

The Power of the Rabbinate: Opportunities for Education and Awareness in Combating Domestic Violence in the Jewish Community

by Rabbi Lisa B. Gelber

*U'fros Aleinu Sukkat Sh'lomekha.*¹ We offered these words as we began the service designed to provide a space in which to unearth the pain of struggle, of loneliness, and of frustration so that we might find healing. *Blanket us within the safety and shelter of your peace.* These same words continue to sustain me in my work with victims of domestic violence and the communities in which they live.

These are, of course, our communities - our Jewish communities. The ones in which so many naively believe that domestic violence does not exist, that Jewish homes are exempt from abuse within the family, that Jewish women with strong, creative, motivated female role models, like D'vorah and Miriam, could not possibly stand for physical, verbal, emotional or spiritual abuse. Yet, we know that abuse happens. To the best of our current knowledge, domestic violence occurs in Jewish homes at the same rate in which it takes place in non-Jewish homes. It shouldn't happen at all. When we ignore it, we absent ourselves from the responsibility to care for, protect, and nurture the lives created *b'tzelem elohim*,² in God's image.

Our tradition teaches, "seek peace and pursue it."³ Perhaps that is why God's sukkah is so profound an image of hope and healing. Even the most temporary and fragile of structures can serve as a haven. Even the smallest of gestures, of kindness, of affirmation and support may bring peace to someone's soul. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "God is hiding in the world. Our task is to let the divine sparks emerge from our deeds."⁴ Peace does not merely exist; it must remain in the forefront of our consciousness, so that it might be integrated into our lives and released into the world.

In 1997, the Silent Witness Exhibit and Initiative came to Washington State. Initiated in Minnesota in 1990, Silent Witness is a visual reminder of the problems of domestic violence and our responsibility to stop that violence. In 1995, at least 30 women in Washington State died violently at the hands of their husband, lover, or ex-lover. Washington's Silent Witness Exhibit depicted 30 of these women through life-size silhouettes made of plywood, and painted blood red. Each figure wore a shield marked with the woman's name, age, date of death, information about where she lived, an account of how she was murdered, and the outcome or legal status of the case. A 31st silhouette honored those women whose murders went unsolved or were erroneously ruled accidental. I wish that I could adequately represent the emotion and feeling in the room when those 31 figures were displayed in the sanctuary of the Mercer Island Presbyterian Church. We had gathered, an interfaith community, for an ecumenical service of

remembrance and dedication, to honor women who had been victims of domestic violence. Surrounded by members of the various faith communities, domestic violence workers and advocates, state representatives, and clerical leaders from our community, we acknowledged the crisis of domestic violence and prayed for healing and for peace. To this day, I receive notes thanking me not only for the presence of the Jewish community at that gathering, but also for acknowledging the critical role of religious leaders in addressing the problem of domestic violence in our communities.

Going out into the community and making a statement about domestic violence that acknowledges the pain and suffering of the victims, and asserts that this is not acceptable, raises the level of community awareness. As important as it is to make those statements within the context of the larger community, it is just as important to recognize the existence of domestic violence, to talk about it, to learn how to identify it, and to put a face on it, in our own space. With this in mind, the Women's League at my synagogue in Washington held a forum entitled "Shalom Bayit - Family Peace....Not in Pieces," and asked me to moderate the program. In my capacity as rabbi, I introduced the speakers and interwove various concepts, values, and texts from our Jewish tradition. Messages about the importance of our partnership with God in creation, the responsibility of the Jewish community to address social ills, the role of the rabbi as a careful pastoral listener and someone who provides direction and identifies resources, and the sense that one's home is to be a sanctuary, a place of safety in which God abides, enhanced the informative presentations of shelter representatives, teen counselors, specialists on elder abuse, pediatricians, consultants on the assessment of domestic violence in the Jewish family, and members of the King County Prosecutor's office. Most powerful was the personal story of a member of our congregation. Her strength and wisdom provided hope, supporting the claim of Rav Nachman of Breslov, "[. . .] you are never given an obstacle you cannot overcome."⁵

Many people cannot comprehend domestic violence as a Jewish problem, let alone one about which Judaism has something to say. In that evening, it became clear to everyone present that domestic violence exists in our world and in our homes; its victims have faces that we recognize. That evening, it became clear that our tradition has something to say about domestic violence, and we, as a people, are committed to doing something about it.

Opportunities for education and awareness must not be limited to the adult population. Teens need to learn to respect themselves and their bodies, as well as those of their peers. The teenagers with whom I studied in Seattle were remarkably aware of the extreme highs and lows that confront them in relationships during these years of exploration and development. During our weekly meetings to explore healthy relationships, the students talked about the need for balance in their interactions with others and how they counted on Judaism to provide guidance about what it means to make the world a better place. Critical for them, as well, was the knowledge that someone from the community, a rabbi, would take time out of the evening on a regular basis to talk to them, learn with them, and really listen to what they had to say. Forty five minutes of validation a week, for one semester, and those kids not only developed a

stronger sense of self and Jewish identity, but strengthened their bonds with me and with their peers.

One more personal experience, and then I'll conclude. Those of you who know me, and those of you who attended the workshop entitled *A Journey Towards Freedom: Healing Through a Community Seder*, are aware that I had the unique privilege of working with a superb group of women in Seattle, Washington, to create a Haggadah specifically designed to illuminate the relationship between the story of our people's exodus from Egypt and the individual and universal stories of survivors of domestic violence. The creation of a piece of liturgy highlighting the integral messages of our tradition—we are a people who have faced abuse, and a people who know enslavement; nevertheless, we move forward towards liberation and freedom, towards healing and wholeness—reminds us that Judaism is a living, breathing entity that has relevance in our daily lives.

We are commanded to tell our story. The Haggadah is designed for that purpose. We don't sit around the seder table and read to ourselves. We read aloud the story of our ancestors; we interject our thoughts and our opinions; we remember. We honor our memories, whether they be of the one who told the story who no longer sits at the head of our table, or of the wine splotches in each of our Haggadot. Every memory carries a sacred story. The opportunity to share the communal story of victims of domestic violence, in a setting that exudes love and safety, and clearly represents the blessings of Jewish community, is a gift that is never taken for granted by those who participate. In fact, it is a reminder of our responsibility to recognize the existence of domestic violence, to embrace its victims, and to provide a venue for healing—not just a physical space, but a spiritual home within our Jewish community and tradition as well.

Our tradition teaches, "*Al shlosha d'varim ha'olam omaid - al ha din, v'al ha'emet, v'al haShalom*—our world rests on three things, on justice, on truth, and on peace."⁶ As rabbis, people look to us for guidance and example. This is not just the work of the traditional congregational rabbinate. Wherever our journey has taken us, we have a constituency, and that means that we have the potential for influence; we have a forum in which to create peace. Not only must we be mindful and in control of our own power and authority, we must increase our awareness of and sensitivity to the problem of domestic violence and share that with our colleagues and constituents. We must not assume that bright, articulate, independent women cannot be victims, nor that "upstanding" members of our communities cannot be batterers. We must advocate for and help to create and sustain communities of honesty and trust, communities in which we are all accountable for one another. It is up to us to help spread out God's blanket of peace and embrace those in need of healing.

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1 From the second blessing after K'riat Sh'ma in the evening service on Shabbat and Festivals.

2 *Genesis*, 1:17.

3 *Psalms*, 34:14

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 358.

5 *The Empty Chair: Finding Hope & Joy: Timeless Wisdom for a Hasidic Master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 48.

6 *Pirke Avot*, 1:18