

Domestic Abuse is a Community Issue

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JSafe: The Jewish Institute Supporting an Abuse Free Environment

www.JSafe.org

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Two women, Mrs. Cohen and Mrs. Schwartz, sat down at the local coffee shop. “Oy,” said Mrs. Cohen. “Oy,” said Mrs. Schwartz. Mrs. Cohen protested, “I thought we agreed not to talk about the children.”

We Jews love to complain—whether it’s about a crisis in Israel, anti-Semitism, assimilation, our shuls and schools and the like. And we are good at confronting our problems. We establish commissions, hold fundraisers, strike committees, and organize events and programs.

Let’s consider one of the first times in Jewish history that we find crisis intervention.

שמות פרק ב'

(יא) וַיְהִי בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אָחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאָחָיו : (יב) וַיִּכּוּן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיֵּד אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל : (יג) וַיֵּצֵא בַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וַהֲנִה שְׁנֵי אַנְשִׁים עִבְרִים נֹצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָרֶשַׁע לָמָּה תִּכֶּה רֵעִי : (יד) וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שְׂמַךְ לְאִישׁ שֶׁר וְשִׁפְט עָלֵינוּ הַלְהִרְגֵנִי אֵתָּה אִמֶּר כְּאִשֶּׁר הִרְגֵּת אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן נִדְּעָה הַדָּבָר :

Exodus 2

11. And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brothers, and looked on their burdens; and he spied an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brothers. 12. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. 13. And when he went out the second day, behold, two men of the Hebrews struggled together; and he said to the one who did the wrong, “Why do you strike your fellow?”

“When Moses was grown.” Now, Moses’ chronological age is irrelevant. What’s the difference whether he was 12 or 18 or 21? Why does the Torah tell us וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה, that Moses was grown? The Torah has to be telling us something more than this being the first time that Pharaoh had given him the keys to the royal car.

גדלות, greatness, is a moral distinction. Moses became a גָּדוֹל, a mature, responsible human being. וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה, Moses developed into a socially aware and morally conscious human being.

And when he saw the Egyptian hitting the Hebrew slave, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ, he saw that there was no one, literally, no *mentsch*. They may have been walking down the street. They may have seen the oppression. They may have heard the cries, but not one of them was a *mentsch*, a decent, empathetic and responsible member of society.

But let's look at the story a little more closely. Moses had two encounters. The first pitted an outsider, an anti-Semite against a defenseless Jew, and the second pitted Jew against Jew. Now, which encounter was more difficult for Moses? To which was it harder to respond?

I suggest that the first day was much easier. After all, we are used to the model of Jews as victims. The harsh hand of oppressors—whether during the Holocaust or inquisitions or pogroms or intafadas—is a familiar scenario. But the second day was much more challenging. Jew against Jew. Here a Jew is not just the victim, he is also the oppressor. Here demanded a paradigm shift and a good long look in the mirror: Jews are not always the victims, sometimes we are the perpetrators; Jews are not always right, sometimes we are wrong; and Jews are not always good, sometimes Jews are bad.

And this is the challenge of confronting domestic violence and child abuse in the Jewish community. We are forced to acknowledge that it is our husbands and brothers and sons, and at times our wives and sisters and daughters, that perpetuate violence and fear and intimidation against our own.

Let's sharpen the point. The Anti-Defamation League, in its 2004 ADL Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, shows that there were 1,821 anti-Semitic incidents reported in 2004, up from the 1,557 incidents reported during 2003.

Among the most serious incidents reported in 2004:

- Arsonists damaged the entrance to a local Jewish cemetery in West Roxbury, MA (February).
- Windows of a Jewish day school in North Miami were coated with feces (May).
- A rash of vandalism targeting a synagogue in Eureka, CA, including anti-Semitic graffiti, broken furniture and objects thrown against a door during religious services for young children (December).
- Swastikas, "Death to Jews" and other graffiti written on Houston synagogue (December).
- Members of a hate group harassed patrons at a Connecticut mall, raising Nazi salutes (July).
- An apartment complex in Ft. Lauderdale was targeted with anti-Semitic and racist leaflets "celebrating" Hitler's birthday (April).

In the entire state of Texas, there were a total of 24 incidents, 8 incidents of harassment and 16 of vandalism. In Minnesota, there were a total of 8, 6 incidents of harassment and 2 of vandalism.

My purpose is not to belittle or dismiss the threat and seriousness of anti-Semitism. We have too long a history, and, historically, have been in too vulnerable a position in society for us to dismiss any concern and not to remain vigilant against any

threat. Yet, Jews in America today are safer, more secure, more accepted than at any time and any place in our history.

Now, consider Domestic Violence—the assertion of power and control by one partner over another through a whole spectrum of behaviors: hitting, assault, rape, emotional and verbal abuse, intimidation, economic control, and more. The victims of abuse are overwhelmingly women, but men are victimized as well (and their ability to deal with abuse is much harder and more complicated for a variety of sociological reasons). The Center Disease Control of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lists statistics as to the frequency of these incidents—and most incidents are not even reported.

- A national study found that 29% of women Domestic Violence during their lifetime.
- Nearly 5.3 million incidents of Domestic Violence occur each year among U.S. women ages 18 and older. Most assaults are relatively “minor” and consist of pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, and hitting
- Only about 20% of Domestic Violence rapes or sexual assaults, 25% of physical assaults, and 50% of stalkings directed toward women are reported.
- In the United States every year, about 1.5 million women are raped or physically assaulted by an intimate partner. This translates into about 47 Domestic Violence assaults per 1,000 women.
- Domestic Violence results in nearly 2 million injuries and 1,300 deaths nationwide every year.
- From 1976 to 2002, about 11% of homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner.
- A woman in the U.S. is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped or killed by a partner than by any other type of assailant.

The Surgeon General reports that domestic violence is "the leading cause of injuries to women ages 15 to 44, “more common than automobile accidents, muggings and cancer deaths combined.”

The United States government statistics tell us that 29%—that’s one out of every three or four women who are victims of domestic violence at sometime in their lives. And we know that domestic violence doesn’t discriminate. It doesn’t discriminate by religion; it is found in all religious communities, including our own. It doesn’t discriminate by socio-economic level; it is found among the rich and the poor and the middle class. It doesn’t discriminate by educational background, it is found among PhDs and GEDs.

Jewish Women International, formerly B’nai Brith Women, is in the forefront of combating domestic violence in the Jewish community. On a recent video that they released about dating and relationship violence entitles, “When Push Comes to Shove,

That's Not Love," they show a young man whose father was extremely abusive to the boy's mother. When, as a youngster, he told his psychiatrist that he had seen his father with a gun, the psychiatrist told him not to worry, "he won't use it." "Yes, everything about him said he wouldn't use it," said the young man. "That he was upper middle class. That he was a Ph.D. That he was Jewish. Everything about him said he wouldn't use it, except for the fact that he used it."

His mother was a past president of B'nai Brith Women. She was murdered by her husband. And this was the motivation for their change of focus and the wonderful work they are doing today.

If these statistics are right—and we don't have good numbers about the incidence of domestic violence in the Jewish community at all—that means that out of the 42,000 Jews in Houston (2001), there are approximately 21,000 females and approximately 6,000 Jewish women are being or have been abused. That means that out of the 31,500 Jews in Minneapolis are approximately 16,000 females and approximately 4,600 Jewish women are being or have been abused. And out of the 6,500,000 Jews in the United States, 3,250,000 are women and 942,500 are being or have been abused. Even if the 29% is too high... even if half that number of women... even if a quarter of that number of women... even if one woman! Compare this to the 1,800 incidents of anti-Semitism and the numbers of people they affected!

And I have seen these women, spoken to these women, counseled these women and heard their stories.

- Like the young 20-something wife whose husband gave her a black eye and refused, after order of protection, to support his young children, all the time demanding that he had the right to attend the synagogue where she brings the children to pray.
- Like the middle-aged anesthesiologist who would enter the operating room on the crutches her husband was responsible for.
- Like the professional woman whose husband emotionally abused her and then it was she who was ostracized by her rabbis, her family, and her community.
- Like the Ph.D. who was the head of shelter for battered women, all the while being abused by her husband.
- Like the emotionally, physically and sexually abused woman whose rabbi was upset, not when she told him about the abuse, but only when she told him that her husband had forced himself on her before she went to the mikveh.
- Like the women in my own congregations and communities that spoke to me about the physical and emotional abuse they were suffering.
- Like the abused woman who was told by her own family, "You made your bed, now lie in it."

- And like many more in every community in this country that are being victimized in their homes or who have survived and are now thriving, strong, empowered and safe.

We, like Moses, must be גדול, big enough and mature enough and responsible enough to acknowledge the problems in our own community. And like Moses, not only recognize the problem, but name it for what it is. You see, Moses didn't just say, Why are you hitting your friend?" He said, "רָשָׁע, *evil one*, why are you hitting your friend?"

Like Moses, we Jews must not only recognize the scourge of domestic violence in our community, we must name it as the problem it is! It's not a private matter. And it's not just some name calling or slapping around. It is an evil that afflicts our families, the women who receive the slaps or the insults, and the children who witness it and are forever scarred by it! We must name the problem. We must judge the problem! And we must do something about it!

I am often asked how and why I got involved in matters of domestic violence. Truth is, I am not a woman, and it is mostly women who are involved. I have never been abused, and many survivors of abuse get involved. I am involved because I firmly believe that that this is not only a women's issue! This is not only a survivors' issue! It is a **community issue!** It is a community issue because it is our wives and daughters and sisters, and even some of our husbands and sons and brothers, who are victims of abuse. It is a community issue because it is our husbands and sons and brothers, and even some of wives and daughters and sisters, who are perpetrators of abuse. It is a community issue because whenever anyone in our community suffers, we must respond. When Moses went out to his people, וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם, he saw their suffering, he empathized with their pain. That's what a community is about—to see a need and to do something about it.

The sages of the Talmud could not fathom that any natural phenomenon—earthquake, plague, hurricane—had purely natural causes. To their minds, there had to be some sort of moral or religious infraction that brought about the event. So in explaining a solar eclipse, the rabbis give four reasons (Talmud, Sukkah 29a). One of them: "on account of a betrothed maiden [who was being raped,] who cried out aloud in the city and there was none to save her (See Deut. 22:24)." In other words, the Torah assumes that if someone is in trouble and there are others around, they will help. But even in the middle of a large and densely populated city, if it's the middle of night, if the streets are dark and the shades are drawn and everyone is asleep, there is no one around, no one who can come to her aid. So, if it's broad daylight, if the sun is high in the sky and people are out and about in their offices and in the stores and on the street, and still no one helps—either because they are too busy or because they choose not to see or hear—then the skies darken. Then night falls and the sun is extinguished, because that world is a dark and lonely and cruel one.

But why is this Jewish issue? Why not just have victims of abuse go to general shelters and Domestic Violence Services and other social service agencies. Let me offer two answers:

First, we Jews have always understood the social responsibility that one Jew has for another. כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה, all Jews are responsible for each other, is not just a slogan; it's a way of life. We are an extended family that has a common past and shares a common destiny.

And second, the integrity of the community—its moral, ethical, religious integrity—is on the line. **When we don't respond AS JEWS... to those who seek help AS JEWS... FROM JEWS**, we revictimize them. We revictimize them physically by failing to provide safety and healing. And we revictimize them spiritually when the Jewish community turns its back. We violate their souls and their faith. I have heard stories from too many women who tell too many stories of how they went to their rabbis or synagogues for help, and were turned away or were offered the wrong counsel or were ostracized or were not cared for and protected. These women and their children felt abandoned by their rabbis and betrayed by their community.

This is a woman's issue.
This it is a women's issue.
This is a survivor's issue.
This is a family issue.
This is a community issue.
And this is a Jewish issue.

We spend so much effort maintaining the stereotypes of what we'd like to be—peaceful, kind, compassionate, caring (and many of us are); we spend so much effort denying who and what some of us really are, that we do a great disservice to many and even endanger some.

Through our denial that domestic violence does not occur in our community, (“It doesn't happen to us. It's *their* problem.”) we make it hard for Jewish women to acknowledge their suffering and to get the help they need. Many Jewish women report that they thought that they were the only Jew who was ever battered or abused. And statistics show that while the average women stays in an abusive relationship for seven years, Jewish women, if they leave at all, stay in an abusive relationship for 14 years.

By our concerns for the “*shonda*” factor, over the shame such report bring to the reputation of our community or to the standing of our family, we silence the cries of those who need help.

Because of our discomfort even talking about this topic, many claim that dealing with it and talking about it will only destroy marriages and corrupt our sense of what Jewish families are supposed to be. Others see it as an attack on Judaism or Jewish tradition or the Jewish community.

Chana Weinberg has done great work in the Baltimore area with women who have been abused. She tells of a conversation she once had with her father, the revered Rabbi Ruderman, ר"צ, founder of the Ner Israel Yeshiva. She asked him whether there were incidents of domestic violence in Europe, where he was born. He acknowledged that there were. She asked him if the community ever did anything about them. He said that they did. "What did they do?" she asked. "We closed the shutters."

We can no longer close the shutters. It is time for each of us to be a גדול, to grow up and be mature and sensitive and responsive Jews. We, as a community and as individuals, must respond to the suffering of our mothers and sisters and daughters.

What can we do?

- Just talking about it and putting it on the community agenda breaks the shame, breaks the silence, and breaks the denial, and lets those who suffer know that they are not the only ones.
- Intervene. If you suspect that a woman is being abused, speak to her...or speak to someone who can. Help her plan for safety. Let her know of the community resources available to assist her. Or just let her know that you are there for her, with an open ear and a broad shoulder. Privately and safely, give her a card with the number of someone who can help.
- Rabbis should speak about domestic violence in sermons and write about it in bulletin articles.
- Ads and articles should be placed in Jewish newspapers and periodicals. Information should be available in the Women's Rooms of synagogues and JCCs and available in the lobbies of community institutions and in our mikvehs. Some already do. Everyone should.
- Synagogues need to be safe places where victims of domestic violence can come for help. Display brochures and posters which include the telephone number of the domestic violence and sexual assault programs in your area. Publicize local Hotline numbers or contacts for local Shalom Bayit or other Jewish Domestic Violence programs. Offer prayers on behalf of abuse victims.
- Organize lectures for various community organizations and synagogues. Raise funds for shelters and organizations that combat abuse. Encourage community service projects for youth groups or Bar and Bat Mitzvahs that benefit victims of child abuse or domestic violence.
- Establish policies in Jewish organizations that respect and protect victims. This is one of the mandates of my own organization, JSafe.

- Encourage and support training and education for clergy and lay leaders, hospital chaplains, teachers and rabbinical and cantorial students to increase awareness about sexual and domestic violence. FaithTrust Institute has a tremendous amount of material including books, videos and curricula that are great resources. JSafe offers lectures, programs and training for clergy and for the general public.
- Provide programs for young people of all ages, in our schools and youth groups, about healthy relationships, bullying, conflict resolution, and respect. Insist on meaningful discussions about dating and substantive premarital counseling.
- We need to begin to address the systemic problems endemic to our community that enable abuse including the expectations of privilege and entitlement by some, the acceptance of violence in the media and in our homes and streets, and much more.

Much has happened in the past few years to address domestic violence in our community. Organizations such as Jewish Women International, National Council for Jewish Women, Hadassah, FaithTrust Institute, Shalom Task Force, Shalva, Project Chana, JDAC, Shalom Bayit and many more organizations, programs and initiatives continue to do tremendous work. Much more needs to be done. JSafe: The Jewish Institute Supporting an Abuse Free Environment is establishing a certification program for institutions that will effect systemic change that will create knowledgeable, safer and accountable community. This program can transform communities, locally and nationally.

Moses became a גדול, a mature, responsible, grown-up the day he saw the suffering of his fellow Jews and did something about it. It is time for us to grow up. As individuals. As a community. As Jews. It is time for us not only recognize the great good that infuses Jewish life and the Jewish community, but to confront that problems, to name the evil, to hear the cries and to be there to stop the abuse and transform all Jewish homes into the havens of safety and peace that they are meant to be.

Perhaps, after we all do what needs to be done, Mrs. Cohen and Mrs. Schwartz will be able to sit down for those cups of coffee... and enjoy speaking about their children.