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## Domestic Violence and the Jewish Community: The Literature Expands

review essay by Carol Goodman Kaufman

In the past decade, we have seen progress, albeit slow, in our communal struggle against abuse in the home. More people are acknowledging that violence does indeed occur in Jewish homes. More Jewish women are feeling empowered to come forward and seek help. Rabbis are reporting that they have attended workshops and panels on the subject, and communities have established committees to address the problem. And, publications that address domestic violence in the Jewish community have been filling library shelves.

In 1995, Rabbi Julie Ringold Spitzer broke new ground in publishing *When Love Is Not Enough: Spousal Abuse in Rabbinic and Contemporary Judaism* (Federation of Temple Sisterhoods). She exposed the myth that abuse does not happen among Jews, with our tradition of *shalom bayit*, peace in the home. That belief, she wrote, becomes a burden for women, who feel responsible for maintaining the artifice. Some of the statistics Spitzer cited were unsubstantiated, but she did the Jewish community a tremendous service by bringing a difficult subject to the table.

The following year, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski's *The Shame Borne in Silence: Spouse Abuse in the Jewish Community* (Mirkov Publications, 1996) broke strong taboos among his ultra-Orthodox co-religionists by exposing our people's secrets. For his efforts, and though his work likely saved many lives, Twerski was shunned by his community. Short on research methodology, this slim volume focuses almost exclusively on counseling of abusers and their victims. Twerski was among the first to advocate the separation of couples during counseling sessions so as to ensure the victim's freedom of speech during the session, as well as her safety upon return home.

*Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating*, by Naomi Graetz (Jason Aronson, 1998), is an excellent source for learning about Judaism's laws and traditions regarding spousal abuse, with the rabbinic writings very helpfully presented in chapters according to their attitudes and rulings on the subject. Most surprising for me were some of the seemingly very modern and enlightened responsa by very early rabbis.

Susan Weitzman's *Not to People Like Us: Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages* (Basic Books, 2001), while not aimed exclusively at a Jewish audience, focuses on abusive relationships among educated, affluent couples. Weitzman discusses the economic

and social incentives that keep many such women in their marriages. Since education, professional achievement and the status of “marrying well” are all highly prized in the Jewish community, the author’s findings are applicable to Jewish clients, who are often reluctant to give up their status and prestige in their communities, despite their pain.

Rachel Lev, a psychotherapist, is herself a victim of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her own father. Her book *Shine the Light: Sexual Abuse and Healing in the Jewish Community* (Northeastern University Press, 2002) includes narratives of sexual abuse and incest victims, a chapter on Jewish law relating to the subject by Rabbi Mark Dratsch, and a very interesting section on using artistic expression to deal with the highly charged emotions that victims experience. She also looks at several psychological theories relating to family and community denial, and at victims’ disconnection from family and social life. In her discussion of systems theory and the permeability of boundaries that characterizes all living organisms, Lev successfully delineates between the fuzziness of boundaries in families and the violation of those same borders when sexual abuse takes place. However, in reading the narratives, I sensed that Lev herself might be blurring the therapist/patient boundary. Was she treating friends? Did she befriend her patients? This may simply have been an editing oversight, but it should have been addressed.

Elaine Weiss’s *Family and Friends’ Guide to Domestic Violence: How to Listen, Talk and Take Action When Someone You Care About is Being Abused* (Volcano Press, 2003), while again not a Jewish book *per se*, is a very useful paperback volume whose goal is to provide guidance to friends and family members of abuse victims. Weiss, herself a survivor of spousal abuse, provides an excellent overview of the life of abuse victims and, more important, guidance for loved ones in overcoming their own fears so as to provide empowering support.

The Faith Trust Institute’s entire mission is the prevention of sexual and domestic violence in religious communities. Although the Institute no longer has a rabbi on its interfaith staff, it still sells several excellent books and video training materials targeting the Jewish community, both professional and lay. In “To Save a Life: Ending Domestic Violence in Jewish Families” (1997), survivors of violent marriages tell their stories, interwoven with discussion by rabbis and other professionals who work with victims. “Love—All That and More” (revised 2009) is an award-winning 64-minute video and six-session curriculum aimed at Jewish educators and designed to enable them to teach healthy relationship skills in a framework of Jewish values. *Yad B’Yad: Working Hand in Hand to Create Healthy Relationships* (2005) is a five-session curriculum targeting children in grades 6–8 who are just beginning to explore their own sexuality and relationships. The DVD *Pastoral Care for Domestic Violence: Case Studies for Clergy* addresses religious issues faced by both victims and abusers, as well as training for clergy through a series of role-playing exercises. Two further books published by Faith Trust offer spiritual support to abuse victims. *A Journey towards Freedom: A Haggadah for Women Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence* (2003) interprets the language of a traditional Passover seder as a metaphor for the liberation of women journeying from the slavery of abuse to the freedom of safety.

Toby Landesman's *You Are Not Alone: Solace and Inspiration for Domestic Violence Survivors Based on Jewish Wisdom* (2004) provides prayers, blessings and other writings from Jewish tradition to support and comfort victims, and the professionals in the Jewish community who want to help them.

Jewish Women International remains at the vanguard of all Jewish organizations in the effort to combat domestic violence and help girls and women avoid abusive relationships. In March 2003, JWI sponsored its first international conference on domestic violence in the Jewish community, in Washington, DC. Three more conferences have taken place since then, but only the proceedings of the first were published, offering a range of scholarly responses to this painful phenomenon.

As is the case with many conference proceedings, some presentations are better than others. The editors apparently made no attempt to clean up the transcripts before publication. In some instances, speeches were transcribed word for word, without benefit of sentence completion and the removal of redundancies. Consequently, what may have sounded more natural orally sounds somewhat disconnected on paper. That said, the compendium contains several powerful presentations.

Rabbi David Stein's talk is entitled "Did Maimonides Really Say That? The Widespread Claim that He Condoned Wife-Battering May Be Mistaken." It is devoted to an in-depth discussion of Maimonides's statement in the *Mishneh Torah* ("Laws of *Ishut*" 21) that a man may beat his wife with a rod for failing to do her housework. Outlining the history of the discussion in which this pronouncement was made, Stein goes to great lengths to dismiss it as having been taken out of context. The statement does stand out as completely different from others made by Maimonides, and he may well, as a physician, have set more than one broken bone inflicted on a wife by an abusive husband, making him more sensitive to physical abuse than the typical rabbi. Nevertheless, the difficult statement is there for all the world to see. Too many unscrupulous husbands have used the great teacher's words to justify their own unspeakable actions.

Rabbi Dovid Weinberger's presentation, "Working in the Jewish Community," discusses various laws on marital life, as well as some misconceptions about issues such as the *get*, the Jewish divorce decree. Weinberg asserts that there is much more to learn about each point of law, that things aren't as black and white as the audience might suspect, and that knowledgeable rabbis can help a woman whose husband refuses to grant her a divorce. Emphasizing that working against domestic violence is a matter of *pikuaḥ nefesh*, saving a life, he urges his listeners to organize their communities, particularly their rabbis. Unfortunately, too many women in real life don't have knowledgeable or sensitive rabbis, and some end up as *agunot*, women "chained" in marriage to abusive partners.

Marcia Cohen Spiegel speaks about the danger of sexual abuse by clergypersons within the neo-Hasidic or Jewish renewal movement. Pointing to numerous cases of boundary-crossing, many of them at the hands of the late renewal leader Shlomo Carlebach, she discusses the risk posed by the intense student/rabbi relationship, which puts its participants in close physical proximity. Cohen Spiegel warns the community that it must establish behavioral and ethical guidelines to ward off the danger that

charismatic leaders like Carlebach will take advantage of their guru-like position to engage in inappropriate sexual relationships.

Further JWI contributions to the communal bookshelf are *Healing and Wholeness: A Resource Guide on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community* (2002), an excellent resource for professionals working with Jewish families; *Embracing Justice: A Resource Guide for Rabbis on Domestic Abuse* (2002); and *When the Vow Breaks: Building a Response to Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community* (2005), a package of programs including a short documentary film with personal accounts by survivors, along with commentary from rabbis and a social worker. The Hadassah Foundation has played a major role in funding JWI's efforts, including the six-session program "Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships: A Conversation on Dating, Friendship and Self-Esteem"; and "When Push Come to Shove . . . It's No Longer Love!" a one-and-one-half hour program for teens, young adults and college students, designed to help them recognize and avoid or end unhealthy and abusive relationships. The Hadassah Foundation has also funded the development of a new initiative at the Davidson School of Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, called "Learning to Address the Evaded Curriculum Project," addressing issues that touch the lives of female students but are rarely discussed in Jewish schools.

Individual communities around the country are developing their own programs to train young people. For example, Shalom Bayit (of the San Francisco Bay area) has developed a youth-led dating violence prevention curriculum. "Love Shouldn't Hurt: Campus and Beyond" targets new audiences, including college students, recent college graduates, teachers, and parents. Partnering with Hillel, Shalom Bayit plans to bring its program to campuses across the nation.

For readers who would like to do more research into the area of domestic violence, the Minnesota Center against Violence and Abuse website has a nice bibliography of writings on the subject, including a section on violence in Jewish homes (<http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/bibs/jewish/jewish.html>). Unfortunately, the Jewish section has been out of date for several years, and does not include, among other writings, either Susan Weitzman's book or my own *Sins of Omission: The Jewish Community's Reaction to Domestic Violence* (2003).

When the 2020 edition of *Nashim* appears in our mailboxes, I am hopeful that domestic abuse publications will be relegated to the history shelves.