

LECH LECHA 5767

A man goes to the doctor and tells him that he's worried because he thinks his wife has a hearing problem that she won't admit. So he asks the doctor what he can do to find out how serious the problem really is.

The doctor says, "I'll give you a test you can use, and if she fails the test you'll know you'd better bring her in immediately for a check-up. Tonight when you go home, from the front door ask, 'Hi honey, what's for dinner?' If there is no answer, go into the house and ask again, 'Hi honey, what's for dinner?' If there still is no answer, walk right up behind her and ask again, 'Hi honey, what's for dinner?' If she doesn't hear even that, you know she has a serious problem."

So the man goes home that night and follows the doctor's suggestion. He walks in the door and says, "Hi honey, what's for dinner?" No answer. He goes further into the house and asks again. No answer. So he walks right up behind her and says, "Hi honey, what's for dinner?"

She turns to him and yells, "Fish, I told you 3 times!"

Denial is a common human frailty. It's tough to confront our own failings. As I've shared with you before, each week as I review the Torah portion for the next Shabbos, a passage or 2 will often strike me in a certain way and I will know that I must speak about it on Shabbos. I don't know why. Perhaps I need to hear this message, or perhaps there will be someone present that needs to hear it. Well, this week's passages, unfortunately, are somewhat disturbing and painful to confront.

Imagine for a moment that one morning you pick up the paper and see the following headline: "170,000 Jews in America Assaulted In A Massive Wave of Anti-Semitism." The entire Jewish world would rally instantly with calls for action. Large scale demonstrations would take to the streets demanding protection for the victims, retribution and justice against the attackers. Every Jewish organization would call upon its members to respond. The Jewish press would be filled with articles, editorials and interviews by prominent rabbis and other Jewish leaders both in and out of government; and the entire Jewish community would be mobilized to insure immediate, forceful and decisive action to expunge this evil from society.

Well, 170,000 acts of violence is the most conservative estimate that I have seen of the actual physical attacks that have taken place on Jews—mostly defenseless women and children—by their own loved ones as acts of domestic violence in America. 170,000!

Strange as it may seem, hard as it may be to believe, the safety and security of Jews is at risk today, but sadly we appear to be in much greater danger of being hurt or killed by our own loved ones than by all the anti-Semitism in America. Domestic violence in the Jewish community is one of our best kept secrets. We don't talk about it. We don't acknowledge its existence. We continue to perpetuate the myth that "Educated Jewish husbands are better than those beer-drinking *goyim*, because unlike them, we don't beat our wives."

This myth is far from reality. The truth is that Jewish women have become prisoners to this stereotype. Those that are victims just never tell anyone, because in their isolation and shame, they believe that their experience is an aberration—that they're the only one it happens to.

In reality, every study in the last 15 years has demonstrated that Jews experience domestic violence, in exactly the same proportion as non-Jews in America. And it crosses all socio-economic, ethnic and religious boundaries—from Reform to ultra Orthodox, poor to affluent. In fact, the higher the economic bracket the greater the amount of domestic violence.

The general statistics on domestic violence in America and its impact on the health, safety and emotional stability of women and children in America is staggering:

- **One woman is raped every 6 minutes and one woman is battered every 15 seconds.**
- **One in 2 American women is shoved, slapped, shot or roughed up at least once in her life by a man she loves.**
- **3 to 4 million women are battered each year by their partners or husbands.**
- **Wife-beating results in more injuries that require medical attention than**

rape, auto accidents and muggings combined.

- And in about 50% of women-battering situations, the children are abused as well.

A colleague shared with me the following story. Let me read it to you:

A middle-aged Jewish woman sat across from me. As she spoke, I felt as if I were watching a movie dubbed with the wrong sound. The words did not fit the image—until the tears. The tears left no doubt.

“You should emphasize the children’s angle. The children are not fooled. Adults fool themselves thinking the children don’t know. The children are so vulnerable,” she said.

Shirley grew up in a typical Jewish family in Brooklyn, elder of 2 girls. Her father worked for the City of New York. Jewish values were taught in her home. It seemed to be the model Jewish family.

But Shirley knew differently. The peace of her model childhood was often shattered by the screams and blows of her father beating her mother. Shirley told no one. Had someone asked, she would have shared her story, and her pain. But no one ever asked.

As Shirley sat with me, she confided that she has, as an adult, confronted her parents. But my temporary relief on hearing this was shattered by her next disclosure. “My 22-year-old son just told me that his grandfather—my father—had sexually abused him until the age of 18.”

“Yes, you can share my story, as long as I can remain anonymous. If it helps just one family in your congregation...if it helps just one child.”

Indeed, the conspiracy of silence surrounding violence and abuse must be broken. We claim, *Shalom Bayit*, peace in the home, as one of our most precious Jewish values. Yet, through our silence, through the perpetuation of the myths of Jewish home life, we reinforce the isolation, the fear, the aloneness and the victimization of tens of thousands of Jewish women and children every single day.

Another true story:

Her father, mother and older sister regularly beat her as a child. She retaliated by beating her younger sister. Now, herself a parent, she has beaten her

own daughters and the daughters in turn often strike each other.

Her husband controls her with threats of violence and warns her never to reveal the “family secrets.” She is a 42-year-old member of a liberal synagogue from an upper middle-class family. Sometimes she fantasizes her husband’s death, either through natural causes or by her own hand.

She has tried to stop hitting her children, attending therapy sessions with husband, but she is afraid to say too much out of fear that her husband will not return to the sessions or that he will throw her out of the house, leaving her without economic support.

When asked whether family violence was a problem among Jews, she said, no. She was not aware of a single Jewish family in which violence was a problem.

This is the insidious devil of denial. And we must not stick our heads in the sand any longer! We must understand that battered women are not masochists, and they don’t enjoy being abused. Fear is the main reason woman stay—afraid they will be killed, afraid for the safety of their children, afraid they will lose their children, afraid they will end up on welfare or without a home.

So are Jewish battered women different from other battered women? Not really. All battered women experience isolation and loss of self and self-esteem. What makes them different is that as Jewish women, they experience their abuse in the backdrop of the idealized version of the Jewish family.

The image of the warm, loving, nurturing Jewish family, where Jewish men always make the best husbands simply makes it all the more difficult for the Jewish woman who is being battered to accept that it is not her fault. The shame is intense, for she thinks that there must be something very wrong with her if this could be happening even in a Jewish family.

And what about the children? Children who see violence in their homes—even if directed at someone else—experience this as an abuse in and of itself. Children who grow up in violent homes learn violence as a way of life. They see it as the normal response to anger, to frustration and upset. Studies now indicate that witnessing abuse between parents as a child is a greater determinant for abusing a spouse in adulthood than being abused oneself.

What needs to be done?

1st we must recognize that this is not a problem just for others. It's now a Jewish problem—170,000 times over.

2nd, if you are a victim, you must go for help—whether emotional, legal or both. There are resources in the community. The Jewish Family and Children Services offers support groups, counseling, mentoring, educational and outreach programs. There's a 24-hour hotline in Georgia: Georgia: 1-800-33-haven, and a help line 1800-children.

3rd, if you know someone who is being victimized, reach out to them so that they can be helped.

In today's parsha we read about the very 1st Jewish family: Abraham and Sarah, with her handmaiden Hagar who became a surrogate wife to bear a child for her, and their sons Ishmael and Isaac. It's a tale of total dysfunction and, dare I say, abuse. Abraham goes to Egypt during a famine to look for food. Sarah is abducted by Pharaoh and would have raped her if Gd had not made him ill. He later chides Abraham for telling everyone that Sarah was his sister—as if raping her if she were only his sister would have been OK.

When Hagar gets pregnant she gets uppity and makes fun of Sarah and then Sarah oppresses her. The Radak, in his commentary, suggests that she physically abused her by striking her. Later, Abraham sends Hagar and son Ishmael away into the desert, he then terrorizes his son, Isaac by binding him, holding a slaughtering knife over his head and sparing his life only at the last possible second. After that abusive incident, there is a complete and utter breakdown of the family. Sarah is in shock and dies. Neither Isaac nor Ishmael ever speaks to their father again, and he dies old and alone.

These are sacred stories. The Torah doesn't hide them in order to teach us that our ancestors, although holy, were not perfect. Here, perhaps, the lesson is that abuse is not an invention of modern times, and we need not feel so isolated, so alone in our suffering. Remember the story of when Moses angrily smashes the original tablets of the 10 Commandments when he saw the people dancing around the Golden Calf? What did he do with the broken pieces? According to

tradition, he carefully gathered up the broken fragments and placed them in a 2nd ark, carried side-by-side with the holy ark, for they were just as holy.

Those who are broken must never be cast away or discarded. They are ever as much—or perhaps even more—holy than those of us that are whole. As the psalmist puts it (34:19): *Karov Hashem l'nishb'rey levy; v 'et dakey ruach yoshi-a*, “Gd is close to the brokenhearted; and those crushed in spirit, He saves!”

So let's not live in denial anymore. Those of you who are broken, those who are scared, those whose very souls seem shattered and in pieces, reach out for help—to the community, to your shule, to Gd. Those who know someone suffering in silence, help them break the silence and get help, so that they and the Jewish community can be made whole once again. Amen

Rabbi Mark Kunis

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