

SHABBAT SERMON
Parashat Vayeira
5778

I am going to talk about the very difficult issue of sexual harassment, a topic that evokes very strong feelings. I may say things that you disagree with. I expect that with every sermon I give, certainly when I speak on a topic so charged as this one. As always, I welcome your feedback, even your disagreement.

What motivates me to speak on this topic is that the Jewish world has lost one of its intellectual giants. Marc Sack has lost a thinker whose insight was always unique and incisive; whose writing was a delight to read.

Leon Wieseltier is not a household name. You may remember his book, *Kaddish*, written after his year of saying Kaddish for his father. This product of Flatbush Yeshivah, also studied at Harvard, Oxford and Co-

lumbia, from whom he has a Ph.D. in Jewish History. He was the Literary Editor of The New Republic for 30 years. He wrote on the building of the Holocaust Museum in D.C., settlements in the West Bank and nuclear proliferation. When he left The New Republic, he became the “Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy” at the Brookings Institute and a contributing editor at The Atlantic. He spoke on numerous panels at AIPAC Policy Conferences.

And he was a sexual predator. Not on the scale of Harvey Weinstein. He never forced any women to have sex with him. He did regularly comment on their clothing and looks. He was a paternalistic figure who kissed junior associate women on the forehead or cheek – and occasionally on the mouth.

As business and social giants fall from grace because of their personal behavior, does their work lose all value? I am struggling with that question.

Before I go on, I must say a few things. Sexual harassment is a man using his position of power to either make women uncomfortable – which is, I believe, what Wieseltier did – or to have sex with them – which is what Harvey Weinstein did. It is always wrong.

Complicit in this sin are all those companies and organizations who knew what was going on and looked the other way and did nothing. It was well-known in Hollywood and the in the Weinstein Company who Harvey Weinstein was. It was well-known at Fox who Bill O’Reilly was. And it was well-known at The New Republic who Leon Wieseltier was. And everyone kept their mouth shut. That famous quote of Edmund Burke comes to mind. “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is

that good men do nothing.” In this case, it was men who were in the position to do something and for a very long time they did nothing.

What happens to their work? Does it lose all value? I personally cannot articulate the criteria to say, “this man’s sins make his creative work permanently tainted,” with another man’s sins do not. What is the “egregious scale” that wipes out the value of one’s work – I do not know.

The Hebrew Bible is very pointed about saying that its so-called heroes were all men with – to use the phrase first found in the book of Daniel – men with feet of clay. The heroes of the Bible were all deeply flawed.

- Abraham pimped his wife to save his own neck.
- Jacob, of course, fooled his blind father to purloin the family blessing.
- Aaron the High Priest facilitated the building of the Golden Calf.

- David sent Uriah the Hittite to the front lines to be killed so David could take his wife Bat Sheva.
- Moses, the greatest hero of the Hebrew Bible, killed a man and then hid his body in the sand before running away to the desert.

Judaism does not ignore the sins of these men. Just the opposite. It puts them in front of us to see. It does seem to say that their contribution was big enough that we must focus on that. In the cases of Abraham, Jacob and Moses, the Bible may be saying that it was their ability to change and to take risks for the sake of the people that contributed to their heroic status. But saints – none of them were. They were, like all of us, deeply flawed human beings.

The expectation that anyone, for their creativity or genius be recognized, must also be an upstanding person, can be dangerous.

- The writer William Burroughs was a junkie who accidentally shot his wife in the head.

- The painter Caravaggio was a murderer.
- Neither Frank Sinatra nor Pablo Picasso were saints
- Richard Wagner was a virulent anti-Semite.
- If someone dug up salacious dirt about Shakespeare or Dickens or Twain, or Michelangelo or da Vinci, would their work be less brilliant?

Judaism does not have saints. **Everyone** has clay feet. And I do not know where on the “egregious scale” to draw the line and say this person’s sins make all his previous work invalid. In our current discussion, I believe that rape crosses the line.

- For me, Bill Cosby, however brilliant his comedy, has invalidated his work. He drugged women to have sex with them.
- Rape is among the accusations against Harvey Weinstein.

For me, that crosses way over the line. Where else we draw the line, I do not know. But I do believe that somehow, we must find that line before we throw everything out.

For all of us who read these stories with outrage and sadness for what is being lost, we must remember this. **Being very smart or very talented does not mean that one knows how to control one's self.** Perhaps it even makes it harder to do so. No matter how gifted one may be, everyone must work daily on controlling one's instincts. On that there is no free pass.

The pen of Leon Wieseltier will go silent for a long time, perhaps forever. He made great contributions to the discussion of what it means to be Jewish today. I will miss his insight.