

# Do Jewish Men Really Do That?: Domestic Violence in the Jewish Community

Often, when people hear about my work at CHANA, the Counseling, Helpline & Aid Network for Abused Women, they ask: "Do Jewish men really do that?" "Does domestic violence really happen in the Jewish community?"

Several prevalent myths lead Jews to doubt that domestic violence is a Jewish problem. One such myth is that Jewish families are loving, nurturing and harmonious. "*Shalom bayit*," domestic tranquility, is a central ideal in Judaism, but unfortunately it is not the reality in many homes. Another myth is that domestic violence is limited to families that are less educated, of low socioeconomic status, non-observant, intermarried, immigrant--the list goes on. In fact, individuals with all levels of social power, status and connection can choose to exert control over those close to them. With enough forcefulness, an abuser can victimize anyone, regardless of the person's resources.

We all want to believe that domestic violence happens only to others--not to people who live near us, who sit with us in shul, whose children go to school with our children, who are our sisters, mothers, or friends. This belief can prevent us from recognizing dangerous situations and from being able to reach out to and support women who are being abused.

## **Domestic Violence and Jewish Women**

Substantial evidence shows that emotional, sexual and physical abuse happens to women of every economic class, every culture, every racial background, every level of education, and every religion. Domestic violence occurs in Jewish families at about the same rate as it does in families of other religions - about 15-25%. Domestic violence is found in every kind of Jewish home: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and unaffiliated.

Domestic abuse in the Jewish context includes the elements found in domestic abuse anywhere. Abuse is about one partner exerting power

and control over another. It can be as subtle as an unkind word or as blatant as a slap across the face. It is insidious, often beginning with name calling, jealousy, and criticisms, then escalating into slaps, punches, choking, and possibly death. It affects children growing up in the home, even if they are not themselves the targets. Without successful intervention they may be especially likely to be involved in abuse as adults.

One important difference between Jewish women and others is that Jewish women take far longer to change their situations -- seven to fifteen years versus three to five years, according to one study.

The reasons for this difference are many. Jewish women's pressures to stay with abusers include Judaism's primary emphasis on the family, the feeling that it is a central responsibility to maintain shalom bayit, and the fear of shame that could be brought on the family or the broader Jewish community by public knowledge of the abuse. In addition, Jews with money or strong social networks have access to more supportive resources than do women in general, and thus ironically may take longer to reach the crisis points that can precipitate leaving. For traditionally observant women, the pressures to stay can be even stronger, including the difficulty of raising large numbers of children alone, the men's knowledge of and gender-based participation in certain religious practice, the importance of fathers in sons' education, and a heightened sense of shame in a close community.

### **When the Ideal Jewish Marriage Isn't**

What happens to a woman when she finds herself with a husband who is not the "nice Jewish boy" everyone thought he was?

Like some, she might suffer in silence, never telling anyone what is happening behind closed doors. She might live that way for years until her children grow up or her husband dies. Like some, she might reach out to a friend or relative. She might get help. Or she might be told things like, "He's under a lot of stress." "Your husband would never hurt you." "Just stay out of his way." "A divorce would kill your mother." Like some, she might go to a counselor. She might get help. Or she might be sent to couples counseling and be too afraid to participate in the process. Like some women, she might go to her rabbi. She might get help. Or she might be told, "You must stay with him for the sake of shalom bayit." She may fear shaming her family, or wonder how she would get kosher food if she stayed in a shelter.

CHANA and other domestic violence organizations exist to make sure women who are abused get the support and concrete assistance they need. Based in Baltimore, Maryland, CHANA provides a telephone helpline, individual and group counseling, legal assistance, a safehouse, and many outreach and education programs -- all with a Jewish focus and targeted to Jews across the religious spectrum. To accomplish its goals, CHANA partners with Jewish Family Services and the House of Ruth (the largest local domestic violence organization), and works with over one hundred volunteers. In its first five years, CHANA has responded to over six hundred calls to the Helpline and has provided ongoing individual counseling to over one hundred women. To date, the Baltimore Jewish community is one of only a few nationwide (including New York City, Seattle and Philadelphia) that have developed Jewish-focused domestic violence services. The need elsewhere is great to address the specific needs of Jewish victims of domestic violence.

### **How to Take Action Against Domestic Violence:**

#### IN YOUR COMMUNITY

1. Find out if there is a Jewish domestic violence program in your community. If so, consider volunteering. If not, speak out about the importance of developing one.
2. Bring educational programs about domestic violence to your synagogue, group, organization, and school. There are even groups that do workshops for teenagers to prevent dating violence.
3. Talk to your rabbi about his/her view on this issue. Ask what he/she does when someone talks about feeling uncomfortable or afraid in her home. Encourage your rabbi to speak out about the subject in sermons.
4. Get involved with domestic violence programs targeted to the general community. Help staff and volunteers understand some of the ways domestic violence can differentially affect Jews.
5. Join the mailing list of a legislative group that deals with domestic violence. When there is a request for action, respond.
6. Contact your legislators (or their staff) to ask what they are doing to address domestic violence. Let them know how you feel about their efforts.

#### IN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE

1. Learn about the issue of domestic abuse. Look out for media addressing the issue, including articles, books and television programs.

2. Be open to talking to those who may be experiencing abuse, and practice communicating in a supportive, non-judgmental way.
3. Learn about available services so you can share information with those who may need it.
4. Teach your children that there is no excuse for violence. Show them the example of adults who have mutually respectful, nonviolent relationships.

## **Resources**

Jewish Women International's domestic violence resource list, which has a large number of local and national, Jewish and general sources.  
<http://www.jewishwomen.org/resource.htm>

JWI's home page has two Mother's Day related sections: a fundraiser in which individuals can send flowers to battered women's shelters, and the Million Mom March supporting gun control.  
<http://www.jewishwomen.org>

## **Related articles on the Jewish obligation to respond to relationship violence**

1. Druckerman, Pamela. "Domestic Violence Among Jews..." The Jewish Advocate. 1994.
2. Jacobs, Lynn and Dimarsky, Sherry Berliner. "Jewish Domestic Abuse: Realities and Responses," Journal of Jewish Communal Service. Spring, 1992, p.95.
3. Kupferstein, Elana Eizah. "Violence in the Jewish Family: Breaking the Silence." Washington Jewish Week. March 3, 1989, p.10ff.

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