

Teaching Holiness, to Save a Life

A few years ago, the UPJ's Religious Action and Advocacy Centre asked if our Temple would devote the Shabbat preceding White Ribbon Day to helping raise awareness about Domestic Violence. So I began doing some homework, educating myself about the extent of this dreadful problem, and the work that's being done to address it in Australia. The first stop in my exploration was the website of Impact For Women, a Victoria-based organization whose spokesperson at the UPJ Conference had presented us with some alarming statistics, like the fact that an astounding "1 in 3 Australian women" in intimate relationships experience partner violence at some point in their lives; that "domestic violence is the *leading* contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15-44," exceeding the impact even of "high blood-pressure, smoking, and obesity"; that "domestic violence is the most common factor contributing to homelessness among women and their children"; and that "an estimated 80% of [violence] cases...go unreported to the police."[\[i\]](#) A silent killer, this dreaded affliction.

My next stop was the Jewish Care-New South Wales website, at which I learned that "domestic abuse is the most common form of assault in Australia," *and* that domestic violence knows no *ethnic* bounds. That is, that "rates of abuse within the Jewish community suggest that women experience domestic violence at similar rates to other groups" and that "domestic violence occurs in both religious and...secular Jewish communit[ies]."[\[ii\]](#)

I then consulted a variety of books I'd read for my pastoral care classes, where I reencountered a few sobering stories that survivors had shared—stories about living with partners who'd abused them either physically, emotionally, spiritually, sexually, or financially. "He terrorized me and the kids—screaming and yelling, swearing," one said. "I didn't think anyone would understand what it meant to live at the mercy of his whims and moods, his anger...I was so scared."

Another recalls her husband commanding, "'Don't call your mother. I don't like your friends. If you love me you'll stop seeing them.' It became easier to cut these people out of my life than to try to sneak around or risk the explosions that came if it became known that I, God forbid, had lunch with my mother."

One victim laments, "I feel so alone...No one will believe me. From the outside, we look just fine...I smile and act like everything is okay. It isn't. I look in the mirror and weep at who I have become...I am drowning in loneliness."

Speaking about her shame, one survivor confesses, "I didn't feel pure or holy...I was afraid he would convince people that I was crazy, a bad mother...His voice was in my head, broadcasting the propaganda 24 hours a day."[\[iii\]](#)

Aside from these jarring statistics and stories, one particularly disturbing discovery in my exploration of this topic were the words found on *every* screen of the Impact for Women website, right below the instruction to "call 000 if you are in danger." There, in bright red flashing capital letters were the words "CLICK HERE IF YOU NEED TO LEAVE THIS SITE QUICKLY." I found this message, the mere need for a quick escape feature, completely heartbreaking. The idea is that if an abusive partner happens to walk in the room while you are browsing the website seeking help, support, or rescue, you can "click here" to instantly exit the Impact screen and get rerouted to a more "neutral," innocuous webpage, sparing yourself a potential conflict and flaring of anger and violence. The website actually has an entire page devoted to "internet safety," complete with instructions on how to clear your history of webpages visited,

change email passwords, set up alternate IDs—all so that you can't be traced. Chilling, isn't it, this need to remain *invisible*?

This is why we raise awareness: because there's *so* much that's invisible and shrouded in silence. And detecting a silent cry for help can only happen if we're alert and aware. No one's going to come up and say, even to their rabbi, "I'm being abused," or "I'm battering my wife and want to stop, can you help me?" We need to learn to read between the lines, the limping, and the long-sleeve shirts. To see beyond the visible.

But beyond awareness, what's a shul to *do*? Organizations like Jewish Care and Impact for Women do a tremendous job in addressing the issue of domestic violence and its painful fallout. They provide advocacy, counseling, court support, financial assistance, and more, for women trying to escape dangerous homes, seek protection, and establish new lives for themselves and their children. How can we do our part, here on our own campus?

One step is the posting of Jewish Care signs in our rest room stalls that let victims know who to contact, including their rabbis, for support and assistance. Another step is to offer reassurance that those who then turn to their rabbis will find a listening, believing, non-judgmental ear—rabbis ready to sit with you, cry with you, and help you get the help you seek.

But what can we do as a community *before* such a crisis point is reached? What fascinates me most is how those who *have* managed to escape violent situations and find safety *miraculously* did so. How, amid the depths of shame and self-loathing, fear and confusion, they found *something* within themselves that they believed *worthy* of help, worthy of life. How, living in an isolated, lonely, shrinking world, they found *something* that enabled them to place trust in the universe. As a community, it is our duty and our challenge to instill that "something" in our children and teens at an early age—something that may not protect them from entering *into* unhealthy relationships, but that might give them a chance at recognizing and escaping them. What is that something, which we, as a Jewish community, can instill? Perhaps for us that something is a sense... of holiness.

Judaism teaches that the home is to be a *mik'dash me'at*—a small sanctuary. That with the fall of the Holy of Holies, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, *each Jewish home* became a place to show reverence for God—at our dinner tables, on our door-posts... The Jewish value of *shalom bayit* demands that our home—this small sanctuary—be a place of peace. When violence disturbs that peace and that sanctity, leaving is an appropriate response.

Judaism also teaches that *relationships* are holy—*kiddushin* (sanctification) being the word for the initial stage of a marriage. God made Eve not to *serve* Adam, but to solve the problem of *loneliness*^[iv]—a Divine response to our solitude. When those we love and trust leave us feeling isolated and fearful, leaving is an appropriate response.

Judaism teaches that *life* is holy—that preserving a life is more important than even the holiest day of our week, or our year. When our relationships move from blessing to curse, from affirming life to threatening death, we are called to choose life, and leaving is an appropriate response.

And finally, Judaism teaches that within each *individual* dwells a spark of holiness—that each of us is created in the Divine image—*betzelem Elohim*. When we lose sight of that spark in ourselves or our partner, when we look into the mirror or into our souls and feel that image has been desecrated, then leaving is an appropriate response.

A sense of holiness—perhaps this we can instill. As we recall, this Chanukah season, our ancestors' rededication of the Holy of Holies, so we rededicate our *selves* to teaching where holiness can be found in the *absence* of our ancient Temple: holiness at home, holiness in relationship, holiness of life, holiness in us. May our efforts gird and strengthen those in need, until each of us finds, in the safety and comfort of our own homes, the small sanctuaries of which our sages dreamed.

Shabbat shalom.

[i] ImpactForWomen.org.au

[ii] JewishCare.com.au

[iii] Selections from Toby Landesman's *You Are Not Alone: Solace and Inspiration for Domestic Violence Survivors Based on Jewish Wisdom*

[iv] *God vs. Gay: The Religious Case for Equality*, by Jay Michaelson