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Current Issues

Taking Domestic Violence To Task

By Jeanie Silver

Domestic violence in the Orthodox community is like a tear in the lining of a beautiful garment. The wearer of the garment knows it exists and feels it ripping, giving way with time. It is hidden from the outside observer until the damaged material slips out from underneath and becomes visible.

Perhaps at the *mikvah*, at a meeting of a community organization or school, or in the neighborhood grocery, the damage begins to show. Until recently, those who would have chosen to have the garment repaired could not find a tailor who did the work. That is changing. Around the country, Orthodox communities are trying to catch up to the problem that, while incomprehensible to some, is a bitter reality for others.

From the East Coast to the West, sensitive and dedicated individuals and organizations are instituting new programs in an attempt to raise community awareness and search out solutions to the problem of domestic violence. Rabbis, Orthodox social workers and lay people are receiving training in recognizing and dealing with abuse. There is much to do, but steadily it is getting done.

One organization that has spearheaded the effort to deal with domestic violence is the Shalom Task Force, a devoted volunteer group of more than 60 women under the leadership of Nechama Wolfson. The group started in 1992, when a New York pediatrician approached several community members after repeatedly treating bruised and wounded Jewish women and children. Without fanfare and with great care, the Task Force has quietly and effectively dealt with the most difficult of topics and has done so under the guidance of *gedolei Yisrael*.

Sandie's Story

[Sandie*](#) is a 45-year-old mother of four beautiful children, ages 10, 14, 15 and 22. She works as a school administrator and is highly regarded by staff and parents alike for her professionalism and sensitivity to the children's needs. Her husband David owns a successful business that caters

to the growing Jewish population in their neighborhood. He is on the board of their synagogue, attends a Daf Yomi shiur every morning, and is well known as someone who is always willing to help out when a need arises in the community.

Sandie's greatest joy is a new grandchild, their first. Her greatest shame is that, unbeknownst to any of her friends, Sandie's husband abuses her. Some of her most painful moments have been at events when she and her husband were being honored for their community activities; it's all she can do to keep smiling when people tell her how wonderful her husband is, and how lucky she is to be married to him.

Sometimes Sandie has a hard time believing what really happens at home. When David comes home at night, she scans his face to see what kind of evening it's going to be. If he's in a "good" mood, he might generously say, "Forget what you've made for dinner. Let's all go out to eat!" On a "bad" night, she hustles the children into their rooms and tells them to do their homework alone because, "Abba needs it nice and quiet tonight."

On nights like that, she knows that it won't take much to send him into a rage -- throwing dishes, screaming at her, slamming his fists into the walls, calling her names, accusing her of infidelity, or threatening to divorce her and take the children with him. Although he has shoved her and pulled her hair in the past, he has never hit her or broken any bones. Sometimes he yells at the kids too, but more often he spoils them and tells them that their mother is "too strict." He used to apologize and bring her gifts after a fight; but that never happens anymore.

Over the years, she's tried many ways to fix her marriage. She suggested couples' counseling several times, but David refused to go, saying that all their problems are her fault. She's spoken to

rabbis and counselors, most of whom told her to leave him, but they couldn't tell her how she was supposed to support her children on her own. Others told her that he "just has a bad temper," and that she must avoid doing things that "push his buttons." Part of the reason Sandie went back to work was to build up a nest egg for herself, but David insists that she deposit her check directly into his bank account.

She's spent many nights crying, agonizing over the person her husband has become and wondering what she's done wrong. She feels so ashamed that she hasn't been able to keep shalom bayis in her home that she has rarely tried to tell anyone else. When she has hinted at problems, people say she must be exaggerating. She actually has few friends anymore, as David doesn't trust her to see people on her own. He insists they do everything as a couple.

The most recent incident was over the fact that she bought new shoes for their youngest child without asking David first. He kept her awake until 4:30 a.m. yelling about how she can't handle money, and how careless and lazy she is. (He gives her an "allowance" every motzei Shabbos to cover food, gasoline, clothing, school supplies and household expenses: the amount depends on whether she's been "good" that week, but it's never more than \$200 for everything.)

For some reason, this fight was the last straw for her. She realized that he wasn't ever going to change; and she didn't want her children to grow up thinking this was normal behavior. That week she saw a card at the mikvah advertising a hotline for abused Orthodox women. When she called, the counselor really listened -- and made her feel that someone finally understood. But she didn't tell her what to do. Sandie had hoped the hotline would give her an answer, but by the end of the conversation, she realized that she was going to have to make

some hard decisions for herself. She did feel better, however, after they worked out a safety plan in case things got worse again. The counselor gave her the names of some therapists, a battered women's support group, and a rabbi who would believe her, and told her she could call back any time she wanted to talk some more.

Sandie decided to start with the rabbi, and called to make an appointment. Although she was hesitant at first to give details, he seemed to understand what she meant by a "bad temper." He assured her that he would not endanger her by telling her husband she had come to him, and he set about helping her evaluate her options within a halachic framework. He also suggested that it would be a good idea for her to talk to a domestic violence counselor.

At this point, after a few visits with the rabbi, Sandie doesn't yet know if she'll stay with David or ask for a divorce: she feels there are pros and cons either way, and she wants to make sure she does the right thing for her children. She does feel, however, that she has finally opened her eyes and is on her way to making things better for herself and for them. She feels hopeful for the first time in years.

* Sandie's case history was provided by NISHMA, a program for Orthodox battered women in Los Angeles. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

One historic contribution the Task Force has made is in the arena of rabbinic awareness and education. In November, 1997, more than 80 rabbis came together to listen to Harav Avrohom Pam, Rabbis Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, Dovid Weinberger and Yisrael Reisman in a three-hour workshop entitled "A Halachic Symposium for Rabbanim on Domestic Violence." The symposium was a follow-up to one held a year prior which was attended by 200 rabbis from every segment of the observant community.

Rabbi Yisrael Reisman spoke powerfully of the reluctance of many to believe that the problem of abuse is found in the Orthodox community. He asserted that though it exists only to a limited degree, it is nevertheless an issue which rabbis and others who come into contact with it must know how to handle.

Long coats, short coats, full, trimmed or no beards, Ashkenazic and Sephardic rabbis from every neighborhood and culture listened and learned together. "Learn to recognize signs of abuse," they were told, "never blame the victim or trivialize the abuse; never ask what *she* did to provoke the violence; find out if she is in immediate danger; help her create a future safety plan; find out if she has shared her secret with a relative, friend or neighbor; know your limitations and to whom to refer; follow up after initial contact has been made; provide a non-judgmental supportive ear, and know the *halachos* of confidentiality."

The rabbis learned that a batterer may criticize his partner through name-calling, mocking and ridicule. He may belittle his partner's family and friends and

try to isolate her from them. He may have explosive temper outbursts and expect his wife to conform to fantasies and unspoken expectations, and he may threaten homicide or suicide to cajole his partner into certain behaviors.

"Educate yourself and your congregation by speaking about the problem in *shul*," said Rabbi Weinreb. He told his colleagues how he spoke about domestic violence from the pulpit one Shabbos: the following week he received four calls for help. It is estimated that for each person who seeks help, at least four or five remain silent.

Rabbi Pam touched on the subject of verbal abuse with a compelling message about the devastating effect of *ona'as devarim* -- words that hurt and cause pain. While praising the attention and care given by the community to the topic of *lashon hara*, Rav Pam pointed out that little is spoken about *ona'as devarim*, also prohibited by the Torah. "Harsh words, words spoken in anger, thoughtlessly, carelessly, cut like a sword," he said. "The pain that is inflicted lingers on and festers until the whole foundation of the marriage is worn down."

Each speaker had only the highest praise for the manner in which the Shalom Task Force has addressed the problem, with its deference to *gedolim* and its attitude of *chesed* and commitment. Its telephone hotline, (718) 337-3700 or 1-(888) 883-2323 is staffed by volunteers who have received a twelve-week training course. The volunteers, who never meet the callers, are there to provide referrals and help them sort out their problems. Sometimes the callers are children, and occasionally a man will call and say, "Help me! I'm out of control." Sometimes it is the husband who suffers from domestic violence, although it is rare. The hotline number, which is posted in *mikvaos* and a selection of English and Yiddish newspapers, is now nationally accessible.

The organization has developed "The Young Woman's Prevention Education Project," an educational program offered to young women in yeshivah high schools, seminaries and colleges who are of marriageable age. Based on the premise that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, the workshops are designed to help build skills in communication and conflict resolution. The young women are taught that warning signals may surface during the dating process or early in marriage. And they are urged to speak to someone in confidence if they feel uncomfortable about something. After receiving many requests from yeshivos, the Task Force is developing a similar program for young men.

There is no question that the Orthodox community is mobilizing against this ugly problem. What else is needed? More community education; a pool of trained lawyers willing to work pro-bono for clients who often have no money and no access to family funds (a common manifestation of abuse); Orthodox social workers willing to work on a sliding scale; advocates trained and ready to accompany a woman to *beis din* or court. In cases where all else has failed and divorce is the only solution, women in abusive relationships may have difficulty obtaining a *get* from a recalcitrant husband. Rabbis are needed who are ready to go the extra mile to do everything possible towards achieving a speedy resolution.

Domestic violence can happen in homes where you would least expect it. If a friend confides in you, you may feel shocked, embarrassed and confused about whether or not to intervene. Nechama Wolfson's advice: "Don't run away. Urge her to seek the guidance of qualified people. Give her the hotline number. Most importantly, don't abandon her."

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