

A Marriage of Jewish Family Services and the Criminal Justice System

Innovation and Collaboration in Addressing Domestic Violence in the Orthodox Community

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In the field of family therapy it is widely accepted that not every relationship is *bashert* (meant to be). This notion certainly holds true for organizational partnerships as well. Competition for limited funding opportunities, coupled with the unique nuances in mission, expertise, and style of each organization, can often create an environment in which agencies work individually rather than in concert. This article explores Project Eden, an innovative and successful partnership in Brooklyn, New York, which brings multiple Jewish family service agencies together with the criminal justice system to address domestic violence in the Orthodox community. As more than 450 abused women have been served by Project Eden and its partners, many would likely consider this union of multidisciplinary services to be *bashert*.

Addressing domestic violence in the Orthodox community is a challenging mission, even given the tremendous inroads made in the past 10 years to raise the community's awareness and accountability for this social issue. Additionally, the criminal justice system, a traditional approach, is often considered an unwelcome entity in the Orthodox community. This resistance, rooted in the notion of *mesirah* (not turning another Jew in) and the fear of *shonda* (shame), often dissuades women from calling the police and using the justice system to gain safety.

The Kings County District Attorney's

Office and local Jewish Family Service agencies serving Brooklyn's Orthodox community have for years shared a common goal of putting an end to domestic violence and providing victims with essential services. Given the multiple dimensions of domestic violence (legal, religious, and community issues), neither the criminal justice system nor Jewish Family Service agencies could achieve these lofty goals alone. Project Eden is a model worth examining not only for its unique collaboration and programming but also for its home at the Kings County District Attorney's Office. Widely known in the community as a "Jewish" ven-

ture yet based out of a government office, Project Eden is a distinctive model in the Jewish communal world. The benefits of this unique collaboration have been felt not only by the recipients of Project Eden's services but also by the practitioners and agencies involved. As two of those practitioners, it is our hope that similar "unusual" collaborations within the Jewish Family Service system will follow.

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY

A primary tenet of social work practice is that we provide culturally competent services, recognizing the unique issues that cultural background can contribute to an individual's experiences. This tenet can have a variety of implications for the provision of direct services, community perceptions, and professional practice. In the field of domestic violence, there is ongoing dialogue on how to best serve clients given their varied backgrounds. No blanket approach can adequately address the varying experiences that women face.

Tricia Bent-Goodley (2005), in her work examining domestic violence in the African American community, asserts that "growing scholarship has acknowledged the significant role of race, culture and ethnicity in assessing and intervening when domestic violence occurs." She reports that research that has informed traditional programs has primarily used populations of "White and poor women, despite the fact that domestic violence crosses race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status religion and sexual orientation."

We believe it is critical to look at all of the factors affecting an individual's experiences, including ethnicity, race, gender, religion, immigration status, and sexual orientation. An exploration of these facets of an individual's family and community provides a foundation to understanding perceptions of marriage, family life, and gender roles. Our experience and education have taught

us that this exploration must guide our interventions.

Domestic violence is understood as abusive behavior that one person in an intimate relationship uses to control the other. It is a pattern of behavior perpetrated by one partner against the other in an attempt to maintain an imbalance of power in the relationship (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2005). Such behaviors include physical, sexual, financial, emotional, and verbal abuse.

According to research by Bauman, Smailes, and Chantler (2004),

Traditional domestic violence services to women of African, African-Caribbean, South Asian, Jewish and Irish backgrounds are structured by assumptions about "culture" which produce barriers to the delivery of domestic violence services. Discourses of both cultural specificity and generality/commonality are shown to interconnect to effectively exclude minority ethnic women from such services. Domestic violence emerges as something that can be overlooked or even excused for "cultural reasons." Key findings in this research identified the need for service design, delivery and development, including the need for both culturally specific and mainstream provision around domestic violence, and the need to challenge notions of "cultural privacy" and "race anxiety" in work with minority communities.

Cultural/religious factors play a critical role in shaping the manner in which victims address and manage abuse and whether or not they access services and assistance.

One of the first questions asked about all victims of domestic violence is why they stay in abusive relationships. This is a complex question for all victims. For an Orthodox woman,¹ there are many layers to this

¹For the purpose of this article, masculine pronouns are used when referring to perpetrators of domestic violence, whereas feminine pronouns are used in reference to victims. Although there are male victims and female perpetrators, this language reflects the fact that the majority of domestic violence victims are female. The 2005 U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Family Violence Statistics estimate that 84% of reported incidents of spousal abuse are committed by men against women.

answer, many stemming from the insularity and deeply religious nature of the community. Based on our years of working closely with this population, we have identified several powerful themes that give a unique flavor to an Orthodox victim's domestic violence experience, preventing her from accessing traditional domestic violence services.

From an early age Orthodox women are taught about the important value of *shalom bayit* (peace in the home). It is not uncommon for an Orthodox woman to internalize this value as her primary role and responsibility. She often focuses all of her efforts on maintaining a state of harmony within her home, seeing it as her own "personal failure" if any problems exist, including any form of abuse. In an effort to fulfill this role, women often go to extraordinary measures to "manage" and "fix" these complex situations on their own. Unfortunately, doing so causes many families to experience further potential risk to their physical and emotional safety.

Although the notion of shame can be seen in almost any domestic violence case, in the Orthodox community, the *shonda* (shame) factor reaches a profound level. In a community deeply rooted in traditional family structure and life, maintaining a strong family standing and reputation is critical for a variety of reasons. Living in close proximity to one another, in tightly knit communities in which families all shop in the same stores, attend the same synagogues, and send their children to the same schools, it is almost inevitable for everyone to know each other's business. Every possible effort is often made to ensure that family issues and problems remain private. Having the police show up at one's front door would be a true disaster, as all of the neighbors would see and too many questions would be raised.

The strongest force driving this shame and secrecy is fear that a tainted family name could affect the ability to secure good *shidduchim* (marriage prospects) for a family's children. Through our work with Proj-

ect Eden, we have worked with multiple women who did not come forward to report years and years of terrible abuse until their youngest child was out of the house and married. Additionally, if a family successfully maintains a good reputation and strong community standing, it also becomes unimaginable to others that the head of such a "wonderful" household would be capable of the atrocities of domestic violence. Orthodox women often fear that no one will believe them that their husband (who may be an esteemed rabbi, principal, doctor, synagogue president, or successful businessman) could possibly be abusive. As part of their pattern of power and control, batterers often remind their victims of this dimension, silencing them out of fear that no one will believe them.

In many of the Orthodox communities we have worked with in Brooklyn, the *shidduch* (arranged dating) system often results in women getting married at a very young age, in many cases with minimal educational and work experience. Additionally, Orthodox families tend to be large in size, many with eight to ten children. We have worked with families of up to 13 children. The cost of providing clothing, kosher food, yeshiva tuition, and shelter for such a large family can be exorbitant. Furthermore, a lack of work experience or vocational training can create a situation of overwhelming financial dependence. The mere thought of leaving a marriage and having to care and provide for such a large family can be immobilizing and a true barrier to leaving an abusive relationship. For many of the women we have worked with, helping them achieve self-sufficiency goes beyond polishing resumes and finding prospective job placements. Numerous women lack basic skills, such as how to send a fax.

An additional factor underlying many of our clients' decision to remain with their abusers is the primary role that men play in Orthodox Jewish family life. For many women the desire to have their husbands home for Friday night *kiddush* (prayer for wine) and to perform other religious acts is

a factor in this decision to remain in the relationship. We have observed a yearly pattern occurring during the few weeks preceding many of the *Yom Tovim* (Jewish High Holidays), when women who are fully engaged in their safety planning process and have already obtained orders of protection through the court system suddenly try everything they can to have the orders removed. These clients often express a desire to have their husbands/father of their children home to perform the Passover *seder*, sing *zmirot* (songs) in the *sukkah*, and make *kiddush* on Rosh Hashanah.

The fear of losing their children, both physically and/or emotionally, also plays a major role in preventing many Orthodox women from leaving abusive relationships. Children are often used as pawns in the pattern of power and control exerted by batterers. This dynamic is seen in both the civil court and *bait din* (Jewish court) systems. Batterers often threaten to use high-powered attorneys to gain custody by proving to the courts that their wife is a terrible mother and is “too crazy” to raise children. Having been insulted and degraded repeatedly throughout an abusive relationship, a woman’s self-esteem is shattered, and such threats seem entirely plausible. The reality is that men often do have the ability to retain expensive, high-powered attorneys, and with limited resources, women are often faced with the challenge of obtaining any legal representation at all. Women also often fear that their abusive husbands will simply turn the children against them, filling them with rumors and lies. Again, this has been the reality in many of the families we have worked with through Project Eden.

Some Jewish laws and traditions also play a major role in keeping Orthodox victims of domestic violence from accessing the many critical resources available to them. The notion of *mesirah*, not turning another Jew in, often keeps women from calling the police or obtaining an order of protection. In one of the first Project Eden cases, the husband of a 23-year-old young woman from Israel was arrested. Unlike many of the women

we have worked with, she was very forthcoming about the abuse she had endured (being beaten, bitten, locked in her room for days, etc.), but she begged us to do everything we could to make the case disappear because her father who “was the most important person in the world to her” had threatened to disown her. He told her “a Jewish girl should not be responsible for putting a Jewish guy in jail with the *goyim* (non-Jews).”

Orthodox women may also fear they will never receive a *get* (Jewish divorce) and therefore will not be able to rebuild their lives and possibly remarry. If a woman has not been granted a Jewish divorce by her husband, she enters the status of *agunah*, (one who is chained) and remarriage is forbidden to her. For many of the Orthodox women we work with, a civil divorce is simply not as relevant as a *halachic* (Jewish law) one and is considered to be useless. Refusal to grant a *get* is yet another weapon in the game of power and control played by the batterer.

Many of the Orthodox women we have worked with are undocumented immigrants from Israel, Russia, and the Bukharian region of the Former Soviet Union. Batterers often threaten to have them deported if they report their abuse, making immigration concerns another major barrier to accessing services and reporting violence. Victims are often unaware of immigration laws and live in fear of being returned to their country of origin. One Bukharian client shared that, after each beating, her husband would threaten that if she ever attempted to call the police, he would have her sent back to Bukhhara. The most frightening part of this threat is that he would consistently remind her that “once you are there, my brothers will kill you for good.” As intended, this client was silenced by her fears. She began receiving services only after her 16-year-old daughter called the police when she witnessed her father brutally raping her mother. Following her husband’s arrest, she and her family were connected to Project Eden’s web of legal and mental health ser-

vices. The formalized collaboration between Jewish Family Services and the criminal justice system ensured that she and her family received linguistically and culturally appropriate services.

The list of factors could go on, from a simple fear of the police to knowing it is inappropriate to “air dirty laundry” to actually loving the batterer because he is often a very loving and wonderful husband and father.

It is important to note that traditional domestic violence services, particularly those of the criminal justice system, do not address the above concerns and issues. Furthermore, women living in some of the more isolated Chassidic and immigrant communities simply do not know about the existence of services or even that their legal rights are being violated. Many families live in isolated neighborhoods and have no exposure to public outreach about domestic violence services. Many women rarely leave their communities, many families do not own televisions, and in many homes, not even all Jewish newspapers or publications are permitted. These are all critical factors in the creation of culturally competent services and the impetus behind the unique collaboration of Project Eden.

THE MARRIAGE: JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM JOIN FORCES

Various Jewish Family Service agencies serving Brooklyn’s Orthodox community have offered domestic violence services for many years. Similarly, the Brooklyn District Attorney’s Office and the criminal justice system have also addressed the issue of domestic violence, although these services were not reaching Brooklyn’s Orthodox community. More importantly, for many cases of domestic violence, there is no single remedy. The social service system cannot provide the legal protection and services often necessary for the safety of a family, and the criminal justice system certainly cannot provide the essential therapeutic

and social services a family must have to fully tackle domestic violence. Project Eden was created based on the recognition that a multidisciplinary, holistic approach would stand the greatest chance of ensuring a family’s safety while respecting cultural and religious norms.

The collaboration of Project Eden was made possible by a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Violence Against Women in 2002. The program was designed to be a bridge between the Orthodox community and the criminal justice system to provide the best possible network of culturally sensitive domestic violence resources and a culturally appropriate program of education/training to raise awareness and utilization of services. For the program’s initial partners, Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and Ohel Children’s Home and Family Services—two Jewish social service agencies with pre-existing domestic violence services—this grant opportunity created a unique and unusual partnership with a criminal justice agency. An obvious benefit was that this new partnership offered significant funding to each of the social service agencies. It allowed each to expand existing services and be part of a larger holistic network of services.

Competition for limited funding sources and territoriality about client work can often create environments in which agencies do not communicate and certainly do not collaborate. Before Project Eden was created, the practitioners at each partner agency were only peripherally aware of the services and programs provided by others. Although staff may have referred clients to each other, there was often no mechanism or communication system for ensuring follow-up. In addition, staff often did not understand or even know what important roles and services were being offered by the other agencies, causing each to essentially work in a vacuum. At the 2003 and 2005 International Jewish Domestic Violence Conferences sponsored by Jewish Women International, this lack of communication

and collaboration was a recurring frustration expressed by practitioners across the country. Sadly, it is the clients who suffer the most from this lack of communication.

One of the most successful aspects of Project Eden is the seamless web of communication and collaboration that has been created by the partnership, expanding even beyond funded program partners. Each client has a “team” of individuals working with her. This team joins forces to hold her hand, counsel her, provide her shelter, represent her in court, help her obtain public benefits, teach her computer skills, and more. The formal collaboration has created a one-stop shop for Orthodox victims of domestic violence. Through Project Eden, a client knows that each agency and practitioner are working together as part of her team, eliminating the need for her to repeat her painful story numerous times and giving her the strength and courage to follow through with a long-term safety plan for her and her family.

The Jewish social service agencies of Project Eden play a critical role in both the direct services and education/training components of the program. Without their longstanding reputation as trusted Jewish agencies, it would have been impossible to bring the critical legal resources of the DA’s office to the many women served by Project Eden. In addition to its confidential hotline, the Shalom Task Force has been a driving force in educational programming for rabbis and other leaders in the Orthodox community. Ohel Children’s Home and Family Services operates a specialized domestic violence shelter for the Orthodox community in which clients can easily observe *Shabbat* and laws of *kashrut* (kosher diet). The Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty is well known in the Jewish community for its critical crisis intervention services, including emergency financial support, employment assistance, and advocacy. Key to the success of the program is that practitioners at partner agencies speak Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian; are knowledgeable in Jewish law; and have an understanding of

the complex issues faced by Orthodox victims.

To supplement the direct service team offered to clients through the Project Eden collaboration, partner agencies have joined forces to address the macro issue of domestic violence in the Orthodox community as well. The agencies work collaboratively to raise awareness of the issue and to create a community that holds batterers accountable and provides a supportive environment for victims and their families. Drawing on each agency’s strengths and networks of relationships, Project Eden provides a multilayered education/training program, targeting individuals and groups throughout the community’s hierarchy.

In addition to regularly scheduled educational programming for mental health and community professionals—those who work in family service agencies, Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), schools, law offices, and other community-based organizations—Project Eden provides grassroots educational programming for other individuals who may be privy to a family’s suffering. This component of Project Eden’s programming is aimed at ensuring that women in even the most isolated segments of the community become knowledgeable about their legal rights and aware that there are culturally sensitive resources available.

As part of the initial planning process, Project Eden partners studied in depth the community’s stakeholders and gatekeepers, with special attention paid to identifying groups of individuals who have regular contact with women in the community and might learn of difficult home situations. As such, Project Eden and its partners offer educational programs for *mikvah* (ritual bath) attendants, *kallah* teachers (bridal instructors), day care providers, *sheitelmachers* (wig stylists), rabbi’s wives, and others who may have contact with women in the community. *Kallah* teachers, for example, often become confidantes of women well beyond the time of their *kallah* class, often throughout their marriage, as they are often the only individual discussing intimacy and

other deeply personal issues. As intended, Project Eden agencies have received numerous referrals as a result of this grass-roots programming.

Recognizing the pivotal role that rabbis play in Orthodox life, often being the first point of contact for families in times of trouble, Project Eden worked collaboratively to convene a conference attended by more than 300 Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox rabbis on the role that rabbis play in these complex situations. Renowned rabbis and other professionals addressed the audience, offering varying views on the important issue. The philosophy of Project Eden is that it is critical to work with the rabbinic community and other forms of leadership simultaneously in order to have the greatest impact.

As part of the effort to reach all segments of the community, Project Eden has held two widely attended public symposia for the Orthodox community on domestic violence. The utmost sensitivity went into the planning of these programs, a primary tenet of Project Eden being the need to work with the community, rather than against it. For example, the words "domestic violence" were not used in the symposia titles, and the speaker was a well-respected authority from the community, Rabbi Abraham Twerski, MD. The symposia were entitled "Issues of Family Wholesomeness," and Dr. Twerski was listed on publicity tools as the author of *The Shame Born In Silence: Spouse Abuse in the Jewish Community*, his courageous book calling attention to this social ill.

Although there continues to be much to accomplish in this area, it is important to note the significant progress made by the community in recognizing and addressing domestic violence.

OUTCOMES OF PROJECT EDEN

Benefits of the unique collaboration between JFS agencies and the criminal justice system can best be illustrated by case examples:

As intended, Project Eden's educational programming often results in case referrals to the various agencies in the collaboration. In the Friedman case (names have been changed), a speech therapist from a Jewish early intervention program was able to put to practical use the information she learned about recognizing domestic violence. While she was on a home visit treating two of ten children from a Chasidic family, she recognized the signs of abuse and called Project Eden for guidance in how to best broach the topic. Mrs. Friedman was not ready to speak to a counselor at the DA's office for many of the reasons outlined earlier in this article. Working collaboratively, the Orthodox speech therapist was coached by the counselor at the DA's office on what to say, eventually building enough trust over time that Mrs. Friedman decided to go to Family Court to obtain an order of protection. Still fearing the *shonda* factor, Mrs. Friedman could not ask friends or family members to watch her children so she could go to court. Project Eden agencies joined forces not only to get her child care for the day but also to get her a court escort and consultation with a civil legal attorney to represent her. Most important, because the family was too large to be housed in a shelter, Met Council was able to use its wide network of community councils to find housing for the family in a vacant Yeshiva dormitory. Without this innovative collaboration of Jewish Family Service agencies and the justice system, it is likely that Mrs. Friedman and her ten children would have continued to suffer in silence. Only because of the Jewish agencies' involvement was she able to trust the justice system as a vehicle for creating a safer environment for her family. The combination of legal and Jewish Family Services is the vehicle that offered safety to this family plagued by violence, gambling addiction, and financial insecurity. A client's ability to access this range of services at the same time, with all of the agencies working as one team, is the unique strength of this project.

Our work with Rivky (name has been changed) is another example of the direct service benefits of this unique collaboration. After being violently attacked by her husband of 3 years, Rivky called the confidential hotline of the Shalom Task Force, another Project Eden partner agency. Rivky was referred to Met Council where she was met by an Orthodox social worker who conducted an initial intake and discussed the various services available to her. Because of the severity of the violence, it seemed like Rivky's turbulent home life could not be handled by the com-

munity alone; rather, it warranted the involvement of the justice system. After establishing a rapport and sense of trust, Rivky decided she was ready to go the DA's office and to file a police report. The Met Council social worker escorted her there and the teamwork continued. She was connected with the Project Eden counselor at the DA's office, in addition to a culturally competent Project Eden volunteer who accompanied her to Family Court. Rivky continued to receive individual therapy and employment services from Met Council. Additionally, while Met Council helped her retain a civil attorney for divorce actions, the DA's office provided support related to the criminal proceedings. Rivky was also able to attend a support group at Ohel, another partner agency located in a convenient neighborhood for her. Now divorced both civilly and *halachically* (according to Jewish law), Rivky continues to see a social worker and career counselor at Met Council, has set obtainable vocational goals, and has started to date again, in search of a safe partner.

Over the past 4 years, the success of the Project Eden collaboration has led to expansion and vital growth. Although initially funded only by the federal government, the program has since received corporate support as well. Building on the success of its work in the Orthodox community, Project Eden has expanded to serve the Russian-speaking community. To meet this need, the Edith and Carl Marks Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, another Jewish social service agency, was added to the project. South Brooklyn Legal Services has also been added as a provider of free civil legal advice and representation.

As Project Eden grew, an Advisory Council was formed, bringing together additional Jewish Family Service agencies, mental health professionals, victim advocates, community leaders, medical professionals, rabbis, lay leaders, attorneys, law enforcement professionals, and other individuals to learn from one another and to discuss ways to work together. Many of these agencies and individuals, even those providing similar services, had never sat at the same table together and often had misconceptions of what each other did. The unique partnership of the DA's office and

Jewish Family Service agencies created this much-needed forum, and more important, the DA's office provided a neutral setting in which they could all come together, politics aside. One of the initial Advisory Council meetings was entitled "Show and Tell: Getting to Know the Agency Next Door." Although it was amazing to see people's excitement as they exchanged information and swapped business cards that day, the true satisfaction came when seeing these working relationships grow and develop over time.

The relationships formed through such collaborations as Project Eden and various others in the Orthodox community have resulted not only in the better handling of domestic violence cases but also in networks that have joined together to address other important social issues, such as child abuse, eating disorders, and other addictive behaviors that are intertwined with religious and cultural issues. Traditional secular services are often inadequate in providing services to this community as they are not designed to meet its unique religious and cultural needs.

The Project Eden model of bringing together multidisciplinary services for the provision of a well-strategized program of direct services and education/training has implications for all insular and isolated communities. In most deeply religious communities, factors similar to those described in this article prevent women from accessing services. Looking closely at these barriers, identifying stakeholders/gatekeepers, and joining forces to offer a culturally appropriate network of services and educational programming—although not an easy feat—could make a true difference in many communities. Whether one is working with the Muslim community, the Amish community, Southeast Asian communities, or any others, it is imperative to use a cultural lens in shaping services.

We have also found that merely offering a network of direct services is not enough to fully address the issue of domestic violence in a given community. Project Eden's mul-

tilayered and culturally appropriate program of education and training has resulted not only in increased referrals for each agency but also in a gradual shift in the community's perceptions. Over time, this type of cross-hierarchical education and training should lead to holding batterers more accountable and maintaining supportive environments for victims and their families.

In addition to the obvious agency benefits of increased funding and enhanced service delivery, the collaborative process has been beneficial to practitioners on an individual level as well. As in any field of trauma work, there is a high burnout rate for individuals providing domestic violence services. Workers face the darkest sides of a community, listening and confronting horrific stories of violence and rape. As a result, it is not uncommon for domestic violence specialists to suffer from secondary trauma, in which a helper is affected by the suffering of a client.

The work of helping others in distress can offer great rewards, but when strained, providers may experience symptoms similar to the victims themselves. Secondary trauma can manifest itself in a variety of forms, including psychological symptoms of depression, dread, anxiety, and fear or cognitive shifts of cynicism and guilt. Social problems can even include substance abuse and relationship problems (Valent, 2002).

As many partner agencies have only small domestic violence departments, the peer support offered through the multi-agency collaboration is invaluable. Together, workers from different agencies are able to support each other while working collaboratively in support of clients. As part

of its program, Project Eden has sponsored roundtable discussions on burnout and peer support, in which clinicians from various agencies come together to process and share the toils and successes of this work.

This article began with the notion that in the field of family therapy not all relationships are deemed *bashert*. The Project Eden collaboration, however, tells a different story. The relationships formed through this out-of-the-box collaboration feel *bashert* not only because of the valuable services provided to so many women in need but also for the true feeling of respect, camaraderie, friendship, and sense of family the collaboration has inspired—a gift for which we as practitioners are truly grateful.

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