

# Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association RESOLUTION

## ENDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

1991

"It is not an enemy who reviles me...it is you, my equal, my companion, sweet was our fellowship..."  
(Psalm 55:13-15)

"Do not envy a man of violence and not choose any of his ways." (Proverbs 3:31)

### Background:

Domestic violence is the most common violent crime in the United States, Spouse or partner abuse, child abuse, dating violence, and elder abuse are its prevalent forms, Statistics on spouse abuse demonstrate that a woman is beaten by her partner every eighteen seconds. Ninety-seven percent of physical violence against partners is perpetrated by men. Abusive men come from all walks of life, economic classes, races, ages, religions and ethnic groups.

Domestic violence refers to controlling behaviour and physical violence against intimate partners. Abusive men attack those who are most vulnerable, those who love them or who are less powerful. Physical abuse includes hitting, kicking, breaking objects, choking, forced sex and imprisonment. Verbal attacks, humiliation, intimidation and economic deprivation are also forms of abuse. Violence may start gradually, or it may be sudden and severe. It may occur daily, weekly, or infrequently, but its occurrence usually is unpredictable. Without outside intervention, the abuse will often grow more severe.

Often, women who are abused feel ashamed or afraid to speak out. Friends and family members may blame her. It is not widely understood that only the abuser is responsible for and can control his violence. These facts are a legacy of a Western and, in the Jewish community, a highly ambivalent legal tradition which has in the past condoned domestic violence. The result is a pervasive silence about battering in society and in the Jewish community which helps tolerates and helps perpetrate domestic violence.

It is now known that domestic violence exists in the Jewish community. Some believe its incidence to be no less frequent than is true of any other community. While Jewish tradition voices contradictory teachings about physical and emotional violence against wives, key sages speak out definitively in condemning this behaviour. These include Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg ( Even Ha-Ezer) Yosef Caro (Shulhan Aruch Even ha-Ezer 154:3) and Moses Isserles (gloss on E.H.). From generation to generation, the Jewish family has been viewed as an island of peace in a hostile world. Nonetheless, the home that sheltered men from outside pressures was often a place of fear and violence for women.

During the past fifteen years, the first counseling services and temporary shelters for Jewish women who have been battered have been developed. In 1988, the Council of Jewish Federations resolved that domestic violence by a priority issue. Nevertheless, the existence of domestic violence among Jews continues to be largely silenced. Programs are too few and underfunded, and Jewish institutions, such as synagogues, rarely have established educational or other programs in this area. There is a lack of sanctions against the full involvement of men who are abusive in the life of any Jewish organizations.

A high proportion of homicides committed by women are the culmination of many years of victimization by their partners, often in desperation and without premeditation. Courts have generally been unwilling to admit as evidence a defense based on what is referred to as "learned helplessness." This is the theory that people who have been lose the ability to do anything about their plight, including leaving the relationship.

Therefore:

1. We call upon members of the RRA and our Rabbinic colleagues to become better educated about domestic violence.
2. We urge all those who offer pastoral services learn to recognize the physical and emotional signs of abuse, so as to make appropriate referrals to trained professionals. We call upon their professional organizations, including the RRA, RRC and FRCH, to offer specialized training to facilitate this knowledge.
3. We urge leaders of all Reconstructionist organizations to challenge silence in their institutions and in the Jewish community about this issue. We urge that the assumption be challenged that a man who is active in the Jewish community cannot be an abuser.
4. We call upon Jewish organizations to increase services and support for programs to help end domestic violence.
5. We call upon the American legal system to render admissible the "learned helplessness" legal defense for formerly battered women who have killed their abusive partners. We urge clemency for those currently in prison who are deemed unlikely to commit further offenses.