



SHALOM BAYIT

Ending Domestic Violence in Jewish Homes

SHALOM BAYIT SAMPLE SERMON: PURIM

March 11-12, 2022 / 9-10 Adar II, 5782

Shabbat Shalom.

In a few days we will celebrate the joyous holiday of Purim. Purim is such a positive event that we are told to rejoice not only for one day, but for the entire month. We say, “Be happy, it’s Adar.” And yet, the day before Purim is a day of fasting and penitence.

The fast of Esther, observed this coming Wednesday, is a day to commemorate Queen Eshter who fasted and prayed before daring to approach the king for intervention when Haman threatened the Jews.

Haman was going have all of the Jews killed. Mordecai got word to Esther and she planned lavish banquets to soften up the king before asking him, her husband, to save her own people! Esther fasted and prayed because she knew that the king held absolute power of life and death – her life, the life of her family, and the life of every Jew.

Esther was of course not the first queen to encounter this absolute power of monarch and husband. Her predecessor, Vashti, had been commanded by King Ahashuerus to dance before him and his drunken advisors. Some believe she was asked to dance naked, wearing only the royal crown. Upon her refusal, she was banished. Two powerful women, queens in their own right, yet subject to the volatile whim of one man who ruled them.

On Purim we tell ourselves that this is legend, ancient history. We tell ourselves that men, whether kings or husbands, no longer yield that sort of absolute power.

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As Jews we pride ourselves on equality in relationships. And in our progressive Bay Area community, it is hard to imagine that such tyranny would be tolerated.

And yet, we know differently. We know that there are women who live in fear of their partners, of the absolute power to which they have been subjected. They fear for their lives, for their children, for their freedom. They live in a modern-day domestic reign of terror.

Domestic violence is a pattern of power and control, where one partner exerts that control over the other. It can take many forms: *Ona'at devarim*--oppression by means of words. It can also look like intimidation, emotional abuse, financial control, sexual coercion, threats. It can look like manipulating the children, isolation from family or friends, controlling resources. And yes, physical violence. These are all tools an abuser uses to trap their victim in a cycle of fear.

So often people ask, why don't victims just leave? That is entirely the wrong question, because it blames the victim for the abuse that is perpetrated against them, as if it were in their power to easily make it end. Perhaps some better questions would be: Why are so many people unsafe in their own homes? Why are so many abusers allowed to get away with abuse? Why don't we, as a community, stop them?

And still, as difficult as it is, survivors of abuse do stand up to their abusers and leave, just like Vashti. And they are doing so every day.

It may take a survivor several tries to leave. Many are almost entirely dependent on their partners financially. If they do leave, they may have nothing. Why is the burden on abuse survivors? Why do people assume that they have to be the ones to leave their homes? Why do they have to give up everything they have, and walk away with nothing, just to have themselves back again?

It is profoundly unfair. And despite this injustice, abuse survivors are leaving every day. They are struggling to be single parents, to find jobs, to rebuild their lives. To find Jewish spiritual community that is not tainted by their abuser's presence. They are struggling to be believed in a Jewish community that often believes their abusers instead.

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Is this the price of freedom? Vashti spoke up and refused to obey the King. But Vashti had to leave her home and community and was never heard from again. And today she is often portrayed as the evil queen in Purim stories. Is this the fate of all women who resist violence? What kind of message does that send to women? To children? To men?

One in four Jewish women will experience abuse from a partner in her lifetime. And while domestic abuse primarily falls along gender lines, it also happens to 1 in 4 gay men, more than 1 in 3 transgender people; and a small percentage of straight men. These are our neighbors, our teachers, our synagogue members. At such a magnitude, we cannot name this violence an “interpersonal issue,” a “family matter,” or even a “women’s issue.” It is a societal and communal issue that requires a societal and communal response.

So as Purim approaches, let us ask ourselves: who are the Esthers, the Vashtis that we know? Who are the brave women who say no to unwanted sexual advances, who fear the power of their own husbands or partners, who can only escape public humiliation by risking their lives and communities to say NO to a tyrant who was supposed to treat them as an equal? And who are the women hiding, afraid to admit that they are living with a tyrant? As our children don masks on Purim, let us ask: what are the masks that abuse survivors feel they must wear all the time, pretending to have a happy family life? What would happen if they took those masks off, and named the violence against them? What can we do to make our community a safer place for them to tell their stories and get the help they deserve? What is the cost to our entire community, that violence and abuse go unnoticed, or are tolerated, in our midst?

Purim is a time for celebration, for the *megillah* tells us that we were victorious on that day. As we celebrate one kind of liberation from the hands of Haman, let us not forget that it was women’s strength and resistance that brought us there. Let us honor Vashti, punished for disobedience. Let us remember Esther, who lived in privilege, but at a cost – and whose strategy saved the Jewish people. These daring and courageous women represent the difficult choices many survivors make each day: to protect themselves, to protect their children, to retain dignity in the face of fear and oppression.

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For all Esthers, who feel they have to marry the king and pretend everything is OK
– or quietly plot plans to keep herself and her loved ones safe...
For all Vashtis, who speak truth to power at great personal risk...For all abuse
survivors who live in fear because someone else controls their destiny, I dedicate
this moment to you. And I ask all of us here to do what we can to break the silence
about abuse in our midst.

Thank you.

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