

THE ROCKLAND JEWISH REPORTER

Published by the Jewish Federation of Rockland County ☐ March 1999 – Adar/Nisan 5759 – Vol. 8 No. 7

Abuse – Why does it happen?

By Pam Cohen

Why do people abuse others? The question is not as easy as it seems. One is inclined to place the onus solely on the abuser “he comes from a family that was abusive,” or “he has psychological wounds that need therapy.”

Yes, this is part of the answer. But the overall cultural ethos also contributes immensely to the problem.

When men abuse, it is common for them to place responsibility for their actions outside of themselves. The Catholic Social Services in Michigan, which runs a program called Alternative to Domestic Aggression, has published a list of “obfuscation’s batterers involved in our intervention program have used to describe their behavior.” Some of them include:

- “My anger controlled me.”
- “We had a domestic argument.”
- “I was born with aggressiveness.”
- “I didn’t engage my brain before my mouth.”
- “I was diffusing her upset and irrational behavior.”
- “I have a high history of violence in my life.”
- “It’s hereditary.”
- “It’s the only thing I know how to do.”
- “My ability to reason was swept away.”
- “I don’t have the skills.”
- “You don’t know my wife.”
- “The stick hit her.”

These excuses raise important issues. One is the now well-known fact that those who abuse have a family history of domestic violence. The other is that abusers often play dual roles - behaving impeccably to the outside world but acting out aggressively toward their wives and/or children behind closed doors.

Many also blame drugs, alcohol or something or someone else for their behavior. They minimize the violence and claim loss of control. It is interesting, too, that others acknowledge their inability to resolve differences in a constructive way. For them, violence becomes the only form of problem solving.

Approaches to abuse vary. Some community agencies take the view that abuse is pathology. Hence, the individual needs treatment to change his behavior. Other agencies believe that a fundamental shift away from the all-pervasive cultural belief in male privilege has to take place in order for domestic abuse to stop.

The latter belief is the bottom line perspective of the International Battered Women’s Movement. Locally, it is the motivating factor behind the work of the VCS Community Change Project (CCP) in New City, NY. One of the main functions of the CCP is to engage legislators and other community leaders in an ongoing (and often very persuasive) conversation about ways to end domestic violence effectively.

Phyllis B. Frank, founder and director of the VCS Community Change Project since 1978, has developed Domestic Violence Classes for Men, a unique project designed “to offer the criminal justice courts one consequence, out of several available to them, to use to hold men accountable who have committed acts of abuse against their partners - when incarceration would be too serious a response given the nature of the crime.”

Men are ordered by the court to attend 1½-hour classes, once a week, for minimally six months and, most often, for a year. They are also required to pay a fee for attending the classes (fees are worked out on a sliding scale according to economic ability). It is the responsibility of the VCS Community Change Project to let the courts know if the man has complied with class requirements, such as arriving on time, paying his fees and behaving in class according to set standards of behavior.

“If he does that for the required length of time, we let the court know he has complied with the order, and that is considered to be a successful outcome. Historically, men have rarely been held responsible for committing a crime of this nature against women,” explains Frank. “It is successful because the court has taken the crime, infraction or violation seriously, and the perpetrator of that act has complied with the consequences.”

Jim McDowell, senior instructor at the program, says. “In running these domestic violence classes, we must be very clear about our goals. “Our purpose is not to change the individual man. He hears comprehensive information about domestic violence, and what he takes away with him is his own business. This course does not deal with his particular story or why he was arrested.”

He continues, “Men know how to control themselves with their bosses, the policeman that stops to give them a ticket, etc. It is only with their wives or partners that they are routinely this abusive. When a man asks me, “How can I manage my anger?” I say, “You already know how to manage it. You manage it very well with everyone else.”

Jon Cohen, Assistant Director of the CCP and another senior instructor, elaborates: “Compliance with the requirements in no way suggest that the man has stopped being abusive. The responsibility of ending domestic violence does not rest on the shoulders of one project. It is the job of the entire community to make domestic violence intolerable.”

Frank’s analogy is helpful too: “When I get caught speeding, if I do everything the court requires, the case is closed and the outcome is considered successful. Do they ask whether I am going to speed

again? They don't. Do they hope I won't speed again? Sure they do."

The Project has a diverse group of instructors who teach material under the basic heading: "How to end domestic violence in the US." Different themes are tackled in the classes including: What is domestic violence and what are the solutions to it?

"We teach the men who come to us the very same material we teach to probation officers, psychiatrists, mental health professionals, religious leaders and lay audiences. We're bringing people up to date on material pretty much otherwise not available, because it has developed in the last 20 to 25 years out of the battered women's movement," explains Frank.

If the man does not fulfill his obligations, the court has a wide range of possible responses. It has the right, in some instances, to incarcerate, to reorder the man back into the class, to extend probation or to levy more penalties, depending on each individual case.

The message behind all this is that the New York criminal justice system takes the crime of domestic battery seriously and sends out the word that is intolerable and legally unacceptable behavior.

This was not always the case. It is only since 1979 that New York State laws have recognized that domestic violence is a crime that should be regarded as any act of physical violence. A mental leap has had to take place - not only in the legal community, but in the public mind - from the pervasive belief that police (and the legal system in general) should not interfere in domestic arguments, to acknowledgement that women deserve protection by the law as much as anyone else, whether they are wives or girlfriends or simply dating someone.

Frank compares this to the case of drunk driving: "It's not just a matter of having good laws; it's bigger than that. Drunkenness used to be considered funny in the US and driving while under the influence of alcohol was not taken very seriously. People, if stopped by police at all at that time, were taken for coffee or taken home. Police might wink and say, 'Cmon get some sleep' and take the unwitting culprit back to the precinct to let him sleep it off."

Frank points out that not only have the laws changed dramatically in this regard, but there has been a fundamental change in the cultural belief system.

Where does domestic violence fit into the picture? Frank who helped to establish the New York State Coalition Against domestic violence in 1979, remembers the first meeting held on the subject. "All of the police departments in this County at that time were represented. Most were making jokes, anti-women jokes. That would never happen today - in front of us - or when we are not present! Times and attitudes have changed what is generally acceptable discourse. Today one of the best champions against domestic violence in the County of Rockland is Police Chief Kevin Nulty of the Orangetown Police Department."

Historically, there has been a common myth that domestic violence rarely occurs in the Jewish Community. Yet, like every other community, there is a constant presence of Jewish men who are ordered to attend classes at the CCP.

McDowell explains how the center views the men who take their classes. "There is no way to put a category around men who batter. You cannot say it is those men over there. You cannot give a list of traits or clues that show that this man is a batterer. One of the common myths is that batterers are this tiny subset of men who are a bunch of crazy, monstrous hoodlums."

Jon Cohen observes, "Maybe men who batter are acting normative male behavior and, if we define anything as crazy, it would be the culture that programs men to believe that they have the right to control women. These are our brothers, fathers, cousins and uncles. They are not monstrous - they might have committed monstrous acts but in fact they're doing what they were taught to do from the time they were babies. We do place the onus on individual men to the extent that every man is totally responsible for his behavior. But saying this does not imply individual psychopathology. It's normal male behavior that is part of our social problem."

According to the Resource Guide for Rabbis on Domestic Violence, there are many Jewish sources, which prohibit the use of violence, both physical and verbal, against one's wife. An article that appears in the Guide by Conservative Rabbi Elliott N. Dorff, notes that, although the sources are not as unified as we would wish against "wife beating" there have been through the ages strong condemnations of the use of physical violence against one's wife.

"The strongest condemnation of wife-beating is represented in the opinion of Rabbi Simhah Ben Shmuel of Vitri (author of the Mahzor vitri, died 1105), who sees wife beatings as more serious an offense than assaulting any other person because a husband takes on a special obligation to honor his wife in the marriage contract. Rabbi Simhah decrees penalties for wife-beating which are considerably more severe than the remedies for general assault, including excommunication, flogging and "one should even cut off his hand if he is accustomed to it (wife beating)."

Rabbi Dorff also points out that "The Mishnah and Talmud went very far to protect the rights of the women, but, after all is said and done, the very language for betrothal is that a man 'acquires' (konech) his wife. We no longer think of marriage in this way, and so husbands have no more right to discipline their wives than wives have to discipline their husbands." He is clear that any past sources that disagree with this "should be set aside as no longer applicable, and wife-beating must be regarded as prohibite by Jewish law."

Just as interesting are the Jewish sources that might be understood to instruct a man not to abuse his wife verbally. It is noted that verbal abuse "violates the relationship between the individual and G-d." Rabbi Dorff states that there is a more general category "which is framed in a combination of legal and theological terms. That category is 'ona'at devarim,' oppression by means of words. The Talmud points out that verbal abuse is more serious an offense than financial deception. The latter, after all, affects one's money, while the former affects one's person."

Similarly, the Talmud says that a man's wife is given to him so that he might realize life's plan together with her; she is not the man's to vex or grieve. "Vex her not, for G-d notes her tears." Indeed, "He who loves his wife as himself and honors her more than himself is granted the Scriptural promise, 'you shall know that your tent is in peace.'"

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