



Shalom Task Force

RABBINIC GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING DOMESTIC ABUSE



Rabbinic Guide to Understanding and Addressing Domestic Abuse

What is Domestic Abuse?

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Domestic abuse, also known as domestic violence or intimate partner violence, occurs when one individual in a relationship exercises power and control over the other and instills fear in the relationship. This results in a dynamic where the abuser has control over the experiences of the partner who feels unable to express their thoughts or feelings or act freely in their day to day for fear of repercussion.

What is the prevalence in the Domestic Abuse in the Jewish community?

National data estimates that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have been the victims of an incident of physical abuse, but there is minimal data specific to the Orthodox community. Data gathered from groups of divorced Orthodox women indicates that abuse played a significant role in many of their decisions to leave the marriage. Since it was established in the 1990s Shalom Task Force's domestic violence support line has received over 35,000 calls and has supported thousands with legal support. Some of the calls are from victims, some are from concerned friends, family, or professionals.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can fall victim to an abusive relationship, regardless of their background, economic status, personality, or level of religiosity. In a similar vein, abusers can be individuals who are outwardly religious and well regarded in the community. It is often surprising to the point of disbelief when a victim comes forward and asserts that they have been abused, as the reported abuser is "a great person," or "such a baal chessed."





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What does abuse look like?

In all abusive relationships, one side uses intimidation and manipulation to maintain control of the other person. At the same time, the particulars of abusive relationships can manifest differently and there is usually more than one form of abuse that presents in an abusive relationship. It's important to widen our thinking about the portrait of an abusive relationship so that we can be alert to varied ways in which abuse presents:

- **Physical abuse:** Violence is a tactic, either in practice or by threat, to hold the other person in check and augment fear. This is the most commonly known form of abuse. Despite popular misconceptions, men can also be victims of physical abuse.
- **Verbal/Emotional abuse:** Ongoing and unrelenting blaming, shaming, putting down or insulting. It is important to emphasize the deep traumatic impact of such repeated behaviors.
- **Psychological abuse:** Manipulation, "gas-lighting" and causing the victim to question their perceptions of events and their role in the abuse. Ultimately, the victim may begin to question their mental stability and wonder if they are culpable for the abuse. This experience is compounded in cases where a victim reaches out for support and is responded to with doubt or questioning.
- **Financial abuse:** Controlling access to funds. This may manifest in removing a spouse's name from accounts and assets, doling out an insufficient "allowance", or interfering with a person's ability to maintain employment. This also includes making financial decisions in a way which harms the victim's ability to have a stable financial future, such as opening and overusing credit cards in the victim's name.





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- **Digital abuse:** Encompasses digital tracking, e.g. of location, calls, and texts to invade freedom of movement and the ability to connect with others and receive support. This also includes utilizing the internet and social media to harass, malign or threaten, e.g. with the use of intimate images.
- **Sexual abuse:** Forcing unwanted sexual acts up to and including rape, or withholding sexual affection as a punishment. In marriages, misperceptions around halachic imperatives can be weaponized and/or create feelings of duty and obligation.
- **Religious/Spiritual abuse:** Imposition of halachic observances to impose a controlling environment and/or not allowing a spouse to fully observe as they desire e.g. not being allowed to observe taharas hamishpacha. As an illustration of the interplay of abuse tactics, this can then be used to gaslight victims, e.g. "You don't deserve my going to the mikvah", "You're not that frum, last week you...." , or "Hashem hates you for not maintaining shalom bayis" giving any number of reasons for what the person may have done to be deserving of such a disdainful response.





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What do I need to know about perpetrators?

There are many misconceptions about perpetrators of abuse. While most abusers are male, they can also be female and of any socio-economic background, education, religious level, race, or ethnicity. Abusers are often charismatic individuals who consciously mold an admirable public image personally, professionally and through communal involvement. There are varied factors that can influence and drive an abuser's behavior. With reflection on their conduct, ownership of the harm they inflict, motivation to change, and professional assistance, the possibility that they can learn to engage in a respectful and safe relationship does exist. At the same time, it is important to note that data around perpetrator treatment programs does not show a strong rate of success.





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Why do some people take so long to come forward for support?

There is often a confluence of issues that deter people from seeking support and become barriers to disclosure:

- **Denial:** Many individuals subconsciously rationalize their situations as a coping mechanism.
- **Guilt/shame:** The victim may blame him/herself for the mistreatment they have endured.
- **Societal/Familial pressure:** Abused individuals may be concerned about stigma and may feel pressure from their community or family to not “air their dirty laundry” or “sully” the family’s reputation, e.g. by effecting shidduch prospects.
- **Fear of escalation:** The valid concern that the aggressor may react to their control being challenged. The most dangerous time for a victim is immediately after leaving an abuser.
- **Worries about the unknown:** An undetermined future can be scary.
- **Practical considerations:** Finances and the effect on children and custody are usually of significant concern.
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What can be done in terms of prevention?

Introducing and supporting preventative programs can reduce the risk of abuse in your community.

- Bring awareness to the existence of domestic violence as a communal issue by naming it clearly and sharing its presentation. Identify opportunities whether they be when speaking from the pulpit or bringing in outside speakers. This has the secondary benefit of informing individuals who may be suffering in silence that you are a person who will not discount their story if they approach you for support.
- Support the learning of tools for healthy relationships – Consider shiurim and drashos highlighting the importance of healthy and respectful relationships, groups dedicated to personal introspection and growth, and marriage workshops.

Does abuse get categorized as a “Shalom Bayis” issue?

- It's important to differentiate between typical “shalom bayis” issues, challenges typical in all marriages, and an abusive dynamic. Even skilled therapists can have a hard time detecting abuse without having numerous conversations with both parties individually. In cases of abuse where there is a power and control dynamic, couples therapy is contra-indicated as is having a joint meeting with both spouses.
- When you're working with a couple, get as complete a picture as possible. In an abusive situation the victim will often withhold part of their experience in the presence of the other in order to not make waves or escalate abusive behavior. Having individual conversations with a spouse you suspect is being abused may give you a clearer perspective.
 - Please be aware that in recalling traumatic memories the retelling may seem disjointed. This is typical of trauma and does not indicate that the episodes are being fabricated.





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How should a Rabbi respond to a DV disclosure?

- **Priorities:** When you are approached by a member of your community, the priority is to support, ensure the safety of, and restore self-direction and autonomy to the abused partner.
- **Confidentiality:** Confidentiality and discretion are crucial when dealing with domestic abuse. If the individual who sought support learns that the Rabbi shared private information without their consent, this may compromise their trust and deter them from further engagement. A Rabbi must also consider the possibility that word could get back to the abuser, thereby endangering the victim.
- **The subtle reach for support:** A victim often "tests the waters" with a seemingly neutral shaila: "Is a husband required to share his bank account with his wife?", "Does a wife have to go to the Mikvah if she is under a lot of stress?". The Rav should answer fully and express openness to answering further questions. Sometimes, the individual may "drop" a comment such as "Marriage can be so hard", and the Rav should endeavor to respond in a non-judgemental fashion that allows the person to follow up. The way to engage in these conversations is with curiosity and without judgment.
- **Allegations:** Allegations about an abuser are often jarring and incongruous with the prevalent perception of the person. As mentioned, abusers are often charismatic individuals who consciously mold an admirable public image. While the imperative of being dan l'kaf z'chus prohibits one from rushing to judgement, it should not interfere with the obligation of lo sa'amod al dam rei'echa. Assertions of abuse must be received with a sense of gravity, and the victim must be provided with appropriate support.





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- **Empowering the Victim:** It is critical to ensure that the individual is given the opportunity to make their own choices. Resist the visceral instinct to try to rescue them. Rather than dictating what should be done, you can ask "What do you want to happen now?", and "How can I help you?". Providing the victim with agency is essential for their well-being and their ability to regain control of their lives
- **Being Supportive:** One of the most difficult elements of abuse is the feeling of isolation and vulnerability. When an abused individual confides in you, you can be most helpful by listening and validating their experience and feelings. There may be a place for discussing aspects of hashkafa relating to their situation, but emotional support is primary.
- **Refer:** Have an idea of what kind of providers/services exist in your community and have a few you trust well enough to refer to. This may include therapists, social service agencies, or other rabbonim with knowledge of the DV experience who feel more comfortable answering shailos about it than you might. It is important to make the appropriate referrals as efficiently as possible, both for the safety of the couple and for your own personal boundaries. You can assure the victim that while you are referring to a professional, you are also there at their side. Shalom Task Force is able to guide you through this process and help you identify resources. Please contact our rabbinic consult service at **RabbinicConsults@ShalomTaskForce.org** or **212-742-1478 x800**.





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Interventions to Avoid

- Mediating a conversation between the two spouses can cause escalation and potential danger. You might envision a specific benefit or goal, but you are not in control of its success or failure. Abusers are often savvy and manipulative, so you won't know if you have made the situation better or worse. Caution is critically important.
- Encouraging the abused party to invest more effort into shalom bayis plays into the script of the abuser, who blames the abused for the marital difficulties.
- Know your limits, both professionally and emotionally. Without the proper training and experience, it is extremely difficult to manage a situation of potential abuse. Additionally, you can easily become enmeshed and overwhelmed. Consult with and refer to the relevant professionals or services, and then stay in the supportive role that you can play.





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For your consideration in your shul and community:

- How would you handle the situation of a shul officer being accused of domestic violence? Similarly, how would you handle the granting of kibbudim?
- How is your shul able to manage the enforcement of an order of protection?
- If the couple were no longer together, how would you collaborate with the victim-survivor so that they felt safe at family simchas where the past partner would be in attendance?

Shalom Task Force is here for you as a resource:

- Our **confidential hotline/chatline/Whatsapp line** is here to provide support and referrals to victims, their friends and family members and can be reached at 888.883.2323
- Our **legal team** is available to provide free consults on a multitude of issues, such as what happens if you call the police, orders of protection, and questions around custody and divorce in both secular courts and the beis din.
- Our **rabbinic consult line** is available to community Rabbis who are seeking guidance in supporting a victim at RabbinicConsults@ShalomTaskForce.org or 212-742-1478 x800.

