

# Shalom Bayit: The Myth of Peace in the Jewish Home

## ABUSE HAS ALWAYS EXISTED THROUGHOUT JEWISH HISTORY

How prevalent has abuse been in Jewish communities? Widespread enough that biblical, talmudic, and rabbinic scholars have discussed it in their writings of law and custom. Rabbis respond to both specific and hypothetical cases of wife abuse.

A clear biblical example appears in the 55th Psalm: “My heart is convulsed within me; terrors of death assail me...I said, O that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and find rest...It is not an enemy who reviles me--I could bear that; it is not my foe who vaunts himself against me--I could hide from him; but it is you, my equal, my companion, my friend;...his talk was smoother than butter, yet his mind was on war; his words were more soothing than oil, yet they were drawn swords.”

## DENIAL FACTORS

### 1. *Stereotypes:*

- Domestic violence, child abuse, incest, addictions, etc. don't happen in the Jewish community
- Jewish women are strong, pushy, in-charge, in control
- Jewish families are perfect; Jewish men make the best husbands

### 2. *Protecting the community from attack:*

- Fear that community won't survive
- Logical reactions against anti-Semitism
- Ethic of not airing our “dirty laundry”
- Importance of maintaining close-knit, supportive family units---or the *image* of these things

### 3. *Myth of Shalom Bayit:*

- Jewish ethic of “peace in the home” was once a beautiful tradition/standard to strive for.
- Stereotypes and community insulation result in the transformation of a positive image into a mandate. That mandate becomes the responsibility of women to maintain in their families.
- Logical conclusion: If Jews live by the ethic of Shalom Bayit, then violence never occurs.

## HOW DENIAL IMPACTS BATTERED WOMEN

### 1. *Within the Jewish community:*

- Women who come forward with stories of abuse are not believed; moreover, **THEY ARE SILENCED**;
- Rabbis and other leaders have tended to tell women to “go home and make *shalom bayit*,” in other words, if she is being abused, she must be doing something wrong and should go home & fix it;
- It is often not safe for Jewish women to seek help within close-knit Jewish circles unless there is unequivocal support, clear understanding of the danger levels, and guarantees of protection.

### 2. *Outside the Jewish community:*

- Who would believe that a Jewish woman could be abused? Myths of strong Jewish woman and of perfect Jewish families prevent non-Jews from believing/identifying severity of abuse;
- Denial has prevented service providers from seeking training on how to work with Jewish women or be accessible to Jewish women; therefore, many programs do not meet their needs or even reach out to battered women who are Jewish.

**Jewish battered women seeking help are therefore often RE-VICTIMIZED and blamed once again for the abuse they have endured.**

## What do Jewish text, law, and tradition say about domestic abuse?

Jewish text and law do not exist in a vacuum. Every community, in every century of Jewish life, creates its own social norms based on their understanding of Jewish text and influenced by the surrounding cultures.

### MESSAGES THAT PERPETUATE ABUSE

- Denial that abuse exists in our communities
- Interpretation of Bible that man will rule over woman
- Community pressure to keep the family together
- Several rabbinic responsa that allowed physical attacks against women under certain circumstances:
  - >Yehudai Gaon (8th c; Pumbedita): “A wife should never raise her voice against her husband, but should remain silent even if he beats her--as chaste women do.”
  - >RaMBaM (12th c.): “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.” (Maimonides, *Isshut* 21:10). (Some scholars feel that this refers to the rabbinic court, not the husband; but many have interpreted his words as permitting ‘corporal punishment’ of a wife by her husband.)
  - >Solomon Luria (16th c): “A husband may strike his wife if she transgresses the law...He can only beat her if she doesn’t heed his warning.” (*Yam Shel Shlomo* on Baba Kama, 20b#9)
  - >Rabbi Moses Isserles (16th c): “A man who strikes his wife commits a sin, just as if he were to strike anyone else. If he does this often, the court may punish him, excommunicate him...But if she is the cause of it...then he is permitted to beat her.” (*Darkei Moshe*)

### MESSAGES THAT CONDEMN ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR

- Jewish ethics of social justice, *tikkun olam*, “Whoever destroys a single soul is as though they had destroyed an entire world” (*Sanhedrin* 37a)
- “Thou shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” (Lev 19:16). Domestic violence must be confronted; it is not a private “family matter” but rather a community issue. This is our obligation to not remain silent when others are in danger.
- “We are all created in the image of God” (Genesis). To strike another human being is to desecrate the image of God--not recognizing the divine in that person or in yourself. If you willfully strike a human being, you strike at an image/representation of God.
- True meaning of *Shalom Bayit* (peace in the home).
- Judaism condemns all sexual abuse, and in fact says a Jewish man must pleasure his wife before himself!
- *Ona’at devarim* is the oppression by means of words. This is a recognition of how devastating verbal abuse can be. “He who publicly shames his fellow is as though he shed blood...” (Bava Metzia 58b-59a). This recognizes that emotional abuse is a form of violence.
- Many rabbinic codes of law condemned family violence:
  - >Rabbi Meir of Rotenberg (13<sup>th</sup> c): “A Jew must honor his wife more than he honors himself. If one strikes one’s wife, one should be punished more severely than for striking another person. For one is enjoined to honor one’s wife, but is not enjoined to honor the other person.” (*Even haEzer* 297)
  - >Talmud (B. *Gittin* 6b-7a): “If a man terrorizes his household, he will eventually commit three sins: unchastity, blood shedding, and desecration of the Sabbath.”
  - >Talmud (B. *Eruvin* 100b) “A man is forbidden to force his wife to have sex...”
  - >Rabbi Israel of Krems (15<sup>th</sup> c): “A man is forbidden to beat his wife, and is moreover liable for any injury caused by him. If he is in the habit of beating her continually or insulting her in public, he should be forced to divorce her...”