



Jewish Male Violence

by Paul Kivel

AFTER I HAD WRITTEN *Men's Work*, a book on male violence, and after I had worked with incest offenders and batterers and had even said that I am never surprised to learn that any man is a batterer or child molester, my sister revealed to my mother and me that my father had molested her many times when she was a child.

I had conflicting feelings. I believed her. And, at the same time, I wanted to believe that there was some mistake, or that the abuse wasn't as serious as she described it, or that there were, somehow in a way I couldn't even imagine, extenuating circumstances. I hoped there was some way that I could deny the abuse because it contradicted everything I had believed about our family life and my childhood. Of course incest was common. Of course ordinary men did it. Of course you never knew. But my own father?

I quickly realized that I couldn't deny it, that it was perfectly and unfortunately believable, and in fact, was quite consistent with everything I knew about my father, and what I knew about my sister and her life struggles. When my sister told some of our relatives about the abuse, they had the same responses, but even more strongly than I had. My father had been successful, educated, Jewish, likable, and a contributor to the community. How could he possibly have molested his daughter?

As I supported my sister and dealt with my own anger, pain, and sadness over my father's abuse, I realized again how fundamental male violence is as a force which keeps systems of exploitation and violence in place. As I confronted the denial within myself and among my relatives, I realized again how thick are the layers of denial which keep us from confronting and stopping the violence.

What's the connection between Jewish men and domestic violence against Jewish women? Obviously we can start with the fact that many Jewish women are abused by Jewish men.¹ Although in some

¹ I use the word "abused" to include not only physical assault, but emotional, verbal, financial, and sexual assault as



circles Jewish men may have a reputation for making good husbands, for being *mensch*s, those of us who grew up with abusive Jewish fathers, stepfathers, uncles, or other family members know that such positive stereotypes can be just as false and damaging as negative ones.

Many of us who are Jewish men also experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from Jewish men. In addition, all men, including Jewish men, are likely to know women—our mothers, sisters, daughters, co-workers, partners, or friends—who have experienced violence, whether from Jewish or from non-Jewish men.

For all of these reasons this is not a Jewish “women’s” issue, it is ours, as Jewish men. This is true regardless of how much we may want to deny or minimize the impact of Jewish male violence in our lives. However, this truth is also highly contested within our communities. Even for those of us who accept the reality of the devastating impact of male violence on our lives and on the lives of these around us, it can still be hard to admit that this is an issue of paramount importance—one in which we are morally and practically compelled to be involved.

Although we still face much denial within the Jewish community about the extent of male violence, many of us have come to understand the issues and to be, in the abstract, strong supporters of ending such violence. In actual practice, however, when it comes to men we know or know of, many of us inadvertently find ourselves denying, minimizing, or colluding with perpetrators of abuse and withholding support and resources for survivors.

For example, in the last few years there has been much conflict within parts of the Jewish community because many women have come forward accusing internationally known singer and spiritual leader Shlomo Carlebach of harassing and assaulting them throughout his over 30 years of leadership. It is hardly likely that all these accusations are false. Many women of various ages, from different parts of the United States who don’t know each other have corroborated Carlebach’s sexual abuse towards them. Yet even so, there has been denial and minimization about the charges from many Jewish men.

I know of rabbis, cantors, Jewish agency staff, Jewish summer camp staff, and respected lay members of the Jewish community who also have abused others. In addition there are many thousands of ordinary Jewish men, Orthodox and Reform, Renewal, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated, who have physically, sexually, or emotionally abused their partners, co-workers, their children, or their clients. Yes, Jewish



men can be abusive—this is incontrovertible and today seldom denied in principle.

What is denied is that the particular Jewish man I know could be that abuser. Someone else's rabbi, someone else's father, someone else's good friend—they could be abusive. But my rabbi, my father, my good friend, my revered spiritual leader? Wait a minute, I've known him for years, he is so caring, he is so smart, he contributes so much, he has such insight and besides he's such a *mensch*—not the abusive type at all.

I have been in this situation of disbelief more than once myself. Given the wonderful contributions of Shlomo Carlebach to Jewish life and culture it was hard for me to believe he could have done the things he was accused of. A few years ago I found out that a good friend of mine had assaulted his partner. Yet, given the wonderful caring and deep insight I had experienced in my friend it was hard for me to believe he could have hit his partner. Even more painfully, given the experience I had of a loving family and happy childhood, I did not want to believe that my father had sexually molested my sister and had been verbally and emotionally abusive to my mother.

Each time I have been confronted with instances of male violence I have had to remind myself about how abusers operate—how charming, how manipulative, how discreet, how ordinary they can be. I have had to remind myself that people seldom make up stories of their victimization because coming forth as a survivor of abuse often sets them up for further abuse from the perpetrator, and, in addition, to public attack, disparagement and isolation. I have needed to remind myself that women are so discredited in the public eye, and men's word given so much authority, that it will often just feel like I should believe his word against hers. I will also have to remind myself that the fact that he is abusive doesn't negate or lessen the contributions he might have made in other areas. Being a perpetrator of violence is only part of who he is--the other parts are still real and important to keep sight of. And so is the abuse. His contributions cannot negate that either.

Holding all these feelings and information has been difficult for me. The anger, the disappointment, the grief can be overwhelming and deeply uncomfortable. There is a "here we go again" cynicism that these revelations bring on in me because I know too well how ordinary and common abuse is in the Jewish community. There is a feeling of outrage at the perpetrator for the violence and betrayal because I know how devastating it is for the survivor, and for our community.



And I always feel equal parts hope and pessimism. Hope because I want to believe that this time the Jewish community will come together, believe the abused, and confront the perpetrator. Maybe this time we will move forward in our collective understanding of how and why abuse happens and how crucial it is that we respond with justice and compassion. And, of course, pessimism because I have yet to see such a response from any Jewish community I have worked with.

I have seen great individual courage and commitment as individuals, women and men, have reached out to survivors and offered them support, resources, advocacy, and healing. I have seen small groups of women establish shelters for Jewish women, advocacy programs, information booklets, training for Jewish leaders, and personal support networks. I have yet to see a congregation confront the stark and painful reality of male violence in the Jewish community with strong, comprehensive, sustained, and committed efforts to end it.

Instead I see abuse continue.

Instead I hear excuses like these:

“We can’t just believe her word over his.”

“I can’t believe he would do something like that.”

“She is just vindictive, angry, unhappy, controlling, or likes being a victim.”

“He says he is sorry.”

“The situation is too divisive for the community to deal with.”

“It’s a private matter.”

“It’s all over now, they have separated/he’s dead/it happened a long time ago.”

Instead I see women avoiding services, or leaving the congregation, I see women leaving Judaism, I see women’s connection to their religious practice and spiritual lives severed. I see other congregants (mostly women) become cynical and sometimes also leaving their congregation.

I see inadequate, victim-blaming responses to male violence from men and women alike. But as a man I want to address other men because I think we have a particular responsibility to respond to Jewish male violence, and we have often been the ones to most adamantly deny or minimize abusive situations, blame the abused or collude with the abuser.



A Question for Jewish men

My question is: Why do you think your friend is any different from my friend, your father different from my father, your spiritual leader different from mine?

If an abused person comes forward we need to attend to her or his needs for safety, healing, and justice. But all too often our attention is cursory and our efforts inadequate because we don't want to believe that the accusation is true. We don't really believe her, so we go directly to the accused and ask him if it is true or not. If he says no, we push to have the matter dropped. If he says "yes, but it happened a long time ago", or "Yes, but I've changed since then", or "Yes, but I made an error in judgment", or "Yes, but I'll never do it again", or "Yes, but it was mutual—she was quite abusive to me", then we may still want to conclude the investigation and move on by minimizing the abuse and downplaying its effects on the victim. Either way, we are relying on the word of someone whose abusive tactics often include denying, minimizing, or blaming others for their behavior. Abusers often simply lie and deny what they have done.

Taking male violence seriously means much more than asking an alleged abuser if they have been abusive. Knowing the levels of violence in Jewish family and interpersonal relationships, we can no longer afford to be surprised by accusations of male violence, no matter how well-known, how respectable, how Jewish, how well-loved, or how close to us a man might be.

Every situation is different and we will still have to determine how best to meet the needs of the abused and of the community. We will still have to determine the most appropriate response to the perpetrator. But if we are not surprised we will notice the abuse more often; we will believe the survivors more seriously; and we will collude less with the men who perpetrate attacks on those around them. We will begin to end the silence that keeps the violence unchallenged.

In order for our personal responses to be stronger we need a systematic, community-wide response that puts the safety and healing of survivors first, that provides training and education and prevention throughout the community, and then, finally, focuses on the perpetrator and his *t'shuvah* (repentance and healing). Our goal should not be so much on just stopping violence, but on creating a safe, inclusive Jewish congregation/community in which every member is valued, fully able to participate, safe, and able to heal



from abusive situations (with some obvious qualifications for people who are abusive).

In order to achieve such a community, all of us who are Jewish men have some work to do.

What is Jewish men's work?

There are several aspects to Jewish men's work against male violence. First we need to look at our own behavior. In what ways are we controlling or abusive? How do we treat the people around us—our children, our partners, our co-workers, our neighbors? Are there any ways in which we scare, intimidate, threaten, yell, or coerce others using physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or financial means? What are we going to do to change those patterns? (See the section at the end of the article for some questions to ask yourself)

The second area of men's work is to challenge other men. Many of us know men who are abusive. Many of us see male intimidation, put-downs, and harassment occurring and do not intervene. Many of us hear of abuse and do not investigate. Many of us know of men who are abusive and we deny, minimize, or otherwise downplay the significance of the abuse. And many of us fall back on individual self-righteousness, excusing our lack of involvement by saying that we are good men, we don't hit or abuse anyone and that's all we can be responsible for.

We do have a responsibility to stop male violence. The concept of *tikun olam* does not just apply to abstract social justice issues. It applies as well to interpersonal relationships. Part of men's work is to reach out to other men with strength and caring to challenge abusive behavior whenever and wherever we encounter it.

The third area of men's work is to model and teach our sons—Jewish boys and young men—non-abusive ways to be men. They are looking to us for models of men who treat others respectfully, solve problems non-violently, and participate in struggles to make our community more inclusive and more just. Many of us are fathers, others are teachers, counselors and therapists, probation officers, youth workers, coaches, uncles, grandfathers, older brothers, cousins, and neighbors. We can reach out to Jewish boys and young men to help them understand and resist the pressure to become men who abuse others. Jewish youth receive the same mainstream cultural messages from peers and the media as non-Jewish youth do to be tough and aggressive, in control, not to back down, and to use force to take care of business. They also receive the cultural messages to



devalue and objectify women and to expect them to take care of men emotionally and sexually. Drawing on our own values and on the progressive aspects of Jewish tradition we can contradict those messages and offer them other ways to be strong, caring, and involved Jewish men.

The final area of Jewish men's work is in the community. We can be active participants in the struggles in our congregations, our neighborhoods, and our cities for gender equality, social justice, and an end to male violence. We can support the efforts of the many Jewish women who are already actively working to stop the violence. We can help change the policies and institutional practices which foster abuse. We can support training and prevention efforts in our congregations, schools, and youth programs.

I want to end with an example of Jewish men who are making a difference. Although Jewish men have been active in the movement to end male violence since the very beginning, it has only been in the last few years that we have addressed issues of male violence in the Jewish community.

Several years ago, inspired by the women of *Shalom Bayit* and their efforts to challenge domestic violence in the Jewish communities of the San Francisco Bay Area, a group of us came together to create a group we called *Gvarim: Bay Area Jewish Men Against Violence*. We began to support *Shalom Bayit's* work, and to do education with youth and adults within the Bay Area Jewish community. Some of us were members of the Kehilla Community Synagogue, a Jewish Renewal congregation of which I am a member. We decided to work with the congregation, in collaboration with *Shalom Bayit*, to develop policies and protocols to create a safe congregational community and to respond to those incidents of abuse which were brought to our attention.

Through this work I have seen men take initiative in supporting the efforts of Jewish women to create a safer community. Men who are fathers, men who are spiritual leaders, men who are synagogue board members, men who are teachers—men who understand their stake in building a safe and inclusive community. The congregation has been developing a set of protocols dealing with all aspects of male violence, and some of these men are helping to craft it, to refine it, to lobby for it, and to implement pieces of it as appropriate situations arise.

These men are willing to struggle with their own issues of abuse, with the traditional denial within the Jewish community, and with the patterns of collusion and male bonding that have often undermined



women's safety. Each of these men inspires me and gives me hope that, working with women, we can indeed confront male violence within the Jewish community.

I invite you to join these efforts. We have a long history in Judaism of drawing on alternative versions of masculinity which are not based on the dominating and violent norms of the societies in which we lived (the *mensch* tradition). These alternative masculinities have valued learning, critical thinking, caring, concern for justice, and sensitivity to the needs of the community. However these same values have not always translated into non-controlling, non-abusive relationships with women, with children, and with each other. Now is the time to extend our male values to include taking a stand against male violence and building a safe, inclusive community in which everyone can thrive.

Questions for Jewish men to ask themselves

- Do I yell at the people around me?
- Do I tease, put down or belittle others?
- Do family members or co-workers “walk on eggshells” when I get angry?
- Do I physically touch women around me in ways that are sexual, intrusive, or disrespectful?
- Do I threaten or intimidate my children or partner?
- Do I talk louder than others, interrupt people, pull academic or professional rank, or otherwise try to control conversations, silence others, or increase my own status?
- Have I ever hit, slapped, shoved, pushed, or used my body to threaten others?
- Have I had sex with a partner when I knew they did not want to?
- Have I seen abuse in my family or in relationships around me and not intervened?
- What is my next step in ending controlling and abusive behavior in my own life and in the lives of those around me?

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.

