



interfaith partnership against domestic violence  
because no one should have to choose between faith and safety

### ***For Jewish victims of sexual and domestic violence, religious teachings can be a barrier to freedom...***

**Shalom bayit** means peace in the home. It refers to an ideal married state that a couple creates through shared responsibility, mutuality, and free choice. Although it is the abuser who destroys *shalom bayit*, not the victim, this concept is sometimes misinterpreted to hold a woman solely responsible for the creation of peace in the home. *Shalom bayit* is often stated as a reason why Jewish women tend to stay in abusive relationships longer than non-Jewish women.

**Hillul Ha-Shem** means the desecration of God's name. Some victims fear that reporting abuse will dishonor the Jewish Community or God, but many rabbis believe that *Hillul Ha-shem* occurs at the moment of battering, not when a woman reports abuse. It is greater *Hillul Ha-shem* to stay silent about abuse. Getting help and ensuring the safety of oneself and ones children are acts of **Kiddush Ha-shem**, or sanctification of God's name.

**"Any wife who refrains from ... among the labors that she is required to do, they force her ... even with a whip" (Ishut 21:10).** This is a grossly misinterpreted piece that seemingly justifies abusing one's wife to force her to carry out a husband's command. However, upon putting this in context with references to judges, and in noticing the use of the plural, this bit references the power of the court – not of the husband. On the contrary, in various Jewish scripture, there are actual guidelines according to Halachah that outline payment that is obligated on men who abuse and cause injury to their wives.

***...Or a resource more precious than gold.***

**"... Sages commanded that a man honor his wife more than his own person, and love her as he loves his own person" (Ishut 15:19).** The Mishneh Torah is clear in proclaiming that spouses should treat one another with love and mutual respect. It goes on to state that they should share their financial resources and not case superfluous measures of fear over one another. In that capacity, it is clear that true, loving relationships demand reciprocity, love, and respect in all aspects of the relationship – from physical to emotional to financial.

**God calls people of faith out of oppression and into the Promised Land.** When the people of Israel were in slavery in Egypt, God heard their cries for help (Ex. 3:7-9) and came to their aid. God delivered them from their oppression "with a mighty hand" (Ex. 3:39), and led them through the Wilderness to the Promised Land. **Ona'at devarim** or oppression by means of words is forbidden in Jewish tradition. God stands on the side of the oppressed, and is active in human lives to move people from oppression to freedom. God hears the cries of domestic violence victims too, and walks with them towards safety and freedom.

**"Do not go about spreading slander amongst your people; do not stand on the blood of your neighbor" (Lev 19:16).** Often times, out of fear of bringing dishonor upon the family or the Jewish Community, victims of sexual and domestic violence may not call for help or reach out to available resources regarding their abuse. This verse may seem to suggest that speaking out against an abuser is impermissible. On the contrary, there is an obligation to speak out against a perpetrator, even if their reputation may be damaged. **Pikuach nefesh** means saving a life. Jewish tradition teaches that saving a life supersedes all other obligations, even taking precedence over the daily observance of Jewish practices.

**Teshuvah** literally means "returning" and refers to the act of returning to a life of decency after atoning for the harm one has done to another. *Teshuvah* depends on participation in an active process that includes acknowledging the abusive behavior, feeling remorse, confessing publicly, asking for forgiveness, making restitution, and refraining from abuse in the future. Only time can prove if true repentance has occurred. It is distortion for the concept of *teshuvah* to be used to pressure a victim into forgiving an abuser. Even if an abuser has gone through *teshuvah*, it is up to the survivor to decide when and if she will forgive. If reconciliation is not possible, then it is better to mourn the loss of the relationship, to move on, and to know that God will be with you.

*This has been provided by Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence using material from Marie Fortune's Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse. Many thanks to the Rev. Fortune for her groundbreaking work.*