



Bullyproofing Bikers

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Ten-year-old Xander Rose wants to be a biker more than anything in the world. He loves wearing his leather jacket and sunglasses. He loves watching motorcycles zip by. He used to love school too until kids started picking on him for his size, for his clothes, and for his dreams of riding motorcycles. This year, the bullying has gotten worse. Kids jumped him on the bus, they tried to rip of his leather jacket, they screamed racial slurs at him and told Xander he should go die in a hole.

Sadly, Xander's story is not unique. Bullying is on the rise. The percentage of children who are bullied has increased by 50% since 1983. Serious bullying (characterized by intensity and frequency) has increased by 65% in that same period. 160,000 teens skip school every day to avoid continued harassment. These students suffer from higher levels of depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and often have difficulty learning.

This week, Florida lawmakers unveiled a proposal to fight bullying in the classroom. The bill, called the Hope Scholarship Program, provides students who have been the victims of bullying with vouchers to cover either the cost of private school tuition or the cost of transportation to a different public school.

Proponents celebrate the bill's potential to address and heal the negative impacts of bullying. As Rep. Byron Donalds explained, "we all know if you experienced a trauma at a particular place, a reasonable adult wouldn't return." This bill empowers victimized students to

leave challenging situations and begin again at a new school which doesn't trigger memories of abuse. Without fear of specific bullies, these students can reduce their symptoms of depression and anxiety, increase their capacity to learn, make friends, and chart a newly successful course in life.

But, critics point out that removing victims from the situation does nothing to address the problem of bullying in general. Additionally, when individuals are removed from the situation, the underlying communication is that these students are at fault. It is their presence which caused the bullying and thus their absence which will solve it. Rep. Janet Cruz adds, "it's a ridiculous concept that the child being bullied should be forced to leave their neighborhood school while their bully will be free to continue to harass other students."

While this law winds its way through the Florida legislative system, the particulars of the Hope Scholarship Program bear striking resemblance to the way our country has responded to a different type of bullying.

Over the past few months, our world has been roiled by stories of sexual harassment and sexual assault. With the rise of #MeToo, people are coming forward to share stories of pain they have harbored for years, even decades, in silence. Their stories have been received with open arms, fueled by hashtags of #Ibelieve you and general media outrage. Time Magazine even named the #MeToo Silence Breakers "people of the year" this week. No industry has proved immune from the scourge of sexual violence and the revelation that powerful figures have been using their sexuality to victimize people again and again throughout their careers.

But while these stories have been a force for redemption and redress for the victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence, the response has been both deeply satisfying and deeply

disturbing. Overwhelmingly, individuals implicated in stories of sexual misconduct have been terminated from their places of employment often without any official legal action. Just this week, renowned conductor James Levine was suspended from the Met. Last week, Matt Lauer was fired by NBC. Before that it was public radio host Garrison Keillor, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Charlie Rose, Roy Price, Louis CK, Mark Halperin, Andy Dick, and the list goes on.

It is tempting to look at these people and say that justice has been done. For too many years they used their power and prestige to victimize others. For too many years they achieved at the expense of others. Now the truth is out and they will no longer have the influence or the power to inflict such harm again.

But we are facing a bigger problem. Just like removing the bully or the victim from the classroom does nothing to solve the challenges of bullying in school, so too removing these powerful men from their jobs does nothing to solve the climate of willful ignorance and blindness which allowed their predatory behavior to continue.

According to a new poll released by the New York Post in November of this year, 60% of American women have been sexually harassed. (I must admit, that statistic feels rather conservative to me.) A recent National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey reveals that one in two women and one in five men will be the victims of sexual violence. These numbers are bigger than the comedians, actors, conductors, chefs, politicians, and journalists who have been implicated by sexual misconduct. While we respond to every accusation with immediate termination, while we allow ourselves to get caught up in each new scandal, we lose track of a very real threat which affects each one of us and every part of our world.

This week, our Torah provides a different story of bullying. Joseph's story is complex. You can read him as a provocative victim, puffed up with pride and dreams of dominance, constantly haranguing his brothers and speaking ill of them. Or, you can read him as a legitimate victim, picked on by his brothers for reasons outside his control. Either way, his brothers decide that the solution to their problem is to get rid of Joseph, to send him away, to sell him into slavery.

If separation were the answer we would expect things to get better for Joseph and his brothers. But in fact, the opposite unfolds. Jacob doesn't choose a new favorite son, he is not more present for his other children because of Joseph's absence. Instead, he mourns the loss of his one and only favorite Joseph and retreats even farther into himself. The brothers do not gain access to more resources, they do not have an easier time getting along. In fact, their lives grow harder. There is famine in the land. They must leave home to seek out resources.

Joseph is not having an easy time of it either. He leaves one bullying situation and quickly finds himself in another. Potiphar's wife torments him, eventually framing him in a scandal sends him to prison. Free from the persecutions of his brothers, he nevertheless finds himself confined within rigid social structures, forced to eat alone even when he escapes from prison because he is "other."

Separation does not solve the brothers' problems, but the situation is not without hope. In a few weeks, Joseph and his brothers will be reunited. For the first time in their lives, they will be transparent with one another, sharing their pain and remorse for the past, and demonstrating through their behavior in the present that they have changed. Joseph will be touched by the way his brothers band together to protect their youngest sibling, instead of allowing him to be thrown to the wolves the way they did Joseph. Joseph's brothers will be touched by the way he opens

himself up to them, and the powerful force of his forgiveness. It is when Joseph and his brothers acknowledge their problems, when they are able to take responsibility for their part in the conflict and work to heal their relationship moving forward that they find peace; and with it, enough physical resources to live together.

Torah and experience teach us that bullying is not the problem of individuals, but the problem of a community. That's why Jewish tradition teaches us to apologize in the plural. We say *ashamnu*—we have sinned—because when we hurt someone else, the impact is felt throughout the community. We apologize in the plural because we know that standing by and watching bullying is just as bad as bullying someone. We apologize in the plural because we know that just as we have the power to treat others with kindness, we also have the power to nurture a social climate which makes bullying impossible.

Which brings us back to Xander Rose. After calls to the school, school board, parents and local did nothing to change her son's experience at school, Katie (Xander's mother) decided to go out of the box. She called a local group of bikers to see if maybe they could help. The answer was an immediate and emphatic yes.

7:30 AM rolls around, 200 bikers show up to escort Xander and his family to school. For the first time in a long time, Xander was excited to go. He sat proudly on a motorcycle, waving to the cars and people that lined the road to cheer the biker group and the little boy. When they arrived at school, the bikers made a path for Xander from the parking lot all the way up to the school doors and cheered him on as he walked into school. One of the bikers said, "I'm hoping he knows, from now on, if somebody bullies him, he's got somebody to go to. He can look on the corner on any street. He's going to find a leather vest. He's now one of our brothers." We take care of our brothers.

We're not bikers, but that doesn't mean we can't ride in to save the day. We have an important choice in this moment. We can look around and say that bullying is a problem, we can look around and demonize the individuals that have been caught—to be clear, there should be justice, but there's something else we need to be doing. We must rise up, and with our loving regarding presence, make it clear that bullying is not welcome here or in any community. Our rabbis teach, Olam Chesed Yibaneh—together we can build a community and a world of love. Let's do it!