

Jewish Perspectives in Domestic Violence

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In her heart she is a mourner for those who have not survived.

In her soul she is a warrior for those who are now as she was then.

In her life she is both celebrant and proof of women's capacity and will to survive, to become, to act, to change self and society. And each year she is stronger and there are more of her.

Andrea Dworkin 1978

Introduction

In this paper, I posit different ideas relative to Judaism in regard to domestic violence, offer Jewish precepts and texts, raise current problems for Jewish battered women, describe Jewish programs, make known Jews in the movement/field, cite Jewish Domestic Violence cases, and conclude with Creating Rituals and Blessings.

Depending on whom one consults about the topic of Domestic Violence in the Jewish community, Naomi Graetz (1998) noted the responses may vary. Some accept and legitimize the occurrence as the exercising of the husband's inherent right to educate, discipline, and/or correct a disobedient wife. According to Jewish law, the man owns the wife. When a man is betrothed the Hebrew word *koneh* translates to the verb acquires. Some reject the concept that it is permissible for Jews to use domestic violence because of adherence to the principle that a husband is bound to honor his wife over others. That women, as well as men, are made in the image of God is a more egalitarian interpretation for rejection of domestic violence and some who respond in that way actively promote equality within Judaism. "God created man in His image, male and female, He created them," (Genesis 1:27). Some respond with denial that domestic violence occurs in Jewish families. We have heard that Jewish men make the best husbands and even Gentile women prefer them. Some take the role of the apologist, noting that unequal and maltreatment of women occurred a long time ago when times were different, even though it became ingrained and carried over; however, they contend things are better now. Some may totally evade, using the explanation that they do not want to talk about it or it is a private matter and they are powerless to do anything to change it.

Claire Renzetti, formerly of St. Joseph's University in Pittsburgh and currently at the University of Dayton, was project director of Domestic Violence in Jewish Families in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. The project from 1991-1993 is thought the best and most comprehensive research on the incidence and description of Jewish domestic violence.

Wife abuse, as a social phenomenon, is maintained by the main institutions of society and religion. A change in Jewish law called *takkanah* would remedy acquisition of Jewish wives (Graetz, 1998). In the United States, civil law and religious law are separate. In religious law, a more pressing problem for Jewish women is that they are not permitted to initiate divorce. Progress toward equality and the valuing of women is noted with the ordination of women rabbis in Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative Judaism; however, Orthodox Judaism does not ordain women rabbis. Women have served as presidents of congregations, federations, and of other Jewish organizations.

Applicable Precepts and Texts

Landesman (2004) provided comfort based on Jewish wisdom to those who have experienced abuse. An act of *Teshuvah*, repentance and contrition, is in order for much of the Jewish community because of the state of denial regarding domestic abuse. *Teshuvah* is applicable also to those who commit the abuse. *Avadim hayyinu* recalls the one down position of Jews which is also applicable to victims, “we were slaves in Egypt,” (Deuteronomy 6:221). “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is being spilled” (Leviticus 19:16) invokes Jews and the Jewish community to help those in need.

Our ancestors lived an incredibly oppressed and cruel life. God called to Moses from the burning bush and gave hope and promise. “And God said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry...I know their sorrows’ ”(Exodus 3:7) conveys to victims that someone cared.

“It is not an enemy who reviles me—I could bear that; ...but it is you, my equal, my companion, my friend...” (Psalm 55:13-14) shows the understanding of problems with loved ones.

Shalom Bayit--Peace in the house, household harmony, has been the hallmark of Jewish homes and one of the few *mitzvot*, good deeds, accorded primarily to women. This can be used against women when interpreted to mean keeping the family together at any cost. Women and slaves were exempt from *mitzvot* that required something that must be done at a specific place and time. Some interpreted the exemption pejoratively as a way of restricting women. A positive interpretation viewed the exemption as a consideration to protect those needing protection or those vulnerable.

The *mitzvah* of *shalom-bayit* put women in the position of responsibility for something beyond their power to guarantee. Women who want to end the marriage with a Jewish divorce are not able to do so. A Jewish divorce or *Get* must be initiated by the husband and given to the wife. Men have been known to hold women hostages, not physically, but by not giving them a divorce. The woman is, in effect, a chained or anchored woman called an *Agunah*. Some American Jewish marriages have sought remedy by injecting what is known as the Lieberman clause into the *Ketubah*, marriage contract, when a couple marries. The clause stipulates that divorce in civil court will also be adjudicated by a rabbinic court, *Bet Din*. Not all Judaism

recognizes this strategy and some believe it treads on conflict between church and state with the religious court bound to follow the civil decision.

Jews are taught to avoid *Lashon Hara*, evil tongue or gossip, which has concomitantly been used to quiet victims, implying that talking about abuse is *Hillul Hashem*, desecration of God. Orthodox Rabbi Mark Dratch believes bringing abuse into the light, can be a *Kiddush Hashem*, honoring of God. The *Shandah*, shame or disgrace, is the abuse and tolerance thereof rather than victims being ashamed of the abuse. If *Halakha*, Jewish law, cannot protect the victim, then the law is not being interpreted correctly. Reinterpretations may be necessary to honor a pro-victim perspective.

Victims draw comfort, encouragement, and support from their Judaism. *Pikuah Nefesh*, saving a life, is commanded of Jews even if the life is one's own; therefore Jewish battered women are instructed to count themselves in. Comfort is offered by God, "I will give you peace in the land and you will lie down, and no one will make you afraid" (Leviticus 26:6).

Humor keeps us going, "I get up. I walk. I fall down. Meanwhile, I keep dancing," attributed to Hillel.

Jewish Programs

Prominent Jewish women's organizations in the United States have worked diligently to eliminate domestic violence.

Jewish Women International (JWI), www.jwi.org, was founded in 1897 as an auxiliary to the men's group B'nai Brith. Since the 1990's, JWI's main focal point has been Domestic Abuse. Their website regarding Domestic Abuse is extensive and comprehensive. JWI's Legal Project Website provides information to battered women and their advocates about the legal system and other resources. JWI began hosting an International Conference on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community in 2003 and it continues every other year. The JWI National Alliance hosts monthly teleconferences on varied topics relevant to domestic abuse. JWI developed an education program for teens to develop healthy and non-abusive relationships. JWI's National Library Initiative collects children's books for domestic violence programs. The Mother's Day Flower Project sends flowers to mothers in shelters.

Hadassah, www.hadassah.org, during the Silent Witness March on Washington made sure the women from Israel killed by their husbands were represented in the event. Hadassah, a Zionist organization, is the single largest women's organization in this country and, as such, has a particular obligation and an unwavering commitment to women's rights and concerns. Hadassah has condemned all forms of violence against women including domestic violence with special emphasis on domestic violence in the Jewish community. Hadassah has called on the U. S. Government to recognize gender-based violence as grounds for asylum; adapt the asylum process to accommodate women fleeing gender-based violence, including providing female officers to hear their cases, and training immigration officers and judges on issues relating to gender-based violence; and create a high-level office within the Department of Homeland Security to oversee all issues relating to asylum and expedited removal. Hadassah has

condemned the trafficking of women when women are forced, defrauded, or coerced into labor or sexual exploitation within and across national borders. Hadassah's monthly magazine has carried numerous articles on domestic violence.

National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), www.ncjw.org, is a grassroots, volunteer organization that has been at the forefront of social change in the United States for over a century. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW courageously takes a progressive stance on issues such as child welfare, women's rights, and reproductive freedom. NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. On the grassroots level, NCJW sections around the country are involved in a variety of domestic violence prevention programs, including Court Watch programs, teen dating violence education, and Silent Witness and Clothesline projects. The organization in Houston which I helped found and develop is known as Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse (AVDA) and was initiated by NCJW and NCJW provides continuing support. NCJW collaborates with Houston's local *Shalom Bayit*, a program of Jewish Family Service and The Bureau of Jewish Education to bring the teen domestic violence prevention program, Love Shouldn't Hurt, into Jewish religious schools.

Na'amat USA, www.naamat.org, for more than 80 years has had one mission: to support the women and children of Israel. To accomplish its mission, *NA'AMAT*—through its sister organization in Israel— provides a broad range of social services, from day care centers to domestic violence shelters.

JSafe, www.jSafe.org, was founded by Orthodox rabbi, Mark Dratch, to set standards for training and certification of Jewish religious institutions and to hold Jewish professionals responsible in the area of domestic abuse and making sure congregations have an effective protocol for dealing with both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

Faith Trust Institute (FTI), www.faithtrustinstitute.org, is an international, multi-faith organization working to end sexual and domestic violence. FTI addresses the religious and cultural issues related to abuse. FaithTrust Institute works with many communities, including Asian and Pacific Islander, Buddhist, Jewish, Latino/a, Muslim, Black, Anglo, Indigenous, Protestant and Roman Catholic. FTI is a catalyst for change within our religious institutions and their work continues until our churches and synagogues, stakes and assemblies, mosques and temples are effectively responding to victims and abusers, bringing forth healing and justice. Religious teachings can serve as either a resource or a roadblock in addressing the issue of domestic violence. Religious communities have been aided by FTI in acting on their responsibility to minimize any barriers facing abused congregation members and maximize the resources that exist within our religious traditions. FTI (1997) produced the video about Jewish Domestic Violence, **To Save a Life**, which is available for purchase.

Jewish domestic violence shelters exist in New York. Far Rockaway, NY shelter is *kosher*. Many of the country's domestic violence programs have worked hard to meet cultural, religious, or ethnic needs of client populations. Some have partnered with religious programs for sensitivity and cultural competence activities. Jewish groups have educated domestic violence programs on anti-Semitism and Jewish cultural competence. Many domestic violence programs

have the possibility for Jewish clients to keep *kosher* or at least not have pork meals. Pork is usually a problem. Domestic violence programs serve pork as it is inexpensive. Lobster and shellfish are not as problematic because of their expense. Jewish groups sometimes outfit and provide for shelters plastic trunks with non-perishable *kosher* food, prayer books, Sabbath or electric candles, separate dishes and cutlery, and other holiday items. Providing the resources has been collaborative between domestic violence programs and Jewish organizations. Shelters are not always aware a woman is Jewish as government funding does not permit programs to ask about religion. A program letting it be known that *kosher* food can be made available make services for a Jewish woman more welcoming.

Jews in the Domestic Violence Field

Two of the earliest, well-known and well-respected Jewish names in the field are Lenore Walker and Susan Schechter (of blessed memory). Best known is Walker, author of one of the first books **The Battered Woman**. Walker first described what is referred to as the Cycle of Violence comprised of the Buildup, Explosion, and Honeymoon Stages. Walker originated the term *Battered Women's Syndrome* and she has been an expert witness in many high profile cases. In her book **Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement**, Schechter chronicled the underpinnings, development, and challenges of early efforts against domestic violence. Much of her later work explored the way domestic violence affected children. Schechter's career was cut short by her death in 2004 from endometrial cancer. At the time of her death, she was faculty in the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa.

Paul Kivel, Gus Kaufman, Phyllis Frank, and Jackson Katz are all leaders in the work with men who are violent, abusive, and/or controlling with intimate partners. Paul Kivel, a trainer, activist, writer, and cofounder of the Oakland Men's Project, believes that violence is rooted in social injustice based on inequality in race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Included in books authored by Kivel are **Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears our Lives Apart**; with Allan Creighton **Helping Teens Stop Violence: A Practical Guide for Counselors, Educators**; "Jewish Men and Jewish Male Violence" in **Men's Work in Preventing Violence Against Women**, editors James Poling and Christie Neuger. Gus Kaufman is one of the originators of Men Stopping Violence in Atlanta and his writings include "The Mysterious Disappearance of Battered Women in Family Therapists' Offices: Male Privilege Colluding with Male Violence" in **Secrets in Families and Family Therapy**. In 1978, Phyllis Frank designed and still directs the nationally known New York Model Program for abusive men in Rockland County, New York. Her program is part of research funded by the National Institute of Justice to assess the responsibility of the legal system for holding batterers accountable when they are not compliant with the court order to participate in and complete a battering intervention program. Anti-sexist male activist, Jackson Katz, writes, educates, and makes films in the field of gender violence prevention with men and boys, particularly in sports and the military. **The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help** is his book and **Tough Guise** is his video.

Evan Stark, faculty in public administration at Rutgers University, specializes in health and medical care, family and community violence, criminal justice, and policy issues dealing

with racial and gender justice. His book, **Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life** reframed domestic violence as a liberty crime.

In Texas during the 1990's, six of the 12 member Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) Board were Jews working in domestic violence programs across the state--Fran Danis, Toby Myers, Jeff Basen-Engquist, Nina Rivkin, Rhonda Gerson, and Ellen Fisher. Fran Danis, a Professor of Social Work joined the faculty of University of Texas Arlington in August 2008. TCFV has referred to me, Toby Myers, as "the mother of the Texas Battered Women's Movement." Even though I was deeply ingrained in social justice movements, I would not have come to battered women's work had I not found myself partnered with a violent, abusive, and controlling man. I have helped to start and worked in domestic violence organizations in our city, state and nation including the first battered women's shelter in Houston and our statewide network Texas Council on Family Violence. I taught our state's first course in Domestic Violence at Texas Woman's University in 1980.

Domestic Violence Cases Involving Jews

High profile domestic violence cases include that of Joel Steinberg and Hedda Nussbaum. On the surface, they appeared to be the epitome of an upscale, yuppie couple. He was a lawyer and she a former book editor. Photos of her when she was an editor were of a beautiful woman. Yet when their adopted daughter Lisa died from abuse and the public saw what had happened to Hedda, the myth that abuse does not exist in the Jewish community was exploded.

Steve and Elana Steinberg seemed like the perfect couple in Scottsdale, Arizona. Their home was a dream of good taste, furnished with purchases that Elana, a quintessential bargain hunter, had carefully made. In 1981, her husband stabbed her 26 times, and was acquitted by a jury after his defense attorney, also Jewish, portrayed her as a Jewish American Princess obsessed with shopping and who made incessant demands on her husband for more and better. These allegations played into the worst stereotypes of Jewish women and made inveterate gambler Steve appear the victim. The Jewish community was polarized over this case. Steinberg went to temple after his trial, acquittal, and release from jail. The rabbi granted him an *aliyah*, honor, permitting Steve's recitation of the *birkat haGomel*, the Jewish blessing of thanksgiving for one's deliverance from danger. There was no mention of Elana.

Knoxville lawyer Perry March maintained his wife Janet left one night in 1996 never to return. In 2006, March was found guilty on charges of second degree murder, tampering with evidence, and abuse of a corpse. March had been extradited to the United States from Ajijic, Mexico for arrest and trial. He, his new, Mexican wife, and his children had been living in their luxury surroundings. His own father eventually testified against him. Janet March's parents, the Levines, worked diligently to see he was brought to justice and that their grandchildren were returned to this country. The children are with the Levines.

Cherry Hill, New Jersey Rabbi Fred Neulander was found guilty of paying hitmen to kill his wife Carol on November 1, 1994. She was found beaten to death in their home. Neulander's apparent motive was to continue a relationship with a former Philadelphia area radio personality,

Elaine Soncini. He was thought to have felt a divorce would compromise his authority as a spiritual leader, and thus possibly his job; hence, the need to have his wife done away with. Suspicion swarmed around Neulander from the day of the killing, but it was not apparent who committed the actual act. Following the guilty verdict, after his second trial, Neulander was sentenced to serve 30 years to life in New Jersey State Prison. Son Matthew Neulander, now a physician, testified against him.

Jean Harris, who is not Jewish, served time in Bedford Hills for having killed Jewish Scarsdale Diet guru and high-society cardiologist Dr. Herman Tarnower. Harris, headmistress at Madeira an exclusive school in a Washington, D. C., endured fourteen years of psychological abuse and flagrant infidelity from Tarnower. Planning to take her own life in March 1980, Harris went with a gun to say goodbye to Dr. Tarnower. She ended up shooting him in a scuffle and was subsequently sentenced to prison. There, she was an ideal inmate. In 1992, Harris was granted clemency by New York Governor Mario Cuomo.

Creating Our Own Rituals and Blessings

Jews experiencing domestic violence have sought ritual and prayers specific to those needs. Sometimes the need could be fulfilled by opening a prayer book or consulting a Jewish source. Sometimes what is found does not hold the adequate words or actions for those who sought them. Consequently, women began to create their own rituals and prayers when ones that fit could not be found. Rituals and prayers were created over such milestones, both sad and happy, of miscarriage, birth, menopause, marking a same sex union, entering a child into kindergarten, buying a home, and achieving crone or wise-woman status. The Talmud teaches that one who enjoys pleasures of this world without reciting a blessing is like a thief who steals from God. Rabbis composed blessings for all imaginable events; therefore why should women not create their own special blessings and supplications? Abused women have created rituals for having survived and becoming freed from an abusive relationship.

A Jewish ritual should resonate with something Jewish. Jewish symbols, concepts, or words may be used in a new context, but in a context that is consistent with their symbolism. For example, a *Havdalah* candle lit to separate Sabbath from the rest of the week could be lit when a child leaves home for college marking the separation from home to independence or when a divorce is obtained. A ritual is a way to sanctify changes and to make and mark a transition, to connect ourselves to past and future, and to share transitions either privately or with a larger community. The website www.ritualwell.org can teach how to consider, plan, develop, and carry out new rituals. Marcia Cohn Spiegel's knowledge, creativity, and commitment provided instruction on writing and developing rituals and blessings. Spiegel led many through the steps to create a ritual and or blessing. Creating a blessing starts with traditional blessing formula—1) Naming God in the formula--Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, Creator of the Universe 2) Attributes, qualities and power of God—who is great and mighty in mercy, wisdom, and loving kindness 3) Be with me as—I embark on this dangerous task of leaving this home with my children, and 4) God's ability to act—if you deem me worthy, shelter yourself over us and protect us from harm, provide us strength to perform this momentous task, and help me to be a credit and contributor to my community and to peace in the world, and help me to be a sign and

example to women that they do not have to endure humiliation, control, abuse, and violence from the one with whom they should have been the most safe.

NCJW Houston more than 20 years ago initiated A Women's Passover *Seder*. Taking part in that event, Houston's *Shalom Bayit* each year includes a recitation on the empty chair in recognition of any woman not in attendance because of the oppression, control, abuse and/or violence.

Haggadot, books reciting the order of the Passover Meal have been rewritten for women, for lesbians, and for victims of domestic violence (Faith-Trust Institute's **Journey to Freedom** 2003). Rituals have been incorporated as an *Aliyah*, an honor given during the Jewish services, for having freed oneself and having survived an abusive relationship. During the portion of the regular Service, many rabbis when reciting the *Mi She'Beirach*, special prayer for the sick and afflicted, include battered women. Important, not only because it has a message for victims that they are not alone, but also it is a sign in the community that an important religious institution takes a position and stands with those who are victims.

It is essential that the Jewish Community, in recognition of Jewish battered women, partner with them to assure that their voices are heard in all their richness and that a milieu is created that disallows violence, abuse, and control and that promotes equality and true peace in the home. As that occurs, women will keep moving toward full status and participation in all phases of the Jewish community. Work toward that end has happened. More is needed. More is underway. More will come. Those who have been part of the effort will derive satisfaction in knowing our contribution meant something.

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Biography

Referred to as "the mother of the Texas Battered Women's Movement" by the Texas Council on Family Violence, Toby Myers helped found and has been active in many organizations to end violence against women. Her domestic violence related activities include work with attorneys as an expert witness, a counseling practice, serving on boards and committees, training, and technical assistance. A good friend of gray hair, crow's feet, and cellulite, Myers dreams of people living in intimate relationships not only non-violent, but also mutually respectful, mutually satisfying, and growth promoting.