

Husbands Who Abuse

- Basil Herring.

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I would not want anyone present to dismiss the comments I am about to make, as being somehow irrelevant to the Jewish community, or the observant home. For the first thing to make clear when discussing domestic abuse as it occurs in communities such as ours, is that we are not just talking about beating your wife. Of course a man is an abuser if he slaps, punches, kicks or physically hurts his wife. But he is also one even if he only threatens to do these things. And it doesn't have to be physical either: if a man uses verbal or psychological abuse to control his spouse, so as to undermine her sense of emotional security, by engaging in things such as her public humiliation, private degradation, isolation from her family or friends, or harassment (even by telephone), he engages in domestic abuse. And then, of course, there is sexual abuse, which can include any number of unwelcome behaviors that may culminate in rape itself. Any, and all, of these acts come under the category of family violence and domestic abuse. Which is precisely why I have chosen to speak on the topic today, on this parshat Naso.

For last week I attended a gathering, together with rabbinical colleagues in neighboring communities, intended to sensitize us to the problem, which perhaps we should call this shanda, as it exists right now, and right here. The meeting was organized by the Shalom Task Force, a group made up primarily of women who seek to address this very issue in the Jewish community. One indication of the need for such a group, is the fact since they established a Hotline a few months ago, they have received more than a hundred calls from local Jewish women seeking help. The Task Force is not alone, for in every major Jewish community in the country similar groups exist. And the level of religious observance of such couples and communities makes no difference. They are all equally effected, be they Boro Park or Beverley Hills. Domestic abuse, apparently, does not discriminate among Jewish families.

Yet some of us might argue that this is not a substantial Jewish problem. Jewish men as wife-beaters? Aren't Jewish men generally known as extraordinarily protective of, and sensitive to, their wives, in addition to being "good providers" who avoid alcohol or other destructive behaviors? Well the truth is that while the rates of spousal abusive in Jewish families is in all likelihood significantly lower than it is in the population at large, it is still grossly and unacceptably high. It's not just "crazies" who do it. In fact in certain respects the suffering is not less, but more, for abused Jewish women.

Why so? Firstly, the fact is that battered Jewish women on average endure ten more years of abuse than their non-Jewish counterparts before they seek help. This is so because from childhood they have been taught, correctly so, that their first responsibility is to be good wives and mothers, maintaining the wholeness of their family structure. The very idea of going outside of the marital cocoon for help, and thereby endangering the survival and continuity of their families, is simply intolerable to most Jewish women. And there is a heightened sense of shame before their fellow Jews in the community. In general, women who are abused tend to have

strong feelings of guilt and inadequacy, as if they have done something wrong to bring this down on them. All the more so Jewish women, whose initial reaction to being abused is that Jewish men don't do these things, so if their husband does it, then perhaps there is something wrong with themselves as wives and mothers. Finally, as it unfortunately happens all too often, when such women do go for help, or talk to others about their problem, they are not believed, even by their families, their friends, or their rabbis. And when they are believed, or when their bruised and battered bodies or shattered emotions cannot be hidden or denied any longer, they are often given well-intentioned, but dead wrong, advice. Sometimes they are told that they should preserve the marriage at all costs; that they should go back and work on the marriage; that perhaps it is indeed their fault for not being more accommodating or flexible; that they should accept at face value the earnest promises of their spouses that things will change. But without serious and sustained professional help, the abusive behavior hardly ever does change.

For the truth is that domestic abuse, at bottom, is not about physical pain at all. It is about asserting control and wielding power over another human being. To be sure, none of us wants to feel weak or ineffectual or not respected. But those men who abuse their wives, physically or emotionally, invariably are motivated by an exaggerated need to be in control, or are convinced that they must assert a husband's authority, or even that as the primary breadwinner it is their right or privilege to rule over and regulate the lives of the rest of the family. But when they sense that they are losing control, when they become convinced that their significant other is too independent, that she is charting a course that they cannot contain, then such husbands will use every physical means available to reassert control, and dominate their spouses once again.

We all need to feel important and in control of our lives; tragically, however, the abusive husband tries to satisfy that need by dominating his spouse, and bullying her into submission, either physically or emotionally. Rather than command respect, he demands it. And instead of earning her esteem, he stands on it. Given such a psychological profile, the abuser and the abused both need to get psychological help on a fundamental level. Promises and resolutions alone, no matter how sincere or well-intentioned, do not help. And advice by others to cultivate and reinforce shalom bayit, or domestic tranquillity, are the equivalent of the proverbial water on a duck's back. Even worse, such counsel usually prolongs the agony and the suffering for all concerned: wife, husband, and children alike.

Speaking of water, it is this very point, and the very concept of shalom bayit, that bring me to a number of relevant passages in Parshat Naso. Most particularly, we can refer to the well known pronouncements of the Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessing, that culminates at its very apex with the familiar encomium, vayasem lekha shalom, that God bless the beneficiary with peace. What is the peace here referred to? The Sifri quotes a number of views:

R. Hananiah Segan ha-Kohanim says "this is shalom bayit, peace in your home." R. Natan says "this is the peace of the House of David," as it says in Isaiah 9:6 le'marbeh ha-misrah u-le'shalom ein ketz, "that authority be increased, and of peace there be no end." How great is peace! That even God distorted the truth to preserve domestic peace between Abraham and Sarah, and He permitted his Holy name to be wiped out by the Bitter Waters of the suspected adulteress, in order to restore domestic peace between husband and wife. Sifri Numbers 6:26 Clearly the pursuit of shalom bayit is an extraordinarily important priority. In the first instance,

God Himself, in reporting the words of Sarah did indeed take pains to doctor them in a way that would avoid Abraham's resentment or anger against his wife of many years. Sarah had said that Abraham was barren, but God reports her as saying that it was she who was responsible. Secondly, as it appears right here in this very parshah, the Torah tells us of the procedure for either acquitting or condemning a woman suspected by her husband of infidelity: ve-Katav et ha-alot ha-eileh ha-kohen be'sefer, u-mah^oah el mei ha-marim. The kohen shall write this curse containing the name of God written in the book, and dissolve it in the bitter waters. Nu. 5:23

Here is a couple whose marriage, to put it lightly, is in deep trouble. Her life is on the line; if guilty of adultery, this woman faces divine retribution of extreme unction. If innocent, she will be restored to her family and her husband. One might have thought that the Torah would dictate the conventional judicial procedure for determining the outcome of the case: convene the Sanhedrin; summon witnesses; weigh the evidence; pronounce judgment. But such is not the case. Instead God puts His Own name into "play," His Own honor on the line. Rather than leave the fate of this woman and her marriage in the hands of the court, divine intercession is called for, and God's good name is not merely invoked, it is obliterated. So crucial is shalom bayis! But what is so fascinating here, is how the shalom bayis is to be achieved: it is precisely by God diminishing His self, His image, His name, His glory, His honor. The significance is stunning: God is telling man that domestic peace demands diminution of self, self denial, self contraction, if you will. It means giving in, compromising your self and your honor, if need be, to permit the other to live and to love. If God can live with the idea that His good name will be diminished as the result of a vile adulteress, then so must man. Or, lehavdil, even the God of truth will compromise Himself to tell a lie, if that is what is necessary to cover up the words of Sarah that could have hurt Abraham needlessly.

Hence we can understand the Sifri's choice of verse: le'marbeh ha-misrah u-le'shalom ein ketz, "that authority be increased, and of peace there be no end." Isaiah foretells a remarkable eventuality: that unlike the present, there will come a time when on the one hand power and authority will grow and be established, but on the other, paradoxically, people will still be tolerant of each other, with endless peace prevailing. That miracle will yet occur in the messianic future. But for now, Isaiah implies, the dictates of darkei shalom, the paths of peace, require that we accept our own limitations; that we understand that we cannot force our will on others, that we must sometimes forego the effort to control those with whom we live, or those with whom we wish to have peaceful and harmonious relations. In this respect, our model must indeed be God Himself.

There is, to be sure, a lesson in all of this not just for the abusive husband, but for all of us, in our relationships in marriage and family life, and beyond. But in contemplating the sad circumstance of the battered Jewish woman in our time, there are specific and concrete lessons to be taken to heart. As a community, but no less as individuals, we need to learn how to recognize the problem, in all of its manifestations, be it in our own families or in others with which we come into contact. And we ought to assist and strengthen the victims of such abuse, either by directing them to those who can truly help them, or by supporting such care givers financially or in other ways. In this regard you should know that I have this week made a contribution to the Shalom

Task Force in the name of our synagogue. I am sure that other contributions will be much appreciated and wisely utilized.

But in addition to all of that, and more broadly, we need to strengthen our spiritual moorings, renewing our connections with the Biblical and post-Biblical sources that have molded our moral character as a people and as families and as individuals, thereby to discover within ourselves the substance and stamina to resist the social and familial pathologies which so threaten the Jewish family, the very foundation of all of Jewish life. When all is said and done, and after we will have strengthened the hands of the victims and those who help them, it is this renewed connection to the life-giving waters of our Torah and tradition that will enable us to overcome the bitter water of discord and abuse in our time. As the Sifri concludes,

Said R. Natan: shalom zeh Torah, peace flows from Torah, as it says (Ps. 29:11),

Hashem oz le'amo yiten, Hashem yevarekh et amo ba-shalom.
God will grant His people strength, He will bless His people with peace.