

Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence

By: Sheiny New

The Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence

The Orthodox assumes it happens amongst the Reform. The Reform assumes it happens amongst the Orthodox. The Conservative look in both directions. The young blame the old saying, “This is the way they were raised. They don’t know any better.” The old shake their heads at the young. Those who live in the city say it happens in the suburbs where people lead lives of desperation and those living in the suburbs say it happens in the ugly city. Middle and upper income people say it happens amongst the poor. No one says it happens amongst the wealthy- but it does. Who better to have the power and privacy to abuse? The truth is that all of us who are pointing fingers at other groups are right- it does happen there. But, so are those pointing at us. *Sherry Dimarsky, Family Violence expert and attorney, Oct. 1994*

The Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence was established 15 years ago in Melbourne, Australia. This group of dedicated and committed volunteers worked long hours to put Family Violence on the communal agenda. When we first started, skepticism was the initial reaction of anyone we encountered, “Surely Family Violence does not exist within the Jewish community!” Disbelief that abuse and violence could be taking place behind the picture perfect image of the often envied icon “the nice Jewish family.” After all, every one knows that Jewish men make the best husbands! But it does happen. Just ask Hatzollah- the Jewish Medical Emergency Response Team. They’ll tell you about being called back time and time again to the home of the woman who burns herself with a hot iron – on her back. Or the mother who cannot explain how she keeps falling down the same flight of stairs. But over the years we have chipped away at the doubt by organizing forums on Family Violence for the wider community, by taking creative programs into our schools and reinforcing with our teen-agers that we **do**

not shove out love. We have worked closely with the Rabbinite, Jewish Care (The Jewish Service Provider), the schools, doctors and psychologists and slowly, very slowly this group of dedicated volunteers has been able to - if not end the denial then certainly reduce the stigma of DV so that a woman or man who finds themselves in an abusive relationship should not be too filled with shame to seek help. Because if the perception is that no Jewish men hit their wives (I refer to the man doing the hitting because although it **does** happen in the reverse MOST crimes of abuse are perpetuated by men) the victim of abuse will ask herself, "What is wrong with me? What did I do to create this nightmare? Obviously it is my fault." Now, as a community now we tell her, it is not your fault. You haven't done *anything* wrong. It is never OK for a spouse to raise a hand against the person they have sworn to love and protect, nor is he permitted to insult, denigrate or intimidate her. We can reassure her that she is not alone. It happens in our community, and with appropriate assistance things can and have changed for the better.

But there is another subject that is so ugly and so insidious that it is unthinkable. To acknowledge its existence makes us question all that we hold precious. It shakes our identity as "a light unto nations" to the core. It makes us doubt the love of a parent to its child, the adoring gaze of a youngster into the eyes of its Bubba and Zaida. It changes how we perceive aunts, uncles and cousins coming for Seder night. Suddenly, the extended network of family and friends takes on a whole new dimension. Then of course, there is our teacher, mentor and spiritual guide, our Rabbi. Our family, close friends and spiritual leaders; these are the people we love and even more significantly these are the people we trust. They make up our universe and give us our sense of self worth. They give our lives flavor, texture and color. But what happens when the flavor is acid, the texture feels like shards of broken glass and the color is black? Unthinkable.

During her recent visit to Melbourne, Debbie Gross, the founder and director of the Crisis Centre for Women in Jerusalem stated that Family Violence is a very serious issue but child sexual assault is an epidemic. Is she for real?

If child sexual assault is an epidemic why do we hear so little about it? Why is there so little public awareness of the issue? And why has it taken this long for us to finally start talking about it?

We hear so little about it for many reasons but primarily because we don't want to *believe* it, and that is what victims come to understand very quickly, and what perpetrators are counting on. The 1995 Child Maltreatment Report states that "over 80 percent of abuse where physical contact is made is perpetrated by either family members or people in the community who are trusted by the family." Studies show that victims of assault who have the courage to come forward are either disbelieved and accused of lying to stir up trouble or hushed up not to bring shame on the family's good name. After all, what good would it do anyway? Victims are afraid to speak up because they know that *they* may be ostracized rather than the perpetrator. In the frum (religious) world the match making system is a very real part of day to day life. "Is it a nice family?" comes before specific inquiries about the young man or young lady in question. Violence, abuse and molestation do not a nice family make.

"To be molested as a child makes you different. Suddenly, you are "outside" yourself and those around you. Nothing is the same. You are not the person you were the second before it began. To be compelled to keep this secret widens the gap between you and everyone and everything else.

These are the words of author, survivor and therapist Rachel Lev. She continues:

“To be a Jewish child makes you different. Already “outside” the dominant culture we are taught the importance of not drawing attention to our “differences” not to bring shame or danger to our families or community. Whether molested or not, the message is clear: It is not safe to be noticed too much. We learn, often indirectly, a responsibility to reflect positively upon our people. We are taught to respect our people, teachers, rabbis, and elders. But what are we to do when one of them is molesting us? If we start to tell, who will listen? Without compassionate listeners to believe us and help us, the gap between us and other widens. For a Jewish child to be molested adds to any feeling of being alone. Our loneliness is often profound.”

What about the young boy or girl looking for added spiritual meaning in his or her life? What happens when she enrolls for shiurim with the charismatic Rabbi and youth director who is adored by all students on campus and he makes inappropriate advances towards her? Or worse. Can she take him on? It becomes her word against his. In the past, the whitewashing defense of prominent Rabbis has sounded something like this:

“Isn’t she that troubled kid who was *always* attention seeking? It was probably *her* fault! It is our responsibility to ensure that the institution’s good name is not sullied. And for heaven sake, what happens if the newspapers catch wind of this! What a scandal! What a Chilul Hashem, What a transgression of God’s name. It is best for everyone if we hush it up quickly.”

Tragically, very often nothing is done and the offender is free to continue to commit these crimes against children and teen-agers. Sometimes they are spirited out of the community into another unsuspecting one with no warning of what he is capable of and is once again free to continue molesting. It has actually been said that, “We can’t ruin his reputation. Who will provide for his family? Besides, if we disclose our suspicions aren’t we

guilty of speaking Lashon Hora?” And so a conspiracy of silence descends.

In the Chassidic world we say to parents, “Yes, it is a spiritually purifying experience for your sons to routinely go to mikvah but did you stop to think that perhaps not every other attendee is there for Chassidische reasons? In all fairness, your response might be a horrified “No!” but be warned [informed] that 1/3 of inappropriate advances to boys are made at the Mikvah. We want to believe that everyone lives by the same moral code that we do and therefore we have denied for too long that sometimes [even] Jews can do terrible things to each other.

As Jews we are always conscious of the reality that we are tolerated guests in our countries of residence. Anti Semitism rears its ugly head just often enough for us never to be able to fully ignore its presence. Therefore we want to be able to say don’t look here, we are different, we are better. But, as Lev so poignantly asks, “What could be more anti-Semitic then letting Jewish children be destroyed by their families or communities?” So we deny that children are molested in our communities because it protects us from having to figure out how to fix it. We can’t solve what we don’t know exists.

Lev says, as a survivor she understands why the community denies. It is a defense against pain. “She says, Victims deny. Survivors deny. Witnesses of abuse deny. Family members deny. Perpetrators deny. Helpers deny. Friends deny. And anybody I missed denies.

Looking away is the greatest gift we can offer child molesters. Therapist Bob Gluck states, “In the 10 years of counseling abusive men, I learned that the single most powerful factor contributing to Family Violence is the ability to get away with it.” (Lev, R., p31)

After being so betrayed twice, first by the trauma of the assault itself followed by reactions ranging from disbelief to minimizing the experience when reaching out for help, a molested child's self esteem is so decimated they start to believe they are not worthy. Not worthy of assistance, not worthy of a normal life, sometimes not worthy of life, full stop.

But they are worthy and it is our responsibility to remind them. Each and every one of us is created in the image of G-d and we carry the Divine within us. If a crime is inflicted on our body it in no way diminishes our worth it only diminishes the humanity of the abuser. Although we recoil from him in horror, we may not write the offender off as intrinsically evil-what he has done is evil but all too often it is because evil has been done to him. We tell mothers who find themselves in abusive relationships that although they think they are doing the right thing for their children by staying in the marriage, "After all the children need a father", they are almost guaranteeing that their sons will become abusive husbands, that their daughters will look for abusive partners. Many abusers lash out because they themselves have been wounded and carry terrifying scars. Abuse is very much a cycle that will continue, unless deliberately interrupted by a process of healing. There must be a process of healing, *first* for a victim and *then* for an abuser.

Debbie Gross told us about a program she coordinated in Israel just a short time ago. She had been approached by a few women of a community who felt it would be wise to train themselves about the realities of Family Violence and child sexual assault. They were hoping it would be "*refua lifnay hamaka*" roughly translated as "providing the cure before the disease strikes." Five women were trained by Debbie herself and she admitted to us that she couldn't help wondering why they were putting so much energy into this community which had never really shown any indication of either problem.

Yet, within weeks, a Mom was having a chat to one of the five women and relayed something her son had mentioned to her during bath-time, which sounded a bit worrying. As you have already figured out with just a little bit of gentle questioning it came to light that 70 little boys had been molested by a very popular kindergarten aid over a number of years. Counselors were brought in and these young boys are going to get the help they need to develop into healthy young men capable of healthy relationships. If this awareness program hadn't been initiated by these mothers and the children wouldn't have received appropriate support, not even including any additional victims the offender would have continued to have had access to, statistically each one of those could have gone on to molest other children. Seventy boys – you do the math.

Where and how can healing begin?

What is our responsibility as a community? How can *we* make sure it doesn't happen?

To be a community, to be a parent, to be a mentch means that it is our responsibility to make sure our children are safe. We must think about the unthinkable, talk about it and know about it so that we can prevent it. Silence and denial are not going to protect our children.

The Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence has been at the forefront of community education and awareness of the realities of Family Violence and sexual assault in the Jewish Community for over 15 years. Integral to the multi faceted approach of the JTAFV is the culturally sensitive response to victims of abuse, working to give them the courage and tools to rebuild shattered lives, as well as the facilitation of innovative and creative programs working towards the prevention of abuse and violence for all ages.

Our projects have included:

- A. Training programs for communal leaders, rabbonim, rebbetzins, principals, teachers and medical health care providers about the realities of child physical assault and how to provide a proper and sensitive response. If a victim does not get the support that they so desperately need from one of their own, chances are they will look outside the Jewish community and may never recover from their feelings of rejection.

- B. Age appropriate sessions for children in schools incorporating good touch/bad touch, good secrets/bad secrets (no long term secret from a parent is a “good” secret), respect, healthy relationships, and who to contact for help if necessary.

The launch of the “The Jewish Taskforce Support Line” is a venture of which we are very proud, as we believe it is of vital importance to address the needs of Jewish victims of Family Violence and sexual assault.

The Jewish Taskforce Support Line is a safe and confidential service, which allows a vulnerable member of our community the opportunity to reach out for help and understanding without the fear of repercussions. Too often victims of Family Violence are either afraid or ashamed to admit their “terrible secret” to people they know. ***“Anonymity allows them to reach out for help when under other circumstances they would not do so.”*** *Debbie Gross, Founder and Director of the Crisis Centre for Women in Jerusalem.* The intention of the phone line is to [eventually] empower callers to find solutions to their problems thus reducing the prevalence of Family Violence and working to end the cycle of violence and sexual assault.

Unfortunately, no community is immune to violence and abuse and it has been the experience of the JTAFV that open, honest discussion and community education is the most efficient and successful means with which to reduce the stigma of abuse for

victims, and empower our children with the ability to protect themselves from predators. Ultimately, this leads to happy, healthy relationships and homes.

The Jewish Taskforce Support Line 9523-2100.