

A Mother's Day Against Abuse ¹

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5770

I love Mother's Day. We make it a total family affair. My sisters come over, my nephews, my cousins will be there. Close friends come over. It is a terrific excuse to have people over to our house. There are always a few jokes at my expense about how the bbq looks more like a Fathers' Day menu than a menu that the mothers would have selected – but that is the cost of having me to the cooking.

I did some research on the history of Mother's Day. Actually, I just went to Wikipedia and this is what I found. According to Wiki:

In the Roman religion the Hilaria festival was held in honor of the mother goddess Cybele and it took place during mid-March. As the Roman Empire and Europe converted to Christianity, this celebration became part of the liturgical calendar as Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent to honor the Virgin Mary and the "mother church".

During the sixteenth century, people returned to their mother church for a service to be held on Laetare Sunday. This was either a large local church, or more often the nearest Cathedral. Anyone who did this was commonly said to have gone "a-mothering", although whether this preceded the term Mothering Sunday is unclear. In later times, Mothering Sunday became a day when domestic servants were

¹ Developed from a sermon by Rabbi Cindy Enger, Jewish Women International, and the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse

given a day off to visit their mothers and other family members. It was often the only time that whole families could gather together, since in other days they were prevented by conflicting working hours.

By the third decade of the twentieth century, the custom of keeping Mothering Sunday had tended to lapse in Europe. It was revived through the influence of American and Canadian soldiers serving abroad during World War II, who celebrated Mother's Day on the second Sunday in May. People from Ireland and the UK started celebrating Mother's Day again, but on the same day Mothering Sunday had been celebrated before it fell into disuse, the fourth Sunday in Lent.

Mothering Sunday remains in the calendar of some Canadian Anglican churches, particularly those with strong English connections.²

Mother's Day seems like such a perfect non-holiday holiday - greeting cards; bouquets of flowers; breakfast in bed; the works. And all of this is well deserved by mothers around the world.

But this week, I have been thinking about one mother in particular... beyond my own. I have been thinking about what this Mother's Day will be like for Sharon Donnelly. Sharon is the mother of Yeadley Love, the lacrosse player at University of Virginia who was killed by her boyfriend last Monday.³

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothering_Sunday

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/06/yeardley-love-memorial_n_565712.html

I imagine that Sharon was expecting a call from her daughter. Maybe they would have talked about her college graduation which was just 2 weeks away. Maybe the major lacrosse tournament she was about to play in. There are so many things that they might have spoken about – but now, this Mother’s Day, Sharon will be grieving.

Her daughter was the victim of domestic violence.

What is emerging are allegations of a quiet story of repeated abuse. While this tragedy took place not far from here at UVA, it should be felt even closer as we remember that the accused murderer went to school in our Bethesda community at Landon.

Domestic violence is not an abstraction. It is within our midst. As we prepare for Mothers’ Day, I want us to think about the real dangers of domestic abuse that place women at risk.

In a study published by the San Francisco Jewish Federation, they write:

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 occurs in Jewish families at about the same rate as it does in families of other religions - about 15-25%. Domestic violence is found in every kind of Jewish home: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and unaffiliated.

Domestic abuse in the Jewish context includes the elements found in domestic abuse anywhere. Abuse is about one partner exerting power and control over another. It can be as subtle as an unkind word or as blatant as a slap across the face. It is insidious, often beginning with name calling, jealousy, and criticisms, then escalating into slaps, punches, choking, and possibly death. (It can be controlling access to bank accounts, who the victim can talk to on the phone or see, or asserting control in other ways. Abuse is not about anger, it is about control and power.)

It affects children growing up in the home, even if they are not themselves the targets. Without successful intervention they may be especially likely to be involved in abuse as adults.

One important difference between Jewish women and others is that Jewish women take far longer to change their situations -- seven to fifteen years versus three to five years, according to one study. The reasons for this difference are many. Jewish women's pressures to stay with abusers include Judaism's primary emphasis on the family, the feeling that it is a central responsibility to maintain *shalom bayit*, and the fear of shame that could be brought on the family or the broader Jewish community by public knowledge of the abuse. In addition, Jews with money or strong social networks have access to more supportive resources than do women in general, and thus

ironically may take longer to reach the crisis points that can precipitate leaving.⁴

Roughly 1 in 4 Jewish women experience abuse. That is shocking. If we are going to build a community where true *shalom bayit* exists, peace in the home, we need to address this hidden problem. Our silence or our mistaken belief in an out-dated community myth that Jews do not abuse and are not victims has not kept women safe. But with awareness and with courage, we can help to save lives and bring about justice and healing. The challenge is not impossible and I believe there are tangible things we can do.

First, we can assist victims of domestic violence in establishing their safety. The synagogue must be a safe space where victims of abuse, both adult and children, can come. A way that we do this is to establish ourselves as an open and safe place. We learn about domestic violence, we learn about our local resources for 24 hour hotlines⁵ and shelters. And we need to make sure that those resources are available in easily accessible ways. I will be making sure appropriate material is on our web site and that they are available in other areas of the shul. The assistance of the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse – JCADA⁶, has been very important. JCADA is an important resource and support in combating this crime. J-C-A-D-A.org There are also resources for victims of domestic violence in Israel as well.

Second, we need to strengthen our relationships with local shelters.

Imagine, what would it look like if we were to periodically provide Shabbat

⁴ <http://sanfrancisco.ujcfedweb.org/page.aspx?id=12584>

⁵ Montgomery County 24 hour hotline number – (240) 777-4357

⁶ www.jcada.org

candles and challah to a local women's shelter or to at least let the staff know that we are here for their Jewish clients?

Thirdly, we make our community a safe space for victims to come forward when if we hear a story of abuse, we do not discount it but encourage the victim to get help. At the very least, you should encourage the victim to confide in the confidence of one of the clergy. If you have no idea what to say, you know now that you can encourage them to talk with Beth El's clergy.

Assisting victims of domestic violence is not enough though. In this context, often the abuser will also be Jewish. So let me be clear for everyone. Physical or emotional abuse is contrary to the core values of respect, love and caring captured in the phrase *betzelem elohim* – that we are all created in the image of God. Abuse is a wrong and, in the words of Leviticus (19:16), we can not stand idly by as the blood of our neighbor is spilled.

The physical, emotional and spiritual toll of victimization is far too great.

But our tradition teaches that the Gates of Repentance are always open (Deut Rabbah 2:12). With courage, commitment and appropriate treatment, an abuser might be able to change their behavior. But that can not happen if abuse continues. Domestic violence can not be tolerated.

It is about 11:45 now and I think I know where Sharon is right now.

Yeardley's funeral service is being held at this moment at the Cathedral in

Baltimore. Sharon should have been getting ready for Mother's Day but instead, she is living a nightmare. Due to domestic violence, she is burying her daughter.

I want everyone to hear this. Whether you are relatively new to intimate relationships as a teenager or you are a person of more years, you do not have to be a victim. Let this Mother's Day strengthen your resolve to move to a place of safety.

That way, when we greet each other with Shabbat Shalom, we can truly mean that this Shabbat will be a time of peace and safety for everyone.

Shabbat Shalom