

# Breaking the Silence

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Elaine Witman is the Director of the Shofar Coalition. The Shofar Coalition was convened in 2005 as a wake-up call to the Jewish community of Baltimore to address child and adolescent victims of sexual and all forms of abuse, children exposed to the trauma of domestic violence, and adult survivors of trauma. It is involved in all aspects of care for trauma survivors of all ages within the Jewish community. This article appears in issue 8 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

On the Sunday before Rosh Hashanah in 2009, an audience of 225 individuals attended a Jewish community-wide Healing Service in Baltimore, Maryland. The Healing Service was convened as a gathering for survivors of domestic, sexual, physical, verbal, and all forms of abuse; family members and friends of survivors; mental health and physical health professionals; clergy; educators; and all who wanted to learn how to “break the silence” that surrounds and permeates abuse and trauma in a community. The Healing Service was designed and sponsored by the Shofar Coalition, a program of CHANA and the ASSOCIATED Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore.

Representatives from Shofar, CHANA, the Baltimore Board of Rabbis, and the *Baltimore Jewish Times* joined with eight courageous survivors who agreed to share their experiences of trauma endured as children, adolescents, or adults. Together, they delivered a message—in words, in chants, in prayer. In doing so, they challenged the audience to cultivate a Healing Community, one that actively listens to the truths spoken by those among us who have been victimized; one that believes and accepts that these traumatic experiences affect not only the victims but all of us; and a community that responds with compassion and action rather than with silence and denial.

## **Why a Healing Service?**

Allow me to quote from a statement publically issued several weeks before the event by Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, President of the Baltimore Board of Rabbis:

As Jews, we understand viscerally from our historical experience what it is to be victims of persecution. Time and again, we have demanded that the voices of victims be heard, that their pain be acknowledged, and that justice prevail. Yet in our own midst, many have suffered silently for far too long, as victims of abuse and trauma whose pain and suffering have gone unacknowledged, whose stories have not been believed, and whose perpetrators have been shielded from suffering the appropriate consequences their behavior warrants. Silence and inaction have re-victimized those traumatized by abuse by inflicting fear, shame, and guilt. As a community, we have participated in a conspiracy of silence: denial of the truth of abuse in our midst, the silencing of victims, and our own individual choice of silence when fear or disbelief take precedence over informed response. The

silence must end.

The ethical issues and the moral imperatives raised in Rabbi Scheinerman's statement apply to communities of all faiths, not just Jewish, and in societies across the country and the world. There is no place for denial, silence, or inaction in any community—certainly not in any Jewish community. In a Healing Community, of any faith, all of its members share a responsibility to acknowledge the pain and to help ease the suffering of victims. Pursuing justice by holding those responsible for abuse accountable, and thus preventing other innocent individuals from being victimized, is also an integral obligation for a faith community. There is no place in a Healing Community for bystanders.

In any discussion of the ethical issues related to abuse, it is important to understand certain facts. The majority of perpetrators are not strangers to the victims. It is difficult to secure an accurate number of abuse victims in general due to the consequences of the shame, fear, and silence that typically paralyze victims and communities. If an individual feels guilt and shame over the abuse, as is often the case, he or she will not admit that the abuse occurred. If a community denies that abuse happens—and worse, blames the victim or anyone who speaks about abuse and accused abusers—then the resulting fear often gives rise to victims being forced into silence. Where there is fear and silence, suspected abuse of children or adults remains unreported to the authorities, thus allowing perpetrators to continue to victimize others, sometimes for many years. Failure to report suspected abuse means a failure to bring the perpetrators of abuse to justice.

I know of a woman in her mid-30s who was molested when she was a teenager by a well-known and greatly revered congregational rabbi in Baltimore. Shortly after the abuse occurred, her mother and two other rabbis whom she turned to for guidance told her to keep quiet so as not to destroy this much-loved rabbi's reputation. Besides, she was told, no one would believe her anyway. All these years later, this woman continues receiving professional therapy to help her deal with intense guilt over the number of women who were molested by this same rabbi long after she was. She believed that her imposed silence had resulted in the suffering of other women. Similarly, hundreds of men who had been sexually abused when they were young boys by the same rabbi over a period of more than 20 years finally came forward to speak of their suffering only after several of this particular rabbi's victims broke their silence, thus giving voice to so many who were re-traumatized by remaining silent for so long.

Knowing that the actual number of incidences of abuse is higher than reported, it is shocking to note that studies indicate that one in four women *report* that they have been victimized by domestic violence as an adult. Likewise, one in four women and one in six men *report* that they have been sexually abused in their lifetime. In the United States, 4 million children are *reported* to have been abused every year. There is no indication that these numbers are any different among Jewish individuals, nor is there any known difference in numbers among the various denominations within Judaism. A groundbreaking study published in November, 2007 entitled "History of Past Sexual Abuse in Married Observant Jewish Women" states that "Twenty-six percent of respondents in a study about the sexual lives and attitudes of married Orthodox Jewish women— 55% identifying as Modern Orthodox and about 45% as right-wing Orthodox—indicated that they had at some point suffered sexual abuse." (*American Journal of Psychiatry* 164: 1700–06).

### **The Ethical Imperative in Judaism to Help Trauma Survivors**

Rabbi Mark Dratch, Founder and President of JSafe: The Jewish Institute Supporting an Abuse-Free Environment, wrote in a 2007 article entitled "Few Are Guilty, but All Are Responsible: The Obligations to Help Survivors of Abuse":

The Torah expresses the obligation to help those under assault or subject to abuse through both positive and negative precepts: 'Thou shalt not stand by the blood of thy neighbor' (Lev. 19:16) and 'And you shall restore him to himself' (Deut. 22:2). The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 73a) teaches that while

the latter verse teaches that one must intervene personally, the former expands that responsibility; a person may not just stand around idly while someone is being hurt.

All too often, the obligation to help victims of trauma and abuse is trumped by a fear of speaking out and getting involved—and a denial that the abuse even occurred. The resulting silence takes the place of bringing relief to the suffering of the victims and securing the safety of the community by bringing the perpetrators to justice. Both abuse victims and observers of the abuse are scared that no one will believe them if they speak up. They are afraid that exposing the abuse and the abuser will destroy their families or the families of the perpetrators.

By exploring the ways that victims are harmed by silence and inaction, whether self-imposed or imposed by others, we can best understand the importance of the Torah-based obligation stated above. The silence often sentences a victim to years upon years of isolation and feeling alone. Many of the people who come to the Shofar Coalition for help do so after years of telling no one what happened to them. Some come forward for the first time when they are in their 40s, 50s, or even 60s. An individual who attended our Healing Service last September submitted a note that stated: “I have been suffering from mental, emotional, and physical abuse for so many years. Can someone help me? I don’t feel safe.”

The prevailing silence contributes to feelings of intense shame, guilt, and low self-worth on the part of victims of trauma. People may wonder why the victim would feel guilty or ashamed about something that was done *to* them, not *by* them. As one survivor of incest explained to me, until the abuser is named, the victim carries and owns the shame and guilt. Once others know about the abuser, the shame is shifted from the victim to the abuser where it belongs. Excerpts from the testimonies of three of the eight survivors who spoke at the Shofar Healing Service gives us a window into the feelings of shame, fear, and isolation born out of silence.

*A 45-year-old woman:* I was a college graduate. I was a nice, Jewish girl from Pikesville [Baltimore] who married her best friend’s brother, also from Pikesville. So how in the world could I be lying in the hospital emergency room with a broken arm, caused by my own husband? This kind of thing wasn’t supposed to happen to people like me. I was scared and embarrassed, humiliated, and so ashamed. I felt so alone, I just wanted to disappear. The physical pain didn’t even hold a candle to the mental pain I was holding inside. It was easier to keep that secret.

*A 32-year-old man:* I was first molested at the mikva when I was 4 years old....I was afraid to tell my father, so he never knew about it. It was like I had a Scarlet Letter on my forehead that said “easy target, molest me!” As a child, I was also molested by a female neighbor, my bar-mitzvah teacher, and while I was in yeshiva. Most of the molestations took place in a religious environment. [I was brought up to believe] that you should always have respect for your elders, that the Rabbi/teacher/parent/adult is always right. This led me to believe that I was the problem—It was my fault; I was bad.

*A 65-year-old man:* I didn’t think that I was affected at all by these encounters with the rabbi and his friend, however 52 years later I realize that shame, embarrassment, and fear kept me from revealing the revered rabbi’s insidious behavior. In fact, I could not speak out loud the name of the rabbi who molested me until I was 60 years old.

So many trauma survivors have expressed to me that perhaps even more painful than the original abuse that they have endured is the feeling that they were betrayed by the reaction of trusted individuals (parents, friends, rabbis, teachers) who were sought out for comfort, compassion, validation, support and guidance. The denial, silence and inaction on the part of trusted individuals give rise to profound feelings of being “re-victimized.” The emotional scars left by such re-victimization are often long lasting and more difficult to heal. A woman who was molested by her uncle over the course of two years beginning when she was ten, and who came to Shofar for services when she was in her mid 40s

says:

For many years, I only told my closest friends about what had happened to me. The first time I told someone in a position of authority in confidence was to my rabbi when I was in my late 20s and already a mother. I went to my rabbi, whom I very much respected as a man of terrific judgment and integrity, and asked for help. He did not ask about me or my mental health, he didn't pursue a line of questioning that might have led to accountability for my uncle, he didn't even want me to upset my father by telling him the truth if there were some way that it could be avoided. I went back into the closet of my shame and closed the door.

Rabbi Dratch, in a 2006 article entitled "The Shame of It All: The Real Shonda in Revealing Abuse," points out yet another way that victims and the entire Jewish community are harmed by silence, inaction, and feelings of betrayal by family and respected members of the community. He states:

Many [Jewish] victims of abuse are exploited first by their Jewish perpetrators and then are betrayed by the reaction of the family and community they thought would help them, nurture them, and find them justice. In many cases, these victims lose faith in themselves, in the community, and in God. Those who do not reject their Judaism find strength in their faith, despite all that has been done to them. But in many cases victims are disillusioned by the institutions and leaders they thought they could trust. Too many of them abandon mitzvah observance and their connections to the Jewish community are weakened. This is a real *hilul hashem*!

## **Perceived Barriers, Unique to Jewish Communities, to Revealing Abuse and Acting to Help Abuse Survivors**

### ***Concerns of Hilul Hashem***

Rabbi Dratch addresses these concerns in "The Shame of It All" when he states: "this concern about protecting the reputation of God and the Jewish people by repressing public discussion of behaviors and actions that may be deemed a '*shonda*,' scandalous and disreputable, may in fact itself be a *hilul hashem*. It is the abuser and not the abused that has committed *hilul hashem*, and it is those who cover up and silence victims, not those who seek justice and the protection of innocent victims that desecrate God's Name."

### ***The Shonda Factor***

Individuals are often afraid to discuss abuse or to expose an accused abuser because of the potential harm to the perpetrator's reputation. They fear that they and their families will be shunned or ostracized by the community. Sadly, this is often the case. Victims, and their advocates who do speak out, have become the target of verbal, written, and physical attacks. They are viewed as having brought shame to the entire community. The *shonda* factor is further intensified in some Jewish communities by the fear that speaking out about abuse may damage the possibilities of young people in a given family finding suitable marriage partners. All in all, these fears not only give rise to the silencing of victims but to the organized cover-up of dangerous situations and enabling of potentially harmful abusers.

### **Lashon haRa (*Libel or Slander*) and Mesirah (*Informing Civil Authorities*)**

Some Jewish people attribute their silence and inaction in the face of abuse to their adherence to and understanding of Jewish laws prohibiting *lashon haRa* and *mesirah*. In his “Few Are Guilty” article, Rabbi Mark Dratch states that: “These principles, and others, are valid, essential principles of Jewish life and law and should be carefully observed by committed Jews. But all too often misplaced priorities and misconceived interpretations of Jewish law have trumped equally valid halakhic concerns for the safety and security of Jewish bodies and souls.”

In the same article, Rabbi Dratch eloquently expresses the ethical responsibilities of the Jewish people when those among us are suffering from the horrors of abuse. In expounding on a quotation by Abraham Joshua Heschel having to do with a Jewish response to evil (“Few are guilty, but all are responsible”), Rabbi Dratch states: “So, while a small minority of the Jewish community is actually guilty of perpetrating abuse and violence, the entire community is responsible to come to the aid of victims, to pursue justice, to demand accountability, and to protect the innocents of our community and the integrity of our faith.”

Many years ago, on a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., I saw the following line: “Thou shall not be a perpetrator; thou shall not be a victim; and thou shall never be a bystander.” The Museum’s website attributes the quotation to Yehuda Bauer, professor of Holocaust studies at the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I do not in any way mean to equate the evils and horrors of the Holocaust with the evils of child abuse and domestic violence. I do, however, mean to say that we as Jews cannot and must not stand idly by while some of our fellow Jews are suffering due to no fault of their own, but rather due to the fault of abusive people and silent bystanders. Historically we as Jewish people know all too well the consequences of silence in the face of human suffering. **And abuse thrives in silence.**

I challenge all Jewish communities to rebuild themselves as Healing Communities. Healing Communities say to those who are hurting among us that they need not suffer in silence alone any longer. We need to replace fear, denial, and silence with compassion and truth, and inaction will be replaced with action. We as Jewish communities will attend to the healing of all those who wish to recover from the long-term effects of abuse. We will commit to bringing the perpetrators of abuse to justice and to preventing them from hurting others. We can do this! We must do this!

For information about Healing Services and other Shofar or CHANA sponsored activities, contact Elaine Witman at [ewitman@associated.org](mailto:ewitman@associated.org) or 410-843-7582.