

**Mah Nishtanah?: What's Different About This Feminist Moment?,**  
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**Wexner Graduate Fellowship Summer Institute 2018**

**Locating the Problem where the Problem Lies**

1. Once Megan (Twohey) and I understood the essence of the Weinstein allegations, we realized that part of our job was to give the women a mountain of evidence to stand on: documents, internal emails, settlement records, human resources reports. Our goal was to break the he-said-she-said-cycle, and show how much evidence there was for what these women were telling us. We didn't want to publish a first story that set off debate about what had really happened. Our aim was to publish a story that would cause debate about how so many allegations had accumulated at all. (Speech by New York Times reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey upon receiving the Pulitzer Prize for their sexual harassment investigation, April 2018)

**Sexism: More than what happens to individuals.**

2. In hearing these individual tales, we're not only learning about individual trespasses but for the first time getting a view of the matrix in which we've all been living: We see that the men who have had the power to abuse women's bodies and psyches throughout their careers are in many cases also the ones in charge of our political and cultural stories....And while it may feel cathartic for some women to finally get to say things they've been waiting years to say, this does not undo the damage. We can't go back in time and have the story of Hillary Clinton written by people who have -- unlike political commentator Mark Helprin - not been accused of pressing their erections into the shoulders of young women who worked for them. We cannot retroactively resituate the women who left jobs, who left their whole careers because the navigation of the risks, these daily diminutions and abuses, drove them out. Nor can we retroactively see the movies they would have made or the art they would have promoted, or read the news as they might have reported it. This tsunami of stories doesn't just reveal the way that men have grabbed and rubbed and punished and shamed women; it shows us that they did it all while building the very world in which we still have to live. (Rebecca Traister, "Our National Narratives are Still Being Shaped by Powerful, Lecherous Men" New York Magazine's The Cut, 10/27/17)

3. What we know is that the Jewish communal world, even to this day, is led primarily by men. And that these men have tended to hire other men, including Steven M. Cohen, to survey American Jews. This large and expensive social research apparatus, driven by

male leadership and sustained by aggressive boundary policing, has placed Jewish continuity at its center and defined Jewish continuity in extraordinarily troubling ways.

Most troubling about the data-driven mode of Jewish continuity conversations are its patriarchal, misogynistic, and anachronist assumptions about what is good for the Jews. We learn that single women, queer people, unwed parents, and childless individuals or couples are all problems. And we learn that the Jewish community, should it want to survive, must step into the role of calling out and regulating those problems.

Jewish communal leaders, in turn, learn that the continuity crisis — and its prescriptions about how to regulate primarily women, their bodies, and their sexuality — has its own productive energy that can be harnessed to convince donors to open their pocketbooks and support the very research and programs that prove that the crisis exists.

Jewish academia has benefited from the continuity crisis, as well, accepting its terms and its male leaders and averting its eyes from disturbing or far worse power dynamics, sometimes playing out at Jewish studies conferences. (Kate Rosenblatt, Lila Corwin Berman and Ronit Stahl, “A #metoo Disaster” *The Forward*, July 9 2018)

4. Cohen has shaped an enormous part of the Jewish communal conversation over decades. It is up to us to ask tough questions.

To what extent do traditional patriarchal values shape our vision of modern, liberal American Jewish life? What might continuity look like if not focused on literal, biological reproduction? How has our communal conversation been colored by sexism and misogyny? How did Cohen’s gatekeeping keep certain kinds of women, ideas and points of view, out of the conversation?

How can we know what might have been?

These are huge questions that extend to every level of Jewish life. It won’t be easy, but these distressing allegations against a trusted communal leader may prove to be an unprecedented opportunity for reckoning within the American Jewish community. Maybe we will take this chance to ask who gets to speak, who controls the agenda, and how individuals are, for good and ill, allowed to impose their own values on the community as a whole. (Rokhl Kafrissen, “How a #metoo Scandal Proved What we Already Know: Jewish Continuity is Sexist” *The Forward* July 20 2018)

## **Fighting the Patriarchs, Fighting the Patriarchy**

5. Is this what victory feels like? A significant number of women are commuting each morning to a workplace that is either already rid of its abusers or humming with the music of oncoming retribution. The newspapers tell us that in these cases—of Harvey Weinstein, Leon Wieseltier, Louis C.K., Michael Oreskes, Robert Scoble, Knight Landesman, and more—justice has been served. The New York Times has already framed these downfalls in historical terms, calling it a “click” moment that has redeemed the accusations of women going back to Anita Hill. This movement is bringing sexual predators, harassers, and manipulators to their reckoning. Click, click, click: Watch the lights go out, one by one.

But this model for gender justice, in which a villain is brought low to give the public their satisfaction, does not eradicate the power imbalances and resulting fear that animate harassment. There is no on/off switch for sexual intimidation, and workplaces are not cleansed as if by magic when one man is fired, or even if many of them are swept away by the “tsunami” metaphor so favored by the press. More troubling still, this model oversimplifies the truth about sexual abuse, obscuring the experiences of marginalized women and fundamentally altering the way we address the problem. (Josephine Livingstone, “The Task Ahead for Feminism” *The New Republic* November 17, 2017)

6. The #MeToo moment has shifted social attitudes, inspired widespread calls for change and resulted in unprecedented accountability. But the revelations about the pervasiveness of harassment — and of the legal and institutional failures to address it — illuminate how tough it will be to extinguish.

“We can’t fire our way out of this problem,” said Paula Brantner, who runs sexual harassment workshops for nonprofits and businesses, pointing out that removing individual offenders is not enough.

Harassment has flourished in part because structures intended to address it are broken: weak laws that fail to protect women, corporate policies that are narrowly drawn and secret settlements that silence women about abuses. “The reality is, the problem is systemic, and we have to address it at a systemic level,” said Rory Gerberg, also a consultant whose clients include technology companies. (Jodi Kantor, “#MeToo Called for an Overhaul. Are Workplaces Really Changing?” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2018)

7. Surely the results of the #MeToo phenomenon are worthy. It’s a seriously good thing Harvey Weinstein is gone and that the potential Harvey Weinsteins will think twice or

thrice or a thousand times before harassing women whose fortunes they control. But “the end of patriarchy”? Look around.

This month, President Trump signed into law a tax bill that throws a bomb at women. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act systematically guts benefits that support women who need support the most: It means an end to personal and dependent exemptions (a disaster for minimum-wage workers, nearly two-thirds of whom are women). An expiration date for child-care tax credits and a denial of such credits for immigrant children without Social Security cards. An end to the Affordable Care Act’s individual mandate. And, barely avoided, thanks to Democrats’ objections: an enshrinement of “fetal personhood” in the form of college savings accounts for unborn children, a sly grenade lobbed at legal abortion.

Not to mention that Republican congressmen plan to pay down the enormous federal deficit the bill will incur by slashing entitlements that, again, are critical to women: Medicaid (covering nearly half the births in the nation and 75 percent of family planning), Medicare (more than half of beneficiaries 65 and older — and two-thirds of those 85 and older — are women) and so on.

And that’s on top of all the other Trump administration insults: reviving the global gag rule on abortion, suspending tracking of the gender wage gap, deep-sixing the Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces executive order and much more.

Which leads me to wonder, if we get rid of a handful of Harveys while losing essential rights and protections for millions of women, are we really winning this thing? (Susan Faludi, “The Patriarchs Are Falling. The Patriarchy Is Stronger Than Ever.” *The New York Times*, Dec. 28, 2017)