

## Renewal and Reconciliation after Family Violence?

by Gus Kaufman, Jr., Ph.D.

Over twenty years of working with men who have battered their partners have led me to identify four reasons men batter: it works, they can get away with it, they learned to and trauma re-enactment. I will touch on these in more depth, but for now I want to consider the implications of this information for questions of renewal and reconciliation after family violence. *For men to stop battering it has to not work, men must not be able to get away with it, we must learn differently, and we must successfully address the creation, prevention and healing of trauma.* This last imperative means we must forget punishment—the repetition of violence (cf. James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence*, 2001.). But these imperatives also mean men must be held accountable for their abusive behavior--there must be consequences. This is both an individual and a collective necessity. Collectively we have much to do to build our society, our synagogues, our families into places where violence doesn't work, men can't get away with it and power and control aren't ways of organizing relationships.

What does this process of *teshuvah* (turning, repentance) look like? Individually, men must:

1. Stop battering. This means learning what battering is. While men learn the behaviors and attitudes of male supremacy, dominance and centrality growing up, we do not learn to see this from the perspective of the oppressed. In fact, much of learning to “be a man” is learning to dis-identify, to objectify, to not feel.
2. Own what we've done. This accountability is paradoxically more likely to start in a setting with other men who called to be accountable—the very setting those who abuse most avoid. Our social instincts are to privatize abuse and dealing with abuse. The first book on battering was entitled *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear*. At a recent meeting of people seeking to organize synagogue responses to domestic violence the participants, many abuse survivors, agreed that these issues would most likely be brought to the rabbi, if anyone, not to others in the synagogue. Yet I question how effective a rabbi alone can be in getting a man to stop his abuse. My experience is that groups of men have the power and can model for other men really owning and taking responsibility for what they have done. In the batterers' program I co-founded, each orientation session for men considering entering the program included a man who had been through the course telling the story of what his abusive behavior had been and how it had affected his partner, children and others. This statement had been written and rewritten as he learned, through confrontation, with support, to own more and more honestly and completely his actions and their effects.

3. Listen—this means learning how to listen and being willing to listen. I have come to believe the quintessential batterers’ statement is “Shut your g-damned mouth!” Battering is fundamentally an attempt to obliterate the other as an actor/speaker. Listening means appreciating the other’s reality, autonomy, and enfranchisement. In our batterers intervention classes we taught men not to interrupt. And then to let go of ‘white-knuckle listening,’ in which we prepare a rebuttal as the other is talking. Respectful listening also means not contacting her if and when she doesn’t want to be contacted. To learn about the effects of his behavior and stance, a man has to listen to the woman he has attempted to silence and other women. We had men read battered women’s books and watch their videos, movies. (We can’t intimidate a book). Men need to hear in synagogue and from the bimah from women also. And see women listened to and respected by other men there.
4. Make restitution and work for justice —Pay child support, do our share of childcare, alimony, therapy costs, etc. Don’t force her from the synagogue. No longer support the silencing and suppression of women and their interests. A man who went through a batterers’ program at Brother to Brother in Rhode Island quotes a statement “only when a batterer permanently forsakes all control over his partner does he cease to be a batterer. Few achieve this.” Anne Ganley, a psychologist who pioneered batterer intervention groups, sheds light on why that is in her chapter in *Feminist Approaches for Men in Family Therapy*, when she speaks of “men’s socialization to the concept of entitlement in relationships with women or family members.” Ganley states that “In order to better meet their intimacy needs, men need resocialization to accept ‘no’s’ from women and family members, to experience disappointment rather than anger at those times, and to perceive these no’s as being acts of autonomy rather than as acts of attack on them” (p. 17).
5. Heal. Learn about ourselves, learn other ways to relate, practice them, own and heal our wounds. Connect with others in non-controlling intimate ways. Give and get support from other men: don’t expect women to do all the emotional/relational work—connecting us to our families and others. Trauma involves numbing: Carol Gilligan has said men learn to be “specialists in disconnection.” Paul Kivel and the Oakland Men’s Project have called this the “Act Like A Man” box. (Cf. *Men’s Work* and *Boys Will Be Men*). An earlier formulation of this, which I helped revise for the manual *Men Stopping Violence: A Program for Change*, is called the “male emotional funnel system.” Instead of learning to show no emotion or anger used to control others, we men must learn to identify, acknowledge and express the whole spectrum of feelings. To do this we must confront homophobia/sexism—the idea that emotional vulnerability and caring are feminine and therefore inferior or taboo. Judaism has offered us the idea of maximizing the *yetzer hatov* (the impulse toward good) and transforming the *yetzer hara* (evil impulse); this is good but not specific enough. From Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor therapy, a body-based system of emotional re-education and healing (see [www.pbsp.com](http://www.pbsp.com)) I have taken the idea that we each have the developmental tasks of

integrating our masculinity and our femininity, our power and our vulnerability. PBSF has also taught me a powerful technology for understanding the specific phenomenology of trauma/abuse and of recovery, an area that has continued to grow since Judith Herman's ground-breaking book *Trauma and Recovery*.

All these efforts are necessary to set the stage for the possibility of renewal and reconciliation. We have in mainstream society almost no images of men taking responsibility for abusive actions and doing the hard long work of *teshuvah*. This is not a sudden conversion, but a process. In searching for models of men changing, and of the change process, I remembered Alice Walker's great novel *The Color Purple*. In its last section we have an example of repentance and change by an abuser that's convincing. As Celie, the long-abused narrator of the story, finally escapes from Mister \_\_\_\_\_ (she refuses to write his name), she says to him: "I curse you...until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble...Until you do right by me, everything you even dream about will fail. ...Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say...the jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot."

She escapes. When she returns to the area much later she hears that Mr. has become "not so quick to judge...he clean that house just like a woman. Even cook and wash the dishes when he finish." We hear how he was suffering until he sent Celie the rest of her sister's letters, which he had withheld from her — "Meanness kills." Still later she is able to write to her sister "he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things god was playful enough to make...when you talk to him now he really listen..."

Still later they are able to discuss Shug, the woman they both love. Mr. admits he was jealous, "I wanted to kill you and I did slap you around a couple of times."

He speaks of what a fool he was. Celie:

"Well, I say, we all have to start somewhere if us want to do better, and our own self is what us have to hand. I'm real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me. Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. Way after while I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars. Other times he want to know about my children."

More time passes and in a conversation Celie says:

"You know how long it take some mens to notice anything, I say. Took me long enough to notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh. He ain't Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to."

In my presentation I did not address questions of what is the work for those who have been abused. Rabbi O'Donnell Setel considered what Jewish texts and tradition offer on the subject of

whether *teshuvah* always involves forgiveness. Laura Davis, in her magnificent book, *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again: The Road From Estrangement to Reconciliation*, gives us many stories and maps of the possibilities. A few of the things I gleaned from her book:

- That true reconciliation requires a deep acknowledgement of the injury we have suffered.
- The five R's of *teshuvah*: recognition, remorse, repentance, restitution and reform—stages one must go through in order to be forgiven for an offense.
- Reconciliation is ongoing. Accountability must therefore be ongoing and active also. Without accountability there is only so far reconciliation can go.
- When you continue to act violently, your pain and sorrow never go away.
- For justice we need to:
  1. Make the victim whole.
  2. Restore the perpetrator, so he can be a contributing member of society.
  3. Achieve this with compassion and nonviolence.

It's important to give people the chance to make right what they've screwed up. Obviously, this cannot be imposed on another. For me, however, I feel a need to see perpetrators as human or risk losing some of my humanity.

My approach to renewal and reconciliation after family violence has evolved. The battered women's movement and the approach to intervention with men who had battered that grew out of it said men must be arrested, convicted and jailed. This would send the message that battering is a crime and that the perpetrators would be held accountable. Women of color in particular have criticized this approach as not adequate, because our criminal justice system is not rehabilitative. Men should not be degraded and broken down further. As I have looked deeper into my own history and that of the abusive men with whom I have worked, I have been influenced by those who have studied trauma and its transmission. I have come to believe that men who abuse learned to do so. Their traumatic histories—and what we call male socialization is in varying degrees traumatic—must be addressed. But this work may have to follow, or at least be simultaneous with, their work to be accountable for the suffering they have inflicted. Yael Danieli, editor of the *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, in a talk at Emory University posited the following steps as necessary for healing:

- Justice is critical to healing and includes: investigation of the crime; bringing it to trial; conviction; punishment; redress; restitution
- The perpetrator officially acknowledges responsibility and remorse to the victim: acknowledgement; apology (extremely important to the victim); redress (which includes compensation, both material and symbolic); financial restitution
- Commemoration

Where there is a flight into reconciliation without these steps there is the opposite of justice and this becomes a new traumatic factor. Danieli's co-presenter, Dori Laub, of Yale University, a Holocaust survivor remarked: "it doesn't cost the perpetrator to acknowledge what happened." They quote Bruno Bettelheim: "What cannot be talked about cannot be put to rest" and so wounds fester generation to generation.

My belief is that Judaism has always acknowledged the tension of the individual and the societal. In the story of our liberation from Egypt, for example, we follow two individuals--an abuser, Pharaoh—a just man—Moses, as they make choices that both represent and affect their peoples. It is not a simple polarity—both the oppressed people and their leader will be called to account for their bad behavior at other times. This polarity is repeated again and again in the Bible—in the story of Jonah and Nineveh, the prophets, the Maccabean revolt. I mention this because just such a tension informs work to end abuse. We must think of: 1) what we can do about abusers other than ourselves and 2) what we can do about ourselves. On the one hand we have the battered women's movement—women claiming moral authority/voice—but this arose from countless individual struggles given voice. One of its powerful tools—the Power and Control wheel—came from a group of women at the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, MN cataloging their individual experiences. Out of women's insistence came the call and the pressure for men to begin to change. When each woman's story so resonated with others, it became clear that battering was not about individual pathology, but social control—that its true context was social norms of hierarchy. It was only when these norms were challenged, such that battering no longer worked, that batterers' intervention programs arose. Thus, when a man who has been abusive begins to work with his own *yetzer hara* involving abuse of a family member 1) he is likely to be and needs to be doing so within a structure of accountability, safety for his former victims and sanctions—societal support that helps produce 2) his decision/ choice/ intention to be non-abusive-which means giving up power over others, working for equality, justice, restitution = *teshuvah*. How often are all these conditions in place today? If we want family violence to become as unthinkable as slavery and lynching are today, we must transform society, building interpersonal, familial and social practices and institutions that teach and support justice and equality and negatively sanction domination and hierarchy. We must do this in a way that is itself nonviolent, humane and just.\*

\*One effort in this direction is my new organization Retreat From Violence, Inc. See [www.retreatfromviolence.com](http://www.retreatfromviolence.com).

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