

Why No ‘Rachmones’ from the Women’s Movement for Israeli Rape Victims?



Amy Neustein, Ph.D.

Israeli police investigators, rape crisis centers and forensic medical examiners were abundantly clear in describing the horrors of sexual violence perpetrated against Israeli women and girls residing in the kibbutzim and towns near the Gaza border during the Oct. 7 massacre. There were 1,500 eyewitness statements, detailed pathology reports and ample video recordings. The findings were unsparingly gruesome: women were shot in the face while being gang raped; pregnant women were raped, disemboweled and their fetuses dismembered; nails and other rusty metal objects were found inside the feminine orifices of the women who had been mutilated and murdered.

Sadly, this litany of horror was not enough to elicit rage from the women’s movement that has prided itself as the defenders of the #MeToo campaign – the show of unconditional support for all women who are victims of sexual violence. What this showed was that in a very short window of time, the aloneness of being Jewish and female was made perfectly clear to every Jewish woman around the world. Jewish men, likewise, enraged over the brutal assault on Jewish women and girls, felt the betrayal of the global community. Many in the Jewish community, aside from the collective support of one another, knew that they stood alone in their pain, anguish and grief, as they have for thousands of years.

Certainly, at this critical time we sorely needed the support of the women’s movement to validate our feelings of outrage and to publicly decry the violation of Jewish women and girls. Such inhumane sexual

acts have resonated profoundly in our community. Every young girl assaulted by the Hamas attackers was a future Jewish mother; and every woman who was profanely violated was a mother, a grandmother, a sister, or an aunt.

As our women were defiled, debased and dishonored, this represented a “Churban” – massive destruction and desecration – of Jewish women who are the fulcrum of community life. Desecration resonates so deeply in our religion that our calendars are marked with holidays and fast days to commemorate those events in our history. The reason is, we use the date of desecration as a marker to delineate our inextinguishable flame of survival against all odds. This is something we, as Jews, understand intrinsically. However, others do not. They have neither endured cycles of persecution, murder and annihilation, nor have they been repeatedly scorned by cadres of enemies.

Surely, our disappointment in the failure of the women’s movement to denounce our attackers might stem from too much credit given to our “assimilation” in today’s modern world. On one hand, at no other time in Jewish history have we so seamlessly integrated with non-Jewish populations. Except for insular Hasidic communities, the modern Jew today exists in a world of all nationalities and faiths – no doubt a stark contrast to those close-knit small town European “shtetl” communities. On the other hand, assimilation is often deceptive since it offers a false sense of integration with other ethnic groups and faiths, when the reality belies this myth. We saw this play out in the wake of the Oct. 7 massacre when women’s groups were reluctant to support their Jewish sisters.

Alas, our sisters in solidarity, with whom we’ve worked laboriously on reproductive freedom, the

Equal Rights Amendment, LGBTQ rights, along with other important women’s issues, have woefully disappointed us. They were slow to respond, if at all, to our searing pain. Where we expected “rachmones” – sympathy, empathy, understanding – to flow from the faucets of human kindness we found, instead, the ashes of the Shoah hitting us in the face. Once again, we were alone, forced to navigate our fate sans champions to take up our cause.

All in all, the ruse of modern times may have led most of us to think we have successfully assimilated when in truth we stand very much alone. Perhaps this is a wake-up call. If so, we need to reevaluate, recalibrate and reconsider our role in the women’s movement of today. Our tradition teaches us to be strong and to never give up. It also teaches us to stand up for what’s right. And that includes demanding accountability from the women’s movement for their shameful silence on the Oct. 7 massacre. ■

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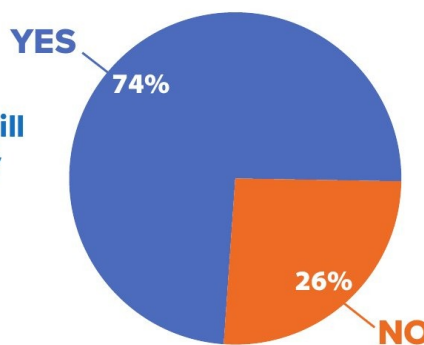
Congressional Republicans’ Concern About Antisemitism

I heard some of the congressional hearing with the university presidents that is referenced in your Dec. 13 editorial “Elite University Leaders Shrouded in Shame.” I, too, was surprised by and did not take as sincere the Republicans’ expression of concern about antisemitism. Why? Because the whole Republican Party has fallen in line behind and will do anything for their leader, a man whose reaction to the neo-Nazi marching in Charlottesville, Virginia, was not to condemn Nazism but to call the neo-Nazi “fine people” and who, according to news reports, has recently used phrasing that Hitler used. This party should have lost all the public’s support years ago. ■

David Fallick, Rockville

Dec. 14 Poll Results

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