

## Senior Sermon – Domestic Violence - פרשת ויצא

Kim Ettlinger

My name is Leah. I am 34, my husband Jake is 37. I graduated college with a basic arts degree. We are both attractive and, for the most part, respected and well liked. We have 4 children and live in a middle class home with all the comforts we could possibly want. **I have everything, except life without fear. (White Sheet 1)**

For most of my married life, my husband has beaten me periodically. What do I mean by “beaten”? My body has been hit violently and repeatedly, resulting in combinations of painful bruises, swelling, bleeding, and unconsciousness. **I have successfully learned to hide my bruises from everyone. {Sheet 2}**

Not every day is bad. I find myself hoping that my husband will change, that things will be different. He often promises me that he will get help. I can see the pain on his face. But, he never follows through, and the good days grow fewer and farther between the bad days. Early in our marriage, I went to my rabbi who told me that my husband meant me no harm, that he was just confused and felt insecure.

**Forgiving is a Jewish value. {sheet 3}**

Things continued. I turned to my family doctor. He gave me relaxants and told me **I was just too nervous.** {Sheet 4)

So, I turned to a **friend** for help. Her husband told me I was exaggerating the situation. Her husband told her to stay away from me. **He made her feel disloyal because she believed me.** {Sheet 5)

When I turned to a professional family guidance agency, they told me that my husband needed help and that **I** should find ways to control the incidents. I have nowhere to go if it happens again. Who wants to take in a woman with 4 children and **involve themselves in a “domestic situation?”** {Sheet 6)

==

I have found the strength. Don't ask me how or where? I know that though I may feel alone, **I am not alone.** (Sheet 6 removed)

I have found a rabbi and counselor who will listen to me. **Judaism does not teach me to stay in an abusive relationship.** (Sheet 5 removed)

I have contacted my local battered woman's shelter. They listen. **They know what I am going through. (Sheet 4 removed)**

My husband and I have separated. He says he is finally willing to get help. All I know is that I need help. Help to heal. Help to rebuild my life: a **life without fear and shame. (Sheet 3 removed)**

It is not easy but I have found that there are more people than I realized who are able and willing to help me. **I know that I am not alone. (Sheet 2 removed)**

**My name is Leah and I now feel in control of my life (Sheet 1 removed)**

Substantial evidence shows that emotional, sexual, and physical abuse happens to women of every economic class, every culture, every racial background, every level of education, and every religion. Domestic violence is cross-denominational affecting Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox and unaffiliated Jewish homes.

Tragically, domestic violence is an epidemic. The Jewish community, which at one stage was immune to the levels of domestic violence in the gentile world, now faces the same levels, about 15-25%. Look around you, one in four women in an average congregation is experiencing or has experienced domestic violence. One in four Jewish families suffers. It is no longer the epidemic of the 'other.' It is our epidemic!

Domestic violence occurs in different forms, marriages of any length of time, teen dating, and same sex relationships. Most often, domestic violence occurs in heterosexual relationships where the woman is usually the victim. Today, I will use the most prevalent example of domestic violence, the woman as victim.

Abuse is about one partner exerting power and control over another. It is as subtle as an unkind word or as blatant as a smack across the face. It may begin with name-calling, harsh criticisms, fevered jealousy, then escalating into slaps, punches, choking, and possibly death. It affects children growing up in the home, even if they are not the intended targets. Without successful intervention, when children reach adulthood, they are likely to be involved in abuse as adults.

We do not need to go any further than this week's Torah portion to see a preliminary form of Domestic Violence. Our fictional Leah has an ancestor. In chapter 29:31, we read, "וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי־שִׂנְאוּתָהּ לְאָה" "God saw that Leah was hated." Jacob's lack of love left Leah feeling inadequate and therefore forced her to vie for his love and attention; even going so far as to find him a concubine. Even then, this Jewish family was striving for **בֵּית שְׁלוֹם**.

**בֵּית שְׁלוֹם** is a Jewish value that over thousands of years Jews have held in high regard. The antithesis of **בֵּית שְׁלוֹם** is Domestic Violence. Yet paradoxically, a yearning for **בֵּית שְׁלוֹם**, is why many battered Jewish women do not seek help.

Victims often feel a deep sense of shame and failure that they were unable to maintain **בֵּית שְׁלוֹם** and so they take responsibility for the abuse against them.

The myth that supports this is that **all** Jewish men are good husbands who provide well for their families and do not abuse substances, cheat, gamble, or hit their wives and children. This myth encourages the negative stereotype of a Jewish woman who is demanding, whining, overbearing, and a princess, which only serves to hide domestic violence even more. Who would believe the woman? The rabbis?

To some extent, the rabbis seem divided on Domestic Violence. On the one hand, the *Maharam*, Rabbi Meir of Rottenberg wrote in a responsum that “*one deserves greater punishment for striking his wife than for striking another person, for he is enjoined to respect her.*” (Even HaEzer, 298).

Maimonides, however, condones the use of physical abuse against wives. His opinion is “*A wife who refuses to perform any kind of work she is obligated to do may be compelled to perform it, even by scourging her with a rod*”; this is recorded in Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Nashim* (21:10). Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquieres, Ravad the III, a contemporary of Maimonides responds by saying, “*I have never heard of chastising women with rods.*”

Maimonides himself took a different view concerning forced intercourse. In terms of the sexual life of a couple, Judaism prohibits forced intercourse. In the Rambam’s *Mishnah Torah, Sefer Nashim* (15:17) he states “*he should not ...compel her to have intercourse with him against her will. Rather, he should do it only with her consent, accompanied by pleasant discourse and enjoyment.*” The Sanhedrin notes in 46a that the rabbis imposed punishments upon husbands who raped their wives.

Essentially, the vast majority of Jewish scholars do not endorse a husband's use of violence to control his wife, as they believe men as well as woman have an obligation to advance **שְׁלוֹם בַּיִת**. Therefore, it is our responsibility to do something, to act!

The next step is to ask ourselves as human beings 'what can we do?' 'What is our responsibility to our community?'

First, we must recognise the signs of Domestic Violence. It typically follows a three-stage cycle.

- a. A build up of tension that may include minor violence, verbal abuse, hitting or destroying objects, or giving the silent treatment.
- b. an explosion of violence, such as punching, kicking, choking, or assault with weapons.
- c. thirdly, A feeling of remorse, in which the abuser begs forgiveness and promises never to do it again. Usually he will be kind and considerate until the tension builds up again.

The second things we can do it to make sure we know the resources in our community to help victims of Domestic Violence. Please feel free to take some of the literature on this problem after services. (hold up literature)

And, thirdly, scholarship on Domestic violence states that the most important need for a victim is to feel safe. It is our responsibility to help establish programs in our synagogues, which provide security, programs that give victims the three things they need most; a safe house or environment, counseling and protection and counseling for children.

Our job as future leaders of the Jewish community is simple. We must protect the innocent. It is up to us to act, and to **uncover** the cycles of Domestic Violence. It up to us to do what is necessary to protect our communities, our families, and ourselves from this epidemic. To paraphrase Leviticus 19 “And let us not avert our eye and stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds.”

Boker Tov