

# Surviving Abuse

## By building awareness and advocacy, grassroots efforts help Jewish women find safety and healing.

By Rahel Musleah

Amy Robbins Ellison always believed she could fix anything. After all, she could unclog toilets and fix garbage disposals, build furniture, wire light fixtures, knit, play the cello and sing. As a cardiac anesthesiologist, she managed the anesthetic care of patients who had triple valve operations and hundreds of other procedures.

So when her husband became violent, she thought she could fix that too. "I knew from the beginning that he had a fairly volatile temper," says Ellison, 48. "In all my wisdom, I felt I'd be a stabilizing influence." As the violence escalated, he would shove her, drag her by the hair, page her incessantly at work, keep her awake all night haranguing her, and threaten to kill her if she left with their daughter, Hillary. She recalls one incident in which Hillary, small as a doll, stood between her parents with outstretched arms to prevent further hurt.

"It doesn't matter how smart I was. I got into a nightmarish situation," says Ellison. "The most amazing part is that even after my mother-in-law called the police following a terrible incident she had witnessed, I went home again." A friend finally put Ellison in touch with a lawyer, who arranged for a temporary restraining order. Seventeen months and \$200,000 later, the divorce came through.

Ellison's story has a happy ending: She moved from New York to Chicago and remarried in June 2001. And by breaking the silence from the bima of a synagogue five years ago, she has become a voice for other women who share her story. "I'm a survivor," she says proudly. "I don't feel like a victim. What people don't understand is that domestic violence not only exists, but that it crosses all boundaries."

## It's About Power and Control



Ten years ago, domestic violence in the Jewish community was shrouded in secrecy and denial. Today, although much remains to be done, dramatic strides have been made in eroding the myth that "it can't happen here." Back then, "nobody was naming the problem as abuse," says Wendy Lipshutz, program director of Shalom Bayit, a child abuse and family violence prevention program sponsored by Jewish Family and Career Services in Atlanta. "It was about marriage or communication. That's not what abuse is about. It's about power and control."

Despite the inherent tragedy of domestic violence, the story it tells is far from unremittingly bleak. Enfolded in its myriad aspects are stories of women, of extraordinary courage—some who brave their fears and leave; others who continue to endure its daily terrors—and of a grassroots effort to establish resources for safety, healing and awareness. Today there are more than 60 programs in the United States providing service to Jewish victims of domestic abuse.

Although no national statistics chart the prevalence of domestic violence in the Jewish community, experts agree that it mirrors that of the general community. About one in five women will experience physical abuse in her lifetime; many more experience emotional, psychological, verbal, sexual and financial abuse. No community is immune: secular or ultra-Orthodox, wealthy or poor, Russian or Sephardic, educated or not. Nor is there a typical profile: "What makes her at risk is that she's a woman," says Lipshutz.

Domestic violence is "an equal-opportunity destroyer," agrees Hedvah Campeas-Cohen, former director of Shalva (tranquility), an organization in Chicago helping abused Jewish women and their families, who is currently in private practice. Although women often think they are alone in experiencing abuse, in group therapy they find out that is far from the truth. "As one woman said, 'He has a different name, he has a different face—but we are all married to the same man,'" says Campeas-Cohen. "It's empowering for women to realize they are not the cause of the problem."

Nor is domestic violence restricted to the lower classes, says Dr. Susan Weitzman, author of *Not to People Like Us: Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages* (Basic Books, 2000). "Highly educated and upper-income women rarely report abuse and remain trapped by their own silence," she notes on her website, [www.nottopeoplelikeus.com](http://www.nottopeoplelikeus.com). Rather than the stereotypically helpless female, the abused woman often is self-sufficient, resourceful and used to "making things

happen."



Like Amy Ellison, some survivors are outing the problem. For Elaine Weiss, a conversation in the beauty parlor nine years ago did the trick. "The woman next to me was discussing the O. J. Simpson case. She said, 'I have no patience for women like Nicole. Why don't they just leave?' I was at a loss for words. I couldn't explain why I had stayed in my marriage for eight and a half years. That was the beginning of my career as a domestic violence advocate." Weiss's second book, *The Family and Friends Guide to Domestic Violence* (Volcano Press), is due out this spring, following the success of her first book, *Surviving Domestic Violence: Voices of Women Who Broke Free* (Agreka Books). "What is needed now," she says, "is outrage."

## Piercing the Silence

Often, only specialists in the field recognize that homicide is the ultimate and most tragic outcome of domestic violence. Jewish communities in Chicago, Brooklyn and Springfield, Ill., were shocked at recent cases in which domestic violence turned deadly.

Despite such tragedies, abused women and their advocates continue to report high levels of disbelief that abuse occurs in the Jewish community. "I've had difficulty getting something organized in my 900-family Reform synagogue," notes Ellison. "When the sisterhood sponsored a big health fair, I asked if I could discuss domestic violence. The program coordinator answered, 'I had cancer and I don't go around telling people.' I said, 'I was beaten up for 10 years and I feel compelled to talk about it.' She said, 'If we talk about it, people will think there's a problem.' I said, 'That's the point.'" Even when people recognize that abuse occurs, they often relegate it to another segment of the community: if they are Orthodox, it happens among the Reform; if they are Reform, it happens among the Orthodox.



Rabbis serve a critical role in raising awareness, says Rabbi Cindy Enger, director of the Jewish Program at Seattle's Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, a national interreligious organization that, among its many programs, trains clergy and rabbinical students. "The rabbi can be a resource for creating spaces of safety and healing, or can be a roadblock in the process," says Enger, a lawyer who, before her ordination, represented children in abuse and neglect cases. "Whenever a rabbi gives a sermon on domestic violence, it goes a long way to break the silence surrounding the fact that our families are not perfect."

Many congregations and Jewish organizations are building alliances with shelters, creating tzedakah projects around domestic violence, distributing handouts, and posting phone numbers in bathrooms. "We've done much to break the silence," Enger says. "Now we are also beginning to address the issue of accountability: What is the community's responsibility in holding batterers accountable? We won't get at the root of the problem until the community says the behavior is not OK."

Kehillah Community Synagogue in Berkeley, Calif., has taken on the issue by developing policy guidelines that restrict known abusers from receiving synagogue honors, including being called to the Torah or taking a leadership role in a service or on a committee.

## **Slow to Leave**

Tapping into the resources of the Jewish community can be vital for abused women, says Nancy Aiken, director of CHANA, the Counseling, Helpline and Aid Network in Baltimore. CHANA has forged a comprehensive program that incorporates individual and group counseling, employment, mental health and substance abuse referrals, financial assistance, a kosher food pantry and community education. "Even if they have to go to different Jewish agencies, the women still feel it's their community responding," Aiken says. With a two-room kosher shelter available, women don't have to choose between ensuring their safety and keeping Jewish law.

Many Jewish domestic violence groups don't have their own shelters; instead, they train staff at secular shelters to be sensitive to Shabbat, kashrut and other Jewish issues. Shalva began a Jewish shelter when it was established 16 years ago, but switched to counseling services when the organization found that by and large, "Jewish women don't leave," says Campeas-Cohen.

Despite a lack of supporting data, most advocates say Jewish women stay in abusive relationships longer than their non-Jewish counterparts. "It has been a strong Jewish belief that the family has to stay together no matter what," says Lipshutz. "That's changing, but it's pretty ingrained."

Laura Kaufman, executive director of the Jewish Women's Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago and former executive director of a rape crisis center, disputes that claim. "Everyone stays too long," she says. "Staying longer may be more indicative of economic status than ethnicity. Jewish women are often in the middle class or above, so their means are connected to the batterer. They are frightened they won't make it financially. It's ironic that if a woman is already poor, she may feel she has less to lose and less incentive to stay."

While most of the programs receive some funding from the Jewish community, Campeas-Cohen warns of "a thimbleful of resources in an oceanful of needs. This is not on the central agenda of the Jewish community and it should be." The good news is that the explosion in the number of Jewish women's foundations has made more money available, says Kaufman.

The Jewish Women's Foundation of Chicago, for instance, gave away \$132,000 in 2002; \$37,000, or 28 percent, went to domestic violence programs. These included a needs assessment Jewish Women International (JWI) will undertake in 2003; Shalva; the Response Center, a Jewish Federation agency that offers safe dating workshops for teens and sexual assault counseling; and agencies in Israel. But, Kaufman notes, "Jewish women's foundations will never by themselves provide enough dollars to address this issue. Other funders have to step in: federations, individual donors, family foundations."

Each segment of the Jewish community has different needs, agrees Henna White, community liaison for the Brooklyn District Attorney's office, which employs a social worker who deals solely with the Jewish community. Within the Orthodox community, many men refuse to grant their wives a get—a Jewish divorce. Project Eden, a new federally funded program in the DA's office, will train wigmakers, mikvah ladies, nail salon employees and others in whom Orthodox women may confide. The Russian community faces added problems, since domestic abuse is not a crime in Russia. (To learn about materials that JWI has developed for abused women in the Russian Jewish community, turn to JWI in Focus in this issue.)

## **More Than a Woman's Issue**

Orders of protection provide a measure of security for battered women. Many Jewish women use orders issued through family court as a first step, says White. "It's a civil rather than a criminal procedure," she explains. "If the husband violates that, the woman can call the police and get him arrested."

White has also created a batterers' group for Jewish men called Brairot (Choices). Early prevention ranks high as a goal of domestic violence outreach. At Shalva, Project Peers and Project Heart teach middle school, high school and college students about healthy relationships,

peer abuse and dating. More funding and research are necessary to explore how to transmit the message to boys, says Campeas-Cohen. For domestic violence to stop being seen as a women's issue, the community must realize that men too are diminished by violence, she says.

"Much of the root of domestic violence lies in sex-role stereotypes," says Lipshutz. "Women are taught to be nurturers. Men learn that they should be in control. It's OK for both to express their emotions, for both to be strong." Kaufman, the mother of a four-year-old daughter, is "alarmed that in 2003, girls don't think it's OK to say no at the same time as they say, 'I can be president someday.' That can lead to willingness, as an adult, to put up with abusive relationships."

As Jewish communities work toward preventing domestic violence and ending the shame surrounding it, they can only hope to mirror Amy Ellison's testimony of survival: "I'm the happiest I've ever been," she says, "because now I have real peace."

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Survivors of abuse often live a life plagued with scarcity. We were taught at a young age that we weren't enough, there wasn't enough and life would not provide enough for us in the future. When we suffer financial abuse or trafficking, things are often worse. We can believe we have a finite worth, we are a commodity, and we have already expended that worth. All these beliefs leave very little hope for an abundant future. My relationship with money has been a struggle for my entire life. Surviving abuse-healing through words. The cycle of domestic abuse can be broken. I have broken that cycle in my life and am finding my beautiful life again. Every day is a gift I see with unclouded eyes...they are beautiful, bright eyes. See more of The Foundation for Survivors of Abuse on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of The Foundation for Survivors of Abuse on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? NAASCA-National Association Adult Survivors of Child Abuse. Nonprofit Organization. Say It, Survivor. Surviving after abuse. When the abuse is finally over " you have arranged all the practical things like housing, money, schools for the children, and you feel reasonably sure that your abuser has stopped harassing you " you may be expecting to feel great. But that is unlikely to happen straight away. Recovering from abuse by someone who was close to you is a long process, and the damage may stay with you and your children for years. Once you are away from the abuse, and it is safe to feel again, you may have a sense of anti-climax. After experiencing repeated verbal and physical abuse, A exhibited the symptoms of accumulated trauma -- so much so that some parts of his body turned numb. Multiple visits to psychiatrists, psychologists and physical therapists didn't help much. "The fight-flight-freeze response is the body's mechanism for surviving and after the freeze stage, it stores trauma in our body. Somatic experiencing is a therapy that aims to relieve trauma.