SPECIAL REPORT

Domestic abuse in the Jewish community

By Martha Schick
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WALTHAM — For a number of cultural, economic and religious reasons, few members of the Jewish community acknowledge domestic abuse; even when it is acknowledged, many of those same factors deter a spouse from leaving an abusive relationship.

Julie Youdovin works at Journey to Safety, the domestic abuse program at Jewish Family & Children Services, based here. She said Journey to Safety is one of the few Jewish groups that puts domestic abuse front and center, which is a necessity.

"We speak from the Jewish community to the Jewish community," Youdovin said. "There's a whole cultural community that wants to get services from people who understand the pressure."

She described that pressure in one sentence, a common concept among the survivors who come to Journey to Safety: 'If Jews don't do this, how is it happening to me?'

Domestic abuse occurs at the same rate in the Jewish community as the community at large, according to Rachel Rose Light's kosher Yale University study of Jewish intimate partner violence; but Jewish women stay in abusive marriages twice as long as non-Jews after the abuse begins. Abused Jewish wives stay an average of eight-to-10 years, while non-Jews stay an average of three-to-five years.

There is no reason Jewish women stay longer, but cultural norms, stereotypes, religious teachings and religious laws specific to Jews can work against an abused woman to make hurdles to leaving even higher.

Even the abused spouse's awareness that abuse is occurring cannot be taken for granted. Youdovin and Journey to Safety director Elizabeth Schön Vainer noted abuse often does not manifest physically, but in other controlling behavior.

"The largest consistent kind of abuse [we see] is emotional abuse, and after that, it's financial abuse," Schön Vainer said. "They have no access to money, they don't know how much their partner makes, they don't have bank numbers."

Light's study shows higher rates of financial abuse — when money is withheld from a spouse — in Orthodox homes. Because the spouse does not have the financial means to leave, the only option would be to go to an emergency shelter — most of which do not have the ability or inclination to accommodate observant Jews who keep kosher.

"There are many people in our program who have never been hit, but have no control over money," Youdovin said. "[They] are constantly put down and have no control over their lives."

Schön Vainer said many instances of abuse could cut off the abused spouse from people who could have helped or seen what was going on.

"The most powerful part of the abusive relationship is that the survivor becomes isolated in odd ways," Schön Vainer said. "The victim may get more and more limited [by their abuser], discouraged from having a relationship with their family members."

Although the isolation may be part of the abuser's behavior, it can also be self-inflicted. A deep sense of shanda, or shame, particularly in minority communities, can keep people facing abuse from reaching out, for fear of giving anti-Semites validation for their hatred.

The spiritual and social concerns of Jews in abusive marriages can vary greatly, depending on their degree of observance.

Schön Vainer said there is "still a lot of rigidity in the expectations of women" from their own peers, using the example of a woman who left her abuser only to find her former friends rejected her.

"An Orthodox woman was really shunned by her community," Schön Vainer said. "No more invites to Shabbat."

"There's a fair amount of unjust outcomes in this kind of process," she continued. "As is true for all survivors of domestic abuse, they realize there are many trade-offs for being safer. A lot of those trade-offs have to do with religious practice and spiritual practice."

In addition to the judgment and discrimination survivors may face in their communities, the logistics of leaving can seem impossible to overcome. For observant Jews, moving out while remaining close enough to their synagogue to walk to services means staying within walking distance of their abuser. Often, safety and a spiritual home seem to be at odds.

These decisions, while difficult on their own, become even more fraught when children are involved. Schön Vainer said the largest demo-
graphic group of Journey to Safety clients are 30-to-55 years old, and that most have children.

Even the act of coming for help can be a struggle, according to Schön Vainer.

"It can be really difficult for moms to find time to talk to us if they don't have care for their young children," she said.

Many of the women who come in may be seeking help, but will refuse to entertain the idea of upsetting their children's lives; Schön Vainer said they are "fiercely protective of not wanting their children's lives to change."

In that sense, children moving out of the house can be a double-edged sword.

"Kids leaving can be frightening or liberating," Schön Vainer said. "Like, I got the kids through, I can leave or He's been restrained for years in front of the kids."

THE NICE JEWISH BOY. The nagging wife. The timid little accountant. The overbearing mother. The mama's boy. Stereotypes placed on Jewish men and women, no matter how harmless some may seem, provide barriers for survivors seeking help.

Despite the fact that rates of abuse are roughly equivalent across demographic groups, the perception of the "battered woman" is still a poor, undereducated woman of color. This can give rabbis and other community members blind spots when it comes to highly educated, upper middle class Jewish professionals, according to Light.

The idea that the Jewish wife is overly attentive, to the point of relentless badgering, "can be a factor in how they're perceived when they come forward with abuse allegations," Youdovin said. Women are already seen as predisposed to be difficult to get along with may receive advice to be more agreeable and less demanding, instead of being believed and supported.

The portrayal of women as "Jewish American Princesses" in media is also harmful to those trying to leave. Light said the stereotype of

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the "materialistic, dependent, manipulative and entitled" Jewish woman is "reinforcing anti-Semitic stereotypes about money, class and power, and further giving reason for men to lose their patience with their 'demanding wives.'" It gives those trying to minimize abuse a script to follow, where they can claim the wife only wants to leave because she doesn't know how good she has it, or she just wants to live off her ex-husband's money.

The stereotype of the nice, non-threatening Jewish man only reinforces the concept that abuse could not possibly take place in Jewish households. Especially for men who participate in their local congregation and help the community -- a "real mensch" -- there is a resistance to looking at the marital relationship critically. This leaves women in a "he-said-she-said" situation.

Light spoke to the prevalent idea of the non-threatening, or even docile, Jewish man. She called it an "internalization of [of] the anti-Semitic myth that Jews are 'too timid' to be violent.

"Throughout history, Jews have been accused of contributing to their oppression by choosing not to resist it aggressively," she continued.

This repeated claim can actually give men an internalized sense of inferiority, particularly when paired with the idea that women are demanding. They may attempt to counteract these stereotypes through aggressive and abusive behavior, Light said.

"He may also have a personal history of assaults on his gender identity, such as being called a wimp, sissy or mama's boy... The assertiveness of Jewish women may be threatening to their masculinity," Light said.

These stereotypes specific to Jews, combined with popular culture's broader obsession with masculinity, can also result in male survivors struggling to come forward. Schön Vainer said the vast majority of survivors seeking care are women, but some men have come to JF&CS in her seven years there.

"There's additional shame for men," Schön Vainer said. "The abuses [for men and women] are similar kinds of issues -- a little less of the financial, more emotional and manipulation [for men]."

Societal pressures and conceptions aside, the way rabbis teach and talk about marriages and gender roles can make women feel trapped by religious authority. The mitzvot taught by rabbis, both generally and specifically for a successful marriage, can be tools for working through relationship woes. However, they can also be used to make women feel that abuse is their responsibility to fix, according to a look at Jewish terminology and abuse by Light.

The mystical Jewish concept of a predestined soulmate -- bashert -- can keep a spouse from leaving. The stakes are high when someone was supposedly chosen by God as a match, so any earthly woes, even abuse, can appear trivial when compared to God's plan. Leaving that marriage can even be construed as thinking one knows better than God can.

The community still sees shalom bayit, the idea that peace in the home is holy, as primarily the wife's responsibility. While this means they may be recognized for their
hard work when a home runs smoothly, it also means they may be faulted if there is abuse or other strife in the marriage. Instead of seeking help, conventional wisdom would tell them to work harder, especially if children are involved.

Even if the wife understands that the abuse is not her fault and seeks out help, an apology from the husband may prevent her from leaving. Many rabbis teach the concept of teshuva, that after a wrongdoing, no matter how egregious, the wronged person should try to forgive. While the concept of sincere remorse may seem like a solution, the majority of abusers fall into patterns of controlling or violent behavior. Rarely will this seemingly heartfelt apology materialize into a marriage without abuse.

Responsibility to the community itself must also be taken into account with the concepts lashon hara, or using hateful speech against another Jew, and chillul haShem, or bringing doubt or shame to the Jewish community.

Many rabbis view the prohibition on lashon hara to be valid even when the reputation-harming information is true, leaving the spouse either to suffer through the abuse in silence or risk being told they’re performing a disservice by harming their family’s stature in the community.

“Many Jewish women cited lashon hara as a reason they did not disclose their victimization, the fear that they would damage their husband’s reputation in the Jewish community,” Light said.

The prohibition of chillul haShem also refers to a Jews being judged in non-Jewish courts, according to Light. As an insular minority community, identity of their children.

The consequences of moving on with only a civil divorce can be devastating for observant women, particularly those of whom may still want children.

“Failure to get a Jewish divorce means the woman cannot remarry within the Jewish faith,” Fishbayn Joffe said. If she did remarry and had children, they would be considered mamzerim, or illegitimate, which follows the woman’s lineage for generations.

“The mamzerim would be considered bastards under Jewish law,” she continued. “They’d be seen as a child who is born of adultery. [The woman’s] children would not be able to marry someone in the community.

“For someone who is in their reproductive years, having a get withheld could impact their ability to move on and remarry and have kids,” she concluded.

In the cases Fishbayn Joffe has studied, get refusal is not typically the first instance of abuse in a marriage.

“When scholars see sort of long term withholding, they see that this has been an abusive relationship in other ways as well—a pattern of abuse,” she said.

Light goes so far as to say that in every case of get withholding, there has been abuse previously.

“According to a rabbi associated with the Boston Bet Din, women request divorces more often than do men,” Light said. “Between 5 percent and 10 percent of husbands are considered recalcitrant, defined by the refusal to give a wife a get within three years after the civil separation.”

Fishbayn Joffe works with the Boston-based organization Get Your Get, which helps provide

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any impropriety is seen as giving ammunition to anti-Semites and Jews appearing in court for domestic abuse cases can make the survivor feel that they have brought shanda to their community and people.

SOME FORMS OF ABUSE can only be experienced in Jewish marriages; one form, in fact, can only be wrought upon a woman seeking to end her marriage with a get—a divorce in Jewish court.

Although civil divorce laws have become far more egalitarian, the husband must pursue a Jewish divorce, according to Halacha. The only situation in which a Bet Din, or Jewish court, can proceed with a divorce without the husband bringing it forth is in the case of death, or in the case of long-term incapacitation, like a coma, with clear former wishes that the wife receive a get.

Lisa Fishbayn Joffe, a scholar in Jewish divorce law and director of the Project on Gender, Religion and the Law at Brandeis University, said this inequality gives the husband another avenue through which to commit abuse.

“Sometimes, a husband will use the power he enjoys under Jewish law... to use divorce as a bargaining chip,” Fishbayn Joffe said. “That power to use entitlements under Jewish law to try to control and manipulate the wife is a form of domestic abuse.”

This manipulation can manifest in different ways. Husbands may use it in a civil separation to gain access to children not outlined in a custody agreement; to deny their wives child support or alimony; or simply to keep her from leaving. The result is a woman who is “chained” to her husband—an agunah.

“It doesn’t always have to do with children, but not wanting the spouse to move on,” Fishbayn Joffe said. “People have different motives.”

Regardless of motivation, the withholding of a divorce can fall under emotional, financial or even spiritual abuse; in the latter case, women seeking a divorce are told they must stay or forfeit their religious identity and the religious
women seeking a Jewish divorce with legal support, since she is not confident that changes are coming to halachic divorce laws.

“I don’t think we’re seeing a significant change in Jewish law that would allow women to go forward with a divorce,” she said.

Get Your Get also provides resources for a prenuptial agreement, something that gives Fishbayn Joffe hope when it comes to eliminating get refusal.

“The spouses sign a document that is an enforceable civil agreement before they enter into a Jewish marriage,” she continued. “In it, they agree to divorce each other if one spouse asks for it.”

One of the more encouraging signs she sees is the refusal by some Orthodox rabbis to officiate marriages between couples who have not signed the prenup.

Fishbayn Joffe encourages engaged couples to download and sign the prenup, if not for their own possible marital health, then for “modeling for the community wanting to have a more egalitarian marriage.”

JOURNEY TO SAFETY, which provides care to non-Jews as well, has seen an increase in Jewish survivors seeking their services. Of the typical 70 open cases, about 35 percent are Jewish, an increase in recent years that Schön Vainer attributes to a push for rabbis to educate themselves about domestic violence and support services for survivors.

“With a rabbi helping to dispel the myth and say, ‘[Abuse] also happens in our community,’ through sermons and notices and bathroom posters, any kind of awareness raising starts to sink in, helping survivors feel like they can reach out to rabbis,” Schön Vainer said. “And the rabbis have anticipated that moment so they don’t freak out or judge the person.

“Rabbis shouldn’t feel burdened by handling this themselves,” she continued. “They should reach out to someone knowledgeable for support and consultation, like us.”

The language rabbis use in the first interaction with the survivor is key, Youdovin said. For example, calling the abuser a bully and avoiding putting labels like “victim” or “abused” on the person seeking help can prevent defensiveness.

“Calling someone a ‘bully’ or ‘controlling’ puts the label on the abuser,” Youdovin said, which allows the person seeking help to hold onto an identity outside of abuse.

Youdovin recalled a modern Orthodox rabbi who, upon hearing the story of a woman’s abuse, used the woman’s own faith to validate her experience and fears, telling her, “It would be a mitzvah for you to leave and protect your children.”

This belief and acceptance of her experience inextricably tied to her faith alleviated some of the fear of thinking she may lose her religion by escaping her husband.

Although some types of domestic abuse may be seen more in observant households and communities, a rabbi’s response to a congregant’s admission of abuse does not necessarily conform along movement lines.

“We have had conversations with Reform and Conservative rabbis who don’t get it,” Schön Vainer said. “I think it has a lot to do with classism, and the idea that the upper middle and wealthy class — the educated class — wouldn’t do this.”

“There’s a lot of finger-pointing within the Jewish community and saying it’s not in our community,” Youdovin said. “These assumptions run really deep.

“Most of our outreach and education is helping people understand what domestic abuse actually is,” she said.

Rabbis who know what to do are invaluable, Schön Vainer said.

“Sometimes, it’s a gut feeling,” Youdovin said. “Rabbis can call us and talk through things, which means [Journey to Safety] can be helping clergy have the language to introduce [the idea to seek help].”

Contact Journey to Safety at bit.ly/Journey-to-Safety or (781) 647-1FCS (5327).