

Swiping Left on Indifference: Giving Voice to the Silenced
Riverway Project Kol Nidre 5779 | Rabbi Jen Gubitz

“For [their] first date, he took an Uber to [her] apartment through a winter storm. As the snow fell outside, [they] sat close on [her] couch while he talked touchingly about poetry. Two hours in, [she] was hoping he would kiss [her], and he did.”¹

As the night went on, with every move he wanted to make:

“Is this O.K.?” He would ask.

“Yes,” she would respond.

“Is *this* O.K.?” He would ask [again.]

“Yes,” she would respond [once more.]

“Let’s assume you have blanket consent,” she promised.

“I’m not comfortable with that,” he said.

Modern love in the age of consent. On a snowy night a Tinder swipe right. It seemed as if this encounter, from a New York Times Modern Love Column by Courtney Sender, was respectful and consensual, equitable and powerful and held possibility for true connection.

But their second time together:

“Is this O.K.?” He asked.

“Yes,” she responded.

“Is *this* O.K.?” *She* asked.

He was taken aback [by her question identical to his.] “I ask *you* that,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because I’m the one who could make you do something you don’t want to [do],” he said. “Not vice versa.”

Modern love in the age of consent. On a snowy night, an initially equitable dynamic for both had swiped right. Where yes really meant yes. *Except...* yes only meant yes when he felt the power belonged to him.

When the night ended, he promised to cook dinner next time. “See you soon,” he vowed.

And then he disappeared. Ghosted. All that remained were those three silent dots on iMessage - [*I know you know them well*] that vowed, promised, teased a response. But *he* ghosted

¹Courtney Sender, “He Asked Permission to Touch, but Not to Ghost,” New York Times Modern Love, Sept. 7, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2NqsJim>

because yes only meant yes when he felt the power belonged solely to him. Sure, it was just Tinder. What do you expect? You might think. But it is clear, he ghosted to silence her. He ghosted because he couldn't imagine a connection where they might have **equal** power and **equal** voice. <<Dot.Dot.Dot>> The silent sound of ghosting.

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<<Dot.Dot.Dot>> When he didn't answer my text, I was worried.

"Are you feeling any better?" I asked. I knew he was getting over the flu. With no response, I inquired further.

"Hey, it's the rabbi here," in case he'd lost my number. Once I'd told him what I do, what I *am*, he took to calling me *only* that.

"Are you alive?" I asked. <<Dot.Dot.Dot>> was frozen on the screen. With no response to *that* question either, as *the rabbi* often faced with situations of life and death, all I could assume was that, in fact, he was dead.

"Great news," I texted, "Rabbi here, and happy to officiate your funeral." Of course, since he was dead, he still didn't respond. So I sat a brief *shiva* for the relationship that was not to be and didn't sign back onto OKCupid until I was sure his dating soul was no longer stuck in purgatory between Jdate and JSwipe.

Either he was a priest and it just wasn't going to work out, or he *just wasn't that into me*. Or because that's a summary of many encounters I've had when it seemed clear that the power was always in their hands until they found out what I do for a living, oft calling me only by the name *Rabbi* in order to use their now seemingly diminished power to distance me from myself.

<<Dot.Dot.Dot>> Modern Love in the age of a woman's ascent to leadership roles and moral authority only men could once represent. A response was due only when he felt the power belonged solely to him. Sure, it was just JSwipe. What do you expect? But it seemed clear that he ghosted me because he couldn't imagine a connection with someone who might have equal power, or even greater influence in the world than him.

<<Dot.Dot.Dot>> The silent sound of ghosting.

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That silent sound of ghosting is not just forgetting to respond or to hit send. It is not *just* about getting back to someone you are *sort* of interested in when you've finally got some downtime. And it's not only about dating. Rather, rooted deeply within those powerful <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>s that can diminish **any** person on the receiving end no matter their gender -- rooted deeply is a breach, a gap filled with deep silence and utter disrespect. The kind that occurs when one individual in an encounter believes that they are or should be more powerful than another. Their silence and disregard speak loudly of their inability to imagine a world where there might just be enough power to go around. Such silence and disregard speaks loudly of an inability to

imagine a world through the lens of vulnerability, honesty, integrity and respect. Hidden in those powerful <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>s, that visual response of non-responsive silence, ***is this message:*** I don't want to hear what else you have to say. If one person doesn't respond and does not finish the conversation, the other is silenced from doing so as well.

Rebecca Solnit addresses in her book [The Mother of All Questions](#) this issue of silence as it impacts all people, especially but not exclusively women: "If to have a voice, to be allowed to speak, to be heard and believed is essential to being an insider or a person of power, a human being with full membership, then it's important to recognize that silence is the universal condition of oppression, and there are many kinds of silence..."²

Solnit acknowledges the many intersections of gender, class, race, sexuality, poverty and wealth that contribute to this great human silencing. Genocide is a great silencing. Slavery was a great silencing. "It was in opposition to [slavery]," Solnit teaches, "that American feminism arose" (50). When Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended the World's Anti Slavery Convention in 1840 London, she discovered that as one of the many female abolitionists present, (*here it comes <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>*), as a woman she was not entitled to sit or speak. Furious first about slavery and second about being silenced and shut out gave rise to the first women's rights movements and a century later led to the civil rights movement. But for eons and still today, justice and equality was and is determined primarily by white males as "silence [remains] the historic condition of women."³

We did not even have language to describe the present *#meToo* moment until around 1974 when the term sexual harassment was coined at MIT by Dr. Mary Rowe. It was not until a 1982 Supreme Court Case when Louisiana's Head and Master rule was struck down and marriage could no longer be defined as a relationship between a dominant male and a subordinate female. Year by year, some silences *have* been given voice.

Now, how many of you are itching to reach into your pockets to turn on your phones, to respond to that person -- maybe it's just your sister -- who right now can only see the <<Dot.Dot.Dot>> that may promise *either* eventual response or ultimate silence? And how, you wonder, did the rabbi get from iPhones to Tinder to JSwipe to Silence to Slavery to Feminism to #MeToo?

It's all connected. The <<Dot.Dot.Dot>> on our phones is a microcosm of the broader issues we face in our world today: of the silencing of women, people of color, the queer community, immigrants, and so many others. And we haven't even touched our biblical Jewish roots.

² Rebecca Solnit, [The Mother of All Questions](#), Haymarket Books, Chicago, p. 50.

³ Solnit, p. 51.

Judaism itself is a religion rooted in our patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the matriarchs who get second shrift: passed off as sisters when they are wives; mothers to sons whose fathers heed God's command to sacrifice their lives; barren women for the sake of poetic symbolism; and, of course, it is Eve's fault for eating that forbidden fruit. Of course, at humanity's beginning a woman's "bad" behavior is at the root. A few strong profiles of women emerge in Torah, but you have to dig into the textual silence to find them far beneath the surface, often waiting thousands of years for their silent voices to be superimposed on our sacred texts.

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Ghosting, the silent disappearance and silencing of another on JSwipe or Facebook or email, is a microcosm of this history of silence. Why did it take until just last year for the silence to begin to unravel? When Alyssa Milano took to Twitter to encourage women to give voice to a world of silence around sexual harassment and assault? *#meToo* - two of our most basic words when compounded together, finally voiced years, decades, centuries of collective pain. It was a tidal wave of women over 12 million strong discovering their shared voice, and alleviating their isolation. This phrase and leadership, however, was originally used by activist Tarana Burke, who started the movement. She is a woman of color. Another <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>: a another silencing where humanity can hear *some* voices, but still not all [voices.]⁴

An original Torah reading for Yom Kippur was from the book of Leviticus, and focused on relationships permitted or prohibited by God. Most progressive Jewish communities, however, treat [part]⁵ of this original textual selection with a <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>, choosing to silence it for its lack of understanding and nuance of the ways in which relationships between any gender or sexual orientation have the power to be holy. It did not comport with our values of acceptance and recognition that love is love is love. And so we read from Nitzavim, a text of great import that both guides us in right action and is addressed to **everyone**. From the Jew to the Jew-adjacent, the waterdrawer to the woodchopper, the investment banker to the uber driver to the migrant worker. It gives voice beyond the biblical patriarchy to everyone who embodies the vastness of humanity.

The proverbial <<Dot.Dot.Dot>> of changing Torah portions gave progressive Judaism, as a collective of people with great power, an opportunity to use their power, to act in ways that live our values and to restore voice to the silenced.

A day like Yom Kippur has the power to restore us to our original selves. It has the power to equalize us as we sit amid a growing hunger, as we sit with our thoughts, our regrets, and our mistakes. Yom Kippur has the power to release us, to revive us, to uncover and recover the

⁴ Thanks to Rabbis Jodie Gordon and Molly Kane whose High Holy Sermon inspired this section.

⁵ Leviticus 18

parts of ourselves and the power within ourselves that has been silenced by others or by our own accord. Yom Kippur has the power to bring us to thoughtful silence as we consider what we might change in ourselves, in our homes, what we might change in our communities, or change about the ways our world works or does not. All the ways we might make change if *only we had the power to do so*.

Well, we do have that power. You have power. And of course, it starts with those awful <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>s. First, don't ghost people. It's not nice! Even if it might, for a moment, make you feel a bit more powerful, it doesn't make you look or feel good. And you dishonor yourself by disrespecting someone else. There is no word in Hebrew appropriate for public forums that is equivalent to the meaning inherent in the act of ghosting someone. And you must know by now that's just a foil for contrast. Rather, the best Hebrew option is *l'hitaleh* and it means - <<Dot.Dot.Dot>>: Indifference.

In whatever circles you inhabit, whether your family, your school, your workplace, your neighborhood, your Jewish community, when that proverbial <<Dot.Dot.Dot>> becomes more than just insecurity or indecision and moves to indifference, you are further muffling those who are already silenced. And you are wasting **your** power to give others voice. You are wasting your power to wage against the silence we've inherited from our patriarchs and transformed into our own. If ever you've felt diminished by someone else who has more power or more authority or more influence than you, or than you think you should have, don't waste the power you **DO** have by silencing yourself, silencing someone else, and modeling that silence to others.

For the sin of indifference, our tradition would urge us...**swipe left**. That is not a match for who you want to be. For respectful, caring relationships are just too important.

For the sin of silencing others by ignoring them, for the sin of fearing our own power will be diminished by the power of someone else: our tradition would urge us...**swipe left**. That's not a match with who you want to be. That is not a match with how you want your world to go 'round. That is not a match with how you want your sister or your brother or your friend or your neighbor to be treated.

For the act of restoring, responding, lifting up, and listening deeply to the voices crying out to be heard across the ages, our tradition would urge us... **swipe right**. Swipe right on kindness, equity, vulnerability. Swipe right on respect, honesty, and integrity. When you swipe right on the best version of yourself, you will find a match with the holy power that rests within the very palm of your own hands. Shana Tovah.