

I Stand with Sheila Katz's Michael Steinhardt #METOO Moment

by Phyllis Chesler



Michael Steinhardt

A year ago, Sheila Katz went public about being sexually harassed by philanthropist Michael Steinhardt. In solidarity, please allow me to share *my* Steinhardt story. When the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Organization (JOFA) asked me to debate him I agreed to do so. When I arrived, together with my chevrutah, Rivka Haut (z'l), Steinhardt looked incredulous, motioned me aside, then asked me if I was really Phyllis Chesler. I said I was. Then he said: "And what would you think if I kissed you hard and put my tongue down your throat?" Stunned, insulted, I hesitated for a moment, then said: "And what would you think if I punched you hard?" He backed down, bullies often do, and then said: "But I'm interested in why Israeli judges are putting men in prison just for flirting with women." Said I: "You could convey your interest in reasonable, decent words,

not in highly inappropriate words.” I was offended, one could consider this workplace harassment, but I did not walk out. We went to the stage and sat in our separate corners, separated by a female moderator wearing such a big hat so that Steinhardt and I could not see each other. I proceeded to defend Jewish women’s extraordinary religious learning and he proceeded to denigrate it as “foolishness,” narashkeit. His views were wrong, and given that the audience was composed of many learned Jewish women, his words were also cruel and inappropriate.

When I told people about what had happened I was told, by many others, that Steinhardt is just “eccentric,” no big deal, it wasn’t rape, it wasn’t even sexual harassment, his heart is in the right place, he’s done such good work—and their dismissals of his “eccentric” behavior were even more upsetting than Steinhardt’s behavior. Katz also found that all those who supported, defended, and enabled Steinhardt and who refused to stand with her, betrayed her trust in ongoing ways. This is exactly what I write about in “A Politically Incorrect Feminist,” about a feminist leader and friend who opportunistically buddied up to my rapist and thereafter launched a campaign to defame me—lest I ever tell what really happened.

I deeply appreciate