

Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence by Sheiny New

The Orthodox assume it happens amongst the Reform. The Reform assume 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, domestic violence expert and attorney, Oct. 1994

(Lev,R.,p25)

The Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence was established 10 years ago in Melbourne, Australia. This group of dedicated and committed volunteers worked long hours to put Domestic Violence on the communal agenda. When we first started, skepticism was always 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 domestic violence for the wider community, by taking creative programs into our primary and high schools and reinforcing with our teen-agers that a healthy relationship is one of mutual respect especially when spouses are having a disagreement. We have worked with Rabbis, Jewish Care (The Jewish services provider here in Melbourne), 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 family violence 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 it is not possible that 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) she asks herself, "What is wrong with me? What did I do to create this nightmare? Obviously it is my fault." 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 a 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 subtly changes how we perceive aunts, uncles and cousins coming for Seder night, not to mention the orchim we welcome into our homes and hearts and know nothing about. 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 Crises Centre for Women in Jerusalem stated that domestic violence is a very serious issue but child molestation is an epidemic. Is she for real?

If child molestation 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 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." (Lev, R., p.23) Our lives revolve around familial celebrations and life-cycle events, whether we gather for a shalom zachor Friday night, circumcisions, bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings, for apples dipped in honey on Rosh Hashana, latkes on Chanukah, matzoh on Pesach- you take my point. Zaida sits at the head of the table beaming with naches. This is his dream. This is what sustained him through the horrors of the Holocaust. Hitler destroyed his first family-is his granddaughter going to destroy his second one by claiming that his son, her uncle indecently touched her? Or worse, that her father assaulted her? Or even that her Zaida did? What about Bubby? How will she survive the shame of these accusations? Studies show that victims of molestation 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 world the match making system is a very real part of day to day life. "Is it a nice family?" comes before specifics inquiries about the young man or young lady in question. Violence, abuse and indecent assault 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." (Lev, R. p.xxvi)

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 have 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 he is spirited out of the community into another unsuspecting kehilla with no warning of what he is capable of and is once again free to continue taking advantage of children. 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 misguided conspiracy of silence descends with those who have chosen to remain silent now complicit in the crime.

Parents, as Chassidim we encourage our sons to go to Mikvah daily but did you stop to think that perhaps not every other mikvah-goer is there for Chassidishe reasons? In all fairness, your response might be a horrified “No!” but it is so important and so simple to protect your child by gently warning him that no one is allowed to invade his privacy in any way. 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.

We deny this ongoing offense against our children because as Jews we are all too historically aware of the precarious position we maintain in any host country Anti-Semitism wafts along behind us rearing its nasty 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 at us, we are different-we don’t have any of that kind of ugliness. But, as Lev so poignantly asks, “What could be more anti-Semitic than letting Jewish children be destroyed by their families or communities?” We deny 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.” (Lev, R., p31)

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, their shame so great, they start to believe they are not worthy. Not worthy of assistance, not worthy of a normal life enriched with the love of a spouse, sometimes not worthy of life: full stop.

But they are and it is our responsibility to remind them. Each and every one of us contains chalek Eloka mimal mamesh.

We are all created with the spark of Hashem and we carry Godliness 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. But believe it or not even a child molester carries a spark of Godliness within him. Although we may recoil from him in horror, we cannot discount him as the devil because every person, no matter the crime, is given the opportunity to do Teshuvah. We do not write the offender off as evil. What he has done is evil and 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 inform themselves about domestic violence and child indecent 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. 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 but professional questioning it came to light that 70 little boys had been molested by a very popular kinder 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 assistance- not even including any additional victims the offender would have continued to have had access to – each one of those could have potentially 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.

As members of The Melbourne Jewish Taskforce we know that the only way to break the silence, end the denial and work towards prevention is community education and awareness. Although the issue of child physical assault might seem overwhelming, an excellent and vital beginning could be

Training programs for communal leaders, Rabbonim, principals, teachers and medical health care providers about the realities of child indecent 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.

Age appropriate sessions for children in schools incorporating good touch/bad touch, respect, healthy relationships and good secrets/bad secrets. Children can be made to understand that no long term secret from a parent is a “good” secret, and who to contact for help if necessary.

We have a difficult decision to make. Are we going to protect our children from this insidious crime against their bodies and souls? As parents, are we going to do everything in our power to shield our children from these sinister offenders? Or are we going to hide our heads in the sand because the whole issue is simply too ugly and painful to confront and deal with? Just be warned. If you don’t do it for your children, nobody else will.