Break the silence about domestic violence

By Elizabeth Schön Vainer

“My father tried to kill my mother. Maybe this is why I ended up working with violent men, men ordered by the courts to a Batterer Intervention Program where I ran education groups. Maybe this is why I wrote ‘The Murderer’s Daughters,’ a novel about sisters who witness their father murder their mother, a story of sisters pretending to be orphans while their father is locked away in prison. Maybe this is why I know it is a myth that there is no abuse in Jewish homes—though I dearly wish it were true.”

Several weeks ago, author Randy Susan Meyers shared these words with a group of Hadassah Northeast and Temple Emunah members gathered for a program called “Love Should Be Safe: Shalom Bayit and Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community.”

Attorney Susan Howard, a Brookline-based criminal defense attorney with a focus on domestic violence and restraining orders, and JF&CS Journey to Safety staff member Julie Youdovin joined Ms. Meyers to speak about domestic abuse in the Jewish community, highlighting ways to support abuse survivors and work to end abuse.

At Journey to Safety, we understand that the strongly held myth that Jews don’t perpetrate or suffer domestic abuse prevents survivors from reaching out for help. The myth is reinforced when this issue is rarely referenced in clergy sermons or bulletin articles and is rarely the focus of Sisterhood, Brotherhood, parent education, or teen dating abuse prevention programs.

The Jewish community can work to end domestic abuse by recognizing that it occurs at about the same rate among Jews as any other group.

One in four women in the U.S. reports domestic abuse in her lifetime. There are many reasons why, as human beings, we find it difficult to acknowledge, let alone speak out, when people we know may be either perpetrating or suffering domestic abuse.

In Lexington, Hadassah Northeast leaders—along with clergy and lay leaders from Temple Emunah and Temple Isaiah—are breaking that silence. Through educational programs spanning the past year, they have provided opportunities for members and congregants to learn more about the issue and support organizations assisting survivors.

Dispelling the myth, publicly recognizing the importance of the issue at the Hadassah Northeast/Temple Emunah program, Ms. Howard, a long-time Hadassah member, told the crowd, “If you see something that may be domestic violence, stalk- ing, harassment, or elder abuse— even if you are not sure, say something.”

Whether we reach out on an individual level or open the conversation publicly—in a Jewish or secular place—we convey to survivors that they are not invisible. Equipping people in the community with helpline numbers and key messages such as “I believe you” and “This isn’t your fault” is central to building an effective response to abuse survivors.

Let’s shine a spotlight on this issue; our message is simple, but powerful: We will not tolerate domestic abuse in the Jewish community or beyond.

To learn more, contact Journey to Safety or one of the many other domestic abuse programs listed below.

As the days grow shorter and people of many faiths celebrate December holidays, it is a good time for all of us to think about how we might light a candle for someone living in darkness.

— Elizabeth Schön Vainer is the program director of Journey to Safety, the domestic abuse program of Jewish Family & Children’s Service. Journey to Safety can be reached at 781-647-5327. Help is also available through REACH Beyond Domestic Violence at 800-899-4000, Domestic Violence Services Network at 888-399-6111 or The Second Step at 617-965-3999.

In addition, Hadassah Northeast will be running similar programming in the future as domestic violence is one of its key advocacy initiatives. Please contact Hadassah Northeast to get involved in future initiatives at 781-455-9055 or hne@hadassah.org.