

An old joke-

There once was a man, who was very, very faithful. One day he was swimming in the ocean, when he realized he was far from the shore. Soon his arms began to ache and he worried he might not be able to make it back. A woman with an inner tube swam by- "Hey, you look tired, grab onto this inner tube and I'll pull you back in..." "No, no," the man said, "I have faith. God will provide." A few minutes later a man fishing in a rowboat approached, "Sir, you're far from shore, climb in, I'll row you back." "No, no," the man said, "I have faith. God will provide." Now, the man was getting very tired, a coast guard helicopter arrived, and dropped a rope ladder. "Climb up," they called, "we can save you." "No, no," said the man, "I have faith. God will provide." Well, soon, the man could no longer swim- he sank into the ocean- and before long, he was standing face to face with God. The man couldn't believe it, "God, I am a faithful man, I really believed you would provide for me when I needed you!" God looked back at the man, exasperated, "Who do you think sent the inner tube, the row boat and the helicopter?!"

God has power! We learn this at the very beginning of the Torah. We read it this morning. In Genesis Chapter 1. God said let there be oceans and sky...let there be trees and flowers... God said, "*Vayomer Elohim y'hi or, va'y'hi or.*" God said "Let there be light" and what happened? "There was light." That is power.

But on the sixth day, God formed something different from all of the other creations. God shaped something, "*b'tzelmeinu kidmutainu,*" in God's image, after God's likeness. This creation was, of course, us. Humans.

The first two of these new creations, Adam and Eve, got themselves into trouble very quickly. God set them up in an all inclusive resort called Eden, a bountiful garden. They were given only one rule- "You must not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, or else you will die." Adam was content without knowledge, but Eve, the first woman, was not happy spending all day in this garden empty headed. With a little encouragement from a serpent, she took a risk, she ate the forbidden fruit.

And with this, we, humans, God's final creation, demonstrated that we have power. Our Torah is not a science book, nor is it a history book- but the foundational myth that we tell about ourselves begins with an assertion of our human power. The power to act independently of God, the most powerful force we can imagine. People are powerful.

It would be unfair to say that all power is the same. It is true, people with more power can sometimes hurt people with less power. Some people are presumed to have more power because of their gender, or the color of their skin, or their economic status. Or they are presumed to have power because of their position- in a school, or a company or a government. Or a referee at the US Open. But no matter your gender, whether you are a boss or a worker, black or white, no one can take your power away.

When Eve ate the forbidden fruit, she gained the power of knowledge. Not just any kind of knowledge but the knowledge of good and evil- the ability to tell right from wrong.

And though this knowledge is important, it is useless unless we use our power to speak up when we see that something is wrong.

This past year, we have learned the stories of countless women who were mistreated at work- or who were mistreated trying to get a job- or who were bullied by powerful men who used their power to hurt others. It has been a painful year, so many women said “Me Too” when these stories came out of the shadows. For some, it was a year of confronting the misdeeds of heroes and even friends. For some, it re-opened old wounds. But one of the most disheartening revelations was just how many people knew that harm was being done and remained silent.

Over and over again we learned that those who did harm were surrounded by a culture that was indifferent and enabling. And, yes, it is easy to point fingers or to claim that this is just a Hollywood problem. But this is also a Washington problem - perhaps you’ve told someone about a congressional office to avoid, or to stay away from a clerkship with a judge who has a bad reputation.

Each of us has the power not to remain on the sidelines, but to speak out, stand up when we see that people are being mistreated.

You may be thinking, “hmm, wasn’t expecting to hear about the ‘#metoo movement’ in a service for families,” but it is right here that this message is the most important. Because cultures of complicity start very young. When you see someone at your school, or in your office, or even among your friends, trying to make someone else feel small, you have the power to intervene. At the very least, you have the power to make someone else feel less alone. You have the power to stand up- and in the new year- let’s find the courage to use that power

But, you may say, “What can I do? I’m only one person.” Yes, each of us has power, but on our own, our power is limited. If more people use their power together, the whole will be greater than the sum of its parts. To quote a contemporary prophet, from the album “Everything is Love” Jay-Z says, “Over here we measure success by how many people successful next to you, Here we say you broke if everybody is broke except for you.”¹ When you work with others, when you bring them into your work, you have more power than you would if you were working alone.

This spring, our nation mourned the tragedy in Parkland, Florida. In the days that followed, we discovered a new generation of leaders- who took their mourning and turned it into activism. Emma Gonzales, David Hogg, and so many others. It began with a few lone voices, but when they called us to march- we marched. All over the country, we took to the streets because teenagers, many of whom couldn’t drive, who couldn’t vote, who couldn’t even buy their own tickets to R Rated movies, called on us to show up and say never again to gun violence.

¹ “Boss.” The Carters. *Everything is Love*.

And while a march may not make change on its own, the ongoing organizing around that march can. Since the March for Our Lives, the students leaders have been using their platform to build a movement across lines of difference. They are registering people to vote. Particularly young people who are historically underrepresented in the voting booth. In Florida, where they have focused their work, youth voter registration is up 41 percent.² And voting is power.

We don't have to look all the way to Florida to find young people using their power. Our teens, right here at Temple Sinai, have been organizing- have been advocating- have been speaking out. You have been working on political campaigns, and engaging in protest, and bringing your friends along. You are using your power to lead us forward.

Emma Gonzales and David Hogg are just teenagers. They still do regular teenager things- they worry about college, they shared the first dance at their prom in May. They are teenagers who experienced a life changing tragedy. And they amplified their voices by reaching out to other teenagers, by creating a movement that has spread from high school to high school, from state to state, and hopefully soon, to our elected officials and lawmakers. Organizing is power.

Eve is often remembered as a Biblical bad girl. Christian scripture blames her for the fall from grace in Eden. Many traditional Jewish sources have been equally unkind, comparing her to the serpent, painting her as devious, deceptive, an embodiment of Satan. And, it is true, Eve disobeyed God and was punished for her actions. But Eve uncovered our power. Bible scholar Reuven Kimelman teaches, "In the creation narrative, God makes the rules...By eating from the tree, Eve changes the rules of the garden...Not satisfied with the role of servant of the law, she aspires to be its master and maker."³ Eve, given the chance to have knowledge, to have agency, to have power...well, she reached out, she grabbed it, and she took a big bite out of it.

This deed defines us. To act with self determination, free will, personal power is what it means to be human. And as we welcome a new year, let us use it. Let us use our power to stand up when we face injustice, speak up when we see wrongdoing, let us reach out to others and organize so that our power added to others can bring about change. God created us with the power to break the rules, to challenge authority, and to take a stand for what we believe in. May this be a year when we uncover, embrace and increase our God given power.

² <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/08/david-hogg-is-taking-his-gap-year-at-the-barricades.html>

³ Reuven Kimelman, "The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender."