



Break the Silence:

The Central Ohio Faith Community
Responds to Family Violence

Jewish Sample Readings and Preaching Suggestions

There is a tragic misconception that Jewish families do not suffer from domestic violence. However, studies by Jewish Family Services and others demonstrate that 15 to 25% of Jewish families in the United States and Israel do experience domestic violence. These families come from all economic backgrounds and branches of Judaism. Yet, many never talk about the violence and abuse under which they live.

There exists in the Jewish community a myth that abuse does not happen in Jewish families. This myth, namely that of the exalted standing of family values within the Jewish community, can discourage abused Jewish women from seeking help, according to Rabbi Julie Spitzer in "When Love is Not Enough: Spousal Abuse In Rabbinic and Contemporary Judaism." There is a fear among Jewish women of damaging the Jewish community's reputation. As Spitzer points out, the irony is that the emphasis Jewish tradition places on family values may be preventing the Jewish community from recognizing that the problem exists.

Furthermore, Jewish women tend to stay in abusive relationships twice as long as women in other abusive relationships. This is due to the fact that many Jewish women see the responsibility for upholding the Jewish value of "shalom bayit," peace in the home, as entirely their responsibility. Therefore, when abuse does occur in the home, Jewish women - like many other women - blame themselves for that abuse. However, in truth, shalom bayit is the responsibility of everyone in the household.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, MD writes in his book, The Shame Borne of Silence: Spousal Abuse in the Jewish Community, "Shalom Bayit is a truly peaceful home where harmony prevails. Peaceful co-existence, particularly at the price of self-effacement by the wife is not shalom bayit."

It is important for Rabbis, Cantors, Educators and other Jewish communal professionals, to recognize that domestic violence and abuse exists in Jewish families. It is equally important for these leaders to understand how Jewish values towards family and shalom bayit can themselves be an obstacle to victims of domestic violence and abuse in seeking help and assistance.

Suggestions for Preaching About Family Violence

Building Blocks for Sermons on Family Violence

Shabbat Zachor

"Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways." (Proverbs 3:31)

"It is not an enemy who reviles me...it is you, my equal, my companion; sweet was our fellowship..." (Psalm 55: 13-15)

“When you pass through water, I will be with you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be scorched; through flame, it shall not burn you...Because you are precious to Me and honored, and I love you.” (Isaiah 43: 2, 4)

1. Family violence is, and must be faced as, a communal problem.

Concept: Family violence is an issue which affects many Jewish families, yet is hidden from the sight of the community. Only by communal acknowledgement of the problem can help be offered to those in need, and can family violence be ended.

Text: *Parashat Vayikra* (Lev. 4:1-2, 13-21) addresses how to respond to a misdeed committed “unwittingly” by an entire community – which hides this fact from its leaders. Misdeeds can be understood as collectively tolerated harmful acts against loved ones. While we no longer have expiation through sacrifice as a remedy, communal action can effect change.

2. Family violence represents an abuse of power.

Concept: The theme of Shabbat Zachor is to ever remember the Amalekites. Amalek abused its power by attacking Israel from behind, when she was most vulnerable. Family violence is the use of physical violence, threats and intimidation to coerce and control. It results in physical injuries, economic loss, emotional devastation, loss of trust and the destruction of marriages and families. The FBI estimates that up to 97% of all domestic violence is perpetrated by men. As an abuse of power, domestic violence may be seen as a contemporary Amalek.

Text: Deuteronomy 25: 17-19; “Remember Amalek”.
“Not by power, not by might,
But by My spirit, Says the Lord of Hosts”
(Zechariah 4:6)

“Resh Lakish said: He who lifts his hand against his neighbor, even if he did not strike him is called a wicked man” (B. Sanhedrin 58b).

3. Silence and denial perpetuate family violence.

Concept: Judaism is a religion that makes distinctions, for example, between Shabbat and the other days of the week. Only on Purim do distinctions become intentionally blurred. Mordecai and Haman, good and evil, are intentionally confused. Purim can call to mind how we perpetuate problems, such as alcoholism and domestic violence, by our denial that they are real. We confuse truth and falsehood in order to protect ourselves from painful realities. Denial is what allows abuse to go unchallenged. The abuser, himself, his victim, their family and the community all deny the reality of what is going on. Thus, an abusive man may be a highly respected member of a congregation or organization, who masks his violent home behavior from peers and the public. Denial supports his abusive behavior.

Text: B. Meg 7b teaches that on Purim we are to become so intoxicated as to not distinguish between the words “Blessed is Mordechai” and “Cursed is Haman.” Just as intoxication and the wearing of festival costumes and masks cause distinctions between people’s identities to be blurred, so does denial blur the lines between truth and falsehood about domestic violence, causing great suffering.

4. Family violence must be recognized as a Jewish problem.

Concept: Giving a name to difficult problems unaddressed by the community is the first step towards change. We must identify family violence as *our* problem. We can do this by speaking of it and acknowledging its effects.

Text: Gen. 2:19-20; Adam is called upon to offer names for the animals. The act of naming made concrete that which was abstract and unspoken. It also helped Adam decide whether the status quo, that he had sufficient company, would suit him. The act of naming revealed to Adam and God that change was needed, “but for Adam no fitting partner was found” (Gen. 2:20), and thus Eve was created. Naming domestic violence as our problem can have the same effect of giving concrete reality to an unacceptable status quo.

5. Domestic violence harms the ones we love most.

Concept: Domestic violence refers to controlling behavior and physical violence against intimate partners. Abusive men attack those who are most vulnerable to their assault. The result is lasting emotional, physical and economic harm to our loved ones.

Text: “It is not an enemy who reviles me...it is you, my equal, my companion; sweet was our fellowship...” (Psalm 55:13-15) “However mighty the man, once the arrow leaves his hand, he cannot make it come back...However mighty the man, once frenzy and power take hold, he strikes even his father, even his mother, and even his closest family, as he moves in his wrath.” (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata 4).

6. Let us welcome those who seek help.

Concept: It has been considered a *shanda* to admit victimization. Family and friends often unwittingly perpetuate the assumption that a victim must have done something wrong. Women who are abused thus find little support, and so rarely find the help and guidance they need. Rarely, too, is the behavior of men who abuse challenged. While it *is* a *shanda* to act abusively, it is not shameful to seek help. Although few men who abuse welcome interventions or help, at the moment, many are grateful months later. If domestic violence were acknowledged as a communal problem, stigma would be lessened, rendering help far more accessible to the women and men who need it.

Text: The *Ahavah Rabbah* prayer (*V'haer eineinu...*) from the Siddur, includes the phrase: “*v'lo nevosh l'olam va'ed*: that we may never live in shame.” It is not shameful to be a battered woman. Neither is it shameful for a man to admit he has acted wrongly and needs help.

7. True Shalom Bayit means safety within the family.

Concept: Traditionally, Jewish law has understood “keeping the peace” as a wife’s responsibility. Thus, women have at times been held accountable for their husband’s emotional reactions, or considered provocateurs for not acceding to their spouses’ wishes. They have been told: “If you hadn’t upset him, he wouldn’t have beaten you.” The truth is that responsibility for violence is the abuser’s alone. Shalom bayit can be possible only when all family members take responsibility for their own emotions and problems, and do not blame others. There is no place for coercion and control in a healthy family.

8. Battered women require not only advocacy, but also compassion and comfort.

Concept: Clergy can be of assistance by becoming informed about domestic violence and its effects on women. Pastoral care must include making appropriate referrals for

legal advice and counseling, accompanied by an attitude of acceptance about the battered woman's feelings and needs.

Text: "Fear not, you shall not be shamed; do not cringe, you shall not be disgraced...For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but My loyalty shall never move from you, nor my covenant of friendship be shaken, said the Lord." (Isaiah 54: 4, 10).

"When I think my foot has given way, Your faithfulness, O God, supports me. When I am filled with cares, Your assurance soothes my soul." (Psalm 94:18-19)

"You need not fear the terror by night, nor the arrow that flies by day, the plague that stalks in the darkness, nor the scourge that ravages at noon." (Psalm 91-4-5)

(Bob Gluck/David Stein – January 1989)