

Safe Jewish Homes

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A few years ago, I spoke about domestic violence on Yom Kippur. Afterward, two very sweet members of my synagogue came up to me and said, "Rabbi, you shouldn't speak about such ugly things from the pulpit. That doesn't happen here."

I thought to myself, "Two rows behind you and a little to the left, it does."

Domestic violence happens in Jewish homes. This article is the reopening of the conversation, because we need to confront this issue. I wish we didn't have to. But this isn't only an issue in the Catholic Church. It is much closer to home than we'd like to admit.

Abuse happens within Jewish families. Physical and verbal abuse happen in Jewish families.

We don't like to talk about what is ugly and painful. We feel shame in revealing our less than perfect family lives. We don't want the outside world to know. We don't want each other to know. So we remain silent. But we are hurting. Some of us are suffering, right here, in our midst. Others inflict deep pain upon those they claim to love.

Victims of abuse can be women or men, young or old. It has been suggested that, on average, Jewish women stay in abusive relationships for five to seven years longer than non-Jewish women, primarily because they don't want to believe that Domestic Violence happens to Jewish women.

There are aspects of traditional Judaism, present even in modern congregations, that maintain the weak position of the victim in the face of abuse. Here are two:

1) Some rabbis have invoked the Jewish ideal of "shalom bayyit," of maintaining peace in the home, as justification for sending a woman back to her abuser. Some rabbis continue to counsel this way, and have only served to disempower suffering Jews.

2) A get, or Jewish divorce decree, by Orthodox law, can only be issued by a man, who can torment his partner with the get's legal power and its control over the wife's future. This makes the vulnerable woman an agunah, a chained woman, trapped by Judaism's rules.

These two aspects of traditional Jewish life are problems. They make victimization possible within Jewish families, and they must be changed. We must take the deeply Jewish step forward and, together, condemn abuse of any kind in our community.

Abuse can be physical, sexual, verbal or emotional. It can come in the form of the ongoing use of demeaning words like "you're stupid," or ugly, or crazy. It can be total access to and control over bank accounts and finances. It can be threats to injure children or pets. It can be monitoring and limiting friendships, going out, talking on the phone.

Domestic violence is not about having a bad temper or being out of control. It is about power and control—one person exerting power and control over another. Domestic violence impacts on the entire family, injuring also the children who witness abuse by hearing it or seeing it.

I offer two anonymous testimonies from Jewish victims of abuse. One is physical, and might help those in verbally abusive relationships say, "Oh, that's not me." But the second is a case of verbal abuse, perhaps even harder to escape.

1) "The Jewish Community sees my husband as a respected professional who is educated, talented, outgoing, friendly, loving, caring, and compassionate. They were not witness to what took place in the privacy of our home. No one saw him hit, kick, and choke me. No one heard him tell our child, 'Mommy's dead.' No one was present when he threatened to commit suicide in the presence of our child, wipe me off the face of the earth, and promised that I would not survive the night."

2) "I have a boyfriend who is charming to everyone, a real mentsch, sharp thinker—and everyone around looks up to him. So you can understand how I feel alone in how I am feeling, since everyone thinks so highly of him. It's difficult to talk to him about anything because everything I say is either "stupid" or "crazy." Sometimes I have to lie because I'm afraid of how he'll react to certain things. I don't mean to ramble—today was just a bad day. He says it's my fault that the relationship is going south. I know I have to distance myself from the relationship but, honestly, I don't think I can."

We bear witness to these anonymous testimonies, wondering whether or not people sitting near us are in similar situations. We wonder, perhaps, what to do with the inescapable knowledge that there is, most likely, someone reading this article who is hurting.

So how do we do that? We can turn to halakha, Jewish Law, for guidance. The following is a brief summary of a lengthy teshuva, a Jewish ruling, by Rabbi Elliot Dorff, entitled "Family Violence (HM 424.1995)":

- 1) Beating and other forms of physical abuse, such as sexual abuse, are absolutely forbidden by Jewish law.
- 2) Verbal abuse is absolutely forbidden by Jewish law.
- 3) An abuser has the responsibility to acknowledge his behavior and do teshuva by getting help.
- 4) Parents may never cause a bruise to their children, no matter what decisions they make regarding corrective parenting.
- 5) Children may not beat their parents, even when parents were formerly abusive themselves.
- 6) The requirement that one preserve not only one's own life (pikkuah nefesh) but others as well, demanded by the laws of the pursuer (rodef) and of not standing idly by when another is in danger (lo ta'amod al dam ra'ekha), not only permit, but require others who discover spousal or parental abuse to help the victim report the abuse and take steps to prevent repetition of it. Jews who suspect that children are being abused must report such abuse to the civil authorities, no matter what the consequences. Saving a life takes precedence over the presumption that parental custody is best for the child.

These policies are halakhically binding. They are not optional. We are commanded by our tradition to protect ourselves and to intervene when necessary for others. There are times when it is necessary to act to protect the vulnerable.

Opening up darkened spaces is a scary, saddening task, but it is a sacred one as well. We've been taught by our tradition that "anyone who saves one soul, it is said about her that she has saved a whole world" (TB Sanhedrin 37a).

And one person's safety is reason enough for us all to spend the energy talking about abuse.

Perpetrating violence on an intimate partner is an affliction with a spiritual dimension that threatens the welfare of the entire community. We act with commitment to the health of our community when we hold abusers accountable. We act in accordance with halakha's call to pursue justice when we declare that abusers cannot remain in our midst and must dwell outside the camp.

The fabric of our Jewish homes is tradition's instruction to create spaces of safety. The fabric of our homes is our Jewish ethics, which demand that we pursue justice. The fabric of our homes is our developing liturgies and holy days, which call upon us to heal and create wholeness in our world.

For the welfare of both the individual homes we are blessed to have, as well as the collective one we create together, I pray that we commit ourselves to doing so.

May our homes be safe and healthy.