 10th anniversary, Bat Ami last year treated 175 survivors. Eighty-eight percent were female victims, the youngest under a year old and the oldest in her 80s. The overwhelming majority were girls in their early to mid-teens. Their abusers were rarely strangers. The 19-year-old soldier had just completed a nightshift with the man who raped her. Dr. Bauman recalled the victim sobbing as she told her that she froze when he started but never said no. “He probably thought I wanted him,” the doctor was told.

“My reply was forceful,” said Dr. Bauman. “I told her: ‘He didn’t have a heater there. I fell on it,’” while she came at me, I kept saying no, till Seidel Levy, the social worker, the child robotically repeated: “I fell. The heater was there. I fell on it,” while mother insisted: “My husband loves his daughter. He loves all his children. He’d never hurt them.”

“W e sensed something was wrong, so we didn’t give up until the child was ready to tell her story,” said Levy. “Eventually, she spoke: ‘He’s been at my sister for months. When he came at me, I kept saying no, till he grabbed me and pushed me on the heater and held me there.’ The mother, found to be herself sexually and physically abused by her husband, broke and confirmed every word.”

Bat Ami functions as both ER and multidisciplinary treatment center. Every day of the year, 24/7, it can call on specialized teams from among 14 ob-gyns, 14 nurses, several pediatricians and 30 social workers. Its comprehensive three-room suite is comprised of the lounge-like interview room with a mini-refrigerator, coffee, tea and cookies; an examination room, equipped for medical and forensic assessment and documentation; and a bathroom. Its $28,500 state-of-the-art colposcope, a gift from Hadassah-Australia, collects photo and video documentation for police and prosecutors.

Bat Ami keeps its profile low to ensure the privacy and safety of the victims. “I know her uncle’s interfering with her,” a scared Israeli Arab mother recently told a Bat Ami team. Her terrified 13-year-old daughter, shaking so hard she could scarcely speak, blurted out: “Today, I’ll tell you what he does. Tomorrow, he’ll kill me.” Representatives from Bat Ami took them both to a shelter.

Lev...
Dr. Bauman teaches both mandatory and elective courses at the Hadassah-Hebrew University School of Medicine and lectures widely to medical and legal professionals and the general Israeli public. “When I quote Association of Rape Crisis Centers figures that one in three women is sexually abused, the reaction is usually: ‘Women exaggerate! It can’t be so high!’” she said. “But #MeToo has changed that. One senior Hadassah physician recently remarked: ‘I never believed that figure, but now I realize it’s true.’”

The male physician’s comment highlights Dr. Bauman’s second emphasis: involving men. “Because 88 percent of victims in Israel are female”—in the United States, 91 percent of victims are female—according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center—“the struggle against objectification and abuse of women has largely been a feminist issue, but the men should be there, too,” she said. “Over 95 percent of abusers are men. Even among male victims, 98 percent of perpetrators are men. The responsibility to combat abuse is equally that of men and women, from public campaigning to reining in friends who harass women.”

If unwanted advances are recognized as abusive rather than macho or manly, victims—especially male victims—are more likely to report sexual mistreatment, she said. “We know that one in six men is abused—half the number of women, but still very high—yet only 12 percent of Bat Ami’s patients are men. In a country like Israel, where every teenage boy dreams of serving in an elite IDF unit, the shame of abuse is paralyzing.”

Dr. Bauman recalled a male university student who was violently raped. It took him two days to seek medical help from Hadassah. He felt utterly humiliated—from falling for his abuser’s flattery to its brutal aftermath. “We collected forensic evidence from his body,” Dr. Bauman said, “and told him he had 90 days to report the crime.” (Lobbying from grassroots advocacy groups has recently extended the reporting time up to five years.) The decision to bring charges belongs to the victims, part of Bat Ami’s focus on helping them regain control over their bodies and their lives. This young man’s first response was not to press charges. “I just want to forget it ever happened,” Dr. Bauman recalled him telling her. However, two days before the reporting window closed, he called her, asking whether Hadassah still had his rape kit. “He told me that he’d done some thinking and decided to go to the police, she said.

Dr. Bauman firmly believes that men should be on Bat Ami’s staff—and they are. The “very special and very dedicated” among them can jumpstart recovery, she said, as a way to prevent the development of phobias and restore trust in men. Dr. David Mankuta, who heads Hadassah’s labor and delivery unit at Ein Kerem, is one.

“Bat Ami’s patients sometimes flinch when they see me,” said the ob-gyn, who is originally from Long Island in New York. “A violently raped 15-year-old told me, ‘Go away! I don’t want a man near me!’ I replied that we’d call a woman doctor, but could we chat first? She agreed. As we talked, she saw me not as a man but as someone who cared about what had happened to her and allowed me to treat her.”

Because victims are often too ashamed or frightened to speak out, Dr. Bauman thinks that all doctors should ask patients whether they have ever suffered sexual violence as a standard part of taking their medical history, recorded in the same way as hypertension and drug allergies. “For some, this opening to recount buried horror opens floodgates,” she said. “We physicians must then ask: Have you ever told anyone? Would you like to talk about it now?”

There is no emotional statute of limitations on the harm wrought by sexual predators. Increasingly, however, with today’s changing climate and the help of Bat Ami and other crisis centers in Israel, their victims are speaking out and accepting the fact that they are not to blame.

Wendy Elliman is a British-born science writer who has lived in Israel for more than four decades.

HADASSAH HOSPITALS: WHERE HOPE & HEALING MEET

“I owe my life to Hadassah doctors and this hospital.”

Journalist Oshrat Ohana Nagar didn’t know just how sick she was until she met with Dr. Rifaat Safadi, head of Hadassah hospital’s liver unit. After a diagnosis of a rare liver disease and six miscarriages, Oshrat remained determined to grow her family. Under Dr. Safadi’s care, she realized this dream, having her third child a year ago. Today, Oshrat is the happy mother of three children, a mother who can take care of her family.

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Sexual Harassment Takes a Toll on Health

It is crucial that victims are listened to and supported

By Sarah Yahr Tucker

Ignoring sexual comments and obnoxious remarks from male customers is almost “in the job description” for a restaurant server and bartender, according to Rhiannon, who has worked in the field since she was a teenager.

But the 26-year-old resident of California’s High Desert area, who preferred not to give her last name, said other incidents continue to haunt her. Like the night two years ago when she was serving a rowdy group of men, and one of them wrapped his arms around her waist, refusing to let her go.

“He had his face in mine trying to kiss me,” Rhiannon said, “and I’m bending backwards trying to get away from him. He was like, ‘Am I making you uncomfortable?’ And I said, ‘Yes, yes, you are.’ And he said, ‘O.K, I’ll let you go,’ and then squeezes me tighter, starts to grope me. I’ve never felt so trapped in my life.”

After that, whenever the man, a close friend of the owner, came into the restaurant, Rhiannon found herself having an anxiety attack—stomach churning, mind racing, hands shaking. She had been prescribed Xanax a year earlier for an attack—stomach churning, mind racing—since she was a teenager.

Anti-Defamation League released in February 2019 found that 18 percent of Americans had been sexually harassed online.

Psychologist Susan Lipkins, who specializes in treatment of sexual harassment and bullying, says that depression, anxiety and PTSD are common among victims. She points out that it is impossible to predict when harassing behavior might turn into something more aggressive.

And for someone who was sexually harassed or abused as an adolescent, re-experiencing harassment from a boss or coworker will likely cause more intense trauma.

Lipkins, who is based in Port Washington, N.Y., encourages anyone experiencing symptoms from sexual harassment to seek help from a mental health professional as well as use methods like mindfulness, relaxation and exercise to reduce stress. She also says that reporting harassment to an employer or institution can be an important part of recovery and that receiving a supportive response can actually mitigate the victim’s trauma.

“I see a lot of ambiguity around reporting,” said Lipkins. “It’s hard to know when and how to report and whether that report is going to be taken appropriately seriously or not.”

She added that “if there are people who respond and not only take care of you but look into it and stop the harassment, then you feel much more powerful and positive.”

This was Tarah Chieffi’s experience in her early 20s, when an effective response from an employer left her feeling empowered. While working at a hotel in Louisville, Ky., Chieffi, 37, said her manager made frequent comments about her body and clothing as well as told sexually explicit stories. After six months, Chieffi’s discomfort grew into severe anxiety. She dreaded going to work.

“I did not have a lot of self-esteem at the time,” said Chieffi, “but I went to someone outside of the organization, and they said, ‘You know, you can call the corporate office and make a report against him and tell them that you’re not comfortable in this environment.’ So, I did that, and they actually were very responsive.”

She said the branch headquarters sent a representative to interview her and her manager and informed them that this behavior would not be tolerated. When the harassment continued, Chieffi reported it a second time, and the manager was fired. Her anxiety disappeared.

Even an anonymous report may be beneficial. Emily May, co-founder and executive director of Hollaback!, an organization aimed at combating sexual harassment in public spaces, has seen a range of mental health consequences for victims, including people who have become suicidal. She is concerned about the lack of resources dedicated to supporting victims of harassment, compared to those available for sexual assault or domestic violence.

In addition to anti-harassment programs, Hollaback! has collected over 14,000 stories on its social media platforms. In 2013, researchers from the Georgia Institute of Technology interviewed those participants and found that posting on the website helped them manage their trauma. “They no longer saw it as a personal problem or something they did wrong,” said May. “Instead, they were able to see it as a societal problem, and as a result, start to take action.”

But not everyone finds relief after reporting incidents of sexual harassment.

“Has he linked your name with sexual harassment?” Lipkins asked.

“Do women have to just accept the fact that they’re at higher risk for high blood pressure? Or is there something they can actually do to protect themselves?” Thurston asked.

“Does getting treatment help? Does reporting the incident help? Does having a supportive work environment matter?”

For Tarah Chieffi, the next step is teaching her three young sons to be sensitive to inappropriate behavior. She is encouraged that the #MeToo movement has sparked a public conversation around sexual misconduct and that bystanders are being taught to speak up and intervene.

“More people are speaking out,” said Chieffi, “and also more men. I would love to think that my sons would do that someday.”

Sarah Yahr Tucker is a writer based in Los Angeles, Calif.