

## Sermon on Domestic Violence

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Picture for a moment summer nights in Jerusalem. We can hear the wind whistling through the roads and over the hills. Imagine the landscape in a time before buildings and try to envision the temporary structures that sheltered our ancestors, like Abraham and Sarah, as they journeyed in stages throughout the land. We can hear the wind whistling, not from an apartment or a cafe, but from a tent in an encampment high up on a hill. What was it like? What was life like—in the hills, in the tents—for those people, for our people, back then?

*“Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk’notecha Yisrael,”* we read from *sefer bamidbar*, the book of Numbers in the Torah. (Num. 24:5). “How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” called out Bilaam, the Midianite prophet, with words of blessing for the Israelite people, instead of the curse that King Balak requested of him. Like Bilaam, the outsider who looked upon the Israelite encampment of tents, so, too, do we declare *“Ma tovu,”* each day as we begin our morning liturgy—“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!”

In so many ways, our tents, the structures of our people today, are extraordinarily beautiful. Even after centuries of oppression and wandering, after ghettos and shtetls and death camps, with freedoms and abundance never experienced before, we gather together in community. We create synagogues in which we study and share our lives with one another. We continue to commit ourselves to reforming our tradition, to finding new meanings in our texts and to renewing our lives and the life of our people.

But we are not outsiders like Bilaam looking in from a distance. We dwell in the inside; ours is a different view. Yes, we want only to look upon our families and our communities and call out, *“Ma tovu,”* “How beautiful!” But all is not so beautiful inside our tents. We don’t like to talk about what is ugly and painful. We feel shame in revealing our less than perfect family lives. We don’t want the outside world to know. We don’t want each other to know. So we remain silent. But we are hurting. Some of us are suffering, right here, in our midst. Others inflict deep pain upon those they claim to love. Some of us know the secrets that dwell with us in our homes. Some of us know that *“Ma tovu,”* is not yet quite true.

Domestic violence is abuse which occurs within an intimate relationship. The partners might be married or unmarried. Statistics show us that it is most likely that the abuser will be male and the victim female. Yet domestic violence can also occur in same-gender relationships. Domestic violence encompasses a pattern of control and behavior exercised by one person over another.

The abuse can be physical, sexual, verbal or emotional. Abuse can come in the form of the ongoing use of demeaning words like “you’re stupid,” or ugly, or crazy. It can be total access to and control over bank accounts and finances. It can be threats to injure children or pets. It can be monitoring and limiting friendships, going out, talking on the phone. Domestic violence is not about having a bad temper or being out of control. It is about power and control—one person exerting power and control over an intimate partner. Domestic violence impacts on the entire family, injuring also the children who witness abuse by hearing it or seeing it.

We Jews are not immune to the problem of domestic violence. Contrary to our myths, we never have been. Domestic violence occurs in Jewish families at the same rate as in the general population. Yet Jewish women tend to stay in abusive relationships longer than non-Jewish women. *Shalom bayit*, the concept of “peace in the home,” is not solely a woman’s responsibility, nor should it be used as a weapon to keep her in an abusive relationship.

To hasten a time of true *shalom bayit*, we need to address the problem of domestic violence in our community, in our tents. Our silence has not saved us yet. We are still hurting. Our silence will not help us now. But with awareness and with courage we can help to save lives and bring about justice and healing. Our commitment to end domestic violence will help make true “*Ma tovu*.” The challenge is not impossible. There is much we can do.

First, we can assist victims of domestic violence establish their safety. The Torah tells us that in preparing to offer words of blessing to Israel, Bilaam turned his face toward the wilderness. As he lifted his eyes and saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. (Num. 24:1-2). We, too, receive blessings when we gather together in the safety of community. Yet, in order to assist victims of domestic violence establish safety, as a community we must establish ourselves as safe. We do this by learning about domestic violence, offering educational programming and developing awareness about our community’s resources. We do this by developing relationships with local shelters and advocates so we can make appropriate referrals. We do this by providing Shabbat candles and other religious materials to shelters for their Jewish residents. We do this when we listen to a woman and believe her when she says she is being abused. We do this when we speak with kindness and respect for one another, when we refuse to tolerate demeaning speech or behavior in our midst. We do this when we speak out as a community against abuse.

Assisting victims of domestic violence to establish their safety, however, is not enough to make our communities safe and healthy spaces. While safety for victims must remain our primary concern, as a community we also must hold abusers accountable for their behavior. This requires us to take a stand, to remember that we cannot watch on as neutral bystanders, that we must not stand by idly and watch our neighbor bleed. (Lev. 19:16). “*Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*,” the Torah implores us to actively pursue justice. (Deut. 16:20). In the context of domestic violence, justice requires that abusers be held accountable for their actions and that we participate in the process of accountability.

Our tradition recognizes situations in which, for all sorts of reasons, must a person separate himself from the community, temporarily dwelling *hutz l'mahaneh*, "outside the camp." For example, in the book of Leviticus, we read in great detail of the process of examination and treatment of a wide variety of skin ailments. The priest would examine a patient and make a diagnosis, not for the purpose of medical treatment, but to distinguish *tzara'at*, which we often translate as leprosy, from all other skin ailments.

In no way should we suggest that perpetrating abuse on an intimate partner is analogous or even comparable to a skin ailment. Nor should we isolate or ostracize individuals with bodily ailments. But *tzara'at*, for our ancestors, was not simply a skin ailment or leprosy; it may not have been leprosy at all. Rather, our tradition recognizes *tzara'at* as a spiritual affliction, perhaps as a punishment for a breach of ethics. Recognizing that such a condition threatened the welfare of the larger community, the person afflicted with *tzara'at* needed to remain *hutz l'mahaneh*, "outside the camp," for as long as he was so afflicted. We read in the Torah, "Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Lev. 13:46).

Perpetrating violence on an intimate partner is a type of *tzara'at*, an affliction with a spiritual dimension that threatens the welfare of the entire community. We act with commitment to the health of our community when we hold abusers accountable. We act in accordance with our tradition's call to pursue justice when we declare that abusers cannot remain in our midst and must dwell outside the camp for as long as their behavior patterns remain untreated.

Experience shows us that the only hope that an abuser will change is that he admit to the problem and engage in long-term, specialized treatment for batterers. If an abuser has been arrested, we can encourage the legal system to follow through with prosecution and to hold him accountable. We can refuse to honor an abuser with *aliyot*, being called to the Torah, or with other honors and positions of synagogue leadership.

In addressing the problem of domestic violence, we cannot focus solely on the victims. Those who abuse are also among us, and we must not minimize the damage they cause, no matter how wealthy or influential or charming they may be.

And yet, helping to establish safety for victims and participating in the pursuit of justice by holding abusers accountable is not enough. As a people, in our liturgy and in our holy day observances, in our beliefs and in our commitments, the prayer for peace, *shalom*, is always present and always remains our ultimate goal. Peace will come through acts of *tikkun*, repair, that return us to wholeness, which in Hebrew is *shalem*. Here, too, our task is to bring about the return to wholeness.

Domestic violence rips at the fabric of the family. Abuse is a traumatic tear to our tents which cannot be undone. As with any loss, there is no going back to "how things were before." Yet healing is possible, even a restored sense of wholeness.

Our tradition teaches that the gates of repentance are always open. (Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:12). With courage, commitment and appropriate treatment, an abuser may be able to change his behavior. Yet true repentance is a process and involves not only regret over the past but deep and lasting changes in psyche as well as behavior. Indeed, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik reminds us, real repentance is an act of self-creation.<sup>1</sup> Real repentance is so complete that a new person emerges from this process of transformation.

Our society, however, does not value process or the reality that certain matters require time. In our emotional lives, “we expect to be healed without acknowledging the rupture. We expect to arrive at our destination with no journey. But the process of healing requires a journey for which there is no shortcut.”<sup>2</sup> As a community, we fail both victims and abusers when we encourage premature requests or grants of forgiveness.

In fact, the journey of healing the wounds and losses of domestic violence may not result in reconciliation. If the marriage or partnership is going to be dissolved, then, as a community, we can assist those involved in mourning their losses. As a community, we gather together to rejoice with bride and groom. We consider it our sacred obligation to bury the dead and comfort the bereaved. So, too, it is our duty to create and participate in rituals and observances connected with endings of relationships and losses which result from domestic violence. Through our comforting presence, our rituals and acts of remembrance, we facilitate the process of mourning. It is this which allows for healing and wholeness.

In *sefer bamidbar*, the book of Numbers in the Torah, we read that Bilaam, the Midianite prophet, looked upon the Israelite encampment of tents and called out, “*Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishk’notecha Yisrael.*” “How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!” (Num. 24:5). Today, our tents are torn. But the fabric is still beautiful.

The fabric of our tents is those teachings and values that instruct us to create spaces of safety. The fabric of our tents are our ethics which demand that we pursue justice. The fabric of our tents are our liturgies and holy days which call upon us to heal and create wholeness in our world.

The fabric of our tents cries out to be repaired. It is time for us to address the problem of domestic violence. It is time for us to make true “*Ma Tovv.*” For the welfare of our community, I pray that we commit ourselves to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983) 110.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Brener, *Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993) 21-2.